Bullying in School and Online Contexts: Social Dominance, Bystander Compliance, and
Emotional Pain of Victims

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Summary

This chapter examines the contextual conditions that give rise to bullying, the motives underlying bullying behaviors, the plight of victims, and the role of bystanders. First, it emphasizes the critical role of considering environmental features when understanding the motivation behind bullying. Second, the chapter accounts for bystander compliance and explains how the lack of public objection to bullying helps shape misperceptions of social norms that maintain it. Bullying does not just involve an exchange between perpetrator and victim; rather, a defining feature of bullying is that it occurs in front of an audience. In light of the strong associations between victimization, attributions of self-blame, and subsequent distress, it is critical to acknowledge how various environmental conditions of a victim's experience may give rise to different interpretations of why they were targeted. Diversity of the student body is another important feature of school environments that might help curb bullying behavior.

Keywords: Bullying, Bystanders, Cyberbullying, Self-Blame, Social Dominance, Victims

Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive problem among school-aged youth and the topic has generated a large body of empirical research. Most of the research focuses on bullies and/or their targets by examining individual differences, such as personality characteristics or social deficits that can help account for their respective adjustment problems. Less attention has been placed on the larger group context and social functions of bullying. To fill this void, in the current chapter we highlight the group context and the interpersonal dynamics involved in bullying. More specifically, we examine the contextual conditions that give rise to bullying, the motives underlying bullying behaviors, the plight of victims, and the role of bystanders. By focusing on within-group dynamics, we examine these issues in groups and collectives that youth belong to with no choice (e.g., classrooms, schools). Examination of bullying in such involuntary groups provides new insights about its social functions and consequences for the victims as well as bystanders (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008).

Bullying takes many forms, ranging from hitting and kicking to manipulation of social reputations and relationships online. All of these behaviors are designed to intimidate, humiliate or belittle the target (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Bullies do not aggress against everyone, but rather strategically target specific individuals. Moreover, bullying involves more than a private interaction between the perpetrator (i.e., bully) and the target (i.e., the victim; Salmivalli, 2010). Unlike domestic violence or dating violence that frequently remain hidden from others, bullying typically takes place in front of an audience. For example, Johnny wants to trip and humiliate a classmate in a cafeteria full of students, not in an empty hallway. Finally, bullying involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993) that distinguishes it from *conflict* situations where two parties have, or are presumed to have, similar levels of power.

While many direct forms of bullying (e.g., physical aggression, threats, and name-calling) specifically involve humiliation in front of an audience, other more indirect forms of bullying explicitly use the peer group as a vehicle of the attack (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). To be able to damage someone's reputation or social status, a bully relies on the cooperation of peers to spread nasty rumors about someone or exclude the targeted individual from the group (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). Indeed, different social roles can be identified based on the level of cooperation with the perpetrator (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli et al, 1998). For example, some youths are eager to assist the perpetrator but do not instigate attacks on their own (Olweus, 1993). Others do not assist or join in the bullying but nevertheless end up reinforcing bullying by watching or helping spread rumors (Salmivalli et al., 1998). These "reinforcers" are the bystanders whose subtle actions (e.g., smiles) in response to witnessed bullying incidents not only reinforce the power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target, but also further encourage bullying (Salmivalli, 2010).

The goal of this chapter is to extend the above-mentioned analyses of group processes involved in bullying by highlighting the social dominance function of the behavior and its effects on the group. Rather than relying on any one theory, we interpret largely descriptive empirical findings in light of relevant theoretical constructs. We start by examining the motives underlying, and social functions of, bullying behaviors. In the second section, we account for bystander compliance and explain how the lack of public objection to bullying helps shape misperceptions of social norms that maintain bullying. We then review whom bullies are most likely to target, and how the distress of the victims varies depending on certain contextual features of schools (e.g., level of victimization), in the third section. In the fourth section, we turn to electronic or cyberbullying and discuss how the features of the online context may

promote bullying and intensify the distress of the target. The fifth section concludes the chapter with a brief discussion of lessons learned from the reviewed research on how to prevent and intervene with bullying.

