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Be a buddy, not a bully?

van der Ploeg, Rozemarijn

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Discussion and conclusion

This dissertation was part of a research project on the implementation and evaluation of the KiVa anti-bullying program in the Netherlands. This large project not only evaluated the effectiveness of the anti-bullying intervention, it also aimed to expand our knowledge of the complex processes related to bullying, defending, and victimization so that the effectiveness of interventions, including KiVa, can be enhanced. This is highly needed, given that irrespective of the successful reductions in bullying and victimization in Dutch KiVa schools, after two years some 12% of the students were still victimized (Veenstra, 2015).

The main aim of this dissertation was to gain insights into the role of emotional and social processes related to involvement in bullying, defending, and victimization as well as the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach in altering the victims' situation. To this end, I used new measures, new research designs, and new analytical strategies.

I first investigated how the intensity of victimization was associated with psychological and social adjustment problems among victims. Subsequently, I studied whether the Support Group Approach was effective in reducing bullying and victimization, improving the victims' well-being, and increasing defending behavior. To facilitate encouraging students to take up the role of defender more effectively, I examined factors that explain involvement in defending behavior in a third study. Students' social standing in the peer group is considered of very important in the persistence of school bullying (Salmivalli et al., 2012). It can be argued that if defenders become more popular, students might be more willing to intervene in bullying situations. I therefore investigated to what extent and for whom defending was rewarded by classmates in terms of popularity in the peer group. In the fourth study, I studied social status mechanisms that may underlie bullying in the classroom. I investigated the complex interplay between bullying and perceived popularity in the classroom over time, while focusing on how bullying affects the formation and maintenance of popularity ties and vice versa. The following discusses the main findings of the four empirical studies.

MAIN FINDINGS

The victims' situation

Chapter 2 describes my new measures to better address the intensity of victimization and its correlates with victims' psychological and social adjustments. I argued that, in addition to the frequency of victimization, it might be important to consider in how many ways and by how many peers a person is victimized (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010; Nishina, 2012; Romano et al., 2011; Volk et al., 2014).

Theories on attributional processes (Graham & Juvonen, 2001; Weiner, 1985) were used to generate hypotheses on when experiencing victimization leads to more severe psychological problems. I proposed that psychological maladjustment would emerge particularly when the victimization happened often, was done in various ways, or done by several bullies, as in these situations victims were expected to be more likely to assign the harassment to personal characteristics rather than contextual features of the situation. Although I was not able to test the attribution mechanisms directly, the findings showed that victims of more frequent victimization and victims with more than one bully were indeed more likely to show more symptoms of social anxiety and depressiveness, and to feel less comfortable at school. Multiplicity of victimization appeared to be important only for students' well-being at school.

I hypothesized that students' social standing in the classroom would be associated with the frequency of victimization, multiplicity of victimization, and the number of bullies involved as the victimization becomes more visible when it happens more often, in various ways, or by more than one bully. In line with the expectations, I found that frequently victimized students were less accepted, more rejected, and perceived as less popular among their classmates. Victims who were victimized in multiple ways or by several bullies were less accepted and more rejected among their classmates than victims of non-multiple victimization and victims with one bully.

In sum, the findings of Chapter 2 demonstrate that the intensity of victimization is associated with (differences in) students' psychosocial adjustment and social standing in the classroom. Those who are often victimized, victimized in multiple ways, or victimized by more than one bully have been found to have high levels of social anxiety and low levels of well-being at school, as well as low acceptance and high rejection among classmates.

The Support Group Approach, which is mostly similar to the No Blame Method (Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998) and The Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 1989, 2002), aims to tackle pervasive bullying situations and improve the victims' situation in terms of their well-being at school. It involves several discussion meetings with victims, their bullies (i.e., initiators and assistants), and prosocial classmates about how the victims' situation can be altered. Although the Support Group Approach is widely used as an anti-bullying intervention (Smith et al., 2007), few studies investigated its effectiveness. These studies focused on short-term evaluations of changes in the bullying situation (e.g., Smith et al., 1994; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Young, 1998). Most students or teachers reported that the support group was effective in reducing bullying, but often it was not known whether similar effects would be obtained if no support group intervention was organized (Rigby, 2014).

