Participant role approach to school bullying: implications for interventions

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This paper describes practical implications of the participant role approach to bullying in schools. This view looks at bullying as a group phenomenon which is largely enabled and maintained by members of a school class taking on different participant roles (such as assistants of the bully, reinforcers of the bully, or outsiders). Since peers are involved in bullying in different ways, and seem to be powerful moderators of behaviour in a school class, this "peer group power" should also be utilized in putting an end to bullying. In interventions targeting the whole peer group it is peers that, after initial adult encouragement and training, take action against bullying. This happens informally, in their spontaneous everyday interactions. Peers can also be utilized in formal helper roles, as peer counsellors. It is suggested that the focus of counselling could be shifted from supporting the victims towards also working with students in other participant roles.

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Introduction

Why is there bullying in schools? How should we try to reduce it? The answers we give to the former question have an impact on our ideas about the latter. The view of bullying as a group phenomenon has become increasingly salient in the literature and has started to guide empirical research as well. Consequently, intervention methods targeting the whole peer group and utilizing peers as facilitators of change are becoming increasingly popular.

Recently, a series of studies was conducted in Finland (see Salmivalli et al., 1996b, 1997, 1998; Salmivalli, 1998a, b) that began systematic research on what have been called participant roles in the bullying process. The starting point was the assumption that besides bullies and victims, other children and adolescents are involved in bullying as well. It was already known that most students in a class with bullying problems are aware of what is going on around them; in fact, many of them are present in actual bullying situations (Salmivalli, 1992). The question was, what do these other children do while the bully is harassing the victim?

Not only bullies and victims

Participant roles refer to students’ ways of being involved in bullying situations. Besides victims (who are repeatedly and systematically harassed) and bullies (their active, initiative-taking perpetrators), there are also other children and adolescents in classes with bullying problems. They constantly witness the bullying episodes, and through their behaviour in these situations they take a position towards what is going on. This, without doubt, has effects on the outcome of the episodes of harassment.

Some children and adolescents eagerly join in the bullying when someone has started it and act as assistants of the bully. Others, even if they do not actively attack the victim, offer
positive feedback to the bully. For instance, they come to see what is going on, thus providing an audience for him/her, or they incite him/her by laughing or by encouraging gestures. These students can be called reinforcers. Furthermore, a remarkable number of students tend to stay away and not to take sides with anyone: they have been named outsiders. Not even these children are, however, non-involved. In their way, they allow bullying to go on by silently approving it. Finally, there are also students whose behaviour is clearly anti-bullying: they comfort the victim, take sides with him/her, and try to make the others stop bullying. They are defenders.

There are several reasons for conceptualizing these typical bullying-situation behaviour patterns as roles. The concept of social role seems to capture something essential here. Social roles have been defined as clusters of socially defined expectancies that individuals in a given situation are expected to fulfil (Franzoi, 1996, p. 52). Seen from this point of view, participant roles—as roles in general—arise in social interactions and are determined by both individual behavioural dispositions and the expectations of others. An individual’s own behaviour naturally gives guidelines to what others may expect of him/her in future interactions. On the other hand, the needs and expectancies of the other group members determine what kind of a role is possible for a certain group member.

The relative frequencies of students in the different participant roles among our Finnish samples of sixth and eighth graders can be seen in Table 1. The participant roles have been studied among primary school children as well, and the first results have just been reported (Sutton and Smith, 1999).

As can be seen from the Table 1, most students act in ways which are prone to maintain and encourage bullying rather than diminish it, despite the fact that the attitudes of most children have been found to be against bullying (Whitney and Smith, 1993). Unfortunately, individuals' attitudes do not always guide their behaviour—especially in a context of a group of peers, where group norms and mechanisms such as conformity often create pressure for certain behaviours.

Although a follow-up study has shown that the participant roles are relatively stable from one school year to another (Salmivalli et al., 1998), this does not necessarily imply that there is no hope in trying to reduce bullying problems. Rather, it shows that when no systematic intervention is conducted, and no change takes place in the social environment, the participant roles that students have adopted tend to prevail.

Table 1  The percentages of children and adolescents in the different participant roles among the sixth (n=573) and eighth graders (n=316)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant role</th>
<th>Sixth</th>
<th>Eighth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No clear role</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Even if social roles are potentially changing, they sometimes become self-fulfilling prophecies: the behaviour of the individual starts to resemble more and more the expectations directed towards him. When a person has taken, or has been put in, a certain role, he/she might find it difficult to get out of it: the group punishes behaviours that are contrary to that role and rewards behaviours in accordance with it. Self-concept is another thing that, along with others’ expectations, guides an individual’s behaviour. Children or adolescents who define themselves as bullies, for instance, may themselves end up believing that they are completely incapable of other kinds of behaviour. The same is true of students in other participant roles as well.

