Exploring the Dynamics of Bystander Behaviour in School Bullying: Empathy, Emergency Evaluation, and Victim-Bystander Relationships

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Abstract: School bullying significantly impacts students' well-being and academic performance. This study investigates the relationships between empathy, emergency evaluation, and victim-bystander relationships, and the three types of bystander behaviours: perpetrator-helpers, outsiders, and defenders. A total of 230 Chinese students aged 12 to 20 participated in an online survey, collecting data on their bullying experiences, bystander roles, and knowledge of bullying. Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests and Pearson correlations used to examine these relationships. Findings indicate that friendships significantly increase the likelihood of bystanders becoming defenders, while friends of perpetrators are more likely to become perpetrator-helpers. Emergency evaluation is crucial; bystanders are more likely to help when they perceive the situation as an emergency. No statistically significant evidence was found linking empathy to helping behaviour, although there was a trend suggesting empathetic bystanders may be more inclined to help. Fostering friendships and improving students' ability to recognize and respond to emergencies can enhance bystander intervention. Educating students, teachers, and parents on these aspects is vital. Further research is needed to explore empathy's role in bystander behaviour comprehensively. Implementing programs to build social bonds, educate students about bullying, and train students in emergency evaluation can reduce bullying's incidence and impact. Enhanced support systems involving teachers and parents are also crucial for creating a supportive school environment.

Keywords: School bullying, bystander, empathy, victim-bystander relationship, emergency evaluation

1. Introduction

School bullying is a pervasive issue that affects millions of students worldwide, with far-reaching consequences for both victims and perpetrators. This harmful phenomenon, characterized by intentional actions, repetition over a period of time and unbalanced power between victims and perpetrators, has garnered increasing attention from educators, parents, and policymakers [1]. The impact of bullying extends beyond the immediate physical and emotional pain, influencing academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. As schools strive to create safe and nurturing environments, understanding the dynamics of bullying, its root causes, and effective intervention

strategies becomes crucial. Traditionally, many people think that there are only two types of people involved in school bullying: the victims and the perpetrators. However, these opinions ignored the majority of the people related to the bullying situation - the bystanders. Different from victims and perpetrators directly playing a role in the bullying occurrence, individuals who witness the bullying happening but do not take part in it are known as bystanders, comprising 80%-88% of the students involved in the bullying situation [2-4]. As they occupy such a huge proportion among individuals in a bullying incidence, even a simple choice made by this group of people can lead to an incredible influence on the bullying situation. Unfortunately, bystanders rarely act to cheer victims up, oppositely choosing to offer reinforcement and help to the perpetrators or passively watch it. Thus, to find a better way to decrease the frequency of bullying, teachers should guide bystanders to play the defender roles.

To better understand the underlying mechanism of bystanders' behaviour and guide them properly, previous research identifies four bystander roles: the bully's assistants, the bully's reinforcers, the outsiders, and the victim's defenders [4]. According to Salmivalli, assistants participate in the bullying, reinforcers encourage the bully by laughing or cheering, outsiders avoid involvement, and defenders support the victim by comforting and assisting them. The first three roles tend to exacerbate the bullying situation, whereas the defenders, through their supportive actions, have a positive impact. When peers intervene in bullying, they are successful in stopping it 57% of the time [5]. Furthermore, it was found that bystanders don't need to confront bullies directly to be helpful; even small, discreet acts of support, such as privately encouraging the victim, can be effective [6]. To reduce the incidence of bullying, it is crucial to encourage bystanders to adopt the defender role. As the first two types of bystanders are both showing some behaviors to standing in the position of helping and positively encouraging bullies, it is possible to simplify them into one categorisation – helpers, to make the analysis more economic. Thus, in this research, we would distinguish bystanders into three types: perpetrator-helpers, outsiders and defenders.

Social psychologists explain bystander behaviour using the bystander effect, a phenomenon where individuals are less likely to intervene in emergencies when other bystanders are present, compared to when they are alone [7]. Latané & Nida developed a five-step helping model: first, the bystander must price the event; next, he or she must interpret it as an emergency; then, he or she must take responsibility as the individual who needs assistance; following this, he or she must know how to help; and then the bystander must actually decide to carry out helping behaviour. Only when none of the steps are finished without interruption will the bystanders take action to help. While it might seem logical that more potential helpers would increase the likelihood of assistance, the opposite often occurs due to several psychological mechanisms. Diffusion of responsibility occurs when multiple bystanders are present, causing each individual to feel less personal responsibility to act, assuming someone else will step in [8].

