Participant Roles in Bullying: How Can Peer Bystanders Be Utilized in Interventions?

Christina Salmivalli

University of Turku, Finland.

Accepted author version posted online: 31 Jul 2014. Published online: 15 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: Christina Salmivalli (2014) Participant Roles in Bullying: How Can Peer Bystanders Be Utilized in Interventions?, Theory Into Practice, 53:4, 286-292, DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2014.947222

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947222

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
Participant Roles in Bullying: How Can Peer Bystanders Be Utilized in Interventions?

This article provides a view of school bullying as a group phenomenon and practical implications stemming from this approach. The motivation for bullying perpetration often relates to one’s social standing in the group. Peer bystanders are typically present when bullying takes place, often providing the perpetrators with social rewards. The more such rewards (e.g., laughing, cheering) are present and the less the victimized children are supported and defended, the more likely bullying is maintained in a classroom or a peer group. However, bystanders are not necessarily aware of the consequences of their responses when witnessing bullying, and they may not know how to support and defend vulnerable peers.

In interventions aiming to reduce bullying, peer bystanders’ awareness of their own role, their empathy toward victimized youth, as well as their self-efficacy related to defending those youth should be enhanced. Intervention evaluations have shown that changing bystander responses to bullying is a fruitful way to reduce bullying and victimization.

How (and Why) Do Bystanders Reward Bullying?

“IT’S EASY, IT WORKS, AND IT makes me feel good.” The title of an article by Sutton and colleagues (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 2001) captures something essential about the recent view of bullying: It has a function for the perpetrator. Bullying is a highly prevalent phenomenon which often persists over long periods of time, because “it works”; in other words, it helps the perpetrator get something that he or she wants.

To prevent and tackle bullying, one must understand what a child or an adolescent acquires, or attempts to acquire, by bullying others. Although the perpetrators of bullying are not all the same (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010), for many of them bullying seems to be motivated by
the pursuit of visibility, power, and a high status in the peer group (Houghton, Nathan, & Taylor, 2012; Salmivalli, 2010; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009; Veenstra et al., 2007). For that reason, bullies need bystanders, or spectators. They do not want to attack their target in a situation where there are no witnesses around. Rather, they choose a time and place where other peers (but no adults) are present: in its very core, bullying is about public abuse and ridicule of another person. Observational studies in school playgrounds confirm that this is the case: in most bullying situations, there is a group of peers present (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001).

Rather than intervening on behalf of the victimized peer, many bystanders reinforce the bully’s behaviors by verbal or nonverbal cues that are socially rewarding as they signal that bullying is acceptable, or even funny and entertaining (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). For instance, bystanders may be laughing or cheering when the bullying is taking place. Making others laugh is already rewarding for the child doing the bullying, and such a response from peers is likely to prolong the bullying episode. Other bystanders are even more active and assist the bully by catching the targeted child, or by preventing him or her from escaping during episodes of physical aggression or other types of humiliation. Other peers may just silently witness what is happening, without acknowledging that the bully might interpret such behavior as an approval of his or her mean acts. Luckily, some children support the victim or try to make others stop bullying. Within the research line that started in the 1990s, the different ways of responding while witnessing bullying have been labelled participant roles: reinforcer (of the bully), assistant (of the bully), outsider, and defender (of the victim; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Later on, outsiders have also been called silent approvers of bullying; this captures better the idea that they are not completely noninvolved either but might, through their inaction, be involved in maintaining bullying.

How come bystanders reward bullying, even if antibullying attitudes are common among school-aged children and youth (e.g., Rigby & Slee, 1991; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004)—why aren’t such attitudes expressed in public? First, although it might be difficult (or unpleasant) to believe, youth who bully others are often perceived as popular by their classmates, especially during adolescence (e.g., Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Peeters et al., 2010). Longitudinally, youth who engage in aggressive behavior become increasingly popular over time (Cillessen & Borch, 2006). In a study by Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster (2003), bullies were perceived as cool and those who continued their bullying behavior from fall to spring even became more cool over the course of the school year. That is probably one reason why bystanders are not eager to intervene on behalf of the victim: They may be worried about their own status in the group, or about the possibility of ending up the next victims themselves.

The second mechanism that prevents people from expressing antibullying attitudes in public has been referred to as “pluralistic ignorance” (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008, pp. 233–234). When no one challenges the behavior of the bullies, students come to (falsely) perceive each other as approving of it. As a consequence, each individual member of the group might believe that “although I don’t personally like bullying, everyone else seems to think it is okay.” Such a misperception of peer group norms further prevents students from intervening.

