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"The Game of Bullying": Shared Beliefs and Behavioral Labels in Bullying Among Middle Schoolers

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Bullying is observed in schools worldwide with as many as 35% of students bullied by others. Group context and dynamics are critical for preventing bullying and creating supportive school environment, and therefore the primary focus of this study was the importance of the group dynamics involved in the practice of bullying in school contexts. Fieldwork was conducted in 2 consecutive stages: field observations and interviews in 4 class units (with 102 students in total) in 3 public middle schools in Poland. During observation, 4 long-term bullying cases were identified, enabling the analysis of how middle school students perceive, understand, rationalize, and explain bullying behaviors encoded in the peer group dynamics. Subsequently, 47 semistructured individual interviews were carried out with the students from the observed classes. Grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data. The results show that students involved in a particular bullying case built and shared a system of beliefs and behavioral labels. That system comprised shared perceptions of class structure in which bullying is a punishment for threatening class reputations, a shared idea of normality that is shaped in opposition to victimized students' appearance and behavior and self-labeling of their own behavior. In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that it could be beneficial to plan antibullying programs as a targeted, nonpunitive restorative intervention involving peer influences to transform bullying relations by removing behavioral labels.

Highlights and Implications

- Participants in bullying incidents self-label themselves and find it difficult to break patterns of behaviors related to bullying, such as supporting the bully or not defending the victim.
- When deciding whether to defend a victim, students took under consideration existing interpersonal, intragroup networks and alliances; a concern for their class's reputation; and consistency of the presentation of self.
- Antibullying programs can be more effective if students are involved in planning and implementing them.
- Targeted, non-punitive restorative intervention involving peer influence may transform bullying relations by removing behavioral labels.

Keywords: bullying, peer group, grounded theory

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Groups are a powerful and significant part of human development. They serve as major emergent microsocial structures in children's and youth's ecological system (Rodkin, 2004). During middle and secondary school, peer groups become a particularly salient influence (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Wójcik, 2018; Wǒjcik & Hełka, 2019). While they promote a range of prosocial and positive emotional and behavioral attributes, they can also elicit negative or antisocial attributes, effectively "bringing out the worst" in some individuals.

Youth's personal identity and sense of self can be influenced by the peer group to such an extent that their individual autonomy can be affected (Rodkin, 2004). Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka, and Trach (2015) mentioned that group identification and social identity often lead to acceptance and maintenance of dominant group norms. Accordingly, if a peer group endorses negative behavior, adolescents will more willingly endorse such behaviors in order to preserve their position in the group and their group identity.

As the focus of presented study is school bullying, it is important to reflect on understanding the definition of this phenomenon. It has been defined as a social process in which a student in a less powerful position is repetitively and intentionally harassed or excluded by others (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Olweus, 2002; Salmivalli, 2014). Previous studies have described various forms of bullying behavior pointing at two classifications: direct or overt and relational aggression (Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003). Overt aggression involves direct intent to cause immediate harm by physical or verbal acts, whereas relational aggression refers to victim's social circle, friendships, and acceptance in a peer group. It is exhibited through various forms at school or in Internet, for example, by spreading rumors or gossip, exclusion and marginalization, silent treatment, and ignoring. Even more indirect forms refer to inflicting harm to victims via a third party by ruining reputation and destroying friendship networks or by introducing secret codes and collusive communication acts to humiliate the victim (Underwood, 2003; Wójcik, 2018).

However, the intention to harm the victim has been questioned by some researchers (Thornberg, Baraldsnes, & Saeverot, 2018)—bullying can still take place among those who interpret the certain activities as jokes or a form of play. In some cases, it can be difficult to determine "where the joke ends and the abuse begins" (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011, p. 486). Thus, some researchers argue that bullying should be treated as goal-directed behavior instead of intentional harmdoing (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). Moreover, Vaillancourt et al. (2008) noted that when students themselves formulate the definition of bullying, it rarely includes criteria endorsed by adult researchers. For instance, the three prominent criteria typically endorsed by adult researchers in their definitions of bullying—intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance—are rarely included in students' definitions, and students who were given the more traditional (i.e. adult) definition of bullying reported being victimized less than did students who did not provide a definition but decided themselves on what needs to be reported (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Students concentrate on negative behaviors: Younger children focus on physical and verbal aggression, whereas teenagers focus on relational aggression, particularly excluding behaviors (deLara, 2012, 2016; Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Wójcik & Kozak, 2015). Meta-analyzes of bullying prevalence studies show the decrease of physical aggression with age in favor of verbal and relational aggression (Pyżalski, 2017). A characteristic of the period of adolescence from a developmental perspective is that middle school students grow psychologically and emotionally dependent on peer relationships to establish and maintain positive perceptions of the self and become correspondingly independent from adults (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). For adolescents, the main source of anxiety is the fear of rejection by their peer group, a finding that coincides with the results of studies that show the occurrence of physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying climax in middle school, especially during transitions when collective renegotiation of peer relations takes place (Olweus, 2002; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Another justification for the need for an age-differentiated definition of bullying is Moffitt's (2017) conception of hetero-typicality, according to which the tendency to use different forms of aggression changes with development depending on the increase of language and cognitive skills.

Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) indicate that physical, verbal, and indirect bullying are developmentally sequenced and linked to advances in language skills and perception of the complexity of problems.

