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Bystanders to Bullying: Fourth- to Seventh-Grade Students' Perspectives on Their Reactions

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The aim with the present study was to investigate bystander actions in bullying situations as well as reasons behind these actions as they are articulated by Swedish students from fourth to seventh grade. Forty-three semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with students. Qualitative analysis of data was performed by methods from grounded theory. The analysis of the student voices of being a bystander in bullying reveals a complexity in which different definition-of-situation processes are evoked (a) relations (friends and social hierarchy), (b) defining seriousness, (c) victim's contribution to the situation, (d) social roles and intervention responsibilities, and (e) distressing emotions. There are often conflicted motives in how to act as a bystander, which could evoke moral distress among the students. Our analysis is unique in that it introduces the concept of moral distress as a process that has to be considered in order to better understand bystander actions among children. The findings also indicate bystander reactions that could be associated with moral disengagement, such as not perceiving a moral obligation to intervene if the victim is defined as a non-friend ('none of my business'), protecting the friendship with the bully, and blaming the victim.

Keywords: bullying; bystander; moral disengagement; definition of situation; grounded theory.

Introduction

Bullying, usually defined as repeated actions of aggression or harassment towards a weaker victim who finds it hard to defend herself or himself (Olweus, 1993) and is a prevalent problem in schools (e.g., Bontrager et al., 2009; Eslea et al., 2003; Lambert,

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Scourfield, Smalley & Jones, 2008), with negative health and psychosocial consequences for students who are directly involved (e.g., Rivers, Poteat, Noret & Ashurst, 2009; Stavrinides, Georgiou, Nikiforou & Kiteri, 2011; West, Sweeting & Young, 2010).

In addition to the *bully*, who initiates bullying, and the *victim*, who is the target, bullying most often involves bystanders who observe bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001; O'Connell, Pepler & Craig, 1999). Bystanders can assume a range of participant roles. They can act as (1) *assistants*, who join the bully and begin to bully; (2) *reinforcers*, who provide support to bullies; (3) *outsiders*, who remain passive bystanders or leave the situation; and (4) *defenders*, who help the victim (Salmivalli, 1999). Unfortunately, according to observational studies, bystanders seldom take the role of the defender (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig et al., 2000; Hawkins et al., 2001; O'Connell et al., 1999).

Previous research based on advanced statistical analyses of quantitative data drawn from paper-and-pencil tests has suggested empathy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Caravita, Di Blasio & Salmivalli, 2009; Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Choi & Cho, 2013; Gini, Albiero, Benelli & Altoè, 2007, 2008), basic moral sensitivity (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), anti-bullying attitudes (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Ang, & Gini, 2012), moral disengagement (Almedia, Correia & Marinho, 2010; Gini, 2006; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), pro-victim attitudes (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), perceived peer pressure (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), perceived parent pressure (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013), defender self-efficacy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Pöyhönen, Juvonen & Salmivalli, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), social self-efficacy (Gini, Albiero, Benelli & Altoè, 2008), general self-efficacy (Rigby & Johnson, 2006), sense of personal responsibility (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013), coping strategies (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013), and friendship (Oh

& Hazler, 2009) as factors that influence how students act when witnessing bullying in school.

Bosacki, Marini, and Dane (2006) argue that although quantitative research provides a great deal of critical information about bullying, it ‘does not give children an opportunity to discuss their own understanding of bullying experiences in their own voices’ (p. 232). According to interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011), people are constructive meaning-makers of their everyday social life. Although the meaning of things is formed in the context of social interactions and is derived by the actors from these interactions, how they will act in social situations is guided by the meanings they associate with the situations. Qualitative research with roots in the interpretative tradition is therefore crucial to help us understand the meaning of different bystander actions in bullying situations from the students’ point of view (cf., Flick, in press; Patton, 2002), to examine participants’ main concerns and perspectives, and to develop themes and concepts that emerged from and have relevance to the people in the substantive field of the research (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, in press). There is a small but growing body of qualitative and mixed methods studies in which students themselves have been asked to describe how they view bystander behaviours and what motives or reasons they associate with bystander behaviours. Different methods have been used, such as open questions in questionnaires (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2005), field observations and follow-up interviews (Thornberg 2007, 2010), and qualitative interviews (Thornberg et al 2012).

These studies, when taken together, revealed that among students, the reasons associated with helping have been (a) interpretation of severe harm in the situation (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (b) feelings of empathy with or concern for the victim (Bellmore et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et

al., 2012), (c) emphasis on the wrongness or unfairness of the event (Bellmore et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg et al., 2012), (d) anger towards the transgressor (Thornberg, 2010), (e) friendship with the victim (Bellmore et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (f) a high social status among peers (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (g) a desire to demonstrate caring (Bellmore et al., 2012), (h) feeling a confident in helping (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (i) a perception that adults want them to intervene (Thornberg et al., 2012), and (j) stating that helping is simply consistent with the sort of person they are (Rigby & Johnson, 2005).

