

Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science No. 234

# “Why Do We Even Bully?”

Exploring the Social Processes of Bullying  
in Two Swedish Elementary Schools

**Joakim Strindberg**



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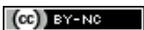
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*Till minne av min far*

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*Joakim Strindberg*

Linköping, September 2021

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>9</b>
AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	11
<b>BULLYING AS A RELATIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL PHENOMENON: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>13</b>
SOCIAL RELATIONS, GROUP AGGRESSION, AND PARTICIPANT ROLES IN BULLYING.....	16
SOCIAL POSITIONING, POPULARITY, FRIENDSHIPS, AND BULLYING .....	18
THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOLING AND THE FEAR OF BEING BULLIED.....	21
ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SCHOOL BULLYING.....	24
BULLYING, “SAMENESS”, AND “DIFFERENCE” .....	26
CONCLUDING REMARKS .....	28
<b>BULLYING AS A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE.....</b>	<b>29</b>
BULLYING THROUGH A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE .....	29
BULLYING AND SOCIAL ECOLOGIES .....	31
THE NEW SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD AND PUPILS AS SOCIAL ACTORS .....	32
BULLYING AND THE THEORIES OF ERVING GOFFMAN .....	34
Bullying, Self-Presentation and Social Performances .....	35
Bullying and Social Stigmatisation .....	37
Bullying and Total Institutions.....	39
CONCLUDING REMARKS .....	41
<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>43</b>
CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY AND LISTENING TO PUPILS.....	43
OVERVIEW OF PAPERS, DATA, AND PARTICIPANTS.....	46
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK .....	47
STUDY 1: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND VIGNETTES.....	48
Aim and Rationale.....	48
Initial Contact.....	50
Composing Groups.....	51

Interviewing .....	52
STUDY 2: ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK .....	56
Aim and Rationale.....	56
Initial Contact.....	57
Participant Observations .....	59
Interviewing .....	62
Leaving the Field.....	64
DATA ANALYSIS .....	64
Analysis in Study 1 .....	65
Analysis in Study 2 .....	67
Openness and Theoretical Sensitivity .....	68
Concluding Remarks.....	69
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	70
<b>SUMMARY OF PAPERS.....</b>	<b>74</b>
PAPER I .....	74
PAPER II.....	76
PAPER III .....	77
PAPER IV .....	79
<b>GENERAL DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>82</b>
THE IMPORTANCE OF COOLNESS AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY.....	82
SOCIAL STIGMATISATION AND THE FEAR OF BEING SINGLED OUT.....	85
SCHOOL BULLYING, SCHOOLING, AND SOCIAL CONTROL .....	86
SOCIAL MARGINALISATION, LONELINESS, AND THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF SCHOOL BULLYING.....	88
LIMITATIONS.....	90
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH .....	94
CONCLUSIONS.....	96
<b>APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>103</b>

# List of Papers

This dissertation is based on the following papers:

- I.** Strindberg, J., Horton, P., & Thornberg, R. (2020). Coolness and social vulnerability: Swedish pupils' reflections on participant roles in school bullying. *Research Papers in Education*, 35:5, 603-622, doi: 10.1080/02671522.2019.1615114
- II.** Strindberg, J., Horton, P., & Thornberg, R. (2020). The fear of being singled out: pupils' perspectives on victimisation and bystanding in bullying situations. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41:7, 942-957, doi: 10.1080/01425692.2020.1789846
- III.** Strindberg, J., & Horton, P. School bullying, schooling and social control: Pupils' perspectives on the importance of friendships to school bullying. (under review)
- IV.** Strindberg, J. 'I'm often alone': Social Marginalisation, Loneliness, and the Social Ecology of Bullying in a Swedish Elementary School. (under review)

# Introduction

Pupils understand that bullying hurts. They often express explicit disapproval of bullying (Dixon et al., 2008), and often condemn it with reference to the harm it causes the victim (Thornberg et al., 2016). It has been underlined that pupils experience adults, such as teachers, as not doing enough to counteract bullying in schools (Mishna et al., 2005), and a majority of pupils express a desire to help or support those being bullied (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). However, bullying remains an ongoing concern in schools in Sweden, and elsewhere (Cosma et al., 2020).

There are indications that school bullying is increasing in Sweden. For example, a recently published study points to an increase of bullying and peer victimisation in Swedish schools during 1993–2017 (Bjereld et al., 2020). A non-profit Swedish organisation for children’s rights, Friends, which annually surveys the prevalence of bullying in Swedish schools, highlights in their 2021 report that 10% of the responding pupils in grades 3–6 report that they experienced being bullied by their peers and classmates during the past year. In addition, 28% of the responding pupils in grades 3–6 state in the same report that they feel alone in school (Friends, 2021). This is worrying, not only because of the harmful effects of bullying, but also because these are higher percentages than reported the previous year (see Friends, 2020).

Bullying behaviour is a public health concern for children and youth (Klomek et al., 2015; Rawlings & Stoddard, 2019). Exposure to school bullying has been associated with a number of negative effects, for those being bullied (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017; Klomek et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2017), for those doing the bullying (Klomek et al., 2015; Ttofi et al., 2016), and for those witnessing bullying (Rivers et al., 2009). Examples of the severe consequences

of bullying include impaired self-esteem, higher degrees of anxiety, and increased risks of suicidality and depression. These effects are often long-lasting, affecting pupils even later in life (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2017). In addition to its severe consequences for individual children, school bullying is also an important societal issue. For example, exposure to bullying risks leading to school absenteeism, and poorer performance and knowledge acquisition, as well as dropping out of school, risks which may result in significant difficulties entering the labour market (Nilsson Lundmark et al., 2016). Bullying is also a societal issue with direct costs for schools—for example the costs of health initiatives, anti-bullying teams, and additional staff, as well as those for reporting and following up incidents of bullying—although the long-term societal costs of not acting against bullying are significantly higher than these direct costs for schools (Nilsson Lundmark et al., 2016). The importance of the short- and long-term individual and societal consequences of bullying points to the importance of knowing more about the causes of bullying, such as the social processes that underpin bullying in schools.

A lot of work has been done to prevent bullying. For example, a variety of school bullying prevention programs have been utilised in Swedish schools (Alvant, 2009; Frånberg et al., 2009), and elsewhere (Gaffney et al., 2019), in order to reduce the prevalence of bullying. In Sweden, school personnel, such as principals, teachers, and school nurses, are obligated to report perceived harassment, degrading treatment, and/or discrimination, and according to The Swedish Education Act (2010:800) principals must ensure that a goal-oriented effort is carried out to counteract abusive treatment of children and pupils, and principals also must ensure that measures are implemented to prevent pupils from being subjected to abusive treatment, such as bullying.

In the sense that pupils generally seem to consider bullying inappropriate rather than acceptable (Thornberg et al., 2016), the preventative work against bullying appears, on the one hand, to be successful. On the other hand, most pupils do not express their disapproval of peers who bully, or make efforts to intervene or support bullying victims (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Why might pupils choose rather to join the bullies (Salmivalli, 2010), or remain

neutral (Thornberg et al., 2018)? This is seemingly contradictory behaviour, and points to the importance of knowing more about the social processes of bullying from the perspective and experiences of pupils. Put differently, a gap appears to exist among pupils who consider bullying a serious moral transgression (Thornberg et al., 2016), the extensive anti-bullying work in schools, and the seemingly escalating prevalence of bullying in Swedish schools and elsewhere. How can this be understood?

Using constructivist-grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), focus group interviews, and participant observations, I set out to explore pupils' experiences of bullying and their reflections on why bullying happens and continues to happen in school, despite pupils' understanding that bullying is wrong. In focus for discussion are the experiences and reflections of 11- and 12-year-old pupils at two public elementary schools in Sweden. While a special focus is given in the dissertation to the social processes of bullying grounded on pupils' school experiences, I also explore the importance of the institutional context of schooling to bullying (see Paper III), as well as the importance of social norms at different levels (micro, meso, exo, macro, see Paper IV).

I hope that the findings of this dissertation can give teachers and school personnel even more possibilities to acknowledge, prevent, and deal with the social processes of bullying, not least for the pupils who are compelled by law to attend schools where they experience bullying on a more or less daily basis (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002).

## Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this dissertation is to explore and deepen the understanding of pupils' experiences of bullying and their reflections on why bullying may occur and be maintained in school, despite pupils' understanding that bullying is wrong. More specifically, the aim of this dissertation is to explore how pupils themselves explain and reason about why pupils may choose to bully, assist, or reinforce bullying, as well as why they may opt to refrain from intervening in defence of a victimised peer. The work of this dissertation has been guided by the following questions:

1. How do pupils explain that bullying occurs and is maintained in school?
2. How do pupils explain the way that other pupils may assume or be assigned various participant roles in bullying? Which justifications, neutralisations, and explanations for bullying do pupils suggest in relation to the occurrence and maintenance of bullying?
3. Which social processes do pupils experience as important or as underpinning bullying? How, and in what ways, are these processes expressed in the everyday school life of pupils?
4. What significance do the social and institutional constraints of the school setting have for the occurrence and maintenance of bullying? How might the social and institutional constraints of the school setting figure in pupils' everyday school life?

# Bullying as a Relational and Contextual Phenomenon: A Brief Overview of Previous Research

Research examining school bullying and its causes is not new. Rather, school bullying has been empirically explored since the late 1960s and '70s in the writings of Peter Paul Heinemann (1972) and Dan Olweus (1973). Since then, the research on school bullying has been extensive (e.g., Volk et al., 2017). Researchers have examined and explored the phenomenon of school bullying with a variety of perspectives, methods, and approaches (Horton, 2021; Saeverot et al., 2018). Extensive anti-bullying work has also been conducted in schools. However, neither a single solution nor any form for a comprehensive approach to the problem of bullying have been found to date (Kousholt & Fisker, 2015). Nor is there consensus regarding the best way to counteract school bullying (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Rather, “questions still outnumber answers” (Hymel & Swearer, 2015, p. 296), despite the significant amount of research into the question of bullying in recent decades (Gaffney et al., 2019; Volk et al., 2017).

What is bullying, and how do we distinguish bullying from other actions and behaviours? While definitions are still being debated by school researchers (e.g., Carrera et al., 2011; Volk et al., 2014), school bullying has traditionally been conceptualised as repeated actions directed at target individuals, who are disadvantaged or less powerful than those who repeatedly harass or attack them (Thornberg, 2015b). A still dominant definition of bullying, often utilised by both researchers and school personnel, is Olweus' (1993, 2003). According to Olweus (1993):

A student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. (p. 9)

Drawing on Olweus (1993) definition, bullying has commonly been distinguished from other types of aggressive actions and behaviours by three prominent components, namely that bullying is: (1) harmful or done with intention to harm; (2) repeated or occurs over time; and (3) characterised by an imbalance of power (Gaffney et al., 2019; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). That bullying consists of these three components has been described as the “hard core” assumptions of the bullying research programme (Smith, 2014, for a review, see Horton, 2021).

In describing the acts that may constitute bullying, it has been proposed that bullying may be carried out in different ways: bullying may be *direct*, in the form of physical aggression, threats, name-calling, hitting, kicking, punching, or taking or damaging someone’s belongings (Rosen et al., 2017), or else *indirect*, in the form of subtler, “behind-the-back” acts, such as rumour spreading, social exclusion practices, or harming someone’s social status and/or social relationships (Olweus, 1997; Rosen et al., 2017). It has been proposed that the acts that constitute bullying may be either *reactive* or *proactive* (Olweus, 1973, 1997), depending on whether the bullying is a reaction to the actions of other peers, or whether it is more proactive, taking place in a seemingly unprovoked manner. Distinctions have been made between *traditional* bullying and *cyber* bullying (Rosen et al., 2017), depending on whether the aggressive acts unfold through the use of electronic devices, including for example, the use of social media platforms (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). It is also possible to discuss bullying as *stigma-* or *bias-based* bullying, depending on whether the bullying is directed at persons because of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and so on (Earnshaw et al., 2018).

In discussing the prevalence of bullying, it has been suggested that girls tend to engage more in relational aggression and boys more in physical aggression (e.g., Olweus, 2003), but other studies have not found a gender difference in relational aggression (for a review, see Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). The distinction

between boys and girls and their supposed different ways of bullying has also been criticised for gender essentialism, and being tied to biological sex (Carrera et al., 2011). For example, Björkqvist (1994) argues that boys and girls simply have to use different strategies in order to attain their goal, and that, “there is no reason to believe that females should be less hostile and less prone to get into conflicts than males.” (p. 178). Some researchers have also pointed to a need for knowing more about boys’ engagement in relational aggression (Carrera et al., 2011).

In asking questions about what bullying is and why bullying happens and continues to happen in schools, some researchers have argued that perceptions about what acts constitute bullying, as well as which intentions may underpin bullying behaviours, often tend to differ between pupils and adults (Hellström et al., 2015; Oliveira et al., 2018; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Other researchers have called for more clarity regarding, for example, defining and measuring bullying (Volk et al., 2017), while still others have argued that the questions posed are fundamentally flawed, and that other questions must be asked instead (Walton, 2011). For example, it has been argued that the importance of bullying’s social context is downplayed, entailing that the specific context, with its specific norms, traditions, and so on, is perceived as less significant in understand why bullying occurs and is maintained (Horton, 2011; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).

To downplay the importance of social context in bullying is problematic, since the underlying processes of inclusion, exclusion, and social difference, which contribute to the occurrence and maintenance of bullying in schools (Carrera et al., 2011; Horton & Forsberg, 2019; Walton, 2015), may then be overshadowed and insufficiently managed (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Temko, 2019). Some researchers have thus argued for the importance of accounting for social group and group dynamics, rather than conceptualising bullying in terms of the fixed or static roles of “bullies” and “victims” (Carrera et al., 2011). In line with such calls, bullying has been explored and researched in terms of participant roles, but also in terms of social status and social positioning, in relation to the institutional context of school, and in relation to social

differences and norms on the micro and macro level. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of this latter research.

## Social Relations, Group Aggression, and Participant Roles in Bullying

In taking bullying seriously as a relational and contextually-rooted phenomenon, the study of bullying has moved beyond the bully/victim dyad, suggested by Olweus (1973, 1997). For example, Salmivalli et al. (1996) argued for the need to acknowledge that there are commonly more peers than bullies and victims involved and present in bullying situations.<sup>1</sup> In explaining why bullying occurs, as well as why pupils may refrain from intervening in defence of a victimised peer in bullying situations, Salmivalli et al. (1996) suggested that pupils in bullying situations may take, or be attributed or assigned, different participant roles. This idea can be traced to the earlier work of Lagerspetz et al. (1982), who suggested that, “aggression in a group can be studied as a relationship between people having different roles” (p. 52). Lagerspetz et al. (1982) argued that aggression had typically been investigated as a mode of reaction associated with certain individuals, their aggressiveness and personality traits, or as a function of situations. While arguing that interest had mostly focused on the persons behaving aggressively, Lagerspetz et al. (1982) pointed to the value of studying the social relationship between the “victim” of bullying and those pupils who engaged in the bullying as well, arguing that aggression in a group could be studied as a relationship among pupils taking different roles, or having roles assigned to them. However, while Lagerspetz et al. (1982) pointed to the roles of “bullies” and “victims”, Salmivalli et al. (1996) further expanded these thoughts and suggested that roles beyond simply the “bullies” and the “victims” are also often present in bullying situations. As Salmivalli et al. (1996) argued:

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this has been found in observational studies as well, see, e.g., Atlas and Pepler (1998).

Not only do the roles of the bullies and the victims constitute an important element in the bullying process, but so, too, do the roles of ‘the others’. We refer to these roles as the *Participant Roles* of the children. (p. 2)

As illustrated in this quote, Salmivalli et al. (1996) further emphasised the social and collective character of bullying. In this sense, they expanded on the roles of “bullies” and “victims”, as emphasised by Olweus (1973) and Lagerspetz et al. (1982). In this way, Salmivalli et al. (1996) thus changed the idea of bullying based on the traits of individual children.

In addition to “bullies” and “victims”, Salmivalli et al. (1996) suggested that other roles might also be present in bullying situations: namely, one or more “assistants” who assist and help the bully, and one or more “reinforcers”, who provide positive feedback to those doing the bullying, by laughing or cheering on the bullying, and “thus provide an ‘audience’ for the bully” (p. 4). In bullying situations, there may also be one or more “outsiders”, who remain passive, doing nothing, remaining outside the bullying situations (Salmivalli et al., 1996). There might also be one or more potential “defenders” of those being bullied, who tries to help, comforting and/or supporting, taking the side of those being bullied, as well as trying to stop the bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Unlike Heinemann (1972), who emphasised the entire group’s violent actions against an individual child, Lagerspetz et al. (1982) and Salmivalli et al. (1996) rather pointed to the importance of the individual children in the group. As Salmivalli (1999) explains, “Participant roles refer to students’ ways of being involved in bullying situations” (p. 453), and may be thought of as typical bullying-situation patterns, or roles (Salmivalli, 1999). Indeed, as Salmivalli (1999) argues, participant roles, like roles in general, arise in social interactions and are influenced both by individual behaviour dispositions and the expectations of others.

In bullying situations, Salmivalli (2010) argues, individuals are thus driven both by their own motives, goals and feelings, and by situational aspects, such as the presence of other pupils. Thus, while social roles are potentially dynamic, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies, in which the behaviour of the individual starts

to resemble more and more the social and/or situational expectations directed towards her/him (Salmivalli, 1999). This is why it might be difficult to escape a certain role once assumed or assigned, and this is also why the group might punish behaviours that are perceived as “out of character”, while rewarding behaviours in accordance with the same role (Salmivalli, 1999). This is also why children or adolescents who define themselves as “bullies” or other participant roles may, “end up believing that they are completely incapable of other kinds of behaviour” (Salmivalli, 1999, p. 455).

As Salmivalli (2010) argues, “Placing bullying in its group context helps to better understand the individuals’ motivation to bully, the lack of support provided to the victims, the persistence of bullying, and the adjustment of victims across diverse contexts.” (p. 113). The participant role model proposed by Salmivalli et al. (1996) has later been used by a number of school bullying researchers in order to explore and explain bullying. For example, researchers have drawn on the participant role model to examine defensive behaviour in bullying (Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012), the relations between bystanding and moral-disengagement reasoning (Killer et al., 2019), and the prevalence of bystanding roles in middle adolescence and the possible gender differences therein (Pouwels et al., 2016), as well as status, behavioural, and peer-valued characteristics in middle adolescence and how these may relate to participant roles (Pouwels et al., 2016).

