



To help or defend? Associations of empathy and social support with bystander response to bullying

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### ABSTRACT

Bullying literature holds that bystanders are active contributors to the social event that unfolds, by either facilitating or inhibiting bullying. This study explored associations of individual, interpersonal, and contextual variables with prosocial bystander behaviour. Two hundred and two Scottish school children, aged 9-12 years, completed a questionnaire examining their responses to bullying with particular focus on whether they defended or helped victims of bullying. The questionnaire also included measures of empathic concern, social support from classmates and a close friend, and past experience of victimisation. A multiple regression analysis revealed that empathy was positively associated with both helping and defending victims of bullying. Furthermore, lower social support from classmates was related to helping victims of bullying. The results highlight that interpersonal variables, in addition to individual characteristics, are related to prosocial bystander responses. These results suggest that empathic children who intend to help victims of bullying are not a homogenous group, and the distinction between defending and helping should be adopted in future research. The findings are discussed in relation to programmes focused on increasing bystander intervention in school-based bullying.

Keywords: Bullying, Bystanders, Empathy, Defending, Helping

In recent years, researchers' understanding of bullying has evolved. Whilst archaically considered a dyadic interaction between the bully and victim, these

interactions are now understood to involve more than just these two individuals. In fact, they typically occur in the presence of *peer bystanders* (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004) who outnumber the bully and victim (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Rivers, Poterat, Noret, & Ashurt, 2009), thereby commencing a 'bully-victim-bystander' research approach (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2011, p.2279). These peer bystanders are recognised to influence how the scenario unfolds, either enabling or deterring the bullying behaviour. Following this progression in research, various anti-bullying programmes have been implemented in schools, which encourage taking social responsibility, reducing facilitative bully behaviours, and increasing prosocial bystander responses to bullying (Barbero, Hernández, Esteban, & García, 2012). Despite various definitions, the current study adopts an understanding of prosocial behaviour as voluntary, intentional actions aimed at benefiting another person (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Grusec, Davidov & Lundell, 2002). These bystander programmes appear effective; after being associated with a reduction in bullying occurrences, decreased passive bystander response, more efficacious attitudes, and even improved academic performance (Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005; Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen & Voeton, 2005). Therefore, understanding the optimal circumstances for prosocial bystander behaviour remains a valuable yet largely neglected area of study.

### **Bystander behaviour**

The term 'bystanders' originates from the well-documented 'bystander effect'; in which spectators witness someone in need but provide no support or intervention (Latane & Darley, 1968). Despite this traditional understanding, there is a general consensus within bullying research that bystanders are, in fact, active contributors to the social event that unfolds (Oh & Hazler, 2009; Twemlow et al., 2004). Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen, (1996, p.7) were first to identify the functions of 'mutually exclusive' bystander roles, including: reinforcer or assistant to the bully, defender of the victim, or outsider. Such roles have since been collapsed into groupings of 'pro-bully' or 'pro-victim' (Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). The role of defender is considered 'pro-victim', or more recently as an 'assertive bystander' (Abbott & Cameron, 2014, p.168). This role involves actively intervening on a victim's behalf by directly challenging the bully, or by seeking a teacher or adult. Additionally, this role is thought to include comforting a victim; however this has been largely underemphasised in the defender's abilities. Research has cautioned that children over report being defenders of victims (Salmivalli et al., 1996), with less than 20% of the student population actually doing so (Frisén, Hasselblad, & Holmqvist, 2012; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008). Additionally, whilst almost all adolescents express an intent to help a victim of bullying, it appears they have no explicit plans of how to do so effectively (Tamm & Tulviste, 2015), highlighting the need for interventions explicating how to safely do so. Looking to cases of defender-victim pairings, they occur most commonly between females (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing & Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996), implying that boys require greater encouragement to defend victimised-peers and, more so, all children should be encouraged to do so regardless of the victim's gender.

Despite this typology system of 'definable participant roles' being widely adopted (Salmivalli et al., 1996, p.11), recent research has highlighted that bystander children's *behaviours* should be considered dimensionally, on a continuum, rather

than labelling them with restrictive and fixed 'roles' (Nickerson, Mele & Princiotta, 2008). The dimensional approach has been predominantly utilised in studies examining bystander behaviour online (i.e. Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Such research has also considered 'helping' victims emotionally as separate to defending, and has urged that bystanders' reports of their own behaviour will be the result of many complex and changeable factors that cannot constitute fixed roles (DeSmet et al., 2014). Understanding that children cannot be categorised into a single static role, and rather their behaviour is dynamic and dependent on interplaying factors, is arguably more realistic. To our knowledge, only one study looking at offline school bystander behaviour has employed the dimensional approach (see Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007). Like Gini et al. (2007), the present study will adopt a dimensional approach, examining the *prosocial behaviours* of children who witness bullying in the playground, specifically: those who defend or help the victim.