In contrast, reasons associated with non-helping behaviour among the students have been (a) interpretation of low or no harm in the situation (Thornberg et al., 2012), including trivialization of the event (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2007, 2010) and habituation to bullying (i.e., bullying takes place often and students view it as a routine phenomenon; Thornberg et al., 2012), (b) dissociation from the event (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2007), including thinking it is none of their business (Rigby & Johnson, 2005) and viewing the victim as a non-friend (Thornberg, 2007, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (c) self-protection (Bellmore et al., 2012), including fear of consequences (Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2007, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (d) friendship with the bully (Thornberg et al., 2012), (e) a dislike of the victim (Thornberg et al., 2012), (f) a lack of personal responsibility and a responsibility transfer to teachers, other peers – particularly the victim's friends – or the transgressor (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2007, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), (g) blaming the victim (Thornberg et al., 2012), (h) enjoyment of the event (Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg et al., 2012), (i) admiration for aggressors (Rigby & Johnson, 2005), (j) believing the bully (Thornberg et al., 2012), (k) low social status among peers (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), and (l)

uncertainty about one's ability to help (Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg et al., 2012) or about what to do (Bellmore et al., 2012). In their study, Rigby and Johnson (2005) made a distinction between ignoring and assisting the bully as two different types of non-help behaviour. Whereas reasons given for ignoring were none of my business, fear of consequences, the responsibility is (or could be) with the victim, action could be counter-productive or futile, and enjoyment of the spectacle, reasons given for assisting the bully were the safer option, admiration for aggressors, and feelings of hostility. In a study by Bellmore et al. (2012), only four students reported that they joined the bully, and self-protection was the only described reason.

Despite the increasing attention to how students themselves make meaning of and articulate reasons and motives for different bystander behaviours, the current literature on students' perspectives on why they take a different range of actions as bystanders in bullying situations is still rather limited. Although the studies by Rigby and Johnson (2005) and by Bellmore et al. (2012) are crucial, the questionnaire design did not give the researchers opportunities to ask follow-up questions to gather more fully elaborated data. Even if that was the case in Thornberg's two reported studies (2007, 2010), the first study examined only one case of a bystander situation, and both studies investigated bystander situations and actions more generally and not bullying situations exclusively. Furthermore, even though the previous studies have generated a growing understanding of meaning of why bystanders help or not from the students' points of view, we still have too little information about what reasons and motives students themselves verbalize and associate with pro-bullying behaviour, that is, reinforcing or assisting the bullies as a bystander response.

The aim with the present study was to investigate bystander actions in bullying situations as well as reasons behind these actions as Swedish students from fourth to

seventh grade articulated them. Thus, the current study continues a growing tradition of listening to the views of children (cf., Bosacki et al., 2006; Knipe, Reynolds & Milner, 2007; Mayall, 2008; Ravet, 2007; Singal & Swann, 2011).

Method

Participants

Forty-three students (15 boys and 28 girls) with an age range from 10 to 13 years, from fourth to seventh grade at five different schools, participated in this study. The grade distribution was: Grade 4 (n = 11; 6 girls, 5 boys), Grade 5 (n = 8; 5 girls, 3 boys), Grade 6 (n = 14; 10 girls, 4 boys), Grade 7 (n = 10; 7 girls, 3 boys). Three of the schools were located in different neighbourhoods in a Swedish city with more than 130,000 inhabitants. The other two schools were located in two Swedish villages with 30,000 and 7,000 inhabitants each. As a result of taking the samples from different schools, the sample in the present study comprises students from different socio-economic (from lower class to upper-middle class) and socio-geographic backgrounds. Students and parents were informed about the study and necessary consent was obtained. Approval from the Regional Ethical Review Board was obtained prior to all data collection.

Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted and ranged from 30 to 60 min. The students were asked to describe one or a few situations in which they had seen bullying taking place. They were then asked to describe how they and other students reacted, what they and others students did, and why they did it. In addition, they were also asked what they thought they and other peers would do if they happened to see bullying as well as why they and other peers would act as suggested. In keeping with the theoretical sampling of grounded theory approach, additional questions were gradually

added to the interview guide when new themes aroused in the interviews. The first author conducted all interviews, which were held individually because of the sensitive topic. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Researcher Role

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher spent 2-5 days in every class in order to make the students more familiar with the researcher. In her interactions and conversations with students, including the interview situations, she avoided the position of authority in accordance with the 'least-adult role' (Mayall, 2008) and the 'friendly researcher' position (Ravet, 2007). She used a non-judgmental approach and treated the students as competent commentators of their social life. She explained to them that she did not work at the school as a teacher but instead was there as a visitor or guest in order to learn from the students about their experiences of and thoughts about bullying (cf., Thorne, 1993).

Analysis

The study was guided by a grounded theory approach (e.g., Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Among the different versions of grounded theory approaches, we adopted the constructivist version (Charmaz, 2004, 2006) because of our interest in what meanings students gave to bullying bystander situations and different bystander actions. In accordance with a constructivist grounded theory approach, data and analysis were viewed as constructed through the work of the interviewer and the research team as well as through the interactions with the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Data were coded in three phases: (1) initial, (2) focused, and (3) theoretical (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, in press). These phases are not to be viewed as a linear analytical process; rather, the analyst moves between them, back and forth.

In the first phase, initial coding, segments of data were named and summarized by scrutinizing the data word for word, line for line. These initial codes were constantly compared with data and with each other. The analysis was characterized by staying open to what happens in the data and asking analytical questions of the data, such as what is happening here, which processes are the students talking about, and how do they understand it (Charmaz, 2006). During the second phase, focused coding, the most significant and frequent codes from the initial coding were used, resulting in a more focused and conceptual analytic approach. These focused codes guided the analysis and were raised into categories by further constant comparisons and clustering of codes and by the construction and development of working definitions. In the third phase, theoretical coding, possible relationships between the categories, were examined and specified (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Theoretical codes were used to form an analytical theoretical story of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical codes refer to underlying logics embedded in theories (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Constant comparisons between theoretical codes and the constructed categories, codes, and data were conducted. Hence, theoretical codes that we adopted earned their way into the grounded theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998). In accordance with a constructivist approach, pre-existing theories and concepts were also used as a starting point as well as sensitive concepts – inspiration, possible seeing, and analytical tools during the analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, in press; Thornberg, 2012).

