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**Bystander Responses to Bias-Based Bullying in Schools:**

**A Developmental Intergroup Approach**

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**Key words:** *childhood and adolescence, intergroup processes, bystanders and bullying*

## **Abstract**

Research on bystanders' responses to bullying shows the valuable contribution that prosocial or defender behaviors can have in reducing bullying in schools. In this article, we propose that a developmental intergroup approach (i.e., a developing understanding of social identities and related intergroup processes) is required to understand fully when and why children and adolescents help bullied peers in diverse contexts. First, we review theory and evidence on intergroup social exclusion to demonstrate the strength of a developmental intergroup approach when understanding responses to complex social scenarios in childhood and adolescence. Then, we review recent evidence that demonstrates the importance of examining group membership, group identity, and group norms to understand children's and adolescents' responses as bystanders in the context of bias-based bullying. Finally, we consider implications for school-based interventions and next steps for research.

Anti-bullying programs (e.g., 1) focus on the role of peer bystanders (i.e., students who witness bullying) since peers are present during most bullying incidents (2). Bystanders can support the bully or ignore the act (thus reinforcing the acceptability of bullying), challenge the bully, report the incident to a teacher, garner support from friends, or comfort and support the victim in other ways (e.g., 3, 4). When bystanders challenge bullying, they can reduce it and reinforce an anti-bullying ethos in schools (1, 5-8); however, defending the child or adolescent who is bullied becomes less likely with age (9).

Researchers have identified many important predictors for defending behaviors. Confidence, self-efficacy, popularity, and empathy predict helpful responses (2, 3). Anti-bullying programs have been shaped around these findings, and meta-analyses show the benefits of programs that support bystanders to challenge and intervene during bullying (10, 11). For example, the KiVa program, which develops the socioemotional skills of students and provides training in how to respond as a bystander, reduces bullying in schools in Finland (e.g., 3, 4). However, these programs may be less effective in diverse communities (6). We propose that additional influences need to be considered in the context of *bias-based bullying*.

First, we review bias-based bullying and describe how it differs from interpersonal forms of bullying. Next, we describe a *developmental intergroup approach* to understanding children's and adolescents' attitudes and behaviors. Then we present evidence for this approach in the context of bystanders' responses to bias-based bullying, focusing on intergroup membership and identification, intergroup norms, loyalty and repercussions, and social-moral reasoning. Finally, we consider the implications of this work for anti-bullying programs.

## **Bias-Based Bullying**

Bias-based bullying is an intergroup context (i.e., involving ingroup and outgroup members) in which someone is bullied because they belong to a particular group (e.g., one defined by race or ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability; 12-14). Typically, bias-based bullying is perpetrated by a member of a social group with majority status toward a member of a social group with minority status (e.g., White bully, Black victim) and constitutes discrimination. This form of bullying is rife in childhood and adolescence, and is more harmful for the victim than interpersonal bullying (14-17).

Bias-based bullying differs from interpersonal bullying because of underlying issues of prejudice and discrimination (15, 16, 18). Therefore, bystanders' responses to bias-based bullying are likely affected by intergroup concerns. In line with this interpretation, in a recent review, anti-bullying programs were more effective in homogenous groups than in more diverse groups (6). This is problematic because children in diverse settings are more at risk of bias-based bullying. Thus, intergroup processes (i.e., group identity, group membership, group norms, social-moral reasoning) and understanding the developmental nature of these processes may inform children and adolescents' responses to bias-based bullying (see also 13).

### **Developmental Intergroup Approach**

Research examining the development of children's attitudes toward and evaluations of intergroup social exclusion, aggression, and helping (e.g., 15, 19-21) has consistently identified the importance of intergroup processes when interpreting youth's changing attitudes and behaviors toward members of different groups. This *developmental intergroup approach* (e.g., 19, 22, 23) shows how intergroup processes shape the way children and adolescents reason about, and respond to, social situations. Moreover, they influence how

attitudes and behaviors *develop* across childhood and adolescence because of changing social cognitions and experiences of intergroup contexts (19, 24, 25).

Early on, children become aware of social categories, and they affiliate with people they see as similar (ingroup) and differentiate from people they view as different (outgroup) (26). At this stage, preference for ingroups guides attitudes and behaviors in intergroup contexts. From middle childhood, as youth develop perspective-taking skills, they also evaluate others based on whether their behavior conforms with or deviates from group norms such as loyalty (22, 27).

