

# If they only knew

Bullying victimization among children and youth  
in the Nordic countries

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*To my grandfather, Ingvar Bjereld (1928-2012), who always encouraged me to make new friends during my wonderful summer visits as a child, and always supported me in my education*

# Abstract

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Bullying is a social and public health problem recognized across the globe. The aim with this thesis is to describe and understand bullying victimization of children and youth in a social-ecological perspective with the focus on prevalence, mental health, social relations and disclosing bullying victimization.

This thesis includes four studies based on three different data sources: the parent-reported Nordic Study of Children's Health and Wellbeing (NordChild, Studies I-II), interviews with Swedish youth (Study III) and the child-reported Swedish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey (HBSC, Study IV). As well as descriptive statistics, the data from NordChild was analysed with logistic regression (Studies I, II) and the HBSC data was analysed in a multi-level logistic regression. The interview study was based on grounded theory, analysed by two-step coding.

The results of this thesis showed that parent-reported bullying victimization had decreased from 1996 (21.7 percent) to 2011 (19.2 percent) in the combined Nordic countries, but immigrant children were bullied more often than native children. Between 29.2–44.3 percent of the bullied children had mental health problems, varying between age and gender. A protective factor that gave higher odds of bullied children being mentally healthy was having several close friends. Not all parents knew whether their child was being bullied, and children with unclear status re-

garding whether they were being bullied had higher levels of mental health problems than non-victims. When bullied children disclosed victimization it was not simply a matter of telling or not telling, it was a circular process in transition between hidden and open victimization. Victims withheld disclosure of victimization for reasons associated with personal identity and/or reasons originating in distrust of adults. Bullied children, especially frequent victims, had higher odds of having poor relations with their parents and teachers than non-victims.

The social-ecological perspective is used to understand the interplay between individual factors and the social context where the bullying exists. The results from the four studies is understood at different system levels; in the interaction with and between peers, family and school, and in interplay with norms and attitudes about victimization and bullying in the broader society.

# List of Studies

**I:** Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Petzold Max (2015) *Differences in prevalence of bullying victimization between native and immigrant children in the Nordic countries: A parent-reported serial cross-sectional study*. Child: Care, Health and Development. 41(4):593-599 doi:10.1111/cch.12184

**II:** Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Gunnarsdóttir Hrafnhildur, Petzold Max (2015) *Mental health problems and social resource factors among bullied children in the Nordic countries. A population based cross-sectional study*. Child Psychiatry & Human Development. 46(2):281-288 doi: 10.1007/s10578-014-0468-0

**III:** Bjereld Ylva (2016) *The challenging process of disclosing bullying victimization: A grounded theory study from the victim's point of view*. Journal of Health Psychology. doi: 10.1177/1359105316644973

**IV:** Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Petzold Max (2017) *Do bullied children have poor relationships with their parents and teachers? A cross-sectional study of Swedish children*. Children and Youth Services Review. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.01.012

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*Ylva Bjereld*

Gothenburg, April 2016



# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Abbreviations, acronyms, concepts.....   | 1  |
| 1 Introduction.....  | 2  |
| 1.1 Problem and aim .....  | 3  |
| 1.2 The emergence of the studies in this thesis.....                             | 6  |
| 1.3 Overview of the thesis.....  | 6  |
| 2 Background.....  | 8  |
| 2.1 Why does bullying exist?.....  | 8  |
| 2.2 Definition of bullying.....  | 9  |
| 2.2.1 Children and parents' understanding of bullying.....                       | 10 |
| 2.3 Bullying victimization and social relations.....                             | 10 |
| 2.4. Disclosure of bullying.....   | 12 |
| 2.5 Prevention of bullying in schools.....                                       | 14 |
| 2.6 Prevalence of bullying.....  | 15 |
| 2.6.1 Prevalence of bullying in the Nordic countries.....                        | 16 |
| 2.7 Limitations in previous bullying research.....                               | 19 |
| 3 Theory.....  | 20 |
| 3.1 Social-ecological theory.....  | 20 |
| 3.2 The stigma of being bullied .....  | 22 |
| 3.3 Victimization - embarrassing and shameful.....                               | 22 |
| 3.4 Identity as a victim.....  | 23 |
| 3.5 Combining the ecological model with concept of stigma, shame, identity ..... | 24 |
| 4 Method.....  | 26 |
| 4.1 Asking about bullying.....   | 27 |
| 4.1.1 Measuring traditional victimization.....                                   | 29 |
| 4.1.2 Measuring cybervictimization.....  | 30 |
| 4.1.3 The measurements impact on the result.....                                 | 31 |
| 4.2 Participants and procedure.....  | 32 |
| 4.2.1 NordChild and HBSC .....   | 32 |
| 4.2.2 Mainly mothers as respondents in NordChild.....                            | 32 |
| 4.2.3 Representativeness, reliability and validity.....                          | 33 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 4.3 Recruitment of a hard-to-reach population .....                                | 34 |
| 4.4 Face to face, phone and email .....  | 35 |
| 4.5 Analysis.....  | 36 |
| 4.5.1 SDQ and risk of false positive cases .....                                   | 36 |
| 4.5.2 Grounded Theory .....  | 37 |
| 4.5.3 Single-level and multi-level analysis .....                                  | 38 |
| 4.6 Ethical considerations .....   | 38 |
| 4.6.1 Surveys.....   | 38 |
| 4.6.2 The interview study.....   | 39 |
| 4.6.3 Ethical approvals.....   | 40 |
| 4.7 Concluding comments.....   | 40 |
| 5 Summary of the studies .....   | 42 |
| 5.1 Study I.....   | 42 |
| 5.2 Study II.....  | 43 |
| 5.3 Study III .....  | 45 |
| 5.4 Study IV .....   | 46 |
| 6 Results and discussion .....   | 49 |
| 6.1 Microsystem.....   | 49 |
| 6.1.1 Prevalence of bullying victimization for native and immigrant children ..... | 49 |
| 6.1.2 Mental health.....   | 51 |
| 6.1.3 Mental health and social relations.....                                      | 52 |
| 6.1.4 Social relations to parents and teachers .....                               | 54 |
| 6.1.5 The identity as a victim.....  | 56 |
| 6.1.6 Disclosing victimization .....   | 57 |
| 6.2 Mesosystem.....  | 58 |
| 6.3 Exosystem .....  | 59 |
| 6.4 Macrosystem .....  | 60 |
| 6.4.1 Gender differences in protective factors for mental health.....              | 60 |
| 6.4.2 Prevalence of bullying victimization .....                                   | 61 |
| 6.4.3 Cross-cultural understanding on bullying .....                               | 62 |
| 6.4.4 Policies, norms and attitudes to immigration.....                            | 63 |
| 6.5 Concluding comments.....   | 65 |
| 7 Conclusions .....  | 67 |
| 7.1 Relevance and implications.....  | 68 |

|                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Sammanfattning på svenska..... | 71 |
| References .....               | 81 |

# Abbreviations, acronyms, concepts

**HBSC.** *Health Behaviour in School-age Children* is a self-reported cross-national survey that collects data every four years on 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds' health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours, including bullying.

**NordChild.** *The Nordic Study of Children's Health and Wellbeing* is a serial cross-sectional comparative study conducted in the Nordic countries on three occasions: in 1984, 1996 and 2011. The questionnaire was filled out by parents who answered questions about their child's health, including questions about bullying.

**SDQ.** The parent-reported version of the *Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire* was included in NordChild 2011. The SDQ is a brief measure of children's and adolescents' internalizing, externalizing and mental health problems.

**Bullying victimization.** The terms being bullied, victim and bullying victimization are approximate synonyms used regularly in the research literature, and also in the present thesis.

# 1 Introduction

It took a very long time before I told my mother what happened. So it was first a discussion about if I should go there [school], because I had a stomach ache and I had a headache and I had a sore throat and... each morning. And then I got there and I was with my friends, but it started right away with insults and, that's very hard to take when you are so young. And then during the breaks we had to be outside, and I was very, I was a bit of a tomboy and played happily with everyone and played soccer. But then it was like, I was not allowed to be in the team and so they were, yes they were mean to me kind of and, yes, froze me out and so on. Kicked balls at me, and threw me and pushed me into pools of mud, and took off my glasses and threw them to the ground and stamped on them.

In the quote above, one informant describes during an interview how bullying over several years was part of her everyday life. Although she was a victim over the years of all kinds of bullying: being hit, having her things destroyed, being socially excluded, having rumours spread about her, being threatened and cyberbullied, she tried to keep the victimization hidden from her parents. Unfortunately, such descriptions of bullying are not uncommon. Bullying is a social and public health problem recognized across the globe. Although talking to parents and teachers is an effective help-seeking strategy for the victim (Dowling & Carey 2013; Smith et al., 2008), several studies have found that bullied children and youth, similarly to the informant in the quote above, do not always disclose victimization to an adult (Black et al., 2010; Fekkes et al., 2005; Frisé et al., 2008; Mishna & Alaggia 2005; Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Disclosing victimization can be understood as a challenging process, involving strong emotions such as shame (deLara 2012) and powerlessness (Mishna & Alaggia 2005). While parents and teachers are important for preventing and ending bullying (Siyahhan et al., 2012), the relationship between victims and adults is complex, which can be illustrated by that victims sometimes withhold disclosure because they are concerned about adults' response (Mishna & Alaggia 2005; deLara 2012).

## 1.1 Problem and aim

The studies in this thesis have been carried out in the five Nordic countries Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), Iceland (IS), Norway (NO), and Sweden (SE). The Nordic Council of Ministers builds upon the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, stating that it will work to protect and promote the rights of children and young people. All children and young people in the Nordic Region are to have influence over their own lives:

...regardless of their gender, gender identity or expression, ethnic background, religion or other expression of faith, disability, sexual orientation, or age. All children and young people have the right to social and economic security, to good physical and mental health, to recreational and cultural opportunities, to an identity and language, and to opportunities to learn and develop (Nordic Council of Ministers 2016, p. 8-9).

Some of these rights are at risk of being violated when a child is bullied. Victimization has been associated with school absence (Cross et al., 2015), high levels of mental health (Arseneault et al., 2010; Beckman et al., 2012; Bjereld et al., 2015b; Cross et al., 2015; Takizawa et al., 2014), and psychosomatic problems (Beckman et al., 2012). Victimization is not only a problem at the time when bullying is carried out, it can have an impact on victims' lives a long time after exposure. Bullying victimization in childhood is a risk factor for poor social, health and economic outcomes at least as long as four decades after exposure (Takizawa et al., 2014). Due to the negative consequences that follow victimization, it is important for professionals in the field of social work to have knowledge of bullying. Victims might make contact with social workers during or after the victimization for help with the bullying or the negative consequences following victimization. Preventing bullying and helping current or former victims requires awareness, understanding and knowledge of the problem. For social workers and other practitioners in related fields, it is pertinent knowledge that psychosomatic and mental health problems might be a symptom of bullying victimization.

Bullying has often been treated as a problem between the perpetrator(s) and the victim (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015), overlooking that bullying concerns a wide range of systems, such as family, friends, school class and teachers, school and a broader social environment. In a social-ecological perspective, bullying is understood as the result of the complex interplay between individual and contextual fac-

tors (Thornberg 2015b). A social-ecological model allows the comprehensive picture of bullying to be studied, but also enabling the focus to be shifted to examine various levels of the child's ecology. The overall aim of this thesis is *to describe and understand bullying victimization of children and youth in a social-ecological perspective with the focus on prevalence, mental health, social relations and disclosing bullying victimization*. Specific aims for each study are stated in the study overview on the next page (Table 1).

**Table 1. Study overview**

| <b>Study</b> | <b>Aim</b>  | <b>Study population</b>  | <b>Data source</b>  |
|--------------|---|--|---|
| I            | Examine parent-reported bullying victimization among children in the Nordic countries at two points in time, 1996 and 2011, and to study differences in prevalence of bullying victimization between immigrant and native children                  | 7107 parents to children aged 7-13 from the Nordic countries   | NordChild, conducted in 1996 & 2011<br>Cross-sectional postal survey      |
| II           | Estimate internalising and externalising mental health problems in the groups of bullied-, unclear if bullied- and not bullied children aged 4-16 in the Nordic countries, and to identify resource factors to bullied children's mental health.    | 6214 parents to children aged 4 – 16 from the Nordic countries | NordChild, SDQ, conducted in 2011<br>Cross-sectional postal survey        |
| III          | Investigate the process of disclosing bullying victimization from the victim's point of view.   | 10 Swedish former or current victims, aged 15-23               | Interviews; face to face, voice to voice and online. Conducted in 2014-15 |
| IV           | Investigate bullied and not bullied children's perception of the quality of their relationship with teachers and parents and to examine if there were any differences in the perception associated with bullying frequency or type of victimization | 6971 Swedish school students aged 11, 13 and 15                | HBSC, conducted in 2013/14<br>Cross-sectional classroom survey            |



## 1.2 The emergence of the studies in this thesis

A starting point for the studies included in this thesis was to examine the prevalence of parent-reported bullying victimization of native and immigrant children in the Nordic countries, and to study if there had been any difference in prevalence since mid-1990s (Bjereld et al., 2015a). The focus was further to study associations between bullying victimization and mental health problems (Bjereld et al., 2015b). Measuring the prevalence of bullying victimization and mental health problems generates knowledge in how common these problems are, but the measurement itself will not help bullied children or provide professionals with better tools to strengthen victims' mental health. How some children manage to stay mentally healthy despite the victimization has rarely been explored in research. In an attempt to identify reasons as to why some children coped with victimization without mental health problems, potential resource factors for bullied children's mental health were explored (Bjereld et al., 2015b).

What became clear from the two first studies was that not all parents knew if their child was being bullied or not (Bjereld et al., 2015a; Bjereld et al., 2015b). As a result, the third study investigated the process of how bullying victimization was disclosed from the victim's point of view. Considerable distrust of adults was revealed in the study, where children feared that some adults would not take the bullying seriously, would not try to help, and if they did try, it would not help anyway (Bjereld 2016). The results from the first three studies regarding parents' unawareness and bullied children's distrust of adults led to the design for the last study in this thesis. In the final study, the question of whether bullied children had poorer relationships with their parents and teachers than non-victims was investigated (Bjereld et al., 2017).

## 1.3 Overview of the thesis

The following part of this thesis is set up as follows: In *Chapter 2*, bullying is described as a complex phenomenon. In order to provide an overview of bullying, the chapter starts with the question of why bullying exists, followed by a description of the definition and understanding of bullying. The chapter continues with a presentation of previous research on bullied children's social relations and the obstacles to disclosing victimization in these social relations. Furthermore, the context and prevalence of bullying victimization in an international and Nordic context is described. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks of limitations in previous

research. In *Chapter 3*, the social-ecological perspective is presented as the main theoretical framework, complemented by the concepts of stigma, shame and identity. In *Chapter 4*, the methods section, the means of measuring bullying are problematized in relation to the definition and understanding of the concept. Furthermore, methodological considerations regarding the different sources of data, the analyses and ethical aspects are elaborated. In *Chapter 5*, a brief summary of the four studies included in this thesis is given. Results and discussion are presented jointly in *Chapter 6*, following the structure of micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems in the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Finally, in *Chapter 7* conclusions and implications are presented.

## 2 Background

Research about bullying until the turn of the 21st century had been conducted in a homogenous research field. Individual psychology had been the dominant perspective, although a minor part of the research had been carried out in the field of education. The research was predominantly conducted through child-reported questionnaires (Eriksson et al., 2002). A problem with uniform research fields is that research questions within a single perspective only receive answers that are possible to give within that particular perspective (Frånberg & Wrethander 2011). If research instead is carried out in various scientific perspectives, it contributes to a richer understanding of bullying (Eriksson et al., 2002; Thornberg 2013). Over the last decade, theories from the social psychology and sociology have nuanced the bullying research field (Schott & Søndergaard 2014). In the field of cyberbullying, media studies, public health, law, and other social sciences have had a strong impact (Slonje et al., 2013). The use of different data collections has been more extensive during the last decade, including observations, focus groups and individual interviews. However, the major part of the research is still child-reported survey data, collected and analysed within the field of psychology and education (Schott & Søndergaard 2014). The research field of cyberbullying has used a greater combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Slonje et al., 2013).

### 2.1 Why does bullying exist?

Bullying is a problem recognized across the globe. Due to the harmful consequences for victims, a number of anti-bullying programmes have been developed, but none of them have been able to end bullying permanently. Although there are several explanations as to why bullying exists, most of them share the basic idea that bullying has a social function. One of the most common explanations is found in the perspective of individual psychology, where bullying is seen as an aggressive form of behaviour between individuals, that originates from the individuals' backgrounds and personal characteristics (Frånberg & Wrethander 2011). In contrast to the individual psychology perspective, bullying can be understood as social processes and dynamics. Bullying often appears to serve the function of a self-serving and socially inclusive ritual in which the bullies co-construct the 'normal us'. While maintaining a shared 'normality', the victim is (re)produced with negative labels such as different, odd or 'not like us' (Thornberg 2013). Bullying can some-

times serve a function for friendship and relationship building. One way to view the excluding nature of bullying is to understand the excluding process of someone as always related to the inclusion of someone else. Excluding processes are used to manifest togetherness in a relationship or in a peer group (Frånberg & Wrethander 2011). Bullying could also be understood as a result of social processes of negotiations within social hierarchies, as a way to establish and maintain social dominance or as social positioning (Thornberg 2015b).

## 2.2 Definition of bullying

Bullying is often described as a complex phenomenon. One of the factors that make bullying difficult to define is that bullying is not a single act, but a relational situation considered in time (Smorti et al., 2003). Although there is some agreement among researchers on the concept of bullying, there is no universally agreed definition of either traditional bullying (Tokunaga 2010) or cyberbullying (Li et al., 2012; Mishna et al., 2012). There is some consensus that traditional bullying includes the component of an *aggressive behaviour* that is *intentional* and characterized by *repetition* and *imbalance of power* (Olweus 2013; Smith & Brain 2000). Cyberbullying could be conceptualized as traditional bullying, communicated through the online mode (Ybarra et al. 2012). Bullying can be direct, such as physical bullying and nasty forms of teasing and abuse, it can also be indirect or relational, in the forms of social exclusion and spreading of rumours (Smith 2013). Traditional bullying and cyberbullying have more similarities than differences (Tokunaga 2010) but some characteristics differ. Cyberbullying is primarily indirect and difficult to escape from, since there is “no place to hide” (Smith 2012).

