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Defending victims: What does it take to intervene in bullying and how is it rewarded by peers?



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ABSTRACT

Defending is considered important in reducing bullying and victimization in schools. Yet, the prevalence of defending is quite low and there is little insight into aspects that explain why students intervene in bullying situations. The current study used a longitudinal design to simultaneously examine the antecedents and status outcomes of defending behavior. It was expected that affective and social-cognitive factors explain involvement in defending. Moreover, it was proposed that defending would be rewarded with popularity among peers, but only for defenders who were not victimized themselves. Unconfined multilevel path models were used and data came from students in grades 4–6 of Finnish elementary schools ($N = 4209$ students from 210 classrooms and 38 schools; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.25$; 50% boys). Affective empathy and students' self-efficacy beliefs were predictive of defending behavior over time, whereas cognitive empathy was not. Additionally, defenders increased their popularity among their peers. No substantial differences between victims and non-victims were found. This pattern of results suggests that, irrespective of victim status, specific children are more likely to defend in bullying situations and are rewarded with increased popularity.

1. Introduction

Bullying in schools is a severe problem worldwide with negative health consequences and psychosocial adjustment problems for those involved (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014). In past decades it has been acknowledged that the behavior of bystanders is crucial to end bullying (Salmivalli, 2014). Research demonstrated 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, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 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 relatively little is known about the aspects that explain student's involvement in defending behavior. The main purpose of this

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study was therefore to obtain insight into the antecedents and outcomes 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 affective 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 were 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 towards victims, high levels of empathy, agreeableness, responsibility beliefs, moral awareness, and perceived ability to intervene were associated with defending behavior among children and adolescents (see: Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012; Pronk, Olthof, & Goossens, 2015; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015). These cross-sectional studies highlight interesting associations, but cannot establish their temporal order. To fill this gap, a longitudinal design was employed in the current study.

Second, the current study aimed to extend the literature by examining the outcomes 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, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 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 outcomes 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, again, the temporal order has not been examined.

The third aim of the current 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, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014). However, there is little insight into the affective and social cognitive processes related to defending among victims. 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 affects both the antecedents and outcomes of defending.

The present study examined affective 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 & Tsofi, 2010), we tested the roles of cognitive and affective empathy (see Fig. 1, path a), self-efficacy (path b) and their interactions (path c). Subsequently, we examined the outcomes of defending concerning perceived popularity in the peer group (path d). It is feasible that empathic and self-efficacious children are more popular among their peers even without being involved in defending and that defending plays a minor role for some children's popular status. In other words, while defending is often seen as pathway to popularity, it may not play this role for children who are high in self-efficacy and empathy as these features might be appealing enough, not requiring that they also engage in defending to be popular. To elucidate whether defending is a necessary intermediate stage to gain popularity, we explicitly modeled indirect effects from cognitive and affective empathy and self-efficacy to popularity via defending (path e). Statistically significant indirect effects indicate that defending behavior indeed acts as a proxy or intermediate behavioral expression of individual characteristics in prediction of popularity among peers. We end by investigating whether these processes differed between victims and non-victims of bullying.

