Children, social groups and school bullying:
The role of social identification and social group norms

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Bullying

• Bullying defined
  repeated unwarranted physical or psychological abuse by a more powerful person or group against a person or group that is unable to resist effectively’

• Types of bullying
  - Overt/direct bullying
  - Covert/indirect/relational bullying
  - Cyber-bullying
Focus of Bullying Research

• **Main focus**
  - Description: who (bullies), what, where, when, how much, against whom (victims)?
  - Identify defining attributes of bullies and victims

• **Research methods**
  - Self-report surveys of children and teachers
  - Class and playground observations
  - Peer and teacher nominations of bullies and/or victims
  - Assessment of bullies and (especially) victims for defining characteristics

• **Strategic response**
  - Identify potential victims
  - Devise interventions that protect victims and discourage bullies
  - Assess efficacy of interventions
What We Know About Bullying

• **Victims**
  - Low SE, anxious, insecure
  - Physically weak
  - Low social acceptance -> social withdrawal
  - Low mood -> depression

• **Bullies**
  - Marked by psychopathology and anti-social personality
  - Physical strength
  - Display externalising behaviours and hyperactivity
  - Bullying compensates for low SE and anxiety

• **Interventions**
  - Need committed children and teachers
  - Involved parents and community
Some Critical Questions About Bullies

• Are all bullies psychopaths? Are there some ‘normal’ bullies?
• Do some children engage in bullying occasionally?
• Do all bullies suffer low SE and high anxiety?
• Do bullies have social intelligence?
• Do bullies have friends?
• Can they be popular?
• Are bullies members of social groups?
• Might (some) bullying be a group-based phenomenon?
Children and social groups

- By school age, children interested in being members of social groups – want to be included and accepted

- Social groups based on similarity and acceptance

- Children’s involvement in social groups increases through middle childhood - fear social exclusion

- Children prefer membership in high status groups, but like own group more than any other group

- Children favour in-group members in allocation of money, food, tasks, games, etc
**Bullying as a Group Phenomenon**

- **Peers and bullying**
  - Olweus (1993): bullying carried out by individuals and **groups**
  - Research:
    - Peers involved in 85% of bullying episodes
    - Different participant roles:
      - Bully
      - Bully reinforcer
      - Bully assistant
      - Victim
      - Victim defender
      - Outsider/observer
  - Might at least some bullying be carried out by groups of children?
Accounting for Group Effects on Bullying

• **Explanation based on social identity theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

• **Main elements:**
  - Kids join groups based on similarity and acceptance – promotes identification with the group
  - Similarity includes gender, ethnicity, neighbourhood, activities, interests
  - Kids prefer membership in higher versus lower status groups, but inclusion/acceptance is critical

• **Group influence on bullying occurs when group members:**
  - Have high in-group identification
  - Endorse a group norm of bullying
  - Hold a prototypical versus peripheral position in the group
  - Seek higher in-group status (e.g., to become a prototypical member)
  - Perceive threat from non-members or an out-group
Social Group Norms and Bullying

- **Social group norms**
  - Norms are the glue that bind groups
  - Norms = group expectations about the appropriate attitudes, beliefs, behaviours to be displayed by group members
  - Group identification increases group norm conformity

- **Implications**
  - Members should conform to norms
  - Members expect other members to conform
  - Committed (prototypical) members should conform more
  - Deviants should be excluded
Research Project

• Examine whether bullies hang out in groups and the nature of those groups

• Examine influence of group-related variables on children’s bullying intentions and bullying behaviour
  - Group norms
  - Group identification
  - Position/status of members within group
  - Status of group compared with other groups
  - Threat to status of in-group from other groups

• Assess role of social cognitions in bullying
  - Cue interpretation
  - Causal attributions
  - Morality judgements
  - Outcome perceptions
Study 1
(Duffy & Nesdale, 2008)

• **Aims:**
  - Examine within-group similarities in bullying involvement
  - Investigate the associations between group norms, intra-group position and bullying behaviour in naturally-formed friendship groups

• **Participants:**
  - 351 students in Grades 5 to 7
  - 170 boys and 181 girls
  - Mean age = 11.22 years (SD = .97)
Study 1 Method