The component of repetition in the definition of bullying is used to distinguish single incidents from systematic bullying. However, drawing a clear line between single and repeated incidents is problematic. The issue of repetition is especially complicated in cyberbullying. Li et al., (2012) use the example of a nasty message written online to illuminate the complication of repetition. The message is only written once, but is then spread and shared by others, with potential to last forever. There is no clear answer to the question of whether such a message would be considered as a single or repeated act (Li et al., 2012). One common way of managing the repetition aspect in bullying is to ask about incidence within a specific period of time. Children who have been bullied once or twice in the last two months are described in some studies as occasional victims and children who have been bullied more of-

ten are considered to be frequent or chronic victims (Chester et al., 2015; Ilola & Sourander 2013; Molcho et al., 2009).

### 2.2.1 Children and parents' understanding of bullying

Researchers' definition of bullying is not always in agreement with how bullying is interpreted by others. The understanding of bullying is associated with factors such as age, cultural and pre-understanding. In a British study on children's and parents' perception of bullying, the results showed that adolescents and adults had a different understanding of bullying than younger children. Parents did not consider social or relational aggression to be bullying as often as children aged 4-8 and 14. Younger children were instead over-inclusive in their definition of bullying and included also negative actions without an imbalance of power. 14-years olds were the group who used the concept of bullying most similarly to the scientific definition (Smith & Monks 2008). Boys and girls define bullying mainly in similar terms (Frisén et al., 2008; Menesini et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2002). In a Swedish study, girls aged 13 included a description of indirect bullying and considered the victim's experience of the situation more often than 13-year old boys. Boys included an imbalance of power more often in their definition (Frisén et al., 2008).

As a consequence of the fact that cyberbullying is a more recent and constantly developing phenomenon, adult's and children's understanding of cyberbullying is not as well researched as that of traditional bullying. In a Canadian study, students in 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades defined cyberbullying as a form of bullying which they compared to traditional bullying. Cyber and traditional bullying were considered similar in forms of spreading rumours and making derogatory comments. One aspect, by some children described as especially distressing, was that cyberbullying differed because it could occur at home, where they expected to be safe (Mishna et al., 2009). A Swedish study showed that adolescents considered the cybervictims' experience of hurt and harm not only as consequences of bullying but also as a criterion for defining bullying (Hellström et al., 2015), similar to the way girls defined traditional bullying (Frisén et al., 2008).

## 2.3 Bullying victimization and social relations

Social relations are vital to mental health (Umberson & Karas Montez 2010). For children, relations with friends, parents and teachers are especially important be-

cause they have an impact on everyday life. Children who are bullied do not necessarily lack friends (Mishna 2012), but having more friends have been associated with less victimization for physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying, although not with cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2009). The way that children communicate with their friends has changed over the past decade. Social networking is the fastest growing online activity among youth (Livingstone et al., 2011). Online communication has negative aspects such as cyberbullying (Valkenburg & Peter 2011), but social media also fulfil an important function in allowing children and youth to build, maintain and develop friendships with peers (Boyd 2010). A Nordic study showed that children with several close friends, regardless of whether they were bullied or not, communicated with friends by phone or online more often than children with few close friends. Bullied children with few close friends used digital communication the least, and had not, like other peers, increased their use of digital communication from 2001 to 2010 (Bjereld et al., 2016).

Parent-child relations are different from the pure relationships of friends because of the radical imbalance of power involved (Giddens 1991). Relations within the family are important for both reducing bullying and limiting the negative impact of bullying on victims (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). For example, parental support (Wang et al., 2009), daily communication with parents on the issues of everyday life (Wang et al., 2012) and maternal responsiveness (Georgiou 2008), are all factors associated with low levels of victimization. But in the same way as parents can be a resource for their children, they can also have a negative impact on their child's mental health and increase the risk of bullying victimization. Children who have been maltreated by parents (Shields & Cicchetti 2001) or are dissatisfied with their parental care and love (Wang et al., 2012) have been found more likely to be victims of bullying. Victimization of boys has been associated with perceived maternal overprotectiveness (Finnegan et al., 1998; Georgiou 2008). For girls, victimization has been associated with perceived maternal rejection (Finnegan et al., 1998).

In a study of 12-14-year-old children's perception of mental health, the interviewed children thought it was important to be able to talk to an adult about negative feelings. Talking was described as an effective means of coping, but a parent was not always considered to be the right person to confide in. The informants were unsure of which other adult to turn to since they would only consider discussing their problems with someone they could trust (Armstrong et al., 2000). A school counsellor was suggested as an appropriate adult to speak to by youth in focus-groups inter-

views. The school counsellor was described as a person with the means to reduce emotional tension due to bullying, and enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem (Oliver & Candappa 2007). Other studies support the idea that talking about bullying victimization is beneficial for mental health. Children who never talked to their teachers or parents about being bullied had higher levels of hopelessness than children who did talk about it (Siyahhan et al., 2012). When parental support was low, support from teachers was associated with fewer symptoms of depression for bullied children (Conners-Burrow et al., 2009). With increased parent, teacher, and school support, bullied children experienced less internalizing distress (Davidson & Demaray 2007). A longitudinal study in a Swedish municipality showed that long-term victims in particular had poor relationships with teachers. The number of children who had trust in the teacher and felt that the teacher cared, decreased after the children became victims (Hellfeldt et al., 2014; Johansson & Flygare 2013). In a study of the transition from pre-school to first grade it was found that children who had functional problems in pre-school were at risk of developing poor relationships with teachers in the first grade. But then, when at-risk students were placed in classrooms offering strong emotional support, the student–teacher relationships did not deviate from the other peers’ relationships with the teacher. Schools and teachers have thus potential to moderate children’s risk of relational problems (Hamre & Pianta 2005).

It is clear that social relations are important for bullied children. Strong relations to friends, parents and teachers, according to the previous research, were associated with less victimization, or fewer problems following the victimization. Poor social relations, on the other hand, were associated with bullying victimization and more problems following victimization.

## 2.4. Disclosure of bullying

A common strategy to prevent bullying is encouraging children to tell an adult if they are being bullied (Black et al., 2010). Telling has a key function, both when it comes to ending bullying with help of adults, but also in helping the child to cope with the feelings that follow the victimization. Previous research suggests that when children are facing danger and trauma they need the opportunity and encouragement to tell their story. When listened to, the child can make peace with their unique experience. The ability to create a positive narrative from their encounter with danger and trauma makes it easier for children to live good later lives (Gar-

barino 2008). Despite this, a large proportion of bullied children do not tell an adult about the victimization (Waasdorp & Bradshaw 2015) and cyber victims have been less likely to tell than traditional victims (Smith et al., 2008; Waasdorp & Bradshaw 2015). Bullied children do not disclose victimization for different reasons, such as the ubiquitous nature of bullying, a sense of autonomy, self-reliance, shame (deLara 2012), a wish to stay friends with the bully (Mishna & Alaggia 2005; Newman et al., 2001), powerlessness (Mishna & Alaggia 2005) and concern over adult response (Mishna & Alaggia 2005; deLara 2012). Cybervictims, similarly to traditional victims, have felt concern over adult response. They also expressed a need to deal with the bullying themselves, feared that they could get into trouble with their parents (Juvonen & Gross 2008) and were afraid of parental restrictions on their internet access if they disclosed victimization (Arseneault et al., 2010; Juvonen & Gross 2008; Mishna et al., 2009).

There is an age aspect in telling. Children in general perceive that telling adults is easier and more helpful at younger ages (Hunter et al., 2004; Oliver & Candappa 2007). Several international studies from Europe and North America have found that parents and teachers in general rate the frequency of bullying incidents as lower than their children have actually experienced (Demaray et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2007; Livingstone 2011; Matsunaga 2009; Stockdale et al., 2002). Telling has been associated with more serious bullying experiences (Smith et al., 2001), and frequently bullied children have been more likely to tell their parents or teacher about bullying than children who were bullied less regularly (Fekkes et al., 2005; Hunter & Borg 2006). Disclosing victimization to an adult could be regarded as a bullied child's last resort (deLara 2008). Girls are usually more likely to tell someone about bullying (Craig et al., 2007; Li 2006), but one study showed that gender difference decreased and disappeared as the number of ways children were bullied increased (Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Together, the results from previous research could be interpreted as indicating that when the extent and seriousness of the bullying reaches a certain level, it takes out the gender difference. At that point, both girls and boys will either disclose victimization, or the bullying will become so obvious that it is detected by adults.

Although talking to teachers and parents has been described as an effective help-seeking strategy by children (Dowling & Carey 2013; Smith et al., 2008), teachers, school counsellors or another school staff member have been considered to be the hardest people to talk to about being bullied (Dowling & Carey 2013; Oliver & Candappa 2007). When teachers or parents find out about victimization, the majori-



ty of them make an effort to stop the bullying (Holt et al., 2007; Fekkes et al., 2005). Teachers or other school personnel are often perceived as the most likely adults to end bullying (Dowling & Carey 2013; Fekkes et al., 2005; Frisé et al., 2012). The conclusion could be drawn that while parents are perceived as easier to talk to than teachers, teachers are the ones with the best prospects of ending the bullying.

In most situations the victim's circumstances improve if adults know about the victimization and react (Black et al., 2010; Smith et al 2001). However, telling an adult about victimization is not guaranteed to make the situation better or end the bullying. Not all adults will be worried when they find out about their child's victimization (Sawyer et al., 2011), or make an effort to help the victim (Holt et al., 2007) and sometimes adults' efforts will lead to nothing or even worsen the situation (Fekkes et al., 2005).

## 2.5 Prevention of bullying in schools

Numerous prevention programmes and anti-bullying strategies have been developed world wide, and the prevalence of bullying has decreased in many places, but no programme seems to be able to end bullying permanently. The most effective method has so far been the "whole school approach", which means addressing bullying on multiple system levels (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). Whole school approach programmes are often focused on changing the school climate by implementing zero-tolerance for bullying, providing knowledge about bullying and related consequences and strengthening bystanders, those not directly involved in the bullying (Flygare & Johansson 2016).

The school, where most bullying is carried out, is the workplace for students, teachers and other occupational groups. All of them have to manage the problem of bullying. When these groups work together, bullying is not only treated within the dyad of perpetrator(s) and victim, but also includes other systems. Flygare & Johansson (2016) problematized that while whole school approach programmes mainly address bullying at micro- and mesosystem levels, they can be criticized for ignoring impacting factors at higher system levels. For example, the increase in coarse language in the media and on online social forums, as well as gender structures in society, is likely to have an impact on the school climate (Flygare & Johansson 2016).

## 2.6 Prevalence of bullying

Bullying has been documented and studied in countries around the world. The major part of bullying research has been carried out in North America, Europe and Australia (Jimerson & Huai 2010). Different surveys that measures the prevalence of bullying often end up with wide variance in their results. For example, one study measuring cybervictimization in Sweden reported a prevalence of 41 percent in 2009 (Friends 2009) while another study measured the prevalence as 11 percent a year later (Livingstone et al., 2011). The diverse results could be explained by the fact that surveys often use different definitions of bullying, have different criteria for what timespan should be included in the measurement (e.g. past month or past year) or have surveyed different time periods. As a result, comparing prevalence of bullying victimization between different surveys is complicated.

In this section, results from two larger cross-national studies will be presented: the *Global School-based Students Health Survey* (GSHS) and the *Health Behaviour in School-age Children* (HBSC) study. These studies have been chosen because they are comprehensive, cross national, and are carried out close in time to similar definitions of bullying, which facilitates comparison of prevalence between both countries and studies. The GSHS questionnaire measures the prevalence of occasional bullying victimization among 13-15-year-olds from five continents<sup>1</sup> (Due & Holstein 2008). The HBSC survey measures the prevalence of occasional and frequent bullying victimization among school children aged 11, 13 and 15. The HBSC study mainly covers countries in Europe and North America<sup>2</sup> (Inchley et al., 2016).

Due and Holstein (2008) used data from both GSHS and HBSC when they examined the prevalence of occasional bullying victimization in 66 countries. They found wide variation across countries. The highest prevalence for boys was found in Zimbabwe (70.2 percent) and for girls in Zambia (67.1 percent). In only three countries, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Tajikistan, did the prevalence of bullying victimization remain below 20 percent. The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) as well as all African countries involved in the study, except Tanzania,

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<sup>1</sup> Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America. For further reading on the GSHS study, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/GSHS/>

<sup>2</sup> More information regarding the HBSC questionnaire is placed in the Methods chapter.

had a very high prevalence of bullying. Other than the geographical patterns mentioned above, prevalence was unrelated to geographical area (Due & Holstein 2008).

Chester et al (2015) used the HBSC data for measuring trends in prevalence of bullying victimization from 2002-2010 in 33 countries. In 2010, the prevalence of occasional victimization in the participating countries was measured at 29.2 percent, and the rate of frequent victimization was 11.3 percent. Overall, both occasional and frequent victimization was declining in a third of the countries. However, there were wide variations. French Belgium deviated from the general pattern since it contradictorily measured a significantly increasing trend in frequent victimization. Canada, Finland, Flemish Belgium, Poland, Spain and Switzerland reported significant decreases in chronic victimization from 2001-06 but then demonstrated significant increases from 2005-10. The decrease in victimization from 2005-10 was greater among boys than girls (Chester et al., 2015). Another study, using HBSC data from 40 countries, showed that girls in the majority of countries were more likely to report higher levels of victimization than boys, independently of age (Craig et al., 2009).

While traditional bullying has been a recognized problem for half a century, the phenomenon of cyberbullying is newer and has thus received less research attention. The technology and online platforms are constantly developing, and access to technology devices and the internet is increasing day by day, which has consequences for how cyberbullying is acted out (Slonje et al., 2013). In a meta-analysis, including 80 studies, traditional bullying was found to be twice as common as cyber bullying but they were highly correlated (Modecki, et al., 2014). The survey Kids Online includes participants from most European countries aged 9-16. In 2010, 6 percent of the children stated that they had been bullied online and 3 percent that they had been bullied by mobile phone calls, texts or image/video during the past year (Livingstone et al., 2011).

### 2.6.1 Prevalence of bullying in the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries have developed a distinct type of welfare state where the social, political, and economic structures are similar (Obel et al., 2004; Esping-Andersen 2001). Nordic countries are the most income-equal in the developed world (Green et al., 2011). Within the field of child and family policy, the Nordic

countries have much in common and a long tradition of working together (Kekkonen et al., 2011). The municipalities are responsible for public pre-school and school, which are settings that nearly every Nordic child attends. In 1983, three adolescent boys in Norway committed suicide as a consequence of severe bullying by peers. The same year the first national campaign against bullying in school was initiated in Norway (Olweus & Limber 2010). Since then, all Nordic countries have developed strategies for preventing bullying (Frånberg 2003). Each Nordic country has implemented laws or regulations against bullying or harassment in school, where one key point is to make schools responsible for establishing and maintaining a plan for how bullying is managed.

Research on bullying has been systematically carried out since the 1970s in the Nordic countries. Finland, Norway and Sweden in particular were early in developing the research field of bullying. The research increased in the 1980s with special focus on school bullying (Frånberg & Wrethander 2011). The Nordic countries are sometimes treated as an entity in bullying research. An example of this is when the results of bullying research in some studies are presented for the Scandinavian countries (DK, NO and SE) or the five Nordic countries together, and not separately for each country at a time (e.g. Bjereld et al., 2015b; Helgeland & Lund 2017; Nordhagen et al., 2005). One reason for this is probably that the Nordic countries sometimes are described as an entity with similar living conditions, geographically located close to each other. Another reason is that there are similarities in the prevalence of bullying, which facilitates a joint Nordic presentation of the results and not one by one.

The prevalence of traditional bullying victimization in the Nordic countries from 1993-2010 is presented in Table 2. The table is composed of data from three different studies based on HBSC data. Iceland did not become an HBSC member until 2005-6 and thus lacks data from 1993-2002 (Bjereld et al., 2016).

**Table 2. Occasional and frequent bullying victimization in the Nordic countries during the period 1993-2010.**

| <b>Occasional victimization %</b> |             |        |        |        |         |              |        |        |        |         |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
|                                   | <i>Boys</i> |        |        |        |         | <i>Girls</i> |        |        |        |         |
|                                   | 1993-4      | 1997-8 | 2001-2 | 2005-6 | 2009-10 | 1993-4       | 1997-8 | 2001-2 | 2005-6 | 2009-10 |
| DK                                | 52.4        | 51.9   | 31.3   | 24.3   | 19.9    | 49.0         | 49.0   | 32.1   | 24.9   | 20.0    |
| IS                                | -           | -      | -      | -      | -       | -            | -      | -      | -      | -       |
| FI                                | 52.9        | 43.0   | 27.1   | 27.4   | 32.6    | 39.8         | 33.2   | 21.0   | 22.0   | 28.6    |
| NO                                | 36.0        | 32.2   | 35.0   | 29.5   | 27.6    | 27.5         | 22.9   | 29.7   | 23.1   | 25.3    |
| SE                                | 18.4        | 18.2   | 15.2   | 15.7   | 12.4    | 15.3         | 12.9   | 14.7   | 13.6   | 12.4    |
| <b>Frequent victimization %</b>   |             |        |        |        |         |              |        |        |        |         |
| DK                                | 25.7        | 26.6   | 11.4   | 8.3    | 6.6     | 23.4         | 24.6   | 11.1   | 7.8    | 6.1     |
| IS                                | -           | -      | -      | 6.3    | 7.1     | -            | -      | -      | 4.4    | 5.3     |
| FI                                | 18.8        | 13.1   | 10.4   | 9.1    | 11.5    | 12.5         | 9.6    | 8.0    | 6.9    | 10.2    |
| NO                                | 16.9        | 15.8   | 12.0   | 9.7    | 9.5     | 12.6         | 10.9   | 9.9    | 6.9    | 8.2     |
| SE                                | 6.8         | 6.4    | 5.4    | 4.6    | 3.9     | 6.0          | 5.2    | 4.1    | 3.5    | 4.0     |

1993-1998, data comes from Molcho et al., (2009). 2001-2010, data comes from Chester et al., (2015), except for Iceland 2005-2010, where data comes from Bjereld et al., 2016.

