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SCHOOLCHILDREN'S SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS ON BULLYING CAUSES

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The aim of the present study is to investigate schoolchildren's social representations on the causes of bullying. Individual qualitative interviews were conducted with 56 schoolchildren recruited from five elementary schools in Sweden. Mixed methods (grounded theory as well as descriptive statistic methods) were used to analyze data. According to the findings, the most prevalent social representation on bullying causes among the children is to view bullying as a reaction to deviance. The second most frequently used explanation type is to view bullying as social positioning. Other social representations on bullying causes are to explain bullying as the work of a disturbed bully, a revengeful action, an amusing game, social contamination, and a thoughtless happening. Social representations of bullying causes appear to be linked to the more general process of social categorization and seem in many bullying cases to promote moral disengagement among the children. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Bullying is a pervasive problem in Swedish schools as well as in schools in other countries in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia (e.g., Borntrager, Davis, Bernstein, & Gorman, 2009; Eslea et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1999). It is a phenomenon that affects a lot of students. Researchers have described associations between bullying by peers and a number of different dimensions of internal distress and social problems. Students affected by bullying will be at higher risk of developing depression, anxiety, loneliness, mistrust of others, low self-esteem, poor social adjustment, poor academic achievement, and poor health as compared to others (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike, & Afen-Akpaide, 2008; Beran, 2009; Cassidy, 2009; Connors-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009; DeRosier & Mercer, 2009; Fleming & Jacobsen, 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Ranta, Kaltiala-Heino, Pelkonen, & Marttunen, 2009; Rigby, 2003; Roland, 2002; Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2008).

Victims of relational bullying in particular are at higher risk of developing loneliness and emotional problems (Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009). Students who initiate bullying will be at a higher risk of developing criminal behavior as compared to other young adults (Aluede et al., 2008; Garrett, 2003; Olweus, 1993; Sourander et al., 2006). Bully-victims are the most at-risk group regarding the development of psychological problems and poor social adjustment (Connors-Burrow et al., 2009; O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009).

Furthermore, even if a majority of students think that bystanders should help the victim and take action against bullies (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006), observational studies indicate that when students witness bullying they seldom intervene (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Other studies show that students as bystanders in bullying situations can take on different participant roles (e.g., Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). An observation study conducted by O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) shows that bystander peers spent 54% of their time reinforcing bullies by passively watching, 21% of their time actively encouraging the bullying, and only 25% of their time intervening on behalf of the victims. Furthermore, whereas perceived popularity is positively linked to bullying behavior, empathy as well as social preference is positively associated with defending the victim (Caravita, Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009).

Research on bullying has usually been conducted by using quantitative methods (for reviews, see Hyman et al., 2006; Rigby, 2003; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004), and evaluated studies of schoolbased programs to reduce bullying have shown mixed findings. When positive effects have been identified, the gains have often been short term (for meta-analyses, see Ferguson, Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; also see Smith et al., 2004). Bosacki, Marini, and Dane (2006) argue that, although quantitative research provides a lot of critical information about bullying, it "does not give children an oppor-

tunity to discuss their own understanding of bullying experiences in their own voices” (p. 232).

The present study adopts a qualitative approach, through the use of qualitative interviews, to investigate schoolchildren’s social representations on bullying causes. Hence, the aim of this study is to explore how schoolchildren themselves explain why bullying takes place at school to better understand their actions as participants or bystanders in bullying situations.

Children’s Representations on Bullying Causes

With reference to social psychological theories such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007), theory of social representations (Moscovici, 2001a, 2001b; Philogène & Deaux, 2001), and social cognition approach (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Fiske & Taylor, 2008), how people define situations and interpret other participants’ acts influences their own behavior in social situations. Any interaction, between individuals as well as groups, presupposes social representations (i.e., shared meanings), which enable the individuals to understand the various aspects of their social reality, to make sense of the world and communicate that sense to each other. They are forms of common-sense knowledge among groups of people. They organize social actions and communications, and function like interpretation systems that influence how people approach the world and others. By active participation in social interactions, children incorporate and co-construct a lot of social representations on various aspects of their social life in school. Therefore, it is urgent for school psychologists and other school personnel as well as for researchers to investigate the schoolchildren’s views and culture and investigate how they interpret, define, and explain bullying situations to better understand their attitudes and behavior in bullying situations.

Previous research indicates that schoolchildren tend to attribute causes of bullying to the victim by interpreting him or her as deviant or different (e.g., different appearance, behavior, clothes, or way of speaking) (Bosacki et al., 2006; Buchanan & Winzer, 2001; Frisé, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Hazler & Hoover, 1993; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Varjas et al., 2008). A recent study has shown that peer-perceived atypical behavior of a child is in fact related to higher levels of social rejection and peer victimization among schoolchildren (DeRoiser & Mercer, 2009). According to a survey study by Hazler and Hoover (1993), students associate causes of bullying to a great extent with different kinds of possible deviance related to the victims. Some students report that they were bullied because of how they acted, what they said, who their friends were, and their size (e.g., “I just wasn’t in the in-group”).