Chapter 3 describes how I used exact matching techniques (Iacus et al., 2011; Stuart, 2010) to compare victims with a support group to similar victims without a support group. I investigated not only differences in bullying, but also took into account defending behavior and the victims' level of well-being at school, as the Support Group Approach (implicitly) aims to increase victim-supportive behavior and the well-being of victims (Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998). Moreover, I argued that it was essential to examine whether effects of the support group intervention were still visible at the end of the school year, so that stronger conclusions about its effectiveness could be drawn. I hypothesized that at the end of the school year, victims who received a support group intervention would be less victimized, more defended, and feel more comfortable at school than similar victims without a support group.

In line with previous findings, I found positive effects in the short term: a vast majority of the victims for whom a support group intervention was organized indicated at the evaluation meeting that the victimization had decreased or stopped. However, at the end of the school year outcomes were less encouraging, seeing that the Support Group Approach only was successful in enhancing defending behavior. No significant differences in the change in the level of victimization between victims with and victims without a support group were found. Moreover, the frequency with which the victimization took place was found to decrease more for victims without a support group than for those victims who received a support group intervention. Also regarding the victims' well-being at school our findings revealed that victims do not benefit from a support group.

All in all, I conclude from Chapter 3 that the Support Group Approach was ineffective in improving the victims' situation in the long term. The short-term success rate seems to disappear over time and victimization tends to even get worse. These findings underline the importance of evaluating anti-bullying interventions over a longer period as effects may fade in time.

Defending victims of bullying

Defending is considered important in improving the victims' situation (Sainio et al., 2011; Salmivalli et al., 2011). I argued that more insights into factors that explain students' involvement in defending behavior were needed so that anti-bullying interventions, including KiVa, could more effectively encourage students to intervene in bullying situations. Chapter 4 describes a longitudinal design I used to examine simultaneously the antecedents and status consequences of students' involvement in defending. As victims tend to defend each other (Huitsing et al., 2014) and there are few insights into differences in the processes related to defending between victims of bullying and non-victims, I made a distinction between non-victimized and victimized defenders.

As various anti-bullying programs have incorporated emotional and social cognitive factors as essential features to reduce bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010), I hypothesized on the roles of empathy and self-efficacy in defending on explaining students' involvement in defending behavior. Students with high levels of empathy and high self-efficacy beliefs were expected to be most likely to take a clear stance against bullying and support victims. However, the findings in Chapter 4 demonstrate that only students with a higher level of empathy were more likely to be involved in defending over time. This was the same for defenders who were also victims of bullying. From Chapter 4 it thus appears that empathy is a stronger predictor of defending than self-efficacy.

Bullying and social status

Although it is promising that intervening on behalf of victims can be related to a greater popularity in the classroom, it is known that bullying is also an effective strategy to obtain high social status among peers (Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Reijntjes, Vermande, Olthof, et al., 2013; Sentse et al., 2015). Chapter 5 describes the longitudinal social network analyses in RSIENA used to unravel the complex interplay between bullying and social status. We investigated the co-development of bullying and perceived popularity in the classroom.

Theories on bullying as goal-directed behavior (Volk et al., 2014), goal-framing theory (Lindenberg, 2008), and social competition theory (Volk et al., 2015) were used to generate hypotheses about how bullying affects students' popularity in the classroom and vice versa. I argued that students become more visible and socially dominant in the classroom by engaging in bullying behavior. Accordingly, I expected that bullying would make students popular among classmates who did not perceive them as popular before. Moreover, I argued that classmates who already perceived the 'new bully' as popular would not reconsider this. In other words: I hypothesized that bullying stabilizes popularity. I also proposed that being perceived as popular would lead to the formation of new bully relations over time and the dissolution of existing bullying relations, as popular students are likely to start bullying those who threaten their high social standing in the classroom.

In line with the expectations, I found that bullying makes students more popular over time *and* that having high social standing leads to engagement in bullying. When I distinguished between the dissolution, maintenance, and formation of bullying and popularity ties, I found that bullying makes students popular among classmates who did not perceive them as popular before. Besides, students' involvement in bullying did not make classmates reconsider their popular status in the peer group. I also found that popular students discontinue bullying their former victims and start bullying classmates whom they did not bully before.

The results in Chapter 5 show that bullying and perceived popularity are intertwined: ties in one network influence the realization of ties in the other network. As such, knowledge about children's social standing in the classroom contributes to our understanding of bullying processes. Another important finding is that bullying relations seem unstable, particularly for popular bullies, who tend to switch victims over time.

The outcomes of the four studies show that bullying, defending, and victimization are related to one's social standing in the classroom, one of the most salient features in (early) adolescent life. The four studies reveal that using new measures (Chapter 2), new research designs (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), and new analytical strategies (Chapter 5) benefits our understanding of how bullying and defending behaviors develop, and provides insights into how (changes in) the victims' situation can be better addressed. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the scientific implications and directions for future research. Subsequently, I reflect on the practical implications for anti-bullying interventions that can be derived from the four empirical studies in this dissertation.

