The Complex Relation Between Bullying, Victimization, Acceptance, and Rejection: Giving Special Attention to Status, Affection, and Sex Differences

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Bullying is a common phenomenon in school classes. In this study, we try to clarify the complex relations of bullying with acceptance and rejection. Because peer processes, especially in childhood and early adolescence, often show gender segmentation, we are interested in whether bullying toward same-gender classmates has the same effect on peer acceptance and rejection as bullying toward other-gender classmates. We argue that besides taking the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies) into account, we should also take the gender of the target (male vs. female victims) and the evaluator (acceptance and rejection by male vs. female classmates) into account to explain the relation between bullying, victimization, and peer status. The following questions will be examined: How are bullying and victimization related to peer status among same-gender and other-gender classmates? Is bullying toward same-gender classmates differently related to status than bullying toward other-gender classmates? And how is this for victimization by same-gender or other-gender classmates? (Lindenberg, 2006). People are aware of aspects in the situation that potentially help or hinder their goal pursuit, and they positively evaluate (like) the former and negatively evaluate (dislike) the latter. Liking and disliking are thus the result of different goal-related processes. This goal-framing approach has recently been applied to questions of acceptance and rejection (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2007), to questions concerning who bullies whom (Veenstra et al., 2007), and to the role of popular adolescents in bullying (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008).

When studying interactions among children, what goals should be considered? Status and affection goals have frequently been identified as important for all human beings (Barkow, 1989; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Huberman, Loch, & Öncüler, 2004; Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Vonkorff, 1997). Although we do not measure these goals directly, we have good evidence for their importance. Pendell (2002) has reviewed much literature that shows affection to be a universal need. The evolutionary and developmental importance of affection has also been shown (MacDonald, 1992). Status has also been established as a universal goal (Barkow, 1989; Huberman et al., 2004), and the importance of this goal for bullying has recently been directly assessed (see Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Both goals are prominent in childhood and preadolescence as well as in adolescence.
them the two goals work differently, although there
are girls. There is no a priori reason to assume that for
boys (liking is not an issue here). For female bullies,
choose those girls as victims who are rejected by
other-gender classmates only. (1b) Bullying other-
gender classmates is related to being rejected by
significant others in the class. Bullies are likely
to divide the classroom into potential sources
of affection (significant others) and potential sources
of domination (victims for whom the significant oth-
ers do not care). For children, the significant others
are likely to be same-gender classmates (Dijkstra
et al., 2007; Maccoby, 1998; Martin & Halverson,
1981). Thus, bullies can also be expected to desire
to be accepted by the significant same-gender class-
mates and not to care much about rejection by the
rest (Olthof & Goossens, 2008).

Bullies thwart the goal pursuit of victims and, on
the basis of goal-framing theory, can be predicted
to be rejected by their victims and by others for
whose goal pursuit they are a potential threat.
From this follows our first set of hypotheses (on
selective threat and rejection). We expect that the
rejection of bullies will only come from the gender
to which the victim belongs: (1a) Bullying same-
gender classmates is related to being rejected by
same-gender classmates only. (1b) Bullying other-
gender classmates is related to being rejected by
other-gender classmates only.

With regard to affection, goal-framing theory
predicts that male bullies are likely to strategically
choose victims who pose a minimal risk for a loss
of affection: those boys who have low acceptance
among boys (i.e., they are not important for affec-
tion) and are rejected by boys. Considering that
children rarely have best friends in the other-gender
group, we argue that for boys it is slightly dif-
ferent to bully girls: Male bullies are likely to
choose those girls as victims who are rejected by
boys (liking is not an issue here). For female bullies,
we expect the converse: Female bullies are likely to
choose those boys as victims who are rejected by
girls. There is no a priori reason to assume that for
them the two goals work differently, although there
will be fewer girls for whom domination is a prom-
inent goal (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004; Han-
ish & Guerra, 2004).

From the foregoing, we can deduce our second set
of hypotheses (on bullying and the avoidance of loss
of affection). We expect that bullies will avoid loss of
affection by choosing victims that are not cared for
by significant others: (2a) If children bully same-gen-
der classmates, they will focus on those potential vic-
tims who are rejected by and have low acceptance
from the bullies’ same-gender classmates. (2b) If chil-
dren bully other-gender classmates, they will focus
on those potential victims who are rejected by the
bullies’ same-gender classmates. (2c) There will be
no negative relation between being a bully and the
level of acceptance from boys and girls (bullies do
not lose affection). If all these hypotheses are sup-
ported by the data, it will be likely that it is indeed
avoidance of loss of affection that drives the results.

