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Older Teenagers' Explanations of Bullying

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Abstract

Background In accordance with the social information processing model, how adolescents attribute cause to a particular social situation (e.g., bullying) they witness or participate in, influences their online social information processing, and hence, how they will act in the situation.

Objective The aim of the present study was to explore how older teenagers explain why bullying takes place at school, and whether there were any differences in explaining bullying due to gender.

Methods Two hundred and fifteen Swedish students in upper secondary school responded to a questionnaire. Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative methods) were used to analyze data.

Results The qualitative analysis resulted in three main categories and nine subcategories regarding accounts of bullying causes. According to the findings, the youth explained bullying much more often with individualistic explanations (bully attributing and victim attributing) than non-individualistic explanations (social context attributing). Furthermore, girls tended to provide a greater number of bullying explanations and were more likely to attribute bullying causes to the bully and the victim, as compared to boys.

Conclusions The findings provide insights into older teenagers' understanding of why bullying occurs in school. The study also identified some gender differences but also some mixed findings regarding gender differences in comparison with previous research with younger participants. The authors concluded that more research has to be done to investigate age and gender differences.

Keywords: Bullying; Peer victimization; Teenagers' perspectives; Attribution; Gender

Introduction

Bullying, commonly defined as repeated aggression or harassments directed at targets who are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the bully or bullies (Jimerson et al. 2010; Olweus 1993; Terranova 2009), is a widespread problem in schools that students across the world report seeing or experiencing (e.g., Borntrager et al. 2009; Eslea et al. 2003). One way of enhancing our understanding of school bullying and hence generating more effective bullying prevention and intervention programs is to investigate students' perspectives and how they explain bullying because how they understand, interpret and attribute bullying has an impact on their reactions and behaviors if they see or become involved in bullying situations.

In Crick and Dodge's (1994) social information processing (SIP) model, children and adolescents' assumptions and conceptions of social situations and people involved in these situations influence how they process social information and thus how they respond and act in these social situations (also see Dodge et al. 2006; Gifford-Smith and Rabiner 2004). Attribution is a cognitive process in which people infer causes of events. Causal reasoning involves assumptions of other people's qualities or characteristics and assumptions of situational dynamics (Fiske and Taylor 2008). How children and adolescents attribute cause to a particular social situation they witness or participate in, influences their online SIP (e.g., formulating and redirecting goals, and accessing and selecting responses), and hence, how they will act in the situation (Crick and Dodge 1994; Dodge et al. 2006). How do adolescents explain or attribute causes of school bullying? It is urgent to investigate the answer because their explanations or attributions are a major influence on how they will behave when they witness or encounter bullying situations.

Research has shown that a common explanation among children and adolescents about why bullying occurs is that the victim is different, odd or deviant in some way (Bosacki et al.

2006; Buchanan and Winzer 2001; Burns et al. 2008; Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisén et al. 2007, 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Hoover et al. 1992; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thomson and Gunter 2008; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008). Another significant theme found in many studies investigating children and adolescents' representations of bullying causes is the struggle for status, power, and friendship (Erling and Hwang 2004; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Owens et al. 2000; Phillips 2003; Swart and Bredekamp 2009; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008). In addition, in many studies, some children and adolescents also attributed bullying to jealousy (Bosacki et al. 2006; Frisén et al. 2007; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). Another bullying explanation among children and teens is viewing bullying as a result of a "disturbed bully", in other words, bullying takes place because the bully is a person who has low self-confidence, a malicious personality, is mean, lacks empathy, or is insecure, and so on (Frisén et al. 2007, 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). For example, in Frisén et al. (2007), 28% of the adolescents thought that bullies bully others because they have low self-esteem, 15% thought it happens because bullies have problems, and 4% thought it happens because the bullies are also victims. Another reason that adolescents associate with initiating and maintaining bullying is to have some fun (Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011) or to create excitement (Owens et al. 2000), and to break the boredom of everyday life in school (Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Owens et al. 2000; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). Explaining bullying in terms of group pressure is also found among some children and adolescents (Buchanan and Winzer 2001; Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisén et al. 2007; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011).

Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) conducted a mixed methods study in which 176 students (15–16 years old) responded to a questionnaire and wrote down their explanations for bullying. Whereas some students gave only one explanation of bullying, others wrote down a few or many explanations of bullying. Sixty-nine percent of the students operated with *bully attributing*, which refers to attributing the cause of bullying to the bully (e.g., the bully has poor self-confidence, low self-esteem, psychological problems, hostile emotions, harsh or non-loving parents, is a mean person, is amused by harming others or has no empathy, and therefore bullies others). Forty-two percent of the students operated with *victim attributing*, which refers to attributing the cause of bullying to the victim (e.g., the victim is deviant, odd, irritable, weak or mean, and is therefore bullied). Twenty-one percent of the students operated with *peer attributing*, which refers to attributing the cause of bullying to the peer group (e.g., group pressure, and peer conflicts). Seven percent of the students operated with *school attributing*, which refers to attributing the cause of bullying to the school setting (bullying is a result of boredom in school or poor anti-bullying practices in school). Seven percent operated with *human nature/society attributing*, which refers to attributing the cause of bullying to human nature or society (e.g., differences among humans result in friction, conflicts, violence and bullying, people in general tend to reject individuals as a result of biological instinct, or society strongly values good-looking people or a pleasing appearance, which in turn causes bullying when people are not good-looking enough).

Furthermore, Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) found that significantly more male students attributed causes of bullying to the victim compared to female students. This confirmed previous research findings showing that boys blamed the victims more than girls in hypothetical bullying situations (Gini 2008) and in self-reports regarding bullying experiences (Hara 2002). In contrast, Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) found that many more teenage girls attributed causes of bullying to the bully compared to teenage boys (also see Frisén et al. 2008). In addition, Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) found that students who had a prior history

of being a bully more often attributed causes of bullying to the victim and fewer by attributing the causes to the bully, compared to students who had a prior history of being a victim, a bystander, or a bully/victim.

The present study is in part a replication of Thornberg and Knutsen's (2011) mixed methods study. According to Hargreaves (2007), replications are "more necessary in the social than the natural sciences because of the importance of contextual and cultural variations" (p. 5). The aim of this study was to explore how older teenagers explain why bullying takes place at school in order to better understand their actions as participants or bystanders in bullying situations. A second aim was to investigate whether there were any gender differences in explaining bullying. Whereas Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) investigated these issues among lower secondary school students, in the current study, participants were upper secondary/high school students. In contrast to Thornberg and Knutsen (2011), we did further gender differences analyses but did not investigate differences due to self-reported bullying experiences. The lack of previous research on gender differences in how older teenagers (upper secondary school students) explain or attribute bullying, motivates the elaborated focus on gender in the current study. Nevertheless, with reference to previous research on younger students (children and younger teenagers; see Gini 2008; Hara 2002; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011), it is reasonable in the current study to expect that whereas boys would display a tendency to attribute the cause of bullying to the victim ("blaming the victim"), girls would be more prone to attributing the cause of bullying to those who bully.

Method

A mixed methods design has been conducted (see Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). Qualitative data have been collected and then qualitatively analyzed. Based on the qualitative analysis, data has been quantified and then analyzed using statistical methods.

Participants

The original sample consisted of 250 students (132 females and 118 males) attending two upper secondary schools located in two medium-sized Swedish cities. All of the students who were invited to participate filled out the questionnaire, but of the 250 students, 35 (17 females and 18 males) were excluded from the study because of incomplete responses to the questionnaire. Consequently, 215 students (115 females and 100 males) participated in the present study. Hence, the participation rate was 86% and the dropout rate was 14%. The age range was 15–21 years ($M = 16.9$ years; $SD = 1.00$). Ninety-two percent of the participants were in the range of 16–18 years. Socio-economic and ethnic background data were not gathered on an individualistic level. Nevertheless, because the sample represented different types of educational programs, and students' choice of attending educational programs in upper secondary schools in Sweden is heavily influenced by socio-economical background, this stratified sampling strategy ensured that the sample in this study represented students from lower- and middle-class families.

