

Addressing school bullying: Insights from theories of group processes[☆]Shelley Hymel^{*}, Robyn McClure, Miriam Miller, Ellen Shumka, Jessica Trach

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ABSTRACT

In order to enhance efforts to address bullying in schools, and in response to the limited success of school-based anti-bullying programs to date, this paper considers bullying as a group phenomenon and explores theories of group processing that can inform future prevention and intervention efforts. Moving beyond efforts to reduce bullying by enhancing bystander responses, we consider research and theory addressing peer group socialization processes, the role of teachers as an “invisible hand” in structuring peer groups, social interdependence as applied to the design of cooperative learning environments, and collective efficacy. Although these theories are not in themselves developmental, and address group processes that operate across ages, they can inform both future prevention and intervention efforts and applied developmental research that explores the age-related contextual and individual factors that contribute to school bullying.

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Bullying is recognized as a significant problem in schools worldwide (e.g., Jimerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2010; Pepler & Craig, 2008; Smith, Pepler & Rigby, 2004; Smith et al., 1999), with attention to bullying often borne of tragedy (Cullen, 2009; Godfrey, 2005; Marr & Fields, 2001; see also *Submit the Documentary*, www.submitthedocumentary.com; *Bully Movie*, www.bullymovie.com). Over the past few decades, increasing pressure has been placed on schools to address the issue and many have taken up the challenge, with no shortage of anti-bullying programs available (see Rigby, 2012; Sullivan, 2011 for overviews). Despite these efforts, rates of traditional forms of bullying appear to be declining only slightly (Currie et al., 2012; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod & Hamby, 2010; Rigby & Smith, 2011), and online bullying appears to be on the rise (Jones, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2013). Although “evidenced-based practice” has become familiar mantra in education (e.g., Slavin, 2002), school-based anti-bullying interventions have met with mixed success. On the positive side, a handful of programs that address bullying and victimization in different ways have documented significant, positive outcomes (e.g., Cross, Hall, Hamilton, Pinabona & Erceg, 2004; Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom & Snell, 2009; Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, Kärnä & Poskiparta, 2010a, 2010b), with whole-school approaches seen as most effective (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). However, demonstrated effectiveness in one context is no guarantee of success elsewhere (e.g., see Olweus, 1993, 1994 versus Roland, 2000, or Hanewinkel, 2004). Moreover, despite the documented

efficacy of some programs, overall effect sizes have been small to negligible (Merrell, Guedner, Ross & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004), with one recent meta-analysis indicating reductions of only 17–23% on average in experimental schools, relative to comparison schools (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Thus, although there appear to be multiple ways to address bullying, and some demonstrated success in doing so, we have not yet identified all of the critical components of effective anti-bullying efforts, and need to remain open to new and different approaches to addressing this complex problem.

In their review of research on school bullying, Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt and Hymel (2010) offer several reasons for the lackluster results reported for school-based anti-bullying programs to date (e.g., insensitivity of measures, implementation fidelity and dosage, etc.). Two of the reasons they offered stand out as particularly significant – that anti-bullying interventions have not been well grounded theoretically, and have not seriously considered the social ecology in which bullying takes place. Accordingly, in this paper, we explore research and theory that focuses on group processes underlying bullying and how these can inform school-based anti-bullying efforts. We begin with a brief review of research that emphasizes peer group factors, and especially the role of bystanders, on bullying behavior. Expanding this focus, we then consider theories of group processes and peer socialization, and how each can provide insights and new directions for anti-bullying pre/intervention efforts. Specifically, we consider Harris' (1995, 1998/2009) Group Socialization Theory, recent research on teachers and classroom dynamics by Farmer et al. (2013), Deutsch's (1949, 1962) theory of social interdependence, as applied to cooperative learning (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2009), and, finally, Sampson's (e.g., Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997) theory of collective efficacy. These theories are not in themselves developmental. Rather, they are based on group processes that appear to operate across the life span,

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in part in response to a fundamental need for all human beings (regardless of age) to feel a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We believe that a better understanding of these processes can impact both educational practice and applied developmental research on school bullying.

Peer processes in bullying

Scholars have increasingly argued for a social-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in understanding school bullying (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2010; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Swearer et al., 2012), within which bullying, like other aspects of human behavior and development, reflects a bidirectional interaction between the individual and the environmental systems in which he/she functions (family, neighborhood, school, community, society, etc.). Consistent with this framework is research focused on the role of the peer group in supporting bullying. For example, the rates of bullying vary as a function of the overall social climate of a school (e.g., see Gendron, Williams & Guerra, 2011; Guerra, Williams & Sadek, 2011; Marsh et al., 2012; Richard, Schneider & Mallet, 2012; Wang, Berry & Swearer, 2013), and the degree to which peer norms support bullying/aggression (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Bullying has long been considered a group phenomenon (e.g., Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 2001). Observational research by (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Pepler, Craig & O'Connell, 2010) showed that peer bystanders are present in 85–88% of bullying incidents, although they seldom intervene on behalf of the victim and are as likely to support the bullying (see also Doll, Song & Siemers, 2004; Pellegrini & Long, 2004; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1996). When peers do intervene on behalf of victims, bullying is observed to stop within just a few seconds 57% of the time (Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001). Given such evidence, peer bystanders have come to be viewed as a critical focus in anti-bullying efforts (e.g., Hazler, 1996; Salmivalli et al., 2010a, 2010b). Unfortunately, studies show that, with age, bystanders are increasingly passive in their responses to bullying (Marsh et al., 2011; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse & Neale, 2010). Moreover, even if effective, there may be emotional costs to witnessing bullying for the bystander (Bonanno & Hymel, 2006; Rivers, 2012; Rivers, Poteat, Noret & Ashurst, 2009). Although efforts to encourage prosocial bystander intervention holds promise for anti-bullying initiatives, telling kids to “stand up” ignores other group processes that contribute to bullying, ones that adults can potentially influence. We suggest that, it is not just about changing bystander responses, but more about shifting group norms and group dynamics to create a sense of community in which bullying is less likely to happen in the first place. To understand these processes, we first consider how peers socialize one another, based on Harris's (1995, 1998/2009) Group Socialization Theory.

