

## University of Groningen

### Be a buddy, not a bully?

van der Ploeg, Rozemarijn

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# 4

## Defending victims

What does it take to intervene in bullying  
and how is it rewarded by peers?\*

\*This chapter is co-authored with Tina Kretschmer, Silja Saarento, Christina Salmivalli,  
and René Veenstra. A slightly different version is currently under review by an  
international peer-reviewed journal



Bullying in schools is a severe problem worldwide with negative health consequences and psychosocial adjustment problems for those involved (Ttofi et al., 2014). In past decades it has been acknowledged that the behavior of bystanders is crucial to end bullying (Salmivalli, 2014). Research demonstrates that defending – directly stepping in, seeking help, or comforting the victim (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) – can make a difference. In the classroom it is associated with lower levels of bullying (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2014) and lower risk of getting victimized (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). Among victims, being defended is associated with fewer negative psychological and social consequences (Sainio et al., 2011).

Knowing that intervening in bullying can make a difference for the victim's situation, it is not surprising that many anti-bullying interventions aim to encourage students to take a clear stance against bullying and support their victimized peers (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Salmivalli, 2014). Still, most bystanders choose not to get involved (e.g., Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012) and little is known about the aspects that explain students' involvement in defending behavior. The main purpose of this study was therefore to obtain insight into the antecedents and consequences of defending in bullying situations. This knowledge helps to encourage bystanders to take up the role of defender.

Using a longitudinal design, we first aimed to put emotional and social cognitive antecedents of defending in bullying situations to a test. A small number of cross-sectional studies investigated between-person variation in the likelihood of defending. These showed that girls are more likely to intervene in bullying situations than boys (e.g., Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Moreover, personal characteristics and beliefs such as positive attitudes toward victims, high levels of empathy, responsibility beliefs, and perceived ability to intervene are associated with defending behavior among children and adolescents (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006).

Second, our study aimed to extend the literature by examining the consequences of defending on social standing in the peer group (i.e., popularity). Especially in schools, children tend to form social hierarchies in which concepts of dominance, status and visibility are important (Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Sijtsema et al., 2009). Although intervening in favor of victims is generally perceived as risky for social standing in the peer group (Meter & Card, 2015; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012), relatively little is actually known about the consequences of defending in

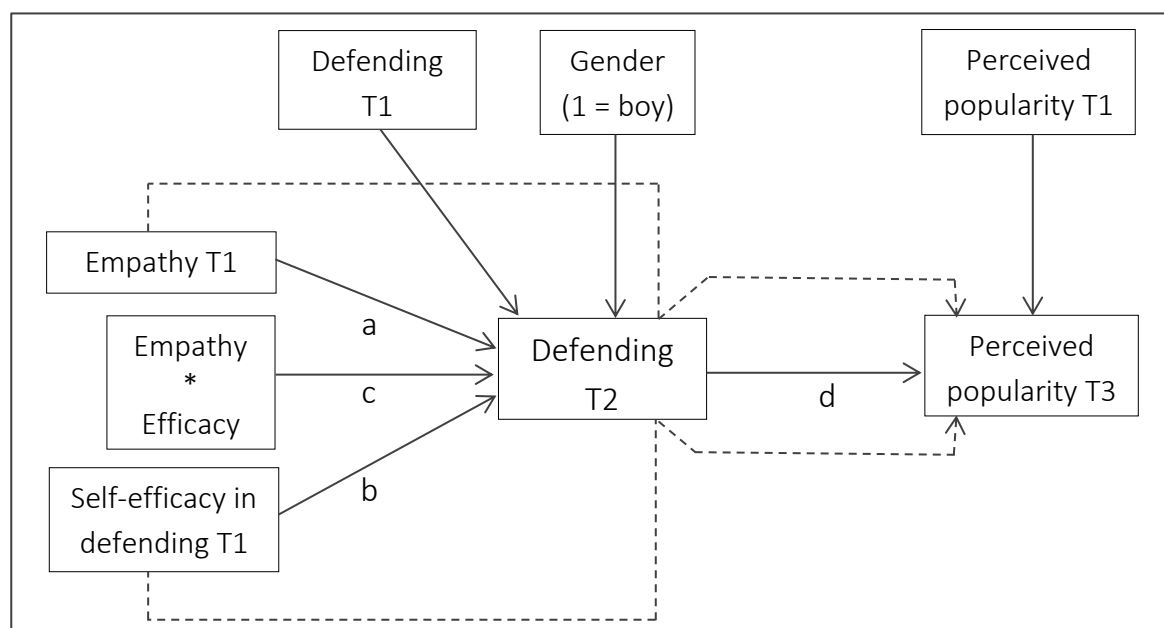
terms of popularity among peers. Some studies report positive associations between perceived popularity and defending (Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Sainio et al., 2011), but the temporal order has not been examined.