Motives Underlying and Group Functions of Bullying

Up until recently, bullying, much like any type of childhood aggression, was presumed to reflect lack of social skills and predict antisocial personality of the perpetrator (e.g., Olweus, 1978). However, to date, there is substantial evidence suggesting that many forms of bullying demand sophisticated social skills (e.g., Björkqvist, Österman, Kaukiainen, 2000), and most youths' engagement in bullying, much like in other antisocial and disruptive behaviors, is short-lived (Broidy et al., 2003). In light of this temporal instability, we might ask when and why some youth would want to intimidate and humiliate their peers.

Some bullies readily admit that they resort to coercive behaviors in order to feel powerful and in control (Ojanen, Grönroos & Salmivalli, 2005; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). When asked how important it is to be visible, influential, and admired, those who engage in bullying score high (Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpää and Peets, 2005; Sitsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). For example, Salmivalli et al. (2005) showed that while valuing power and status were negatively related to social withdrawal and prosocial behaviors, they were positively related to proactive aggression (i.e., bullying).

If bullying behaviors reflect a need or desire to be powerful and prominent, then one might expect bullying to peak particularly during times of social uncertainty or change. One such time pertains to school transitions that interrupt peer networks. One of the most abrupt educational transitions in the US is the one from elementary to middle school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Compared to elementary schools, middle schools tend to be several times larger

in both physical size and student population (Juvonen et al., 2004). In middle school, students also have multiple teachers who do not know their students as well as do teachers in elementary school, and even classmates may vary from one class to the next throughout the school day. Thus, the shift from a highly structured and personal setting to a much less structured and more anonymous one may give rise to bullying. Indeed, bullying behaviors increase between elementary and middle school (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Moreover, there is a particularly robust association between bullying and social prominence after the transition to the new school (e.g., Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Galvan, Spatizer & Juvonen, 2011). Thus, bullying may come to serve a new function in this less personal and less structured school environment.

We propose that the social uncertainties associated with the transition to middle school not only increase the prevalence, but also enhance the utility and value of bullying. Bullying may therefore function much like aggression in some non-human primate troops: social hierarchies are established and maintained through demonstrations of power (Hinde, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1977). Although bullying is not the only way to secure a dominant status (e.g., de Waal, 1986; Hawley, 1999), bullying might nevertheless be a particularly effective way to exert control and feel powerful in expanding novel settings.

But what can then account for classroom and school differences during non-transition times? There is evidence suggesting that the rates of bullying vary as a function of the salience of social hierarchies. If the social function of bullying is in part to gain status and power, then we might expect bullying to be more common in environments where there is competition for social status. Indeed, students in classrooms with stronger hierarchies are at higher risk of victimization (Wolke, Woods, & Samara, 2009), while aggressive students are more popular and

better liked (Garandeau, Ahn, & Rodkin, 2011). Longitudinal analyses indicate that status hierarchies *precede* increases in bullying behaviors (Garandeau, Lee & Salmivalli, 2013). To better understand the interplay between motives underlying bullying behaviors, social hierarchy formation, and the effects of the hierarchy in further facilitating bullying behaviors, we now turn to analyzing the role of those who witness bullying. After all, the social success of bullies depends largely on the reactions of group members who witness the behavior.

Group Norms and Bystander Compliance

The means that help aggressive youth gain and maintain high social status also shape group norms. Studying gossip among adults, Baumeister et al. (2004) demonstrated that those who spread rumors (one form of bullying) gain in social status because engaging in this activity conveys that the gossiper knows the rules that govern the collective. While participation in gossip can strengthen and even elevate one's status within the group, the very characteristics targeted by bullies (behaviors, body shape or size, clothing, etc.), in turn, convey what is not tolerated by the members of this group. For example, in her study of middle schools, Eder (1995) demonstrated that norms about sexuality were enforced through *gender policing*. That is, youth who deviated from the gender norms were labeled as “sluts” and “fags” by those in the position of power. Even when the labels were untrue or incorrect, the process of ridicule and gossip reinforced the norms (e.g., notions about female and male sexuality). Indeed, focusing on deviations or violations of social norms is an effective way to foster compliance among group members (Baumeister et al., 2004).