Note that the hypotheses contain different
sources of acceptance and rejection. In theory, vic-
tims have low acceptance and are already rejected
before being bullied. Choosing these victims is part
of the bully’s strategy to avoid loss of affection,
in particular from same-gender classmates. Bullies
are rejected if they pose a threat. Given the gender
segmentation of children, they are expected to be
rejected by members of the gender of the victim
and ignored by the rest.

Method

Sample

Network questions on bullying and victimization
were collected in middle and late elementary edu-
cation (Grades 5–8 in the Netherlands). The sample
yielded 481 children from 26 classrooms (23 for reg-
ular and 3 for special education): 218 girls (45.3%)
and 263 boys (54.7%), with a mean age of 10.5 years
(SD = 1.5). The mean class size was 19.4 children
(SD = 4.4). Schools were situated in both rural and
(sub)urban areas. The percentage of children with
parents with a low educational level, at maximum
a certificate of secondary vocational education, was
16.9%. The percentage of children from ethnic
minorities (of whom at least one parent was born
outside the Netherlands) was 18.7%.

Procedure

Data were collected from October 2005 to March
2007. After parental consent was obtained, children
filled out the questionnaires in the school class,
under the supervision of a well-trained research assistant. Ninety-seven percent of all children participated in the study. The dyadic peer-nomination assessment took place at school. The number of nominations the children could make was unlimited (they were not required to nominate anyone), and same-gender as well as other-gender nominations were allowed.

**Measures**

*Peer acceptance and rejection.* The numbers of nominations children received individually from their same- and other-gender classmates with regard to “best friends” and “dislike” were used to create measures of same- and other-gender peer acceptance and peer rejection. After the numbers of received nominations had been summed, proportions were calculated to take differences in the number of respondents per class into account, yielding scores from 0 to 1 (see Veenstra et al., 2007, for more information on this dyadic peer nomination procedure).

*Bullying and victimization.* The term bullying was defined to the students in the way formulated in the Olweus’s (1996) Bully/Victim Questionnaire, which emphasizes the repetitive and intentional nature of bullying and the power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Several examples covering different forms of bullying were given. In addition, examples of behaviors that should not be considered as bullying (teasing in a friendly and playful way, fighting between children of equal strength) were also provided.

The numbers of nominations children received individually from their same- and other-gender classmates with regard to different forms of bullying and victimization were used to create measures of same- and other-gender bullying and victimization. We asked “who do you bully by . . . ?” and “by whom are you bullied by . . . ?” using five forms of bullying and victimization: (a) excluding or ignoring; (b) calling names or laughing; (c) hitting, kicking, or pinching; (d) taking things; (e) throwing things. There were no clear differences in the association of the different forms of bullying and victimization with peer status. For that reason, we combined the different forms in highly reliable scales for bullying and victimization (Cronbach’s alphas = .89 and .87, respectively).

**Analyses**

We tested our hypotheses with multivariate analyses using cross-sectional data. Because both acceptance and rejection deviated from normality, we conducted regression analyses with the Tobit model, which accounts for violations of normality of the dependent variables (Long, 1997; Smith & Brame, 2003; Tobin, 1953). The regression analyses included main effects of gender, bullying toward boys and toward girls, victimization from boys and from girls, and (the significant) interaction effects between gender and either bullying or victimization. The effects for girls are equal to the main effects in Tables 2 and 3, but the effects for boys are the sum of the main and interaction effects (Aiken & West, 1991). All continuous variables were standardized for the whole sample ($M = 0, SD = 1$). Finally, we examined whether the effects differed by age.

**Results**

Table 1 shows that same-gender classmates were more accepted and less rejected than other-gender classmates by both boys and girls. Furthermore,
b as male victims have a low level of acceptance, are rejected by girls, particularly supported by the data: Girls who bully girls bullies are indeed rejected by boys only, \( b = .35, t(480) = 2.78, p < .01 \), and not by girls, \( b = .03, t(480) = 0.30, p = .76 \). If boys bully girls, they are only rejected by girls, \( b = .37, t(480) = 4.10, p < .01 \), and not by boys, \( b = -.03, t(480) = -.33, p = .75 \).

For girls, the selective threat hypotheses are similarly supported by the data: Girls who bully girls are rejected by girls, \( b = .37, t(480) = 4.10, p < .01 \), and girls who bully boys are rejected by boys, \( b = .74, t(480) = 5.10, p < .01 \).

Testing the Avoidance of Loss of Affection Hypotheses

With regard to avoidance of loss of affection for boys, we see from Table 2 that victims of male bullies are indeed rejected by boys only, \( b = .35, t(480) = 6.05, p < .01 \), and victims of female bullies are rejected by girls, \( b = .18, t(480) = 2.92, p < .01 \).

