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Victims and their defenders: A dyadic approach

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Abstract

This study focused on the dyadic defending relationships of victimized children in grades 3, 4, and 5 ($N = 7481$ children from 356 school classes, mean ages 10–12 years). Most of the victims (72.3%) had at least one defender. Being defended was positively related to victims' adjustment and social status. Analyses on victim–defender dyads showed that they were usually same-gender relationships. Victims usually liked their defenders and perceived them as popular, although the latter effect was weaker. Also other classmates perceived defenders as popular, indicating that defenders enjoy a high status among their peers in general.

Keywords

bullying, defending, dyad, social networks, victimization

A large number of children are frequently victimized by their peers at school. Victimization is related to a vast range of adjustment difficulties. Victims are anxious and depressed, have low self-esteem, are rejected by peers, and often lack friends (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Ray, Cohen, Secrist, & Duncan, 1997; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). However, the threatening relationship with bullies might for some victims be accompanied with protective relations. The power of protective peers is acknowledged in the increasing interest in defenders, that is, children who comfort and support victims or are even ready to stand up for them when they are being victimized (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). Yet we do not know which victims are defended and whether being defended is related to their well-being. On the basis of previous studies on defending, it is also unclear who defends whom. Therefore, the characteristics of children involved in victim–defender dyads are, so far, unknown. The present study addressed these issues by examining who victims perceived as their defenders.

To our knowledge, there is yet no research investigating directly the function of defenders for victimized children, although there are related studies on perceived support (e.g., Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Holt & Espelage, 2007; Rigby, 1997) and friendship (e.g., Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999).

In the case of *perceived social support* by peers, research findings are somewhat controversial. Although perceived support by peers is found to be negatively associated with victimization, its role in attenuating the psychosocial problems of victimized children is not straightforward. For instance, Davidson and Demaray (2007) found that perceived support by peers actually increased externalizing distress for female victims. In another study, it was found that victimized children with high levels of perceived support were as anxious and depressed as victims with low levels of support (Holt & Espelage, 2007). It is important to note that these studies measured perceived support at a general level. For example, the study by Davidson and Demaray (2007) assessed support by classmates and close friends with questions such as "my classmates treat me with respect" or "my classmates do nice things for me" (see also Malecki & Demaray, 2002). In the study by Holt and Espelage (2007), children were asked to rate their close friends by three questions covering emotional ("how helpful the person is when I have a personal problem") and instrumental ("how helpful the person is when I need money and things") support, as well as satisfaction with the relationship ("how much I have fun with this person"). These measures of social support provide important information on the quality of peer relationships in general, but it is questionable whether they reflect the support related to the plight of being *victimized*.

When it comes to research on *friendships*, the number of friends seems to protect against victimization; however, the protection is weaker when the friends are themselves victimized or have internalizing problems (Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hodges et al., 1999; Pellegrini et al., 1999). Similarly, having best friendships decreases peer victimization only when victims perceive friends as protective (e.g., "my friend would stick up for me if another kid was causing me trouble"), whereas friendships with little protection might even exacerbate the risk for victimization (Hodges et al., 1999). Thus, these studies suggest that not all friends serve as "successful defenders" for victims.

Conversely, it is unclear whether defending only takes place among friends. It might be worthwhile to ask victims directly about their defenders (peers who support and/or stand up for them in situations of bullying) without restricting nominations to their

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friends. Also, many interventions against bullying aim at recruiting defenders for victimized children, not necessarily friends (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010).

Research on defending behavior is, indeed, called for in the field of victimization. However, researchers have by far focused on the characteristics of defenders (Caravita et al., 2009; Gini et al., 2008; Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Pöyhönen et al., 2010), thereby neglecting the characteristics of defended victims as well as the specific dyadic relation between victims and their defenders. Information on defenders is usually based on peer- or self-reports (e.g., Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), which do not provide any information about who is defended by whom. As defenders identified by peer- or self-reports may not be equally likely to defend all victimized classmates, a dyadic approach that captures defending at the relationship level might be important to understand defending behavior.