Other reported reasons are teacher favoritism and school success as well as academic or social shortcomings (Hazler & Hoover, 1993). Other causes of bullying according to schoolchildren are instrumental (e.g., “He wants her lunch/money”) and psychological motives (e.g., “Because she might be jealous, because the other girl is prettier than her” or “It makes him feel better about himself if the other feels bad”) (Bosacki et al., 2006). In a survey study in which 207 students participated, “didn’t fit in” was one of the highest rated items of possible factors motivating bullying. Other very highly rated items were “physically weak,” “short tempered,” “the clothes,” “facial appearance,” “cried/was emotional,” “overweight,” and “good grades” (Hoover et al., 1992). According to Varjas and colleagues (2008), many students reported that bullies engaged in bullying to make themselves feel better or become a “higher person.”

In a focus-group study of teenage girls’ indirect forms of aggression (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000), two main categories of explanations among the girls were found: (a) alleviating boredom / creating excitement (“it’s something to do”), and (b) friendship and group processes, in other words, attention seeking (“hey, notice me. I’m important!”) and group exclusion (“I’m in and you’re out”). According to a study by Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008),

bullying as a way of having fun and avoiding boredom of everyday life was also a reason found among students' perceptions on why bullying takes place.

We have much to learn about ways of enabling children to speak for themselves and in their own way, to encourage and facilitate children's voices (Prout, 2005), and to gain a better understanding of children as social actors, the social interactions they are involved in, and the morality-in-practice they develop and construct as active participants in their own socialization. Children's representations on bullying play an important role in the social process of bullying and bystander behavior. This study will give voice to and explore children's own understandings of why bullying occurs to better understand their actions in bullying situations.

METHOD

Participants

As is common in qualitative research, convenience-sampling procedure was conducted to recruit participants. The participants in this study were 56 students recruited from six elementary schools in Sweden. The sample included 36 girls and 20 boys from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds. Three of the schools were located in different areas of a medium-sized Swedish town, two schools were located in a small Swedish town, and one school was located in the countryside. Only a small minority of the participants was immigrant children. Informed consent was given by all children as well as by their parents. The children comprise four age groups: 10 years ($n = 14$, 10 girls, 4 boys), 11 years ($n = 15$, 10 girls, 5 boys), 12 years ($n = 21$, 14 girls, 7 boys), 13 years ($n = 6$, 2 girls, 4 boys). The total mean age was 11.3 years. These age groups have been chosen in this study because retrospective research has shown that bullying is most frequently remembered from approximately 11–13 years of age (Eslea & Rees, 2001), which indicates the significance of bullying experiences and their influence on people in this age group. In the findings, "younger students" refers to the two younger age groups (children 10–11 years old) and "older students" refers to the two older age groups (children 12–13 years old).

Data Collection

Individual qualitative semistructured interviews were conducted in a quiet room away from the classroom. Five student teachers, at the end of their teacher training, carried out the interviews. They received instructions and training in qualitative interviewing by the author of this article. During the interview, the interviewers were instructed and trained to actively listen (communicating genuine interest and attention to the children by being attentive; saying things like "mm," "okay," and "I see," nodding their head, using empathic and interested facial expressions, and being confirming), with good follow-up questions (e.g., "How come?" "Could you tell me more about that?" "Tell me about it," "What do you mean?" "Tell me more," and "How do you think about that?"), and to take a nonjudgmental approach. In accordance with Prout's (2002) recommendations, they were also instructed to approach and treat the children as the main informants and competent commentators on their own lives as students in school. The children were asked to talk about one or more bullying cases that they had seen, heard of, or been involved in ("Please, tell me about a bullying incident that you have seen, heard of or been involved in, and that has taken place in your own school or in another school."). The children were also asked to report their beliefs as to the cause or causes of the bullying cases ("What do you think started the bullying?" "How come that the bullying took place?"). The mean time for the interviews was 14.7 minutes and ranged from 4 to 42 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Mixed methods (i.e., qualitative and quantitative methods) were used to analyze data. Grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) based on a constructivist position (e.g., Charmaz, 2003, 2006) were conducted to explore and analyze data qualitatively. During this analysis, coding (creating qualitative codes and categories grounded in data), constant comparison (comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, data with categories, etc.), memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes and other theoretical ideas that came to my mind during the coding), and memo sorting (comparing and sorting my memos) were the main grounded theory methods in the study. Theoretical sampling (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of data units was also conducted within the data material.

Furthermore, the following grounded theory coding steps (Charmaz, 2006) were taken: (a) initial coding in which codes were constructed by comparing data segments and using analytical questions, such as “What happens in the data? How do the participants explain bullying? What does the data suggest? What category does this specific datum indicate?” which involved naming words, lines, and segments of data; (b) focused coding in which the most significant and frequent codes from the initial coding were compared to each other (i.e., searching for similarities and differences) to synthesize the large amounts of data in more elaborated categories; and (c) theoretical coding in which the earlier developed codes or concepts were integrated to an analytical story that had coherence. During the analysis, the broad concept “social representation” has been used as a heuristic tool, in other words, to employ it as a “conceptual frame which helps to understand empirical phenomena found in the research field” (Kelle, 2007, p. 208).

After the above-mentioned three steps of grounded theory analysis, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to investigate how frequent the different types of social representations on the causes of bullying were among the schoolchildren and to investigate if there were differences in frequencies between boys and girls as well as between younger and older students.

