

**University of Southampton**  
**Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology**

**Title:** To what extent can bullies be seen as the victims of bystanders?

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### **Abstract**

Bullying is defined as any repeated behaviour designed to cause harm to someone not readily able to defend themselves. Due to the severe consequences of bullying for the victim, it is understandable that bullies have been cast as sole antagonists in the bullying dynamic, victimising the vulnerable and intimidating bystanders into complicit inaction. This essay challenges this view, arguing that bullying behaviour can be viewed as the misguided effort of a rejected group to be more accepted by their peers through the public derogation of other rejected groups. The essay goes on to argue that this reinterpretation of the role of the bully necessitates a reinterpretation of the role of the bystander. Bystanders have been viewed as intimidated into frequent inaction during bullying episodes. This essay argues that bystander inaction can be equally viewed as a form of social rejection of the bully, with bystanders distancing themselves from their counter-normative behaviour. Thus bullies can be seen as the victims of bystander inaction, caught in a vicious cycle where bullying becomes both the cause of and the only perceived solution to social exclusion and rejection. Implications of this reinterpretation of the roles of bullies and bystanders for anti-bullying interventions are discussed.

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Bullying is described as a repeated behaviour that causes harm to any individual not readily able to defend themselves (Olweus, 1999). Bullying can be either be physically or relationally aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Though many children disagree that social exclusion is a form of bullying (Smith et al., 2002), it is often considered so in research (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992).

Bullying is an important phenomenon; it is widespread (Chamberlain, George, Golden, Walker, & Benton, 2010) and occurs frequently (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). It causes long-term harm to victims emotionally (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010), in terms of their learning (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005), and in terms of their school attendance and participation (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

As bullying is such an important phenomenon it has been the subject of widespread research (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Much of this has cast bullies as malevolent forces in the classroom (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002), suggesting that, as sole perpetrators in bullying situations, they both victimise vulnerable children (Hawker & Boulton, 2000) and intimidate bystanders into complicit silence (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006).

This essay will challenge the traditional view of the bully as the sole antagonist in bullying situations. Though research has suggested that individuals bully in order to maintain social status, power and dominance over others (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001), contradictory research suggests that bullies are members of rejected groups in a similar way to their victims (Warden & Mackinnon, 2003). Members of rejected groups can publicly derogate other rejected groups in order to gain greater acceptance from more powerful majorities (Tajfel, 2010). Thus this essay will suggest that individuals' motivation for bullying may be less to do with power and dominance and more to do with belonging, as bullying other rejected

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groups may be one of the only ways in which bullies can hope to gain a greater acceptance from their peers (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004).

This essay will go on to argue that the reinterpretation of the role of bullies in the bullying dynamic necessitates a reinterpretation of the role of the bystander. Bystanders are present during most bullying episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998) yet most of the time they do nothing to intervene (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Past research has considered bystanders to be intimidated into inaction by bullies (Kanetsuna, et al., 2006). However, research shows that groups with anti-bullying norms distance themselves from bullies because their bullying behaviour is counter-normative (Jones, Haslam, York, & Ryan, 2008). Groups can go so far as to exclude counter-normative group members (Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007) in order to preserve their self-esteem and moral identity (Tajfel, 2010) which can be threatened by such deviant behaviour (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003). Thus bystander groups with anti-bullying attitudes may choose not to get involved in bullying situations in order to distance themselves from the bullying individual, thereby protecting their self-esteem and moral identity. Bystander inaction can thus be seen as a form of social exclusion. This essay will conclude that the bullying behaviour of bullies and their social exclusion by bystanders can be seen as a self-perpetuating dynamic. Bullying, though misguided, can be seen as an attempt to belong whilst the inaction of bystanders prevents them from doing so. Thus bullies are caught in a vicious cycle where bullying becomes both the cause of, and one of the only perceived solutions to, social exclusion.

The reinterpretation of the roles of bullies and bystanders in bullying dynamics has significant implications for educational practice. It might be advisable to intervene in bullying dynamics by encouraging bystander groups to accept bullies as a part of their community, by encouraging bullies to engage in more normative, pro-social behaviour, or, in

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situations where bullying is reinforced by bystanders, working to change the norms of bystander groups through pro-social modelling and education.

