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How do secondary school students explain bullying?

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ABSTRACT

Background: In order to support efforts to prevent bullying, more needs to be understood about students’ own explanations of bullying in their everyday school lives. In-depth qualitative analysis can contribute important insights regarding insider perspectives in terms of how students understand and explain the social interaction patterns of bullying.

Purpose: The aim of the study was to examine, in detail, how a small sample of lower secondary school students explain why bullying happens and to develop a grounded theory analysis based on the students’ perspectives.

Method: The participants in the study were 17 Swedish lower secondary school students aged between 13 and 15 years. A total of 17 qualitative interviews and 3 follow-up interviews were conducted. Grounded theory methods based on a constructivist position were used to explore and analyse the data.

Findings: The findings are based on data collected from young people who had witnessed bullying. The analysis of their explanations of why bullying happens resulted in six categories: social positioning, victim constructing, bullying normalising, rule diffusion, rule resistance and cultural ideals. These categories are interrelated, and the core process of bullying was identified as social positioning. The analysis suggested that the main concern of those who engage in bullying is to gain and maintain a high social status. Victims, in turn, were socially constructed as ‘different’ and ‘wrong’, and were connected with a low-status position.

Conclusions: The study draws attention to the need for students’ understandings of bullying to be considered – for example, through student consultations. It is hoped that the current findings could be helpful as a starting point when investigating students’ perspectives and giving students a voice in bullying prevention approaches at school.

Introduction

Bullying is traditionally defined as repeated aggression or harmful actions directed at target individuals, who are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the perpetrator or the perpetrators (e.g. Chalmers et al. 2016; Cowie and Jennifer 2008; Eriksen 2018; Espelage and Swearer 2011; Jimerson, Swearer, and Espelage 2010; Yang and Salmivalli 2015), even though there is an ongoing debate among scholars about how to define bullying (e.g. Canty et al. 2016; Horton 2011; Schott and Søndergaard...
For instance, in the context of cyberbullying, the criterion of repetition has been problematised since an act (e.g. writing a mean message or upload a humiliating video clip) may be carried out just once and can then be repeatedly viewed by the victim and passed along by various bystanders (Grigg 2010). The widespread definition has also been criticised for reducing our understanding of bullying to individual psychological characteristics of the bullies and the victims, excluding contextual, sociological, ideological and discursive understandings (Canty et al. 2016; Ringrose and Renold 2010; Schott and Søndergaard 2014). At the same time, there is a growing body of research that adopts the traditional definition of bullying with a social-ecological framework stating that bullying can be understood and examined as a social phenomenon that is established and perpetuated over time as the result of the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors (see Espelage and Swearer 2011; Hong and Garbarino 2012).

Of importance to the current study, several scholars have problematised the intention of harm built into the traditional definition. For instance, Volk, Dane, and Marini (2014) argue that this definitional criterion should be replaced with being goal-directed, meaning that students bully for things like resources and social reputation/dominance. In addition, bullying might, for instance, take place among students who interpret it as a harmless joke or playing (e.g. TeräSahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2010). There are cases in which it is problematic to determine ‘where the joke ends and the abuse begins’ (Carrera et al. 2011, 486). To address this grey area of intention, Rigby (2008) suggests a distinction between malign and non-malign bullying. The former refers to bullying that is carried out intentionally to hurt someone, in accordance with the traditional definition. The latter refers to bullying in which the perpetrators are unaware that what they are doing is harming the target. Considering the fuzziness of intention as well as the measurement problems of observing and measuring the intention (e.g. in self-reports of bullying victimisation and in peer nomination of bullies; see Volk, Veenstra, and Espelage 2017), we think it is reasonable to include both malign and non-malign actions in the definition of bullying. In other words, we acknowledge the fuzziness of intention of harm and thus focus on harmful actions rather than intention of harm, together with power imbalance and repetition.

The aim of the current study was to examine how a small sample of lower secondary school students explain why bullying happens and to develop a grounded theory analysis based on their understandings. Various definitions and understandings of the word ‘bullying’ exist, particularly among students, but also among teachers and policymakers (Chalmers et al. 2016; Craig, Bell, and Leschied 2011; Erling and Hwang 2004; Eriksen 2018; Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Guerin and Hennessey 2002; Hellström, Persson, and Haquist 2015; Naylor et al. 2006; Purcell 2012; Vaillancourt et al. 2008). Therefore, our aim was not to examine how the students understand the word ‘bullying’ – since several studies have already investigated that – but how they understand and explain the social interaction patterns of bullying as it has been described in the bullying literature: in other words, as a social process in which a student in a less powerful position is repeatedly insulted, harassed or excluded by others, but regardless of the intention of harm. Furthermore, we recruited students who had been bystanders in such social interactions to base our analysis on their concrete experiences of bullying. A bystander is here defined as any student who witnesses
a bullying incident (Polanin, Espelage, and Pigott 2012). Concentrating on concrete, real-life situations rather than abstract concepts can facilitate better responses from young participants in qualitative interviews (Prior 2016). The focus was on their concrete experiences of bullying situations, since human beings learn about and develop their understanding of social situations through their experiences of them and through their interactions with others (Hewitt and Shulman 2011).

