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# The Power of Peers: Why Some Students Bully Others to Conform

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Utilizing an interactionist perspective, two associated sensitizing constructs, and a combination of social psychological theory, this article reports on the influence of the peer group on individual perceptions, and its impact on initiation and persistence of bullying. The specific research question, "How does the need to conform with peers and the peer group influence the initiation and persistence of bullying others?" is investigated. Semistructured, one-on-one interviews with a purposive sample of 51 Grade 7 students (aged 12 years) were conducted during school time to investigate factors that influence students to bully others and what might help them to stop. Emerging from the theme of peer group was the need for belonging and group status, in particular social norms or the need to conform, which was influential when students described why they initiated and persisted with bullying others. The influence of labeling, the group process, and the aspiration to be like others within their group emerged as key constructs. The implications of these data for schools will be described and recommendations made.

**Keywords:** *children; grounded theory; group interaction; health behavior; health promotion; interviews, semistructured; youth, at-risk*

Bullying is common in schools, with Australian studies having found about 8% of boys and 4% of girls self-reporting as repeatedly (on a weekly basis) bullying others, and about one in six students reporting being bullied regularly (at least once a week; Rigby 1997a, 1997b; Rigby & Slee, 1999). The proportion of students bullying others (and being bullied) occasionally is considerably larger. Rigby classified an "occasional bully" as a respondent who reported engaging in bullying "sometimes" or "often" (Rigby 1997b). Baseline data for the Friendly Schools Project found 14% ( $n = 274$ ) of Grade 4 students (aged approximately 8 to 9 years) bullied others at least once during the last term at school (Cross et al., 2003).

Although the complex nature of bullying has resulted in a plethora of research seeking to identify the reasons some students bully others, much of this research is quantitative. The use of a qualitative approach enables a greater exploration of why students bully others and recognizes the important insights primary-school-aged

students contribute to qualitative research (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). This article describes findings of a qualitative study of Grade 7 students aged approximately 12 years who reported bullying others. This qualitative study was part of a larger mixed-methods study (Bryman, 2004; Mendlinger & Cwikel, 2008) that collected quantitative and qualitative data from students, teachers, and parents. Theoretical perspectives used in symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2001) are used to guide this study. This article addresses the specific research question: How does the need to conform with peers and the peer group influence the initiation and persistence of bullying others?

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## Background

The influence and power of groups is significant in human development, and groups are a fundamental, emergent microsocial structure in a child's ecological system (Rodkin, 2004). The peer group becomes a particularly salient influence during middle primary school years (Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006) and continues to be very influential through secondary school (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Groups can promote a variety of positive social, emotional, and behavioral attributes; however, they also have the potential to bring out the worst in some individuals (Rodkin, 2004). It is suggested groups have the potential to influence personal identity and sense of self (Rodkin, 2004), whereas for some, groups might influence personal identity to the extent that individual autonomy and personality might be affected (Rodkin, 2004). Children make observations and implications about their own behavior and their peers' during social interactions that contribute to the development of self (Charon, 2001).

The influence of groups in the complex behavior of bullying is significant, and there are numerous theories that have been developed to try to explain group formation and inter- and intragroup dynamics (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Gini, 2006a; Menesini, Sanchez et al., 2003). It is well recognized that bullying is not just restricted to the conflictual dyadic relationship between those who bully and are bullied, but is an aspect of group process (Gini, 2006a, 2006b; Sutton & Smith, 1999). The group process of bullying is recognized by the role played by various members of the group (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjuorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). One model that helps explain the process is the Social Complexity Model, which suggests that the bully/bullied relationship is the result of a dynamic interaction among variables at different levels of social interaction, and extends beyond those who bully others and are bullied—to the whole group (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003).

Interactions within friendship groups and the broader peer group influence bullying behaviors among school students. There is some evidence that older children and adolescents appear to be more influenced by what peers in their current friendship group do than by their own previous behavior (Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). The need to be recognized by peers and to be part of a social group is significant when considering why

some students bully others. A number of studies have found that some students bully others, or approve of bullying behavior, to enhance their status with peers and to demonstrate their social position (Gini, 2006a; Karatzias, Power, & Swanson, 2002). Bullying might be a means of achieving dominance and enhanced peer status (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006) and power (Gini, 2006a; Karatzias et al., 2002).

