

From indirect aggression to invisible aggression: A conceptual view on bullying and peer group manipulation

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Abstract

Recent research has emphasized the importance of indirect aggression among children and has challenged the conception that aggressive children lack social–cognitive skills. In schools, victimization against non-provocative targets rarely involves just a dyad, but might not be simply the product of group processes either. This paper suggests that in most cases it results from the encounter between a skillful bully and a group that lacks true cohesiveness, through a process of normative social influence. Groups with low quality of friendships may be more likely than others to become instruments of aggression as victimization provides them with a common goal and an appearance of cohesion. We hypothesize that, in some cases, the manipulation of a healthy-functioning group is also possible but requires use of particularly subtle devices, and thus a higher level of social intelligence by the bully. We also suggest that in such a situation the aggressive act is not just indirect, but invisible and the influence exerted on the group might be informational and not normative. Implications for the characteristics of the victim and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Bullying is typically defined as repeated actions aimed at causing either physical or psychological harm to an individual who is not in a position to defend herself or himself. It refers to an intentional behavior targeted at someone who has not provoked it (Olweus, 1991; Smith, 1991). Early research on bullying in schools attempted to identify characteristics of typical victims and typical bullies (Olweus, 1978), and described bullying essentially as a conflict between these two different personalities. However, bullying almost never involves just a dyad. When bullying takes place in a school class, most students know about it and are present when it happens (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Pepler & Craig, 1995). When children witness victimization of one peer by another, their behavior can never be neutral. They may choose to take sides with the victim, to actively join in the bullying, or to remain passive. Remaining passive is not being neutral; it actually reinforces aggression by showing the bully that nothing will come to thwart the activity and letting him or her free to pursue it. In fact, one study has shown that bullying is more likely to continue if peer bystanders are present when it occurs (O’Connell et al., 1999). Even in the absence of witnesses, a bully is less likely to attack someone who enjoys social support in the peer group. For example, friendships tend to have a protective function, and aggressive children prefer to target children who lack friends (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999).

Recent research on this topic has focused less on physical, overt, and direct types of aggression and emphasized the importance of more covert types, such as social, relational, or indirect aggression. Indirect aggression has been defined by Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1992) as “a kind of social manipulation [in which] the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in attack” (p. 52). The terms “social aggression” (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002) and “relational aggression” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) refer to similar phenomena (see Björkqvist, 2001). What characterizes indirect aggression is the absence of direct confrontation between the perpetrator and the victim, as well as the role played by the social community. In indirect forms of aggression specifically, the peer group becomes a crucial component, as it serves as a vehicle for the attack. It is the weapon without which no such aggression could occur.

The emphasis on indirect aggression has led researchers to analyze bullying in relation to group processes (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Salmivalli, 2001b; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Olweus (1991) has described group mechanisms, such as diffusion of responsibility—when presence of many peers makes each one feel less accountable for the victimization—or social contagion—the rapid transmission of emotions or behaviors through a crowd (Jones & Jones, 1995). Studies on the functioning of cliques have also demonstrated how the structure and dynamics of groups of adolescents could account for harassment of certain peers (Adler & Adler, 1995).

According to some of these studies, it seems that there is something about group processes that leads to exclusion and victimization. Victims appear to be an inevitable by-product of group functioning, either because they are different (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001), have low social status (Adler & Adler, 1995), or have high social status that is perceived as a threat by the aggressor (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Bullying is certainly widespread, but does not occur in all peer groups all the time. Similarly, not all groups have victims. Which particular configuration leads a whole class—or the majority of a class—to isolate and victimize a peer who has done nothing to provoke it?

In this paper, we suggest that bullying based on indirect aggression arises from the conjunction of a particular type of bully with a particular kind of group. According to Olweus (1978), bullies are generally characterized by a lack of empathy, a strong need to dominate others, and a positive attitude towards violence that naturally lead them to try and hurt someone—preferably one target at a time. Use of the peer group as an instrument of aggression requires specific skills from the bully, including a good knowledge of group mechanisms. We suggest that poor friendship quality among members of a peer group may make this group more likely to be manipulated against someone. The combination of these two factors, the skills of the bully, and the relationships between group members appear to determine whether victimization may occur or not. This paper also examines the possibility that a bully may use a

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