Procedures and Materials

The participants were given the questionnaire and filled it out in their ordinary classroom setting. According to ethical guidelines for social science research in Sweden, the researcher has to obtain informed consent from those who participate in the study, and if participants are under 15 years old, parental consent has to be obtained as well (HSFR 2009). In line with ethical recommendations, it was sufficient to obtain informed consent from the participants, and not from their parents. Authors 2 and 3 were present in every classroom during the data gathering and the definition of bullying, according to Olweus' (1993) definition, on the very front page of the questionnaire to the participants was read aloud.

Bullying means that a student, or a group of students, repeatedly say or do nasty and unpleasant things to another student. It's also bullying when others repeatedly exclude a student. But it's not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight. Jokes between friends are not bullying if everyone involved thinks it's okay. But it's bullying if a student, or a group of students, repeatedly makes fun of or teases another student in a way he or she doesn't like.

Accounts of the Causes of Bullying

Furthermore, an open question was used to ask the participants to explain why they thought bullying occurs, "How come bullying takes place at school? I think bullying takes place because _____?" with 16 empty lines provided for their answers (and an explicit suggestion to continue writing on the next page if they needed more space).

Data Analysis

First, grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978) were used in order to qualitatively analyze students' written responses to the open question about the causes of bullying. 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 and so on), and memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes) were the main grounded theory methods in the study. This procedure generated a set of categories and subcategories, grounded in data. As in Thornberg and Knutsen (2011), the broad concept "attribution" was used as a heuristic tool, meaning that it was employed as a "conceptual frame which helps to understand empirical phenomena found in the research field" (Kelle 2007, p. 2008). In addition, during the qualitative analysis, the developed categories in Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) were compared with our data and generated codes. As a result, we adopted some of their categories, based on fit and workability (Glaser 1978). There were only few minor disagreements during the coding, and we discussed them until a consensus was reached and the consensus was then coded.

Second, the statistical analyses were conducted. We calculated % of bullying explanations within the total sample as well as within the boy group and the girl group. A dependent *t* test was also conducted to investigate if there was a significant difference between the frequency of individualistic explanations and the frequency of non-individualistic explanations among the students. Finally, χ^2 tests and a *t* test were conducted to investigate gender differences in explaining bullying.

Results

The qualitative analysis of students' accounts of the causes of bullying generated three main categories (bully attributing, victim attributing, social context attributing) and nine subcategories (see Table 1). A dependent *t* test, in which individualistic attributions (a sum of all subcategories of bully and victim attributing) and non-individualistic attributions (a sum of all subcategories of social context attributing) were compared, revealed that the student explained bullying much more in individualistic terms than in non-individualistic terms ($t = 20.163, p = .000, r = .70$).

Bully Attributing

Eighty percent of the students came up with explanations in which they attribute the cause of bullying to the bully. The analysis resulted in four subcategories (and an "others" category): psychosocial problems, social positioning, emotionally-driven, and thoughtlessness.

Table 1 Main Categories and Subcategories of Bullying Explanations (the Percentage of the Total Sample Using Each Category Is Reported in the Brackets)

Bully Attributing (81)	Victim Attributing (45)	Social Context Attributing (21)
Psychosocial problems (57)	Deviance (45)	Group pressure (13)
Social positioning (41)		Inviting School Environment (5)
Emotionally-driven (21)		Peer conflicts (4)
Thoughtlessness (7)		
Other bully attributing (6)		

Note. Whereas some participants operated with only one main category or subcategory, others operated with more main categories or subcategories. Also note that 4% reported other explanations than those in the category system above, 4% did not answering the question, and 0.5% responded with an “I don’t know” response.

Psychosocial Problems

The account of psychosocial problems means that bullying takes place because the bully has psychosocial problems. This was the most common subcategory of bully attributing (56% of the total sample). This subcategory consisted of three subcategories: (a) *bully’s inner flaws* (45%), which means that the bully feels insecure, has poor self-confidence, low self-esteem, psychological problems or a weak mind, which cause him or her to bully others (e.g., “If a person has bad self-confidence and feels insecure, then he/she could begin bullying”), (b) *bad home background* (15%), which means that the bully comes from a bad home background, had a difficult childhood, harsh or bad parents, or other problems at home, which drives him or her to bully others (e.g., “they [the bullies] have been treated badly at home”), and (c) *bully’s prior victim history* (7%), which means that the bully has been bullied him/herself, and as a consequence he or she now bullies others (e.g., “People who had been bullied will bully others later in life”).

