Bullying as a Group Process: Participant Roles and Their Relations to Social Status Within the Group

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Bullying was investigated as a group process, a social phenomenon taking place in a school setting among 573 Finnish sixth-grade children (286 girls, 287 boys) aged 12-13 years. Different Participant Roles taken by individual children in the bullying process were examined and related to a) self-estimated behavior in bullying situations, b) social acceptance and social rejection, and c) belongingness to one of the five sociometric status groups (popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average). The Participant Roles assigned to the subjects were Victim, Bully, Reinforcer of the bully, Assistant of the bully, Defender of the victim, and Outsider. There were significant sex differences in the distribution of Participant Roles. Boys were more frequently in the roles of Bully, Reinforcer and Assistant, while the most frequent roles of the girls were those of Defender and Outsider. The subjects were moderately well aware of their Participant Roles, although they underestimated their participation in active bullying behavior and emphasized that they acted as Defenders and Outsiders. The sociometric status of the children was found to be connected to their Participant Roles.

Key words: aggressive behavior, peer relations, roles, social acceptance, social groups, victimization

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools can be seen as a category of aggressive behavior in which there is an imbalance of power, and the aggressive act is repeated over time [Olweus, 1991; Smith and Thompson, 1991]. Bullying is social in its nature, and takes place in relatively permanent social groups, in which the victim has little possibility of avoiding his/
her tormentors, and the bully often gets support from other group members [Björkqvist et al., 1982]. The attacks are mostly unprovoked and may be physical or verbal, direct or indirect. Researchers in this field often emphasize the social character of bullying. For instance, Pikas [1975] describes bullying as violence in a group context in which the pupils reinforce each others' behavior in their interaction. This view of bullying as a primarily social activity is, however, seldom converted into empirical research. Studies on bullying have typically concentrated only on the bully-victim relationship. It is as if bullying behavior was regarded only as a function of certain characteristics of the bully and/or the victim, while the group context is set aside, or forgotten.

Lagerspetz et al. [1982] have pointed out two important features of bullying among school children: 1) its collective character, and 2) the fact that it is based on social relationships in the group. They suggest that aggression in a group can be studied as a relationship between people taking different roles, or having roles assigned to them.

The present study focuses on these roles, regarding them as part of a process involving a whole group, the school class. The main research problem was to investigate what other pupils, or group members, do, when a bully is harassing a victim. It was assumed that all the children in the class are somehow involved in, or at least aware of, the bullying process, even if they do not actively attack the victim.

Bullying often takes place in a situation in which several members of the group are present; even the ones not present are usually aware of what is going on, due to the fact that bullying by definition happens repeatedly, over a period of time. Even if the majority of children in the class do not participate in active bullying behavior, they may behave in ways which make the beginning and continuation of the bullying process possible. What matters more than their real attitude to bullying—in fact, most children disapprove of bullying behavior or say that they cannot understand why some children bully others [e.g., Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Whitney and Smith, 1993]—is how they actually behave in bullying situations. Even the ignoring of what is going on between the bully and his/her victim may be interpreted by the bully as approval of his/her behavior. Not only do the roles of the bullies and the victims constitute an important element in the bullying process, but so, too, do the roles of "the others." We refer to these roles as the Participant Roles of the children.

Rigby and Slee [1993] suggest that, among school children, there are three dimensions of interpersonal relations, reflecting tendencies, first, to bully others, second, to be victimized by others, and third, to relate to others in a prosocial and cooperative manner. Their results support the factorial independence of these dimensions. However, in a bullying situation, prosocial/cooperative behavior could imply many things, e.g., taking sides with the victim, staying uninvolved and not engaging in active bullying behavior, or perhaps even cooperating with the bully.