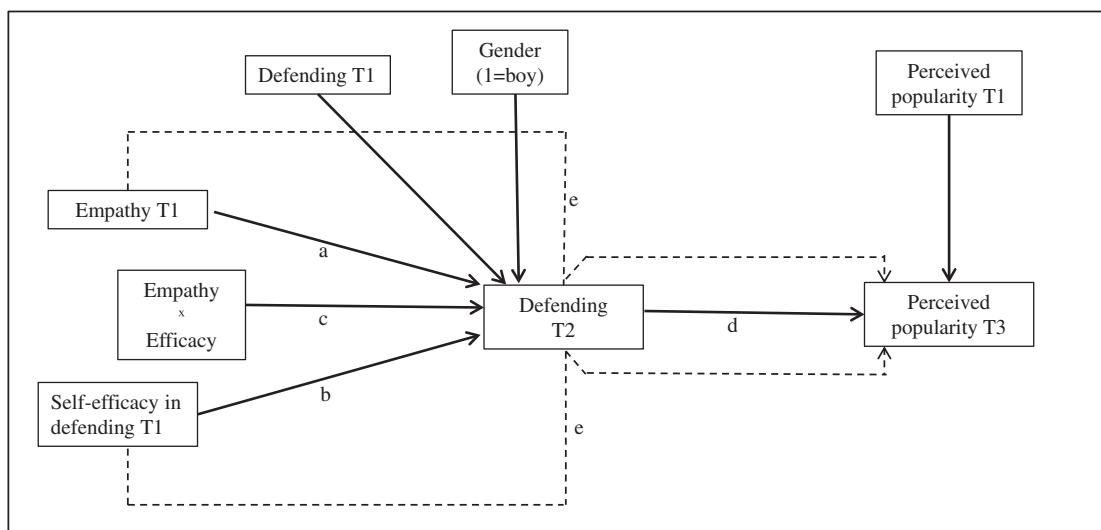


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

1.1. Empathy and self-efficacy as antecedents of defending

Students' emotions and social cognitions 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; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010). Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share emotions of another (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). It plays 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 used cross-sectional data to examine whether empathy is related to defending victims of bullying (see Van Noorden et al., 2015 for an overview). It was found that both understanding how victims of bullying feel (i.e., cognitive empathy) and actually feeling the victim's emotions (i.e., affective empathy) were associated with higher levels of defending. In line with these findings, we hypothesized that higher levels of empathy, both cognitive and affective, are related to a higher involvement in defending behavior (Hypothesis 1).

Besides empathy, self-efficacy might 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 success 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 in doing so (Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008). Several (cross-sectional) studies have reported positive 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 to be related to a higher involvement in defending behavior (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 insufficient to make someone intervene in bullying situations (for an example, see Gini et al., 2008). Put differently, it can be argued that empathetic children are particularly likely to defend when they also feel they are able to do so, and vice versa. Given the lack of studies that formally examined whether high levels on both traits are needed to become a defender, we tested this interaction in an exploratory manner.

1.2. Popularity among peers as an outcome 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, Imuta, Peterson, & Henry, 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 directly intervening in bullying situations, seeking help or comforting the victim defenders exhibit that they are powerful or influential and dare to take a stance against bullying. Defenders may thus achieve popularity by lowering the dominant and powerful position of bullies (Salmivalli et al., 2011) and “standing out” themselves, which will increase their visibility in the peer group. Moreover, the “protest” against bullying by directly stepping in during a bullying situation will likely be perceived as socially dominant behavior. 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 hypothesized that defending is linked to an increase in perceived popularity among peers (Hypothesis 3).

1.3. Defenders: victims versus non-victims

We propose that associations between cognitive and affective empathy, self-efficacy, defending, and popularity show variation by victim status. 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 can be assumed that the association between empathy and defending is stronger for victims of bullying as they know what it feels like to be victimized (Batanova et al., 2014; Pozzoli et al., 2012) and will be more likely to act upon their empathic concern in bullying situations. In contrast, the association between self-efficacy and defending behavior should be lower for victims, given that they are already a target of bullying and unable to defend themselves. Even if highly efficacious, victims will probably not defend other victims. In sum, we expect that victim status will moderate the effects of cognitive and affective empathy and self-efficacy on defending (Hypothesis 4).