However, even with the diffusion of responsibility explaining the general tendency, it is still not enough to fully understand the underlying mechanism of bystanders' behaviors. There are instances where bystanders choose to help even when their responsibility has diffused, and sometimes a lone bystander still does not help. Empathy, described as the ability to understand and share others' perspective, plays a crucial role. Previous researcher has introduced the empathy-altruism model to explain altruistic helping behaviour, where the helper seeks no personal benefits. According to this model, true altruism arises from empathizing with the victim—seeing the situation from the victim's perspective and understanding their feelings. When individuals feel empathic concern, they become motivated to enhance the victim's well-being, even at a personal cost. Additionally, the evaluation of the emergency plays a crucial role in the decision to help. Individuals choose to help only when they interpret the situation as an emergency and find intervention necessary [9]. If they deem help unnecessary, either through their own evaluation or by observing others' reactions, it leads to inaction

[7]. Besides, the relationship between victims and bystanders could also play a big role in bystanders' choices when facing a bullying situation. As identified previous research, friendships consist of element of care and individuals in good friendship tend to engage in helping behaviors [10].

Hence, this research aims to explore the potential correlations between three key factors—empathy, emergency evaluation and victim-bystander relationships, and the three types of bystander behaviour – the perpetrator-helpers, the outsiders and the defenders. By examining these correlations, we seek to uncover explanations for the different bystander behaviors and provide insights for reducing school bullying by focusing on changing the behaviour of bystanders.

2.   Methods

2.1.   Participants

A group of 230 Chinese aged ranging from 12 to 20 participated in the study through Qualtrics. The investigation was carried out as an online questionnaire published through Wenjuanxing platform.

2.2.   Design

The questionnaire was structured into five sections to gather participants' experiences with school bullying. The first section collected basic information, such as age and gender. The second section focused on participants' experiences with bullying. Considering that some participants might not recognize their experiences as bullying, in addition to the general question "Have you been bullied or witnessed bullying at school?", this questionnaire included specific questions about particular bullying incidents such as being hit or kicked, having things stolen, being called derogatory names, being threatened, having lies spread about them, and being excluded. Participants could respond with "never", "once or twice", "3-10 times" or "more than 10 times".

2.3.   Procedures

Participants scanned a QR code shared online to join the study. Before beginning the task, they were provided with an information sheet detailing the study, which focused on school bullying and bystanders' behaviour in such situations. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire based on their own experiences and were assured that no private information would be requested.

Participants who reported not being bullied but indicated they experienced these specific incidents three or more times were also classified as having experienced bullying. These individuals were then directed to complete the third section of the questionnaire, which inquired about whether they received help from bystanders, the nature of their relationship with the helper, and the effectiveness of the help. They were also asked if they would assist other victims when witnessing bullying.

Participants identified as not having been bullied were automatically directed to skip section three and proceed to section four. Section four asked about their observations and reactions to bullying situations, their reasons for either helping the bullies, ignoring the incidents, or aiding the victims, and their intended actions for future incidents. The fifth section explored participants' knowledge about bullying, including their understanding of its definition, impact, and prevention strategies, as well as whether they had received relevant education and if their school had systems in place to report bullying and seek for help. After finishing all the five parts of the questionnaire, participants would be asked for permission to share their data and instructed not to retake the survey.

3.   Results

Data from 34 respondents were excluded due to incomplete survey responses or lack of consent for data sharing.

3.1. Effectiveness of helping from bystanders

The effectiveness of helping behavior was evaluated among participants who have been bullied and received help from bystanders. Using a chi-square of goodness-of-fit test to assess the association between helping behaviour, the results indicated a significant association between the variables, $X2$ $(1, N = 113) = 55.230$, $p < .001$. The data suggest that there is a statistically significant effect of helping behaviour from bystanders.

3.2. Relationships

A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted to examine whether the relationship between bystander and victim could influence whether bystanders would help, according to those participants who received help and their relationship with the helpers. It is observed that friendships were notably more common between defenders and victims compared to strangers. Besides, family members and even distant classmates or schoolmates were more inclined to assist the victims. with a significant results of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test, $X2 (3, N = 214) = 61.477$, $p < .001$. Additionally, when asking participants about whether they are going to help when witnessing a bullying situation, 56% of them would choose to help when the victims were their friends, The results of the chi-square goodness-of-fit test were significant, $X2 (1, N = 230) = 3.407$, $p = .065$, suggesting that although the p-value is slightly above the conventional threshold of .05, it is still indicating a trend that the relationship between the bystander and the victim may influence the likelihood of helping behaviour. Furthermore, among all the 19 participants who reported that they have observed a bullying situation before and become the perpetrator-helper, 21.1% of them said that it was because that the perpetrators were their friends, which also suggesting that the relationship between bystanders, perpetrators and victims could be associated with bystanders' choices when facing a bullying situation.

3.3. Empathy

A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether individuals with a history of bullying experience are more likely to become defenders of victims when witnessing bullying incidents. For those with no bullying experience: 34.7% directly walked away, 11.0% helped perpetrators, and 54.2% became defenders. For those with bullying experience: 36.1% directly walked away, 8.3% helped perpetrators, and 55.6% became defenders. The results of the chi-square test indicated no significant association between bullying experience and the response to witnessing bullying, $X2 (2, N = 190) = 0.360$, $p = .835$. In terms of those who choose to be defenders when witnessing a bullying situation, only 9.6% said that it is out of empathy. Thus, there is no sufficient evidence to indicate the role of empathy in bullying situations.