In this study, we examined defending relationships in classrooms by asking victims to nominate *their* defenders. We focused on the victims' perspective, because it is important to know whether victims perceive that they are defended, and by whom. A measure in which the victims have to specify the peers by whom they are defended might also be more valid than an assessment tool merely asking whether or not they have defenders. Nominating defenders requires victims to think concretely about the peers who defend them. Furthermore, defending can take subtle forms that are not highly visible to peers, although experienced by victims themselves (e.g., comforting after public harassment).

Research questions and hypotheses

Are victims better adjusted when they have defenders? A negative self-view has been associated with victimization in numerous studies (e.g., Egan & Perry, 1998; Salmivalli, 1998; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Already the symbolic interactionist theories on self-esteem (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) postulated that the opinions of significant others become incorporated into one's self-view. It might be argued that whereas victimization is a sign of others' negative feelings and opinions of oneself, being supported and defended carries the opposite message. Perceived support can thus be hypothesized to buffer against the loss of self-esteem caused by victimization. It has been shown that self-esteem is partly context-specific (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009), and experienced support in one context is related to self-view especially in that particular context (Harter et al., 1998). Thus, the experience that peers are ready to support, comfort, or defend oneself when victimized is likely to be reflected in victims' self-worth when among peers. It is also possible that defended victims have a better position among classmates. The fact that they are supported by some peers might decrease the likelihood of other classmates perceiving them in a negative light (i.e., as ''complete failures'') and taking distance to them, as often happens in classes where victimization takes place (e.g., Schuster, 2001). We hypothesize that *defended victims have a better self-esteem when around peers, and a better social status among classmates than undefended victims.*

Who do victims nominate as their defenders? Utilizing peer reports on defending, it has been found that girls are more often nominated as defenders than boys (Gini et al., 2007; Goossens et al., 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1996). However, it is not known whether boys also nominate girls as their defenders. Considering previous findings on defending, as well as the gender-segregated nature of peer interactions of children aged 10–12 (e.g., Maccoby, 1998), we hypothesize that *victim–defender relationships take place predominantly among same-gender peers, and most often within girl–girl-dyads.*

Defenders identified by peer reports are generally liked (Goossens et al., 2006; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996) and, at least in middle childhood, perceived as popular (Caravita et al., 2009). However, it is unclear whether their high social status is an artifact of victimized children liking them, or whether they really enjoy a high status among the wider peer group. It has been suggested that a high status is a prerequisite of taking sides with the victims, due to the social risks involved in defending behaviors (Pöyhönen et al., 2010). On the other hand, with dyadic reports we might also identify defenders who give their support in less visible ways, and thus are not necessarily socially prominent children. Thus, we test whether victims' defenders are mainly liked by the peers whom they provide with support, or whether they are liked and perceived as popular among classmates at large.

Method

Participants

This study is part of a larger project evaluating the effectiveness of the *KiVa bullying intervention program* developed at the University of Turku, Finland. In the present study we utilized the pre-test data collected in the first phase of the evaluation study, in May 2007. The 78 schools participating in this phase of the evaluation represented all five provinces in mainland Finland, involving 429 classrooms and a total of 8,248 children in grades 3–5 (mean ages 10–12 years). To recruit the children from this target sample, guardians were sent information letters including a consent form. A total of 7,564 children (91.7% of the target sample) received active consent to participate and 7,312 children (88.7% of the target sample) responded to the questionnaire. Of them, 50.3% were girls. Most children were native Finns, the proportion of immigrants being 2.4%.

As sociometric peer nominations were presented only in classrooms with at least seven children, all classes below this limit were excluded from the study. Classrooms with less than 50% participation rates were further excluded in order to obtain reliable peer report data. This resulted in 356 classrooms with an average class size of 22 children, ranging from 8 to 35. The total number of children in these classes was 7,481 (50.1% girls), with a respondent rate of 93.2%. This sample was used to investigate differences between defended versus undefended victims.

