The Role of Classroom Peer Ecology and Bystanders' Responses in Bullying

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ABSTRACT—*Over the last few decades, research on the role of classroom peer ecologies in student-to-student bullying has widened our understanding of this phenomenon. Bullying functions not only for individual perpetrators but also for the whole peer group by, for instance, providing a common goal and a semblance of cohesion for the group members. Bullying is more likely in classrooms characterized by poor climate, strong status hierarchy, and probullying norms. Bystanders' responses contribute to the bullying dynamic by either rewarding or sanctioning the behavior of the perpetrators. Bystanders' responses to bullying can be changed through school-based programs, mediating the effects of the programs on bullying. Further efforts are needed to transform evidence into schools' preventive practices encompassing the peer ecologies.*

KEYWORDS—*bullying; bystanders; classroom; peer ecology*

Bullying is defined as intentional acts of aggression directed at one individual over an extended period. Another feature of bullying is the power differential between the perpetrator and the victim (1). This imbalance of power, which can be based on physical, psychological, or social characteristics, makes it hard for the targeted individual to defend himself or herself against the aggressive acts. While recognizing that bullying occurs in many social contexts, in this article, we focus on student-to-student bullying at school, which affects the socioemotional and academic development of children and adolescents worldwide. Along with its often-damaging consequences for the victims (2)

and links with later adjustment difficulties for the perpetrators (3), bullying can also adversely affect students who witness it (4).

Much of the early research on school bullying focused on the individual characteristics of bullies and victims (5). Although the individual attributes associated with the risk of bullying perpetration and victimization need to be understood, this perspective represents only part of a complex dynamic. Since the late 1990s, researchers have increasingly conceptualized bullying as a group phenomenon in which most members of the group are involved (6). As such, it is the larger group—such as a classroom of students—that has the power to enable or disable bullying. In this article, we discuss how peer ecologies in classrooms, and especially the responses of bystanders, contribute to bullying. First, we introduce the theorized functions of bullying behavior and how they relate to peer group dynamics. We then examine the characteristics of classroom peer ecologies that are associated more frequently with bullying problems. Drawing from both correlational and intervention studies, we take a closer look at bystanders' behaviors and how they relate to bullying and victimization. We conclude with implications for antibullying practices and suggestions for further research.

THE FUNCTIONS OF BULLYING AND THE PEER GROUP

Children who bully can have good social-cognitive skills and can be perceived as popular by peers (7). Then what drives the bullying behavior? At least some of it is motivated by the perpetrators' quest for power and high status, and bullying can help individuals obtain these goals (8). Because the group assigns status to its members, acts of bullying need an audience. Indeed, witnesses are present in most bullying incidents (9). By its members' responses to the acts of bullying—that is, whether the bullying behavior is socially rewarded—the group can either enable or put a stop to bullying. This view of bullying as goal-directed behavior fueled by social reinforcement from peers also helps explain the links between certain individual

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characteristics and victimization: To maximize the effectiveness of their strategic behavior, perpetrators tend to select targets who are seen as unlikely to stand up for themselves or be defended by others (8, 10).

Bullying may serve a function not only for the individual perpetrators but also for the whole peer group: Usually targeted at only one or two group members (11), bullying can provide a common goal and a semblance of cohesion to dysfunctional groups characterized by low-quality friendships and lacking in cohesiveness (7). According to this perspective, bullying often results when the bully exerts normative social influence that is exacerbated by the bully's popularity and by peers' fears of becoming the next victims. Dysfunctional groups may be more susceptible to such normative social influence than well-functioning groups because of the semblance of unity that ganging up on a few selected peers may provide the rest of the group, albeit at the expense of the victims' well-being. Although it may be easier to explain the emergence and persistence of bullying in dysfunctional groups, socially skillful bullies can sometimes manipulate even well-functioning groups (those characterized by higher quality relationships and cohesiveness based on mutual sympathy) into enabling the bullying (7). This requires using more subtle forms of aggression and hiding any hostile intent that could lead the group to turn against the bully.

