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Bullying and the peer group: A review

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ABSTRACT

It is often stated that bullying is a “group process”, and many researchers and policymakers share the belief that interventions against bullying should be targeted at the peer-group level rather than at individual bullies and victims. There is less insight into *what* in the group level should be changed and *how*, as the group processes taking place at the level of the peer clusters or school classes have not been much elaborated. This paper reviews the literature on the group involvement in bullying, thus providing insight into the individuals' motives for participation in bullying, the persistence of bullying, and the adjustment of victims across different peer contexts. Interventions targeting the peer group are briefly discussed and future directions for research on peer processes in bullying are suggested.

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Bullying is a subtype of aggressive behavior, in which an individual or a group of individuals repeatedly attacks, humiliates, and/or excludes a relatively powerless person. The majority of studies on the topic have been conducted in schools, focusing on bullying among children and youth (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1978; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Veenstra et al., 2005). Bullying has also been studied at kindergartens (Alsaker & Nägele, 2008), workplaces (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008), in prisons (Ireland, 2005; Ireland, Archer, & Power, 2007; South & Wood, 2006), and at least in one study, in an army setting (Ostvik & Rudmin, 2001). Throughout the present review, the concept of bullying is used to refer to peer-to-peer bullying among school-aged children and youth, when not otherwise mentioned.

It is known that a sizable minority of primary and secondary school students is involved in peer-to-peer bullying either as perpetrators or victims — or as both, being both bullied themselves and harassing others. In WHO's Health Behavior in School-Aged Children survey (HBSC, see Craig & Harel, 2004), the average prevalence of victims across the 35 countries involved was 11%, whereas bullies represented another 11%. Children who report both bullying others and being bullied by others (so-called bully–victims) were not identified in the HBSC study, but other studies have shown that approximately 4–6% of the children can be classified as bully–victims (Haynie et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2001).

Bullying constitutes a serious risk for the psychosocial and academic adjustment of both victims (Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman,

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2008; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Isaacs, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008; Olweus, 1994; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005) and bullies (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000; Nansel et al., 2004). Besides victims and their perpetrators, there is evidence that peers merely witnessing the attacks can be negatively influenced (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005).

Thinking of how the group is involved in bullying is in a way “returning to the roots”. The concept originally used in Scandinavian languages to refer to bullying was mobbing (in Swedish, mobbning), and the phenomenon was described as *a group of children ganging up on one and the same victim*, harassing and tormenting him/her repeatedly. The term mob had been used even before to refer to unorganized, emotional, often antisocial and/or aggressive crowds (see Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Berts, & King, 1982). Thus, in the early writings on “mobbing” among school children, the idea of group engagement was clearly present. Heinemann (1972), for instance, described mobbing as a situation in which the entire school class, or the majority of it, attacks an individual child. Olweus (1978, p. 5), on the other hand, stressed in his early book, the role of individual bullies and possibly subgroups of bullies, and warned about overemphasizing the “collective aspect” of mobbing. He suggested directing attention to situations in which an individual child is exposed to aggression systematically and over time, whether from an individual, a small group, or a whole class.

Today, group involvement in bullying is understood somewhat differently than the whole group, or gang, actively attacking one person. The group members are seen as having different roles in the process, driven by diverse emotions, attitudes, and motivations. Their individual characteristics interact with environmental factors, such as classroom norms, contributing to the process which can have tremendously hurtful outcomes for the targeted individual(s). Placing bullying in its group context helps to better understand the individuals' motivation to bully, the lack of support provided to the victims, the persistence of bullying, and the adjustment of victims across diverse contexts. Finally, the group view is helpful in developing effective interventions against bullying.

1. What does the bully want?

In social groups where bullying takes place, initiative ringleader bullies can typically be identified. Their prevalence in child and adolescent samples is typically around 5–15% (Craig & Harel, 2004; Kärnä et al., in press; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Early explanations of bullies' behavior emphasized their aggressive personality pattern (Olweus, 1978), which caused them to aggress against several people in different contexts. Bullying behavior was seen, as aggression in general, rather stable over time and independent of social context. The early descriptions of bullies' personality (e.g., Olweus, 1978, p. 158–163) were not yet influenced by the nowadays commonly used taxonomy based on the functions of aggressive behavior, namely, the distinction between reactive and proactive aggression (Dodge, 1991). Bullying, which is typically unprovoked and deliberate, can be considered a subtype of proactive, goal-directed aggression (Coie, Dodge, Terry, & Wright, 1991). The conceptualization of bullying as proactive aggression has led to the acknowledgement that bullies are not necessarily socially unskilled or emotionally dysregulated but can quite skillfully use bullying in order to achieve their goals (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006; Sutton, 2003; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999).