RESULTS

All of the children in the study have witnessed or at least heard of bullying incidents. Most of them report bullying cases from their own school class. Very few tell about cases in which they have the role of the victim or the bully. Typically they appear to act as bystanders or are vague in their presentation of their own role. Nevertheless, the presence or idea of bullying seems to evoke some sort of negative feelings (e.g., uneasiness, anxiety, fear, discomfort, distress, or uncertainty) among the children. Furthermore, some of them appear to perceive a threat of becoming a victim if they act in a “wrong” way. Others report that bullying in general is wrong but still seem to do nothing about it in the particular case.

One way of dealing with bullying is to make sense of it, to try to understand why it happens. The interviews with the schoolchildren show indeed that this is something they do. According to the findings, they operate with one or more explanation types to make sense of bullying incidents they have seen, heard of, or been involved in. All in all, at least seven social representations on bullying causes are used to explain bullying: (a) bullying as a reaction to deviance, (b) bullying as social positioning, (c) bullying as the work of a disturbed bully, (d) bullying as a revengeful action, (e) bullying as an amusing game, (f) bullying as social contamination, and (g) bullying as a thoughtless happening. Table 1 presents the proportions of the number of children using each social representation on bullying causes in the study.

Table 1
Proportions of the Number of Children Using the Social Representations on Bullying Causes (in %)

Bullying causes	Boys	Girls	10-11 year	12-13 year	Total
Reaction to deviance	85	81	66	100	82
Social positioning	60	78	59	85	71
Work of a disturbed bully	30	39	38	33	36
Revengeful activity	20	31	38	15	27
Amusing game	25	19	21	22	21
Social contamination	25	19	21	22	21
Thoughtless happening	15	14	7	22	14

Note. While some children only operate with one social representation others operate with two or more social representations.

Bullying as a Reaction to Deviance

The most prevalent social representation on bullying causes among the children in this study is to view *bullying as a reaction to deviance*. Eighty-two percent of the children use this explanation type. This social representation means that the victim is interpreted as deviant, different, or odd, which in turn provokes others to bully him or her.

Interviewer: What do you think caused the bullying?
 Child: Being different.
 Interviewer: Different? What do you mean?
 Child: Well, different clothes, and talking differently, looking different.
 Interviewer: Can you tell a bit more about this? Looking different?
 Child: Tall, short, fat, different styles of clothes and such things.
 (Interview with a 13-year-old boy)

According to the children, typical bullying causes are (a) *deviant appearance*, such as being ugly, fat, short, thin, wearing wrong or odd clothes, wearing glasses, having a special color of skin, or just looking odd or bad in some way (“She had bad-looking make up,” 12-year-old girl); (b) *deviant behavior*, such as weird speech, playing with peers of the opposite sex, clumsy behavior, or behaving in ways that does not fit into the peer group (“She didn’t behave like all the others,” 10-year-old girl); (c) *deviant characteristics*, such as being stupid, nerdy, childish, odd, or a crammer (“That person is totally weird,” 11-year-old girl); or (d) *disabilities*, such as a handicap, being “retarded,” being deaf, or confined to a wheel chair (“It was because they thought that—because of the CP disability Nina had and because she might drool,” 11-year-old girl).

Another theme is *deviance by association*, which means that a child is socially defined or

labeled as deviant by peers just because s/he has an “odd mum,” poor parents, an “odd friend,” or is associated with a specific religion, an ethnic culture, or a country interpreted as different or odd (“If someone has another religion perhaps the person thinks: so stupid, or, why do you wear things like that [makes a gesture above her head] or whatever it is called,” 12-year-old girl). *Fear of deviance association* can also explain bullying. Children can avoid or ignore a victim as well as directly enjoy others bullying a victim to avoid being associated with the stigmatized victim. “If you are with him then the others will start to think that you are like him” (11-year-old boy). Hence, the children most often define the victim as deviant, and this interpretation is viewed as the bullying cause. By being defined or labeled as deviant, different, or odd, the victim is constructed as a person who evokes contempt or disregard from others, provokes others, or does not fit into the peer group. All the older students (100%) use this type of explanation, whereas 66% of the younger students use it.

Bullying as Social Positioning

The second most frequently used social representation on bullying causes among the children refers to the explanation of *bullying as social positioning*; in other words, bullying takes place because it is an expression of a struggle for status, popularity, power, or friends. Seventy-one percent of the children use this explanation type. Three subtypes of this representation on bullying causes emerged during the analyses: (a) bullying as status positioning, (b) bullying as power positioning, and (c) bullying as friendship positioning.