Children also recognize that challenging ingroup norms can result in negative evaluations and other social repercussions. With increased experience of groups, what might be perceived as morally wrong in early and middle childhood (e.g., it is never acceptable to exclude another person) can be viewed as relatively more acceptable from later childhood into adolescence (e.g., it is acceptable to exclude Sarah from soccer practice because she's a girl and probably isn't good at soccer). In this way, negative social interactions can be justified through perceived knowledge of groups and group expectations (19, 22).

Together with social experience, developing social cognitions (i.e., perspective taking, understanding group norms, group loyalty, and group-related repercussions) influence evaluations and social-moral reasoning about social incidents such as social exclusion and aggression (22, 24, 25). We propose that these same group processes influence when children and adolescent bystanders help victims of bias-based bullying. Because of the developmental nature of such processes, we propose that they can also help explain the developmental decline in defending responses.

## **Bystanders and a Developmental Intergroup Approach**

### **Intergroup Membership and Identification**

Children's and adolescents' responses as bystanders are influenced by intergroup processes (9, 28-30). In one study, when an ingroup member behaved aggressively toward an outgroup member, youth who belonged to the same group as the aggressor (as opposed to being unaffiliated with the group) had less negative attitudes toward the perpetrator (31). Extending these findings, another study (9) examined the responses of children and adolescent bystanders to bias-based verbal bullying: With age, youth were more likely to help when the victim was an ingroup member than when he or she was an outgroup member. This finding was mediated by increased social identification; a bystander could not simply view him or herself as belonging to the same category, but also had to identify with [AU: Please clarify "find meaning" by replacing that phrase with something more specific and concrete.] that social category. This highlights the importance of intergroup processes for bystanders' intentions and demonstrates how these processes become increasingly influential with age, as social cognition and the importance of identity increase (24, 25).

Further demonstrating the importance of group membership to bystanders' responses, in a recent study of adolescent bystanders, stronger ingroup bias (preference for one's own group) was negatively related to helping an immigrant peer in an outgroup who was bullied (28). Consequently, when examining bystanders' responses, the relative ingroup-outgroup affiliations between parties could indicate when helping is most or least likely. On this premise, a bystander who identifies with the bully would be more likely to support and less likely to challenge the bully (31). If the bystander identifies with the victim, he or she would be more likely to help (see Figures 1a and 1b).

[Insert Figure 1a and 1b here]

### **Intergroup Norms, Loyalty, and Repercussions**

The developmental intergroup approach extends beyond the relative group memberships of those involved. Research on social exclusion shows the strength of group norms on children's evaluations of peers over and above group membership (19, 27). In the intergroup context, group norms refer to the expectations affiliated with one group that differ from those affiliated with another. In this way, they differ from classroom norms (e.g., an anti-bullying ethos), which also predict defenders' responses to interpersonal bullying (e.g., 2, 7, 8).

When evaluating others, children focus increasingly on group-specific norms, in part because of the development of cognitive perspective-taking abilities (e.g., 24, 27) and increasing social experience (e.g., 25, 32). With age, relative group norms influence ingroup and outgroup evaluations more strongly. For example, children endorse ingroup aggression when doing so fits an ingroup norm (33). Furthermore, youth are more likely to endorse bias-based acts (e.g., telling a racist joke) in the presence of a specific-group norm for doing so (19).

Evaluations of ingroup members who challenge ingroup norms (e.g., deviants or dissenters) become increasingly negative with age, and evaluations of outgroup members who behave in line with ingroup norms become more positive (27). This happens even in the context of negative group norms: In one study, across adolescence, youth became increasingly concerned about group-based repercussions for bystanders who challenged a group norm for telling race-based jokes, expecting it to result in exclusion from the peer group (29). Consequently, an increasing knowledge of group dynamics can reduce the likelihood of a bystander defending someone.

Additionally, children evaluate members of an outgroup with an *exclusive* norm (not liking and excluding other members) more negatively, whereas those outgroup members with an *inclusive* group norm (liking and including other group members) are viewed more



positively (32). Consequently, bystanders' responses to bias-based bullying likely depend on group-specific norms (actual or perceived). For example, if a British child is a bystander to a bullying incident in which another British child bullies an immigrant child, and the British group holds an inclusive norm, the likelihood of the bystander helping the outgroup member should increase (since the ingroup bully is dissenting from the group inclusion norm) compared to when the British group holds an exclusive group norm (see Figures 2a and 2b). If the British group holds an exclusive ingroup norm, ingroup bystanders should support their own group, resulting in less outgroup helping. Extending this logic, when bystanders perceive outgroups as exclusive, victimized members of these outgroups may be seen as less in need, or less wanting or deserving of help (e.g., 34), which would likely result in less helping. Perceptions of and stereotypes about victimized groups may drive bystanders' responses regardless of a bystander's own affiliations (e.g., as a member of the perpetrator's group or an unrelated third party).