### **An ecological systems theory of bullying**

Current research contends that it is imperative to consider bullying from a social-ecological (SE) viewpoint (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1989; Craig et al., 2000; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Lee, 2009). The initial outline from Bronfenbrenner (1989) posits that whilst behaviour is guided primarily by individual differences, we must also consider the influence of the context in which the behaviour occurs. This notion has resonated in developmental work since (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Researchers have outlined five levels which constitute the SE model, including: the individual child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Barboza et al., 2009; Lee; 2011). Whilst factors at the level of mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem less directly impact children, factors at microsystem level are those that are recurrent, immediate and apparent to the child, such as interpersonal relationships with peers. Whilst it is acknowledged that bullying is guided by factors at each of these levels, it is out with the current study's scope to exhaustively cover features of all five. Therefore, only factors at an individual and microsystem level will be considered, as Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.22) explicated that factors at these levels are particularly central to children's social development. Whilst insightful, the SE framework is impeded by a lack of specificity regarding the direction or nature of associations between the levels. Consequently, research must attempt to decipher how factors at these levels are related to one another, examining potential interactive effects to determine whether one simply acts as a buffer of another (Swearer et al., 2006). Despite this limitation, the SE model makes sense of the numerous studies that have demonstrated both individual characteristics and various ecological contexts to account for a large portion of variance in children's reactions to bullying (e.g. Lee, 2009; 2011; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). Therefore, the SE model provides an overarching framework, within which additional theoretical considerations can be referred to (Mishna, 2012).

In the SE model, Messick and McClintock's (1968) Social Value Orientations (SVO) exist at the level of the individual and can account for differences in bystander response to bullying. According to SVO, when people are faced with a social dilemma, fundamental individual differences in the value they assign to others, as well as their own outcomes, will manifest in their responsive behaviour. These differences are known as 'orientations' and research has generally pointed to three prevailing orientations: prosocial or co-operator; individualistic; and competitive

(Bogaert, Boone & Declerck, 2008). Prosocial orienters will seek to maximise others' opportunities, restore justice, and seek equality, thereby putting their own outcomes secondary to those of others (Van Lange 1999; Joireman & Duell, 2005). Meanwhile, competitive orienters are willing to assist others but not at their own expense. Individualist orienters however, will act only in ways that maximise their own opportunities, disregarding the outcome for others. These three orientations are respectively comparable to bystanders who defend the victim, those who help the victim, and antisocial behaviours. Whilst widely applied within social psychology, SVO has not been considered for bystander behaviour, which is surprising given that bystanders are faced with a social dilemma upon witnessing bullying.

### **Empathy**

Empathy is considered pivotal to prosocial motivation and altruism (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1990). It is also considered multidimensional, consisting of a cognitive ability which facilitates understanding another's emotions (i.e. perspective taking), and an affective trait which facilitates experiencing another's emotions (i.e. empathic concern; Davis, 1994; Olweus & Endresen, 1998; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). The literature holds that the cognitive component is a prerequisite to the affective trait of empathy (Feshbach, 1987; Pöyhönen et al., 2010).

Research demonstrates that even at a young age highly empathic individuals are more socially attuned to other's behaviours and thus navigate more successfully through their social environment (Findlay, Girardi & Coplan, 2006). Childhood and adolescence are periods where bullying occurs most frequently, but are also periods considered critical to empathy development. As such, perspective taking and empathic concern have been particularly well-researched in child and adolescent samples within the bullying literature (Özkan & Çifci, 2009; Dodaj, Sesar, Barisic, & Pandza, 2012; Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004). However, whilst there is a consensus that prosocial behaviour is generally associated with higher levels of empathic concern than antisocial behaviour, there is also contention in the literature with regards to gender. For example, whilst a positive relationship between helping victims and empathic responsiveness has been found across primary and secondary school students (Gini et al., 2007; Cleemput et al., 2014), Warden and Mackinnon (2003) found in their younger sample, that males deemed prosocial were no more empathic than males considered 'bullies', and compared to antisocial females. One potential underpinning of these conflicting results is the different developmental stage of the two samples, between which marked physical and cognitive changes occur. Accordingly, recent longitudinal research has demonstrated that empathic concern in males declines at early adolescence and only reemerges in late adolescence, whilst remaining relatively stable across childhood and adolescence for females (Van der Graff et al., 2014). Therefore, whilst empathic concern may be central to a female's prosocial reactive behaviour, additional factors may be contributing to male prosocial behaviour at the early adolescent stage.