**Background**

**Symbolic interactionism and the new sociology of childhood**

Symbolic interactionism has been adopted as the theoretical framework in the current study (Blumer 1969; Charon 2001; Hewitt and Shulman 2011). According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism is built upon the premises that: (a) humans act towards objects, including people, situations and whatever they have to deal with in their world, on the basis of the meanings such objects have for them, (b) these meanings arise out of social interactions, and (c) the meanings are handled in an interpretative process used by humans in dealing with the objects they encounter. How people interpret a situation affects and guides their actions in that situation, and ‘although there may actually be a reality out there, their definition is far more important for what they do’ (Charon 2001, 136). Thus, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the way in which students interpret and explain social interaction patterns that have been conceptualised as bullying in the literature is a major influence on how they will act when they encounter such social situations.

Previous studies on school bullying that are informed by symbolic interactionism have, for instance, examined bullies’ intentions to bully and interpretations of the situations (Burns, Cross, and Brown 2008), students’ explanations of why bullying occurs (e.g. Forsberg and Thornberg 2016), victims’ understandings, explanations and experiences of being bullied (Thornberg et al. 2013), the process of disclosing bullying victimisation from the victim’s point of view (Bjereld 2018), and students’ understandings and explanations regarding why bystanders react and act as they do in bullying situations (e.g. Forsberg, Thornberg, and Samuelsson 2014). Taken together, these studies demonstrate the importance of how students interpret or define the situations, the bullies and the victims, social belonging and social positioning, peer pressure to conform, labelling and stigma, emotions, and justifications. Common to all these studies is that the researchers have based their analyses on students’ understanding of the term ‘bullying’. In contrast, the starting point in the current study was students’ experiences of social situations, in which a student in a less powerful position is repeatedly insulted, harassed or excluded by others. Thus, the focus has been on their concrete experiences of social acts or joint actions of bullying, as defined in the literature, rather than their definitions of the abstract word ‘bullying’.

Furthermore, and with reference to the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997), children and adolescents are not passive recipients, but active agents in their socialisation process. They are both constructed by structure and at the same time active agents acting in and upon structure. They do not simply internalise the world but strive to make sense of their culture and to participate in it. ‘Children create and participate
in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concern’ (Corsaro 2005, 18–19). It is therefore important to investigate how they make sense of social situations and phenomena as well as how these understandings or perspectives are related to societal norms and discourses, in order to better understand their actions and interaction patterns.

**Students’ explanations of bullying**

There is a small but growing body of studies exploring how students explain bullying, which shows that children and adolescents report a range of explanations, including being a result of victims’ differentness (Cheng et al. 2011; Frisén et al. 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Purcell 2012; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008), bullies’ pursuit of social status, dominance and popularity (Forsberg and Thornberg 2016; Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisén et al. 2008; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008), bullies suffering from psychosocial problems (Frisén et al. 2008; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008), bullies’ mean or bad personality (Thornberg 2010), peer pressure (Erling and Hwang 2004; Thornberg 2010), and just having fun and avoiding boredom (Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Thornberg 2010).

In previous studies, the word ‘bullying’ – with or without an explicit definition – has been used as a starting point in the interviews or questionnaires. However, when using this word, there is a risk that students might rely on their own understanding of it rather than the definition presented at the beginning of the questionnaire or interview (Felix et al. 2011; Volk, Veenstra, and Espelage 2017) and in the bullying literature. Thus, in previous studies, researchers have examined what students say about why bullying – as they understand the term – occurs, rather than asking them about why repeated harmful actions directed at target individuals, who are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the perpetrator or the perpetrators, take place. In contrast, we did not use the word ‘bullying’ as a starting point but rather provided a description of behaviours in which harm, power imbalance and repetition were built into the description, which in turn elicited students’ own experiences of witnessing such behaviours.

**Methods**

Qualitative methods can contribute important insights regarding the insider’s perspectives (Patton et al. 2017). Due to the exploratory aim of examining how students explain why bullying happens, we used research methods in the current study that allow ‘informants to express their views freely without unnecessary pre-guidance’ (Belt and Belt 2017, 55). In accordance with this, we conducted qualitative interviews within a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory was adopted in the current study since it is designed to explore social psychological processes and participants’ perspectives, and has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Charmaz 2014).
**Ethical considerations**

Approval from the Regional Ethical Review Board at Linköping University was obtained prior to all data collection. Parental and student informed consent were obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of all information provided. Their own names, the names of their schools and geographic locations, and the names of other people that they mentioned were removed from the transcriptions, and the audio recordings were stored on an encrypted external hard drive locked in a fireproof archiving room at Linköping University.

