



Brief note: Applying developmental intergroup perspectives to the social ecologies of bullying: Lessons from developmental social psychology[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, the field of bullying research has seen dramatic growth, notably with the integration of the social-ecological approach to understanding bullying. Recently, researchers (Hymel et al., 2015; Hawley & Williford, 2015) have called for further extension of the field by incorporating constructs of group processes into our investigation of the social ecologies of bullying. This brief note details the critical connections between power, social identity, group norms, social and moral reasoning about discrimination and victimization, and experiences of, evaluations of, and responses to bullying. The authors highlight a parallel development in the bridging of developmental social-ecological and social psychological perspectives utilized in the field of social exclusion that provides a roadmap for extending the larger field of bullying research.

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Researchers have argued that efforts to understand and thus prevent bullying may be improved by the integration of developmental and social psychological principles (Hawley & Williford, 2015; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka, & Trach, 2015). The field, however, has yet to fully integrate social psychological constructs into the developmental study of bullying (Hawley & Williford, 2015; Hymel et al., 2015), despite the common thread of examining behaviors within their social ecologies. In this brief, we highlight the developmental intergroup framework (DIF; see Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010) as an established approach that bridges developmental and social psychological theories. DIF has examined social psychological constructs fundamental to youth bullying and victimization,¹ accounting for the broader developmental intergroup context. First, we summarize the call to integrate social psychology and bullying research, and identify social psychological constructs relevant to understanding bullying. Next, we define and present findings on key social psychological constructs from the DIF. Finally, we offer recommendations for the study, prevention, and intervention of bullying.

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¹ In line with previous work, the term victimization (and its variants) is used to represent broadly the “experience of being bullied,” (p. 38, Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005), whether physically or relationally. For brevity, we also use “victimization” when referencing a body of work including studies of both physical and relational bullying.

1. Integrating developmental and social psychological perspectives

Bullying has been defined as “aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance” (p. 328, Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014), often conceptualized as occurring repeatedly (Olweus, 1993). Early developmental studies on bullying focused on personal characteristics of individuals who bully and/or are victimized (e.g., intent attributions; arousal regulation, Dodge & Crick, 1990); and later, interpersonal dynamics between the two parties. Scholars then established bullying as a group-based phenomena (e.g., Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), and many recognized that related social psychological group processes (e.g., power, identity, norms) were at work in proximal peer and school contexts (e.g., Veenstra, Verlinden, Huitsing, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2013). As developmental researchers shifted their attention to the critical influence of bullying social ecologies (see Espelage & Swearer, 2010), they emphasized proximal social ecologies (e.g., peers, schools) as the most impactful on bullying behaviors (Rodkin, 2004).

Parallel to this work, social psychologists have examined constructs key to social interactions (e.g., social identity, group norms, power), that are also foundational to the social-ecological structure of bullying. In a call to apply social psychological theory to bullying research, Hymel et al. (2015) argued that social identity or group identification often results in one's acceptance and maintenance of prevailing group norms. If a child's peer group promotes bullying or victim-blaming, the child will more readily endorse these acts to preserve the group as a whole and their position in the group. Furthermore, Hawley and Williford (2015) argued that to decrease bullying, interventions must go beyond skill building and behavioral control, and address youth's perceived attitudes and norms toward behaviors. The emphasis remained on proximal groups, however.

Research guided by DIF has integrated social identity, group norms, and macro-level power/status into the study of intergroup social exclusion (SE), and, although developed largely in isolation of the mainstream bullying literature, there are clear connections between the two bodies of work. The DIF merged developmental and social psychological theories in studying intergroup relations beyond proximal peer ecologies. SE, when meeting the criteria of bullying (i.e., goal-directed, intended harm, repetition), is a form of indirect relational bullying that targets a lower power/status victim's social standing and relationships (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Predominantly, however, DIF research on intergroup SE has examined one-time instances of social exclusion (an exception Brenick, Margie, Lawrence, & Veres, 2016); considered not just explicit, but also implicit intended harm by the excluder; and explored group-level power/status differentials that are rooted in macro-level social hierarchies. The relevance of this work to the bullying literature is clear when one considers that acts of interpersonal exclusion across social groups are often perceived as holding discriminatory intent—even if implicitly (Brenick, Titzmann, Michel, & Silbereisen, 2012), and perceptions of either explicit or implicit discrimination yield significant negative consequences (Major, Mendes, & Dovidio, 2013).