Whilst other individual characteristics have been seen to strengthen empathy's relation to defending, i.e. greater self-efficacy (Gini et al., 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010) and moral reasoning (Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes & Shell, 1996), ecological systems theory highlights the importance of considering factors at microsystem level. Attention has recently been assigned to interpersonal factors that also contribute to empathic children acting prosocially (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Findings highlight the

impact of peer perceptions in determining how empathic children react to bullying. For example, Caravita et al. (2009) and subsequently Pöyhönen et al. (2010) found that only empathic children, who also had high social standing within a group and were thus perceived as popular, defended victimised peers. Therefore, personal characteristics are only indicative to an extent and should be considered in conjunction with potentially moderating interpersonal variables. In which case, studies exploring empathy's relation to prosocial behaviour in isolation overlook the more complex nature of this association.

### **Social Support**

Social support is characterized as the provision of resources between a minimum of two people, which can be 'perceived or actual instrumental, and/or expressive' (Lin, 1986, p.18), that is intended by the provider, or interpreted by the recipient, to benefit them (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p.13). Rooted in relationships with others, it is thought to provide a sense of security, belongingness, and dependable unity (Weiss 1974; Barrer, Fleming & Khan, 2004). It is also a multidimensional construct in that it consists of various forms, including appraisal, informational, instrumental and emotional support (House, 1981). Emphasis has been placed on emotional and instrumental support as these forms are provided most prominently amongst student peers (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Emotional support has been conceptualized as expressions or offerings of empathy, acceptance, or genuine concern; whilst instrumental support refers to the provision of more directly tangible resources, such as time, money, or physical company (Boulton et al., 2013).

Previous research has demonstrated that social support acts as a 'buffer', in that those experiencing greater stress will benefit most largely from social support (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). For example, Davidson and Demaray (2007) showed that higher social support moderated the association for children being victimised and anxiety and depression. Similarly, Rethon, Head, Klineberg and Stansfield (2011) found greater social support from peers served a protective function for bullied children attaining poor academic performance. Moreover, Boulton et al. (2013) demonstrated that social support was directly related to children's intentions for future behaviour, instead of being a buffer. Specifically, they found that higher instrumental and emotional social support was predictive of greater willingness to disclose information to class teachers, following a hypothetical bullying incident. Therefore, although well established as a buffer, it is also worth exploring the more direct impact of social support.

Although well-documented in relation to bullies perceived support, or that of victims (e.g. Rigby & Slee, 1999; Rigby, 2000; Demaray & Malecki 2003, Holt & Espelage, 2007), research has rarely considered the role of social support for bystander children. Children spend a large portion of their school day with peers, and therefore come to depend on them for providing support (Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & Ylc-Cura, 2006). Given that bystanders are presented with the opportunity to help a victim, it is surprising that the impact of *their* perceived support has been overlooked. Moreover, since prosocial behaviour in response to bullying is risky (Juvonen & Galván, 2008), protective factors such as social support are likely to impact bystanders reactions. Looking to the limited research, perceived emotional support from friends appears crucial to bystander student's willingness to defend victims (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2011). Moreover, seeking social support is seen to amplify

the willingness of adolescents to intervene in a bullying scenario (Batanova, Espelage & Rao, 2014). Additionally, Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro and Bukowski (1999) showed that having a single best friend can serve a protective function to the risk of victimisation. Collectively, these findings suggest that children's perceptions of support from peers or a close friend is associated with an enhanced ability to intervene on behalf of victims. This appears relevant to the findings of Caravita et al. (2009) and Pöyhönen et al. (2010) – that only popular individuals will defend victims. This popularity, whilst at the peer group's discretion, may be interpreted by the popular individual as social support. In which cases, the known risks of defending a victim are minimized, as children perceive support behind their choices which provides them firmer pretext to act on their emotive responses.

Additionally, research has demonstrated that empathic children are typically the prosocial individuals of their peers (Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003). These empathic, prosocial children also report better quality of friendships (Smith & Rose, 2011; Chow, Ruhl & Buhrmester, 2013), and enjoy a high status in the peer group (Goossens, Bokhorst, Bruinsma, & van Boxtel, 2002; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003), from which they likely source social support. Whilst we cannot infer the directions of causality between empathy, social support, and prosocial behaviour, it is evident that these factors are at interplay in line with the SE model. Therefore, it seems logical to explore them collaboratively in the present study.

### **Experience of victimisation**

Looking again to the microsystem level of the social-ecological model, recent researchers have urged consideration of the role of social context (e.g. Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). A factor that potentially sets such context is whether the spectators to bullying have personal experience of victimisation. Given that empathizing with a person involves understanding their emotional experience, bystanders who have themselves been victimised, are further equipped to understand a victim's emotions.