All in all, pupils may adopt or be assigned different participant roles, such as “bullies”, “victims”, “assistants”, “reinforcers”, “outsiders”, and “defenders” not only because of their individual traits, but even more so due to situational factors.

## Social Positioning, Popularity, Friendships, and Bullying

In understanding bullying as a relational matter, researchers have also highlighted the relation between social status, or peer group status, and peer perpetration and bullying victimisation in school. In order to better understand this relation, some researchers have distinguished between acceptance (also referred to as likeability or sociometric popularity) and perceived popularity (e.g., de Bruyn et

al., 2009; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015). Whereas acceptance refers to being well-liked, perceived popularity refers to social visibility, prestige, social dominance, and popularity (de Bruyn et al., 2009; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015). In a more general sense, dominance may be referred to in terms of individual competition for resource acquisition (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). From a social dominance perspective, various strategies may be used to establish and/or maintain dominance, and the behaviours used by pupils, such as bullying, are understood as instrumental strategy to establish status, or to maximise one's own success at minimal personal cost (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001).

It has been found that peers in pre-adolescence and adolescence attach great importance to social status, and that they may prioritise status over other domains in school, such as friends, achievement, or obedience (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). A number of studies have found that "bullies" tend to enjoy a high status in peer groups (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Reijntjes et al., 2013; Rodkin & Berger, 2008), while "victims" tend to have a lower social status in the peer group (Rodkin & Berger, 2008), despite "bullies" tending to be disliked by peers (Pouwels et al., 2016). This is important in relation to bullying for several reasons. For example, pupils may choose to engage in bullying in the hope of thus being afforded social status (Volk et al., 2014). It has also been found that pupils with a low social status in the peer group, or those who are subjected to relational victimisation, tend to have fewer friendship relations (Cassidy & Asher, 1992), and are less likely to be selected as friends (Sentse et al., 2013) in comparison with peers who enjoy a higher social status in the peer group (Cassidy & Asher, 1992).

The importance of status may also be understood in relation to protection against the risk of bullying in a more general sense. Indeed, it has been highlighted that whereas pupils with relatively high social standing are also at risk of being bullied, those at the very top of the social hierarchy seem to be protected (Faris & Felmlee, 2014). It has also been found that low-status or less-accepted peers are at greater risk of being bullied (Berguno et al., 2004). On the other hand, having friends provides a buffer against victimisation, not least in relation to the social protection that friends may provide (Boulton et al., 1999; Hodges et al., 1999; Kendrick et al., 2012).

However, this may also depend on aspects such as the status of one's friends. As Sentse et al. (2013) point out, whilst certain friends are able to protect adolescents from being victimised, others may pose a risk for bullying.

In relation to bullying's perceived social payoffs, such as having friends (Cassidy & Asher, 1992), and given the association between high social status and friends at school (Cassidy & Asher, 1992), pupils may choose to engage in bullying despite the widespread perception that bullying is wrong (Thornberg et al., 2016). For example, it has been highlighted that bullying often happens when children want to be "cool" or "tough", when they want to manifest, maintain, or enhance their status or popularity, when they are struggling for power or peer authority, or when they are struggling to either win or keep friends (Thornberg, 2010). Similarly, it has been found that pupils may interpret "co-bullying" as a social opportunity for them to seek the social approval of a "popular bully" or peer, and thus as an opportunity to obtain a higher social status (Forsberg et al., 2014). Pupils' engagement in bullying may then be thought of as goal-directed (Volk et al., 2014), as driven by "agentic" goals, like self-interest, independence, and dominance (Ojanen et al., 2013, p. 550), or dominance-oriented (Olthof et al., 2011) strategic behaviour, aimed at obtaining, for example, social status and friends.

The suggested relation between social standing and the risk of being bullied may also explain why pupils choose to take on various participant roles in bullying. Indeed, social status has also been associated with different participant roles in bullying (Pouwels et al., 2016). For example, Pouwels et al. (2016) highlights that while those who initiate bullying tend to enjoy the highest social status, "assistants" and "reinforcers", in turn, tend to also display high social status, but not as high as "bullies". In contrast, "victims" tend to be positioned and socially perceived at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Pouwels et al., 2016). Pupils acting as "defenders" in bullying tend to be the most accepted (i.e., well-liked) members of the peer group, and average in popularity. "Outsiders", in turn, tend to be neither liked nor disliked by their peers. They also tend to be unpopular, but not as unpopular as "victims" (Pouwels et al., 2016).

All in all, findings regarding the importance of social status, and the associations between friends, risk of peer victimisation, and the various participant roles, may help to better understand why pupils may take on, try to take on, or be assigned different roles in bullying situations.

## The Context of Schooling and the Fear of Being Bullied

Findings regarding the importance of social status and participant roles provide important information about the social context of school bullying, but say little about the institutional context within which school bullying occurs. Several school bullying researchers have thus argued for the need to consider the importance of the school setting to bullying (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Horton, 2018b; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003).

For example, questions have been posed regarding what about the school context or social milieu specifically makes bullying more common in school than in other contexts (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002; Horton, 2018b; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). The prevalence of bullying has been related to the overall school environment, that is, the “patterns of people’s experiences of school life”, which reflect “norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” at particular schools (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 358). It has been found that the norms of particular classrooms shape pupils’ attitudes towards bullying at a collective level (Pozzoli et al., 2012). Bullying has also been associated with class size (Garandau et al., 2014), seating plans (Horton, 2012, 2018b), competition (Duncan, 2013; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996; Jacobson, 2010b; Langmann & Säfström, 2018), boredom (Nassem, 2012), lack of school connectedness (Horton, 2018b), lack of teacher intervention in bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2010), lack of (and/or poor) teacher supervision (Atlas & Pepler, 1998), student density (Horton & Forsberg, 2020; Horton et al., 2020), and school design (Horton & Forsberg, 2020; Horton et al., 2020). It has also been suggested that teachers may contribute to bullying indirectly, for example, through their pedagogical practices, behaviour, and

classroom manner (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012; Horton, 2018b; Juva et al., 2020; Roland & Galloway, 2010).

In looking more closely at pupils' social relations in school, and at why bullying seems more common in school than elsewhere, a number of researchers have highlighted how bullying is a contextual matter, tied to the structural conditions of the school's institutional context (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). In discussing the importance of school context to school bullying, Eriksson (2001) and Eriksson et al. (2002) point to four aspects of the school setting of importance to bullying: (1) pupils spend a long time, or an undefined amount of time, in the school setting; (2) pupils are unable, or limited in their ability, to choose whom they spend time with in the school setting; (3) pupils are not permitted to leave the school setting; and (4) the number and presence of pupils is somewhat arbitrary (Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002).

Similar to Eriksson (2001) and Eriksson et al. (2002), Duncan (2013) points to four specific features of schooling with relevance to bullying: (1) compulsion; (2) compression; (3) control; and (4) competition. As Duncan (2013) points out, school attendance is usually not voluntary, but rather compulsory. In Sweden, for example, schooling is compulsory for children through grade nine. Compression entails being forced together with peers in small spaces, where pupils must remain for most of their time, and where pupils' influence over whom they spend time with is limited (Duncan, 2013). When combined with compulsion, compression means that those subjected to bullying may not be able to find space of their own, away from other pupils with whom they may or may not get along (Horton, 2018b). In this sense, phenomena such as bullying may not primarily be tied to the individual traits of pupils, but rather arise in the web of social relations, identity construction, and social negotiations of power and influence (Wrethander Bliding, 2004). Such social negotiations may unfold within processes of inclusion and exclusion (Søndergaard, 2012; Wrethander Bliding, 2004), and competition (Duncan, 2013; Jacobson, 2010b; Langmann & Säfström, 2018), which are constantly going on in schools.

While pupils' engagement in bullying may be interpreted as, for example, a sought-for social dominance (Ojanen et al., 2013;

Olthof et al., 2011; Volk et al., 2014), or as aggression (Salmivalli, 2010; Smith et al., 2004; Volk et al., 2017), the same behaviours may also be interpreted as symptomatic of the context in which pupils find themselves. As Duncan (2013) points out, the competitive features of schooling, for example, serve to send the message that competition is more important than, “the humanistic qualities of collaboration and cooperation” (p. 39). Pupils thus, “learn the value-laden game of hierarchy and individuation, providing meaning to the experience of who counts and who does not within schooling” (Jacobson, 2010b, p. 276). This is important to bullying since being a pupil also entails mandatory presence where one’s hope for inclusion and fear of exclusion are interconnected, and where the risk of being judged unworthy of belonging is a latent fear (Søndergaard, 2012; Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018). These features of schooling are reinforced by the compulsory, compressed, controlled, and competitive aspects of schooling (Duncan, 2013).

Indeed, pupils arrange and order their social lives, and are aware of their own social positions and status, as well as their peers’ (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Forsberg et al., 2014; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Wrethander Bliding, 2004). Pupils create for themselves the norms and rules that serve to define their peer relationships, such as whom to include and exclude, whom to consider one of “us” or “them”. This kind of negotiated belonging revolves around the question of “who belongs and why?” (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016, p. 20). In such social-ordering work, and in arenas like school, some may be “winners” while others will be positioned as “losers” (Duncan, 2013; Wrethander Bliding, 2004).

Pupils may thus assume various roles, such as the “outsider”, in bullying situations (Salmivalli et al., 1996) out of a fear of committing social blunders that may lead to losing friends, social status, and/or reputation (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Forsberg et al., 2014; Thornberg et al., 2018), or pupils might assume an “reinforcer” role in bullying situations because of the socially dominant position that bullying may provide in the eyes of onlookers. Pupils might also refrain from intervening in defence of a bullied peer due to fear of social panic or social exclusion (Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018).

A closer look at the institutional context of school reveals that the laughter arising in bullying situations, for example, may be a means of identity construction (Jacobson, 2010a), and to find “a meaningful place to stand” (Jacobson, 2010a, p. 50) in order to fulfil a “longing to belong” (Hansen & Søndergaard, 2018), rather than being primarily an expression of social dominance per se. This demonstrates the importance of the institutional constraints of the school setting to bullying.

## Ecological Approaches to School Bullying

Alongside recognising the importance of pupils’ peer relationships and the importance of the school context to bullying, a growing number of school bullying researchers acknowledge the complexity of bullying, and argue that the prevalence of school bullying is influenced by multiple factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels (e.g., Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015; Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Thornberg, 2015b). As Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2015) explains:

The Ecological Model is a specialized form of system theory that describes the complex of multiple factors that contribute to or prevent specific behaviors. (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015, p. 13f)

The quote highlights the intertwined nature of bullying. Bullying is thus not primarily understood as a dyadic relationship of pupils, not as occurring in isolation, but the occurrence and maintenance of bullying might instead be imagined as a set of Russian nesting dolls (Horton, 2016): bullying stems from different levels, strata, or socio-ecologies, all of which influence the emergence and continuation of bullying (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015). Such factors may include, for example, peer, family, and school influences, as well as community and cultural influences, like discourses, discursive practices, hegemonies, ideologies, power relations, normative moral orders, and so on (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015; Thornberg, 2015b). As Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2015) state, in pointing out what an ecological perspective means for the understanding of school bullying:

For bullying, this means the culture of bullying that exists within a school is a result of multiple factors that exists on multiple levels, with the upper strata influencing the culture and interactions on subsequent levels. (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015, p. 14)

This quote points to the understanding of bullying as more complex than the individual, social relationships, and school context. An ecological perspective of school bullying has been utilised to explore factors associated with peer-defending behaviour in offline and online contexts (Lambe et al., 2019), as well as risk and protective factors for bullying in general (for a review, see Hong & Espelage, 2012). An ecological perspective of school bullying has been utilised to explore teachers' perspectives on spatiality, school design, and school bullying (Horton et al., 2020), as well as to explore the prevalence of homophobic bullying and protective aspects of homophobic bullying in schools (Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

While drawing attention to the intertwined nature of various aspects of bullying, researchers have also criticised ecologically-oriented school bullying research for focusing primarily on factors at the individual level (Horton, 2016). As Horton (2016) points out:

The first doll, the individual, has received the greatest amount of attention from school bullying researchers and has been explained in terms of supposedly individual characteristics and predictors of bullying behaviour. [...] Perhaps most surprisingly, the last doll has received very little attention at all, despite the fact that this is the doll from which the other dolls stem and is also the only doll visible when the bullying doll is fully assembled. (Horton, 2016, p. 16)

The quote highlights a criticism of the ecological perspective's failure to pay sufficient attention to the importance of social norms to bullying. This critique, in turn, points to the importance of understanding bullying in terms of social norms, "sameness" and "social difference" at the macro level.

## Bullying, “Sameness”, and “Difference”

School bullying researchers have emphasised bullying as tied not primarily to individual pupils, but to normative categorisations and beliefs regarding ethnicity, social class, disability/ability, sexuality, age, and/or religion (Dixon et al., 2008; Thornberg, 2015b; Walton, 2015). As Walton (2015), for example, argues, bullying is “a broader social problem at its core, and not a behavioural one” (p. 27), thus pointing to an understanding of bullying as larger than individuals and individual characteristics.

Normative categorisations and beliefs are important to bullying, since perceptions of “sameness” and “difference” regulate pupils’ perceptions of how one “should” be an “appropriate” girl (Duncan & Owens, 2011; Thornberg, 2018) or boy (Horton, 2007, 2018a; Martino, 1999; Swain, 2016) in school, and in particular classrooms as well (Juva et al., 2020). The importance of perceived social “difference” is one aspect recurrently emphasised by pupils asked to suggest why pupils bully, or why pupils may be picked on, or risk being bullied (Bosacki et al., 2006; Dixon et al., 2008; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2018). Indeed, some researchers have suggested perceived social difference as central to the development of bullying relations (Huggins, 2016; Walton, 2015).

The reasons for a perceived difference may be “practically anything” (Lahelma, 2010, p. 9). For example, Dixon, Smith, and Jenks (2008) highlight not only how pupils with special educational needs are socially discredited, socially stigmatised, and bullied, but also how perceptions of “sameness” and “different” might be pivotal in pupils’ social decision-making, particularly in relation to exclusion and inclusion. Thornberg (2018) highlights how bullying of girls perceived as “boyish” (acting tough, aggressive, cool, cocky, or mean), “fat”, “ugly”, or behaving in ways perceived as socially deviant, might be socially justified. Yet another example of how practices of social difference relate to bullying is demonstrated by Odenbring and Johansson (2019), who highlight how bullying might be related to practices of everyday racism in schools, wherein an individual might be socially constructed as the “other” based on ethnicity. Pupils might thus be bullied because they are socially

perceived as “wrong-doers”, “different”, “odd”, “deviant”, or “not like us” (Evaldsson & Svahn, 2012; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; for a review see, Thornberg, 2011). Bullying may then unfold as the result of punishment or “correction” for the perceived social deviation. This is a sort of category-maintenance work (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016), wherein a bullied peer may be interpreted and socially co-constructed as deserving the bullying (Evaldsson & Svahn, 2012; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2018).

Perceptions of social difference do not arise in a vacuum. Rather, perceptions of social difference are closely intertwined with social norms and discourses at different levels, such as the macro (Horton, 2018a; Pascoe, 2013; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015; Walton, 2015), regional (Horton, 2007), and local level (Bragg et al., 2018; Horton, 2007). As Ringrose and Rawlings (2015), for example, explains:

[...] Bullying is not merely individual or psychological, but made possible through a system of ordered *performances* and repetitions of normative gender and (hetero)sexual *discourses*, centred on enacting complex inclusions and exclusion. (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 83)

Ringrose and Rawlings (2015) raise the issue of how perceptions of normality and difference relate to social perceptions and categorisations that are repeated and reproduced socially. In this sense, certain behaviours, characteristics, or ways of being, for example, tend to be socially privileged and valued, while others tend to be diminished, reduced, and rejected (Bansel et al., 2009; Pascoe, 2013; Walton, 2015).

Although the devaluation of certain characteristics might give rise to bullying, it is important to acknowledge that the values informing perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours or characteristics can differ. Indeed, children are active, reflective, and creative social actors who adapt their actions based on their understanding of the situation and their interactions with others (Charon, 2009; James & Prout, 2015). Thus, while pupils’ social interactions might serve to generate and uphold certain social norms

(Horton, 2019), pupils are reflective and may thus pick up and make use of societal norms in a flexible manner, depending on the peer culture and/or context in which they find themselves.

Taken together, the importance of difference to bullying demonstrates that bullying is not only tied to social relations or to the institutional context of schooling. I argue that this demonstrates the importance of looking beyond individual peers, as well as the relevance of further exploring the ways in which social and locally constructed perceptions of difference relate to the occurrence and maintenance of school bullying.

## Concluding Remarks

As I have highlighted in this chapter, school bullying has been explored using several different lenses, including the importance of social relations, the institutional context of schooling, the social ecologies of bullying, and the importance of social norms and social difference. Despite the growing body of qualitative research on school bullying in the last decade or so, relatively little attention has been paid to how pupils themselves explain and reflect on the occurrence and maintenance of school bullying (Nassem, 2017). It is against this background and in this context that the aims and research questions of the present dissertation have been formulated.

# Bullying as a Social Experience

## Bullying through a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

In this dissertation, I consider bullying as a social phenomenon, rooted in social interactions and peer relations, as well as in the institutional school context and the social and cultural context in which pupils find themselves. In working with this dissertation, I have therefore utilised the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). The term symbolic interactionism refers to a sociological and social psychological approach to the study of human interaction (Lindesmith et al., 1999). Although symbolic interactionism is not a single coherent theory, but rather consists of several different assumptions and theoretical concepts (Charmaz et al., 2019), it is nevertheless a framework that emphasises humans as reflective, active beings (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). Symbolic interactionism acknowledges that human existence is fluid and dynamic rather than deterministic. Through interaction, people learn not only about themselves, but also about other people, their everyday lives, and society (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009).

