Relations Between Actual Group Norms, Perceived Peer Behavior, and Bystander Children’s Intervention to Bullying

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The goals of the study were (a) to predict children’s intervention in bullying situations from class-level norms for intervention, as well as child-level perceptions of the number of peers who would intervene, and (b) to determine whether these predictions held when accounting for children’s levels of empathy, prosocial behavior, and callous-unemotional traits. Participants were 751 racially and ethnically diverse fourth- and fifth-grade students (53.8% female) in 43 classes. Participants completed peer nominations about which classmates they perceived would intervene during bullying situations. Empathy and callous-unemotional traits were assessed via self report, whereas prosocial behavior was measured through peer report. Using multilevel modeling, each child’s intervention in bullying was positively predicted from class-level norms for intervention (class means for the percentage of children who nominated each child as intervening) but negatively predicted from child-level perceptions of the number of peers who would intervene, after accounting for the 3 child traits. Class-level findings support past research on group norms which suggest that children are more likely to display a behavior if their peers display the same behavior. Child-level findings support the presence of the “bystander effect” in children’s bullying episodes, in which children are less likely to intervene if they believe that more peers will do so. Thus, although children were more likely to intervene in classrooms with cultures that made intervention more normative, within the context of each class’s culture, children were more likely to intervene if they perceived that fewer peers would do so.

School bullying is a prevalent problem; approximately 10% of children report being bullied at school (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying results in negative outcomes in children’s academic performance, psychological functioning, and physical health. Compared to nonbullied children, bullied children perform more poorly on standardized tests, feel lonelier, and more often avoid school (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). Bullied children also suffer more often from depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Borowsky, Taliaferro, & McMorris, 2013; Card & Hodges, 2008). Finally, bullied children experience more somatic symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and sleep difficulties (Biebl, DiLalla, Davis, Lynch, & Shinn, 2011; Knack, Jensen-Campbell, & Baum, 2011).

Bullying typically occurs when peers are present (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), and bystander children impact the duration and
outcome of bullying (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Intervening to support the victim or involve an adult tends to end bullying and discourage future bullying (Pepler & Craig, 1995). This finding has motivated prevention efforts that promote bystander intervention (e.g., The KiVa Antibullying Program; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alalen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011). To enhance these efforts, we need to understand more about how both group norms for intervention and children’s perceptions of whether their peers will intervene impact each child’s bystander behavior.

Group Norms for Bystander Intervention

A substantial literature suggests that youth behave in accordance with actual group norms. When peers smoke cigarettes (Nargiso et al., 2012), drink alcohol (Vitaro, Brendgen, Ladouwer, & Tremblay, 2001), use drugs (Hampson, Andrews, & Barckley, 2008), and get into trouble with authority figures (Wiesner, Capaldi, & Kim, 2012), youth are more likely to display these same behaviors. Although most research on group norms has focused on problematic behaviors, a study of fifth and sixth graders suggests that children match the group norms for both aggressive and prosocial behavior (Berger & Rodkin, 2011). This tendency to follow group norms may apply to children’s bystander intervention to bullying.

Children’s Perceptions of Whether Peers will Intervene

Empirical work on the impact of children’s perceptions of peer behavior on their own behavior is more inconsistent. Some previous work suggests that children also behave in accordance with perceived group norms, regardless of how peers actually behave. In several prior studies, youth changed their own behavior when their perceptions of peers’ behavior were experimentally manipulated. For example, when adolescents’ misconceptions that overestimated group norms in alcohol consumption were corrected, their alcohol consumption was reduced (LaBrie, Hummer, Neighbors, & Pedersen, 2008). Thus, children may be more likely to intervene in bullying situations if they perceive that their peers will do so. In fact, Pozzoli, Gini, and Vieno (2012) found that children were more likely to defend victims of bullying when they believed that their peers would also intervene.

On the other hand, empirical work from social psychology research on the “bystander effect” (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968) suggests that bystanders are less likely to help a victim when they perceive that others are present and capable of helping. This effect has been widely replicated. In their review of the first decade of research on the bystander effect (conducted mostly in adult samples), Latané and Nida (1981) found that most individuals (75%) helped when alone, but fewer individuals (53%) helped when bystanders were present. These results suggest that as the number of bystanders increases, each individual’s perceived portion of personal responsibility may decrease. When applied to children’s perception of their peers’ bystander intervention, children may feel less personally responsible for intervening if they believe that others will help a victim of bullying.