Results

According to the analysis of students' narratives, we constructed a grounded theory of how students as bystanders think and act in school bullying. In general, students view bullying as wrong because of the harm it causes the victim (e.g., 'You don't want to see anyone feel bad, you want to help, and then you do what you can', girl, grade 4) and feel

that they ought to help the victim (e.g., ‘You should go and help the bully victim and tell the bully to stop or get a teacher’, boy, grade 4). Nevertheless, in what degree this generalized moral voice of condemning bullying and helping the victim really will guide students’ actions or not depends on how they define the situation. Other considerations might conflict with, reduce, or override this moral voice as shown in the excerpt below.

I think that I would have gone directly and said something, but, um, you don’t really know. I think that you don’t really know how to react until you’re in a situation like that. (girl, grade 7)

The *definition of the situation* is a concept proposed by Thomas and Thomas (1928). They argue, ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (pp. 571-572). In other words, how people interpret a situation affects and guides their actions in that situation. In accordance with this so-called Thomas theorem, which is fundamental in symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2007; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011), how children as bystanders interpret and make meaning of the situation will also guide their actions as to whether they: (1) intervene, (2) non-intervene, or (3) co-bully. Intervening means to help the victim by telling the bully or bullies to stop, telling the teacher, or supporting the victim. Non-intervening refers to remaining a passive bystander or leaving the situation. Co-bullying refers to going along with the bully or bullies by actively supporting them or starting to act like them. Figure 1 gives an overview of the main categories in our grounded theory of bystander’s definition of bullying situations and its relation to bystander action.

– insert Figure 1 about here –

Defining the situation consists of several processes. We do not argue that this is done in a linear manner like separate phases. Instead, we argue that the students’ narratives reveal a complex interplay between these domains of considerations when

defining a bullying situation. Also note that whereas students might be strongly motivated to intervene by defining and considering one aspect of the situation, this motivation might be counteracted or reduced by their definition and consideration of another aspect of the situation. Moral agency refers to the capacity to act in accordance with a moral sense of responsibility to help a victim in distress. Moral distress and moral disengagement will be discussed later on.

Defining the Seriousness

As found in previous studies (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), the degree to which students define harm in the situation influences their motivation to intervene or not intervene. Not all situations are defined as serious or as bullying. As bystanders, students interpret and consider the level of violence. Physical bullying tends to be represented as a high level of violence and hence more severe than verbal, relational, and cyber bullying (e.g., ‘I think people help more if someone is hitting someone, they react and reflect more then’, girl, grade 7). Physical violence creates an awareness of seriousness that makes bystanders more upset and motivated to intervene, whereas teasing the victim and the victim being ‘alone’ do not make them as angry or emotionally engaged and are not interpreted to be as serious as physical violence.

Interviewer: What do you think makes someone sometimes intervene and help, and sometimes not help, as you just told me?

Student: It’s how big the situation is. If it’s very big then a whole bunch of people can come and intervene, but if it’s just a small one, like someone saying something mean, then maybe not so much happens

Interviewer: What do you mean ‘big’?

Student: That it’s starting to become a physical fight.

(boy, grade 5)

In particular observing verbal attacks, rumour spreading, cyber bullying, and a peer being alone are more often interpreted as no big deal or non-serious, and therefore to a lesser degree are associated with intervening (e.g., ‘You are used to verbal attacks, so, it happens, sorry for him or her [laugh]’, girl, grade 7). In the case of witnessing rumour spreading, students are not always sure of who started it or if the rumour is true or not, and it is unclear if it is really bullying (‘It’s hard to know who starts the rumours, bullying, you might see who it is, but not rumours, it’s hard to approach’, girl, grade 6). In the case of loneliness, it is also unclear to the students if this really was a case of bullying or just a free choice of the loner (e.g., ‘I don’t think being alone is sort of bullying, because no one is actually doing anything’, girl, grade 6; ‘She’s not bullied anymore but she’s still alone’, girl, grade 7). The proneness to interpret physical bullying as more serious and harmful than other forms of bullying also was found among students who had been bullied themselves, even though they more often reported experiences of verbal and relational victimization than physical victimization.

Some students also reported how difficulties in defining the seriousness in the situation create *seriousness uncertainty*. During such circumstances students do not know how they should respond and therefore will be less likely to intervene (e.g., ‘I think I would have told the teacher, but I need to know if it’s bullying’, boy, grade 4). Seriousness uncertainty can also produce a fear of wrongly intervening. If a bystander intervenes as if it is a serious case of bullying but it turns out not to be, then he or she might be perceived by others as someone who overreacts and makes a fool of him- or herself.

Nevertheless, whereas *contextual familiarity* reduces the risk of seriousness uncertainty, *contextual unfamiliarity* contributes to this risk. To what degree bystanders know the people involved as well as the history and context of the situation influences

their definition of seriousness. In particular, if they do not know the people involved and are unfamiliar with the situation's history and context, it will be more difficult for them to define the situation and its seriousness. This difficulty leads to *seriousness uncertainty*, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Interviewer: How come it's easier when it's someone in your class?

Student: Well sort of, you know the people, but you might feel strange if you approach someone you don't know at all, and you don't know if the victim might have done something too. It depends on, it depends on how, because you can't know, can't be sure if it's bullying then, or if it has happened several times. I think it's easier to just approach people you know and just tell them to stop. (girl, grade 6)

Moreover, if teasing and harassment are perceived as *ordinary elements* in students' everyday school life, identifying bullying and thus defining the situation as serious seems to be harder for them (e.g., 'We use hard words around here and then when someone says something, you think, it's not serious', boy, grade 7). This kind of *trivialization* of the event (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2007, 2010) is conceptualized by Thornberg et al. (2012) as *habituation to bullying*. Bystanders' perceptions of *victim cues* also influence their definition of a situation and its seriousness. They are looking for signs such as whether the victim is looking sad or laughing or is not trying to resist in any way.

