

**Bystanders to Bullying: An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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Bystanders to Bullying: An Introduction to the Special Issue

Researchers worldwide have investigated the phenomenon of bullying, which has been defined as aggressive, goal-oriented behaviour which harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). Bullying and cyberbullying are a cause of concern not only at school, but also in other institutional contexts (e.g., college; workplace; Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Varghese & Pistole, 2017).

Bullying is a social phenomenon involving several onlookers or bystanders, beyond the perpetrator and the target. Research investigating bullying at school has outlined that bystanders might show a constructive behaviour, such as helping the target and preventing any escalation of the situation, or they might reinforce bullying through their behaviour (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). More specifically, some bystanders, referred to as *assistants*, take side with the perpetrator, by helping actively, while some others support the perpetrator indirectly, through laughing or smiling when bullying happens. These bystanders are referred to as *reinforcers*, because they are thought to reinforce bullying with their behaviours. *Defenders* help the target of bullying, either by supporting the target or by confronting the perpetrator. Finally, some bystanders, referred to as *passive bystanders* avoid any involvement, and shy away when bullying happens.

The behaviour of passive bystanders has also been suggested to reinforce bullying (Kärnä et al., 2011). This is mainly because bystanders' passive behaviour can signal a silent assent to the perpetrators. Workplace bullying research has also recognised the role of bystanders as integral, rather than incidental to the bullying episodes, and has shown that the bystander typologies are relatively similar to the ones identified in the school bullying research; i.e., bystanders may take side with the target or with the perpetrator, and can even take multiple roles (Paull, Omari, & Standen, 2012). Bystander behaviour is widespread both

at school and in the workplace. Naturalistic observation of bullying at school showed that bystanders are present in 88% of bullying episodes, but they intervene in 19% of them (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). In the workplace, up to 30% of employees have experienced witnessing bullying (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2004). High peer acceptance of passive bystander behaviour has been found also in the online context (DeSmet et al., 2014).

Different variables seem to affect bystander behaviour. For instance, the presence of many bystanders - compared to the presence of a few bystanders – attenuates their sense of responsibility, and in turn discourages bystander intervention (Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2016). In line with the model of bystander intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970), cyber-bystanders are more willing to intervene when they perceive the incident as serious, and when they interpret the situation as an emergency (Obermaier et al., 2016). Importantly, being exposed to bullying can have serious implications on the mental health of bystanders (Rivers, Potteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009), which is one of the reasons why bystanders should be helped to recognise and tackle bullying.

Overall, research on bystanders of bullying in different contexts has considerably increased in recent years; however, many issues need to be clarified. For instance, research investigating simultaneously individual and contextual factors linked to bystander behaviour is lacking. In addition, our knowledge of the different strategies that bystanders adopt to support the target is still limited. Moreover, recent research has shown that combining physiological and self-report measures might constitute a new avenue to understand bystander behaviour (Barhight, Hubbard, & Hyde, 2013); however, research studies combining both methods are lacking. Finally, researchers need to gain a deeper understanding of the evidence-based strategies that positively affect bystander behaviour in different bullying contexts.

Based on these assumptions, the contributions in this special issue have the common goal to shed light on the aforementioned aspects in relation to bystander behaviour in various contexts (e.g., school; workplace; cyberspace). Overall, the contributions bring new knowledge to the field, and offer useful insights for future research.

### **Bystander Behaviour: The Contribution of Individual and Contextual Variables**

#### *Defending Behaviour as a Multidimensional Construct*

Previous research has shown that children who defend their victimised peers online are prosocial and show high levels of empathy (Romera, Bravo, Ortega-Ruiz, & Veenstra, 2019; Barlinska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2018). Different instruments, including self-reports and peer nominations have been adopted to assess cyber-defending. However, one of the limitations in the extant literature is that the different types of cyber-defending behaviours (e.g., comforting the victim versus confronting the perpetrator) have rarely been disentangled (Bastiaensens et al., 2014). In addition, previous research has considered cyber-defending behaviour as a unidimensional construct, involving prosocial behaviour (Barlinska et al., 2018). However, most recent studies have shown that cyber-defending behaviour does not involve only prosocial behaviours (DeSmet et al., 2014; Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016).