Bullying as status positioning happens when children want to be cool or tough, and to manifest, maintain, or enhance their status or popularity. “To play cool, I think. They think they are cool because of that and then they get a telling-off, and that’s cool or something, and they think they will be more popular, I think, among those kids who are popular” (12-year-old boy). *Bullying as power positioning* happens when children are struggling for power or peer authority. “Bullying is about power and being the boss . . . Those kids who bully feel that they have more power than the others or the bullied person” (11-year-old girl). Children can bully because they want to show or enhance their power. *Bullying as friendship positioning* is when bullying occurs as a result of struggling to either win or keep friends. “They do it to get more friends” (12-year-old girl). “They bully others just because they want to have their friends for themselves” (11-year-old girl). According to some children, bullies who want to show or maintain their status and/or power often choose *victims who are weak* in some way, for example, quiet, physically weak, unpopular, shy, younger, lonely, or new, and therefore are easier targets. “They attack them because they can’t defend themselves” (13-year-old boy). Moreover, bullying as social positioning can be triggered by *envy*, according to some children’s reasoning. Bullies may pick a victim because they envy him or her for some reason, such as having nice clothes or wealthy rich parents or being good at school. “If you think like this, that a person has much nicer clothes, then you try to make her feel small so you can look better yourself . . . You want to be as nice as the other one. You’re jealous” (11-year-old girl). Attributing bullying as social positioning is a more common social representation on bullying causes among older students (85%) than younger students (59%) as well as among girls (78%) than boys (60%). Furthermore, only girls in the sample attribute bullying as friendship positioning.

Bullying as the Work of a Disturbed Bully

The third most frequent social representation on bullying causes among children is to explain *bullying as the work of a disturbed bully* (36% of the children use this explanation type). The bully is regarded as a child who has a bad temper, an angry or bad personality, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or poor self-esteem; is mean; feels insecure; feels bad; or does not know what to do with all the anger inside. Bullying is then explained as a

result of these kinds of personal problems or characteristics in the bully. “I think she doesn’t feel so good, otherwise, she wouldn’t behave like that” (11-year-old girl). Often children connect the work-of-a-disturbed-bully explanation with *family problems*. In other words, the bully is “disturbed” because there are a lot of quarrels or problems in his or her family, such as alcoholism or drug problems, aggressive parents and/or siblings, divorce, or bad or negligent parents.

Child: [The bullies] probably feel insecure, and also that they have problems at home that makes them bully others.

Interviewer: Problems at home you say. What kind of problems can that be?

Child: Mum and dad might quarrel a lot, and well, perhaps they don’t care much about the kid.

(Interview with a 12-year-old girl)

Some children connect the work-of-a-disturbed-bully explanation of bullying to the idea that *the bully has been bullied*, and so s/he now bullies others. “They may have been bullied when they were younger” (11-year-old boy). By these earlier experiences as a victim the bully may have learned to bully others or may have developed negative emotions that drive him or her to bully others. Some more girls (39%) than boys (30%) explain bullying as a work of a disturbed bully.

Bullying as a Revengeful Activity

A fourth social representation on bullying causes is about explaining bullying in terms of revenge, payback, or punishment (27% of the children use this explanation type). The victim has done something that is interpreted or constructed by the bully or the bullies as something mean, harmful, or aggressive. For example, he or she said something mean, was teasing, started a fight, was nasty to the bully’s little brother, spread negative rumors, snitched and told teachers, and so on.

Child: He [the victim] does something bad, and then he gets shit back.

Interviewer: What could he have done?

Child: Well, it could be that he asks if he can join in a game, and they say no to him, and then he goes in and tells a teacher so you get a lot of telling-off. And then, the others usually think, “well, that wasn’t so smart [of him].” And then a lot of things happen during the lessons and we can’t go outdoors and have breaks because of that.

Interviewer: So it’s like a bit of punishment then?

Child: Yeah, and then the whole class gets it.

Interviewer: Well, okay, but how come that the bullying occurs?

Child: Well, because he [the victim] has done something or has started something, that he has said something.

(Interview with a 10-year-old boy)

Bullying is then about vengeance on the person for a negative or harmful thing s/he has done to the bullies or to others. “They want to retaliate, to get revenge . . . often he (a victim in the class) is teasing you so you get angry, so sometimes it’s his own fault even if it is sometimes hard on him” (11-year-old girl). Thus, it appears to be easy to *blame the victim* when the bullying cause is constructed as a revenge activity. Attributing bullying as a revengeful activity is a more common social representation on bullying causes among younger students (38%) than older students (15%) as well as among girls (31%) than boys (20%).

Bullying as an Amusing Game

A fifth social representation on bullying causes refers to the explanation of *bullying as an*

amusing game; in other words, bullying takes place because the bullies are amused by it in some way (21% of the children use this explanation type). “They may bully because they want to have some fun” (11-year-old boy). Some of them reason that children may act like this because they have nothing to do or are *bored at school*. “Well, it’s usually because they have nothing to do during the breaks, and then they realize, ‘Well, if we go and tease that person, it may be fun’” (12-year-old girl).

According to how some of the children reason, it is *the reaction of the victim* that is perceived as amusing or funny among the bullies, and then they pick victims based on how they react. “They think he reacted in a funny way, so they think it was fun to tease him” (12-year-old boy). “They think it was fun because he gets angry” (12-year-old girl). Others reason that bullying takes place because bullies think *it is fun to be haughty or mean*. “Perhaps they think it’s funny because they want to be mean” (11-year-old girl). According to some children, bullying is sometimes actually *perceived as a nonbullying joke* by bullies and even sometimes by bystanders. “Most often when they bully a person, they don’t mean it seriously. It’s only a joke” (11-year-old boy). Finally, *the amusing response of the audience* is viewed as a bullying motivating factor. “Sometimes there are others around them who are cheering them on” (12-year-old girl). In sum, bullying could be an amusing, funny, or exciting activity to carry out which can cause and motivate children to bully others.