Groups provide power, attention, and status to group members who promote the groups' well-being, which for some translates to aggressive behavior (Bukowski, 2003). Status, leadership, and aggression have been found to be associated (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003) with some group leaders being forceful, strong, and assertive, with a larger coercive or aggressive component than other students. (Bukowski, 2003). Some students who bully have been found to experience high social status among peers even though their classmates avoid their company when possible (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Others suggest that moderately aggressive (but not highly aggressive) students enjoy status within their peer group even though they are not typically liked by other students (Bukowski, 2003). Some researchers consider that being liked occurs at the dyadic level, whereas the perception that someone is popular occurs at the group level (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003), which might help explain perception of popularity discrepancies. However, those who bully others and were also bullied were found to be the most socially ostracized by peers (Juvonen et al., 2003).

According to Social Identity Theory (Gini, 2006a), individuals' perceptions of and attitudes and behaviors toward "in-group" and "out-group" members derive from the need to be associated with the "in-group" to enhance their own self-esteem. Consequently, individuals tend to favor behaviors of the "in" or popular group members. In contrast, "out-group" members are more likely to be discriminated against (Gini, 2006a). This is especially true if students identify strongly with their group and they believe their status is being threatened by "out-group" members, or they feel that by bullying they might enhance their status (Gini, 2006a). They are more likely to consider bullying to be acceptable and normative behavior. Bullying among peers might be influenced by, and even motivated by, social identity concerns, such as a search for higher social status and, in turn, enhanced self-esteem (Gini, 2006a).

## Methods

The 51 participants in this qualitative study were Grade 7 students (approximately 12 years of age) from 15 primary schools in the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia who participated in the Friendly Schools, Friendly Families (FSFF) bullying intervention research project. FSFF was a 3-year, group-randomized control trial where schools were randomly sampled and randomly assigned to intervention and comparison conditions (Burns, Cross, Alfonso, & Maycock, 2008; Cross et al., in press). In this study we adopted a mixed-methods approach collecting quantitative and qualitative data from students, their parents, and teachers. The students who were invited to participate in this qualitative component of the study had been involved in almost 2 years of the FSFF Project intervention prior to the qualitative data collection. By the conclusion of the intervention some students reported they had stopped bullying others. Involving these students provides valuable insights into why some students desist and others persist in bullying others. Students, through their school, were involved in high-, medium-, or low-dose intervention groups. A range of whole-school strategies was developed as part of the FSFF Project. The high-intervention schools received all whole-school strategies with an extra emphasis on capacity-building to engage parent/caregiver involvement. The moderate-intervention schools received professional development for teachers and committee members. Like the high-intervention group, they were also provided with support, curricular materials, and ideas for whole-school activities. The low-intervention group received the whole-school manual but was provided with no professional development or ongoing support. The FSFF Project is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Burns et al., 2008; Cross et al., in press). Qualitative data were collected at the conclusion of the intervention (20 months following its introduction, when students were completing their final year at primary school).

Quantitative data were collected from students involved in the FSFF Project via self-report questionnaires at baseline, 8 months (posttest 1), and 20 months (posttest 2). Baseline data describing students' self-reported bullying behavior were used to identify and recruit students for this qualitative study. The questionnaire item adapted from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), "How often have you bullied others during this term?" was

used to identify bullying behavior. Students who reported bullying regularly responded "almost every day," "most days," "once a week," or "every few weeks" when asked how often they bullied other students during the term. Those who reported bullying occasionally responded with "once or twice" to this question.

All students from the 15 participating schools who reported bullying regularly on the baseline quantitative questionnaire and who were still attending the school during the second year of the intervention ( $n = 34$ ) were invited to participate in this study. Students who reported bullying occasionally were randomly selected to participate ( $n = 123$ ). To reduce the likelihood of stigmatization of students who bully, additional students who reported no involvement in bullying behavior at baseline were also randomly selected and invited to participate ( $n = 36$ ).

Of those interviewed, 11 (21.6%) students reported bullying others regularly, 35 (68.6%) reported bullying others occasionally, and 5 (9.8%) reported not bullying when they completed the quantitative questionnaire at baseline (Table 1). Although the small size of the sample of students who reported no bullying precludes any direct comparison of this group, these additional students provide valuable insights into bullying and hence have been included in this analysis. Interestingly, some of these students also reported bullying behavior during the interview. Thirty-one (60.8%) students interviewed were boys and 20 (39.2%) were girls. The higher proportion of boys is consistent with the Grade 6/7 cohort at baseline, where boys were significantly more likely to report to bullying regularly ( $n = 57$ ; 8.7%) and occasionally ( $n = 196$ ; 30.7%), compared to girls (regularly:  $n = 19$ ; 3.1%; occasionally:  $n = 161$ ; 26.5%) ( $\chi^2 = 23.693$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Analyses (chi-square and ANOVA) were conducted to ensure the sample was representative of the Grade 6/7 cohort who reported bullying others. No statistically significant differences ( $p > 0.001$ ) were found between the characteristics, attitudes, or reported behaviors of students in the Grade 6/7 study cohort who reported bullying others and the students involved in this qualitative study.