Whitney and Smith [1993] studied school children's attitudes to bullying. The pupils were asked what they usually did when they saw someone being bullied, and whether they might join in the bullying. About half of the junior/middle school pupils reported that they would try to help the victim, whereas only a third of the secondary school pupils felt this would be likely. Of those pupils who reported their likelihood of doing nothing, some felt they ought to help the victim, while some thought it was none of their business. The majority of the pupils did not think they would join in the bullying; only about one-fifth reported that they might do so. Attitudes, however, do not necessarily correlate with the actual behavior of the children in bullying situations.
The Participant Role an individual child takes in a bullying situation is undoubtedly determined by many factors, personal as well as contextual. One of these factors may be the social status the child has established in the group. The behavioral patterns possible for a child depend on his/her social status. For example, a low-status child might be afraid of being victimized himself, if he/she takes sides with the victim. Reciprocally, the behavior of the child obviously has an effect on his/her status in different ways. We wanted to examine the connections between the Participant Roles in the bullying situation and the sociometric status of the children.

Bullying apart, literature describes plenty of studies on children’s group behavior in general and its correlates with their sociometric status. It has been repeatedly noted that a child’s social approval (positive status) is connected with obedience to rules, with friendliness, and with prosocial interaction. Being socially rejected (negative status) is connected with aggression and destructive behavior [Coie et al., 1990].

Lancelotta and Vaughn [1989] studied the relations between different subtypes of aggressive behavior and the sociometric status of third- and fourth-grade children. Significant negative correlations were found between social status and all categories of aggressive behavior for both sexes, with the exception of provoked physical aggression in boys. Indirect aggression (defined by them as tattling, stealing, damaging others’ property) was the type of aggressive behavior that correlated most highly with low peer ratings.

Perry et al. [1988] studied 9- to 12-year-old victims of peer aggression. Children’s victimization scores were negatively correlated with peer acceptance and positively correlated with peer rejection.

In the study by Lagerspetz et al. [1982] the bullies were found to be less popular than both controls and well-adjusted children, although not so unpopular as the victims.

In the study by Lindman and Sinclair [1988], both bullies and victims were found to be less popular than other children. However, the female bullies constituted an exceptional group, whose popularity was surprisingly high (measured by questions like “whom would you like to sit next to you in the classroom?” or “who would be the leader in the class, if the teacher were absent?”). Even if some characteristics typical of leaders were linked to male bullies as well, they were not accepted leaders.

Coie et al. [1982] have suggested that instead of two types of social status, positive and negative, there are five status types: rejected, neglected, average, popular, and controversial. In their study, popular children were viewed by peers in obviously prosocial terms, while rejected children had an opposite profile: they were viewed as disruptive and as liable to start fights. Controversial children, who were both highly liked and highly disliked, were perceived by their peers as disruptive and aggressive (like the rejected group) but also as social leaders (like popular children). The authors describe them as visible, active, and assertive children. In a further study by Dodge [1983], controversial boys were found frequently to engage in both prosocial and antisocial behavior.

In a study by Boulton and Smith [1994], both bullies and victims were found to be overrepresented in the rejected status group, and to be underrepresented in the popular group, relative to not-involved children. In addition, sociometrically rejected boys received significantly more bullying nominations than popular, average, neglected, and other status boys. Both rejected boys and girls received significantly more victimization nominations than popular, average, and other status boys and girls.
The purpose of the present study was to investigate the following questions: 1) What kind of Participant Roles—in addition to the traditionally studied roles of the bully and the victim—do the children take, or have assigned to them, in the bullying situation? 2) How well are children aware of their own Participant Roles? 3) How is the social status of children related to their Participant Roles?

METHODS

Pupils

Altogether 23 classes from 11 Finnish schools were surveyed. The pupils participating in the study were 573 sixth-grade children (286 girls, 287 boys), aged 12–13 years. Class sizes varied from 19 to 32 pupils, mean class size being 24.9.

Questionnaire

The pupils filled in a questionnaire consisting of 1) evaluations of each child’s behavior in bullying situations; both self- and peer-estimates, from which the Participant Roles were derived; 2) identification of the victims bullied by others; and 3) a sociometric part. Before starting to fill in the questionnaire, the pupils were presented with a definition of bullying as “one child being exposed repeatedly to harassment and attacks from one or several other children; harassment and attacks may be, for example, shoving or hitting the other one, calling names or making jokes of him/her, leaving him/her outside the group, taking his/her things, or any other behavior meant to hurt the other one.”

