

Should I Defend or Should I Go? An Adaptive, Qualitative Examination of the Personal Costs and Benefits Associated With Bullying Intervention

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Abstract

Bystanders play a crucial role in encouraging or preventing bullying situations and feature prominently in several international antibullying programs (e.g., KiVa). Despite a surge of recent interest in bystanders, relatively little is known about the functional reasons why individuals choose to engage with or ignore bullying incidents. Given the importance of bystanders' influence on bullying, we argue that further consideration needs to be given to the individual costs and benefits of bystanders' intervention. Adolescents in our study ($N = 101$, $M = 15.37$ years) read different bullying scenarios and were then asked to respond with how the bystander would react in each scenario while considering and explaining potential personal costs and benefits. We focused on the cognitive reasoning of important factors adolescents may consider when faced with the decision of whether to intervene or not in a bullying situation. Our study provides novel evidence that adolescents engage in quite explicit cost–benefit decisions regarding their decisions of whether or not they would intervene in bullying. The content and structure of these cost–benefit decisions support an adaptive model of bullying behavior and may be helpful in developing more targeted peer-based antibullying programs.

Keywords

bullying, social and educational environment, bystanders, secondary education/adolescence

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Bullying has been examined from a number of perspectives and it involves not just bullies and victims, but many others who play roles such as the perpetrator, the victim, reinforcers, passive onlookers, and defenders (Olweus, 2001; Salmivalli, 2014). Research on bullying has recently taken a functional perspective, with some perspectives considering bullying as behavior by individuals with low social skills, self-esteem difficulties, and having other psychological issues, whereas others consider bullying as an adaptive behavior where bullies are characterized as individuals with considerable social skills and popularity (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). According to Volk, Camilleri, Dane, and Marini (2012), bullying can function as an adaptive behavior for many adolescents, as these individuals use their traits and skills to strive for dominance. Adaptations generally come with both costs and benefits, and according to this growing perspective, students would choose to take part in bullying behaviors when the benefits outweigh personal costs (Garandau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014; Koh & Wong, 2017; Kolbert & Crothers, 2003; Reijntjes et al., 2013; van der Ploeg, Steglich, & Veenstra, 2016; Volk, Dane, Marini, & Vaillancourt, 2015).

Although we have an increasingly clear picture of bullying perpetration as a potentially adaptive behavior, our knowledge of the different roles and dynamics of bullying still needs to be better understood. If taking part in bullying actions can be seen as an adaptive strategy, are the other individuals in bullying also adaptively motivated? In particular, while victims may clearly be at a disadvantage, do bystanders and those who choose to intervene in bullying appear to do so for adaptive reasons? The goal of the current study is to use an adaptive theoretical framework to qualitatively explore the cognitive decision of whether or not one should intervene in bullying episodes.

The Many Roles of Bullying: Bystanders

While bullying is ultimately a conflict between bully(ies) and victim(s), the reality is that most bullying incidents also involve adolescents other than just the bully and the victim. Bystanders can play a crucial role in bullying incidences, as they can choose to provide social rewards for the individuals involved (Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). Previous research has confirmed that the frequency of bullying behavior in a classroom decreases when bystanders choose to defend the victim and increases when bystanders choose to reinforce the aggression (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). The seminal work of Pepler and Craig (1995) found that peers have been present in over 85% of observed bullying episodes, whereas they only attempt to discourage the bullying about 25% of the time (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Moreover, Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, and Craig (2012) found that only 17% to 46% of students report choosing to intervene in a bullying situation.

The KiVa (Salmivalli, Garandau, & Veenstra, 2012; Salmivalli et al., 2011) and Meaningful Roles (Ellis, Volk, Gonzalez, & Embry, 2016) intervention programs emphasize the importance of these peers by targeting interventions that reduce peer support of bullying to reduce bullying behaviors indirectly. Bystanders might be more easily influenced to prevent bullying than an aggressive perpetrator because they are

not the direct recipients of bullying's rewards (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Yet, the conflicting roles of peers in bullying (from supporting to defending) suggest that there is significant ambiguity with regard to how to respond to a bullying incident.

