Getting angry matters: Going beyond perspective taking and empathic concern to understand bystanders' behavior in bullying

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A B S T R A C T

The present study examined the relations between different empathic dimensions and bystanders' behavior in bullying. Specifically, the indirect effects of empathic concern and perspective taking via empathic anger on defending and passive bystanding were tested in a sample of Italian young adolescents (N = 398; M_{age} = 12 years, 3 months, 47.2% girls). Path analysis confirmed the direct and indirect effects, via empathic anger, of empathic concern and perspective taking on bystanders' behavior, with the exception of the direct association between perspective taking and passive bystanding that was not significant. Our findings suggest that considering empathic anger together with empathic concern and perspective taking could help researchers to better understand the links between empathic dispositions and bystanders' behavior in bullying.

Since the mid-1990s, after the publication of Salmivalli and colleagues' seminal work (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), bullying research has progressively shifted from a simplistic view of the phenomenon as a dysfunctional dyadic relationship between a bully and a victim to the analysis of group processes. When bullying occurs, all peers within a group are in some way involved, and everyone can play a different role: bystanders can either reinforce or assist the bully, defend the victim, or behave as passive bystanders, staying away and acting as if nothing wrong is happening (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 1996). The presence and reactions of the audience not only can increase or reduce the likelihood that bullying continues but also influence how peers perceive the victims, students' sense of safety at school, and victims' adjustment and wellbeing (e.g., Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011). Given these findings, it is not surprising that scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of involving bystanders and promoting defending in anti-bullying programs (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Menesini, Nocentini, & Palladino, 2012; Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015). Theoretically and empirically, especially in the last decade, great efforts have been devoted to understand the factors that promote defending behavior and reduce the likelihood of pro-bullying and passive bystanding conduct.

Among individual variables, empathy has often been described as an important antecedent of defending in bullying (e.g., Meter & Card, 2015). The present study aimed to deepen our understanding of how various empathic components are related to bystanders' behavior. Specifically, we tried to overcome two limitations of the existing literature. First, the study of empathy in the field of bullying has been limited to the analysis of its cognitive and affective components, in which the former has been usually operationalized in terms of perspective taking dispositions, and the latter as the tendency to feel empathic concern and/or sympathy for the victim. In this study, we investigated a second, almost-neglected component of affective empathy: empathic anger. Second, to date, it is unclear which empathic components can help better explain differences between students who defend and those who

remain passive and how these components relate to each other concerning bystanders' behavior. In particular, consistent with Hoffman's (2000) theory on empathy and its relation to moral development and prosocial behavior, we tested the hypothesis that perspective taking and empathic concern could have both a direct and an indirect relation, via empathic anger, with defending and passive bystanding, in a sample of adolescents.

1. The multidimensional nature of empathy

Since the 1980s, the scientific community has increasingly agreed on the adoption of multidimensional models of empathy, in which affective and cognitive processes play equally important roles (Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Hoffman, 2000; McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006; Roberts & Strayer, 1996). Feshbach was the first scholar in the psychological field who proposed empathy as a multicomponential construct (Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Feshbach, 1975). Briefly, from her perspective, empathizing means feeling the same emotion felt by the observed person (i.e., affective match) but also being aware that this emotion stems from the other person's emotion. Therefore, affective and cognitive components co-occur to produce an empathic response.

More recently, Hoffman (1987, 1989, 2000) stated that empathizing does not mean feeling the other person's emotion exactly, but understanding and vicariously sharing the other's emotional experience. In other words, compared to Feshbach's definition, Hoffman's definition expands the set of emotional feelings that can characterize an empathic experience. In particular, Hoffman defined empathy by not focusing on the outcome (e.g., affective match) but rather on the processes underlying the relation between the observer's and the target's feelings. As Hoffman (2000) put it, "the key requirement of an empathic response according to my definition is the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation" (p. 30). In this sense, Hoffman did not deny that an affective match between the observer and the target can exist, but suggested that experienced emotions can also differ.

A specific example Hoffman reported concerns the feelings of anger that someone can experience when observing an aggressor who attacks an innocent victim, although the victim is sad, scared, or disappointed rather than angry. Hoffman (2000) referred to this empathic emotion as "empathic anger." In this situation, the affective tone of empathy can be influenced by causal attributions: when the aggressor is blamed for the victim's suffering and the victim is not considered to deserve his or her condition, the observer can feel distress for the victim and, consequently, experience anger because he or she perceives the aggressor-victim interaction as a moral violation. Indeed, anger is a common emotional reaction of people who face social injustice, both when they personally experience it and when they witness injustice experienced by other people (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Krehbiel & Cropanzano, 2000), in particular when they perceive that someone is intentionally causing harm to another person (Haidt, 2003).

Considering the construct of empathic anger, therefore, leads to broaden the view of affective empathy and to question its conceptualization as primarily a sadness-related emotional experience in relation to victims (Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003). However, empathic anger has been substantially overlooked in empirical research about empathy, while it may offer important insights especially in the context of bystanders' behavior during peer aggression episodes, which inherently deal with morality and justice. In this respect, Hoffman (2000) proposed a possible explanation of different bystanders' behavior during aggressions, specifically prosocial and indifferent behavior. In particular, he suggested that perspective taking and empathic concern can both represent a driving force to defend the victim, but also can be considered prerequisites for empathic anger that, in turn, promotes defending behavior and hinders passive bystanding. His idea is that the proneness to feel anger at the culprit derives from a disposition to both take the victim's perspective and feel empathic concern for his or her condition. This is specifically the hypothesis we tested in the current study.

2. Empathy and prosocial behavior

The idea that perspective taking and empathic concern represent a basis for prosocial and helping behavior has been a topic of interest for decades (e.g., Batson, 1991, 1998; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). In general, these empathic dispositions have been associated with different types of prosocial or altruistic behavior both in adults and in preschool- and school-aged children and youth (Batson, 1991; Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001; Lockwood, Seara-Cardoso, & Viding, 2014; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009; Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013; Roberts, Strayer, & Denham, 2014; Thompson & Gullone, 2008; Williams, O'Driscoll, Moore, Müller, & Vaish, 2014).

Conversely, as underlined by Hoffman (2000, 2001), empathic anger has been largely neglected in empirical research on prosocial and helping behavior, and this claim is still valid. Indeed, to date, only one manuscript exploring the relation between empathic anger and helping behavior with adult participants has been published (Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003). Briefly, this study showed that empathic anger was significantly and positively associated with empathic concern, whereas its relation with perspective taking was not significant. Moreover, findings suggested that the intention to help the victim was predicted by both empathic anger and empathic concern. Albeit interesting, in our opinion, Vitaglione and Barnett's (2003) study has at least two limitations. First, Hoffman's (2000) hypothesis that empathic concern precedes empathic anger has not been tested. Second, although a correlational analysis showed a non-significant relationship between perspective taking and empathic anger, it would have been interesting to consider the role of perspective taking together with both empathic concern and empathic anger in a single model predicting helping behavior.