Participant Roles in the Bullying Process

In the first part of the questionnaire, the pupils evaluated (on a three-point scale: 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often) how well each child in their class, including themselves, fit 50 bullying-situation behavioral descriptions (presented in the Appendix). From the 50 items, five subscales describing tendencies to act as Bully, Reinforcer of the bully, Assistant of the bully, Defender of the victim, and Outsider were formed (two items were dropped out in order to raise the reliability of the scales).

The items of the Bully Scale (α = .93) described active, initiative-taking, leaderlike bullying behavior. The items of the Assistant Scale (α = .81) also described active, but more follower than leaderlike bullying behavior. On the Reinforcer Scale (α = .91), there were items describing tendencies to act in ways which reinforce the bullying behavior, like laughing, coming to see what is happening, and being present, thus providing an “audience” for the bully, inciting the bully, etc. On the Defender Scale (α = .93), the items described supportive, consoling side-taking with the victim as well as active efforts to make others stop bullying. The items of the Outsider Scale (α = .89) described “doing nothing,” staying outside the bullying situations.

The peer-estimated scores on the Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider Scales were standardized by class (i.e., the mean score of each class = 0, SD = 1). The scores were used to identify children with corresponding bullying-situation roles. In the following we refer to these as Participant Roles.

For instance, a child was considered to have the Participant Role of being a Bully, if 1) he/she scored above the mean (0.00) on the standardized Bully Scale, and 2) he/she scored higher on that scale than on any of the other scales.

Since some children received almost equal scores on two or more scales, an addi-
tional criterion had to be established: if the difference between a pupil's highest score and his/her second highest score was less than 0.1, he/she was regarded as not having a clearly definable Participant Role. Those not scoring above the mean on any of the scales were equally considered not to have a Participant Role. The percentage of pupils without any Participant Role was 12.7%.

**Identification of Victims**

The victims were picked out separately by the pupils; on the second part of the questionnaire, the pupils wrote the names of the peers they thought were the victims bullied by the others. If 30% or more of the classmates named somebody as a victim, that was considered to be her/his role, regardless of how she/he scored on the Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider scales.

The identification of the victims in this way was based on the assumption that being a victim was, after all, the "primary role" of a child so assessed by 30% or more of her/his peers, no matter how she/he behaved in a situation where someone else was the target of attacks.

**Sociometry**

In the sociometric part, the pupils were asked to nominate the three female and the three male classmates whom they liked the most and the three female and the three male classmates whom they liked the least. These nominations were standardized by class (see above), and the variables social acceptance (like most nominations) and social rejection (like least nominations) were formed. Furthermore, the pupils were divided into the status groups of popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average suggested by Coie et al. The procedure was the same used by these authors [Coie et al., 1982, p. 564]. The popular status group (n = 146) consisted of children with many positive and only few negative nominations. On the contrary, rejected children (n = 137) had few positive, but many negative nominations. Both positive and negative nominations of the average status group (n = 156) were near the mean. Neglected children (n = 15) had few positive and few negative nominations, while controversial children (n = 19) had many positive and many negative nominations.

**RESULTS**

**Participant Roles in the Bullying Process**

In accordance with the procedure described, it was possible to assign a Participant Role to 87% of the pupils. The most common Participant Roles were Outsider, Reinforcer, and Defender.