What is it that bullies want? It has been suggested that bullying behavior is motivated by the bullies' pursuit of high status and a powerful, dominant position in the peer group (Pellegrini, 2002; Salmivalli & Peets, 2008). Although an individual motive, a quest for status is very much group-related. Status is the individual's relative standing in the peer hierarchy — “the outcome of an evaluation of attributes that produces differences in respect and prominence” (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003, p. 265). Furthermore, it is the group that assigns status to its members, so the bullies are dependent on the peer group in the realization of their status goal.

Children differ in the relative importance they attach to communal (making friends, being prosocial, feeling close to others) and agentic (being visible, influential, and admired) goals. Self-perceived importance of agentic goals has been found to explain variation in proactive (but not reactive) aggression (Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpää, & Peets, 2005). Sitsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, and Salmivalli (2009) found that the child's probability of being involved in a bullying relationship as a bully was related to a high degree of status goals, especially among adolescent males. The scale assessing status goals was a subscale of the agentic goals scale used by Salmivalli et al. (2005), including three items: (When with your peers, how important it is for you that)… “you appear self-confident and make an impression on the others”, “the others think you are smart” and “the others respect and admire you”.

Björkqvist, Ekman, and Lagerspetz (1982) studied the ego picture, the ideal ego picture, and the normative ego picture of 14–16 year-old adolescents. They found that bullies not only perceived themselves as dominant (ego picture) but also had high ideals concerning dominance — male bullies actually wanted to be even more dominant than they already were (ideal ego picture). Furthermore, the bullies believed that others expected them to be dominant (normative ego picture). In a study conducted among adult (male) prisoners, South and Wood (2006) found that bullying was positively related to the perceived importance of social status and prestige, operationalized by items such as “It is important to me that other prisoners don't see me as weak”, and “One of the most important things in prison life is being respected by other prisoners”.

If bullying is driven by status goals, it should be more common during periods in life when peer status is considered important. One such period is obviously adolescence (e.g., Eder, 1985; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2009). In a recent study, LaFontana and Cillessen (2009) showed a clear peak in prioritizing status enhancement in early adolescence, when one third of study participants chose status enhancement over friendship, and as many as 74–79% considered it more important than rule adherence. The expected increase in bullying others during adolescence has been found in several studies (e.g., Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). It has been suggested, however, that the developmental changes in prioritizing status and in bullying others might be qualified by the transition to a new school. In other words, the transition to middle/secondary school might enhance the importance of peer acceptance, popularity, and “fitting in” in the new social environment (Juvonen & Ho, 2009; Pellegrini, 2002) and consequently, bullying behavior. However, a recently collected data set involving 195,000 Finnish students from all grade levels of comprehensive education, i.e., Grades 1–9 (Salmivalli and the KiVa project, unpublished data collected in May 2009) shows that the increase in bullying starts taking place already at the age of 12, i.e., one year before the transition (Grade 7 in Finland), rather than after it. This suggests increase in bullying is not due to the transition alone.

If bullies want status, they should be likely to choose their victims, as well as the time and place for their attacks, to best serve the achievement of this goal. Bullies are indeed selective in their aggression, choosing victims who are submissive (Schwartz et al., 1998), insecure of themselves (Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005), physically weak (Hodges & Perry, 1999) and in a low-power, rejected position in the group (Hodges & Perry, 1999). This enables bullies to repeatedly demonstrate their power to the rest of the group and renew their high-status position without the fear of being confronted. Witnesses are important, too. Rather than attacking secretly, bullies seem to initiate their attacks when peers are present. In studies utilizing naturalistic observations in the schoolyard, it has been found that peers are present in 85–88% of all bullying episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001).

Bullies have reasons to believe that their behavior helps enhance their peer status. Studies have shown that aggressive children, including bullies, can be perceived as *cool*, *powerful*, and *popular* even in mainstream peer groups (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003), and bullying can indeed be helpful in gaining prestige. In their longitudinal study from fall to spring Juvonen et al. (2003) found that changes in bully status were associated with changes in perceived coolness: fall bullies were perceived cool in the fall, spring bullies were considered cool in the spring only, and children who bullied others both in the fall and in the spring were perceived as cool both times.

The high status of bullies might seem to contradict previous studies reporting an association between bullying and peer rejection, i.e., the child being nominated as disliked by many peers (e.g., Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). However, being disliked and being perceived as cool or popular do not necessarily contradict each other (e.g., Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008; Rodkin et al., 2006). A child can be rejected (personally disliked by many classmates) and yet perceived as popular, as the latter construct reflects the social centrality, visibility, and impact of children in their peer group — exactly the things bullies seem to value.