**Participants**

The participants in the study were 17 Swedish lower secondary school students (age range = 13–15 years old, \(M = 13.8\)) recruited from five different schools, and from different socioeconomic and socio-geographic backgrounds. The rationale behind this was to maximise variations in perceptions, experiences and descriptions (Belt and Belt 2017; Hallberg 2006). A total of 14 participants had a Swedish ethnic background. The sample consisted of 11 girls (age range = 13–15 years old, \(M = 13.8\)) and six boys (age range = 13–14 years old, \(M = 13.7\)). In order to obtain this sample, first, a purposive sampling of schools was carried out, which resulted in the inclusion of five schools: a public school in the countryside, two public schools in a small Swedish town and two private schools in different neighbourhoods of a medium-sized Swedish city. Then, a purposive participant sampling, based on consent and a questionnaire report, was conducted at each school, in order to recruit participants who had experienced bullying as bystanders. This resulted in the sample of 17 participants, with the number of participants per school ranging from one to nine.

We developed a new retrospective bullying-witnessing scale for the purpose of the study, in order to try to recruit participants who had their own experiences of witnessing bullying. In line with our aim, our scale did not provide the word ‘bullying’ with an a priori definition. Instead, it started with the question: ‘Think about all the years that you have been at school: For how long have you seen the following happen about once a week or more often? One or more students have repeatedly done the following things towards another student who was weaker, less popular or less powerful in comparison to them’, followed by 15 concrete behavioural items covering traditional bullying and cyberbullying to examine whether they have witnessed a social process in which a student in a less powerful position has been repeatedly insulted, harassed or excluded by others. We designed and carried out this questionnaire to base our interviews on the participants’ own concrete experiences of bullying as witnesses rather than on abstract and hypothetical concepts or scenarios. The cut-off ‘once a week or more often’ was chosen to make sure that we recruited students with bystander experiences of intense bullying. The questionnaire was distributed to 67 students based on parental consent and their own consent, and then filled out by 32 students. All students who reported that they had experienced bullying as witnesses were included in the current study (17 students) and thus interviewed. In addition to using these results to recruit participants, their reports were also used as a starting point in the interviews.
Data collection: interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet room, within the school setting but away from the classroom. In line with constructivist grounded theory and its underlying symbolic interactionist theoretical framework (Charmaz 2014), most of the questions in the interview guide were open-ended questions with a focus on social processes and meaning-making of the situations, as these questions ‘reflect a symbolic interactionist emphasis on learning about participants’ views, experienced events, and actions’ (Charmaz 2014, 65). Three master’s students in psychology (the second author, and two additional master’s students) carried out the interviews. They received instructions and training in qualitative interviewing from the first author. First, all participants were interviewed once, resulting in 17 interviews ranging from 19 to 46 min ($M = 28$) in length. The students were asked to say more about their experiences of witnessing bullying reported in the online questionnaire. They were asked to describe the incidents in more detail, what happened and why they thought it had happened (see Appendix). As a further result of theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014), three of the 17 participants (all girls; age range and $M = 14$ years old) were selected for shorter follow-up interviews ranging from seven to 12 min ($M = 10$) in length. There were some incomplete and unelaborated reports in the previous interviews with them that we wished to follow up. In the follow-up interviews, the participants were asked about emerging themes and categories (see Appendix). The interviewers avoided the position of authority and took an atypical, less power-oriented, adult research role in accordance with the ‘least-adult role’ (Mandell 1991), including the adoption of a non-judgmental approach (i.e. telling the participants at the outset of the interview that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they did not care about what the teachers thought was right or wrong, but would really like to know what the participants thought, and did not openly judge the participants in terms of right or wrong during the interviews, instead listening carefully and with empathy and an open mind). In accordance with Prout’s (2002) recommendations, they were also instructed to approach and treat the students as the main informants and competent commentators on their own lives as students at school. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the excerpts from the interviews that are quoted in this article have been translated into English.

Data analysis

Grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2014; Glaser 1978) based on a constructivist position (Charmaz 2014) were used to explore and analyse the data. During this analysis, coding (creating codes and categories grounded in the data), constant comparison (comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, data with categories and so on), memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes and other theoretical ideas that come to mind during the coding and analysis), and memo sorting (comparing and sorting memos) were the main grounded theory processes.
Findings

