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The social ordering of belonging: Children's perspectives on bullying



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ABSTRACT

In this article we investigate children's perspectives on bullying, by listening to how they themselves discuss and make sense of how and why bullying emerge and how this can be understood from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Forty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Swedish schoolchildren from fourth- to seventh grade and analysed with constructivist grounded theory. Our findings suggest that social ordering of belonging appeared to be a core process of children's narratives of what produces bullying. Social ordering of belonging refers to a process in which children positioned themselves and others in terms of social inclusion/exclusion and social dominance/subordination and addressed three sub categories producing bullying: (a) social hierarchical ordering, (b) peer ordering, and (c) new member ordering.

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1. Introduction

During middle childhood, the development of new cognitive and emotional skills allows children to invest more in their friendships and to engage in more intimate interactions. Friendship turns into a stronger significant influence on their lives, development and functions, while at the same time acting as a protective factor against victimization (for a review, see Bukowski, Motzoi & Meyer, 2011). Moreover, children become more aware of the presence and significance of popularity structures among peers, which in turn is also linked with bullying. Research has shown that whereas students who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy with no or almost no friends are the typical targets of bullying, those who are most active in bullying tend to have a high social status (for a review, see Thornberg, 2015b).

Bullying, in turn, is frequently defined in the literature as repeated actions of aggression towards a less powerful victim (e.g. Olweus, 1993). It can take on several different expressions such as physical, verbal and indirect, and is a current and common phenomenon in schools (e.g. Borntrager, Davis, Bernstein, & Gorman, 2009; Craig et al., 2009), mostly occurring among 10–15 year old children (Flygare et al., 2011; Nansel et al., 2001) and declining with age (Craig et al., 2009; Flygare et al., 2011). Researchers have found that involvement in bullying ranges between 4 and 40 per cent across countries, where Sweden has among the lowest rates in the world (Craig et al., 2009). Approximately 7–8 per cent of Swedish children aged between 10 and 15 are bullied in school (Craig et al., 2009; Flygare et al., 2011). Victims of school bullying are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013), psychosomatic health problems (Beckman, Hagquist, & Hellström, 2013) and poor academic achievement (Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008). Being a victim of childhood bullying is also associated with

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long-term negative consequences such as a higher risk of mental health problems in adulthood (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

School bullying usually takes place where there are no teachers present (Craig, Peplerm, & Atlas, 2000; Osbeck et al., 2003). As bystanders, children seldom intervene (Craig et al., 2000) or tell the teacher (Rigby, 2008). From a child's point of view, telling the teacher might be viewed as "uncool" as well as dangerous because teachers are sometimes perceived as making things worse (Patterson, Allen, & Cross, 2015). Younger children tend to report bullying incidents to adults more often compared to older children (Rigby, 2008), and adults' interventions might be more successful among younger children (Smith, 2010) since younger children might be less influenced by their peers, whereas interventions among older children might need to be peer-mediated (Hymel & Bonanno, 2014). Moreover, boys have been found to be more involved in bullying compared to girls (Rigby, 2008; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009).

From interactionist and social-ecological perspectives, bullying is understood as a social phenomenon that is established and perpetuated over time as a result of the complex interplay between various factors such as individual, family, peer and school factors (Espelage & Swearer, 2011; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015; Thornberg, 2015b), and therefore needs to be addressed from several perspectives (e.g. Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Espelage & Swearer, 2011; Thornberg, 2015b). However, most definitions of bullying have been formulated by adults. Children have seldom had influence over the definition of bullying (e.g. Frånberg & Wrethander, 2011; Hellström, Persson, & Hagquist, 2015) or bullying interventions in schools (e.g. Osbeck & Söderström, 2014). Differences have been found between adults' and children's perspectives on bullying, where children more rarely address repetition and power imbalances as part of their bullying definition (Cheng, Chen, Ho, & Cheng, 2011; Frisé, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008, Hellström et al., 2015). However, Compton, Campbell, and Mergler (2014) found that teachers tended to ignore power imbalance in their definition, whereas both children and teachers disregarded repetition as crucial. Children have also been found to address the victim's experience of hurt and harm as part of their definition (Hellström et al., 2015). We need to address the gap between (a) school bullying literature and bullying prevention and intervention efforts conducted by adults and (b) children's understanding of bullying and how to resolve bullying in their everyday school lives. Expanding our knowledge of children's perspectives on bullying addresses "miscommunication and passive responses" (Hellström et al., 2015; p. 7) that might occur despite teachers' efforts to counteract bullying due to different views of this phenomena.

The aim of the present study was to listen to how Swedish schoolchildren themselves discuss, reason about and make sense of how and why bullying emerges to extend our knowledge of what social processes are important among children. As stated by Green and Hill (2005), we value children's perspectives and want to understand their lived experience, and are motivated to "find out more about how children understand and interpret, negotiate and feel about their daily lives" (p. 3). While most studies on bullying have used quantitative methods, Mishna, Saini, and Solomon (2009) argue that qualitative methodologies present an opportunity for developing a deeper understanding of the group processes of bullying and participants' perspectives on peer harassment. They are "capable of discovering important discourses and nuances" (p. 1222) that might be less visible in large-scale studies.

There is a small but growing body of research on children and adolescents' perspectives on bullying. Previous qualitative studies have revealed that children report a range of explanations as to why bullying takes place but tend to address either the victim or the bully as the cause of bullying (for a review, see Thornberg, 2011b). The victim is commonly described as deviant, odd or different, and children explain such deviant or odd characteristics or behaviour as causing the bullying (e.g., Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, Chatzilambou, & Giannakopoulou, 2012; Cheng et al., 2011; Frisé et al., 2008; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010, 2015a; Varjas et al., 2008). Another common explanation used among children to describe why bullying occurs addresses the bully, who is viewed as striving for power and status (e.g., Frisé et al., 2008; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011; Varjas et al., 2008), suffering from psychosocial problems, insecurity or problems at home (e.g., Frisé et al., 2008; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011; Varjas et al., 2008), or simply being a mean or bad person (e.g., Thornberg, 2010). Further bullying explanations address peer pressure (e.g., Erling & Hwang, 2004) and having fun and avoiding boredom (e.g., Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

Thornberg (2011a) suggests labelling and stigma theory as a theoretical framework to gain a deeper understanding of children's tendency to blame the victim, where bullying is viewed as a social process manifested as an interactional pattern of inhumanity and power abuse. Bullying could also be understood as a collective action where labelling the victim as the cause justifies the social act of bullying with the bullies being constructed as the "normal us" (Thornberg, 2015a). Hence, inclusion and exclusion might be considered as ongoing processes embedded in children's ways of organising their peer activities (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1995; Bliding, 2004), which means that some actions might not be defined as bullying from the children's perspectives. In this study it is therefore of interest to explore how and in what ways children discuss bullying, to extend our knowledge of what processes are important among children. In our theoretical and methodological framework we therefore came to adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective and constructivist grounded theory.

2. Theoretical perspective

Symbolic interactionism has been adopted as a theoretical framework in the current study. It assumes that perspectives and social selves arise in social interaction and processes that humans take part in (Blumer, 1979; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011; Mead, 1934). Experiences of interaction are therefore fundamental for constructing perspectives of various social events,

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