There was a statistically higher significant sex difference \([\chi^2 (5) = 239.5, P < .001]\) in the distribution of the Participant Roles. There were more Defenders among the girls (30.1% of the girls, 4.5% of the boys) as well as Outsiders (40.2% of the girls, 7.3% of the boys), while among the boys, the Participant Roles of Reinforcer (37.3% of the boys, 1.7% of the girls) and Assistant (12.2% of the boys, 1.4% of the girls) were more frequent. More children were also designated as Bullies among the boys (10.5%) than among the girls (5.9%). The frequency of the Victims was about the same for both boys (11.8%) and girls (11.5%, Fig. 1).
Self-Estimated Behavior in a Bullying Situation

The self-estimated scores on the Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider scales were positively correlated with the corresponding peer-estimated scores.

Self-estimated scores on the Bully Scale were associated not only with the peer-estimated Bully Scale, but also with the peer-estimated Reinforcer and Assistant Scales. Respectively, both the self-estimated Reinforcer and Assistant Scales correlated positively with all the peer-estimated scales Bully, Reinforcer, and Assistant. The self-estimated scores on the Defender Scale correlated positively not only with the peer-estimated scores on the Defender Scale, but also with the Outsider Scale. The self-estimated scores on the Outsider scale correlated positively with the peer-estimated scores on the Defender Scale. Intercorrelations of all the self- and peer-estimated Participant Role scales are presented in Table I.

**TABLE I. Correlations Between Self- and Peer-Estimations on the Participant Role Scales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-estimates</th>
<th>Self-estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>.40**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-estimates</th>
<th>Self-estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-estimates</th>
<th>Self-estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-estimates</th>
<th>Self-estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer-estimates</th>
<th>Self-estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P=0.05, **P=0.01 (two-tailed tests).
The scale means of the self- and peer ratings on the Participant Role scales are presented in Table II. As the table reveals, self-estimated scores were significantly lower than peer-estimated ones on the Bully Scale. This suggests that pupils underestimated their tendency to act as bullies. On the other hand, self-estimated scores turned out significantly higher than the peer-estimated ones on the Reinforcer, Defender, and Outsider Scales. Obviously, pupils overestimated their tendency to act in these ways. On the Assistant Scale, there was no significant difference between self- and peer-estimated scores.

As Table II shows, self-estimated scores differed on most scales significantly from the corresponding peer-estimations. However, we had a closer look at how children with different Participant Roles actually evaluated their own behavior in bullying situation.

Bullies, Assistants, and Reinforcers scored higher than the other status groups on the self-estimated Bully Scale \[F(5,421) = 11.34, P < .001].^1\] On the self-estimated Reinforcer Scale, Assistants, Bullies, and Reinforcers had the highest scores \[F(5,421) = 13.37, P < .001].^2\] On the self-estimated Assistant Scale, the ones scoring highest were again Bullies, Assistants, and Reinforcers \[F(5,421) = 9.56, P < .001].^3\] Defenders, Outsiders, and Victims scored highest on the self-estimated Defender scale \[F(5,424) = 10.11, P < 0.001].^4\] On the self-estimated Outsider Scale, Outsiders and Defenders had the highest scores \[F(5,422) = 5.87, P < .001].^5\]

Of all the children identified as Victims, 49.3% assigned themselves as victims, 23.9% named someone else as being a victim, and 26.9% did not fill in this part of the questionnaire at all. That is, 67.4% of those victims who responded to this particular question, mentioned themselves as victims.

**Secondary Roles of the Victims**

The Participant Roles (Victim, Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider) were, by definition, considered as mutually exclusive. It was, however, possible to examine the secondary roles of the victims—i.e., how the victims behaved in a situation in which someone else was attacked. It should be remembered that the victims were picked out by a separate peer-nomination procedure.

The scores of the victims on the Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider scales were compared with the scores of nonvictimized children (those not assigned as victims by anyone). The results suggest that, compared with them, the victims scored significantly higher on the Defender Scale \[t(77.04) = 2.59, P < .05]\ and on the Outsider Scale \[t(445) = 2.01, P < .05]\, but slightly—although not significantly—lower on the Bully, Reinforcer, ^4\text{ and Assistant}^5\ Scales.

Among all Victims, there was only one girl (3.0% of the female Victims) and three boys (8.8% of the male Victims), whose actual “secondary role” was that of a Bully, and who thus can be thought to correspond to the bully/victims described in the literature.

Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test, (.05 level):

1. Bullies > Outsiders, Defenders, Victims, Reinforcers, Assistants > Outsiders, Defenders
2. Assistants, Bullies > Outsiders, Defenders, Victims
3. Reinforcers > Outsiders, Defenders
4. Bullies > Outsiders, Defenders, Victims, Reinforcers, Assistants > Outsiders, Defenders
5. Reinforcers > Outsiders
6. Defenders > Reinforcers, Bullies, Assistants
7. Outsiders, Victims > Reinforcers
8. Outsiders > Bullies, Victims

Mean scores of victims and nonvictims on the five scales: \(^{1}\text{victims} .146, \text{nonvictims} .108; ^{2}\text{victims} .292, \text{nonvictims} .249; ^{3}\text{victims} .074, \text{nonvictims} .083; ^{4}\text{victims} .195, \text{nonvictims} .196; ^{5}\text{victims} .088, \text{nonvictims} .109.\)
TABLE II. Scale Means of Self- and Peer-Estimations, and the Significancies of Their Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Self-estimate</th>
<th>Peer-estimate</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P&lt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>11.66</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Role and Sociometric Status**

When the connection between Participant Roles and sociometric status in the class was examined, the following aspects were taken into consideration. First, the children’s social acceptance (like most nominations) and social rejection (like least nominations) were compared with their Participant Roles. Second, the children’s Participant Roles were related to their belonging to one of the five status groups (popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, or average). In the final set of analyses, behavioral profiles were formed for children belonging to the different status groups.

**Social Acceptance and Social Rejection**

A significant multivariate effect of Participant Role \( F(10,976) = 9.99, P < .001 \) was found. In the univariate analysis, a significant effect of Participant Role appeared in the case of both social acceptance \( F(5,49) = 6.17, P < .001 \) and social rejection \( F(5,49) = 19.03, P < .001 \) of the child.

Fig. 2. Means for social acceptance of girls and boys in the different Participant Roles.
A significant interaction between sex and Participant Role appeared \( [F(10,976) = 2.22), P < 0.05]\) in the multivariate test. Further univariate analysis revealed a significant interaction between sex and Participant Role in regard to social rejection \( [F(5,49) = 3.48, P < 0.005]\). There was no significant interaction of Participant Role and sex in regard to the social acceptance of the child, however.

The standardized score means for social acceptance (like most nominations) and social rejection (like least nominations) of the children with different Participant Roles are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Both male and female Victims scored low on social acceptance and high on social rejection—they were clearly rejected children. Other children with a similar pattern (low acceptance, high rejection) were male Bullies, female Reinforcers, and female Assistants. Female Bullies, however, scored above average both on social rejection and social acceptance—seeming to have a profile like the children described as controversial by Coie et al. [1982]. Male Reinforcers had a profile like popular children (high acceptance, low rejection), while male Assistants scored near average on both social rejection and social acceptance. The children who scored highest on social acceptance (scoring also low on social rejection), however, were the Defenders of the victim. This was true in the case of both sexes. The Outsiders (both female and male) scored below average on both social acceptance and social rejection.

**Status Groups**

Following the procedure suggested by Coie et al. [1982], 473 pupils were selected, from the original pool of 573, as fitting one of the five social status groups (popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average).
Since the number of children selected in the neglected status group was very small (n = 15; only 12 of them had a definable Participant Role), that group was dropped from the chi square analysis (three Victims, four Reinforcers, one Defender, and four Outsiders belonged to the neglected status group). In addition, the Reinforcers and the Assistants were truncated to one category due to their small cell frequencies. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the status groups of the children with different Participant Roles ($\chi^2 (12) = 81.9, P < .001$).

The distribution of children having different Participant Roles in the status groups of popular, rejected, average, and controversial are presented in Table III.

The controversial status group was not the most typical one for any of the role groups, which is partly due to the relatively small number of the pupils (n = 19) belonging to the controversial group.