Examining how participants make meanings of their experienced social interactions (Blumer 1969) and define social situations (Charon 2001) is in line with symbolic interactionism, as this theoretical perspective assumes that participants derive interpretations and meanings from previously experienced social situations, which in turn will influence and guide their actions in forthcoming similar social situations. As explained above, the starting point of the interviews was participants’ experiences of witnessing repeated harmful actions directed at target individuals, who were disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the perpetrator or the perpetrators. However, although the interviewers did not mention the word ‘bullying’ at the start, it was interesting that the students themselves began to use the word ‘bullying’ when they referred to these experienced incidents, with the exception of some incidents that they interpreted as non-serious jokes. In other words, they tended to recognise these social processes with the label ‘bullying’. In the analysis, we therefore used the word ‘bullying’, because the incidents that were discussed represented bullying in accordance with the definition that we adopted in the study. It should be borne in mind that, for the reasons discussed earlier in the paper, we were not focussed on how the participants understood the term ‘bullying’ itself, but rather how they understood and explained repeated harmful actions in social interactions characterised by power imbalance. The analysis of how the students explained why bullying happens at school resulted in six categories: social positioning, victim constructing, bullying normalising, rule diffusion, rule resistance and cultural ideals. These categories are interrelated, and social positioning represents a basic social psychological process that emerged as the core category, meaning that it is the most significant and frequent category and ‘accounts for most of the variation in a pattern of behaviour’ (Glaser 1978, 93) in the current study. In the sections that follow, each category is presented and discussed in detail. Anonymised, translated quotations from the data are included to explain and illuminate relevant points.

Category 1: social positioning

The students explained that bullying is primarily performed as a means of achieving power, influence, status and popularity within the peer group. Thus, from their perspective (cf. Charon 2001), a bully’s main concern is to achieve or maintain a high social position among their peers – to get peer attention and try to make oneself cool or popular. This is the prime motivator for their bullying behaviour. For example, one student commented, ‘I think it’s lot about that they’re–, I mean, they get that kind of attention and then feel that they’re cool’. Many students reported that the ‘cool’ students ‘rule the school’ as they dictate peer norms and ideals in terms of appearance, clothing, behaviour etc. The social hierarchy was maintained by the students at the top of the hierarchy as they insulted and harassed students with less power and lower status.

Bullying is not only about achieving high status, it is also about maintaining or defending an achieved high position in the social hierarchy, and several of the students explained bullying as the result of a social positioning in which the bully wants to maintain his or her high social position and to avoid the risk of becoming socially
degraded. The hierarchical ranking creates competition for the positions at the top. This could be linked to the symbolic interactionist concept *negotiated order*, stating that social order is produced and maintained but can also be changed by the ongoing process of negotiation among various members in an organisation or a social group (Strauss 1978). In negotiating, people attempt to exercise power over one another, which is an important determinant of social order (Hewitt and Shulman 2011). Our analysis of the data suggests that bullying others is high-status students’ continued resolution of their main concern, which is gaining and maintaining a high social position among their peers. As one student explained,

If you’re more popular, then you might get used to having that position and you don’t want to lose it, have it taken away from you, and you might feel threatened or jealous or something if you’re kind of used to having high status.

The collective fear of being the next victim expands the power imbalance between high-status bullies and low-status victims in that the high-status bullies also influence less involved peers to take their side or at least to remain as passive bystanders in bullying situations. Although uninvolved peers might sympathise with the victim, bullying could still continue because many peers ‘don’t want to end up in the very same situation as the one who the others are mean to’. Many students argued that taking the high-status students’ side or complying with them leads to a better chance of acceptance and inclusion – it is a way of protecting one’s own social status.

At the same time, the concept of ‘coolness’ had an ambiguous meaning for the students. Although bullying produces high status and supposed ‘coolness’ for those who are bullies, several students pointed out that in fact bullying does not make anyone ‘cool’, even though the bullies are still socially recognised as ‘cool’. The following excerpt illustrates one student’s articulation of this understanding:

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about it? How come, do you think, they are mean to her?
Student: Well, I mostly think it’s because they’re trying to, well, show that they’re kind of cool and to fit into the group. That’s what I believe.
Interviewer: How does that turn out, that they’re cool?
Student: Well, they–, that group isn’t, in my opinion, supercool but they think they are.

Later in the interview, this student responded to the direct question of whether those who are mean towards someone else would be recognised as ‘cool’ by saying: ‘actually, they won’t be that but they kind of want to be seen that way’. From the students’ point of view, bullying can be associated with an ‘ambiguous coolness’. On the one hand, students argued that bullying behaviour often leads to high social status in terms of being ‘cool’. On the other hand, some students pointed out that bullying and being mean are not ‘cool’, as another student explained:

Student: You won’t be cooler because you’re talking badly about others. Well, you maybe feel better, but you aren’t.
Interviewer: Okay.
Student: Perhaps you feel better, but I don’t think you are. I think it’s lame to talk badly about someone else.

According to the students, bullying perpetration leads to power and social status in the peer group. All students in the present study reported that those who bully have high status and receive attention and support from peers. At the same time, some of the students stated that bullying perpetration creates feelings of being cool rather than actually being cool, and stressed that it is not cool to be mean but something that they thought was wrong. In other words, the ‘ambiguous coolness’ reflects a conflict between being a ‘popular peer’ and a ‘good person’ if the former is at the expense of the latter. ‘Coolness’ in the first meaning is related to being successful in terms of social reputation and dominance, which are driven by social competition or simply survival within the social hierarchy. ‘Coolness’ in the second meaning is related to acting in accordance with decent and humane moral standards, whereas failing to act in this way makes the actor ‘uncool’.

