

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

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## Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

group with strong friendships between its members as a means of aggression in some cases. We hypothesize that this particular process would require the bully to have very good social–cognitive skills and would rely on group mechanisms that are different from the ones typically described in studies on bullying processes.

### 1. An alternative view of the bully stereotype

Recent studies have challenged some traditional conceptions of aggressive children and adolescents, in terms of social isolation/affiliation, popularity, and social intelligence or “theory of mind” skills. Several studies suggest that there is an association between social rejection and aggression. Peer-rejected children are generally more aggressive than their non-rejected peers (Asher & Dodge, 1986). In a study on peer-rejected boys, 48% were found to be aggressive, impulsive, and disruptive (Cillessen, van IJzendoorn, van Lieshout, & Hartup, 1992). Similarly, bullies have been found to be rejected by their peers (Boulton & Smith, 1994). Thus, it would seem that bullies may tend to be socially isolated. However, other studies have shown that aggressive children often had a network of friends, were solid members of peer clusters and were as likely as other children to be named “best friend” (Cairns et al., 1988). Related to this, Xie et al. (2002) found that social aggressive adolescents had high levels of social network centrality and were nuclear members of nuclear groups.

Aggression has traditionally been linked to low social status (Dodge, 1983), leading to the idea that aggressive children are not popular. However, a distinction can be made between two types of popularity. Sociometric popularity, or social preference, indicates the degree to which a child is liked or disliked by peers, or a child’s level of peer acceptance (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Perceived popularity refers to social status in terms of social power, impact, and visibility. It corresponds to peers’ perceptions of a child’s social reputation (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). In a study with adolescents, Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1998) found that these two types of popularity were only moderately correlated. Several studies have demonstrated that aggression is positively correlated with perceived popularity, but not necessarily with sociometric popularity. Even when they are not well-liked, aggressive adolescents are of generally high status, defined as high levels of peer-perceived popularity (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). In a study with children from grades four to eight, perceived popularity was found to be positively correlated with physical and relational aggression (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002).

These divergent findings as to the status correlates of aggressive children may be due to the fact that aggressive children do not form a homogeneous category. What is true for some of them (e.g., social rejection) may not be true for others. Even though bullying is an aggressive act, there might be large differences between a certain type of bully and disruptive, maladjusted children. Vaillancourt, Hymel, and McDougall (2003) found important differences among aggressive children in a study with 6th-to-10th graders. They distinguished socially rejected, psychologically troubled bullies from bullies with leadership qualities and high levels of peer-perceived popularity.

The above mentioned discrepancy may be even clearer when considering these children’s social intelligence or social–cognitive skills. Social intelligence refers to an ability to analyze or read the social behaviors, intentions, and goals of others. In one view, aggression is seen as the result of a bias or deficiency of social information processing (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986). According to Crick and Dodge (1994), aggressive acts can be due to a misperception or misinterpretation of social cues by children. Given that social behavior is affected by the processing of social information, it makes sense that social cognitive deficits could lead to antisocial behaviors.

However, indirect forms of victimization, such as gossiping, trying to get others to dislike someone, telling bad or false stories, and becoming friends with someone as a form of revenge towards someone else (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992), obviously require a high level of social cognition. Kaukiainen and colleagues examined associations between different types of aggression and peer-estimated social intelligence among 10, 12, and 14-year-olds (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). While no association was found between direct forms of aggression (physical and verbal) and social intelligence, indirect aggression correlated positively and significantly with social intelligence in every age group. A previous study also yielded a positive correlation between social intelligence and indirect aggression among 12-year-olds (Kaukiainen, Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1996).

Importantly, use of indirect aggression increases with age (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Rivers & Smith, 1994). It increases as cognitive skills develop, suggesting a link between the two. It seems logical that manipulating a group by finding lies that others will readily accept, or choosing the right target, should depend on an ability to understand others’ minds. Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999) argued that some bullies may have higher than average “theory of mind” skills. These skills are defined as the ability to mentally conceive what others think, desire, or believe in

order to understand and predict their behavior (Astington, Harris, & Olson, 1988). As pointed out by Sutton et al. (1999), a study by Waterman, Sobesky, Silvern, Aoki, and McCauley (1981) revealed an association between perspective-taking superiority and more severe antisocial behavior among fourth-grade boys.

It is important to keep in mind that social intelligence alone does not lead to aggression. Obviously, not all socially skilled children are aggressive. Rather, as suggested by Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (2000), social intelligence is required for indirectly aggressive behavior, but the presence of empathy mitigates the aggression. Several studies have suggested that empathy has an inhibiting effect on aggression (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1982; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Thus, a high level of social intelligence may contribute to indirect aggression only when combined with certain personality traits, such as a lack of empathy.

