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Defending victims: What does it take to intervene in bullying and how is it rewarded by peers?



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ABSTRACT

Defending is considered important in reducing bullying and victimization in schools. Yet, the prevalence of defending is quite low and there is little insight into aspects that explain why students intervene in bullying situations. The current study used a longitudinal design to simultaneously examine the antecedents and status outcomes of defending behavior. It was expected that affective and social-cognitive factors explain involvement in defending. Moreover, it was proposed that defending would be rewarded with popularity among peers, but only for defenders who were not victimized themselves. Unconfined multilevel path models were used and data came from students in grades 4–6 of Finnish elementary schools ($N = 4209$ students from 210 classrooms and 38 schools; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.25$; 50% boys). Affective empathy and students' self-efficacy beliefs were predictive of defending behavior over time, whereas cognitive empathy was not. Additionally, defenders increased their popularity among their peers. No substantial differences between victims and non-victims were found. This pattern of results suggests that, irrespective of victim status, specific children are more likely to defend in bullying situations and are rewarded with increased popularity.

1. Introduction

Bullying in schools is a severe problem worldwide with negative health consequences and psychosocial adjustment problems for those involved (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014). In past decades it has been acknowledged that the behavior of bystanders is crucial to end bullying (Salmivalli, 2014). Research demonstrated that defending - directly stepping in, seeking help, or comforting the victim (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) - can make a difference. In the classroom it is associated with lower levels of bullying (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2014) and lower risk of getting victimized (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). Among victims, being defended is associated with fewer negative psychological and social consequences (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011).

Knowing that intervening in bullying can make a difference for the victim's situation, it is not surprising that many anti-bullying interventions aim to encourage students to take a clear stance against bullying and support their victimized peers (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Salmivalli, 2014). Still, most bystanders choose not to get involved (e.g., Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012) and relatively little is known about the aspects that explain student's involvement in defending behavior. The main purpose of this

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study was therefore to obtain insight into the antecedents and outcomes of defending in bullying situations. This knowledge helps to encourage bystanders to take up the role of defender.

Using a longitudinal design, we first aimed to put affective and social-cognitive antecedents of defending in bullying situations to a test. A small number of cross-sectional studies investigated between-person variation in the likelihood of defending. These showed that girls were more likely to intervene in bullying situations than boys (e.g., Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Moreover, personal characteristics and beliefs such as positive attitudes towards victims, high levels of empathy, agreeableness, responsibility beliefs, moral awareness, and perceived ability to intervene were associated with defending behavior among children and adolescents (see: Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012; Pronk, Olthof, & Goossens, 2015; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015). These cross-sectional studies highlight interesting associations, but cannot establish their temporal order. To fill this gap, a longitudinal design was employed in the current study.

Second, the current study aimed to extend the literature by examining the outcomes of defending on social standing in the peer group (i.e., popularity). Especially in schools, children tend to form social hierarchies in which concepts of dominance, status, and visibility are important (Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Although intervening in favor of victims is generally perceived as risky for social standing in the peer group (Meter & Card, 2015; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012), relatively little is actually known about the outcomes of defending in terms of popularity among peers. Some studies report positive associations between perceived popularity and defending (Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Sainio et al., 2011), but, again, the temporal order has not been examined.

The third aim of the current study was to examine whether the processes described above are different for victims of bullying compared to non-victims. Previous studies have demonstrated that self-reported victimization is associated with a higher willingness to intervene (Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014) and that victims of bullying often tend to defend each other (Huitsing, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014). However, there is little insight into the affective and social cognitive processes related to defending among victims. It has been suggested that victims defend each other because they are friends (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013) or because they are targeted by the same bully (Huitsing et al., 2014). We argue that it is important to understand whether being victimized affects both the antecedents and outcomes of defending.

The present study examined affective and social cognitive factors as antecedents of defending. As various anti-bullying programs have incorporated empathy and efficacy in defending as essential features to reduce bullying (Farrington & Tsofi, 2010), we tested the roles of cognitive and affective empathy (see Fig. 1, path a), self-efficacy (path b) and their interactions (path c). Subsequently, we examined the outcomes of defending concerning perceived popularity in the peer group (path d). It is feasible that empathic and self-efficacious children are more popular among their peers even without being involved in defending and that defending plays a minor role for some children's popular status. In other words, while defending is often seen as pathway to popularity, it may not play this role for children who are high in self-efficacy and empathy as these features might be appealing enough, not requiring that they also engage in defending to be popular. To elucidate whether defending is a necessary intermediate stage to gain popularity, we explicitly modeled indirect effects from cognitive and affective empathy and self-efficacy to popularity via defending (path e). Statistically significant indirect effects indicate that defending behavior indeed acts as a proxy or intermediate behavioral expression of individual characteristics in prediction of popularity among peers. We end by investigating whether these processes differed between victims and non-victims of bullying.

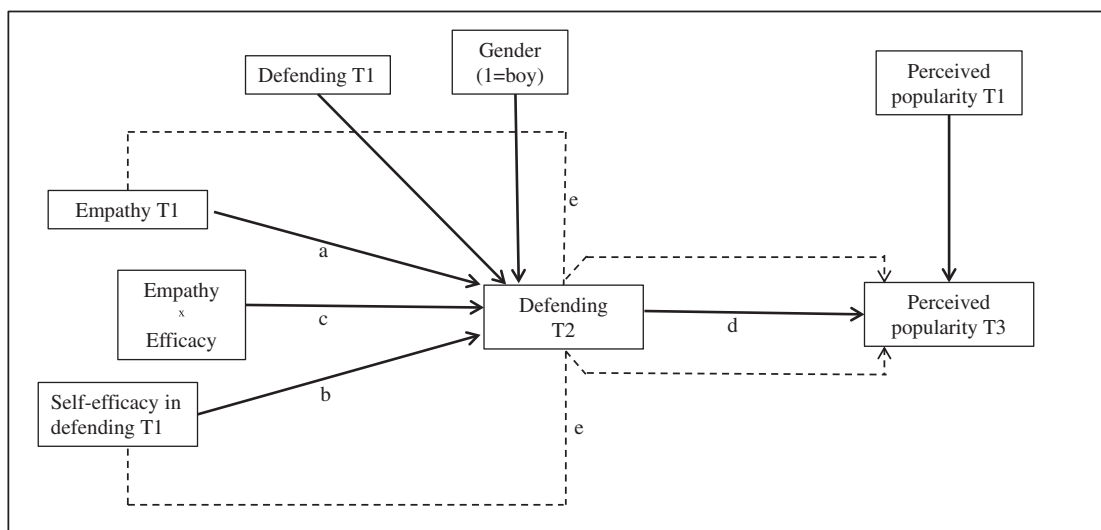


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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