Bystanders in Bullying: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Bystanders in Bullying: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Bullying is a problem in most, if not all, contemporary schools around the world and is associated with socioemotional, academic, and physical difficulties for not only the victims of bullying, but also the youth who engage in bullying (Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008; Hawker & Boulton, 2000) and bystanders (Janosz et al., 2008; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). As the actions of bystanders contribute to the deterrence or maintenance of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010), it is critical to understand those factors that lead bystanders’ to either protect the victim or facilitate the bullying. To this end, the articles in this special issue provide novel insights into bystanders of bullying, building upon emerging themes in the literature. This introduction summarizes the contributions of each article, focusing on three themes: (a) the process-oriented nature of the decision to defend victims or reinforce the aggressors, (b) the need to differentiate qualitatively different forms of defending, and (c) the role of classroom and societal norms in bystanders’ behaviors. This introduction concludes with a call for a next generation of studies that integrates the lines of research presented in this special issue.
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In 1996, seminal work by Christina Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) altered the course of bullying research and intervention. By identifying bullying as a group process, these researchers charted a course toward illuminating the social reinforcement structure underlying bullying, including the interpersonal benefits to perpetrators, the motivational systems for engagement in bullying, and the potential for deterrence through implicit or explicit peer condemnation. While examining youth who bully and those who are peer victimized has remained vital, literatures have developed around understanding the bystanders of bullying whose behavior serves to reinforce or mitigate their peers’ aggression (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). The knowledge base that has been accrued in the intervening years is considerable, with particular attention being paid to the social-cognitive underpinnings and socio-contextual determinants (Ettekal, Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Ladd, 2015; Meter & Card, 2015) of defending behaviors and, to a lesser degree, pro-bullying bystander behavior.

Currently, theory regarding the etiology of bystander behavior has progressed, paving the way to a new generation of research. Perhaps because training bystanders to be active and prosocial when witnessing bullying is widely seen as critical to reducing bullying and other school violence (Baynard, 2015), theoretical advances have primarily focused on bystanders’ decision to defend those being bullied. Meter and Card (2015) and Ettekal et al. (2015) have each presented conceptual frameworks that integrate the extant literature on the correlates of bystanding behavior with developmental and social psychological theory. Drawing on interdependence theory, Meter and Card highlight the role of interdependent relationships in determining bystanders’ decision to defend victims, as well as the situational and personal factors that facilitate defending. By examining bullying participant roles from a person × environment perspective, Ettekal et al. delineate how social-information processing may interact with peer norms and teacher socialization processes in shaping bystanders’ responses. Common to these two conceptual frameworks is a focus on how: (a) children’s bystanders behaviors are the culmination of their understanding of the bullying situation, their perceived ability to affect the
actions and feelings of others, and their affective and motivational responses when witnessing peers’ aggression; and (b) contextual factors may impede or enhance these intra-individual factors.

In soliciting papers for this special issue of the *Journal of School Psychology*, we sought novel investigations that build on the theoretical advances outlined by Meter and Card (2015) and Ettekal et al. (2015), as well as highlight important emerging themes in the study of bystanders to bullying. Thus, the papers compiled in this special issue reflect three evolving themes within the study of bystanders to bullying: (a) bystander behavior is the product of a complex set of social-cognitive and affective processes; (b) to fully understand the bullying context, subtle distinctions need to be made between bystander behaviors that previously were viewed as functionally indistinct; and (c) bystander behavior is impacted by peer group norms and broader value systems.

To begin our special issue, we present two papers that reflect important, yet nascent, themes in the study of bystanders to bullying. The first is a need to understand the specific information-processing steps that underlie the decision to intervene or remain passive when witnessing bullying. Although social-cognitive correlates (e.g., self-efficacy for defending, moral disengagement) of defending, passive bystanding, and probullying bystander behavior have been examined in previous studies, there has been a substantial need to better understand the cognitive steps taken within a bullying context that lead to positive bystander behavior. Fredrick, Jenkins, and Ray (2020) utilized the social psychological theory of bystander intervention proposed by Darley and Latané (1968). This model conceptualizes bystander behavior as a series of five steps: notice the event, interpret it as an emergency, accept responsibility for intervening, know how to act, then the actual intervention act. Their findings suggest that the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy are differentially related to these steps. Cognitive empathy was significantly and positively related to the noticing, accepting, and knowing steps, while affective empathy was significantly and positively related to the actual intervention. Another important finding was affective empathy was positively associated with interpreting bullying events as emergencies, but only for youth with low to moderate levels of internalizing symptoms.

In the second paper presented as part of this special issue, Lambe and Craig (2020) investigated the multidimensional nature of defending behaviors. Whereas defending has both
conceptually and empirically been treated as a unitary set of behaviors in most of the research literature, early indications suggest the need to differentiate various forms of bullying. Lambe and Craig provided initial evidence of reliability and validity for the Defending Behavior Scale, which consists of four dimensions of defending behavior: indirect defending (consisting of reporting and comforting) and direct defending (consisting of aggression and solution-focused). They also found gender differences in the frequency of these types of defending where girls reported more indirect defending and boys report more direct, aggressive defending. Overall their study highlights the need to have a multidimensional definition and measurement approach for defending.