Students participated in a 40-minute, semistructured, face-to-face interview with the first author of this article. Interviews were held on school premises during class time.

A semistructured interview guide was developed using the literature and the baseline quantitative data (collected for the broader FSFF Project) to draw links

**Table 1**  
**Differences Between Level of Bullying for the**  
**Whole Study Cohort and Students Involved in**  
**the Qualitative Study at Baseline**

	Students Interviewed <i>n</i> (%)	Grade 6 Cohort at Baseline <i>n</i> (%)
Boy		
Regular	8 (25.8)	57 (8.9)
Occasional	21 (67.8)	196 (30.7)
Not at all	2 (6.5)	386 (60.4)
Total	31	639
Girl		
Regular	3 (15)	19 (3.1)
Occasional	14 (70)	161 (26.5)
Not at all	3 (15)	427 (70.3)
Total	20	607

between the predictors measured and the qualitative structure. The interview guide was tested with two 12-year-old students prior to administration. Consistent with theory development and purposive sampling, the interview questions were modified slightly as more targeted data were required (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A short vignette was provided after introductory questions and questions about self to begin discussion about bullying behaviors. The vignette was developed by the first author, from her research and teaching experience, and tested with one male and one female child aged 12 years. Separate vignettes were developed for boys and girls. Although similar, the use of female and male names in the gender-specific vignettes reflects peer-group structures at this age (Rodkin, 2004). The vignette used for girls substituted the name Tony with Holly and Sam with Suzie.

Tony is in year 7 and has a close group of friends. However, one Monday morning things seem to change. His group of friends seem unfriendly and abrupt. He tries to catch the eye of his friend Sam but Sam avoids his gaze. At recess time he joins his friends late and arrives just in time to hear one of his friends saying something nasty about him. Later that day the class is playing basketball in "phys ed" [physical education classes]. While the teacher isn't looking, Tony's "friend" Sam hits him in the arm causing a huge bruise.

Students were asked questions about bullying associated with the vignette. Discussion initially

focused on bullying behaviors in the third person before progressing to behaviors in the first person. Students were asked a range of questions about their own bullying behaviors, reasons why they initiated and persisted in bullying, and what might help them to stop bullying.

## Data Presentation

As data were collected from students who had been involved in a 2-year bullying prevention program, it was important to identify the level of intervention their school implemented, and the levels of self-reported bullying and of being bullied. Although these qualitative data are not able to be used to discuss the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of statistical significance, coding data according to changes in reported behavior and level of intervention provide important insights into the intervention and add to the richness of the theory development.

All students in the study were allocated a pseudonym. Data are presented with the student pseudonym followed by the level of intervention, and self-reported bullying and/or victimization in parentheses. Self-reported bullying of others and experiences of being bullied from the quantitative data were collected from students at baseline, posttest 1, and posttest 2. The level of bullying reported in the qualitative study reflects changes in behaviors over these data collection periods. For example, if a student reported bullying regularly at baseline, occasionally at posttest 1, and not at all at posttest 2, these data are presented as (regular-occasional-no bully). If the student reported no changes or changes at only one collection point, data are presented as (regular bully) or (regular-occasional bully), respectively. Therefore, all quotes are accompanied by a short student profile, for example: Emily (moderate intervention, occasional-regular-occasional bully, occasional-no bullied).

## Data Analysis

This study was informed by the theoretical perspectives found in symbolic interaction. Specific constructs used included the effect of labeling, definition of the situation (Becker, 1963), the development and understanding of deviance, and the development of self (Denzin, 1974; Rubington & Weinberg, 1987). Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor was a useful heuristic concept as it enabled the investigators to examine front- and backstage behavior and the roles

and interaction that supported the performances (Goffman, 1959).

Using these perspectives, data were coded and placed in categories that emerged from these data and those derived from the literature. Data management of full transcripts and other relevant text was facilitated by the NUD\*IST software package QSR N5 (QSR International, 2000).

The time frame for data collection precluded full analysis of each interview prior to conducting the next; however, basic data analysis allowed for the inclusion of additional questions to the interview guide. For each participant, themes that emerged in the third- and first person were compared (Glaser, 1992). For example, did peers influence initiation of bullying in both third- and first person? Inconsistencies in concepts throughout the interview were also noted and included as notations in NUD\*IST.