The third aim of this study was to examine whether the processes described above are different for victims of bullying compared to non-victims. Previous studies have demonstrated that self-reported victimization is associated with a higher willingness to intervene (Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014) and that victims of bullying often tend to defend each other (Huitsing et al., 2014). However, there is little insight into the victims' motives to defend other targets of bullying. It has been suggested that victims defend each other because they are friends (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013) or because they are targeted by the same bully (Huitsing et al., 2014). We argue that it is important to understand whether being victimized affect both the predictors and consequences of defending.

The present study first examines emotional and social cognitive factors as antecedents of defending. As various anti-bullying programs have incorporated empathy and efficacy in defending as essential features to reduce bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010), we test the roles of empathy (see Figure 4.1, path a), self-efficacy (path b) and their interaction (path c). Subsequently, we examine the consequences of defending concerning perceived popularity in the peer group (path d). We end by investigating the differences in motives for defending and status consequences of defending between victims and non-victims of bullying.

**Figure 4.1**

*Theoretical model*



### Empathy and self-efficacy as antecedents of defending

Students' emotions are likely to determine their behavior and can influence whether or not someone is willing to stand up for victims of bullying (e.g., Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010). Empathy is the ability to understand and share emotions of another (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). It has been proposed to play an important role in prosocial behavior in general (Belacchi & Farina, 2012) and defending behavior in particular (Espelage et al., 2012; Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014). Most previous studies use cross-sectional data to examine whether empathy is related to defending victims of bullying (see Van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015 for an overview). It was found that both understanding how victims of bullying feel (i.e., cognitive empathy) and actually feeling the victims' emotions (i.e., affective empathy) are associated with higher levels of defending. In line with these findings, we hypothesized that a higher level of empathy is related to a higher involvement in defending behavior over time (*Hypothesis 1*).

Besides emotions, social cognitions such as self-efficacy possibly predict whether someone is willing to take a stance against bullying. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacity to successfully perform a specific task in a specific situation – unless a person can be certain of the successfulness of their actions, there is little motivation to act (Bandura, 1997, 2001). In line, it has been argued that students only defend victims of bullying when they believe in their ability to be effective (Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008). Several studies have reported positive (cross-sectional) associations between students' perceived self-efficacy in defending victims of bullying and their actual defending behavior (e.g., Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006). In contrast, a longitudinal study on peer aggression found no significant effect of self-efficacy beliefs on defending (Barchia & Bussey, 2011). As our study concerns defending victims of bullying in particular, we expected that – in line with the literature (e.g., Bandura, 1997, 2001) and the cross-sectional findings – a higher level of students' self-efficacy beliefs in defending is related to a higher involvement in defending behavior over time (*Hypothesis 2*).

Because both emotions and social cognitions are considered essential prerequisites for defending victims of bullying, it is likely that merely being empathic or having only high self-efficacy beliefs in defending might be insufficient to make someone intervene in bullying situations (see for an example: Gini et al., 2008). Put differently, it can be argued that empathetic children are particularly

likely to defend when they also feel they can do so, and vice versa. We therefore hypothesize that children with both high levels of empathy *and* high self-efficacy beliefs in defending are particularly involved in defending behavior over time (*Hypothesis 3*).

### **Popularity among peers as a consequence of defending**

Although negative behaviors such as aggression and bullying are considered particularly effective strategies to obtain popular status in the peer group (Salmivalli, 2014), prosocial behavior has also been linked to perceived popularity among peers (Caputi, Lecce, Pagnin, & Banerjee, 2012; Slaughter et al., 2015). Defending can be seen as a subtype of prosocial behavior as defenders show that they care for victims of bullying by actively supporting or comforting them (Veenstra, Verlinden, Huitsing, Verhulst, & Tiemeier, 2013). Defenders demonstrate dominant behavior (Meter & Card, 2015) to peers (i.e., bullies) who are generally perceived as highly popular (e.g., Caravita et al., 2009). That is, by intervening in bullying situations defenders exhibit that they are powerful and dare take a stance against bullying. Defenders may thus achieve a more popular status by lowering the dominant and powerful position of bullies (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Moreover, their "revolt" against bullying increases the visibility of defenders in their peer group, as a result of which they will likely be perceived as socially dominant. Given that perceived popularity refers to social dominance, status, and visibility in the peer group (e.g., Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Lease et al., 2002), we hypothesize that defending will lead to an increase in perceived popularity among peers (*Hypothesis 4*).