However, fewer studies have examined the bystander effect in child samples, and those that have been conducted have produced equivocal results. In some investigations, the bystander effect is found with children. For example, Caplan and Hay (1989) found that preschoolers did not believe that they needed to help a distressed peer when competent adults were present. In contrast, in other studies, the presence of peer bystanders actually increased the likelihood of helping behavior. For example, in a large sample of 8- to 12-year-olds, children reported that they would be more likely to help a peer if their friends were present than if they were alone (Sierksma, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2014). These discrepant results suggest that more work is necessary to understand whether the bystander effect applies to child samples and to children’s bullying situations in particular.

In summary, research on group norms is consistent in suggesting that children may be more likely to intervene in bullying situations if they are in classrooms in which actual intervention is more normative; however, prior work is less clear about the role of children’s perceptions of peer intervention on their own bystander behavior. On one hand, prior work on perceived group norms supports the idea that children will be more likely to intervene if they believe that their peers will also intervene. On the other hand, previous research on the bystander effect suggests that children may be less likely to intervene if they perceive that other classmates are available to help. The primary purpose of the current study was to investigate the role of actual group norms for bystander intervention, as well as children’s perceptions of the number of other peers who would intervene on children’s own intervention behavior.

Individual Characteristics

Several individual characteristics have been empirically linked to children’s bystander intervention in bullying. A secondary goal of the current study was to investigate whether the study’s hypothesized links hold when accounting for individual characteristics including empathy, prosocial behavior, and callous-unemotional (CU) traits.
Empathy

Previous investigations suggest that children who respond more empathically when they witness bullying are more likely to intervene. Children’s physiological and emotional reactions to bullying videos have predicted peers’ reports of intervention at school (Barhight, Hubbard, & Hyde, 2013). In addition, self-reported empathy has predicted defending behavior such that boys who report high levels of empathy are more likely to intervene to stop bullying (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Alto, 2007).

Prosocial Behavior

Prior studies suggest that children who are generally more prosocial are more likely to intervene in bullying incidents, regardless of whether or not bystanders are present. In one recent study, 8- to 12-year-old children who self-reported higher prosocial behavior indicated that they would be more likely to help a peer than less prosocial children, and their responses were less influenced by the presence or absence of bystanders than were the responses of less prosocial children (Sierksma et al., 2014). Similar findings emerged from an experimental study of adults, half of whom were primed for prosocial behavior through a scrambled sentences activity; results suggested that participants who were primed were more likely to help a stranger who had dropped her books and that these effects were maintained in both situations with and without bystanders (Abbate, Ruggieri, & Stefano, 2013).

Callous-Unemotional Traits

Finally, although to our knowledge no previous studies have directly addressed the question of whether children higher in CU traits are less likely than their peers to intervene when they are bystanders to bullying, previous authors have suggested that lack of empathy and emotion in individuals with CU traits may make them particularly resistant to bullying intervention efforts (Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Frederickson, 2009). Children high on CU traits tend to be unconcerned about the feelings of others, to lack guilt, to report fewer vicarious emotional responses, and to show less heart rate reactivity when watching an emotionally evocative film (Kimonis et al., 2008; Roose, Bijttebier, Decoene, Claes, & Frick, 2010). In a study of Italian children in Grades 6 and 8, children higher in CU traits self-reported lower levels of prosocial emotions and behaviors, including helping and comforting others (Ciucci, Baroncelli, Franchi, Golmaryami, & Frick, 2014). Thus, children high in CU traits also may be less likely to intervene when they witness others being bullied.

The Current Study

In sum, the primary purpose of the current study was to predict children’s bystander intervention in bullying from actual group norms for intervention and from children’s perceptions of the number of peers who would intervene. A multilevel modeling approach was used, in which the actual group norms for intervening were conceptualized as a class-level variable and the perceptions of the number of peers who would intervene were considered a child-level variable, with both levels used to predict children’s own intervention behavior. Prior empirical work on behavior in accordance with actual group norms suggests that children may be more likely to intervene in classrooms with higher group norms for intervening. Previous research on children’s perceptions of peers’ behavior is more conflicting, with work on perceptions of group norms suggesting that children may be more likely to intervene if they perceive their peers as intervening, whereas work on the bystander effect indicates that children may be less likely to intervene if they perceive that peers are available to help. A secondary goal of the study was to determine whether these associations held when accounting for children’s levels of empathy, prosocial behavior, and CU traits, characteristics that have been linked to bystander intervention in bullying in previous work.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 771 students (54% female) in 43 fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in two urban/suburban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. This developmental period was chosen because bullying becomes increasingly common as children enter preadolescence (Olweus, 1993). Parental permission letters were sent home with 1,083 children, and 845 parents (78%) granted consent to participate. Of these children, 21 (2.5%) declined assent, an additional 53 (6.3%) were absent on the day of their classroom data collection, and 20 (2%) did not complete the peer nominations for bystander intervention, resulting in a final sample of 751 children. Children’s age ranged from 9.50 to 12.50 years ($M = 10.58$, $SD = 1.17$), although age was not related to the outcome variable of children’s bystander intervention to bullying, $r(751) = .06$, ns. Parents reported children’s race/ethnicity as European American (60%), Latino American (18%), African American (12%), Asian American (4%), and Mixed Race/Ethnicity (4%); race/ethnicity was not reported for 2% of children. Thirty-nine percent of children in these school districts qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

