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# Adolescents' explicit and implicit evaluations of hypothetical and actual peers with different bullying participant roles



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined how adolescents evaluate bullying at three levels of specificity: (a) the general concept of bullying, (b) hypothetical peers in different bullying participant roles, and (c) actual peers in different bullying participant roles. Participants were 163 predominantly ethnic majority adolescents in The Netherlands (58% girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 16.34$  years,  $SD = 0.79$ ). For the hypothetical peers, we examined adolescents' explicit evaluations as well as their implicit evaluations. Adolescents evaluated the general concept of bullying negatively. Adolescents' explicit evaluations of hypothetical and actual peers in the bullying roles depended on their own role, but adolescents' implicit evaluations of hypothetical peers did not. Adolescents' explicit evaluations of hypothetical peers and actual peers were different. Hypothetical bullies were evaluated negatively by all classmates, whereas hypothetical victims were evaluated relatively positively compared with the other roles. However, when adolescents evaluated their actual classmates, the differences between bullies and the other roles were smaller, whereas victims were evaluated the most negatively of all roles. Further research should take into account that adolescents' evaluations of hypothetical peers differ from their evaluations of actual peers.

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## Introduction

Bullying is a major problem in schools. It is associated with increased risks for psychosocial maladjustment for both bullies and victims (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Bullying takes place when individuals or groups repeatedly and over time attack, humiliate, or exclude victims who cannot defend themselves (Salmivalli, 2010; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Bullying is a group process in which children can have different roles (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). In addition to the *bullies* and *victims*, *assistants* actively join in by helping the bullies, *reinforcers* give bullies positive feedback (e.g., by providing an audience or laughing), *defenders* try to stop the bullying or comfort the victims, and *outsiders* refrain from getting involved.

Previous studies placed much emphasis on how youths evaluate bullying behavior because this is expected to be an important determinant of their own behavior in bullying situations (see, e.g., Almeida, Correia, & Marinho, 2010; Andreou, Vlachou, & Didaskalou, 2005; Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Rigby, 2005; van Goethem, Scholte, & Wiers, 2010). However, children's role in bullying situations is not always in line with their attitudes toward bullying (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). To date, most studies have examined children's evaluations of the general concept of bullying, but evaluations of the specific participant roles have not been examined systematically yet. The current study went beyond evaluations of the general concept of bullying by also examining youths' attitudes toward specific roles and, furthermore, how these attitudes depend on their own bullying role. When evaluating the six participant roles, evaluations of hypothetical peers may very well differ from evaluations of actual classmates in these roles. Therefore, we compared adolescents' evaluations of the participant role behaviors in hypothetical situations (hypothetical peers) with their evaluations of the same behaviors in their actual classmates (actual peers). In addition, we studied the difference between explicit and implicit evaluations of bullying involvement by comparing explicit and implicit evaluations of hypothetical peers in each bullying role. Differences between evaluations of hypothetical and actual peers and between explicit and implicit evaluations may help us to understand why adolescents' own bullying involvement is often inconsistent with their attitudes. The results may contribute to anti-bullying programs by increasing adolescents' awareness of potential mismatches between their general evaluations of bullying (role) behaviors and their evaluations of actual peers who engage in them.

### *Adolescents' evaluations of the general concept of bullying*

Most children and adolescents evaluate bullying negatively and intend to support victims of bullying (Menesini et al., 1997; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; van Goethem et al., 2010). However, only 20% of adolescents seem to behave according to their attitude and actually defend or comfort victims of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010). In addition, the link between adolescents' evaluations of bullying and their own bullying behavior is weak to moderate at best (Menesini et al., 1997; Rigby, 2004; Scholte, Sentse, & Granic, 2010). This discrepancy may be explained by the way studies have examined adolescents' evaluations of bullying.

In most studies, adolescents' evaluations of bullying were measured with the "attitude toward bullying" scale (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Scholte et al., 2010) or the "attitudes toward victims" scale (Rigby & Slee, 1991). In these scales, adolescents evaluate multiple aspects of bullying such as rejection of vulnerable peers, cognitive or affective empathy toward victims, approval of pro-bullying behavior, intervening in bullying situations, and support for victims. Answers to such items usually are aggregated to one score assuming a one-factor scale. We define the evaluations of these aspects of bullying in the attitude toward bullying scale as "evaluations of the general concept of bullying." A potential problem of those scales is that they do not take into account that adolescents may evaluate different aspects of bullying differently.

### *Adolescents' evaluations of hypothetical peers with different participant roles*

Although most adolescents have negative attitudes toward the general concept of bullying, a number of them still show pro-bullying behaviors. This may be explained by adolescents' evaluations of

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