To shed more light on the behavior of controversial children, among the other status groups, the behavioral profiles (peer-estimated scores on the scales Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider) of the five status groups were examined. The results are presented in Table IV.

As can be seen in Table IV, there were significant differences between the scores of children with different status groups in all scales except the Outsider Scale. Controversial children scored above the mean on all scales except one (the Outsider Scale). On the Bully, Reinforcer, and Assistant Scales they scored significantly higher than several other status groups (Tukey’s HSD test). It seems that although engaging in active bullying behavior, the controversial children also tend to act as Defenders of the victim or as Reinforcers and

### Table III. Distribution of Children in the Different Participant Roles in Four Status Groups (Popular, Rejected, Controversial, and Average)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status group</th>
<th>Participant role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversial</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table IV. Peer-Estimated Scores on the Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, and Outsider Scales as a Function of Peer Group Social Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociometric status group</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Reinforcer</th>
<th>Assistant</th>
<th>Defender</th>
<th>Outsider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Popular (N=146)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rejected (N=137)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Neglected (N=15)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Controversial (N=19)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Average (N=156)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$F$ values: 10.13, 2.47, 5.31, 2.93, 0.07

$\text{df}$: 4, 4, 4, 4, 4

$p$: .001, .05, .001, .05, n.s.

Tukey’s HSD test:

- 2 > 1.5
- 2 > 1.5

(.05 level)
Assistants—but not as passive Outsiders. The results support the view of them as visible, active, and assertive children, as they were described by Coie et al. [1982].

The behavioral profiles of the other status groups corroborate the results already presented in Figures 2 and 3 and in Table III. The ones scoring highest on the Defender Scale were popular children. Surprisingly, also rejected children scored relatively high on the Defender Scale; this may be due to the Victims’ tendency to act as Defenders, when somebody else is harassed. The ones scoring high on the Bully, Reinforcer, and Assistant Scales were rejected children (in addition to controversial children, who scored higher than all others on these scales).

**DISCUSSION**

The results support the notion that bullying may be regarded as a group phenomenon in which most children of a school class have a definable Participant Role.

Boys seemed, in general, to be more actively involved in the bullying process: their most frequent Participant Roles were those of Reinforcer and Assistant, while among the girls the Participant Roles of Outsider and Defender were the most common ones. The boys were also more frequently designated as Bullies than were the girls, which is a result obtained in several previous studies as well [Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Whitney and Smith, 1993].

Several interpretations of these differences are conceivable. For boys, at least physically aggressive ways of being together are more common and also more approved of—even expected; boys use aggression to create social order. To be accepted in their peer group, boys are expected to join, at least to some extent, in rough-and-tumble play, mutual “testing,” and bullying behavior. The idealization of aggression among boys, but not among girls, has been found in several studies [e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 1982; Rauste-von-Wright, 1989]. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to behave in more prosocial, caretaking, and helping ways—it is a part of the female social role. Sex differences in aggression, as well as in helping behavior, can be explained referring to the different social roles of males and females [Eagly, 1987]. A further explanation for the different Participant Roles of the boys and the girls might be the girls’ better developed ability for empathy [e.g., Hoffman, 1977]. According to Erwin [1993, p. 168], the school-aged girls’ intimate, dyadic relationships lead to a style of moral reasoning which emphasizes empathy and sensitivity.

The results on self-estimated behavior in bullying situations suggest that the children were moderately well aware of their own Participant Roles. Bullies, as well as Reinforcers and Assistants, seemed to realize their central role in the process, even if they underestimated their participation in active bullying behavior and mostly claimed that they acted as Reinforcers. This explains the fact that peer-estimated score means on the Reinforcer Scale were higher than self-estimated ones; not only Reinforcers, but also those assigned as Bullies and Assistants gave themselves high scores on the Reinforcer scale. Defenders and Outsiders were also aware of their prosocial and/or passive role.