We used the multilevel p_2 model for analyzing victim–defender dyads. As examining very low-density networks is not informative (and was actually found to be impossible) we excluded classes with less than three defending relationships. This resulted in a subsample of 209 classrooms with 4,614 children. The mean class size was 22 students, ranging from 9 to 35.

We focused on victims' relationships with their classmates, thereby ignoring relationships outside the classroom. In Finland, elementary school children are normally together with the same classmates for at least the first six years of their basic education. Thus, this peer group is important and salient for children, and probably highly significant for their social adjustment.

Furthermore, preliminary observations of the KiVa data set showed that defending most often takes place within classes (93.2% of victims who had defenders reported them being from one's own class).

Procedure

In May 2007, children filled out internet-based questionnaires in the schools' computer labs during regular school hours. Teachers were supplied with detailed instructions concerning the procedure, and provided with a possibility to get support via phone or e-mail prior to and during the data collection. Teachers received individual passwords for all the children who had obtained parental permission to participate in the study. They distributed the passwords to the children, who used them to log in to the questionnaire. The order of questions, individual items, and scales used in this study was randomized extensively so that the order of presenting the questions would not have any systematic effect on the results. Similarly, the order of the names of classmates in the peer nominations was randomized by the computer program. Children were assured that their answers would remain confidential and would not be revealed to teachers, peers, or parents.

The term *bullying* was defined to the children in the way formulated in the Olweus' Bully/Victim questionnaire (Olweus, 1996), which emphasizes the repetitive nature of bullying and the power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Several examples covering different forms of bullying were given. Moreover, an explanation of what is not bullying (teasing in a friendly and playful way; fighting between children of equal strength) was provided. Teachers read the definition out loud while children could read it from their computer screens. Additionally, to remind children of the meaning of the term bullying, a shortened version of the definition appeared on the upper part of the computer screen when children responded to any bullying-related question.

Measures

Frequency of victimization. Victimization was measured by the Olweus Bully/Victim questionnaire. Children were presented one global item ("How often have you been bullied at school in the last 2 months?") and 10 specific items concerning several forms of bullying (e.g., physical, verbal, and relational bullying). Children answered the items on a 5-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 2 = *two or three times a month*, 4 = *several times a week*). The 10 specific items formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$) indicating the frequency of victimization.

Dyadic nominations on defending. All children who (1) indicated on any of the 11 self-report items that they were victimized at least two or three times a month (Solberg & Olweus, 2003), and (2) reported having classmates who supported, comforted, or defended them when they were victimized, were asked to nominate their defenders. They were presented a list with the names of all their classmates and asked to mark an unlimited number of classmates who supported, comforted, or defended them when victimized. Victims who nominated at least one defender were assigned as *defended victims*, whereas victims who did not nominate defenders in their classroom were assigned as *undefended victims*. The remaining children were categorized as *non-victims*. For correlations, the received and given nominations for defending for each student were summed and divided by the number of respondents in class, leading to proportion scores of *defender nominations received* and *defender nominations given*, respectively. For the dyadic analysis, squared adjacency matrices (Y), where the rows and columns equaled the number of children in the class, were constructed to represent the defending relationships (Y_{ij}) for each of the 209 classrooms used in the p_2 model. A cell in the matrix represents defender nominations by child i to child j (Y_{ij} is 1 if i nominates j as a defender, and 0 otherwise).

Self-esteem among peers. We used a 10-item scale to measure children's self-esteem. Items were derived from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), slightly adapted by instructing children to "report the way you feel about yourself when around peers" (Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpää, & Peets, 2005). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not true at all*, 4 = *exactly true*) to items such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others." The scores for the 10 items formed a reliable scale and were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

Social status. Social status was indicated by *peer acceptance*, *peer rejection*, and *perceived popularity*. These were assessed by asking children to mark three classmates (from a list of all classmates) they liked the most (acceptance), liked the least (rejection), and considered to be the most popular (perceived popularity). The received nominations for each student for each status variable were summed and divided by the number of nominators in the classroom. In addition, we constructed *corrected scores* for peer acceptance, peer rejection, and perceived popularity by excluding victims' nominations for their defenders. This provided us with the opportunity to investigate how defenders were evaluated by other classmates, besides the victims they defended. For the dyadic p_2 analyses, we also constructed squared adjacency matrices for *perceived popularity*, *liking*, and *disliking* between children in the classroom. These matrices were similarly constructed as the matrices for defending relationships.