Even the association between rejection and bullying is not a universal truth, but rather varies across school classes (Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007). Furthermore, in a recent study by Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksma, and Dijkstra (in press) bullies were actually rejected only by children to whom they represented a potential threat. For instance, males bullying females were rejected by female classmates only, whereas males targeting the members of their own sex were disliked by males but actually accepted by females.

It is not completely clear why bullies are perceived as “cool” and popular even in normative peer cultures. This association is strongest – and best documented – among adolescents (Caravita et al., 2009; Juvonen et al., 2003; Rodkin & Farmer, 2000), and one explanation is that as antisocial and tough behaviors represent challenges to adult norms and values, they are welcomed by peers at this developmental period (Moffitt, 1993). However, some studies suggest that bullies can be relatively popular among their peers even as early as the age of five to eight (Alsaker & Nägele, 2008, p. 238). *Resource control theory* posits that individuals who are effective in their goal attainment and have access to material and social resources (the most wanted toy, the best role in a game or play, sexual attention) are valued by peers (Hawley, 1999, 2002). Resource control can be based on coercion, on prosocial strategies, or both. Especially the most popular members of bullying groups can use their aggression effectively (Pellegrini et al., 1999), and many of them might combine bullying with prosocial behavior (bistrategic controllers, see Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007) in order to maximise their resource control and consequently, perceived popularity.

It should be noted that so-called bully–victims, who are themselves victimized *and* bully others, seem to be a distinct group from nonvictimized bullies in many ways, also with respect to the reasons for their attacks. Rather than skilful and strategic children, bully–victims seem to be dysregulated, hot-tempered, and high on both proactive and reactive aggression (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001).

In summary, there is some support for the assumption that (nonvictimized) bullies are driven by a quest for high status. Bullying is related to self-reported goals of being respected, admired, and dominant (Björkqvist et al., 1982; Sitsema et al., 2009). Bullies seem to choose their targets, as well as the time and place for the attacks in a way that maximises their chances of demonstrating their power to peers, and in many cases they are successful in gaining prestige (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2003). More research is needed on possible sex differences and developmental changes in the motives underlying bullying; so far studies have mostly consisted of preadolescent and adolescent samples and sometimes they have found a weaker association between status goals and bullying among females, as compared with males (e.g., Sitsema et al., 2009).

2. Peer involvement during bullying incidents: participant roles

The fact that peer witnesses are present in most bullying incidents has led researchers to ask how these bystanders react during such episodes, and how their reactions might either contribute to the problem or help resolve it (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2001; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Salmivalli et al. (1996) used a peer-nomination procedure to identify four *participant roles* that children may have in the bullying process, in addition to being bullies or victims: assistants of bullies, reinforcers of bullies, outsiders, and defenders of the victim.[1] Assistants are children who join the ringleader bullies, reinforcers provide positive feedback to bullies (e.g., by laughing or cheering), outsiders withdraw from bullying situations, and defenders take sides with the victims, comforting and supporting them. After the first Finnish studies, numerous other researchers from various countries (Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Menesini, Codecasa, & Benelli, 2003; Schäfer & Korn, 2004; Sutton & Smith, 1999) have utilized the same methodology, or a similar conceptualization of bullying. Olweus (2001, pp. 14–15), for instance, has described the “bullying circle” in which eight different bystander modes of reaction represent the combinations of children's attitudes to bullying (positive–neutral–indifferent–negative) and behaviors (acting vs. not acting).

The importance of bystander reactions becomes obvious if we think about their potential impact on the children who bully, on the targets of harassment, and on each other. Having others join in the bullying or getting even subtle positive feedback by verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g. smiling, laughing) is probably rewarding for those who are doing the bullying, whereas challenging the bully's power by taking sides with the victim provides negative feedback for them. In their observational study Hawkins et al. (2001) found that when bystanders reacted on behalf of the victim, they were often effective in putting an end to a bullying episode. Bystander influences on bullying have been investigated at the classroom level as well, by aggregating children's scores on participant role scales to the classroom level. The aggregated scores reflect behaviors that are typical or atypical of children in a certain classroom. It has been found that the more classmates tend to reinforce the bully, the more frequently bullying takes place in a school class, whereas classroom levels of supporting and defending the victims have an opposite effect (Kärnä, Salmivalli, Poskiparta, & Voeten, 2008). Furthermore, the association between victimization and its two known risk factors, social anxiety and peer rejection, is strongest in classrooms that are high on reinforcing bullies and low on defending the victims. In other words, the likelihood of anxious or rejected children ending up as victimized depends on the social context, being highest in classes where bystanders appear as supporting the bully's behavior, rather than challenging it (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, in press).