More specifically, symbolic interactionism argues that: (a) people's actions are based on the social meaning that things or situations may have for them; (b) social meaning is derived from social interaction; and (c) meanings are modified and handled through interpretation, not least by the person(s) dealing with the things and situations they encounter (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). People also engage in "joint action" (i.e., what A does influences B, and vice versa), which entails that they may try to fit their lines of action to those of other members, and also that people take the

actions of others into account prior to their actions (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). As Blumer (1986) puts it:

Group life necessarily presupposes interaction between the group members; or, put otherwise, a society consists of individuals interacting with each other. The activities of the members occur predominantly in response to one another or in relation to one another. (p. 7)

Blumer (1986) highlights the importance of social interaction and the relationship between individual, groups and society. Indeed, people have agency, they reflect on situations, and they make choices (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). Such an understanding is very much in line with my approach in this dissertation.

Pupils, for example, thus interpret what their peers might think of them, and what they imagine their peers' judgement of them to be. In turn, this imagined judgement calls forth feelings about the self, like pride or shame (Charmaz et al., 2019). Thus, rather than just reacting to situations, people respond to situations through interpretation and reflection (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). This further entails that rather than mere mechanical replicators of cultures or social orders, people are social actors and the interactive co-creators of the social contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, they interpret events in a situation or social setting, like school, and might subsequently alter their actions based on those interpretations (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009). As Blumer (1986) states, in explaining the methodological position of symbolic interactionism:

The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction. (p. 5)

In the above quote, Blumer highlights some of the central outlines for a symbolic interactionist understanding of humans and human interaction. As emphasised, interpretation, actions, and social meanings are central aspects; not least, Blumer points to the ways in which the interplay between social interpretation and action has consequences. Taken together, symbolic interactionism is a framework that highlights the importance of social perceptions, and the ways people reflect on their social reality. Thus, a symbolic interactionist perspective provides ways of understanding why pupils act as they do, for example in bullying situations, which is in line with the type of knowledge that is in focus in this dissertation.

## Bullying and Social Ecologies

This dissertation pays attention not only to the importance of (micro)interactions, but also to how pupils, in turn, are influenced by the (meso-, exo-, and macro-) context and norms they partake of. One way to understand how interactions are related to the contexts (or systems) within which (and in relation to which) their interactions take place, is with the help of American developmental psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development and social ecologies. In *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) Bronfenbrenner highlights how people not only relate to their immediate settings (such as the home or classroom) but also to the surrounding society. Thus, in a similar way to symbolic interactionism, Bronfenbrenner emphasises the nested relationships of individual, context, and society. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains:

The ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls. [...] It is as if within each society or subculture there existed a blueprint for the organization of every type of setting. Furthermore, the blueprint can be changed, with the result that the structure of the settings in a society can become markedly altered and produce corresponding changes in behavior and development. (p. 3f)

In relation to bullying, Bronfenbrenner (1979) draws attention to the importance of not only looking at the concrete interactions among pupils, but also broadening one's perspective to include the societal norms—or the “blueprint”—that characterises interactions among pupils at the microlevel in schools. Thus, as Bronfenbrenner underlines, interaction between individuals and their environment is two-directional, that is, “characterized by *reciprocity*” (p. 22). As he argues:

In ecological research, the properties of the person and of the environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms.  
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 41)

Pointing to the mutual relationship between individual and environment, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that there is, “nothing original in this formulation”, but it rather, “has its roots in the role theory of George Herbert Mead” and “in the Thomases’ concept of the ‘definition of the situation’” (p. 22f). This points to the close ties between symbolic interactionism and Bronfenbrenner’s understanding of social ecologies and human interaction.

While preparing this dissertation, I considered symbolic interactionism and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) emphasis on social interaction and social ecologies as my starting points for deepening the understanding of pupils’ actions in bullying situations. Symbolic interactionism, and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) emphasis on the reciprocity of individuals and their contexts, provided lenses for exploring and deepening the understanding of why pupils may act as they do, not least by helping to ask questions about social interpretations, social negotiations of meaning, and the importance of the school setting and social norms to bullying.

## The New Sociology of Childhood and Pupils as Social Actors

While I utilised symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986; Charon, 2009) and Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social ecologies (1979) as

overall perspectives, to consider pupils' actions in school bullying, I was also inspired by the new sociology of childhood and its emphasis on understanding children as competent social actors (James & Prout, 1997, 2015; Wyness, 2019). As James and Prout (1997), for example, explain:

[...] Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults. This means that children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. (p. 4)

James and Prout (1997) emphasise the agency of children and pupils. Indeed, I recognise how the new sociology of childhood shares many of the ideas emphasised by symbolic interactionists. For example, I acknowledge how both perspectives share the importance of social structures while arguing that individuals are not determined by social structures. I also recognise how they both identify children as active, reflexive and creative social actors, who adapt and alter their actions based on their understanding of situations and through their interactions with others (Charon, 2009; James & Prout, 2015).

In this dissertation, I have assumed these perspectives when thinking about pupils' actions in social situations, but also when thinking about school bullying in a more general sense. I acknowledge that the voices and experiences of children have a value in themselves, and that children are social actors in their own right, rather than merely objects subordinated to the views and/or perspectives of adults (James & Prout, 1997, 2015). I also argue that pupils' interpretations of bullying are of importance for why bullying may occur or be maintained in school. Put differently, I take seriously pupils' social interpretations and consider these to be important, not only for understanding their actions in bullying situations, but also for the occurrence and maintenance of school bullying.

## Bullying and the Theories of Erving Goffman

In addition to symbolic interactionism, Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development (1979), and the new sociology of childhood, I have also been inspired by the writings of the American sociologist Erving Goffman. More specifically, I chose to draw on Goffman's writings on impression management and self-presentation in everyday life (1959) and social stigmatisation (1986), as well as his analysis of total institutions, in *Asylums* (1990). While Goffman did not refer to himself as a social interactionist, but rather an urban ethnographer (Goffman, 1982), he is nevertheless an influential contributor to the symbolic interactionist perspective (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Indeed, as Susen (2016) underscores:

[A]s an interactionist account, Goffman's approach focuses on the study of human interaction. As such, it sheds light on the intersubjective aspects that allow for the construction of the human self. Interactionist programmes scrutinize the ways in which performative subjects relate to one another in their everyday lives in order to grasp how they participate in, attribute meaning to and act upon the world. Far from existing simply for themselves as entirely independent and isolated entities, human selves live their lives with and through other human selves. Only insofar as we are able to relate to our human fellows are we capable of relating to ourselves [...] Put differently, we face up to our immersion in reality by engaging in face-to-face interactions with other members of society. (p. 113f)

This quote highlights the relationship between symbolic interactionism and Goffman's approach to social life. Briefly, Goffman's work revolves around an interest in the routines and rituals of everyday face-to-face interactions (e.g., Goffman, 1959). He explores aspects of human identity and the social self, as well as the ways these may be maintained, upheld, or disregarding in social interaction (e.g., Goffman, 1986), while also analysing the ways in which the qualities of institutions, like boarding schools, affect the social interactions that take place there (Goffman, 1990). Indeed,

this focus on and interest in social and everyday life resembles my exploration of bullying in this dissertation. Thus, I have chosen to use Goffman's theories as a "general sense of reference" or as "directions along which to look" (Blumer, 1986, p. 148) in my approach of an in-depth understanding of school bullying.

### *Bullying, Self-Presentation and Social Performances*

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman demonstrates the importance of self-presentation and impression management to social interaction. In particular, he underlines how people in every social situation strive to maintain an image of themselves, while also trying to influence other's perceptions of them. As Goffman (1959) explains:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. [...] the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally *expresses* himself, and the others will in turn have to be *impressed* in some way by him. (Goffman, 1959, p. 1f)

Goffman points to the importance of social performances and interpretation, as well as the importance of social situations and interaction. Through the use of social "performances", that is, "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion" (Goffman, 1959, p. 8), people seek to influence the other people present. While the aim of any specific performance may vary (making others think highly of one, making others believe that one thinks highly of *them*, or performing to no clear end), the overall interest of the performing individual is to control the conduct of others, and "especially their responsive treatment of him." (Goffman, 1959, p. 3).

Goffman's notion is important to bullying. Indeed, as Goffman suggests, people might try to convey an impression that it is in their interest to convey. Impressions might thus be given in a thoroughly calculated manner, solely to give a certain kind of impression (Goffman, 1959). In discussing social impressions and performances, Goffman (1959) distinguishes between a front- and a

backstage. The social frontstage is the “setting” (such as furniture, décor, and physical layout), appearances, and manner. The social front is about the situations where someone appears in front of others (an audience) with the aim of performing and maintaining the desired image of themselves. Beyond the audience and the frontstage, however, is the backstage, where individuals prepare performances, where they can act “privately”, and be “true” or “real” in ways that cannot be shown to the audience (Goffman, 1959).

While the concepts of front- and backstage highlight social interaction as performance, they also highlight the relationship between structure and individuals, and how social structure (or a certain “setting”) affects which interactions or behaviours are possible, or impossible. This is important to school bullying, and points to the intertwined relation of school context and the interactions that take place there. Social performances might, however, also be performed in teams, that is, “a set of performers who co-operate in presenting a single performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 50). As Goffman explains:

It is apparent that individuals who are members of the same team will find themselves, by virtue of this fact, in an important relationship to one another. [...] Each team-mate is forced to rely on the good conduct and behaviour of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him. There is, then, perforce, a bond of reciprocal dependence linking team-mates to one another. (p. 50)

Goffman highlights how performances can also be done in groups, whose participants are mutually dependent for the credibility of the performance. However, Goffman distinguished between the concept of teams, and members of informal cliques. As he underlines:

Often it seems that small cliques form not to further the interests of those with whom the individual stages a show but rather to protect him from an unwanted identification with them. Cliques, then, often function to protect the individual not from persons of other ranks but from persons of his own rank. Thus, while all the members of one’s clique may be of

the same status level, it may be crucial that not all persons of one's status level be allowed into the clique. (p. 52)

Goffman emphasises the importance of the group as a means of distancing oneself from others, but also in terms of how groups are both inclusive and exclusive at once. Drawing on Goffman's thoughts on social interaction, Susen (2016) acknowledges the difference between the public and the private in Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management. As Susen (2016) explains:

Human selves are masked selves. Every individual has a public persona, which differs in some cases, fundamentally from the person they are in private. [...] Our public persona forces us to 'adopt a social face', that is, a face that is constructed both through and for society: it is constructed through society, because it is developed via our interaction with the social world; at the same time, it is constructed for society, because it is oriented towards our interaction with the social world. Different types of social interaction require that we develop different forms of persona: in order to function in different social scenarios, we need to cultivate different social roles. (Susen, 2016, p. 125)

As underlined by Susen (2016), individuals (and groups) may try to alter their social personas in relation to specific scenarios or situations. Being part of a group can, for example, serve as a way of signalling who is friend, who is foe, and so on. Indeed, pupils' behaviours in bullying situations are thus not primarily about individuals and their traits, but rather more about social aspects and interactions. This is yet another example of how Goffman's theories have inspired my thoughts about bullying in this dissertation.

### *Bullying and Social Stigmatisation*

In *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Goffman (1986) explains how every society divides people into social categories based on perceptions of what is "normal" for its members. Perceptions of "normal" or abnormal are in turn related to social

expectations about how people “should be” in particular situations or settings. As Goffman (1986) underlines:

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap. (p. 2f)

As highlighted by Goffman, social stigmatisation is a concept that illustrates how members of social categories or groups may be discriminated against by other members of society. A social stigma is not an inherent trait, but rather a relative property, which is socially constituted and rooted in social interactions (Goffman, 1986). Thus, someone may be stigmatised for various reasons. An individual may be perceived to have “abominations of the body” (related to socially perceived physical deviations), “blemishes of individual character” (related to socially perceived deviations in individual character), or “the tribal stigmas of race, nation, and religion” (related to socially perceived deviations based on group membership) (Goffman, 1986, p. 4). Put differently, a stigma is “a language of relationships” (p. 3) between “attribute and stereotype” (p. 4), and between the “discredited/stigmatised” and “normals” (Goffman, 1986, p. 4f).

Socially stigmatisation is a typical response to social threats, providing possible protection for the community from harm (Goffman, 1986). Thus, while the meaning given to particular traits may vary, a social stigma always revolves around the same sociological aspects, where the stigmatised individual is labelled, stereotyped, isolated, denigrated, and discriminated against (Goffman, 1986). This may occur because of the differential points of reference, but also because the stigma, or the stigmatised individual, is commonly interpreted as socially threatening (Goffman, 1986; Huggins, 2016). For those who stigmatise, social

stigmatisation might enhance self-esteem, buffer against anxiety, or provide a subjective sense of well-being (Heatherton et al., 2000). For the stigmatised individual, stigmatisation may lead to feelings of shame and uncertainty, and the assimilation of negative perceptions, as well as self-stigmatisation (Goffman, 1986; Thornberg, 2015a). Those who encounter the stigmatised individual risk contracting the stigma themselves, and losing credibility through their association with the stigmatised individual (Goffman, 1986; Thornberg, 2015).

Taken together, Goffman (1986) demonstrates the ways in which people act in relation to social symbols (such as stigma symbols), and their meaning is interpreted socially. In this sense, Goffman's theory of social stigmatisation also shares many of the concerns of symbolic interactionism, including an emphasis on social interpretation and meaning making (Charon, 2009).

### *Bullying and Total Institutions*

In his writings on total institutions, found in *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (1990), Goffman focuses on the relation between institutional contexts and the individual. More precisely, Goffman analyses how particularly routinised and scheduled settings, such as boarding schools, mental hospitals, and prisons, affect the individual, and he discusses the importance of context and how it affects the way individuals manage institutional life. The "total institution" is a setting where all aspects of social life occur under the same roof, where "each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others" (Goffman, 1990, p. 6), where all aspects of social life are carefully planned in accordance with formal rules and policies, where social activities are coordinated in order to fulfil the official goals of the institution, and where large groups of people are treated by the means of bureaucratic organisation. As Goffman explains:

A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. (Goffman, 1990, p. xiii)

Goffman (1990) highlights some of the key features of total institutions. The context, in turn, is significant, not least because it affects the ways in which social life is organised within total institutions, and because it has significant consequences for the lives of its members. For example, the context of total institutions requires the individual to adapt (Goffman, 1990). Adaptation may be carried out by the means of different strategies, such as “secondary adjustment” (the course of action or practice that allows the individual to obtain forbidden satisfactions, or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means) (p. 189), “colonisation” (to obtain a maximum of satisfaction within the institution using the limited means available) (p. 62), or by “playing it cool” (a combination of different strategies, by which individuals strive to stay out of trouble) (p. 64).

While I do not argue that the schools participating in this dissertation are total institutions such as Goffman (1990) describes, the features of total institutions, as proposed by Goffman, are nevertheless similar to the portrayal of schools within sociological school bullying research regarding the importance of the institutional setting of schooling, and the ways these have been considered relevant to bullying (Andrews & Chen, 2006; Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996; Horton, 2018b; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). In discussing the importance of the school context to bullying, Gordon and Lahelma (1996) for example noted:

The school as a physical space provides a context for the practices and processes that ‘take place’ there. But the physical school is more than a context; it is an aspect in the shaping of these practices and processes producing differentiation. (p. 303)

A school is not only its physical structure, but also the compulsory, compressed, controlled, and competitive framework within which teachers and pupils interact (Duncan, 2013; Horton, 2018b; Langmann & Säfström, 2018). This entails, for example, that those subjected to bullying might not escape from other pupils, with whom they may or may not get along (Duncan, 2013; Horton, 2018b), but

are rather, “constantly forced to be involved in human relationships that are not of their own choosing” (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003, p. 325).

## Concluding Remarks

As briefly laid out in this chapter, I considered bullying to be a social phenomenon, rooted in social interactions and peer relations, as well as the institutional school context and the social and cultural context in which pupils find themselves. I have utilised a symbolic interactionist perspective to understand why pupils act as they do, for example in bullying situations, and I have been inspired by the new sociology of childhood and its emphasis on understanding children as competent social actors who adapt and alter their actions based on their understanding of the situation and through their interactions with others. I considered school bullying to be based on several simultaneous levels: it is underpinned by social interactions and relations at the microlevel, by the specific institutional context of schooling at the meso- and exo-levels, and by social norms at the macrolevel.

Using Goffman’s theory of impression management, I have considered bullying as the staging of a character, or “social face” (Susen, 2016, p. 125), with which pupils might try to control others’ conduct, and thus their own treatment by classmates and peers. I have also been inspired by Goffman’s (1959) concepts of front- and backstage, not only as a means to understand why pupils may act as “bullies”, “assistants”, or “reinforcers”, but also in understanding why pupils might take on an “outsider” role in bullying situations, as well as why they might refrain from intervening in defence of their peers, despite understanding that bullying is wrong, and despite a desire to intervene (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Thornberg et al., 2016).

I have acknowledged Goffman’s notion of the reciprocity between pupils’ performances, such as bullying, and the setting (or “social establishment”) in which they find themselves (Goffman, 1959, p. 152). I have also thought of pupils’ actions in bullying situations not only as ways in which they strive to maintain a certain

face, but also as ways in which they strive to adapt their performances to different situations and social contexts.

The concept of social stigma was not only been utilised to think about bullying, but also inspired me to think about pupils' reflections on bullying, such as regarding the experiences of pupils who intervene in defence of a bullied or unpopular peer. I have also thought of the consequences of stigma, in terms of guilt, shame, and uncertainty regarding others' "real" impressions of oneself (Goffman, 1986, p. 14). I have considered this important in understanding pupils' experiences of bullying.

Goffman's (1990) work on total institutions, their specific features and importance to social interactions, has been considered important, not only to better understand the social processes of bullying, but also to understand how the institutional setting of schooling might underpin bullying processes. Taken together, As I will show in the subsequent chapter, this theoretical understanding also has significance for the methodological procedures of this dissertation.

# Methodology

## Constructivist Grounded Theory and Listening to Pupils

This dissertation is based on research conducted using methods from constructivist grounded theory (CGT), a qualitative method with a focus on social processes and on the concerns that study participants emphasised as important (Charmaz, 2014). Among different qualitative approaches, and different versions of grounded theory, I chose CGT (Charmaz, 2014) of this dissertation's research questions. CGT is well suited for qualitatively exploring pupils' experiences of bullying, not least because it is a method that accommodates individuals' own understandings of social phenomena, such as school bullying (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2017; Thornberg et al., 2014).

