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Victimising of school bullying: a grounded theory

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The aim of this study was to investigate how individuals, who had been victims of school bullying, perceived their bullying experiences and how these had affected them, and to generate a grounded theory of being a victim of bullying at school. Twenty-one individuals, who all had prior experiences of being bullied in school for more than one year, were interviewed. Qualitative analysis of data was performed by methods from grounded theory. The research identified a basic process of victimising in school bullying, which consisted of four phases: (a) initial attacks, (b) double victimising, (c) bullying exit and (d) after-effects of bullying. Double victimising refers to a process in which there was an interplay between external victimising and internal victimising. Acts of harassment were repeatedly directed at the victims from their social environment at school – a social process that constructed and repeatedly confirmed their victim role in the class or the group. This external victimising affected the victims and initiated an internal victimising, which meant that they internalised the socially constructed victim image and acted upon this image, which in turn often supported the bullies' agenda and confirmed the socially constructed victim-image. The findings also indicate the possible positive effect of changing the social environment.

Keywords: bullying; victimising; labelling; stigma; qualitative interview; grounded theory

School bullying is a major problem in several countries (e.g. Borntrager et al. 2009; Eslea et al. 2004). Smith and Sharp (1994) define bullying as 'a systematic abuse of power' (2). According to Olweus (1993), the victim is repeatedly exposed to negative actions over time, and has difficulty defending him/herself as a result of the power imbalance between him/herself and the bully or bullies. Examples of negative actions that might take place during bullying are hitting, kicking, threatening, teasing, name-calling, taunting, rumour spreading and excluding someone from the group. Being a victim of school bullying is associated with a number of different dimensions of internal distress and psychosocial problems. Research has shown that students affected by bullying run a higher risk of developing depression, anxiety, loneliness, distrust of others, poor social adjustment, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement and health problems as compared to others (e.g. Aluede et al. 2008; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Rigby 2003; Roland 2002). For example, West, Sweeting, and Young (2010) found that being a victim of bullying at age 11 correlated with depression symptoms at ages 13 and 15.

In the Swedish school system, elementary school consists of a kindergarten year (the year children become 6 years old) and then Grades 1–9 (sometimes the period of Grades 7–9 is translated into English with the term 'upper elementary school' and sometimes with 'lower secondary school' but formally these later grades belong to the Swedish elementary school system). In recent reports from The Swedish National Agency for Education (2010, 2011), approximately 6–8% of the students in Swedish elementary schools (demarcated to Grades 4–9) reported that they had been bullied at school. According to the Swedish Education Act (2010); every school in Sweden has to prevent all forms of peer harassment and intervene when students are found to be victims of peer harassment at school. Nevertheless, scientifically evaluated methods or programmes for anti-bullying practices are still poorly implemented or not at all in Swedish schools (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011).

One common reason for being bullied or peer-harassed, according to students themselves, is that the victim is different, odd or deviant in some way (e.g. Frisé, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Frisé, Jonsson, and Persson 2007; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Mooij 2011; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008). The victim is regarded as a person who does not fit in. Ethnographic studies have identified and linked bullying to a significant element of intolerance to diversity in peer cul-

tures at school (Cadigan, 2002; MacDonald and Swart 2004). In Teräsahjo and Salmivalli's (2003) focus group study, children in many cases separated the victim from other students and constructed him or her as a negatively deviant student, the 'odd student', who deserved to be treated with hostility. In this children's discourse, when children were talking about reasons for bullying, they talked about the victim as a 'little bit different', 'odd', 'weird' or used other expressions of deviance. Teräsahjo and Salmivalli use the concept 'the odd student repertoire' and related it to the discourse of homogeneity – deviant students disturb the existing order and threaten the status quo – and its demand for conformity. According to Lahelma (2004), the constructed 'differentness' in everyday life at school is then used as a reason for bullying and harassment. DeRosier and Mercer (2009) has actually shown that peer-perceived atypical behaviour of a child is statistically related to higher levels of social rejection and peer victimisation among schoolchildren. Furthermore, Sweeting and West (2001) found that experiences of being bullied or teased were more likely among schoolchildren who were different in terms of being less physically attractive, overweight, had a disability or performed poorly at school.

These findings indicate a link between being bullied and being perceived by the peers as different or deviant, which in turn could be understood from the perspective of the stigma theory (Goffman 1963; Jones et al. 1984), the labelling theory (Becker 1963) and the social misfit hypothesis (Wright, Giammarino, and Parad 1986), which all claim that identifying and defining a peer as deviant is always a social construction produced in the peer group associated with its culture and social norms. When a student is labelled as deviant, other peers interpret him or her as a person who violates important social taken-for-granted norms or normative standards of the peer culture. Stigma is then the core concept for understanding the consequences of labelling. In this paper, and in accordance with Becker's (1963) labelling theory, deviance refers to a perceived violation of social norms, i.e. a shared perception among peers about a negative, problematic or provocative non-conformity of a peer. Furthermore, what is actually perceived as deviant among people might vary across groups in accordance with differences in group norms and social climate (Wright, Giammarino, and Parad 1986). Considering the findings and the social interactionist theories above, it would be valuable to investigate prior victims' perspectives of possible labelling and stigma processes in relation to their prior bullying experiences.

Whereas a few studies have interviewed bullies in order to investigate the process of becoming and being a bully (Burns et al. 2008; Lam and Liu 2007), we have not found any study in which victims were interviewed in order to explore the process of becoming and being a victim of school bullying. In light of the current research body of school bullying, there is a clear need for conducting qualitative studies in order to gain a deeper understanding of victims' perspectives on their bullying experiences. The aim of this study was to investigate how individuals, who had been victims of school bullying, perceived their bullying experiences and how these had affected them, as well as to generate a grounded theory of being a victim of bullying at school.