Social Positioning

The second most common subcategories of bully attributing is the account of *social positioning* (41%). This subcategory refers to the explanation that bullying takes place because those who bully others want to manifest, maintain or enhance their power, status or popularity, and consisted of three subcategories: (a) *the status-seeking bully* (35%), which means that people bully in order to receive or manifest high social status in the peer group (e.g., “you think you are cool, that you get ‘status’ if you bully”), (b) *avoiding victimization* (7%), which means that people bully in order to protect themselves from bullying (e.g., “you could bully in order to avoid being a victim of bullying”), and (c) *power-seeking bully* (5%), which means that people bully in order to show, get or enhance their power over others (e.g., “they want to show you their power”).

Emotionally-Driven

The third most common subcategories of bully attributing is the account of *emotionally-driven* (21%). This subcategory refers to the explanation that the bully is driven by hostile or mean feelings or emotions, and consisted of three subcategories: (a) *jealous-driven* (14%), which means that the bully bullies because of jealousy (e.g., “the person bullies because he/she is jealous of the victim because he/she is smarter than the bully, has higher grades and understand things better”), (b) *annoyance-driven* (4%), which means that the bully dislikes, cannot stand or is annoyed at the victim (e.g., “people get annoyed at others and have a hard time keeping their feelings inside themselves”), and (c) *amusement-driven* (4%), which means that bullying takes place because the bully is amused by bullying (e.g., “because they think it’s fun when others become upset”).

Thoughtlessness

Another subcategory of bully attributing is thoughtless behavior (7% of the total sample),

which refers to the explanation that bullying occurs because the bully has an inability to put him- or herself into other people's situation or is not thinking at all about what they are doing and why they are doing it; it just happens (e.g., "people who bully don't know how you really feel, I guess"). We made a distinction between psychosocial problems (see above) and thoughtlessness because whereas the former refers to internalizing problems as a cause for bullying ("the suffering bully"), the latter refers to insensitivity and unawareness of or not caring about the harming consequences of the action as causes for bullying ("the insensitive bully").

Other Bully Attributing

Other explanations of bullying that attribute the cause to the bully found in the data (6% of the total sample) were for example "many people are bad, mean, and don't have a life", "they are afraid of new things", and "I think that a lot of them who bully others are messed up in their head, they are not as smart as others".

Victim Attributing

Forty-four percent of the students came up with explanations in which they attribute the cause of bullying to the victim. The analysis resulted in just one subcategory: deviance.

Deviance

The account of *deviance* was used by 44% of the students, and means that bullying takes place because the victim is deviant, different, odd or does not fit in, which in turn leads to victimization (e.g., "It could be someone who deviates from the rest, perhaps is differently dressed, has a different hairstyle, has a different dialect or background, any simple deviation").

Social Context Attributing

Twenty-one percent of the students came up with explanations in which they attribute the cause of bullying to the social context in which the bullying takes place. This category in turn consisted of three subcategories: group pressure, inviting school environment, and peer conflicts.

Group Pressure

The most frequent subcategory of social environment attributing was the account of *group pressure* (12% of the sample), which means that bullying is simply a consequence of group pressure (e.g., "There could be group pressure that makes you bully another person, even though you don't want to").

Inviting School Environment

The explanation of inviting school environment was used by 5% of the students, and means that bullying occurs because the school environment invites students to bully—the school context makes students bored, which results in bullying, or the school staff do not do enough to prevent bullying (e.g., "I think it's the teachers' fault too. If they don't want bullying to happen, then they have to do something in time").

Peer Conflict

According to the account of conflicts (4% of the students), bullying stems from conflicts between peers (e.g., "conflicts between people can end up in bullying").