Individual students' actions depend strongly on how they interpret a given context and their own involvement therein, as well as how they perceive themselves from the perspective of their peer group (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Thornberg, 2011; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017). Numerous studies have found that students bully others or support bullies to enhance their own social status or secure their position among peers (Gini, 2006). Accordingly, bullying might be a means of achieving dominance, given that peer groups provide attention, power, and status to those who promote group cohesion, which sometimes translates to excluding or bullying students of lower status (Thornberg, 2018; Troop-Gordon et al., 2019). The complexity of bullying has generated a considerable body of research examining the contextual factors and social processes of bullying, as well as variables associated with adolescents' behaviors (Mazzone, Camodeca, & Salmivalli, 2016; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Yun & Graham, 2018). A review of the research on bullying shows that some recent studies (Burns, Maycock, Cross, & Brown, 2008; Forsberg et al., 2018; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Mazzone, Thornberg, Stefanelli, Cadei, & Caravita, 2018; Pyżalski, 2017; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018) present bullying as an intricate interplay of individual and group factors, embedded and evolving within the context of a peer group. The portrayal of bullying in those studies suggests that it is important to consider bullying as a collective action that embraces social roles and norms, stigma processes, co-constructions of meaning, power structures, social hierarchies, and social ordering processes.

Theoretical Perspective

The present study adopted symbolic interactionism as its theoretical framework (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011), which assumes that the social life, morality, and identity are social, collective, and cultural processes created and recreated through individuals' interpretations and meaning making of daily interactions (Charon, 2007). The shared beliefs and meanings of what behaviors or actions are expected guide participants in these interactions (Blumer, 1979). Accordingly, the ways in which adolescents talk about and explain bullying in this study will clarify the types of interactions in which they have been engaged, which in turn will inform us of the social situations in which bullying arises.

Symbolic interactionism has three main principles: (a) Humans' behavior toward other people and situations is based on the meanings they have assigned to those people or situations; (b) these meanings are formed through social interactions; and (c) these meanings are handled through an interpretative process (Blumer, 1979). Thus, to understand the patterns and regularities of bullying, we must examine the social processes that create it, including the socially and personally constructed meanings that guide students' behavior in bullying situations (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Thornberg, 2015).

The primary objective of our work was to investigate how the Polish middle school students from several class units located in three different schools understand, rationalize, interpret, and give meaning to bullying behaviors as an element of class dynamics (here, "class/class unit" means "a formal group of about 20–25 students who remain in a single class unit with the same classmates for the entire school day for the three years of middle school"). The class unit is considered students' *microsystem*, as it is the group with which adolescents interact in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Students are considered active agents in the construction of their microsystem, which is collectively created and shared (Corsaro, 2005; Wójcik, 2018). Similarly, bullying is considered a collective action embracing social roles, stigmatization, co-constructions of meaning, and social ordering processes (Coloroso, 2009; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014; Thornberg, 2007, 2011). We therefore think it is essential to consider the school class context and dynamics and understand students' perspectives of them in order to recognize conditions in which bullying is reinforced or weakened and determine why students in some classrooms are more likely to be involved in bullying.

Understanding these conditions by investigating the main concerns and perspectives of Polish middle school students on bullying might be useful for psychologists and educators in other countries. First, bullying is a common phenomenon around the world, with reports from Europe and North America showing that as many as 30% of students have been involved in bullying (as a bully or a victim; Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009). Second, educational systems in Europe and North America have many similarities—for instance, secondary education is divided into two phases, middle/junior high school (11–14 years old) and high school (14–18 years old), and students customarily advance together from one grade to the next as a single cohort or "class" upon reaching the end of each school year.

We employed a grounded theory approach to guide our data collection and analysis, as it allows for deeper understanding of the group processes and students' perspective on complex intragroup relations. Furthermore, this approach culminates in a theory grounded in data that has been collected directly from participants on the basis of their lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As a result, it can help us understand bullying as a set of social processes in the everyday context (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006) and determine the interactions, interpretations, and meanings of those processes (Charmaz, 2017).

Method

Participants

The Polish school system begins with preschool, when children turn six, followed by 12 years of compulsory schooling: six years of primary school (age 7–11), three of middle school (age 12–14), and three of secondary school (age 15–18). This study concentrates on middle school students.

Classrooms are identifiable and constant units for the three years of middle school, and students remain together for all or most of their courses. Each classroom contains a class teacher, who in addition to teaching one subject has a number of additional duties such as conducting parents' meetings, organizing trips, taking care of administrative documents, and acting as the intermediary in conflicts (e.g., between students, students and teachers. or parents and teachers). Following approval by the University Committee for Research Ethics, we collected a convenience sample of eight middle schools from the city board of education of a large Polish city. The head teachers of those schools were contacted, and the research aims and procedure were explained. Only three public middle schools agreed to participate. Following their agreement, we arranged meetings and data collection.

From the three schools, a sample of 102 students (54 females and 48 males) attending four class units was recruited. All students were 13–14 years old at the time of the study. Socioeconomic data for individual students were not collected. However, considering the schools' location, the sample likely represented students from lower- (unemployed or earning minimal wage and claiming child benefits) and middle-class families. The homogeneity of Polish society was reflected in the sample, as all students were of Polish origin. Following further approval by the University Committee for Research Ethics and the board of education, we were granted access to the participants. Informed consent was obtained from the students and their legal guardians prior to data collection. The students' names have been changed in this article to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Procedure

The study was carried out in two consecutive stages: field observations to identify bullying cases and interviews with students to explore how they interpreted and explained bullying behaviors in their classes. The data encompassed field notes and transcripts of audio recordings. All data were collected within the same school year from January to June 2018.

During the preliminary stage, which lasted three months, we spent two to three days per week with each of four classes (A, B, C, D) conducting observations of everyday interactions during lessons, breaks, and field trips. We focused on specific behaviors of peers during their interactions, the way they created social networks (the frequency and type of interpersonal peer to peer interactions), and the roles they played in them. The observation stage pro-

vided us with the preliminary results that were then used to design second stage of the research.

Because it was important for us to approach and treat teenagers as the main informants of their school lives (Kane & Chimwayange, 2014), we tried to immerse ourselves in the class setting, spending as much time as possible with the students. By observing lessons and breaks, and participating in trips and other activities, we learned numerous facts about the students and their immediate school context. At all times, we tried to avoid assuming positions of authority or power, adopting the "least-adult" role (Mandell, 1991).