Bullying as Social Contamination

A sixth social representation on bullying causes refers to the explanation of *bullying as social contamination*; in other words, children begin to bully because of being exposed to negative social influence (21% of the children use this explanation type). A victim in the study describes how classmates who could be nice and kind to her become mean and begin to bully her when they come together as a group.

Well, I know that when they are here at school, and perhaps they are with me or with others, they are really nice and kind, but when they come together, they maybe want to be much tougher in order to avoid being seen as a nerd. And I have really noticed that they want to be very tough when they are all together (12-year-old girl).

She and some other children use an explanation repertoire in which they *blame the group* and explain bullying as a result of *group pressure*. Group pressure as well as *social influence from an individual bully*, according to some children, can get others to begin bullying. Two types of bullying motivating fears are identified in the interview material and can be related to negative social influence or peer pressure: *fear of becoming a new target of bullying* and *fear of social exclusion* if you do not conform (i.e., if you do not join in the bullying). “The others may start to think that he or she is a loser just because she doesn’t want to bully someone, and then perhaps they begin to bully her instead” (10-year-old girl). According to some of the children, peers in such groups think, “If I don’t bully that kid too, then maybe I will be frozen out of the group” (12-year-old boy). They bully just like the others do because “they want to fit into their groups” (11-year-old boy).

Moreover, some children explain bullying in terms of *social learning*: Children who bully others may in previous situations have seen other children bully others and then learned to bully from these observations. “It’s because they have learnt from the others, from the older kids. They see it because they are in the playground too. They aren’t indoors. I think the younger ones learn from the older ones” (12-year-old girl). Finally, some talked about bullying causes in terms of *rumor spreading*. “First it happened that he was—, there was a rumor at school that he was yucky, and then they began bullying him” (12-year-old girl). The spreading of rumors is a social process in which a child is socially constructed and labeled as a deviant or a person who deserves to be punished because of what s/he has done to others. This

rumor in turn socially influences children who hear and believe the rumor to begin bullying the child.

Bullying as a Thoughtless Happening

Finally, a seventh social representation on bullying causes refers to the explanation of *bullying as a thoughtless happening* or so-called “mindless bullying,” meaning that the bullies are not thinking at all about what they are doing and why they are doing it; it just happens (14% of the children use this explanation type). “Usually they don’t think, they just go for it” (12-year-old boy). They do not see the consequences of their behavior and they do not realize that they are actually bullying. “And then they say something and then maybe the other person becomes upset, and perhaps they say something everyday without thinking about it, and then it becomes bullying” (12-year-old girl). According to this explanation, the thoughtlessness among bullies causes and maintains bullying. Attributing bullying as a thoughtless happening is a more common social representation on bullying causes among older students (22%) than younger students (7%).

Social Categorization, Victim Career, and Moral Disengagement

The findings indicate that there is an interplay between the social representations on bullying causes and the more general process of social categorization. The children categorize themselves and others into many social categories by social comparison as well as by interpreting many social representations embedded in their peer group and social environment. Many social categories are polarized, such as normal versus deviant/odd, powerful versus weak, high status versus low status, friends versus nonfriends, nice versus mean, in-group members versus out-group members, and so on. The social representations on bullying causes, with which they operate, help them to make sense of bullying incidents they have seen, heard of, or been involved in and to socially categorize the people involved (including themselves), which in turn helps them to create a sense of a more predictable and understandable social world.

Furthermore, bullying produces a type of deviant career (cf., Becker, 1963) in terms of a *victim career*, which most often begins when a child is socially constructed as deviant or marginalized (e.g., does not fit in, is odd, is weak, is of low social status, is not a member of the group, or is a nonfriend) among peers. One property of this victim career is *social devaluation* of the victim. Although bullying offers the victim opportunities for a *negative identity construction* by social labeling and devaluation processes, it also offers the other children, who are witnesses or are involved, opportunities for a more *positive identity construction* because they can compare themselves to the victim and conclude that they do not belong in the same negative social category—they are not as “bad” (deviant, odd, weak, or marginalized) as the victim (e.g., “He is a bit odd, not like the rest of us,” 11-year-old boy). Furthermore, at least in some cases, the bystanders can also compare themselves to the bully or bullies and infer that they are not as “bad,” “mean,” or “disturbed” as they are.

Moreover, the children’s social representations on bullying causes appear to promote *moral disengagement* among the children in many of the cases of bullying they witness or in which they are involved. This moral disengagement process typically includes at least three subprocesses: (a) normalization of bullying, (b) victim dissociation, and (c) responsibility transfer. The two main social representations of bullying causes (i.e., reaction of deviance and social positioning) indicate that the children often view bullying as a more or less normal consequence of deviance (deviant students evoke or attract bullying) and/or ordinary struggles for status, power, or friendship (in a way, just how social life works). This *normalization of bullying* might be associated with the concept “familiarization process” referring to the process of interpreting emergency situations (e.g., bullying situations) as typical and ordinary, and therefore trivial and nonemergent events (Thornberg, 2007), which in turn might reduce a

sense of harm awareness, empathic distress, caring, social responsibility, or moral norms as motives for intervention (cf., Bierhoff, 2002; Hoffman, 2000; Latané & Darley, 1970; Staub, 2003). The social representations on bullying causes as an amusing game as well as a thoughtless happening can be associated with normalization of bullying and the familiarization process too, and, thus, risk inhibiting intervention among them who share these definitions of the bullying situation.