CGT was chosen to achieve my aim to explore and shed light on social processes and on pupils' interpretations and rationalisations of school bullying. Indeed, one overall interest of this dissertation is to hear pupils' own reflections, including their explanations and understandings of school bullying and why bullying may occur and be maintained in schools despite pupils' understanding that bullying is wrong (Thornberg et al., 2016). Thus, CGT was chosen to better understand how pupils themselves motivate, reason, and reflect on pupils' choices to take on, or be ascribed, various participant roles in bullying. I also wanted to explore the ways in which pupils themselves suggest that bullying may be justified, neutralised, or explained. Listening to pupils is important, not only in terms of ecological validity (Cicourel, 1982), but also for better developing and improving strategies for preventing and managing bullying in schools (Cross & Barnes, 2014; Woods & Wolke, 2003).

CGT is also an approach well suited for studies with an ethnographic approach, not least because of the reciprocal interplay between ethnography, interested in social interaction, and CGT, with its interest in studying how social action and meaning are constructed (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2014). Both grounded theory and ethnography have their roots in Chicago School sociology, and they both seek to understand context and content, meaning and action, structures and actors (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2014). Additionally, I wanted to focus the second study on exploring which social processes pupils experience as important or as underpinning bullying, as well as how, and in what ways, these processes are expressed in the everyday school life of pupils. I also wanted to explore the significance of the school setting's social and institutional constraints for the occurrence and maintenance of bullying, and what role the school setting's institutional constraints may play in pupils' everyday school life. Thus, I considered CGT a well-suited methodological starting point for to an ethnographic approach and an effort to understand social processes and the importance of the school context to bullying.

CGT's close ties to symbolic interactionism were yet another reason for why I considered the constructivist version of grounded theory well-suited. As highlighted in the previous chapter, symbolic interactionism emphasises the importance of social interaction, social processes, meaning, and social interpretations. These focuses are very much in line with the questions I wished to explore in relation to school bullying. Indeed, CGT and symbolic interactionism are closely intertwined (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz et al., 2019). As Charmaz (2014), for example, puts it:

Symbolic interactionism offers grounded theorists an open-ended theoretical perspective that can inform grounded theory studies. Researchers may draw on symbolic interactionism's major strength of combining theory and method into a coherent unified whole without forcing their data and ideas into a prescribed set of concepts. Symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methods fit, complement, and can advance each other. (p. 277)

As highlighted by Charmaz, symbolic interactionism and CGT are closely related. Theoretical perspectives shape what one looks at and how one sees it (Charmaz et al., 2019), and in this dissertation, I have been particularly interested in exploring the meaning that pupils themselves ascribe school bullying, as well as why bullying may unfold. Thus, rather than focusing on the characteristics or traits of individual pupils, I have set out to focus more particularly on social relations, as well as on the social and institutional school context within which bullying might unfold. I thus chose to focus on social order, status processes, peer relationships, social roles, and on the institutional context of schooling, as well as on the importance of social norms to school bullying. More specifically, I seek to explore, understand, and illustrate pupils' experiences not only as socially situated, but also as socially intertwined with norms at both the local and societal level.

The use of CGT has entailed a focus on exploring and deepening the understanding of the social processes of school bullying, as well as an ambition to listen to pupils' own understandings of bullying as a social phenomenon in school (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2017). CGT's close ties to symbolic interactionism do not, however, entail that the broader societal context is neglected by constructivist grounded theorists (Charmaz 2014). Rather, human actions are understood as embedded in social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, and a special emphasis is also placed on social structures, situations, relationships, power relations, and social hierarchies, as well as how these arise and are maintained in social relations and in social interactions. As Charmaz (2014) clarifies:

Symbolic interactionism assumes that society precedes the individual and that we exist in a material environment. [...] symbolic interactionism is a dynamic perspective that also assumes continuous reciprocal processes occurring between the individual, collectivity and environment. [...] Structures exist and persist but some individuals may resist, circumvent, or ignore these constraints or use them for their own purposes. (p. 269)

As Charmaz states here, symbolic interactionists and constructivist grounded theorists acknowledge social structure, while also emphasising that individuals are not determined by them. In this dissertation, I acknowledge the relationship between individuals and their contexts as reciprocal and intertwined.

## Overview of papers, data, and participants

In total, 108 pupils from years 5 and 6 (i.e., 11–12 years old) from a total of nine classes at two Swedish primary schools participated in this study (see Table 1). I chose to focus on the experiences of 11–12-year-old pupils, since it has been suggested that bullying tends to occur most frequently between pupils aged 11–13 (Eslea & Rees, 2001).

**Table 1**

*Overview of participating pupils*

Study	Year	Girls		Boys		Total
		Birch wood	Alderdale	Birch wood	Alderdale	
I	5–6	26	24	11	13	74
II	6	16		18		34
Total			66		42	108

In the first study (Papers I and II), I used focus group interviews combined with a bullying vignette. In the second study (Papers III and IV), I conducted fieldwork, encompassing participant observations and interviews with pupils and teachers (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Overview of papers, data, and participants*

Paper	Title of paper	Data	Participants
I	Coolness and social vulnerability: Swedish pupils' reflections on participant roles in school bullying	22 focus group interviews	74 pupils
II	The fear of being singled out: pupils' perspectives on victimisation and bystanding in bullying situations	22 focus group interviews	74 pupils
III	School bullying, schooling and social control: Pupils' perspectives on the importance of friendships to school bullying	Participant observations and 9 pair and group interviews	34 pupils
IV	'I'm often alone': Social Marginalisation, Loneliness, and the Social Ecology of Bullying in a Swedish Elementary School	Participant observations and 9 pair and group interviews	34 pupils and 7 teachers

## Focus Group Interviews and Ethnographic Fieldwork

A central ambition in CGT is to collect empirical material that is as detailed as possible, both in terms of breadth and variation (Charmaz, 2014). I therefore chose to collect data using focus groups interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. While qualitative

interviews, such as focus group interviews, may provide insights into the subjectivity, voice, and lived experience of pupils with use of probing follow-up questions (Rapley, 2013), ethnographic fieldwork (i.e., participant observations and interviewing) may provide for an in-depth understanding of cultural and social worlds through involvement in the same context for an extended period of time (Coffey, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011; Walford & Delamont, 2008).

In this dissertation, I also considered an ethnographic approach, which provides opportunities to use theoretical sampling, that is, to return to the field and collect additional data, fill in data gaps, et cetera (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2014). I considered this important for the general analysis of the overall aim and questions of this dissertation. I considered these two data collection methods to be complementary, while also providing a scope that is in line with the questions of interest in this dissertation.

## Study 1: Focus Group Interviews and Vignettes

### *Aim and Rationale*

The overall aim of the first study was to explore the ways in which pupils themselves explain the participant roles that pupils may take on, or be attributed, in bullying situations. A second aim was to explore what rationalisations of bullying, including justifications, neutralisations, or explanations of bullying, that pupils themselves emphasise may be deployed in relation to school bullying and school bullying situations.

I chose to conduct the first study (Papers I and II) using focus group interviews and a qualitative vignette, since I acknowledged that discussing bullying, or the ways that pupils may neutralise, justify, or explain bullying, could be sensitive. Although focus group interviews do not completely eliminate the risk of discomfort (Wellings et al., 2000), and can be problematised in terms of issues of disclosure and groupthink (Hollander, 2004) among other things, I nevertheless considered the use of focus group interviews and vignettes as well-suited. Not least, they potentially minimise some

of the difficulties related to discussing a sensitive topic like school bullying (Barter & Renold, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998b).

On the one hand, focus groups can be thought of as, “small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic” (Hollander, 2004, p. 606). On the other hand, focus group interviews may also, “create a milieu in which social relations are forged and processes of discussion initiated which are similar to those experienced in everyday settings” (Wellings et al., 2000, p. 265). For the first study, I chose focus group interviews for several reasons. The use of focus group interviews may increase opportunities for interviewees to use their own language, and their own ways of reasoning, in comparison with individual interviews (Wilkinson, 1998b). When compared to individual interviews, focus group interviews also allow participants greater opportunities to pose questions of their own, and to initiate topics relevant to themselves (Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b). While I considered this to be important in relation to the research questions, focus groups may also reduce the researcher’s power and control (Barbour, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998a), in a sense thus making focus groups a relatively “egalitarian” method, simply by the number of participants simultaneously involved in the research interaction (Wilkinson, 1998a, p. 190). I also found this latter aspect important, given that my interview subjects were pupils age 11–12.

Vignettes may be described as simulations of real events (Gould, 1996; Wilks, 2004), as hypothetical short stories, or as stimuli or a snapshot for eliciting an extended discussion about a specific scenario or topic (Jenkins et al., 2010). Indeed, as Jenkins et al. (2010) highlight, vignettes may be defined as:

A technique used in structured and depth interviews as well as focus groups, providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalised) scenarios. The respondent is then invited to imagine, drawing on his or her own experience, how the central character in the scenario will behave. Vignettes thus collect situated data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour. While in structured interviews respondents must choose from a multiple-choice menu of possible answers to a vignette, as used in depth interviews and

focus groups, vignettes act as a stimulus to extended discussion of the scenario in question [...] (p. 175f)

As suggested, vignettes focus on the elicitation of data on group beliefs and values, a focus that I perceived as relevant to the purpose and questions of the present study. However, I also chose to use vignettes because reflecting on a made-up story may be less threatening than talking about one's own experiences (Barter & Renold, 1999). I considered the less threatening aspects of vignettes to be important, not least in relation to the age of the pupils, but also given that bullying is a sensitive subject. I also considered vignettes well-suited based on the interests of symbolic interactionism and constructive theory, namely, to understand social processes and meaning making. As highlighted by Jenkins et al., understanding the participants' situated experiences is also a key point of the use of vignettes.

### *Initial Contact*

During the autumn of 2015, I contacted the principals of several schools to enquire about possible participation in the present study. I initially contacted the principals by phone, then provided information about myself, the study's aims, and its practical implementation, via email. Although many principals concluded that their schools could not participate within the study's time frame, two principals were positive about participation within the given timeframe. One of the schools, which I call here "Birchwood School" is a rural elementary school in a smaller Swedish municipality. The other, called here "Alderdale School," is a public primary school in a socioeconomically diverse part of a medium-sized Swedish municipality. Birchwood School encompasses about 350 pupils from preschool-class to 6<sup>th</sup> form, i.e., 12 years of age, while Alderdale School holds about 400 pupils, from preschool class to 6<sup>th</sup> form.

Via the school principals, I contacted teachers from the respective forms at the schools via email and provided them with information about myself and the study. In agreement with the teachers, I visited the respective classes in the latter part of 2015 and

spring of 2016. I told pupils about the study and about myself. I explained that I was writing a book about what life was like at school, explained that I understood pupils often know bullying is wrong, but that I knew bullying still occurs in schools. I stated that I was especially interested in their thoughts and experiences about being pupils, and how bullying happens despite pupils' knowing it's wrong. I also explained that I would be very grateful for their expertise and experiences, not least because they, as pupils knew best how it was to be a pupil.

At this initial meeting, I also explained to the pupils about the study and what their participation would entail. For instance, I said that they would be interviewed in groups of friends, and that they would be asked to discuss a picture, rather than their own experiences. I told them about how long I estimated the interviews to last, and I also promised not to tell anyone outside the groups, such as their class teachers, parents, or the other pupils in class, what was discussed in interviews. I explained that if they wanted to participate, they needed to fill out a consent form together with their parents or guardians, to enable participation in the interviews.

### *Composing Groups*

In order to facilitate groups where pupils would feel safe and comfortable to explore issues relevant to “the person-in-context” (Wilkinson, 1998b, p. 112), the pupils who provided consent were asked to draw a map of pairs or groups of pupils who were friends, or who often met at school. I showed pupils an example of how the map could look, and told them that they were supposed to complete the map on their own without showing them to each other. I also told pupils that the groups in the maps should consist of pupils who knew each other well and were good friends. Using the same approach as Cairns et al. (1988) and Salmivalli et al. (1996), I asked the pupils to draw one map each of their respective classrooms.

Based on pupils' maps, I compiled suggested groups. Prior to conducting interviews, I asked teachers to consider my suggested groups, then made minor adjustments in accordance with their input (for a discussion of the ethical considerations taken, as well as the encountered difficulties, see ‘Ethical considerations’, page 70f). In total, 22 groupings of 74 pupils were suggested (*Min*=2, *Max*=5,

*Mean*= 3.36 pupils per pair/grouping). The groups involved 26 girls and 11 boys in one school, and 24 girls and 13 boys in the other: a total of 68% girls and 32% boys. In every group but one, pupils' suggested groupings were segregated by gender.<sup>2</sup>

### *Interviewing*

The vignette used in the first study was designed by the third author of Papers I and II. The overall aim with the vignette was to provide opportunities for pupils to reflect on pupils' actions in bullying situations. Another purpose was to elicit reflective discussions of the participant roles described by Salmivalli et al. (1996) and Salmivalli (1999). Thus, the vignette depicted a bullying scenario, involving a group of six boys or girls (depending on whether the interview was with boys or girls), who took on five different roles: one 'bully' (labelled A in the vignette), one 'victim' (labelled B), one 'assistant', who joins in (labelled C), one 'reinforcer', who laughs at the bullying (labelled D), one 'outsider', who watches the bullying (E), and two 'outsiders', who are leaving the situation (F) (see Figures 1 and 2).

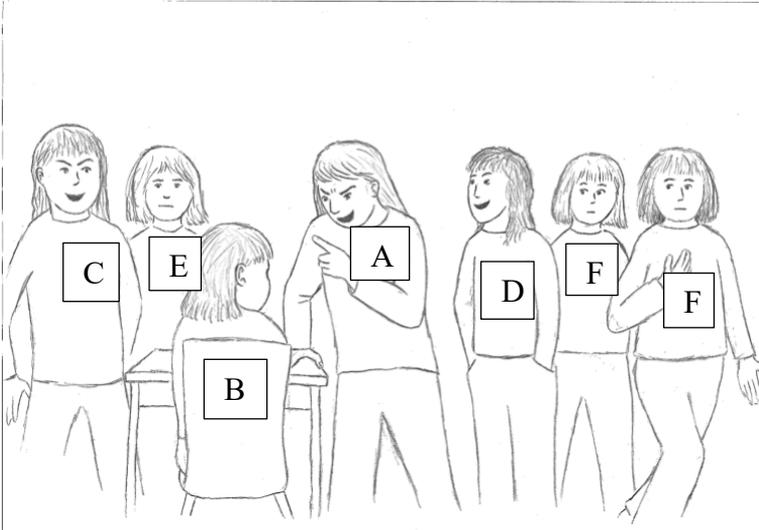
In relation to the depicted bullying scenario, several questions were provided, also formulated by the third author of Papers I and II. For example, pupils were asked to reflect on the portrayed pupils' actions, and to reflect on what they thought each of the portrayed pupils was thinking in the situation (see page 54f). Similarly to the vignettes, these questions were used as a means to elicit reflective (Jenkins et al., 2010) and non-judgemental (Barter & Renold, 2000) discussions about pupils' actions in bullying situations.

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<sup>2</sup> This was not entirely surprising. Rather, ethnographic research on children in school settings have highlighted children and adolescents tending to play and position themselves in gender segregated groupings in cases where they are allowed to decide for themselves (e.g., Thorne, 1993).

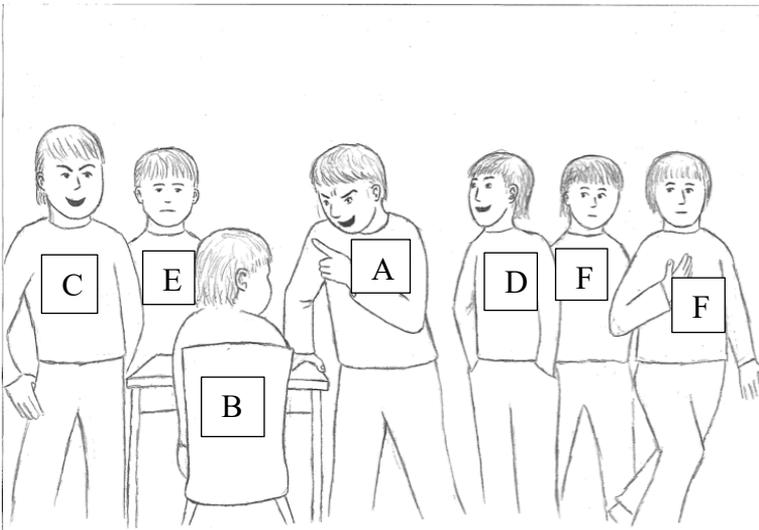
**Figure 1**

*Picture of the vignette, girls*



**Figure 2**

*Picture of the vignette, boys*



Since pupils' proposed groupings were gender segregated, I chose to use the vignette that reflected the composition of the particular groupings, that is, groupings of boys were shown the vignette depicting boys, while groupings of girls received the vignette depicting girls. I did so to strengthen the ecological validity, i.e., "the extent to which responses to interview and survey questions reflect or represent the daily actions of a collectivity" (Cicourel, 1982, p. 16).

Prior to beginning interviews, I greeted the pupils and explained briefly how the interview would proceed. I explained that I was going to record the interview, but that the recording would remain confidential. I reminded them that I would not share with teachers, parents, or other pupils what we discussed during the interview. I also told pupils that it was permitted to withdraw from the interview at any time they wished, without explanation. I then introduced the vignette to the pupils in the following way:

In the picture you can see some boys/girls who are in the same class. They are in year [the same year as the participants], like you. Basically, all these boys/girls really think that bullying is wrong and bad. Nevertheless, this happens in the class ...

After the vignette had been introduced, the pupils were asked to reflect on the portrayed pupils' actions, and to explain what they thought each of the portrayed pupils were thinking. The questions were presented to them as follows:

- This boy/girl (A) usually bullies the seated boy/girl in the picture (B). He/she does it at least a couple of times every week. Why do you think he/she does so even though he/she basically thinks that bullying is wrong? What do you think he/she is thinking?
- This boy/girl (C) joins the other boy/girl and he/she also starts to bully the seated boy/girl. Why do you think he/she does so, when he/she knows that bullying is wrong? What do you think he/she is thinking?