Before we commenced the observation stage, students were informed that we would act as guests, not as teachers, and that we would merely observe their everyday school activities because we wanted to know what it was like to be a middle school student. We promised not to discuss class matters with teachers, or parents, and that we would only react if somebody's life or health were in danger. At the beginning of interviews, we informed each student that the collected information would help in designing antibullying school programs. Then, we assured students that they did not have to answer questions or discuss issues if they did not feel comfortable.

Subsequently in second stage, we conducted 47 semistructured individual interviews with the students from classes with identified bullying cases. Students were recruited by asking them to volunteer. Fifty-nine students volunteered, however nine parents did not permit their children to participate, two students changed their mind, and one was absent during data collection due to illness. Ultimately 47 students participated in interviews (21 males and 26 females).

We used qualitative interview methods to encourage students to speak for themselves in any way they wanted. These methods allowed us to understand how students interpreted their relationships within their class and the interactions that they were involved in. Each student was interviewed by the first author at their school, in a room away from other students. Because students might talk about sensitive issues, become upset, or disclose distressing facts for the first time, we arranged for the school psychologist and counselor to be available to support students during and after each interview. At this stage together with the school authorities, we planned to introduce an antibullying intervention program immediately following data collection.

We employed a common interview guide for each of the 47 interviews. Participants were initially asked to comment freely on their class experience (e.g., "Tell me about your class," "Describe your school day," "Are there any things that you like or dislike about your class?"). This prompted students to mention some bullying behaviors, as well as their own and classmates' involvement and roles therein. We then used probing questions to clarify students' descriptions and interpretations of the bullying.

In order to obtain specific information about four long-term cases of bullying, we asked all participants to describe and comment on bullying incidents as well as their classmates' involvement in them. We asked for interpretations of their own and others' behaviors, for example "Why did you/he/she behave like that/do that/say that?" Additionally, we asked what, in their opinion, were their peers' interpretations of bullying (generally) and bullying in their class.

At the end of each interview, the student had time to ask questions or express doubts. Everyone also had the opportunity to talk to the school psychologist if they required support. Each interview (average time 39.7 min) was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Observation

The first stage of the analysis involved reading and rereading field notes collected during observation to generate lists of interpersonal peer-to-peer behaviors (e.g., sitting together and talking during breaks, playing games, sharing pictures, helping each other, sharing food or drink, arguing, fighting, name-calling, insulting, laughing at each other, kicking each other, etc.). Then we assigned listed behaviors to particular students in each class separately, creating a peer network, identifying victims of the most frequent negative behaviors and aggressors who initiated those behaviors. In the next step we used the bullying circle approach, which involves identifying different behavior styles on a continuum surrounding the aggressor and vic-

tim (Olweus, 2002; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Wójcik & Flak, 2019) to identify other students' roles based on certain exhibited behaviors. According to the bullying circle approach, we identified two behavioral patterns: proaggressor behaviors, that is, behaviors to encourage or directly carry out the aggressor's ideas or strategies (henchmen, active supporters), and neutral behavior, such as not getting involved or refraining from active involvement (passive supporters, disengaged onlookers). There were no provictim behaviors observed in the four identified bullying cases.

Interviews, Transcripts, and Coding

The interview transcripts were the primary study data and were analyzed using NVivo 11 based on a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017). The main grounded theory methods included coding (creating qualitative codes and categories grounded in the data), constant comparison (comparing data with data, codes with codes, data within codes, etc.), memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes and other theoretical ideas that came to mind during the coding), and memo sorting. Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) resulted in our adding some new questions during the interview process. Theoretical sampling was also performed within the data itself. We initially performed open coding, which involved breaking down the data into units of meaning. Because the interviews were not structured, we analyzed the data word-for-word, looking at particular incidents and events. This step involved coding words, lines, and segments of data. This coding process was guided by the following analytical questions (Charmaz, 2017): What do the data suggest? What is happening in the data? What category does a specific incident indicate? How do participants perceive their classes? The similarities and differences between items and cases were then analyzed to produce categories.

In the second step, we carried out focused coding. We compared the most frequently appearing codes derived from the open coding to synthesize data into more elaborate conceptual categories: social structure and intragroup interdependence, bullying justification, normality versus oddness, and expected behaviors in bullying situations. These concepts delimited and guided further work.

Finally, in the third step, we conducted theoretical coding (Glaser, 2005). This process involved exploring and analyzing how the core conceptual categories and constructed codes related to each other. We then integrated them into a grounded theory by using the theoretical codes.

Results

The results presented here concentrate on students' perception, understanding, rationalization, and explanation of bullying behaviors in their class context and are based on interview data. However, to give an overview of the four bullying cases, we will also present descriptive observational data.

Our initial observations revealed four cases of bullying in three classes (one class, "D," was free of bullying). The victims of bullying in class "A" were Ania and Tomek, the victim in class "B" was Karol, and the victim in class "C" was Pawel. The bullies were Marcin in class "A," Pat in class "B," and Darek in class "C."

Similarly to the bullying circle (Olweus, 2002; Olweus & Limber, 2010), "bullies" (Marcin, Pat, and Darek) were defined as students who instigated negative behaviors toward victims, for example, taking their belongings, introducing and using offensive names, physically abusing victims by pushing and kicking them, planning and executing unpleasant jokes to humiliate victims, persuading others to avoid or tease them, and making up and spreading gossip about victims. "Victims" (Ania, Tomek, Karol, and Pawel) were students identified as the targets of negative behaviors mentioned above. They did not have friends in the class and spent breaks alone, sat alone during the majority of lessons (unless the teacher decided otherwise), did not participate in school trips, and did not spend time with classmates at the playground after lessons. We also identified other roles based on certain exhibited behaviors: "henchmen," who directly assisted the bully and took active part in the bullying, for example, hid belongings taken from victim by the bully, participated in jokes (such as tying a backpack to a table), warned the bully about an approaching teacher, and offended the victims. "Active supporters" also openly supported the bullying, but

in an indirect way, through laughing at jokes made by bullies and henchmen (but not taking an active part in teasing), cheering during incidents, and avoiding interactions with victims, expressing discontent when forced to sit with them. "Passive supporters" did not show outward signs of support but were present during bullying incidents, observed interactions with seemingly neutral attitudes and also avoided victims. Finally, "disengaged onlookers" tried not to get involved or side with any party and often walked away from the situation when they could, turned away when they noticed bullying incidents, and sat or worked with the victim only when asked to by a teacher. The summary of students' roles and corresponding behaviors are presented in Table 1.

