# The Complex Relation Between Bullying, Victimization, Acceptance, and Rejection: Giving Special Attention to Status, Affection, and Sex Differences

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To understand the complex nature of bullies' acceptance and rejection, this article considered goal-framing effects of status and affection as they relate to the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies), the target (male vs. female victims), and the evaluator (acceptance and rejection from male vs. female classmates). The hypotheses were tested with data from a social network questionnaire conducted in 26 elementary school classes ($N = 481$ children; $M_{age} = 10.5$ years). The findings revealed that bullies were only rejected by those for whom they were a potential threat and that bullies generally chose their victims so as to minimize loss of affection by choosing victims who were not likely to be defended by significant others.

Bullying is a common phenomenon in school classes. In this study, we try to clarify the complex relations of bullying with acceptance and rejection. Because peer processes, especially in childhood and early adolescence, often show gender segmentation, we are interested in whether bullying toward same-gender classmates has the same effect on peer acceptance and rejection as bullying toward other-gender classmates. We argue that besides taking the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies) into account, we should also take the gender of the target (male vs. female victims) and the evaluator (acceptance and rejection by male vs. female classmates) into account to explain the relation between bullying, victimization, and peer status. The following questions will be examined: How are bullying and victimization related to peer status among same-gender and other-gender classmates? Is bullying toward same-gender classmates differently related to status than bullying toward other-gender classmates? And how is this for victimization by same-gender or other-gender classmates?

*Theoretical Elaboration*

In the goal-framing approach, focal goals are hypothesized to influence what people attend to, what knowledge is being activated, how people evaluate things, and how they process information

(Lindenberg, 2006). People are aware of aspects in the situation that potentially help or hinder their goal pursuit, and they positively evaluate (like) the former and negatively evaluate (dislike) the latter. Liking and disliking are thus the result of different goal-related processes. This goal-framing approach has recently been applied to questions of acceptance and rejection (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2007), to questions concerning who bullies whom (Veenstra et al., 2007), and to the role of popular adolescents in bullying (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008).

When studying interactions among children, what goals should be considered? Status and affection goals have frequently been identified as important for all human beings (Barkow, 1989; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Huberman, Loch, & Önçüler, 2004; Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Vonkorff, 1997). Although we do not measure these goals directly, we have good evidence for their importance. Pendell (2002) has reviewed much literature that shows affection to be a universal need. The evolutionary and developmental importance of affection has also been shown (MacDonald, 1992). Status has also been established as a universal goal (Barkow, 1989; Huberman et al., 2004), and the importance of this goal for bullying has recently been directly assessed (see Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Both goals are prominent in childhood and preadolescence as well

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(Buhrmester, 1990; Hawley, 2003; Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Oldehinkel, Rosmalen, Veenstra, Dijkstra, & Ormel, 2007). Thus, it seems to be a safe assumption that bullies, like other human beings, want to realize status *and* affection.

Given these goals, the crucial aspect of the pursuit of status is that it is conditioned by the pursuit of affection. People want both status and affection and are not eager to forego one for the sake of the other (Lindenberg, 2001). For bullying this means that children who want to dominate will be keenly aware of opportunities to do so without risking loss of affection from significant others (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Thus, bullies (i.e., instrumental and not reactive bullies) can be expected to strategically choose victims who are already rejected (disliked) by significant others in the class. Bullies are likely to divide the classroom into potential sources of affection (significant others) and potential sources of domination (victims for whom the significant others do not care). For children, the significant others are likely to be same-gender classmates (Dijkstra et al., 2007; Maccoby, 1998; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Thus, bullies can also be expected to desire to be accepted by the significant same-gender classmates and not to care much about rejection by the rest (Olthof & Goossens, 2008).

Bullies thwart the goal pursuit of victims and, on the basis of goal-framing theory, can be predicted to be rejected by their victims and by others for whose goal pursuit they are a potential threat. From this follows our first set of hypotheses (on selective threat and rejection). We expect that the rejection of bullies will only come from the gender to which the victim belongs: (1a) Bullying same-gender classmates is related to being rejected by same-gender classmates only. (1b) Bullying other-gender classmates is related to being rejected by other-gender classmates only.