The bystanders' reactions make a difference for the victims' adjustment as well. In a study by Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, and Salmivalli (submitted for publication), victims who had one or more classmates defending them when victimized were less anxious, less depressed, and had a higher self-esteem than victims without defenders, even when the frequency of victimization experiences was controlled for.

Unfortunately, children witnessing bullying do not seem to utilize their potential to reduce it. Despite the fact that most children's attitudes are against bullying and they report intentions to support victimized peers in hypothetical situations (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Whitney & Smith, 1993), actual defending behavior assessed by peer reports is rare. In a Finnish study (Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998) the frequencies of sixth- and eighth-grade students identified as defenders of the victims were 17–20%, whereas the children who either reinforced or assisted the bully amounted to 20–29%. Almost one third (26–30%) did not take sides with anyone but rather withdrew from bullying situations, thus passively enabling bullying to continue. There seems to be a disconnect — something prevents children from defending their bullied peers even if they think that it would be the right thing to do and have intentions of doing so.

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[1] The latest version of the questionnaire consists of 15 items, which are available from the author.

3. Why don't peers intervene more often?

Why don't children support the victim more often, instead of joining the bullying or rewarding it? Some reasons might be related to the characteristics of typical bullying situations, and the social standing of the bullies and victims in the group. As bullying incidents tend to have multiple witnesses, the likelihood of intervening might be reduced by the classical "bystander effect" (Darley & Latane, 1968): helping is less likely when many individuals are witnessing a potentially dangerous or harmful situation. This might be due to the diffusion of responsibility (no one feels personally responsible and perhaps expects someone else to take action) or children might monitor each other and infer that as the others don't do anything, this can't be so serious. Most bullying actually consists of attacks that might appear as relatively "mild", such as verbal abuse (Rivers & Smith, 1994). The harm caused is mostly psychological, and thus easy to explain away or construe as "only joking" (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003) — even the victims themselves might try to hide their suffering from others.

Also children's attitudes towards victims might be influenced by their observing of each others' reactions. Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, and Franzoni (2008, Study 2) manipulated the bystanders' reactions in hypothetical scenarios and found that when middle-school children imagined witnessing a bullying incident where other bystanders intervened to help the victim, they reported more victim liking than in the condition where bystanders assisted the bully.

As bullies are often perceived as popular and powerful, it takes a lot to thwart their behavior. Rather, it might seem adaptive for children to distance themselves from low-status victims, i.e., avoid their company and appear more like the bullies (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). Behaving aggressively (or at least not being friendly) towards the target of bullying becomes like a trend, a way of "fitting in" and emphasizing one's belonging to the peer group (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). For some children, this might reflect strategic understanding of what is adaptive in the group (Juvonen & Cadigan, 2002) whereas others might just get too anxious to react (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005, Study 1).

Bullies often have only one or two main targets in the class (Schuster, 1999). Garandeau and Cillessen (2006) have argued that this way bullying is more efficient and less risky. If there were several targets, they might support one another. Furthermore, in such a case the classmates might attribute the cause of bullying to the aggressors, rather than their victims. When there is only one victim, on the other hand, bullying might seem more justified and appear as the victim's fault, especially because the victims are partly selected on the basis of being rejected and having few, if any friends (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Tragically, the victims have been shown to be both intra- and interpersonally most maladjusted in contexts where victimization is targeted at few children only (Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, in revision; Sentse et al., 2007). Thus, both bystanders and victims themselves might be more prone to blame the target when few children share his or her plight.

Schuster (2001) provided evidence of peers having a strong negative bias with regard to their victimized classmates. In a study utilizing the hypothetical vignette paradigm, the victims (previously identified victimized classmates) were seen as personally responsible for their failures more often than nonvictimized classmates. A similar bias is likely to be present when children evaluate the victims' responsibility for their plight (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003), and it might get stronger as victimization continues. In accordance with this, and with Olweus' (1978) notion concerning "gradual cognitive changes in the perceptions of the victim" it has been shown that even though victimized children are already rejected when chosen as victims, they tend to get even more rejected over time (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003).

The attitudes children report towards bullying in general, or towards hypothetical, "imaginary" victims in the questionnaires or hypothetical vignettes might differ from the attitudes they have towards the actual victims in their own school class (e.g., "I disapprove of bullying in general, but *that kid* certainly deserves it"). Overall, it seems that over time being the target of harassment starts to resemble *a social role* in the group: it has consequences for how the others view the victim and for the victim's possibility to connect with peers.