Past research has looked to identify stable characteristics of people labelled 'victims' (e.g. Gasser & Kelly, 2009; Gini, Pozzoli & Hauser, 2011). Implicit within this research however, is the idea that there is a cut-off point at which children either are, or are not, victims meaning any experiences less than the cut-off point are disregarded. Rather than categorising children into a victim category on the basis of peer-nominations, it seems more valuable to consider experience of victimisation, as even one incident can negatively impact a child and their behaviour (Snyder et al., 2003). Moreover, ascribing a victim status assumes these children are incapable of behaving diversely and overlooks the influence of context on their behaviour. Evidencing that victims are instead dynamic individuals whose behaviour is equally influenced by context as any other child's, Salmivalli et al. (1996) contended that victims are an exception to their generally enduring participant 'roles'. They demonstrated that victims can behave in ways atypical to their victim label. For example, when victims witness another child being victimised they are more likely to engage in defending behaviour. Notably, contemporary research has similarly found that past victimisation is positively associated with adolescents' willingness to intervene, with children who help victims more likely to have been victimised themselves (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Batanova et al., 2014; Cleemput et al.,

2014). In addition, past victimisation acts as a moderator of coping strategies and willingness to intervene, supporting proposed buffer effects (Batanova et al., 2014).

Researchers have demonstrated that people who have experienced victimisation have a heightened understanding of other victim's painful experiences (Barchia & Bussey, 2011). Accordingly, victims demonstrate advanced perspective taking and demonstrate more caring behaviours towards others than children with no experience of victimisation (Gasser & Kelly, 2009; Espelage et al., 2004). Thus, when empathy may not be sufficient to result in intervention, the additional context that past victimisation sets may facilitate transitioning dispositions into behaviour. Therefore, those children previously victimised can essentially utilize their enhanced understanding to benefit others.

### **The present study**

The focus of the current study is to explore individual characteristics (empathy), interpersonal (social support from classmates and/or a close friend), and contextual (past experience of victimisation) factors in relation to bystander behaviour in response to playground bullying. The behaviours of interest include defending or helping a victim of bullying. To our knowledge no previous studies include both helping and defending the victim as distinct behaviours. However, as both are prosocial behaviours, it was thought no discernible trends would emerge between the study variables. One exception being that since popularity has already been associated with defending (Caravita et al., 2009), social support from classmates would be more strongly associated with defending than helping. Although no offline bullying research has directly explored emotionally helping victims, Hunter, Boyle and Warden (2004) found that victimised children that turned to others reported feeling better and believed it was an effective coping strategy. On the basis of such, there is evidence for the value of bystanders reaching out to help victims in this supportive manner. Moreover, as research has shown that the cognitive ability of empathy is not related to defending victims of bullying and can be used against a victim (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006; Pöyhönen et al., 2010); only affective empathy was assessed in the current study. Due to gender and age differences having been previously found for empathic concern and for bystander behaviour (e.g. Oh & Hazler, 2009), both were included as control variables in the analyses. Students of primary six and seven were recruited for this study as it is thought that an association between empathy and prosocial behaviour is increasingly evident at this stage (see Espelage, et al., 2004). In line with ecological systems theory, we devised specific hypotheses of associations, and interactive effects between the study variables. Firstly, we hypothesized that: empathy levels, social support from classmates, social support from a close friend, and experience of victimisation would be positively associated with both defending, and helping a victim of bullying. Secondly, based on recent literature illustrating that interpersonal and contextual variables moderate the association between empathy and defending behaviour (Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Ruggieri, Friemel, Sticca, Perren, & Alsaker, 2013), we expected that empathic children who also reported greater social support from classmates and/or a close friend would report more defending and helping behaviours. Moreover, we expected empathic children who had also experienced victimisation in the last year would report more defending and helping behaviours. In sum, we expected the association between empathy and prosocial



behaviours would be strengthened if children had higher social support, and/or had been victimised in the past year.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 202 children (43% male, 57% female) aged nine to twelve years from Primary 6 and Primary 7 classes in six nondenominational schools, from two local educational authorities in the West of Scotland.

### Measures

All participants completed a 45 item questionnaire comprising of all measures detailed below. The questionnaire firstly gathered demographic information (gender, age, and primary).

*Definition of bullying.* The original outline of the questionnaire included Sutton and Smith's (1999) definition of bullying. However, after consultations with *Respectme*, an anti-bullying service involved in the study, the definition was amended. It was altered so that any labels of victim or bully were omitted, it also then explicated that one instance of victimisation can be considered 'bullying', and finally the social exclusion form of bullying was incorporated. Research shows that children who experience victimisation even once are worse off than those who have never experienced victimisation, meaning this one incident shouldn't be discounted as bullying (Snyder et al., 2003). This amendment allowed for a definition that encompassed academic researchers, genuine students, and policy maker's conceptualizations of bullying (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006). The questionnaire was piloted with ten appropriately aged children and a senior teacher, leading to slight modifications of certain wordings in response to feedback.