Bullying also fosters compliance among bystanders who witness such behavior. Observational data obtained in Canadian elementary schools show that while peers are present in over 85% of bullying situations, a peer tries to stop the behavior in only about 10-19% of the

cases (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Although most youth regard bullying unacceptable or wrong (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), they typically go along with it and rarely challenge the behavior or stand up for the victim (Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli et al., 1998). In the case of repeated bullying incidents where the bully attacks the same target over and over again, diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latane, 1968) –a construct used to account for bystanders' inaction in response to violent crime where they do not know one another or the victim--seems inadequate to account for bystander passivity. To comprehend the lack of responses to incidents, we need to understand how bullying affects those who witness such incidents.

The mere witnessing of bullying is emotionally distressing, which might explain why bystanders fail to intervene. By relying on end-of-school-day mood ratings and open-ended accounts of daily bullying incidents (both personally experienced and witnessed), Nishina and Juvonen (2005) demonstrated that both anxiety and school dislike peaked during the days when middle school students saw someone else being bullied. Other studies suggest that fear of retaliation or threat to one's own social standing as well as lack of confidence in knowing how to effectively intervene can account for bystander passivity (e.g., Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2008; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005; Pöyhönen, Juvonen & Salmivalli, 2010; Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli & Voeten, 2007). While anxiety and self-protective motives can help explain why most youth are reluctant to intervene with bullying, the exceptions involve those with high social status. Examining the relations between feeling empathy for the victims and defending as well as self-efficacy to intervene and defend, Pöyhönen et al. (2010) found that these associations were each moderated by social status. That is, only high social status individuals were propelled to act on their empathy and sense of self-efficacy to intervene.

By failing to protect the victims, most bystanders thereby align themselves with bullies. When bullying incidents take place, some bystanders respond by smiling and laughing, giving the impression that they approve of the behavior (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1998). But even the mere passivity of the onlookers suggests that they do not object to the behavior (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Although youths should recognize that they themselves do not always act consistent with their moral judgments, they interpret others' public behavior (i.e., not objecting to bullying) as indicating their approval of the behavior. Thus, bystander compliance gives rise to *pluralistic ignorance* (Miller & Prentice, 1994) when youth falsely assume that peers' behavior reflects their approval of bullying. Such misperceptions in turn further promote bullying. This link was demonstrated by Sandstrom, Makover, and Bartini (2012) who compared fourth and eighth graders' perceptions of their personal attitudes and their classmates' attitudes toward bullying. Not only did students perceive the attitudes of their classmates to be more favorable than their own (i.e., more supportive of bullying), but also their overestimation of classmates' approval was related to higher likelihood of joining the bullying and lower likelihood of defending the victim.

While misperceived group norms help further account for why youth fail to show their concern for victims of bullying even when they condemn the behavior, the power of social norms can also work the other way. Pozzoli and Gini (2010) showed that perceived pressure to intervene, in turn, predicts defending. Thus, in addition to social status, group norms play a critical role in either inhibiting or encouraging bystander involvement. Taken together, these findings again demonstrate the importance of the larger group context: bystanders' passivity is not explained by lack of personal concerns or inability to feel for the victim, but rather by (mis)perceptions of group norms and their social rank.

Victim Plight in Context

Thus far we have reviewed the role of social hierarchies in promoting bullying and how bullying and the hierarchical structure of the group shape peer norms. We have also described how policing of group norms relates to bystander compliance and how pluralistic ignorance about the acceptability of bullying can further encourage bullying. Although we have referenced victims of bullying insofar as they are targeted by bullies and not helped by bystanders, here we shift our focus to accounting for the emotional pain of victims and how this varies across different group contexts.

