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Chapter 8

**General Discussion — Outsiders' Defender Potential: A Theoretical Framework,
Some Considerations, and Some Recommendations**

Rationale and Main Objectives

Despite the increasing research attention bullying is receiving, bullying and victimization are still a serious concern for youth's physical and mental health problems as well as for their academic functioning (Fekkes, Pijpers, Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Nakatomo & Schwartz, 2010; Troop-Gordon, Rudolph, Sugimura, & Little, 2014). The main objective of the research presented in this thesis was to advance the theoretical and practical knowledge regarding how bullying in schools could be addressed more effectively. Specifically, this thesis focused on the outsiders and their defender potential based on the following premises: (a) peers' presence and success in stopping victimization and its negative consequences, despite a relatively low frequency of actually doing so (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2001), (b) outsiders' and defenders' shared antibullying attitude, despite a low frequency of acting accordingly for outsiders (Olthof & Goossens, 2008; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), (c) the large volume of classroom students who are outsiders, and, therefore, their potential in changing the group process (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & Van der Meulen, 2011; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998), and (d) the persuasiveness of the majority (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011) and the fact that outsiders and defenders combined could become the classroom majority.

Throughout youth's development defensive acts on behalf of victimized classmates are less likely to be executed and outsider behavior becomes more common (Goossens et al., 2006; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012). The research presented in this thesis therefore had two specific goals. The first goal was to increase our knowledge about outsiders and how they differ from defenders; both in terms of their cognitions and behaviors in response to witnessed victimization, and in terms of their personality. The second goal was to investigate to what extent a theoretically well-supported intervention to boost outsiders' defender potential works when given to outsiders and victims specifically.

Outsiders' Defender Potential

Without exception, the findings suggest that outsiders can indeed play an important role in counteracting the negative consequences of victimization on victims (Chapters Two through Seven). They were repeatedly found to be quite like defenders in terms of their behavior (Chapter Two through Seven), social cognitions (Chapters Two and Three), and personality (Chapter Five). While outsiders may overestimate their actual behavior in response to witnessed victimization (Chapter Four), their behavior proved to be less stable (Chapter Six) than it is often hypothesized to be. Outsiders *do not* always remain avoidant of witnessed victimization and they *do* sometimes defend victims, specifically by using indirect intervention strategies. Finally, it can be — carefully — concluded that directing intervention efforts at outsiders specifically can indeed have a positive effect on the school bullying group process (Chapter Seven).

Still, several characteristics were found to distinguish outsiders from defenders. The first of these characteristics is competence or skillfulness (Chapters Two and Five). While outsiders were found to have the intention to help classmates who are being bullied, they were found to lack in competence and skillfulness within bullying situations (Chapter Two). Moreover, outsiders' personality profile also suggests they are socially inhibited by a sensitivity for punishment (Chapter Five). Finally, previous studies have also suggested that outsiders are lower in general social competence (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008) and social self-efficacy (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). A recent study demonstrated that those who intervene on behalf of victims run the risk of retaliation by the bullies (Huitsing, Snijders, van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014). Based on these findings, it seems important for practice to work on increasing outsiders' physical and social competence if we want their defender potential to be activated.

The second characteristic is emotional distress or competence (Chapters Three and Five). Two important cognitive motivators of students' defender behavior were found to be awareness of victim's

distress and anticipated feelings of guilt and shame for nonintervention (i.e., moral awareness; Chapter Three). Moreover, students' tendency to show outsider behavior was found to be related to an emotionally stable personality profile (i.e., impulse control; Chapter Five). Also, outsiders were previously found to be less competent at the emotional level, that is, they tend to not cope effectively with victimization (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013). And finally, a recent study suggested that while all students know that bullying is a morally wrong type of behavior, emotional distress caused by a bullying situation can render students unable to act in line with their moral beliefs and thus to perform provictim interventions (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014). Based on these findings, it seems important for practice to work on increasing outsiders' emotional competence and their emotion regulation or coping skills.

The third characteristic is friendship or within-classroom friendship connectivity (Chapter Two). Previous findings have already shown that friends who are victimized, are more likely to be helped than nonfriends (Nishina, & Bellmore, 2010; Oh & Hazler, 2009) and my own findings show that outsiders and defenders are both more likely to help their victimized friends. Promoting friendship connectivity within classrooms and increasing students' identification with victims and how they are affected by bullying are techniques that in my opinion should be incorporated in antibullying programs. Not only does having friends positively impact youth's social and psychological development (Berndt, 2002), but promoting the within-classroom friendship connectivity may both decrease victim suffering and increase outsiders' personal mental health.

And the fourth characteristic is ambition or at least social dominance ambition (Chapter Six). While defenders' behavior and social dominance were not found to be positively related longitudinally, outsiders' behavior and their social dominance position were found to be in a mutual longitudinal negative spiral. It has already been suggested that outsiders do not seem to desire a socially dominant position (Olthof et al., 2011), that is, they do not seem to care that they are relatively

invisible within their social groups. In combination with the characteristics above, it seems important to teach outsiders that it is indeed possible to help victims in relatively safe ways, for example by simply consoling and being nice to the victim. While their lack of dominance ambition may not be countered this way, it may ease them into acting according to their moral standards.