Gender Differences

Table 2 shows the % of how many boys and girls using the different main categories of bullying explanations. In order to ascertain whether gender differences existed in bullying explanations, an initial set of two χ^2 tests were conducted. We investigated gender differences in relation to bully attributing (Test 1) and victim attributing (Test 2). We dropped testing gender differences in relation to social context attributing since Table 2 displayed very small % differences. The analysis revealed that significantly more girls (88%) attributed causes of bullying to the bully compared to boys (71 %, $\chi^2 = 9.465$, $p = .002$). Moreover, significantly more girls (51%) also attributed causes of bullying to the victim compared to boys (36 %, $\chi^2 = 5.080$, $p = .024$). Hence, more girls explained bullying by blaming the bully as well as blaming the victim, compared to boys.

Table 2: Percentages of Girls and Boys Using Different Bullying Explanations

	Girls	Boys	Total
Bully Attributing	88 % (n = 101/115)	71 % (n = 71/100)	80 % (n = 172/215)
Victim Attributing	51 % (n = 59/115)	36 % (n = 36/100)	44 % (n = 95/215)
Social Context Attributing	20 % (n = 23/115)	18 % (n = 18/100)	19 % (n = 41/215)

Table 3 shows the % of how many boys and girls using the different subcategories of bully explaining. In order to explore gender differences in bully attributing, we conducted a χ^2 test for each subcategory. The analysis revealed that significantly more girls explained bullying by referring to psychosocial problems of the bully, compared to boys ($\chi^2 = 18.958$, $p = .000$). In addition, significantly more girls than boys explained bullying by saying that the bully is driven by emotions ($\chi^2 = 4.801$, $p = .028$). No significant gender differences were found in the frequencies of explaining bullying as bully's social positioning and bully's thoughtlessness.

Table 3: Percentages of Girls and Boys Using Different Sub Categories of Bully Attributing

	Girls	Boys	Total
Psychosocial Problems	70 % (n = 80/115)	40 % (n = 40/100)	56 % (n = 120/215)
Social Positioning	44 % (n = 50/115)	38 % (n = 38/100)	41 % (n = 88/215)
Emotionally-Driven	26 % (n = 30/115)	6 % (n = 6/100)	21 % (n = 44/215)
Thoughtlessness	8 % (n = 9/115)	6 % (n = 6/100)	7 % (n = 15/215)

The fact that significantly more girls attributed bullying to the bully *and* the victim as compared to boys suggested that girls in general operated with more bullying explanations in parallel than boys, which might indicate more elaborate or complex representations of how to explain bullying. The descriptive statistics presented in Table 4 report % of girls and boys operating with different numbers of bullying explanations at the same time. The statistics here

are calculated based on the presence of the nine subcategories in Table 1 and the category “Other bullying explanations” (see the note in Table 1) in the participants’ written responses. An independent *t* test confirmed the descriptive statistics by showing that girls ($M = 2.34$, $SD = .92$) explained bullying using significantly more explanations in parallel than boys ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .88$; $t = 4.613$, $p = .000$, $r = .31$ or Cohen’s $d = .65$).

Table 4: Percentages of Girls and Boys Using Different Numbers of Bullying Explanations (Calculated on The Nine Sub Categories and “Other explanations”)

Numbers of Bullying Explanations	Girls	Boys	Total
0	0 %	1 %	0.5 %
1	20 %	43 %	31 %
2	35 %	36 %	36 %
3	35 %	14 %	26 %
4	8 %	4 %	6 %
5	1 %	0 %	0.5 %

Discussion

As in the Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) study, the qualitative analysis in the present study revealed several ways in which teenagers explained bullying. The three main categories were bully attributing, victim attributing, and social context attributing. In addition, our study confirmed Thornberg and Knutsen’s (2011) when showing that teenagers typically use individualistic explanations (bully attributing and victim attributing) when explaining bullying. According to our findings, non-individualistic (social context attributing) were much less common among the teenagers. Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) speculate that this tendency toward individualistic explanations over non-individualistic explanations might be explained in terms of “the fundamental attribution error (or correspondence bias), which is the most commonly documented bias in social perception, and is about over attributing behaviors and social events to individual dispositional causes and at the same time over- looking other forces such as social norms or social pressure” (p. 187). This kind of bias—the strong tendency to individual explanations of bullying—limits teenagers’ perceptions of bullying, which in turn is reasonable to assume limits their views of possibilities to prevent or counter-act bullying.