The specific motivations for why bystanders are choosing to not intervene are unclear (Rock & Baird, 2011). Boulton, Bucci, and Hawker (1999) found that the majority of adolescents do have a negative view toward bullying and an interest in assisting the victim. Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, and Franzoni (2008) also found that adolescents did not endorse bullying behavior and had negative attitudes toward bystanders who chose to remain passive, whereas Berkowitz (2013) found that while students may not be supporting violence in the school, they were also hesitant to intervene in such situations. Despite these negative views toward peer victimization, most witnesses to bullying behavior choose to leave or avoid intervening when they are bystanders to instances of bullying (Ferrás, Selman, & Feigenberg, 2012). We therefore face something of a paradox: bystanders are often present in bullying episodes and they generally do not approve of that behavior, but they rarely choose to defend the victim—why? Research has begun to explore this question, finding social status (i.e., Pouwels et al., 2018; van der Ploeg, Kretschmer, Salmivalli, & Veenstra, 2017), empathy (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; van der Ploeg et al., 2017), an individual's role in the interaction (Pouwels, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2017), and/or mental health (i.e., Lambe, Hudson, Craig, & Pepler, 2017) as potential reasons for noninvolvement. Previous research has also found cognitive factors that adolescents may be considering when making their decision to intervene include the potential for personal harm or their moral responsibility (i.e., Thornberg et al., 2012) and their friendship status with the victim (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014). Cappadocia et al. (2012) found that the biggest reason students chose to intervene was a feeling of social justice, whereas adolescents who chose to not intervene felt that it was not be their place or that the action was not severe. In addition, bystanders may not know how to properly intervene in a bullying situation and may not be aware of how their actions will affect the action and future social interactions (Salmivalli, 2014). One may also assume that their actions will not have much of an effect on a situation, as in the case involving an overly powerful bully, defending the victim may be deemed relatively ineffective as a choice of action (Salmivalli et al., 2011).

Thus, these explanations provide a scattered view of why most individuals fail to intervene against a behavior that is largely viewed as negative (Berkowitz, 2013; Boulton et al., 1999; O'Connell et al., 1999). Because bystanders potentially play a large role within bullying situations, it is important to consider that they may be functionally applying adaptive logic toward cost–benefit decisions of defending or not. Although studies have begun to explore motivations of bystander intervention (i.e., Cappadocia et al., 2012; Forsberg et al., 2014; Pouwels et al., 2018), these studies have not explicitly considered an adaptive cost–benefit framework. In addition, it is possible that previous studies have been limited by the use of quantitative questionnaires that may be unable to gather a thorough understanding of the potential costs and benefits adolescent bystanders may be encountering. Qualitative data are useful when the main goal is to gain a better understanding of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Moreover, qualitative data allow for a deeper exploration of relationships between individuals, specifically, differences in power and other factors that may be contributing to their interactions, which is particularly important when examining adolescent bullying (Mishna, 2004; Volk, Veenstra, & Espelage, 2017). Finally, and perhaps most salient to this project, qualitative data allow for a broader exploration of unknown factors (Cypress, 2015). We therefore plan on utilizing qualitative methods in combination with an adaptive framework in our study to illuminate the cognitive reasoning behind the decision-making process of adolescent bystanders.

Current Study

Our choice of qualitative methods was influenced by its capacity to more fully explore novel and unexpected participant responses. Qualitative methods are most useful when exploring and understanding phenomena that are occurring that we have relatively little knowledge regarding (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, Morse (2012) states that qualitative research is advantageous when the researcher's goal is to understand the perspectives, actions, and behaviors of the participants. This fits closely with the goals of our study. As our goal was to explore a range of potential motives of adolescents when making the decision to intervene, the use of qualitative methods allowed us to examine multiple perspectives within the process of bullying (Creswell, 2007). In addition, previous studies using qualitative methods in bullying research has found this type of methodology necessary to better understand the viewpoints of children and/or adolescents and to gain deeper knowledge of bullying relationships to support effective interventions (Mishna, 2004; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008).

In applying an adaptive perspective, we wanted to see whether adolescents were able to articulate potential costs and benefits of choosing to intervene in a bullying situation. Because bullying perpetrators may be able to attain benefits through their actions, we predicted that there would also be clear costs and benefits that would be considered by adolescent bystanders. We chose to openly explore the motives of adolescents through the exploratory nature and design of our study. However, based on theories of adaptive behavior (e.g., Ellis et al., 2016; Salmivalli, 2010), we did expect that adolescents would be at least be partially aware of these costs and benefits and act in ways that maximized their individual fitness (i.e., consider aspects such as popularity or mental well-being).

Method

Participants

Our sample consisted of 101 adolescents (50.5% female) between the ages of 12 to 18 ($M = 15.37$, $SD = 1.71$; see Table 1). The participants were predominantly White (84%; 9.9% racial minorities, 6% did not report ethnicity). Most of the adolescents in the present study reported their family to be about the same in richness compared with average Canadian families (63.4%). The participants were accessed through youth organizations within a region of southern Ontario.

Table 1. Demographic Data: Sample Composition.