With regard to affection, goal-framing theory predicts that male bullies are likely to strategically choose victims who pose a minimal risk for a loss of affection: those boys who have low acceptance among boys (i.e., they are not important for affection) and are rejected by boys. Considering that children rarely have best friends in the other-gender group, we argue that for boys it is slightly different to bully girls: Male bullies are likely to choose those girls as victims who are rejected by boys (liking is not an issue here). For female bullies, we expect the converse: Female bullies are likely to choose those boys as victims who are rejected by girls. There is no a priori reason to assume that for them the two goals work differently, although there

will be fewer girls for whom domination is a prominent goal (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004; Hanish & Guerra, 2004).

From the foregoing, we can deduce our second set of hypotheses (on bullying and the avoidance of loss of affection). We expect that bullies will avoid loss of affection by choosing victims that are not cared for by significant others: (2a) If children bully same-gender classmates, they will focus on those potential victims who are rejected by and have low acceptance from the bullies' same-gender classmates. (2b) If children bully other-gender classmates, they will focus on those potential victims who are rejected by the bullies' same-gender classmates. (2c) There will be no negative relation between being a bully and the level of acceptance from boys and girls (bullies do not lose affection). If all these hypotheses are supported by the data, it will be likely that it is indeed avoidance of loss of affection that drives the results.

Note that the hypotheses contain different sources of acceptance and rejection. In theory, victims have low acceptance and are already rejected *before* being bullied. Choosing these victims is part of the bully's strategy to avoid loss of affection, in particular from same-gender classmates. Bullies are rejected if they pose a threat. Given the gender segmentation of children, they are expected to be rejected by members of the gender of the victim and ignored by the rest.

## Method

### Sample

Network questions on bullying and victimization were collected in middle and late elementary education (Grades 5–8 in the Netherlands). The sample yielded 481 children from 26 classrooms (23 for regular and 3 for special education): 218 girls (45.3%) and 263 boys (54.7%), with a mean age of 10.5 years ($SD = 1.5$). The mean class size was 19.4 children ($SD = 4.4$). Schools were situated in both rural and (sub)urban areas. The percentage of children with parents with a low educational level, at maximum a certificate of secondary vocational education, was 16.9%. The percentage of children from ethnic minorities (of whom at least one parent was born outside the Netherlands) was 18.7%.

### Procedure

Data were collected from October 2005 to March 2007. After parental consent was obtained, children filled out the questionnaires in the school class,

under the supervision of a well-trained research assistant. Ninety-seven percent of all children participated in the study. The dyadic peer-nomination assessment took place at school. The number of nominations the children could make was unlimited (they were not required to nominate anyone), and same-gender as well as other-gender nominations were allowed.

*Measures*

*Peer acceptance and rejection.* The numbers of nominations children received individually from their same- and other-gender classmates with regard to ''best friends'' and ''dislike'' were used to create measures of same- and other-gender peer acceptance and peer rejection. After the numbers of received nominations had been summed, proportions were calculated to take differences in the number of respondents per class into account, yielding scores from 0 to 1 (see Veenstra et al., 2007, for more information on this dyadic peer nomination procedure).

*Bullying and victimization.* The term *bullying* was defined to the students in the way formulated in the Olweus's (1996) Bully/Victim Questionnaire, which emphasizes the repetitive and intentional nature of bullying and the power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Several examples covering different forms of bullying were given. In addition, examples of behaviors that should not be considered as bullying (teasing in a friendly and playful way, fighting between children of equal strength) were also provided.