Method

We adopted a qualitative research design, guided by grounded theory methods, because a grounded theory approach has a clear focus on interaction, meaning and social processes (Charmaz 2006). As Mishna, Saini, and Solomon (2009) put it, qualitative research on bullying driven by a grounded theory approach presents an opportunity for developing a deeper understanding of the group processes of bullying and participants' perspectives on peer harassment. It is 'capable of discovering important discourses and nuances' (1222) of bullying that might be less visible in large-scale studies.

Participants

A volunteer sampling was conducted to recruit participants. We distributed a recruitment questionnaire to students in five Swedish secondary schools and to five student groups in a department of psychology, sociology and education at a Swedish university. In the secondary schools we visited, access to the participants was firstly granted by the head teachers after being informed about our study. Our access to the classrooms to distribute the questionnaires to the students was negotiated with teachers, both in secondary schools and at the university. Informed consent was then obtained from the students participating in the study. In total, 523 students received the questionnaire in the classroom and 511 of them (389 secondary school students and 122 university students) completed it. In the questionnaire, students were asked about (a) their past experiences of school bullying and (b) their willingness to participate in an interview regarding their experiences of school bullying. One hundred and sixty-eight students reported past victimisation by school bullying, and 36 of them consented to participate in interviews. Fifteen of these 36 volunteers reported bullying victimisation for less than a year in duration, and were therefore not included in this study.

The final sample was 21 students (14 female students and 9 male students). Out of these 21 students, 9 were secondary school students and 12 were university students (age range = 17–34 years, $M=23.5$). As mentioned earlier, note that in the Swedish school system, elementary school consists of a kindergarten year (the year children become 6 years old) and then Grades 1–9, and that students usually begin secondary school the year they become 16 years old and graduate the year they became 19 or 20 years old. Whereas some of those who study at universities in Sweden begin directly after their high school graduation, others might work or do other things for a few years or longer before beginning their university studies.

As can be seen in the reported sampling procedures above, the 21 participants in this study were a volunteer sample. The large age span could of course be problematised in terms of developmental differences. Nevertheless, with reference to the qualitative research tradition, this could be seen as a heterogeneity sampling, used in order to maximise the variation of data (Patton 2002) – in this case, variation based on development and lifetime opportunities for coping and reflection in relation to the prior experiences of school bullying – which are valuable in the constant comparative procedures of grounded theory (cf. the concept of far-out comparisons in Strauss and Corbin 1998).

According to the ethical guidelines for social science research in Sweden, the researchers have to obtain informed consent from those participating in the study, and if participants are under 15 years of age, parental consent has to be obtained as well (The Swedish Council of Humanities and Social Sciences Research 2009). Part of the previous questionnaire design involved all 21 participants giving their informed consent. When they were contacted for interviews, we repeated the information about the study. We made it clear that participation was voluntary, and they were asked if they still were positive to participating. They all gave their informed consent once again. Regarding the secondary school students in our study, all of them were over 15 years of age, and in line with the Swedish ethical recommendations, it was sufficient to obtain informed consent from them, and not from their parents.

Data collection

Individual qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet room far away from other students and teachers. We used the qualitative interview method since it encourages participants to speak for themselves and in their own way, which in turn helped us to gain a better understanding of them as social actors and the social interactions they have been involved in. The secondary school students were interviewed at their school and the university students were interviewed at the university (except for three university students who were interviewed in their homes). The second, third and fourth authors carried out the interviews.

Only one of them was present in each interview. They received instructions and training in qualitative interviewing by the first author of this article. During the interviews, the interviewers were instructed and trained to actively listen (communicating genuine interest and attention to the participants by being attentive; saying things ‘mm’, ‘okay’ and ‘I see’, nodding their head, using empathic and interested facial expressions), and confirming with good follow-up questions (e.g. ‘How come?’, ‘Could you tell me more about that?’, ‘Tell me about it’, ‘What do you mean?’, ‘Tell me more’ and ‘What do you think about that?’), and to take a non-judgemental approach (e.g. Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). They treated the participants as the main informants and competent commentators on their lives. A common interview guide was used in each interview – the participants were asked to talk about (a) their victimisation experiences of school bullying, from the very start to the end, (b) their thoughts, feelings and actions regarding the bullying they had experienced and (c) their perceptions of how their bullying experiences had affected them during as well as after the bullying period. The mean time for the interviews was 46.8 min and ranged from 37 to 84 min. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Grounded theory methods (e.g. Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Thornberg and Charmaz 2011) based on a constructivist position (e.g. Charmaz 2003, 2006) were used to explore and analyse data. During this analysis, coding (creating qualitative codes and categories grounded in 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 came to mind during the coding), and memo sorting (comparing and sorting our memos) were the main grounded theory methods in the study. Theoretical sampling (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967) resulted in adding new questions in the interview guide during the research process. Theoretical sampling of data units was also conducted within the data material.

Furthermore, the coding steps of initial and focused coding described by Charmaz (2003, 2006) were used. First, we conducted an initial coding in which codes were constructed by comparing data segments and using analytical questions such as ‘What is happening in the data? How do the participants explain bullying? What does the data suggest? What category does this specific datum indicate?’ (see also Glaser 1978). This step involved naming words, lines and segments of data. In the second step, we carried out focused coding. The most significant and frequent codes from the initial coding were compared to each other to synthesise the large amounts of data into more elaborated categories. ‘Victimising’ identified as the core concept of the study as well as a set of other focused codes now delimited and guided the coding work.