2. Developmental intergroup framework

The DIF (see Killen et al., 2013) offers a theoretical and empirical approach that accounts for the developmental implications of social psychological constructs in contexts such as intergroup bullying and victimization. The DIF has already bridged established social, developmental, and cognitive theories (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Social Identity Development Theory, Nesdale, 2004; Subjective Group Dynamics, Abrams & Rutland, 2011; Social Domain Model, Turiel, 1983), yielding a developmentally driven reconceptualization of some key social psychological theories and constructs such as power, social identity, group norms, and social and moral evaluations of discriminatory victimization.

2.1. Power

All forms of bullying involve the intentional abuse of power/status and target individuals of lower status who differ from the majority (Olweus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014). Power differentials in the bullying literature are often viewed in terms of individual traits such as strength and popularity (Espelage, 2015; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2015)—though the latter has been considered at the group level as it falls within the context of the proximal peer ecology (Rodkin, 2004). However, the DIF literature demonstrates that asymmetry of power is often based in larger macro-level group-based status hierarchies. Social minorities who, as a group, are culturally, ethnically, and/or linguistically different and hold lower status in the macro-level social hierarchy, can be prime targets for discriminatory SE (Hawley & Williford, 2015; Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015). Thus, interpersonal SE may be driven by intergroup dynamics, resulting in discriminatory SE of an individual based solely on group identity (e.g., religion, ethnicity), not individual traits (Killen et al., 2013), or based on a combination of both individual and group traits reflecting multiple layers of potential power imbalance.

2.2. Social identity

Social identity, or the identification with and belongingness to a social group, is an example of how social ecologies relate to bullying behaviors, attitudes, and one's self-concept. From social psychology, the Social Identity Theory (SIT) contends that people strive to view their ingroups positively and of higher status than outgroups, so that they may view themselves in the same manner. SIT also theorizes that individuals engage in outgroup derogation to maintain a comparatively positive regard for the ingroup, and thus the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In adult samples, strong ingroup bias relates significantly to highly

negative outgroup attitudes, like prejudice or ethnocentrism (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Similarly, when evaluating hypothetical bullying scenarios, preadolescents differentiated outgroup characters as more blameworthy and ingroup characters as more preferable (Gini, 2007). Hence, when an individual's goal is to maintain a positive image of the ingroup and the self, they may be more accepting of outgroup victim-blaming and bullying of outgroup others by a fellow ingroup member.

The DIF has been used to investigate the relation between social identity and intergroup bias across childhood and adolescence. For example, Nesdale (2004)'s Social Identity Development Theory, defines a trajectory in which social identity develops from awareness and categorization of social groups, to group preferences, and only then—potentially—to outgroup prejudice. Children as young as three categorize themselves according to their social identities. By the age of four, children have taken on their ingroup social identity fully and demonstrate clear ingroup preferential bias, however without the outgroup negative regard that would be predicted by SIT. For example, Brenick et al.'s (2010) study supports Nesdale's (2004) assertions that prior to the last phase of social identity development at 7 years, children will not develop outgroup negativity to maintain positive ingroup and self-regard as theorized by SIT. In their study, Middle Eastern children falling in Nesdale's earlier stages ($M_{age} = 5.70$ years), identified with and assigned traits and behaviors based on in- and outgroup categorizations. Nevertheless, the children rejected outgroup exclusion—a form of outgroup derogation that would be expected by SIT (Brenick et al., 2010).

Developmentalists also consider the dynamic process of exploring and committing to various social identities throughout adolescence (Phinney, 1990), as well as one's position within the ingroup (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). Younger adolescents ($M_{age} = 14.22$ years), particularly those high on social identity concerns about their relationships (e.g., with whom they date or hang out), generally appeal to concerns about group functioning and identity to justify outgroup SE (Brenick & Killen, 2014). In other words, youth who consider their social relationships to be indicative of their legitimacy as an ingroup member, are more accepting of discriminatory SE to try to preserve their place in the group. Often, these youth reasoned that different groups would not get along and that ingroups and outgroups would enjoy different things. Moreover, youth on the group periphery who strive to attain higher status within the group are also more accepting of aggression and bullying, compared to ingroup members who are popular or hold prototypical positioning (Charters, Duffy, & Nesdale, 2013; Duffy, Penn, Nesdale, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Thus, the goal of obtaining status within the social group may lead to the acceptance of bullying of an outgroup member, particularly in adolescence when social group membership holds the utmost importance.