NORMS AND BYSTANDER CHILD BEHAVIOR DURING BULLYING
Procedures

A graduate student and approximately four undergraduate research assistants collected data during a 1-hr visit in each classroom. The graduate student group-administered paper-and-pencil measures to participating children, who used a manila folder standing upright on their desks to protect the confidentiality of their responses. Undergraduate research assistants circulated throughout the room to ensure that children stayed on task, to answer children’s questions, and to maintain privacy. In addition, other research assistants worked individually with any children who required reading assistance. Children without parental permission were assigned another activity by the teacher or were provided with a packet of puzzles to complete.

Measures

Bystander intervention to bullying

Bystander intervention to bullying was assessed via peer nominations. Children were first provided with the following definition of bullying: “Bullying is when a kid does something on purpose to hurt or threaten another kid. It could involve hurting the kid’s body, like hitting or kicking. It also could involve hurting the kid’s feelings, like mean teasing or name calling.” Children then completed two peer nominations (“When other kids are being bullied, who tries to stop the bullying?”; “When other kids are being bullied, who gets an adult to help?”). Each peer nomination was listed on a separate page followed by the class roster. Children nominated an unlimited number of classmates who fit each description by circling their names. The two variables—Received Nominations for Stop Intervention and Received Nominations for Adult Intervention—were computed by dividing the number of nominations each child received by the number of nominators. These variables were correlated, \( r(751) = .66, p < .0001 \). Because of the strong overlap between the two variables, they were averaged to form the variable called Received Nominations for Bystander Intervention.

Perceptions of classmates’ bystander intervention to bullying

Children’s perceptions of the percentage of their classmates who would intervene in bullying incidents were assessed using these same peer nominations. The two variables—Given Nominations for Stop Intervention and Given Nominations for Adult Intervention—were computed by dividing the number of classmates’ names each child circled for each of the two items by the number of children in each class. These variables were correlated, \( r(751) = .67, p < .0001 \). Accordingly, these variables were also averaged to form the variable called Given Nominations for Bystander Intervention.

Of note, the same peer nominations of bystander intervention were used to assess both children’s actual intervention behavior and children’s perceptions of the number of their peers who would intervene in bullying. When the number of nominations that a child received from peers was aggregated across all classmates, the variable was considered an index of actual behavior. In contrast, the number of nominations that a child gave was used to assess each child’s perception of the number of peers who would intervene in bullying episodes.

Individual Characteristics

Empathy

Empathy was assessed through children’s self-report on the 20-item Basic Empathy Scale (total scale; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) using a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree; sample item: “After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad”). The measure has demonstrated construct validity through expected gender differences on scores, as well as correlations with measures of sympathy, perspective taking, alexithymia, and likelihood of helping when witnessing a classmate being bullied (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Internal consistency was acceptable (\( \alpha = .79 \)). The variable called Empathy was calculated by reverse scoring items as necessary and averaging.

Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior was assessed through two unlimited peer nominations (“Who shares?” and “Who helps others?”). These items have been validated in previous studies of children’s peer relations (Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Younger & Daniels, 1992). The variables called Shares and Helps were each computed by dividing the number of nominations each child received by the number of nominators. These two variables were correlated, \( r(751) = .77, p < .0001 \). Because of the strong overlap between the two variables, they were averaged to form the variable called Prosocial Behavior.

CU traits

CU traits were assessed through self-report on the 24-item Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits Youth Version (Kimonis et al., 2008) using a 4-point response scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (definitely true; sample item: “I do not feel sorry when I do something wrong”). The scale has demonstrated good construct validity, relating to measures of aggression,
delinquency, and physiological reactivity (Kimonis et al., 2008). Internal consistency was good (a = .82). The variable called Callous-Unemotional Traits was calculated by reverse scoring items as necessary and averaging.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among all final variables are reported in Table 1. The primary analysis was conducted in HLM 7 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & duToit, 2011). The model included two levels: 751 children (Level 1) within 43 classrooms (Level 2), and HLM was used to account for the fact that children were nested within classrooms. In the model, Received Nominations for Bystander Intervention was the outcome variable, and the Level 1 predictor variables were Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, Callous-Unemotional Traits, and Given Nominations for Bystander Intervention. In addition, the class mean for Received Nominations for Bystander Intervention was included as a Level 2 predictor; the class mean for Given Nominations for Bystander Intervention was not included as well because the two variables were correlated, r(43) = .96, p < .0001, and had virtually identical descriptive statistics (see Table 1). All Level 1 and 2 predictors were significantly related to the outcome variable. All predictors were grand-centered. Positive predictors of Received Nominations for Bystander Intervention were Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and class mean for Received Nominations for Bystander Intervention, and negative predictors were Callous-Unemotional Traits and Given Nominations for Bystander intervention. The change in variance explained when each Level 1 predictor was excluded from the full model is also provided (Snijders & Boskers, 2012; see Table 2).

