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Psychosocial and Moral Factors of Bystanders in Peer Bullying

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Abstract

The aim of our study was to explore students' bystander roles in peer bullying considering the interaction between their individual and contextual characteristics. We included social status goals (popularity, social preference and social insecurity), moral disengagement and peer support as key variables for differentiating bystander behaviour. Our sample comprised 5148 students from the 8th and 9th grades across 118 primary schools in Slovenia. Bystander roles (active and passive reinforcers, ignorants and defenders) were determined by peer nominations. Other characteristics were measured with self-report questionnaires. For each variable, we normalized students' results with regard to their classroom to define classroom norms as the context of peer bullying resulting in "low", "average" and "high" group. Students with similar individual and contextual characteristics were grouped into four clusters. The results showed that students from all clusters were present in all bystander roles, which indicates a highly complex interaction of various factors in bystander behaviour. Some educational implications are discussed.

Keywords:

Peer Bullying, Bystander Roles, Classroom Norms, Moral Disengagement, Social Goals, Peer Support, Students

Introduction

Peer bullying is a widespread phenomenon in schools. It is defined as intentional, targeted, and repetitive aggressive behavior by one or more individuals towards one or more individuals and involves an imbalance of power (Volk et al., 2017). Research indicates that on average, 20-35% of students are actively involved in it - either as perpetrators, victims, or in both roles (Espelage et al., 2013; Pečjak et al., 2021). However, this violence typically does not only involve a dyadic bully-victim relationship but often occurs in the classroom in the presence of bystanders. Peer bullying is often a means for adolescents to achieve higher social status among their peers, for which bullies require an audience. A significant proportion of students report their presence as bystanders in peer bullying incidents (63-73%, Oh & Hazler, 2009); of these, 43 to 72% appear in the role of bystanders in upper elementary grades and in secondary schools (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2018).

Bystanders, as the largest social group in the classroom, have significant potential power to either reinforce or stop the aggressive behavior of peer bullies (Salmivalli et al.,

2011). However, as many as 90% of older elementary school students report that they do nothing if they witness peer bullying (Pergolizzi et al., 2009). There are various reasons for this. In situations of peer bullying, where multiple bystanders are present, diffusion of responsibility often occurs, also known as the bystander effect, where students expect another peer to intervene. Often, the perpetrators of violence are popular students with significant power, and thus, intervening as a bystander requires a lot of courage and carries the risk that the defender might become a victim themselves or worsen their social status (Pečjak et al., 2021).

Bystanders in Peer Bullying

Bystanders in peer bullying are not a homogeneous category; they appear in different roles: reinforcers of bullies (active and passive), outsiders or ignorants, and defenders (Pečjak et al., 2021; Salmivalli, 2010). Active reinforcers or assistants of the perpetrator are those who aid the bully (e.g., hold the victim, encourage the bully), while passive reinforcers are those who pay attention to the bullying (e.g., observe, record, laugh at the victim), thus reinforcing the violence. Ignorants have the potential to stop the bullying but withdraw from the situation or pretend not to notice anything. Defenders intervene in peer bullying – they try to stop it or support and comfort the victim.

Studies show that defending victims is associated with less peer bullying in schools (Salmivalli et al., 2011) and better social-emotional outcomes for victims, such as reduced anxiety, depression, and improved self-esteem (Holt & Espelage, 2007; Sainio et al., 2011). Therefore, a relevant question is how to encourage outsiders, who are the predominant majority in the classroom, including potentially passive reinforcers of the perpetrator, to stand up for the victim. The answer to this question is complex, as, in line with social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is necessary to acknowledge that bystander behavior in peer bullying is the result of complex interactions between numerous individual and contextual factors that influence students' roles.

The premise of our study is that peer bullying in schools is a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from complex interactions between the individual and psychosocial characteristics of adolescents and their classroom contexts (Alcantara et al., 2017). This also applies to the various roles of student bystanders, which were the target group in our research.

Individual and Contextual Factors in the Roles of Bystanders in Peer Bullying

Among individual factors in bystanders of peer bullying, studies have most commonly examined moral disengagement, empathy, social goals, social status, perceived peer support, and self-efficacy; while among contextual factors, classroom norms, attitudes towards bullying, and school climate have been investigated (Jenkins & Tennant, 2022; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Pronk et al., 2020; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Smith, 2014). In the next section, we provide a detailed presentation of the factors included in our study – moral disengagement, social goals, social status insecurity, and perceived peer support.