The prevalence of bullying behaviour decreased from 1993-2006 in the Nordic countries (Molcho et al., 2009). In 2009-10 the decreasing trend had declined or reversed in Iceland, Finland and Norway. Compared to most other countries, the prevalence of victimization has been low in the Nordic Region (Craig et al., 2009). Although there are similarities in prevalence of victimization, there are also some obvious differences. Denmark started out with highest prevalence of victimization in the two first waves, 1993-4 and 1997-8, and then reduced the prevalence more than any other country over the following years. Sweden, on the other hand, had a low prevalence of victimization from the beginning and has continued to reduce victimization. Norway and Finland show a similar pattern, especially with regard to frequent victimization, starting out with higher prevalence of victimization than Sweden, but lower than Denmark (except Finnish boys who reported victimization

at similar levels to Danish boys in 1993-4). Both Finland and Norway have reduced victimization during the years, but not at the same rate as Denmark.

Although the prevalence of traditional bullying victimization in the Nordic Countries is low in an international perspective, the same conclusion could not be drawn for cybervictimization. Results presented in the report from EU Kids Online showed that between 5 and 12 percent of the Nordic children had been bullied on the internet during the last year, which is to be compared with a mean of 6 percent in all participating countries (Livingstone et al., 2011). Finland, the Nordic country with the highest prevalence of traditional victimization (Chester et al., 2015), contradictorily had the lowest prevalence of cybervictimization (Livingstone et al., 2011). Describing the Nordic countries as an entity in bullying research is correct from the point of view that the prevalence of traditional bullying is low compared to other countries in general (Craig et al., 2009), and that there has been a declining trend (Molcho et al., 2009). But there are also wide differences between the countries that are at risk of disappearing in the description of the five Nordic countries as one entity.

## 2.7 Limitations in previous bullying research

Despite the large amount of research that has been carried out in the bullying field, the research has been unevenly focused. Some areas, especially at the individual level, have been well researched, such as factors associated with victimization and characteristics of those involved in bullying. Others areas are partly left unsearched. Most previous research, especially the one conducted has been based on child-reported questionnaires (Eriksson et al., 2002; Schott and Søndergaard), with the consequence that deeper knowledge that includes the victims' own perceptions, thoughts and feelings is scarce. Much more is known about families of children who bully others than families of children who are victimized (Espelage & Swearer 2010). Parents' understanding of bullying is not as well researched as children's, and when parents have been included in research the fathers have sometimes been excluded (Finnegan et al. 1998, Georgiou: 2008), which leaves several questions regarding the relationship with fathers unanswered. Most previous research has had a cross-sectional design, and it is not, for example, possible to establish if overprotective mothers have always been overprotective, or if it is a consequence of the bullying.

## 3 Theory

The social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979), combined with the concepts of stigma (Goffman 1968), shame (Scheff 1995) and identity (Tajfel & Turner 1986) is used to analyse and discuss the results from the four studies that this thesis is based on. The ecological framework constitutes a meeting point where individual characteristics of children can be understood in interaction with environmental contexts or systems that promote or prevent victimization (Thornberg 2015b).

### 3.1 Social-ecological theory

In social-ecological theory, bullying is understood as the result of the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors (Thornberg 2015b). The social-ecological theory rests on Bronfenbrenner's classic ecological framework (1979), where human development is seen as a product of interaction between the person and the environment. The ecological environment is described as a set of nested structures, each inside the next. The innermost layer is the individual and the factors that directly shape the person's development. Bronfenbrenner found inspiration for the model in Kurt Lewin's (1936) equation  $B = f(PE)$ , which states that behaviour (B) is a function (f) of the person (P) in their environment (E). The individual's environment is found in various systems named micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Later, Bronfenbrenner developed the model with respect to biological factors and included a chronosystem level for transitions over time (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

A *microsystem* is a setting where individuals can engage in direct interaction (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Children are surrounded by microsystems. In this thesis the focus is on bullied children's relations with the microsystems consisting of parents, friends, practising of sport and teachers. The most direct influences on bullying are within microsystems. As a consequence, questions considering the interaction within and between microsystems have received most attention in previous research (Hong & Espelage 2012). A *mesosystem* refers to the interactions among two or more microsystems in which the individual actively participates (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For children, this could be the relations *between* parents, friends, practising of sport and teachers. When a child enters a new setting (e.g., school), the child be-

come a link between family and school, and constitutes a mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). An informant in Study III described how his mother asked him if she should call school to report him sick in order to escape the bullies (Bjereld 2016). The mother's phone call to the school is an example of interaction within a mesosystem. Ecological transitions occur throughout the life span whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered. A transition is a change in role or setting, and consequently also a change in the expectations for behaviour associated with a specific position in society (Bronfenbrenner 1979). A transition of setting could be entry into school, while a transition of role could be from non-victim to victim.

An *exosystem* is one or more settings that do not involve the individual in direct interaction, but still affect, or are affected by, what happens in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). An exosystem for children could include the teacher's opportunities for professional training on bullying prevention and the activities of the school board. A *macrosystem* is the consistencies observed within a given culture, made up of lower-order micro-, meso-, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Examples of macrosystems are the societal and cultural norms, which in turn are associated with discrimination, and oppression in relation to factors such as age, appearance, ethnicity and gender (Thornberg 2015b). Bullying varies across cultures and contexts, where national differences in bullying can be illustrated by the seriousness of offence perceived by the wider community as well as the labels used to identify bullying (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015).

With the ecological perspective, a simple cause–effect relationship that works the same way for all people is seldom identified. Instead, cause and effect depend upon who the individual is and in what context the phenomena occur. Whether X causes Y depends upon factors such as gender, temperament, age, neighbourhood and culture (Garbarino 2008). The conclusion that bullying increases the odds of mental health problems was drawn in Study II (Bjereld et al., 2015b), but whether bullying will cause mental health problems for a specific victim depends on factors within the child's ecology. Most children can handle one risk factor, but few can manage a set of them. Standing against the risk are the developmental assets that predict resilient response to stress and challenge. Resilience refers to the ability to stand up to adverse experiences and avoid or overcome long-term negative effects and developmental threats (Garbarino 2008).



## 3.2 The stigma of being bullied

The sociologist Erving Goffman established the term stigma, which is used for an attribute that is deeply discrediting. Individuals possessing a stigma are seen as different from others in a way that is undesired and shameful (Goffman, 1968). Bullying victimization is sometimes described with negative labels such as insecurity, or as being associated with low self-esteem and few friends (Smith 1999). Bullied children could be called by dehumanising and oddness-related labels such as; moron, ugly, retarded, stupid, stinking and weird (Thornberg 2015a). Such negative labelling in bullying can be understood as stigma. One informant in Study III explained how he did not want to admit being bullied because:

It really felt like I did not want any kind of label or something like that. And it was also that behaviour. I tried to be with everyone, so that, I really did not want to get that label.

Sometimes children avoid the bullied child, afraid of being bullied themselves if they socialize with the victim (Thornberg et al., 2013; Thornberg 2015a). Goffman used the concept of ‘courtesy stigma’ to describe this tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to close connections. When a stigma is not immediately apparent or known beforehand, the stigmatized person has to decide how to handle the information about the stigma. That is, to tell or not to tell; to lie or not to lie; and in each case make these decisions depending on to whom and in what context (Goffman 1968). Physical bullying could leave visible marks, such as dirty clothes, bruises and destroyed property. No such marks are solely connected to bullying and they could, as some of the informants in Study III did, be explained as the consequence of accidents or rough play, and not as the result of bullying (Bjereld 2016). Why the bullying was hidden could be understood with respect to the culture and norms that prevail in a society which values normality. Goffman argued that because of the great benefits associated with being considered as normal, a person can make an effort to hide the stigma in an attempt to pass as normal (Goffman 1968).

## 3.3 Victimization - embarrassing and shameful

Although shame is a relevant emotion in bullying, theories about shame and related emotions are seldom used as an analytical tool in bullying research (Lindberg & Johansson 2008). In Goffman’s work on presentation of self, feelings and emotions

go largely unnamed, although embarrassment and avoidance of embarrassment is a central thread. In a sociological definition, shame is described as a large family of emotions that includes embarrassment, humiliation, shyness related to rejection and failure (Scheff 2000). Similarly to courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1968), shame can be socially transmitted (Scheff 1995). Shame is directly related to the state of social relationships. Pride cognates a social bond, and shame signals threat to the bond (Scheff 1997). Children with close friends feel pride, while it is shameful not to have any close friends. Victims of crimes can have a feeling of shame over being unable to prevent the offence (Katz 1999). Informants in Study III expressed feelings of shame and related emotions when they described how they initially denied being bullied, were afraid of being seen as a victim by others, how they felt ashamed about being a victim, and how the bullying they were victims of was too shameful to disclose (Bjereld 2016).

Shame is a basic emotion that becomes disruptive only when hidden or denied (Scheff 1997). Shame can bring an experience of inability to do the right thing (Katz 1999). Bullied children who feel ashamed might not tell an adult about the victimization. If the victimization remains hidden due to shame over a long period, the shame becomes continuous. Such shame can lead to paralysis or irrationality, which brings serious consequences (Scheff 1995). An obvious consequence in the case of bullying is that if the victimization is hidden, no adult will make an effort to interrupt the bullying.

### 3.4 Identity as a victim

In the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), the identity could be divided into *personal identity* and *social identity*. Individuals have as many identities as there are groups they belong to or personal relationships they have. The personal identity consists of personality attributes and close social relationships (Hogg et al 2004), such as a son/daughter, classmate, pupil or a friend. The social identity is the aspects of personal self-image that derive from the social categories to which individuals perceive themselves as belonging. Memberships of social groups are associated with positive or negative value. Positive identity is to a large extent based on favourable comparisons between groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). A valued social identity and belonging to a prestigious high-status group have a positive effect on self-esteem (Hogg et al 2004). A group belonging to victims of bullying can be stigmatic and for that reason carry a negative value. While bullies' social identity

can be positively strengthened in comparison with the victim, constructing “the normal us” (Thornberg 2013), the victims’ identity is negatively constructed as deviating. Identities are created, recognized, negotiated and lost in social interaction (Charon 2009). While the bullies create their identity as “the normal us” the victim’s identity as normal is lost in relation to the bullies and other peers who witnessed the bullying.

Although a bullied child is seen as a victim by the bullies and others who are aware of the victimization, the identity is not only a product of what other thinks. Who the individual thinks he or she is and wants to present to others also has a strong impact on identity (Charon 2009). A child who does not want to be seen as a victim can instead present him/herself as a non-victim. If a bullied child’s identity as a non-victim is confirmed by the others in the interaction, such as parents or friends, the child can hold onto the identity as a non-victim in the microsystems with these relations. If the identity, on the other hand, is not confirmed, the child will have trouble keeping up such identity. Only when an identity is confirmed by others does the identity become real to the individual holding it (Waksler 1991).

### 3.5 Combining the ecological model with concept of stigma, shame, identity

The ecological model originates from the field of psychology (Bronfenbrenner 1979), while the concepts of shame and stigma have roots in sociology (Goffman 1968; Scheff 1997). Identity, as used in this thesis, is a social-psychological interactionist concept (Turner and Oakes 1986). In short, the psychological perspective could be defined as the study of the person, and the sociological perspective could be described as the study of society. There are similarities between the psychological and sociological perspectives, since both have an interest in studying human behaviour (Charon 2009).

There are parts of the social-ecological model and the concepts of identity, shame and stigma that unite them. They all acknowledge that interactions between person and environment are characterized by reciprocity (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Charon 2009; Goffman 1968; Scheff 1997; Turner and Oakes 1986). In this thesis, they are used to understand the process of being bullied. Goffman (1968) described a socialization process when the stigmatized person first learns what is considered to be

normal and acquires the identity beliefs of the wider society and a general idea of what it would be like to possess a particular stigma (Goffman 1968). When children grow up, they learn and value the normality, which is not being bullied, while bullied children are described with negative labels. Non-bullied children develop a positive social identity in relation to bullied children, feeling pride for their social bond with peers. If a child then has an ecological transition and becomes a victim, the child learns what it is like to possess the stigma of being a victim. The social identity is then a negative comparison with non-bullied peers. The pride over the social bonds turns more or less into shame. If the victimization and the subsequent shame are acknowledged, there are prerequisites for the victim to manage the consequences of the stigma. If the shame remains unacknowledged, the child has to struggle with contradictory identities, the stigmatic identity as victim and the identity as normal. The identity as a victim is created in school among peers, sometimes, but not always, acknowledged by adults in school. When the victimization is hidden, the identity as a victim is unacknowledged at home in the family and negative emotions of shame are repressed in interaction with the parents.

## 4 Method

This thesis comprises four studies based on three different data sources: the Nordic Study of Children’s Health and Wellbeing (NordChild), interviews and HBSC (Table 3)<sup>3</sup>. Studies I and II are based on NordChild, a Nordic parent-reported serial cross-sectional survey containing questions focused on traditional bullying victimization. Study III is based on interviews with bullied youth in Sweden, conducted face to face, over the telephone and online. Finally, Study IV is based on Swedish HBSC data, a child-reported cross-sectional survey with questions focusing on both cyber and traditional bullying victimization.

**Table 3. Overview of study design, measures and analysis.**

| <b>Study</b> | <b>Design</b>                                   | <b>Measures</b>  | <b>Analysis</b>  |
|--------------|---|--|--|
| I            | Serial cross-sectional survey (NordChild)       | Bullying victimization<br>Birth country                            | Descriptive<br>Logistic regression                         |
| II           | Cross-sectional survey (NordChild)              | Bullying victimization<br>Recourse factors<br>SDQ                  | Descriptive<br>Logistic regression                         |
| III          | Interviews: face to face, telephone and online. | Interview guide theme:<br>Disclosing victimization                 | Grounded theory<br>Two-step coding                         |
| IV           | Cross-sectional survey (HBSC)                   | Bullying victimization<br>Cyber victimization<br>Quality relations | Descriptive<br>Multi-level multinomial logistic regression |

<sup>3</sup> For specific aims and study population, see Table 1 on page 5.

## 4.1 Asking about bullying

That bullying is a complex phenomenon is reflected in how bullying is measured in questionnaires. Although there is some consensus among researchers that bullying includes the components of *aggressive behaviour* that is *intentional* and characterized by *repetition* and *imbalance of power* (Olweus 2013; Smith & Brain 2000), there is variation in how questions of bullying are asked in surveys. A common approach is to attach questions about bullying with informative texts to clarify what is meant by bullying. Most questionnaires use one single item/variable (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The measured prevalence of bullying can vary depending on how the questions are worded (Hellström et al., 2013). Table 4 shows how respondents were asked about bullying in this thesis.

**Table 4. Overview of how informants were asked about bullying victimization.**

| <b>Study</b> | <b>Data</b> | <b>Informative text and following question</b>  |
|--------------|-------------|---|
| I & II       | NordChild   | <p>Sometimes several children get together in order to torment/bully another child (e.g. fight him or her, make fun of him or her). Does your child bully other children?</p> <p>Has your child been bullied?</p>   |
| III          | Interviews  | <p>Have you been bullied?</p>   |
| IV           | HBSC        | <p>We say a student is being bullied when another student, or a group of students, say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like or when he or she is deliberately left out of things. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight. It is also not bullying when a student is teased in a friendly and playful way.</p> <p>How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?</p> <p>How often have you been bullied in school the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Someone took embarrassing or inappropriate pictures of you and put them online against your will?</li><li>• Someone wrote nasty instant messages, posts, emails and text messages, or created a web page that humiliated you?</li></ul> |

Informants for the interviews were recruited with the question “Have you been bullied?” They were thus not given any definition of bullying and could instead freely talk about how they had been bullied in the interviews. Some of the interviewees described a collision between how they experienced being bullied, while adults explained the same bullying as accidents, or considered the bullying as normal behaviour. The complexity in the perception of what bullying is could be illustrated by how one of the informants initially described how she had been bullied:

Others probably would not say that I have been bullied and therefore I have not talked about it and if I ever done it, I have used the word "teased" instead which is milder.

#### 4.1.1 Measuring traditional victimization

The informative text on bullying in the child-reported HBSC survey was about three times as long as the description given in the parent-reported NordChild questionnaire. The longer description could be viewed as more complex, with the risk that some children might not read it thoroughly, or might not consider what was written. When a complex definition of bullying is given in a questionnaire, there is a risk of the respondents ignoring it and instead using their own definition and understanding of the meaning of the term (Smith & Brain 2000). In such a situation, it is not possible to distinguish what the respondents intended by their answers.

The NordChild questionnaire was originally developed in 1984. At that time a scientific definition of bullying had not yet been determined or was barely discussed. In the two following waves of NordChild the definition remained, in order to facilitate comparison to 1984. The informative text gave two examples of bullying, fighting someone or making fun of someone. While two of the characteristics of bullying behaviour were captured in the description; aggressive behaviour and imbalance of power, the repetition or intention was omitted. The informative text did thus not explicitly describe any form of social exclusion. If Nordic parents, similarly to British parents, do not always include social exclusion in their concept of bullying victimization (Smith & Monks 2008), there is a risk of children bullied through social exclusion being underreported in the NordChild questionnaire.



In the HBSC questionnaire, a shorter version of the definition from the Revised Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (see Olweus 2013) was used to describe bullying. The text served as an introduction to questions measuring both traditional and cyber victimization. Like the NordChild questionnaire, the description captured the aspects of bullying such as aggressive behaviour and imbalance of power, but did not fully capture the repetition or the intention. Although the text describes repetition and intention in the sentence

...teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like or when he or she is deliberately left out...

it is not clear if the repetition and intention is also valid for other aggressive behaviour than teasing.

Previous research has shown that 14-years olds use the concept of bullying in a similar way to the scientific definition (Smith & Monks 2008). The HBSC questionnaire was answered by children aged 11-15, and it is thus possible that they include both repetition and intention in their answers even though the informative text partly omitted that. Children who answered that they had been bullied once or twice in the past months were considered to be occasional victims, and children bullied more often were considered to be frequent victims (Bjereld et al., 2017). The criterion of repetition in bullying victimization implies that children exposed to nasty or unpleasant things only once are not to be considered as bullied. However, the response options did not make it possible to distinguish children that were exposed only once from children exposed two times the past months. The group of occasional victims thus includes a combination of bullied and non-bullied children.