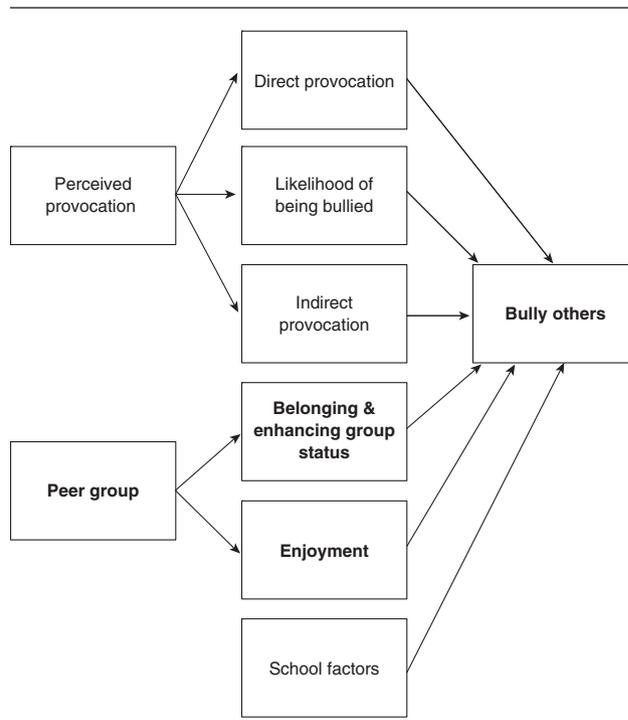
During the analytical process transcribed data were coded for common themes relating to the present objectives; however, consistent with a grounded theory approach, other categories and codes emerged from the data (Becker, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, Ricci, & Gunter, 1990). Sixty-four tree nodes were created in addition to 17 free nodes. From these, 10 key tree nodes emerged. Saturation was achieved (Glaser, 1992) for the key themes. The conceptual model for the whole qualitative study (Figure 1) was developed by analyzing these key nodes using the key question, “What influences upper-primary-school-aged students to initiate, persist, and desist in bullying others?”

Credibility of these data were achieved by ensuring the interview process was consistent with good practice for interviewing children and young adolescents (Wilson & Powell, 2001). Transferability was achieved by ensuring the data were as rich as possible (Bryman, 2004). Comparing data collected using the vignette and other third-person accounts with personal experiences provided rich data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the first author against the original tape and the field notes within a week of the interview to maintain dependability (Bryman, 2004). To reduce bias and enhance conformability the coding and themes were analyzed by the research group. The research protocol, interview guide, and consent procedures were approved by the Curtin University of Technology Human Research and Ethics Committee.

**Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to understand the “why” and “by-what-process” aspects of bullying

**Figure 1**  
**Factors Influencing the Initiation and Persistence of Bullying**



Note: The bolded themes are discussed in this article.

others. Specifically, this article discusses the influence of peers on bullying behaviors. We entered this study with several research questions we wanted to understand, which might have limited the types of questions being asked.

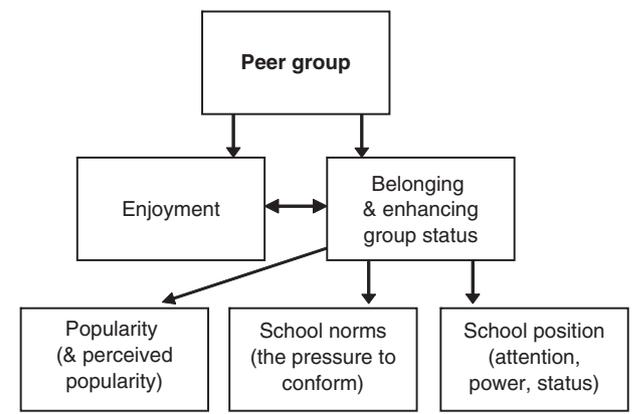
The sample was selected from schools that had already completed an intervention as part of the FSFF Project, and as a consequence there is the possibility that some of their responses might be influenced by social desirability, enhanced as a result of the intervention. We tried to reduce this potential by including questions that could be answered in the third- and first person, using a funneling repeat method of interviewing designed to put students at ease, and re-asking similar questions in different ways. Because of their involvement in the FSFF Project it is possible that these students might not be representative of other 12-year-old students who bully. It is likely the intervention increased student awareness of bullying and related issues and that it contributed to the development of different cessation (or concealment) pathways compared to students from schools with no intervention. Completing the questionnaires as part of the FSFF Project might have also contributed to testing and intervention effects among students involved in the

qualitative study, which is a threat to internal validity. These students might have become more sensitized to the aims of the study as a result of their involvement. The use of a low-intervention group reduces the threat of intervention effect (Bryman, 2004). The quantitative analysis between students who bully who participated in this study and those who did not suggest that the group interviewed were similar to others who bully and who were involved in the FSFF Project. When quantitative data were analyzed, no statistically significant differences were found between levels of self-reported bullying and key moderating (gender, socioeconomic status, and school size), mediating (attitudes toward those bullied, attitudes toward bullying, number of good friends, and perceptions of peer support), and contextual (feelings at school, feelings at playtime, and feeling safe at school) factors among those who participated in the qualitative study compared to those who did not. Despite this, students who chose not to participate might differ in other behaviors and/or socioecological factors not measured as part of the study. For example, factors such as school and home connectedness have been associated with the increased likelihood of bullying others (Swearer & Espelage, 2004).