One of the students in the study described this duality of coolness as fear-driven. Fear of victimisation motivates students to comply or move away when the ‘cool group’ arrives, which in turn makes that group feel ‘tougher’ and ‘cooler’. The reactions and attention that bullying receives from other peers creates, in the words of one student, ‘waves on the water, as when they think they are cooler, they become cooler, and then it continues’. Bullying is associated with social visibility, dominance and status, but this is not the same as being genuinely liked and appreciated. The ‘ambiguous coolness’ related to bullying is reminiscent of the classic distinction between perceived popularity (i.e. the extent to which other peers rate a peer as socially dominant, powerful or having high social status) and sociometric popularity (other similar terms include ‘likeability’, ‘peer acceptance’ and ‘peer preference’, i.e. the extent to which other peers like or appreciate a peer; e.g. Hymel et al. 2011). A high position in the social hierarchy is not the same as being liked.

In the interviews, all the students reported that the main cause behind bullying is the desire to become popular, high-status and ‘cool’. This primary concern of popularity was also considered to be why bullying could take place even though the vast majority of the students declared that they judged bullying to be wrong. Several students claimed that even the bullies are aware of the wrongness of bullying, but that the desire to be cool and popular is far more important to them. Social rewards outclass moral concerns. From the students’ perspective, the social hierarchy of the peer landscape creates bullying as an expression of the survival of the fittest. As one student put it, ‘To survive, they have to make others small to raise themselves up’.

**Category 2: victim constructing**

According to the majority of the students in the present study, those who bully to enhance or maintain high social status pick out, but also construct, their victims in terms of differentness. In bullying, a victim’s appearance, personality and behaviour are socially interpreted and co-constructed as odd, different or ‘deviant’. One student explained this in the following way:
They were calling you names and if you did something that they didn’t think was – for example, if you kind of gave a wrong answer to a question in the classroom, they would like to bring that up for weeks afterwards./.../or if you just said something ordinary at lunch and they thought it was something wrong to say, then they would bring that up and stand in your way and say, ‘No, you can’t do this’, or get other people to dislike you by going behind your back and kind of saying mean things and intentionally making the person feel excluded.

The excerpt above illustrates a recurrent pattern in the interview data in which the students explained that in bullying the target peer is interpreted as ‘different’ and ‘wrong’, and this social construction of the victim as deviant is then spread among their peers. For instance, one of the students observed that this victim constructing emerges when some ‘cool’ students begin to be bothered about someone for any reason and then ‘try to find flaws in that person’. In bullying, the ‘cool’, high-status students decide who is ‘uncool’, ‘wrong’ and ‘different’, and the victim constructing is then further consolidated and spread by name-calling, rumour-spreading and social exclusion, meaning that the victim is further labelled as deviant and stigmatised. According to several students in the study, victims have low social status and are perceived by others as deviant, and this low-status victim position was considered to be extremely difficult to escape from or, as one of the interviewees put it, ‘if you’re the one who is bullied in Grade 7, you’ll be the same in Grade 8 and Grade 9’. With reference to symbolic interactionism, being labelled as ‘deviant’ by others is about being socially constructed as someone who violates certain social taken-for-granted norms of the social group, culture or society. Stigma is a core concept of labelling. Being stigmatised is about being socially disapproved of, dehumanised and pushed to be a social outcast (Goffman 1963; Thornberg 2011, 2015). The person ends up in a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which he or she becomes nothing more than the labels for their peers (Thornberg 2011, 2015).

**Category 3: normalising bullying**

Students also reported that repeated mean behaviours towards ‘deviant’, low-status students, positioned as victims among their peers, are not always perceived as bullying. Instead, such behaviours can be re-defined and re-interpreted as reasonable results of different social roles and as a natural part of everyday social life. Some behaviours can, for instance, be viewed as an expression of the ordinary joking jargon, and thus become socially accepted since they are not labelled as bullying but described as jokes, playful fights or a normal and natural part of a tough jargon among peers. In other words, bullying can be interpreted as something ordinary, normal and more or less trivial. The border between joke and abuse becomes blurred, as one student commented:

I don’t know how you were as kids, but today kids are very tough and use a lot of bad language and like that to each other. There’s a lot of that. I don’t know, I don’t know where to draw the line between what’s mean, what’s nice, and what’s just about making fun. Sometimes you don’t know whether people are just joking or not.

Students reported that bullying often consists of jokes at someone’s expense, but that it might start as ‘only’ a joke and then escalate or be misinterpreted by the target student, and thus develops into bullying. However, the students told us that it is sometimes hard to know exactly where the joke ends and the bullying begins, in
particular if other peers and maybe even the victim are laughing. For example, one student said ‘Perhaps you think that the person [the victim] doesn’t take it as bullying’, since it was considered as a joke or a playful act just to have some fun. Another reflected, ‘They are making fun of the victim, but they are not thinking of it as bullying and justify it by saying, “I’m just joking”’. In other words, bullying becomes something that is described as wrong on the one hand, while at the same time it could be, in the words of another interviewee, ‘seen as fun, and that mean thing becomes like a joke’. Bystanders can also participate in this normalising of bullying in terms of re-defining and co-constructing it as joking by smiling and laughing. As one student explained, ‘They were laughing with [the bullies] and then everyone thought it was a funny joke’. Many students also referred to playful fights or rough-and-tumble play developing into ‘real fights’ and into bullying, in which it is sometimes hard to know where the play ends and the abuse begins.