SCIENTIFIC IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although school bullying has been investigated in a wide range of studies for many years, we have gained substantial new insights into the victims' situation, emotional and social processes related to bullying and defending, and (examining) the effectiveness of an intervention. One main finding in Chapter 2 is that the intensity of victimization can be measured in several ways, which can help to better understand differences in the maladjustment of victims. Although future researchers should investigate the validity of the new measures (i.e., multiplicity and the number of bullies involved), we recommend using these detailed measures of victimization in future studies, rather than only distinguishing between non-victims and frequent victims. This might prevent overlooking a group that is at higher risk for (adjustment) problems (see Ybarra et al., 2014).

From the findings in Chapter 3 we can conclude that evaluations of interventions benefit from a longitudinal design, seeing that effects can disappear over the course of a school year. In our study, sample size was relatively small and matching strategies were needed to distinguish victims with a support group from those without a support group. Future intervention studies would move the field ahead if randomized control trials are used to study the effectiveness of both preventive and reactive anti-bullying strategies. In addition, especially for reactive strategies (if preventive strategies do not work) it might be fruitful to collect data frequently to obtain more insights into what happens during the intervention. Besides, future studies should use randomized control trials rather than post-hoc matching procedures. This would make it easier to discover if, why, and when there is a relapse in the reduction of bullying with regard to the support group intervention. There are several possible reasons why positive changes in the short term disappear over the course of a school year. For instance, from Chapter 3 it seems that prosocial students in particular are affected by the intervention. The short duration of the Support Group Approach and the failure to address the costs and benefits of bullying might give bullies little reason to give up their strategy (see Ellis et al., 2015). Moreover, in Chapter 5 I found that bully-victim relationships are unstable over time as bullies tend to choose new victims. The Support Group Approach might be effective for a specific bullying situation, but the victim might get harassed by others afterwards. These processes should be investigated in order to be able to enhance the effectiveness of the intervention.

A longitudinal design was also needed to explore the antecedents and consequences of students' involvement in defending (Chapter 4). I focused on

emotional and social cognitive factors as predictors of defending behavior. However, it is essential to also examine the extent to which other factors, such as personal goals (Rodkin, Ryan, Jamison, & Wilson, 2013) or the classroom context (Peets et al., 2015) can clarify why students (do not) intervene in bullying situations. An important novel finding in Chapter 4 was that defending is rewarded with greater popularity for defenders who were not victimized themselves. This finding offers a nuance to the general perception that intervening in bullying situations can be harmful for social standing in the classroom (Meter & Card, 2015). However, a challenge for future research is to unravel who perceives these defenders as popular and how defenders' social status depends on the persons they defend. Social network analyses may contribute to increase our knowledge on these interpersonal processes (see Huitsing et al., 2014; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012).

In Chapter 5 I used social network analysis to better understand the relational patterns of bullying and perceived popularity. Studying both bullying and popularity as dyadic relations, that is who bullies whom, and who perceives a person as popular, rather than examining whether a person is bullied or how many people perceive someone as popular (i.e., proportion scores) provided valuable insights into this complex phenomenon. The study showed that bullying is an effective strategy to increase one's popularity in the classroom *and* that popular students tend to establish new bully relations and dissolve their former bullying relations over time. It thus appears that social status is indeed one of the mechanisms that underlies involvement in bullying.

In this dissertation, I argue that involvement in both bullying and defending behavior are likely to arise from status goals (e.g., Lindenberg, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2010; Sijtsema et al., 2009; Volk et al., 2015). However, from the empirical studies it remains unclear which students use antisocial behavior and which use prosocial behavior to obtain popular status in the peer group. Possibly, defenders not only strive for a dominant position, but also want to be accepted by their classmates. Studies on school bullying can move ahead by investigating how status goals affect behavior. This will help to better understand how to strengthen defending behavior and how to discourage involvement in bullying.

Another, more general direction for research on bullying and victimization is to focus on between-classroom processes. This dissertation was about bullying, defending, and victimization in the classroom. Nevertheless, in Chapter 2 a substantial number of victims reported being harassed by students from other classrooms. Another recent study (Huitsing et al., 2014) found that bullying and

defending ties outside the classroom were quite common (25%). It would be interesting to see whether differences in emotional and social processes exist when the bullying or defending takes place outside the classroom. Moreover, we should investigate whether preventive and reactive interventions, such as KiVa and the Support Group Approach, are effective in tackling bullying and victimization in the broader school context, for instance in bullying situations which involve students from several classrooms.