In a third step, we conducted what Glaser (1978, 1998, 2005) termed as theoretical coding. We explored and analysed how the core concept and our other constructed codes or concepts were related to each other and integrated them into a grounded theory by using theoretical codes. Glaser (1978, 1998, 2005) introduced theoretical codes as tools for conceptualising how categories and codes generated from data may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory. Theoretical codes ‘give integrative scope, broad pictures and a new perspective’ (Glaser 1978, 72). According to Charmaz (2006), they ‘specify possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding’ (63). Examples of theoretical codes that we used because of what Glaser (1978, 1998, 2005) called ‘earned relevance’, in other words, because they earned their way into the analysis in terms of fitting with the data and with our previously generated codes, were process, phases, self-concept, external–internal, strategy and mutual interaction. Moreover, during the analysis, pre-existing theoretical concepts from literature, such as social construction, stigma and labelling, were

used as sensitising concepts (Blumer 1969) or analytical tools (Charmaz 2006; Thornberg and Charmaz 2011), because we found them relevant – they fitted with our data and codes. In other words, we employed them as a source of possible and ‘non-forcing’ seeing and interpretation. Like the theoretical codes that we used, these pre-existing concepts earned their way into the analysis.

During the initial and focused coding steps, each of us coded different interview transcriptions independently of each other, and then we compared and discussed our developed codes and their relation to data. We discussed them and when we found it necessary, we elaborated them until a consensus was reached. The second, third and fourth authors initiated the theoretical coding as a team and generated some tentative links between the core concept and other focused codes. The first author then critically scrutinised and elaborated their work and completed the theoretical coding in dialogue with them. Hence, the inter-coder reliability was not based on mathematical logic as in quantitative research but in terms of critical dialogue procedures within the research team, more in line with the traditions of qualitative research. In addition, according to Wiener (2007), group coding involve more brains and thus makes it easier to see beyond the concrete and specific in order to generate abstract concepts, to opening up more possibilities, and to reach a higher precision.

A grounded theory of victimising in school bullying

The systematic analysis of data, guided by grounded theory methods, generated a grounded theory of victimising in school bullying. Victimising was a social process in which victims, bullies and other individuals participated and by their participation they influenced the process and its outcomes. The path through victimising involved four phases: (a) initial attacks, (b) double victimising, (c) bullying exit and (d) after-effects of bullying.

Phase one: initial attacks

How they became victims of bullying varied from participant to participant. Six of them reported that the bullying began in the first grade at school or when they began in a new class at school. One or more classmates started to physically or verbally harass them. Initially the verbal harassment was about their appearance, clothes or behaviour. ‘Minor taunts from the first day from different directions about my clothes, that I was fat and ugly. So I think it began there’ (Sophia, 26-year-old university student). A sudden negative incident at school, such as being beaten in a fight or acting in a way that others started to laugh at, was the starting point of victimising, according to three students. Twelve students reported a more insidious emergence of victimising. They perceived a diffuse start of bullying that was hard to pinpoint.

I can’t remember how it started. But it was mostly small things at first, such as stealing my cap and teasing me, ‘What an ugly little brother you have’ and ‘What a weird name your dad has’ – his name was Tore, and it was apparently very odd. (Johanna, 34-year-old university student)

A common theme in the initially verbal attacks was to be negatively labelled as different or deviant in comparison with other peers, as the two excerpts above illustrate. According to the informants’ narratives, the initial attacks acted as a catalyst that triggered a long period of bullying.

Phase two: double victimising

A significant concept in our grounded theory was double victimising and this emerged during the next phase of victimising. The concept of double victimising refers to an interplay and cycling process between external victimising and internal victimising.

External victimising in turn refers to acts of harassment repeatedly directed at the victims

from their social environment at school – a social process that constructed and repeatedly confirmed their victim role in the class or the group. This interaction patterns affected the informants and initiated an internal victimising, which meant that they internalised the socially constructed victim-image and acted upon this image, which in turn often supported the bullies' agenda and confirmed the socially constructed victim-image. Both these sub-processes of double victimising broke the victim down but they did so in different ways.

External victimising

According to our analysis of narratives of the participants, external victimising contained two sub-processes: (a) stigmatising by being labelled as different and (b) social excluding.

Stigmatising by being labelled as different. In the initial attacks, there already appeared to be a tendency to negatively label the victims as different. This stigmatising process was then vigorously maintained and enhanced during the established bullying period. In their narratives, the informants described how they heard disparaging remarks from their bullies about their appearance, personalities, backgrounds and behaviour.

I had two best friends in the class, but then there was a particular group in the class who didn't like me and thought I was different and always teased me because of my lips, and because I was different. (Anna, 17-year-old secondary school student)

Others talked about them being odd, different or a person who did not fit in. Whereas many informants expressed a clear idea of what 'deviance' or 'deviances' that got others to bully them (e.g. having a big nose, wearing the 'wrong' clothes, being a 'swot', having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, not being cool enough, being fat, coming from another ethnic culture, being ugly, being the smallest in the class, laughing at wrong times, being quiet or having another dialect than the others), some reported more diffusely that they were different in a way that made them a target of bullying or thought they were deviant because they were bullied without knowing how they were deviant (e.g. 'I didn't understand why. What was wrong with me? What could I do to fit into this group?'). Nevertheless, being socially defined and interpreted as different resulted in the process of stigmatising as well as in the other sub-process of external victimising – social excluding.

Social excluding. Many informants reported that they became involuntarily isolated, rejected or excluded from the social life at school as classmates in their environment began to avoid, ignore or draw away from them. 'I was never let in and no one wanted to be with me . . . I was often left standing alone in the cloakroom, and looked on while the others played. I felt like air' (Maria, 26-year-old university student). Many informants reported like Maria how they were treated as invisible citing examples such as not getting any answer when they said something or not being let into games or play situations. As a result, several of the informants felt that they were socially invisible to their peers.