### **Defenders: victims versus non-victims**

Previous studies showed that defending is positively associated with victimization (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Batanova et al., 2014; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012) and that victims of bullying tend to defend each other (Huitsing et al., 2014). It has been argued that victims are willing to intervene in others' bullying situations because they have high levels of (affective) empathy, given that they know what it feels like to be a victim (Batanova et al., 2014; Pozzoli et al., 2012). In contrast, it can be assumed that victims' perceived self-efficacy in defending is relatively low as they are unable to protect themselves from victimization. Hence, we expect that on the one hand, empathy will be a stronger indicator for victims' involvement in defending behavior than for non-victims' involvement (*Hypothesis 5a*). On the other

hand, self-efficacy in defending is expected to be a weaker predictor of defending in victims compared to non-victims (*Hypothesis 5b*).

With regard to popularity in the peer group, we know that victims are generally unpopular among their peers (Bouman et al., 2012; De Bruyn et al., 2010). This can be explained in two ways. First, most bullies tend to choose easy targets to harass, usually peers perceived as unimportant by others (Sijtsema et al., 2009; Veenstra et al., 2007). Second, it has been argued that the peers' perceptions of victims change gradually when victimization endures. If the harassment persists, victims may be seen as less worthy or more risky to associate with, as a result of which their popularity in the peer group decreases (e.g., Boulton, 2013; Sentse, Dijkstra, Salmivalli, & Cillessen, 2013).

It can be argued that others do not perceive defending among victims as a revolt against the bully, but rather as supporting fellow sufferers. Victims of bullying are unlikely to have a central position in the classroom (De Bruyn et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). The fact that "victim-defenders" are still victimized themselves is likely to level out the positive effect of defending. Hence, we expect that defending will not result in an increase in perceived popularity among peers for victims of bullying (*Hypothesis 6*).

## METHOD

### Participants

Data come from three waves of data collection for the evaluation of the Finnish KiVa anti-bullying intervention and were collected in May 2007 (pretest, Grades 3 to 5), December 2007 and May 2008 (Grades 4 to 6) in 78 primary schools. The participating schools represent all five provinces of mainland Finland (see Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011 for more information on the sampling procedure). Half of the participating schools were randomly assigned to the intervention condition; the others served as control schools. Control schools were asked to continue their "care as usual" anti-bullying approach until they could start participating in the KiVa program starting in August 2008.

As the KiVa intervention might influence the associations between our study variables, we used data only from schools in the control condition ( $N = 4229$  students, 49%). Not all classes and schools participated in every wave. Some only participated in the pretest, whereas others just took part in the post-test. These classes and schools were excluded from our sample ( $N = 1162$  students, 27.5%). The



final sample consisted of 2803 students (50% boys,  $M_{age} = 11.28$ ) from 182 classrooms and 36 schools. In our data, the percentage of missing data was low (8.6%). More details on the percentages as well as common missing data patterns in the dataset are described extensively in the KiVa evaluation study (see Kärnä et al., 2011, Appendix A).

## Procedure

The data were collected via online questionnaires that students filled out once their parents had given active consent. Questionnaires were administered during regular school hours by teachers who were provided with detailed instructions two weeks prior to the data collection. In addition, teachers could obtain support via phone or email during data collection.

At the start of the questionnaire, students were guaranteed that their responses would remain anonymous and would not be revealed to teachers or parents. Instructions for participating were presented orally by teachers as well as written in the questionnaires. Similarly, the definition of bullying, as formulated in Olweus' Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), was explained to students. Several examples covering different types of bullying were given, followed by an explanation emphasizing the intentional and repetitive nature of bullying and the imbalance of power. The questionnaire included both self-reports and peer nominations. The order of questions, scales, and items was randomized so that presentation order would not have a systematic effects on the results.

## Measures

This study distinguishes between victims and non-victims, based on students' self-reports concerning victimization. Participants indicated how many times they had been victimized in the past months (Olweus, 1996) on a five-point scale (1: did not happen, 2: once or twice, 3: two or three times a month, 4: about once a week, 5: several times per week). According to the recommendation of Solberg and Olweus (2003), students who indicated they had been victimized at least two or three times a month were considered victims of bullying.