When looking at subcategories, the bullying explanation most used among the teens in the present study is attributing bullying to the bully’s psychosocial problems. This type of explanation is also found in other studies (e.g., Bosacki et al. 2006; Frisé et al. 2008), such as “inner flaws”, “boosting well-being”, and “problematic family” of the bully (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011), bullying as the work of a disturbed bully (Thornberg 2010b), and “bullies have low self-esteem”, “bullies have problems” and “bullies are also victims” (Frisé et al. 2007). Another common bullying explanation among the youth in the present study was to refer to the deviancy of the victim. This kind of reasoning has been found in many studies (Bosacki et al. 2006; Buchanan and Winzer 2001; Burns et al. 2008; Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisé et al. 2008; Frisé et al. 2007; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Hoover et al. 1992; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thomson and Gunter 2008; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008). Blaming the victim in terms of deviance can be related to what Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) called “the odd student repertoire”—a discourse among students in which they separated the victim from others and constructed him or her as a negatively deviant student—which Teräsahjo and Salmivalli related to the discourse of homogeneity (i.e., deviant students disturb and threaten

the existing social order) and its demands on conformity. The constructed “different-ness” or “deviance” in everyday school life is then used by students to justify bullying (Lahelma 2004; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2010b).

A third common explanation of bullying was to view it as a result of bullies’ social positioning work (the bully wants more power, higher status, more friends or to appear tough or “cool”), which also has been found in other studies (e.g., Frisén et al. 2007; Frisén et al. 2008; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). Ethnographic studies have shown a clear link between bullying or peer harassment and the social process of social positioning or the struggle for social status, power or friends in school (e.g., Cadigan 2002; Eder et al. 1995; Kinney 1993; Kless 1992; for a review, see Thornberg 2011). In addition, explaining bullying in terms of victim’s deviance as well as in terms of social positioning can be related to ethnographic research that has shown a link between being defined as different/deviant and being attributed lower status; students who are bullied are usually at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and socially marginalized and constructed as “odd” or negatively deviant (Thornberg 2011). Also other subcategories in the present findings resemble student explanations of bullying from other studies, such as the emotionally-driven bully, i.e., being jealous or annoyed with the victim or disliking the victim (Bosacki et al. 2006; Frisén et al. 2007; Frisén et al. 2008; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011), and peer pressure (Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisén et al. 2007; Thornberg 2010b; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011).

Considering gender differences, the present study demonstrated that many more girls attributed the causes of bullying to the bully, compared to boys, which supports Thornberg and Knutsen’s (2011) study. In order to better understand this gender difference, we moved beyond Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) by further investigating gender differences in bully attributing by exploring their subcategories. Whereas we found no gender differences in attributing bullying to bully’s social positioning work and thoughtlessness (mindless bullying), our findings demonstrated that, when compared to boys, girls explained bullying much more by pathologizing the bully, i.e., explaining that bullying takes place because the bully has psychosocial problems (e.g., poor self-confidence, low self-esteem, psychological problems, feels “bad”, or a bad home background) or the bully is driven by emotions (jealousy, dislike or is annoyed by the victim, or is amused by bullying). The girls’ tendency to explain bullying by attributing causes to psychosocial problems and emotions of the bullies could, at least in part, be understood in relation to gender socialization and differences in gender norms and cultures in childhood and adolescence. Whereas boys play and interact in larger groups and establish and maintain friendships based on mutual interests and activities, girls form close, intimate friendship relationships in which they more typically share confidences (Golombok and Fivush 1994). Being sensitive, empathic, affectionate, intimate, and interested in emotional issues is more in line with traditional female identity and norms and less with male identity and norms (e.g., Maccoby and Jacklin 1987; Thornberg 2010a; Thorne 1993). For example, Tracey et al. (2005) found that female adolescents were more interested in social issues than male adolescents.