With regard to popularity in the peer group, we know that victims are generally unpopular among their peers (Bouman et al., 2012; De Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2010). This can be explained in two ways. First, most bullies tend to choose easy targets to harass, usually peers who are perceived as unimportant by others (Sijtsema et al., 2009; Veenstra et al., 2007). Second, peers' perceptions of victims change gradually when the victimization endures. To begin with, victims of bullying are unlikely to have a central position in the classroom (De Bruyn et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). With persistent harassment, victims will increasingly be seen as unworthy and risky to associate with, resulting in further decreasing popularity in the peer group (e.g., Boulton, 2013; Sentse, Dijkstra, Salmivalli, & Cillessen, 2013). It is unlikely that the effects of being victimized can be leveled out by defending others, also because defending among victims is not usually perceived as truly opposing the bully, but rather as supporting fellow

sufferers. Hence, we expected that defending will not result in an increase in perceived popularity among peers for victims of bullying (Hypothesis 5).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data used in this study 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 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 in August 2008.

As the KiVa intervention might influence the associations among our study variables, we only used data from schools in the control condition ($N = 4229$ students, 49%). For twenty students (0.5%) there was no information on their classroom ID. This resulted in a final sample consisting of 4209 students (50% boys, $M_{age} = 11.25$) from 210 classrooms and 38 schools.

2.2. Measures

The current study distinguished 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 ranging from 1 (*it did not happen*) to 5 (*several times per week*). Based on 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; 882 students (21.2%) lacked information on their victim status and thus could not be assigned to a group.

2.2.1. Perceived popularity

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 to 1).

2.2.2. Defending behavior

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 $\alpha = 0.92$ in both waves). Scores could range from 0 to 1.

2.2.3. Empathy

Affective and cognitive empathy (Kärnä et al., 2011) were assessed using four and three items, respectively. Cognitive empathy describes an understanding of victims' feelings (e.g., “I can understand how the bullied student must feel”). Affective empathy describes the degree to which students share the feelings of victims of bullying (e.g., “When the bullied student is sad, I also feel sad”). Answers ranged from 0 (*never true*) to 3 (*always true*). Scores for both scales were averaged across items such that a higher score indicated a higher level of empathy (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$ and 0.81 for cognitive and affective empathy, respectively).

2.2.4. Self-efficacy in defending

Students indicated how difficult or easy it would be for them to defend a victim of bullying (Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008). The questionnaire included three different ways of defending, similar to the PRQ items (e.g., “Trying to make others stop bullying would be [...] for me”). Students' answers ranged from 0 (*very easy*) to 3 (*very difficult*) and 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 $\alpha = 0.71$).

2.2.5. Gender

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

2.3. Procedure

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 the 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 effect on the results.

2.4. Analyses

The study hypotheses were tested using unconflated multilevel path models (so-called 1-1-1 models, indicating that all constructs of interest were measured on the individual level) in Mplus 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012; Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010) with students nested in classrooms and schools (we used the Mplus Analysis command: TYPE IS COMPLEX TWOLEVEL RANDOM). Unconflated multilevel path models were used to avoid bias which might arise when classroom level effects influence individual level effects, even though only the latter ones were of interest to our study. If we estimate only individual level slopes, the within-level and between-level effects are conflated. The resulting estimate is biased if within-level and between-level effects are not equal (Preacher et al., 2010). When the actual within-level effect is less than the actual between-level effect, the combined slope overestimates the within-level effect. When the actual within-level effect is greater than the actual between-level effect, the combined slope underestimates the within-level effect. Unconflated multilevel path models avoid this bias by separating the within and between components.

In accordance with this approach, all individual level predictors and the mediating variable were group mean-centered (Preacher et al., 2010). Both group-mean centered measures and group means were entered into the models on the between- and within-level, respectively. Following this method, we could distinguish between-level and within-level variance components of the paths estimated in the model (Preacher et al., 2010).

The indirect effects from self-efficacy and empathy to popularity via defending were estimated using the MODEL CONSTRAINT command. All models were estimated using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation with robust standard errors (MLR). The FIML estimation is regarded as a state-of-the-art technique for handling missing data (Enders, 2010): it avoids listwise or pairwise deletion as it includes all pieces of available information in generating the final parameter estimates. Auxiliary variables, selected based on their association with missingness, were included in the model to optimize the Full Maximum Likelihood specification. The maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors adjusts for non-normality in observations.