Sometimes, some of the informants were included but simultaneously experienced a strong sense of being superfluous or implicitly unwelcome in the group. 'Like these small groups of friends such as "No, you can't join us" and "we're already a group" or being ignored like "Well OK then, you can be with us" but then you felt like a third or fifth wheel' (Sara, 33, university student). A number of informants perceived that other classmates allied themselves with the bully or the bullies in order to avoid being victimised themselves. As a result, these informants became ostracised and had no one to be with.

Internal victimising

The informants incorporated the victim-image which their classmates produced in conversations and behaviour directed toward them at the same time as the informants tried to develop strategies in order to protect themselves, which in turn and paradoxically often actually sup-

ported the bullies' agenda and confirmed the socially constructed victim-image. We have found internal changes reported by the informants that also seemed to influence their behaviour in school: (a) a sense of not fitting in, (b) distrusting others, (c) self-protecting, (d) self-doubting, (e) self-blaming and (f) resignation.

A sense of not fitting in. Most informants described a sense of not fitting in, as a result of being bullied, and said that they often felt that they were misunderstood and perceived that everything they said and did was wrong. Usually a sense of not fitting in was about feelings of being abnormal and perceptions of not being like the other classmates. 'I thought there has to be something very wrong with me, that I was kind of sick in the head, because I didn't fit in with the others' (Maria, 26-year-old university student). As the excerpt here indicates, the informants incorporated the victim-image the bullies ascribed to them, which resulted in a self-image of being different and hence a sense of not fitting in with the other classmates.

Distrusting others. Many informants also reported how they began to distrust others as a result of being bullied in school. 'No one was nice to me, so I started to think that everyone always had ulterior motives. I never trusted anyone. It actually took many years before I began to realise that people who do nice things for me actually like me' (Sara, 33 years old). As an effect of developing distrust of others, the informants began to experience both bullying situations and many other social situations as unsafe, threatening, uncomfortable or unpleasant to be in. A few of them also described how these experiences made them view people and social life in a cynical way. 'A lot of cynical thoughts about people, society and about the world. And these cynical thoughts made me depressed for two, three years' (Anna, 17 years old). Hence, there seemed to be a tendency to generalise the perceived harming intentions of the bullies beyond the bullying situations to people and social situations in general.

Self-protecting. The analysis of the informants' narratives revealed different strategies that they appeared to have used to protect themselves from bullying or its harmful effects. We identified five self-protecting strategies: (a) self-isolating, (b) introverting, (c) social shielding, (d) turning off emotions and (e) self-inhibiting.

Self-isolating meant that the victim withdrew socially and avoided others, and thereby isolated him- or herself from peers.

You were like a loner and sat alone at home, sat by yourself in front of the TV and so on; sat alone in front of the computer. You kind of isolated yourself from the rest of the world . . . to avoid meeting the people who bullied you. It was like a safe zone. (My, 18-year-old secondary school student)

Through self-isolating, the informants tried to create a zone where they were left alone, felt safe and avoided harassment. Many informants also seemed to use *introverting* as a self-protecting strategy. This strategy meant that they passed their time wrapped up in their own thoughts and lived in their own inner world. Introverting is closely related to self-isolating and was, at least in part, a result of spending most or all their school days alone.

I lived very much in a sort of fantasy world that I had created, not necessarily by choice but more because I had a need, a need for relationships. If I didn't have any relationships outwardly, I had to create an inner world that I could relate to. (Daniel, 28-year-old university student)

As the excerpt illustrates, introverting had a socially compensatory function. In the absence of real relationships and friends, the victim created an inner world that he or she could relate to and stay in. It became a way of dealing with the loneliness and alienation created by social excluding and self-isolating, and thus a way of protecting themselves from the suffering of loneliness at school. Whereas self-isolating was a behaviour strategy to avoid social interactions and relationships, introverting was a mental strategy to cope with the loss of social

interactions and relationships. *Social shielding* was another strategy of self-protection identified in the analysis and meant that the victim tried to appear emotionally unconcerned or unaffected in front of bullies and others in order to hide how hurt, sad or upset they had actually become by the external victimising.

I became cold and hard on the outside, because if you don't show the bullies that you were in fact sad and upset, then they didn't think it was fun anymore, but you were actually terribly sad. (John, 21-year-old university student)

The informants used social shielding in the hope of ending the bullying by showing the bullies that it was not especially fun to bully them since they did not get upset or hurt. Sadly, the participants' narratives clearly display that this strategy did not work in that way. The external victimising just continued. Some informants also adopted another strategy of self-protection by *turning off emotions* in situations in which they were targets of external victimising.

Every time someone hurt me with their words, I somehow turned myself off. I kind of made myself faraway. I wasn't there. I can't really describe how that feels because I never felt it so much since I turned off those feelings. (Daniel, 28-year-old university student)

By social shielding and turning off emotions, the informants attempted to dramaturgically and emotionally dissociate themselves from the ongoing unpleasant situation of external victimising. At the same time, social shielding and turning off emotions made the harming consequences more or less diffuse or invisible for others, which in turn facilitated the bullying process. Another self-protective strategy was *self-inhibiting*, which meant that they held themselves back in social situations. They attempted to not stand out or be seen in social life of school. 'It was better to be quiet and withdraw than to say or do something wrong so that others might laugh at me' (Maria, 26-year-old university student). In addition to the perceived risk of making social blunders, the informants reported that their growing distrust of others as well as a growing sense of not knowing how to participate in peer communication and interaction led them to inhibit themselves in social situations. They thought self-inhibiting made them more socially invisible and hence reduced the risk of peer victimisation.