For a long time, aggressive behaviors were thought to be more typical of males. It has been demonstrated that males do display more physical aggression than females do (see, for reviews, Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Hyde, 1984). Recent research on less overt types of aggression has cast a new light on female aggressiveness. Björkqvist et al. (1992) reported data from different studies indicating that girls of various ages—11, 15, and 18-year-olds—use significantly more indirect aggression than do boys, according to peer assessments. In a study with 3rd-to-6th graders, girls were also found to be significantly more relationally aggressive than were boys, based on peer nominations (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Contrary to the stereotype of bullies as socially marginal and maladapted males lacking social intelligence, a significant number of them are likely to be females, at the center of peer clusters, having high levels of peer-perceived popularity and good social-cognitive skills. Good social skills may allow children or adolescents to use sophisticated forms of aggression, which have been examined mostly among adult populations in the workplace (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Hirigoyen, 2001; Leymann, 1990).

This level of subtlety in aggression may have been underestimated among younger populations. In a study comparing data from different sources—children aged five to seven, teachers, and parents—adults had trouble making a distinction between mere conflicts between children and actual bullying episodes (Alsaker, 1993). Another study has shown that a majority of bullies identified by peers could not be accurately identified by teachers (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999). As pointed out by Alsaker and Valkanover (2001), a study has found that teachers of young children were reluctant to admit that these children could be systematically mean to others (Jost & Zbinden, 1999). Adults do not usually think of children as Machiavellian beings, elaborating shrewd strategies in order to harm an innocent peer. We may hypothesize that young bullies bank on underestimation of their skills by adults, including teachers and other school authorities. Research on gender differences in children's peer groups seems to support the idea that indirectly aggressive children plan their aggressive actions taking into account presence and opinions of adults. Girls' peer groups play closer to adults and are more sensitive to adults' reactions to their behavior than are boys' groups (Maccoby, 1998; Thome & Luria, 1986). Underwood (2003) suggested that there might be a link between girls' use of indirect aggression and their concern for adults' opinions of them.

## **2. The bully disappears behind the group**

Using the peer group as a means of attack allows the aggressor to hide behind the group, which has many advantages for her/him in terms of safety and efficiency. Björkqvist, Österman, and Lagerspetz (1994) suggested that indirect aggression has a more favorable effect-to-danger ratio than overt forms of aggression because it reduces the probability that the victim will retaliate. In some cases, the target individual may not even know who the aggressor is. A study with 7th-graders revealed that 9% of the time, victims of indirect attacks could not identify the instigator of the attack (Xie et al., 2002), which obviously protects them from any counter-attack. Nevertheless, this does imply that victims of indirect aggression are aware of their aggressor's identity most of the time (the remaining 90%). The safety of the aggressor relies on the fact that it is extremely difficult for the victim to retaliate. Propagating lies or "stealing" friends (Björkqvist et al., 1992) are aggressive acts that cannot be clearly identified and denounced. School authorities are more likely to intervene when physical aggression occurs (Xie et al., 2002). Thus, it is difficult for victims to report the aggression to adults. Similarly, by responding to indirect aggression via direct means of aggression victims put themselves at risk of punishment by the school authorities.

Furthermore, other members of the peer group who have been manipulated by the bully may attack the victim overtly, which may cause the victim to retaliate in kind and school authorities to punish them in response. Quite frequently, physical fights or direct verbal attacks between two adolescents are instigated by another adolescent using

social aggression (Xie et al., 2002). In such cases, the initiator of the aggression was never involved in the open conflicts she or he generated.

Using the peer group may also have an effect on attributions victims make about their situation. If the aggressive act is carried out by one single peer, the victim may assume that this particular person does not like her or him. If an entire group engages in the aggression, the victim may assume to be hated by everyone and that this may be due to serious personal failures and shortcomings. It has already been shown that victimized children are apt to feel responsible for their plight. They tend to endorse more characterological self-blame attributions than non-victims in response to hypothetical incidents of peer harassment (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Such tendency to self-blame and make internal rather than external attributions (see Heider, 1958) are expected to be exacerbated when the victim is targeted by a larger number of peers rather than just one. If victims tend to blame themselves, they are unlikely to retaliate against the aggressor or report the aggression to adults. By making aggression almost invisible, using the group allows the instigator to effectively inducing harm while taking minimum risks. The next question then is: How does it work? How can a whole group of individuals be turned against someone for no apparent reason?