3.4. Emergency evaluation

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between participants' knowledge of school bullying and their reactions to witnessing bullying incidents. A higher score on knowledge was coded for less understanding about school bullying, while a higher score on reactions indicates more helpful responses towards victims. The analysis showed a Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.129 between the knowledge of school bullying and the helpfulness of reactions, with a significance level (two-tailed) of $p = .076$. This suggests a weak negative correlation that is not statistically significant at the conventional .05 level. Thus, although the evidence is not sufficient enough, there is a trend that when people know more about bullying, they are more likely to help. Furthermore, the results of the chi-square test revealed a significant association between the level of severity judged for the observed situation and the reaction to the bullying scenario ($X2 (4, N = 196) = 9.498$, $p < .05$).

This indicates that there is a relationship between the perceived seriousness of the situation and the likelihood of engaging in helping behavior when witnessing bullying. Additionally, for those who chose to be outsiders when they observed a bullying situation before, 29.9% of them said that it was because they did not realize it was school bullying.

4. Discussion

This research examined the relationship between three factors that may influence helping behaviors—empathy, emergency evaluation, and the victim-bystander relationship—and three types of bystanders: perpetrator-helpers, outsiders, and defenders. The findings suggest that when a friendship exists between the victim and bystander, bystanders are more likely to become defenders. Conversely, friends of perpetrators are more likely to become perpetrator-helpers, exacerbating the bullying situation. Based on these results, it would be beneficial to educate students on how to support victims as friends. Special attention should be given to introverted students who lack friendships. Schools can implement programs that encourage students to form friendships and social bonds through activities like team-building exercises, group projects, and social clubs, helping introverted or isolated students develop meaningful connections. Establishing buddy systems where older students mentor younger ones can provide support networks, making it more likely that bystanders will step up as defenders when they witness bullying.

Regarding emergency evaluation, our study indicates that bystanders are more likely to help in situations perceived as emergencies. If bullying situations are not correctly identified or are perceived as less serious, bystanders are less likely to defend and may become outsiders or even perpetrator-helpers unknowingly. To enhance the accuracy of emergency evaluations, it is necessary to educate students on identifying and responding to bullying. Schools should offer regular training sessions to help students accurately identify bullying situations and assess their severity. This can be done through workshops, interactive sessions, and real-life scenario discussions. Organizing campaigns such as Anti-Bullying Month can raise awareness and educate the entire school community about the signs of bullying and effective intervention strategies. These campaigns can include posters, assemblies, and guest speakers. Such educational activities can help students better understand bullying, distinguish it from pranks and jokes, and know how to intervene as bystanders. These initiatives can empower students to realize their responsibility to stop bullying and carefully consider their reactions.

Concerning empathy, our findings do not provide sufficient evidence to confirm its association with helping behaviour. However, the absence of statistically significant results does not rule out a correlation. A tendency for an increased likelihood of helping behaviour among empathetic bystanders was observed in the data. Therefore, building empathy among students is still important. Conduct workshops that include role-playing exercises where students can experience and understand the feelings of bullying victims. This can foster empathy and encourage more students to take action as defenders. Integrating empathy-building activities into the regular curriculum can help students develop a deeper understanding of their peers' emotions and the impact of bullying. Although the evidence from our study is not sufficient to fully support the correlation between empathy and helping behaviors for bystanders, further research on this correlation is necessary to refine and enhance bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

Last but not least, equipping students with these skills is not enough to fully support victims and avoid bullying; supporting teachers and parents is also crucial. Providing training for teachers and parents on how to recognize signs of bullying, foster supportive environments, and guide students in making ethical decisions about helping behaviors can create a more cohesive approach to bullying prevention. Establishing clear communication channels between students, teachers, and parents can ensure that concerns about bullying are addressed promptly and effectively. Teachers and parents can

play a pivotal role in reinforcing the lessons learned from anti-bullying programs and ensuring that students feel supported both at school and at home. This comprehensive approach can help create a safer and more inclusive environment for all students, reducing the prevalence and impact of bullying.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the dynamics of bystander behaviour in school bullying, focusing on the roles of empathy, emergency evaluation, and victim-bystander relationships. The findings reveal that friendships between victims and bystanders significantly increase the likelihood of bystanders becoming defenders, while friendships between perpetrators and bystanders often result in perpetrator-helpers. This highlights the importance of fostering positive social connections among students to encourage defender behaviors. Educating students to recognize and respond appropriately to bullying emergencies is crucial, as accurate emergency evaluations lead to more bystander interventions. Although this research did not find a statistically significant link between empathy and helping behaviour, a trend suggests that empathy may still influence bystander actions. Hence, incorporating empathy-building activities into school programs remains beneficial. Furthermore, involving teachers and parents in bullying prevention through training and open communication channels is essential. They can support students in recognizing bullying and making ethical decisions about intervening. This comprehensive approach, combining student education, empathy development, and adult involvement, can create a safer and more inclusive school environment. Future research should continue to explore the role of empathy in bystander behaviour to further refine bullying prevention strategies. Overall, our study emphasizes the need for a multi-faceted strategy to reduce school bullying and its impact on students' well-being.

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