For victimized students it seems especially difficult to attain a different role amongst their peers. Even in a completely new class with no former classmates, victimization tends to start again (Salmivalli et al., 1998). It is never easy to enter a new group, and it is probably especially difficult for a child or adolescent who has had the traumatic experience of being harassed in another group in the recent past. Insecurity and fearful expectancies are likely to arise. Unfortunately, these are easily communicated to the new classmates, who thus may see the newcomer as a suitable target for bullying. It has been shown that children’s own expectations have an effect on what kind of an attitude their peers actually will have of them (Rabiner and Coie, 1989). Transferring the victimized student into a new class thus cannot be regarded as a solution to bullying problems. Instead, these problems should be handled within the social group in which they have arisen. In this way, all members of a school class obtain a positive experience about how to deal with interaction problems and how, when the problem has been successfully solved, everyone in the group feels better.

**General awareness-raising, self-reflection and rehearsal**

If we are to help an individual change his/her typical behaviour in the group, we should be able not only to motivate the individual and provide him/her with the necessary skills, but also to make other group members allow—preferably even encourage—that change. If we think about interventions against bullying, the most obvious general principle implied by the participant role approach is that since most children are somehow involved in the bullying process, and their respective roles are supported by the group, interventions should be directed not only towards the bullies and the victims but towards the whole group.

Children in the different participant roles, (outsiders, assistants, or reinforcers, for instance) should be made use of when trying to put an end to bullying. It may be that their behaviour is easier to change than the behaviour of the aggressive bullies. Through these changes the behaviour of the bullies might also be affected. The bully hardly continues to bully without his/her supporters and audience, for instance.

How the acquisition of anti-bullying roles can be encouraged in students is thus a question of importance. The suggestion here is that this could be accomplished by (1) general awareness-raising, (2) chance for self-reflection and (3) possibilities to rehearse behaviours different from previous ones.

General awareness-raising refers to providing students with information about the different participant roles and group mechanisms involved in bullying (such as group norms and conformity). Introducing the different participant roles to the students cements the matter and makes it easier for them to understand that with their behaviour they might have encouraged bullying even if they did not mean to do so. Facts about group mechanisms give them an idea of why individuals sometimes act differently from how they really would like to, and that they do this sometimes without even noticing it. It should be emphasized to
students that everyone is responsible for whether or not there is bullying in the class. This kind of awareness-raising may well happen in the presence of all the class and it can take the form of a lecture, followed by discussion.

Chance for self-reflection means discussions in which students are encouraged to reflect upon their own behaviour in bullying situations. These discussions can take place in small groups, in pairs, or with individual students. In addition to self-reflection, students can also be given direct feedback about their social behaviour (as it has been observed by the teacher or by classmates), as long as this does not occur in an imposing manner.

Offering information and awakening feelings of responsibility are both important. However, it can also be argued that most students probably already know that taking action against bullying would be the right thing to do. However, actually doing this is another matter. In addition to motivation and self-confidence, taking action acquires some kind of intuition about how it could be done. If a student has never stood up for the victim, it is difficult to do it the first time in an actual bullying situation. Exercises using drama and role-play can be useful in both awakening motivation and offering a safe context to rehearse certain anti-bullying behaviours that the students have not tried before, such as telling others to stop bullying. Later on, these behaviours may generalize into their spontaneous everyday interactions with their peers.

Role-play can also be used in order to explore feelings associated with different participant roles. How does it feel to be a reinforcer or assistant of the bully? Why does it feel so difficult to take sides with the victim and support him/her in the presence of others? As has been described by Cowie and Sharp (1994a), role-play also gives opportunities for examining personal experiences of bullying, motivation to bully, the consequences of bullying, etc. These authors also present several useful exercises for these purposes.

**Assertiveness training: not only for victims**

Role-play exercises are suited for assertiveness training as well. Victims of bullying certainly benefit from this kind of training: in a study by Salmivalli et al. (1996a) it was found that the victims who reacted to bullying with what these authors called nonchalance (i.e. acting as if they did not care, staying calm in bullying situations) were, according to their peers, most likely to make bullying diminish or stop. In the same study, it was found that both helplessness (starting to cry, for instance) and counteraggression (responding with aggression and trying to “pay the bully with his own coin”) were perceived as provocative, i.e. making the bullying continue rather than diminish. It should be remembered that a victim’s counteraggression is usually ineffective and often awkward and “ridiculous”—otherwise he/she would not be a victim.

Children in other participant roles, however, may also benefit from learning assertiveness techniques. In their case, assertiveness means resisting the group pressure and not joining in bullying even if that is what other students in the class (or, some of them) expect. Telling, instead, how one really feels about bullying is an assertive response.

Even bullies might benefit from some kind of assertiveness training. The study by Huey and Rank (1984) showed that adolescents’ classroom aggression could be effectively reduced by providing them with assertiveness training based on what these authors call the verbal response model of assertiveness. Furthermore, it should be emphasized here that, according to the same study, peer-led assertiveness training groups were as effective in reducing the subjects’ classroom aggression as were the groups led by a professional trainer! (If, however,
peers are used as trainers in this kind of group, they should be kept on track by a professional supervisor.)