[Insert Figure 2a and 2b here]

Generic norms (i.e., expectations held by society generally) are also important for defenders' behavior, and research in interpersonal and intergroup contexts supports their influence (e.g., 7-9). Behaving in line with these societal or broader group-level norms can mediate the developmental decline in bystanders' prosocial intentions to bias-based bullying; for example, older children who perceive a norm for helping among their peer group are more likely to help than those who do not (9). Broader generic norms interact with group-specific norms during intergroup contexts (32). More research is needed to determine when generic-level norms override group-specific norms, and vice versa, in the context of bystanders, and how this effect differs across childhood and into adolescence.

## **Social-Moral Reasoning**

Children's and adolescents' reasoning about responses to bias-based bullying further demonstrates the social-cognitive processes underpinning bystanders' responses. With age, children become more adept at weighing competing concerns in response to social scenarios (e.g., 15, 19, 24). Although bias-based bullying is viewed overwhelmingly as unacceptable and can always be considered a moral issue (i.e., someone is being harmed, injustice and inequality are present), as children get older they become more aware of additional group-related concerns (i.e., norms, repercussions) and sometimes prioritize these over their moral judgments of transgressions (e.g., 19, 22).

Younger children typically justify negative evaluations of social exclusion by focusing on the morality of a situation (i.e., it is unacceptable because it is unfair, wrong, causes harm to someone). With age, the moral component is still acknowledged, but children become more cognitively adept at weighing moral concerns against competing concerns, such as social-conventional issues (i.e., is there a rule or group norm that suggests this behavior is acceptable or unacceptable?) or psychological issues (i.e., is this my responsibility; is there anything I can do about this; do I want to help; is it that big of a deal?).

In one study that asked youth to reason about their responses as bystanders (9), younger children, who also reported helping intentions more often than adolescents, presented moral justifications more frequently. Adolescents were slightly more likely to draw on social-conventional concerns and significantly more likely to draw on psychological concerns when reasoning about their decision to help. In a separate study, older adolescents were more likely than younger adolescents to play down the negative nature of a bias-based act (29), which was also related to perceiving the act as relatively more acceptable. Thus, social-moral reasoning sheds light on the way social experience and group processes affect

young people's choices as bystanders, and is important when considering the age-related trends in bystander defending (6, 11).

### **Implications for Anti-Bullying Interventions**

Anti-bullying programs that focus on promoting helpful interventions by bystanders reduce bullying in schools (1). However, considering the lack of focus on bias-based bullying in such interventions, it is perhaps unsurprising that anti-bullying techniques are less effective in heterogeneous communities (6, 15). Typically, schools have taken a one-size-fits-all, reactive, and bully-victim approach (i.e., one that focuses on bullying as dyadic, rather than involving the wider peer group) [AU: What is a bully-victim approach? Please define briefly.] when tackling all forms of bullying. This can be difficult for practitioners when dealing with bias-based bullying, which is often accompanied by controversial and contentious issues such as xenophobia and immigration, because these approaches ask practitioners to deal with these issues only after a negative act occurred.

We propose that consistently promoting more inclusive attitudes toward a range of social groups may be more useful so practitioners can refer students to these discussions when dealing with specific incidents of bias-based bullying. Indeed, the developmental intergroup approach suggests that addressing anti-bullying interventions more proactively by tapping into wider intergroup phenomenon (i.e., fostering overarching identities while valuing difference and creating inclusive norms) might more constructively encourage prosocial bystander responses to bias-based bullying.

To facilitate these aims, interventions could also draw from research in the intergroup field. For example, interventions that encourage positive interactions between members of ingroups and members of outgroups improve attitudes, intentions, and behaviors toward outgroup members (35, 36). Furthermore, cross-group friendships and other forms of

intergroup contact are related positively to bystanders helping (28) and related negatively to bystanders responding passively (30). Thus, improving attitudes toward others by embedding contact interventions in anti-bullying programs is one way practitioners can improve prosocial and defender responses to bias-based bullying.

### **Conclusion**

In this review, we highlighted the importance of the developmental intergroup context—which is grounded in well-established theoretical and empirical work on social exclusion—in examining bystander responses to biased-based bullying. We hope researchers will use this approach to study *when* and *why* children and adolescents defend victims of biased-based bullying. The evidence we have presented shows that group processes predict bystanders' responses in the context of bias-based bullying. These processes may interact with individual differences such as empathy and openness (28), possibilities that merit further exploration.