#### 4.1.2 Measuring cybervictimization

The HBSC survey had no single universal question about cybervictimization such as “Have you been cyberbullied?” Instead, the survey included two questions asking about the specific forms of cyberbullying: mean messages, humiliating websites and posting of embarrassing pictures. The measurements included several aspects of cyberbullying, but did not capture all. For instance, starting and spreading rumours online is not directly captured by the items. Thus, there are reasons to be-

lieve that more children were victims than was captured with the item measuring cyberbullying.

Neither the NordChild nor the HBSC questionnaire specifically asked the respondents to exclude cybervictimization when they answered the general question if they had been bullied. This implies that respondents who included cyberbullying in their own conception of bullying might have taken that into consideration while answering. Questions designed solely to measure traditional bullying victimization are thus likely also to capture cybervictimization if the respondent includes cyberbullying in their perception of what bullying is.

#### 4.1.3 The measurements impact on the result

There are different ways of describing bullying. Providing the respondent with the most correct definition would lead to a very long text, with the risk of the respondents not reading it thoroughly. Providing a shorter definition, on the other hand carries a risk of the respondents underreporting victimization. In addition, all definitions are read and taken into consideration together with the respondents' pre-assumptions about the phenomenon. The perfect definition of victimization in questionnaires in general is missing. In this thesis, the overall aim was to describe and understand bullying victimization of children and youth in a social-ecological perspective with the focus on prevalence, mental health, social relations and disclosing bullying victimization. The intention was not to study in detail in what ways children and youth had been bullied, but rather to study what individuals who have experienced bullying victimization have in common and what divides them. In Study I, prevalence of bullying victimization was measured, which was dependent on how the question about bullying was asked in the survey. The parents' personal understanding of the concept, more or less combined and in agreement with the scientific definition and the description of bullying provided in the survey, results in the measured prevalence. The NordChild survey was serial, meaning that potential underreporting of victimization was likely to be similar in both 1996 and 2011, possibly affecting the reported prevalence of bullying victimization, but not the comparison between the years.

## 4.2 Participants and procedure

### 4.2.1 NordChild and HBSC

NordChild was carried out in the Nordic countries in 1984, 1996 and 2011. Study I is based on NordChild 1996 and 2011, and Study II is based on NordChild 2011. Official nationwide registries were used to compose a stratified randomized sample in each Nordic country, and approximately 3000 children from each country were included in each wave of the NordChild. The questionnaire was sent to parents of children aged 2–17, attached to the instruction that the person most familiar with the child's circumstances should respond, possibly together with the child. The data collection was mainly conducted using postal questionnaires with prepaid return envelopes supplied. In 2011, Denmark divided the parents into three groups who received either a paper questionnaire, a log-in code to a Web-based questionnaire with an incentive consisting of a chance to win a tablet computer (Web/tablet) or both a paper questionnaire and a log-in code to a Web-based questionnaire (Hohwü et al. 2013).

HBSC is a cross-national World Health Organization collaborative study, performed every four years. In Study IV, data from the Swedish HBSC collected in winter 2013/14 was used. School children aged 11, 13 and 15 were randomly sampled using a stratified cluster probability sampling scheme with school class as the sampling unit (Inchley et al., 2016). The paper questionnaire was administered during school hours in the classroom. Students who were present in class on the day of the surveys filled in the questionnaire anonymously.

### 4.2.2 Mainly mothers as respondents in NordChild

NordChild were sent out with the instruction that the primary caregiver should answer the questionnaire, resulting in the vast majority (84 percent) of the respondents in NordChild being mothers. One explanation for the higher responsive rates for mothers might be that it reflects Nordic society. Although female employment has been high for a long time (Lewis et al., 2008) and most children attend public day-care or school (Sommer 2005), mothers take the main responsibility for child-care (Craig & Mullan 2011). The unequal gender distribution of respondents could be especially problematic if fathers and mothers have a different conception of what bullying is. Unfortunately, no previous research on differences between fathers' and mothers' perception of bullying has been found. Better researched is the

definition of bullying by boys and girls (Frisén et al., 2008; Menesini et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2002), as well as male and female teachers, which shows a high level of gender agreement (Menesini et al., 2002). Based on these results there is no reason to believe that there should be any significant gender disagreement on the definition of bullying among parents when there is no or minor disagreement between children and teachers. Nonetheless, the lack of previous research on fathers' and mothers' perception of bullying prevents any definitive conclusion on the subject. The studies based on data from NordChild have not focused on parents per se, but on parents' perception of the child. In that sense, the most important thing for the reliability of the thesis is that the parent with best knowledge of the child's situation, the primary caregiver, answers the question and not that there is an equal gender distribution.

#### 4.2.3 Representativeness, reliability and validity

The overall response rate in the HBSC survey was 69.4 percent (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2014), slightly higher than the response rate of NordChild 1996 with 65.7 percent. The lowest overall response rate was measured in NordChild 2011 with 50.5 percent (Bjereld et al., 2015a). The problem with declining response rates in cross-sectional surveys is well documented. Low response rates have become common (Schoeni et al., 2013), but the question is whether it has an impact on representativeness.

The low response rate in NordChild 2011 was a concern especially in Study I, which aimed to measure prevalence, where the representativeness of the population is naturally important. Recent studies have demonstrated that there is no direct correlation between response rate and validity, but there is a potentially greater risk of low validity (Morton et al., 2012). Instead, response representativeness is more important than response rate (Cook et al., 2000). The non-response analysis of the NordChild 1996 showed that families with parents born outside the country, single parents and parents with low education were under-represented in the sample (Nordhagen et al., 2005). The non-response analysis of NordChild 2011 showed that single-parent families and parents with lower education were under-represented, but in contrast to 1996, families with parents born outside the country were not underrepresented (Gunnarsdottir et al., 2014). The representativeness could thus be argued to be better in NordChild 2011 than in 1996, despite the lower response rates. Associations were measured in all the quantitative studies (I, II, and IV). Low response rates need not necessarily lead to biased results, and associations

are less sensitive to non-response biases than prevalence estimations (Rindfuss et al., 2015; Van Loon et al., 2003).

Apart from non-responses and gender distribution among the respondents, there are other factors to take into consideration regarding representativeness, reliability and validity. First, the HBSC questionnaire was distributed within the school setting and there is thus a risk of selection bias since only children who attend school are respondents. Students who were absent from school on the day of data collection were not included. Victims usually have a higher rate of absence from school than non-victims (Cross et al., 2015), which means that victims could be underrepresented in the sample. Second, careless marking generally occurs in a small percentage of respondents, and may be influenced by the respondents' reading level, mood, and attitude. Third, there might be a social desirability effects, denying bullying (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay 2010). The prevalence of bullying victimization is often measured as twice as high when measured with several questions on specific aggressive behaviours compared to single-item questions. In that sense, it may be easier to admit being subjected to different types of peer aggression without having to label oneself (Hellström et al., 2013) or one's child as a victim of bullying. Victims, or parents of victims, may be hesitant to admit being bullied because they associate bully victimization with negative labels such as insecurity, low self-esteem and few friends (Smith 1999). Bullying victimization can be described as a stigma when it is associated with such negative labels. When bullying is stigmatizing, some respondents might not want to admit to themselves that they are exposed to bullying, and others might not have realized that what was happening was bullying. The stigma can spread from the stigmatized individual to close connections (Goffman, 1968). A victimized child can thus spread a stigma to the parents. The parents may not admit in such a case that the child is bullied, or explain it as something else, such as teasing. The child might also hide the victimization from the parents, in attempt to protect them from the stigma of having a bullied child. That would have an impact on the parental response rate in NordChild, where there is a risk of false negative responses.

### 4.3 Recruitment of a hard-to-reach population

In the interview study, the data collection was considered as one of the most challenging parts, since victims who had not always told an adult about victimization were assumed to be a hard-to-reach population. Information on the study was post-

ed at schools, in the adolescents' section of libraries, and at youth clinics, sport centres, labour market organizations for young adults, and colleges. The posters used in the recruitment provided brief information about the study and the link to a website for more detailed information. A link to the website was also posted on the author's Facebook page along with the comment "please share", and was thus spread and shared on Twitter and Facebook. Informants in the interview study were able to choose between participating by email/chat, by telephone or by meeting face to face. The choice of using three different types of data collection was justified by the reason that bullying might be a sensitive subject to talk about. Some of the informants, possibly for the first time, would talk in detail about experiences of victimization and there were reasons to believe that not all of them wanted to meet face to face.

During the recruitment period 16 people made contact to participate in the study. Three of them were not within the age span 15-24 and were thus not included in the study. Two individuals withdrew their participation without notice. One person was initially signed up for a face to face interview, but changed her mind since she thought it would be too difficult to talk about her victimization. Instead she wanted to participate over the phone, but in the end she cancelled the phone interview as well. A total of ten interviews were carried out. The sample included a wide range of informants, from those who had never told an adult about victimization to those who most often told an adult. One informant had seen information about the study several months before making contact to participate, which might illustrate how difficult it was for some informants to talk about victimization. Most of the informants were no longer being bullied, and some of them stated that they would not have been able to participate in an interview at the time when the victimization was ongoing. When the bullying was at its worst they were occupied in managing their day. Participants in the interviews were thus mainly represented by youth that had escaped the victimization.

#### 4.4 Face to face, phone and email

All informants were informed that they were free to choose time and location for the interview. Five informants participated by email, justifying their choice by this being the "easiest" way, the informant otherwise being "hard to reach", had been "difficult to meet" or had "fear of the telephone". Some of the informants who participated by email would probably not have volunteered for an interview if online

participation had not been an option. Previous research shows that the anonymity of the survey situation online makes such interviews suitable for studies on sensitive topics (Daneback 2006; Lee & Lee 2012; Mangan & Reips 2007; Sveningsson et al., 2003). The online conversation in an interview setting tends to become less spontaneous but more thoughtful than a verbal conversation. For many informants it requires more time and effort to write than to speak. This means that the informant may rationalize away what he or she perceives as less important (Sveningsson et al., 2003). The quality of the online interviews in Study III varied. A few informants initially wrote longer, more comprehensive emails but then responded very briefly to the follow-up questions. One interview started as an email interview and then continued over the phone a few days later. The other email interviews had more of a chat setting, where questions and answers were written and answered instantly.

## 4.5 Analysis

In Studies I and II, the NordChild data was presented with descriptive statistics and further analysed with multinomial logistic regression. In Study II, the parent-reported version of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used as a measure of their child's internalizing and externalizing mental health problems. Study III was based on the Charmaz version of Grounded Theory (GT), analysed with two-step coding. Finally, in Study IV the HBSC data was presented with descriptive statistics, and further analysed with a multi-level multinomial logistic regression. Methodological considerations regarding the analyses based on the SDQ, GT and single- or multilevel regressions are presented below.

### 4.5.1 SDQ and risk of false positive cases

In bullying research, one common tool to assess the mental health of children involved in bullying is to use the SDQ (Gini 2008; Lien et al., 2009; Pryce & Frederickson 2013; Skrzypiec et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2013; Woods & White 2005; Zwierzyńska et al., 2013). SDQ was included in NordChild 2011, on the grounds that it is a comprehensive measurement that has been translated and found valid for use in all the Nordic countries (Goodman 2001; Koskelainen et al., 2000; Malmberg et al., 2003; Niclasen et al., 2012). The SDQ contains 20 different items focused on hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer relations, inattention and conduct problems. In Study II, SDQ was used to assess children's mental health,

presented in total difficulties scores (TDS) and divided into two subscales: *internalizing problems* (emotional + peer symptoms, 10 items) and *externalizing problems* (conduct + hyperactivity symptoms, 10 items). One of the items regarding peer relations asked “Is the child teased or bullied by other children?” As a result, bullied children would automatically score higher than not bullied children on one of these 20 items. There was thus a risk of “false positive” screening for the TDS and internalizing problems, but not for externalizing problems. The cut-off point for mental health is usually set to the 80th, or the 90th percentile. The cut-off point in Study II was set at the higher 90 percentile, which is recommended if false positives are to be avoided (Goodman et al., 2004, He et al., 2013). Using the higher cut-off point will not eliminate the false positives, but reduce them.

#### 4.5.2 Grounded Theory

Study III was based on grounded theory methods, motivated by three main reasons. First, the focus of the study was the process of disclosing victimization, and grounded theory emphasis on studying processes (Charmaz 2008; Corbin & Strauss 2008; Glaser & Strauss 1967). Second, the study investigated the victim’s point of view, which is in line with how grounded theory takes interest in the meanings that peoples give to experience of events (Corbin & Strauss 2008) and the emphasis on how people create and view their worlds (Charmaz 2008). Third, the process of disclosing bullying victimization has been rather unexplored in previous research, and grounded theory is feasible when the purpose of the research is to explore a new topic. That is because grounded theory emphasises discovery and stresses the need to approach investigations without being restricted by the concepts and theories of previous research (Denscombe 2010).

Grounded theory was first presented by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Since then, grounded theory has been developed and further modified by both the original authors and other researchers. Study III was based on grounded theory in the way that Kathy Charmaz (2014) describes it. Charmaz’ version of grounded theory has a constructivist approach, acknowledging subjectivity and researchers’ involvement in the construction and interpretation of data. Characteristic of grounded theory is the use of theoretical sampling, which means sampling data to develop emerging categories and theory construction, not for population representation or description. The focus is on experiences and actions, not on the individual per se (Charmaz 2014). The participants in Study III were asked about several aspects of the process of disclosing victimization, in what circumstances they had told someone about be-



ing bullied, or when the victimization had remained hidden. Categories are considered as saturated when fresh data does not spark new theoretical insights or reveals new properties of the core theoretical categories (Charmaz 2014). In the analysis of the interviews, the categories that emerged reached saturation in the sense that no new theoretical insight was revealed in the analysis of the last interviews. Although interviews with new informants had led either to new theoretical insights or confirmed the saturation, the timeframe and the study design did not allow new interviews. In accordance with a constructive position of grounded theory, Study III contributes with an interpretive portrait of the process of disclosing victimization, not an exact picture of the phenomenon (see Charmaz 2014).

### 4.5.3 Single-level and multi-level analysis

The NordChild study used a one-stage stratified randomized sample, composed from official nationwide registries (Nordhagen et al., 2005). The standard sampling design on which statistical models are built is random sampling (Snijders & Bosker 2012), which the NordChild study used. The data from NordChild was thus analysed with single-level statistical models in the forms of descriptive statistic and logistic regression (Studies I, II). The HBSC study instead used a two-stage stratified cluster probability sampling scheme with school class as the sampling unit (Inchley et al., 2016). When individuals are clustered in higher-order social groupings, the people clustered in the groups will tend to be similar in various ways (Heck et al., 2012). Single-level statistical models are thus not valid if it is the dependency of observations within clusters that is of interest (Snijders & Bosker 2012). In the HBSC study school class could be a potentially confounder, since the school climate and the teacher might influence willingness to relate negative experiences. A multi-level analysis was thus used in the HBSC study to take into account the possibility that the clusters might differ in certain respects.

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

### 4.6.1 Surveys

A common approach in bullying research is the one used in the HBSC study, where questionnaires are handed out in classrooms for students to answer. There are some ethical aspects to consider in such studies. A questionnaire about experience of victimization could put victims in a position of unwanted attention. In a school class,

the other students are often well aware of who is bullied and who is not. Some students will probably automatically think about the victim(s) during the survey situation, and it is possible that the victim is aware that that is the case. The attention could potentially be a problem because victimization can be experienced as stigmatizing. Bullying victimization is a sensitive subject. Answering questions about bullying is not the same as responding to questions about how often you play soccer, have a headache or if you recycle. The HBSC survey included a wide range of questions regarding health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours. When questions about bullying are included in such a large questionnaire, the stigmatization in the situation for the victim may be less intense than if the questionnaire was solely designed to measure bullying.

#### 4.6.2 The interview study

The study was based on the principle of informed consent and followed the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines. There were two ethical aspects to take particular account of. The first was to consider the risk of victims participating in the belief or hope that it would lead to an improvement in their life situation. The other was that the interview potentially could arouse difficult emotions that the participant did not foresee when agreeing to participate in the study. In order potentially to address hopes that the interview would lead to any help, each participant received written information before agreeing to participate where it was stated that no practical help in managing bullying would be provided. Although no practical help was given, some informants stated that it had felt good to talk about the bullying. Similar patterns have been recognized among children using the online support of the Swedish voluntary organization Children's Rights in Society (BRIS). An evaluation showed that most children felt better after the contact, and many children wrote that it was the first time an adult had listened to them, which was described as important. Adolescents aged 16-18 in particular reported that this contact had helped (Andersson & Osvaldsson 2011), which is a similar age-group to the participants in Study III.

Prior to the interviews, the interview guide was discussed with a school counsellor. Two pilot interviews, one face to face and one by email, were carried out with adults who were former victims, to verify that the interview format was satisfactory. Each participant was informed prior to the interview that it was possible to terminate the interview at any time. The interview situation was structured in a way that the informant could control and influence the content, both regarding what to

talk or write about and to exclude things that were experienced as too difficult to disclose. After each interview the participants received information and details about how to make contact with youth clinics, school counsellors and BRIS.

### 4.6.3 Ethical approvals

For the interview study, the Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, Sweden was consulted and provided their opinion on the study. Ethical approval for NordChild was achieved according to prescribed guidelines in each Nordic country. The HBSC survey was carried out by the Swedish Public Health Agency, for which ethical consent is not needed. When researchers have nevertheless applied for ethical consent to use the data, different ethical review boards in Sweden have responded that the research was not subject to the law (Act 2003:460) dealing with ethical vetting of research involving humans.

## 4.7 Concluding comments

This thesis is a contribution to the bullying research field where each of the included studies can be compared and viewed in the light of the body of previous research. In Study I, a questionnaire was used to examine prevalence and characteristics of the victims, a design that is common in bullying research. More unusual was that the NordChild survey was parent-reported, which is far less common than child-reported data. Study II also included the group of parents who did not know if their child was bullied, which is rare in bullying research. The strength with NordChild was that the study was cross-national, used in all Nordic countries with a random stratified sample of the population of children. The questionnaires were sent out close in time in each country and facilitated cross-national comparisons between the Nordic countries and between 1996 and 2011.