We first estimated overall path models ($N = 4209$) separately for affective and cognitive empathy, in which we did not distinguish by victim status. Subsequently, we included interaction effects to examine whether associations between affective and cognitive 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.

In additional analyses we tested whether being perceived as popular affected defending behavior, as this has been assumed in previous cross-sectional studies (Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Sainio et al., 2011). All models showed that perceived popularity predicted defending behavior over time, but the effects of defending (T2) on popularity (T3) did not change substantially when we included this direct effect. As we particularly aimed to examine whether popularity could be an outcome of defending, we chose to present the most parsimonious models in which we controlled for the covariance between popularity (T1) and defending (T2).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive results

Means and standard deviations of our study variables are presented in Table 1. Table 2 shows correlations, suggesting that both wave 1 and wave 2 defending ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$), and wave 1 and wave 3 perceived popularity ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) were

Table 1
Descriptive information on study variables ($N = 4209$).

	Min	Max	M (SD)/%
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Affective empathy T1	0	3	1.81 (0.72)
Cognitive empathy T1	0	3	2.24 (0.63)
Self-efficacy in defending T1	0	3	1.79 (0.73)
<i>Grouping variable</i>			
Victim			15.0%
Victim status unknown			21.1%
<i>Control variables</i>			
Gender (1 = boy)	0	1	0.50 (0.50)
Defending T1	0	1	0.19 (0.15)
Perceived popularity T1	0	1	0.16 (0.19)
<i>Dependent variables</i>			
Defending T2	0	1	0.19 (0.15)
Perceived popularity T3	0	1	0.13 (0.19)

Table 2
Correlations among the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Affective empathy T1								
2. Cognitive empathy T1	0.55**							
3. Efficacy in defending T1	0.19**	0.15**						
4. Victimization	0.03	0.05 [~]	-0.08**					
5. Gender	-0.29**	-0.13**	-0.06*	0.05 [~]				
6. Defending T1	0.31**	0.18**	0.09**	-0.05 [~]	-0.42**			
7. Perceived popularity T1	0.00	-0.01	0.06*	-0.07**	0.05 [~]	0.20**		
8. Defending T2	0.29**	0.15**	0.09**	-0.06*	-0.40**	0.67**	0.16**	
9. Perceived popularity T3	0.01	0.01	0.06*	-0.07**	0.03	0.14**	0.71**	0.20**

[~] $p < 0.05$.
* $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.001$.

highly correlated, which indicates stability in defending and popular status over time. Moreover, positive associations between empathy and defending (r ranging from 0.29 to 0.31 for affective empathy and r ranging from 0.15 to 0.18 for cognitive empathy, both $p < 0.001$) as well as defending and perceived popularity were found (r ranging from 0.14 to 0.20, $p < 0.001$). With regard to self-efficacy in defending, correlations with defending ($r = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived popularity ($r = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$) were small but statistically significant in both waves.

3.2. Antecedents and outcomes of defending: affective empathy as predictor

Fig. 2 presents the unstandardized regression coefficients for the overall path model in which affective empathy was examined as predictor of defending. This initial model showed a satisfactory fit (bar the *srmr* for the between-level): $\chi^2 (28) = 303.93$, *RMSEA* = 0.048, *CFI* = 0.990, *TLI* = 0.802, *srmr* (within) = 0.005, *srmr* (between) = 0.296 (cf. Hu & Bentler, 1999). Results on the student level indicated that higher levels of affective empathy predicted defending behavior over time after controlling for gender (defending is more likely in girls), 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). Our second hypothesis that self-efficacy in defending would affect one's defending behavior was also supported by the results. No significant interaction effect between affective empathy and self-efficacy on defending over time was found, implying that those who were highly empathetic and had high self-efficacy beliefs were not significantly more involved in defending than those who “only” scored high on affective empathy or self-efficacy in defending.