Moral Disengagement in Peer Bullying Bystanders

Moral disengagement is defined as a set of socio-cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to cognitively distance themselves from their own actions and to avoid feelings of shame, guilt, or negative self-esteem that typically arise when they violate their own moral standards (Bandura, 1999). According to Bandura (2002), the most common mechanisms include moral justification (where individuals justify their immoral behavior with socially acceptable reasons, such as worthy goals or good/moral intentions), diffusion or displacement of responsibility (where individuals shift responsibility for immoral behavior to the group or share it with peers), and disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of perpetrators and dehumanizing victims (by diminishing their human or equal value or by blaming the victim).

There is ample evidence that moral disengagement is one of the most significant individual factors explaining bystander behavior in bullying. Studies indicate that defenders and outsiders have lower levels of moral disengagement compared to reinforcers of the bully or bullies themselves. Defenders feel more responsible for providing help than ignorants and also differ from them in feeling more self-efficacious in providing assistance or support to the victim (Pozzoli et al., 2012; Oberman, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg et al., 2015).

Social Goals of Popularity and Preference, Social Status Insecurity, and the Roles of Bystanders

For adolescents, their social status among peers, or where they stand in the social hierarchy of the classroom as a student, is crucial. Therefore, understanding social goals that help adolescents achieve this status is important. One common way for students to gain and maintain a higher social position in the classroom social hierarchy is through aggression, manifested in peer bullying (Pouwels et al., 2018). Students differ in their social goals. For some, it is primarily important to be popular among peers, as popularity indicates the attention and dominance of the student over peers. On the other hand, some adolescents are more focused on relationship quality and prefer being liked and well accepted. From this perspective, we can talk about two types of social

goals: popularity and social preference goals (e.g., Cillessen & Marks, 2011; Košir et al., 2021).

In previous research, high social goals related to popularity have been found to be more associated with aggressive behavior among students, while high social preference goals have been linked to prosocial behavior and a lower level of relational aggression (Košir et al., 2021; Li & Wright, 2014; Pouwels et al., 2019), or have been found unrelated to bullying behavior (Garandeau & Lansu, 2019). Additionally, studies show that adolescents' high peer status is correlated with bystander behavior – positively with defending and negatively with ignoring bullying situations (e.g., Pronk et al., 2020; Yang & Gao, 2022).

By competition for better peer status or maintaining it, adolescents may experience concerns or uncertainties about their social standing among peers, known as social status insecurity. This is especially true for students with high popularity goals. They worry that their status in the classroom is not as high as they would like or that it is threatened by their peers, leading them to use aggressive strategies to defend or promote their status (Košir et al., 2021; Long & Li, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Regarding the association between social status insecurity and bystander roles, studies indicate that insecurity, in combination with high popularity goals as a moderating variable, increases the likelihood of taking on the role of a defender, while it is not associated with the role of ignorants (Zhang et al., 2022).

Perceived Peer Support

Good relationships or perceived social support from peers can be considered indicators of students' social and emotional well-being in the classroom (Alcantara et al., 2017). Vaux (1988) highlights three interrelated elements of social support: sources and forms of social support, and individual's subjective perception of social support. Sources of social support are the social networks that individuals turn to for help and support (or that provide help to them spontaneously). Forms of social support are specific behaviors of assistance to the individual, either spontaneously or upon their request. Perceived peer support is the assessment of the presence and quality of this support, primarily expressed through emotional aspects such as closeness, care, and acceptance from peers (Hlebec & Kogovšek, 2003).

Studies show that peer social support can act as a protective factor against victimization of individual students in the classroom and increase the prosocial orientation of bystanders (Alcantara et al., 2017). In this regard, Ewans & Smokowski (2015) explain that positive peer relationships influence bystander behavior in peer bullying in two ways. Firstly, defenders of the victim serve as role models for other bystanders, from whom they can learn prosocial behavior. And secondly, students see that social support derived from the social network to which they belong can reduce the fear of becoming a victim themselves if they were to defend the victim against the bully. On the other hand, they found weak social ties among reinforcers, which leads them to feel that they must repeat bullying behavior to belong to a social network.