Students' *perceived popularity* was assessed using peer nominations. Participants were asked to nominate up to three classmates whom they felt were most popular. For each student the nominations received were summed and divided by the number of nominating classmates to create proportion scores (scores varied from 0-1).

*Defending* was measured using the Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ) (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). The defender scale consisted of three items (i.e., "Tries to make others stop bullying"; "Comforts the victim or encourages him/her to tell the teacher about the bullying"; "Tells others to stop bullying or says that bullying is stupid"). Students were asked to nominate an unlimited number of classmates who fit the descriptions given in these items. For each participant, the nominations received were summed and divided by the number of nominators (proportion scores). Afterwards, a scale score was created by averaging across the three items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$  in both waves). Scores could range from 0 to 1.

Seven items that specify the degree to which students share or understand the feelings of victims of bullying were used to measure *empathy* (e.g., "I can understand how the bullied student must feel" (Kärnä et al., 2011). Answers could range from never true (score 0) to always true (score 3). The items were averaged such that a higher score indicated a higher level of empathy (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

To measure students' *self-efficacy* in defending, students were asked to indicate how difficult or easy it would be for them to defend a victim of bullying (Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008). The questionnaire included three ways of defending, similar to the PRQ items (e.g., "Trying to make others stop bullying would be 0: very easy [...] 4: very difficult for me"). Answers were reverse coded, meaning that a higher score indicated greater self-efficacy beliefs in defending. Together the items formed an internally consistent scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ).

Previous studies showed significant differences between boys and girls in defending behavior, with girls more likely to defend (Trach et al., 2010). Hence, *gender* (0 = girl, 1 = boy) was included as a control variable.

## Analyses

Our hypotheses were tested using multilevel path models (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2011) with students nested in classrooms (type = COMPLEX). School was not used as a third level, given that school-level variation in our data was low and peer nominations were limited to the own classroom. All models were estimated in Mplus 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation with robust standard errors (MLR). The estimation has two important advantages over conventional linear regression. First, it avoids listwise or pairwise deletion as it includes all pieces of available information in generating the final parameter estimates. The FIML estimation is regarded as a state-of-the-art technique for handling missing data (Enders, 2010) as it avoids bias

caused by complete cases analyses. A second advantage is that maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors adjusts for non-normality in observations.

We first estimated an overall path model which made no distinctions in victim status. Subsequently, we used multiple group comparisons to examine whether the associations between empathy, self-efficacy and defending on the one hand, and the association between defending and perceived popularity on the other hand, differed among victims and non-victims. For each association we computed separate models for both groups and tested for differences in effects by constraining paths to be equal in both models. The constrained model fit was compared to the model in which paths were free to vary, using the Satorra-Bentler difference test (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). If a constrained model fit the data as well as an unconstrained model, the constrained model was preferred because of model parsimony. A non-significant difference in model fit between constrained and unconstrained models indicates that victims and non-victims do not differ with regard to model parameters. In all models we tested for indirect effects of empathy and self-efficacy on perceived popularity.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive results

Means and standard deviations of our study variables are presented in Table 4.1. Table 4.2 shows correlations, suggesting that both wave 1 and wave 2 defending, and wave 1 and wave 3 perceived popularity were highly correlated. This indicated stability in defending and one's popular status over time. Moreover, positive associations between empathy and defending as well as defending and perceived popularity were found. With regard to self-efficacy in defending, correlations with defending and perceived popularity were small but statistically significant in both waves.

**Table 4.1***Descriptive information on study variables (N=2803)*

	Min	Max	Mean (SD)
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Empathy T1	0	3	2.01 (0.61)
Self-efficacy in defending T1	0	3	1.79 (0.73)
<i>Grouping variable</i>			
Victim	0	1	.19 (.39)
<i>Control variables</i>			
Gender (1 = boy)	0	1	.50 (.50)
Defending T1	0	1	.19 (.15)
Perceived popularity T1	0	1	.16 (.18)
<i>Dependent variables</i>			
Defending T2	0	1	.20 (.14)
Perceived popularity T3	0	1	.12 (.19)

**Table 4.2***Correlations between the study variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Empathy T1							
2. Self-efficacy in defending T1	.19**						
3. Victimization	.03	-.08**					
4. Gender	-.25**	-.06*	.04~				
5. Defending T1	.30**	.10**	-.04~	-.42**			
6. Perceived popularity T1	.01	.07**	-.07**	.06*	.18**		
7. Defending T2	.28**	.10**	-.05*	-.41**	.74**	.17**	
8. Perceived popularity T3	.03	.07**	-.07**	.02	.13**	.69**	.20**

