Bullying and the peer group: beyond the bully-victim dyad

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"Mobbing"

- "Mobbing", "Mobbning"
  - Group of people attacking against one person
- Heinemann (1972)
  - described mobbing as the entire school class, or the majority of it, attacking an individual child
- Olweus, 1978
  - stressed the role of individual bullies
  - warned about overemphasizing the collective aspect of bullying
"Bullying as a group phenomenon"

- Does not refer to a big gang of aggressors attacking one individual, but rather…
- …to a complex process were group members have different roles
- Students’ individual characteristics interact with environmental factors (e.g., classroom norms) contributing to a process which can have tremendously hurtful outcomes for the targeted individual
• Placing bullying in its group context helps to better understand
  – individuals' motivation to bully
  – lack of support provided to the victims
  – the persistence of bullying
  – the adjustment of victims across diverse contexts
  – What is needed in order to prevent and stop bullying
The social architecture of bullying

- Bullying can be a strategy to gain status and power in the peer group...
- …and it is often successful
  - bullies are perceived as popular (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2008)
  - bullying helps to maintain status (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008)…
  - …and to increase status over time (Cillessen & Borch, 2004)
The social architecture of bullying

- By choosing victims who are submissive, insecure of themselves, physically weak and in a low-power, rejected position in the group...
- ... the bullies can repeatedly demonstrate their power and renew their high-status position without being confronted
The social architecture of bullying

- The power demonstrations need witnesses
- in most bullying incidents, a group of peers is present
The social architecture of bullying

bully 8% 12% victim
The social architecture of bullying

- Participant roles in bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996)

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- 20% reinforcers of the bully
- 8% bully
- 12% victim
- 7% assistants of the bully
- 24% outsiders
- 17% defenders of the victim
Why aren’t the targeted students supported by peers more often?

- Emulation of the behavior of "cool" kids (Juvonen et al., 2003); wish to be accepted by them (Olthof & Goossens, 2008)
- Fear for losing one’s status
- Some classroom contexts inhibit even highly empathic children from helping their vulnerable peers (Pöyhönen et al., 2008; Peets et al, 2015).
Evidence that the group is important: Interview data

• Interviews with adults who used to be bullied in their schooldays
  – the most negative memory related to bullying was that ”everyone was just laughing, no-one seemed to care” (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2000)
Evidence that the group is important: Correlational data

• Individual level:
  – the defended victims are better adjusted than the undefended ones (Sainio, Veenstra, Huizing, & Salmivalli, 2010)
Evidence that the group is important: Correlational data

• Classroom level:
  – The likelihood of victimization is higher in classrooms where reinforcing the bully is occurring at high levels (Salmivalli, Voeten & Poskiparta, 2011)
  – Individual-level risk factors, such as anxiety, are more likely to lead to victimization in classrooms where reinforcing is common, whereas high levels of defending minimize the effects of such risk factors (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010)
Evidence that the group is important: Intervention study

- KiVa antibullying program (Salmivalli et al., 2010)
  - specifically addresses the bystanders and their responses when witnessing bullying
  - student lessons, online antibullying game, KiVa teams

- RCT evaluation (Kärnä et al., 2011): Main effects on bullying and victimization, but also on attitudes, empathy towards victimized peers, and bystander responses
Changes in being bullied by different forms during one school year, Grades 4 to 6

KiVa vs. Control

- Verbal
- Social exclusion
- Physical
- Social manipulation
- Material
- Threats
- Racist
- Sexual
- Cyber
Proportion of students repeatedly bullying others; Schools implementing the KiVa antibullying program in Finland, 2009-2015
Evidence that the group is important: Intervention study (mediators of KiVa)

Implementation of KiVa begins
• Indicated actions
• Universal actions

Student level
Antibullying attitudes increase
Perceptions of teacher attitudes toward bullying change
Perceptions of peers’ bystander behaviors change
Bullying decreases

Classroom level
Collective perceptions of teacher attitudes toward bullying change
Bullying decreases
Victimization decreases
Conclusions

- Bullying is partly motivated and maintained by processes taking place in peer groups.
- Qualitative (interview), correlational, as well as experimental (intervention) studies demonstrate that bystanders *should*, and *can* be influenced by interventions addressing bullying.