



Developmental trajectories of bullying and social dominance in youth[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Bullying is increasingly conceptualized as strategic behavior motivated by a desire to gain social dominance in the peer group. Cross-sectional research has shown that relative to their peers bullies are higher in social dominance as indexed by resource control, and are often perceived as powerful and “cool.” However, research examining the developmental relationship between bullying and resource control is lacking. The present longitudinal study fills this gap in the literature.

Method: Using a three wave design, participants ($N=394$) were followed from late childhood into early adolescence. Joint trajectory analyses were used to test whether groups with distinct developmental trajectories of bullying and resource control can be identified, and how these trajectories are related.

Results: For both bullying and resource control three groups emerged (high, medium, and low), indicating that bullies and social dominants do not constitute one homogeneous group. More intense bullying is associated with higher levels of social dominance. Being consistently high in bullying is almost synonymous with being consistently high in resource control, whereas the reverse is not the case.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that high bullying leads to the attainment of high social dominance, and do not support the view that children high in social dominance engage in bullying to maintain their dominant position.

Practice implications: This study further underscores the need for interventions targeting mechanisms by which the peer group assigns social dominance to bullies.

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All over the world, bullying is a widespread phenomenon in elementary and secondary schools (Nansel et al., 2001). In general, boys engage in higher levels of bullying than do girls (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Bullying is typically unprovoked and deliberate, and is considered a subtype of proactive, goal-directed aggression (Coie, Dodge, Terry, & Wright, 1991; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Bullying occurs when an individual who has difficulty in defending himself is exposed repeatedly and over a long period of time to intentional harm by one or several others (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 2010). Such repeated harassment of a weaker peer can take several forms, including direct physical and verbal behaviors (e.g., hitting, kicking, the taking of personal belongings, threatening, name calling), as well as more indirect manifestations such as group exclusion or malicious gossip.

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Many contemporary researchers subscribe to the view that much bullying should be considered a strategic attempt to gain a powerful, central position in the peer group (Garbarino & DeLara, 2002; Pellegrini, 2002; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). For instance, research has shown that the most frequently reported answers to the question “why do you bully?” are “to feel powerful” and “to look cool” (Farrington, 1993). Sijtsema et al. have found that bullies in early adolescence endorse significantly higher levels of status, power, and prestige goals than do their non-bullying peers (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). In their study, the instrument to index status goals included items such as “When with your peers, how important is it for you that... you appear self-confident and make an impression on others” and “the others admire and respect you”?

Research has shown that bullies tend to be successful in their quest for power, such that they are often afforded a high degree of status and tend to be perceived as powerful and prominent, even in normative peer cultures (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmavalli, 2009; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Vaillancourt et al., 2003). Why might that be the case? One contributing factor is that the peer group appears to consider the willingness to engage in physical and verbal aggression as “tough” and “cool” behavior, which contributes to the bully’s visibility and prestige (e.g., Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Moreover, indirect or relational bullying such as exclusion, ignoring, or spreading a rumor can be used to effectively manipulate group relationships in ways that increase social power (e.g., Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). Bullies also tend to torment “weak” (shy, rejected, insecure) victims in particular, and typically attack them when other peers are present (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). In so doing, the peer group is regularly confronted with their power, which reinforces their high status position.

High status is in turn likely to facilitate access to material and social resources, which contemporary researchers consider the key index of social dominance (Hawley, 1999, 2007; Pellegrini, 2008). Social dominance is a fundamental characteristic of interpersonal relationships. The concept of social dominance originally stems from ethology. In this literature, social dominance was inferred when aggressive behavior towards a peer resulted in his or her submission. In more recent conceptualizations in psychology, social dominance is defined in terms of effective resource control; that is, relative success in the competition with other members of one’s group for access to valuable but scarce resources (Hawley, 1999; Pellegrini, 2008). Resources are attractive goods that can be material (e.g., food, toys), social (e.g., alliance partners, friends), and informational (facilitating the acquisition of resources). Youth high in resource control are those who, for example, have access to the most attractive parts of the school yard, are treated respectfully by their peers, and have many playmates.

Somewhat surprisingly, we know of only one study directly examining the link between bullying and social dominance as indexed by resource control (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & van der Meulen, 2011). Using a large sample of 9–12-year-old children, it was observed that bullies were significantly higher in resource control than their peers. Resource control was assessed by having teachers and peers rate participants on items such as “who usually get the first hold of the nicest toys or the best gadgets?” and “who usually get what they want?” The results of this study provide preliminary evidence of the potential utility of bullying in establishing social dominance. However, notwithstanding the merits of this study, critical research gaps exist.

First, by employing a cross-sectional design Olthof et al. only examined contemporaneous linkages. Consequently, the stability of the core constructs over time is unknown. Moreover, the longitudinal relationship between bullying and resource control remains to be investigated. One possibility is that bullying leads to resource control. Both traditional and contemporary views of social dominance consider coercive strategies such as taking, threatening, and bullying as highly effective in obtaining material and social resources, and hence social dominance in the peer group. In fact, some researchers have even included aggression as a component of social dominance (e.g., Pettit, Baksi, Dodge, & Cole, 1990).

Conversely, it may be that high resource control predicts high bullying. Once a position of high resource control has been achieved, bullying may be employed to maintain this desired situation and defend the boundaries of the in-group. For example, a socially prominent and powerful bully may ignore lower status peers or ridicule them in an attempt to consolidate his own standing in a high-status clique. Consistent with this possibility, in their study examining prospective linkages between aggression and perceived popularity among early adolescents, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) found that perceived popularity preceded both physical and relational aggression. It is also possible that the prospective linkages between bullying and resource control are bidirectional, such that high bullying is associated with high resource control over time, which is also prospectively associated with high bullying. For instance, in a study examining prospective linkages between peer victimization and internalizing problems, Reijntjes et al. found such bidirectional, reciprocal prospective relations (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Second, similar to much previous research examining the correlates and consequences of bullying, Olthof et al. used rather arbitrary cut-off points to identify (ringleader) bullies. A significant limitation of this approach is that bullies are considered to be one homogeneous group. However, both cross-sectional (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010) and prospective studies (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008) have shown that different subtypes of bullies exist that differ in their functioning or development. For instance, Pepler et al. (2008) found four different trajectories for bullying throughout adolescence (i.e., high, moderate and desisting, moderate stable, and low) that were differentially linked to problems in the individual, parent, and peer relationships domains. Importantly, in the case of distinct subgroups of bullies aggregate-level parameters may describe none of the sub-groups validly (Von Eye & Bogat, 2006). In addition, these parameters are often least applicable to participants who show the greatest deviation from the sample mean (Labouvie, Pandina, & Johnson, 1991). That is, because group-level averages pertain to aggregate changes over time, the change for participants showing the highest levels of bullying are likely to be masked. This is a relevant issue, because often the most extreme groups are the most interesting

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