In all Participant Role groups the pupils tended, if compared to peer-estimations, to underestimate their aggressive behavior and emphasize prosocial and withdrawing behavior, both of which are more socially desirable. Österman et al. [1994] have referred to a “self-serving attribution bias” explaining the differences in self- and peer-estimated
aggressive behavior: individuals make attributions which favor their self-perception and support their self-esteem. The same mechanism seems to appear in the results of the present study as well.

Almost one fourth (23.9%) of the Victims (i.e., those who were assessed so by at least 30% of their peers) did not mention themselves, but someone else, as a victim. One, perhaps unlikely, reason for this may be that they really do not have the subjective experience of being harassed. Another possibility is that the Victims deny the fact that they are bullied by their peers. It should be noted that almost one third of the Victims did not answer this particular question at all, which can be seen as a further sign of this denial/repression.

This brings up the methodological question about whether the victims of bullying should be identified by self-rating or peer-rating procedures. In some earlier studies, the Victims have been identified by asking the subjects themselves, whether or not they have been bullied [e.g., Boulton and Underwood, 1992], while some have used peer-assessment procedures alone [e.g., Perry et al., 1988] or together with teacher’s nominations [Olweus, 1994]. Our result speaks for the peer ratings as a superior procedure to self ratings: using peer ratings, the Victims’ tendency to deny their situation does not have any effect.

When someone else was attacked, the Victims tended either to defend him/her or keep themselves outside. So they did not, when they got an opportunity, eagerly join in the bullying. The Participant Roles of the Bully and the Victim were clearly separate: only few children could be assigned as bully/victims. This is in accordance with Olweus’ view of the Victims as not aggressive or teasing, but mostly passive and submissive in their behavior [Olweus, 1991, 1994]. Also in a study by Boulton and Smith [1994], no more than 4.4% of the children could be designated as bully/victims. Further studies of the behavior of the Victims are in progress in our research group [Salmivalli et al., in press].

Among both boys and girls, Victims had a lower status than the other groups. They scored high in social rejection, low in social acceptance, and their most frequent status group was that of being rejected. This corroborates the results of many earlier studies [e.g., Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Lindman and Sinclair, 1988; Perry et al., 1988]. The unpopularity of Victims can be seen both as a cause and a result of continuous bullying. One reason for their being picked on and harassed in the first place may be their original unpopularity within the group. On the other hand, as Olweus [1991] pointed out when describing the group mechanisms involved in bullying, there are gradual cognitive changes in the perceptions of the victim by the peers. As the bullying continues, they start to see the victim as deviant, worthless, and almost deserving of being harassed; along with these cognitive changes, the victim becomes even more unpopular. It becomes a social norm of the group not to like him/her.

Defenders of the victim had the highest status. This supports previous results about the high-status prosocially behaving children have [Coe et al., 1990]. Two interpretations are conceivable: 1) Defenders have a high status just because they react to bullying in that particular way: defending the victim is appreciated by the peers; 2) a high-status child does not have to be afraid of being victimized himself, even if he takes sides with the victim. High status enables the defending of the victim.

The two interpretations do not exclude each other, but may both have an influence. If the first interpretation were true, defending the victim would be an effective way of improving one’s status in the peers’ eyes: it would be a role worth taking on. One might think that in the case of the girls this makes sense: many girls
(30.1%) take the role of Defender, and that kind of behavior is just what is expected from girls.

However, there were no more than 4.5% of the boys who had the Participant Role of a Defender. For this reason, the second interpretation might better explain the high status of male Defenders; probably only those boys who have a good position in the peer group have the courage to take sides with the victim—even if it is "against the norm" in the boys' peer group.

In the study by Lagerspetz et al. [1982], bullies were found to have a low status. It will be remembered, however, that in the study by Lindman and Sinclair [1988], male bullies were found to be high-status children, although male bullies had a low status. French found out in her studies [1988, 1990] that the relationship between aggressive behavior and rejection was not as powerful among girls as it was among boys. In the present study, male Bullies were clearly low-status children, scoring low in social acceptance and high in social rejection. They were not, however, quite as unpopular as Victims. Female Bullies, on the other hand, formed an exceptional group: they scored above the mean in both social acceptance and social rejection.

