The use of aggression in primary school boys' decisions about inclusion in and exclusion from playground football games

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Background. Sociometric studies have shown that some aggressive boys are popular, perceived as popular or cool, dominant, and central in the peer group (Estell, Cairns, Farmer, & Cairns, 2002; Milich & Landau, 1984; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006). This is not predicted by social information processing (SIP) models which see aggression as socially incompetent, resulting from distorted understanding of the social world (e.g. Crick & Dodge, 1994). However, sociologists of childhood have argued that some aggressive boys are popular because they use aggression to gain status and dominance, to undermine those of lower status, and to achieve hegemonic masculinity (Adler & Adler, 1998; Ferguson, 2000; Renold, 2007).

Aims. This study aims to connect psychological and sociological literatures, asking whether social processes of status formation contribute to the link between popularity and aggression identified sociometrically.

Sample. The paper describes case studies of three boys, aged between 8 and 10 years, attending a London primary school.

Methods. Sociometric data on liking, disliking, and aggression are combined with ethnographic and interview data for each case study.

Results. The data show that one way in which aggression aids popularity and dominance is through boys' strategic use of aggression to enforce decisions about inclusion and exclusion in desirable activities. It can be difficult for individual boys to achieve acceptance without resorting to aggression.

Conclusions. The data provide support for sociological explanations of aggression in terms of status and inclusion, and challenge the SIP claim that aggressive children are socially incompetent and biased.

Some developmental psychologists have tended to conflate aggression, social competence and rejection, assuming that aggressive children are socially incompetent...
and rejected by their peers (Bukowski, 2003; Estell, Cairns, Farmer, & Cairns, 2002; Milich & Landau, 1984). This conflation is evident in the social information processing (SIP) model developed by Dodge, Crick, and their colleagues (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Crick & Ladd, 1990; Dodge & Frame, 1982), arguably the dominant psychological account of children's peer relations at present (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). According to this model, children who behave aggressively do so because they process information about the social world in a biased, inaccurate, and distorted manner (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Dodge & Rabiner, 2004; Lansford et al., 2006). The model is based in the information processing tradition, which attempts to 'specify the processes that operate to extract information from the sources of environmental stimulation available to us' (McShane, 1991, p. 7). This view of humans as information processors has become commonplace throughout psychology (Galloway, 2000; Wilson, 1996), and now dominates psychological conceptions of children's peer relations. For example, friendship is now conceived as a form of 'social cognition' (Kessen, 1981), and children's behaviour towards their peers is explained in terms of their ability to process information about their peers accurately (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick & Dodge, 1996; Crick et al., 2002).

As noted by Smith and Boulton (1990) and Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999a), aggressive children are defined by the SIP model as necessarily defective, because aggression is seen as a result of erroneous or biased processing, and also as socially incompetent. For instance, Crick and Dodge (1996, p.994) assert that 'Skillful processing at each step [of the SIP model] is hypothesized to lead to competent performance within a situation, whereas biased or deficient processing is hypothesized to lead to deviant social behaviour (e.g. aggression)' while according to Crick et al. (2002, p. 1134), 'aggressive children demonstrate deficiencies at all processing steps that are likely to contribute to their engagement in aggressive acts'. SIP research studies also link aggression and rejection because they often select research participants who are both aggressive and rejected (e.g. Dodge & Coie, 1987; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge & Somberg, 1987; Dodge & Tomlin, 1987). SIP research has neither looked for nor studied children who are aggressive and accepted.

However, developmental psychologists are accruing evidence that not all aggressive children are rejected (Marshall & McCandless, 1957) or socially incompetent (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999b). Studies have shown that some aggressive children are popular (Estell et al., 2002; Milich & Landau, 1984), perceived as popular (Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003), of controversial (well liked and well disliked) sociometric status (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993), dominant in the peer group (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Milich & Landau, 1984), perceived as cool (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006) and/or central to their social network (Estell et al., 2002; Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003).