However, whereas previous research has shown that many fewer girls attribute causes of bullying to the victim, as compared to boys (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011), and that boys blame the victims more than girls in hypothetical bullying situations (Gini 2008) and in self-reports regarding bullying experiences (Hara 2002), the present study did not support this gender difference. On the contrary, we found that more girls attributed causes of bullying to the victim, as compared to boys. At a first glance, we found this result puzzling as it conflicted with previous research and challenged the “good girl / bad boy” stereotype (e.g., Thornberg 2010a; Trach et al. 2010). Nevertheless, there are some possible explanations for this inconsistency. The participants in the previous studies were younger— Italian students aged 9–12 years old in Gini (2008), Japanese students aged 12–14 years old in Hara (2002),

and Swedish students aged 15 years old in Thornberg and Knutsen (2011)—than in the present study (Swedish students aged 15–21 years old). Hence, the mixed findings between previous and current findings might be due to age or developmental issues. In addition, our findings do not suggest an attribution shift from bully to victim among the girls, but a tendency among girls as older teenagers to add victim attributing to their repertoire of bully attributing. The main finding considering gender differences in the current study is actually that girls in general operate with more bullying explanations, as compared to boys, which in turn indicates a tendency among girls, as compared to boys, to display more elaborate or complex representations of how to explain bullying. This gender difference in complexity in bullying attributing might in turn, at least in part, be explained in girls' higher interests in social issues and relationships (Tracey et al. 2005).

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of this study should be noted. As discussed in Thornberg and Knutsen (2011), the open question that was used to tap students' bullying explanations might result in just replying with what spontaneously came into their minds without any further elaboration and more explanations that might be elicited with follow-up questions, which would have been possible in, for example, qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, in accordance with SIP models (e.g., Crick and Dodge 1994; Gifford-Smith and Rabiner 2004; Fiske and Taylor 2008), a possible interpretation is that the participants' own answers in the questionnaire are an outcome of easy accessible information in their long-term memory. If so, such cognitive representations would be more influential on their on-line processing of social information in bullying situations than other explanations of bullying, which they might have in their long-term memory. Furthermore, the risk of a social desirability bias is much higher in qualitative interviews as compared to filling out questionnaires anonymously, especially considering the delicate topic of bullying. Moreover, considering the fact that the female students tended to provide a greater number of explanations than male students, a note of caution needs to be sounded regarding the interpretation of the gender differences in the endorsement of the specific explanations (i.e., bully's psychosocial problems and state of being emotionally driven). In addition, a note of caution also needs to be sounded regarding the generalization of these findings due to contextual and cultural variations across countries, ethnicities, social classes, and sub-cultures of adolescents within different cultures. This sample of teenagers from a particular area of Sweden may or may not be similar to the population of teenagers with whom the readers primarily work.

Implications for Practitioners

According to Rudduck et al. (Rudduck 2006; Rudduck and Fielding 2006; Rudduck and Flutter 2004), empowering the "student voice" expressed as 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 and interaction patterns of everyday school life. This "student voice" movement is close to the principles and practices of democratic citizenship education and in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In accordance with this movement, we argue that it should be significant in the development and practices of bullying prevention and interventions to seriously listen to children and teenagers' perspectives on bullying and systematically construct and accumulate knowledge of their voices, experiences and sense-making. The current study is an addition to a small but growing body of research on children and adolescents' perspectives on bullying.

The current findings indicate that older teenagers typically operate with individualistic bullying explanations, which confirms Thornberg and Knutsen's (2011) work with younger

teenagers. However, by almost exclusively attributing the causes of bullying to the bully or the victim, teenagers risk overlooking social psychological and sociological factors such as group processes and peer pressure (e.g., Burns et al. 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008), group norms (e.g., Duffy and Nesdale 2009; Salmivalli and Voeten 2004), labeling and stigma processes, social inhibition (e.g., bystander effect), social facilitation, moral disengagement (e.g., moral justifications, diffusion of social responsibility, dehumanization, and blaming the victim; e.g., Bandura 1999), instability in peer networks (e.g., Neal 2007), different participation roles in bullying situations (e.g., Salmivalli et al. 1996), gender and heterosexual hegemony (e.g., Neal 2007; Phoenix et al. 2003; also see Thornberg 2011), and reinforcing mechanisms operating in the peer group or school class. Overlooking such factors might in turn diminish students' awareness of their own impact and responsibility as bystanders as well as bullies. Hence, bullying prevention efforts and interventions have to promote children and teenagers to critically reflect upon their representations of bullying causes as well as broadening their ways of understanding and explaining bullying by adding social psychological and sociological perspectives, and thus to discover, understand and consider the complexity of bullying.

