



Children's intervention strategies in situations of victimization by bullying: Social cognitions of outsiders versus defenders[☆]



Jeroen Pronk^{a,b,*}, Frits A. Goossens^{a,b}, Tjeert Olthof^c, Langha De Mey^d, Agnes M. Willemen^e

^a Department of Educational Neuroscience, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b LEARN! Research Institute for Learning and Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^c Department of Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^d Department of Theory and Research in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^e Department of Child and Family Studies, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the social cognitions of outsiders and defenders about intervening in situations of victimization by bullying. Do outsiders and defenders behave differently in victimization situations because of differences in competence beliefs, or because of a selectivity effect in intervening? These issues were examined in a sample of 102 outsiders and 107 defenders who were classified into these bullying roles through a peer-nomination procedure out of a total sample of 761 10- to 14-year-old Dutch children. These children were presented with imaginary victimization events. They answered questions about their cognitions and self-efficacy beliefs about intervening in victimization situations and about handling such situations. Outsiders, compared to defenders, claimed to intervene indirectly in victimization situations rather than directly. Defenders, compared to outsiders, claimed to intervene directly in victimization situations rather than indirectly. Both outsiders and defenders claimed to be more likely to intervene when a friend was being victimized than when a neutral classmate was being victimized. Outsiders and defenders did not differ in their self-efficacy for indirect intervention, but only defenders claimed a high self-efficacy for direct intervention. Both outsiders and defenders claimed to benefit from direct help when they themselves are victimized, but only outsiders also reported to need indirect help. The results suggest that outsiders and defenders behave differently in victimization situations because of differences in competence beliefs rather than because of a selectivity effect. More generally, the results suggest that not only defenders but also outsiders have the intention to help children who are being bullied. However, outsiders' anti-bullying attempts are likely to be indirect and less firm than those of defenders.

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1. Introduction

Victimization by bullying is generally defined as the repeated exposure to aggressive actions by one or more individuals over time (Greene, 2006; Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). During those actions some children (one or more bullies) intentionally attempt to harm another individual (the victim). Moreover, an imbalance in perceived or actual power exists

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* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, Van der Boerhorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 20 5981713.

E-mail address: j.pronk@vu.nl (J. Pronk).

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between them. Bullying can be directly or indirectly aimed at a victim and can take the form of physical acts (e.g., hitting), possession-directed acts (e.g., taking belongings), verbal acts (e.g., name-calling) and social/relational acts (e.g., ostracizing; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Rigby, 2008). Bullying can be seen as a coercive strategy aimed at reaching and maintaining high ranks in the social hierarchy of the group (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & Van der Meulen, 2011; Reijntjes et al., 2013).

Self-reports have been used to differentiate children as bullies, victims, bully–victims, and a group generally known as “bystanders” (Olweus, 1993, 2010). However, observational studies have demonstrated that the term bystander covers a wide range of different behaviors (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; O'Connell et al., 1999). Bystanders include not only children who are uninvolved in the bullying process but also children who either side with the bully (assistants or reinforcers) or with the victim (defenders). Finally, there is a group of children who tend to shy away from the bullying; they turn their backs on the bullying. These children are referred to as the outsiders. Peer-reports such as those designed by Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1996) enable the distinction between these participant roles.

Meta-analytic studies suggest that anti-bullying interventions are more effective when they: (a) treat bullying as a group process (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012); (b) focus on promoting prosocial bystander behavior (Polanin et al., 2012); (c) have a more intensive program (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011); or (d) target bullying from multiple points of view (e.g., targeting teachers and parents; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). An example of a school-based anti-bullying intervention that incorporates these aspects in its program is KiVa (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). One of KiVa's main aims is reducing bullying by influencing the different bystander-roles. Evaluation of KiVa has proven that it is effective in reducing bullying and victimization behaviors within classrooms (Kärnä et al., 2011). Although KiVa effectively reduces bullying and victimization, it is more effective in influencing teacher behavior than in promoting prosocial behavior in bystanders. Specifically with regards to pro-victim attitudes, including helping and intervening on behalf of the victim, the effect sizes of KiVa were small (Cohen's d 's $\leq .08$; Kärnä et al., 2011). Therefore, more knowledge of the different bystander roles is still needed to achieve further gains in the effectiveness of whole group anti-bullying interventions. The present study therefore aimed at improving the knowledge of children's social cognitions about intervening in victimization situations. The focus was on the bystander groups of outsiders (i.e., those who shy away from the bullying) and defenders (i.e., those who actively intervene on behalf of the victim).

There are three reasons for focusing on outsiders and defenders. Firstly, observational studies indicate that peers are almost always present (more than 85% of the time) when bullying takes place (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2001; O'Connell et al., 1999). Only in about a quarter of all victimization situations, peers actually discourage the bullying or act to alleviate the victim suffering caused by it. When peers decide to intervene on behalf of the victim, they do so effectively more than two-thirds of the time (Hawkins et al., 2001).

The second reason for focusing on outsiders and defenders is that both have been implied to have an anti-bullying attitude. Previous findings have indicated that both outsiders and defenders are attitudinally against bullying and dislike children who bully others (Olthof & Goossens, 2008; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Defenders also behave in a way that matches their anti-bullying attitude; outsiders on the other hand do not behave according to their anti-bullying attitude—or at least not consistently enough to be qualified by their peers as defenders (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

The third reason for focusing on outsiders and defenders is their number. The group of outsiders has been found to be as large as one third of the classroom (Olthof et al., 2011; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). Another one-fifth of the classroom consists of defenders. Together they can make up more than 50% of the children in the classroom. Therefore, the sheer number of children, combined with their anti-bullying attitude makes them an attractive focus for interventions promoting defending behavior. A genuine reduction in bullying might only be achieved by urging children with an anti-bullying attitude to actively help victims and to stand up for their views (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008; Orpinas & Horne, 2010; Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 1999; Twemlow et al., 2010).

Previous research has suggested that outsiders and defenders are quite similar to each other. Both are low in reactive and proactive aggression and are equipped with the ability to avoid being victimized themselves (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Next to that, both outsiders and defenders are relatively well liked by their peers (Goossens et al., 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1996), which is an important motive for hanging out together and for endorsing similar prosocial behaviors (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Witvliet et al., 2010). Moreover, outsiders and defenders have been found to be similar in empathy (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008), an important prerequisite for prosocial behavior (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Research has indicated that children who are prosocial, are more likely to be friends with, and to be friendly to, victims. Conversely, having friends can be important for victims too, as friends protect each other when they are being victimized (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009).

1.1. Competence hypothesis

Still, there are behavioral differences between outsiders and defenders. These differences seem to be at least in part related to social self-efficacy (Gini, Albiero et al., 2008). Self-efficacy embodies the belief that one has the right tools to handle oneself effectively (Bandura, 1997). Only defender-behavior, but not outsider-behavior was found to be related to competent and assertive conduct in social situations (Gini, Albiero et al., 2008). Similarly, Pozzoli and Gini (2010) found that in victimization situations specifically, outsider-behavior was related to avoiding problems, whereas defender-behavior was related to solving problems. Outsiders' tendency to avoid problems may explain why they remain passive and do not intervene on behalf of victims.

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