Outsiders' Defender Potential: Some Considerations and Some Recommendations

While the Stand Strong: Interact antibullying intervention (SS:I) did not effectively increase outsiders' indirect defender behavior, it did counteract the normal decreases in defender behavior that were apparent in the control group (Chapter Seven). As a first evaluation of the SS:I program, I believe that these findings are promising for research and practice. Nevertheless, there is obvious room for improvement in the SS:I program. Based on the meta-analysis by Ttofi and Farrington (2011), increasing the duration of and intensifying the training program are obvious possibilities. After all, extending students' opportunity for practice is likely to result in better performance and indirect defender behavior may simply need more than a ten-week period to be adequately installed in the mindset of outsiders.

A second consideration — not only for the SS:I, but for bullying research in general — is to extend the focus to another bullying subgroup which has, thus far, received only little research attention, the subgroup of classroom students who receive too few nominations to be assigned a bullying role. In studies using bullying role classifications, these students are usually assigned a rest category status of 'uninvolved'. However, very little is known about this type of students. Are they a relative homogeneous subgroup with regards to bullying-related behaviors? Do the nominations that they receive indicate that they belong to either the pro- or antibullying camp? And if the latter is the case, could they be turned into defenders, that is, could they be included in antibullying programs — like the SS:I — to more effectively tackle the school bullying dynamic? In the empirical studies

presented in the previous chapters, I mainly opted for the use of proportion scores for bullying-related behaviors so as to make optimal use of all behavioral variance in the data. However, since the role classification data is available, this is something I expect to investigate in the near future.

A third consideration is that antibullying intervention — like the SS:I — may need to start using defender role models to enable behavioral change in outsiders (Chapters Six and Seven). Previous findings have already suggested that the like-minded outsiders and defenders tend to prefer each other's company (Olthof & Goossens, 2008). I suggest that outsiders may strategically seek to increase their closeness to their defender classmates. According to the information goods theory (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), infocopying (i.e., learning and imitating from the source via proximity) the behavior of the more prestigious classmates (i.e., those who you identify yourself with) results in an increased closeness and a stronger friendship connection. In this line of reasoning, intervention programs may ease behavioral change in outsiders by including defenders in the training groups to serve as positive role models.

With regards to this last consideration, I am eager to investigate the theoretical application of the information goods theory (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001) to the domain of bullying. I believe that this theory could provide both research and practice with valuable information, specifically when it comes to the prosocial — and seemingly altruistic — behavior of defenders. Contemporary research is increasingly suggesting that whereas bullies' behavior earns them the top positions within their social groups, they are not necessarily liked by their classmates (Huitsing et al., 2014; Reijntjes et al., 2013). My own research suggests that while defenders have a respectable level of perceived popularity (see also: Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011) — at least compared with outsiders — those who defend victims *do not* necessarily earn a socially dominant position, but they *do* score high on likeability (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Olthof & Goossens, 2008).

In this regard, I suggest that there may be two distinct ways of looking at the obtainment of a high social standing (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). On the one end there is dominance, or earning deference based on the strategic use of coercion and force (either exclusively, or in combination with more prosocial tit-for-tat strategies; e.g., Olthof et al., 2011; Reijntjes et al., 2013). On the other end there is prestige, or earning deference based on a more general skillfulness (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Defending has been repeatedly found to be attributable to a general skillfulness and moral awareness in both my own studies (Chapters Two, Three and Five) and in those by other researchers (Gini, et al., 2008; Obermann, 2011; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2013; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Moreover, students who defend their victimized classmates have been repeatedly found to be well-liked by their classmates (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008), but this finding was also obtained for outsiders. Does having and using their skillfulness earn defenders a prestigious status with their classmates and as such respect and social standing? And, if this is indeed the case, how do outsiders look at the obtainment of a prestige-based social standing? And more in general, as bullies can be expected to not earn respect and social standing in this way, do we need to start looking at social peer group status in a different way altogether?

In summary, the research presented in this thesis provides evidence for outsiders' potential success in changing the bullying group process and increasing victims' safety net. Nevertheless, more research is clearly needed to strengthen the theoretical framework regarding outsiders and their defender potential *and* to increase the effectiveness of antibullying programs like the SS:I. In my opinion, increasing within-classroom friendship connectivity could be an important future direction for practice. After all, my own research and those of others has repeatedly shown that provictim intervention is more likely for friends. For the SS:I specifically, it would be interesting to see defenders become included in the training program as they could potentially serve as role models for

behavioral change in outsiders. Finally, I would be interested in investigating the applicability of the information goods theory to the domain of bullying. I believe that this theory could offer valuable insights into explaining why some students decide to act in a seemingly altruistic way when witnessing victimization, while other students refrain from acting in a prosocial way on behalf of classmates who are victimized.