The numbers of nominations children received individually from their same- and other-gender classmates with regard to different forms of bullying and victimization were used to create measures of same- and other-gender bullying and victimization. We asked ''who do you bully by . . . ?'' and ''by whom are you bullied by . . . ?'' using five forms of bullying and victimization: (a) excluding or ignoring; (b) calling names or laughing; (c) hitting, kicking, or pinching; (d) taking things; (e) throwing things. There were no clear differences in the association of the different forms of bullying and victimization with peer status. For that reason, we combined the different forms in highly reliable scales for bullying and victimization (Cronbach's alphas = .89 and .87, respectively).

*Analyses*

We tested our hypotheses with multivariate analyses using cross-sectional data. Because both acceptance and rejection deviated from normality, we conducted regression analyses with the Tobit model, which accounts for violations of normality of the dependent variables (Long, 1997; Smith & Brame, 2003; Tobin, 1953). The regression analyses included main effects of gender, bullying toward boys and toward girls, victimization from boys and from girls, and (the significant) interaction effects between gender and either bullying or victimization. The effects for girls are equal to the main effects in Tables 2 and 3, but the effects for boys are the sum of the main and interaction effects (Aiken & West, 1991). All continuous variables were standardized for the whole sample ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Finally, we examined whether the effects differed by age.

## Results

Table 1 shows that same-gender classmates were more accepted and less rejected than other-gender classmates by both boys and girls. Furthermore,

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of Peer Status, Bullying, and Victimization for Boys (N = 263) and Girls (N = 218)*

|  | Boys | Girls |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Acceptance by boys | .393 (.203) | .110 (.121) |
| Acceptance by girls | .110 (.142) | .474 (.250) |
| Rejection by boys | .119 (.160) | .163 (.183) |
| Rejection by girls | .267 (.250) | .091 (.142) |
| Bullying toward boys | .065 (.083) | .034 (.051) |
| Bullying toward girls | .064 (.092) | .035 (.053) |
| Victimization by boys | .041 (.070) | .032 (.057) |
| Victimization by girls | .023 (.045) | .022 (.053) |

Table 2

*Multiple Regression Analyses on Peer Rejection and Its Relation to Bullying and Victimization (N = 481)*

|  | Peer rejection by boys | Peer rejection by girls |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Gender (1 = boys) | −.77 (.18)** | .94 (.19)** |
| Bullying toward boys | .74 (.15)** | .36 (.15)* |
| Bullying toward girls | −.03 (.11) | .37 (.09)** |
| Victimization by boys | .35 (.06)** | .15 (.11) |
| Victimization by girls | .16 (.09)† | .18 (.06)** |
| Gender × Bullying Toward Boys | −.38 (.14)** | −.33 (.19)† |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 13.8% | 15.9% |

*Note.* White–Huber standard errors that adjust for clustering of individuals within classrooms are reported. Pseudo $R^2$ values as obtained from Tobit analyses are reported. Values are expressed as $B$ (*SE*).
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 3

*Multiple Regression Analyses on Peer Acceptance and Its Relation to Bullying and Victimization* (N = 481)

| | Peer acceptance by boys | Peer acceptance by girls |
|---|---|---|
| Gender (1 = boys) | 1.64 (.14)** | −1.56 (.15)** |
| Bullying toward boys | −.46 (.19)* | −.28 (.14)* |
| Bullying toward girls | −.01 (.08) | −.09 (.08) |
| Victimization by boys | .12 (.15) | .08 (.15) |
| Victimization by girls | −.05 (.07) | −.17 (.08)* |
| Gender × Bullying Toward Boys | .55 (.18)** | .50 (.17)** |
| Gender × Victimization by Boys | −.43 (.15)** | −.26 (.18) |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 20.1% | 20.4% |

*Note.* White–Huber standard errors that adjust for clustering of individuals within classrooms are reported. Pseudo $R^2$ values as obtained from Tobit analyses are reported. Values are expressed as B (SE).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

boys were more rejected than girls. Table 1 also shows that boys were more often nominated than girls as perpetrators of bullying toward both boys and girls.