4. Individual differences

Despite the factors that might inhibit defending victimized peers, there are individual differences in how children behave when witnessing bullying. With respect to individual differences, supporting and defending victimized peers has so far received most attention. Not surprisingly, children who have strong anti-bullying attitudes (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), are empathic (Caravita et al., 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, in press; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003), have high self-efficacy related to defending (Pöyhönen et al., in press; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008), and tend to be nominated as defenders by their classmates. In addition, defenders have been found to be emotionally stable (Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003) and cognitively skilled children (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, in press). Younger children tend to be more supportive of victims, both in terms of their attitudes and intentions (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Rigby & Slee, 1991) and peer-reported defending behaviors (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Finally, girls are nominated as defenders more often than boys, both by their classmates at large (e.g., Goossens et al., 2006; Menesini et al., 2003; Pöyhönen et al., in press; Salmivalli et al., 1996) and by victims themselves (Sainio et al., submitted for publication).

Importantly, defenders enjoy a positive peer status. They are both well-liked (Salmivalli et al., 1996) and at least in middle childhood, perceived as popular by their peers (Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., in press). Besides its main effect on defending, social status moderates the effects of empathy and self-efficacy on defending, strengthening these associations. It has been suggested that a high status is needed in order to defend the victims (Pöyhönen et al., in press). By challenging the bully's behavior, a low-status child might run the risk of becoming the next target. However, the direction of effect (whether high status is a precursor or a consequence of defending behavior) has never been tested in a longitudinal sample.

Children in pro-bullying roles (bullies, assistants, reinforcers) have attitudes that are more approving of bullying (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Rather than lacking self-efficacy, they seem to lack empathic understanding for the victims (Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008). Withdrawing and staying out from bullying situations, on the other hand, is positively associated with empathy but negatively related to self-efficacy to defend (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2008; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008).

Identification of individual characteristics explaining variation in bystanders' reactions is the first step in understanding those reactions. What is more important, however, is to find out how these individual factors interact with the characteristics of the social environment. Some group contexts (whether peer clusters within school classes, or whole school classes) might inhibit or encourage actions that are either pro-bullying (bullying, assisting, reinforcing) or against it (defending) in individual children.

5. Peer clusters and involvement in bullying

The group (i.e. classroom) in which bullying takes place differs from many social groups in an important respect: the membership is involuntary, which means that the victim cannot easily escape his or her situation. The other group members cannot just leave, either. Although students cannot choose their classmates, social selection processes (Kandel, 1978) take place within classrooms, resulting in cliques and friendship dyads that consist of similar others.

Bullying-related attitudes and behaviors are among the characteristics that clique members tend to share with each other (e.g., Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2009). Children with similar participant roles tend to belong to same peer clusters, resulting in a social structure where some cliques consist of children who tend to take on pro-bullying roles (bullies, assistants, reinforcers) and others involve more prosocial (defenders) or non-involved (outsiders) children (Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997).

It is not known whether within-group similarity in bullying-related behaviors is due to *selection* or *socialization* processes (see Prinstein & Dodge, 2008): the relative influence of these mechanisms has not been tested in bullying research. However, there are some studies providing preliminary insight into their possible roles. Whereas the typical way to think of selection effect is that individuals who are alike come together because of mutual liking, recent findings by Olthof and Goossens (2008) suggest that 10–13 year-old boys who engage in bullying in pro-bullying roles (ringleader bullying or following) are *not* liked by similar others. In their study, antisocial involvement in bullying was positively related to *desired acceptance* (but, importantly, negatively to *received acceptance*) of other boys who were either bullies or their followers. Accordingly, Witvliet et al. (2009) argued that children might join the bullying groups in order to enhance their own social standing in the classroom, rather than because they are attracted to members of such groups. These authors showed that even if the within-classroom clique members resembled each other in bullying, there was even more resemblance within peer cliques in perceived popularity. Furthermore, perceived popularity of the group accounted for a large proportion of within-group similarity in bullying. Together, the studies of Olthof and Goossens (2008) and Witvliet et al. (2009) suggest that selection effects bringing bullying children together might be based on the need to be accepted by the bullies, or the wish to improve one's own social position by affiliating with them, rather than actual attraction felt towards them.

Social influence processes, in turn, refer to clique members' reciprocal influences on each other's attitudes and behaviors. Espelage et al. (2003) used friendship nominations to identify peer groups of middle-school children and followed them longitudinally from fall to spring during a school year. They found that the members of cliques that were high on bullying (operationalized in this study as relatively “mild” forms of aggression, such as teasing, name calling, and social exclusion) increased their corresponding behaviors over time among both boys and girls. The study provides initial evidence of the peer-group socialization effect on bullying behavior, although it leaves open the question how the influence unfolds.

