

## Summary

# Bullying as a Group Process: Investigation of Participant Roles in Terms of Social Status and Gender

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The first scientific studies on bullying which is the most common form of aggression among children and adolescents in schools, were started at the beginning of 1970's by the Norwegian researcher Olweus (Olweus, 1993; 1994). Olweus (1993, p. 9), defined bullying as: "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students".

In the literature, researchers generally see bullying as a dyadic relationship between the bully and the victim. However, in recent studies it can be observed that there has been a shift from the approach that focuses on the characteristics of the bully and the victim toward a group process approach (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Smith, 2004; Sutton & Smith, 1999). The first systematic approach addressing bullying as a group process is the participant role approach proposed by Salmivalli et al. (1996).

The term "participant role" refers to students' ways of participating in bullying process. Salmivalli et al. (1996), identified five participant roles besides the victim. These roles are the bully (actively attacking the victim), the assistant (assisting the bully), the reinforcer (providing positive feedback to the bully), the outsider (remaining uninvolved and thus silently approving the bullying) and the defender (taking side of the victim).

A study conducted by Salmivalli et al. (1996) on 575 children between the ages of 12 and 13 in Finland showed that of all children 87% involved in one of the participant roles as bully (8.2%), assistant (6.8%), reinforcer (19.5%), defender (17.3%), outsider (23.7%) and victim (11.7%). In a two-year longitudinal study carried out by Salmivalli et al. (1998) with students in 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades showed that participant roles in the bullying process remain stable. Sutton and Smith (1999) also showed

that participant roles in the bullying situations are valid for younger children (7-10 years old).

The research on the basis of participant roles approach indicated that boys are generally more actively involved in the bullying process than girls. In other words, boys are in the roles of bully, assistant and reinforcer more frequently than girls while girls are mostly in the roles of defender and outsider than boys (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Goossens et al., 2006; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli et al., 1998). In terms of being bullied, one research showed that there was no difference between boys and girls (Salmivalli et al., 1996), while some studies showed that boys were exposed to the bullying more than girls (Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

Another variable related to bullying is the social status of adolescents among their peers. Having low social status among peers or being rejected by them is a serious problem starting as early as preschool years (Dodge et al., 2003). Children rejected by their peers generally experience difficulties in developing skills related to social competences (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). It is also indicated that peer rejection experienced in early years increases the risk of delinquency in adolescents in later years (Dodge et al., 2003; Miller-Johnson, Coie, Maumary-Gremaud, Lochman & Terry, 1999).

Studies on the relationships between bullying and social status revealed that both bullies and victims were rejected by their peers although their interactions with peers vary (e.g., Coie, Dodge, Terry, & Wright, 1991; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to test the participant roles approach, which takes bullying as a group process, on a sample from Turkey. In this context, the aim of the study was to adapt the Participant Role Questionnaire,

mainly based on peer reports, to Turkish and determine the prevalence of adolescents who participate in bullying in different roles. In addition, adolescents' levels of awareness about their roles in bullying situations were examined on the basis of the relationships between self-report and peer-reports. Finally, also examined whether the participant groups differentiate according to gender and social status.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 774 children (384 girls and 390 boys) from 6th, 7th and 8th grades of eleven different public secondary schools in Turkey. The mean age of the sample was 12.07 ( $SD = 0.49$ ), 13.04 ( $SD = 0.48$ ) and 14.00 ( $SD = 0.32$ ) for the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students respectively. The class sizes in the schools varied between 13 and 38 and average class size was 26.69.

### Measures

**The Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ).** We used the short form of the Participant Role Questionnaire developed by Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) in order to examine how children behave in bullying situations. The PRQ consists of 15 items and five subscales including *bully*, *assistant*, *reinforcer*, *defender* and *outsider*. The peer reports are the primary information source in the questionnaire, but it also allows self-reports. The participants were asked to evaluate themselves and each peer in their class on a three-point scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often) in terms of the roles of bullying situations.

The short form of Participant Role Questionnaire was translated from English to Turkish by the researchers. After taking the opinions and recommendations of four professionals about the translation, necessary corrections had been made and the final version of the Turkish form was completed. The item of "comforts the victim or encourages him/her to tell the teacher about the bullying" in the original questionnaire was divided into two items as "Comforts the victim" and "Encourages the victim to tell the teacher about the bullying" because children had difficulty in responding to the original item in the pilot study. Thus, the Turkish version of the questionnaire ended up with 16 items in total.

