

Bullying and Cyberbullying Roles

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Introduction: Defining the Roles and Dynamics

The study of bullying and cyberbullying has evolved significantly, moving beyond a simplistic dyadic model--the aggressor and the targeted individual--to recognize the complex, systemic nature of these harmful interactions. Contemporary psychological research emphasizes that bullying is fundamentally a group phenomenon, sustained and shaped by the surrounding peer ecology. Understanding the specific roles assumed by participants is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies, as each role carries distinct psychological motivations, behavioral patterns, and associated risks. These roles are rarely static; individuals may transition between them depending on the context, the specific incident, and the developmental stage, though certain roles tend to become entrenched over time.

The foundational work identifying these participant roles posits that the behavior of the primary actors--the bully and the victim--is heavily influenced by the reactions of the onlookers, collectively known as **bystanders**. This realization led researchers, most notably Salmivalli and colleagues, to categorize the peer group into specific functional roles, recognizing that the audience often provides the necessary social reinforcement that maintains the aggressor's behavior and validates the power imbalance. This framework allows for a more nuanced analysis of the social dynamics, acknowledging that participation ranges from active physical or verbal aggression to passive acceptance or even covert encouragement.

In both traditional bullying and the digital equivalent, cyberbullying, the primary roles identified include the **Perpetrator** (Bully), the **Target** (Victim), and the complex, often marginalized category of the **Bully-Victim**. Furthermore, the Bystander category is subdivided into roles such as Assistants, Reinforcers, Defenders, and Outsiders. Analyzing the functions of these roles reveals that bullying is not merely an interpersonal conflict but a performance intended to establish or maintain social dominance, where the passive or supportive reactions of peers are often more determinant of the behavior's continuation than the direct consequences faced by the aggressor.

The Perpetrator (The Bully)

The Perpetrator, often referred to as the bully, is defined by their consistent engagement in aggressive behavior characterized by an intent to harm, a repetition of actions over time, and a clear imbalance of power between themselves and the target. This power imbalance can manifest physically, socially, or psychologically, and the aggressor uses this advantage to gain status, material goods, or simply derive satisfaction from the dominance display. Contrary to older psychological stereotypes suggesting profound insecurity, many successful perpetrators exhibit high levels of social intelligence and possess strong manipulation skills, allowing them to effectively choose vulnerable targets and mobilize peer support. Their aggression is often instrumental, serving a calculated purpose rather than being purely reactive or impulsive.

Psychologically, perpetrators often display deficits in affective empathy, meaning they struggle to genuinely feel or share the distress of their victim, although they may possess adequate cognitive empathy, allowing them to understand how their actions affect others and thus how to maximize harm. They frequently exhibit low tolerance for frustration, a strong need for control, and a tendency to externalize blame, refusing to take responsibility for their harmful actions. Longitudinal studies indicate that engagement in bullying behavior during childhood is a significant risk factor for developing subsequent antisocial behaviors, criminal activity, and relationship problems in adulthood, highlighting the critical need for early intervention focused on modifying aggressive schemas and improving self-regulation skills rather than simply punishing the behavior.

Risk factors contributing to the establishment of the perpetrator role are often rooted in the individual's environment. A home environment characterized by harsh, inconsistent parenting, lack of warmth, or exposure to violence can model aggressive conflict resolution techniques, normalizing the use of force to achieve desired outcomes. Furthermore, perpetrators often thrive in school or social environments where adult supervision is lax or where aggressive behavior is tacitly accepted or even glamorized as a sign of strength or coolness. Their ability to successfully mobilize assistants and reinforcers within the peer group solidifies their position of dominance, making it increasingly difficult for them to shift away from the aggressive role without significant, targeted intervention focusing on prosocial skill development and genuine accountability.

The Target (The Victim)

The Target, or victim, is the individual subjected to repeated negative actions by one or more perpetrators, leading to distress, fear, and sometimes physical harm. Research traditionally divides victims into two main categories: **passive victims** and **provocative victims**. Passive victims tend to be submissive, anxious, physically weaker, and lack the social skills or assertiveness necessary to effectively defend themselves or deter the aggressor. They often display internalizing symptoms such as depression, social withdrawal, and high levels of generalized anxiety, which unfortunately can signal vulnerability to potential aggressors, perpetuating the cycle of victimization.

The consequences of sustained victimization are profound and far-reaching, impacting virtually every aspect of a target's well-being. Academically, targets often experience difficulty concentrating, leading to declining performance and increased school avoidance or truancy. Socially, they suffer from social isolation, loss of trust in peers and adults, and severe damage to their self-esteem and sense of personal security. Psychologically, the experience can lead to the development of severe internalizing problems, including clinical depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and in severe cases, symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly when the aggression is intense, prolonged, or involves physical violence or sexual harassment.