*Reactive behaviours.* This section began by asking participants to imagine they were witnessing bullying in their school playground, and to consider how they normally react when they see it occurring. The measure was developed from Sutton et al.'s (1999) adapted role approach. The adapted role approach was originally utilized as an interview and adopts a categorical approach of bystander roles, meaning only seven relevant items were incorporated into this study's self-report questionnaire. Minor modifications were made to various items (i.e. substituting 'Doesn't do anything or take sides' with 'Do nothing and not take sides'). Additionally, for the purpose of the present study where children responded to witnessing bullying, items such as 'Isn't usually there, stays away', was replaced with 'Deliberately avoid the bullying situation' (in line with the Participant Role Descriptors from Nickerson et al., 2008). No previous studies to our knowledge, have measured 'helping the victim' independently of defending the victim, and consequently, three additional items assessing this behaviour were designed (i.e. 'Listen to the victim and be a support for them'), as well as an additional item for the purposely doesn't get involved behaviour (i.e. 'Carry on as normal and try to forget you saw the bullying'). In summation, the final measure comprised of 12 items assessing directly defending behaviours (4 items,  $\alpha = .55$ ), helping behaviours (4 items,  $\alpha = .67$ ), and purposely not getting involved (4 items,  $\alpha = .72$ ), in response to witnessing bullying in the

playground. The inclusion of the purposely not getting involved subscale gave participants an option for reporting non-prosocial behaviours, limiting demand characteristics and potential ceiling effects. Responses were indicated on a 4 point Likert scale (ranging from 0 = 'Definitely not' to 3 = 'Definitely').

*Olweus Empathic Responsiveness Questionnaire (ERQ; Olweus & Endresen, 1998).* All participants then completed the ERQ; a 12 item self-report measure that has been frequently utilized with children and adolescents (e.g. Olweus & Endresen, 1998; Nickerson & Mele-Taylor, 2014). The ERQ assesses empathic concern in relation to victimisation. Items include 'I feel very sorry for a student who is being bullied by others', responses to which are given on a 6 point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = 'Not true' to 6 = 'Always true'). Previous studies demonstrate the ERQ to be internally consistent,  $\alpha = .92$  (Nickerson et al., 2008; Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston & Feeley, 2014). For the present study,  $\alpha = .90$ .

*Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale, Level 1 (CAASS; Malecki, Demaray, Elliott, & Nolten, 1999).* All participants also completed the CAASS, which assesses levels of general perceived social support from four possible sources (teacher, parent, classmates, and close friend). For the present study's purpose, only support from classmates and a close friend were assessed, each with 10 items. Children responded on a 6 point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = 'Never' to 6 = 'Always'). Items include 'My classmates treat me with respect', and 'My close friend sticks up for me when others don't'. The present study found CAASS to be internally consistent,  $\alpha = .93$  for social support from classmates, and  $\alpha = .93$  also for social support from a close friend.

*Past experience as a victim.* After restating the definition of bullying, children were asked to respond to 'How often have you been bullied in the past year?' on a 6 point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = 'Never' to 5 = 'Several times a week' (taken and adapted from Cleemput et al., 2014). The present study extended Cleemput et al.'s (2014) six month time frame to one year, to allow children a wider time frame in which to base judgements.

### **Procedure**

After receiving clearance from the University of Strathclyde's Ethics Committee, the parents of students in participating schools were asked to provide consent. On return of parental consent, children were gathered in groups of no more than twenty, in separate classrooms to their non-participating peers. The children were organized to ensure no child could see another's responses. The researchers spent some time explaining rationale for the project, reading the information sheet aloud, and then asking children to sign their allocated consent form if they were happy to participate. Children were encouraged to be entirely honest in their responses as full confidentiality was assured. They were also asked not to discuss their responses and go through the entire questionnaire at the pace the researchers read it out aloud to ensure any confusion could be clarified in the process. A questionnaire was then allocated to each child, which included the materials detailed above and a section consisting of hypothetical vignettes as part of a separate study (of similar topic). In total, the procedure lasted no longer than fifty minutes. Upon completion, children were given debrief forms and thanked for their time. All students who had returned

the parental consent form were entered into a prize draw, with the chance of winning either a £20, or one of two £5 gift vouchers for a local shopping centre.