In Study III, youth who had not always told adults about being bullied were interviewed. Previous research that includes victims' own perceptions of withheld disclosure is limited. The respondent could choose to be interviewed face to face, over the telephone or online. This is a rare study design, with the benefit that it allowed interviews with youth who would not have wanted to participate face to face. Finally, Study IV had a classic bullying research design since it was based on a child-reported survey. The strength with the HBSC survey, similarly to the NordChild survey, was the random sample. The cross-sectional design in HBSC and Nord-

Child was a limitation as it was not possible to establish causal relationships. The data was analysed for associations, but the direction of the associations could not be established. For example, in Study IV it was not possible to establish if the relationship between victims and their parents was poor as a consequence of the bullying or if the relationship was poor even before the bullying occurred.

# 5 Summary of the studies

## 5.1 Study I

### **Differences in prevalence of bullying victimization between native and immigrant children in the Nordic countries: a parent-reported serial cross-sectional study**

Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Petzold Max

The aim of this study was to examine parent-reported bullying victimization among children in the Nordic countries at two points in time, 1996 and 2011, and to study differences in prevalence of bullying victimization between immigrant and native children. This study was the first cross-comparative study that included all five Nordic countries to investigate differences in prevalence of bullying victimization between native and immigrant children.

#### **Method**

Data came from the two most recent waves of NordChild, which was a serial cross-sectional comparative study conducted in the Nordic countries in 1984, 1996 and 2011. A stratified randomized sample was composed from official nationwide registries of approximately 3000 children in each country and year, and a questionnaire was sent out to the parents of children aged 2–17 (Bjereld et al., 2015b; Nordhagen et al., 2005). The survey was mainly conducted through mailed paper questionnaires with pre-paid return envelopes. In 2011, Denmark divided the respondents into three groups who received either a paper questionnaire, a log-in code to a Web-based questionnaire or both the paper questionnaire and a log-in code to a Web-based questionnaire (Hohwü et al., 2013).

#### *Analysis*

7107 children aged 7–13 were included in the analysis. Children born within the country were coded to ‘native’ and children born outside the country were coded to ‘immigrant’. Frequencies for prevalence of bullying victimization among immi-

grant and native children were estimated for the five countries separately, and for the total Nordic countries. A multiple logistic regression model was created to estimate associations between bullying victimization and immigrant children, adjusting for the independent variables: living area, financial difficulties, gender and age.

## **Results and discussion**

The parent-reported bullying victimization in the combined Nordic countries had decreased from 1996 (21.7 percent) to 2011 (19.2 percent). Difference in prevalence of bullying victimization was found both between native and immigrant children, and between countries. The largest difference in prevalence between native and immigrant children was identified in Sweden in both measurements, where bullying victimization varied between approximately 9 percent among native children and 28 percent among immigrant children.

Immigrant children in both measurements had higher odds than native children of being bullied in Norway, Sweden and in the combined Nordic countries, even when adjusted for potentially confounding factors. The prevalence of bullying victimization differed between most countries for native children, but among immigrant children statistically significant differences were only identified in Iceland in 1996. The levels of bullying victimization among immigrants were thus similar in all Nordic countries, while the prevalence among native children differed between countries. Immigrant children in Sweden had four times higher odds of being bullied than Swedish native children, both in 1996 and in 2011.

## **5.2 Study II**

### **Mental health problems and social resource factors among bullied children in the Nordic countries: A population based cross-sectional study**

Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Gunnarsdóttir Hrafnhildur, Petzold Max

It is well known that bullied children are at higher risk of having mental health problems than non-bullied children (Arseneault et al., 2010; Beckman et al., 2012; Cross et al., 2015; Takizawa et al., 2014), but why some bullied children have mental health problems while others do not is a less explored question. This study

aimed to estimate internalizing and externalizing mental health problems in the groups of bullied, unclear if bullied and non-bullied children aged 4–16 in the Nordic countries, and to identify resource factors for bullied children’s mental health.

## **Method**

Data came from the NordChild survey 2011 (see summary of Study 1), including the parental version of SDQ that has been developed for children aged 4–16.

### *Analysis*

SDQ scale scores were calculated in three age groups; pre-school children aged 4–6, primary school children aged 7–12 and adolescents aged 13–16. Logistic regression was used to identify potential resource factors for children’s mental health. The dependent variable was child mental health, assessed from the SDQ scales of internalizing and externalizing problems. The independent variables consisted of ten potential resource factors as well as possibly confounding covariates<sup>4</sup>. Each independent variable was first analysed with binary logistic regression. Variables with statistical significant associations to mental health were later included in a multiple logistic regression model.

## **Results and discussion**

The result was based on a final sample of 6,214 children. Variations between countries were small, and the result was thus presented jointly for the Nordic countries. Mental health problems were most prevalent among children parent-reported as bullied, varying from 29.2–44.3 percent between age groups and genders. Among children with unclear status regarding if bullied, the prevalence varied between 13.0–25.6 percent, which was less prevalent than for bullied children, but more prevalent than for non-victims where 5.3–7.9 percent of the children were measured as having mental health problems. Bullied girls aged 7–16 had a higher prevalence of internalizing than externalizing problems, while in all other groups exter-

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<sup>4</sup> Eight potential resource factors were measured with the question: How often does the child do the following things? Read books, participate in association activities, play a musical instrument, practise sport, listen to music, watch TV/video/DVD, play TV games/computer games, surf/blog online, participate in joint parent-child activity or have more than 3 friends. Regularly carrying out such activities was considered as a recourse factor. Potential Confounding Covariates were financial stress (FS), living area, children’s birth country and long-term disability or illness (LTI).

nalizing problems were more prevalent. Of the ten potential resource factors analysed for associations to bullied children's mental health only one remained statistically significant for both boys and girls. Children with at least three close friends had higher odds of being mentally healthy than children with fewer close friends. For bullied boys, one further resource factor was identified: their odds of being mentally healthy were higher if they regularly practised sport.

### 5.3 Study III

#### **The challenging process of disclosing bullying victimization: A grounded theory study from the victim's point of view**

Bjereld Ylva

One problem in the preventive work against bullying is that many victims do not tell an adult about the bullying. The research on these hidden victims is limited, and the available knowledge about disclose victimization is thus restricted. This study aimed to investigate the process of disclosing bullying victimization from the victim's point of view.

#### **Method**

The study was designed to include not only individuals who most often told adults about being bullied, but also those who had never or almost never told anyone. Informants were able to choose between participating through email/chat, by telephone or by meeting face to face. The data collection resulted in a final sample of ten interviews with Swedish youth aged 15-23. The informants currently were being or had been bullied during specific periods in school or their entire time at school.

#### *Analysis*

The study was based on grounded theory methods described by Charmaz (2014), carried out and analysed in a constant movement and comparison between data collection and analysis. Initial and focused coding was used in the analysis. Parts of the interviews that concerned situations, thoughts and actions related to disclosing bullying were initially selected for further analysis. In the initial coding, codes were constructed line by line, with the focus on processes. In the focused coding, codes



identified in the initial coding were compared to each other and to memos. Clustering described by Charmaz (2014) was used to understand and organize the data. Finally, the identified categories were further interpreted with the concept of region (Goffman 1959) and identity (Charon 2009).

## **Result and discussion**

Disclosing victimization was identified as a circular process in transition between hidden and open victimization. Generally, victimization started as hidden since adults were not present when the bullying occurred. To make the victimization open, the victim actively had to tell an adult about the bullying. In short, there were two main routes to disclosing victimization. The first was when the victim told an adult almost immediately after a bullying incident. The second was when the victim followed the steps of *keeping control*, *keeping up a façade* and *cracks in the façade*. Victims who took the second path on their way to disclosing victimization did not initially tell anyone due to mistrust of adults or reasons associated with the personal identity. Victims could not control the bullying, but they could control who knew about the victimization. But the bullying did not disappear by itself, and the victim eventually started to show signs that something was wrong. At this point, it was not enough to be quiet in order to keep up the façade as not being bullied, the victim also had to come up with alternative explanations for worrying signs that adults observed (e.g. no friends, dirty clothes, bruises, sadness, stomach ache). As the bullying escalated, the worrying signs became more apparent and the façade as not being bullied started to crack. When this happened, some victims fought hard to not disclose bullying, while other gave up and told an adult about the victimization. Victims' strategies to disclose bullying could not only be understood as a matter of tell or not to tell. It was also a question of whether to *continue* disclosing victimization or not, an outcome closely associated with adults' reactions after finding out about the bullying. Negative experiences from disclosing bullying contributed to some victims feeling that their only option in order to manage the situation was to do it without adult involvement.

## **5.4 Study IV**

### **Do bullied children have poor relationships with their parents and teachers? A cross-sectional study of Swedish children**

Bjereld Ylva, Daneback Kristian, Petzold Max

Both parents and teachers play an important role in preventing and ending bullying (Siyahhan et al., 2012). The relation between victims and adults is thus important in order to manage bullying, but not unproblematic since a large proportion of parents do not know if their child is being bullied (Bjereld et al., 2015a; Bjereld et al., 2015b; Sawyer et al., 2011), and it is common for victims not to disclose bullying to adults (Waasdorp & Bradshaw 2015). The aim of this study was to investigate bullied and non-bullied children's perception of the quality of their relationship with teachers and parents, and to examine if there were any differences in the perception associated with bullying frequency or type of victimization.

## **Method**

The data came from the 2013/14 Swedish HBSC survey, which is part of a cross-national World Health Organization collaborative study, performed every four years. The questionnaires were distributed anonymously to students aged 11, 13 and 15. A stratified cluster probability sampling scheme was used, with school class as the sampling unit.

### *Analysis*

A multi-level multinomial logistic regression model was created to estimate odds ratios (ORs) for association between type of bullying victimization and quality of relationships with parents and teachers. The model simultaneously included exposure to five different outcomes of the dependent variable bullying victimization – occasional traditional victims, occasional cybervictims, frequent traditional victims, frequent cybervictims and non-victims, using non-victims as the reference category. Age and gender were included in the analysis as potential confounding factors

## **Results and discussion**

Of 6971 students included in the study, 17.8 percent reported being traditionally or cyberbullied, 853 (12.2 percent) were occasionally bullied and 386 (5.5 percent) were bullied frequently. The gender distribution was quite similar among traditional victims, but girls were cyberbullied significantly more often than boys. The result showed that bullied children had poorer relationships with their parents and teachers than non-victims. Whether the children were occasionally or frequently bullied, or if they were bullied at school or cyberbullied, they had higher odds of feeling that the family did not listen to what they had to say. They also had higher

odds of having low confidence in their teacher, that is, to experience that their teacher did not accept them as they were, did not care about them as a person and did not feel trust their teachers. Frequent victims also had higher odds of finding it difficult to talk to parents about things that bothered them. Frequent cyber victims had the highest AdjOR (2.09--3.37) of having poor quality relationships with teachers and parents.

## 6 Results and discussion

This chapter follows the structure of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), discussing the result at micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem level, sometimes intervening with each other. The intention is to use the ecological model to obtain an overview of the results and to understand how different aspects of bullying victimizations are connected and nested within various systems. Within the ecological model, the results are further discussed in relation to the concepts of stigma, shame and identity.

### 6.1 Microsystem

The innermost layer of the ecological model is the individual and the factors that directly shape the person's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Each child has a set of individual factors that can be risk of or protective against being bullied. Although bullying victimization was associated with sex, birth country and living area, the majority of Nordic children born abroad, living in a rural area will not be bullied, regardless of their sex (Bjereld et al., 2015a; Bjereld et al., 2015b). In the ecological perspective, cause and effect depends upon who the child is and in what context the bullying occurs (Garbarino 2008).

#### 6.1.1 Prevalence of bullying victimization for native and immigrant children

While the prevalence of parent-reported bullying victimization for native children had decreased from 1996 to 2011 in Denmark and the combined Nordic countries, no such pattern was identified for immigrant children. Instead, differences in prevalence of bullying victimization were measured between native and immigrant children in all the Nordic countries. The differences were found in both the 1996 and 2011 measurements, but were only statistically significant in Norway, Sweden and the combined Nordic Countries. There is thus not a uniform pattern recognized in all Nordic countries. The unambiguous results are a reflection of the research field, which is characterized by inconclusive findings (e.g. Fandrem et al., 2009; McKenney et al., 2006; Strohmeier et al., 2011). The result will be discussed below in relation to the social function of bullying.

One way to understand the social function of bullying is to view it as a self-serving and socially inclusive ritual in which the bullies co-construct the ‘normal us’. A shared ‘normality’ is maintained, while the victim is (re)produced as different, odd or ‘not like us’ (Thornberg 2013). Previous research has identified children perceived as being different from their peers as being at higher risk of being bullied (Sweeting & West 2001). Most immigrant children differ in appearance or language from the majority, native children. The NordChild survey had no question to establish who the perpetrator(s) was, or if the child had been bullied due to birth country. Although deviation from the norm is one possible explanation as to why children born outside the country were more likely to be parent-reported as bullied, it does not explain variation between countries. Sweden had not only the highest proportion of the population born outside the country in 2011 (Munch Haagersen 2012), but also the highest odds of immigrant children being bullied (Bjereld et al., 2015a). If deviation was the only explanation for victimization, the odds for immigrant children being bullied should logically be highest in the country with the lowest proportion of the population born abroad, since immigrants in that country would deviate most.

However, the hypothesis of deviation should not be dismissed completely. The result did not show where the victims lived, that is, whether the immigrant children lived in an area where they were in the majority or the minority in the neighbourhood. Although the analysis was controlled for the variable living area, the item only measured the number of inhabitants where the child lived, not whether the area had high proportions of native or immigrant children (Bjereld et al., 2015a). Sweden in 2014 was ranked as the number one country in integrating migrants, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index, a tool which measures policies for integrating migrants in 38 countries. The same index ranked Finland and Norway in joint-fourth position. Denmark was ranked at number 13 and Iceland at number 23 (Migrant Integration Policy Index). During the period 1986-2010, Sweden had the strategy of placing newly arrived migrants across the country, in an attempt to avoid concentrations in the larger cities (Johansson Heinö 2012). Although Sweden had a larger proportion of the population born abroad than the other Nordic countries, the integration policy might have placed immigrants most often in neighbourhoods where the majority of the population were native. By that logic, immigrant children in Sweden deviated to a similar extent as immigrant children in the other Nordic countries.

The social function of bullying varies with context. Forsberg and Thornberg (2016) described, in what they called the *new member ordering*, how a newcomer in the school class forced other classmates to position themselves in relation to the new classmate. Newcomers were often described as violating normative moral orders, potentially challenging and disrupting the established social order (Forsberg and Thornberg 2016). According to the new member ordering, negotiating within social hierarchies and social positioning might be more common in schools characterized by change and disorganization than in schools where most structures are established. Although immigrant children live in all parts of Sweden, housing segregation exists, with an effect on the composition of students in school. There are major differences in student composition in terms of socio-economic factors and Swedish or foreign origin between schools in Swedish municipalities (Skolinspektionens rapport 2014:1). Schools in segregated areas often have high levels of drop-outs and new students, compared to schools in less segregated areas (Bunar 2010). The new member ordering will thus occur more often in schools located in segregated areas, which in turn could lead to higher prevalence of bullying.

This reasoning has suggested deviation from the norm and the new member ordering as potential explanations for the higher prevalence of victimization among immigrant children. However, the question of why immigrant children in Sweden had the highest odds of being bullied remains unexplained. The difference in prevalence will be further deliberated in the section on macrosystems with the focus on attitudes to immigration.

### 6.1.2 Mental health

Between 29.2-44.3 percent of the bullied children in Study II had mental health problems. Externalizing problems were more prevalent than internalizing problems among bullied boys aged 4-16 and girls aged 4-6. For bullied girls aged 7-16, internalizing problems were more common (Bjereld et al., 2015b). Whether the difference between the sexes is due to girls and boys being victims of different types of bullying, or if they react differently to victimization, was outside the ambition of the study. Nevertheless, the different outcomes of externalising and internalising problems are of interest when victims are to be acknowledged and helped to cope with the emotions that follow victimization.

Although there is a strong association between bullying victimization and mental health problems (Arseneault et al., 2010; Beckman et al., 2012; Bjereld et al., 2015b; Cross et al., 2015; Takizawa et al., 2014), not all bullied children have poor mental health. Defence against the risk of mental health problems is the child's assets that predict resilient response to stress and challenge (Garbarino 2008). In Study II, several potential protective factors for bullied children's mental health were investigated (Bjereld et al., 2015b).

Regularly practising sport was not found to be a resource factor for bullied girls (Bjereld et al., 2015b), despite previous studies having found that children's and adolescents' sport activities have psychological and social health benefits (Eime et al., 2013). One explanation for practising sport being a protective factor for boys but not for girls might be found in the type of sport they practise. There are differences in which sports are beneficial for mental health. Team sports in particular have been associated with improved health outcomes (Eime et al., 2013), whereas other sports are associated with higher risk of negative health outcomes in form of poor body esteem (Frisén et al., 2014; Lunde 2014; Thompson & Sherman 2010). Bullying in sport practice is not as well researched as bullying in schools, but there is nothing to indicate that the prevalence is higher in practising of sport than in schools (Evans et al., 2016). The NordChild questionnaire did not include any question about what kind of sport the children participated in, and it was thus not possible to examine if there were variations in sport participation between boys and girls. Nor was it possible to establish if any bullying was present, or if the victim had any friends when practising sport. To better understand the association between bullying victimization – mental health – sport practice - sex, future studies should include variables to study type of sport, as well as the occurrence of friendship and victimization in the practising of sport. Although practising sport is a microsystem that children have direct interaction with, the explanation as to why it was a recourse factor only for boys may be found in societal culture and norms, and will thus be further discussed in the section on macrosystems.

### 6.1.3 Mental health and social relations

Social relations are vital for mental health (Umberson & Karas Montez 2010). Although close friends were identified as a protective factor in bullied children's mental health (Bjereld et al 2015b) bullied children often have fewer friends than non-bullied children (Arseneault et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2004). This might be explained by courtesy stigma (Goffman 1968) that occurs if the negative labels that

are associated with victimization are transmitted to the victim's friends. This might lead to friends feeling ashamed for their bullied friend. If the courtesy stigma has the effect that bullied children's friends avoid them and end the friendship, the bullied child's situation becomes even more stigmatizing.