Note. \*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$ ; ~ $p < .05$

## Antecedents and consequences of defending

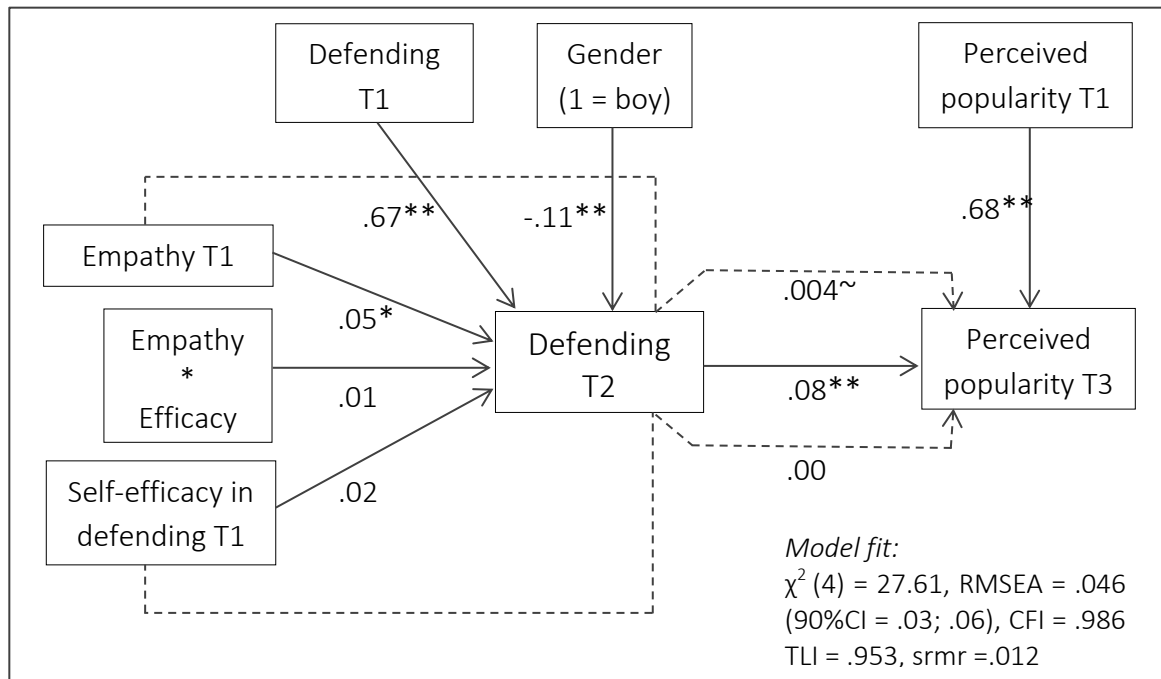
Figure 4.2 presents the standardized regression coefficients for the overall path model. This initial, freely estimated model showed a good fit:  $\chi^2(4) = 27.61$ ,  $RMSEA = .046$  (90%  $CI = .03; .06$ ),  $CFI = .987$ ,  $TLI = .953$ ,  $SRMR = .012$  (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Results indicated that higher levels of empathy predicted defending behavior over time ( $\beta = .05$ ;  $p < .01$ ) after controlling for gender (more girls defend) and stability in defending. This is in line with our expectation that empathy is positively related to involvement in defending behavior over time (*Hypothesis 1*).

In contrast, our second hypothesis that self-efficacy in defending would affect one's defending behavior was rejected ( $\beta = .02$ ;  $p = .11$ ). Also, no significant interaction effect for empathy and self-efficacy on defending over time was found ( $\beta = .01$ ;  $p = .47$ ), implying that those who are highly empathetic *and* have high self-efficacy beliefs are not particularly involved in defending (*Hypothesis 3*).

After controlling for stability in perceived popularity, defending behavior predicted perceived popularity over time ( $\beta = .08$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Our finding was consistent with the expectation that defending can increase social status (*Hypothesis 4*). Lastly, a small but statistically significant indirect effect from empathy to perceived popularity, via defending was found ( $\beta = .004$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

**Figure 4.2**

*Antecedents of defending and its status consequences (N = 2803)*



Note. All coefficients are reported as standardized betas (stdyx standardization)

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$ ;  $\sim p < .05$

The model explained 55.7% of the variance in defending and 48.2% of the variance in perceived popularity (both  $p < .001$ ).