### **3. Why do others follow? The bully's knowledge of social psychology phenomena**

Aggressive bullies can be high in status and power and at the heart of peer clusters, implying that they have much impact and influence on the rest of the group. A longitudinal study has shown that the achievement of high status, conceptualized as perceived popularity, precedes use of aggression (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Status seems to facilitate use of aggression in the peer group. Bullies may take advantage of their power to scheme the aggression. Starting a rumor could be compared to launching a new trend.

Social psychology shows that human beings need to interact with others and that deprivation of human contacts is traumatizing (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People's need to belong to a group creates a strong fear of being excluded and a strong desire to be included. Indirectly aggressive children may rely on these two feelings to manipulate the group. The fact that group members may act aggressively towards a victim out of fear is implied by several studies. For instance, while the majority of students does not think that bullying is right (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991), most students fail to support the victim when bullying occurs (Sutton & Smith, 1999). This discrepancy between anti-bullying attitudes and pro-bullying behaviors suggests that most students feel pressure not to thwart the aggression.

While aggression is positively correlated with perceived popularity, it is negatively correlated with social preference (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Vaillancourt et al., 2003). The fact that aggressive children are not well-liked may mean that their peers are unlikely to believe the rumors they are told and that instead fear of ridicule and exclusion may be the main motive to go along with the aggressive peers. Indeed, studies of high-school cliques have indicated that clique members often obey the leader for fear of derision and exclusion (Adler & Adler, 1995). By targeting someone else, the aggressive child arouses in others the fear that they themselves may become targets if they do not follow.

Bullies also give group members the opportunity to feel even more accepted in the group. Behaving aggressively towards the target or saying bad things about her/him is like following the trend. It becomes a "fashionable" thing to do, a way to "look good" in front of others and to reinforce one's sense of belonging to the group. The famous experiments by Asch (1956) have shown that a majority of people will give a wrong answer to a simple question just to conform to others, even when they are complete strangers. Even though they knew the correct answer, saying it out loud when it contradicted the group made them uncomfortable. This normative social influence leads people to comply publicly but not privately. An experiment by Schachter (1951) confirmed that resisting the social influence of the group resulted in being ignored or excluded. In victimization, bullies may use their status among the group to force a sufficient number of people to conform. Once the trend is set, it becomes increasingly difficult for others not to follow.

### **4. The homogeneity/cohesion hypothesis**

Researchers who have focused their attention on the role of the peer group in victimization often noticed that the act of exclusion seemed to have a particular function for the group. Victimizing someone would help the group achieve or maintain cohesion and homogeneity (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001).

Bukowski and Sippola (2001) suggested that groups have goals, such as cohesion (integration in the group that links persons to one another) and homogeneity (within-group agreement about important issues). Victimization might be the consequence when certain individuals block these group goals. According to this view, groups give power to members who facilitate the achievement of these goals (leaders) and force out individuals who prevent goal achievement (e.g., aggressive or withdrawn children). Any child who happens to be different in some way risks to be excluded because she/he jeopardizes group homogeneity.

This theory might explain the *exclusion* of individuals from groups, but does not account for their *victimization*, a repeated, long-lasting process. Owens, Slee, and Shute (2001) investigated the nature of indirect harassment among 15-year-old girls attending middle-class high schools in Australia. They pointed out that “when a victim sought escape by transferring to a new school, sometimes the aggressor spread information to the new school so that the victimization started again” (p. 221). Once the victim left the school, she or he no longer jeopardized group homogeneity. Yet, victimization persisted.

Furthermore, it seems that peer groups who harass a specific individual are far from being homogeneous and cohesive. First, these groups are typically based on a hierarchical structure as they ascribe power to a leader (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001). Thus, the relationships within the group are governed by an imbalance of power. It seems odd that differences in social status should be necessary to maintain homogeneity. Some psychologists argue that social dominance among young children is actually a way to prevent conflict. They argue that conflict is avoided because of individuals’ awareness of their position in the hierarchy (Baudier & Céleste, 2002). Empirical evidence, however, suggests the opposite, at least for older children. Groups who exclude and victimize a peer do experience internal conflict. In their study on pre-adolescent cliques, Adler and Adler (1995) found that central clique members not only turned others against outsiders but also picked on lower status peers within the clique. The harassment that peer members suffered could be as cruel as the one aimed at targets outside of the clique. In his description of a group of junior high school girls, renowned for their cruel behavior towards teenagers outside their group, Merten (1997) emphasized how these girls eventually turned their meanness toward each other. It is evident that in these groups no real cohesion was achieved through the process of victimizing an outsider.