From Table 3, we see that male victims have a low level of acceptance among boys, \( b = -.31, t(480) = -3.91, p < .01 \). Among girls, female as well as male victims have a low level of acceptance, \( b = -.17, t(480) = -2.02, p = .04 \).
rejected by and had low acceptance from same-gender classmates. For potential other-gender victims we hypothesized that children would focus on those who were rejected by the bullies’ same-gender classmates. We found that victims of male bullies were indeed rejected by boys only and that male bullies were never low on acceptance. Thus, as expected, boys seem to choose their victims so as to minimize loss of affection.

Girls victimized by girls were rejected and unacceptable by girls, as goal-framing theory had predicted. However, girls who bullied boys lost acceptance and were more rejected by both genders. We have no way of saying whether this latter finding is specific to the data we used or whether it can be replicated in other studies. Girls do not frequently bully boys, but if they do they might do so because they have lost strategic control through habituation of aggression and the ensuing desensitization to its consequences (Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003). The important point of this article is that for the vast majority of bullies, the pursuit of status and affection seems to foster strategic control of bullying behavior: realize one without losing the other.

There were age differences in the relation of bullying and victimization with peer acceptance by boys. Bullying toward girls was positively related to male acceptance in middle childhood, but negatively in preadolescence. Furthermore, victims of female bullies had low levels of male acceptance in middle childhood, but not in preadolescence. It might be that boys perceive cross-gender bully-victim relationships less negatively when they enter preadolescence because they become more interested in girls and may see this interaction with girls as attention (Adler & Adler, 1998; Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001).

There was one circumstance in which bullying was significantly positively associated with acceptance (cf. Luthar & McMahon, 1996; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Lagerspetz, 2000): Male bullying of same-gender classmates was positively related to female acceptance. Again, at least for some girls, boys might have already become romantically important, with bullying fitting into a prototypical mold of being male. It should be noted, however, that the female acceptance of male-male bullying did not vary by age. Thus, older girls were not more likely to welcome male-male bullying. Yet, with regard to rejection, the selective threat effect could be observed here as well: Male bullying of girls was positively related to female rejection. By distinguishing the targets’ gender, we could make clear that the evaluation of bullying depends on whether the bullying is perceived as a threat. Our findings also show that avoidance of loss of affection depends on the gender of the bully and the target.

In line with Dijkstra et al. (2007), we found that acceptance and rejection are not tied to the same process. For example, male bullying was positively related to peer rejection by the gender to which the victim belonged, but not negatively to peer acceptance. We also found that the explained variance for acceptance (about 20%) was higher than the explained variance for rejection (about 15%). It is likely that this difference is due to the fact that in preadolescence gender plays a larger role in the realization of interaction goals (and thus peer acceptance) than in disturbance or threat of disturbance of goal pursuit (and thus peer rejection). As can be seen from the multivariate analyses, gender is the factor that explains acceptance and rejection the most, but acceptance to a larger extent than rejection. The goal-framing approach also throws light on the question when behavior of the other gender will be met by positive or negative evaluation and when it will be ignored (Dijkstra et al., 2007). It depends on the contribution that a particular reaction from the other gender will make for the realization of affection and status goals.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study had a number of strengths and limitations. One strength is the elaboration of the complex nature of acceptance and rejection related to bullying. Another strength is the inclusion of boys’ and girls’ nominations for peer status, bullying, and victimization, each with dyadic same-gender and other-gender nominations. A strong point is also the relatively large sample. We used a sample of almost 500 children, including a proportional number of boys and girls. In view of this sample size and the use of network questions, the findings can be considered rather robust.

However, it should be taken into account that a cross-sectional correlational design was used. Even though the hypotheses derived from the goal-framing approach were supported by the results, these associations are not determinant. Ultimately, the relation between same-gender and other-gender bullying, victimization, and peer status should be tested with longitudinal data. Bidirectional influences between bullying and peer relations (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) would fit well into the approach taken here. Classmates who are not accepted might
be even less accepted when they are bullied because victimization is likely to lower their status. Being associated with them might lower one's own status and, for this very reason, may make one more vulnerable for becoming a victim oneself (Hodge, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999).

In sum, the complex nature of acceptance and rejection can be traced quite well by hypotheses derived from goal-framing theory and the assumed simultaneous pursuit of status and affection. We found that bullies are not rejected in general, but only by those for whom they are a potential threat. Bullies seem to choose their victims so as to minimize loss of affection. To this end, they are likely to bully victims that are rejected by their same-gender classmates. To understand these processes it is necessary to distinguish the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies), the gender of the target (male vs. female victims), and the gender of the evaluator (male vs. female classmates who accept and reject bullies and victims).

References