Regardless of whether bullying is viewed as a means to achieve group members' individual goals, as serving a function for the whole group, or both, these views on the functions of bullying tie in with the social ecologies in which bullying takes place. And they call for a deeper understanding of the kinds of contexts in which bullying is likely to be rewarded, as well as raising considerations for prevention and intervention.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASSROOM PEER ECOLOGIES AND BULLYING

Rates of bullying and victimization vary across classrooms (12), typically co-occurring with students' negative perceptions of the classroom and school climate (13). Although the causal direction of the association is unclear and conceptualizations of climate vary, students' negative perceptions of the shared psychosocial environment may reflect membership in a dysfunctional peer group. Such environments, as discussed earlier, may be more likely to foster susceptibility to peer influence, and the emergence and maintenance of bullying because of the artificial appearance of cohesion that bullying may provide. Classroom peer ecologies that tend to promote bullying are also characterized by strong status hierarchies (large differences in students' social status; 14, 15). Aggressive children are more popular in highly hierarchical classrooms (16), which may be linked to the higher prevalence of bullying in such classrooms via bullies' exacerbated social influence on the peer group.

In addition to poor climate and strong status hierarchy, probullying classroom norms help explain why students in some classrooms are more likely to be involved in bullying. Such norms can be reflected in students' prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, such as in low levels of antibullying attitudes (17, 18), positive expectations regarding the social outcomes of probullying actions (19), and negative expectations of the social outcomes of provictim actions (18), as well as in high levels of bullying perpetration (17)—all of which are associated with an individual student's higher risk of involvement in bullying. Furthermore, bullying perpetration is more accepted in classrooms in which popular students engage in it frequently (20), indicating that the norms set by popular students matter more than the average rate of bullying in the classroom.

From the point of view of students at risk for becoming the perpetrators or targets of bullying, the association between individual risk factors and bullying involvement varies from one classroom to another and depends on the classroom normative environment. For instance, children with a stronger genetic disposition for aggressive behaviors are more likely than others to behave aggressively; they are even more likely to behave in this way when classroom norms favor aggression (21). These children are also at a higher risk of being victimized by their peers, but only when classroom norms are unfavorable toward aggressive behaviors, whereas a genetic disposition for such behaviors may protect children from victimization when the norms favor aggression (21).

Classroom norms can also be reflected in the explicit behaviors of students when witnessing bullying. Because the reactions of peers to bullying provide direct feedback to the bullies as well as their targets, they can affect whether the bullying continues as well as the victims' adjustment. We now take a closer look at the many roles at play in bullying.

BYSTANDERS' RESPONSES TO BULLYING

The participant role approach (6) has shed light on the different ways members of a group, such as a classroom, contribute to bullying. Beyond the bully–victim dyad, bullying incidents usually involve a group of bystanders: Assistants join in and help the ringleader bullies, whereas reinforcers stay around and signal their approval of the bullying by laughing or cheering. Defenders step up to intervene on behalf of the victimized peers or otherwise support the victims, whereas outsiders remain passive and do not signal explicitly either approval or disapproval of the situation.

The correlates of different bystander behaviors have only recently gained researchers' attention. According to studies on this issue, defending the victim is associated with high self-efficacy for defending behavior and affective empathy for the victim, and a high social status in the classroom enables students to act on their self-efficacy and empathy (22). Moreover, whereas defenders tend to have positive expectations that the victim will feel better as a result of being defended and value such an outcome, reinforcers' expectations tend to be negative

and they do not seem to value the positive outcomes for the victimized. Outsiders who remain passive in bullying situations have conflicting expectations of outcomes and values (23).

Studies also suggest that like bullying perpetration and victimization, the peer context influences both students' willingness to intervene (24) and behaviors by bystanders (25, 26). Accordingly, although students' participant roles are quite stable when no changes take place in the classroom context (27), children's and adolescents' behavior in bullying situations can vary across contexts. The power of the context is also demonstrated by the fact that although most students disapprove of bullying, most engage in probullying behaviors (e.g., assisting or reinforcing the bullies' behavior). However, classrooms differ in the extent to which students tend to engage in probullying versus provictim bystander behaviors.

When peers intervene on behalf of a victim, this often stops the bullying quickly (28). Bullying is perpetrated more often in classrooms where bullies' behavior is often reinforced and victimized classmates are rarely defended, implying that bullying is socially rewarded (29). Perpetrators may be even more sensitive to the lack of peers' reinforcing behaviors than to expressions of support for the victims, which may occur outside the bullies' presence (29, 30).

Classmates' bystander behaviors are also important from the point of view of vulnerable students: Children who are socially anxious and those who have been rejected by peers more often become targets of bullying in classrooms characterized by high levels of reinforcing the bully and low levels of defending the victim (31), indicating that individual risk factors lead to victimization only when the context allows. Furthermore, bystanders' responses can determine victims' adjustment: Whereas bystanders' indifference to victims' plight may cause the most traumatic memories, having at least one defender in the classroom can buffer against the harmful effects of bullying to victimized students' self-esteem and social status (32).

