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The role of bystanders in students' perception of bullying and sense of safety[☆]

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Abstract

Two studies employing a mixed experimental design were conducted to determine if perceptions of bullying, attitudes towards victims, and students' sense of safety at school were influenced by bystanders' reactions to different types of bullying. In Study 1, 217 middle-school children were randomly assigned to read a hypothetical scenario describing a direct bullying episode. In Study 2, 376 primary-school children and 390 middle-school children were presented with scenarios describing a direct bullying episode and an indirect bullying episode. In all scenarios, the bystanders' reactions to the bullying and the gender of the victim were manipulated. Participants endorsed the prosocial behavior in favor of the victims and did not endorse pro-bullying behavior. Furthermore, they perceived passive reactions to the bullying as negative behavior. Participants showed positive attitudes towards victims, which were significantly higher at younger grade levels and among girls. Bystanders' behavior influenced both participants' perceptions of the victims and their perceived sense of safety at school. Implications for anti-bullying programs based upon the group ecology are discussed.

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Bullying is one of the most pervasive forms of school violence, which worries teachers, parents, and psychologists because of its serious consequences (Rigby, 2003). It is commonly defined as a proactive form of aggression directed towards a weaker peer (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 1999). Bullying may involve physical attack, verbal harassment, threatening or more indirect behavior, such as social exclusion, malicious rumor spreading, or withdrawal of friendship (Björkqvist, 1994; Craig, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Traditionally, most research works in this field have looked at the personal characteristics of the individuals involved as bullies, victims, or bully/victims, such as their personality traits, their emotional and social cognitive abilities, and the parental styles and attachment models connected to bullying and victimization (e.g., Andreou, Vlachou, & Didaskalou, 2005; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Rigby, 2005; Smith et al., 1999).

The study of bully–victim dyads has been expanded recently beyond analysis of individual characteristics to include social contextual information. Such research suggests that the context of bullying behavior is likely to influence children’s evaluation of bullying and victimization (Courtney, Cohen, Deptula, & Kitzmann, 2003; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Social factors, such as adherence to peer group norms, homophily, and social identity concerns, might also contribute to inter-group conflicts and aggressive conduct among peers (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Gini, 2006a, 2007; Nesdale & Scarlett, 2004). However, more research is needed on the role of bystanders in influencing students’ perception of bullying. In the present paper, we analyzed whether primary and middle-school students’ perception of the victim of bullying (i.e., whether the victim is liked or blamed) and their sense of safety at school might be influenced by hypothetical bystanders’ reactions to bullying. These research questions were based on the idea that bullying should not be studied merely as a conflictual dyadic relationship between a bully and his or her victim; rather, it may be better understood when other variables present in the immediate social context are considered.

Several observational studies confirmed the important role of peer ecology in the bullying phenomenon. When bullying occurs in school, most students are not only aware of it but also witness it (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Moreover, social contagion, diffusion of responsibility, friends’ expectation and other group mechanisms may partly explain the pervasiveness of bullying (Olweus, 2001; Rigby, 2005; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). For example, preadolescents’ behavior in bullying situations seems to be more influenced by what their current peers in the immediate network tend to do in similar situations than by their own previous behavior (Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). Finally, even though most students generally sympathize with the victims and disapprove bullies (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Menesini et al., 1997; Randall, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1993), some of them are often reluctant to intervene or to inform adults, and sometimes they even join the bullies in abusing the victim (Cunningham et al., 1998; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

Possible roles of those who witness

Students can play different roles when witnessing a bullying episode toward a peer (from passively onlooking to actively participating; Atlas & Pepler, 1998). In particular,

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