## Results and Discussion

Students were asked a range of questions that allowed them to discuss bullying from a first- and third-person perspective. Perceived provocation (discussed elsewhere; Burns, Maycock, Cross, & Brown, in press), peer group, and school factors emerged as key themes when students in this study discussed reasons for initiating and persisting with bullying behaviors. Figure 1 describes the relationship between these themes and subthemes. The subtheme of belonging and enhancing group status emphasizes the need to maintain inclusion within a group. The feeling that bullying enhanced status within the group and possibly the broader peer group within the school environment was evident. Within the theme of belonging and enhancing group status three key concepts emerged: social norms (the pressure to conform), popularity (and perceived popularity), and social position (including elements of attention, power, and status). This article discusses findings and data related to social norms and the pressure students might feel to conform (Figure 2). In particular, it uses two sensitizing constructs—the definition of the situation (Thomas, 1972; Thomas &

**Figure 2**  
**Peer Group as an Influence on Initiation and Persistence of Bullying**



Thomas, 1928) and the dramaturgical metaphor (Goffman, 1959)—to examine the interaction between the student, the event, and those who watch the event either passively or actively.

The definition of the situation is a simple concept first proposed by Thomas and Thomas (1928). In its most simplistic presentation it is the process humans use to assess a situation and the consequences of taking one path of action over another. How they define the situation provides insight into how they perceive the reality of the situation (Crick & Dodge, 1996). The task of constructing the definition is complex and involves processes such as role-taking (Lauer & Handel, 1983) and self-indication (Blumer, 1969). To start to understand how students defined a bullying situation, a vignette was used. This enabled the student to discuss bullying in the third person, to identify the factors that might have contributed to the bullying, and to make his or her own assessment of the situation.

### *Pressure From Within the Friendship Group*

When discussing bullying in the third person some students suggested that perceived pressure to bully was likely to come from within the friendship group, and that some students bully to maintain this inclusion and hence confirm a sense of belonging to their friendship group. This might be associated with social norms to conform to the members of their peer group (Gini, 2006a), or because of reputational bias (Hymel, 1986) or labeling (Becker, 1963), where a reputation or label has been established that the

student feels is difficult to change (Becker, 1963; Hymel, 1986). This feeling of pressure was supported by Ronan's comments when discussing the vignette. He suggested, "Sam might have got pushed into not liking him" (Tony; Ronan, male, high intervention, occasional–no bully, no bullied). When this response was explored in more detail Ronan suggested this pressure might have come from "some of his other friends that don't like Tony."

Although Justin provided a range of comments about why Sam might have bullied Tony, he also justified his behavior by suggesting that Sam had been influenced by his peers. Interestingly, Justin also suggested there might be "other" things happening with friends that might have resulted in Sam bullying Tony.

Um I'm not sure, depending on what was going on probably um Tony may have done something to him just beforehand. Or maybe Sam had just been influenced by his peers or he's seen something on TV or maybe they'd had a fight or something before or um maybe other things were happening with other students and he just wanted to be away from them for a while. (Justin, male, moderate intervention, regular–occasional–no bully, occasional bullied)

The pressure to conform was also evident if students had friends who were also bullying others and who did not want to stop. These students were unlikely to change their behavior. Some students justified their own behavior by implying they participated because friends were also bullying. Hannah's comment is consistent with these feelings, and reinforces the influence of the peer group and the need to conform (Gini, 2006a; Karatzias et al., 2002):

Um because my friend she was picking on her and I didn't want to look like . . . I was like helping. (Hannah, female, high intervention, regular–occasional bully, occasional–no bullied)

### *The Dynamics of the Peer Group: A Role for Everyone*

Once the students had constructed their explanation of the interaction in the vignette, the researcher asked them about their own experiences. When discussing personal experiences some students suggested their reaction to seeing others being bullied differed depending on who was involved. For example, if the person bullying was a friend they

would encourage and might even directly join in the "act." When the person being bullied was a friend the responses varied, with some students suggesting they would get help and others saying they would support the person being bullied. Some students suggested that if they were not friends with the students involved they would ignore the situation.