Analyses

After presenting the correlations among all study variables, we present the main analyses in two sections. First, we focused on the mean differences in self-esteem, peer acceptance, peer rejection, and perceived popularity of defended victims, undefended victims, and non-victims using univariate ANOVAs. We also tested the mean differences with gender and, additionally, the frequency of victimization as covariates.

Second, we shifted attention to victim–defender dyads in order to examine the characteristics of victims, defenders, and victim–defender dyads. There are dependencies in our data. First, participants are involved in multiple dyads, as potential victims and defenders. Second, participants are nested within classrooms. In order to take these dependencies into account, we used the *multilevel p_2 model.* Compared to other available dyadic methods, this model allows us to analyze the dichotomous dyadic data in a multilevel framework, increasing the power to detect the covariate effects in the model (Zijlstra, Veenstra, & Van Duijn, 2008). In short, the multilevel p_2 model is a three-level random effects model that is suitable for the analyses of binary relational data. In the model, the dyads (the defending relationship, Level 1) are cross-nested in actors (students, Level 2) who are nested in networks (classrooms, Level 3). The p_2 model estimates the probability of dyadic

Table 1. Correlations between the study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Frequency of victimization	—	−.32	−.05	−.09	.23	.50	.08
2 Self-esteem	−.31	—	.07	.06	−.13	−.14	−.06
3 Perceived popularity	−.10	.11	—	.57	−.14	.04	.17
4 Peer acceptance	−.13	.13	.59	—	−.21[a]	.04	.27
5 Peer rejection	.26	−.18	−.15	−.29[a]	—	.13	−.06[a]
6 Defender nominations given	.41	−.13	.00	.02	.09	—	.11
7 Defender nominations received	.05	.01	.17	.26	−.14[a]	.08	—

Note. Correlations for girls ($n = 3{,}747$) above and boys ($n = 3{,}734$) below the diagonal; $r > |.04|$ $p < .001$; [a]Significant gender differences (Fisher *z*), $p < .001$.

Table 2. Mean differences (and standard deviations) between non-victims, defended and undefended victims, and ANOVA results

	Non-victims ($n = 5{,}357$)	Defended victims ($n = 1{,}164$)	Undefended victims ($n = 447$)	Group differences (controlling for gender)	Group differences (controlling for gender and frequency of victimization)
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)		
Self-esteem	2.95 (0.70)	2.56 (0.80)	2.29 (0.81)	$F(2, 6801) = 270.47$	$F(2, 6800) = 28.16$
Popularity	0.15 (0.17)	0.13 (0.16)	0.10 (0.13)	$F(2, 7004) = 30.86$	$F(2, 6963) = 12.41$[a]
Acceptance	0.15 (0.10)	0.13 (0.11)	0.10 (0.10)	$F(2, 7004) = 49.01$	$F(2, 6963) = 13.52$[a]
Rejection	0.12 (0.14)	0.18 (0.18)	0.25 (0.21)	$F(2, 7004) = 216.05$	$F(2, 6963) = 43.64$

Note. Group comparisons are significant at $p < .001$ for every variable. Groups differ from other groups at $p < .01$, in the Scheffe's test; [a] Non-victims and defended victims do not differ from each other in popularity and acceptance at $p < .05$ with self-reported frequency of victimization in the model.

outcomes (i.e., the victim–defender relationship) in the network allowing covariates in the model for senders (victims as nominators), targets (defenders as nominees), the density (the frequency of defending relationships in a network), and reciprocity (symmetric relationships). The dependencies in the data are handled by random effects in the model: class variance, nominator and target variances, and nominator–target covariance. The multilevel p_2 model is estimated using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo algorithm (Zijlstra, Van Duijn, & Snijders, 2009).