• Bullying
  - Direct Involvement in Bullying (e.g., “Teases others in an unpleasant way”)
  - Harming Friendships (e.g., “Tries to ruin other people’s friendships”)
  - Physical Presence (e.g., “Is usually there when someone is being ignored or left out”)
  - Direct Support for Bullying (e.g., “Holds onto someone who is being hit or kicked, so they can’t escape”)

• Social groups/networks
  - Social Network Assessment Measure (Cairns et al., 1988): Are there children in your class who hang around together a lot?
Study 1 Method

• **Group norms**
  - How happy would the group be if one of its members displayed bullying behaviour?

• **Intra-group position (prototypicality)**
  - How similar is each group member to other members of the group?
Study 1 Results

- **Within-group similarities**
  - 58 groups used for analyses
  - Intra-class correlation coefficients calculated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intraclass correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Involvement</td>
<td>.37***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harming Friendships</td>
<td>.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Presence</td>
<td>.38***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct Support</td>
<td>.35***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$    ** $p < .01$    *** $p < .001$
Study 1 Results

• **Group norms**
  - Based on peer-reports of group norms
    - 15 groups (53 participants) with a norm for bullying selected
    - 15 groups (46 participants) without a norm for bullying selected

### Mean bullying subscale scores (standard deviations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bullying subscales</th>
<th>Approves of bullying</th>
<th>Disapproves of bullying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Involvement</td>
<td>18.54 (7.56)</td>
<td>5.56 (5.07)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harming Friendships</td>
<td>1.85 (1.61)</td>
<td>1.11 (1.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Presence</td>
<td>5.17 (1.86)</td>
<td>2.54 (1.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Support</td>
<td>3.28 (2.16)</td>
<td>.33 (.52)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Study 1 Results

- **Intra-group position**
  - Only groups with a norm for bullying included in the analyses
    - Step 1: Age & gender
    - Step 2: Intra-group position

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct Involvement</th>
<th>Harming Friendships</th>
<th>Physical Presence</th>
<th>Direct Support</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R^2</strong></td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR^2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Step 1</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<td>.21**</td>
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<td>sr^2</td>
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<td>Intra-group position</td>
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<td>.078*</td>
<td>.141**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001
Study 1 Conclusions

- Group members display similarities in their behaviour in bullying situations
- Groups with a norm supportive of bullying can be identified
- Children belonging to these groups show a greater involvement in bullying
- Within pro-bullying groups, those who have a central position are most heavily involved in bullying
Study 2
(Duffy et al., 2012)

• **Aim:**
  - Examine whether group norms contribute to the explanation of bullying behaviour after children’s individual empathy has been controlled

• **Participants:**
  - 426 students in Grades 5 to 7
  - 197 boys and 229 girls
  - Mean age = 11.75 years (SD = 1.03)
Study 2 Method

• **Bullying**
  o Direct bullying (e.g., “I threw something at other kids to hurt them”)
  o Indirect bullying (e.g., “I tried to keep certain kids from being in my group during an activity”)

• **Empathy**
  - Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) (e.g., “I get caught up in other people’s feelings easily”)

• **Group norms**
  - Children asked to think about their group at school and rate how much it would approve if one of it’s members displayed bullying behaviour
Study 2 Results

• **Direct & indirect bullying**
  - Hierarchical regression analyses
    o Step 1: Age & gender
    o Step 2: Empathy
    o Step 3: Group norms
Study 2 Results

- **Direct & indirect bullying**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type of bullying</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.158***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\Delta R^2$

- Step 1: .039***, .005
- Step 2: .005, .001
- Step 3: .114***, .076***

$sr^2$

- Gender: .009*, .001
- Age: .003, .001
- Empathy: .001, .002
- Group norms: .114***, .076***

* $p < .05$  ** $p < .01$  *** $p < .001$
Study 2 Conclusions

• Group norms that support bullying are associated with greater direct and indirect bullying

• Group norms contribute to the explanation of bullying behaviour, even after individual characteristics of the child are considered
Study 3
(Nipedal, Nesdale & Killen, 2010)