After controlling for stability in perceived popularity, defending behavior predicted perceived popularity over time ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.016$). Our finding is thus consistent with the expectation that defending can increase social status (Hypothesis 3). Lastly, affective empathy predicted perceived popularity via defending.

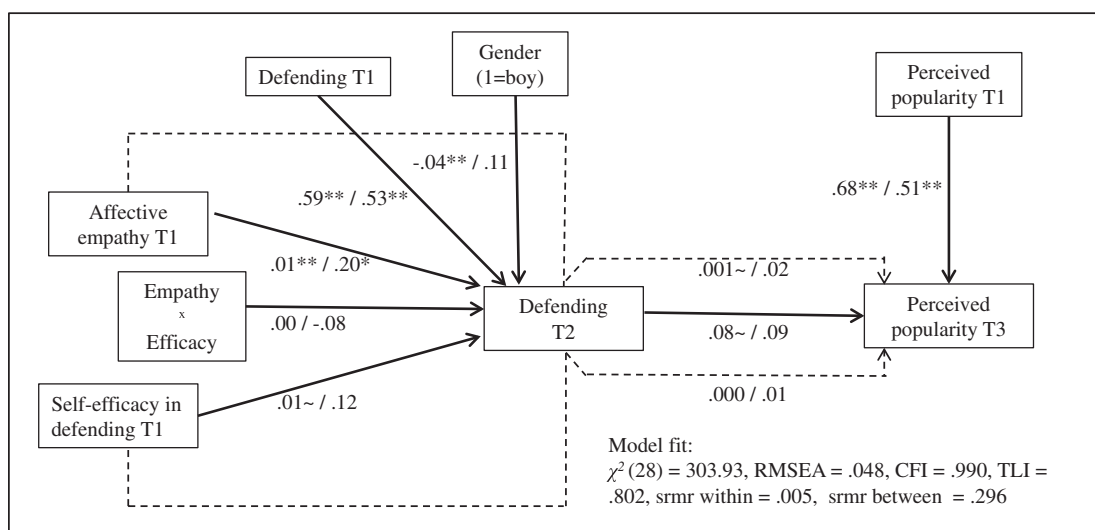


Fig. 2. Antecedents of defending and its status outcomes, model with affective empathy ($N = 4209$). Note. Student level associations are presented before the dash and classroom level associations behind the dash. All coefficients are unstandardized. [~] $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.001$.