It is not clear how the SIP approach, which sees aggression as socially incompetent (Crick & Dodge, 1996, 1999; Crick et al., 2002), can explain the link between aggression and popularity and dominance (which suggest social competence). Some developmental psychologists have instead sought to understand this link with reference to social stratification and hierarchy in the peer group, arguing that some children (usually focusing on boys) employ aggression to achieve status and dominance (Estell et al., 2002; Farmer et al., 2003; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rodkin et al., 2006). Such an argument is in line with ethological studies on dominance (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1976). It also fits neatly with accounts of aggression.
offered by sociologists of childhood, who draw on ethnographic and interview data to argue that children who are high status in the peer group are often also aggressive, and indeed use aggression to maintain their status by attacking those lower down the hierarchy (Adler & Adler, 1998; Swain, 2004). Sociologists have also argued that boys' aggression must be understood with reference to their emerging constructions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), which often prizes aggression, fighting, and toughness (Connell, 1989; Ferguson, 2000; Skelton, 1996; Swain, 2003) and pathologises and attacks boys personifying alternative forms of masculinity (Renold, 2004, 2007).

Psychologists have tended to investigate childhood aggression using quantitative data derived from sociometric measures, teacher rating scales, and closed interviews or questionnaires (e.g. Estell et al., 2002; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Lansford et al., 2006; Sutton et al., 1999b), while sociologists have collected qualitative data derived from participant observation and open-ended interviews (e.g. Adler & Adler, 1998; Fine, 1981; Renold, 2004). It may be that the social processes described by sociologists enable the quantitative links between aggression and popularity, dominance and so on observed by psychologists, but because data take such different forms in the two disciplines, using one to explain the other is problematic. For example, when sociologists such as Adler and Adler (1998) talk about popularity, does this equate with psychologists' concept of peer acceptance or likeability, or is it more aligned with perceived popularity (Rodkin et al., 2006; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004)? We need studies that incorporate both sociometric measures and the rich qualitative data typical of sociological studies, so that we can begin to pin down how quantitative links between aggression and popularity, dominance and so on are achieved through the everyday interactions that sociological methods document. There is a precedent for this approach in studies of inter-ethnic peer relations (Denscombe, Szulc, Patrick, & Wood, 1986) but to the author’s knowledge, not in the area of children's aggression. This paper describes three boys who each had rather different experiences of aggression in the school playground, exploring how the sociometric profile of each is manifested in that boy’s behaviours and peer relations. The aim is to further our understanding of what exactly sociometric acceptance, rejection, and aggression scores mean in terms of boys’ everyday interactions with one another on the school playground.

Method

Fieldsite

The research was conducted by the author over 18 months in 2001–2003 at Woodwell Green1, a large primary school with three classes in each year, situated in a multicultural working class area of west London. Access was gained for the author's PhD research, following a period during which the author worked as a volunteer helping younger children at the school with their reading. At the time of the research, 38% of the children were of Indian ethnicity, 25% English, 8% Somali, 8% Pakistani, and 21% a range of other ethnicities including Arab, Afghanistani, and White Western European (all as categorized on school records). In terms of religion, 27% of the children were Sikh, 26% Muslim, 22% Christian, 11% Hindu, 13% non-religious, and 2% other2. The school undergoes a high level of migration, as families move to and leave the area. During the research, seven

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1 The name of the school, and of children and adults at the school, are pseudonyms.
2 The total is not exactly 100% because of rounding.
children in the year 4 class which is the focus of this study left the school and seven joined.

As a participant observer who spent a prolonged period of time at the school, I maintained a precarious balance between adult and friend in relation to the children. On the one hand, I sometimes helped the children with their work, tried to break up fights, and reprimanded children who attempted to harm one another in front of me. On the other hand, I did not tell them off for many acts that other adults at school condemned, such as swearing, talking in class, chewing gum, and bringing forbidden objects into school. The children in this study confided in me and some strongly criticized their teachers in interviews. These behaviours are evidence that they saw me to some extent as a confidante not equivalent to teachers at school. Thus it seems unlikely that they told me things in order to seek revenge (e.g. expecting me to tell a teacher who would pursue the fight or injustice recounted) or to evade discipline (e.g. by blaming someone else for starting a fight). This is in contrast to most psychological research in schools whereby children are expected to confide in researchers they have only just met, and whose loyalties they have had no opportunity of testing. Nevertheless, children’s accounts must be seen in the context of a dialogue with me (and with their peers, in group discussions) - as with all psychological data, there can be no neutral description of events or internal states (Edwards, 1997).

Participants
This article focuses on Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul, three boys who were observed and interviewed when they were in years 4 and 5 (aged 8–10 years). Boys were focused upon because they were more frequently involved in physical aggression at Woodwell Green than girls, and because much of the existing literature focuses upon boys. Pavandeep’s ethnicity is Afghanistani and his religion Sikh. He joined Woodwell Green at the beginning of year 4 at the age of 8 years, 4 months, and remained there until he moved to secondary school. Faizel’s ethnicity is Pakistani and he is Muslim. He had attended the school since reception, and also remained there until he moved on to secondary school. He was 8 years and 6 months at the start of year 4. Paul’s ethnicity is English and he is Christian. Like Pavandeep, he joined Woodwell Green at the start of year 4, aged 8 years and 10 months. He left the school early in year 5.

Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul were all in Miss Chahal’s class. Several other boys feature in this paper, including Amandeep (Indian ethnicity and Sikh religion), Idris (Arab ethnicity and Muslim religion), Zak (Somali ethnicity and Muslim religion), and Sam (English ethnicity and no religion). All were in Miss Chahal’s class, except Sam who was in a different year 4 class. All these boys were keen football players except Amandeep, who played only occasionally. Parental consent was gained for all children involved in the research, and where possible the children also consented to my use of the data included in this paper.

Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul were selected for several reasons. Firstly, their sociometric profiles showed varying levels of popularity and aggression. Secondly, a rich array of ethnographic and interview data were available for these particular boys. Thirdly, Pavandeep and Faizel often brought a ball into school to play football with at break and lunchtime (the school did not provide these for general use), the most desirable activity for most boys at the school. Whoever owned the ball in a particular match was generally considered to be in control of who could play (as noted by Evans, 1989; Sluckin, 1981). Therefore the owner of the ball was inevitably involved in often
fraught decisions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of other boys. The contrast between how Pavandeep and Faizel handled this role helps reveal the place of aggression in their peer group. Finally, Paul's case was interesting because he saw his own aggression as transforming his status in the peer group.

**Procedure**

A multi-method approach was taken. Throughout the time when Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul were in year 4 and the first half of year 5, participant observation was conducted by the author in the boys' classroom (2 days a week during year 4), the canteen, and the playground (3 or 4 days a week throughout the fieldwork), along with other settings not relevant to this paper. This methodology entails a blend of interaction and observation (Van Maanen, 1996) in order to gain the trust of participants and an insider's perspective. Abbreviated notes are taken either during or immediately after observations, and typed up into extensive fieldnotes as soon as possible afterwards (Sanjek, 1996).

Sociometric data were collected from the middle to the end of year 4. In individual interviews, the researcher asked all children in the class, 'Which five children do you like most in your class?', 'Which five children do you like least in your class?', and 'Who do you argue with most often?' Children's answers were used to create sociometric scores for Faizel, Pavandeep, and Paul. At the end of year 4 the boys' teacher scored each pupil from 0 to 3 for popularity and aggression (physical, verbal, and relational).

In the autumn term of year 5, all children in the class were interviewed individually. These interviews comprised descriptions of six disputes which fieldwork had shown to be common at Woodwell Green. For example, one description read: 'Five children are playing a game together. Then John/Joanne, who is in their class, comes up and asks to play. The children don't really like playing with John/Joanne because they think s/he's a bit pushy, bossy and rude. John/Joanne asks to play'. Children were asked various questions about each dispute, including 'Have you ever been in a situation like this?' Their replies were transcribed verbatim during the interviews. Finally, in the spring term of year 5, the author conducted recorded discussion groups on physical aggression and inclusion and exclusion within playground games (among other topics). Each child with parental consent participated in one discussion group. All interviews and discussion groups took place in the school library, a small teaching support room near the boys' classroom, or in an empty classroom. At no point were any other people in the room apart from the researcher and the interviewee(s).

For the purposes of this article, all events or talk that (a) related to football and/or aggression and (b) involved Pavandeep, Faizel, and/or Paul, were collated from the fieldnotes and the transcripts for the sociometric interviews, interviews about disputes, and discussion groups. Along with the numerical sociometric data, these constituted the data set for this article. From this data set, the author sought to identify the role of aggression in the playground life of each boy. Typical quotes and descriptions from the data set are used in the case studies below, along with indications as to their frequency. For example, a quote in a case study describing Faizel as aggressive is accompanied by information on the number of other children who described him as aggressive, the number of observations recorded in fieldnotes of Faizel behaving aggressively, and any contradictory data, such as a quote from Faizel's classmate claiming he does not get into fights. These details are included to defend the author's interpretation of the data and to enable the reader to consider and evaluate alternative interpretations.
Analysis
Sociometric data on the three boys are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociometric data on Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul in year 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Boys in class (N = 15)</th>
<th>Whole class (N = 30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pavandeep</td>
<td>Faizel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Like most' votes from peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Like least' votes from peers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's popularity rating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Argues or fights' votes from peers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's physical aggression rating</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's verbal aggression rating</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pavandeep
Named by one peer as someone they liked and five (one of whom was Faizel) as someone they disliked, Pavandeep's sociometric profile in Table 1 resembles that of a rejected child. He was not seen as aggressive by peers or his teacher. How does this profile relate to Pavandeep's actual experiences in the school playground, particularly as a boy who often brought in a football to play with? Here is Pavandeep in year 4 (in his sociometric interview) explaining who he had the most arguments or fights with at school:

Pavandeep: Miss I used to have a fight with Sam and Ali and Idris and Faizel. But Miss Sam and Ali don't beat me now, they used to, but Idris and Faizel still do, they still beat me up. Miss Sandeep says when someone beats you up don't let them play but I still let Idris play.

RW: Why do you still let him?

Pavandeep: Cos he just does innit. He just comes.

RW: Um, hang on, do you mean Idris just plays even if you tell him not to?

Pavandeep: Yeah Miss.

[Later in the interview:]

RW: So what about, with Idris and Faizel, after you've had a fight with them do you make friends?

Pavandeep: Miss I never be friends with them. Miss but we still play with each other. Miss he just plays with me without asking me.

RW: Who does?

Pavandeep: Idris and Faizel.

RW: How does that make you feel?

Pavandeep: [pauses] Miss nothing. I said they can play.

In this extract, Pavandeep claims that even though Faizel and Idris are aggressive towards him, he lets them play with his ball, because they ignore any attempt on his part to stop them. Pavandeep is not efficacious in the decision-making process of which he, as owner
of the ball, is purportedly in charge. Pavandeep’s account is corroborated by his more popular classmate Zak in his response to the story about unpopular John’s request to play:

**RW**: Have you ever been in a situation like this?

**Zak**: Sam’s John, Sam’s too rough, Sam’s always rough, we don’t want him to play football with us. But the person, the person, Pavandeep always brings the ball, it’s Pavandeep’s ball yeah. Miss at playtime, Sam kicked Pavandeep’s ball away. At lunchtime, Pavandeep let him play again!

Not only is Pavandeep unable to exclude those who mistreat him from football games, but when the boys play with Faizel’s ball rather than his own, he is sometimes excluded. He complained to me in his ‘dispute’ interview in year 5, ‘I was playing football, thingy, and it was Faizel’s ball, and he said no you can’t play, because I scored for the other team. Miss I’m gonna let him play with my ball’. A little later I asked Pavandeep why he thought Faizel behaved in this way towards him. ‘Miss I don’t know, he hates me’, he replied. ‘Cos he starts fighting with me sometimes. When I like tackle him, he say you foul me, and he start pushing me and that’. He continued: ‘Miss sometimes I think I might have to start a fight with him. Cos he tries to fight with me every day. But I’m afraid I’ll get told off that’s why’.

Pavandeep is caught between two different ways of relating to Faizel: submission or physical aggression. So far his strategy has been submission to Faizel, who decides both whether Pavandeep can play with *his* ball, and whether *he* can play with Pavandeep’s ball. The alternative would be to respond to Faizel’s provocations or actively deny him a place in the football game, both of which are likely to lead to a fight. He is in a difficult situation. He loves playing football, but is sometimes excluded by Faizel, to whom he submits. When they play with his ball his inclusion is secure, but to avoid confrontation he lets boys like Faizel, Idris, and Sam play even though they have behaved in an aggressive and unfriendly way towards him. Through his reluctance to fight, he produces himself as less dominant than his peers, losing control over decisions about inclusion and exclusion that are officially his.