Self-doubting. Doubting themselves was something that several informants reported that they experienced during their bullying period. It was, for example, expressed in terms of low self-confidence, poor self-esteem and worse self-image. 'I didn't really dare to fully trust myself. It felt like whatever I did, it became embarrassing or something like that. I mean, it went bad, yeah, became embarrassing' (Eric, 17-year-old secondary school student). According to many informants, their self-doubting restricted them in their everyday life. Many explained how they developed feelings of worthlessness during the period of school bullying. 'I felt that I was really worthless, that if I wasn't worthless, why else would they have picked me as a victim?' (Ann, 26-year-old university student). Ann's feelings of worthlessness originated in her realising she was being peer-victimised. The internal process of self-doubting appeared to contribute to the gradual emergence of disintegrating self-esteem. It resulted in the emergence of a self-representation more and more like the representation the bullies attributed to the victim.

Finally I thought like them, that it was me who was all wrong. It wasn't them who were bad. I was bad, and so I had to change myself to fit in better . . . I accepted what they said. I didn't do so at first, but I quickly began to accept what they said and I thought they were right. (Johanna, 34-year-old university student)

The excerpt above illustrates how starting to accept her peers' image of her changed Johanna's own self-image. Also note the element of self-blaming in her description.

Self-blaming. The tendency to blame themselves could be seen in the narratives from several informants. Self-blaming was about explaining being a victim of bullying which was caused by one's own faults, flaws or defects. In other words, self-blaming refers to 'it's all about me' explanations. Examples of faults or flaws that informants thought they had and made them a victim were that they were quiet, shy, looked different or were odd or different in other ways.

I was quiet from the very first day in first grade at school, so I got bullied. When I changed school, because I began at high school, I wasn't so quiet anymore, and so didn't get bullied. I have learned my lesson that I shouldn't be so quiet. (Michael, 19-year-old secondary school student)

Michael believed that when he changed from being very quiet to being less quiet, the bullying ended. He thought his quiet manner most of all had made him the victim of bullying. Nevertheless, in most instances, the informants could not see any ways of changing themselves in order to remove the 'flaws' or 'faults' that they thought caused the bullying. They were who they were. They could not escape their victim role because of their own innate characteristics.

And sure, as a way I saw it then, being small, shy and afraid of conflicts. It was quite natural what happened. That's it. Not that I accept it and think it was okay, but I really understand why. (Peter, 24-year-old university student)

Resignation. Many reported that during the bullying period, they went into a state of resignation expressed as hopelessness and despair. Eventually, they gave up and stopped caring because they were so accustomed to being left out and exposed to harassment. They saw no escape from the bullying and loneliness. They perceived that there was nothing they could do to change the situation.

I didn't do much to try to break it. It became like a vicious circle. During Grade 7-9, I had the attitude that nothing could be done, that there was no point in trying to socialise with people or to fit in, because it would still not lead to any change. (Daniel, 28-year-old university student)

According to their reports, several informants began to accept their bullying situation as a natural part of their everyday school life. 'Finally I took it for granted. It was my place to be out in the cold' (Johanna, 34-year-old university student). The resignation was sustained by the idea that their victim situation could not be changed; all their efforts would only lead to failure. This pessimistic expectation can be associated with the concept of learned helplessness (Seligman 1975), the perception of not being able to influence or change their bullying situation became overwhelming for many informants and for some of them resulted in feelings that life was meaningless. 'I felt that there was no meaning in life anymore. Everything just felt pitch black. I wanted to get away from everything and everyone' (Liv, 18-year-old high school student). The inner process of resignation, and its association with self-blaming, seemed to explain the depressive, self-destructive and even suicidal thoughts that some of the informants reported that they developed as a result of their bullying experiences.

Phase three: bullying exit

A turning point that led to an end of the external victimising (e.g. the situation of being bullied) according to many informants was changing school or class. Coming to a new class (i.e. becoming a part of a new formal group of students) gave them a chance to take on a brand new role or position. The absence of their old stigmatised victim role enabled them to take the opportunity to socialise and develop friendships. A critical difference between the new and the old class, according to many of them who got away from being bullied, was about the so-

cial climate. They perceived that the social climate in the new class was friendlier and imbued with a greater degree of tolerance, understanding and respect.

Everyone had a place and was appreciated. We had some different interests but we all had an understanding about that. It was a very comfortable atmosphere. (Sophia, 26-year-old university student)

Many reported that when they came to the new class, they became a part of the class. For the first time, they experienced a sense of social belonging in the school, and hence a part of belonging to a larger community.

When we started in that school, it was like coming to a different world. Everyone said hello, showed interest in us, and was happy. We felt very safe and appreciated, or you know, being liked and appreciated, not like in the other class. There was a really big difference . . . I felt that I –, people wanted to be with me, people wanted to talk to me. I had a world around me. (Eva, 25-year-old university student)

However, the analysis revealed that changing class or school did not automatically result in a bullying exit. Some informants reported that they also became bullied in the new class. By comparing their narratives, we found that one factor that seemed to influence whether they became bullied again or not was their perception of the social climate of the new class. Those who reported that they got away from bullying as an effect of starting in the new class described a pleasant and accepting climate in the new class. Those who continued to be bullied described a more hostile atmosphere and a widespread need to pick on others – characteristics that they recognised from their former class.

Phase four: after-effects of bullying

The analysis of the informants' narratives about the time after their bullying exit revealed a lot of remaining effects many years afterwards. It was a matter of after-effects that, according to their own perspectives, continued to affect them in a negative or positive way. These after-effects of bullying involved two sub-processes: (a) lingering internal victimising and (b) acquiring life skills.