- This boy/girl (D) is standing apart, watching the bullying. He/she laughs and cheers at those bullying the guy/girl. Why do you think he/she does so, even though he/she knows that bullying is wrong? What do you think he/she is thinking?
- This boy/girl (E) also sees what's happening. He/she does nothing in particular, but stands in the background and remains quiet. Why do you think he/she does so, even though he/she knows that bullying is wrong? What do you think he/she is thinking? (If he/she doesn't care, then what do you think he/she is thinking?)
- This boy/girl (F) also sees what's happening. He/she does nothing in particular, but leaves the situation without helping the boy/girl (B). Why do you think he/she does so, even though he/she knows that bullying is wrong? What do you think he/she is thinking? (If he/she doesn't care, then what do you think he/she is thinking?)

In conducting the interviews, I sought to avoid positioning myself as an expert or a teacher. I also sought to hand over some of the agenda to the pupils, so as to let them control and pace the interviews, and to let them explore and raise questions relevant to them (Mayall, 2008). I sought to signal my interest in the participating pupils' particular experiences and reflections by asking them to elaborate further on what they said, and following up on what they suggested and discussed.

After the vignette was discussed, the pupils were asked if there were situations where they thought it could be okay to tease, hit, exclude, or spread negative rumours about someone else. All pairs and groups were interviewed once, and the interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in quiet rooms, separated from the rest of the class, to ensure confidentiality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of research position and ethical considerations in relation with the interviews, see "Ethical considerations", page 70f.

## Study 2: Ethnographic Fieldwork

### *Aim and Rationale*

In the second study, data were collected with ethnographic methods, including participant observations as well as formal and informal interviews with teachers and pupils. I considered ethnographic fieldwork to be well suited because I wanted to make sense of pupils' experiences and reflections on school bullying "at first hand" (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4), and in pupils' everyday school life. As Hammersley (2006) states:

Ethnography is often seen as a specific form of qualitative inquiry, to be compared or contrasted with others [...] This usually involves fairly lengthy contact, through participant observation in relevant settings, and/or through relatively open-ended interviews designed to understand people's perspectives [...] As ethnographers, we typically insist on the importance of coming to understand the perspectives of the people being studied if we are to explain, or even to describe accurately, the activities they engage in and the courses of action they adopt. At the same time, there is usually an equal emphasis on developing an analytic understanding of perspectives, activities and actions, one that is likely to be different from, perhaps even in conflict with, how the people themselves see the world. (p. 4)

The above highlights ethnography's effort to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants, here the pupils. The quote also highlights an effort to understand the activities that, for example, pupils engage in at school, while also understanding such activities theoretically and analytically. While this is in line with the research questions three and four of the present dissertation, which focus on processes and the importance of the school context to bullying, an effort to understand pupils activities at school is also in line with theoretical sampling, which is a way to further strengthen the validity and quality of grounded theory studies (Thornberg et al., 2014). The use of an ethnographic approach can also be understood

as a way of exploring a phenomenon from different angles and inputs (Blumer, 1986).

As Murphy and Dingwall (2007) explain, even inappropriate or counter-productive seeming actions may make sense when interpreted as part of a particular setting. In the second study, I sought to deepen the understanding of the ways in which pupils interpreted bullying as a possible phenomenon in their daily school context, but also to explore the “situated rationality of action” (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007, p. 2224), such as why pupils can bully to be cool, while stating that bullying is not cool. I also wanted to understand what pupils regard as important in their daily school life (Hammersley, 2006), as well as the potential importance of the institutional school context in bullying from the perspective of pupils (Emerson et al., 2011; Walford & Delamont, 2008).

Put differently, I wanted to study what pupils did in their everyday school lives, what activities they engaged in, as well as which courses of action they adopted (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4). I wanted to attain, “an analytic understanding of perspectives, activities and actions” (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4). However, I also thought of ethnographic fieldwork as a means to further explore the findings of the first study, such as the perceived importance of coolness, social vulnerability, and pupils’ fears of being singled out.

### *Initial Contact*

Prior to conducting the second study, I decided to contact the principals of Birchwood School and Alderdale School again. I did so in spring 2019, reminding them who I was and about the first study, conducted a few years prior. I told them that I would conduct a second study about school bullying, and I informed them of the study’s approximate schedule. I explained that my research focused on pupils in years 4 through 6, but I left class choice otherwise up to the principals.

The principal at Alderdale School emphasised that they would participate, but that they were unable to do so until the next semester. I thus decided to start at Birchwood School, where the principal provided suggestions for teachers whom I could contact for further planning of the study. I contacted these teachers via email, and told them about myself, my dissertation, and the planned study.

I asked for an opportunity to meet in person to tell them more. I also stressed that this meeting would be an opportunity for them to ask me questions about the study, its purpose, methods, and/or ethics.

I took seriously the task of establishing a rapport with teachers of the suggested classes. Not least, I considered it important to build mutual trust and acceptance, not only in relation to who I was, but also in relation to how I intended to conduct the study. In meeting with the teachers, I once again provided information about the purpose and aim of the study, as well as information about ethnographic methods in a more general sense. While I perceived the teachers to be genuinely interested, they also had questions about the practical implementation of the study and about my role during the fieldwork. For example, they asked how I would act in the classroom, and if I had any preferences about where to sit in the classroom. I explained that I was not to act as a teacher, and that this meant that I would not tell off pupils if they broke school or classroom rules. I also told the teachers that I, as much as possible, planned to spend my time with the pupils, and that this perhaps could be perceived as my distancing myself from them, or as a disinterest in their work as teachers. Indeed, I considered this explanation part of informed consent, but also as a way to minimise potential harm due to, for example, unclear or different expectations about the study (Hammersley, 2020).

At Birchwood School, I met the pupils later on the same day that I met with the teachers, and at Alderdale School, a week or so after meeting with the teachers. In meeting with the pupils, I introduced myself and explained to them that I was working on a book about school bullying and pupils' everyday school life. I told them about the interviews I conducted at their schools several years prior, and I also asked them if they had any questions for me. They certainly had questions for me, and I was asked all sorts of questions: my favourite colour, my preferred football team, what music I listened to, whether I preferred Obama or Trump, my age, favourite candy, and so on—an occasion I found very uplifting.

I planned with the teachers at Birchwood School to carry out participant observations four days a week and asked to be at their school for approximately three months. In agreement with the teachers, I decided to start on October 4<sup>th</sup> and stay until pupils'

Christmas holidays, December 19<sup>th</sup> (i.e., 45 days  $\approx$  11 weeks). However, due to holidays, my own teaching, and sick leave with my own children, the number of days per week varied (*Min*=2, *Max*=4, *Mean*=2.63) and the total days at Birchwood School were 29, see Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Overview of number days at Birchwood School*

Class	Days at Birchwood	Holidays	Days teaching	Sick leave	Total
6C	16	5	2	1	24
6D	13	1	4	3	21
Total	29	6	6	4	45

While I initially planned to conduct fieldwork at both Birchwood School and Alderdale School, I had to interrupt fieldwork at Alderdale School in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In describing the practical implementation of the fieldwork (i.e., participant observations, interviewing, and leaving the field), I therefore delimit the focus to my work at Birchwood School here.

### *Participant Observations*

I decided to start with the class I chose to call 6C, which was the class where the most consent forms had been returned. In beginning my first day at Birchwood School, the teachers of class 6C, Sara and Stefan, had arranged a place for me in the classroom. I sat at the back of the classroom; a place which I liked, but also a good vantage point for observation of classroom interactions (Horton, 2012). Indeed, from this position, I was able to observe the interactions in the classroom while also reducing the impact and possible disruption of my own presence.

During these first days at Birchwood School, I found it difficult to remember which pupils had returned their consent forms, and which had not. As I also became aware, several groupings of pupils chose to spend their time together at school of which only some pupils consented to participate. While I found this methodologically and ethically challenging (not least in terms of

field notes and informed consent), I tried to handle this, for example, by taking notes on social interactions and situations, but without primarily focusing on pupils or on the actions of pupils. I thought of this as a possible way for me to take seriously the respect of informed consent and the privacy of pupils, while also trying to write down what it seemed to entail being a member of this arena. Thus, I tried to note down everything about the context, while I also sought to be there and to participate in pupils' "day-to-day affairs" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 3). I sought to get a sense of the social milieu, its routines, traditions, and spoken and unspoken norms (Emerson et al., 2011).

A regular school day in 6C and 6D at Birchwood School begins at 08:00 and finishes at 14:20, excepting Thursdays when pupils finish at 13:50. I decided to conduct the fieldwork in the form of a compressed time mode, a type of ethnography that, "captures the dynamics of a context, documenting the visible and less tangible social structures and relations" (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, p. 538). In this study, this entailed that I spent time with the pupils, that I participated in their break activities when invited to do so, and that I engaged in informal conversations with them about things that interested them. Like other school ethnographers (e.g., Horton, 2012; Thorne, 1993), I spent my time with the pupils, positioning myself in the same spaces as them, and doing the same things. I talked to pupils, sought to establish relations, and tried to become a familiar figure. This, for example, entailed that I stood in line with the pupils waiting to be let into the cafeteria, that I ate lunch together with pupils in the cafeteria (rather than in the teachers' lunchroom), that I went outside during breaks just as the pupils must, that I walked the couple of hundred meters to the building where the pupils at Birchwood School had physical education lessons, and that I played football, basketball, and Four Square with the pupils. Sometimes I just walked around the schoolyard with my book and noted what I saw, heard, and felt.

Entering a field is, however, not just about asking for permission. Nor is it possible to merely pick up or adopt the role of an accepted member (Coffey, 2018). Rather, field roles are fluid and subject to change, for example depending on the time spent in the field (Coffey, 2018, see also Anderson, 2003 for some empirical

examples of this). Thus, the access involved in entering a field (such as a school and school class) is negotiated (Coffey, 2018). For instance, negotiated access is about articulating the research to the participants in a setting in ways that are meaningful to them (Coffey, 2018). This may entail sharing one's interests, one's intentions, and one's plans. Thus, I asked for the pupils' permission to sit at their table in the canteen, but also waited for them to ask me if I wanted to participate in their break activities, rather than requesting to join in. I sought to take a 'least-adult' role (Mandell, 2003), and to position myself as "the naive incompetent" or "unknowing" in the beginning of the fieldwork (Coffey, 2018, p. 68). I asked the pupils of classes 6C and 6D what it meant to be a pupil at Birchwood School, as well as questions about what they were doing, what they liked and did not like about their class and their school, what they liked to do in their spare time, and so on.

While I did not expect to pass as an adult, and while acknowledging the obvious problems in fully assuming a least-adult role (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988), I nevertheless tried not to act as a typical adult or teacher. Rather, I sought to position myself as a guest in the classes, one who did not take it for granted that pupils wanted to talk to me or tell me things. I also considered my mode of dressing, and sought to avoid seeming like a teacher at school. For example, I wore hoodies rather than shirts, and was careful not to do things that could seem teacher-like. Neither did I tell pupils off for using bad language, breaking school- or classroom rules, or being inside during breaks. At times, pupils would skip the lunch line in the cafeteria, seeming to check how I would react to what they knew was a violation of their school's rules. On these occasions I said nothing, but insisted that I was not a teacher. I told myself that it was important to also signal my status with my way of behaving (see Mandell, 2003). In this sense, I sought to "blend in to the social world of the children, not siding with adults, operating physically and metaphorically on the children's level in their social worlds" (Mayall, 2008, p. 110).

In the fieldwork's later stages, I was more of a familiar face. The pupils of classes 6C and 6D did not seem to take as much notice of me as they had previously. Nor did I find that they perceived me as a stranger in the same way as done in the early stages of the

fieldwork. I felt more trusted, and perhaps accepted, by the pupils (Anderson, 2003). Indeed, I experienced how I gradually became more and more accepted, admitted, and immersed into their social worlds, and teachers told me that I was asked for on the occasions when I was not at Birchwood School. This entailed, for example, that I could enter places and situations where teachers were not welcome. In the beginning of the fieldwork, pupils sometimes shouted, “A teacher is coming!”, when I approached the cloakroom where they stayed without permission during breaks, but this did not occur during the latter portions of the fieldwork. On other occasions, pupils watched YouTube on their computers, which was also not permitted, and would say, “Oh well, it’s just Joakim, he’s not so dangerous”, and then continue watching. Pupils also asked me if I wanted to sit next to them on those occasions while they watched films.

### *Interviewing*

At the end of my stay at Birchwood School, the pupils who had given their consent to participate were asked to be interviewed. While all pupils who had initially given their consent to participate were positive about being interviewed, several pupils did not give consent to participate asked if they also could be interviewed, too. I explained that I would happily interview them, but that I would need a completed consent form. Thus, a number of pupils provided consent, so that they could also be interviewed together with their friends.

I composed the groups based on my observations of which pairs or groups of pupils often chose to spend their time together at school. I found this to be less problematic than in the first study, not least because more pupils had given their consent to participate (i.e., 20 of 22 pupils in class 6C, and 14 of 25 pupils in class 6D). I provided the teachers with suggested groupings prior to beginning interviewing, and they did not object or suggest any other grouping. I wanted to conduct the interviews in groups of friends, not only so as to facilitate a comfortable interview situation (Mayall, 2008), and to allow for natural conversations between pupils, but also to provide, “the social contexts within which ideas are formed and decisions made” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 105).

I conducted interviews as a complement to the participant observations, since the interviews provided opportunities to ask more in-depth questions about what it entailed to be a pupil in their classes and at Birchwood School. The interviews were also opportunities to ask about situations and aspects in their daily school life that I had observed during the fieldwork. I asked, for example, about what they found important at school, what they liked about school, and what about school they did not like, if anything. I asked how pupils were sometimes excluded at school (something I had observed), and I asked for their perspectives on findings from the first study, such as the importance of coolness and popularity to pupils. At the end of the interviews, I also asked a couple of more general questions about their reflections on why pupils may sometimes do things in school that they know are wrong.<sup>4</sup>

As when conducting interviews in the first study, I sought to avoid positioning myself as an expert or a teacher, and I sought to hand over some of the agenda to the pupils (Mayall, 2008). Also as when conducting interviews in the first study, I sought to signal my interest in the participating pupils' particular experiences, and I used probing questions to follow up aspects that the pupils themselves raised as important to them in school. While I had prepared a semi-structured guide for interviewing, based on the aim of the study as well as my fieldnotes, I also found it important to allow topics raised by the pupils to lead the conversations. Between the different interviews, I revised the interview guide slightly, as pupils brought up topics and issues, such as the social importance of friendships and status to pupils, which I wanted to follow up. I thought of this as a kind of theoretical sampling (Thornberg, 2017) by which to clarify not only my research questions and the findings from the first study, but also "what data to collect next and where to find them" (p. 368). In the latter interviews, I also decided to remove some of the more general questions about Birchwood School and classes 6C and 6D in favour of further focus on friendship, loneliness, and the institutional setting of schooling.

Taken together, the ethnographic approach was important for the interviews, not least because I could ask about things I had

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1.

observed and wanted to know more about, but also because the ethnographic approach provided for mutual comprehension and experience between me and the pupils as regards, for example the social status of certain pupils. This would not have been if I had not been at Birchwood School during the autumn. The interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. Due to some pupils being absent at the time of interviews, or not wanting to be interviewed, 28 of the 34 pupils participating were interviewed. Most groups were interviewed on one occasion, but two groups were interviewed on two occasions because of their willingness to talk about their school experiences. All the interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in quiet rooms, separate from the rest of the class.

### *Leaving the Field*

When I started the fieldwork in early autumn of 2019, the upcoming Christmas break, at the end of December, seemed to form a natural endpoint for my fieldwork. While my work in the field was beginning to exhaust, and although I looked forward to reviewing my fieldnotes and interviews, I would not end fieldwork without thoughts for the pupils with whom I formed relationships during my time at Birchwood School.

One day shortly before Christmas holidays, Gabriel, a pupil in 6C, came running across the schoolyard while I was on my way to lunch with the 6D pupils. He told me that he thought I was the kindest adult he had met at school and gave me a Christmas card that he made during a Christmas crafts workshop. I felt it important to really thank the pupils for allowing me to be a part of their schooldays for a couple of months, and for sharing their experiences with me. I asked Lydia, Sara, and Stefan, the teachers, for permission to do so during the school's Christmas speech day. I thanked the pupils and emphasised that I thought their experiences and reflections would be important to other pupils. I then left Birchwood School.

## Data Analysis

All data in this dissertation have been analysed through the use of CGT (Charmaz, 2014). All interviews have been audio-recorded and

transcribed by me into written form. All fieldnotes have been transferred from handwritten, then further processed, and analysed. In working with both studies, I used “memos”, that is, “informal analytic notes” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162), to capture ideas about the data and ongoing data collection. I also used memos to ask questions of myself about the emerging importance of various aspects of the data to follow up, such as the school context to bullying. For example, in the second study, memos included, “how do pupils talk about schooling and about the importance of schooling to bullying?”, “how might the social and institutional context of schooling be understood as important to bullying?” I also used memo writing to ask why some pupils, but not all, were alone or excluded during the school day. In the following analysis, I highlight in greater detail how I analysed the data from the two studies. While I chose to portray the analysis stepwise, I often found myself moving back and forth between the different steps of initial, focused, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014).

### *Analysis in Study 1*

After conducting the first interviews, I started to transcribe and preliminarily sort and code the data. I looked for recurring patterns in the data, and for interesting aspects and segments in data to follow up in subsequent interviews. In an initial phase of coding, I read and re-read the data, “carefully but quickly” (Thornberg et al., 2014, p. 409). I assigned the data different labels, then sorted and reduced them. I sought to become acquainted with the data (Thornberg et al., 2014). At this stage of the coding, I tried to stay as close to the data as possible. This entailed, for example, that I did not code the data with overly analytical terms or concepts, but rather sorted and categorised the data and the provisional codes under different topics and themes, related to the various aspects and events suggested. Rather than, “forcing data into preconceptions” (Thornberg et al., 2014, p. 410), I tried to stay open towards what the data seemed to suggest, and thought of the codes as temporary, modifiable, and open for revision (Thornberg, 2012). I strived to get a sense of the material, while also striving for a sort of preliminary sorting of data. To really explore what was going on in the data, I posed a set of open analytical questions to the data, such as, “What is happening in the

data?"; "What do the data suggest?"; "What is left unsaid?"; "What processes seem to be at stake, and how may these be defined and understood?"; "What are the social consequences of these processes for the pupils involved?" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 127).

In a focused phase, I followed up and further explored data which seemed to be of particular importance (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In this step, I treated the most significant codes constructed during initial coding as focused codes. Because focused codes are usually more conceptual and comprehensive than initial codes (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), this phase of coding also helped me to further sort, cluster, and reduce the data. Data of particular importance were followed up and further explored.