You can tell from the person, maybe he was happy before and now he might be more and more sad every day, and when he comes to school he might not talk as much as he used to do. (boy, grade 7)

If the victim looks happy or unaffected, if he or she does not appear to be sad or lonely, the situation seems to be not so serious or not serious at all, and students will therefore not be as motivated to intervene. In addition, if the victim laughs, says things back, or fights back, this will make students hesitate and prone to interpret the situation more as a conflict than a bullying situation, and hence one that is not so serious.

Distressing Emotions

According to the analysis of the student voices, when a bystander interprets the social event as serious bullying, the definition of the situation appears to evoke *distressing emotions*, particularly in the form of empathy or sympathy for the victim (e.g., ‘I would feel really sad if I heard someone, especially when my friends are, when they are exposed to something like that’, girl, grade 7). Feelings of empathy or sympathy for the victim or guilt for not intervening seem to operate as an *emotional imperative* to intervene (e.g., ‘I stood there, uninvolved, and oh I didn’t feel so good, it didn’t feel good seeing them fight’, boy, grade 4; ‘If someone gets bullied you feel bad because you feel sorry for that person, so I helped, I told the teacher’, girl, grade 6). Although previous studies have shown that empathy with or concern for the victim is something students themselves associate as motives for helping the victim (Bellmore et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), the analysis here reveals a widespread perception of the distressing character in these emotions, like a *moral alarm*. As long as they do not intervene, they have to endure distressing emotions. Anger towards the bully is another distressing emotion reported by the students (e.g., ‘I could be angry, that has happened many times and I only feel so angry on the inside, why this person keeps bullying. It’s the most common reaction I can get’, girl, grade 7). Like empathy and sympathy for the victim, anger towards the bully is an emotional imperative to intervene (e.g., ‘I would get really angry and tell them to stop. If it didn’t help I would get a teacher’, boy, grade 4). As we will show, however, how bystanders define the situation could facilitate or amplify as well as reduce or neutralize empathy, sympathy, guilt, and anger.

Defining Relations

One major dimension of defining the situation concerns: (1) who is being bullied, (2) who are the perpetrators, and (3) who are the other people in the situation or nearby. Students define and consider the horizontal as well as vertical dimensions of the social relations in the situation.

Friendship

Horizontal relations refer to friendships. Identifying friendships, particularly if one's own friend or friends are involved in the situation, is a significant motive source for action, according to the students. This research confirms previous findings (Bellmore et al., 2012; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2007, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), conceptualized by Thornberg (2010) as *friend loyalty*. Seeing a friend being bullied evokes more distressing emotions of empathy, sympathy, guilt, or anger as well as a stronger sense of responsibility to intervene (e.g., 'If it's my best friend I want to help', boy, grade 6; 'I was furious just hearing that my best friend was bullied', girl, grade 4). The help also seems to be twofold: help from friends is mostly expected (e.g., 'At least my friends will help, I'm sure of it', boy, grade 6), whereas help from non-friends is more uncertain (e.g., 'Nobody [the bystanders were defined as non-friends to the victim] cared to help', boy, grade 5). This widespread peer norm of prioritizing aid to friends could, in part, be understood as learned from experience (e.g., 'I think my three best friends would help because they have done that before', girl, grade 6).

Thus, when the victim is not a friend or is an unknown peer, the reactions are less direct and less affective-based, and the actions taken tend to be non-intervening or sometimes even co-bullying. Moreover, when the victim is defined as a non-friend or unknown, the influence of self-protection appears to be more significant, which in turn inhibits intervening even more.

Um, it depends on who is being bullied. If it's someone I don't know at all, then I think, I wouldn't dare to intervene directly or defend. But if it's my best friend or a close friend of mine, then I would definitely defend. (girl, grade 6)

Furthermore, defining the bully or the bullies as friends demotivates and inhibits the bystanders from intervening and actually motivates them to co-bully (e.g., 'Well, it could happen, as I said before, that I start to bully if I'm a friend with the bully and maybe not a friend with the victim, that could happen', boy, grade 7). The major reason is the importance of maintaining the friendship by not disproving the actions of friends. This is accomplished by co-bullying or at least non-intervention in the situation, even though the students might think the bullying is wrong.

I think that if it wasn't their friend, they wouldn't co-bully, they would protest and intervene, but since it was their friend, they don't want to lose their friend. (girl, grade 6)

The motives for co-bullying arise from both fear of friendship loss and perceived peer pressure.

Well, if they started with peer pressure against me, then you feel, 'I don't want to lose my friends', because that could happen. I don't know, but if they, I could resist quite a lot, but eventually, if they eventually wouldn't want to be friends with me, everyone says then they aren't real friends, but you don't want to lose them. (girl, grade 6)

Peer pressure has a major impact on how bystanders respond (cf., Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), and those whom they define as their friends in the situation represent a major source of peer pressure.

Social Hierarchy

In addition to considering the horizontal dimension (friendship), and like the students in Thornberg et al. (2012) research, students witnessing bullying also define and consider the vertical dimension of the social relations in the situation. Social hierarchies exist among the students, which are kept in mind when observing bullying and guide their actions by evoking and mutually interacting with self-protecting considerations (e.g., the

fear of retaliation, social disapproval, social blunders, getting bullied, losing friends, or losing social status).