Effective support for targets requires a multi-faceted approach focused on restoring a sense of safety and agency. Interventions should prioritize immediate protection, reducing exposure to the aggressor, and providing psychological support to address trauma and rebuild self-worth. Crucially, targets need assistance in developing robust social coping mechanisms, learning appropriate assertiveness, and strengthening their social network to minimize their vulnerability. It is essential to avoid approaches that inadvertently blame the victim by focusing solely on changing their behavior without addressing the systemic factors and the behavior of the perpetrator and the peer group.

The Bully-Victim (Aggressive Victims)

The Bully-Victim role represents one of the most complex and challenging categories within bullying research, characterized by individuals who concurrently exhibit aggressive behaviors toward others while also being frequent targets of victimization themselves. These individuals are often referred to as **aggressive victims** or **provocative victims**, and they typically display a distinct and highly problematic profile. They are frequently characterized by high levels of emotional dysregulation, poor impulse control, and deficits in social information processing, leading them to misinterpret neutral or ambiguous social cues as hostile, resulting in reactive aggression.

Unlike pure perpetrators who often enjoy high social status or peer acceptance, bully-victims are generally the most disliked and socially rejected participants in the bullying dynamic. Their aggressive outbursts alienate potential friends and defenders, while their underlying vulnerability makes them easy targets for more dominant perpetrators. This dual status puts them at the highest risk for severe negative mental health outcomes, often experiencing a combination of internalizing problems (like depression and anxiety stemming from victimization) and externalizing problems (like conduct disorder and hostility stemming from their aggressive tendencies). This unique risk profile necessitates highly specialized intervention strategies.

The developmental trajectory for bully-victims is often associated with early exposure to chaotic or violent environments, frequently involving physical punishment or neglect, which teaches them that aggression is a necessary tool for survival and attention, even if it invites retaliation. Intervention must therefore address both sides of their behavioral repertoire. It requires teaching effective emotional regulation and impulse control skills, while simultaneously providing social skills training to improve peer relations and reduce the likelihood of provoking aggression. Furthermore, the systemic context must be altered to break the cycle where their aggression invites victimization, which then fuels further aggressive attempts at self-defense or status establishment.

The Bystander Phenomenon and Peer Ecology

The **bystander phenomenon** refers to the collective group of peers who witness bullying incidents

but are neither the aggressor nor the primary target. This group is far from passive; their reactions--or lack thereof--are the critical determinants of whether a bullying episode continues, intensifies, or ceases. Bullying is fundamentally a social behavior designed for an audience, and when the audience provides positive reinforcement, whether through laughter, attention, or silent approval, the perpetrator's behavior is validated and maintained. Conversely, when bystanders intervene or express disapproval, the social rewards for the aggressor diminish significantly, often leading to the cessation of the aggressive act.

The decision of a bystander to intervene is influenced by numerous factors, including the concept of **diffusion of responsibility**, where the presence of multiple witnesses leads individuals to feel less personal accountability to act. Furthermore, bystanders often operate under a fear of retaliation, believing that intervening will make them the next target, especially if the perpetrator is highly dominant or popular. Social norms also play a crucial role; in school environments where bullying is normalized or where the victim is socially marginalized, bystanders are less likely to perceive the behavior as requiring intervention, thus reinforcing the existing negative peer ecology.

To effectively address bullying, interventions must pivot from focusing solely on the bully and victim to fundamentally changing the peer ecology. The goal is to shift the social norms so that defending the victim becomes the socially acceptable and reinforced behavior, while supporting the aggressor becomes socially costly. Researchers categorize bystanders into several functional sub-roles based on their typical reactions, providing a framework for targeted social-emotional learning and intervention programs designed to empower prosocial action and minimize harmful reinforcement.

Supportive Bystander Roles: Reinforcers and Assistants

Within the bystander group, **Assistants** and **Reinforcers** play direct roles in supporting the perpetrator, thereby sustaining the bullying dynamic. The Assistant is the peer who actively joins the aggressor, participating directly in the negative behavior, whether through physical force, verbal insults, or social exclusion. Assistants often operate out of a desire for proximity to power, hoping to secure their own social status or protection by aligning themselves with the dominant individual, or sometimes due to genuine shared animosity toward the target. Their actions multiply the harm experienced by the victim and increase the perceived strength of the aggressive coalition.

The Reinforcer, conversely, supports the aggressor more indirectly, yet their role is equally vital in maintaining the behavior. Reinforcers are the individuals who laugh, cheer, make encouraging comments, or provide the rapt attention that the perpetrator seeks. They provide the necessary social reward structure, signaling to the aggressor that their behavior is effective, entertaining, or socially acceptable. While a Reinforcer may claim they are not actively bullying, their non-verbal or verbal support validates the power display and ensures the continued performance of aggression.