Processes such as “deviancy training” (Granic & Dishion, 2003) might take place within bullying cliques, involving verbal and nonverbal cues of acceptance not only during bullying episodes but also during discussions of such episodes (deviant talk with respect to what was done, and how the target seemed ridiculous). Such processes have not been empirically studied and overall, the socialization of bullying behavior within bullying cliques has not been much elaborated.

Yet another way to think of the socialization of bullying-related behaviors is that children do not necessarily need to belong to the bullying cliques or even interact much with the bullies in order to be influenced by them. Juvonen and Ho (2008) recently showed that during the transition to a new middle school, students who initially *perceived bullies as high-status children* (i.e., nominated the same classmates as cool and as bullying others) were likely to show increases in their bullying behavior over time. In addition, students who *wished to hang out with the bullies without this wish being reciprocated* increased their bullying behavior. For some children and youth, bullies can represent distant role models whom they start mimicking (Juvonen & Ho, 2009) by engaging themselves in more bullying behavior.

Besides resembling each other in their overall levels of aggression, friends have been shown to share their targets of aggression (Card & Hodges, 2006). Also peer cliques might be contexts fostering not only aggressive and bullying behaviors in general, but also aggression *toward specific peers*. Some have argued that “bullying together” might provide a sense of cohesion in groups that lack high-quality friendships and genuine cohesiveness (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). In such groups, the function of aggressing together (and perhaps against shared targets) would serve the function of creating bonds between group members, having something in common, and entertaining each other. Accordingly, Roland and Idsoe (2001) have argued that bullying might not only be useful for gaining status and power, but also for creating a sense of belonging between children who bully.

It should be remembered that peer cliques exert positive influences on children and youth as well. Rigby and Johnson (2006) found that children who believed that their friends (and parents) expected them to support victimized children were more willing to intervene in bullying situations. Defenders of victims often form cliques with other defenders (Salmivalli et al., 1997) and might thus encourage each others' prosocial behaviors and serve as positive models to each other. Unfortunately, the powerful and popular bullies might be the ones who set the norms at the classroom level, and such norms might override the influence of potentially positive role models within one's own prosocial group. In any case, positive peer influence in the context of bullying has so far been ignored in empirical studies.

6. Classroom effects

Classrooms differ from each other in their levels of bullying and victimization. In recently collected Finnish data involving almost 7000 students from 378 different classrooms, 87% of total variation in victimization was found to be due to individual differences, while a significant 13% is due to differences between classrooms (Kärnä et al., in press). Similarly, classroom effects explain about 10% of variance in bullying behavior (Kärnä et al., 2008). Already this indicates that there is something in the class context that potentiates or inhibits bullying. Classroom effects on bystander reactions, that is, behaviors of children witnessing bullying are, however, even larger. It was found in a recent study (Kärnä et al., in press) that the proportions of variance attributable to between-classroom differences, were as high as 19% and 35% for reinforcing the bully and defending the victim, respectively. The latter value, for instance, means that more than one third of total variation in defending behavior lies between classrooms. Utilizing the same data set, Pöyhönen, Kärnä, and Salmivalli (2008) showed that the defending-empathy slope varied significantly between classrooms as well. In other words, empathy was more likely to lead to defending behaviors in some school classes rather than in others. The classroom context thus moderates the effects of individual characteristics on defending. Such person–

environment-interactions have not yet been examined in relation to other participant role behaviors.

Classroom differences have been explained by "class norms" related to bullying. In social psychological literature, a norm is typically defined as "a rule, value or standard shared by the members of a social group that prescribes appropriate, expected, or desirable attitudes and conduct in matters relevant to the group" (Turner, 1991, p. 3). Such norms might help to understand why bullying is more likely to occur, or why peers witnessing bullying are more likely to intervene on behalf of the victim in some classrooms than in others. It is not clear, however, which type of assessment would produce an index of bullying-related norms that has most predictive validity.

One way to assess classroom norms is to aggregate bullying behaviors to the classroom level. This produces an index of descriptive norms, that is, the extent to which bullying behaviors are (on average) displayed by children in a classroom (Henry et al., 2000). Taking this approach, Sentse et al. (2007) showed that in classrooms where bullying occurred at high levels (i.e., was normative), it was less likely to be related to peer rejection, and more likely to be associated with peer preference. This is in accordance with the person-group dissimilarity model postulating that behaviors deviating from what is normative in the group are likely to lead to peer dislike (Wright et al., 1986). However, it should be noted that the classroom-level association between bullying and peer acceptance (or, perhaps between bullying and popularity) could itself be used as an index of the normativeness of bullying in a classroom: we do not know whether the fact that bullying is common ("normative") leads to higher acceptance of such behavior over time, or whether the acceptance of bullies is observed by other kids and motivates them to bully as well.