Lingering internal victimising

Twenty of the 21 informants indicated through their narratives that after the bullying had stopped, there was still a lingering internal victimising, which in turn created psychosocial problems for them. Hence, even if the bullying had ended and hence the external victimising was gone, the internal victimising continued more or less within them, which affected their thoughts and feelings as well as their behaviour in relation to themselves and others. Many informants reported that afterwards they struggled with the negative consequences of their previous peer victimisation.

And every time I'm going to do something I think carefully if I really should do it. What happens if I do it? What happens if I don't do it? And then I think negatively and then I daren't do it. (Eric, 17-year-old secondary school student)

The excerpt above illustrates how Eric's insecurity, poor self-confidence and fear of social blunders prevented him from doing things he wanted to do. A lot of details in their reports about how they related to themselves and to other people several years after the bullying had ceased, indicated the presence of one or more sub-processes of internal victimising in their everyday life – a sense of not fitting in, distrusting others, self-protecting (especially self-isolating, social shielding and self-inhibiting) and self-doubting.

I'm shy and find it hard to get to know new people. I'm uncomfortable with peers and I find it awfully difficult to trust other people. These are all effects of the time I was bullied. It wasn't like this before. (My, 18-year-old secondary school student)

For many informants, the lingering self-protecting led to difficulties in trusting others and showing their feelings in front of other people, which they perceived caused trouble in their current social life.

I still have difficulties in showing my feelings. I find it hard to let people get close to me. To open up and make myself vulnerable and to make friends takes quite a long time. (Johanna, 34-year-old university student)

Johanna, in the excerpt above, reported how various after-effects of bullying were still being manifested in her social relations with other people. These lingering processes interfered with or hindered her capacity to make close friends. Several informants said they had worked for a long time and still had to work with themselves in order to get on better socially with other people. 'I have to work at being giving of myself and not to be expressionless' (Sophia, 26-year-old university student). Their awareness of their own lingering internal victimising meant that they realised that this process (a) restricted or hindered them in their present social life and (b) made them feel a need to work with this inner process with the intention of bringing about a change and an attempt to get out of this lingering internal victimising.

Acquiring life skills

Twelve of the 21 informants also reported positive consequences of their experiences of being bullied at school in terms of acquired life skills – knowledge of the workings of social life and an increased awareness of themselves in relation to their social environment. The ability to understand human interaction and the ability to read moods and signals from other people were some of the benefits they perceived they had received or obtained from their bullying experiences.

I think that if you have gone through something like this, you have experiences that could be translated into knowledge and insights. And insights like this can be formulated into something valuable and helpful. As I said, my interest in understanding and learning about other people and learning from other people comes from this. (Daniel, 28-year-old university student)

Just like Daniel in the excerpt above, some of the informants told us about how their interest in other people had emerged from their experiences of being bullied. The positive life skills acquired among those former victims of bullying actually appeared to be a product of consciously facing and working with their lingering internal victimising, indicating an interplay between these two sub-processes. Hence, those who did overcome their bullying experiences and become stronger seemed to do so because they initiated a kind of self-rebuilding process (e.g. 'Even if it was an experience in which I've been victimised, somehow I have transformed it into an insight into all this', John, 18 years old; 'I've worked a lot on myself', Lisa, 22 years old), and some of them also reported that they had the strength to do so thanks to supportive social relationships or influences (e.g. from their parents or friends) in their childhood, adolescence or adulthood (e.g. 'I also think that the basic trust instilled in me by my parents when I was a little child, before I started going to school, also saved me', Sara, 33 years old). These informants described a development of personal traits, attitudes, capacities or behaviours such as empathy, commitment against social injustice, being confident in themselves, a new-found sense of social relaxation, or an ability to read other people, as a result of a self-rebuilding processing triggered by and in relation to their lingering internal victimising.

Today, I'm confident in myself, I know who I am . . . I don't try to make myself please others, like I did before, since back then it was very important that 'Oh, I have to get everyone to like me'. But today, I don't put any energy into that . . . I developed a way of reading other people quite early. So my instinct tells me quite quickly whether I can trust them or not. (Sara, 33-year-old university student)

Instead of being preoccupied with a sense of not fitting in, as they were before, some informants expressed a current relief from this prior preoccupation. People are different and you have to accept and respect that fact, they argued. They were aware of who they were and felt a sense of confidence from this self-insight. Other informants even displayed a form of pride that they managed to endure the suffering of bullying. Instead of blaming themselves for being bullied, the insights which they obtained helped them to remove this self-blaming in favour of putting the blame on the bullies. They perceived that the faults or flaws that produced the bullying were not theirs but were to do with the bullies.

I have realised that there was nothing wrong with me at all. The people who bullied others felt bad themselves. I would imagine that the experiences from the time when I was bullied have made my life richer. I think I have become a stronger individual because I don't get caught up in the smallest detail. I'm proud of what I have been able to go through. (Lucas, 18-year-old secondary school student)

In the excerpt above, Lucas described how he could look back later on his bullying experiences in a positive way. He argued that this previous period actually had made him stronger as a person, as for example he could take more adversity than before. Through their acquired life skills, many informants reported that they perceived that they could live their life in a competent and insightful manner, could relate to other people and to themselves, and had a sort of sensitivity to and readiness to alleviate other people's suffering in their everyday life.