By sorting and reducing data, a number of categories gradually emerged as especially relevant to the participating pupils (Charmaz, 2014). The following is an example of how I formulated codes, how I reasoned, and how I posed questions to the empirical material:

A number of codes, such as "cool", "being cool", "popularity", and "tough" seem to recur more frequently. I also note that codes, like "cool", are often related to "having friends", "to decide more", and "not being bullied".

- *Why* is it important to be cool?
- *Why* is it that pupils might bully to be cool, even though they stress that it isn't cool to bully?

The above is an example of how I worked during the analysis and how I asked questions of the data. By asking questions of the data, and by further sorting and elaborating the data, a number of overall categories could gradually be formulated. The following is a memo exemplifying how I worked to formulate more overarching themes in the data:

An overall theme of "coolness" seems to stand out in the data, encompassing codes related to the perceived importance of social status and popularity. In a similar vein, a theme that can be called "social vulnerability" seems to be suggested by the pupils, entailing codes and coded segments

concerning their fear of being bullied, and their reflections about what it may entail to be positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Additionally, I should also look more closely at the ways that pupils tie these codes and themes to particular roles in the vignette.

This is an example of how I reasoned during the focused phase of the analysis. In parallel with focused coding, and in the latter stage of coding, I developed and used more theoretically oriented codes to further explore, sort and reduce the emerging themes and codes. As Thornberg (2017) explains, theoretical codes, “refer to underlying logics on how to relate, organize and integrate concepts that could be found in various theories across different disciplines” (p. 364). In working with theoretical coding, I was inspired by a number of theories, such as the concept of social exclusion anxiety (Søndergaard, 2012; Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018), and longing for belonging (Søndergaard, 2012; Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018), as well as Goffman’s (1986) theory of social stigmatisation, and I utilised these theories as analytical tools and lenses to better understand the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Taken together, the analysis of Study 1 helped a broader picture to gradually emerge, which showed different rationales in bullying, as well as in relation to pupils taking or being assigned various roles in bullying situations.

### *Analysis in Study 2*

In working with analysis and coding of the interviews in the second study, I used the same approach described above in the first study. In the second study, the analysis was also guided by memo writing and fieldnotes. I used codes, memos, and fieldnotes not only to follow up interesting or seemingly relevant patterns in the data, but also to build and maintain “a storehouse of analytical ideas” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 120). More specifically, I used fieldnotes (97 pages in total) to return and look more closely at contextual aspects, such as pupils’ ways of talking or dressing, as well as to remind myself of the various situations, interactions, and events that I experienced at Birchwood School. In the latter part of the second

study, I also wrote more reflexive fieldnotes (Salzman, 2002) about my own experiences, feelings, and thoughts at Birchwood School.

In the second study, I also used my fieldnotes together with interviewing as a sort of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), to further explore and follow up aspects of daily life at Birchwood School that were of interest to the aim of the study. As Charmaz (2014) explains:

Theoretical sampling, which means seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory. [...] Theoretical sampling brings explicit systematic checks and refinements to your analysis. (p. 192f)

Charmaz (2014) emphasises the use of theoretical sampling as refining one's analysis. Inspired by the use of theoretical sampling, I also used the interviews in the second study to ask pupils about aspects of my observations. For example, I asked about pupils whom I observed being left out at school, and why this occurred. I also asked about the importance of friendships and status in school, and the different pairs and groups of pupils in classes 6C and 6D. Taken together, the combination of fieldnotes and interviewing was an important part of the analysis in the second study.

### *Openness and Theoretical Sensitivity*

Although the value of reviewing relevant literature and theory prior to conducting a study is debated (Thornberg, 2012), I have chosen to do so here, not least to maintain curiosity about the data, while at the same time being well read and informed about one or more theories and concepts. Indeed, as Dey (1993, p. 63) states, “[There is] a difference between an open mind and empty head”. To me, having an open mind, but not an empty head, has meant focusing on the data, and what seems to happen in the data, while also considering several theories and perspectives that I have found relevant to better understand the aim and questions of this dissertation. As Blumer (1986) argues, in pointing to the importance of concepts in research:

Throughout the act of scientific inquiry concepts play a central role. They are significant elements in the prior scheme that the scholar has of the empirical world; they are likely to be the terms in which his problem is cast; they are usually the categories for which data are sought and in which the data are grouped; they usually become the chief means for establishing relations between data; and they are usually the anchor points in interpretation of the findings. Because of such a decisive role in scientific inquiry, concepts need especially to be subject to methodological scrutiny. (p. 26)

Blumer (1986) highlights the benefits of theoretical concepts and their contribution to the scientific process. However, the potential benefits of theoretical concepts has not entailed, for example, that I consider the *only* possible explanation for pupils' bystander behaviours in bullying situations to be social stigmatisation (Goffman, 1986). Pre-existing theories and concepts have not been uncritically adopted, or "forced" (Glaser, 1978) into the analysis in a deductive manner. Rather, I have sought to keep an open mind to the data's suggestions, and to acknowledge that different explanations of the data may always be possible (Thornberg, 2012; Thornberg & Dunne, 2019). In line with an informed grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012), I have treated theories and concepts as modifiable heuristic tools rather than "truths". Lastly, I have worked with theories and concepts by critically evaluating these in terms of their fit and relevance (Thornberg, 2012; Thornberg & Dunne, 2019).

### *Concluding Remarks*

In grounded theory, analysis of data should go hand in hand with data collection throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). However, there were several different occasions when collecting and analysing data in parallel was not practically possible. For example, in the first study, numerous interviews were occasionally scheduled for the same day, a challenge that I sought to manage by recording preliminary notes

prior to imminent interviews. In the second study, I sometimes fell behind in writing up fieldnotes on my computer. Nevertheless, I have utilised the methodological possibilities of memo writing, theoretical coding, and sensitivity to explore the social processes highlighted by pupils as significant to them in bullying situations. In line with a qualitative tradition, I leave it for the reader to decide (in terms of, for example, recognition and face validity) whether the analyses and findings are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and valid (Carminati, 2018; Larsson, 2009).

## Ethical Considerations

All research discussed in this dissertation has been ethically approved, and the ethical guidelines of The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) have been followed. In particular, these guidelines mention the need to avoid discomfort and harm to study participants, to provide information about the purpose of the study to its participants (*informationskravet*), to obtain informed consent from those participating (*samtyckeskravet*), to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (*konfidentialitetskravet*), and to clarify the ways and contexts in which the collected data will be used (*nyttjandekravet*). Researching bullying is, however, obviously a sensitive topic. Thus, despite ethical guidelines, it is important to also acknowledge the importance of having an ethical approach and awareness throughout the whole research process. As Hammersley (2020) underlines:

[...] There are no prescriptions that will avoid ethical problems arising, nor recipes for immediately resolving them. Instead, the best that can be done is to make appropriate judgments in the circumstances, taking into account the full range of relevant considerations [...] (p. 455)

Hammersley (2020) raises the point that ethical concerns are not just about ethical guidelines per se, but also about considerations and ethical reflection. In both studies, I have thus informed participants about the overall purpose of the studies, both orally and in writing, and in both studies consent forms were distributed to pupils and their

legal guardians. In the second study, consent forms were also distributed to the teachers directly involved with classes 6C and 6D at Birchwood School. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, all audio recordings stored under lock and all transcriptions have been anonymised using pseudonyms. This has entailed that all names of schools, teachers, and pupils have been exchanged in all the transcripts and texts produced. I have left out specific details which might create a risk for recognition of the specific schools, pupils, and teachers.

To clarify the ways and contexts in which the collected data will be used, I explained to participants that I intended to write texts and books about pupils' school experiences and school bullying, and that no teacher or parent would be told about what was said in interviews. Pupils were repeatedly informed during both studies about the practical implementation of the studies, such as what participation might entail and how particular moments, such as interview situations, were to be carried out. I consistently underlined in meetings with the pupils that their participation was voluntarily, and that they retained the right to withdraw participation, or to refuse to answer any questions, if they so wished.

Letting pupils draw their own suggestions for groupings in the first study was particularly important, both ethically and methodologically. Methodologically, it was important because group composition has been found to be one of the more critical aspects related to the use of focus groups (Barbour, 2005). It was important ethically because I wished to minimise the risk that a person being bullied was placed in the same group as those doing the bullying. In addition, group composition is important since it may provide a relatively safe environment in which to share experiences, and for participants to discuss the topics and reflections in their natural peer group (Barbour, 2005). I also considered group composition important in relation to questions of disclosure, such as disclosing more than one perhaps intended to do (Hollander, 2004), as well as to offer pupils "a relatively safe environment" (i.e., a group consisting of friends compared to a group of classmates) in which to share their experiences and reflections (Barbour, 2005, p. 743).

Although I perceived it as important to let pupils suggest their own groupings, it was not possible to accept the suggested peer groups in every single case. In some cases, I had to form pairs of pupils or groups of three, even though the suggested natural group consisted of more peers, according to the maps. In another case, I conducted an individual interview with a pupil whose teacher stated she did not get along with her suggested peer group. While I chose not to include this interview in the findings, I nevertheless considered the interview as a means to ethically handle the situation.

I chose to use focus groups and vignettes rather than individual interviews, not only to reduce the imbalance of power between me (as an adult) and the pupils (Barbour, 2005), but above all to facilitate reflections on a sensitive subject like bullying (Barter & Renold, 2000). In conducting the interviews, I underlined that they were not forced to speak, and I remained sensitive to non-verbal signals of discomfort. I sought to avoid positioning myself as an expert or a teacher, and to hand over some of the agenda to the pupils (Mayall, 2008). In acknowledging that interviewing about a sensitive topic, such as bullying, may provoke stressful feelings (Barter & Renold, 1999), I asked pupils at the end of the interviews if they knew whom to turn to at their school, if they or someone else experienced bullying. I informed pupils about *Barnens rätt i samhället* (BRIS) a Swedish organisation operating an anonymous helpline for children and adolescents. I also emphasised the importance of not sharing with others what had been discussed in the interviews.

In the second study, I considered the negotiated aspects of consent (Hammersley, 2020; Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). Indeed, due to the flexible design of ethnographic fieldwork, it is not possible to fully know what the research will entail in early stages of ethnographic research (Hammersley, 2020). Thus, I was always keen to answer pupil's questions as best I could, including questions about what I wrote down in my notebook, or interested me at their school, in order to help pupils decide whether to grant or withdraw consent. With my way of acting towards the pupils at school, I positioned myself as a guest who sought to distance himself from the role of teacher or other adult at school. Put differently, it was ethically important to me that pupils know I did not come from outside their

school to tell them how to behave, or what was right or wrong, et cetera. Rather, I sought to give them the space to be as they usually were, as well as space to reach out to me if *they* wished. Hence, I also waited to ask concrete questions about their class and school until later stages of the fieldwork, when I knew the pupils better, and when they better knew who I was and why I was present.

In all research, researchers have an obligation to anticipate the possible benefits of the research in relation to its potential harm to participants (Hammersley, 2020; Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Bullying is a sensitive topic, and reflecting on bullying evoked feelings of sadness and discomfort in at least one case. Nonetheless, I perceived that the saddened and discomfited girl, like most of the pupils I met, seemed genuinely glad that someone wished to hear their specific reflections about school bullying and pupil life. The pupils often also seemed genuinely happy that their reflections might help adults understand bullying from the perspective of pupils, and might even help other pupils. I therefore consider the subject of this research a sensitive one, but find that the research and its implementation has been conducted in a way that protected individual pupils and teachers who participated, while (hopefully) in turn giving something back to pupils and teachers.

# Summary of Papers

## Paper I

**Coolness and social vulnerability: Swedish pupils' reflections on participant roles in school bullying.** Joakim Strindberg, Paul Horton, and Robert Thornberg (2020). *Research Papers in Education*, 35:5, 603–622.

The aim of this paper was to explore Swedish school pupils' perspectives on why some pupils engage in bullying, support bullying, or avoid standing up for those being bullied, despite a shared understanding that bullying is wrong. The findings are based on focus group interviews and two bullying vignettes portraying a group of six girls or boys assuming five different roles in a school bullying situation. A total of 74 pupils in years 5 and 6 (i.e., 11–12 years of age) from two public primary schools were asked for their perspectives about what the pictured pupils thought and felt, and how the situation could be understood. In discussing the portrayed situation, the participating pupils repeatedly stated that bullying was wrong and that it was never ok to tease, fight, spread negative rumours, or socially exclude a peer. Despite these assertions, the pupils stated that a variety of reasons could explain why pupils might initiate bullying, assist, laugh, and/or remain passive in bullying situations. In discussing the possible rationales for the various actions in bullying situations, the socially perceived importance of “coolness” and “social vulnerability” were raised as main concerns for pupils.

In explaining the “bully” role in the vignettes, most focus groups referred to the importance of perceived coolness. As they explained, bullying may allow pupils to increase their perceived coolness in the eyes of their peers, and hence their popularity or social status. Coolness was perceived as an important factor in inter-

peer power relations, related to social processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, pupils' engagement in bullying situations was suggested to provide a means for pupils to improve, maintain, or strengthen their social standing and thus secure continued inclusion within the peer group.

In highlighting the perceived social payoffs of taking an "assistant" role in bullying situations, the interviewed pupils suggested that pupils may think that those bullying are "cool", and believe they themselves will also be "cool" should they, for instance, join those bullying. Pupils may also provide positive reinforcement (like laughing at the bullying behaviour) to ensure inclusion in their current group. As the findings suggest, this may even be the case in situations where pupils consider bullying to be wrong. Indeed, as the findings underline, pupils' desires to be perceived as "cool" may overshadow their moral reservations pupils about the bullying of a classmate or peer.

In discussing the importance of being perceived as "cool", the pupils often returned to the perceived risk of "social vulnerability" (such as being perceived as the "weakest link" or positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy). In this sense, joining those bullying, or adopting an "outsider" role in bullying situations, were suggested as means for pupils to minimise the risk of being bullied or made "socially vulnerable."

The findings of this paper underline the ways in which pupils interpret and try to anticipate the consequences of their actions, including whether they can be positioned as "cool" and avoid being bullied by classmates and peers. Important conclusions of this paper are thus the importance of taking seriously pupils' engagement in bullying situations as the negative outcome of situational and relational interpretations, such as minimising social vulnerability. In bullying situations, the situational roles of "bully", "assistant", "reinforcer", and "outsider" might thus be understood as potential means for promoting, maintaining, or protecting one's own social position. Taken together, the findings of this paper contribute to school bullying research by illustrating the ways that pupils' involvement in bullying situations is influenced by their hierarchically organised social and relational school context.

## Paper II

**The fear of being singled out: Pupils' perspectives on victimisation and bystanding in bullying situations.** Joakim Strindberg, Paul Horton, and Robert Thornberg (2020). *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41:7, 942–957.

The aim of this paper was to better understand why pupils may opt to remain passive in bullying, despite understanding that bullying is wrong. The paper explored pupils' perspectives on the roles of “victim”, “passive bystander” and “outsider” in bullying situations. As in Paper I, the findings of this paper are based on focus group interviews conducted with 74 Swedish pupils (age 11–12), who were asked for their perspectives on a qualitative bullying vignette involving six girls or boys taking on five different roles in a school bullying situation. The findings were analysed using methods from constructivist grounded theory and through Goffman's theory of social stigmatisation. In explaining the “victim” role, the participating pupils described the bullied pupil as someone who possessed an undesired difference, who was identified as the “other” (i.e., inherently different and assigned a number of negative connotations) by her/his peers and/or classmates, and who was subsequently bullied.

While some of the interviewed pupils identified perceived “otherness” based on the size or physical weakness of the person being bullied, others suggested that bullied pupils could be identified as “other” based on their clothes and clothing style, or because of their individual character (such as, “those who are furthest down and who don't dare to talk back”). Several interviewees connected bullying specifically to the perceived behaviour of the person bullied, while others pointed to issues of friendship and group membership. Pupils' perceptions of difference were not connected to the inherent characteristics of the person bullied, but were rather locally and socially constructed in relation to broader social and societal norms regulating their perceptions of “difference” and “normality”. The findings of this paper underlined how pupils may be socially positioned as “different” or as the “other” very early during the formation of a class. Their social position as the “other”

may then not only be very difficult to escape, but may also negatively influence the ways in which they are perceived and treated. Once bullying becomes common enough in a school, class, or peer group, bullying behaviours might be de-dramatised and neutralised by pupils, becoming, in turn, something that pupils no longer much notice.

The findings also demonstrated that pupils might allow bullying to occur because of a perception that the situation has nothing to do with them. However, many of the interviewees also suggested that a main concern for pupils taking on a “bystander” or “outsider” role in bullying situations would be protecting themselves and their “social selves” from the situation of those bullied. Some of the interviewees suggested that the position of ‘victim’ is a difficult one to escape. Thus, even though pupils might think highly of the pupil being bullied, they might not dare to help or support and, thus, take on the role of “defender”. Taken together, the findings of this paper help explain not only why some pupils risk being bullied, but also why pupils might adopt a “passive bystander” or “outsider” role in bullying situations, and why pupils adopting these roles may refrain from intervening in defence of their classmates and peers, despite understanding that bullying is wrong.

## Paper III

**School bullying, schooling and social control: Pupils’ perspectives on the importance of friendships to school bullying.** Joakim Strindberg, and Paul Horton (under review).

The aim of this paper was to better understand how school bullying relates to friendship processes, and how friendship processes and school bullying are in turn influenced by the institutional constraints of the school setting. Unlike Papers I and II, which are based on interviews and vignettes, the findings of this paper are based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at one Swedish elementary school. Two to four days a week, and a total of 29 days, were spent at the school I call Birchwood School (16 days at the class here referred to as 6C, and 13 days at the class referred to as 6D). The findings were analysed through a sociological approach to

school bullying and with research discussing the institutional aspects of schooling and bullying. The findings demonstrated the importance to pupils of friendship, which they discussed in terms of the care and social support that friends provided. Social support and care were, in turn, discussed in essentially two different ways.

On the one hand, pupils explained that school could be very boring, stressful, and a generally negative experience. Friendships alleviated boredom, not least by providing someone to have fun and laugh with. As pointed out by the pupils, having a close friend in school was especially important because of the compulsory nature of schooling, which did not allow those without friends to go elsewhere in search of fun. Friends were also described as caring and supportive, in terms of pupils knowing in advance that someone would probably be waiting for them at the start of school and would probably accompany them during the day.