### Data Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to explore our expectations about individual, interpersonal and contextual factors, relations with prosocial bystander behaviour. The statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. The analyses comprised of two stages. Firstly, we assessed whether defending or helping behaviour was associated with the study variables. Secondly, we assessed whether the association between affective empathy and *defending behaviour* was moderated by past experience of victimisation or social support (from classmates and/or a close friend). Similarly, we assessed whether the association between affective empathy and *helping behaviour* was moderated by past experience of victimisation or social support (from classmates and/or a close friend). The preliminary step in all analyses controlled for possible gender and age effects. Predictor variables were mean centered prior to creating interaction terms (see Jaccard, Wan & Turrisi, 1990, for the benefits of transforming variables). Dichotomous variables were scored either 0 or 1. A histogram, a normal P-P plot, and scatterplot were generated to test for homoscedasticity. These revealed no violations of homoscedasticity.

## Results

### Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, empathy was positively and significantly correlated with past experience of victimisation, social support from classmates, and with social support from a close friend. Defending behaviour was significantly and positively correlated with affective empathy, social support from a close friend, and helping behaviour. Helping behaviour was significantly and positively correlated with affective empathy, past victimisation and social support from a close friend. Moreover, past experience of victimisation was associated with helping the victim, rather than directly defending.

**Table 1.**  
**Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables**

	2	3	4.	5.	6.	M(SD)	Range
1. Empathy <sup>1</sup>	.15*	.19**	.37***	.29***	.47***	55.81(10.56)	23-72
2. Victimisation	-	-.36***	-.06	.10	.13*	1.73(1.62)	0-5
3. Social Support – Classmates		-	.41***	.08	-.00	48.53(9.39)	14-60
4. Social Support – Close friend			-	.20**	.23**	53.91(7.26)	23-60
5. Defending				-	.48***	9.19(1.96)	4-12
6. Helping					-	9.87(1.81)	3-12

<sup>1</sup>Affective Empathy. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Analysis 1: Defending victims.* Control variables (gender and age) were entered as the first step of a multiple linear regression predicting defending behaviour. These variables did not significantly account for a portion of the variance in defending behaviour, as seen in Table 2. At Step 2, affective empathy, past experience of victimisation, social support from classmates, and social support from a close friend were added to the model. Only affective empathy was associated with defending ( $\beta = .29, p = .001$ ). To test if the remaining variables moderated the empathy-defending relationship, three interaction terms were added at Step 3 (i.e. Empathy X Victimization, Empathy X Social Support Classmates, Empathy X Social Support Close Friend). None of the interaction terms were significant. Thus, empathy is associated with bystanders defending victims of bullying regardless of their past experience as a victim, or perceived social support from classmates or a close friend.

**Table 2.**

**Multiple regression analysis predicting defending behaviour from age, gender, empathy, past victimisation, social support from classmates, and social support from a close friend**

Step	Predictors	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$	Step 3 $\beta$
1	Gender <sup>a</sup>	.08	-.09	-.06
	Age	-.02	.03	.05
<i>F</i> (2,199) = .76, <i>p</i> = .47, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .01				
2	Empathy		.29**	.30***
	Past		.06	.05
	Victimisation		-.07	-.03
	Social Support – Classmates		.15	.15
	Social Support – Close friend			
<i>F</i> <sub>change</sub> (4,195) = 5.56, <i>p</i> < .001, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>change</sub> = .10				
3	Empathy X Victimization			.08
	Empathy X Social Support – Classmates			-.13
	Empathy X Social Support – Close friend			.14
<i>F</i> <sub>change</sub> (3,192) = 1.68, <i>p</i> = .17, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>change</sub> = .02				

<sup>a</sup>Gender coded (0=male; 1=female). \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01; \*\*\* *p* < 0.001

*Analysis 2: Helping victims.* As above, control variables (gender and age) were entered at the first step of a multiple linear regression predicting helping behaviours, which significantly accounted for a portion of the variance in helping behaviours, see Table 3. Both gender and age appeared as significant predictors of helping behaviour ( $\beta = .21, p = .003$ ;  $\beta = -.15, p = .027$ , respectively), indicating that younger, female children were more likely to help victim's. At Step 2, affective empathy, past experience of victimisation, social support from classmates, and social support from a close friend were added to the model. Empathy was significantly associated with helping behaviour ( $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ). Surprisingly, social support from classmates was negatively associated with helping behaviour ( $\beta = -.15, p = .045$ ). Neither social support from a close friend, or past victimisation were significantly associated with

helping ( $\beta = .12, p = .100$ ;  $\beta = .02, p = .829$ , respectively). Step 3 involved adding three interaction terms, to test if any of the remaining variables moderated the empathy-helping relationship (Empathy X Victimization, Empathy X Social Support Classmates, Empathy X Social Support Close Friends). None of the interaction terms reached significance. Thus, indicating that empathy is positively associated with bystanders helping victims of bullying, whilst social support from classmates is negatively associated. This is regardless of past experience of victimisation, or social support from a close friend.

