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Why do early adolescents bully? Exploring the influence of prestige norms on social and psychological motives to bully

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines psychological (e.g., Machiavellianism) and social (i.e., perceived popularity) motives for bullying, exploring the effects that classroom prestige norms for physical and relational aggression may have on these associations. A longitudinal multilevel study design was adopted, which included 978 5th to 7th graders from four Chilean schools. Participants were assessed three times over one year on self reports on bullying and Machiavellianism, and peer reports on popularity. Classroom prestige norms were calculated as the within classroom association between peer perceived coolness and aggression. Both Machiavellianism and perceived popularity were associated with bullying. However, hierarchical linear modeling analyses showed that Machiavellianism, but not perceived popularity, predicted bullying after controlling for baseline scores. Classroom prestige norms for relational aggression increased the association between Machiavellianism and bullying. Separate models were tested for boys and girls, showing no differences. Results are discussed in light of conceptual and methodological considerations.

Recent perspectives on bullying have stressed the link between the motivational components of social behavior and bullying. At the psychological level, bullying has been linked to status goals (e.g., Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009), and to distortions in social motivation (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Bullies pursue more antisocial goals than non-bullies (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005) and use bullying as means for achieving dominant positions (Houghton, Nathan, & Taylor, 2012; Sijtsema et al., 2009). These findings, along with studies providing some evidence that bullies are not socially incompetent but have good social skills (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999), support the view of bullies as dominance oriented and prone to use their skills in order to effectively manipulate their peers to obtain their own goals (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999). This perspective is in line with the initial definition by Olweus (1978) that considers bullying as an intentional behavior acted by youth with higher (physical, psychological or social) power than their victims.

Bullying has been associated with the Machiavellian personality disposition (Christie & Geis, 1970; Sutton & Keogh, 2001), considered a non-pathological personality trait (Paulhus & William, 2002) characterized by the belief that people are manipulative and manipulable (Andreou, 2004; Wilson, Near & Miller, 1996). Consequently, social manipulation can be used

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by Machiavellian individuals to pursue their social goals. Since bullying has been linked to the pursuit of dominance goals particularly in adolescence (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012), and bullies perceive this behavior as an effective tool in handling relationships with peers (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006), adolescents with higher Machiavellianism may be more at risk of displaying bullying behavior.

Bullying is also a group phenomenon (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). From a social perspective, studies show that bullies can be popular within their peer groups (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003), and that bullying can be used to achieve social status (Houghton et al., 2012). Accordingly, there is some evidence that in adolescence being perceived as popular by peers can work as an additional, social motive to bully others (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012). Nevertheless, no studies have investigated the relative influence of individual (such as being Machiavellian) and social (such as being popular) motives in explaining bullying.

Bullying and more broadly aggression have also been shown to depend on the peer context, particular on peer group norms (Berger & Rodkin, 2012; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). This line of research posits that descriptive (behavior displayed by the members of the group), injunctive (attitudes and beliefs shared at the group level) and prestige norms (behavior showed by high status individuals within the group) set the stage for bullying to occur, by creating a social context that normalizes, accepts, or even values these behaviors (Chang, 2004; Dijkstra & Gest, 2014). Besides directly promoting bullying, norms can also moderate the likelihood of certain individual attributes to predict bullying (Menesini, Palladino, & Nocentini, 2015; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2015).

The present study expands these findings by assessing simultaneously intrapsychological and social motives for bullying. Moreover, adopting an ecological framework, this study tests if these motives for bullying are affected by classroom prestige norms.

Machiavellianism, popularity and bullying

There is consistent evidence showing that popularity is associated with bullying and aggression (e.g., Berger & Rodkin, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2003). Recent studies suggest that the pursuit of dominant and high status positions within the peer group is the main motivation for bullying behavior (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & van der Meulen, 2011; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Accordingly, among adolescents bullying behavior has been found to be associated with the endorsement of agentic goals (i.e., oriented to power, mastery and status; Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Sijtsema et al., 2009). Likewise, in a study with early adolescents who were suspended because of bullying episodes, participants reported how they deliberately used bullying to gain respect and recognition (Houghton et al., 2012).

Machiavellianism is a personality trait, consisting in the degree a person feels that other people are untrustworthy and manipulable in interpersonal situations, and is willing to manipulate others (Andreou, 2004; Christie & Geis, 1970). Among adults, Machiavellianism has been found to be associated with a preference to obtain reward and to make reward-oriented decisions (Birkás, Csathó, Gács, & Bereczkei, 2015). More broadly, individuals with higher levels of Machiavellianism show behavioral tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, and aggressiveness. Scholars investigating Machiavellianism in (early) adolescence (using the Kiddie-Mach scale; Christie & Geis, 1970) showed that the construct of Machiavellianism includes different components, even if with some differences regarding its structure in different cultural contexts. In an English sample of 198 early adolescents, aged 9–12 years, Sutton and Keogh (2001) found that Machiavellianism included three dimensions: beliefs of lack of faith in human nature, dishonesty (beliefs that lying and being non-honest are acceptable behaviors), and distrust (beliefs that you cannot trust in other human beings). In a Greek sample of 186 early adolescents aged 9–12 years, besides the three dimensions identified by Sutton and Keogh, Andreou (2004) found a fourth dimension, manipulation, described as beliefs that manipulating others in order to reach desired goals is acceptable.

Considering the relevance of peers during adolescence, Machiavellian adolescents may perceive their relationships with peers as functional in order to achieve their goals, and thus they may use different social behaviors (antisocial and prosocial) to manipulate their relationships (Bereczkei, Birkás, & Kerekes, 2010; Hawley, 2003). Accordingly, even though bullying is often socially rejected, it has been also found to be efficient to achieve social goals depending on the context in which it occurs (Sutton et al., 1999). In light of these findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that Machiavellianism could constitute a risk factor for adolescents to bully others.

In this vein, few studies investigated the association between Machiavellianism and bullying. In their seminal work Sutton and Keogh (2000) found that early adolescents who were categorized as bullies scored higher on Machiavellianism than their peers. These findings have been mirrored also in a study on 187 adolescents (9–14 years old), in which bullying was positively associated with the Machiavellian tendency (Giampietro & Caravita, 2006). Likewise, Andreou (2004) showed that bullying was positively related to Machiavellianism (total score) and to the lack of faith in human nature component among boys. Among girls higher levels of bullying were related to higher levels of manipulation. Andreou also found that adolescents who reported to be bully/victims showed higher Machiavellianism, total score and on lack of faith in human nature component, compared to their peers.

Altogether, the aforementioned literature supports the view of bullying as a behavioral tool that can be used by adolescents to acquire social status, thus generating a self-reinforcing social process for bullying. Adolescents may use bullying to gain status, and popular adolescents may bully peers to keep their status (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). Hence, adolescents high in Machiavellianism may be particularly at risk of displaying bullying behavior.