Finally, the perpetrators of bullying are typically selective in their aggression. By choosing targets who are submissive and insecure (Schwartz et al., 1998), or in a low-power position in the group (e.g., Hodges & Perry, 1999; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005), bullies can maximize the social rewards they gain from peers while minimizing their loss of affection (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munnikema, & Dijkstra, 2010). If they targeted peers who had many friends, or who were highly liked by classmates at large, students doing the bullying would be more likely to be confronted or rejected by these friends, or by classmates in general.
To sum up, bullies desire to be visible, powerful, and popular. Unfortunately, research demonstrates that it is possible for them to reach such goals by bullying others. The peer group rewards the perpetrators of bullying in at least two ways: by expressing approval (or by not expressing disapproval) during actual bullying situations, and by providing the perpetrators with the position of power and status in the long run.

**Bystanders Matter**

How bystanders behave when witnessing bullying is important from the perspective of the individual children targeted by bullying, but also from the perspective of the whole bullying dynamics of the classroom.

Research has demonstrated that the victims who have classmates supporting and defending them are better off than victims without defenders. The defended victims are less depressed and anxious, they have a higher self-esteem, and they are less rejected by peers than victims without defenders, even when the frequency of their victimization experiences is taken into account (in other words, their better adjustment is not only a result of the fact that they are bullied to a lesser extent; Sainio, Veenstra, Huizing, & Salmivalli, 2011). Furthermore, interviews of adults who used to be bullied during their school days (Teräsaaho, 1997) have revealed that the most traumatic memories related to past bullying are often related to the feeling that no one cared, rather than to the attacks of the perpetrators as such. Thus, even one bystander taking sides with the victimized child or expressing support to him or her can make a difference.

How bystanders respond when witnessing bullying also influences the extent to which bullying behavior takes place in a given classroom. Classrooms vary in how much and how often bullying is taking place; about 7% of total variation in bullying behavior is due to differences between different classrooms (the rest being due to individual differences; see Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Although the percentage may seem relatively low, it means that there are some characteristics of the classroom context (in addition to characteristics of individual children) that explain why there is more bullying in some classrooms than in others. The classroom differences can be partly explained by the degree to which classmates tend to reinforce bullying versus support and defend victimized peers (Nocentini, Menesini, & Salmivalli, 2013; Salmivalli et al., 2011). More specifically, the more classmates tend to reinforce bullies’ behavior and the less they provide support to the victims, the more often bullying is likely to take place in a classroom. Furthermore, some well-known individual risk factors for victimization, such as social anxiety, are more likely to lead to victimization in some classrooms than in others: again, this depends on whether it is common among classmates to reinforce the bullies or support the victimized peers (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). Even vulnerable at-risk children do not necessarily end up as victimized, if the classroom context does not support such behavior.

The important role of teachers in creating an environment that does not support bullying should be noted. Teachers’ efforts to intervene in bullying, or lack of such efforts, may affect classroom norms regarding bullying and related behaviors. Students who perceive their teacher as clearly disapproving of bullying are less likely to engage in it (Saarento, Kärnä, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013). Also, it has been found that positive and supportive student–teacher relationships increase students’ willingness to report bullying (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010).

**Implications for Interventions**

**Targeting the Group: Why and How?**

Children and adolescents facing bullying problems as bystanders are in a controversial situation. On one hand, they understand that bullying is wrong and they would like to do something to stop it—on the other hand, they strive to secure their own status and safety in the peer group. However, if fewer children took on
the role of reinforcer or assistant when witnessing bullying, and if the group refused to assign high status for those who bully, important rewards for bullying would be lost. Although peers are often part of the bullying problem, they can also be part of the solution. Therefore, the success of bullying prevention/intervention efforts often depends on how well peer bystanders are utilized in such efforts.

Bystanders are likely to be easier to influence than the active, initiative-taking bullies. The bystanders often think that bullying is wrong; they feel bad for the victim, and they would like to do something to help. Converting their already existing attitudes into behavior is a challenging task, but it might nevertheless be a more realistic goal than influencing an individual bully by adult sanctions or rewards only.

Even if the change in bystanders’ behavior would not lead (at least immediately) to changes in the bully’s behavior, it is very likely to make a difference in the victim’s situation. Mobilizing the peer group to support the victim is crucial in minimizing the adverse effects for those who are victimized. Victimization is an attack on the victim’s status, but also on his or her need to belong (Hawker & Boulton, 2001), and often a successful one. Having protective friendships or supporters in the classroom has been shown to buffer against further victimization, as well as the negative influences of victimization (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Sainio et al., 2011).