2.3. Social group norms

One's social identity often rests in one's adherence to the group's norms. Group norms are the shared behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs—whether objectively measured or perceived—that unite group members and distinguish an ingroup from outgroups (Davies, Wright, Aron, & Comeau, 2013; see; Sentse et al., 2015). Acting in accordance with ingroup norms, whether prosocial or prejudiced (Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009; Brenick & Romano, 2016; Davies et al., 2013), allows youth to attain social rewards, such as group belongingness, favor within the group, and ingroup positive distinction (see Volk et al., 2014). Also, youth often achieve group acceptance when acting in accordance with social group norms, but are rejected if they act contrary to them (Veenstra et al., 2013).

For example, Veenstra et al. (2013) found that the social gains from bullying, and thus the decision to bully or intervene, varied according to the norms of the proximal social ecology. Their research showed that youth acted on context specific peer group norms favoring bullying to attain social rewards of status and acceptance; bullies selected victims who were not accepted by their peer ingroup and children were more likely to accept bullies if they felt that the bullying behavior would serve to protect them. Other studies have found that peer norms of bullying relate significantly to children's greater acceptance of (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004) and engagement in bullying behaviors (Sentse et al., 2015).

DIF complements this line of work by looking beyond proximal group norms regarding aggression and including peer, parent, and macro-level group norms about intergroup relations (Mulvey, Hitti, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014; Titzmann, Brenick, & Silbereisen, 2015), and by considering the influences of age and the source of the norm. Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, Kiesner, and Griffiths (2008) found that youth ingroups with no bullying-accepting norms reported stronger intentions to bully an outgroup member when their ingroup simply held an unrelated norm of outgroup dislike. Mulvey et al. (2014) and Mulvey and Killen (2016) found that children and preadolescents (9–10 years) were less accepting of challenging aggressive group norms than older adolescents (13–14 years). Thus, younger children and preadolescents may be more willing than older adolescents to utilize bystander intervention skills that challenge peer acceptance of bullying behaviors. Brenick and Romano (2016) found that adolescents (14–18 years) who perceived their peers or parents to hold norms of negative outgroup attitudes were more accepting of SE targeting the outgroup. Thus, older adolescents may be less willing to challenge ingroup norms about both bullying behaviors and intergroup relations, particularly as they fear it could lead to their own rejection from the ingroup. Additionally, the influence of perceived peer versus parent norms differed by the context in which SE occurred (e.g., home versus social outing), recognizing that the salient group identity, and the influence of the associated group norms, vary by context beyond the peer setting (Brenick & Romano, 2016).

2.4. Social and moral reasoning in intergroup contexts

The decision to engage in discriminatory SE is influenced not only by the prevailing norms of one's social ecology, but also the negotiation of multiple competing social and moral concerns. Guided by the DIF, the Social Reasoning Development (SRD)

perspective (Rutland et al., 2010) acknowledges social psychological constructs such as social identity and group norms (described above, Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Nesdale, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and integrates them with developmental models of social and moral reasoning (Social Domain Model, Turiel, 1983). This perspective asserts that to most effectively address intergroup victimization, like discriminatory physical bullying and SE, we must understand how youth make sense of these harmful social interactions within their social and cultural ecologies.

The strength of the integrative SRD approach is that it looks beyond the correlates of behavior (e.g., bullying, bystander intervention) to *how* one perceives and evaluates those behaviors. SRD is similar to the social psychological Theory of Planned Behavior's treatment of perceptions (Ajzen, 1991), but places greater emphasis on understanding justifications for *why* behaviors are perceived in certain ways. A component of the SRD approach, the Social Domain Model, conceptualizes social interactions as the quintessential context in which individuals coordinate three distinct domains of social reasoning: *the moral*, *the societal*, and *the psychological*. It asserts that "morality is primarily about ways of approaching social relationships and how people ought to treat each other" (Turiel, 2014, p. 19). Previous research has demonstrated that individuals often reject acts like discriminatory SE based on *moral* principles regarding the inequality, unfairness, and wrongfulness of discrimination and prejudice, rather than *societal* (micro and macro-level) concerns (Brenick & Killen, 2014; Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008; Mulvey & Killen, 2016).