Nevertheless, these same studies have pointed out that exclusion and victimization of outsiders tended to consolidate the group’s cohesiveness. “Exclusionary techniques fostered clique solidarity because members developed internal cohesion through their collective domination of others” (Adler & Adler, 1995, p. 153). Having a common enemy seemed to be the only way to create bonds between these group members, as though they had nothing else on which to build their relationships. This suggests that cohesion these groups seemed to have might only be apparent. Rejection may not occur because the target jeopardizes the homogeneity and cohesion of the group; it may be the very process of victimizing that person that gives the group a superficial appearance of cohesion and homogeneity.

The reasons for indirect aggression provided by students themselves tend to confirm that it could be a lack of solid bonds that leads teenagers to victimize. In their study about indirect harassment among teenage girls, Owens et al. (2001) found that reasons most often provided for victimization amounted to “alleviating boredom” and “creating excitement.” Targeting others and saying bad things about them provided the group with an entertaining subject of conversation. As one girl put it, “If you didn’t bitch and stuff like that, there wouldn’t be very much to talk about” (Owens et al., 2001, p. 224). The interviews with these girls suggest that groups who victimize may appear cohesive, when in fact it might be the absence of true friendship between the members that created the need for a victim.

## 5. Different kinds of groups

The studies mentioned above (Adler & Adler, 1995; Merten, 1997; Owens et al., 2001) illustrate characteristics of groups who are likely to exclude and harass peers. These characteristics seem to amount to poor dyadic relationship quality among group members. The clique descriptions suggest that clique members actually did not like each other all that much. Their attraction to each other seemed to be guided more by a concern for perceived popularity (being seen as popular) rather than social preference (actually being liked).

Clique members often describe victimization as “entertaining.” They typically say that picking on someone is “just fun to do” (Adler & Adler, 1995), or that it makes them less bored by giving them something to talk about (Owens et al., 2001). This suggests that they have little to share with each other, and that something is lacking in their relationships. Bullying behavior appears to be artificially filling this void.

As mentioned, these groups do experience much internal conflict. Insiders who suddenly become targets of harassment are usually left wondering what could have triggered the aggression (Merten, 1997). This shows that these conflicts are not caused by a genuine disagreement or some important misunderstanding, as is often the case between friends. Instead, these conflicts seem strongly related to intragroup hierarchy (Merten, 1997). The groups in these studies are generally characterized by large differences in social standing among members. Typically, more central clique members try to secure or enhance their position in the hierarchy by victimizing those lower in prestige within the group (Adler & Adler, 1995). In this study, aggressive acts were never directed to the leader. Intragroup aggression usually occurred from the top down. Nevertheless, peers of higher status could also become targets at some point. Leaders resorted to aggression against peers whose growing popularity was seen as a threat (Adler & Adler, 1995). This is confirmed by the fact that both perpetrators and victims of “reputational aggression” (attempts to damage another person’s social reputation) have high levels of peer-perceived popularity (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

The social distance between group members and the desire of high-status individuals to maintain dominance over others mean that group members are not treated equally. Many are treated badly at one point or another. But because of the possibility of rejection by the group, belonging to it appears as a privilege, that is, a way to achieve or maintain a high status. The search for perceived popularity seems to dominate interactions, as opposed to a search for genuine affection or sympathy. Group members seem to value the image of their status more than the quality of their relationships. Accordingly, there is often a discrepancy between positive reports aggressive children make about their peer interactions and what can actually be observed about their relationships (Bagwell & Coie, 2004; Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

Weaknesses, such as low-quality friendships within these groups, seem to make victimization beneficial for them in terms of image—perceived popularity and apparent group cohesion. Thereby, these groups may be easy to turn against a targeted peer. To a certain extent, these groups could be compared to dysfunctional families. According to family systems theory (Satir, 1967), each family strives to maintain a certain balance—homeostasis—and dysfunctional families require psychopathology in one of their members in order to maintain this equilibrium. Groups who frequently victimize a non-provocative peer could be considered dysfunctional insofar as they seem to need a victim to maintain an appearance of cohesion.