In order to determine the psychometric characteristics of the Participant Role Questionnaire a principal component analysis, with varimax rotation of the factors, was conducted for the sixteen peer-reported items. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, accounting for 86.13% of the total variance.

All of the items from the bully, assistant and reinforcer subscales were loaded on the first factor ac-

counted for 51.26% of the variance. However, in order to separate the effective and initiator bullies from the ones whose essential roles is to help or support the bully, the first factor was divided into two separate subscales named "bully" and "assistant-reinforcer", as done or indicated by Camodeca and Goossens (2005a), Goossens et al. (2006) and Sutton and Smith (1999). The defender and outsider subscales were clearly distinguished from each other and from the first factor on which the items of bully, assistant and reinforcer subscales were loaded, accounting for 21.36% and 13.51% of the variance respectively. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were .98 for bully, .98 for assistant-reinforcer, .91 for defender and .84 for outsider.

**Identification of Victims.** In this research, victims were identified according to peer-responses to the question: "Who gets bullied in your class?" A child was considered as a victim if he or she was nominated by 30% or more of the classmates as being exposed to victimization, regardless of her or his score on the other role scales (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

**Sociometric Status Scale.** In order to determine social status groups, a method proposed by Coie, Dodge and Coppotelli (1982) was used. In this method, children were asked to nominate three classmates whom they like the most and three classmates whom they like the least. In this way, five social status groups were identified: popular, rejected, neglected, controversial and average.

### Procedure

After the Turkish Ministry of Education's permission for the study to be carried out, the questionnaires administered to the children after a short verbal explanation informing them about the purpose of the study and ensuring them about the confidentiality of their responses. On the questionnaires, children were provided a list of the names of their classmates and asked to nominate how well each child in their class fits each statement on the questionnaire. Children were also given a definition of bullying in order to give them a clear understanding of the concept of bullying. The definition of bullying was presented both orally and written on questionnaires.

## Results

The findings showed that of all children 74% involved in one of the participant roles as bully (11.5%), assistant-reinforcer (10.9%), defender (21.1%), outsider (20.9%) and victim (9.7%).

T-test results conducted to determine awareness level of their participant roles in bullying situations showed that self-reported scores of bullies and assistant-reinforcers ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = .37$  for bullies and  $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .36$  for assistant-reinforcers) were significantly

lower than the peer-reported scores ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = .32$  for bullies and  $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = .30$  for assistant-reinforcers) on the same scales. Additionally, self-reported scores of defenders and outsiders ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = .75$  for defenders and  $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .74$  for outsiders) were significantly higher than the peer-reported scores ( $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = .24$  for defenders and  $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = .18$  for outsiders) on the same scales. Also, 59% of the adolescents who were reported as victims according to peer-reports also reported themselves as victims.

Results of the  $\chi^2$  test which were used to determine whether participant roles differ according to gender showed that the numbers of boys in bully ( $\chi^2_1 = 29.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ), assistant-reinforcer ( $\chi^2_1 = 40.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and victim ( $\chi^2_1 = 24.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) groups were more than those of girls while the numbers of girls in defender ( $\chi^2_1 = 40.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and outsider ( $\chi^2_1 = 39.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ) groups were more than those of boys.

In terms of social status, the findings showed that the percentages of bullies that were in rejected and average status were significantly higher than those in popular and neglected status. In addition, the percentages of assistant-reinforcers in average status were significantly higher than those in popular, rejected and neglected status. Furthermore, the percentages of defenders and outsiders in popular and average status were significantly higher than those in rejected and neglected status. The percentages of the victims in rejected status were found to be significantly higher than those in all other status groups.

Also, the results of a one way ANOVA showed that the mean score of the bullies' peer acceptance ( $M = -.18$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) was lower than that of defenders ( $M = .31$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) while the mean score of the victims' peer acceptance ( $M = -.65$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) was significantly lower than those of bullies ( $M = -.18$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), assistant-reinforcers ( $M = .00$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) defenders ( $M = .31$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) and outsiders ( $M = .12$ ,  $SD = .92$ ). On the other hand, mean peer rejection scores of bullies, assistant-reinforcers and victims ( $M = .64$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $M = .32$ ,  $SD = .96$ ;  $M = .70$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ , respectively) were significantly higher than those of defenders and outsiders ( $M = -.44$ ,  $SD = .53$ ;  $M = -.39$ ,  $SD = .62$ , respectively).

