



Classroom relationship qualities and social-cognitive correlates of defending and passive bystanding in school bullying in Sweden: A multilevel analysis

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ABSTRACT

Using the social-ecological and social cognitive theories as integrated guiding frameworks, the present study examined whether moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy at the individual level, and moral disengagement, quality of teacher–student relationships and quality of student–student relationships at the classroom level were associated with passive bystanding and defending in bullying situations. Participants were 900 Swedish students from 43 classrooms, ranging in age from 9 to 13 years. Multilevel regression analyses revealed that passive reactions by bystanders were associated with greater moral disengagement and less defender self-efficacy. Defending, in turn, was associated with less moral disengagement and greater defender self-efficacy and classroom student–student relationship quality. Furthermore, students who scored high in moral disengagement were even less prone to defend victims when the classroom student–student relationship quality was low, but more prone to act as defenders when the classroom student–student relationship quality was high. In addition, the negative association between defender self-efficacy and passive bystanding was stronger both in classrooms with higher student–student relationship quality and in those with lower class moral disengagement. Implications for prevention are discussed.

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Bullying is commonly defined as repeated aggression directed at individuals who are disadvantaged or less powerful in interactions (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). School bullying does not occur in a social vacuum, but rather is embedded in a social context in which peers are most often present as bystanders (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). A *bystander* is defined as any student who witnesses a bullying incident (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). According to the seminal work of Salmivalli (1999), six different social roles can emerge in bullying situations: *bully* (initiating and leading the bullying), *victim* (target of the bullying), *assistant* (joining the bully and participating in bullying others), *reinforcer* (supporting the bully by cheering and laughing), *outsider* (remaining passive or neutral), and *defender* (helping or supporting the victim). The latter four of these are characterized as bystander roles that students might adopt in a bullying situation. Assistants and reinforcers both encourage bullying by siding with the bully, and could therefore be categorized as pro-bullying bystanders (Nocentini,

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Menesini, & Salmivalli, 2013). This has also been confirmed in a previous factor analysis of a bystander scale conducted by Thornberg and Jungert (2013). An outsider that remains passive or neutral is also referred to as a passive bystander (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

Research has revealed that between-classroom variability in bullying can be explained in part by the prevalence of bystander behaviors (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Nocentini et al., 2013; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). The more classmates assist and reinforce bullying, provide less support and fail to defend the victims, the more often bullying is likely to occur. Hence, bystanders matter in bullying situations, and understanding how individual and contextual factors are associated with various bystander behaviors is an essential component of effective bullying prevention and intervention (cf., Polanin et al., 2012).

Previous research on bystander behavior in bullying has primarily focused on individual factors, such as empathy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014; Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Caravita, Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008), negative attitudes toward bullying (Pozzoli, Ang & Gini, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012), moral disengagement (Gini, 2006; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg, Pozzoli, Gini, & Jungert, 2015), self-efficacy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012; Pronk, Goossens, Olthof, De Mey, & Willemsen, 2013; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), and coping strategies (Batanova et al., 2014; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2012). Some studies have also examined bystanders' perceptions of the victims and other aspects of bullying situations (Chen, Chang, & Cheng, 2016; Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015), including experiences of social and emotional maladjustment as bystanders (Werth, Nickerson, Aloe, & Swearer, 2015).

Only a handful of studies have examined how contextual factors in school settings are associated with bystander behavior, such as peer group influence (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003), collective efficacy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011), anti-bullying peer attitudes (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), and moral disengagement at classroom level (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Pozzoli, Gini & Vieno, 2012). To address this research gap, we examined whether individual moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy, classroom teacher–student and student–student relationship qualities and class moral disengagement were associated with two main bystander behaviors in bullying (passive bystanding and defending) among a sample of students in Sweden. We conceptualized teacher–student and student–student relationship qualities as the degree of caring, warm, supportive, and respectful interactions and relationship patterns. We used gender, age, and class size as covariates.

1. Social-ecological framework and social cognitive theory

With reference to the social-ecological framework, bullying and bystander behavior patterns are established, sustained, and changed over time as a result of reciprocal associations between individual and contextual factors (Espelage, 2014; Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Indeed, scholars have long asserted that a social-ecological framework is particularly useful for understanding bullying behavior among children and adolescents (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). The most proximal influences on bullying situations are situated within the microsystem, which consists of individuals or groups of individuals who the student interacts with in the immediate environment, such as homes and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We focus on the classroom microsystem, which we consider to be the most significant influence with which students have direct contact in schools.

Bandura (1999, 2002, 2016) states that moral agency includes the power to refrain from acting inhumanely and to act humanely. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, social and moral cognition and behavior need to be understood as an on-going result of the interrelation between individual and contextual factors, which is in line with the social-ecological framework. "Moral agency is socially situated and exercised in particularized ways depending on the life conditions under which people transact their affairs. Social cognitive theory, therefore, adopts an interactionist perspective to morality. Moral actions are the products of the interplay of personal and social influences" (Bandura, 2002, p. 115). To understand humane and inhumane behaviors in bullying situations, social cognitive theory offers two important concepts that we have adopted in the current study: moral disengagement and self-efficacy.

1.1. Individual factors

Although students typically judge bullying as wrong and a serious transgression (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg, Thornberg, Alamaa & Daud, 2016), as actual bystanders, they seem to be less prone to act as defenders to stop bullying (Craig et al., 2000; O'Connell et al., 1999). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999, 2002, 2016), a critical reason why students do not always display moral agency as bystanders and intervene on the behalf of the victim is the presence of *moral disengagement*. This concept refers to a set of self-serving cognitive distortions by which self-regulated mechanisms can be deactivated and moral self-sanctions can be disengaged, which in turn promotes inhumane behavior without any feelings of remorse or guilt. Examples of moral disengagement mechanisms are moral justification (i.e., using worthy ends or moral purposes to excuse pernicious means), diffusion of responsibility (i.e., diluting personal responsibility because other people are also involved), disregarding or distorting the negative or harmful consequences of the actions, and blaming the victim (i.e., believing that the victim deserves his or her suffering). Moral disengagement processes are learned through social interactions with others, but can also develop into habits or dispositions, and occur at both individual and collective levels (Bandura, 1999, 2002, 2016).

So far, most research on moral disengagement and its association with bullying and bystander behaviors has only examined the association at the individual level. Extant studies have demonstrated that aggression, including bullying, is associated with

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