We may therefore hypothesize that groups with a higher quality of friendship might be more resistant to the influence of bullies. Groups in which peers are treated equally, in which there is no need to alleviate boredom, and in which cohesion relies on mutual sympathy rather than fear of being excluded, should be less likely to benefit from victimizing someone. Asch’s studies demonstrated that participants were more likely to resist the false norm if they had an ally in the group. Similarly, peers might be less apt to be turned against someone against their will if they have close friends in the group. It should be harder for bullies to use a group with positive and strong friendships as a means of attack, if victimization does not fulfill any need for these groups. A bully should less easily rely on the peers’ fear of being rejected to make them conform to her or his aggressive norm. In fact, it has been suggested that if aggressive behaviors are particularly rare in a group, bullies are likely to be rejected from that group (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986), and thus unable to manipulate it. Nonetheless, further research is needed to examine if cohesive groups with solid friendships are actually less likely to surrender to the influence of a bully and do not benefit from victimizing others. The link between occurrence of victimization in a group and friendship quality among its members can be examined empirically using one of the existing measures of friendship quality (see, e.g., Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994; Parker & Asher, 1993).

## 6. Manipulation of non-dysfunctional groups

One plausible suggestion is that groups with high quality friendships may be less easy to influence in the way that dysfunctional groups are influenced. Their manipulation may rely on different processes. A study with children from primary and secondary schools has shown that bully roles remained relatively stable over time, despite changes in social contexts (Schäfer, Korn, Brodbeck, Wolke, & Schulz, 2003). While victim status changed depending on the degree of hierarchical structuring in the peer group, variations in peer hierarchies had little effect on the status of the bully. This suggests that aggressive children or adolescents tend to maintain their hostile behaviors regardless of the type of group to which they belong.

Observations of dysfunctional groups indicate that they tend to surrender to normative social influence, meaning that the peers do not necessarily internalize the rumors they are told even though they behave in accordance with

them. In groups in which peers have no fear of being rejected and truly like each other, telling rumors that are obviously false seems unlikely to be efficient. In that case, the manipulation of the group could work only if the aggressive intent was hidden. Making aggression invisible involves use of subtle devices and requires good social–cognitive skills on the part of the aggressor.

As previously indicated, social intelligence is positively correlated with the use of indirect aggression (Kaukiainen et al., 1996, 1999), suggesting that bullies with high levels of social intelligence are able to use sophisticated forms of aggression. Since the use of covert aggression increases with age (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Rivers & Smith, 1994), research on adult aggression might be useful to understand what may happen in school settings, especially among older adolescents.

Some studies with adult participants go beyond the dichotomy direct/indirect aggression, and make distinctions between various types of indirect aggression. In a study of the link between different types of aggression and subjective well-being with adults in work settings, the researchers distinguished three types of non-direct aggression: indirect manipulative, covert insinuating, and rational-appearing (Kaukiainen et al., 2001). Indirect manipulative aggression refers to aggressive acts that involve the group of peers, such as spreading rumors or isolating someone from the group. In this case, identity of the perpetrator may remain hidden from the victim. Covert insinuating aggression and rational-appearing aggression are both characterized by the aggressor's attempt to conceal his intention to hurt the victim. In covert insinuating aggression, the aggressive act is disguised in the form of malicious insinuations, such as imitating the person's gestures in a derogative manner.

Rational-appearing aggression is probably the most invisible type of aggression. It is a form of aggression disguised by rational arguments that are presented as normal communication. In this study, it was operationalized essentially as unfair criticism of a person's work. Although the arguments are not presented as aggressive, they are experienced as hurtful by the target person. Even the victim may doubt that any harm was intended. By using rational arguments and concealing her/his hostile intentions, the aggressor's aim is to make others believe the truthfulness of what is said. If victims ignore the aggressive intent of the perpetrator, they may see the criticism as justified and start doubting their self-worth and competence. In other cases, victims may get hurt because the rational arguments used by the aggressor have managed to convince others of the victim's incompetence. The efficiency of this specific type of aggression—in which the aggressive intent is hidden—seems to rely on its power to modify or influence people's cognitions.

It is conceivable that similar things might occur on the scale of a peer group in school settings. Using invisible means of aggression such as the ones described above, a bully with good social–cognitive skills might turn peers against a target by acting on the peers' perceptions of the victim, without showing any hostile intention. The possibility that a bully could exert this kind of influence on a group of peers has not been empirically demonstrated. However, there is evidence of an attributional bias held by non-victimized peers toward victimized children. While it has been shown that the majority of victimized children are not “provocative victims” (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1978; Schwartz, 2000), most peers hold victims responsible for their plight (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Owens et al., 2001). In a study investigating peers' social perceptions of the targeted child, Schuster (2001) demonstrated that the attributional bias held by peers against victims is strong and not easily modifiable. There are several possible interpretations for this bias, including cognitive dissonance or rationalization—peers may develop a negative view of the victim to justify their hostile behavior toward her/him—or even diffusion of responsibility.