When defining the situation students indicated that they considered issues such as the people involved, their own social position, the situation, and the audience. They gave examples of how these elements could combine to shape their behavior and the interaction with others. These different levels of involvement and the consequential performances they described are consistent with Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor that implies individuals have some control over what occurs in an interaction (Goffman, 1959). Rather than just responding to what others do, the performance is used to control how others define and treat individuals. The performance might change depending on the performances of others. Using this theoretical approach, the person bullying works to convince the "audience" or the bystanders that he or she possesses certain attributes; for example, is "cool" or "tough," and in turn those who see bullying happening are influencing his or her "performance." Consequently, when those who see bullying happening encourage the person's bullying, he or she performs accordingly. Similarly, the person being bullied is also an "actor," and his or her reactions to those who see bullying happening and those who are bullying might also influence the "act." Goffman suggests that most social settings consist of a front or back region (or front stage and back stage). In this context the person bullying plays to those who see bullying happen in the front-stage setting; however, there might also be a group of peers who are involved in the back stage who might support the front-stage behavior of the bully. Those involved in the front-stage performance are not necessarily privy to the back-stage involvement. Although the student who bullies others and his or her friends might portray to the front-stage audience feelings of superiority and power, these feelings might not be endorsed "back stage." Though it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this in detail, there is evidence from the interview transcripts that back stage the students involved might be feeling quite different from their overt actions; that is, although they might be appearing to support the person who bullies others, they might be feeling

uncomfortable with their behaviors and that this cognitive dissonance might be one of the precipitating factors that lead to behavior change of students who bully.

The complexity of bullying and the range of roles played are well recognized. Salmavalli et al. (1996) suggest that the group process of bullying is recognized by the role played: victim, bully, reinforcer of the bully, assistant to the bully, defender of the victim, and outsider. The findings of this study are consistent with other research that highlights the complexity of the bullying process and the importance of considering all participants when planning interventions to reduce the prevalence of bullying behaviors.

#### *The Role of Those Who See Bullying Happen (Bystanders)*

When discussing the issue of their involvement if they see bullying happen, a few students suggested they might join in the incident, although most provided a socially desirable response such as telling a teacher. The reference to bullying being enjoyable was also reinforced. Adam's comments provide a good example:

Yeah I'd probably stand back and if I was like really getting into the mood I'd think it was funny and I'd probably push him (the person being bullied) or something . . . twice or something. (Adam, male, high intervention, regular–no bully, occasional–no bullied)

When asked why he would do it, he responded:

I dunno people just do it because I dunno they just feel like they're in the group. . . . yeah and then they just go and talk about it later and they laugh about it.

Adam's comments reflect a need to assert his dominance and enhance status, although he justifies this by suggesting that he would just do it "twice or something." His comments reflect a significant escalation from verbal to physical support for the person who bullies others. He also suggests there is a desire to be part of the group and his actions reinforce his sense of belonging. This reinforces the salience of group membership and the need to belong for this age group. In their Social Learning Analysis of Aggression Model, Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975) suggest that when aggressive acts that might be considered morally wrong are

performed by groups, responsibility is diffused from the individual. Collective action is likely to weaken restraints by reducing the chances of being blamed or punished by others. The majority of students in this study identified in the third person that bullying was a group process. Some students also provided first-person examples of the influence of the group. The reference to those who see bullying happen strengthens the finding that group involvement, at a variety of levels, is likely to diffuse responsibility (Bandura et al., 1975). Although students in this study did admit to initiating bullying, as the behavior is generally considered socially undesirable they were more likely to discuss involvement if they diffused the blame; that is, if they were not initiating the incident. The comments of Adam (above) and Hayden (below) provide examples of this finding.

The strength of peer affiliation (belonging and enhancing group status) and how that influenced the definition of the situation was confirmed by both Adam and Hayden, who suggested their reactions would be different if one of their friends was involved. Adam said that if one of his friends was being provoked he would help him. Hayden also suggested his reaction would differ depending on who was involved. The sense that the incident was "fun," linking to the theme of enjoyment, was also reflected in Hayden's comments:

Well um if I don't really know them I'd start going "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry [imitating the Jerry Springer television show] and like I know heaps of other people would start doing it as well . . . and like that's what most of the girls do they just stand around and watch . . . like when someone's getting their head bashed in they're going "ha ha ha ha look at him ha ha ha . . . but if they were someone I liked then I'd break it up . . . as much as I could. (Hayden, male, low intervention, occasional–no bully, regular bullied)

When asked how he would feel if the students involved were not his friends, Hayden responded,

Um then I'd be on the floor laughing because I can't believe if they were two people I didn't like I didn't really care who won or lost . . . I just hope they both lost.