In order to shed light on the different types of cyber-defending behaviours, Moxey and Bussey (2020) developed a questionnaire measuring different forms of defending, which was administered to a sample of ethnically diverse Australian adolescents. Coherently with the aforementioned line of research, Moxey and Bussey (2020) show that defending behaviour is a multidimensional construct, as defenders can employ constructive strategies, such as consoling the target of cyberbullying, or destructive strategies, such as threatening the perpetrator. The study also shows that aggressive cyber-defenders are likely to be cyber-perpetrators. Interestingly, the authors found an association between aggressive cyber-

defending and moral disengagement, showing the importance to address socio-moral aspects in future anti-bullying programs.

*The Role of Empathy, Contextual Variables and Physiological Functioning*

The contribution by Schultze-Krumbholtz et al. (2020) expands the focus of investigation, by taking into account contextual factors associated with cyber-defending and assisting. By confirming previous literature, findings show that higher levels of cognitive and affective empathy are associated with higher cyber-defending behaviour (Romera et al., 2019). Among the contextual factors investigated in this study, the authors found that teacher support positively predicts defending behaviour. As to pro-bullying behaviour, the authors found that cognitive and affective empathy are associated with lower levels of cyber-assisting behaviour. The authors conclude that both empathy components might be seen as inhibitory factors against actively supporting cyberbullying behaviour. Contextual factors are also associated with assisting cyber-bystander behaviour, which is more likely in classrooms where students perceive less positive peer interactions. Interestingly, the study shows that individual predictors account for more variance than class-level factors when examining cyberbullying. One possible interpretation of this finding might be related with the cultural context in which the study was conducted. Individual factors might be more relevant than contextual factors in countries with an individualistic orientation, such as Germany. In other words, students showing cyber-defending and assisting behaviours might be inclined to show these behaviours based on their individual dispositions, and might rely less on contextual factors, such as school climate. An alternative interpretation might have to do with the nature of the behaviour investigated; i.e., individual factors might be particularly relevant in the context of cyberbullying, because this form of negative behaviour might not happen on the school grounds, and as such, might be less tight to contextual factors.

Overall, this study has the merit of combining individual and contextual factors when investigating cyberbullying. However, due to the cross-sectional design of the study, it is not possible to infer causal relations between the variables object of this study. Future longitudinal studies assessing various cyber-bystander behaviours at several time-points are warranted.

The important role of empathy in fostering positive bystander behaviours has also been outlined in the study by Rudnicki et al. (2020). The authors of this study investigate celebrity bashing, which is a specific form of online aggressive behaviour involving derogatory messages towards celebrities. The study combines physiological and self-report measures, and investigates the role of the neurophysiological substrate of empathy, (i.e., the oxytocinergic system), in affecting bystanders' response to online celebrity bashing. The authors found that intranasal oxytocin administration reduces bystanders' self-reported acceptance of online celebrity bashing. The study shows that combining self-report and physiological measures could give an important insight into bystander responses to negative behaviours online. One of the main methodological strength in this study is the adoption of a non-invasive and objective measure in assessing the neurophysiological substrate of empathy. Future research should adopt similar techniques to enlarge our knowledge of the neurophysiological correlates of bullying-related behaviours. However, because the authors did not assess empathy, it is not possible to draw a connection between the activation of the oxytocinergic system and self-reported levels of empathy. It is advisable for future research to overcome these limitations by assessing the link between the activation of the oxytocinergic system and self-reported empathy levels.

### **How to Increase Active Bystander Behaviour?**

Successful intervention programs have shown that positive bystander behaviour could be encouraged by increasing students' awareness about bullying (Kärnä et al., 2011). In order

to foster positive intervention strategies, students need to a) increase their awareness of bullying, b) learn new skills to act in appropriate ways in bullying situations, and c) be encouraged to make use of their knowledge and skills in real life situations.

Doane et al., (2020) build the rationale for their study around the importance of increasing bystanders' awareness about the positive responses to cyberbullying incidents. More specifically, they explored the effect of a video providing suggestions on positive responses to cyberbullying incidents, on College students' intentions to help. The findings show that students in the experimental group are more willing to help immediately after the video, compared to students in the control group. Students in the experimental group report higher scores on intentions to help at one-month follow-up, though the differences between the two groups are non-significant. Overall, the study shows that participating in an informative session about positive bystander behaviour can have a positive impact in the very short-term. However, the findings indicate that being exposed to the intervention in a single session might not have a long-term impact on bystander behaviour. Based on these findings, future intervention programs should be more intense and systematic.