### Differences between victims and non-victims

Satorra-Bentler comparisons of model fit suggested that all paths could be constrained to be equal between victims and non-victims, except for the path between defending in wave 2 and popularity in wave 3. The constrained model showed good fit:  $\chi^2(16) = 52.30$ ,  $RMSEA = .041$  (90%  $CI = .03; .05$ ),  $CFI = .980$ ,  $TLI = .968$ ,  $SRMR = .020$ .

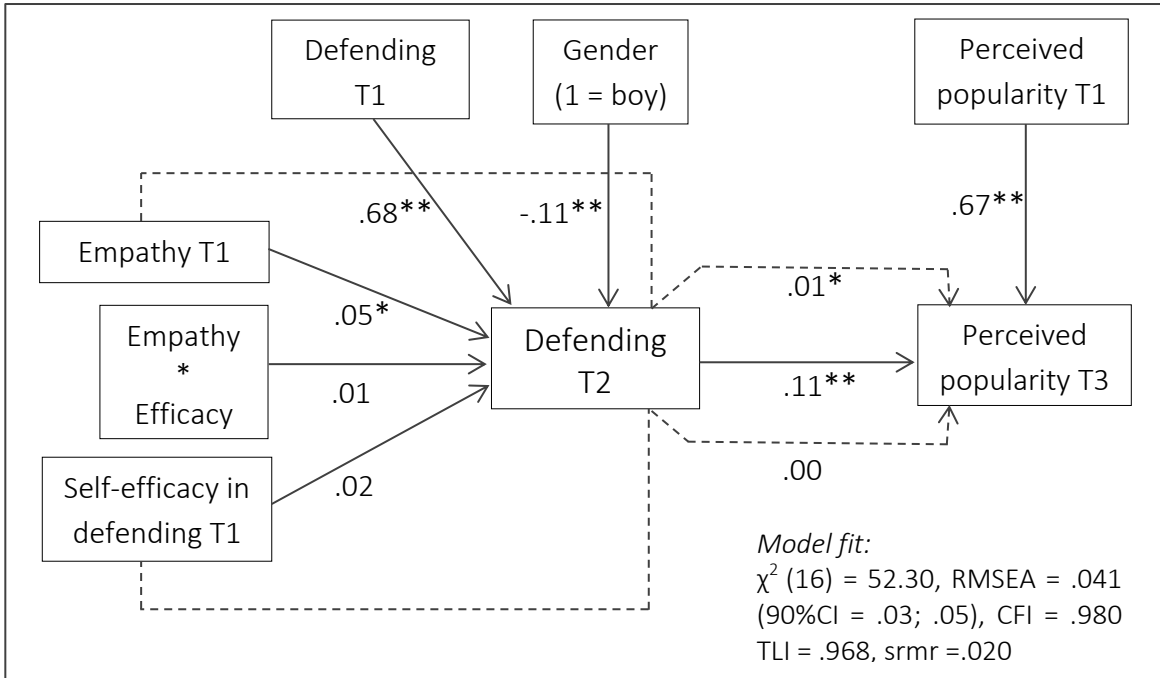
Figure 4.3 presents the path model examining predictors of defending and its status consequences for non-victims. The outcomes are similar to those presented in the overall model. Higher levels of empathy positively affected future defending behavior among non-victims ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and non-victims who defended victims of bullying became more popular among classmates over time ( $\beta = .11$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of empathy on popularity, via defending was small ( $\beta = .01$ ;  $p < .05$ ), but statistically significant. The model explained 57.3% of the variance in defending and 48% of the variance in perceived popularity (both  $p < .001$ ).

Figure 4.4 presents the results for victims of bullying showing that higher levels of empathy lead to higher levels of defending ( $\beta = .04$ ;  $p < .01$ ), after controlling for gender and stability in defending. However, the results indicate that defending among victims did not statistically significantly affect their perceived popularity among classmates ( $\beta = -.04$ ;  $p = .58$ ). Moreover, the indirect paths did not reach statistical significance. This implies that neither empathy nor self-efficacy in defending had a statistically significant influence on victims' popularity.

In sum, the results of the multiple-group models do not support our expectations that empathy and self-efficacy in defending are more and less important, respectively, in predicting victims' involvement in defending as compared to non-victims (*Hypothesis 5*). However, the results concerning the consequences of defending with regard to perceived popularity among peers are in line with our hypothesis that defending other victims would not benefit the popularity of victimized children (*Hypothesis 6*). The explained variance in defending (49.2%,  $p < .001$ ) was a bit lower compared to the other models. For perceived popularity the variance was explained by 49% ( $p < .001$ ).