Another possible explanation for this bias is that non-victimized peers may have been deceived by a skillful bully using subtle forms of aggression in which hostility is hidden. For instance, while talking to group members in the absence of the target, the bully may compliment the target (‘She/he is so nice, generous, smart, etc.’), with only one small detail that is negative (‘a little bit arrogant sometimes’). Group members are likely to pay attention mostly to the one negative detail, possibly because of the salience effect. This negative detail will seem all the more convincing and relevant to them as it comes from someone who appears to be objective and well intentioned towards the target person. In this example, group members would probably remain unaware of any aggressive intent by the bully. They are likely to think that the bully has a positive opinion of the victim. However, the one negative piece of information they received may color their entire perception of the target. As a result, their behaviors toward the victim may gradually change and become more distant and unpleasant. The subtle strategy used by the aggressor may lead to an attitude change, that is, to a private acceptance of the lies and not merely a public compliance. Whereas normative social influence may be at work in dysfunctional groups, members of non-dysfunctional groups may surrender to



informational social influence. In such a situation, they most likely internalize the lies they are told and may not necessarily be aware that they are being influenced. The bully's success in turning the group against the target would depend on the concealment of the aggression.

This hypothesis is extremely hard to test empirically, as it relies mostly on processes that are not observable. Also, if peers and victim are unaware of the aggression, they cannot be expected to report it in interviews, questionnaires, or self-reports. This may explain the lack of empirical findings on this subject. Such types of bullying may be more frequent among adolescents than among younger children. Björkqvist et al. (1994) suggested that the various forms of aggression people use tend to be more and more "ungraspable" with age. This emphasizes the need for researchers to take into account elusive forms of aggression that are extremely hard to study because they cannot be easily operationalized. In future research, it could be interesting to investigate the actual reasons for the attributional bias held by most peers against victims. Longitudinal studies examining the stability of this bias against victims across various peer groups might be useful.

## 7. Implications for the characteristics of the victim

This paper offers suggestions about victimization processes in which the aggression is directed at peers who have not provoked it, or passive victims (Olweus, 1991). It does not account for the victimization of aggressive children: that is, provocative victims or "bully-victims," whose rejection by the whole group appears more justified and not necessarily orchestrated by one or two bullies. We suggest that bullies, whose status remain stable across various social contexts (Schäfer et al., 2003), are the main instigators of the aggression. We emphasize the key role of the peer group in this process insofar as it constitutes an efficient weapon for the bully. Non-provocative or "passive" victims cannot be considered directly responsible for their victimization. Still, this does not imply that all peers have an equal chance to be targeted. If the choice of the victim is not random, which criteria does it depend on?

### 7.1. One actual victim but several potential victims

Before discussing the features that may differentiate victims from their non-victimized peers, an important point needs to be made about what could be called the *illusion of the single target*. In each school class, there is usually at least one victim, but rarely more than two (Schuster, 1999). Even though peer groups may experience internal conflict, there is usually one main target of victimization; even though a few peers outside the group may be picked on, one can typically be identified as the central or primary target. This conveys the idea that there must be something about that particular individual that causes the victimization. The bullying seems warranted to witnesses, including school authorities. The victim is thought to have done something wrong, or to possess some negative personality trait that encouraged the aggression; why otherwise would a whole group reject and victimize that person?

We argued above that it might be in the bully's interest to target only one person. In that case, the aggression is safer and more efficient. The aggression may seem justified to most witnesses if there is only one victim who appears responsible for the victimization. Victims would feel less affected by the aggression and may support one another if they were attacked collectively. Several victims are in a better position to retaliate than a single victim without support. If it is in the bully's interest to attack a single target, we may infer that there may be several potential victims in the group even if only one is actually picked on. This makes it harder for researchers to identify the characteristics of victims, as the actual victim may be similar to other potential victims, who are not identifiable as long as they are not targeted.

### 7.2. What differentiates potential victims from other peers?

Studies have revealed that aggression is selectively directed at certain children, and that some peers occupy the role of victim repeatedly over time (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). This stability suggests that some children may have personality traits or other characteristics that make them more prone to victimization than others. Research has shown that non-provocative victims tend to be anxious, cautious, sensitive, have low self-esteem (Olweus, 1978), and are prone to blame their victimization on their own personality (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). These characteristics make them convenient targets. Children with low self-esteem and self-blaming tendencies are unlikely to defend themselves against a bully and the rest of the peer group. Highly confident peers are more likely to

remain unhurt and retaliate against the aggressor, in which case the attack would not reach its goal and might even ridicule the bully. Sensitive children with low self-esteem are easier targets likely to make the aggression successful.