Having few friends signals a threat to the social bond and could be stigmatizing and shameful (Scheff 1997). Social bonds are available for social comparison online, where having many friends could be a symbol of popularity (Utz & Jankowski 2012). Social networking sites (SNSs) provide the user with excessive opportunities for social comparison and make it easy to compare each other's number of friends, number of likes and number of followers (Stapleton et al., 2017). Children who do not want to disclose information about friends and cyberbullying to everyone can either use available privacy settings, or have to leave the social network. Victimization online can otherwise be visible to other microsystems, such as family or friends outside school, in a way that traditional victimization is not.

Apart from the protective factors of sport practice and number of close friends, eight other potential resource factors for bullied children's mental health were investigated, but had no statistical significant association<sup>5</sup>. Previous research on protective factors for bullied children's mental health is limited, and Study II thus had an explorative design, including several variables as potential resource factors. One of the hypotheses that were tested, that in the end had no effect, was if bullied children who regularly spent time together with their parents in some form of activity had higher odds of remaining mentally healthy than other victims. The background to this hypothesis was that bullied children are at risk of being excluded from peers and thus stay at home for a major part of the after-school hours. Spending time and doing something together with a parent might be beneficial to the child's mental health. The hypothesis was not confirmed. Bullied children who regularly participated in a joint activity<sup>6</sup> together with their parents did not have higher odds of remaining mentally healthy than other victims. While there was no association, the

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<sup>5</sup> Read books, participate in association activities, play a music instrument, practise sport, listen to music, watch TV/video/DVD, play TV-games/computer games, surf/blog online, several close friends and joint activity with parent.

<sup>6</sup> Parent and child joint activity was estimated with the question: How often do you do the following things together with the child? Play, play games / visit the cinema, theatre or sports events / do homework/ Read books / take walks / play a music instrument, sing/ practise sport / watch TV/video/DVD, play TV games, computer games / surf, blog online / go shopping / give a ride to activities/ go to a concert /do something else.



result might instead reflect how valuable it is for children to have friends. Parents have an important role in the child's life, but cannot compensate for the victimization.

Approximately 10 percent of the parents responding in NordChild did not know if their child was bullied, and were thus excluded from the analysis in Study I (Bjereld et al., 2015a). Parent-reported victimization is not as well researched as child-reported victimization, and when parents do not know if their child is bullied they are often excluded from the analysis (Nordhagen et al., 2005; Santalahti et al., 2008; Shetgiri et al., 2013). The consequence of such research design is that the knowledge of children whose parents do not know if they are bullied is limited. In Study II, children whose parents did not know if they were bullied were also included in the analysis. Since NordChild was parent-reported, there was no way of establishing if children with parents who did not know if they were bullied actually were victims or not (Bjereld et al., 2015b). Previous research has shown that victimization rates are higher when reported by children than parents (Holt et al., 2008; Matsunaga 2009; Stockdale et al., 2002). Whether the children with unclear status of bullying victimization actually were bullied or not, mental health problems were more prevalent among these children (13.0–25.6 percent) than among non-victims (5.3–7.9 percent). Solely not being aware is thus a reason to be concerned for the child's mental health.

#### 6.1.4 Social relations to parents and teachers

Relations within the family are essential to prevent bullying and reduce the negative impact of bullying on victims (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). In Study IV it was shown that bullied children were more likely to have poor quality relations with their parents than non-victims. Bullied children had higher odds than non-victims of feeling that their family did not listen to what they had to say, and of finding it difficult to talk with their parents about things that bothered them (Bjereld et al., 2017). The poor quality relations are problematic since they can prevent children from using the parents as a resource for coping with the emotions that follow victimization. Talking has been described as effective when coping with negative feelings (Armstrong et al., 2000). The poor relations between bullied children and parents are an obstacle to the child creating a positive narrative from the experience of victimization. Positive narratives often lead to a good later life, while negative narratives risk bringing a more negative outcome (Garbarino 2008). To

improve the possibility of a good later life, bullied children should be provided with opportunities to be listened to, and encouraged if they tell their story.

Bullying victimization does not cause a poorer relationship to parents automatically but the victim's exposed situation can be a provocation to the relationship. Children who have not been bullied have never thought about disclosing, or tried to disclose victimization to the parents. They have no experience of testing the relationship with their parents regarding bullying victimization and might thus find it unproblematic to confirm that the family listens and that it is easy to talk to parents about things that bother them. The relation to the parents in that way is unchallenged, because non-victims have never tried to talk about being bullied with their parents and actually experienced if it was easy and if they were listened to.

Victims not only had poorer quality relations to parents, the relations to teachers were also poorer. Victims reported more often than non-victims that their teachers did not accept them as they were, felt that their teachers did not care about them as a person and had no trust in their teachers. Overall, victims, and in particular frequent victims had higher odds than non-victims of having poor quality relations with parent and teachers (Bjereld et al., 2017).

Since the HBSC survey was cross-sectional, it was not possible to establish the direction of the association between bullying victimization and poor-quality relations with teachers and parents (Bjereld et al., 2017). However, one longitudinal Swedish study showed that the proportions of children that had trust in the teacher and felt that the teacher cared about them decreased after the children became victims (Hellfeldt et al., 2014; Johansson & Flygare 2013). The experience of bullying victimization is thus likely to have a negative impact on the relationship with teachers. Being bullied in school, even if it is not in front of the teacher, is something that concerns the teacher. Even if the child does not tell the teacher about the victimization, the bullied child might still think that the teacher should notice that something is wrong and react.

The suggestion that non-victims' relationship to parents had a higher quality because it was unchallenged, can also be applied to the relationship with teachers. Children who have not been bullied in school have not had the need to ask the teacher for help regarding bullying. These children might find it easy to answer that

the teacher cares and is accepting, a trustworthy adult. Bullied children, on the other hand, have probably already thought about the relationship to the teacher and whether it is possible to trust the teacher with the bullying experience. In Study III, one informant described the teachers support as:

It often seemed as if they closed their eyes when they saw me so they didn't have to think about my situation.

Other informants described that when they had disclosed victimization, the response from the teacher was crucial for the degree to which the victim would trust the teacher with problems in the future (Bjereld 2016). The relationship between teacher-victim and parent-victim will thus be tested in such a way that children who are never bullied have to test their relationship with the teachers or parents.

#### 6.1.5 The identity as a victim

The child's identity could be placed in the centre of the ecological model, encapsulated by individual factors and nested between microsystems that the child belongs to and interacts with, such as the family, the school and the peer group. Being bullied is not only exposure to different kinds of perpetration; the bullying will also lead to an ecological transition in change of the child's role in school. Bullying changes the child's position from non-victim to victim. While the identity is affected by the victimization, the identity also has an impact on how the victimization is managed.

Most bullying is carried out when adults are not present. For the microsystems that are not directly involved in the bullying, such as family and teachers, the transition from non-victim to victim is thus initially hidden. If the family or teachers are to understand that the child is being bullied, they need information about the victimization. Some microsystems will receive such information and thus be aware of the bullying, while others will not. The microsystems that receive knowledge about the transition will change their understanding of who the child is when they include the victimization in the perception of the child. How a person is treated will alter the individual's thoughts and feelings (Bronfenbrenner 1979). When informants in Study III did not tell anyone about being bullied, it was often due to the identity. Some informants experienced the victimization as stigmatic and felt ashamed about

being bullied (Bjereld 2016). Individuals strive for a positive social identity, which can be achieved through positive comparison to others (Hogg et al., 2004). Not wanting to be identified as bullied could be seen as an attempt to belong to the group of non-victims. Being seen as a non-victim would mean avoiding the negative comparison of oneself as a victim.

Bullying is not immediately apparent, and the bullied child has to decide how to handle the information about the victimization. The child can try to keep the victimization hidden from those who are not directly involved in the bullying. There are major benefits associated with being considered as normal (Goffman 1968). In an attempt to pass as non-victim, a child might suppress information about being bullied to parents. The child's identity would thus be created in interaction with the parents without parental knowledge about the victimization.

#### 6.1.6 Disclosing victimization

The parent-child relation is special because of the radical imbalance of power involved (Giddens 1991). One result from the interviews in Study III was that while victims could not control the bullying, they could control who knew about the victimization. Although parents usually are the ones with greater power within the microsystem of the family, the children and youth had power over disclosing victimization. Most informants that participated in the interviews had told someone at least once about being bullied.

I have always been able to talk to them and so [parents]. I didn't always want their support, and I sometimes didn't want to talk to them.

Disclosing victimization, as shown in the quote above, was not only a matter of telling or not telling, it was a question of continuing to disclose victimization (Bjereld 2016). Continuing to disclose victimization could be seen as a way to incorporate the role as a victim in the presentation of self and thus identity over and over again.

Victimization could be perceived as shameful and embarrassing. Such feelings have the function of regulating social bonds, but continuous shame and embarrass-

ment can lead to paralysis or irrationality (Scheff 1995). One of the informants described the problem of telling her parents that she was being bullied once again as:

I was terrified that my parents would find out about it. Because it felt like I had already been there when I was little, been bullied. And now they would think something was wrong with me.

Shame about being bullied once again led to the informant not disclosing victimization to the parents, although later during the interview she explained that she thought they would support and help her if they knew. How the informant kept the victimization hidden could be explained by the stigma she experienced of being bullied once again, and the shame that followed was stronger than the benefits obtained from disclosing victimization. As well as stigma, shame and identity struggling, distrust in adults was a major obstacle to disclosing victimization.

The argument as to why victims should disclose victimization is that they will then receive help to cope with and stop the bullying. But then, if the bullied child (despite the stigma, shame and identity as a victim) discloses victimization and the positive consequences from telling are limited or absent, there are no obvious reasons for the child to continue to disclose victimization. Children controls their actions and assess what the right action could be (Charon 2009). If the child perceives that the benefits of appearing not to be bullied are greater than what comes of openly revealing the victimization, it is logical that not all children will continue to disclose victimization.

## 6.2 Mesosystem

A mesosystem refers to the interactions between microsystems in which the individual actively participates (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Disclosing victimization, for the bullied child, meant revealing information about bullying that happened in the microsystem of peers and disclosing this in another microsystem, such as the one of the family or the one of teachers and school staff. When children kept the victimization hidden at home, the parents could react to the absence of interaction with other peers. Never seeing friends could be a reason for the parents to ask question about peers and bullying. The façade as a non-victim started to crack when the microsystems of family and peers interacted with each other. When parents witnessed

how their child was chased home from school by peers, or had nasty messages written on their Facebook page, the child had trouble keeping up a front as a non-victim (Bjereld 2016).

After the victimization had been disclosed, one way the school could handle the situation was to set up a meeting for parents, teachers and sometimes both perpetrator(s) and victim. In that way, different microsystems were no longer isolated from each other, and could interact together in a mesosystem. The child's experiences of disclosing bullying to adults were crucial to what the individual would disclose about future victimization. Children with mainly positive experiences often continued to disclose bullying, allowing for two or more microsystems to work together in a mesosystem. Children with negative experiences often went back to hiding the victimization from adults. When the child successfully kept up a façade as not being bullied, different microsystem were kept apart and did not communicate with each other (Bjereld 2016).

### 6.3 Exosystem

An exosystem is a setting that does not involve the individual in direct interaction, but still affects, or is affected by, what happens in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For the child, the parents' financial situation can be an example of the exosystem. The family's finances have an impact on the child's situation, but the child has no influence over the finances. In Study I, the analysis was adjusted for "financial difficulties", and in Study II the analysis was adjusted for "financial stress". A family was considered to have financial difficulties if the family had had problems in meeting its current expenses during the last year. Financial stress included the same variable as financial difficulties, but also whether the family in a crisis situation was able to get hold on a sum of money equivalent to 1,500 euro. If the parent answered that they did not have a cash reserve available, and/or that they had had difficulties in meeting their current expenses, they were considered to have financial stress. Children who lived in families with financial problems had higher odds of being bullied (Bjereld et al., 2015a; Bjereld et al., 2015b).

Being a child in a family with financial stress should be understood in the context in which the family lives. Nordic countries have been the most income-equal in the developed world (Green et al., 2011), and poverty in families with children is low in an international perspective (Ploug 2012). When poverty is uncommon, children

in families with financial problems differ from their peers' families. In a Finnish study, children aged 10-15 reported that poorer children did not lack clothes, equipment for leisure activities, or a mobile phone, but could be recognized by having models that were outdated, second-hand or broken. Children associated poverty with humiliation, where poor children were considered to carry a social stigma (Hakovirta & Kallio 2016). Although children are not bullied because the family has financial difficulties per se, the consequences of the financial situation might lead to the child deviating from the peers by having obsolete possessions. Considering that both bullying and relative poverty can be stigmatic, the combination of them means bearing a double stigma.

## 6.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the consistencies within a culture, constituted of the lower-order systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Although all children and young people in the Nordic Region are to have influence over their own lives regardless of gender and ethnic background (Nordic Council of Ministers 2016, p. 8-9), these factors, in specific contexts, have an impact on who is at risk of being bullied. The individual factors, sex and birth country, were briefly discussed at the start of this chapter. Here, the discussion continues with the focus on cultural norms and values.

### 6.4.1 Gender differences in protective factors for mental health

Regularly practising sport was a protective factor for bullied boys' mental health, but not for girls'. Why practising sport was not also a protective factor for girls could not be explained in Study II (Bjereld et al., 2015b). There might be a more complex relationship between practising sport and bullied children's mental health. For the child, practising sport is a microsystem, influenced by all outer systems. As well as type of sport and the occurrence of friendship and bullying at the practising of sport, cultural norms and values potentially have an impact on whether practising sport is a protective factor for mental health. Cultural norms can be associated with oppression in relation to factors such as gender (Thornberg 2015b). Norms are the source of social influence in groups because they are prescriptive, not merely descriptive (Hogg et al 2004). During an interview an informant described herself as a tomboy during her first years in school. In that way, she deviated from the prescriptive norm of how a girl typically should act in that particular school setting. She described how she wanted to play soccer, but was not allowed to and instead

was bullied by her peers. Historically, sport has been dominated by men, both in terms of participation and governance. Although the difference in involvement between the genders is becoming narrower, the historical legacy partly remains (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). For example, the vast majority of top management in international sports organizations is still dominated by men (Alm 2014). Previous research has shown gender differences in valuation of sport, where boys in general rate the practising of sport higher; for example, boys value being good at sport as more important than girls do (Klomsten et al., 2005). When sport is associated with strong positive values, it might contribute to sport being a protective factor.

#### 6.4.2 Prevalence of bullying victimization

The prevalence of children parent-reported as bullied was lower in 2011 than 1996 in all the Nordic countries except Iceland (Table 4), although the differences between the years were only significant for Denmark. Denmark had the highest prevalence and Sweden the lowest, while Finland, Iceland and Norway constituted an interlayer with similar prevalence, especially in 2011 (Bjereld et al., 2015a).

**Table 4. Children parent-reported as bullied in percent in 1996 and 2011, presented for the total country, native and immigrant children.**

|      |           | Denmark | Finland | Iceland | Norway | Sweden |
|------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| 1996 | Total     | 29.6    | 21.6    | 14.7    | 20.9   | 10.7   |
|      | Native    | 29.3    | 21.4    | 14.9    | 20.3   | 9.1    |
|      | Immigrant | 37.9    | 30.0    | 12.5    | 39.1   | 28.4   |
| 2011 | Total     | 23.4    | 17.9    | 17.3    | 17.9   | 9.8    |
|      | Native    | 23.0    | 17.8    | 16.8    | 17.1   | 8.6    |
|      | Immigrant | 31.4    | 25.0    | 25.0    | 30.2   | 27.8   |

Data comes from Bjereld et al., 2015a

Boys had higher odds of being parent-reported as bullied than girls, both in 1996 and 2011, although the odds had decreased in the later measurement ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Bjereld et al., 2015a). In Study IV, carried out in 2013/14, the gender distribution was equal among traditional victims. Instead, almost twice as many girls as boys



were cyberbullied (Bjereld et al., 2017). This result is in line with more recent findings on gender differences, where several Swedish studies have identified girls as being cyberbullied more often than boys (Beckman et al., 2013; Friends, 2015; Låftman et al., 2013).

#### 6.4.3 Cross-cultural understanding on bullying

Sweden has traditionally had a low prevalence of bullying ever since it first began to be measured in research (see Chester et al., 2015; Molcho et al., 2009; Nordhagen et al., 2005). Why this is the case has not been completely explained. Sweden was early in developing national strategies to counteract bullying, but the other Nordic countries have followed. The prevalence of bullying was already low in Sweden compared to other countries before any major intervention against bullying on a national scale took place (Frånberg 2003; Nordhagen et al., 2005). Bullying is well-known in all Nordic countries, and the words for being bullied are a permanent feature in each country's language (Bjereld et al., 2015a). One could speculate whether the lower prevalence of bullying victimization in Sweden might in some way reflect cultural diversity in understanding of the concept bullying. That is, do inhabitants in Sweden interpret the definition of bullying somewhat differently than inhabitants in the other Nordic countries?

Although no previous research has studied whether the inhabitants of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway or Sweden respond differently to linguistic terms and cultural concepts of bullying, there are a few cross-national studies discussing diverse cultural understanding of bullying. Jordi Escartín et al, (2011) did find both similarities and differences in the conceptualization of workplace bullying in Spain and Costa Rica. Fonzi et al., 1999 described how the term *prepotenze* had been widely used for asking about bullying in Italian questionnaire studies. The problem was that the term has a broader meaning than bullying, including for example physical aggression (Fonzi et al., 1999). The use of different terms to translate bullying significantly affects the reported prevalence (Fonzi et al., 1999, Smith et al., 2008). There is no evidence that Swedes might have an understanding of bullying that deviates from in the populations of the other Nordic countries, but distinguishing behavioural from linguistic differences is problematic. It is difficult to know for certain if the variations in percentage in the Nordic countries are solely a reflection of real behavioural differences, or if they to some degree represent differences in interpreting the term bullied. If there is a difference in the understanding of bullying, families with children born abroad might be newer to Swedish society and thus

have a more international understanding of bullying, more in agreement with other Nordic families with children born abroad, than with Swedish native families.