It is well established that victims of bullying exhibit a variety of concurrent and long-term psychosocial problems. In the short-term, students who are bullied often experience internalizing symptoms (e.g., feeling anxious and lonely; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010), school adjustment difficulties (e.g., attendance problems, poor grades; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), and physical health complaints (e.g., headaches, nausea; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009). Even experiencing single incidents of bullying is related to increased daily levels of humiliation and anxiety (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). Furthermore, longitudinal analyses suggest that victimization experiences have lasting effects on the chronically bullied. Controlling for a range of childhood risk factors, those who are bullied during childhood or adolescence are more likely to experience psychiatric problems in adulthood, compared to nonvictimized youth (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Thus, there is much evidence that victims of bullying experience high levels of emotional distress not only as these incidents occur, but also, in some cases, over the course of many years.

Can we then predict who is likely to be bullied by their peers? Given the strategic nature of bullying, it is not surprising that perpetrators target those who do not fit the group (e.g.,

classroom or school) norms. For example, youth who are overweight (Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002), those who physically mature “off-time” compared to peers (Reynolds & Juvonen, 2010), youth with disabilities (Son, Parish, & Peterson, 2012), or those who are perceived to be or who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012) are likely to be targeted in most school settings. It appears that personal characteristics and particular social identities are conducive to bullying especially when accompanied by marginalized social status (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Hence, in addition to indicating what is not tolerated or what might threaten the group’s image, bullies target the most non-conforming individuals who are also frequently less socially connected. Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that by early adolescence non-conforming in-group members are evaluated more harshly than out-group members who are perceived similar to self (Abrams, Rutland & Cameron, 2003). The least fitting classmates (or schoolmates) therefore suffer not only from bullying but also from social isolation and lack of support within their collectives.

We presume that the silence by the bystanders further exacerbates the humiliation and pain of the victimization experience. Under these circumstances, the victim is likely to conclude that “nobody cares about me” or “there is nothing I can do to stop this”. Indeed, internalizing problems (e.g., depression, loneliness) are linked to victims’ tendency to blame themselves for these bullying experiences. Specifically, victims of bullying frequently endorse *characterological self-blaming attributions*, which involve attributing an event to something internal, uncontrollable, and stable (e.g., It’s something about *the type of person I am*; Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Such attributions help account for the distress of the victimized (Graham & Juvonen, 1998) as well as the continuation of victimization (Schacter, White, Chang, & Juvonen, 2014).

Maladaptive self-blaming attributions are also sensitive to the broader social context in which victims experience bullying. Focusing on an ethnically diverse sample of middle school students, Schacter and Juvonen (2014) found that when bullied youth attended schools with lower levels of overall victimization, they were more likely to turn inward and feel like ‘it’s all my fault’. Victims at schools with higher levels of victimization, in contrast, were more likely to attribute these negative experiences to more controllable and less stable factors, such as being ‘in the wrong place in the wrong time’. Consistent with these findings regarding attributions, the associations between victimization and mental health (i.e., social anxiety, depression) are also stronger in settings with lower overall levels of bullying and victimization (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004; Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2012). This is one demonstration of how social-cognitions (e.g., self-blame) are shaped not only by personal experiences, but also by the normativity of the experiences within groups and collectives. Such findings highlight that victimization experiences are embedded within a broader group and school context, which has implications for victims’ subsequent adjustment.

Beyond overall prevalence of victimization at school, another important contextual feature relating to youth’s bullying experiences is ethnic composition, and specifically the ethnic diversity schools. As classroom and school level ethnic diversity increase, students belonging to societally marginalized ethnic groups (African-American and Latino) report feeling greater sense of school safety, and less loneliness and victimization (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). We presume that schools with high ethnic diversity possibly provide students more opportunities to fit in, and as such they may also reduce the need to establish and maintain a social hierarchy, while in homogeneous settings group members may feel pressure to conform to a narrow set of norms. Further analyses of diverse settings by Graham, Munniksma and Juvonen (2013) showed

how those students who were able to “take advantage” of the diversity of the school by forming cross-ethnic friendships felt least vulnerable. Taken together, these findings suggest that the composition of groups and collectives is another important contextual factor to consider.