*Testing the Selective Threat Hypotheses*

The multivariate analyses are depicted in Tables 2 and 3. Let us first turn to the selective threat hypotheses about the rejection of bullies. As hypothesized, boys bullying boys are only rejected by boys, $b = .36$, $t(480) = 2.78$, $p < .01$, and not by girls, $b = .03$, $t(480) = 0.30$, $p = .76$. If boys bully girls, they are only rejected by girls, $b = .37$, $t(480) = 4.10$, $p < .01$, and not by boys, $b = −.03$, $t(480) = −0.33$, $p = .75$.

For girls, the selective threat hypotheses are similarly supported by the data: Girls who bully girls are rejected by girls, $b = .37$, $t(480) = 4.10$, $p < .01$, and girls who bully boys are rejected by boys, $b = .74$, $t(480) = 5.10$, $p < .01$.

*Testing the Avoidance of Loss of Affection Hypotheses*

With regard to avoidance of loss of affection for boys, we see from Table 2 that victims of male bullies are indeed rejected by boys only, $b = .35$, $t(480) = 6.05$, $p < .01$, and victims of female bullies are rejected by girls, $b = .18$, $t(480) = 2.92$, $p < .01$.

From Table 3, we see that male victims have a low level of acceptance among boys, $b = −.31$, $t(480) = −3.91$, $p < .01$. Among girls, female as well as male victims have a low level of acceptance, $b = −.17$, $t(480) = −2.02$, $p = .04$.

On the whole, there is, as predicted, no negative relation between bullying and acceptance. Girls even seem to welcome boys who bully boys: acceptance, $b = .22$, $t(480) = 1.93$, $p = .05$. There is one exception, though: Girls who bully boys have a low level of acceptance by both genders (see Table 3), acceptance by boys, $b = −.46$, $t(480) = −2.50$, $p = .01$, and by girls, $b = −.28$, $t(480) = −1.99$, $p = .05$.

*Differences Between Middle Childhood and Preadolescence*

Given the age range, we controlled for age and examined whether the results differed for middle childhood and preadolescence (median split at 10.45 years). Age had no main effect on acceptance and rejection. Only the results for peer acceptance by boys showed age differences. Girls bullying boys was more strongly related to low levels of male acceptance in middle childhood, $b = −.67$, $t(480) = −3.49$, $p < .01$, than in preadolescence, $b = −.35$, $t(480) = −1.96$, $p = .05$. Bullying girls was positively related to male acceptance in middle childhood, $b = .29$, $t(480) = 3.58$, $p < .01$, but negatively in preadolescence, $b = −.17$, $t(480) = −2.19$, $p = .03$. Victims of female bullies had low levels of male acceptance in middle childhood, $b = −.23$, $t(480) = −2.62$, $p < .01$, but not in preadolescence.

### Discussion

Bullies and victims are not equally disliked. To understand the complex nature of bullies and victims' acceptance and rejection for children in middle and late elementary education, we considered goal-framing effects of status and affection as they relate to the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies), the target (male vs. female victims), and the evaluator (acceptance and rejection from male vs. female classmates).

Our first set of hypotheses dealt with bullying as a selective threat to goal pursuit. We hypothesized that bullies would only be rejected by those for whom they were a potential threat, and this bore out. Bullies, whether male of female, were indeed rejected by the gender to whom the bullying was directed but not by the gender to whom it was not directed.

Our second set of hypotheses dealt with the bullies' avoidance of loss of affection by choosing victims that were not cared for by significant others. We predicted that bullies focus strategically on those potential same-gender victims who were

rejected by and had low acceptance from same-gender classmates. For potential other-gender victims we hypothesized that children would focus on those who were rejected by the bullies' same-gender classmates. We found that victims of male bullies were indeed rejected by boys only and that male bullies were never low on acceptance. Thus, as expected, boys seem to choose their victims so as to minimize loss of affection.