But if they were his friends:

Well if two of them were my friends I'd go and get the teacher, if one of them was my friend and like he could take care of himself I'd just let him go on but if the dude was kicking his butt then I'd try and break it up.

Hayden's comments are consistent with many of the examples described by other students. They clearly demonstrated how students take into account issues of people, position, peers, and audience when defining the situation and deciding what action to take. Hayden's comments also reinforce the power of the media. His imitation of the "Jerry Springer Show" creates an atmosphere, a sense of performance, which is likely to provide significant encouragement to the person bullying. This type of situation is likely to attract more students to the incident, hence, potentially escalating the severity of the situation and further diffusing responsibility on others who choose to be involved. This reinforces the influence of the peer group in inciting and maintaining bullying (Gini, 2006a; Karatzias et al., 2002). Later in the interview, when discussing how a person who bullies might feel about his or her behavior, Hayden again mentioned the "hype" associated with bullying and the sense of prestige it might afford some students. Hayden distances himself from his response by implying that this is the feeling of others:

He might be going, "Hey cool, some people actually want to see me kick this guy's butt." Some people have strange minds. (Hayden, male, low intervention, occasional–no bully, regular bullied)

### *Labeling and Reputational Bias*

When discussing this in both the third and first person, several students suggested that students bullied others because once they had started and became known as a "bully," or were involved in the group who bullied, it was difficult to stop. This is consistent with theories of labeling (Becker, 1963) and reputational bias (Hymel, 1986), and has implications for presentation of self and role consistency. Justin's and Luke's comments reflect this feeling:

I think it may be because of a habit or because maybe once they start their friends will come along and they will keep them going and then they may want to stop but their friends keep on. (Justin, male, moderate intervention, regular–occasional–no bully, occasional bullied)

I'm sort of saying if you bully a kid for like three weeks straight like everyday then you stop it you look a bit weird . . . cos you've been going for so long . . . and then you just stop. (Luke, male, moderate intervention, occasional–no–regular bully, regular bullied)

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, social interaction creates the social objects students use and,

consequently, it alters their relationship with their environment. What they do in any given situation, at any point in time, depends on their definition of what others do. The actions of others might then be influenced by what they do. In this process students might define who others are, or label them. These labels subsequently become important for how students act toward those they have labeled (Becker, 1963). This helps to explain the dilemma for some students in changing their bullying behavior. If their label provides status and power it might be difficult to relinquish that title. In addition, if students are likely to think of themselves in terms of someone who others see as "tough" or "not to challenge," they are more likely to act in ways that are consistent with the label (Becker, 1963). Labeling, especially by attributing the blame to the victim, might also make bullying appear more personally and socially acceptable (Bandura et al., 1975). Whereas cognitive dissonance encouraged a few students to change their behavior positively to avoid the label of "bully," for others feelings of dissonance changed to consonance to enable them to justify their behavior (Festinger, 1962). The feeling that bullying becomes a habit (as discussed by Justin), or that it would be difficult to stop once you had been bullying for a long period of time ("three weeks," as described by Luke), suggests labels are developed relatively quickly for students this age.

Luke also suggested that these students might "lose face" with their friends if they suddenly stopped bullying others. The reference to bullying for "three weeks straight" and the need to remain consistent with the behavior suggests that for students the presentation of self is as important as the concept of role consistency. Luke's statement implies the consistency of interaction is important for self-identity. The loss of face might relate to a potential loss of social status. The reference to losing face might also support the preservation of self; that is, once the child has established himself or herself as someone who bullies, in this particular group, he or she needs to maintain the behavior. These comments and the need for recognition are also consistent with Goffman's approach to the study of social interaction, which suggests that when people interact with others they not only perform but are an audience for their performances, as well (Goffman, 1959). Luke's comments imply that a person is likely to bully for an audience. The reinforcement the person who bullies others receives because of his or her actions is also consistent with response consequences described in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986).

Most students discussed bullying with their friends, whereas some also described subtle pressure to assert themselves to be part of the group. These feelings reflect normative expectations which might result in perceived social pressure to bully others (Ajzen, 2002). The need to assert or secure their position within a group was highlighted by a few students. Several girls described situations of social exclusion and talked about the need to bully to regain status in their group. Emily described a situation in which she was excluded from her group of friends:

I was feeling left out because that person had all the friends and I didn't really have any . . . yeah. (Emily, female, moderate intervention, occasional-regular-occasional bully, occasional-no bullied)

Although labeling is often considered as something imposed by outsiders, there is clear evidence that the students in this study self-labeled their behavior. When certain behaviors were identified as bullying, some students accepted that label as their own. Goffman highlights that consistency of self-projection is important to maintenance of self and social psychology (Goffman 1959). Consistency is seen to be a positive trait, even when being demonstrated in a negative way (Cialdini, 2001).