## Discussion

Findings of the study showed that the percentage of adolescents falling into five participant roles (bully, assistant-reinforcer, defender, outsider and victim) was 74. This finding is consistent with the findings of the international literature on the subject (Salmivall et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

The findings as to the relationship between self-reports and peer-reports revealed that adolescents were

aware of their roles in bullying situation to a certain extent. However, they underestimated their tendency of acting as bully and assistant-reinforcer while they overestimated their tendency to act as defenders and outsiders in bullying situations. These differences between self-reports and peer-reports of the participants might be due to "self-serving bias" as Österman et al. (1994) pointed out. Since aggressive behavior is not considered acceptable in many cultures, it seems normal that aggressive adolescents reported themselves as less aggressive compared to the reports by their peers.

Only 59% of the participants reported as victims by their peers, reported themselves as victims. As these results suggested, a considerable number of adolescents avoided reporting themselves as victims. Being bullied is a hurting experience for the self and the self-esteem of bullied children are lower than those of the other children (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Olweus, 1993). Thus, the victims may be in need of more of such biased attributions about themselves in order to consolidate their weakened self.

Another important result of the study is that the boys were more frequently involved in the roles of bully and assistant-reinforcer while girls involved more frequently in the roles of defender and outsider. It is thought that the findings which were in accordance with the common view of the literature can be evaluated on the basis of social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Steffen, 1986). According to the theory, male gender role includes rules that support many forms of aggression. For example, in most societies, men are expected to be tough, rugged, and aggressive and aggressive behaviors of males are approved more than those of females. On the other hand, consistent with the traditional gender roles, women are more prone to helping a friend or providing emotional and social support to others than men. This may explain why girls are in the roles of defender more frequently than boys.

In this study, results related to the relationship between being bullied and gender showed that boys were more exposed to bullying than girls. This finding is consistent with those of many studies (Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Şirvanlı-Özen & Aktan, 2010). However, some researchers draw attention to the differentiation between girls and boys in terms of the kind of peer bullying committed and being subjected to. In other words, it is stated that physical bullying is more common among boys while indirect bullying is more common among girls (Collins et al., 2004; Gültekin & Sayıl, 2005; Maynard & Joseph, 2000; Olweus, 1993; 1994; Pekel-Uludağlı & Uçanok, 2005).

The results regarding social status of adolescents participating in bullying process showed that the victims

were at the lowest social status among other participant roles. Low social status of the victims among their peers can be a factor increasing the likelihood of their being subjected to bullying. Being rejected by their peers deprives victims of peer support. Thus, bullies, most probably, choose their victims from those without peer support since they do not have the fear of being reciprocated.

Bullies, like the victims, were rejected by their peers. However, in terms of peer acceptance scores, the average of the victims were significantly lower than all other participant groups while the average of the bullies were only lower than that of the defenders. Besides, bullies, were not only rejected but also were in the average status. These findings are especially important because they show that the peer group members in a classroom approve of bullying to a certain extent. Such approval of bullying, can reinforce the behaviors of bullies by providing them positive feedback that consolidates their reward expectations which motivate aggressive behavior.

Adolescents who involved in the bullying process as defenders and outsiders were mostly in average and popular status groups. Being liked and accepted by their peers may increase the possibility that defenders influence their peers in developing anti-bullying attitudes and even take sides with the victims.

In summary, in this study bullying was addressed

as a group process on the basis of participant roles approach and the results supported this approach. Our findings may contribute to the relevant literature especially in two respects. The first of these is that bullying is not a phenomenon between only the bully and the victim but other adolescents could affect the sustainability of the process in many ways by participating in bullying in different roles. Second, it is thought that the findings are important in developing a holistic intervention program about peer bullying. Programs focused on all the groups rather than only the bully and victim groups can be more effective. While building up such programs, assistant-reinforcers and outsiders can be prioritized since their behaviors can be easier to change than those of bullies. Also, changes in these groups' behaviors can also affect the behaviors of bullies, because without them, it would be difficult to sustain bullying behavior.

This study is the first attempt to demonstrate that bullying in Turkey is a group process which is participated not only by the bullies and the victims but also other members of peer groups. In future studies, it is thought that examinations of the mechanisms effective in reinforcing the bullying roles of adolescents will strengthen the group process approach and this will contribute significantly to the understanding of the process more fully and to the development of intervention programs.