Results

Correlations

Correlations among the study variables, separately for boys and girls, are shown in Table 1. The frequency of victimization was moderately related to low self-esteem and peer rejection, and also weakly to low peer acceptance and low popularity.

It should be noted that nominating defenders was conditioned on victimization, thus it is naturally positively associated with the frequency of victimization, and to some degree with a low self-esteem and peer rejection. Receiving defender nominations, in turn, was moderately correlated with peer acceptance and perceived popularity and weakly negatively correlated with peer rejection. No large gender differences were observed.

Defended and undefended victims

The number of children who reported being victimized at least two or three times a month in any of the 11 victimization items was 1,611 (23.1% of the sample). Boys reported victimization more often than girls (24.4% and 21.6% of the boys and girls, respectively), χ^2 (1, 6968) = 8.96, $p < .01$. Among the victims, 72.3% nominated at least one defender, and were classified as *defended victims*. The remaining 27.7% were *undefended victims*.

ANOVA analyses showed a significant difference between the three categories on the frequency of victimization, $F(2, 6964) = 3226.71$. Undefended victims ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 0.69$) scored higher on the frequency of victimization than defended victims ($M = 0.78$, $SD = 0.56$, $p < .001$), whereas non-victims scored by far the lowest ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.15$, $p < .001$). We also found gender differences in the likelihood of belonging to one of the categories, $\chi^2(2, 6968) = 23.04$. Boys were overrepresented among the undefended victims (60.2%), whereas there was no gender difference in being a non-victim (48.4% boys) or a defended victim (49.7% boys).

Next, we conducted ANOVAs to compare non-victims ($n = 5{,}357$), defended victims ($n = 1{,}164$), and undefended victims ($n = 447$) in terms of their adjustment and social status. Means, standard deviations, and *F*-tests are reported in Table 2. Undefended victims had lower self-esteem, were perceived as less popular, were less accepted, and were more rejected by peers than defended victims. Non-victims were the best adjusted. The group differences were substantially similar with and without gender as a covariate.

We further modeled the differences in adjustment and status controlling for the frequency of victimization (last column in Table 2). This was done in order to ensure that the group differences were not an artifact of undefended victims being harassed more frequently. This resulted in substantially lower effect sizes. Nevertheless, defended victims still had a higher self-esteem and they were less rejected than undefended victims, although they no longer differed significantly from non-victims in either perceived popularity or peer acceptance. Overall, these results indicate that defended victims were better adjusted than undefended victims.

Victim–defender relations: Multilevel p_2 model

Next, we shifted our attention to the victim–defender dyads. We report two models generated by the multilevel p_2 model (Tables 3 and 4). In the first model (Table 3), we report findings concerning

Table 3. Multilevel p_2 model on who is defended by whom. Parameter estimates and odds ratios for a model with dyadic nominations

	Estimate (*SE*)	*OR* (95% *CI*)
Overall mean		
Density	−8.98 (1.16)**	
Reciprocity	1.22 (0.14)**	
Dyadic (victim–defender) covariates		
Girl–girl	2.89 (0.13)**	18.00 (14.03–23.09)
Boy–boy	1.94 (0.24)**	6.94 (4.31–11.17)
Boy–girl	−0.45 (0.21)*	0.64 (0.42–0.96)
Girl–boy	Reference	
Popular by victim	0.36 (0.09)**	1.43 (1.19–1.71)
Liked by victim	3.03 (0.08)**	20.65 (17.52–24.35)
Liked least by victim	−1.30 (0.10)**	0.27 (0.22–0.33)
Random effects		
Class variance	4.51 (3.92)	
Nominator variance	19.61 (1.40)**	
Target variance	0.33 (0.16)**	
Nominator–target covariance	−0.85 (0.20)*	

Note. 101,864 dyadic relations from 4,614 children from 209 Finnish elementary school classes. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Multilevel p_2 model on who is defended by whom. Parameter estimates and odds ratios for a model with nominator (victim) and target (defender) characteristics

