Bullying Contextualized: Changing the Group Process by Changing Outsiders' Involvement

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Chapter 1

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General Introduction — Bullying Contextualized: Changing the Group

Process by Changing Outsiders' Involvement

Background

Continuous peer victimization has been related to physical and mental health problems (Fekkes, Pijpers, Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Troop-Gordon, Rudolph, Sugimura, & Little, 2014) as well as to problems in academic functioning (Nakatomo & Schwartz, 2010). Moreover, in classrooms in which peer victimization is frequent, similar effects were found for nonvictimized students (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). While prevalence estimates differ from country to country, research indicates that about one in four primary school students suffers from peer victimization (Veenstra et al., 2005). Despite the fact that the number of studies addressing the bullying dynamic — as well as interventions trying to reduce bullying and victimization behaviors within classrooms and schools — has substantially increased over the last decades, bullying and victimization are still a serious concern for youth's health problems. The objective of the research presented in this thesis was to advance the theoretical knowledge about how bullying in schools could be more effectively addressed within practice. However, it is necessary to contextualize the bullying dynamic first.

Bullying Contextualized

First of all, how can bullying be defined? Bullying is perhaps the most frequently encountered subtype of aggression students will encounter from the first moment they step inside a school building. Bullying is defined based on three characteristics (Olweus, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010). The first one is *intention*, indicating that bullying is aggressive behavior that is executed with the goal of harming the victim. The second one is *repetition*, indicating that bullying is aggressive behavior that is executed on multiple occasions over a longer period of time. And the third one is *power differential*, indicating that bullying is

aggressive behavior that is executed by physically or mentally stronger bullies towards a weaker victim. Bullying is strategic behavior that helps the bullies to reach high status positions within their social groups, that is, the classroom and/or school (Olthof et al., 2011; Reijntjes et al., 2013).

Second, how can victims be bullied? Two, not mutually exclusive, subtype classifications are common (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The first one is a distinction at the actor-reactor level, that is, bullying behaviors can be aimed at a victim directly by the bullies, but also indirectly via a third party. The second one is a more sensory-functional distinction, that is, bullying can be: (a) physical (e.g., hitting or pushing the victim), (b) material (e.g., taking or damaging the victim's belongings), (c) verbal (e.g., calling the victim names or insulting them), and/or (d) relational (e.g., gossiping about the victim or excluding them from social activities). While physical bullying is the most visible bullying subtype, verbal and relational bullying behaviors are actually more common (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005).

And third, who are involved in the bullying process? Bullying is a peer group process rather than a series of isolated events between bullies and victims. Observational research has shown that bullying almost always takes place in the presence of witnesses (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). These witnesses are almost always classmates or schoolmates, while adult supervisors are almost always absent. Peer report procedures (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999) have provided consensus about witnesses' behavior in bullying events. Two types of witnesses are supportive of the bullying: (a) the *assistants* who join in with and who help the initiating bullies, and (b) the *reinforcers* who remain more passive as

an instigating audience to the bullying. Another type of witnesses is supportive of the victim. These are the *defenders* who come to victims' aid and try to alleviate the negative consequences of victimization on the victim. And finally, there are witnesses who distance themselves from bullying events. These are the *outsiders*, who avoid being involved in bullying. Despite the fact that outsiders are against bullying and do not want to be involved in the bullying, their behavior has undesired side effects (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). By remaining evasive, the bullies do not bother about the outsiders or their relatively harmless attitudes with regards to the bullying, that is, the bullies may observe outsiders' behavior as permission to continue. At the same time, outsiders' behavior negatively affects victims, as victims interpret outsiders' evasiveness as a lack of support. In the research presented in this thesis, the outsiders will have the main focus.

Changing the Group Process by Changing Outsiders' Involvement

The aims of this thesis were twofold. First of all, this thesis aimed at increasing the theoretical knowledge about outsiders. Who are the outsiders and why do they not help victims like defenders? Two questions are of interest here: (a) How can outsiders be characterized? and, (b) How stable is outsider behavior? This theoretical knowledge formed the basis for the second aim of this thesis: the development and evaluation of an anti-bullying intervention that aimed at activating outsiders' defender potential.

Why focus on the outsiders specifically? There are four interrelated findings from previous research to explain this focus. First of all, while witnesses' presence leads to intervention in about one quarter of the witnessed bullying events, defensive activities on behalf of victims are successful in stopping the bullying and in counteracting its' negative effects on the victim (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2001). Second, outsiders

— like defenders — have an antibullying attitude (Olthof & Goossens, 2008; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) and help their victimized classmates. However, unlike defenders, outsiders only sporadically intervene on behalf of victims (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Goossens et al., 2006; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Third, outsiders are the largest classroom subgroup — of about one-third of classroom students — and thus a large portion of witnesses to bullying are outsiders (Olthof et al., 2011; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). And fourth, research has shown that dominant classroom subgroups have an influence on the attitudes and behaviors of all classroom members (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 2011). If outsiders' defender potential can be activated, they could form a new dominant classroom subgroup together with the already present defenders, who also make up about one-fifth of classroom students (Olthof et al., 201; Salmivalli et al., 1998).