Electronic Context of Cyberbullying

Thus far we have focused on the role of group processes and larger contextual variants within schools and classrooms. But in recent years, bullying increasingly occurs online as well. Cyberbullying has been defined as targeted humiliation or intimidation (e.g., insults or threats) sent and received through the use of the Internet or mobile devices (Smith et al., 2008). Across studies of cyberbullying, prevalence estimates generally range between 10 and 40% reporting cybervictimization, and approximately 10 to 20% reporting cyberbullying others (see Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014 for meta-analysis). Many of the same youth who students who are targets of school-based bullying also experience cybervictimization (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Similarly, there is significant overlap between students involved in traditional and cyberbullying perpetration (Kowalski et al., 2014). The question relevant to this chapter is whether the group processes underlying cyberbullying, bystander compliance, and victim plight might be unique to online environments.

In spite of the overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, certain features or properties of electronic communication are likely to magnify both bullying behaviors and experiences. For example, limited monitoring (i.e., by adults) and potential for anonymity create a venue where youth do not necessarily think twice about posting or sending hurtful messages (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). At the same time, lack of social cues (e.g., facial expressions, emotional reactions) promotes greater levels of self-disclosure (Mesch, 2009). In focus groups (Mishna et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008), youth have specifically expressed

concerns about the increased disclosure. When they convey sensitive information about themselves and their relationships online, this information can then be used to humiliate them. Thus, cyberspace promotes disinhibited behaviors, making bullying perpetration easier, while also increasing the odds of becoming the target of bullying.

Bystander responses, in turn, appear to be swayed by factors similar to school-based bullying. For example, in an experimental study of online bystander behavior, Bastiaensens and colleagues (2014) found that youth witnessing cyberbullying were more likely to join in and engage in similar behaviors if they were told that their good friends were also encouraging the bullying. Consistent with our previous analysis of the social function of bullying, these results suggest that joining in bullying behavior may be particularly common when such behaviors are regarded as normative among close friends.

Given the above described dynamics with bullies and bystanders, there are reasons to expect that experiences with bullying in the electronic environment may be particularly distressing for victims. Youth report that picture/video clip and chatroom bullying are significantly worse experiences, compared to traditional bullying (Smith et al., 2008). This may be partially attributable to the very public nature of information posted on social media (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Unless strict privacy settings are enacted, when a humiliating photo of a student is posted on Facebook, it reaches wide audiences, not just a close group of friends. Moreover, victims often experience cyberbullying at home, alone, and without the immediate support of peers to step in (Smith et al., 2008). This experience may then feel as if the victim is humiliated under a spotlight on stage, while the audience hides in the darkness of a large auditorium.

Taken together, the lack of social cues online may facilitate bullying behavior and also increase risk for being targeted due to greater self-disclosure. Although the group processes of

witnessing cyberbullying may function similarly to those operating in school-based bullying, visible reminders of one's large social network audience (e.g., number of Facebook friends) may make the victimization experiences more painful. Thus, there are reasons to expect that the specific features of the online environment not only promote the hostile behaviors, but may also magnify the pain of the targets.

Lessons Learned

In this chapter, our goal was to provide a social-contextual framework for understanding the group processes involved in bullying during childhood and adolescence. By examining how the prevalence and impact of bullying behavior shifts across different social and structural features of environments, we identified specific conditions under which bullying may be particularly useful and when experiencing bullying may be especially painful for victims. Where do we go from here? We hope that our discussion of bullying offers several important lessons regarding the processes underlying this behavior and implications for prevention and intervention initiatives.