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to predict children’s bystander intervention in bullying from class-level actual group norms for intervention and child-level perceptions of the number of peers who would intervene. At the class level, prior empirical work on behavior in accordance with actual group norms suggests that children may be more likely to intervene in classrooms with higher group norms for intervening. Our findings are consistent with this literature and expand work on the impact of actual group norms on children’s behavior to the context of bystander intervention in bullying. This class-level effect suggests the importance of classroom
cultures that support bystander intervention, one of the primary goals of the most evidence-based bullying prevention programs (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alanen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011).

At the child level, the current study tested competing hypotheses about how children’s perceptions of their peers’ bystander behavior would influence their own bystander behavior during bullying situations. On one hand, prior studies of perceptions of group norms suggest that children may be more likely to intervene if they perceive their peers as intervening, whereas previous investigations of the bystander effect indicate that children may be less likely to intervene if they perceive that peers are available to help. Results were consistent with the bystander effect; children who nominated more of their peers as intervening in bullying situations were less likely to be nominated by their peers as intervening themselves. These results suggest that, within the context of each classroom’s norms for intervention, children may feel a reduced sense of responsibility to help the victims of bullying if they believe that their classmates are ready and willing to do so.

A secondary goal of the current study was to investigate whether these associations held when accounting for child-level traits linked to bystander intervention in past empirical work, including empathy, CU traits, and prosocial behavior. In fact, the associations just described emerged within an analysis that also included these three child-level traits as predictors. Children’s perceptions of the number of classmates who would intervene accounted for an additional 2.39% of the variance in their bystander intervention, within a model in which the three child traits each accounted for 4.30% to 19.07% of this variance. This result suggests that children’s bystander behavior may be somewhat context dependent while also being driven by children’s traitlike qualities.

These findings suggest two points of entry for bullying prevention programs, targets that may at first appear contradictory. Specifically, program developers may want to aim to increase both classroom cultures that support bystander intervention and each child’s sense of personal responsibility to intervene. Program efforts to create a classroom climate that encourages bystander intervention in bullying may inadvertently decrease each child’s sense that individually he or she has an obligation to act to protect victims of bullying, if such programming leads children to believe that other classmates are ready and willing to intervene. Thus, prevention programs need to strike a delicate balance between creating classroom cultures that emphasize the importance of bystander intervention and encouraging each child to feel a sense of individual accountability to help their bullied classmates.

These findings and implications should be considered in light of the study’s limitations. First, due to the cross-sectional design of the study, causation cannot be inferred. Although children’s perceptions of peers’ bystander behavior were conceptualized as preceding their own bystander behavior, we assessed these constructs concurrently. It may be that children’s actions during bullying situations mold their beliefs about peers’ behavior in similar situations. Future studies should use longitudinal designs to untangle the temporal sequence of these constructs. Second, our work assumed that a decreased sense of personal responsibility was the mechanism explaining why children were less likely to intervene when they perceived more peers as willing to intervene in bullying incidents. However, in our investigation, we did not assess sense of responsibility directly, and we did not test mediation. Third, the definition of bullying that we provided to children did not include a focus on repeated incidents over time or a power differential between bully and victim, two features that theoretically distinguish bullying from aggression more generally. In addition, the examples of bullying that we provided to participants described physical and verbal aggression and did not include relational aggression. Thus, it may be most prudent to consider the current study an investigation of children’s physical and verbal aggression than a study of strictly defined bullying and the many forms it can take. Fourth, our choice of child characteristics to predict bystander intervention was based on previous empirical work rather than on theory. Finally, results found in the current sample of fourth- and fifth-grade students may not generalize to older children and adolescents who tend to change classrooms during the school day and, thus, whose behavior may be less linked to a single classroom’s actual norms for bystander intervention. Future studies should build upon these limitations to further increase our understanding of how children’s bystander intervention is driven by both group norms for bystander intervention and children’s perceptions of their peers’ intervention behavior.

REFERENCES