This does not mean that aggression is always triggered by the vulnerability of the victim. According to Olweus (1978), bullies have strong needs for dominance and power. Several studies have shown that aggressive children are often high in perceived popularity (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) and nuclear members of groups (Cairns et al., 1988). Aggression is also associated with position in the peer group hierarchy (Adler & Adler, 1995; Schäfer et al., 2003). Therefore, any peer who refuses to submit to the bully's authority or threatens the bully's dominance because of a growing popularity may be at high risk of being victimized. Case studies of victims of harassment in the workplace have suggested that resistance to authority could be an important factor in bullying (Hirigoyen, 2001). In order to maintain his dominant status in the group, the bully needs to control other peers. In the same way that dictatorial regimes repress all resistance, peer groups characterized by hierarchical relationships may not tolerate any resistance to the dominance of the leader. In some cases, the victim might be the only one who had the strength to rebel against the bully's leadership.

Even though some common features of non-provocative victims have been identified, victimized children are not a perfectly homogeneous group. For instance, targets of aggression behavior have been found to be either highly perceived-popular (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003) or low in peer status (Adler & Adler, 1995). Deviant physical features, such as obesity, or a physical disability, can be factors in victimization (Stephenson & Smith, 1989). Olweus (1978), however, found that victims were no more likely than their non-victim peers to have a deviant external characteristic. Yet, the relative stability of their victim status suggests that there might be some constant feature among non-provocative victims.

In a research on the link between aggression and self-esteem, Salmivalli (2001a) has suggested that aggressive people have underlying insecurities about themselves, despite reports of high self-esteem. This suggestion was partly based on the finding that aggression is related to narcissism, or what has been called "threatened egotism" (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, and Lagerspetz (1999) found that bullying was related to a defensive type of self-esteem: that is, a self-esteem characterized by a refusal to believe anything negative about oneself. These victims may have been chosen as targets because the aggressors perceived them as a threat to their positive self-image. This suggestion is consistent with finding that targets of reputational aggression have high levels of peer-perceived popularity (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Thus, one plausible hypothesis is that jealousy may play an important part in the choice of the target.

The above mentioned hypothesis would be easy to demonstrate if all bullies had mostly negative attributes (e.g., physical unattractiveness, low social background, low academic level, lack of social support) and all victims had mostly positive attributes (e.g., beauty, wealth, success, friends). This is not the case. This does not mean that jealousy is not a determinant of aggression. People who objectively have much that should make them happy and fulfilled can be more jealous than people who are deprived of the most essential things. Victims may in fact be victimized because they trigger more jealousy than their peers even though they do not objectively seem better off. The objects of jealousy may not be obvious positive features such as attractiveness, intelligence, wealth, or academic success. The bully's jealousy may instead be driven by less obvious aspects of the victim's personality. As previously mentioned, peer groups most likely to victimize suffer from a lack of genuine friendships, and the group members seem to be concerned about the image of cohesiveness of the group. The bully may envy someone who has an ability to create solid bonds with others, even if this person does not actually have very many friends. What the bully may be envious of in the victim is an ability to forge and enjoy relationships that are not based on dominance.

This might explain why it could be easier for a bully to manipulate a dysfunctional group. Most peers in these groups have difficulties in creating such relationships, which may be frustrating for them. The bully may take advantage of these frustrations and turn them into violence against someone who does not share their problems.

In situations in which the aggressive intent is hidden and the group is truly cohesive, the bully must conceal her/his lack of empathy, her/his need to dominate others and violence-prone attitudes, and play a character that presumably the others will appreciate—someone who is nice and respectful—in order to be integrated into the group. Being visibly aggressive in a non-aggressive group would lead to her/his rejection from the group. Consequently, anyone in the group who can see beyond appearances and "unmask" the bully becomes a threat to the bully's acceptance in the group and thereby a potential victim. Being able to detect the bully's deceptive attitudes may put any group member at a very high risk of being victimized.

## 8. Suggestions for empirical research

In order to obtain empirical evidence about the group processes at work in victimization, it may be useful to conduct longitudinal studies of whole peer groups in which the victim or the bully leaves at some point. Comparing cohesiveness of the group during victimization and after the departure of the victim would provide information about the function of the victim for the group. Observing the behavior of the peer group toward the victim after the bully leaves will give insight about the kind of influence exerted by the bully on the group members.