Classroom Norms

Individual factors of the bystander interact with the social context of the classroom, specifically with classroom norms regarding peer bullying. Classroom norms can be defined as consensus-determined standards of behavior that describe which behaviors are acceptable and which are not in a given class. We distinguish between injunctive norms, which refer to what students in a classroom approve and disapprove of (what ought to be done), and descriptive norms, which refer to how students actually behave in the classroom (Veenstra et al., 2018).

Students in Slovenian schools are together in the same social group—the classroom—day after day for several years, sometimes for all nine years of primary shool, during which they influence each other. Through this mutual influence, classroom norms gradually develop.

Research on the relationship between norms and the role of bystanders does not yield unequivocal results. The study by Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) shows that injunctive classroom norms against peer bullying (i.e., disapproval of encouraging the bully and approval of defending the victim) were positively associated with defending the victim among 6th-grade students, but not among younger students. Similarly, Lucas-Molina et al. (2018) found that antibullying classroom norms were associated with greater defending. On the other hand, the study by Pozzoli et al. (2012) indicates that antibullying classroom norms predict only ignoring the bullying and not defending.

The Aim of Our Study

In the last 15 years, the focus of research on peer bullying has shifted from examining the individual characteristics of active participants (perpetrators and victims) to investigating the social context in which peer bullying occurs, as peer bullying is most often a public event. An important part of this context is also peers – bystanders, who play a critical role in intervening (Lambe et al., 2019). These bystanders appear in various roles – some siding with the perpetrator, others with the student experiencing bullying, and others ignoring the situation.

Therefore, the goal of the current study was to investigate the prevalence of roles of student bystanders in peer bullying from the perspective of

the interaction of their individual and contextual characteristics. In this regard, we focused on individual characteristics such as social status goals (popularity, social preference), and social status insecurity, as these goals are related to behavioral strategies to achieve them. Based on findings from previous studies, we first hypothesized that students with more expressed popularity goals will more likely appear in the role of active and passive reinforcers, and those with more expressed social preference goals in the role of defenders (Košir et al., 2021; Yang & Gao, 2022).

Furthermore, we were interested in perceived support and moral disengagement in individual bystander roles. Our second hypothesis was that students with lower moral disengagement would more likely be in the role of defenders and less likely in the role of reinforcers (Alcantara et al., 2017; Lucas-Molina et al., 2018; Thornberg et al., 2022). Regarding the relationship between perceived support and the roles of bystanders, studies do not yield consistent results: some indicate a positive correlation with the role of victim defender (e.g., Alcantara et al., 2017; Lucas-Molina et al., 2018), while others indicate a positive correlation with the role of bully reinforcer (Salmivalli et al., 1997; Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

In our study, we measured descriptive norms among students by first determining the norms for each variable at the class level students belong to. Then, for each student, we assessed whether they deviated below, above, or within these classroom norms.

Due to the complex nature of the interplay between individual and contextual factors in each individual, we chose the person-centered approach methodology, which can help understanding the heterogeneity of bystander responses when witnessing peer bullying. Therefore, we divided bystanders into different clusters/groups, where students with similar individual and contextual characteristics were grouped together within each cluster.

Method

Participants

The initial sample comprised a total of 6786 students. Following data screening to eliminate students with missing relevant data, 5148 students remained. Thus, the analyzed sample consists of 5148 students from the 8th and 9th grades across 118 primary schools in Slovenia. Of these, 47.3% were boys and 47.3% were girls. Gender information was unavailable for 5.4% of students. The average age of the students was 13.43 years (*SD* = 0.64). While the sample was convenience-based, it was notably large, encompassing approximately 12% of all Slovenian students within this age group, and represented schools from all regions of Slovenia.

Instruments

The roles of bystanders in the classroom were determined using peer nominations. The initial question was: "Who among your classmates in the classroom and online is the one who... joins the bully (e.g., starts bullying others themselves) for active reinforcers; ... agrees with such behavior without joining the bully (e.g., laughs)? for passive reinforcers; ... stands up for the victim (e.g., stops the bully, reports to teachers)? for defenders; and ... does nothing when others bully classmates? for ignorants. For each description, students had six lines to name their classmates, they could also include themselves.

To measure moral disengagement, we utilized the Moral Disengagement in Peer Victimization Scale (Thornberg et al., 2019). The scale consists of 18 items (e.g., "If you say mean things about a classmate behind their back, it's okay because they probably won't notice anyway."; "If you can't be like everybody else, it is your own fault if you get bullied"), and students responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), considering their classmates in the classroom and online. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted on our sample of students confirmed a one-factor structure (CFI = 0.938, TLI = 0.927, RMSEA = 0.048, and SRMR = 0.035), with a Cronbach's α reliability coefficient of 0.85. A higher score indicates greater moral disengagement or a lower level of morality.

