



# Bullying victimization and the social and emotional maladjustment of bystanders: A propensity score analysis<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated how bystanders, who have and have not been bullied, perceive their social and emotional maladjustment depending on the form of bullying (physical or verbal) they witness. Using propensity score matching, equivalent groups of 270 victimized and 270 non-victimized bystander groups were created based on middle school students' responses on the Bully Survey-Student Version (BYS-S; Swearer, 2001). Victimized bystanders experienced higher social maladjustment than non-victimized bystanders. Path analysis results suggest that social and emotional maladjustment as a bystander is related not only to social-emotional maladjustment as victim, but to gender and the form of bullying witnessed. The way in which bystanders are influenced by their personal victimization may be a critical factor in predicting, understanding, and increasing active bystander intervention.

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## 1. Introduction

As a subset of a larger aggressive social phenomenon, bullying is a distinct but pervasive social problem throughout the world (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define bullying as unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another peer (individual or group) that may harm or distress the targeted youth physically, psychologically, socially, or educationally; it involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is or is highly likely to be repeated (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Bullying takes many forms including: physical (e.g., kicking, hitting), verbal (e.g., name calling), relational (e.g., social exclusion, gossip), and cyberbullying (e.g., hurtful messages or images through text message or email; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Bullying tends to peak in middle school (Eslea & Rees, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001).

Traditionally, research dichotomized youth who were involved in bullying into bully or victim categories without recognizing the social contexts in which bullying occurs. Bullying not only involves the youth who bully and who are bullied, but also bystanders who witness bullying as it occurs (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Swearer, 2001). The behaviors of bystanders play an important role in initiating, mitigating, or exacerbating bullying. Although the current study focuses on all bystanders who witness bullying, it should be noted

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that other studies have further differentiated these roles into behaviors such as: (a) assisting or reinforcing the bully, (b) defending the victim, or (c) being an outsider (i.e., uninvolved or unaware; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, 2001; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukieinen, 1996; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Several researchers (Goossens, Olthoff, & Dekker, 2006; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; Sutton & Smith, 1999) have suggested that participant roles are not fixed, but static and dependent on situational factors (e.g., social status and networks). Therefore, students may be both bullies and defenders, victims and defenders (Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012), and bully-victims (Veenstra et al., 2005) depending on the social context.

Bullying contributes to negative short- and long-term behavioral, psychological, social, and academic outcomes for perpetrators and victims (Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2012; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Tfofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). Although there is a robust literature linking involvement in bullying and victimization to social and emotional maladjustment (see Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010), far less is known about the experiences and impact of bullying on bystanders. The current study uses a social-ecological framework, which recognizes individual, familial, peer, school, and community factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Salmivalli et al., 1996), to enhance our understanding of the role of the bystander in bullying. Furthermore, we draw from Garbarino's (2001) accumulation of risk model as a framework for understanding how and when children suffer the most adverse consequences of exposure to violence. More specifically, this model suggests that although most children cope successfully with negative experiences, when risks accumulate, youth require protective factors and/or positive experiences to prevent the precipitation of harm. Using these theoretical frameworks, the current study examined the social and emotional maladjustment of bystanders who have been victimized and who have not been victimized using propensity score matching to isolate the impact of victimization on bystanders. Additionally, we explored the extent to which the forms of victimization experienced and witnessed predict social and emotional maladjustment of middle school-aged bystanders.

### 1.1. Social and emotional maladjustment: Victims, bystanders, and multiple participant roles

#### 1.1.1. Victims

Victims tend to experience social and emotional maladjustment evidenced by lower social standing, fewer friends, poorer relationships with classmates, increased sadness, anger, and loneliness, and difficulty making friends compared to youth in other bullying status groups (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2012; Nansel et al., 2001). Some research has supported an inverse association between bullying and academic achievement, grades, and attendance (Glew et al., 2005; Nansel et al., 2001; Srabstein & Piazza, 2008), although this association may depend on the presence of low parental support and school disengagement (Beran, 2008). When compared to students not involved in bullying incidents, victims are lower in academic achievement and school belonging (Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2012; Glew et al., 2005), and express more safety concerns (Glew et al., 2005). Support from teachers, classmates, friends, and parents may moderate the links between victimization and emotional (loneliness, depression, anxiety) and social (aggression) maladjustment, although these links are also gender dependent (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010).

#### 1.1.2. Bystanders

Although the behavioral, academic, social, and psychological functioning of the bullying status group has been studied, the adjustment of bystanders has received less attention (Cook et al., 2010; Demagnet & Van Houtte, 2012). Extant literature on bystanders has focused primarily on correlates of bystander roles (e.g., assistant, reinforcer, defender, outsider) and empathy (Almeida, Correia, & Marinho, 2010; Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008), self-efficacy, outcome expectations (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012), classmate and teacher support (Choi & Cho, 2013), "Theory of Mind" abilities (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009), attitudes regarding roles in bullying, and morality (Almeida et al., 2010).

The few studies that have explored social and emotional maladjustment have found that bystanders reported increased emotional isolation, anxiety, depression, hostility, and paranoia (Hutchinson, 2012; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Physiological (i.e., skin conductance and heart rate) and psychological reactions were comparable when individuals recalled witnessing bullying and when they recalled their own victimization; furthermore, reactions to witnessing bullying were similar to those associated with life threatening experiences such as natural disasters (Janson & Hazler, 2004).

A study by Pozzoli and Gini (2010) that examined bystanders' actual, rather than hypothetical, coping strategies found that distancing and avoiding may result from moral disengagement, a situation-based cognitive reconstructing that leads to benign or positive attributions of moral transgressions (Almeida et al., 2010; Obermann, 2011). Moral disengagement and unconcerned feelings about bullying incidents are associated with passive bystander behavior (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013a), whereas seeking social support, problem solving/relying on self, and internalizing are associated with defending behavior (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Students who defend often have negative attitudes toward bullying and view bullying as a serious problem (Obermann, 2011; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013a). Defenders of bullying are thought to vicariously share the feelings of the victim, which drives defending behavior (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010).

Although the associations between coping strategies and social and emotional adjustment of victims and immediate behavioral reactions of bystanders have been studied, it is unclear how bystanders may be influenced by their own personal experiences of victimization. This information may be critical for predicting, understanding, and increasing active bystander intervention because defending victims of bullying is a risky behavior (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010) that may not be possible for students experiencing social and emotional maladjustment as a result of witnessing bullying. Negative emotions, internalizing coping styles, and physiological and emotional reactivity (e.g., physiological arousal corresponding to sadness, madness, fear, and empathy) may increase the likelihood of intervening during a bullying incident (Barhight, Hubbard, & Hyde, 2013; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Although these factors, as

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