#### 4.4.4 Policies, norms and attitudes to immigration

Why Sweden, of all the Nordic countries, had the largest difference in prevalence of bullying victimization between native and immigrant children, was not established in Study I. It was clear that some of the difference in prevalence could be explained by living area (micro), or financial difficulties in the family (exo). However, after adjusting for these factors in a logistic regression, the odds of immigrant children in Sweden being bullied was four times higher than for native children. In Norway, the odds were two times higher for immigrant children being bullied, while in Denmark, Finland and Iceland there was no longer any statistically significant difference. In this section, the higher odds in Sweden are discussed in relation to policies, norms and attitudes.

At least since the mid-1990s, the Swedish population has generally grown more open-minded in its attitude towards immigrants and immigration, and less restrictive in its attitudes toward integration of migrants than most other European populations (Demker 2014). It might be thought that a population with open-minded attitudes to immigration would be associated with low levels of bullying victimization of immigrant children. One study showed that Swedes have been more positive to immigrants, than the inhabitants of the other Nordic countries. In 2006, 33 percent of the Swedish adult population thought it was a good idea to allow more immigrants from other ethnic groups to migrate to the country. The corresponding percentage for Denmark was 8 percent, and in Norway 14 percent (Demker 2014). In Sweden, with a population more open-minded to immigration and with higher levels of positive attitudes to immigration, the victimization of immigrant children should hypothetically be low. But this is not the result. Immigrant children were bullied to the same extent in all the Nordic countries.

The answer to the puzzle as to why positive attitudes to immigration are not reflected in low levels of bullying of immigrant children might be found in what the political scientist Johansson Heinö (2012), describes as a conditional tolerance. Although Swedes have high tolerance to immigration, the tolerance is limited and conditional. Public opinion in Sweden has been constantly towards assimilation, that is, the minority adapting to the majority (Johansson Heinö 2012). This condi-

tional tolerance challenges the picture of Swedes as open-minded with positive attitude to immigration. When immigrant children deviate in appearance, language or name, they automatically receive more attention than native children. Thornberg (2015) described that when children are labelled as deviant, they are seen as individuals who violate important social taken-for-granted norms of the social group, culture or society (Thornberg 2015b). Immigrant children in Sweden will be assessed according to the extent to which they adapt to Swedish society. Although Swedes had more positive attitudes towards migration than the inhabitants of the other Nordic countries, such attitudes do not automatically mean that Swedes behave more tolerantly than the inhabitants of the other Nordic countries.

Garbarino (2008) argued that children exposed to stress and challenge can handle one risk factor but few can manage a set of them. Although Garbarino's reasoning was related to children at risk, such as victims of bullying, it might be used the other way around as well, from the bullies' perspective. One deviation, such as a peer born in another country, is not problematic. However, if the risks continue to pile up, for example that the child born in another country does not appear to have assimilated to the culture of the society, and thus violates important social taken-for-granted norms, this might, for some children, be a reason for bullying. In the Nordic countries, individualistic values are highly ranked (Amnå 2008). Swedes have in an international perspective, low respect for traditional hierarchies and authorities. Instead, individual autonomy is important (Statsrådsberedningen 2013). Immigrant children's otherness is possibly a matter of addition, the more deviations the higher the risk of victimization. The deviation is not only a matter of numbers, but also a question of quality, in what way the children differ. When Swedes' attitudes are grounded in individualism, a child who submits to parental authority, religious traditions or customs of other countries deviates more than a child who simply deviates in appearance.

This discussion has not provided any clear answers. It has been suggested that the differences in prevalence could be explained by cultural variations in the understanding of bullying, as well as immigrant children deviating, and thus being more likely to be bullied. In what way birth country is associated with victimization is a field that is important to continue to investigate, not least because the victimization of native children had decreased in the combined Nordic countries, but not for immigrants. The preventive work against bullying has in that way failed to include immigrant children. There are several aspects of this that could be studied in future research to broaden understanding of the problem. Factors such as number of years

the child has lived in the country, and the impact of the municipality and school could advantageously be investigated.

## 6.5 Concluding comments

There is a mountain of previous research on individual factors associated with bullying victimization. This research has value for pointing out individual factors associated with a higher risk of being bullied. In that way, we can predict which groups of children need extra attention in efforts to counter against bullying. However, these individual factors need to be examined and understood in the context in which they exist (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). Solely addressing the fact that immigrant children in Sweden had higher odds of being bullied (Bjereld et al., 2015a) does not provide an understanding of why that is, and consequently neither does not indicate how to lower the risks for being bullied. The social-ecological perspective helps to understand the interplay of individual factors in a social context. The ecological model in this thesis has been used as a tool to analyse and discuss the results from the four studies included. The social-ecological perspective was (1) used to understand why some children were at a higher risk of being bullied and, (2) applied to understand the transition from non-victim to victim and the impact it had on the child's social ecology.

Individual factors such as children's sex, birth country and mental health, as well as the families' financial situation, were associated with bullying victimization. These associations could partly be understood from norms and attitudes in the Nordic countries. A child born outside the country might deviate in appearance from the peers (micro), and if the child also submits to religious traditions and customs that are not assimilated to the Nordic country they live in they might challenge social taken-for-granted norms about individuality (macro). A child living in a family with financial stress (exo) is probably not bullied because of the family's finances as such, but is at higher risk of being bullied if the financial situation is shown in the child's appearance of having outdated clothes and an old mobile phone. The outdated possessions make the child deviate from the peers (micro). The notions that are associated with outdated possessions due to poverty is stigmatizing and embarrassing (macro).

A bullied child has to manage emotions, stigmatization and identity struggling related to the role as a victim. In the child's microsystems, the victim's friends will

be at risk of courtesy stigma, and might withdraw from their friend in an attempt to avoid being bullied as well. The social relations with friends are not the only ones at risk when being bullied; relations to teachers and parents also have increased odds of being poor (Bjereld et al., 2017). The bullied child has to decide whether to disclose the victimization to adults or try to manage the situation alone. If the child discloses the victimization to an adult, it is then possible for the adult to help the child and initiate contact with other systems involved in the bullying situation (meso). How the child will be helped after disclosing being bullied is dependent on the adults receiving the information (micro), the policy and training of managing bullying in the school (exo) and ultimately what norms, legislation and national guidelines exist about bullying victimization in society (macro).

## 7 Conclusions

The dominant perspective in bullying research has traditionally been individual psychology and education. In recent years other perspectives have contributed to the research field, especially with respect to cyberbullying (Schott & Søndergaard 2014). This thesis has been written within the field of social work and is a contribution to the variation and expansion of the research field. Bullying victimization is a complex problem. With a variety of perspectives, different system levels of bullied children's ecology can be described and understood. The social-ecological theoretical framework allowed individual, along with contextual, factors to be analysed and discussed simultaneously.

Cultural norms of bullying victimization have an impact on all the inner levels of the ecological model. Norms that pervade society, schools and families have an impact on how children who deviate from norms will be accepted and which children are more likely to be bullied. The most successful anti-bullying programmes are the ones that use a "whole school approach" (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). Such programmes can work in different systems and reach both children and staff. However, the school is still part of a municipality, and will be affected by culture and norms in the community. It is thus not possible to view bullying as a problem solely between the bully and the victim or as a problem with one specific school class, or even as a problem in one particular school. The whole community, the taken-for-granted norms, politics, legislation and laws have to be taken into consideration in how bullying victimization is to be understood.

Living in a family with financial difficulties, being a boy and especially being a first-generation immigrant all resulted in higher odds of being parent-reported as bullied (Bjereld et al., 2015a). Why these specific factors were associated with victimization must be seen in the context of where the bullying took place. Norms and culture decide what is considered to be normal and what is deviating. The preventive work against bullying cannot solely focus on individuals, but has to work with several ecological systems to understand and challenge norms and notions associated with specific personal characteristics.

Disclosing victimization could be viewed both from an adult and a child perspective. The viewpoints are obviously, like all perspectives, simplifications of reality, but serve here as an illustration of the contradictory in disclosing victimization. In the majority of cases of bullying the situation becomes better for the victim after telling an adult (Black et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2001). From an adult perspective it could thus be reasonable to expect victims to disclose bullying, so that the bullied child is able to receive help and support. From a victim perspective, it is not always rational to disclose bullying. To tell can be difficult, and is associated with feelings of shame (Bjereld 2016). Bullied children had in general poorer relations with their teachers and parents than non-victims, adults they are urged to confide their victimization in (Bjereld et al., 2017) and victims sometimes withhold disclosure because they are concerned about adults' response (Bjereld 2016; Mishna & Alaggia 2005; deLara 2012).

The victim and adult perspectives are based on different logic that is hard to reconcile. The one caught in the middle between them is the bullied child trapped in a catch 22 situation. Victims do not always tell anyone, and adults remain unaware of the bullying, assuming that bullied children will report it. When telling is perceived as challenging and the relation with adults are poor, then the rational action for victims might instead be to manage the situation alone. If the bullied child does not disclose victimization, the child is in a particularly vulnerable situation. The child is exposed to bullying, with the harmful consequences that follow. Instead of help from adults in managing the victimization and the feelings that follow, the victim stands alone with the problem and has no one to confide in.

## 7.1 Relevance and implications

Encouraging victims to disclose victimization is an effective strategy in the sense that the majority of victims tell adults about victimization. However, the strategy is apparently not sufficient for those victims who do not disclose victimization. The creation of conditions required to disclose victimization is likely to vary depending on why the victimization is hidden. If the victimization is hidden as a consequence of poor relations and distrust in adults there might not be any reliable adult to confide in. Teachers and other school staff have a crucial role in detecting bullying since most bullying occurs in school or on the way to and from school. The problem is that teachers are often considered to be hard to talk to about bullying (Dowling & Carey 2013; Hunter & Borg 2006; Oliver & Candappa 2007), and vic-

tims are more likely to have poor relationships with teachers than non-victims (Bjereld et al., 2017). Efforts to help victims should focus on strengthening the relationship between bullied children and teachers, and support teachers to become more available for conversations about victimization.

The school counsellor has by youth been described as a person with the means to reduce emotional tension due to bullying, and enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem (Oliver & Candappa 2007). School counsellors can be a resource in work on bullying prevention in school for two reasons: their position as outsider and their specific education and training. The children are not in a relationship of dependency with the school counsellor in the same way as they are with the teacher or parents. Bullying concerns different systems that school counsellors in their role have access to, such as schoolyard, classrooms, teachers and the principal. The school counsellor can, in the right circumstances, be a bridge from the microsystem within the school to parents, other schools and the larger community. School counsellors could thus help victims to cope with the victimization, but also provide support in the communication with parents and teachers.

Victimization sometimes remains hidden for reasons associated with identity, such as denying, not wanting to be seen as a victim, and feeling ashamed about being a victim (Bjereld 2016). If the child nevertheless discloses victimization, it is crucial that the adult reassures the child that the victimization is nothing to be ashamed of. The stigmatic labelling of victimization must be worked on not only at a micro level, but in several systems of the child's ecology. The culture and norms relating to bullying victimization that exist in society, in the community, in the school among students and staff, in the school class and in the child's family will all have an impact on whether the bullied child will disclose victimization.

Creating situations where children feel safe to disclose victimization is a core obstacle in efforts to counter bullying. More research is needed to fully understand the process of disclosing victimization, from the victims point of view, but also from parents and professionals such as teachers, school counsellors, psychologists and social workers who encounter bullying in their work. When victimization is disclosed, it is important to regularly follow up on the victim since it is revealed that it is not only a matter of telling or not, it was a matter of continuing to disclose victimization. Disclosing victimization once could be challenging, and some victims did not disclose victimization again, although the bullying continued (Bjereld



2016). In such scenarios adults might assume that the bullying has stopped since the victim does not report any further incidents, but the reason why the victim does not disclose victimization any longer is that it is hard to tell, or that the action by the adults so far has been insufficient or non-existent.

# Sammanfattning på svenska

## Om de bara visste

## Mobbade barn och unga i de nordiska länderna

Mobbning är ett fenomen som förekommer över hela världen. Det är ett problem som medför negativa konsekvenser för den som är mobbad. Mobbing är bland annat associerat med frånvaro i skolan (Cross m.fl., 2015), psykisk ohälsa (Arseneault m.fl., 2010; Beckman m.fl., 2012; Bjereld m.fl., 2015b; Cross m.fl., 2015; Takizawa m.fl., 2014), och psykosomatiska besvär (Beckman m.fl., 2012). De negativa konsekvenserna kan sitta kvar långt upp i vuxen ålder (Takizawa m.fl., 2014). Som problem har mobbing uppmärksammats sedan 1970-talet (Frånberg & Wrethander 2011), men trots ett stort antal genomförda antimobbingsprogram så har det visat sig vara svårt att stoppa mobbing. En vanlig strategi från skolor i arbetet med mobbing är att allmänt uppmana studenter som blir utsatta att berätta för en vuxen (Black m.fl., 2010). Men trots sådana uppmaningar är vuxna många gånger ovetande då 25-50 procent av de barn som mobbas inte berättar om det för någon vuxen (Black m.fl., 2010; Fekkes m.fl., 2005; Friséen m.fl., 2008; Skrzypiec m.fl., 2011). Att berätta om mobbing kan vara svårt eftersom det involverar starka känslor som skam, (deLara 2012) och maktlöshet (Mishna & Alaggia 2005). Även om föräldrar och lärare är viktiga för att förebygga och stoppa mobbing (Siyahhan m.fl., 2012), så är relationen mellan mobbade barn och vuxna komplex. En av anledningarna till att mobbade barn och unga inte berättar om mobbningen är att de är oroliga för hur de vuxna ska ta emot deras berättelse (Mishna & Alaggia 2005; deLara 2012).

I den här avhandlingen studeras frågor om hur vanligt förekommande mobbing bland barn är i de nordiska länderna; på vilket sätt mobbing har ett samband med psykisk ohälsa och vilka resurser som potentiellt kan stärka mobbade barns psykiska hälsa. Frågor om hur relationer till lärare, föräldrar och vänner är förknippat med mobbing har också en väsentlig plats, samt hur processen om att berätta om mobbing går till.

Syftet med avhandlingen är att beskriva och förstå mobbning av barn och unga i ett socialekologiskt perspektiv, med fokus på förekomst, psykisk hälsa, sociala relationer och förutsättningar för att berätta om mobbning.

## Teoretiskt ramverk

Resultaten från de fyra artiklar som utgör grunden för denna avhandling har beskrivits, analyserats och förklarats i ett socialekologiskt perspektiv, med avstamp i Bronfenbrenners ekologiska modell (1979). Mobbning är ett fenomen som berör och är beroende av fler parter än den mobbade och den/de som mobbar. Det social-ekologiska perspektivet gör det möjligt att resonera kring samspelet mellan individuella och kontextuella faktorer i olika system som har betydelse för mobbning. Begreppen stigma (Goffman 1968), skam (Scheff 1995) och identitet (Tajfel & Turner 1986) användes inom ramen för den ekologiska modellen för att analysera processen av att bli mobbad och de konsekvenser som kan drabba individen själv och för interaktionen med andra.

## Design och metod

De dominerande perspektiven inom mobbningsforskning var fram till 2000-talets början främst individualpsykologi och en mindre del pedagogik (Eriksson m.fl., 2002). Under senare år har andra perspektiv bidragit till bredare ansatser inom mobbningsforskningen (Schott & Søndergaard 2014). Den här avhandlingen är författad i ämnesdisciplinen socialt arbete och inkluderar fyra studier baserade på tre datakällor; den föräldrarapporterade enkätstudien *Barns hälsa och välfärd i Norden* (NordChild, studie I-II), intervjuer med unga personer som var eller varit mobbade (studie III), samt den självrapporterade enkätstudien *Skolbarns hälsovanor* (studie IV).

Datakällorna NordChild och Skolbarns hälsovanor var båda tvärsnittsstudier med slumpmässigt urval. Den data som användes av NordChild var seriell från 1996 och 2011, genomförd i de fem Nordiska länderna Danmark, Finland, Island, Norge och Sverige. Enkätstudien Skolbarns hälsovanor genomfördes 2013-14 och intervjuerna 2014-15 i Sverige. Intervjupersonerna fick välja mellan tre sätt att bli intervjuade på; ansikte mot ansikte, över telefon eller online. Olika intervjuformat är ovanligt i en och samma studie men motiverades med att det skulle fånga upp också personer som annars inte velat delta i en intervju ansikte mot ansikte.

## Sammanfattning av delstudierna

### *Studie 1*

Norden beskrivs ibland som en enhet när forskningsresultat om mobbning presenteras (tex. Bjereld m.fl., 2015b; Helgeland & Lund 2017; Nordhagen m.fl., 2005). Det är korrekt i avseende att förekomsten av mobbning traditionellt varit låg i Norden i ett internationellt perspektiv (Craig m.fl., 2009), och det har också varit en nedåtgående trend i förekomsten av mobbning (Molcho m.fl., 2009). Men det finns också stora skillnader mellan länderna som riskerar att försvinna i beskrivningen av de nordiska länderna som en enhet. Syftet med den här studien var att undersöka föräldrarapporterad mobbning av barn i Norden vid två tillfällen; 1996 och 2011, samt att studera skillnader i förekomsten av mobbning mellan invandrade och infödda barn.

Enkäten NordChild besvarades av föräldrar till 7107 barn i åldrarna 7-13 år. Enkät-svaren analyserades med multivariat logistisk regressionsanalys. Resultatet visade att förekomsten av mobbing bland barn i Norden var lägst i Sverige och högst i Danmark vid båda mättillfällena. Finland, Island och Norge utgjorde ett mellanskikt med ungefär lika stor förekomst av mobbning. Mobbningen i Norden minskade totalt sett från 21,7 procent 1996 till 19,2 procent 2011. Någon minskning kunde dock inte identifieras bland invandrade barn, i den gruppen var mobbning också mer förekommande än bland barn födda inom respektive nordiskt land. Störst skillnad i förekomst av mobbning återfanns i Sverige vid båda tillfällena då 28,4/27,8 procent av barnen födda utanför landet var mobbade, jämfört med 9,1/8,6 procent av barnen födda i Sverige.