On the other hand, the findings also suggested that being a pupil entails an inherent risk of being bullied, and pointed to friendships as being of particular importance because of the social support and protection they provide. Thus, in addition to providing care and support, friendships were also understood as being protective against negative situations. The importance of friends was due to the degree of control they offered over how a school day might unfold, as well as help managing potential negative situations that might arise.

As demonstrated by the findings of this paper, pupils' possibilities for friendships are, however, contingent on their social status and how they are perceived by classmates and peers. As underlined by the interviewees, pupils tend to seek and favour friendships with popular classmates and peers. This, in turn, entails that those pupils perceived as popular or "cool" make more friends, while those perceived as unpopular establish fewer friendships, and thus risk being left out, without social protection or anyone who takes extra care. Put another way, popular pupils have more friends who "care about them", "who get involved", and who are willing to side with them in conflicts and help manage situations, while unpopular peers do not enjoy the same social support. Pupils may thus find it necessary to present themselves in particular ways, not only to increase their chances of inclusion and friendship, but also to

protect themselves against the risk of being bullied. As underlined by the findings, pupils' perceived need to present themselves in particular ways is important for understanding why pupils might initiate bullying, why they might get involved in bullying situations, and why they might choose to take on a "passive bystander" role.

Important conclusions of this paper are that pupils' behaviours in school, as well as in bullying situations, can be understood as self-serving (promoting and protective) strategies that have less to do with the negative character traits of pupils, than with attempts to obtain or maintain some degree of control in social situations, over which they otherwise have little control.

## Paper IV

**'I'm often alone': Social marginalisation, loneliness, and the social ecology of bullying in a Swedish elementary school.** Joakim Strindberg (under review).

The aim of this paper was to explore three pupils' experiences of social marginalisation, loneliness, and bullying. As in Paper III, the findings here are based on ethnographic fieldwork at one Swedish primary school. As in Paper III, two to four days a week, and a total of 29 days, were spent at the school I call Birchwood School (16 days in class 6C, and 13 days in 6D). The findings were analysed using methods from constructivist grounded theory and through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development, as well as critical bullying studies. In this paper, I consider not only the school context, but also the importance of broader societal gender and identity norms to bullying. Thus, bullying was understood as a phenomenon influenced by different layers, systems, or settings, all mutually intertwined in a social ecology, and all influencing the emergence and continuation of bullying interactions.

As demonstrated in this paper, pupils may experience a range of bullying interactions, both "direct" forms (such as being called a "wimp", a "nerd", or a "sissy", having their behaviour commented on, having pencils thrown at them, or having their bag thrown in the toilet), and "indirect" or "relational" forms (such as not being asked

to participate, being denied participation, or being treated as if they were invisible). Rather than the direct repeated incidents of verbal or physical aggression that teachers tend to associate with bullying, the findings point to the significance of relational forms of bullying, such as being asked infrequently to participate. Additionally, the findings of this paper highlight the importance of considering bullying interactions as the *lack* of certain behaviours, rather than the presence of others.

The findings demonstrate that bullying interactions are tied to social processes, status, and norms in the different layers, or “settings”, of the bullying ecology. Pupils draw from a range of differential points of reference, which they use to socially evaluate themselves, their classmates, and their peers. Depending on the school or class context, pupils might be socially devalued for not playing football, not wearing makeup, or not wearing the “right” clothes or shoes, all of which may be socially evaluated by other pupils as signs of low social status and “misfitting”. The findings of this paper highlight how pupils might be socially marginalised, excluded, or bullied because of being socially perceived as not living up to the desirable ideals considered “appropriate” in the particular setting.

As demonstrated by the findings, processes of social marginalisation and bullying may occur in the microsystem of one school, and particularly in relation to pupils from one class. These interactions may have been quite different in another class or school setting, somewhere more accepting of diverse modes of interaction, for example through activities other than football. In relation to the meso-system, the findings illustrate how ways of interacting (e.g., playing computer games) in the home setting might not be possible (or socially accepted) in the school setting, and may thus serve to negatively affect pupils’ popularity in the school setting. The importance of the meso-system, in turn, highlights the importance of the exo-system. As highlighted, schools are imbued with a range of possibilities for pupils to gain and establish social status and prestige, and these are influenced by decisions about playground design, resource allocation, and the prioritisation of some activities over others. In turn, this paper demonstrates how norms associated with being a “wimp”, a “nerd” or a “sissy”, and which connect

football playing with status and popularity, stem from “consistent patterns of differentiation” at the macro-system level (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 26).

Taken together, the findings illustrate how pupils perceived as socially different may be socially devalued, marginalised, and “thrown away” from the rest of the class. Pupils might thus not only find themselves severely restricted in their opportunities to engage with their classmates, and in their chances to get to a classmate, but may also be subject to rejection, social marginalisation, loneliness, and bullying.

# General Discussion

The overarching aim of this dissertation has been to explore and deepen the understanding of pupils' experiences of bullying and their reflections on why bullying may occur and be maintained in schools, despite pupils' understanding that bullying is wrong. In this chapter, I discuss the main findings and address some of the limitations of this research. I also discuss the practical implications of the findings and make some suggestions for further research. Lastly, I highlight the conclusions of the work included in this dissertation.

## The Importance of Coolness and Social Vulnerability

The importance of coolness and social vulnerability was emphasised both in the focus group interviews, and by pupils participating in the ethnographic fieldwork. For example, when pupils in the first study discussed why they think pupils might consider taking on a "bully" role in bullying situations, they raised the importance of coolness. The importance of coolness to bullying was also raised by the pupils, who discussed the actions of "assistants" and "reinforcers" (Paper I), and suggested that pupils may choose to take on these roles to be socially accepted and/or positioned as a "cool" high-status peer.

Although it is possible to think of the importance of coolness to bullying in terms of social dominance (such as to obtain socially valuable resources), or the attainment power, peer authority, or friends (Thornberg, 2010), the findings of this dissertation suggest an understanding of bullying as not primarily driven by the pursuit of social dominance per se. Rather, pupils' pursuit of coolness must be understood in relation to pupils' perceptions of social vulnerability. This is a way of thinking about coolness (and its

perceived importance for pupils) that has not received much attention previously. It also puts the perceived importance of coolness for pupils in a somewhat new light, where the primary motive underpinning bullying behaviours is not social dominance.

On the one hand, the findings of this dissertation suggest that peers considered “cool” may have greater influence over daily school life and a degree of control over others (Papers I and III), and that pupils might adopt various roles in bullying situations to enhance their possibilities for gaining friends and a higher social status in the peer group (see Paper I). On the other hand, the findings underline that coolness should be understood in relation to social vulnerability, as well as the social perceptions of classmates and peers. Indeed, thinking of coolness, or the lack thereof, as related to social vulnerability nuances the understanding of coolness, as well as that of pupils’ involvement in bullying situations. This more nuanced understanding contributes a more in-depth perspective of why coolness may underpin bullying and be considered important to pupils. To bully to appear “cool” may then be understood in terms of social expectations and pressure; to avoid being positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Thus, bullying, assisting, or reinforcing, in bullying situations, may be symptomatic of pupils’ attempts to manage the risk of social vulnerability, including the risk of being socially perceived as “uncool” and bullied themselves, rather than an attempt at social dominance. This is a significant contribution and points to the need for working with social norms to make classrooms safe places where pupils need not engage in social positioning, or fear being singled out.

The spectre of social vulnerability thus appears to be a key factor in understanding the importance of coolness to pupils and why pupils may engage in bullying. In discussing the importance of being perceived as “cool”, the pupils often returned to the related importance of not being perceived as the weakest link in the peer group, as this could increase the risk of being bullied (see Paper I). As the findings of this dissertation suggest (see Papers I and III), pupils may thus engage in bullying in the hope of reducing their chances of themselves being socially excluded and/or bullied. These findings suggest that bullying is not so much about social dominance

as it is a sort of self-serving strategy to promote, maintain, and/or protect one's social position among peers.

As underlined in Paper II, pupils may find it necessary to stand by in bullying situations, instead of engaging as a "defender", in order to manage their social vulnerability. Even when pupils may wish to help, or like or are friends with the bullied pupil, they may nonetheless feel unable to help because of the related risks of being socially stigmatised, excluded, or bullied. As the findings demonstrate, promoting, maintaining, and/or protecting one's social position is important to pupils, not least to reduce the risk of social vulnerability. Rather than a strategy of social dominance, bullying may be about maintaining one's social status, since being perceived as "uncool" may lead to a degree of social vulnerability, for example in terms of potential exclusion from the peer group (see Paper I).

Taken together, the findings on the importance of coolness and social vulnerability add to understandings of school bullying. Not only do the findings nuance and add to previous findings concerning pupils' motives for taking on a "bully" role or reinforcing acts, such as laughing in bullying situations, they also contribute to understandings of *why* pupils might opt to passively stand by in bullying situations. Pupils' engagement in bullying situations should be understood not only in relation to pupils' "longing for belonging" (that is, to be an accepted member of a group or community) (Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018), but also in relation to pupils' fear of being singled out. "Coolness" may be socially perceived as a means for pupils to assuage their "social exclusion anxiety" (i.e., their fear of being excluded from the peer group or community) (Søndergaard, 2012; Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018). As demonstrated in Papers I–III, this is also why pupils may desire and seek "coolness" even in those situations where pupils think bullying behaviour is wrong, and why the socially perceived importance of coolness may potentially overshadow any potential moral qualms about bullying. This way of thinking about coolness is an important contribution to school bullying research, not least because an understanding of coolness as related to a fear of social exclusion shifts the focus from individuals and towards the relational and institutional school context in which bullying takes place.

## Social Stigmatisation and The Fear of Being Singled Out

The findings of Paper II expand and deepen understanding of the importance of social vulnerability to bullying. More specifically, the findings of Paper II underline the importance of social vulnerability to bullying, not only by providing insights into how social stigmatisation processes may unfold in pupils' peer relationships, but also by providing important insights into the social consequences that stigmatisation processes might have for pupils in their daily school life. As illustrated in this dissertation, the perceived social difference and stigmatisation of pupils may become socially established in a peer group or school class relatively quickly after a new group or class is formed. In turn, social stigmatisation processes (as shown in Paper II) might position pupils as socially "discreditable" and "blameworthy" in the eyes of their peers. For the person concerned, such positioning might, in turn, place them in a negative situation that is not only difficult to escape, but which might also entail further bullying. Not only does this further highlight the significance of social vulnerability to bullying, but it also points to the importance that pupils may attach to "coolness" and social visibility in schools, which in turn helps to deepen understanding of the social processes underpinning the occurrence and perpetuation of school bullying.

In pointing to the importance of social stigmatisation to pupils, the findings of Paper II also add to research on why pupils may choose not to intervene in defence of a vulnerable or bullied peer. The importance of social stigmatisation to bullying illuminates what it may entail for pupils to act as "defenders" in bullying situations. Thus, the findings of Paper II also problematise calls for pupils to intervene in, or report bullying situations (e.g., Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Salmivalli, 2014). As suggested by the participating pupils in this dissertation, such calls fail to adequately account for the stigma processes involved, as well as for the social vulnerability associated with intervening and reporting. As shown in Paper II, a person who is victimised may not passively accept their isolated and stigmatised position. Nonetheless, it may be difficult to escape or change that position. Indeed, once positioned as the

“victim”, this position risks becoming socially established, and any attempts to escape or change the stigmatised position might risk further bullying. In turn, this might entail that the position and the socially vulnerable situation become even more rigid and difficult to escape. Then, rather than defending the stigmatised person, pupils may attempt to distance themselves from them, and thus attempt to fit in, rather than also risk being perceived as a “misfit” (Thornberg, 2018).

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation, and especially the findings of Paper II, demonstrate the ways pupils may opt to refrain from intervening in bullying situations, and underline that such actions should be interpreted as socially perceived means for pupils to deal with the social vulnerability that the defence of a discredited peer might otherwise entail. While these findings highlight the ways in which processes of coolness and social status intersect with social vulnerability in bullying situations, they also highlight that the various bystanding behaviours in bullying might not be so much about the traits of the pupils involved in those situations, but may rather involve pupils’ attempts to socially navigate their fear of social stigmatisation, social exclusion, and bullying in a school context that they cannot easily leave. This, in turn, raises the importance of the school context and schooling to bullying.

## School Bullying, Schooling, and Social Control

While coolness, social vulnerability, and social stigmatisation are important to bullying, it is also important to consider the institutional context of schooling in which these aspects occur and are experienced. As discussed in Paper III, schooling is compulsory and pupils are not permitted to leave the school setting. Pupils also spend a long time, or an undefined amount of time, in the school setting. Schools are confined spaces where pupils are unable or limited in their ability to choose with whom they spend time. Schools are competitive contexts wherein pupils compete not only scholastically but also socially. Schools are also spaces wherein pupils’ daily lives are largely controlled by others (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002). As underlined by the pupils in Paper III,

friends are particularly important in such a context, as they help to alleviate the boredom associated with being in school by providing the joy of having someone with whom to laugh. As suggested in Paper III, friends entail advance assurance that someone will be there to provide companionship during the school day, as well as support and protection against potential exposure to the possible negative actions of peers, such as teasing and bullying.

When combined with the perceived importance of friendships, the findings of Paper III further expand the understanding of the perceived importance of coolness to pupils by demonstrating that the possibilities for pupils to form friendships are contingent on their social status and how they are socially perceived by their classmates and peers. As suggested by the pupils participating in this study, pupils tend to seek and favour friendships with popular classmates and peers. In turn, those pupils who are perceived as popular or “cool” can make more friends, while those who perceived as unpopular are less able to establish friendships. As underlined in Paper III, pupils might therefore find it necessary to present themselves in particular ways to increase their chances of inclusion and friendship. However, pupils might also find it necessary to present themselves in certain ways to protect themselves against the risk of social “escalation” and bullying. Like the pupils participating in Paper I (in the first study), the participating pupils in Paper III (the second study) pointed to bullying as a means to socially appear “cool”. Like the pupils in Paper I, the pupils in paper III stated that pupils might want to appear “cool” to have friends, but also to protect themselves against the immanent risk of bullying. Like the pupils in the first study (Papers I and II), the pupils in the second study (Paper III) suggested that pupils might refrain from intervening in bullying situations to control the potential threat of bullying. The findings of Paper III add, however, to the findings of Papers I and II by raising further awareness of the importance of the institutional constraints of schooling for understanding pupils’ actions and rationales in bullying situations.

As demonstrated in Paper III, pupils socially relate to the institutional conditions of schooling. An important contribution to the findings of Papers I and II, as well as to school bullying research more broadly, is how the importance of coolness and social

vulnerability were discussed as socially intertwined with the institutional constraints of the school setting in which pupils find themselves. Put another way, the compulsory and compressed nature of schooling means that those in the difficult position (see for example Paper II) of being socially excluded, socially stigmatised, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy must remain in the same context and situation for “many, many years”. The compressed nature of the school setting also precludes escaping the judgmental perceptions of peers, with whom they share their schooled lives. Thus, helping a less popular or unpopular peer might cause a potential shift in the status hierarchy, leading to an escalation of the situation, and a loss of control. Paper III thus illustrates that pupils’ behaviours in bullying situations are based on contextual considerations and not simply underpinned by the individual characteristics of the pupils involved.

When combined with the findings of Papers I and II, the findings of Paper III point to bullying as a defensive, protective, and/or flexible practice of adaptation, by which pupils strive to protect, maintain, or strengthen their own social selves to gain some degree of control over their schooled life. Taken together, the findings of Papers I to III point to the importance of looking more closely at the intertwined and nested social ecology of school bullying.

## **Social Marginalisation, Loneliness, and the Social Ecology of School Bullying**

Similar to the findings of Papers I to III, the findings of Paper IV underline how school bullying is more complex than the individual pupils involved in those interactions. However, rather than confining the discussion of bullying in terms of perceived social difference, the ethnographic approach taken in this study makes visible the ways in which schools are imbued with a range of possibilities for pupils to either be afforded social status and prestige, or to find themselves socially devalued and rejected. Thus, the findings of Paper IV, even more than those of Papers I–III, demonstrate that bullying interactions are tied to social processes, status, and norms in the different layers, or “settings”, of a larger canvas or bullying ecology.

As underlined by the findings in Paper IV, pupils may not only experience a range of bullying interactions, such as being called a “wimp”, a “nerd”, or a “sissy”, having their behaviour commented on, having pencils thrown at them, having their bag thrown in the toilet, not being asked to participate, or being ignored, they might also find themselves forced to spend their time alone at the “borderlands” of the schoolyard (Newman, Woodcock, and Dunham 2006), thinking about their mistakes in life, and seemingly non-existent and invisible to their classmates and peers. As demonstrated, pupils’ social evaluations may entail strong expectations about playing football, especially for boys in certain classes or schools. An important conclusion of Paper IV is thus that playing football is not only something for pupils to do during breaks, but also an arena for pupils’ social negotiations of social order, status, or “self-classifications” (Swain, 2000). Indeed, pupils draw from a range of differential points of reference, which they then use to socially evaluate their peer landscape (i.e., themselves, their classmates, and their peers). This points to bullying as something that is underpinned by social processes and social interpretations.

As highlighted by the findings of Paper IV, performing as a footballer may also be a way of acting out how a boy “should be”. This is important to bullying, not least because football is a socially defining activity, regulating pupils’ perceptions of who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’. In turn, this might entail that pupils absent from the court, like Liam, Isabella, and Ava in this study, find themselves subordinated and conceptualised as the “other”. Pupils might then find their opportunities for engaging with and getting to know classmates severely restricted. In relation to the importance of friends and the compulsory aspect of schooling, as discussed in Paper III, these are important findings for teachers and other school personnel to consider, not least given the large number of pupils who state that they feel alone in school (Friends, 2020, 2021).

Taken together, an important conclusion of Paper IV is that the same ways of interacting that serve to negatively affect pupils’ school experiences in one school or class setting may, in another setting (class or school), lead to acceptance and being socially valued. Thus, pupils’ interactions and experiences of bullying may be quite different in another class or school setting where other ways

of interacting, other than football for example, are accepted. This highlights that playground design, resource allocation, and the prioritisation of some activities over others are important, and points to the importance of teachers and other school personnel to not only looking at the various processes of inclusion and exclusion (as discussed in Papers I–III), or even beyond “direct” forms of bullying, but also, even more importantly, considering the interdependent processes of the bullying ecology as a whole more thoroughly.