**Table 3.**

**Multiple regression analysis predicting helping behaviour from age, gender, empathy, past victimisation, social support from classmates, and social support from a close friend**

Step	Predictors	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$	Step 3 $\beta$
1	Gender <sup>a</sup>	.21**	-.00	-.01
	Age	-.15*	-.11	-.09
<i>F</i> (2,199) = 8.83, <i>p</i> < .001, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .08				
2	Empathy		.42***	.44***
	Past		.02	-.03
	Victimization		-.15**	-.15**
	Social Support – Classmates		.12	.18**
	Social Support – Close friend			
<i>F</i> <sub>change</sub> (4,195) = 10.79, <i>p</i> < .001, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>change</sub> = .17				
3	Empathy X Victimization			.00
	Empathy X Social Support – Classmates			.06
	Empathy X Social Support – Close friend			.09
<i>F</i> <sub>change</sub> (3,192) = 1.30, <i>p</i> = .28, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>change</sub> = .02				

<sup>a</sup>Gender coded (0=male; 1=female). \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01; \*\*\* *p* < 0.001

## Discussion

The general aim of this study was to explore individual (affective empathy), interpersonal (social support from classmates and/or a close friend), and contextual (past victimisation) variables associated with defending and helping victims of bullying. Results confirmed that higher empathy was strongly associated with defending victims of bullying. Demographic, interpersonal, and contextual factors were not related to defending behaviour. Higher empathy was also strongly associated with helping victims of bullying. Younger female children were most commonly associated with helping victims, reflecting the demographics of previous research (Cleemput et al., 2014; Rigby & Johnson, 2006). Surprisingly, lower social support from classmates was also related to helping victims of bullying. Neither social support from a close friend or past victimisation was related to helping victims of bullying. Finally, the interpersonal and contextual factors did not moderate empathy's association with defending, or helping behaviour.

The strong association between affective empathy and both forms of prosocial bystander behaviour echoes the extant literature (Caravita et al., 2009; Cleemput et al., 2014; Gini et al., 2007), confirming the importance of both understanding and experiencing a victimised peer's emotions. This finding implies that the affective response of empathic concern for another child's plight reduces the chances of bystanders passively responding to bullying. Empathy has long been considered the initial catalyst for prosocial behaviour, as the emotional response it induces increases concern for others well-being (Blum, 2009; Gini et al., 2006; Hoffman, 1984). Intent to behave prosocially appears to indicate the attainment of emotional maturation at this stage, in which children become notably less self-orientated and show increasing care towards others (Arnett, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). Therefore, the importance of empathy to children's prosocial behaviour cannot be denied. As it stands, programmes centred on empathy are currently dispersed across Scottish schools, e.g. 'The Roots of Empathy' (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012). The present study's findings validate the importance of these programmes, especially given their recent outcomes of reduced aggression and amplified caring behaviours (MacDonald, Bell, McLafferty, McCorkell, Walker, Smith, Balfour, & Murphy, 2013). Thus these programmes should be continually developed and further implemented across schools.

Despite previous research showing that experience of victimisation increases one's willingness to intervene in bullying (Batanova et al., 2014; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Salmivalli et al., 1996), the present study found no such relationship. It is notable that past research refers to more current incidents of victimisation; either within a thirty day time frame or during the present school year. Given that the present study measured victimisation spanning 12 months, the emotional saliency of this experience inevitably varied across children, thus weakening the impact victimisation has on prospective prosocial behaviour. It is understood that defending is risky, as it can result in children themselves being victimised and thus compromise their social position (Juvonen & Galván, 2008). However, the social standing of children currently experiencing victimisation is already jeopardized, and so, defending another victim makes little difference to their already compromised position. Whereas, in the current study, children who in the last year experienced victimisation could have now lost their 'victim' status, and may be unwilling to put themselves back at risk by sticking up for a victim, irrespective of their empathic concern for them. This would seem the case in the present study, which found a positive association between empathy and past victimisation, suggesting children understood the difficulties experienced by the victims but were incapable of acting on this. This severance of knowing from doing can be understood as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; 2002), where people with a strong sense of morality use legitimization to justify behaviour that discords to their moral-awareness. Accordingly, Thornberg and Jungert (2013) posit that children with previous personal involvement in bullying, who are then bystanders to a subsequent incident, morally disengage. Additionally, the present study found that past victimisation was negatively correlated with both sources of social support, thus implying that those previously victimised perceive a low level of support from peers, providing further reason to not intervene.