**Figure 4.3**

*Antecedents of defending and its status consequences for non-victims (N = 2284)*

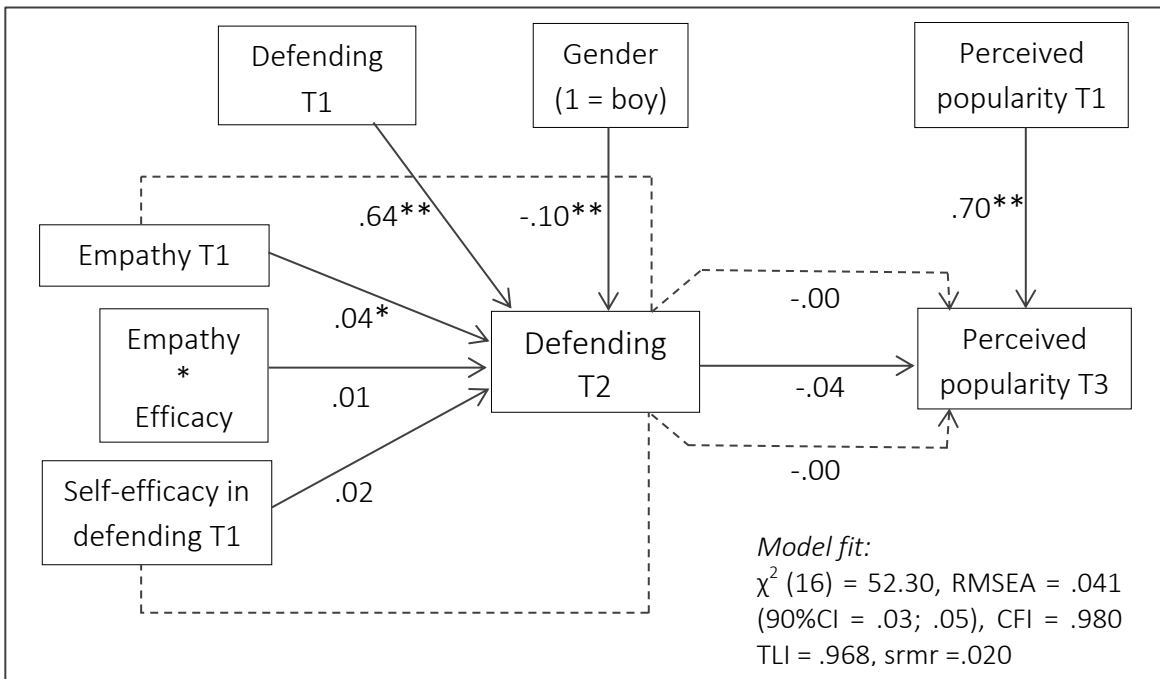


Note. All coefficients are reported as standardized betas (stdyx standardization)

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$ ; ~ $p < .05$

**Figure 4.4**

*Antecedents of defending and its status consequences for victims (N = 519)*



Note. All coefficients are reported as standardized betas (stdyx standardization)

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$ ; ~ $p < .05$

## DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to simultaneously investigate the antecedents and consequences of defending, while distinguishing between non-victims and victims of bullying. Although many anti-bullying interventions focus on enhancing defending behavior in bullying situations (see Polanin et al., 2012), the share of defenders in classrooms is low (e.g., Espelage et al., 2012). Relatively little is known about factors that explain students' involvement in defending behavior. Likewise, there is little insight into whether differences in the processes related to defending exist between victims and non-victims of bullying (for an exception see Batanova et al., 2014). To heighten the prevalence of defending, it is important to know what makes students intervene in bullying situations and how peers reward this defending behavior. Hence, we examined to what extent emotional and social cognitive factors influenced involvement in defending and tested how defending affected students' popularity in the peer group.

We hypothesized that empathy and self-efficacy in defending were important predictors for students' involvement in defending. Our findings demonstrate that students with a higher level of empathy are more likely to be involved in defending over time. This is in line with cross-sectional studies in which empathy is positively associated with defending (Van Noorden et al., 2015). However, contrary to our expectations and most cross-sectional studies (Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), students' perceived self-efficacy failed to predict defending. In other words, believing that you are good at defending does not necessarily make students actually stand up for victims. Moreover, self-efficacy was not found to amplify the influence of empathy on defending, or vice versa. It thus seems that empathy is a stronger predictor of defending than self-efficacy is.

