



The effect of victims' responses to overt bullying on same-sex peer bystander reactions



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of victims' responses to overt bullying on peer bystanders' attitudes and reactions. Fifth- and seventh-grade students ($N = 206$; $M_{age} = 11.13$ and 13.18 years, respectively) completed online questionnaires about gender-consistent videotaped hypothetical bullying scenarios in which the victims' responses (angry, sad, confident, ignoring) were experimentally manipulated. Victims' responses significantly influenced bystanders' attitudes towards the victim, perceptions of the victimization, emotional reactions, and behavioral intentions. In general, angry victims elicited more negative reactions, sad victims elicited greater intentions to act, while incidents involving confident victims were perceived as less serious. Several variations depending on the bullying type and students' grade, gender, and personal experiences with bullying were evident. Implications for individual-level and peer-level anti-bullying interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive problem that is typically defined as repeated and intentional aggressive behavior occurring within an asymmetrical power relationship between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1994). School bullying has been recognized as a group phenomenon (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), which affects and is affected by bullies, victims, and bystanders alike. Research has indicated that peer onlookers are present in approximately 85% of school bullying episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997) and various participant roles adopted by bystanders have been identified (Salmivalli et al., 1996b). Depending on their behavioral reactions, bystanders have the potential to either contribute to the problem of bullying (e.g., by joining in, reinforcing the bully, or passively withdrawing) or form part of the solution (e.g., by defending the victim or telling a teacher). Bystanders' decisions to intervene have been found to depend on their social and moral attitudes towards victims, perceptions of bullying situations, and emotional reactions (Thornberg et al., 2012). Therefore, in addition to assessing bystander's reported actions, it is important to examine the cognitions and emotions that are associated with bystanders' behaviors. This approach may highlight key bystander outcomes amenable to intervention while furthering current understandings of bystander roles in bullying.

1.1. Determinants of peer bystander outcomes

Consistent with social cognitive theory which highlights the complex interplay between behavioral, personal, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986), peer attitudes and bystanders' reactions to bullying situations have been found to depend on a range of individual (e.g., gender, age, bullying experiences) and situational factors (e.g., bullying type, degree of harm) (Baldry, 2004; Gini, 2008; Gini,

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Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008; Oh & Hazler, 2009). For example, characteristics of the person such as female gender and younger age have been associated with higher rates of defending victims of bullying (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Characteristics of particular bullying situations have also been found to impact bystander reactions, with peers showing less support for bullies who engaged in direct physical or direct verbal aggression compared to those who engaged in relational or indirect verbal bullying (Tapper & Boulton, 2005). Further examination of factors that influence peer bystanders' attitudes and reactions may assist in the development of anti-bullying interventions targeting the peer group, which seek to educate students about bullying, reduce bystander complacency, and promote positive peer relationships. One situational factor whose effect on bystanders has not been adequately investigated is the victim's response to being bullied. This salient feature of bullying incidents may hold important implications for a range of bystander outcomes.

1.2. Victims' responses to bullying

The way victims respond to bullying has been identified as a significant determinant of both future victimization and victim maladjustment (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996; Spence, De Young, Toon, & Bond, 2009). Researchers have distinguished between two subgroups of victims: aggressive and passive victims (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Aggressive victims (also known as provocative victims) tend to display anger, respond with reactive aggression, and engage in unregulated and often unsuccessful counterattacks. In contrast, passive victims, who tend to be the majority, display sadness and anxiety and engage in withdrawn and submissive behaviors. Angry, aggressive, and externalizing coping strategies including fighting back as well as internalizing coping strategies implying sadness or helplessness have been found to perpetuate the cycle of victimization by provoking further aggression or reinforcing the bully (Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990; Salmivalli et al., 1996a). Hence, anti-bullying interventions typically recommend that victims respond calmly and confidently using neutral, non-provocative comments which aim to confuse the bully and diffuse the situation (Berry & Hunt, 2009; Fox & Boulton, 2003). Victims are also commonly advised by teachers or researchers to calmly ignore the bully and continue their activities while displaying a nonchalant expression (Berry & Hunt, 2009; Salmivalli et al., 1996a; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991).

Past research has typically evaluated the effectiveness of victims' responses to being bullied in terms of each strategy's ability to diminish or stop the bullying (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). While this is obviously an important goal, it is also crucial to consider the effect of victims' emotional displays and behavioral responses during bullying episodes on the broader peer group. In particular, it is important to consider the effect of victims' responses to bullying on peer bystanders who are present during bullying episodes and who have the power to influence the situation through their own reactions. Individual-level interventions should take into account the peer processes at play when advising victims in how to respond to peer harassment. Peer-level interventions (e.g., Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005) can also draw upon this knowledge when tackling a culture of bullying within the peer group. Improvements to both individual-level and peer-level anti-bullying interventions employed within the context of whole school programs (e.g., Kärnä et al., 2011) may offer an important stepping stone towards increasing the efficacy of anti-bullying programs (Tofi & Farrington, 2011).

1.3. Effect of victims' responses on peer bystander outcomes

Research has yet to directly examine the potential effect of victims' responses to bullying on the attitudes and reactions of bystanders. However, some evidence suggests that victims' responses may influence other people's perceptions of bullying incidents. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found anecdotal evidence that pre-service teachers and school bullying experts considered victims' reactions, including how well they defended themselves, when determining the seriousness of bullying episodes described in written vignettes. Cross-sectional (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002) and longitudinal research (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003) has also demonstrated connections between victims' coping responses and peer preference, providing preliminary evidence that victims' responses may influence peer attitudes. Related literature has revealed that peer rejection mediates the relation between aggressive or withdrawal behaviors and victimization (Hanish & Guerra, 2000), suggesting the influence of victims' behavior on peer preference and future victimization in turn.

Victims' responses to peer aggression were found to impact children's perceptions of the aggressor and the victim within an experimental study which adopted a story paradigm (Courtney, Cohen, Deptula, & Kitzmann, 2003). Children liked the aggressor more in situations where the victim responded assertively rather than passively. In addition, nonassertive victims were liked less than assertive victims, particularly in situations where the aggressor behaved aggressively towards multiple children. Other studies, which have experimentally manipulated victims' responses to teasing using video scenarios, found that hostile victims were rated as less friendly compared to victims who adopted empathy-inducing, humorous, or ignoring responses (Lightner, Bollmer, Harris, Milich, & Scambler, 2000; Scambler, Harris, & Milich, 1998). While these studies have highlighted the potential influence of victims' responses to bullying on other people's attitudes towards victims (e.g., peer liking) and perceptions of the victimization (e.g., perceived seriousness), more research with a specific focus on peer bystanders is needed, as these students observe victims' immediate responses to bullying incidents. Exploring a wide range of bystander outcomes spanning cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains will also offer further insights into the peer dynamics involved in bullying.

1.4. Aims and hypotheses

The current study aimed to extend past research by investigating the impact of the victim's response to school bullying on peer bystanders' attitudes and reactions. Viewing gender-consistent hypothetical videotaped scenarios, participants assumed the role of

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