We employed the questions proposed by Li and Wright (2014) for popularity and social preference goals and for social status insecurity to measure two social goals: popularity goals with six items (e.g., "I want to be popular among my classmates.") and social preference goals with five items (e.g., "I want to be well-liked by my classmates."), along with social status

Table 1
Sample characteristics

Grade	Number of all students	Number of students with complete data	Proportion of students with complete data	Number of boys (B)	Number of girls (G)	B/G
8	3403	2460	72.29%	1589	1606	0.99
9	3383	2688	79.46%	1621	1605	1.01
Total	6786	5148	75.86%	3210 (47.3%)	3211 (47.3%)	0.999

insecurity with six items (e.g., "I feel that my social status in the class is threatened."). Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1-never, 5-all the time). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted on our sample confirmed the original three-factor structure of the questionnaire (CFI = 0.928, TLI = 0.910, RMSEA = 0.068, SRMR = 0.062); individual scales demonstrated good/acceptable reliability (α for popularity goals was 0.87, for social preference goals 0.69, and for social status insecurity 0.83).

Peer support was assessed using the Perceived peer support scale from the Classroom Life Instruments (Johnson et al., 1983) with 5 items (e.g., "My classmates really care about me."). Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1-never true, 5-always true). In our sample, a one-factor structure of the scale was confirmed (CFA: CF = 0.998, TLI = 0.995, RMSEA = 0.034, SRMR = 0.010) with good reliability (α = 0.87).

Data Collection

All primary schools in Slovenia were invited to participate in the study. A total of 138 schools responded to the invitation. Once the schools agreed to participate, we prepared an informal parental consent form and requested parents or guardians to provide consent for their children's participation in the study. After collecting parental consent forms, we retained only those students in the sample for whom at least 90% of students in each class had provided consent. Consequently, the final sample comprised 118 schools. Data collection was facilitated by school counselors, who were provided with detailed instructions for conducting the study. Participants completed the questionnaires in paper-pencil format during school hours, taking approximately 45 minutes. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Data collection took place between October and December 2022. School counselors and teachers were provided with feedback based on the study findings, along with a video lecture containing guidelines on preventing and responding to bullying. The study received approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee.

Data on the roles of bystanders were collected using peer nominations – all students in a particular class reported which of their classmates fit a specific description (active or passive reinforcer, ignorant, or defender). Past research indicates that peer nominations are more reliable for determining roles in peer bullying than self-report measures, as the likelihood of measurement errors is reduced due to a larger number of evaluators (Bouman et al., 2012).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Python, leveraging several libraries for data manipulation, statistical analysis, and visualization. Pandas was used for data cleaning, manipulation, and normalization processes. NumPy was employed for numerical operations, including calculating Euclidean distances between student profiles. SciPy was utilized for additional statistical analysis and cluster validation techniques. Statsmodels was applied for advanced statistical modeling and hypothesis testing. NetworkX was used to visualize the similarity matrix and clustering results as a network structure, aiding in understanding the relationships between student profiles. Matplotlib was utilized for visualizing data distributions, dendrograms, and cluster formations.

For each variable, individual students' results were normalized at the classroom level to account for the social context inherent within each classroom. This normalization involved centering each student's score by subtracting the mean value of their classroom and then dividing by the standard deviation of that classroom. The resulting standardized scores categorized students into three distinct groups for each variable: "low" (assigned a value of -1), where the student's score was more than one standard deviation below the classroom mean; "average" (assigned a value of 0), where the score fell within one standard deviation of the classroom mean; and "high" (assigned a value of 1), where the score was more than one standard deviation above the classroom mean.