**Category 4: rule diffusion**

Students reported that school rules were frequently inconsistently enforced. According to them, teachers’ efforts to uphold the rules in everyday school life were inconsistent and contradictory, which seems to produce what Thornberg (2007, 413) calls rule diffusion among students. This refers to ‘uncertainty and interpretation difficulties regarding which rules are in force and how they should be applied’. The students know that there are certain rules at school, but at the same time they are uncertain as to whether their perception of the rules corresponds with the actual system as a result of a perceived poor rule work and inconsistent rule enforcement. This is illustrated by the following exchange during an interview:

**Interviewer:** Does something happen if you break a rule that exists at this school?

**Student:** I actually don’t think so, because even though it’s like you shouldn’t use bad language, I don’t know if we have that kind of rule, maybe we have. And that you shouldn’t insult others. It might be that the teacher maybe talks with that person, but not every time. I don’t think much is happening, and that’s a shame because if there is a rule, there should be consequences if you break it.

**Interviewer:** Does it happen that you’re working with these rules?

**Student:** No, I don’t think so. Well, when we came together as a class for the first time, we were maybe asked to read the rules and get some information about them. But I wouldn’t be able to rattle them off. I don’t remember any rules. And I don’t even know, I think we have a piece of paper somewhere with the rules written down, but I don’t know where they are. And I don’t think anyone really has, I mean, really knows what the rules really are.

Inconsistent rule enforcement and a lack of sanctions undermine the rules and create rule diffusion among the students; or, as one of them put it, the rules ‘are just words on a piece of paper, and there’s like no punishment or nothing happens if you break them, so there’re like just words’. The teacher might tell the student to stop, but later on the student can go back to his or her rule transgression again. Some students also claimed
that there is a lack of sanctions when students are involved in bullying because the teachers do not discover it or do not intervene when they are nearby. One of the students even argued that teachers sometimes seem to perceive bullying incidents as non-serious jokes:

Well, the teachers say, ‘Yes, we take away all bullying and we take away all insults’. They don’t do that. They’re just standing there and laughing, I mean certain teachers even laugh like it’s just a kind of joke.

From a student perspective, teachers’ inconsistent and poor rule enforcement results in a school climate in which bullying events become trivialised and ignored, and thus do not appear to violate the school rules, which further obscures the border between joke and abuse. If students perceive that teachers and other school staff allow bullying to occur (i.e. no real sanctions towards the bullies, and the bullying can continue), then the lesson learned is that bullying is an accepted behaviour at school, and is not banned by school rules.

**Category 5: rule resistance**

Inconsistent rule enforcement and weak or non-existent sanctions not only create rule diffusion but also facilitate rule resistance and disobedience. The students reported that there are certain peer groups that do not care about the rules because social status, dominance or popularity can be achieved by breaking the rules. One said, ‘Even if there are rules, there are kids who don’t care about them because they think popularity is more important than what you should do or say’. Another student explained that the ‘cool’ peers may think that breaking the rules is a cool thing and that ‘rules are meant to be broken’.

Rule transgressions may result in attention (visibility), power and ‘coolness’; bullying others can then become a part of the repertoire of rule-breaking strategies to be used as tools in social positioning. A common explanation among the students in the current study as to why students are breaking rules at school was the consequence of gaining social rewards in terms of being recognised as cool. ‘You don’t follow the rules, which make you cool/.../and gets power’. Students at the top of the social hierarchy were considered to be more able to violate school rules and demonstrate their high social status by their rule resistance. Weak or non-existent sanctions then facilitate students in breaking the rules, including bullying others.

**Category 6: cultural ideals**

The students argued that there are collective perceptions among students about which characteristics are ‘cool’ and associated with high status, as well as the opposite and ‘wrong’ characteristics that put students at greater risk of being positioned with low status and victimised. These collective perceptions are influenced by the social positions among the students, in which those who are ‘cool’ become the template for what is ‘right’. At the same time, social media is an important resource in the process of social positioning. According to the students, there are cultural or societal ideals that influence who gets high status as a result of successfully living up to these ideals on the one hand, and who
gets bullied on the other hand. Popularity is associated with being similar to those cultural ideals mediated by social media, particularly in terms of appearance, body and dress:

Student: Well, I think it’s mostly about social media and—, a lot of ideals and stuff.
Interviewer: Social media? In what way, do you think?
Student: Well, kind of models uploading pictures and kind of writing how slim and good-looking they are, and people think they’re good-looking and think that others should be like them.