This view of Pavandeep is supported by fieldnotes, which document three separate occasions on which different classmates were physically aggressive towards Pavandeep, who did not respond in kind to their provocations. However the dataset includes three instances which could challenge the above interpretation. In sociometric interviews, two relatively unaggressive children who said they disliked Pavandeep gave reasons alluding to aggression. A girl said ‘he always pushes and shoves about in the line’, and a boy that Pavandeep and Paul ‘both start arguing and stuff in football’. The third instance arose in the discussion group in year 5 with Pavandeep and three of his classmates. The boys were asked: ‘You are playing a game with your friends, and someone you don’t really like comes and asks to play. You say no, but they join in the game anyway. What do you do?’ Pavandeep’s solution was a relatively aggressive one: ‘Miss first I say no you can’t play, but when they start like bothering me, I just start, they start fighting with me, I start fighting back and then we start swearing at each other’. This finding seems to contradict both the sociometric data and the accounts given above by Pavandeep and Zak. However, there is evidence that many of the boys gave non-representative answers to this question. Nine of the twelve boys who participated in the discussion groups proposed aggressive solutions to this problem, and the majority of these were relatively unaggressive according to sociometric, interview, and ethnographic data. It seems likely that along with some of his classmates, Pavandeep sought to impress his peers with his expressions of violence in the discussion groups. Overall, the picture is of a boy who is
generally reluctant to use aggression, at least towards aggressive peers, but may have been somewhat aggressive on occasion towards unaggressive peers.

_Faizel_

Faizel’s sociometric profile suggests that he is somewhere between ‘average’ and ‘controversial’ sociometric categories, being named by six peers as someone they like, and five (including Pavandeep and Paul) as someone they dislike. Faizel also appears quite verbally and physically aggressive in peer and teacher reports, which is consistent with the ‘controversial’ category (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Newcomb et al., 1993). This profile maps on to a way of dealing with inclusion and exclusion in football games which differs sharply from Pavandeep’s. When Faizel brings his ball in, he ensures that boys respect his decisions by employing verbal and physical aggression. As we saw above, Pavandeep claimed that Faizel played with his ball without asking yet when it was Faizel’s ball, he excluded Pavandeep. Two children in the sociometric interviews (including Paul) and three in the ‘disputes’ interviews (including Pavandeep and Paul) told me that Faizel did not let them play football, and four children in the sociometric interviews (including Pavandeep and Paul) and four in the ‘disputes’ interviews (including Pavandeep) spoke of fights they had had or witnessed involving Faizel. (The only contradictory data is that one of Faizel’s classmates, Farhan [who is mentioned by Amandeep below] stated in the sociometric interview that Faizel did not get into fights.) Here is an example from Amandeep’s ‘disputes’ interview:

_Amandeep:_ Faizel’s not scared of no one. But when he gets beatings he starts to cry innit. Like when Idris took Faizel’s ball, Faizel smacked his face, Idris kicked Faizel in the stomach and Faizel cried.

_RW:_ Did he?

_Amandeep:_ Yeah, but he’s still saying, come on then, come on! [Looks amused and disapproving] If people start crying they shouldn’t say come on then, come on!

Amandeep notes Faizel’s aggression and refusal to back down, even in the midst of pain, giving the sense that Faizel is a force to be reckoned with in the playground. This comes through in Faizel’s descriptions of himself too. Here is his response to the story about a boy called John who is unwanted by the group of children he asks to play with (from ‘disputes’ interview):

_RW:_ Have you ever been in a situation like this?

_Faizel:_ Which situation? [gestures to John and group in accompanying picture]

_RW:_ Either, it doesn’t matter.

_Faizel:_ Probably that [points to group], not that [points to John]. Probably once, someone asks – actually it happens nearly all the time, someone joins in the football and I say you can’t play who said you can play and they say a name but they’re lying.

Amandeep corroborates Faizel’s account in response to the same story:

_RW:_ Have you ever been in a situation like this?

_Amandeep:_ Yeah. Once, Faizel didn’t let us, me and Farhan, play football, and once I brought my football in and Faizel said let us play and I said no why should I? You didn’t let me play! [laughs]

_RW:_ [laughs] And do you know why Faizel wouldn’t let you play?
Amandeep: No. But he won’t ever let us play, he says no you’re crap, you can’t play. And Sam. We just play anyway.

RW: What happens when you do that, does Faizel try to stop you playing?

Amandeep: Yeah, but I just go I’m playing I don’t care. Farhan just says come on man let’s go, and I say no man don’t do nothing. Farhan gets scared, he always says come on let’s play something else. Cos Faizel and Sam try and beat him up and he gets really angry.

Amandeep’s, Faizel’s, and Pavandeep’s descriptions suggest that Faizel acts aggressively in the playground to good effect, ensuring respect for his decisions. In these accounts, aggression appears to be more efficacious than requests and commands. However, Faizel’s aggression is not indiscriminate, as demonstrated during a discussion group in year 5. Faizel and his classmates Zak, Idris, and Amar were asked: ‘You are playing a game with your friends, and someone you don’t really like comes and asks to play. You say no, but they join in the game anyway. What do you do?’ Faizel opened the discussion:

Faizel: You – go – and, well Miss that happened today, twice.