By adopting a similar methodology, Dal Cason et al. (2020) used video-vignettes depicting workplace bullying episodes with a sample of college students. The authors tested the hypothesis of a positive association between bystander intervention in support of the target of bullying, and moral courage (operationalised as "acting correctly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal or discouragement"). Findings show that moral courage, fostered bystander's intervention in situations of workplace bullying, especially among participants who showed high levels of personal involvement (i.e., willingness to help the target). The study can be included in the line of research that addresses morality to empower bystanders against bullying.

Workplace bullying literature has started only recently to look at bystanders and to recognise their role in the bullying dynamics. Therefore, this work is an important contribution to the workplace bullying literature. However, one of the main limitations is that the study adopted a sample of University students. In order to preserve the ecological validity of the findings, future research should investigate these issues with employee samples.

The last contribution included in this special issue, presents the evaluation findings of an anti-bullying intervention program aimed at empowering bystanders to tackle bullying. As outlined in a previous literature review (Sivaraman, Nye, & Bowes, 2019), there is a need for more rigorously evaluated anti-bullying intervention programs in low income countries. The contribution by Arënliu et al. (2020) meets this need by evaluating, through a rigorous methodology, a short and ultra-short version of the ViSC program (ViSC), in a low-income country (i.e., Kosovo). The ViSC program aims at empowering adolescents to recognise bullying, and to intervene in bullying situations, and it has been shown to be effective in reducing victimisation with students in a high income country such as Austria (Yanagida, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2019). Findings show that the ultra-short version of the program is effective in reducing physical victimisation. Previous evaluations of anti-bullying programs in middle and low-income countries have shown no effect on the reduction of bullying and victimisation (Sivaraman et al., 2019). Therefore, findings of this study add to the extant literature, in that they show that an ultra-short intervention program can to some extent reduce victimisation, in spite of the restricted resources.

## **Conclusions**

By acknowledging the important role that bystanders cover in bullying situations, the contributions in this special issue aimed at investigating bystander behaviour in various contexts (i.e., school; cyberspace; college; workplace), with the goal of expanding our knowledge and providing useful insights for evidence-based intervention programs. The work

by Moxey et al., (2020) showed that cyber-defending can take different forms, among which aggressive responses. Two contributions included in this special issue consistently show the key role of empathy in enhancing positive bystander behaviour in online bullying (Rudnicki et al., 2020) and restraining from pro-bullying behaviours (Schultze-Krumbholtz et al. 2020). The contribution by Doane et al., (2020) outlines the importance of educating bystanders about the importance of supporting the target of bullying, whereas the study by Dal Cason et al., (2020) shows the role of moral courage to foster positive bystander behaviour. Finally, the study by Arenliu et al. (2020) highlights the usefulness of adapting anti-bullying intervention programs to low-income countries.

Taken together, the studies included in this special issue provide several insights into bystander behaviour and are inspirational for future research in the field. Some important messages can be drawn based on the findings of the contributions included in the special issue. First, researchers need to take a multidimensional approach when investigating defending behaviour. Hence, the instruments currently adopted to detect defending should be revised in order to include items assessing constructive and destructive forms of defending. This could, in turn contribute to elucidate the dynamics of offline and online bullying, and could help to design intervention programs aimed at fostering constructive bystander behaviour.

Second, this special issue shows that combining Neuroscience techniques with instruments adopted in the field of Social Sciences might greatly contribute to the field of cyberbullying. Future research might adopt such methodological innovation to explore various issues in connection with bystander behaviour of online and offline bullying.

Third, based on the contributions of this special issue, positive bystander behaviour is closely linked with moral variables (e.g., empathy; moral courage), which implies that prevention and intervention programs should include a socio-moral component. The

possibility of including such a component can greatly help in tackling bullying, as fostering moral actions can act as a deterrent for various forms of aggression, including bullying. This indication is in line with the outcomes of intervention programs which aim primarily at fostering students' socio-cognitive abilities (i.e., ViSC program), and that have been shown in turn, to empower bystanders to tackle bullying.

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