Olweus (1999) classes a behaviour to be bullying if it intentionally causes harm, is carried out repeatedly over time, and occurs in an interpersonal relationship where there is an imbalance of power. Bullying can either be direct or indirect (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Direct forms of bullying include physical hitting or kicking as well as overly aggressive teasing and physical tormenting (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Indirect forms of bullying, sometimes termed relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), are much more insidious. Relational aggression, performed more often by girls than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), involves the manipulation of relationships in order to reduce the social status of the target; this can include gossiping, the spreading of rumours and becoming the friend of an enemy of the target (Björkqvist, et al., 1992; Rappaport & Thomas, 2004). Relational aggression also includes deliberately excluding an individual from a group (Björkqvist, et al., 1992). However, this view is not shared by all young people. In showing depicted stick-figure relationships to 14 year-olds, Smith, et al. (2002) discovered that only 62% agreed that social exclusion was a form of bullying. In an earlier UK study, Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker (1999) measured the attitudes of 13-15 year-old secondary school children and found, similarly, that only 60% agreed that social exclusion was a form of bullying.

Bullying is a widespread and frequently occurring phenomenon. A recent survey of 250,000 children commissioned by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) found that just under half of 6-10 year-olds in the UK have been bullied at school (Chamberlain, et al. 2010). The same study found that for 40% of these children bullying was at least a weekly occurrence. In a similar survey of 2,300 children in the UK, Smith and Shu (2000) found that around 12% of children suffered bullying on a regular basis; for 22%

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of these children, the bullying lasted for over a year. Given that only around 60% of children agree that social exclusion is a form of bullying (Boulton, et al., 1999; Smith, et al., 2002), the actual prevalence of bullying in UK schools might be much higher than estimated. Atlas and Pepler (1998) video-recorded 28 hours of footage in a public school in Toronto and identified that bullying episodes occurred in the classroom at a rate of once every 30 minutes. In a similar study of 185 school children, Craig, Pepler, & Atlas (2000) observed bullying to occur an average of once every 13 minutes in the playground.

Given that bullying is both a frequently occurring and widespread phenomenon it is understandable that its consequences have received a lot of attention in research. One study, conducted by Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham (2000), investigated the relationship between bullying and measures of psychological adjustment including self-worth, loneliness and depressive symptoms. Juvonen, et al. found that if children were victimised they were likely to have poorer psychological adjustment scores than their non-victim peers. Being bullied has also been linked to physical symptoms such as headaches and may increase the risk of individuals becoming physically unwell (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005). It has also been shown to contribute independently to children's long-term mental health problems (Arseneault, et al., 2010). Victimisation has been shown to hinder children's learning, predicting poor academic performance both immediately and up to a year later (Juvonen, et al., 2000; Schwartz, et al., 2005). Victimised children's academic outcomes have also been found to be further hampered by an associated reduction in classroom participation and school attendance (Buhs, et al., 2006).

Given the severe consequences of bullying for victims, it is understandable that explanations of the phenomenon have, at times, cast the bully as a malevolent character, motivated by power and dominance over their peers (Pellegrini and Bartini, 2001). Pellegrini

and Bartini (2001) considered bullying to be an aggressive act aimed at securing social status through the dominance of other children. They stated that the purpose of such dominance was to gain greater access to resources, in the form of toys at a very young age, and in the form of sexual relationships for young adults. Pellegrini and Long (2002) provided evidence for this theory through a longitudinal study demonstrating increases in bullying immediately following transition between schools. Pellegrini and Long considered that these temporary increases were evidence of bullies meeting their need to secure power and dominance in new social groups.