## Summary

In this article we have presented student-centered examples that illustrate the factors students considered when observing a school bullying situation either as an initiator or bystander, and the subsequent actions they chose to take. In their descriptions of the events, the issues of self and consistency of presentation of self; the people involved; their status; the relationship to peers, friends, and the audience; and the expectations of others were all considered when deciding what action to take. The perceived pressure from friendship groups to conform influenced the likelihood that students would initiate or persist in bullying others. In some cases, to maintain inclusion in the peer group, students felt they or others needed to bully.

The social norms or normative expectations of the group were such that if friends also bullied others and did not want to stop, they were unlikely to change their behavior. This is consistent with the findings of Social Identity Theory (Gini, 2006a), which suggest that perceptions of significant peers are influential in bullying behaviors. Also, the label of being a bully, and in some

cases the social benefits and status this afforded, was difficult to relinquish. Similarly, others suggested that once a child is labeled as a bully this is difficult to change (Becker, 1963; Hymel, 1986), suggesting that the label, or reputation, might encourage persistence of the behavior and make it harder to stop.

The findings of this study reinforce the salience of the peer group (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006) and the strength of peer affiliations (Gini, 2006a). It is acknowledged that, although the peer group can promote a variety of positive social, emotional, and behavioral attributes, the group can also encourage negative behaviors (Rodkin, 2004).

## Recommendations

The recognition of the strength and influence of the peer group and the power of social norms or the need to conform is paramount to the development of appropriate intervention strategies for this target group. The findings of this study support the need for universal bullying prevention programs in all primary schools. The importance of establishing a positive, whole-school ethos cannot be overemphasized. Inherent within a whole-school program is the need to understand the importance of strategies that target students, teachers, parents, and community members.

At an individual level it needs to be recognized that the establishment of self in the social context of bullying might result in students feeling obligated to continue their bullying behavior as a way of preserving self-image and social position. This highlights the importance of schools implementing early intervention to help stop reputation development and restorative practices to reduce future conflict. Feelings of dissonance encourage behavior change, or consideration of behavior change. Strategies should work to develop feelings of dissonance about bullying behaviors. Consideration should be given to developing strategies that assist students to maintain their sense of self and retain their perceived social position at least within the broader student body.

The sense of self that is currently afforded to those involved in the bullying act through the diffusion of responsibility back to the group is one social norm that needs to be modified. The responsibility of all bystanders, regardless of level of involvement, must be emphasized. Designers of programs do, however, need to be aware of the complexity of the relational issues students are assessing when they are defining

the situation, and issues such as peer affiliations and consistency in presentation of self need to be included in classroom activities. Universal classroom-based activities that focus on social rights and responsibilities of all students need to be trialed and integrated in bullying curriculum.

Although the main emphasis of school-based programs should be universal interventions, for some students who bully, and those who are bullied and bully others, selective or indicated programs are necessary. Students who bully need to be mixed with prosocial students where possible. Others have found that including 4 to 6 teacher-nominated pro-social students in a group with 1 or 2 prosocial students in an indicated program to address the development of social and problem-solving skills training to be beneficial (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 1999). It might also be pertinent to consider class grouping and also groups within classes where possible to avoid the facilitation of groups of students who encourage each other to bully. This study lends support for methods, such as the Pikas Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 2002), and we would recommend that teachers and school psychologists be trained to implement restorative strategies. Trialing and evaluating the effectiveness of selective and indicated programs embedded within a broader universal program is necessary. This reduces the likelihood that at-risk students will be grouped together, which might encourage further antisocial behavior and also lead to stigmatization. The risk of possible iatrogenic effects of such programs should be recognized, and every attempt made to reduce stigmatization.

It is recognized that bullying is a complex issue, and this article has addressed just one influential factor. Well-planned, evidence-based, universal prevention programs, including classroom strategies, policy, and teacher and parent education are needed to reduce the prevalence and problems associated with bullying among school students. Governments need to be advocated to ensure the implementation of universal bullying prevention programs in all schools. Selective and indicated programs should also be made available and integrated within universal programs, as appropriate. For a small proportion of students, indicated programs that address social, communication, and problem-solving skills and anger management might be necessary. Schools need to be encouraged and assisted to utilize existing support services within the school and the broader community.

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