	Estimate (*SE*)	*OR* (95% CI)
Overall mean		
Density	−6.59 (0.37)**	
Reciprocity	1.77 (0.15)**	
Dyadic (victim–defender) covariates		
Girl–girl	3.19 (0.12)**	24.19 (19.25–30.39)
Boy–boy	2.30 (0.20)**	9.98 (6.76–14.72)
Boy–girl	−1.14 (0.19)**	0.32 (0.22–0.46)
Girl–boy	Reference	
Nominator (victim) covariates		
Self-esteem	−1.06 (0.10)**	0.35 (0.28–0.43)
Perceived popularity	−0.02 (0.47)	0.99 (0.39–2.48)
Peer acceptance	2.29 (0.92)**	9.86 (1.64–59.24)
Peer rejection	4.73 (0.55)**	112.84 (38.78–328.33)
Target (defender) covariates		
Self-esteem	−0.02 (0.04)	0.98 (0.90–1.06)
Perceived popularity	0.85 (0.25)**	2.35 (1.44–3.82)
Peer acceptance	0.06 (0.45)	1.06 (0.44–2.55)
Peer rejection	−2.46 (0.26)**	0.09 (0.05–0.14)
Random effects		
Class variance	1.11 (0.23)**	
Nominator variance	14.36 (0.88)**	
Target variance	1.02 (0.09)**	
Nominator–target covariance	−0.82 (0.22)**	

Note. 101,864 dyadic relations from 4,614 children from 209 Finnish elementary school classes. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

victims' perceptions of their defenders, including dyadic effects of liking, disliking, and perceived popularity. In the second model (Table 4) we report the effects of being accepted, rejected, or perceived as popular by other classmates on the likelihood of being nominated as a defender.

In both models the digraph of victim–defender relationships in a classroom of n students was the dependent variable (Y) with four dyadic outcomes: (1) the null relationship ($Y_{ij} = 0$, $Y_{ji} = 0$) is the reference category and indicates that there are no defending relations between i and j; two asymmetric relationships where either (2) i nominates j for defending ($Y_{ij} = 1$ and $Y_{ji} = 0$), or (3) j nominates i ($Y_{ij} = 0$ and $Y_{ji} = 1$), and finally (4) a reciprocal defending relationship, where both i and j nominate each other for defending ($Y_{ij} = 1$ and $Y_{ji} = 1$). It is important to note that in this study only victims were allowed to nominate defenders, thus a reciprocal relationship can only take place when two victims nominate each other as defenders.

We have included two network parameters, density and reciprocity, in the models to control for the dependencies in the data. As only victims were allowed to nominate their defenders, it is likely that defending relationships are scarce. In the p_2 models, this is indicated by the negative *density* parameter (a value of zero would mean that half of all the possible dyadic relationships are present). The positive *reciprocity* parameter implies that defending nominations tend to be mutual, that is, victims nominate each other more often than expected by chance. We also found considerable random actor effects. The nominator variances were larger than the target variances, indicating that more children gave than received defender nominations. The negative nominator–target covariance indicates that respondents who were frequently mentioned as defenders were less likely to be victims themselves.

For the dyadic gender covariates, adjacency matrices were constructed. Same-gender dyads were modeled by symmetric boy–boy (i.e., if i = boy and j = boy, the matrix value is 1, otherwise 0) and girl–girl matrices. In addition, asymmetric boy–girl matrices were prepared leaving the girl–boy dyads as a reference category. Defending relations took place in particular among same-gender peers, more often among girls ($OR = 18.00$) than among boys ($OR = 6.94$). The likelihood of victim–defender relationship of boy-victims with girl-defenders was negative ($OR = 0.64$). Thus, the reference group, girls nominating boys as defenders, was more likely than the situation where a girl defended a boy (Table 3).