In addition to pathologizing bullies, blaming the victim is a very common bullying explanation among the teenagers in the present study. Forty-four percent of them interpreted the victim as deviant or different and attributed the cause of bullying to this deviance as at least one of their explanations of why bullying occurs. Such interpretation of bullying can be identified as a subprocess of moral disengagement (i.e., dehumanizing and blaming the victim, see Bandura 1999), which has a tendency to diminish the feelings of empathy for the victim (Almedia et al. 2010; Hyde et al. 2010), increase the risk of aggressive behavior (Bandura et al. 1996, 2001; Barchia and Bussey 2010; Paciello et al. 2008; Pelton et al. 2004; Pornari and Wood 2010), including bullying behavior (Gini et al. 2011; Hymel et al. 2005; Menesini et al. 2003; Obermann 2011), and diminish the tendency to defend the victim when witnessing bullying (Gini 2006).

Research has actually indicated that students who bully others are more likely to blame the victim compared to other students (Hara 2002; Hymel et al. 2005; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). With reference to the attribution theory, Gini (2008) argues that "in the case of potentially harmful events, blaming other individuals is a very real self-serving attribution and, in particular, blaming victims for their fate allows people to distance themselves from thoughts of suffering" (p. 337). It diminishes or hinders children and adolescents' empathic arousal and moral concerns in relation to bullying situations, victims' distress, and their own actions or inactions (cf. Hoffman 2000). Furthermore, explaining bullying by referring to "deviance" of the victim indicates an underlying logic of conformism and intolerance, which should be pedagogically challenged by pointing out and inviting teenagers into a deliberative discussion about the content and consequences of taken-for-granted norms, the mechanisms of stigma, labeling, and dehumanization, and the values of multiplicity, heterogeneity, social inclusion, a caring community, and tolerance (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011).

In addition, explaining bullying in terms of (a) bully's social positioning and its underlying logic of "social Darwinism", (b) bully's thoughtlessness and its expression of a lack of self-regulation and awareness of how one's actions affects others' welfare, and (c) group pressure and its underlying logic of "just do what the others do", should all be pedagogically challenged by inviting and promoting students to establish a social climate built on cooperation, participation, caring, and prosocial values (Thornberg 2010b). Previous research has demonstrated that a positive and supportive social climate in schools and classrooms can be linked to: caring and prosocial behavior and moral development among students (Battistich 2008; Solomon et al. 2001); positive attitudes toward seeking help for bullying (Eliot et al. 2010); discouraging maladaptive behavior (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2009; Kuperminc et al.

1997); and, fewer students engaging in bullying (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2009) and blaming the victim in bullying situations (Gini 2008). In sum, there is a risk that at least some of the bullying explanations among children and teenagers could function as justifications for bullying as well as for not helping the victim, especially if the explanations stigmatize (or dehumanize) and blame the victim. For example, Terranova et al. have found that students who experience higher levels of peer victimization tend to receive less social support (i.e., prosocial behaviors) from their peers (Terranova 2009; Terranova et al. 2011).

The current study has shown that the older teenagers tended very much to explain bullying in individualistic terms (mostly by attributing it to the bully, but also to lesser degree by attributing it to the victim). Whereas the few previous studies that have been conducted in this area have focused on younger participants (children and younger teenagers) and have showed that boys are more prone to “blaming the victim” than girls, this gender difference was not found in the current study, which might be due to the older age span. Nevertheless, the female teenagers tended to provide a greater number of bullying explanations than male teenagers, and explained bullying more often as a result of the bully’s psychosocial problems or state of being emotionally driven, when compared to male students. Considering the mixed findings in relation to previous studies, future research should investigate age and gender differences by, for example, constructing and distributing a comprehensive “student view on bullying causes” scale that allows researchers to conduct more sophisticated statistical analyses.

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