Interviews

In further analysis of primary data interviews, we concentrated on the shared beliefs built around the four long-term bullying cases. It is important to know that there were: two victims, one bully, four henchmen, 12 active supporters, 10 passive supporters, and 18 disengaged onlookers among interviewed students. In order to contextualize the specific situations and participants, we ascribed each quote to participant using their names, bullying case, and participants' roles.

The systematic analysis of the data generated a grounded theory of beliefs and behavioral labels formed and shared around bullying. The theory consisted of four aspects: perception of class structure and intragroup relations, bullying as a punishment for ruining class reputation, notion of normality, and self-labeling and the fear of losing face.

Perceived Intragroup Relations

The students were aware of the various groups and dyads of friends in their class as well as popularity and exclusion patterns. This knowledge was necessary for them to fit into the

Table 1
Descriptive Observational Data

Students' roles	Definition of role	Exhibited behaviors	Number of students
Victims	Students identified as the targets of negative behaviors	having no friends in the class, spending breaks alone, sitting alone during lessons, not participating in school trips, and not spending time with classmates	4
Bullies	Students who instigated negative behaviors towards victims	taking belongings, introducing and using offensive names, physically abusing victims by pushing and kicking them, planning and executing jokes to humiliate victims, persuading others to avoid or tease them, making up and spreading gossip	3
Henchmen	Students who directly assisted the bully and took active part in the bullying	hiding belongings taken from victim, participating in jokes, warning the bully about an approaching teacher, offending the victims	10
Active supporters	Students who openly supported the bullying, but in an indirect way	laughing at jokes made by bullies and henchmen (but not taking an active part in teasing); cheering during incidents; avoiding interactions with victims	23
Passive supporters	Students who did not show outward signs of support but were present during bullying incidents	Observing incidents with neutral attitude, avoiding victims	15
Disengaged onlookers	Students who ho tried not to get involved or side with any party	Walking or turning away from bullying situation, interacting with victim only when asked by a teacher	20

setting—to avoid exclusion and position themselves safely between exclusion and popularity. Students were able to indicate negative behaviors toward victims (name-calling, insulting, pushing, jostling, laughing at, ignoring, gossiping about, plotting against, refusing to sit or work with, or expressing contempt in various ways). They were also able to point to the leaders who initiated those behaviors, the followers who joined in, active and passive bystanders, and disengaged onlookers. In one of the bullying cases, Marcin (Ania and Tomek's bully) was referred to as the "boss." He dealt with the class organization and task distribution and was generally considered the most powerful figure in the class. He was both feared and admired. Students in his class had positive opinions about Marcin and admired him for his sports achievements. Only a few disengaged onlookers and victims (Ania and Tomek) considered him malicious and unpredictable. His henchmen (Kamil, Patryk, Łukasz) on the other hand, were considered "a bunch of idiots," who were disrespected but feared:

> Marcin is kind of our boss, who tells others what to do. He is popular, and those three boys follow him around and do what he tells them, which includes bullying Tomek and Ania. I do not usually do anything. Marcin is OK. (Mary, Ania and Tomek's class, passive supporter)

> I do not like him (Marcin). I never know what he might do; I just do not want to get involved. I have my group of friends and we stick together; I do not like what they are doing (bullying) but I wouldn't know what to do. (Kris, Ania and Tomek's class, disengaged onlooker)

Ania and Tomek both admitted to being bullied by Marcin (the bully), Kamil, Patryk, and Łukasz (his henchmen) and ignored by others in the class. They both perceived that the bullying started about two months after the beginning of the school year with jokes about their appearance. When asked a general question about her class and classmates, Ania reported, "They call me names and play stupid jokes that I hate. Girls laugh at my appearance because I am chubbier than most of them. But those boys are the worst ever." In answering the same questions, Tomek said, "Me and the fat girl Ania are victims. I don't get why me. Nobody seems to notice. Maybe because it's mainly teasing or just not talking to me all day."

When talking about the situation in this class, students expressed concern about having friendships or belonging to a particular group of friends, which they believed would help them avoid becoming the next victims of Marcin and his henchmen.

> I do not defend Ania or Tomek because they are not my friends. If Alan (a friend) was bullied I would act immediately. And he would too (defend me), that's why we need to stick together. And it's good to have a friend. (Kuba, Ania and Tomek's class, passive supporter)

> You got to try hard to have some friends around you. That's what school is for, right. (Beata, Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter)

In two other long-term bullying cases (Karol and Pawel) students were also able to describe the vertical class structure and networks surrounding the bullying:

> Pat (Karol's bully) is the funny guy but he also kind of tells people what to do in the class. You know, Magda is his girlfriend, Mick and Seba his besties. Our class gang, the royals. You better stay out of their way. (Iga, Karol's class, active supporter)

> You know Pawel (victim) is really, really weird. So no wander Darek (bully) gets angry at him and pushes him or offends him. Piotr, Robert and Staszek are Darek's friends and so they do things together, although Staszek not so often. We do not do much about it. Some people laugh at Pawel but it is hard not to (Kasia, Pawel's class, passive supporter)

Some studies with a functionalist perspective state that status hierarchies decrease intragroup conflicts and improve group performance by emphasizing the predictability and stability of relations (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). However, there is little evidence that status hierarchies are associated with low levels of aggression in groups (Anderson & Brown, 2010). In fact, a growing body of research supports a balance-of-power view by demonstrating that status inequality is associated with victimization and bullying. Garandeau et al. (2014) showed that higher levels of hierarchy were associated with higher levels of bullying and that students who were perceived as those with the lowest status were those most likely to be bullied.