As regards other dyadic covariates, we used matrices with dyadic nominations of perceived popularity, liking, and disliking. As predicted, all dyadic covariates appeared significant, that is, victims were more likely to nominate as defenders classmates they liked ($OR = 20.65$), and less likely to nominate those they disliked ($OR = 0.27$). Also, victims were more likely to nominate classmates they perceived as popular ($OR = 1.43$), although this effect was not as pronounced as for liking (Table 3).

In the second model (Table 4), we wanted to examine whether defenders nominated by victims had high self-esteem, and more importantly, whether they had a high status among classmates other than just the victims who nominated them as defenders. For social status we used the corrected scores excluding victims' nominations for perceived popularity, peer acceptance, and peer rejection. In Table 4, we can also see the nominator characteristics in these measures, that is, victims in victim–defender dyads in comparison to other children in the class (both undefended victims and non-victims). Nominating defenders was related to low self-esteem (OR = 0.35) and high peer rejection ($OR = 112.84$). Perceived popularity, on the other hand, did not appear significant for victims who had defenders, and peer acceptance actually appeared positive ($OR = 9.86$). That is, the more defenders victims nominated, the more accepted they were. Thus, when controlling for peer rejection, the defended victims were even above average in acceptance.

Turning to our hypothesis, self-esteem was unrelated to being nominated as a defender (target covariates, $OR = 0.98$). However,

we found that defenders were perceived as popular also by other children, besides the ones they provided with support ($OR = 2.35$). Peer acceptance appeared non-significant in the model; however, without perceived popularity in the model, it was positive and significant (0.81, $p < .01$; $OR = 2.24$, 95% CI = 1.03–4.88). Peer rejection was related to a low likelihood of being nominated as a defender ($OR = 0.09$).

In sum, it appears that victims personally like their defenders but also perceive them as popular. Other classmates are likely to perceive them as popular, even more so than to like them. Thus, it turns out that defenders have a high status even among other peers, not just the ones they defend.

Discussion

This study was set out with the aim to assess, first, how defended victims differ from undefended victims in their adjustment and social status among peers, and second, to investigate the characteristics of victim–defender relations. Different from previous studies on defending behavior (e.g., comforting or supporting victims of bullying, directly intervening when bullying takes place), we utilized a dyadic approach by asking victims *who* defended them, that is, victims' perceptions of their defending relationships. We expected that victims who felt defended by peers were better adjusted than undefended victims. We further assumed that victims' defenders were predominantly their same-gender peers. Finally, we tested whether defenders were mainly liked by victims whom they defended, or whether they had a high status among peers in general.

Defended versus undefended victims

Almost three quarters of the victims in our sample reported that they were defended by at least one classmate. As anticipated, these victims were less frequently victimized than undefended victims. They had a higher self-esteem and a higher status among peers, even when we took the frequency of victimization into account. The better adjustment was not only reflected in victims' own evaluations (self-esteem) but also in peer evaluations (peer acceptance, peer rejection, and perceived popularity).

It should be noted that as many as 6.4% of the children in the sample (27.7% of victims) were in a deleterious situation of being victimized without a single supporter among classmates. These children were not only the most frequently victimized but they were also the most rejected and least accepted among their classmates. An important question is why they were undefended. It is possible that some proportion of the likelihood of having defender(s) can be explained by victims' adjustment. For instance, it might be difficult for the most rejected or most frequently harassed victims to have anyone on their side, as the other children are likely to distance themselves from low-status peers (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008). Whether it is possible to recruit defenders for the most victimized and maladjusted children remains a question for future studies. It would also be important to examine what kind of defense is necessary for victims. It can make a difference whether a victim is publicly defended during a bullying situation or comforted afterwards. Moreover, both the form of defending and the meaning of being defended might be different for overtly and relationally victimized children.

The victim–defender relationship

In the second part of the study, we examined by whom the victims were defended using a multilevel p_2 model. As anticipated, defending took place predominantly among same-gender peers, thus being in line with the notion of gender segregation in preadolescence (Maccoby, 1998). In addition, defending relationships were more frequent among girls than among boys. Thus, dyadic nominations of defenders produce findings comparable to those obtained by utilizing peer reports: girls are more often nominated as defenders than boys (e.g., Goossens et al., 2006; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996). However, for the small number of cross-gender victim–defender relationships girls nominated boys as their defenders more often than boys nominated girls.