RW: Ok so this is

Faizel: Miss that happened today, honestly.

RW: All right then, so what happened?

Faizel: [interrupting] Miss, Mandeer I think his name was, he came and played with us, and then I said go away you’re not playing

RW: This is playing football yeah?

Faizel: Yeah Miss and then he came again yeah, Miss, and then even though I, then I told Mrs Thomas [playground supervisor] yeah, Miss, and then Mrs Thomas said go yeah, and then, he never listened, he still carried on yeah. Then Miss afterwards I just said get lost, I moved, I threw his, I never really threw it I just moved his pack lunch, I said [inaudible] your pack lunch and go, Miss and then he just went.

In this extract, Faizel describes himself as strong-willed and determined to prevent someone unwanted from joining in the game. His comments were followed by a discussion about the efficacy of requests versus more forceful commands like Faizel’s. Then Faizel raised a problem which he claimed to grapple with himself:

Faizel: What, what if it isn’t your ball?

Idris: Exactly!

Faizel: And then Pav, if it is Pavandeep’s ball, what if he says yeah

Idris: [interrupting] A-All the time, I play-

Faizel: [interrupting] And you don’t wanna, you don’t wanna?

RW: So does that happen sometimes?

Faizel: Yeah Miss it does, Pavandeep says yes and I say no. And what would you do then?

Idris: I’d stay playing like I usually do.

Faizel: No, if someone else came and you didn’t want them to play but Pavandeep was saying yes, let ’em play.
When the ball does not belong to him, Faizel notes that he is not entitled to enforce his own views on inclusion and exclusion, no matter how frustrating this may be. This extract suggests that Faizel experiences differences of opinion between himself and the owner of the ball as problematic, indicating that to some extent at least he respects the rule that it is the owner of the ball who decides about inclusion and exclusion. He does not see it as entirely appropriate to behave aggressively in this situation, and this sense of appropriateness hints at a nuanced and differentiated use of aggression in the playground.

Paul

Like Pavandeep, Paul was named by five classmates as someone they disliked and only one as someone they liked, so he also resembles a 'rejected' child. Children's reasons for disliking him imply a person who sought dominance unsuccessfully. For instance, children commented, 'Paul goes, I can run faster than you yeah, but he was the last person', 'He's bossy', 'He likes to have his own way', and 'He always has to get his own way'. Unlike Pavandeep, his teachers (though not so much his peers) saw him as verbally and physically aggressive. Their view is supported to some extent by interviews and fieldnotes. In his sociometric interview, Paul's classmate Josh, who was not at all aggressive and usually played with girls, complained that Paul swore at him and called him 'gay'. My fieldnotes document occasions when Paul was victim of aggression, and others when he was perpetrator. For instance, he hurt his arm after several boys in another class pushed him over in the playground, and during a wet play Faizel screwed up his paper aeroplane; while he threw a beanbag in his cousin's face because she was annoying him, and called Faizel 'a skinny little runt' during a dispute in a gym class.

Paul certainly saw himself as unpopular. One playtime in October, when he had been at the school a month, I came across him sitting on a bench alone, looking fed up. I asked what was wrong and he said that the boys would not let him play football, going on to single out Faizel. He added, 'I've been here a month and I still haven't made a single friend'. Paul's mother subsequently spoke to his teacher, Miss Chahal, who tried to tackle the problem by carrying out exercises with the class designed to help them understand how it feels to be left out. She and Paul also asked his classmates why they would not let him play football. On the two occasions I observed, the answer was the same: 'It's not me, it's Faizel!' Paul's peers thus explicitly abdicated responsibility for decisions about inclusion to their dominant classmate Faizel.

A few months later, in his sociometric interview, Paul said that he disliked Faizel, Zak, Idris, and Sam, but added that recently all four had become nicer to him. Wondering if Miss Chahal's interventions had been effective, I asked why he thought the change had come about. Paul replied immediately and with conviction, 'Because I hit Sam'. He went on to explain how it happened:

Paul: Well the thing was after maths he started saying stuff like, really horrible, and I asked Sandeep where is he and he said I'm not telling you.

RW: Did he? Why did he say that?

Paul: Cos he knew I was gonna fight him. I went up to him

RW: [interrupting] How did you find him?

Paul: I just looked around and I saw him. I went up to him and I said all right Sam and I just went whack!
I asked Paul how he felt after he hit Sam.