First, we have emphasized the critical role of considering environmental features when understanding the motivation behind bullying. Based on the research reviewed here, it is important for researchers, policymakers, and school personnel to be aware of how large, unstructured, and anonymous environments necessitate the creation of structure. Youth may fill this desire by forming social status hierarchies, which are in turn related to elevated levels of bullying. Moving forward, it will be important to experiment with the implementation of school organizational structures. Specifically, these structures should reduce the need for youth rely on bullying in order to form social hierarchies during social transitions. Another goal is to change the social norms so that social status can be gained not by subordinating others, but by being

brave enough to stand up for others (cf. Gini et al., 2008). At the same time, it is also vital to consider the individual motives of bullies. If bullying is about fulfilling a need to dominate others, perhaps schools can offer leadership opportunities for students that allow them to harness this motivation in a more productive and acceptable fashion.

Additionally, our review highlights that bullying is, at its core, a dynamic social process. Bullying does not just involve an exchange between perpetrator and victim; rather, a defining feature of bullying is that it occurs in front of an (often silent or encouraging) audience. Given the power of social norms guiding behavior, and given that most youth misinterpret bystander passivity as a sign of approval of bullying, it might be important to teach youth about such misperceptions. Making students aware of each other's true beliefs and attitudes about bullying (i.e., that it is unacceptable) may help to prevent pluralistic ignorance and hesitance to take a stand in bullying situations. For example, the KiVa bullying intervention in Finland has shown success by providing students with methods to enhance empathy, self-efficacy, and show support to victims of bullying (Kärnä et al., 2011). This program also publicizes students' private attitudes about bullying, in order to eliminate their impressions that others agree with bullying behavior. Thus, we believe that interventions that go beyond traditional approaches (e.g., advertising what is not tolerated in school and the importance of reporting of incidents) and aim to change the social norms that support bullying have great promise.

Although changing peer group norms may help victims of bullying feel more supported, we must also be increasingly sensitive to the role of the broader context in the victim experience. In light of the strong associations between victimization, attributions of self-blame, and subsequent distress, it is critical to acknowledge how various environmental conditions of a victim's experience (e.g., varying levels of victimization at school) may give rise to different

interpretations of why they were targeted. Thus, in addition to interventions that aim to change group norms, techniques like attributional retraining might be particularly effective in alleviating victims' tendencies to blame themselves, thereby reducing their negative mental health outcomes. These programs may be especially effective for students that are targeted in schools that lack ethnic diversity, or where they represent the predominant ethnic group (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009).

Diversity of the study body is another important feature of school environments that might help curb bullying behavior. Environments that can promote a balance of power among ethnic groups are beneficial, insofar as they encourage an egalitarian social setting where bullying does not serve the same benefits as in a more structured, or hierarchical environment. But other types of diversity pertaining to socioeconomic differences, variations in sexual orientation, and numbers of students with disabilities may matter also. In more homogenous schools, it may be particularly obvious when a student does not fit group norms. Furthermore, social norms about what is and is not tolerated can become increasingly narrow if bullying continues. Thus, many forms of diversity might promote multiple group norms where most students can find their niche and feel both safe and accepted.

Finally, we also discussed cyberspace as a relevant context for understanding bullying behaviors and victim plight. There are a number of similarities between online and offline (e.g., school) contexts. In terms of the unique risks posed by cyber environments, we acknowledge that the majority of students today use online communication to maintain and expand existing social relationships. In turn, we do not suggest that youth should avoid using these media; in fact, there is evidence that social interactions with peers online can be quite beneficial for students coping with exclusion (Gross, 2009). Although we highlighted the potential negative consequences of

online communication among youth, it is important to realize that texting, tweeting, and Facebook posting also offer opportunities for positive social development. As such, intervention and prevention programs specifically targeting cyberbullying should not only use similar approaches to those listed above (e.g., encouraging bystander intervention, improving victim attributions) but also find ways to capitalize on these features of online environment that can promote adaptive coping.

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