The consistent negative relation between being nominated as a defender and peer rejection indicates that defenders were not likely to be rejected by classmates. Quite the contrary, the defenders seemed to be accepted and perceived as popular, as has been found in previous studies (Caravita et al., 2009; Goossens et al., 2006; Pöyhönen & Salmivalli, 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996). They were especially liked by the victims they defended, but enjoyed a high status among other children in the class as well. This could mean that they need a high status in order to face the social risk involved in standing up for the vulnerable ones (Pöyhönen et al., 2010), or it is also possible that defending peers actually increases ones status in front of peers.

For future studies, the association of being nominated as a defender and perceived popularity merits attention. In recent literature perceived popularity of aggressive children and adolescents has been emphasized (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). It is encouraging that constructive behaviors such as defending the victim can be related to popularity as well. Moreover, popular children can be in the position to influence the classroom norms regarding bullying (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008), and they might also affect the norm to side with victims. We might also ask whether popular children are better defenders from the victims' point of view. For instance, it is possible that high status defenders can influence other children very well, but a low-status friend who provides support in the background might be equally important for the victim's intrapersonal adjustment.

Limitations

The dyadic approach is an important direction for studies on defending behavior. Our study is not, however, without limitations. Our methodological choice to rely on victims' own perception on their defending relationships can be criticized for subjectivity. For instance, victims who are seriously victimized might ignore peers who actually defend them, or at least underestimate the support, and victims who have relatively positive peer relationships could nominate their peers as their defenders, although their behavior is not actually defending behavior (i.e., overestimate their support). Instead of victims' reports, one option would be to ask all children in a classroom "who defends whom", like Rodkin and Berger (2008) and Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, and Salmivalli (2009) did for bullying relationships. However, we might ignore a considerable proportion of victim–defender dyads by utilizing peer reports, because they do not capture less visible forms of support and defending. A recommendation for future studies would be to combine the perspectives of the victim and the defender, thus not

only asking children by whom they are defended but also asking who they defend themselves. In that way it is possible to verify whether both perspectives are in line with each other (for a comparable approach with bully–victim dyads, see Veenstra et al., 2007).

Other limitations concerning the dyadic approach should also be noted. For instance, we limited defender nominations to classmates. Some children identified as undefended victims in the present study might have defenders outside their class. In addition, the nomination procedure does not inform us how frequently the defenders actually stand up for the victims, or how they defend (comfort afterwards or directly intervene when bullying takes place). These are important aspects of defending relationships to be considered in future studies.

The cross-sectional design of this study is also an important matter to take into account. A longitudinal design could inform us whether the perception of being defended is a prerequisite or rather a consequence of less frequent bullying. Less frequent bullying or a relatively high status in the peer group might be more likely to invite defenders (defending being less risky). Moreover, it should be noted that the criterion for the identification of victims in this study was rather loose, resulting in more victims than generally reported in studies on victimization. Also we did not consider which victims were "true victims" (children whose victimization is confirmed by peer reports; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001)—on the other hand, we believe that having defenders is important whether or not peers confirm the victimization.

Finally, ethical concerns can be raised about sociometric procedures utilized in this study, especially concerning negative nominations. However, such nominations are widely used in peer relations research, and studies have not found evidence of their potentially negative effects. Children usually do not experience emotional distress and their interactions are not affected following sociometric testing (e.g., Mayeux, Underwood, & Risser, 2007).

Despite these limitations, our data offered a unique opportunity to investigate relationships between victims and their defenders. The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it provides valuable information on the differences between victims with and without defenders. Second, by utilizing a dyadic approach, we gained insight into the relationship characteristics of defending. Third, with the focus on the victims' perspective, the study provided valuable information on who victims themselves perceived as their defenders. The good news is that many victims have defenders who have an influential position in their class. However, our study raises a serious concern for the considerable number of victims who cannot nominate a single defender among their classmates.

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