**Paul:** I wasn't really happy about it, but I had to do it. When I ask Miss something it never works really.

**RW:** Do you think it could've worked if Miss Chahal had done something different, or do you think it was just impossible to sort it out that way?

**Paul:** It's impossible to do it the way Miss Chahal said. I won't punch anybody else. If Sam does it again really bad for another couple of months I'll do it again.

Paul explained that since this event, which earned him a detention, Sam no longer swore at him, and treated him with more respect, 'saying do you want this Paul, passing me my ball instead of kicking it down the end of the playground'. 'He's scared a little bit – not that much, just a little bit', he said, describing how other boys including Faizel were also treating him more respectfully. In an interview early in year 5, Paul reported that this shift had persisted, and that Faizel was now his friend. This claim is supported by fieldnotes, which document several occasions on which Paul was to be found playing football with Faizel and others in the playground. Soon after he changed schools, and Faizel and Zak told me that they were sorry he had left.

It is not that Paul was completely unaggressive until the day he hit Sam. As noted above, I had observed encounters between Paul and other boys, including Faizel, in which both parties swore at and insulted the other, and several of Paul's peers saw him as domineering. However, according to the dataset, Paul's aggression prior to this turning point was primarily verbal, and when physical, it seemed to be directed to unaggressive peers. Therefore the day he walked up to perhaps the most aggressive boy in his year and hit him in the face marked a decisive and transforming change.

**Discussion**

These case studies show that aggressive acts play a key role in the process by which boys make decisions about inclusion and exclusion in their football games, and more generally in the construction of a dominance hierarchy in the school playground. Those who are able and willing to aggress against others establish themselves as dominant over those who submit to them. Thus, when Faizel and Pavandeep encountered one another in decisions about inclusion, Faizel's aggression and Pavandeep's backing down reproduced Faizel as more powerful and influential than Pavandeep, while Paul's decisive act of aggression against perhaps the most aggressive boy in his year transformed his place in the peer group and afforded him respect and acceptance.

The data support psychologists' findings that some aggressive children are popular, dominant, central to the social network, and/or perceived as popular or cool (Estell et al., 2002; Farmer et al., 2003; Milich & Landau, 1984; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rodkin et al., 2006; Xie et al., 2003), and the mainly sociological literature on boys' use of physical aggression at school to gain status and construct themselves in line with hegemonic masculinity (Adler & Adler, 1998; Boulton, 1993; Connell, 1989; Ferguson, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1976; Swain, 2003, 2004). This paper adds to the literature by demonstrating one specific means by which the connection between popularity and aggression detected on sociometric measures is realized. The data show that aggression can play a crucial role in enforcing decisions about inclusion and exclusion in a coveted playground activity. Swain (2006) discusses the role of aggression in decision-making about inclusion but includes no evidence. This paper provides that
evidence. As such, it goes some way to demystifying the connection between popularity and aggression which has puzzled some psychologists (Newcomb et al., 1993), and contributes to our understanding of social dynamics on the school playground.

The case studies challenge the SIP approach to aggression, according to which children aggress as a result of biased information processing about the social world (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Crick et al., 2002; Dodge & Rabiner, 2004). According to this approach, Pavandeep perceives the social world more accurately than the more aggressive Faizel, whose propensity for information processing errors leads him to aggress against his peers. Yet the case studies tell a different story, in which aggression signifies dominance and decision-making ability, aspects entirely missed by the SIP account. Faizel uses aggression not as a consequence of distorted processing of information, but in order to create himself as a force to be reckoned with among his peers. Meanwhile, Pavandeep is non-aggressive not so much because he processes information accurately, but because he is afraid to fight. And Paul’s view that hitting Sam gained him peer acceptance seems to convey a solid understanding of his social reality. Because the SIP approach conceives the social world as information, it negates the possibility that aggression has specific meanings to people (such as dominance), and it is people’s orientation to and construction of those meanings, rather than simply the accuracy of their information processing, that informs their levels of aggression (see Merten, 1996a, 1996b for a related argument). Aggressive children may differ from non-aggressive peers not so much in their information processing ability, but in their values (Smith & Boulton, 1990; Sutton et al., 1999a) and emotions (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001).