Students also emphasized the importance of having a friend or a group of friends, which was not only an essential part of life but also acted as a protective factor against problems, including bullying. They expressed fear and worries about being "not liked, outside the class, or bullied." For example, two participants noted the following:

> If I am in trouble, like I forgot my homework, Susan and Mary are always there to help me out. Once, when that boy called Susan "thin sprat," we (me and Mary) told him to shut up and get lost. (Ola, Pawel's class, disengaged onlooker)

> We (three boys forming a friendship group) always wait for each other before entering school. We feel more confident and it's easier to survive boring lessons and some fights. (Jan, Karol's class, disengaged onlooker)

These findings agree with social exclusion anxiety and the fear of social death suggested by Søndergaard (2012) and confirmed by Thornberg (2018), who showed that students considered being excluded, bullied, or having no friends as the worst possible situation for them at school. Having friends is crucial for adolescent youth and is a normative component of development. Naturally, friendships promote social adjustment in youth, and having friends is an indicator of social adjustment (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

Bullying as a Punishment for Ruining Class Reputation

In analyzing students' reports of bullying, we noticed that they used common words to describe victimized students, such as "strange," "abnormal," "nerd," "fat," "pig," or "retarded." They also willingly offered explanations as to why victims were bullied. Long-term victims were represented as "a fat girl who doesn't know how to behave, who is childish and interested in frivolous matters" (Ania); "a nerd who is interested only in studying, and who is gay, weak, and oversensitive" (Tomek); "fat, ugly, and unpredictable" (Ania); "having strange ticks and making funny faces" (Karol); and "strange and different" (Pawel). These labels were assigned to each bullying case and shared by the students in their classes.

Marta: (Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter): "The truth is, those two students are teased and laughed at and stuff. Bullied."

Interviewer: "How come Ania is bullied?"

Marta: "You saw her, right?"

Interviewer: "Yes I did."

Marta: "So you know what she is like. Did you see her Bieber t-shirt and pink sneakers? We are middle schoolers. She should know better."

In another interview, a student who acted as a bully was asked about the situation during the lesson and how decisions were made about who would work with whom:

Pat (Karol's class, bully): "If we are allowed to choose who we want to work with, Karol is always left alone. I also refused to work with Karol."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Pat: "He behaves like a gay. He is girlish and weak. That's all."

The students suggested that victims' otherness was the main reason for their position and situation in the class. They said for example:

> No wonder Ania is called a fat pig. She is fat, you can see for yourself. If she didn't talk like that we wouldn't avoid her but, as she is, you just do not want to be seen near her. (Paula, Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter)

> You have to control what you say, do, and wear in school. They should do that too and, if they do not . . . well, sorry. (Miki, Ania and Tomek's class, passive supporter)

> Pawel is strange and unpredictable, he says unpredictable things (Wojtek, Pawel's class, disengaged onlooker)

Analyses of the students' discourse on victimized students revealed recurrent patterns of reasoning that if the victimized students simply changed their behavior, the bullying would stop:

> Why doesn't she just stop eating so much and get thinner, and stop showing everyone that she loves Justin Bieber? (Marta, Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter)

> Just behave normal, man. (Robert, Pawel's class, henchman)

> If he (Karol) stops his weird actions we stop (bullying). (Pat, Karol's class, bully)

This finding aligns with that of Jones, Manstead, and Livingstone (2011), Thornberg (2018); Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) and who noted that the misfitting of a victim was a strong theme in students' discourse on bullying. This discourse also revealed interaction patterns in which the victimized student was constructed as a deviant not worthy of belonging to a peer group and thus deserving of bullying.

Another reason that students mentioned in relation to each bullying case was peer pressure and the need to follow group norms:

> Sometimes I think that I am pushed to not like Karol. Personally, I think he is ok. (Mateusz, Karol's class, passive supporter)

> In normal life, I wouldn't let it (bullying) happen. (Wojtek, Pawel's class, disengaged onlooker)

> I don't want to stand out. (Teresa, Karol's class, passive supporter)

The rules and norms of behavior in class were closely connected with being different versus being normal and behaving in expected, predictable ways. According to our respondents, behaving in these ways was obvious to everybody and necessary for class well-being:

> All he needs to do is start acting like a normal person. It would stop all the bullying. The rules are clear. (Monika, Pawel's class, active supporter)

> If we can do normal things and talk in normal way, why can't he. (Greg, Pawel's class, active supporter)

As in the studies of Ellwood and Davies (2010) and Wójcik (2018), students left little room for interpretation of what normal is and what it is not, which in turn extended to their beliefs about the behaviors that had to be eradicated. These norms were apparently shared not only in the classes we analyzed but also across the entire school community.

Indeed, rather surprisingly, students considered each bullying case within the context of the entire school and intergroup relations between class units. In the first interview we conducted, Simon henchman from Karol's class said, "If one person acts like a freak, others (students from other classes) think we are the class of freaks. We cannot let it happen." We explored this theme by asking students how they perceived other class units and how they thought others perceived them as a class.

