



# Early adolescents' willingness to intervene: What roles do attributions, affect, coping, and self-reported victimization play?

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## ABSTRACT

Limited research has sought to understand early adolescents' willingness to intervene in peer victimization as a function of their own responding to being victimized. The present study examined whether early adolescents' attributions, affect, and coping responses to a victimization vignette were related to their willingness to intervene, and whether self-reported victimization moderated the aforementioned associations. Participants were 653 5th- to 8th-grade students (50.4% girls, 58.5% Caucasian, 34.5% Hispanic) who completed a self-report survey that included a vignette asking students to imagine that they were victimized in school. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted separately for boys and girls. Although attributions and affect showed no significant associations with students' willingness to intervene, seeking social support coping was associated with greater willingness to intervene for both boys and girls, and problem-focused coping was associated with willingness to intervene for girls only. Unexpectedly, self-reported victimization was associated positively with both boys' and girls' willingness to intervene. Findings also revealed two unexpected two-way interactions between peer victimization and boys' characterological self-blame and girls' wishful thinking coping. Overall, study findings highlight the need for future research and anti-bullying programs to address how victimization could either motivate or discourage a student's willingness to intervene.

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## 1. Introduction

Peer victimization is widely prevalent during the middle school years, when students are especially vulnerable to pressures of 'fitting in' with local norms while trying to develop a sense of self (Eccles et al., 1993). At the same time, early adolescence is a period when students develop a heightened sense of moral competence, which might enhance students' willingness to intervene during incidents of peer victimization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005; Gini, Pozzolo, & Hauser, 2011). A component of effective bystander intervention is students' intention to defend victims directly (i.e., by sticking up for the victim) or indirectly (i.e., by telling teacher); thus, understanding students' willingness to intervene is a critical step to reducing peer victimization (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012).

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Evidence indicates that certain individual-level characteristics predict intervening behaviors among early adolescents, including high self-efficacy (e.g., perceived ability to intervene), positive attitudes towards the victim, affective empathy (i.e., having concern for others in distress) and personal responsibility to intervene (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Poyhonen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006). Moreover, anti-bullying programs increasingly encourage students to take the side of their victimized peers, particularly through teaching empathy (broadly known as one's vicarious experience and understanding of another person's circumstance; see Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). Some studies indicate that girls may be more likely than boys to intervene (Oh & Hazler, 2009; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010); however, it should be noted that the limited literature has produced mixed findings as to whether there are gender differences in the associations between empathic responding and intervening behaviors (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007, 2008).

Limited research has sought to explicate early adolescents' psychological responding to their own hypothetical victimization, or when they are asked to imagine that they themselves are being victimized (Camodeca & Goosens, 2005). Given that the limited extant literature alludes to students who are willing to intervene as being psychologically strong and emotionally attuned to others' experiences, it is important to know what attributions adolescents make about their own hypothetical victimization and how they might feel and cope in response to the experience. It is also important to consider whether students might be willing to intervene based on personal experiences of current or past victimization. That is, because victims know what it feels like to be victimized, and empathy is a major component of bystander intervention, it is surprising that studies have largely overlooked victims as being capable and motivated to intervene on behalf of other victims (for an exception, see Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012). Based on the existing research, however, the evidence points to a negative relation between self-reported victimization and willingness to intervene. A plethora of research indicates that victims are prone to negative responses to being victimized (i.e., as reflected in their negative affect or destructive coping mechanisms; see Champion, Vernberg, & Shipman, 2003; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Ttofi, Farrington, Losel, & Loeber, 2011; Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000); thus, it is likely that self-reported victimization will be associated negatively with students' willingness to intervene. Given the mixed findings on gender differences in relation to empathy and intervening, it is also important to investigate whether boys and girls respond differently to their hypothetical victimization.

Not all students have personal experiences of victimization to rely on when considering their willingness to intervene in instances of peer victimization. One way of addressing this is to present students with detailed, context-laden hypothetical scenarios, or vignettes, that would elicit psychological assessments and responses similar to such situations in real life. Studies have used hypothetical vignettes to examine individuals' moral decision-making processes and their intent to intervene (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012; Guerra & Slaby, 1990; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009; Wilkinson, 2007). For instance, Syvertsen et al. (2009) investigated how students would respond to a hypothetical vignette where a peer "plans to do something dangerous at school," finding that students with positive perceptions of the school were more likely to say they would do something than those without such perceptions. Research shows that when used properly, hypothetical vignettes elicit responses from individuals that are closely aligned with their behavior in real life situations (FeldmanHall et al., 2012; Jago & Vroom, 1978). Thus, students' likelihood to intervene in peer victimization incidents, regardless of their own victimization experiences, can be measured by presenting students with context-laden hypothetical vignettes. In the current study, the hypothetical victimization vignette involved a situation that is both context-laden and relevant to middle school students' experiences.

Based on the limited extant research, the current study sought to explore early adolescents' willingness to intervene as a function of how they think they would respond to being victimized, as well as due to their own experiences with being victimized. Specifically, this study sought to answer two overarching research questions: (1) Are early adolescents' attributions, affect, and coping responses to a hypothetical victimization vignette significantly associated with their willingness to intervene during incidents of peer victimization? and (2) Over and above the individual responses, are self-reported levels of victimization associated negatively with students' willingness to intervene, and does self-reported victimization moderate the aforementioned associations?

### 1.1. *Attributions and willingness to intervene*

Weiner's (1986, 1995) attribution theory is concerned with the ways in which individuals explain the causes of their own and others' behaviors. Attributions, or grants of responsibility, tend to vary along three dimensions: locus, stability, and controllability. Locus refers to whether the cause of a behavior is internal or external to the person, stability refers to whether the cause is constant or varying over time, and controllability is concerned with whether the cause is subject to volitional influence. Research has largely focused on how perpetrators attribute others' actions and their own negative behaviors (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002), and more recently, on how victims attribute the causes of their victimization. For instance, Graham and colleagues (see Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009) have shown that victims tend to possess an internalizing attribution that is usually stable and uncontrollable, known as characterological self-blame (e.g., "It's something about me"). In contrast, behavioral self-blame involves an internalizing attribution that is unstable and controllable (e.g., "It's something I did in this situation"), whereas an externalizing attribution is usually both unstable and uncontrollable (e.g., "That kid picks on everybody").

To date, there are no known studies that have examined how attributions of students who imagine they are victimized are related to their willingness to intervene during incidents of peer victimization. Indeed, research indicates that bystanders who are willing to intervene or defend others generally do so because they judge the victims to be innocent, rather than blaming the

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