Moreover, the meaning each boy assigns to aggression is informed by the responses of his peers and other people in his life (Evans, 2006). For example, Pavandeep may not see physical aggression as a legitimate basis for decision-making, but if his peers make decisions involving him on that basis, he cannot opt out of such a conceptualization of aggression. Insofar as Pavandeep finds himself growing up in a working class area where aggression may be valued as effective and as constitutive of masculinity (Evans, 2006; Swain, 2004), he cannot avoid grappling with physical aggression and being defined and limited by it. The role of social context in informing a boy’s aggressive behaviour is missed when that behaviour is explained in terms of individualized information processing errors.

An important implication is that interventions designed to improve the accuracy with which individual aggressive boys perceive their social world may be misguided. Any intervention which sees aggression as emanating from individual pathology (distorted information processing) will fail to address the intrinsically social production of aggression. The case studies show that these boys are constantly reaffirming aggression as a primary means by which popularity and decision-making are achieved. Interventions to reduce aggression in the playground must find a way to transform the meanings the boys assign to aggression, such that it ceases to be efficacious and status-conferring. This is not an easy task in areas where adults outside the school gates continue to assign precisely these meanings to aggression (Evans, 2006). Swain (2003) notes that of the three English schools he studied, physical aggression was most prevalent and most likely to confer status at the school situated in a working class area, while Evans (2006) describes how boys in Bermondsey in London seek prestige through violence, not only in school but also in their local community. It seems likely that at Woodwell Green too, boys are grappling with the relationship between status, aggression, and masculinity outside of school as well as inside it.
Not all aggressive acts are effective in enforcing decisions and producing status. Faizel struggled with the inappropriateness of enforcing his decisions when he did not own the ball, while Paul's minor acts of aggression did not have the same impact as the bolder act of hitting Sam in the face. These nuances may help to explain why only some aggressive children are influential and/or popular (Rodkin et al., 2006). Perhaps unpopular aggressive children mainly act aggressively in situations that do not signify dominance for their peers. For example, hitting someone because they scored a goal for the other team might signify petulance or excess to these boys rather than dominance and authority.

These data also help explain the combination of aggressive and prosocial behaviour typical of 'controversial' status children (who are both well liked and well disliked). Coie and Dodge (1988, p. 828) described this combination of aggression and friendliness as 'dramatically contradictory'. To the extent that Faizel uses his aggression to include and defend specific peers, while excluding and attacking specific others, he is prosocial and aggressive simultaneously, and likely to provoke polarized feelings from peers on different sides of his dividing line between inclusion and exclusion (which is not, of course, fixed). Faizel's behaviours seem very likely to lead some peers to like, and others to dislike him.

The boys in this case study had different ethnicities and religions, raising the question of whether the events described in this paper resulted from children's in-group preferences or prejudices against out-groups. It is not easy to answer this question because children rarely spoke openly of such matters (which were taboo at Woodwell Green). However, children of this age usually show preferences for peers of their own ethnicity (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Shaw, 1973; Singleton & Asher, 1979), and may inflict racist insults on one another (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002), and sociometric and (to a lesser extent) ethnographic data indicated that Woodwell Green was no exception (Woods, 2008). For example, Pavandeep was the only boy in the class who wore his uncut hair in a turban, and his classmate Idris teased him by calling him 'Turbanator'. Zak told me that all Muslim children were his brothers and sisters and this meant that he respected them. While looking together at their reception class photograph (when they were aged 4-5 years), Faizel's friend Mohamed (Pakistani Muslim) commented, 'That was when I used to kick you, do you remember? Because I thought you were a white [inaudible]'. When the boys' year 5 teacher told them that there would be a new boy in their class, Faizel asked, 'Is he from this country or another country?'

These observations suggest that at least some children at Woodwell Green saw one another through a lens of ethnicity and/or religion, at least some of the time. Most of the core football-playing boys in Pavandeep, Faizel, and Paul's class were Muslim (mostly Pakistani). It may be that Faizel showed preferential treatment to Muslim peers, but if this was the case, then such a preference was criss-crossed with other concerns. For example, we saw above that according to Amandeep, Faizel would not allow Farhan (who was Pakistani Muslim) to play football, while Sandeep (Indian Sikh) was usually included. Faizel's friend and fellow footballer Mohamed (Pakistani Muslim) named Pavandeep as a friend in his sociometric interview, while Sam (English non-religious) was one of the main aggressors against Paul (English Christian), who in turn aggressed against Josh (English non-religious). Thus although it is likely that children's actions in the playground were informed by their peers' ethnicities and religions, these were certainly not the only issues at stake when they acted aggressively to enforce decisions about inclusion and exclusion.
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