Nobody dares to stand up against that girl, she's kind of the cool girl. If you say something to her, she will, she will get pissed. And nobody bothers to say anything, 'cause everyone knows what a bitch she can be. (girl, grade 7)

As the excerpt above illustrates, students are well aware of and consider popularity or social status among themselves: Individuals and groups are ranked from popular to unpopular; one either belongs to a popular friendship group or not. Considering popularity as well as their individual social status was reported by several students.

Popularity was in turn associated with bullying.

There's those who're more popular and those who're less popular and the popular started [the bullying]—they started it, and then nobody dared to stand up against them. (girl, grade 6)

Whereas being popular and having high social status, as in the excerpt, was more often associated with the role of bully, being unpopular was more often associated with the role of victim (e.g., 'You're just not cool, you're just sort of bullied', boy, grade 6).

Bystanders who define bullies as having higher social status than they do are demotivated and inhibited from intervening, based on self-protection concerns.

Student: You don't want to get involved.

Interviewer: How come, you think?

Student: Um, you sort of don't want people to, the bully to start teasing me as well.

(boy, grade 4)

Furthermore, co-bullying is sometimes considered as an opportunity to strive for higher social status and social approval among the popular bullies, which is facilitated if the bystander defines the victim as an unpopular or low-status peer.

Interviewer: How do you think you would react if you saw a bullying situation?

Student: To be honest, it depends. If it's someone I don't consider cool, I would probably join the bullying. Well, you shouldn't. But if it's a friend I would tell them to stop.

(boy, grade 6)

Whereas bystanders with self-protection concerns avoid intervening when the bullies are older than they are (e.g., 'Younger kids don't dare to approach older kids, they've learned not to do so', boy, grade 5), they see themselves as more capable of intervening if they are older than the bullies (e.g., 'They are still young kids, then it's easier to tell them to stop because no one would bitch back. It's easier to control younger, smaller ones', boy, grade 6). Hence, in addition to popularity or dominance hierarchies within the school class and the peer group, social hierarchy was also considered in terms of age.

Defining the Victim's Contribution to the Situation

Rigby and Johnson (2005) and Thornberg et al. (2012), found that students also tend to consider the victim's contribution to and hence responsibility for the situation. If bystanders perceive the victim as odd, deviant, stupid, or disturbing, they are more prone to blame the victim and, in accordance with that definition of the situation, react with co-bullying or non-intervention.

At my former school it was a girl and she was an outsider. Nobody liked her. She was cocky, mean, and stupid; she thought she was the best. (girl, grade 5)

If bystanders perceive that the victim previously has been a bully or mean in other ways, they also tend to blame the victim and think it is fair that he or she now gets to know what it feels like to be bullied or treated badly.

For example, if a person who's been mean before, been a bully, then another guy starts to bully him, well, then he's got himself to blame, cause he's done the same. So you get to pay, an eye for an eye. (boy, grade 7)

Hence, the bullying is here morally justified by an eye-for-an-eye ethic, which in turn motivates students to respond with co-bullying or non-intervention. Finally, the victim's

present behaviour is also interpreted and considered. If the victim resists or fights back, it is harder for the bystanders to intervene because it is harder to sympathize with the victim or to define it as bullying, which in turn makes the bystander less motivated to intervene.

She was a redhead, and, she could be a bitch against others, only 'cause she felt bad, and then they say something bad to her and she says something back, and they start to fight. And then nobody wants to be with her. (girl, grade 7)

Defining the victim as the cause of bullying reduces or neutralizes distressing emotions, justifies the bullying, and transfers the responsibility to the victim.

Social Roles and Intervention Responsibilities

As shown above, friendship with the victim is most often associated among the students with a moral obligation and responsibility to intervene to help one's friend. In addition, students also assign a responsibility to intervene to two other particular social roles: teachers and so-called peer supporters. Hence, the presence of people in these social roles appears to lead to *responsibility transfer*—that is, bystanders do not see themselves, but rather the person in the particular role, as responsible to act on behalf of the victim (cf. Thornberg, 2007), which in turn demotivates the bystander to intervene (e.g., 'I felt sorry for them, but a teacher was there so I didn't do anything', girl, grade 5). There are schools in Sweden in which a few students (typically two from each class) are formally elected to be 'peer supporters' at school. A peer supporter role means that the students function as an 'extra' pair of eyes and ears for the school staff. They are supposed to help and support students during breaks who are in distress, harassed, alone or, sad (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). At least some of the students in the present study display a proneness to transfer responsibility to a peer supporter if he or she is present (e.g., 'The peer supporters are supposed to deal with it, it's their role', boy, grade 6). Even those who actually are peer supporters in their school report a great responsibility that gives them an opportunity to do something against bullying (e.g., 'If I saw someone

get bullied, I would do something since I'm a peer supporter', girl, grade 6) but at the same time their position raises their classmates' demands, which was shown above.

Bystander Dilemmas and Moral Distress

The analysis of the student voices of being a bystander in bullying reveals a considering complexity in which different definition-of-situation processes are evoked and often create conflicted motives in how to act as a bystander. For example, a bystander might have distressing emotions of empathy and sympathy for the victim but at the same time defines the bully as an important friend or a more popular and powerful student than he or she is. Conflicting motives like these produce dilemmas for the bystanders, which in turn evoke moral distress.

I feel terrible when I hear about bullying and I don't do anything to stop it, I just let it happen.

And people can feel really bad if they are bullied, I don't get how people could bully anyone.