However, in 2003, Warden and Mackinnon conducted a study of 131 children in the West of Scotland, measuring both their social preference (likeability) and social impact (visibility). Warden and Mackinnon found that whilst prosocial children were more likely to be *popular* (high likeability and visibility), bullies were more likely to have a *rejected* status (low likeability and high visibility). Boulton and Smith (1994) investigated peer nominations of 158 children and found that sociometrically rejected children received more bully and victim nominations than other groups. Boulton and Smith also found that bullies were more likely to belong to a rejected group than their peers. Similarly, Cerezo and Ato (2005) found sociometric rejection to be associated with bullies and social acceptance to be associated with children who were not involved in bullying. Thus, rather than having a social standing obtained through dominance of their peers, bullies often belong to an equally rejected group to that of their victims (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004).

Given that many bullies have a socially rejected status, questions are raised about an alternative function of bullying for these individuals. Ojala and Nesdale (2004) stated that rejected groups have the greatest need to enhance their group's status. In 1978 (reprinted in 2010), Tajfel described how minority group members can often find themselves on the

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periphery of a more powerful majority. In these situations group members can attempt to gain acceptance of the majority by publicly derogating another inferior minority. This theory has been applied to groups in school, where members of rejected groups can publicly derogate other groups in order to become more accepted by their peers (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995). This theory can be extended to explain the behaviour of some bullies, for whom perhaps bullying is one of the only ways in which they can hope to gain greater acceptance by the wider majority (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). Thus bullies, rather than being motivated to maintain social status or power, can be seen to be motivated to belong, with the act of bullying being a means by which this rejected group can gain greater acceptance by their peers.

Indeed, the peers of bullies are often watching during bullying episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig, et al., 2000). In their video recordings of 60 bullying episodes, Atlas and Pepler (1998) found peers to be present in the camera frame of 51 of these episodes. Research from Craig, et al. (2000) found, similarly, that peers were involved in approximately 80% of bullying episodes. The peers present during bullying episodes are often referred to as bystanders (Atlas and Pepler, 1998; Craig, et al., 2000).

Unfortunately for bullies, bystanders often have anti-bullying attitudes. Boulton, et al. (1999) measured attitudes towards bullying in 13-15 year-old young people, and found that participants generally held anti-bullying attitudes. This finding is supported by other research (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Bystanders also are aware of and endorse various strategies they might use to intervene in bullying situations such as taking direct action, supporting the victim, and seeking help from friends or teachers (Kanetsuna, et al., 2006).

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Most of the time, however, bystanders do nothing to intervene in bullying situations. Atlas and Pepler (1998) analysed 60 video-recorded episodes of bullying and found that, though peers were present in 50 of these situations, they intervened in only six. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Österman (1996) investigated the roles taken by Finnish children in relation to bullying and reported that bystanders can take one of a multitude of roles during a bullying episode. These roles included victim, bully, reinforcer of the bully, assistant to the bully, or defender of the victim. However, the role taken up most often was found to be that of the *outsider*, a role involving remaining outside of the conflict and observing without intervention. This finding was replicated in a two-year follow-up by Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz (1998), who found that children took up these roles, including that of the outsider, moderately consistently over time. From observations in Canadian schools, O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) found an average of 4.2 peers present during bullying episodes and that the majority of the time (54%) these peers just watched the episode take place. Further research by Whitney and Smith (1993) found that 56% of 6,758 surveyed English students reported keeping out of bullying episodes completely, despite wanting to intervene.

The inaction of bystanders is a paradox described well by Salmivalli (1999), who highlighted that most students act in ways which are likely to maintain bullying rather than discourage it, despite having attitudes that should enable them to intervene. Pellegrini and Long (2002) stated that bullies were motivated to dominate their peers by a need to maintain their social status and access to resources. Pellegrini and Long considered the role of the bystander, therefore, to be to provide an audience for their display of power and dominance. Kanetsuna, et al. explained that bystanders were intimidated by bullies and failed to intervene in bullying situations because they were fearful of either being attacked themselves or of

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becoming a future target for the bully (Kanetsuna, et al., 2006). However, given that recent research suggests that bullies are members of rejected groups, whose bullying behaviour might also be described as an attempt to gain acceptance from their peer group, there might also be an alternative explanation for the inaction of bystanders.