• **Aim:**
  - To test whether group norm effect can be moderated by a contrary community (i.e., school) norm

• **Participants:**
  - 7-year-olds versus 10-year-olds

• **Method:**
  - Minimal group paradigm
  - Manipulated group norm via ‘secret group message’ (inclusion versus exclusion versus exclusion + relational bullying)
  - Manipulated school norm (inclusion versus no message)
  - Bullying intentions measured on vignettes
Study 3 Results

- **Direct bullying**
  - Age: young > old
  - Group norm: exclusion + bullying = exclusion > inclusion on direct bullying intentions

- **Indirect bullying**
  - Age: young > old
  - Group norm: exclusion + bullying = exclusion > inclusion
  - Age x group norm x school norm interaction
Study 3 Results

Age x group norm x school norm effect on indirect bullying
Conclusions

• **Present findings**
  - Social groups during middle childhood can exert an influential effect on group members’ bullying
  - Kids who bully tend to hang out together
  - Bully groups have group norms that endorse bullying
  - Groups that have bullying norms bully more
  - Not all groups bully – but some do so occasionally
  - Group bullying is also influenced by:
    o Position within the group
    o Out-group threat (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004)

• **Future research**
  - Focus on roles within bully groups
  - Bully-victim linkages
  - Mediating effect of social cognitions on bullying
THANK YOU
Study 3
(Nesdale et al., 2007)

• **Aim:**
  - To test whether group norms causally influence children’s bullying intentions

• **Participants:**
  - 85 boys and girls
  - 43 7-year-olds and 42 9-year-olds
Study 3 Method

- **Minimal group paradigm**
  - Each participant assigned to a group for pretend drawing competition
  - In-group and out-group members revealed in photos
  - In-group norms (out-group inclusion versus exclusion) manipulated via ‘message from group’ delivered by researcher

- **Measures**
  - Bullying intentions scale (Duffy, 2005)
    - 4 vignettes involving different members of the out-group team
    - Participants indicated how likely they would respond (on 5-point scale) by displaying each of 4 behaviours (1 direct bullying, 1 indirect bullying, and 2 mildly pro-social behaviours)


Study 3 Results

- **Bullying intentions**
  - Age: 7 years > 9 years
  - Group norms: out-group dislike > out-group like
  - Bullying type: indirect > direct
  - Age x group norm x bullying type interaction
Study 3 Results

- **Age x group norm x bullying type interaction**
Study 3 Conclusions

- Younger children displayed greater bullying intentions than older children
- Group norms had direct causal effect on both direct and indirect bullying intentions at both ages
- Older children’s more restrained responses probably reflected growing social acumen – awareness of need to respond positively to both social group and to important others (e.g., teachers, parents)
Explaining Children’s Group Orientation and Bullying

Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2007)

- **Basic assumptions of SIDT**
  - Children seek to be accepted and to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
  - Children learn about majority-minority group relationships
  - Children prefer to be members of higher rather than lower status groups
Social Identity Development Theory and Bullying (cont.)

• **Phases and processes**

  1) Undifferentiated phase

  2) Social group awareness
     - Awareness of socially significant categories
     - Group self-identification

  3) Social group preference
     - Focus on the in-group
     - Greater liking for the in-group
4) Out-group dislike and attack
   - Depends on:
     o In-group identification
     o Group norm of exclusion, bullying
     o Desire for in-group status
     o In-group position (prototypical versus peripheral)
     o Perceived out-group threat
     o Desire for greater in-group status
Social Identity Development Theory and Bullying (cont.)

• **Implications**
  - Groups: important source of children’s prejudice
  - Bullying not inevitable
  - Role of social cognition mediating bullying responses
    o Interpreting cues
    o Making judgements
    o Invoking moral considerations
Bullying as a Group Phenomenon

• Critical questions:
  - Is children’s bullying influenced by their social groups?
  - How might this happen?
  - Do children who are interested in bullying group up with other kids?
  - Might children in such groups display similar behaviours?
  - Might such groups differ in the amount of time or interest they devote to bullying?
  - What are the limits of the influence of the group?
  - Do children seek to balance the influence of the group against other influences (e.g., parents, teachers)?