Victim dissociation refers to a process in which bystanders or students involved in bullying dissociate themselves from the victim (e.g., “I’m not like her”) as a result of socially categorizing the victim as an out-group member (the victim is categorized as deviant, odd, non-friend, etc.) and/or as a result of fear of being associated with the victim and hence become a victim too (the fear of deviance association, which in turn is linked to the fear of becoming a new target of bullying or being socially excluded). Research has shown that a psychological distance between victim and bystander tends to reduce the likelihood of helping or prosocial behavior in emergency situations (e.g., Horowitz, 1971; Rutkowski, Gruder, & Romer, 1983). Victim dissociation among bystanders and those involved in bullying in the present study seems to inhibit them from helping the victim.

Responsibility transfer takes place when a child who is witnessing or participating in bullying transfers the responsibility to others (cf., Thornberg, 2007). Explaining bullying as a revengeful activity as well as a reaction to deviance can be linked to the process of *blaming the victim*, which, according to Hoffman (2000), puts a psychological distance between bystander and victim, and reduces the bystander’s empathic distress and motivation to help. The responsibility is transferred to the victim. When the children operate with the social representation on bullying causes as the work of a disturbed bully, they actually *blame the transgressor*. Furthermore, explaining bullying as social positioning as well as social contamination seems to result in a sort of *blaming the social life at school*. The responsibility is transferred to a group level. In some instances, children *transfer the responsibility to intervene to other people*, whom they categorize as belonging to the same out-group as the victim (e.g., “I’m not his friend; I think his friends should help him,” a 12-year-old girl), which indicates that victim dissociation might lead to responsibility transfer. In addition, many students appear to transfer the responsibility to intervene to the teachers (e.g., “I think the teachers are the ones who should stop the bullying and help him,” a 10-year-old boy). Responsibility transfer in turn might easily result in *responsibility loss*, which refers to not perceiving any personal responsibility to intervene. Instead of helping, the child just blames others.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, several social representations on bullying causes among schoolchildren have been identified. The social representation on bullying as a reaction to deviance is the most prevalent explanation among the children, and is consistent with other research on children’s perspectives on bullying showing that children often interpret the victim as deviant or different and attribute the cause of bullying to this deviance (e.g., Buchanan & Winzer, 2001; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Hazler & Hoover, 1993; Hoover et al., 1992). This representation resembles *the odd student repertoire* as a way of justifying bullying among children described by Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003), which in turn can be associated with an *intolerance for diversity* (MacDonald & Swart, 2004). By being regarded as deviant, the victim is constructed as a person who evokes contempt or disregard among others, provokes others, or does not fit into the peer group. This could, for example, be compared with the findings from a student survey study that showed that “didn’t fit in” was one of the highest rated items of possible factors motivating bullying (Hoover et al., 1992). Furthermore, empirical research has actually shown correlations between bullying and being different (e.g., DeRoiser & Mercer, 2009; Sweeting & West, 2001). The *social misfit hypothesis* (Wright, Giammorino, &

Parad, 1986) argues that what is perceived as deviance can vary across groups, and a lack of compatibility between the culture of the peer group and the individual's attitudes and behavior could result in social exclusion or bullying. In one group, a certain behavioral style can result in rejection and victimization, but in another group the same behavioral style can result in acceptance, as a function of different sets of group norms (also see Mummendey & Otten, 2001). In their study, Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) conclude: "It is through differences and similarities that a pupil community creates and renews its culture. The perception of differences is, in most cases, focused on the crucial aspects of culture, such as the ideals related to clothing, beauty and powerfulness. Thus, bullying is a way of creating and renewing culturally accepted and appreciated values and ideas" (p. 341).

According to the *labeling theory*, deviance is in the eye of the beholder. There is nothing inherently deviant in any particular behavior until some powerful group or group members define the behavior as deviant. Becker (1963) argues that "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders" (p. 9). Furthermore, we cannot know whether a given behavior will be categorized as deviant until the response of others has occurred. Deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, Becker (1963) argues, but in the interaction between the person who behaves and those who respond to the behavior. Hence this theory emphasizes interactions, power, and social norms within and between groups in understanding the roots of deviance. Being labeled as deviant has consequences for the person's further social participation and self-image. In the light of the social representation on bullying as a reaction to deviance among children, bullying can indeed be interpreted within the framework of the labeling theory. The victim is labeled as deviant, which results in social rejection and further peer abuse as well as the victim's risk of developing a negative self-image. For instance, victims of bullying tend to be lower in several measures of self-esteem (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Rigby, 2003; Roland, 2002), seeing themselves as more troublesome, more anxious, less popular, less physically attractive, and as having lower intellectual and school status than their peers (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Rigby, 2003), and they tend to have low self-concept and low self-esteem, and experience depression in adulthood (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993).