It is not unusual for a victim to move to a new school. Ideally, cohesiveness of the group would be observed in three phases: before the emergence of a victim, during victimization, and after the victim or the bully leaves. Cohesiveness of the group could be evaluated in several ways. First, peers' behaviors could be observed in laboratory settings, playing games such as the prisoner's dilemma. In this game, players may choose the cooperative option, in which they favor the gain of the team, or the competitive option, in which they try to gain as much as possible for themselves. Participants' actions in these games are thought to reflect conflicts in everyday life. Generally, a lack of trust in their partner leads people to choose the competitive strategy. The strategy most frequently chosen by group members could be an indicator of the level of trust or tension between them. Second, analyses could be conducted of peer nomination data. This would show if the whole group tends to dissolve into several smaller groups. Sociometric measures of peer acceptance would indicate if previously popular, average, or controversial children become rejected. The emergence of new victims in the group after the departure of the main victim would demonstrate that the group initially lacked real cohesiveness. Third, structured interviews in which peers would be asked about their level of satisfaction with the rest of the group and the number of conflicts that the group experienced would complement these analyses.

If the group remains cohesive throughout the three phases, we may infer that the cohesion of the group was unrelated to the victimization. It might suggest that isolation of the victim was "fair" because the victim was aggressive or provocative. However, if the group experiences heightened internal conflict in the absence of a victim, this might mean that the victim fulfilled a function in the group. The group may have needed a victim create associations among its members.

The role of the peer group in bullying is based on the conformity of the group to the bully's influence. Peers may conform out of public compliance to normative social influence or out of private acceptance to informational social influence. Observing the behavior of peers toward the victim once the bully is gone might indicate which kind of influence was exerted. For younger children, naturalistic observations on the playground coded by trained coders could be used. For adolescents, self-reports might be a more suitable. If the victim is no longer rejected or victimized after the bully leaves, the peers were acting only out of fear and public compliance but had not internalized the lies and the rumors they were told about the victim.

If the victim remains rejected, there are several possible interpretations. It may suggest that the group members always believed the lies they were told, and acted out of private acceptance. Perhaps, they acted out of fear initially and later convinced themselves that the lies were true due to cognitive dissonance (Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). They may have acted badly towards the victim out of fear, knowing that the victim did not deserve it. The idea of having harmed an innocent peer was dissonant with their need to think of themselves as good. Therefore, they may have forced themselves into believing that the victim was a bad person who deserved being victimized. This phenomenon is known as *blaming the victim*. A third possibility is that they may have acted out of public compliance but are too ashamed to change their behavior after the bully is gone. Adopting a respectful attitude to the victim would demonstrate that their previous behavior was motivated by fear, which would negatively affect their public image. Consequently, in such a study, only a positive change of behavior towards the victim would reveal that the peer group was submitting to normative influence. No definite conclusion could be drawn from an absence of change in peer group behavior.

## 9. Implications for intervention

Many intervention approaches to peer harassment take into account the social context in which it occurs. In order to reduce indirect aggression, these group-oriented programs rely on peer mediation (Rigby, 1996) and on developing concern and empathy for the victim (Maines & Robinson, 1992; Pikas, 1989). This may not be sufficient. The social-cognitive skills of some aggressive children should not be underestimated, and their ability to manipulate a whole

group against someone should not be ignored—especially as the skills of the bully may be directly related to the “invisibility” of the aggression. The more covert and diffuse the aggression, the more difficult it is to investigate and intervene.

The goals of intervention methods should be to deprive bullies of their means of aggression by preventing the peers from conforming to them, and to reduce the harmful power of indirect aggression by increasing the victim’s self-esteem. An efficient means of intervention may consist of teaching students about the group mechanisms at work in situations of bullying and about the possible motivations for the aggression. Salmivalli (1999) suggested an “awareness raising” approach, which would help students feel more conscious of the influences exerted on them and increase their sense of responsibility. Making the peers highly aware of how and why they are being manipulated by giving them enough knowledge of this phenomenon should increase their resistance to the leader of the aggression.

Bullies usually bank on their peers’ desire to look good in front of others and provide them with a trend to follow. Intervention programs could rely on this principle—deep concern about one’s public image—to change behavior in positive ways. Emphasizing the real causes of victimization, such as jealousy or the shallowness of relationships within the group should help to change peers’ conceptions about what they are supposed to do in order to look good. This should also contribute to the victim’s psychological well-being by making her/him feel less guilty and more confident. Once the mechanisms of harassment are made clear to the victim, she/he may realize that the most positive aspects of one’s personality are probably the ones that best determine whether someone will be targeted or not. The victim’s understanding of these facts should considerably decrease the destructive impact of indirect aggression on the victim and thereby decrease the motivation of the bully.

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