Discussion

This study provides one of the first grounded theories of victimising of school bullying based on qualitative interviews and grounded theory methods by which perceptions and experiences from individuals who had been bullied at school have been investigated. The findings in this study describe a path through peer victimisation as a process model involving a set of phases: (a) initial attacks, (b) double stigmatising, (c) bullying exit and (d) after-effects of bullying. The informants' experiences of stigmatising by being labelled different during the initial attacks and especially during the double victimising phase correspond with the works of Cadigan (2002) and MacDonald and Swart (2004). According to their ethnographic findings, bullying was associated with intolerance to diversity in peer culture. Our findings also correspond with studies investigating students' perspectives showing that a widespread idea among children and adolescents is that bullying occurs because the victim is different, deviant, odd or does not fit in (e.g. Frisé, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Frisé, Jonsson, and Persson 2007; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008; Hazler and Hoover 1993; Mooij 2011; Thornberg 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Varjas et al. 2008), and with DeRosier and Mercer's (2009) findings showing a correlation between perceived atypical behaviour and peer victimisation. In reference to the labelling theory (Becker 1963), the stigma theory (Goffman 1963; Jones et al. 1984) and the social misfit hypothesis (Wright, Giammarino, and Parad 1986), the informants became embroiled in a social process that constructed them as a 'deviant' or 'different' peer, which in turn stigmatised them, escalating into social excluding and more harassment. The current study describes and conceptualises this social process from the victims' perspectives, and hence expands these theories by generating concepts regarding processes and strategies of the victims as well as the interplay between these and the bullying.

The findings revealed a socially interactive cycling process, in which an internal victimising emerged as a result of the external peer victimising, leading to a mutual interaction between these two processes. This double victimising repeatedly produced severe attacks on the victim's identity and self-value, both from the outside and the inside. Here, our grounded theory of victimising sheds light on some hidden aspects of bullying – the victim's inner process and its interplay with external victimising. Whereas earlier research has shown correlations between being bullied and psychosocial problems (e.g. Aluede et al. 2008; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Rigby 2003; Roland 2002; West, Sweeting, and Young 2010), the current study contributes to this research body by portraying the psychosocial processes from the victims' point of view, which could, at least in part, describe and explain the link between being bullied and these psychosocial problems.

Furthermore, the current findings revealed a set of self-protecting strategies (self-isolating, introverting, social shielding, turning off emotions and self-inhibiting) that the informants developed during their bullying experiences as ways of coping with this external victimising. Whereas earlier bullying studies, which most often have been hypothetico-deductively driven with highly structured assessment forms to collect data, have not investigated these self-protective strategies, the inductive and qualitative design of this study have permitted us to find, explore and describe these strategies. This knowledge helps us to better understand the interaction patterns of bullying, and clearly shows that victims are not passive receivers but active agents trying to cope with the bullying events and the negative feelings these evoke.

Moreover, according to the findings, even if the bullying had ended, the victimising still continued as an after-effect of bullying in terms of lingering internal victimising, which affected the post-victims' thoughts, feelings and behaviour in relation to themselves and others. Their narratives indicated that many of the informants in the study were still struggling with a lingering internal victimising that produced constraints and problems for them in their social life many years later. Hence, the current findings might contribute to the knowledge body of school bullying by showing how this lingering internal victimising, at least in part, might describe and explain the link found in earlier research between being bullied at school and the higher risk of having psychosocial problems as adults (e.g. Lund et al. 2009; McCabe et al. 2010; Roeger et al. 2010).

Hence, the grounded theory generated in this study might contribute to a deeper understanding of why psychosocial problems are more frequent among victims and post-victims of bullying by highlighting the internal victimising and its interplay with external victimising during the bullying and the presence of a lingering internal victimising that was still operating many years after the bullying had ceased. The inner process of resignation, and its association with a sense of not fitting in, distrusting others, self-doubting and self-blaming, as a long-term and chronic condition and especially if there is a long-term behavioural pattern of self-isolating, might easily lead to poor self-esteem, anxiety and depressive, self-destructive, and suicidal thoughts, as well as to loneliness, poor social adjustment and health problems.

However, in contrast to the previous research which only associated negative things with being a victim of bullying, our findings revealed, in addition to the negative lingering internal victimising, that at least some of the informants also perceived some positive after-effects of bullying in terms of acquiring life skills. According to them, their school bullying experiences have taught them how social life works, increased their awareness of themselves in relation to others, and developed their ability to read signals and moods from other people. However, these positive gains that some informants related to their prior bullying experiences have to be interpreted with some caution, since a possible interpretation would be that these perceptions might be an expression of inceptive self-protecting, in other words, a self-serving narrative or psychological defence in order to cope with the burden of the peer victimisation trauma lead-

ing to a distorted or false perception. However, another possible interpretation is that these positive perceptions of gains are actually results of a healthy resiliency process. Furthermore, the self-protecting strategies during the school bullying as well as the perceived positive after-effects of bullying in terms of acquiring life skills might also be interpreted as what Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) mentioned as young people's *hidden resilience*, which refers to 'patterns of coping that allow youth to subjectively experience their lives as successful whether others outside their culture and context see them that way or not' (4). Young peoples' paths to more adaptive and healthy functioning are driven by their motivation to seek well-being (Dallape 1996; Liebenberg and Ungar 2009).