> Once I participated in a student council meeting as I am class president. And one of the boys from 3b (a class designation) said "Oi, you have that fat girl with Bieber's t-shirt in your class" and started laughing. It was so embarrassing. I told my classmates and they were really angry at Ania. (Beata, Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter)

> So, we went to the cinema. Karol was walking behind in this strange, swinging way. And everybody was pointing at us and laughing. So after that he was given a lesson. (Mirek, Karol's class, active supporter)

> I fancy a boy from another class. Last week, he was standing near and looked at us, I mean me and other girls from my class, and said "So you girls like pink a lot, don't you?" I will never forgive her (Ania)! (Paula, Ania and Tomek's class, active supporter)

These statements suggest that when the entire class reputation is at stake, bullying is treated as a punishment for the misfit and as a way to force them to change their behavior to better fit with the class. We also observed that students believed that others judged their class on the basis of bullied students' behavior and appearance. In a context where each student belongs to a single, defined class, it seems that both individual students' and the class' reputations matter. Moreover, in addition to the clear hierarchy in each class, we observed a hierarchy among the classes within each school. Several students reported:

> 3b is really cool, they do stuff together, win matches, have parties. They are a good team. We are not. (Ric, Karol's class, passive supporter)

> I wish we were like 2c. They are all ok. No weirdos and stuff. (Maja, Pawel's class, passive supporter)

This situation can be interpreted in light of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory proposes that individuals want to achieve a positive self-concept, which in turn can derive from a positive evaluation of their own group. Such positive evaluations can be attained through comparisons of their own group with relevant outgroups, which the participants in this study clearly did in their discourse on school reality. When the comparison resulted in an unfavorable outcome for their own group, students tried to determine the reason for the outcome; in our study, this was often the presence of a misfit student in their group. This is another important group factor that

needs to be considered when planning antibullying intervention programs.

Interpretation of Normality

Individual interviews with students revealed an interesting pattern of categorization. As in Thornberg (2015), students paid special attention to "being normal" and maintaining a shared "normality," thus casting victims as different. The idea of normality was cherished, as it provided a sense of security—"normal" students were not in any danger of being excluded or bullied:

> You've got to be normal to be OK. If you are normal, nobody will make fun of you. You won't give reasons to be laughed at. (Susan, Ania and Tomek's class, disengaged onlooker)

> I don't need to worry. I am normal. (Arek, Karol's class, disengaged onlooker)

However, we noted that the idea of "normality" seemed to be shaped in contrast to the victimized students' behavior and appearance. One student said, "If I was fat I would be bullied. But I am not. I am normal" (Lucy, Ania and Tomek's class, passive supporter). Another boy said, "Normal people don't walk like that (like Karol)" (Bennie, Karol's class, passive supporter). Another student noted, "He cries when he is called names. That is not normal. We normal boys would never do that" (Filip, Pawel's class, disengaged onlooker). This dichotomy between normality and oddness was a recurring theme in students' discourse on their class and everyday life at school. Students in each class with a bullying case were often seen as being divided by a clear boundary: Victims were made the "outgroup," thus making it easier for the "ingroup" to discriminate against them. A similar division was described by Gini (2006), who found that students who were perceived as outgroup members were more likely to be bullied. Furthermore, Brenick and Killen (2014) showed that excluding an outgroup member to include an ingroup member, or excluding a lower-status group member, is acceptable and normative for maintaining a societal status quo among youth.

Self-Labeling and the Fear of Losing Face

We asked the interviewed adolescents, who were aware of the bullying cases, to describe chosen incidents from their own perspective, for example: "Tell me about the PE lesson on Monday and how students were assigned to teams?" and "Tell me about disagreement in your class about the organization of the school play." This allowed for students' perspective and interpretation to be heard without having to justify or rationalize his or her behavior.

Interestingly, students were able to recall (some in great detail) the entire process of creating the victim, from picking them to achieving a state of intensive bullying. Particularly those who acted as disengaged onlookers or passive bystanders remembered that at the beginning they found it difficult to interpret whether the situation was serious or merely funny, which hindered their decision to react. These observers thought that it was safer to hold back and see how the situation progressed:

> Well at the beginning, some boys started calling Ania *pig,* but just like once a day, no big deal. I did not do it myself but I smirked. I also did not tell them to stop or something because I thought it was not a big deal. And then all of a sudden I realized it was serious bullying, but it was kind of too late for me to change [my behavior]. (Alan, Ania and Tomek's class, passive supporter).

> One day, Simon (henchman) was laughing at Karol because he walked like Jar Jar Binks (a character from *Star Wars*). But that happens every day, somebody is always laughing at somebody else. Karol did not even seem to be bothered. From then on we sometimes called him Jar Jar. And one day Pat (the bully) said that Jar Jar was gay so Karol must be gay as well. I was confused what to do because I liked Karol. I did nothing and it went on like that. If I had known it would turn to bullying I would have said something. (Mark, Karol's class, disengaged onlooker)

Mark went on describing very recent bullying incident, and he stated openly that he had not defended Karol. When asked why, he answered "Mhm, what would they say if I defended Karol all of a sudden. That I had also become gay or something." Active supporters and henchmen, in talking about the bullying case in their class, deliberated that their own responses to the initial stages of the bullying had trapped them into a specific role:

> I somehow joined Pat in bullying Karol. I am fed up with it but if I stopped Pat would think I am weak. Dangerous. (Simon, Karol's class, henchman)

> One day they (Darek—bully; Piotr and Robert—henchmen) took Pawel's backpack and started to toss it in a circle, [so] I did too. It was fun but only at the

> beginning. And now when something begins (bullying incidents) my friends always say *come on*. And so I go with them although I really do not want to. (Witek, Pawel's class, active supporter)

> I am bored with it (bullying Tomek). I wish he changed schools or something happened. (Łukasz, Ania and Tomek's class, henchman)