The processed variables, which indicated whether a particular student was within, below, or above the "norm" of the classroom for each variable, were subsequently used to create student profiles. Each student was assigned a five-dimensional vector, denoted as pi for the i-th student, where each dimension corresponded to one of the categorized variables with values of -1, 0, or 1. To assess the similarity between individual pairs of students, we calculated the Euclidean distance between their vectors using these standardized values. Given that the profile values are limited to -1, 0, or 1, the Euclidean distances were further normalized to fall within a unit interval between 0 and 1. This normalization was achieved using the factor 1⁄(2√5), ensuring that the distance dij between the i-th and j-th profiles ranges appropriately. A distance of 0 signifies that the profiles are identical, while a distance of 1 represents the maximum possible dissimilarity between profiles. Based on these calculations, a similarity matrix was constructed where each ij-th element represents the degree of similarity between the profiles of the i-th and j-th students. We then used this matrix to cluster students into groups according to the similarity of their profiles, employing a hierarchical clustering method with Ward's linkage to create the dendrogram (Markovič et al., 2019). The Ward method minimizes the total within-cluster variance, progressively merging individual profiles or existing clusters into larger groups based on

their mutual similarity until all profiles are combined into one or more distinct clusters (Chander & Vijaya, 2021). The goal was to segment the students into well-defined groups, achieving a balance that avoids excessive fragmentation of profiles while preserving a broad representation of student characteristics within each cluster.

Results

Normalization of Students Within the Classroom and Descriptive Statistics

Table 2

The proportion of students in each group after normalization and mean values of included variables

vari-able	Low group		Average group		High group	
	%	*M (SD)*	%	*M (SD)*	%	*M (SD)*
MD	10.41	1.01 (0.02)	75.66	1.78 (0.46)	13.93	3.76 (0.87)
SG-pop	17.11	1.26 (0.19)	64.18	2.40 (0.45)	18.71	3.77 (0.43)
SG-pref	15.40	2.45 (0.60)	73.50	4.08 (0.47)	11.09	5.00 (0.00)
SIS	15.42	1.09 (0.10)	69.85	2.21 (0.53)	14.72	3.91 (0.48)
SS	19.11	1.88 (0.45)	65.87	3.47 (0.49)	15.02	4.64 (0.23)

Note. MD – moral disegagement; SG-pop – popularity social goals; SG-pref – preference social goals; SIS – social insecurity status; SS – social support; M – mean; SD – standard deviation

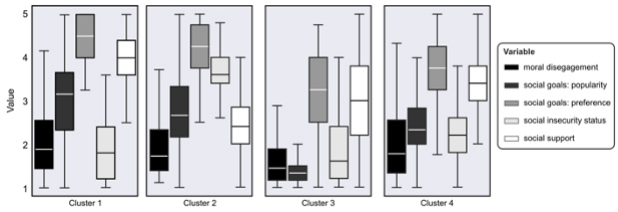
The results in Table 2 show that most students (66 – 76%) were categorized as "average" across all variables, with a smaller percentage—ranging from 11 to 19 percent—classified as "high", and 10 to 19 percent classified as "low". Students in the "low" group had the lowest average values on all examined variables, slightly higher average values were observed in the "average" group, and the highest values were found in the "high" group. The largest proportion of students in the low group was found in social support, while the smallest proportion was found in moral disengagement. In the high group, the largest proportion of students was found in social goals-popularity, while the smallest proportion was in social preference goals. The largest variability in the data was evident for social preference goals in the "low" group, in the "average" group regarding social insecurity, and in the "high" group concerning moral disengagement.

Psychosocial Characteristics of Students in Individual Clusters

First, we present the results of the cluster analysis based on aggregated similarities between different characteristics which produced four distinct student clusters. Cluster 4 comprises the largest proportion of students (2,076 students, 40.3%), followed by Cluster 2 (1,394 students, 27.1%). Cluster 3 has a smaller representation (906 students, 17.6%), and Cluster 1 contains the fewest students (772 students, 15.0%). Figure 1 displays the boxplots depicting the distribution of included variables for the students in each cluster.

Figure 1

Boxplots illustrating the distributions of included variables for each cluster



Note. The box represents the interquartile range (IQR), the horizontal line within the box indicates the median, and the upper and lower whiskers represent the maximum and minimum data points within 1.5 times the IQR from the upper and lower quartiles, respectively.