In 2004, Ojala and Nesdale conducted a study of 120 Australian elementary school children. These children were given a booklet by researchers containing a story about two boys, one belonging to a popular group and the other belonging to an unpopular group. In the story the popular boy, belonging to a group that had either bullying or anti-bullying norms, responded to a behaviour of the unpopular boy in either a bullying or supportive way. Ojala and Nesdale found that children considered the popular boy's group to be more likely to reject him if he acted outside of that group's norms. Ojala and Nesdale were able to conclude that children perceived that bullies were more likely than other children to be rejected from an anti-bullying group. This finding was supported by the work of Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, and Ferrell (2007), who described the more negative judgements of deviant, as opposed to normative, group behaviour as *differential evaluation*, and the resulting exclusion of deviant group members as *differential exclusion*. Abrams, et al. considered differential exclusion to be a form of social exclusion as children expressed a preference for one peer group member over another.

The large majority of bystanders in bullying situations have anti-bullying attitudes (Boulton, et al., 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Whitney & Smith, 1993). As such it is conceivable that these groups would consider bullying to be a deviant behaviour. All groups desire to protect their self-definition and self-esteem (Tajfel, 2010). Eidelman and Biernat (2003) demonstrated that groups associating with individuals behaving in a deviant way are at risk of being miscast themselves. Thus some groups may choose to protect their identity

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and self-esteem via differential exclusion by excluding from the in-group those who behave counter-normatively (Eidelman and Biernat, 2003). If, by bullying, individuals are behaving in a way that is considered deviant to bystander groups, then bystanders may be compelled to socially exclude them. In this way they can distance themselves from the bully and their bullying behaviour in order to preserve their groups' self-esteem and moral identity. Social exclusion is a form of relational aggression which rejected group members, such as that of the bully, have been shown to be most vulnerable to (Adler & Adler, 1995). Indeed during bullying episodes bystanders usually just stand and watch (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; O'Connell, et al., 1999; Salmivalli, et al., 1996; Salmivalli, et al., 1998). Thus the frequent inaction of bystanders could be seen as a means of social exclusion, a way in which bystanders can distance themselves from the bully and their actions (Jones, et al., 2008) in order to maintain their self-esteem and identity as an anti-bullying group.

Previous theorists considered the passivity of bystanders to be passively reinforcing of bullying behaviour (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009) by being interpreted by bullies as a form of approval (Sutton & Smith, 1999). Yet if bystanders can be seen to be socially excluding bullies through their inaction in response to bullying behaviour, then this may be more actively reinforcing than previously thought. Bullies, as a rejected group of individuals, can be seen to publicly derogate other rejected groups as a way of gaining acceptance from the wider majority of their peers. The response of the majority, represented by the inaction of bystanders in bullying situations, is to distance themselves from the bully and their behaviour. Thus the bully is pushed further into the periphery of group membership, with bullying being one of their only available means to gain further acceptance. In this way bullies can be seen as the victims of bystander inaction, caught in a vicious cycle where

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bullying becomes both the cause of and the only perceived solution to social exclusion and rejection.

There are severe consequences to social exclusion. In 2006, van Beest and Williams conducted an experiment with university students in order to better understand some of these consequences. Van Beest and Williams used a three-player internet game called Cyberball to experimentally manipulate ostracism as a variable. In this game players tossed a ball to each other 30 times; however, in the ostracism condition the participant received only two tosses at the beginning of the game and then never received a toss again for the game's duration. Van Beest and Williams manipulated the financial reward for participation such that players lost money for being the recipient of a toss; in this way experimenters could make ostracism more financially rewarding than inclusion. Van Beest and Williams found that, after playing the game, ostracised individuals had a lower mood than more included individuals, even when ostracism had been more financially rewarding than inclusion. Van Beest and Williams considered the risk of social exclusion to be a powerful motivator, one which overrode the rational cost-benefit evaluations of situations. MacDonald and Leary (2005) stated that human ancestors depended on each other for survival and that social exclusion, to them, was life threatening. As such they claimed that social exclusion tapped into an evolutionarily old part of the brain and was felt much like physical pain. In this way it is understandable that long-term social exclusion creates similar problems to chronic pain (Glombiewski, Hartwich-Tersek, & Rief, 2010) including depression and helplessness (Williams, 2007).