These findings are consistent with theories of labeling and reputation bias (Becker, 1963; Hymel, 1986). But more specifically, students in our study self-labeled on the bases of their previous behavior and assumed that their peers shared this label and expected them to be consistent in it. Furthermore, Burns et al. (2008) noted that students admitted to bullying others because once they had started and earned the reputation of a "bully" or "henchman," it was difficult to stop. The concept of "losing face" with peers was present both in our study and in Burns et al. (2008). Our study adds to their work by showing that the fear of "losing face" applies not only to bullies but also to active and passive bystanders and disengaged onlookers. All these students seemed to feel the need to remain consistent with their behavior. Their statements suggested that the consistency of interaction was important for the presentation of their self-identity, so doing something unexpected (e.g., defending the victim) "all of a sudden" might result in a loss of face and thereby endanger their social status. It is also important to notice that the interpretation of the initial attacks described by Thornberg, Halldin, Bolmsjö, and Petersson (2013) indicate the insidious emergence of victimizing not only for victims but also for other students in the class. The summary of described themes with exemplary quotations are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

Despite the small scale of this qualitative study, our findings depict the shared beliefs and interpretative paths followed by students when reasoning and explaining their roles and behaviors surrounding bullying cases. The results that we find especially important for bullying prevention are the complement of labeling theories in bullying (Burns et al., 2008). Our results show that not only bullies and victims but also other participants of bullying incidents self-label and find it difficult to break patterns of behaviors related to bullying, such as supporting the bully or not defending the victim. That means that the same mechanisms of traps in roles are ascribed to supporters (both active and passive) and disengaged onlookers, which is important to consider when planning bullying intervention. Moreover, our results complement the existing literature on students' behavior in bullying situations by adding one more area of reflection when defining a bullying situation and deciding on one's reaction—that is, the concern for class reputation and the need to defend it. These findings also reveal that power and popularity relations are situated not only between the individuals involved in the bullying cases but also between peer groups at the school level. Apart from the people involved, their status, the relationship to peers, friends, and the audience, and the expectations of others, adolescents consider the entire school context.

The students surrounding the bullying cases were from the very beginning engaged in the fitting of each other's actions to prevailing norms and shared beliefs, which guided their behaviors and interpretations when observing bullying and choosing subsequent actions. Specifically, in their interpretation of bullying cases, existing interpersonal, intragroup networks and alliances, a concern for their class's reputation, and the perceived normality and consistency of the presentation of self were all considered in deciding what action to take.

The way in which students navigated the school reality was reminiscent, in some ways, of an online game with different levels to pass, goals to accomplish, and traps to avoid. Nonetheless there are three crucial differences. It appears that when you play "the game of bullying," you cannot stop even if you want to, you cannot start over, and you have to operate on all levels simultaneously. "The game of bullying" must be played in an exceedingly restricted environment with limited possibilities, regulated time, and strict rules. The winners are students who do not get bullied.

Students interact on three levels: intragroup—with their class, intergroup—at the school level, and interpersonal. The intragroup or class level seems to be of primary importance in this game, as our participants were fully aware of the class organization and could position themselves and others within its power structure. The peer networks surrounding the

Table 2
Grounded Theory of Beliefs and Behavioral Labels Formed and Shared Around Bullying

Theme	Summary	Exemplary quotes
Perceived intragroup relations	Students are aware of hierarchies, popularity and exclusion patterns as well as power relations in their classes. They express concern for having a friend or group of friends as well as a strong fear of being left alone.	Pat (Karol's bully) is the funny guy but he also kind of tells people what to do in the class. You know, Magda is his girlfriend, Mick and Seba his besties. Our class gang, the royals. You better stay out of their way. (Iga, Karol's class, active supporter) We (three boys forming a friendship group) always wait for each other before entering school. We feel more confident and it's easier to survive boring lessons and some fights. (Jan, Karol's class, disengaged onlooker)
Bullying as a punishment for ruining class reputation	Students considered each bullying case within the context of the entire school and intergroup relations between class units. When the class reputation is at stake, bullying is treated as a punishment for the misfit and as a way to force victims to change their behavior to better fit with the class.	So, we went to the cinema. Karol was walking in this strange, swinging way. And everybody was pointing at us and laughing. So after that he was given a lesson. (Mirek, Karol's class, active supporter). If one person acts like a freak, others (students from other classes) think we are the class of freaks. We cannot let it happen. (Simon, Karol's class, henchman)
Interpretation of normality	Students paid special attention to "being normal" and maintaining a shared "normality," The idea of normality was cherished -"normal" students were not in any danger of being bullied. The idea of "normality" seemed to be shaped in contrast to the victimized students' behavior and appearance.	I don't need to worry. I am normal. (Arek, Karol's class, disengaged onlooker) He cries when he is called names. That is not normal. We normal boys would never do that. (Filip, P, disengaged onlooker).
Self-labeling and the fear of losing face	Not only bullies and victims but also other participants of bullying incidents self-label themselves and find it difficult to break patterns of behaviors related to bullying, such as supporting the bully or not defending the victim.	One day they (Darek – bully; Piotr and Robert – henchmen) took Pawel's backpack and started to toss it in a circle, [so] I did too. It was fun but only at the beginning. And now when something begins (bullying incidents) my friends always say *come on*. And so I go with them although I really don't want to. (Witek, Pawel's class, active supporter)

four bullying cases were formed by visible differences in social status and influence, which is in line with studies showing that the classroom imbalance of power facilitates the emergence of subsequent bullying (Garandeau et al., 2014; Garandeau, Ahn, & Rodkin, 2011; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). The four victims were positioned at the bottom of the class ladder and were labeled as odd, different, or misfitting. Other students positioned themselves using a solid division between "normal" and "odd" and paid great attention to proving their "membership" in the "normal" group. They rationalized that their well-earned normality provided them with protection from being bullied. The normality was, however, constructed in opposition to the oddness of victims. Particular behaviors and characteristics were presented as examples of odd behavior with an emphasis on the fact that "normal people are not like that" and "do not behave that way." This is reminiscent of the "odd student repertoire" identified by Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003), whereby the group maintains normative orders, executing what is and what is not normal. During this process, the victim is separated from the group and labeled as a deviant student that threatens the social order.