The social representation on bullying as social positioning was the second most frequent social representation on bullying causes among the children and can be related to findings from Varjas and colleagues (2008) showing that many students attribute the motive of becoming the "higher person" as a cause to bullying behavior as well as to those from focus group study on teenage girls' explanation for indirect aggression (Owens et al., 2000). According to the girls in the later study, spreading a rumor can be an effective way for a girl to gain attention and a sense of importance. Moreover, being accepted by the peer group as well as striving to belong to the "right" group is of significant importance to the girls. "Once accepted, girls endeavor to retain their position within the group so that they tend to agree with nasty stories spread about others and participate in the spreading of rumors or the exclusion of 'undesirables.' A self-protection motive is operating" (Owens et al., 2000, p. 80). Many children in the present study associate bullying with struggling for status, power, or friends (for an interesting study on bullying within friendships, see Mishna, Weiner, & Pepler, 2008). This social representation on bullying causes resembles the *social dominance theory*, which suggests that prosocial behavior as well as aggressive strategies such as bullying are used among children and adolescents to achieve and maintain social status and dominance (Pellegrini & Long, 2004; Walcott, Upton, Bolen, & Brown, 2008).

The other fifth social representations of bullying causes identified in the analysis were much less frequent in the study (work of a disturbed bully, revengeful activity, amusing game, social contamination, and thoughtless happening). Nevertheless, more than a third of the chil-

dren (36%) used the explanation type of bullying as the work of a disturbed bully. This social representation contains some elements that can be related to the research conducted by Olweus (1993) indicating that bullies are often aggressive and impulsive, have a strong need to dominate others (which also can be connected to the representation on bullying as power positioning), and live in families with aggression problems and/or neglectful parenting. Even if their idea that bullies are insecure or suffer from poor self-esteem is a controversial topic among researchers (see Olweus, 1993; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), this still seems to be a widespread social representation among the students in this study. Nevertheless, according to a symbolic interactionist and labeling theory perspective (cf., Becker, 1963; Charon, 2007), this social representation on bullying as the work of a disturbed bully risks promoting a social process that stigmatizes and negatively labels the bully in a way that can be problematized in terms of identity construction and behavior conservation, and in the light of research showing that students who initiate bullying will be at a higher risk of developing criminal behavior as compared to other young adults (Garrett, 2003; Olweus, 1993; Sourander et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the social representation on bullying as an amusing game can be compared with findings from a focus group study on teenage girls' explanation for indirect aggression (Owens et al., 2000). According to their study, the girls explained that much of their indirect aggression was just simply "for something to do," to overcome boredom in their daily life (also see Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). Moreover, in some cases it appears possible that, among children, bullying is not defined as bullying at all but as a harmless funny game, which resembles the discourse of *bullying as harmless*, especially the repertoires of underestimation (of the harm), identified by Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) in schoolchildren's talk about bullying cases. Even the social representation on bullying as a thoughtless happening can be discussed in these terms. Here children think that bullies do not see the harm they are doing because they are not aware of what they are actually doing to the victim.

Finally, the social representation on bullying as social contamination indicates that, to some degree, children appear to be aware of the existence of social processes and group mechanisms behind bullying and its moral disengagement effects, such as group pressure, public compliance, social norms, social representations of the victim, modeling, and bystander effect. This reminds us that bullying research and bullying prevention and intervention programs should not be confined to an individual approach focusing only on the personal characteristics of the bully and the victim, but also consider the social climate, group processes, classroom ecologies, and peer interactions at school (cf., Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004; Galloway & Roland, 2004; Roland & Galloway, 2002; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Walcott et al., 2008). For example, a recent study has shown a negative correlation between high-rating perceptions of school moral atmosphere and children's tendency to blame the victim in hypothetical bullying scenarios (Gini, 2008).

Implications for Practitioners

In the light of a social psychological perspective such as symbolic interactionism (cf., Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007), bullying has to be viewed as a social act or joint action, and the meanings of bullying and its participants, victims, and causes are derived from or arise out of social interactions among children. These meanings are dealt with and modified through the interpretative process used by the children in dealing with the bullying they encounter or witness. Even if at least some of the social representation on bullying causes identified in this study might be dismissed as naïve psychological explanations among schoolchildren (cf., Schuster, 2001), these meanings are inevitable parts of how these children define or interpret bullying situations and will therefore influence their attitudes and behavior in these situations. As children interact with each other and interpret what is going on, they develop definitions of a lot of social situations (Charon, 2007). "In most situations in which people act toward one

another they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and how other people will act. They share common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behavior by such meanings" (Blumer, 1969, p. 17). According to the findings, the social representations on bullying causes seem in many bullying cases to promote moral disengagement among the children. Their probable effects on cognitive, affective, and social processes might, at least in part, explain the passive bystander tendency among children who witness bullying at school (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig et al., 2000).