Van Beest and Williams (2006) also created an experience that served as a proxy to bullying. Whilst playing Cyberball, participants were tossed to by other players deliberately repeatedly to their financial detriment. Van Beest and Williams found that their participants' experience of ostracism was felt to be worse than their experience of bullying. Though van

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Beest and Williams' operationalization of bullying was a poor proxy to the experience of chronically bullied children, their conclusion is supported by other writers in the field (Williams and Nida, 2009). Indeed Williams and Nida (2009) consider that ostracism, such as that experienced by bullies, may actually be worse than the bullying received by their victims. Williams and Nida state that bullying, though it has significant consequences for the bullied individual, demonstrates to the target that they have been noticed and that they are important enough for someone to take the time and energy to repeatedly torment. For bullies, however, the experience of ostracism may be worse in that there is an associated message that they do not matter (Williams and Nida, 2009).

Bullies are not always socially excluded, however, as bystander inaction is but one of many possible reactions to bullying situations. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Österman (1996) found that children, in addition to being an outsider in bullying situations, could either support or assist the bully or defend the victim. Duffy and Nesdale (2009) state that in groups with bullying as a normative behaviour, prototypical members would be expected to engage in higher levels of bullying. In situations where there are bystander groups with pro-bullying norms, bullying may be a successful strategy in gaining acceptance by that group. Acceptance from a group may be indicated by support of the individual's bullying. Indeed Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) found in a study of 1220 elementary school children that bystanders were more likely to engage in assisting or reinforcing bullies if they have pro-bullying attitudes. Equally, Salmivalli and Voeten found that bystanders were more likely to defend victims if they had anti-bullying attitudes or a moral disapproval of bullying.

Encouraging bystanders to intervene in bullying situations should be the focus of anti-bullying interventions (Ahmed, 2008). Given the possibility that bullies are compelled to bully in an effort to gain a greater sense of belonging and acceptance from their peers,

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encouraging a sense of belonging in bullies to the wider school community might help to meet their need for acceptance without the use of bullying. Because bullies are rejected group members bystanders can choose not to intervene in bullying episodes in order to distance themselves from the bully and their deviant behaviour. As such helping bullies' peers to accept the bully as a part of their group might encourage them to intervene to change the deviant behaviour of the bully rather than to reject them as a result of it.

There are times, however, where bullying is actively reinforced by bystanders (Salmivalli, et al., 1996). In these situations bullying behaviour may not be seen as counter-normative by the bystander group, who are likely to have pro-bullying attitudes (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). Twemlow, Fonagy, and Sacco (2010) stated that in order to successfully intervene in bullying situations, the *bystander architecture* must be attended to. Indeed in situations where bullying is held as normative behaviour by the bystander community, encouraging a change in norms through education and modelling might be an effective way to intervene. However, bystander groups will need to be supported to maintain a sense of bullies as a part of their community such that they will intervene to change bullying behaviour as it becomes counter-normative. If this does not happen, bullies may begin to be socially excluded and rejected by their peers, and may subsequently increase their bullying behaviour in an attempt to be more accepted.

The problem for bullies is that their behaviour is counter-normative to their peers. Thus if bullies are encouraged to engage in more pro-social behaviour, considered normative to their peers, the resulting acceptance from peers might be reinforcing. In this way a more positive cycle may be possible, whereby pro-social behaviour could lead rejected individuals to be more accepted by peer groups, which, in turn would increase the likelihood of further normative behaviour.

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Bullies can be seen to derogate their victims in an attempt to gain greater acceptance by their peers. Unfortunately for bullies, their peers often have anti-bullying attitudes (Boulton, et al., 1999) and are therefore likely to consider bullying to be a deviant behaviour. As a result, though bullying is a means by which rejected groups might hope to gain a sense of belonging or acceptance, it is also the reason that they remain socially excluded and rejected. This vicious cycle causes a great deal of harm to the victims of bullies, who seem to serve as an unending natural resource necessary for this cycle to continue revolving. The key to preventing this vicious cycle continuing may actually be to encourage bystanders to accept bullies as a part of their community and intervene when those members behave in a bullying and counter-normative way.

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