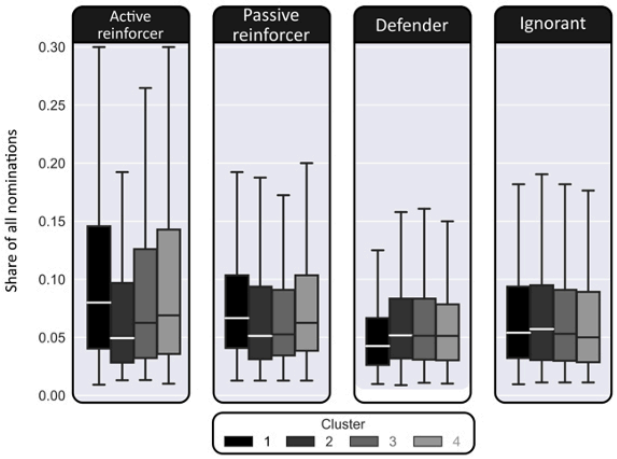
In the smallest cluster regarding the number of students - Cluster 1, students exhibit low moral disengagement, moderate popularity goals, and very high preference goals. However, these students also report low insecurity regarding their own social status and high perceived peer support. Cluster 2 comprises students with low moral disengagement, moderate popularity goals, and high preference goals. These students also demonstrate high insecurity concerning their social status and report the moderate peer support among all clusters. Cluster 3 consists of students with low moral disengagement (the lowest among all clusters), low popularity goals, and moderate social preference goals. These students show low social insecurity (the lowest among all clusters) and moderate perceived peer support. Cluster 4 is the largest cluster composed of students with low moral disengagement, moderate popularity goals, and simultaneously high social preference goals. They exhibit moderate perceived social status insecurity and moderate perceived peer support.

Representation of Students from Individual Clusters in Bystander Roles

To address the question of how different roles of student bystanders are represented within various clusters, we first computed the share of all nominations each student has received within their classroom. Since students in a classroom assume various roles, we further examined the share of nominations that individuals of specific role types received within each cluster. Figure 3 presents the results of this analysis as a boxplot, displaying the distribution of these shares within each cluster for students associated with specific role types and table 3 the differences between clusters regarding the bystanders role.

Figure 2

Distribution of Bystander Role Nominations Across Student Clusters.



Note. Each panel represents one bystander role, displaying the distribution across Clusters 1 through 4 indicated by different shades of gray. The boxplots show the median, interquartile range, and range of the shares, highlighting variations in role adoption across clusters.

Table 3

Differences between clusters with regard to bystander roles

Role	Cluster x (*M*)	Cluster y (*M*)	*p*-value
Active Reinforcer	1 (0.101)	2 (0.078)	<0.001***
	1 (0.101)	3 (0.091)	0.002**
	1 (0.101)	4 (0.096)	0.022*
	2 (0.078)	3 (0.091)	0.004**
	2 (0.078)	4 (0.096)	<0.001***
	3 (0.091)	4 (0.096)	0.073
Passive reinforcer	1 (0.081)	2 (0.069)	<0.001***
	1 (0.081)	3 (0.071)	<0.001***
	1 (0.081)	4 (0.077)	0.071
	2 (0.069)	3 (0.071)	0.167
	2 (0.069)	4 (0.077)	<0.001***
	3 (0.071)	4 (0.077)	<0.001***
Defender	1 (0.070)	2 (0.071)	0.389
	1 (0.070)	3 (0.068)	0.252
	1 (0.070)	4 (0.067)	0.018*
	2 (0.071)	3 (0.068)	0.211
	2 (0.071)	4 (0.067)	0.029*
	3 (0.068)	4 (0.067)	0.146
Ignorant	1 (0.052)	2 (0.062)	<0.001***
	1 (0.052)	3 (0.062)	<0.001***
	1 (0.052)	4 (0.059)	<0.001***
	2 (0.062)	3 (0.062)	0.401
	2 (0.062)	4 (0.077)	0.092
	3 (0.062)	4 (0.077)	0.131

From Figure 2 and Table 3, it is apparent that students from all clusters were present in all groups. However, the proportions of students from different clusters in bystander roles differ significantly. A significantly larger proportion of students from Cluster 1 received peer nominations in the role of active reinforcers compared to the other three clusters (10.1% vs. 7.8%, 9.1%, and 9.6%; $p < .05$). In the role of passive reinforcers, students from Clusters 1 and 4 received a significantly larger proportion of peer nominations compared to Clusters 2 and 3 (8.1% and 7.7% vs. 7.1% and 7.1%). There were practically no significant differences between clusters in the role of defenders. Minor differences, significant at the $p = 0.05$ level, were observed between Clusters C1-C4 (7.0% vs. 6.7%) and C2-C4 (7.1% vs. 6.7%). Slightly more students in Clusters 1 and 2 were assigned this role compared to Cluster 4. In the role of ignorants, students from Cluster 1 were significantly less nominated compared to students from the other three clusters (5.2% vs. 6.9%, 7.1%, and 7.7%).