Limitations of the study

Some limitations to the grounded theory and the conclusions drawn in this study should be noted. First, the grounded theory was built upon analyses of experiences and perceptions that previous victims of school bullying expressed in interviews. It was not built on direct observations nor did it include perspectives representing other participant roles in school bullying, such as bullies, reinforcing bystanders or victim helpers. Further comparable qualitative research focusing on bullies, victims and bystanders should be carried out in order to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of bullying experiences and processes, and to validate experiences and behavioural interpretations of bullies, victims and bystanders. Second, the data were retrospective, which means that later developmental processes and life experiences of the informants inevitably affected the ways in which they viewed their prior bullying experiences during the interviews. However, in line with a constructivist position of grounded theory, we do not claim to offer an exact picture but rather an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon studied (Charmaz 2006). Third, the small and non-probability sample limits the findings' transferability. Nevertheless, instead of statistical generalisation built upon the logic of mathematics, in qualitative research, generalisation has been discussed as an interpretation work – for example, in what Larsson (2009) calls 'generalisation through recognition of patterns', in which the reader, not the researcher, judges the generalisability. In addition, Glaser (1998) argues that a grounded theory is not a fixed end-point but is constantly open for modification as new data are gathered. Hence, our grounded theory should not be seen as a sort of universal truth but as a perspective, which encourages dialogue among perspectives, and a working model or a set of working hypotheses, which has to take into account the local conditions and has to be seen as modest speculations on the possible applicability of findings to other situations (cf. Patton 2002). Research is needed to further explore double victimising, self-protecting strategies, lingering internal victimising and the perceptions of acquiring life skills. It is also urgent to investigate the dynamic interaction between the processes and resources within the victims and the processes and resources in their environment, and how paths of resiliency might take place during and after the period of school bullying.

Implications for practitioners

The findings have implications for teachers and other school personnel in their anti-bullying practices. First, practitioners have to recognise and address the double victimising, in other words: how external victimising and internal victimising interplay as a cycling process by confirming and reinforcing each other. They have to understand how the internal victimising might influence the victims' thoughts, feelings and behaviour in relation to themselves and others. Strategies that the victims use in the hope of protecting themselves from bullying and its effects, such as self-isolating and self-inhibiting, appear to be counterproductive by confirming the victim-image to others. Hence, it seems to be important to recognise that bullying intervention could not be reduced to targeting the bullies in order to make them stop, but to recognise that bullying is a complex interaction pattern in which the external as well as the

internal victimising has to be addressed; and bullying intervention has to consider and target the set of self-protecting strategies of the victims, since these appear to reinforce their role as victims.

Second, and in line with findings from other research as well (e.g. Cardigan 2002; La-helma 2004; MacDonald and Swart 2004; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003), the social construction of the victim as different and the peer discourse of intolerance have to be addressed by deliberately working with social norms, values and attitudes among the students – preventatively as well as in interventions. As concluded by Thornberg (2010, 323),

the dominating social representation on the causes of bullying as a reaction to deviance among the children and its underlying logic of conformism and intolerance, for example, can be challenged by pointing out and inviting students into a deliberative discussion about the values of multiplicity, heterogeneity, social inclusion, a caring community, and tolerance.

The probability of stigmatising by being labelled as different and then socially excluded by the peer group as well as developing a sense of not fitting in would be lower if the peer group is permeated with tolerance, respect for others and positive attitudes toward multiplicity and heterogeneity. Furthermore, we identified social isolation as one result of feeling bullied, which in turn highlights the importance of fostering a positive and inclusive school climate.

In addition, those informants who reported that they got away from bullying as a result of going to a new class or school (becoming a member of a new formal student group) depicted a pleasant and accepting climate in their new class, whereas those who continued to be bullied in the new class described a more hostile atmosphere and a widespread need to pick on others, which they recognised from their former class. Previous research has demonstrated that a positive and supportive social climate in schools and classrooms can be linked to caring and prosocial behaviour and moral development among students (Battistich 2008; Solomon, Watson, and Battistich 2001), discouraging maladaptive behaviour (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold 2009; Kuperminc et al. 1997) and lower amounts of students engaged in bullying (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold 2009; Gendron, Williams, and Guerra 2011; Gregory et al. 2010). In light of this, anti-bullying practices should improve the classroom climate as well as the schoolwide efforts to improve the school climate and to create a more caring environment for all students.

Third, practitioners should be aware of and address the lingering internal victimising issue. Hence, bullying intervention has to continue even when it has resulted in the end of bullying in a particular case. It has to focus on the post-victim's lingering internal victimising in order to reduce the risk of developing depression, anxiety, loneliness, distrust of others, poor social adjustment, new peer victimising, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement and health problems associated with victimising of school bullying. In accordance with Somers' (1994) theoretical work on narratives and social identities, people are guided to act by social relationships and cultural practices in which they are embedded and by the narratives through which they constitute their identities.

People construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within the repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings with one or more narratives. (Somers 1994, 614)

Somers (1994) argues that social actors use stories (so-called 'ontological narratives') in order to make sense of and act in their lives. 'Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do. This "doing" will in turn produce new narratives and hence, new actions' (618). Such narratives exist interpersonally in the

lines of social interactions over time. The positive after-effects of bullying in terms of acquiring life skills expressed by some of the informants in the current study indicated the non-fixed and indeed changing potential of their ontological narratives, and hence of their identity and patterns of attitudes and behaviour. Nevertheless, the overwhelming presence of lingering internal victimising should and could be challenged by post-bullying interventions in which the former victims' identities and stories about themselves emanating from bullying are the target of analysis and change, in order to empower social agency and facilitate healthy development.

Considering the participants' lack of experiences of any effective anti-bullying practices in their former schools, further research should investigate how rigorous implementations of well-known and scientifically evaluated recommendations of bullying prevention and interventions actually are in schools. A recent report from The Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) indicated that many schools in Sweden display an uncritical approach to and use a hodgepodge of methods from different types of anti-bullying programmes of which most of them are not evidence-based or scientifically evaluated. In addition, the treatment integrity, i.e. the degree to which a programme or an intervention is implemented as originally designed, was found to be mostly very low. Hence, there appears to be an urgent need for efforts to enhance the professional knowledge of bullying, anti-bullying programmes and practices as well as the professional competences in critically choosing and rigorously implementing such programmes and methods in schools.

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