Group Socialization Theory

Based on decades of research in social psychology, Group Socialization Theory (Harris, 1995, 1998/2009) posits that, when individuals (of any age) are put into groups, certain group processes naturally emerge. First, *between group processes* begin to operate, inevitably leading individuals in a group to behave in ways that favor their own group and discriminate against other groups. Specifically, *group contrast effects* reflect a natural tendency to emphasize the differences between groups, often in the service of enhancing self-esteem by viewing one's own group as “better”. Over time, these group contrast effects serve to widen (perceived) differences between groups, as similarities are underemphasized (Harris, 1995; Jetten, Spears & Manstead, 1997). Differences gradually become more pronounced and group norms become more extreme, creating an “us” versus “them” mentality, and laying the foundation for further discrimination based on group differences. The classic *Robbers Cave Experiment* of the 1950s (Sherif, Harvey, White,

Hood & Sherif, 1961; Sherif, White & Harvey, 1955) offers an excellent example of group contrast effects, when two seemingly identical groups of boys at a summer camp became increasingly distinct over time as the norms and behaviors set by each group became more pronounced and group differences widened. The “Rattlers” were expected to handle scrapes and bruises without complaint; the “Eagles” began to pray as a group.

Group contrast effects are crucial to the development of group norms and identity, and are typically based on the most salient characteristic that distinguishes two groups. In elementary school, for example, the most noticeable characteristic is gender; during adolescence, sex differences are second to race, age, and social class when groups are being formed (see Harris, 1995, 2009). The resulting within-group favoritism and out-group discrimination are surprisingly easy to elicit once people are placed in groups, which led social psychologist Henry Tajfel (1982), who first identified this phenomenon, to conceptualize it as the *minimal in-group paradigm*. We suggest that this natural, and potentially adaptive, between-group process affords ample opportunities for interpersonal aggression, and allows individuals to justify bullying simply because a peer is not a member of the same group.

Concurrently, two major *within group processes* also operate within groups. One reflects the tendency for group members to become more similar over time, what Harris (1995) referred to as *within group assimilation*. Group members gradually think, feel, and behave in ways consistent with the group prototype or norm (actual or perceived), resulting in increased similarity, and consistent adherence to group standards of behavior (e.g., Berger & Rodkin, 2012 on group effects on prosociality and aggression). If an individual strays too far, other group members are quick to reinforce these norms (Adler, Kless & Alder, 1992), although the tactics through which conformity is maintained often overlap with behaviors that some classify as bullying. The boys in the *Robbers Cave Experiment* would tease group members who did not conform to expected behavior (Sherif et al., 1961). According to Harris (2009, p.158) “laughter is the group's favorite weapon: it is used around the world to keep nonconformers in line. Those for whom laughter alone does not do the job – those who don't know what they're doing wrong or who will not or cannot conform – suffer a worse fate, expulsion from the group.” To avoid such consequences group members increasingly conform to the shared identity and the resulting enhanced within-group similarity serves to further intensify ingroup biases and outgroup discrimination. The more individuals identify with the group, the more they are willing to defend it against other groups and against nonconformers. Indeed, students will attribute blame to a victim for ignoring group norms and view the bully as reinforcing those norms (Tershoj & Salmivalli, 2003).

Perceptions of group norms also impact how peer witnesses respond to bullying. Pozzoli and Gini (2010) demonstrated that children were more likely to intervene on behalf of victims when they felt normative pressure to do so. However, group norms and expectations are often implicit rather than explicit, leaving a lot of room for misinterpretation and misperception. Children who overestimate their peer group's support for bullying report more willingness to join in the bullying and less effort to defend the victim (Sandstrom, Makover & Bartini, 2013). As well, such norms are often inferred on the basis of peer behavior. For example, Gini, Albiero, Benelli and Altoe (2008) and Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi and Franzoni (2008) have shown that when peer bystanders were more passive in their responses to bullying, children were more likely to blame the victim and to like them less.

Taking this one step further, Paluck and Shepard (2012) argued that the public behavior of well connected and highly visible group members, called *social referents*, provide implicit, but influential cues regarding perceived group norms. In a high school field study aimed at addressing peer bullying, social referents were asked to discuss and write essays about their experiences with bullying, and five were chosen to read their essay aloud to the group. By systematically changing the public behaviour of selected social referents, and applying the

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