## Limitations

Here I discuss some of the limitations of this present research. I would also like to discuss why I, despite these limitations, chose to conduct this research using focus groups interviews, vignettes, and ethnographic fieldwork.

*First*, it should be noted that the findings of Papers I–IV draw on a relatively small sample of pupils from two primary schools in Sweden. This necessarily affects the possibility to draw conclusions beyond the pupils participating in this dissertation. Additionally, the relatively small sample of pupils also raises questions about to what extent the findings are useful and valid in contexts beyond the schools and pupils participating, and to what extent it is possible to draw conclusions about the importance of coolness and social vulnerability as underpinning social processes in bullying? Likewise, to what extent are friendships and social control significant to school bullying in a more general sense?

While any social phenomenon occurs in a specific setting with special conditions thereof (Hammersley et al., 2000), and while the work of this dissertation has not been designed with predictive generalisation as a primary goal (i.e., that X will always produce Y, given certain conditions), I nevertheless argue that the findings can still be valid beyond the participating schools and pupils, not least through context similarity and through the recognition of patterns; that is, an assumption of a degree of similarity between the sending and receiving context (see Larsson, 2009). Put another way, although generalisation through context similarity and the recognition of patterns does, in a sense, “presuppose that the context

determines the phenomenon or pattern”, as well as presupposing that, “a specific context will always hold the same qualities in a phenomenon or pattern” (Larsson, 2009, p. 33), and while I do not assert that all schools, classes, or groups of pupils have the same conditions or struggle with the same issues, nevertheless a number of shared patterns and context similarities in terms of pupils’ school experiences (namely compulsory attendance, competitiveness, limited opportunities to choose classmates, lack of pupil control, and group belonging) do seem to exist. Thus, despite the relatively small sample of pupils and schools participating in this dissertation, I nevertheless argue that the findings and analyses discussed are useful, relevant, and valid even in schools beyond those participating in this dissertation. Likewise, given the same line of argumentation, I also argue that pupils in settings other than those represented in this dissertation also find coolness and social vulnerability to be important social processes.

*Second*, one should consider that the use of interviews allows only exploration and analysis of descriptions and reflections of behaviours in bullying situations. Thus, it is not possible to know if the reflections discussed by the participating pupils correspond to pupils’ behaviours in actual bullying situations. Similarly, it is important to note that pupils responses to prompts to comment on behaviours depicted in a qualitative vignette do not necessarily reflect how pupils interpret and behave in actual bullying situations (Jenkins et al., 2010). It is also important to consider that the vignette used in the focus group interviews only showed one kind of bullying situation and lacked any more detailed description of the context within which the depicted actions took place.

On the one hand, I thus see the potential to use more and differently designed vignettes in future research, so as to further explore pupils’ reflections and experiences of bullying. On the other hand, I have not been looking to predict behaviours or events, but rather to elicit discussions about a sensitive topic in a less personal and threatening way than would be possible outside of focus group interviews discussing vignettes. Nor have I sought to reproduce an exact picture of pupils’ actions. Rather, the findings and analyses discussed should be understood as an interpretive portrait of pupils’ reflections on school bullying situations (Charmaz, 2014). Indeed,

my purpose has been to explore the experiences from the perspective of pupils, and to gain a deeper understanding of school bullying from their perspective. This can be described as an emic approach or “insider’s perspective”, which seeks to understand how individuals, groups, or a community create meaning around school bullying (Patton et al., 2017, p. 5). Indeed, such an emic approach provides pupils opportunities for “voicing their thoughts, feelings, and unique experiences and allowing researchers to clarify participants’ expressions of their lived experiences” (Patton et al., 2017, p. 9).

*Third*, it should also be underlined that findings from focus group interviews may be biased, not least as participants are often influenced by the group’s discussions of which they are a part (Parker & Tritter, 2006). While I did not control for possible peer influence<sup>5</sup>, I chose to interview pupils in friendship groups because of a particular interest in exploring their understandings of bullying as shared peer group perspectives, as “person-in-context” (Wilkinson, 1998b, p. 112), rather than individual perspectives. In contrast to individual interviews, focus group interviews allow for exploring the perspectives of pupils in their natural peer context, where peer influence and other group processes are natural and constant features. Indeed, “in focus groups, the research participants talk primarily to each other, rather than to the researcher, and they talk in a way which is more ‘naturalistic’” (Wilkinson, 1998a, p. 188).

In contrast to the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the use of a vignette allows for greater space to reflect over the potential motives and actions in bullying situations, without implicating oneself as the perpetrator of the acts. Vignettes are also a distant and non-judgmental way to give pupils the opportunity to reflect on a sensitive topic such as school bullying (Barter & Renold, 2000). As Barter and Renold (2000, p. 319) put it, “young people do not always feel confident in talking about themselves, particularly if asked direct questions about personal and sensitive subjects” (p. 319). Taken together, I considered the choice of focus group interviews and vignettes well suited, and I argue that allowing for

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that I did choose to analyse the focus group data at the group level rather than at the individual level, which also reduces the importance of the possible bias of individual pupils.

greater space to reflect over the potential motives and actions in bullying situations, without implicating oneself as a perpetrator, outweighs any potential limitations associated with the use of these methods. This possibility is, in turn, important for the ecological validity of a study, not least because ecological validity concerns “the extent to which responses to interview and survey questions reflect or represent the daily actions of a collectivity” (Cicourel, 1982, p. 16).

*Fourth*, it is important to acknowledge that ethnographic fieldwork does not provide an exact picture or representation of the studied context. Rather, ethnographic fieldwork is “inevitably selective” (Emerson et al., 2014, p. 353). The ethnographer “writes about certain things that seem ‘significant’, ignoring and hence ‘leaving out’ other matters that do not seem significant” (Emerson et al., 2014, p. 353). This means that some questions have been brought to the fore, while others remain on the periphery (Emerson et al., 2014). For example, fieldnotes are coloured by my pre-understandings, my research interests, purposes, and questions, which I brought with me into encounters with schools, teachers, and pupils.

In ethnographic fieldwork as well as interview situations, trust and confidence are important regarding whether someone is willing to share or not (Anderson, 2003). The places I observed and events that I participated in were dependent on the relations between me and the pupils, and it is reasonable to assume that I was admitted to certain contexts and situations, but not others. In a similar way, the interview data should be understood as co-constructed by me as a researcher in relationship with the groups of pupils interviewed. This obviously affects to some extent the outcomes of a study, and more specifically, this entails that the findings discussed should not be held as facts that mirror reality, but rather as the sum of active choices and prior knowledge, and as dependant on field relations.

*Fifth*, while my time at Birchwood School gave me the opportunity to approach and understand the how bullying processes may be expressed in everyday school life of pupils, as well as how institutional constraints at school may come into play in pupils’ everyday lives, it should be noted that the second study was interrupted at halfway by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is

obviously limiting, not least with regard to the possibility of providing a sense of “being there” and providing “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 321), often described as a central ambition of ethnographic fieldwork.

*Lastly*, one should consider that all research (qualitative as well as quantitative) involves choices; that is, some aspects are selected while others are blurred or abandoned (Emerson et al., 2011). Put differently, while the findings of the dissertation lack predictive generalisation, and although several limitations to the implementation of the dissertation may be discussed, the findings of this dissertation still provide additional knowledge about how to proceed to prevent school bullying. Additionally, the findings provide greater understanding of how and why bullying occurs and is maintained, despite pupils knowing that bullying is wrong. This is obviously important and useful, despite the limitations pointed out above.

## Practical Implications and Future Research

Although my work does not come with any truths or solid advice about bullying, my hope is that the findings and analyses nevertheless contribute a recognition and further understanding of the social processes that pupils report are significant to bullying. My hope is that the findings of this dissertation can, for example, inspire teachers and school personnel to ask questions about what norms exist in their classes and at their schools, questions that may help the pupils who experience bullying there on a daily basis. I will make several points about the practical implications of this dissertation, and what further research I consider relevant in light of its findings.

*First*, the findings discussed in this dissertation are important, not least because they underline the importance of social processes to bullying that lie beyond individuals and their traits. Rather than decontextualising bullying incidents, by for instance referring to the individual characteristics of “bullies” and “victims”, the findings of this dissertation suggest that bullying situations are connected to social processes of inclusion and exclusion, to pupils’ understandings of difference, to the institutional context of schooling, and to the social ecology of bullying in schools.

While school bullying is dominantly understood as aggressive behaviour linked to individuals, and as a phenomenon not very dependent on the context where it occurs (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Temko, 2019), the highlighting of social processes (such as coolness, social vulnerability, social stigmatisation, and difference), and the ecology of bullying as discussed in Paper IV, demonstrate the importance of focusing preventive anti-bullying work in schools more on aspects of the wider social and relational climate – in classes, peer groups, schools, and in society as well, and less on individual pupils involved in bullying situations.

*Second*, one important implication of this work is to reduce schooling's competitive and comparative aspects. As Jacobson (2010a, p. 50), for example, argues, "bullying activity is foundationally an attempt at self-construction, a social activity seeking to establish a preferred self-image with an other, a meaningful place to stand". As emphasised in this dissertation, schools are a unique arena. Thus, an important practical implication of this work is the importance of examining schooling's institutional setting, and working more with social processes than individual skill-based training of pupils.

*Third*, the findings of this dissertation underline the role of social norms to bullying, and how such norms might be understood as related to a particular context, such as a school. As highlighted in Papers II and IV, someone might be cut off, excluded, and bullied who is socially perceived as failing to meet desirable ideals considered "appropriate" in a certain setting. Another important implication is thus that principals, teachers, and school personnel acknowledge that even seemingly harmless activities, such as football, can contribute to the exclusion, marginalisation and bullying of pupils perceived as failing to be "appropriate" in a particular school or school class.

*Fourth*, although I recognise that the status bases of perceptions of "appropriate" or otherwise may vary between schools and/or settings, I consider it important for teachers and other school personnel to consider and discuss how different activities, such as football, may directly or indirectly contribute to the production and reproduction of social marginalisation, loneliness, and bullying at

their school. Indeed, as shown in Paper IV, the same ways of interacting that devalue and negatively affect pupils (and hence their school experiences) in one school or class setting, may be accepted and socially valued in another setting (class or school). Additionally, the findings of Paper IV also point to the importance of further acknowledging that “indirect” and “relational” forms of bullying are not limited to girls, but are experienced by boys as well.

In considering these suggested implications for practice, I think it would be valuable to further explore the thoughts of teachers and pupils regarding what a changed school environment might entail (i.e., what might such a context look like, how should it be constituted, and so forth). In relation to future research, I also think it would be valuable for future studies to explore teachers’ long-term opportunities for counteracting bullying. Put another way, what are practical opportunities and obstacles do teachers face in daily anti-bullying work in schools? And what happens to preventive bullying work when greater demands, unrelated to bullying, are also placed on schools? What does it mean for preventive bullying work when teachers and other school personnel (such as school safety teams) are required to document and follow up on individual incidents? What does it mean for the preventive bullying work that teachers’ other work faces increased demands for documentation? In relation to exploration of issues such as these, I believe further ethnographic research could be fruitful and well suited.

## Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to explore how pupils themselves explain and reason about why pupils may choose to bully, assist, or reinforce bullying, as well as why they may refrain from intervening in defence of a victimised peer. The work of this dissertation has been guided by the following questions:

1. How do pupils explain that bullying occurs and is maintained in school?
2. How do pupils explain the way that other pupils may assume or be assigned various participant roles in bullying? Which justifications, neutralisations, and explanations for bullying

- do pupils suggest in relation to the occurrence and maintenance of bullying?
3. Which social processes do pupils experience as important or as underpinning bullying? How, and in what ways, are these processes expressed in the everyday school life of pupils?
  4. What significance do the social and institutional constraints of the school setting have for the occurrence and maintenance of bullying? How might the social and institutional constraints of the school setting figure in pupils' everyday school life?

**The main conclusions of this dissertation are as follows:**

In terms of how pupils explain that bullying occurs and is maintained in school (*the first question* of this dissertation), pupils underline the importance of social perceptions, to why pupils take on and are assigned social roles. Pupils may thus take on different roles in bullying because of fear, or to be perceived as cool. When those bullying are considered “cool”, pupils might opt to take on various roles in bullying situations to also be considered “cool”.

In bullying situations, pupils might assume situational roles of “bully”, “assistant”, “reinforcer”, or “outsider” to promote, maintain, or protect their own social position. Bullying may provide a means to control the potential threat of bullying, and thus alleviate social exclusion anxiety. Pupils may provide positive reinforcement in bullying situations, e.g., by laughing at the bullying behaviour, as a means of ensuring their continued inclusion in their peer group. Joining those bullying, or adopting an “outsider” role in bullying, is suggested to minimise the risk of being bullied or becoming socially vulnerable. Pupils might refrain from intervening in defence of a bullied peer because of uncertainty about whether they will be supported by other pupils, and/or fear that they themselves will be bullied.

Regarding *the second question*, namely how pupils explain that pupils may take or be assigned various participant roles in bullying, and which justifications, neutralisations, and explanations for bullying pupils suggest in relation to the occurrence and maintenance of bullying, pupils point to bullying as a means of

socially policing peers. These include peers perceived to have crossed social boundaries, or who deviated too much from their peers. Once bullying becomes sufficiently common, the bullying risks being de-dramatised and neutralised, becoming something that pupils no longer reflect over.

However, pupils also emphasise the importance of social status and friendships processes, and how pupils tend to seek and favour friendships with popular classmates and peers. This, in turn, entails that those pupils who perceived as popular or “cool” can make more friends, while those perceived as unpopular are less able to establish friendships, and thus risk being left out and socially marginalised. This highlights the importance of friendship as an important process and reason for assuming different roles in bullying situations.

*The third question* explores which social processes pupils emphasise as important to or as underpinning bullying, and in what ways these processes are expressed in the everyday school life of pupils. An important conclusion is that pupils underline bullying situations as connected to social stigmatisation processes of inclusion and exclusion, which are in turn underpinned by understandings of difference. In such processes, bullying might even be interpreted as socially justified. Bullying is suggested as a relational phenomenon, tied to hopes of inclusion and the associated fear of exclusion and marginalisation. Such processes can be expressed by pupils socially distancing themselves from those classmates and peers perceived as different or unpopular. Social distancing may take the form of pupils being left out at school and during breaks.

*The fourth question* regards what significance the social and institutional constraints of the school setting have for the occurrence and maintenance of bullying, and how the social and institutional constraints of the school setting come into play in pupils’ everyday school life. An important conclusion is that the social and institutional constraints of the school setting are indeed important to bullying. As demonstrated in Papers III and IV, the social and institutional context of schools are important to bullying, not only in terms of pupils’ intertwining of friendship, popularity, and bullying, or the various aspects of schooling (such as the compulsory,

compressed, competitive, and controlled aspects), but also in terms of a more complex bullying ecology. Indeed, the social constraints of the school setting are important to consider because, as shown in Paper IV, interactions are tied to social processes, status, and norms in the different layers or settings. Thus, the same ways of interacting may serve to negatively affect pupils' school experiences in one school or class setting while, in another setting (class or school), they are accepted and socially valued. In turn, the institutional constraints of the school setting are important to bullying because they entail that pupils are free neither to leave the school setting nor choose whom they spend time with there. This feature of schooling also means that those left alone during breaks cannot go elsewhere to find companionship, and that pupils cannot escape the judgmental perceptions of peers. Rather, pupils must remain in that setting for "many, many years".

*An overall conclusion* of this dissertation is that the social processes that underpin pupils' social interactions and school experiences, such as "coolness", "social vulnerability", and fear of being singled out, are important for understanding bullying. Bullying interactions, as well as social marginalisation and loneliness, should be considered social and relational phenomena, which are related to pupils' social interpretations of "sameness" and "difference", to the social and institutional constraints of the school setting, and to a more complex school bullying ecology at different levels of pupils' daily school life.

# Appendix 1: Interview Guide

The following interview guide has been translated from Swedish.

## **Introduction**

*I greet the pupils and thank them for agreeing to be interviewed by me.*

I have been in your class for a while now, and as you already know, I am interested in what it is like to be a pupil at your school and in your class (6C/6D). You also know that I am particularly interested in *your* experiences as pupils at this school. I thus thought I wanted to ask you, *as pupils*—experts on what it is like to be a pupil in your class and school—some questions about how it is here at your school, about what a day at school can be like. I also have some questions about friendships, about why pupils can sometimes do things they think are wrong, and about what is important for you as pupils while being at school – is this alright with you?

*I inform about the possibility to end the interview if they wish, and I remind them of their right to choose what to tell me about. I remind them that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers, and inform them that I am recording the interview to better remember what they said, and ask if this is alright.*

## **School and class**

- Would you tell me about what it’s like to be a pupil at this school? (If you were to describe this school to a new classmate, how would you describe it?)
- Would you tell me about what it’s like to be a pupil in your class? (If you were to describe your class to a new classmate,

how would you describe this class?)

- Are there things at this school that you like? Are there things that can be difficult?
- Is there anything about your class that you especially like? Is there something that you find can be difficult as a pupil in your class?

### **A day at school/breaks**

- Would you like to tell me about what a day at school can be like?
- I wondered a bit about the breaks; do you like to have a break? Would you like to tell me about what you like to do during the breaks? Can breaks also be boring? (If so, why?)
- Do you always have someone to be with during the breaks?
- Are there also pupils who are alone during breaks? (If so, what might this be like?)

### **Friendships and loneliness**

- Do you think it is important to have friends at school? (Why?)
- Is it important to have a best friend/friends? (Why?)
- Would you like to tell me about what school would be like without friends, or best friends?
- Why do you think some pupils are sometimes alone or left out in school?

### **Concluding questions**

- Might there be situations at school where pupils do things that they know are wrong? (When might this be? Why do you think pupils do things they know are wrong? Would you tell me about it?)
- Why do you think pupils sometimes exclude others, or “freeze out” peers or classmates? Would you tell me about it?
- What is important to you while at school? (Is there something

you find particularly important? If so, why?)

- What do you think teachers can do to help pupils feel better or to enjoy school more?
- Is there something you think that I should have asked about or that I should know about?

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