Extending the approach taken by Sentse et al. (2007), Dijkstra, Lindenberg, and Veenstra (2008) recently showed that bullying was socially accepted especially in classrooms where popular students (rather than students overall) engaged in bullying at high levels, suggesting that it is the behavior of the most popular children that becomes normative in a classroom.

In addition to their impact on bullying-related norms (whether bullying is acceptable or unacceptable) high-status children might use bullying to define other kinds of norms. Juvonen et al. (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008; Juvonen & Ho, 2009) have proposed that by targeting some members of the school class, the bully defines what is normative in the group and fosters compliance and homogeneity among group members. Through homophobic bullying, for instance, gay-like behavior is defined as something *we do not engage in*. Similarly, by harassing less trendy individuals, bullies create and enhance the norm of being trendy and good-looking. The harassment has an impact on children who are not targeted themselves: they will do their best to follow the norms in order not to be the next victims or risk their social position among classmates.

Yet another way to operationalize bullying-related norms is to ask children to evaluate the extent to which certain bullying-related behaviors (reinforcing the bully, defending the victim) would be sanctioned or rewarded by peers if someone in their school class displayed them. Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) found that norms assessed in this way explained part of classroom-level variation in participant role behaviors (assisting the bully, reinforcing the bully, defending the victim). Furthermore, norms were more against bullying among grade four classrooms than among grades five and six.

Sometimes classroom norms have been operationalized as attitudes aggregated to classroom level (e.g., assessment of injunctive norms by Henry et al., 2000). It should be remembered, however, that what is normative in a classroom does not necessarily match with the private attitudes of individual children. So-called *pluralistic ignorance* (Katz & Allport, 1931; Prentice, 2008) has recently been discussed in the context of bullying (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). It refers to a situation when group members privately reject the norm (e.g., they think that bullying is wrong), but at the same time believe that others accept it. When very few children in a school class publicly challenge the behavior of bullies or openly communicate their private attitudes to others, children might infer that *the others think that bullying is OK* (see Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). Such a misperceived norm might have an impact on their public reactions to bullying (further fostering the "false" norm in the classroom).

7. To be the target of bullying: classroom effects on adjustment

The victim role seems to be especially difficult to bear when a child is among very few victims (or even the only victim) in a classroom. Victims have fewer negative feelings in classrooms where they observe other children being also victimized (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005, Study 2). Paradoxically, a "negative" context can thus serve as a protective factor for an individual victim. It has been suggested that in such a context, victims might be less likely to engage in self-blaming attributions concerning their plight. Being the only victim, the child is more likely to blame him- or herself for the situation ("As the others are not victimized, there must be something wrong with me") whereas witnessing others share the same plight is more likely to lead to external attributions ("The bullies are to blame as they target almost everyone"). The former type of attributions, especially so-called characterological self-blame, are likely to lead to more maladjustment (see Graham & Juvonen, 1998, 2001).

Further evidence of such a process was provided by Huitsing et al. (in revision) who showed that victims were worse off (more depressed and with a lower self-esteem) in classrooms where only few children were targeted. The effects held even when controlling for the average levels of victimization in the classroom. The findings show that besides the average level of victimization in a school class, the *dispersion* of victimization really has an impact on the targets' adjustment.

8. Implications for bullying interventions

It is often stated that bullying is a "group process" (O'Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999), and many researchers and policymakers share the belief that interventions against bullying should be targeted at the peer-group level rather than at individual bullies and victims. There is less insight into what in the group level should be changed and how.

The literature suggests that children and adolescents facing bullying problems as bystanders are trapped in a social dilemma. On one hand, they understand that bullying is wrong and they would like to do something to stop it — on the other hand, they strive to secure their own status and safety in the peer group. However, *if fewer children rewarded and reinforced the bully, and if the group refused to assign high status for those who bully, an important reward for bullying others would be lost*.

Bystanders might even be *easier to influence* by interventions than the active, initiative-taking bullies. Bystanders often think that bullying is wrong, they feel bad for the victim, and they would like to do something to help. Converting their already existing attitudes into behavior is a challenging task, but it might nevertheless be a more realistic goal than influencing an individual bully by adult sanctions alone. Already by making the private attitudes of bystanders salient (i.e., by making children aware of what others really think about bullying), and thus reducing "pluralistic ignorance" (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008; Prentice, 2008) may be one key issue in interventions against bullying.