Även om det fanns skillnader i förekomst av mobbning mellan barn födda inom och utanför landet så var skillnaderna endast statistiskt signifikanta i Norge och Sverige samt i hela Norden totalt sett. Invandrade barn hade 2,51/2,11 gånger högre odds att bli mobbade i Norge och 3,68/4,16 gånger högre odds i Sverige, jämfört med barn födda inom respektive land, även efter att oddsen justerats för faktorerna bostadsområde, familjens finansiella problem samt barnets kön och ålder. Studien var den första nordiska upprepade tvärsnittsstudien som studerade skillnader i förekomst av mobbning mellan invandrade och infödda barn. Resultatet är ett bidrag till ett underforskat fält, kantat av tvetydiga forskningsfynd.

## Studie II

Inte alla barn som är mobbade lider av psykisk ohälsa. Men vad det är som gör att en del barn har god psykisk hälsa trots att de är utsatta för mobbning är inte helt klarlagt. Syftet med den här studien var att mäta förekomsten av internaliserade och externaliserande problem bland barn i åldrarna 4-16 år bosatta i Norden, indelat i tre grupper av; 1) mobbade barn, 2) barn som inte var mobbade, och 3) barn vars föräldrar inte visste ifall de var mobbade, samt att identifiera resursfaktorer för mobbade barns psykiska hälsa.

I den här studien användes NordChild enkäten från 2011 som även inkluderade *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ), vilken användes som bedömningsinstrument för att mäta barns psykiska hälsa. Det största antalet föräldrar (4979) svarade att deras barn inte var mobbat, följt av föräldrar som uppgav att deras barn var mobbat (879). Den minsta gruppen var föräldrar som inte visste ifall deras barn hade blivit mobbat (356). Föräldrarna från de olika länderna svarade likartat och därför presenterades det gemensamma resultatet för Norden och inte varje land var för sig. Det var stora skillnader i psykisk hälsa beroende på om barnen var mobbade, inte mobbade eller hade föräldrar som inte visste ifall de var mobbade. Förekomsten av internaliserade och externaliserande problem var låg bland barn som inte var mobbade, i den gruppen uppmättes mellan 5,3–7,9 procent ha psykisk ohälsa, varierande mellan kön och ålder. Högst förekomst återfanns bland mobbade barn där 29,2–44,3 procent av barnen uppmättes ha psykisk ohälsa. I gruppen av barn vars föräldrar inte visste om de var mobbade så hade 13,0–25,6 procent av barnen psykisk ohälsa, vilket var lägre än bland mobbade barn, men betydligt högre än för barn som inte var mobbade.

I studien undersöktes också tio potentiella resursfaktorer som eventuellt skulle kunna bidra till att barn och unga trots att de är mobbade har god psykisk hälsa. Resultatet visade att mobbade barn som hade flera nära vänner också hade högre odds att ha god psykisk hälsa (justerad oddskvot pojkar: 2,94/flickor 2,44) jämfört med de barn som hade färre vänner. Regelbunden idrott visade också ett positivt samband med god psykisk hälsa, men bara för mobbade pojkar (justerad oddskvot; pojkar 1,68/flickor 1,01 ej signifikant). Tidigare forskning har visat att idrott, och framförallt lagidrott, har både psykologiska och sociala fördelar som till exempel bra självförtroende (Eime et., al 2013). I den här studien var det inte möjligt att kontrollera vilken typ av idrott barnen utövade. kanske skiljde den sig åt mellan

mobbade flickor och pojkar och det är möjligt att en del av förklaringen kommer utav det.

### *Studie III*

Tidigare intervjustudier har haft svårt att inkludera unga personer som är eller varit mobbade, men som inte har berättat om det för någon vuxen. Kunskapen om de som är dolt utsatta för mobbning är därför, i avseende på egna tankar och upplevelser kring att berätta eller inte berätta, starkt begränsad. Syftet med den här studien var att undersöka processen om att berätta om mobbning från den utsattes perspektiv.

Tio svenska informanter i åldrarna 15-23, som var eller varit mobbade under delar eller hela sin skolgång intervjuades. Studien var designad med utgångspunkt i grundad teori så som Kathy Charmaz (2014) beskriver den, och analyserad med två-steps kodning. De konstruerade kategorierna var sedan tolkade med begreppen region (Goffman 1959) och identitet (Charon 2009).

Att berätta om mobbning identifierades som en cirkulär process mellan dold och öppen utsatthet. I de flesta fall startade mobbningen i det dolda, eftersom vuxna sällan var närvarande då mobbningen ägde rum. För att mobbningen skulle bli öppen så behövde den utsatta berätta för en vuxen, alternativt att den vuxna på något sätt ändå förstod. I de fall då den mobbade inte berättade om utsattheten direkt för en vuxen var det av anledningar som var associerade med den egna identiteten och/eller av en misstro till vuxna. Informanterna kunde inte kontrollera mobbningen, men de kunde kontrollera vem som visste om den. Mobbningen försvann dock sällan av sig själv och snart började omgivningen se tecken på att något var fel. I längden räckte det inte för de mobbade att enbart låta bli att berätta om utsattheten för att upprätthålla en yttre fasad av att inte vara mobbad. Istället behövde den mobbade ge alternativa förklaringar till de tecken som vuxna runt omkring såg och reagerade på (tex inga vänner, smutsiga kläder, blåmärken, nedstämdhet, magont). När mobbningen fortgick och i vissa fall eskalerade började fasaden om att allting var bra att spricka. En del kämpade då hårt för att upprätthålla fasaden, medan andra resignerade och berättade om mobbningen för en vuxen. Mobbade barn och ungas förhållningssätt till att berätta för någon vuxen om att de var mobbade var inte enbart en fråga om att berätta eller inte berätta. Det handlade också om att *fortsätta* att berätta, vilket var nära associerat med vuxnas reaktioner och agerande efter att de fick kännedom om mobbningen. Negativa erfarenheter från att berätta om

mobbning medförde att en del mobbade upplevde att deras enda alternativ var att försöka hantera mobbningen själv.

#### *Studie IV*

Relationen mellan vuxna och barn/unga är betydelsefull för att stoppa och förebygga mobbning (Siyahhan m.fl., 2012). Relationerna är dock inte okomplicerade då mobbningen ofta är dold för vuxenvärlden. Föräldrar vet inte alltid om deras barn är mobbat (Bjereld m.fl., 2015a; Bjereld m.fl., 2015b; Sawyer m.fl., 2011), och det är vanligt att mobbade barn inte berättar om sin utsatthet (Waasdorp & Bradshaw 2015). Syftet med den här studien är att undersöka barns uppfattning om kvalitén på relationen till lärare och föräldrar, samt att undersöka om det var några skillnader i uppfattningen beroende på om barnet var mobbat, hur frekvent mobbningen var, samt vilken typ av mobbning barnet var utsatt för.

Den enkätdata som användes kom från 2013–14 års Skolbarns hälsovanor, som är en del i en internationell seriell studie som Världshälsoorganisationen (WHO) samordnar vart fjärde år. Undersökningen genomfördes i skolklasser med barn i åldrarna 11, 13 och 15 som svarande. En flernivå multinomial logistisk regressionsanalys genomfördes för att beräkna oddskvoter för samband mellan typ av mobbning och kvalitet på relationen till föräldrar respektive lärare.

Av 6971 studenter var 1239 (17 procent) mobbade. De flesta av de mobbade, 853 (12.2 procent) barn hade blivit utsatta en eller två gånger de senaste månaderna, medan 386 (5.5 procent) barn hade blivit mobbade oftare. Kön fördelningen bland barn som var mobbade var jämn, men flickor var cybermobbade oftare än pojkar. Resultatet visade att mobbade barn hade sämre relationer med föräldrar och lärare än vad barn som inte var mobbade hade. Oavsett om barnen var mobbade ofta eller sällan, om de enbart var mobbade i skolan eller också cybermobbade, så hade de högre odds att uppleva att deras familj inte lyssnade på vad de hade att säga. De hade också högre odds för att ha lågt förtroende för lärare, det vill säga att uppleva att deras lärare inte accepterade dem som de var, inte brydde sig om dem som person och inte litade på sina lärare.

Barn som var frekvent mobbade hade dessutom högre odds än andra att uppleva det svårt att prata med sina föräldrar om saker som bekymrade dem. Allra högst odds att ha svag kvalitet på relationen till föräldrar och lärare hade barn som var frekvent

cybermobbede (justerad oddskvot: 2,09--3,37). Även om relationen mellan vuxna och barn/unga är viktig för att stoppa och förebygga mobbning (Siyahhan m.fl., 2012) så visade den här studien att mobbade barn hade sämre relationer till lärare och föräldrar, det vill säga till de vuxna som är viktiga för att stoppa och hantera mobbning.

## Slutsatser och avslutande diskussion

Individuella faktorer som kön, familjens ekonomi, födelseland och psykisk hälsa var i delstudierna associerat med sannolikheten att bli mobbad eller konsekvensen av att ha blivit mobbad. Resultaten är värdefulla för att förstå vilka barn som har större risk för att bli mobbade samt de konsekvenser som kan följa med mobbningen, men individuella faktorer behöver också bli förstådda i relation till vilken kontext de existerar i (Migliaccio & Raskauskas 2015). Nedan följer en beskrivning av hur de individuella faktorerna födelseland och psykisk hälsa kan bli förstådda i ett socialekologiskt perspektiv genom att resonera kring samspelet mellan de individuella faktorerna och den sociala kontexten.

### Förekomst av mobbning högre bland barn födda utanför landet

Barn födda utanför Norge och Sverige var mobbade mer ofta än barn födda inom respektive land. En liten del av skillnaden kunde förklaras utifrån bostadsområde och familjens ekonomi, men efter att analysen justerats för de faktorerna hade barn födda utanför landet fortfarande högre odds att bli mobbade. Skillnaden i förekomst av mobbning kunde inte förklaras i studien, men kan i ett socialekologiskt perspektiv diskuteras utifrån strukturer i olika system (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Tidigare forskning visar att barn som avviker från sina jämnåriga i utseende eller på annat sätt har större risk för att bli mobbade (Sweeting & West 2001). Barn födda i ett annat land kan avvika från sina jämnåriga i till exempel utseende, språk eller namn. I den socialekologiska modellen beskrivs macrosystem bland annat som bestående av värden och normer som dominerar samhället. I Norden värderas ofta individualitet högt (Amnå 2008) och svenskar värdesätter individuell frihet (Statsrådsberedningen 2013). Om barn utövar religion och kulturella seder så skulle det kunna utmana den dominerande normen av individualitet, vilket ytterligare är en avvikelse från jämnåriga och med det en risk för att bli utsatt för mobbning.

Enligt vad Forsberg och Thornberg (2016) benämner som 'nymedlemsordnande', så kan en ny elev i skolan skapa en social reaktion där klasskamrater behöver posit-



ionera sig i förhållande till den nya eleven. Nya klasskamrater kan potentiellt utmana och störa den etablerade sociala ordningen. Nykomlingar uppfattades ofta som att de bröt mot normer vilket ibland användes som en förklaring till varför nya elever blev mobbade (Forsberg och Thornberg 2016). Det finns stora skillnader i sammansättningen av elever avseende socio-ekonomisk och olika utländsk bakgrund i svenska skolor (Skolinspektionens rapport 2014:1). Skolor i segregerade områden har ofta hög omsättning bland eleverna jämfört med skolor i mindre segregerade områden (Bunar 2010). 'Nymedlemsordnande' uppstår därför oftare i skolor placerade i segregerade områden, vilket i sin tur skulle kunna leda till högre förekomst av mobbning.

I det här resonemanget lyftes avvikelse från jämnåriga och 'nymedlemsordnande' fram som potentiella förklaringar till den högre förekomsten av mobbning av barn födda utanför landet. Det är dock viktigt att poängtera att det handlar om potentiella förklaringar och inga faktiska resultat. Varför barn födda utanför landet hade högre sannolikhet att bli mobbade är viktigt att studera vidare, inte minst eftersom förekomsten av mobbning i den totala Norden hade minskat från 1996 till 2011, men inte i gruppen utlandsfödda barn. Det preventiva arbetet mot mobbning har i den aspekten misslyckats med att inkludera barn födda utanför landet.

## Psykisk hälsa

Psykisk ohälsa var vanligt förekommande bland mobbade barn och unga (Bjereld m.fl., 2015b). Mobbade pojkar som regelbundet idrottade hade högre odds att ha god psykisk hälsa jämfört med mobbade pojkar som inte idrottade. Varför inte idrott var associerad till god psykisk hälsa också hos mobbade flickor kunde inte fastställas, men kan belysas utifrån strukturer i micro- och macrosystem. Beroende på vilket mikrosystem, vilken typ av idrott som barnet utövar, har betydelse för sambandet till psykisk hälsa. Speciellt lagsport har associerats med god psykisk hälsa för utövarna (Eime m.fl., 2013), medan andra idrotter har associerats med högre risk för negativ hälsa i form av mer negativa förhållningssätt till sin kropp (Lunde 2014; Thompson & Sherman 2010). Mobbning förekommer också under idrott på fritiden, men det är inte lika väl undersökt som skolmobbning. Det finns dock inget som indikerar att förekomsten av mobbning skulle vara mer vanligt på idrottsträning än i skolan (Evans m.fl., 2016). Historiskt sett så har idrotten varit en manligt dominerad arena. Även om det till exempel i Sverige nu nästan är lika många kvinnor som män som är medlemmar i idrottsföreningar (44 respektive 56 procent, Riksidrottsförbundet 2015) så sitter det historiska arvet i vissa delar kvar. Idrottens

internationella organisationer domineras till exempel fortfarande av män på de mest prestigefyllda uppdragen (Alm 2014). Den manliga dominansen kan ha betydelse för hur idrottandet upplevs. Forskning har till exempel visat hur pojkar generellt värderar idrott högre än flickor. Pojkar har också värderat att vara bra i idrott som viktigare än vad flickor har (Klomsten m.fl., 2005). När idrott är associerat med starkt positiva värden så är det möjligt att det bidrar till att idrott är en positiv faktor för den psykiska hälsan.

## Vuxnas vetskap och mobbades berättande – Relationen i fokus

En röd tråd i de fyra delstudierna är relationen mellan vuxna och barn/unga. Att berätta om mobbning kan ses både från ett barn- och ett vuxenperspektiv. Som alla perspektiv är sikten begränsad då det är en förenkling av verkligheten, men används här som en illustration av det motsägelsefulla i att berätta om mobbning. Situationen för den som är mobbad blir i majoriteten av fallen bättre efter att ha berättat om mobbningen för en vuxen (Black m.fl., 2010; Smith m.fl., 2001). Från ett vuxenperspektiv kan det därför vara logiskt att förvänta sig att barnet berättar, på det sättet har den mobbade möjlighet att få hjälp och stöd. Ur den mobbades perspektiv är det dock inte alltid lika självklart att berätta om mobbningen. Att berätta kan vara svårt, och är förenat med känslor av skam. Det finns också en misstro till vuxnas förmåga att vilja och kunna hjälpa (Bjereld 2016; deLara 2012). När det är svårt att berätta, och när kvalitén på relationen till vuxna är svag, då kan det ses som rationellt för den mobbade att hantera situationen på egen hand.

Mobbades och vuxnas perspektiv bygger på olika logiker som är svåra att förena vilket gör att det mobbade barnet ibland fångas i ett moment 22. Mobbade barn berättar inte alltid om sin utsatthet och vuxna kan därför förbli omedvetna om mobbningen. När mobbade barn inte berättar så befinner de sig i en utsatt situation. I stället för hjälp från vuxna att stoppa mobbningen och hantera den utsatthet och de känslor som följer så står den mobbade ensam med utsattheten och ingen att anförtro sig åt.

Att förlita sig på att mobbade barn ska berätta för en vuxen är en otillräcklig strategi. Lärare och annan skolpersonal har en avgörande roll i att upptäcka mobbning eftersom den största delen av mobbning förekommer i skolan, eller på väg till och från skolan. Barn anser dock ofta att lärare är svåra att prata med om mobbning (Dowling & Carey 2013. Hunter & Borg 2006; Oliver & Candappa 2007) och mobbade barn har generellt sämre relationer med lärare än vad barn som inte är

mobbade har (Bjereld m.fl., 2017). Arbetet mot mobbning bör därför fokusera på att stärka relationen mellan mobbade barn och lärare och hjälpa lärare att bli mer tillgängliga för samtal om mobbning. Skolkuratorer skulle kunna vara en resurs i arbetet mot mobbning av två anledningar; de har en specifik utbildning och en roll som inte är i ett beroendeförhållande till barnet. Barn och unga är inte i beroendeställning av skolkuratoren på samma sätt som de är av lärare och föräldrar. Mobbning berör olika system som skolkuratoren har tillgång till, så som klassrum, skolgården, korridorer, lärare och rektor. En skolkurator kan under rätt förutsättningar bli en brygga mellan föräldrar och skolan. Skolkuratoren kan hjälpa mobbade barn med att hantera både mobbningen och de känslor som hänger samman, men också erbjuda ett stöd i kommunikationen med föräldrar och lärare.

Att skapa situationer där barn och unga känner sig trygga med att berätta om mobbning är viktigt i det fortsatta arbetet med mobbning. Mer forskning behövs för att förstå hur processen om att berätta om mobbning går till, både från de som är mobbade, men också från föräldrar och andra yrkesprofessionella, så som lärare, kuratorer, psykologer och socialarbetare som kommer i kontakt med mobbning genom sitt arbete. När ett barn eller en ungdom berättat om mobbning så är det viktigt att fortsätta att följa upp situationen för den mobbade, eftersom en utmaning är att *fortsätta* att berätta. Att berätta en gång kan vara utmanande, och några av de som var intervjuade hade berättat om mobbningen en gång, men aldrig igen, trots att mobbningen inte upphörde eller återupptogs (Bjereld 2016). I ett sådant scenario kanske vuxna antar att mobbningen upphört eftersom inga nya incidenter framkommer. Men anledningarna till att den vuxna inte får ytterligare kännedom om mobbningen kan istället vara att det är svårt att berätta, eller att reaktionen (eller den uteblivna reaktionen) från tidigare tillfälle har varit otillräcklig.

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