Girls victimized by girls were rejected and unaccepted by girls, as goal-framing theory had predicted. However, girls who bullied boys lost acceptance and were more rejected by both genders. We have no way of saying whether this latter finding is specific to the data we used or whether it can be replicated in other studies. Girls do not frequently bully boys, but if they do they might do so because they have lost strategic control through habituation of aggression and the ensuing desensitization to its consequences (Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003). The important point of this article is that for the vast majority of bullies, the pursuit of status *and* affection seems to foster strategic control of bullying behavior: realize one without losing the other.

There were age differences in the relation of bullying and victimization with peer acceptance by boys. Bullying toward girls was positively related to male acceptance in middle childhood, but negatively in preadolescence. Furthermore, victims of female bullies had low levels of male acceptance in middle childhood, but not in preadolescence. It might be that boys perceive cross-gender bully–victim relationships less negatively when they enter preadolescence because they become more interested in girls and may see this interaction with girls as attention (Adler & Adler, 1998; Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001).

There was one circumstance in which bullying was significantly positively associated with acceptance (cf. Luthar & McMahon, 1996; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Lagerspetz, 2000): Male bullying of same-gender classmates was positively related to female acceptance. Again, at least for some girls, boys might have already become romantically important, with bullying fitting into a prototypical mold of being male. It should be noted, however, that the female acceptance of male–male bullying did not vary by age. Thus, older girls were not more likely to welcome male–male bullying. Yet, with regard to rejection, the selective threat effect could be observed here as well: Male bullying of girls was positively related to female rejection. By distinguishing the targets' gender, we could make

clear that the evaluation of bullying depends on whether the bullying is perceived as a threat. Our findings also show that avoidance of loss of affection depends on the gender of the bully and the target.

In line with Dijkstra et al. (2007), we found that acceptance and rejection are not tied to the same process. For example, male bullying was positively related to peer rejection by the gender to which the victim belonged, but not negatively to peer acceptance. We also found that the explained variance for acceptance (about 20%) was higher than the explained variance for rejection (about 15%). It is likely that this difference is due to the fact that in preadolescence gender plays a larger role in the realization of interaction goals (and thus peer acceptance) than in disturbance or threat of disturbance of goal pursuit (and thus peer rejection). As can be seen from the multivariate analyses, gender is the factor that explains acceptance and rejection the most, but acceptance to a larger extent than rejection. The goal-framing approach also throws light on the question when behavior of the other gender will be met by positive or negative evaluation and when it will be ignored (Dijkstra et al., 2007). It depends on the contribution that a particular reaction from the other gender will make for the realization of affection and status goals.

## Strengths and Limitations

Our study had a number of strengths and limitations. One strength is the elaboration of the complex nature of acceptance and rejection related to bullying. Another strength is the inclusion of boys' and girls' nominations for peer status, bullying, and victimization, each with dyadic same-gender and other-gender nominations. A strong point is also the relatively large sample. We used a sample of almost 500 children, including a proportional number of boys and girls. In view of this sample size and the use of network questions, the findings can be considered rather robust.

However, it should be taken into account that a cross-sectional correlational design was used. Even though the hypotheses derived from the goal-framing approach were supported by the results, these associations are not determinant. Ultimately, the relation between same-gender and other-gender bullying, victimization, and peer status should be tested with longitudinal data. Bidirectional influences between bullying and peer relations (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) would fit well into the approach taken here. Classmates who are not accepted might

be even less accepted when they are bullied because victimization is likely to lower their status. Being associated with them might lower one's own status and, for this very reason, may make one more vulnerable for becoming a victim oneself (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999).

In sum, the complex nature of acceptance and rejection can be traced quite well by hypotheses derived from goal-framing theory and the assumed simultaneous pursuit of status and affection. We found that bullies are not rejected in general, but only by those for whom they are a potential threat. Bullies seem to choose their victims so as to minimize loss of affection. To this end, they are likely to bully victims that are rejected by their same-gender classmates. To understand these processes it is necessary to distinguish the gender of the bully (male vs. female bullies), the gender of the target (male vs. female victims), and the gender of the evaluator (male vs. female classmates who accept and reject bullies and victims).

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