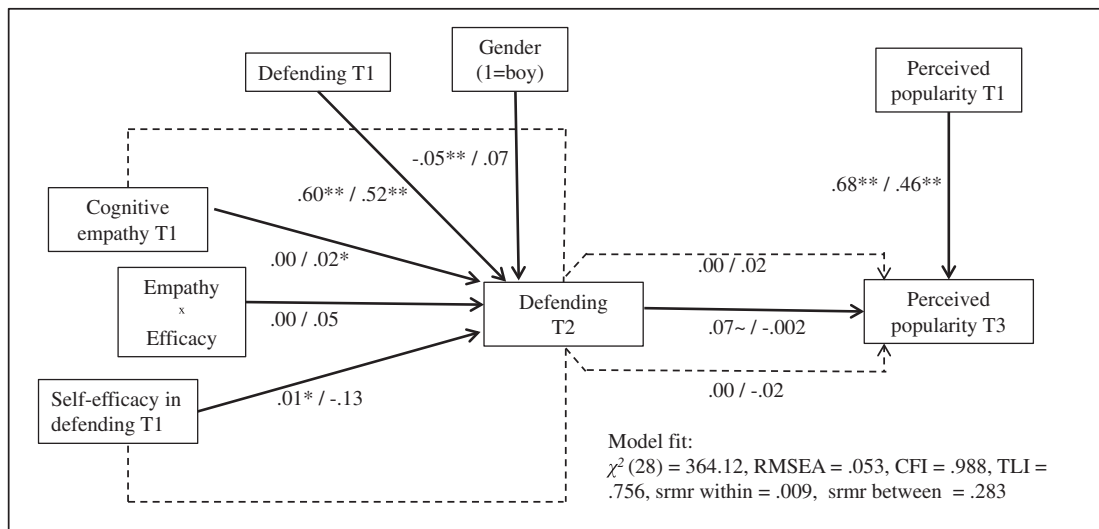


Fig. 3. Antecedents of defending and its status outcomes, model with cognitive empathy ($N = 4209$). Note. Student level associations are presented before the dash and classroom level associations behind the dash. All coefficients are unstandardized. $\sim p < 0.05$. $*p < 0.01$. $**p < 0.001$.

3.3. Cognitive empathy as predictor

We next estimated associations between cognitive empathy, self-efficacy, defending and popularity (Fig. 3), expecting an overall similar pattern of results as for affective empathy. Model analysis results showed the following fit index values: $\chi^2(28) = 364.12$, RMSEA = 0.053, CFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.756, *srmr* (within) = 0.009, *srmr* (between) = 0.283. Cognitive empathy was not associated with defending after controlling for gender and stability in defending. Neither did the indirect path reach statistical significance, implying that defending did not function as intermediate construct between cognitive empathy and popularity. Other estimates were similar to the model presented previously, that is: self-efficacy in defending predicted defending behavior and defending had a small but statistically significant effect on popularity.

3.4. Differences between victims and non-victims

Differences between victims and non-victims in antecedents and outcomes of defending were tested in separate models which included interaction effects between respectively: empathy and victim status, self-efficacy and victim status, and defending and victim status. Model fit results were overall acceptable (details available upon request), however, contrary to our expectations, no differences between non-victims and victims in associations between empathy, self-efficacy, and defending were observed (p -values ranging from 0.208 to 0.866). Similarly, the hypothesized interaction between defending and victim status in the prediction of popularity was not statistically significant in both the model containing affective empathy ($p = 0.108$), and the model containing cognitive empathy ($p = 0.095$).

In sum, the results of interaction models supported neither our expectation that victim status moderated the effects of empathy and self-efficacy on involvement in defending (Hypothesis 4), nor our expectation that defending other victims would not benefit the popularity of victimized children (Hypothesis 5). Children high in affective empathy and self-efficacy and were more likely to defend in bullying situations and were rewarded with an increase in popularity among their peers but this was similarly the case for victims and non-victims.

4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to simultaneously investigate the antecedents and outcomes 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 improve the number of defenders, it is important to know what motivates students to intervene in bullying situations and whether peers reward defending behavior by assigning popular status to those who dare to stand up to the bully. Hence, we examined to what extent affective 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 affective empathy were more likely to be involved in defending over

time), whereas cognitive empathy was not found to be an antecedent of students' defending behavior. This is in line with cross-sectional studies in which affective empathy is generally more strongly associated with defending (correlations ranging from $r = 0.21$ to $r = 0.61$) than cognitive empathy (correlations ranging from $r = 0.14$ to $r = 0.52$, see Van Noorden et al., 2015). Like in most cross-sectional studies that found that self-efficacy in defending was associated with defending (Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006), our findings also show that feeling that one is capable of standing up against a bully or comforting a victim is likely to trigger actual defending. Yet, self-efficacy was not found to amplify the influence of empathy on defending, or vice versa.

Our measure of defending refers to three different behaviors. Two of them are indirect forms of defending (i.e., tries to make others stop bullying and comforts the victim or encourages him/her to tell the teacher about the bullying), whereas the third form (i.e., tells others to stop bullying or says that bullying is stupid) reflects a direct intervention in a bullying situation (Reijntjes et al., 2016). It might be that particularly active, direct forms of defending (i.e., bully-oriented defending) require high self-efficacy beliefs, whereas indirect forms, such as comforting the victim, require high levels of (affective) empathy. If so, our measure of defending might underestimate the effect of self-efficacy. To investigate whether indirect and direct defending are differentially affected by empathy and self-efficacy it may be worthwhile to construct separate measures for these two forms of defending.

