

## Shared Beliefs and Behavioral Labels in Bullying among Middle Schoolers: Qualitative Analysis of Peer Group Dynamics

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**Abstract :** Groups are a powerful and significant part of human development. They serve as major emergent microsocial structures in children's and youth's ecological system. During middle and secondary school, peer groups become a particularly salient influence. While they promote a range of prosocial and positive emotional and behavioral attributes, they can also elicit negative or antisocial attributes, effectively "bringing out the worst" in some individuals. The grounded theory approach was employed to guide data collection and analysis, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the group processes and students' perspectives on complex intragroup relations. Students' perspectives on bullying cases were investigated by observing daily interactions among those involved and interviewing 47 students. The results complement theories of labeling in bullying by showing that all students self-label themselves and find it difficult to break patterns of behaviors related to bullying, such as supporting the bully or not defending the victim. In terms of the practical implications, the findings indicate that it could be beneficial to use non-punitive, restorative anti-bullying interventions that implement peer influence to transform bullying relations by removing behavioral labels.

**Keywords :** bullying, peer group, victimization, class reputation

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