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Defenders of victims of peer aggression: Interdependence theory and an exploration of individual, interpersonal, and contextual effects on the defender participant role

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ABSTRACT

The research on predictors and effects of defending victims of peer victimization and bullying continues to grow, but most research on this topic is lacking a strong theoretical framework. This review of defending research introduces interdependence theory as a theory with the capacity to organize many of the empirical findings from the existing defending literature into a meaningful whole. Other theories used to frame defending research are described, and limitations of these theories are discussed. Framing defending research within interdependence theory leads to new research questions. These include: (1) who defends whom and why?, (2) through what processes do individuals in the peer group internalize peer group norms in regard to peer victimization, and how do these internalized norms affect individual perceptions and beliefs that then guide behavior?, and (3) what are the individual and interpersonal factors that affect whether bystanders defend peers, and how does intervention in peer victimization situations affect defenders in addition to victims? Framing defending research within interdependence theory allows for the organization of previous findings and will guide new research.

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Introduction

Peer victimization, being targeted by peers' aggressive acts (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988), is a problem among children and adolescents that receives worldwide attention (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Peer victimization occurs when a peer is the recipient of intentional aggression. Bullying differs from peer victimization in that in addition to there being an intent to harm, there is an observed or perceived power difference between aggressor and victim which makes it difficult for the victim to defend his or herself and the aggression perpetration toward the victim continues over time or is likely to repeat (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2013; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). Peer victimization and bullying among children and adolescents is problematic because of the many individual and interpersonal difficulties associated with involvement with peer victimization for victims (Card, Isaacs, & Hodges, 2007; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Salmivalli, 2010). Aggressors, and those who witness peer victimization, often referred to as bystanders, are likely to be negatively affected by these experiences as well (Menesini et al., 1997; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Although much research has been conducted to better understand aggressors, victims, and the group nature of peer victimization, there are other youth who actively stand up against victimization. These youth, for whom there is a limited but growing body of research, are the focus of this review.

This theoretical review will first discuss peer victimization as a group process, the theories of the bystander effect and goal-framing theory, and then introduce interdependence theory as a theory with the capacity to organize many of the empirical findings from the existing defending literature into a meaningful whole, while also framing questions and hypotheses for future research. We based this review on studies and previous reviews identified through electronic literature searches and backward searches from other papers.

Peer victimization as a group process

Historically, bullying and peer victimization researchers studied the aggressor–victim dyad, but evidence supports the need to investigate the group nature of peer victimization. The negative psychosocial correlates of witnessing peer victimization for individuals outside of the victim role give credence to the view that peer victimization is a group phenomenon (Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Rivers et al., 2009). Peers have been observed to be present in up to 85% of episodes of victimization; this figure depends on the physical environment (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Unfortunately, involvement with peer victimization in some capacity is typical for children and adolescents in that most children in the school setting are involved with peer victimization through different roles (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukialnen, 1996). In this way, peer victimization can be considered a group process (Salmivalli, 2010). Different studies suggest that these roles are more or less differentiated from each other, but research that identifies these roles has consistently shown children and adolescents' tendency to either support aggressors (as assistants to or reinforcers of the aggressor), attempt to stay outside the problem of peer victimization, or behave in prosocial ways on behalf of peer victims (Casper, 2013; Fitzpatrick & Bussey, 2011; Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Sandstrom, Makover, & Bartini, 2013; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

This latter group, who defend their victimized peers, may enact a variety of prosocial behaviors including comforting and supporting the victim, intervening, getting help, or encouraging the victim to get help (Salmivalli et al., 1996). A common feature of defenders and interveners is that in comparison to passive bystanders who do not intervene or support victims, defenders take an active role in peer victimization by demonstrating anti-victimization behavior including supporting victims by taking their sides (Oh & Hazler, 2009).

Victims are often physically weaker than aggressors and may lack the social skills needed to protect themselves (Card et al., 2007); for these reasons they may have little success in defending themselves. Defenders, however, have been observed to successfully intervene on behalf of victimized peers during victimization episodes (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). However, defenders are not the majority of peer bystanders. Hawkins et al. (2001) recorded children and early adolescents intervening in episodes of peer victimization. Their observations of the playground showed that peers failed to intervene in 81% of peer victimization episodes. In this study, instances of actual intervention were

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