THE IMPORTANCE OF BYSTANDERS IN ANTIBULLYING PROGRAMS

Given their role in bullying and in the adjustment of victimized students, the classroom peer ecology, and bystanders' behaviors in particular, have been recognized increasingly in school-based antibullying programs (e.g., KiVa antibullying program; 33). School-based programs that are founded on the conceptualization of bullying as a group process and that explicitly target bystanders aim to raise students' awareness of group processes in bullying and encourage them to support victimized peers rather than reinforce the bullies. Such programs increased students' likelihood of intervening as bystanders (34) and decreased their tendency to reinforce bullies' actions (12).

Longitudinal mediation analyses, although rare, test the hypothesis that changes in bystanders' responses to bullying influence bullying perpetration. In a recent study on the mediating mechanisms of the KiVa antibullying program, based on the participant role approach, influencing classmates' bystander behaviors reduced bullying (30). School-based antibullying programs that target bullying-related attitudes and group norms, including bystanders' behaviors, can also generalize to cyberbullying (35).

Although we have focused on peer bystanders' reactions to bullying, the way students individually and collectively perceive the reactions and attitudes of the adults at school is also important. Teachers—who often implement or facilitate antibullying practices such as the ones we have described—can influence the bullying dynamic by interacting with the individual students involved in bullying, managing relations between the students involved, and influencing the peer ecology of the classroom (36). In a study on the mediators of the KiVa program, students who perceived their homeroom teacher as increasingly disapproving of bullying were less likely to bully later (30). Victimization declined the most in classrooms in which teachers implemented antibullying curricula with high fidelity (37).

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

Research in the past couple of decades on the role of classroom peer ecology in bullying has widened our understanding of this complex dynamic as well as provided a strong theoretical basis for prevention and intervention programs. Alongside students' individual characteristics and teachers' influences, classroom peer ecologies contribute in many ways to school bullying and can be used in antibullying practices. Although the ultimate responsibility for ending bullying and helping victims should always rest with adults, theory and research suggest that it is key to empower children and adolescents by raising their awareness of the group dynamics of bullying and providing them with opportunities to practice strategies that withdraw social rewards from bullies and help victimized peers. Targeting prevention and intervention efforts at the entire peer group can create an environment that supports the expression of antibullying attitudes.

Several questions remain. Most studies on bullying have been done in school contexts in which the classroom is a stable unit. Compared with those of younger children, adolescents' learning contexts tend to be more varied and complex. This means that the group of peers with whom adolescents interact can change throughout the school day and more often includes individuals outside a student's classroom. Especially in such contexts, researchers should consider the influences of informal peer groups and the broader context of the school community (38), perhaps asking whether the most influential peer group is the one that a student already belongs to or the one he or she aspires to join.

Besides classrooms and schools, children and adolescents are affected by, and interact with, other social contexts (e.g., families, neighborhood play groups, extracurricular activities) that

often increase in number and social complexity as youth grow older. These proximal contexts are embedded within a multilayered social ecology with the society and culture as overarching structures (39). Researchers should consider more comprehensively the influences beyond the most proximal contexts and the interactions of contexts within and across different levels of the social ecology (40).

Although we need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex contextual influences on bullying and victimization, the proximal contexts within which children's daily interactions occur, such as classroom peer ecologies, remain important arenas for bullying prevention. Although research in the past few decades has reshaped our view of bullying, bringing into focus the group processes and contextual factors involved, the bully–victim dyad often appears as the focus of efforts to counteract bullying. In the busy environment of schools, these efforts often revolve more around putting out fires than investing in preventive work that encompasses the peer ecologies. Such discrepancies between theory and practice should motivate increased collaboration among researchers, school professionals, parents, and policymakers to integrate evidence-based tools and programs into the working cultures of schools.

Moreover, even though some antibullying programs have been proven effective, many challenges remain. For instance, a frequent problem for programs that prevent and reduce bullying and victimization by targeting peer ecology is that the most popular bullies often resist changing their behavior (41). We should also focus on how to alleviate the suffering of the children and adolescents who, despite antibullying efforts, remain the targets of bullying in contexts of decreasing victimization (42).

Finally, we should broaden the focus of research to other forms of aggression in schools such as student-to-adult, adult-to-student, and adult-to-adult bullying (43, 44); homophobic teasing; and sexual harassment (45). Shedding light on the extent to which risk factors of the different forms of aggression overlap, and on whether the effects of efforts to prevent aggression (e.g., antibullying programs), can generalize to many forms, will help make schools safer and more supportive environments for all.

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