Several students in the current study argued that students can work out for themselves, at an early stage, what kind of positions their classmates will have due to influences from the media and society. One explained, ‘Of course you know because you can see it in books, movies, TV shows and everything’. Although the students were living in Sweden, some of them referred to American high-school movies and TV shows as an influential source in which they and their peers could easily recognise how the ‘cool’ students looked and acted and how the ‘nerds’ were portrayed. Students referred to and used cultural ideals and norms manifested in social media, movies, TV shows and other media in the process of social positioning, in which, for example, images of a ‘nerd’ in a movie or a TV show can be transferred to their own everyday school life, influencing how a peer positioned in such a role in the school class is then expected to be and behave.

The girls in the study described that the ideal image and the ‘right’ way to be a girl is to be slim and long-haired, to look like the models on Instagram and other social media, and to be good-looking. According to the girls, those who come closest to these ideals tend to be popular and get a lot of attention due to their similarities with what is collectively perceived as the perfect image. One of the girls in the study stated that the Internet and movies influence people ‘very much’ and those who ‘look the way you should look and take advantage of the attention get air under their wings to push someone else down’. Students who do not live up to the ideal images were reported to have difficulties in achieving high status and getting attention. The opposite of the cultural ideals, and more in line with the image of being a ‘nerd’ or a ‘loser’ as portrayed in the media, is, according the students, to be shy, withdrawn, weird and ugly, which they associated with being at a higher risk of being bullied. For instance, as one student pointed out, ‘being less aware of trends’ and, as another explained, ‘not having a slim and beautiful body’ were reported as possible reasons for peer alienation and victimisation. A gap between a student and the ideals was understood as something that could lead to a social position with low status and labels like ‘odd’, ‘wrong’ and ‘different’.

Discussion

Our study was a small scale, in-depth exploration of rich data. Using the qualitative methodology outlined above, we were able to identify categories that offer insight into the students’ own understandings of why bullying happens. In line with the constructivist position of grounded theory, we do not claim to offer an exact picture but rather an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon studied (Charmaz 2014). In this section, we discuss our findings further in the context of the wider literature. Our analysis suggests that, from the perspectives of the Swedish lower secondary school students that we interviewed, the core process of bullying is social positioning, and the main concern of
those engaged in bullying was to achieve or maintain a high social status in the hierarchical peer landscape of the school. This is in line with how students reason in other studies (Forsberg and Thornberg 2016; Erling and Hwang 2004; Frisén et al. 2008; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008). At the same time, our findings problematise these previous studies and prior ethnographic as well as quantitative peer-nomination studies demonstrating that bullying is linked with social status in which bullies are usually more popular or have a high social status (for reviews, see Pouwels, Lansu, and Cillessen 2018; Thornberg 2011). Our analysis of the participants’ perspective showed that bullying as a means of social positioning creates an ‘ambiguous coolness’ among the students. Bullying is associated with being ‘cool’, while at the same time it is considered to be ‘uncool’ to bully. Perceiving bullies as high-status, popular and powerful peers who bully to achieve and maintain their high social positions produces a fear of being the next victim, which motivates students to maintain their social self rather than their moral self by bullying others, taking the bullies’ side or remaining a passive bystander in bullying situations. These findings point to the importance of addressing social positioning as a part of bullying prevention and intervention policy and practice. For example, this might involve teachers and other school staff inviting the students to build up a school culture together with the adults based on equality, non-competition and prosocial values. One way to accomplish this might be to teach such values and discuss them with the students, and then engage them in small group discussions on ‘what kind of classroom and school rules do we need to make sure that all students feel safe and included in the classroom and at school’, followed up by whole-classroom discussions and decisions.

A further lesson that emerges when listening to the students and analysing what they are saying in the current study is that bullying includes victim constructing. In accordance with previous findings (Cheng et al. 2011; Frisén et al. 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Purcell 2012; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008), our study indicates that victims of school bullying are socially constructed as ‘different’ and ‘wrong’ (i.e. not following the peer norms dictated by high-status bullies), which is connected with a low-status position. In the long term, and as reported by students in the current study, bullying could be re-defined and interpreted by students as the reasonable outcome of different social roles and as a natural part of everyday social life, in which the border between joking and abuse becomes blurred. Thus, we suggest that anti-bullying policy and practice in schools should: (a) address peer norms by inviting students into a deliberative discussion about the values of social inclusion, a caring community, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and tolerance; (b) counteract labelling and stigma processes; and (c) educate students to recognise and never normalise bullying, and clearly draw the line between joking and abuse.