The finding that low social support from classmates was related to helping victims is an intriguing contribution of the current study. Firstly, this finding implies that social

support is not *always* merely a buffer, and instead offers evidence of a more direct relation to behaviour. Furthermore, this finding is encouraging as it suggests that even in the face of children's limited support from peers; they remain willing to support a victim. In addition, this finding upholds the importance assigned to factors at microsystem level, as conceptualised by the SE model. Secondly, understanding this finding in relation to the extant literature is problematic, as past research hasn't given due consideration to helping as a unique behaviour. Rather, it has been immersed within a defender scale as only one item (e.g. Caravita et al., 2009; Gini et al., 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996), meaning the existing defender findings aren't representative of helping behaviours and shouldn't be extended to these distinct children. Therefore, whilst defending is related to high social status (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006), it appears helping victims is not. Also interesting, was the finding that social support from a close friend was *not* associated with either prosocial bystander behaviour. As all school children typically have one particularly close friend, this is not necessarily unique to prosocial children. In which case, it is not surprising that no associations emerged with defending or helping. Moreover, research has demonstrated that having support from a single close friend does not necessarily equate to a protective safeguard against victimisation (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005), in the way that popularity from many peers does (Caravita et al., 2009). This potentially underpins the lack of interaction in the present study.

Although previous research has demonstrated the importance of interpersonal factors in defending victims (i.e. Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010), in the present study, interpersonal factors were not associated to defending behaviour. Although well-validated, the CAASS employed for the current study assesses social support in a very general manner, and has not been previously employed in defending research. Researchers have highlighted that using such general assessments of support are not reflective of support for intervening (Sainio et al., 2010). Moreover, given the notable differences found between defending in Pöyhönen et al. (2010) and the present study, it is conceivable that self-reports of social support are not analogous to peer nominations of popularity, and are perhaps tapping into different aspects of the peer network. This highlights an area of research where further study is necessary, in order to extend our understanding of the social context in which children choose to defend.

A novel contribution of the study was the distinction of helping victims emotionally from directly defending them. This study confirmed that whilst these behaviours are both associated with empathic concern, they are differentially related to interpersonal variables, which warrants support to consider them separate entities. Therefore, empathic children who wish to assist a victim of bullying are not a homogenous group, something which past research has failed to consider (e.g. Nickerson et al., 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996). The current research has evidenced that some children will choose to do so in a more discrete and emotionally expressive manner (offering support and comfort to a victim), compared to those who directly intervene (by challenging the bully to an audience of peers). This distinction appears to coincide with the marginal differences outlined for SVO orientations 'prosocial' and 'competitive' (Messick & McClintock 1968). This therefore supports the notion that prosocial orients are comparable to those who defend, at the risk of then being targeted, whilst competitiveness are comparable to those who help the victims

discretely, whilst not jeopardizing their own safety. This helping behaviour warrants further consideration as it doesn't carry as high a risk as defending does.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study present possible routes for future research to take. Firstly, responses were based on a *hypothetical* incident of bullying, meaning that we cannot disregard social desirability effects. Future research could limit this by asking victimised children to identify those who actually defended or helped them emotionally, in the hope of elucidating what makes these genuinely prosocial children behave in such ways. It should be noted however, that children's self-reports on their responses to bullying have been shown to agree with peer reports (Barhight, Hubbard & Hyde, 2013). Finally, given that the extant participant role scales assume a categorical approach, a measure of reactive behaviours was adapted for the present study, and therefore, referring to its previous psychometric properties was not possible. Although the adapted measure displayed adequate internal consistency for helping and outsider behaviour, caution should be taken as the defending scale displayed relatively low internal consistency.

### **Implications**

This study demonstrates that high proportions of children express intent to support a victim of bullying in some way. Therefore, anti-bullying programmes aimed at transforming bystanders prosocial intent to actual behaviour should be continually developed. The success of such programmes was recently documented by Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, Vernberg, and Malcom (2011), who found at a three year follow up that bystanders were the initiators of change in school climate, which in turn spurred on change in their peers. They termed this a transformation of bystanders to 'upstanders' (Twemlow & Sacco, 2013, p.293). Hutchinson (2012) also found that one brave act of defending can encourage many other peers to act comparably pro-victim. Therefore, the potent ripple effect of single pro-victim displays should not be overlooked within intervention strategies.

### **Conclusion**

In order to address the issue of school bullying we must advance our understanding of the individual and social variables that contribute to prosocial bystander responses. This study has revealed important relationships between individual and interpersonal variables, and defending and helping victims of bullying. Therefore, the social-ecological model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding bullying dynamics as it appreciates factors at both individual and microsystem level. Moreover, this study has demonstrated evidence that children's pro-victim behaviour need not always manifest as direct confrontations to the bully, and in fact, there is a distinction between children who defend and those who help the victim. Thus, the prosocial behaviours coincide with two prevailing orientations outlined in SVO. However, as long as directly defending is considered the only pro-victim response to bullying, researchers will continue to overlook the valuable contribution emotional support makes to a victim. For interventions to effectively progress, this distinction must be carried forward.



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