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

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A B S T R A C T

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