The intergroup concepts reviewed here are the tip of the iceberg. Developmental intergroup theories also relate concepts of intergroup status (i.e., 37, 38) and intergroup threat (i.e., 15, 39) to children's evaluations of intergroup scenarios. These remain to be explored in the context of defending intentions and behaviors. Examining bystanders' responses from a developmental intergroup perspective can inform the development and implementation of more appropriate anti-bullying interventions in diverse settings (6), which will more effectively target and tackle bias-based bullying in schools.

### **Authors' Note**

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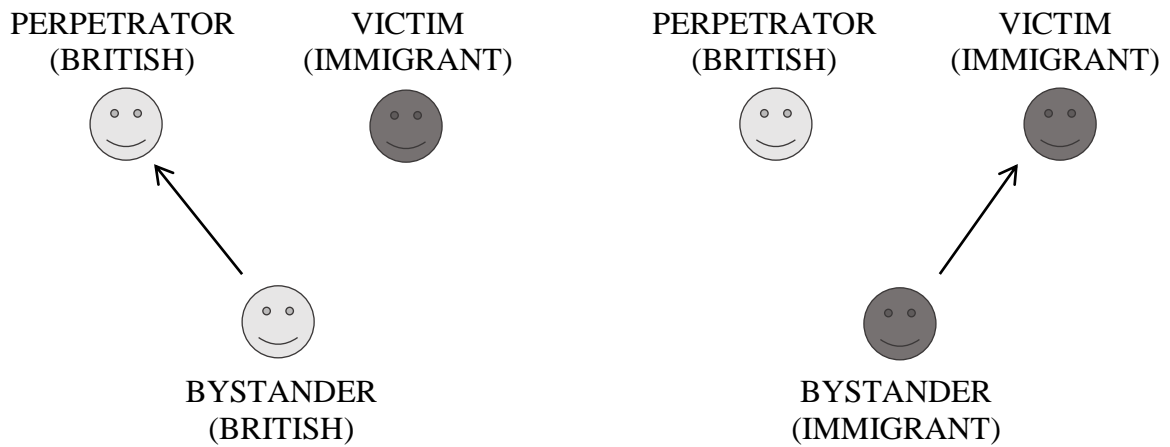


Figure 1. On the left, the bystander belongs to the same group as the perpetrator and supports the perpetrator. On the right, the bystander belongs to the same group as the victim and supports the victim. Note. Arrow indicates bystander support.

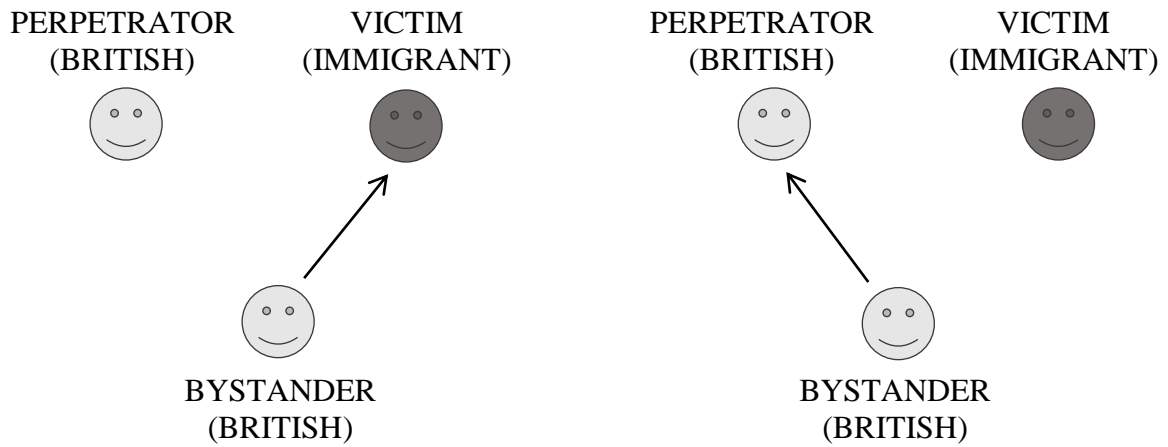


Figure 2. On the left, the bystander supports the outgroup victim, in line with an inclusive ingroup norm. On the right, the bystander supports the ingroup perpetrator, in line with an exclusive ingroup norm. Note. Arrow indicates bystander support.