Hence, the findings have implications for school psychologists and other school personnel in their antibullying practice. First, practitioners have to investigate and reflect on social representations on bullying causes among students. They have to build their instructions, explanations, conversations, and practices on children's contemporary repertoire of knowledge, conceptions, and skills regarding bullying and other social and moral issues. "Moral growth comes about through the child's progressive construction of ways of understanding the world, and not just an accommodation to the positions and practices of adults and society" (Nucci, 2006, p. 663). Research has shown, for example, that effective teachers adapt their teaching based on their learners' prior experiences, knowledge, and conceptions, and encourage their learners to use their own experiences to actively construct and reconstruct understandings that make sense to them and for which they can take ownership (see Borich, 2007).

Second, Rudduck and her colleagues (Rudduck, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) argue that the movement of student voice in terms of real student consultation about and participation in things that matter in school is an urgent direction for school improvement, because of students' experiences of and insights into the social dynamics of school and the classroom, which at the same time is close to the principles and practices of democratic citizenship education and in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. "Being consulted and knowing that what you say is taken seriously builds students' self-respect and gives them a sense that others respect them and this, in turn, can also strengthen their commitment" (Rudduck, 2006, p. 140). The findings in this study can help school psychologists and other school personnel to be more sensitive and receptive to students' views of and attitudes to bullying and its causes as well as to victims and others involved in bullying.

Third, the findings—the identified social representations on bullying causes and their link to moral disengagement—show the urgency of relating moral and citizenship themes into bullying prevention and intervention. Let me show some examples. The dominating social representation on bullying causes as a reaction to deviance among the children and its underlying logic of conformism and intolerance can, for example, be challenged by pointing out and inviting students into a deliberative discussion about the values of multiplicity, heterogeneity, social inclusion, caring community, and tolerance. The social representation on bullying as social positioning and its underlying logic of "social Darwinism," the social representation on bullying as social contamination and its underlying logic of "just do what the others do," and the social representation on bullying as an amusing game and its underlying logic of sadism can all be challenged by inviting and promoting students to establish a moral atmosphere built on cooperation, participation, caring, and prosocial values. Research, for example, has shown that a sense of caring community in the classroom correlates with the frequency of prosocial behavior among students and with moral development (for a review, see Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, 2001).

Fourth, antibullying practice should not be confined to focusing on bullies and victims in identified cases of bullying, but it should be far more holistic by working with all students and with the social climate in school, classrooms, and peer groups as well as with social representations embedded in student groups, especially in a preventive approach. The findings in-

dicating that the power of social representations among students should not be underestimated but taken seriously to counteract bullying and build a positive and caring social climate in school.

Limitations of the Study

Several notes of caution need to be sounded regarding the transferability of these findings. First, it is important to recognize that this is a study with a small and nonprobability sample. This sample of children from a particular area of Sweden may or may not be similar to the population of students with whom the readers primarily work. Percentages in this study have been used to make comparisons between subgroups. Reports of proportions in percentages should nevertheless be interpreted with caution when there are fewer than 100 individuals in the total sample as well as in the subgroups in comparison, which indeed is the case in this study. Some of the strengths of qualitative interviews, however, are “the opportunity to explore the depths of students’ conceptions” (Thornberg, 2008, p. 50), and to give students an opportunity to discuss their own understanding of bullying experiences in their own voices (Bosacki et al., 2006).

Second, regarding the topic of the interview (bullying), social desirability bias is a possible problem in this study. In order to reduce this risk, the interviewers were instructed and trained to actively listen with good and open follow-up questions, to take a nonjudgmental approach, and to approach and treat the children as the main informants and competent commentators on their own lives as students in school. Moreover, the main focus during the interviews was not on how the participants *act* in bullying situations, but on their representations on bullying causes.

Third, both the interviewer and the interviewee construct the content of an interview (see Charmaz, 2006; Rapley, 2004; Silverman, 2001). Hence, it may be difficult to separate the participant’s own representations or attitudes from the impact of the interview context (Doise, 1995). Therefore, the researcher cannot claim to simply present the participants’ views. The author of this article, however, disagrees with an extreme approach claiming that researchers only would and could “focus on the conversational skills of the participants rather than on the content of what they are saying and its relation to the world outside the interview” (Silverman, 2001, p. 97). Instead of completely mistrusting what the interviewee is reporting during the interview, the researcher has to (a) be aware of the coconstructive nature of interviews and interpret the interview results with caution, and simultaneously (b) take the interviewee’s report seriously.

We try to understand but do not necessarily adopt or reproduce their views as our own; rather we interpret them. We attempt to learn but we cannot know what occurs in people’s heads . . . Nonetheless, a careful interpretive understanding often marks classic qualitative studies and represents a stunning achievement (Charmaz, 2006, p. 19).

With these cautions in mind, this study provided rich descriptions of schoolchildren’s social representations on the causes of bullying as well as a grounded theory of social representation and moral disengagement in bullying situations by linking the concept of social representation on bullying causes to social categorization and moral disengagement. Even if the most prevalent social representations on the causes of bullying among the children in this study are to view bullying as a reaction to deviance and a mechanism of social positioning, the findings clearly show that schoolchildren operate with various forms of representations to understand and explain why bullying takes place. These findings should shed new light on students’ attitudes and behavior in bullying situations, and stimulate further research on students’ social representations on bullying as well as investigating these social representations in relation to peer ecology, social interaction patterns, social norms, moral development, social climate, and

actual behavior in school by using quantitative as well as qualitative methods.

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