The students also discussed the need for consistent rule enforcement at school to avoid rule diffusion and rule resistance, which could otherwise facilitate bullying. According to the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997), children and adolescents are both constructed by structure and acting in and upon structure. School rules and how these are maintained (or not) by teachers and other adults in their ongoing social interactions with the students contribute to the quality of the structure and are, thus, a part of the negotiated order (Strauss 1978) of everyday school life. From the students’ point of view, a high degree of structure in terms of rule clarity and consistency is crucial in bullying prevention. In contrast, a poor and
inconsistent structure of school rules seems to create an unsafe school culture that facilitates and normalises bullying. Since many students in the current study intimated the view that adults at school do not always take bullying situations seriously and are not consistent in rule enforcement, the role and responsibility of the teachers and other adults at school need to be emphasised and further discussed and developed in anti-bullying policy and practice. Students are dependent on teachers who take bullying seriously and create a robust, fair and consistent rule structure together with the students, as the ultimate responsibility at school rests with the adults.

The present findings suggest that cultural ideals mediated by social media influence peer norms and determine who gets high status and who gets low status, while at the same time these social ideals are used as tools in the process of social positioning, including victim constructing and bullying normalising. This is very much in line with the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997), which states that children ‘create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns’ (Corsaro 2005, 18–19). Bullying prevention programmes in general have sometimes been criticised for not including components to deal explicitly with gender, ethnicity, body ideals, sexuality, religion, and disability issues (e.g. Temko 2019), and the current findings highlight the importance of addressing cultural ideals. For instance, the girls reported that girls’ popularity was linked with being good-looking, slim, long-haired and looking like the models on social media. These findings are supported by previous research such as Duncan and Owen’s (2011) study indicating that teenage girls’ popularity is associated with physical attributes and popularity with boys. Duncan and Owen (2011) interpret this popularity as based on the widespread heteronormativity. Cultural ideals, including heteronormativity and other hegemonic norms, and social media should therefore also be targeted when working with peer norms as a means of counteracting school bullying.

Some limitations in respect of our study should be noted. First, because we downplayed the criterion of intention of harm in our definition of bullying, some may question to what degree the social incidents that the participants are referring to really represent bullying. Further, even though the students in the current study most often label the incidents they have reported as bullying, the term has still multiple meanings and uses in practice (cf. Canty et al. 2016) because definitions in the bullying literature are general and the meaning is due to the characteristics of languages, cultures, and contexts.

In addition, the use of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework may have resulted in too much of a focus on bullying between individuals and missed bullying explained by factors on a school level. We did not collect any data on whether the participants themselves have bullied others or been victims of bullying. Such information might have shed light on how they view the social positioning of the bully and the perception of victims as odd, different or ‘deviant’. Finally, although the application of the ‘least-adult role’ (Mandell 1991) can be considered as a strength in terms of allowing the young participants to express their experiences and perspectives more openly and freely, this research position has also been problematised in terms of presuming control to be located in the researcher and the research design, and reifying the power differences between adults and children that the researcher seeks to deconstruct as universal and static, rather than recognising their local and dynamic qualities (Raffety 2015). In addition, to further deal with the power imbalance and help the participants to feel confident in the
interview setting, we could have interviewed them in twos or groups of friends instead of conducting individual interviews (see Mayall 2000).

Conclusion

This study offers a contribution to the insider perspective, as we sought to understand more deeply how students explain why bullying happens. We hope that the findings from our study can be used to support teachers, head teachers and other school staff in their efforts to listen to students, examine their understandings and involve them in bullying prevention. Student consultations and participation are crucial because students are more knowledgeable than teachers about what goes on in the playground and the corridors (Rudduck and Flutter 2004). We hope that the findings can offer a helpful starting point when investigating students’ perspectives and giving them a voice in bullying prevention at school.

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Appendix The Interview Guides (translated from Swedish)

**Interview guide used in the main interview**

In the questionnaire, you reported that you had witnessed [mentioning the behaviours that had been reported in the questionnaire].

- Could you tell me a bit more about what you saw? (When?)
- How come, do you think, he/she/they did that to him/her?
- Were there any other students who saw what happened? How did they react?
- How come they [the bystanders] did what they did, do you think? What do you think they thought and felt about it?
- How did you react when this happened?
- How come you did what you did at the time? What did you think and feel about it?
- In what other ways could one have acted in such a situation? How come no one/most of them didn’t act like that, do you think?
- What do you think one can best do to help a person whom others are mean to?
- What could be the other reasons why students don’t help the person?

**Interview guide used in the follow-up interview**

- It seems that those who do mean things at school often become ‘cool’ and get attention. Why do you think that happens?
- How come some students are ‘cool’? Due to what, do you think?
- What determines who gets different roles in the school class?
- Do you think a person is responsible for intervening in situations in which someone gets harassed?
- If teachers see a violent situation or a situation in which someone gets harassed, how could they then react?
- Students whom we have talked to have told us that they sometimes don’t dare to say something when they witness someone getting harassed because they are afraid of getting harassed themselves. How come, do you think, some people are afraid to speak up?
- There are usually rules at schools saying that you should be kind and that you are not allowed to bully others. Do students breach such rules at this school?
- Do you work with the rules at school (for example by discussing them in the classroom)?