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the interactive effects of certain individual and contextual factors in determining the roles of student bystanders in peer bullying since they present a dominant group in the classroom with substantial potential power—either for preventing/reducing or maintaining/promoting such bullying (Lambe et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the factors that determine the roles of bystanders can be helpful in planning interventions in this area.

Among students' individual factors, we investigated the role of moral disengagement and students' social goals; among the contextual factors, we explored social status insecurity and perceived peer support. Both contextual factors are often studied as individual characteristics of students, although they typically reflect classroom dynamics (Košir, 2023). Thus, the level of perceived peer support and social status insecurity are not stable individual traits but are largely influenced by classroom characteristics or the type of feedback students receive from their peers within the classroom.

All variables included in the study were normalized among students, placing them within the context of classroom norms. Classroom norms represent the collective beliefs of all students in the classroom, regulating behavior also in peer bullying situations. As our results indicate, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the students were categorized as "average" across all variables; however, 10-20% of students fell into the low or high groups in individual variables (see Table 2). Of particular interest are the data on the largest and smallest proportions of students in both extreme groups, as these can act either as protective or risk factors. Nearly one-fifth of all students reported significantly lower social support compared to the

majority of their peers, which can be a risk factor for victimization (Koračin et al., 2023; Sainio et al., 2011). Conversely, it is interesting that in the high group, the largest proportion of students (19%) deviated from classroom norms in the pursuit of popularity, which can be a risk factor for peer bullying. Studies indicate that students often use aggressive strategies to achieve greater popularity (Garandeau, 2014; Koračin et al., 2023). On the other hand, in the high group, the smallest proportion of students were focused on social preference goals, which direct individuals towards more prosocial behaviors among peers, potentially resulting in more support and assistance for victimized students in peer bullying situations (Wright et al., 2012).

Psychosocial Characteristics of Students in Clusters

An overview of the psychosocial characteristics of students in clusters reveals certain commonalities as well as some differences among them (see Figure 2). Across all clusters, students exhibit low moral disengagement. This suggests that students in all clusters recognize that aggressive behavior towards peers is morally questionable. However, they may use mechanisms of moral disengagement to distance themselves from such behavior and consequently prevent negative self-evaluation when they respond inappropriately as bystanders of peer bullying (Killer et al., 2019).

Similarities can also be found among individual clusters. Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 exhibit fairly similar characteristics. Both share low moral disengagement along with high expressions of social preference goals and moderate expressions of social popularity goals. The differences between them appear to lie in their perceptions of social status insecurity and social support. Students in Cluster 1 have low sense of social insecurity and high perceived social support. In contrast, students in Cluster 2 experience high levels of social insecurity, associated with feelings of anxiety and fear regarding their social status, which may lead them to more frequently employ aggressive strategies to defend their social position (Košir et al., 2021; Long & Li, 2019; Sijtsema et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Clusters 1, 2, and 4 are similar in the expression of social goals: all three exhibit high social preference goals and moderate popularity goals. This indicates that peer approval is highly important to them, and in seeking desired social status (even through peer bullying), they do not want to lose peer support (Sijtsema et al., 2020).

Regarding social support, students in Clusters 2, 3, and 4 are similar with moderate perceived peer support, unlike Cluster 1 where students report high peer support.

Representation of Clusters in Bystander Roles

The central research question focused on how students from different clusters are represented in bystander roles in peer bullying.

The first general finding based on empirical results is that students from all clusters appear in all bystander roles. This demonstrates that the variables included in the study are just some of the numerous factors determining which role an individual will take as a bystander. The behavioral responses of bystanders to peer bullying thus result from a highly complex interaction of various factors, as indicated by other studies (e.g., Jenkins & Tennant, 2022; Košir et al., 2020; Lambe et al., 2019; van der Ploeg et al., 2017)