Researchers are increasingly aware of outsiders' potential to change the bullying dynamic. A growing number of them suggests that the bullying process may be best tackled by activating outsiders' defender potential (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008; Orpinas & Horne, 2010; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013; Salmivalli, 1999; Twemlow et al., 2010). Unfortunately, outsider behavior becomes more common in the peer group over the course of development, while defender behavior becomes less common (Goossens et al., 2006; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012).

A recent meta-analytical study on factors that are effective in antibullying interventions demonstrates that interventions that focus on promoting prosocial behaviors and attitudes, are indeed more effective in changing the bullying dynamic (Polanin et al., 2012). Some of the most effective antibullying interventions, like the Finnish program KiVa (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010), claim to focus explicitly on changing the

bullying dynamic through changing the group process and promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Unfortunately, although KiVa's effects on promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors were significant, the effect sizes were only small (Kärnä et al., 2011). The research presented in this thesis aimed at being useful in this regard, by creating a theoretical framework regarding outsiders and their defender potential and by using this framework to provide practical assistance in counteracting the negative effects of bullying on victims and on their classrooms and schools.

Troop-Gordon et al. (2014) have shown that victim's mental health problems (i.e., depressive symptomology) can be retraced to their ineffective coping with the consequences of victimization. In light of this finding, the most effective way to help victims deal with the negative consequences of victimization is by offering them immediate relief through consolation and by showing them affective commitment. In my view, these indirect defensive acts will help victims to cope with the consequences of victimization more effectively. As such, these behaviors should not only be executed by defenders, but by outsiders as well. I therefore hypothesize that outsiders' most effective defender potential may be an indirect defender potential.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part — Chapters Two through Six — the focus is on solidifying a theoretical framework about outsiders and their defender potential. In the second part — Chapter Seven — the focus is on the practical application of an intervention that had the goal of activating outsiders' (indirect) defender potential. The thesis will be concluded in Chapter Eight with a general discussion of the empirical research presented in thesis.

To solidify the theoretical framework about outsiders and their defender potential, I will start by presenting two studies in which differences in the social cognitions of outsiders and defenders about provictim intervention (*Chapter Two*) and about antecedents of provictim intervention (*Chapter Three*) were studied. In *Chapter Two*, I will show that outsiders claimed to be willing to intervene on behalf of victims, but only by using indirect strategies (e.g., consoling victims). Moreover, despite a lower competence in bullying events, outsiders claimed to be as self-efficacious about indirect interventions as defenders. In *Chapter Three*, I will show that students' defender behavior was positively related to awareness of the distress that victimization causes to victims. Moreover, students' decision to defend victims was guided by feelings of guilt and shame that would be induced by the idea of not helping victims.

After this, I will follow-up on Chapter Two's findings regarding outsiders' claimed indirect intervention preference in *Chapter Four*. Specifically, I will investigate the correspondence between students' peer reputation of showing outsider and defender behavior and their daily self-reported behavior in response to witnessed victimization. Students' tendency to show defender behavior related to their daily reported indirect intervention behavior. Moreover, students' tendency to show outsider behavior related to their daily reported nonintervention behavior. These findings suggest that outsiders may cognitively overestimate their actual behavior in response to witnessed peer victimization.

Subsequently, the potential role that students' personality profile has on their tendency to show outsider or defender behavior will be investigated in *Chapter Five*. I will show that while both outsider and defender behavior were related to agreeableness, only outsider behavior was also characterized by introversion and emotional stability. Moreover,

only outsider behavior was also characterized by a sensitivity to punishment and an insensitivity to rewards.

The investigation of the theoretical framework will be ended with a longitudinal study about the (in)stability of students' outsider behavior in relation to their social dominance position in *Chapter Six*. Students' outsider behavior and their perceived popularity status were found to mutually influence each other negatively within a stable longitudinal primary school setting as well as in an unstable primary to secondary school transitional period. Moreover, at least some students who mainly showed outsider behavior were found to be able to activate their defender potential over time.

The final study of this thesis regards the practical application of an intervention aimed at activating outsiders' defender potential. In *Chapter seven*, the *Stand Strong: Interact* (SS:I) antibullying intervention — aimed at changing the group process by changing outsiders' involvement — is presented. The SS:I effectively reduced the outsider behavior of students who followed the intervention. Moreover, the SS:I had a positive effect on students' defender behavior, that is, the SS:I counteracted the normal declines in defender behavior over the course of the school year. However, no carry-over effects were found at the classroom level.

Finally, in *Chapter eight*, the findings obtained from the research presented in Chapters two through seven will be discussed in light of the aims of this thesis. Moreover, theoretical and practical implications of the findings will be presented. The thesis will be concluded with recommendations for future theoretical and practical research.