**Structural intervention: re-networking the class**

Within school classes, students form spontaneous peer networks, or cliques: these groups are known to have an effect on their members' behaviour. For instance, the more the members of a certain child's network tend to bully others or assist or reinforce that kind of behaviour, the more the child engages in such behaviours as well (Salmivalli et al., 1997). Of course, the selection effect plays a part here: children and adolescents with similar behavioural tendencies with respect to bullying associate with each other. On the other hand, once these groups have formed, their members socialize each other increasingly into the same direction. An aggressive clique, consisting of bullies and their assistants and reinforcers, develops its own set of norms about what kind of behaviour is wanted or unwanted, and these norms guide the decisions and actions of its individual members.

Some kind of restructuring of the networks in a cliquish school class might prove useful in preventing and diminishing bullying. This can be accomplished by conscious efforts to disperse the cliques—and help constitute new ones. In various school and class projects, children can be put to work together in combinations different from previous ones. They could be given mutual tasks to accomplish and, in this way, they would gain experiences of each other and of co-operation. For instance, bullies would get both different social models and different feedback than they probably get within their own aggressive-favouring peer network.

Naturally, this principle of dispersing the cliques is useful when forming groups for role-play or assertiveness training.

**Peers in formal helper roles: peer counselling**

In most interventions described so far, peers are in a key position. They are the ones that, after the initial adult encouragement and training, take action against bullying. This happens informally, in their spontaneous everyday interactions. However, peers can also be utilized by ascribing formal helper roles to them. Peer counselling practices have been quite widely used in the areas of health education and teaching academic skills, but also in fostering social interaction skills (Garner et al., 1989) and preventing and reducing bullying (Cartwright, 1995).

When it comes to bullying, peer ‘counselling’ has mostly been used to provide support for the victimized children. It is certainly important that the victims get empathic support not only from adults but from their peers as well. In this respect, the traditional work of peer helpers as listeners and supporters of individual children and adolescents is valuable. Research on the self-concept of the victims (Salmivalli, 1998b) has shown that among the different content domains (such as academic, family-related, behavioural, physical, emotional and social) their social self-concept is negative; they feel themselves to be rejected by peers and to be somewhat incompetent in their social relationships with them. Although support provided by teachers and parents, for instance, may be important for the victims, their biggest problems are not such that they could be removed by adult support and consolation only; after all, many victims already feel loved and accepted by adults (Salmivalli, 1998b). What they need is positive experiences with peers, and peer support can be a starting point for that.
However, peer counsellors could also be trained to work with students in other participant roles. They could listen and talk to them either individually or in small groups, the focus being on general awareness-raising and awakening of feelings of responsibility, but also in encouraging students to take action against bullying and giving suggestions about how to do this.

Peer helpers in role-play
Trained peers could be of remarkable help in role-play exercises, too. They can illustrate different possible responses in a bullying situation demonstrated on stage (how to take sides with the victim, how to resist the group pressure, etc.). After this modelling, the group members may try these—or other—ways of dealing with the troublesome situation. Trained peer helpers assist others to get involved by their own example.

One technique in role-play exercises is to “freeze” the situation so that the students involved can describe (out of role) their feelings straight to the audience (see, for instance, Cowie and Sharp, 1994b). Trained peer helpers could be used as facilitators in these exercises, too, thus helping other students understand and empathize with different parties. For instance, enacting the role of the bully may be a difficult task. It has been suggested that either the teacher should take on that role or an empty chair should be used to represent the bully (Cowie and Sharp, 1994b). However, another solution is that a peer helper enacts that role. In this way, it is ensured that the role of the bully is not idealized and that none of the students in the group gets labelled.

Choosing peer helpers
What criteria should be used in choosing peer supporters? If we think about the different participant roles, the most “natural” group would be those who already have the informal role of a defender in their class. They have already been doing “anti-bullying work” in their class, so it is probably something they have the motivation and basic skills for. Perhaps the formal role as a peer supporter would be something they like, too. Furthermore, it is known that defenders have high status among their peers (Salmivalli et al., 1996) and tend to have what can be called genuine high self-esteem (Salmivalli et al., in press) along with a positive image of themselves (Salmivalli, 1998b). Therefore, they have potential as a group to be trained as peer supporters. They are popular and well-liked enough to be accepted by most students, and they have the necessary courage and confidence for the task. However, it has been documented that peer supporters themselves benefit; for instance, their empathy skills and self-concept are developed (Wang, 1987) and they feel more adequate and open to new ideas (Thompson, 1986) after being involved in support work. Giving children who have been acting as outsiders or reinforcers, for instance, the responsibility, along with the appropriate training, to work as peer supporters (if they volunteer, of course) can foster pro-social skills and feelings of empathy in them and lead to the acquisition of informal anti-bullying roles amongst their peers in general.

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References