(girl, grade 7)

Moral distress can be defined as painful feelings or psychological distress that occur when a person is conscious of the morally appropriate action but cannot carry out that action because of external or situational obstacles (Jameton, 1984; McCarthy & Deady, 2008). Lütznén and Kist (2012) describe the situation as 'a person's experiences of external factors preventing him/her from doing what he or she thinks is the right thing to do, at the same time as being aware of his or her inability to take action according to internalized moral guidelines' (p. 16–17). Individuals may be constrained by personal failing—for example, fear or lack of self-efficacy—or by situational factors (McCarthy & Deady, 2008). Being against bullying is a common statement among the students, but at the same time many reported bystander experiences of insecurity in how to deal with the situation or a feeling of being incapable of doing anything because of who is involved or

present—for example, the bully is my friend (friend loyalty) or is more powerful than I am.

Moral Disengagement

As we have reported above, other student narratives in the interview data describe bystander reactions that could be associated with moral disengagement rather than moral distress or moral action in the form of intervention. According to Bandura (1999, 2002), *moral disengagement* is a set of socio-cognitive processes through which people can disengage from humane acts and instead behave inhumanely towards other people. Specifically, Bandura proposed eight moral disengagement mechanisms: (1) moral justification, that is, using worthy ends or moral purposes to sanctify pernicious means; (2) euphemistic labelling, that is, labelling the negative or harming act in a way that makes the act sound less negative or more respectable; (3) advantageous comparison, that is, making a bad act seem less bad by comparing it to a worse or more negative act; (4) displacement of responsibility, that is, detaching or obscuring oneself from personal responsibility for the harming act through viewing one's actions as stemming from authorities; (5) diffusion of responsibility, that is, assuming that other people who are present in the situation have or will take responsibility; (6) disregarding or distorting the consequences, that is, minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the negative or harmful effects of actions, and thus facilitating the individual's ability to avoid facing the harm the action causes; (7) dehumanization, that is, stripping the victim of human qualities and equal values; and (8) blaming the victim, that is, thinking that the victim deserves his or her harm or suffering.

In the current study, students report a tendency to perceive verbal, relational, and cyber bullying—relational bullying in particular—as less serious than physical bullying, and, in line with that, display less proneness to intervene as compared with physical

bullying. This definition of seriousness might, at least to some degree, be associated with advantageous comparison and disregarding or distorting the consequences. In addition, seriousness uncertainty expressed by some students could be associated with moral disengagement, because it seems to inhibit and demotivate intervention. Furthermore, searching for signs such as if the victim is looking sad, unaffected, or laughing in order to determine the degree of seriousness appears to be reasonable, but might at the same time be illusive. For example, Thornberg, Halldin, Bolmsjö & Petersson (2013) found *social shielding* (i.e., trying to appear emotionally unconcerned or unaffected in front of bullies and others in order to hide how hurt, sad, or upset one actually is) and *turning off emotions* (i.e., trying to not feel anything in the bullying situation) were two common self-protecting strategies reported by former victims of school bullying.

A definition-of-situation process that seems to have a major impact on whether bystanders will morally disengage or perceive a moral obligation to intervene is the definition of victims and bullies as friends or non-friends. If the victim is a non-friend, there seems to be a tendency to transfer the intervention responsibility from oneself to the victim's friends, the bystander reasons that this is 'none of my business'. In addition, defining the bully as a friend tends to motivate bystanders to rationalize or justify the bullying in order to approach the situation in a manner that protects and maintains the friendship with the bully. Furthermore, the presence of a teacher or a peer supporter seems to facilitate diffusion of responsibility in that it tends to promote responsibility transfer to these social roles.

Finally, considering whether the victim has acted in ways that actually have caused the situation is a process that could be associated with a proneness to blame the victim. If the bystander perceives that the victim has been mean or has bullied another peer, blaming the victim is accompanied by moral justification based on a sort of retributive

justice or an eye-for-an-eye ethic. This can be compared with findings from Lambert, Scourfield, Smalley and Jones (2008) showing that the attitude, that it is 'OK to beat someone up if they start it' predicted bullying behaviour. Moreover, defining the victim as odd, deviant, stupid, or disturbing seems to facilitate bystanders' ability to both dehumanize and blame the victim. Actually, blaming the victim is in such cases based on dehumanization – the cause of bullying is attributed to the deviant characteristics or behaviours of the victim. In accordance with this finding, the relation between being bullied and 'being different' has been found in previous studies (e.g., Mooij, 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001; Thornberg et al., 2013).

Discussion

The strong emphasis on friendship as a motivational factor reported among the students on how to act as a bystander confirms previous studies on bystander behaviour showing that students are more prone or motivated to help a victim or a peer in distress if he or she is their friend (Bellmore et al., 2012; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Rigby & Johnson, 2005; Thornberg, 2007, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012). This friendship norm may be related to the reciprocity principle, that is, we should help those who help us (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008), friend loyalty (Thornberg, 2010), collectivism in terms of benefitting the in-group (Batson, 1994), and an ethics of care, which emphasizes moral as caring we have in relationship with particular people (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2003). Nevertheless, friendship norms as these have three problematic consequences. Firstly, victims who are defined as non-friends risk being excluded from this limited morality. In comparison with a situation with friends as victims, the bullying situation does not evoke as strongly distressing emotions of empathy, sympathy, guilt, or anger, and the responsibility to intervene tends to be transferred to others who are defined by the bystander as friends of the victim. Considering previous studies showing that victims of bullying most often are

students with the fewest or no friends (Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011), many victims will risk being located outside bystanders' perceived moral responsibility to intervene. Hence, there seems to be a higher risk of moral disengagement among bystanders if they do not consider the victim as their friend. This should be further investigated in future research.

