



Early adolescents' motivations to defend victims in school bullying and their perceptions of student–teacher relationships: A self-determination theory approach



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate whether various dimensions of student–teacher relationships were associated with different types of motivation to defend victims in bullying and to determine the association between these types of motivations and various bystander behaviors in bullying situations among early adolescents in Italy. Data were collected from 405 Italian adolescents who completed a survey in their classroom. Results showed that warm student–teacher relationships were positively associated with defending victims and with autonomous motivation to defend victims. In contrast, conflictual student–teacher relationships were positively associated with passive bystanding and with extrinsic motivation to defend victims. Different forms of motivation to defend were found to be mediators between student–teacher relationship qualities and bystander behaviors in school bullying. Our findings suggest that teachers should build warm and caring student–teacher relationships to enhance students' autonomous motivation to defend victims of bullying as well as their inclination to defend the victims in practice.

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Bullying refers to repeated aggression directed at students who are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with those who bully (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010; Olweus, 1993), and it is a pervasive problem in schools throughout the world (e.g., Harel-Fisch, Walsh, Fogel-Grinvald, De Matos, & Craig, 2011). Bullying is a social process (Salmivalli, 2010) where many students who are not directly involved as bullies or victims are often present as bystanders (e.g., Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). According to the participant role approach (Salmivalli, 1999), students who witness bullying can undertake different roles, including assistants, who assist and join the bullies; reinforcers, who support the bullies by cheering and laughing; outsiders, who remain passive and try to avoid participating in the bullying; and defenders, who try to help the victims.

Defending victims might be motivated by more extrinsic factors such as teacher approval (Thornberg et al., 2012) or gaining or maintaining friendship with the victim (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012; Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2012). Defending might also be more intrinsically motivated by internal factors

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such as empathy (Forsberg et al., 2014; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012), internalized moral standards (Bellmore et al., 2012; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2012), or a perception that helping is simply consistent with the sort of person they are (Rigby & Johnson, 2006). Passive bystanding (outsider role) in turn might be extrinsically motivated by enjoyment of the event (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2012) and self-protection, including fear of retaliation, social disapproval, social blunders, getting bullied, losing friends, or losing social status (Bellmore et al., 2012; Forsberg et al., 2014; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012). Pro-bullying (assistant and reinforcer roles) might be extrinsically motivated by gaining or maintaining friendship with the bullies (Forsberg et al., 2014; Thornberg et al., 2012) or a perceived opportunity to seek higher social status and social approval among the popular bullies (Forsberg et al., 2014).

Research has shown that bullying is more frequent in school settings where bystanders reinforce bullying and is less frequent when bystanders are more inclined to defend the victims (Nocentini, Menesini, & Salmivalli, 2013; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). However, studies indicate that bystanders rarely support the victims (e.g., Craig et al., 2000). Because a set of social and cognitive factors can inhibit bystanders from helping victims (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013, 2014), it is crucial to examine students' motivation to defend victims in bullying situations. Furthermore, even though warm and supportive student–teacher relationships have been associated with defender behavior in a previous study (Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2016), it is currently unclear to what degree this link might be mediated by intrinsic motivation (caring teachers as moral role models promoting identification and moral internalization) or extrinsic motivation (caring teachers as reinforcers of moral behavior and punishers of immoral behavior) to defend victims in bullying.

Self-determination theory

A general theory of human motivation that has gained more attention and has received growing empirical support in recent decades is *self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory differentiates types of motivation and proposes that there are two broad forms of motivation that represent two ends on a continuum of self-volition (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). The motivation continuum extends from 'amotivation' to 'intrinsic motivation'. The former is the lack of motivation and the latter is the prototype of self-determined activity. Between 'amotivation' and 'intrinsic motivation' are four types of regulation. *External regulation* is the classic case of extrinsic motivation in which people's behavior is controlled by specific external contingencies. People seek to attain a desired consequence such as tangible rewards or to avoid a threatened punishment. *Introjected regulation*, which involves the person's ego and the emergence of feelings of pride or guilt or shame when engaging (or not engaging) in a particular behavior, represents a partial internalization in which regulations have not really become part of the integrated set of motivations, cognitions, and affects that constitute the self. *Identification* is the process through which people recognize and accept the underlying value of a behavior. Identification involves the acceptance and personal valuing of an acquired regulation. As compared with external and introjected regulations, *identified regulation* is expected to be better maintained and to be associated with higher commitment and performance. The fullest, most complete form of internalization of 'extrinsic motivation' is *integrated regulation*. This involves identifying with the importance of behaviors but also integrating those identifications with other aspects of the self. An example is when a person says, "I help people because helping is part of who I am".

With reference to these types of regulations, external and introjected regulations are considered to be *controlled motivation*, and identified and integrated regulations are considered to be *autonomous motivation*. However, although introjected regulation is categorized as controlled motivation, it is still recognized as less controlled than external regulation. Autonomous motivation concerns actions that are experienced as emanating from or congruent with one's self. Hence, autonomously motivated behaviors reflect a person's volition, values, or interests and make one feel like they are the "origin" of the behavior rather than a "pawn" acting out the behavior (Ryan & Connell, 1989). In contrast, controlled motivation is experienced as emanating either from external contingencies and controls or from self-imposed pressures like feelings of shame, guilt, or pride (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, controlled behaviors are driven by a desire to maintain self-esteem, avoid self-sanctions, please others, obey demands, and receive rewards and gains as well as to avoid punishments and costs (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

Previous research has shown that autonomous motivation predicts stronger persistence than controlled motivation in domains such as doing homework (Hagger, Sultan, Hardcastle, & Chatzisarantis, 2015), learning and academic performance (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014), physical activity (Teixeira, Carraca, Markland, Silva, & Ryan, 2012), health behavior change and maintenance (Ng et al., 2012; Ryan, Patrick, Deci, & Williams, 2008), job performance (Moran, Diefendorff, Kim, & Liu, 2012), creativity (Grant & Berry, 2011), and work satisfaction (Van den Broeck, Lens, De Witte & Van Coillie, 2013) to name just a few. Moreover, as compared to controlled motivation, autonomous motivation to engage in prosocial behavior has been found to be associated with actual prosocial behavior (Hardy, Dollahite, Johnson, & Christensen, 2015). In two studies by Weinstein and Ryan (2010), it was found that autonomous helpers (university students) provided more help and were perceived as more helpful than controlled helpers in situations where they reported their general prosocial acts in terms of helping someone or doing something for a good cause on a given day and when they were asked to donate money to another participant in the study.

Because peer influence is one of the strongest predictors of bullying in the school context (for a review, see Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010), students' self-determination to defend victims in bullying should be a crucial component. From a theoretical point of view, Tsang, Hui, and Law (2011) argue, "If students are well equipped with self-determination, they are

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