A possible explanation for these unexpected findings for the role of self-efficacy is that the context of the bullying situation might play a role. Barchia and Bussey (2011), who also did not find a longitudinal effect, argued that even self-perceived efficacious adolescents might not intervene in bullying situations unless they know that they would be supported. This is consistent with other studies which found that students' tendency to defend depends on both individual characteristics and (perceived) classroom norms of bullying (Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Sandstrom, Makover, & Bartini, 2013). Likewise, the inclination of self-efficacious students to intervene might depend on the popularity of the bullies or the defender's relationship with the victim (Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, &



Salmivalli, 2015). Future studies should thus examine thoroughly whether self-efficacy beliefs in specific situations do lead to actual defending behavior.

Victims of bullying have been largely ignored as defenders of other victims in most previous studies. Only Batanova and colleagues (2014) investigated how self-reported victimization moderated the associations between psychological responses to bullying and willingness to intervene. We proposed that the motives to intervene in bullying situations differed between defenders who are victimized themselves and non-victimized defenders. Precisely, we hypothesized that empathy would be more predictive and self-efficacy would be less predictive of defending for victims compared to non-victims. Yet, the results show no significant differences between the two groups in the effects of empathy and self-efficacy on involvement in defending over time. It thus seems that although victims may have more empathy and less self-efficacy, the emotional and social cognitive processes are not differently related to defending among defenders who were victims of bullying themselves and those not victimized.

With regard to the consequences of defending concerning perceived popularity in the peer group, we expected that defending would lead to higher popular status among peers, but only when defenders were not victimized themselves. We found that defending was indeed only for non-victims an effective way to gain popularity over time. This finding offers a nuanced picture to the general perception that defending is hazardous for one's social standing in the peer group and an earlier finding that defending is linked to less acceptance by peers (Meter & Card, 2015). Promisingly, not only bullying but also intervening on behalf of victims could be related to a higher popular status in the peer group.

### **Strengths, limitations, and directions for future research**

This study makes a substantial contribution to previous studies that investigated the associations between emotional and social cognitive factors, perceived popularity and involvement in defending behavior with a longitudinal design. We could simultaneously examine what it takes to intervene in bullying situations and to what extent defenders are rewarded by their peers in terms of popularity. A major strength of our study is that it gives important insights into how students can be encouraged to take a stance against bullying and stand up for their victimized peers. With this knowledge, school bullying can presumably be better addressed in the future as the pro-victims behavior of bystanders is likely to reduce bullies' motivation to harass others (Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2014).

Another main strength of the present study is that victims of bullying are distinguished from those not victimized. Although no differences in the students' motives to defend were found, defending led to a more popular status among non-victims only. This finding underlines the importance of distinguishing between victims and non-victims when investigating (the consequences of) defending in future research to obtain a nuanced view of the benefits and costs of defending.

Aside from these strengths, some limitations should be considered. Most importantly, the role of teachers in encouraging defender behavior should be investigated. Previous research has found that teachers' efforts to reduce bullying as perceived by students was related to a lower level of peer-reported bullying over time (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). Similarly, it can be argued that teachers are important in influencing the attitudes, beliefs and actions of bystanders such that they stand up for victims of bullying. It is likely that defending is rewarded more in the classroom when the teacher approves of and encourages defending. With higher understanding of these complex processes, anti-bullying interventions can become more effective in encouraging defending and reducing victimization.

Another limitation is that our study has no information about individuals who perceive defenders as (un)popular and how this relates to personal characteristics of defenders or others involved in the bullying situation. It might be that defenders are perceived as popular by their group of friends, among passive bystanders or just among victims. Social network studies may contribute to our understanding of these processes (see Huitsing et al., 2014; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012).

Future studies would move the field ahead if they considered group norms while examining the antecedents and consequences of defending. Previous research has already shown that students' willingness to defend is associated with contextual factors such as anti-bullying attitudes (Pozzoli et al., 2012) and the level of bullying (Peets et al., 2015) in the classroom as well as perceived peer pressure (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). It is likely that also the consequences of defending differ among classrooms.

### **Practical implications for interventions**

Our findings illustrate that empathy is predictive of intervening in bullying situations and defending is rewarded with greater popularity for non-victims. However, the role of self-efficacy might be overrated. It thus seems that empathy training – a focus of many anti-bullying interventions – is important to enhance defending and

so would help to reduce bullying and victimization in schools. However, anti-bullying interventions should also address the fact that not all students benefit from defending and for certain students in certain situations it might even be harmful to take a stance against bullies. Put differently: understanding which students should be encouraged to serve as defenders is probably essential to effectively intervene in bullying at school.