Even if the change in bystanders' behaviors would not lead (at least immediately) to changes in the bully's behavior, it is very likely to make a difference in the victim's situation. Mobilizing the peer group to support the victim is crucial in order to *minimize the adverse effects for those who are victimized*. Victimization is an attack on the victim's status but also on his or her need to belong (Hawker &

Boulton, 2001), and often a successful one. Having protective friendships at the classroom has been shown to buffer against further victimization as well as the negative influences of victimization (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999), especially when friends possess protective characteristics. Having even one single defender reduces the negative consequences of victimization (Sainio et al., submitted for publication).

Raising children's awareness of the role they play in the bullying process, as well as increasing their empathic understanding of the victim's plight, can reduce bullying. However, as self-efficacy for defending is an important factor contributing to defending behaviors (Pöyhönen et al., in press; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008), students should be taught safe strategies to support the victim and encouraged to make common decisions (e.g., classroom rules) to do so.

Once the reward structure of the classroom changes, supporting and defending the victim can actually become reinforced and rewarded. Targeting bystanders does not mean that individual bullies should not be influenced. Both universal and indicated interventions are needed to effectively put an end to bullying. When bullying comes to the attention of adults, the particular case should be handled, not together in the classroom but by private discussions in which it is made clear that bullying is not tolerated (e.g., Olweus, 1991). Of further help might be discussions with some prosocial, relatively high-status peers who are encouraged to support the victim in need (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2009a,b).

A recently evaluated Finnish anti-bullying program, KiVa (www.kivakoulu.fi), which is now becoming a national program used in Finnish comprehensive schools (Salmivalli et al., 2009a,b) is based on the above principles. It has been found to be highly successful in reducing bullying and victimization, but also in increasing empathy toward victims, self-efficacy related to defending, and the actual peer support provided for victims (Kärnä et al., in press). The mechanisms of such changes are now being investigated in detail, and the findings will hopefully help understand better the peer processes involved in bullying. Even if peers are part of the problem, they can also be part of the solution.

9. Conclusions and future directions

Considering the literature, it seems justified to argue that being bullied is more than just a series of aggressive *interactions*, or a hurtful dyadic *relationship* between the bully and the victim. It often resembles *a social role in the group* (see also Lagerspetz et al., 1982), bringing along many social consequences that are not only persistent but seem to get worse over time. There is a negative bias in peers' evaluations of the victims (Schuster, 2001), and the dislike for victimized children becomes more wide-spread over time (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Many children not directly involved may react in ways which are not only rewarding to the bullies but also tremendously discouraging to the victims, such as laughing at the moments of their humiliation (Salmivalli et al., 1996). By such small acts, many more children than just the active bullies contribute to the harm caused to the victim. In analogy with a jig-saw puzzle, the “whole picture” of bullying is fully revealed only when the small pieces are all put together.

Despite many descriptive studies on the attitudes, intentions, and social positions of children behaving in different ways in bullying incidents, the actual group-level processes potentiating bullying and maintaining it have not been much elaborated. Different modes of group influence have been suggested to be involved, but rarely put to rigorous empirical test. It has been shown, however, that children belonging to bullying cliques increase their bullying behaviors over time (Espelage et al., 2003), possibly through reciprocal rewarding and reinforcing of each others' behavior. Other children might emulate the bullies' behavior because they perceive bullies as cool (Juvonen et al., 2003), wish to be accepted by them (Olthof & Goossens, 2008) or to be included in their group in order to gain status (Witvliet et al., 2009). Finally, as bullies are dominant and perceived popular, they are in a position to exert influence on a wider group of classmates, even those who would like to do something to help the victims (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). For instance, the influence of an individual child's empathy on defending behavior is influenced by the group context (Pöyhönen et al., 2008): some classroom contexts inhibit even highly empathic children from helping their vulnerable peers.

So far, there are many more ideas concerning group involvement in bullying than empirical studies testing them. This can be seen in the frequent use of expressions such as “might be” or “has been suggested” throughout the present review: many of the assumptions or speculations presented in the literature just have not been examined empirically. Furthermore, cross-sectional studies dominate existing research on group engagement in bullying. Longitudinal designs are desperately needed in order to disentangle the precursors of bystander behaviors (such as defending the victims) from their consequences, to disentangle selection from socialization effects in studies of peer clusters, to understand the mechanisms of those effects (e.g., what are the basis for selection; how peer-group socialization effects unfold), and to elaborate how classroom environments contribute to changes in bullying-related attitudes and behaviors over time.

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