The class level is also embedded in the school level, with class units being positioned in other intergroup structures with different sets of rules and status markers. Our analysis introduces the

concept of class reputation and the need to defend it as an important factor in in decision-making about students' own reaction to the bullying situation. The misfitting students were perceived as threatening to the class reputation.

The interpersonal level may have more traps than other levels, some of which have already been described in past studies. For example, through the peer discourse on bullying and creation of social expectations, victimized students became trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy that made it impossible for them to exit victimization (Viala, 2014; Wójcik, 2018). Similar expectations might trap bullies into their bullying behaviors—once a student is labeled as a bully, his or her reputation might encourage a persistence of certain behaviors that makes it harder to stop (Hymel, 1986). The findings of this study show that the same mechanism might apply to all the actors surrounding bullying cases. Students in our study self-labeled on the basis of their behavior during the initial attacks on the victim and believed that other students shared this behavioral label. They found it hard to pinpoint when the bullying actually began and, as a result, held back their decisions on how to react until it was too late. To them, "doing nothing and just observing" seemed the easiest and the safest behavior, which allowed for proper interpretation of the incident. However, this initiated a vicious circle of observing bullying incidents and not reacting. From the symbolic interactionism perspective (Blumer, 1979), it seems that students' identities influenced their behavior when witnessing bullying. This identity was constructed through everyday social interactions, such as during the initial stages of bullying, and thereby affected their subsequent behavior and led to a further reconstruction of their identity.

As mentioned above, students are very restricted in playing "the game of bullying." For example, they have no possibility of choosing other players—their classmates or schoolmates, with whom they have to share their time for years. They cannot choose to leave school without incurring costs or problems (Horton, 2018). As one of our participants noted: "You actually have no choice. You have to be there, with all of them, all day. So you gotta do what you got to do." These findings clearly indicate that bullying is a relational phenomenon constructed out of and reflective of the social relations in the class and school. This idea of compulsion is similarly described by Horton (2018), who noted that it increases the need for skills in navigating the school social world and coping with conflicting demands, as it traps students in playing the game.

Practical Implications

Our findings have implications for teachers and other school personnel in their antibullying practices, both in schools where students remain in one classroom throughout the school day and in schools where students travel together from course to course for all of their academic classes as in academic or interdisciplinary teaming. Thus, exploring the paths through peer victimization in middle schools in Poland might help homeroom teachers and class tutors in school contexts in which the classroom is a stable unit as in many European countries. It may also be helpful for those operating in more varied and complex systems, for example in interdisciplinary teaming in middle schools in the United States. which restricts students' exposure to the general student body at their school because their classmates are always comprised of members of their interdisciplinary team. Teaming may be socially beneficial for popular students but detrimental for children with low social preference, who must endure a poor reputation throughout the majority of the school day (Echols, 2015), which is a similar situation to stable classroom units.

Specifically, our findings point to two important policy implications. First, effective intervention is possible only when the bullying process is fully comprehended. Collaborating with adolescents in planning antibullying programs might prove beneficial only when all parties involved can indicate the context and traps or triggers that lead to bullying. The second implication is in line with Horton's (2011) statement that bullying is not an isolated interpersonal phenomenon created by "evil-minded" aggressive individuals; rather, it is a social phenomenon involving ordinary adolescents in unique situations. The underlying logic of this approach should make us realize that some antibullying interventions—such as tighter security or zero tolerance to bullying—inaccurately situate the violence in the nature of the person and thus unfairly target individuals involved in vio-

lent behavior or who have made a mistake and provide no way back or alternative path/behavior. Thus, besides the traps built into natural group dynamics, students would have to contend with added difficulties due to inadequate antibullying interventions. By assigning those who bully or assist in bullying to a category of "violent people," we orient the responses to the person and not to the event, context, or situation. If everyone treats a student as a bad person, they might as well behave that way. To oppose this, we suggest using a different approach, one that is well stated with White's (1989) aphorism: "The person is not the problem: the problem is the problem" (p. 6). Winslade et al. (2015) even translated this into the context of antibullying work: "The bully is not the problem; bullying is the problem" (p. 4). This particular approach is used in interventions such as "undercover antibullying teams," which are a targeted, nonpunitive restorative intervention that involves exerting peer influences to transform bullying relations by removing behavioral labels. With this intervention, bullies are involved in the transformation, and the victim is never required to confront the bullies (Winslade et al., 2015). In summary, antibullying policies and practices must include a critical pedagogy and focus on social interaction patterns, social hierarchies, peer cultures and cultural norms, power dynamics, domination, and intersectionality, rather than labeling and pathologizing the involved pupils (Horton, 2018; Thornberg, 2018).

Limitations

This study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, in qualitative interviews, there is a higher risk of social desirability bias as compared to anonymous questionnaires, especially when students are asked by adults to talk about interpersonal relations. Second, it was exceedingly difficult for us as researchers to avoid an authority position. Although we were careful and sensitive about locating ourselves within the research process, we were considered teacher-like figures just by virtue of being adults. Moreover, we only assessed four bullying cases and did not include teachers and school staff. Finally, this sample of adolescents from Poland might not be similar to adolescents in other countries because of the contextual and cultural variations across countries and educational systems.

Although the analysis was based on observations and interview data, our findings might not reflect what was really happening in these peer groups; instead, they indicate our interpretation of participants' narrated experiences and perspectives on operating in a peer group with ongoing bullying cases. Interviews are considered as a co-constructive process of meaning-making (Charmaz, 2014, 2017; Westcott & Littleton, 2005) and thus cannot offer an exact picture of reality or general applicability; rather, they offer an interpretative portrayal of the participants' perspectives and experiences. In further studies gender, sexual orientation or socioeconomic factors should be examined relative to bullying dynamics in school class contexts. Moreover, future studies should try to explore complex interrelation and development of social status, social norms, class cultures, and hierarchies.

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