Secondly, if bystanders define the bully or the bullies as their friends, the friendship norm dismisses intervention and promotes co-bullying or at least non-intervention as appropriate bystander responses. The possible actions that students described when witnessing bullying also seem to support bullying as a group phenomenon where an interactional shared definition of how to react and act as a bystander is in accordance with a shared understanding of what actions might gain acceptance from others (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1990; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011), articulated in the present study through social hierarchies and friendship responsibility. However, one does not have to believe in the shared definition of how to act or react as a bystander but feel obliged to perform an action or reaction in a certain way according to the groups shared definition. And this could, as has been shown, create a moral distress among the students as well as making them co-bully even though they in general think bullying is wrong. Thirdly, every individual has a preliminary right to decide the definition in situations that are vital to him or her and to stay quiet in situations that are not vital to him or her (Goffman, 1990). This could be linked to the students' need to focus on their friendships whilst they are less concerned about intervening when the victim is someone they do not know or the bully is someone more popular than themselves. Instead, moral disengagement mechanisms could evoke as a way to construct a definition to hinder, reduce, or neutralize moral distress as well as creating someone else as responsible for the bullying, be it the victim, the victim's social network, or the teacher and the peer supporter.

In contrast to previous research on bullying, bystanding, and moral disengagement (cf. Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Gini et al., 2007, 2008; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), the current study was designed to have students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and motives in their own words, in order to arrive at a good understanding about what matters to them as students. ‘Analysis of children’s own understandings of the social conditions of childhood is an important pre-condition for considering what policies are appropriate to enable children to lead satisfying lives’ (Mayall, 2008, p. 122). In our study the bystander could behave in different ways depending on the situation, and intervening is narrowed down to only a few situations. Not all of these bystander actions and motives are mentioned from every student. When witnessing bullying, however, all students engage in defining the situation, which will guide their actions. There are situations in which every student could intervene as well as situations in which they perceive they are neither able to nor motivated to intervene.

The current study adds valuable knowledge to the literature of bystander/defender behaviour by demonstrating that the bystander actions in bullying situations cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of moral agency versus moral disengagement (cf., Bandura, 1999, 2002). Our analysis is unique in that it introduces the concept of *moral distress* as a third major process that has to be considered in order to better understand bystander actions among children. Moral distress has previously been used to describe a particular form of stress or distress among professional nurses that could emerge when their working conditions prevent them from acting in accordance with their ethical guidelines (Jameton, 1984; Lützné & Kist, 2012; McCarthy & Deady, 2008). The concept has also been used recently to discuss teachers’ experiences of ethical dilemmas as a result of their working conditions (Colnerud, 2013). Nevertheless, our analysis revealed that even children experience moral distress from time to time in the role of bystander in

bullying situations in school. Whereas moral disengagement might be seen as a state of resolving the potential conflict between (1) thinking that supports intervening and (2) thinking that supports non-intervening and co-bullying, by rejecting or ignoring (1) and accepting (2), the conflict between (1) and (2) is unresolved in moral distress.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, our data are based on how students talk about bystander actions as well as what motives and reasons they use. We have no data on what actions they performed in actual situations. However, to minimize the risk of social desirability bias—that children might say things in order to place themselves in a favourable light instead of giving honest accounts—the interviewer positioned her relationship with the students by taking a non-judgmental approach and a ‘least-adult role’ (Mayall, 2008), and thereby avoided a position of authority at the field visits before as well as during the interviews. Secondly, the sample is drawn from a few Swedish schools, which limits the transferability of the findings. Nevertheless, in accordance with a constructivist position of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), we do not claim to offer an exact picture but rather an interpretative portrayal of bystanders’ definition-of-situation processes in bullying situations, by giving voice to and making a rigorous analysis grounded in students’ own perspectives on how they and their peers in school react, reason, feel, and act as bystanders. Furthermore, instead of statistical generalization built upon the logic of mathematics, in qualitative research transferability has been discussed as the work of interpretation. Larsson (2009) for example refers to ‘generalisation through recognition of patterns’, in which the reader, not the researcher, judges the generalizability. A grounded theory is not a fixed end-point but is constantly open for modification as new data are gathered (Glaser, 1998). Our findings should be seen as a working model or a set of working hypotheses, which have to take into account the local

conditions and have to be seen as modest speculations on the possible applicability of findings to other situations (Patton, 2002).

Practical Implications

Present findings on definition-on-situation processes, moral distress, and moral disengagement when witnessing bullying in school have implications for values or moral education in general and for bullying prevention and intervention practises in particular. Moral education cannot be confined to intellectual content in the classroom but has to address and be related to students' everyday situations, and thus include and focus on real-life moral encounters identified by Hoffman (2000), such as witnessing someone in distress or pain, like being a bystander in bullying situations. Our study gives insight into students' complex interpretation of the interplay between social relations, distressing emotions, definitions of seriousness, perceptions of victims' contribution, and different social roles when they witness bullying and consider responsibility and actions. Students' perspectives on bystander actions are of importance for school practise because there are several different definitions of the situations where students as bystanders not only do not intervene but also sometimes co-bully. A whole school approach is needed to prevent bullying, where the students' perspectives on bullying and bystander motives and reasons play an important part. Bystander actions have to be understood as a group phenomenon—most students are somehow engaged/involved in the bullying. Their social relations are formed in groups, and therefore the whole group needs to be the focus of prevention and interventions efforts.