One explanation for the status differences of male and female Bullies could be their different ways of bullying. Girls use more verbal and indirect forms of aggression [Lagerspetz and Björkqvist, 1994], which is more hidden and more "socially sophisticated"—maybe for these reasons also more approved of—than the disruptive, often physical and direct bullying practised by boys. This explanation does not, however, corroborate the results of Lancelotta and Vaughn [1989], who noted that the use of indirect aggression correlated especially strongly with low status.

Maybe the female Bullies are socially and verbally smart children who can choose their words and amuse the others by verbally—directly or indirectly—attacking their victims. According to the descriptions given by their peers [Salmivalli, 1992], the girls in the “gang of bullies” also rate high in terms of the current youth culture; they are “tough girls” who know the newest fashion and the latest idols. It is possible that they are, even if frightening, also admired.

An important practical implication can be drawn from the results of the present study: since most children are somehow involved in the bullying process, interventions in it should be directed not only towards the Bullies and the Victims, but towards the whole group. For example, the intervention method of Pikas [1975] is based on systematic conversations with bullies and victims, while the “noninvolved” children are not taken into account. Olweus [1991, 1994] lays more emphasis on directing the intervention not only on the individual, but also on the group level (in the form of class meetings, class rules against bullying etc.). In our view, the children in the different Participant Roles, for example, Outsiders or Reinforcers, should be made use of when trying to put an end to bullying. It may be that their behavior is easier to change than the aggressive behavior of the Bullies. There is a possibility that through these changes even the behavior of the Bullies might be affected.

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX: Items of the Participant Role Scales

The Bully Scale
1. Starts bullying
2. Makes the others join in the bullying
3. Always finds new ways of harassing the victim
4. Fetches more people into the bullying situation
5. Urges the others to harass the victim
6. Makes suggestions about bullying someone
7. Calls those who don’t participate in the bullying “cry-babies”
8. Makes ironic remarks about the victim
9. Says to the others: “he/she is so stupid, it’s just right for him/her to be harassed”
10. Tells others not to be friends with the victim

The Reinforcer Scale
1. Comes around to see the situation
2. Is usually present, even if not doing anything
3. Giggles
4. Laughs
5. Incites the bully by shouting
6. Says to the bully: “Show him/her!”
7. Says to the others: “Come to see, someone is being harassed there!”

The Assistant Scale
1. Joins in the bullying, when someone else has started it
2. Assists the bully
3. Catches the victim
4. Holds the victim, when he/she is harassed

The Defender Scale
1. Says to the victim: “Don’t care about them”
2. Tells some adult about the bullying
3. Threatens to tell the teacher, if the others don’t stop bullying
4. Tells the others that it doesn’t pay to join in the bullying
5. Says to the others that the bully is stupid
6. Comforts the victim in the bullying situation
7. Attacks the bully in order to defend the victim
8. Takes revenge on the bully for the victim
9. Calls the bullies names in order to defend the victim
10. Tells the others to stop bullying
11. Fetches people to come and help the victim
12. Says to the others that bullying is stupid
13. Tries to make the others stop bullying
14. Tries to arbitrate the differences by talking
15. Comforts the victim afterwards
16. Stays with the victim during the breaks
17. Goes to tell the teacher about the bullying
18. Encourages the victim to tell the teacher about the bullying
19. Is friends with the victim during leisure time
20. Fetches the teacher in charge

The Outsider Scale
1. Isn’t usually present
2. Stays outside the situation
3. Pretends not to notice what is happening
4. Doesn’t do anything
5. Doesn’t even know about the bullying
6. Doesn’t take sides with anyone
7. Goes away from the spot

Two items were dropped from the scales:
1. Stays near and looks
2. Joins in the bullying when the others tell him/her to do so