Among active reinforcers of bullies, peers nominated students from Cluster 1 significantly more often than students from other clusters, whereas among passive reinforcers, peers nominated classmates from Clusters 1 and 4 more frequently compared to the remaining two clusters. Students from both mentioned clusters exhibit low moral disengagement, indicating well-developed moral cognition consistent with Rest's cognitive-developmental model of morality (1983), as they recognize the inappropriateness of their behavior but do not necessarily reflect this awareness in their actions. This discrepancy may stem from their social goals: both clusters show moderate popularity goals and high preference goals, contrary to findings in some prior studies (Košir et al., 2021; Yang & Gao, 2022). This could also result from the interconnectedness between these goal types, suggesting that individuals simultaneously strive for popularity and express a need for preference, maintaining affiliation and relationships with others (Wright, 2012). Our findings align with studies indicating that adolescents aiming for specific peer-group status often pursue both popularity and preference goals, avoiding losing support from influential peers (Sijtsema et al., 2012, 2020). Those with higher expression of both goals are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour, which is in line with our first hypothesis and previous studies (e.g., Cillessen et al., 2014; Košir et al., 2021). Furthermore, we found that students from Cluster 1 experience high and those from Cluster 4 moderate peer social support, which is in line with the findings that adolescents with relatively high peer support are more likely to engage in or reinforce bullying behaviors (Salmivalli et al., 1997; Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

Peers significantly less frequently nominated students from Cluster 1 as ignorants compared to students from the other three clusters. Research emphasizes that the non-response or ignoring of peer bullying by bystanders should always be viewed in the specific peer context (Salmivalli, 2010; Yang & Gao, 2022). It seems that the factors influencing why bystanders ignore observed peer bullying are the most diverse

among all bystander roles. For instance, if bullies are popular among their peers, protecting victimized students may pose a risk of losing one's own social status (Garandeau et al., 2022). This means that even though bystanders may recognize peer bullying as wrong or sympathize with the victim, lacking sufficient social status could potentially result in negative consequences for defending the victim or even make them the next target. Consequently, bystanders may remain passive instead of intervening to stop the witnessed peer bullying (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

There is practically no difference in the representation of students from different clusters in the role of defenders of victims, which is not in line with our second hypothesis. The proportions of students in this role range from a minimum of 6.7% in Cluster 4, through 6.8% in Cluster 3 and 7.0% in Cluster 1, to a maximum of 7.1% in Cluster 2. This again highlights the diversity of reasons why someone intervenes to defend a victimized peer. Common to students in Clusters 1 and 2 is their high expression of social preference goals coupled with high or moderate social support, aligning with previous findings on these constructs (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Kiefer et al., 2015). This indicates that students who are more inclined towards others possess higher social capital, manifested as greater perceived social support from peers. These students feel secure enough to confront the aggressor or defend the victim, knowing that many peers are on their side and can provide support or protection (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

Limitations of the Study and Educational Implications

Through our study, we have demonstrated that the adoption of specific bystander roles is a result of the interactive effects of various factors, incorporating five key predictors identified in previous studies as significant in predicting student responses as bystanders of peer bullying. Despite the varied characteristics of students across different profiles, our findings indicate that these variables inadequately explain certain roles, particularly ignorants and defenders. This suggests that the outcomes—namely, bystander roles—are the product of the interaction of numerous variables (both individual and contextual), highlighting the need for future development and testing of more complex models.

An important contribution of our study is in the enhanced ecological validity of empirical results achieved through our data processing approach, wherein peer nominations of bystander roles were normalized against classroom norms. We also addressed a gap in the literature, as we have not identified any studies that examine the role of contextual factors in the age group of students from our sample, nor studies that consider the fact that these students had been together throughout their entire primary education, spanning seven to eight years. During this period, classroom norms likely became well-established, potentially contributing to greater stability in all student roles in peer bullying, including those of bystanders. In addition to individual characteristics, the context (i.e., classroom norms) also influences the bystander's response or non-response to peer bullying.

In our study, moral disengagement did not play a significant discriminatory role in determining bystander roles, as all clusters of students exhibited low moral disengagement. This suggests that students, in line with the social-cognitive model (Rest, 1983), are morally sensitive and capable of moral judgment—they recognize bullying as unacceptable and understand how they should respond to it, yet they do not always act accordingly in specific situations. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to engage in discussions with students not only about the unacceptability of bullying but also to encourage moral reasoning in their responses to specific situations. Teachers should promote students' moral motivation, for instance, by supporting students who uphold their moral values and behave morally—such as defending victims—by fostering support from both teachers and peers.

It would be beneficial to organize classroom sessions where teachers engage with students in discussions about achieving preference and popularity goals in ways that are more acceptable and do not involve peer bullying. This approach aims to guide students in developing prosocial behaviors and making morally sound decisions in their interactions.

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