Teachers need to help students to understand the severe harm in all forms of bullying and to counteract trivialization of and habituation to bullying. Distressing moral emotions such as empathy with and sympathy for the victim, guilt for inaction, and anger towards

aggressors should be built into the bullying prevention and intervention policy and practices in school in order to promote care and intervention among the students in situations when they are witnessing bullying. Friend loyalty and social hierarchies must be challenged as guiding principles when it comes to bullying and bystander behaviour in bullying. From a moral point of view, personal responsibility in bullying situations never can be replaced by responsibility transfer. If the school uses a peer support system, the risk of responsibility transfer among students has to be addressed. The current findings also support previous research (Almedia, Correia & Marinho, 2010; Gini, 2006; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), which concludes the importance of making students aware of and counteracting the mechanisms of moral disengagement in bystander situations.

Finally, moral distress occurred as a third important process for students as bystanders. This has practical importance for schools because these students could be potential defenders of victims. Moral distress could be linked to situational factors such as friend loyalty, social hierarchy and fear, where students might lack the self-efficacy to intervene. One way to handle this could be to promote pro-social behaviour among students as part of the bullying intervention. However, there are conflicting findings on what works to promote defending behaviours (cf. Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2011 for an overview). For example, what works for girls might not work for boys. Further studies therefore need to pay attention to what makes students act as defenders as well as to what could promote defending when students experience moral distress. What do students think could be helpful? What would make them defend rather than remain passive, or even co-bully? How are they affected in the short as well as the long term by experiencing moral distress, and what could schools do to help students cope with this? Further studies also have to focus more on these social norms and the social

psychological processes from the students perspective, because these seem, according to the complex interplay of factors that our study revealed, to play a crucial part in the bystander processes and therefore will have practical implications for bullying interventions.

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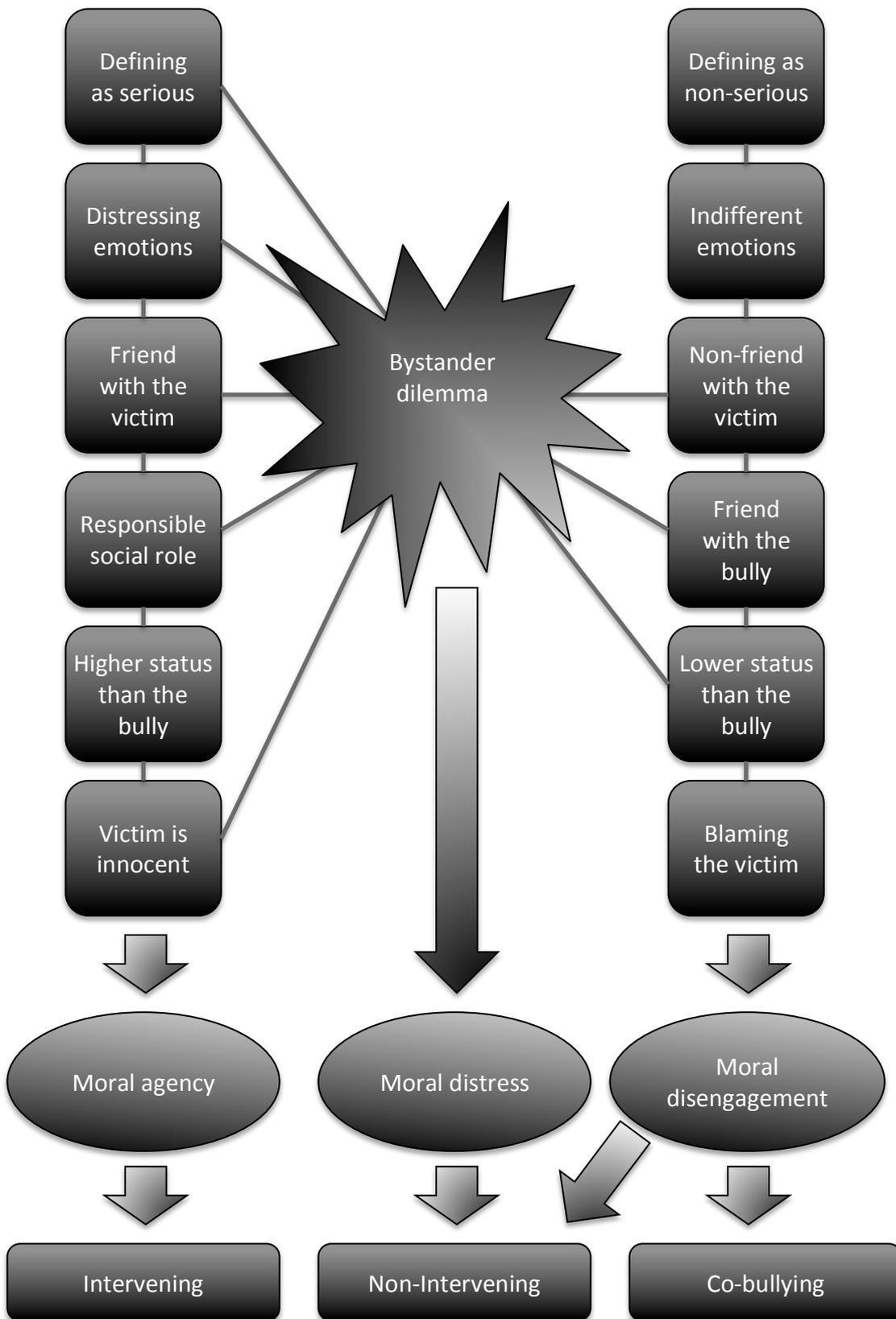


Figure 1. Bystander's definition of bullying situation and its relation to bystander action.