However, research has also found that group norms, prejudices, and sanctioning by those with greater power in a given context may promote SE of others with lower power and status. Responding to scenarios, youth indicated that excluding an outgroup member to instead include an ingroup member (Brenick & Killen, 2014) or excluding a lower-status group member based on prejudiced beliefs is acceptable and normative for maintaining a societal status quo (see Rutland et al., 2010). Relatedly, recent research has found that participants' judgments of the wrongfulness of SE bullying differed significantly based on the ethnic composition and the salience of the group identity; the ethnic composition of the bully/victim dyad influenced youth's perceptions of whether bullying was justifiable and how victims should respond (Brenick et al., 2016). The justification to conform, however, may not be as prevalent in contexts where there is low group identity, such as being the only member of one's social group in a class; thus, adolescents' decisions to abide by social norms vary by context.

The decision to prioritize *psychological* concerns versus social norms relates to whether an act is viewed as victimizing, and, if so, what action, if any, should be taken in response (see Rutland et al., 2010). When youth believe that a group member should challenge a norm of physical aggression, they appeal to *psychological* concerns about personal preferences and agency (e.g., "Everyone should say what they believe in," Mulvey & Killen, 2016). A deeper understanding of how youth perceive, evaluate, and justify acts of bullying will help practitioners recognize contextual variations in responses to bullying, and inform how researchers and practitioners can prevent bullying and promote positive bystander intervention.

3. Implications for practice and policy

Prior prevention programs have focused on preventing aggressive behavior and increasing bystander intervention norms; however, the DIF suggests that cultivating norms that promote diversity and inclusion *together* with anti-bullying norms may strengthen bullying prevention. Mulvey and Killen's (2016) findings suggest that prevention efforts benefited from not only promoting moral principles against bullying, but also from psychologically driven appeals for autonomy and individuality. Schools should employ high-level intercultural education practices and *regularly* engage students in discussions about various social groups, highlighting commonalities across groups while also building norms of respect for group differences (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007; Schachner, Noack, Van de Vijver, & Eckstein, 2016). For example, school curricula could integrate readings about Black History and carry these discussions across the school year, as opposed to treating a social group as entirely separate from the mainstream U.S. society confined to Black History Month. This integrative approach may be well-suited developmentally for adolescents, as previous efforts often fall short in recognizing adolescents' drive to be part of a group alongside their valuing of individuality in their identity development (Yeager et al., 2015).

In addition, anti-bullying efforts should educate students on how and why norms, power, identity, and evaluations of bullying influence bullying behaviors and responses. Youth must be taught how power dynamics in bullying emerge across multiple levels of the social ecology. Individuals are not simply victimized based on their individual characteristics, but also based on a power hierarchy and norms in schools (Horn, 2005) and in the larger society (Schachner, Brenick, Heizmann, Van de Vijver, & Noack, 2015), and this affects how others evaluate the bullying scenario (Brenick et al., 2016). For instance, bullying targeting an African-American boy may be attributed to his impulsiveness in a highly diverse class, but to macro-level stereotypes about ethnic norms and status if occurring in a classroom where his ethnicity was more salient (e.g., he was the only African-American boy). Here, prevention efforts should utilize higher-level intercultural education approaches that teach students about how diversity functions, including discrimination and stereotyping (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015), and how those processes manifest in bullying and bystander behaviors.

Finally, we believe it is important that anti-bullying programs consider the social ecologies in which youths' families are embedded. Families, too, exist within macro-level status hierarchies and are influenced by cultural group identity and norms, which, in turn, affect the messages parents convey about outgroups to children (Brenick & Romano, 2016). Relatedly, hierarchies of social dominance influence the level of cultural, social, and human capital parents have to advocate for their children. As an example, immigrant parents may encounter obstacles of power and identity that keep them from effectively preventing or responding to bullying. These parents have less power due to language barriers and immigration status, and might not identify with the experience of being an ethnic/racial minority in schools. Research on parental obstacles in

advocating for children in the school context may inform anti-bullying prevention programs and school policies tailored for families of varying social-ecological (ethnic, racial, and cultural) backgrounds.

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