It is also possible that the bullying situation plays a role in explaining the strength of the associations between defending and both empathy and self-efficacy. Barchia and Bussey (2011), who did not find a longitudinal effect of students' self-efficacy beliefs, argued that even self-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, such as empathy, and (perceived) classroom norms of bullying (Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Sandstrom, Makover, & Bartini, 2013). Likewise, the inclination of empathetic and 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 specific circumstances may influence the observed effects of empathy and self-efficacy on students' involvement in defending. This is particularly important because longitudinal studies on these effects are scarce.

We proposed that the antecedents and consequences of intervening in bullying situations differed between victimized and non-victimized defenders. However, the results showed no significant differences between the two groups. It thus seems that although victims may have more empathy and less self-efficacy, the emotional and social cognitive processes are not differentially related to defending among victims and non-victims. We also found that defending was an effective way to gain in popularity over time. Here, too, we find insufficient support for the expectation that this would only hold when defenders were not victimized themselves. 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 might be rewarded with greater popularity in the peer group.

4.1. Strengths, limitations, and directions for future research

The current study makes a substantial contribution to previous studies that investigated the associations between affective and social cognitive factors, perceived popularity and involvement in defending behavior using a longitudinal design and data from different reporters. We simultaneously examined what it takes to intervene in bullying situations and to what extent defenders are rewarded by their peers in terms of popularity. Our study gives important insights into how students can be encouraged to take a stance against bullying and stand up for victimized peers. With this knowledge, school bullying can presumably be better addressed in the future as the pro-victim behavior of bystanders is likely to reduce bullies' motivation to harass others (Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2014). Aside from these strengths, some limitations should be noted. The time period in this study was relatively short (one school year) and the stability in defending and perceived popularity was high. Most of the variance in defending was attributed to previous defending behavior, and it is possible that the role of empathy and self-efficacy was underestimated. Moreover, the time span to which students refer might differ between our measures of victimization and defending. With regard to victimization, students were explicitly asked to indicate what happened in the past months, whereas for defending no time reference was given. In other words: it might be that victims refer to a different time span than their peers do when nominating defenders. This might have influenced our findings, as defenders may not have been victims at the same time as they were intervening in bullying situations.

Moreover, our study had 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 & Veenstra, 2012; Huitsing et al., 2014).

Though not a central focus of this study, we note the negative correlation between victimization and defending in contrast to some earlier research, which is likely a consequence of different measures. That is, we focused on peer nominations of defending whereas Batanova et al. (2014) assessed willingness to intervene using self-reports. In other words, those children in our study who reported to be victimized were not perceived by their peers to be defenders whereas victims in Batanova et al. (2014) were more willing to intervene than others. The latter may be true for our sample as well, but willingness to do something and actual behavior are not identical, and thus different findings are not surprising.

Future studies would move the field ahead if they considered group norms while examining the antecedents and outcomes 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 outcomes of defending differ among classrooms.

In addition, the role of teachers in encouraging defender behavior should be investigated in future studies. Previous research has found that student perception of teacher efforts to reduce bullying 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. 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.

4.2. Practical implications for interventions

Our findings illustrate that affective empathy and self-efficacy are predictive of intervening in bullying situations and defending is rewarded with greater popularity. It 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. Similarly, enhancing students' self-efficacy beliefs, for example by teaching children effective ways to intervene in bullying, may have a positive impact. However, our study should only be the beginning of a long and thorough investigation into effective means of increasing defending behavior. Previous research on and practical experience with anti-bullying interventions has shown that much may depend on the classroom context and specific bullying situations. Given 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, interventions designed without a more precise understanding of these complex interactions may not be as effective as expected.

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