The next two papers in this issue integrate the two previous themes by examining social-cognitive processes specific to varying forms of defending. Bussey et al. examine two established correlates of defending behavior – self-efficacy for defending and moral disengagement – as they relate to bystander behavior when witnessing cyberbullying, a highly salient context for peer interactions and aggression in adolescence (Kowalski et al., 2018; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Moreover, by examining two qualitatively different types of defending, constructive defending and aggressive defending, the authors clarify the sometimes contradictory findings regarding the social-cognitive processes supporting defending behaviors. Specifically, the investigators found that whereas high levels of defender self-efficacy and low levels of moral disengagement are associated with more frequent engagement in constructive defending, the opposite pattern emerges for aggressive defending. Not only do these findings shed light on specific cognition-defender response associations, but also suggest that while specific defending behaviors may share the goal of helping the victim, their enactment may reflect diverging objectives on the part of the bystander.

Building on this theme, we then present a study by Baumen et al. (2020) that examined adolescents’ recollections of their bystander behavior during lived experiences of witnessing bullying. Whereas previous research has predominantly relied on questionnaire data to examine correlates and outcomes of bystander behavior, the data from this study yields novel information as to how these processes unfold during actual episodes of bullying. Of particular importance was the finding from this study that the perceived outcomes of defending depend on the specific strategy utilized. Those defending behaviors that were perceived as most effective at stopping the bullying (e.g., telling the
bully to stop, soliciting adult support) were not perceived as highly effective in comforting the victim. At the same time, comforting the victim was reported to alleviate the victim’s emotional distress, but was not viewed as reducing the bullying. The study also sheds light on previously unexplored reasons for not intervening on behalf of the victim, including being shy and presuming that the victim did not require assistance. This methodology and the data it generated paths the way for a more comprehensive understanding of how youth make decisions regarding whether and, perhaps more importantly, how to intervene on the behalf of victims.

The last two contributions to this special issue reflect a growing interest in how the larger social context interacts with person-level factors in contributing to bystanding behavior. Socio-ecological models of bullying demonstrate that the bully-victim dyad is influenced directly and indirectly by their immediate environment, such as their peers, teachers, and school climate, but also by more distal influences such as community and culture (Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011). Others such as Meter and Card (2015) and Ettekal et al. (2015) apply this same principle to bystander behavior. Thus, integral to understanding bystanders’ behavior is to examine the impact of the immediate and broader culture. With regard to the former, in the fifth paper in our special issue, Troop-Gordon et al. examined how perceived group norms that favor the victim interact with person-level factors to predict probullying bystander behavior. Utilizing longitudinal data collected over the course of one school year, the investigators found that heightened probullying bystander behavior is predicted by a combination of low empathy, high moral disengagement, the quality of children’s relationships with peers, and their perceived norms in favor of defending victims. Furthermore, and consistent with interdependent theory (Meter & Card, 2015), the findings were consistent with the proposition that children take into account their own standing with peers (as indicated by high levels of peer victimization or popularity) in relation to their perceived norms for their class’s behavior when responding to witnessed bullying.

Our final contribution to the special issue addresses a much larger cultural factor that impinges on bystander behavior, the internalization of toxic masculinity (Carlson, 2008; Tice & Baumeister, 1985). Ingram et al. utilized data collected on a large group of adolescent boys who were followed for a year and a half during middle school. By identifying groups of boys who followed
diverging trajectories of willingness to intervene in bullying, the investigators were able to examine how indicators of internalized toxic masculinity is associated with motivation to engage in defending behaviors. Importantly, lack of empathy, engagement in homophobic name calling, social dominance, and pro-bullying attitudes were associated with either consistently low willingness to intervene or a declining willingness to intervene. These findings illuminate an often overlooked point in the anti-bullying literature – cultural values that perpetuate aggression and facilitate indifference to others need to be addressed if we are to prevent bullying among youth. Furthermore, these findings point to societal norms and expectations that may underlie or exacerbate individual-level factors (e.g., moral disengagement, assessments of the seriousness of aggression) that curtail defending and enable pro-bullying bystander behavior.

The papers in this special issue demonstrate that bystanders' responses to witnessed bullying is the culmination of early identification and interpretation of the aggressive act, motivation to engage or remain passive, and a determination of the outcomes one prioritizes and feels capable of accomplishing. Furthermore, to understand bystanders' actions we must take into account the functional value those actions serve for both the bystander and those being harmed by the bullying. While shedding light on the multi-faced and process-oriented nature of engaging in bystander behavior, it is the integration of the information brought to light in this special issue that will constitute the next stage in the study of bystanders to bullying. For example, does internalization of toxic masculinity as identified by Ingram et al. contribute to gender differences in types of defending as seen by Lambe and Craig, the affective empathy needed to motivate active intervention as reported by Fredrick and colleagues or which perceived outcomes of bystander behaviors are valued (see Bauman et al.)? Furthermore, do perceived norms for constructive defending versus aggressive defending, as identified by Bussey et al. differentially predict pro-bullying bystander (see Troop-Gordon et al.)? Thus, this special issue serves not only as a means of highlighting important nuances in bystander behavior and the processes that contribute to those behaviors, but also as a call to investigate how a confluence of factors at the level of the person, relationship, and larger culture shape bystanders’ reactions to bullying.
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