Understanding the motivations behind these supportive roles is key to intervention. For Assistants, intervention must address the underlying need for status or belonging that drives them to align with aggression, often requiring social skills training focused on cooperative behavior and positive leadership. For Reinforcers, the focus shifts to awareness--helping them understand the profound impact their laughter or passive encouragement has on both the victim's distress and the perpetrator's motivation. By making the costs of reinforcement clear and establishing a norm of non-engagement, the social rewards that fuel the aggression can be systematically dismantled.

Non-Supportive Bystander Roles: Defenders and Outsiders

The most critical prosocial role in the peer ecology is the **Defender**. Defenders are the individuals who actively intervene to stop the bullying, offer comfort and support to the victim, or report the incident to an adult. Their actions are highly impactful because they directly challenge the aggressor's dominance and provide immediate support to the target, buffering the psychological damage of victimization. Defenders typically exhibit high levels of **empathy**, strong moral reasoning, and the necessary social competence and self-efficacy to withstand potential pressure or retaliation from the aggressor or their coalition.

Conversely, the **Outsider**, or neutral bystander, is the individual who intentionally withdraws from the situation, pretending not to notice or physically moving away. While they do not actively support the aggressor, their inaction is a form of tacit approval, contributing to the culture of silence that allows bullying to flourish. Outsiders prioritize self-preservation, fearing involvement or retaliation, and often rationalize their inaction by minimizing the severity of the incident or perceiving the victim as somehow deserving of the treatment. Though they are not aggressive, their silence perpetuates the power imbalance and isolates the target further.

Interventions focused on empowering the peer group must prioritize strengthening the Defender role. This involves teaching specific, low-risk intervention skills--such as distracting the aggressor or seeking help rather than direct confrontation--and creating a school or social climate where defending is socially rewarded and protected. For Outsiders, the goal is to reduce the perceived risk of intervention by fostering a strong sense of collective responsibility and moral courage, transforming passive witnesses into active allies by demonstrating that the social costs of standing by are greater than the risks of stepping in.

The Context Shift: Roles in Cyberbullying

The advent of digital communication dramatically alters the dynamics and visibility of traditional bullying roles, giving rise to **cyberbullying**. While the core psychological roles (Perpetrator, Target, Bystander) remain, the mechanisms through which they operate are fundamentally changed by technology's features, namely **anonymity**, **persistence**, and **vast audience reach**. The cyber-

perpetrator benefits from the psychological distance afforded by screens, often leading to the **online disinhibition effect**, where individuals engage in more aggressive, vulgar, or harmful behaviors than they would offline due to reduced personal accountability and empathy.

For the Cyber-Target, the experience is often characterized by the inescapable nature of the aggression. Unlike traditional bullying, which often ends at the school gate, cyberbullying is persistent, following the target into their home and personal spaces via phones and computers, leading to chronic stress and hypervigilance. Furthermore, the content--whether rumors, humiliating photos, or threats--is often permanent and can be shared instantly across vast networks, dramatically expanding the scope and longevity of the victimization and potentially leading to public shaming on an unprecedented scale.

The Cyber-Bystander role is perhaps the most fluid and potent in the digital context, often blurring the lines between Reinforcer, Outsider, and Assistant. The act of simply viewing, liking, forwarding, or commenting on harmful content transforms a passive observer into an active participant (a Reinforcer/Assistant), providing immediate, widespread validation for the perpetrator. The speed of digital sharing means the diffusion of responsibility is accelerated, making intervention less likely. Effective cyberbullying prevention requires educating the digital bystanders that their digital footprint matters, and that non-participation--refusing to share or actively reporting harmful content--is the digital equivalent of defending the target.

Psychosocial Implications and Intervention Strategies

The long-term psychosocial implications of participation in bullying dynamics are significant for every role. Perpetrators face increased risks of substance abuse, criminality, and relationship instability in adulthood. Targets suffer from chronic mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and social avoidance that can persist for decades. Bully-victims face the most severe outcomes, demonstrating heightened risk for suicidal ideation, severe externalizing problems, and profound social maladjustment due to their dual exposure to both victimization and aggression.

Effective intervention must move beyond punitive measures for the bully and purely supportive measures for the victim to adopt an ecological approach that targets the entire peer group. Strategies must be role-specific: Perpetrators require intensive social-cognitive training to improve empathy and shift their instrumental goals away from dominance toward prosocial achievement. Targets require resilience training, peer support networks, and therapeutic intervention to mitigate trauma and restore self-efficacy.

The ultimate success of any bullying prevention program hinges on its ability to transform the bystander group into active defenders. Programs like the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program emphasize collective responsibility, providing concrete strategies for peers to intervene safely and non-aggressively, thereby systematically reducing the social rewards available to the aggressor. By

focusing on moral engagement and empowering the silent majority, the environment shifts from one that sustains aggression to one that actively protects the vulnerable, fundamentally altering the roles and the power structure within the social ecology.

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