A final and probably most essential direction for future research is to examine how these processes related to bullying, victimization, and defending can be influenced by interventions. For instance, using longitudinal social network analyses, we can examine whether or not bullies become less popular over time in intervention schools as compared to bullies in control schools. In addition, we could investigate effective ways to increase students' empathy. Lastly, we could examine which support group composition is most beneficial for altering the victims' situation. This information can be used to enhance the efficacy of anti-bullying interventions.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

With this dissertation I aimed to increase our understanding of the complex group processes related to bullying, defending, and victimization since I wanted to build on the effectiveness of interventions counteracting school bullying. In this section I translate the main research findings into practical implications for classroom teachers and other practitioners and make suggestions for anti-bullying interventions.

A main problem in tackling bullying situations is that many victims tend to go unrecognized (Haataja et al., 2015). Likewise, in Dutch KiVa schools the support group intervention was organized for only the vast minority of the victims, which might indicate that classroom teachers and the KiVa team are not detecting bullying and victimization. It has been suggested that teachers may benefit from feedback reports on the social structure of their classroom and the well-being of their students (Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012). These reports would not only be useful to discover who is victimizing whom and how, but can also help identify students with psychosocial adjustment problems at an early stage. In addition, the information about social hierarchy in the classroom can be used to optimize the composition of the support group as it makes it easier to select well-liked (prosocial) peers and friends of the victim. A carefully selected support group is likely to enhance the

potential success of the Support Group Approach in improving the victims' situation in the longer term. Lastly, the reports might be used to distinguish between students who should be encouraged to take up the role of defender and those who should better not intervene in bullying situations, for instance because they are victimized themselves or have a marginal position (e.g., highly disliked, few friends) in the classroom. In the KiVa+ condition, classroom teachers already receive feedback reports. Yet, it seems that these reports are rarely used in targeting bullying situations. Anti-bullying interventions, including KiVa, should therefore carefully instruct teachers on how the information can be used in preventing victimization and tackling existing bullying situations.

In Chapter 5 it appears that bully-victim relationships are unstable, despite the fact that victims are often chronically victimized and bullies persist in peer harassment (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Scholte, Engels, Overbeek, de Kemp, & Haselager, 2007). This might be a reason why the Support Group Approach was found to be unsuccessful in reducing victimization over the course of a school year. It is important for anti-bullying interventions to get detailed insights into the development of group processes, and acknowledge the instability both in classroom hierarchy and in students' participant roles in bullying (see Huitsing et al., 2014). Particularly interventions that target current bullying situations cannot be straightforward, but should always be adjusted to the specific situation.

Lastly, the findings of this dissertation are consistent with the notion that social status is an important mechanism underlying students' involvement in bullying and defending behavior (e.g., Salmivalli, 2010). Nevertheless, the extent to which bullying is a successful strategy to obtain or maintain high social standing in the classroom depends on classroom norms (e.g., Salmivalli, 2014). Anti-bullying programs should therefore contain elements that enhance a positive group climate, which rewards prosocial rather than antisocial behavior. For instance, teachers could be trained in showing their disapproval of bullying and intervening in negative behavior since they are highly influential in establishing group norms (Saarento, Kärnä, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013; Veenstra et al., 2014). Moreover, bullies can be taught other, prosocial behavior to achieve or maintain high social status (Ellis et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2012; Garandeau, Lee, et al., 2014). To enhance students' involvement in defending, interventions should target students' empathy and emphasize that high social standing in the classroom can also be achieved by intervening in bullying and supporting the victim.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation reports on research conducted to better understand the complex phenomenon of school bullying. Why children bully and why bystanders (do not) intervene have been important questions in bullying research for many years. This book offers new insights into the emotional and social processes that play roles in bullying, victimization and defending among classmates. The most important take-home message for anti-bullying interventions is that not only bullying, but also defending can be helpful to gain high social standing in the classroom. Nevertheless, this dissertation also shows that it is crucial to further investigate how victim support can help alter the victims' situation in the longer term. I have taken some important steps in unraveling the mechanisms behind bullying and defending. Future studies should thoroughly examine how the current findings can best be implemented in anti-bullying interventions. Ultimately, such research can be used to further reduce school bullying and will help to make schools safe places for all students.