Raising children’s awareness of the role bystanders have in the bullying process is important. Many children and youth may think that as long as they do not participate in bullying behavior as perpetrators, they do not have anything to do with the problem. Introducing the different participant roles to children and having them reflect on their own typical behavior when witnessing bullying may already be helpful (“I don’t really approve of bullying and I would like it to stop, but admittedly, I often laugh when Lisa is making fun of Mary”). Students may even be provided feedback about their typical participant roles, as observed by the teacher or by classmates. Students can discuss together and brainstorm ways in which they might change their responses to bullying into more constructive ones.

Enhancing children’s empathic understanding of the victims’ situation can strengthen their motivation to stand up for victimized peers. Short films of former victims telling how bullying has influenced their schooldays, but also their lives later on, can be helpful. Also learning-by-doing exercises where children have a chance to understand the feelings resulting from victimization from the target’s standpoint provide them insight into the negative feelings associated with such a plight. Role-play can also be used to explore the feelings associated with other participant roles. How does it feel to witness bullying without doing anything on behalf of the victim? Why is it difficult to show disapproval of bullying or take sides with the vulnerable peers?

Students should be provided with safe strategies to support the victim. This does not necessarily mean heroic acts such as intervening in the bully’s behavior directly, but more subtle ways in which the victimized peer can be made feel included and supported. Also, when children decide to express their disapproval of bullying together as a group, they are likely to be safe—and much more influential. After identifying strategies of countering bullying as an individual and as a group, these strategies can be rehearsed in exercises done together in classrooms, or in smaller groups. When the reward structure of the classroom changes, supporting and defending the victim can actually become reinforced and rewarded.

Because of the group mechanisms involved in bullying, the teacher is usually the key person in delivering the preventive interventions described. This is not to say that parents are unimportant; however, the whole group (such as the students in a classroom, smaller peer networks within classrooms) is present at school together as a group, and the teacher has the possibility to interact with this group, whereas the parents typically know—and interact with—their own child and perhaps some closest friends of their child. The school is, therefore, a unique place to work with the group and to influence its norms.
Focusing on bystanders in bullying prevention/intervention work does not mean that individual bullies should not be targeted at all. When bullying comes to the attention of adults, the particular case should be handled, not together in the classroom but by private, firm discussions with the individuals involved. Even in such cases, however, other peers (e.g., some prosocial classmates of the targeted child) can be met separately and encouraged to think of ways in which they could support the victimized peer who is having a difficult time.

Can Bystanders Be Influenced by Interventions?

The important role of bystanders in the bullying process and, consequently, the potential reductions in bullying that could be achieved by influencing this group of children is not a new idea; it has been discussed in the literature for about 2 decades. It is more rare, however, to find research where the idea has been put into an empirical test, examining whether it is possible to influence bystander behaviors by school-based interventions (usually delivered by teachers), and whether changes in bystander responses actually lead to reductions in bullying.

Polanin, Espelage, and Pigott (2012) identified 12 studies evaluating the effects of school-based programs that focused on increasing bystander intervention (e.g., Creating a Peaceful School Learning Environment, Expect Respect, Kiusaamista Vastaan [Against Bullying; KiVa] antibullying program, Steps to Respect). According to their meta-analysis, the programs had (on average) statistically significant effects on bystander behaviors (intervening on behalf of the victim), suggesting that it is, indeed, possible to change peer responses to bullying. There was variation between different programs, however, and looking at their effects individually reveals that six out of the 12 programs yielded significant changes in the desired direction, that is, leading to more bystander intervention. In most cases, the effects were in the expected direction, even if not significant.

Only one intervention study (Saarento, Boulton, & Salmivalli, 2014) has tested whether changes in bystander behaviors, in turn, lead to reduced levels of bullying. The study was done in the context of evaluating the effects of the KiVa antibullying program (www.kivaprogram.net; Salmivalli, Poskiparta, Ahtola, & Haataja, 2013) which is strongly built on the participant role approach to bullying. The universal and indicated actions included in the KiVa program (three different curricula of student lessons, online antibullying games, school-based KiVa teams tackling the cases of bullying coming to attention together with classroom teachers) are based on the principles of raising awareness and empathy, and providing safe strategies to intervene on behalf of the victimized peers rather than rewarding the bullies.

It was found by Saarento and colleagues (2014) that one mechanism through which KiVa reduced bullying perpetration was by changing students’ perceptions of how their classmates responded to bullying as bystanders. In other words, the KiVa program led individual children to see more defending of victimized students in their classroom environment, which in turn reduced their own engagement in bullying perpetration. Even though other mechanisms of KiVa effects (e.g., changes in students’ attitudes, as well as their perceptions of teachers) were found as well, especially the results concerning how perceptions of the peers’ reactions influenced bullying perpetration lends support to the view that bystanders are important for either maintaining bullying or stopping it, and they should be utilized in interventions.

References