	N = 101
Gender	
Males	50 (49.5%)
Females	51 (50.5%)
Age	
12	10
13	4
14	17
15	17
16	20
17	27
18	6
Average (15 years of age)	$M = 15.37, SD = 1.70$
Grade	
7	11 (10.9%)
8	6 (5.9%)
9	20 (19.8%)
10	19 (18.8%)
11	20 (19.8%)
12	25 (24.8%)
Average (Grade 10)	$M = 10.05, SD = 1.62$
Family SES	
A lot less rich	3 (3%)
Less rich	12 (11.9%)
About the same	64 (63.4%)
More rich	21 (20.8%)
A lot more rich	0 (0%)
Missing	1 (1%)
Average (About the same)	$M = 3.03, SD = 0.67$
Ethnicity	
Caucasian/Canadian	85 (84%)
Asian	3 (3%)
Native	2 (2%)
Mexican	1 (1%)
Indian	1 (1%)
Black	3 (3%)
Did not report (Caucasian/Canadian)	6 (5.9%)

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

Measures

Demographic and bullying history survey. This survey asked adolescents about their demographics (i.e., gender, age, race, socioeconomic status) and 12 questions about the bullying history of the participant (regarding bullying and victimization), that is, “Overall, how often have you been bullied by someone much stronger or more popular than you?” (Volk & Lagzdins, 2009).

Bullying intervention questionnaire. This questionnaire used four bullying scenarios (one each of verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying). The questionnaire was modified from previous studies that examined teacher’s perceptions of bullying situations and how they would intervene (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003), to have the perspective of an adolescent bystander rather than a teacher. Participants were asked to select how likely it would be for the bystander in each scenario to intervene. They were also asked to explain why they thought that decision would be made and what the potential personal benefits and costs for each decision could be. For example, “What are the potential personal costs to Taylor for making this decision?” In addition, participants were asked to think about a time they had witnessed a bullying situation and chosen to not intervene and to reflect on why they had chosen to make that particular decision.

Procedure

After receiving ethical clearance from the University ethics board, coaches and leaders from various youth teams and clubs were contacted to acquire permission to visit a practice or meeting to recruit participants. Potential participants were informed of details of the study and that participation was completely voluntary. Interested participants were given a package with the consent/assent forms, as well as a copy of each of the surveys and researchers returned the following week to collect completed survey packages.

Data analysis. Given that our main goal was to see whether adolescents could actually articulate strategic reasons for choosing to intervene or not, we felt as though qualitative methods were the most effective way to do so. We utilized grounded theory methods to analyze our data as it allowed us to provide a framework to inductively explore the perspectives and opinions of adolescents (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach was appropriate as it allowed us to develop a framework to better understand a unique experience occurring within adolescents (Thomas, 2006). In addition, this approach has been used in previous qualitative research examining bullying within adolescents (i.e., Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Thornberg, 2018), emphasizing the importance of including bottom-up research, driven by participant experiences, within bullying research (Volk et al., 2017). This approach allows for the perspectives of the participants to emerge, to gather a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of bullying (Mishna et al., 2009). Participants were not limited in

the number of costs and/or benefits he or she could respond with, which allowed for our ability to detect a range of responses, as well as avoid potential biases. Purposeful sampling was utilized for our study as we required a specific age range of individuals to examine dynamics of adolescent bullying.

Responses to the open-ended questions were organized by question in Microsoft Excel and analyzed independently of one another. First, we went through the responses of each question multiple times, making notes of overall ideas that were reoccurring, to apply first-level codes to the data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Glaser, 1978). We then reviewed these codes, using focused coding and a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and further organized the codes into categories. Any disagreements in the coding were resolved through discussion among the researchers resulting in a full consensus (i.e., Mishna et al., 2009). Responses may have been given more than one theme, as there was not a limit on how many responses each participant could give on each question. Finally, we counted how many times each overall theme came up to give an idea of how prominent each theme was for each question. This is an important step as it visually displays how often a certain theme was mentioned while also helping protect against potential bias (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Results

Benefits and Costs of Intervening in a Bullying Scenario

By utilizing a qualitative methodology, we explored the decision-making process of adolescents when witnessing a bullying situation. Our results provide a deepened understanding of the potential costs and benefits.

Benefits. For the benefits of intervening in a bullying situation, there were four overall themes that emerged. These themes included gaining a friend through intervening, that the bystander would be a good person and feel good about him/herself, stopping the bullying or helping someone in need (the victim) and therefore making them happy, and the idea of the bystander looking like a good person, therefore becoming more liked and gaining popularity as a result. Table 2 displays participant responses by each of the four scenarios, showing the number of participants that had responses within each of the four themes, including those who did not respond, stated they were “unsure,” or wrote that there were no benefits to intervening. As seen in Figure 1, the strongest benefit to intervening in any bullying situation is the empathic idea that you are stopping the bully and helping someone in need as emphasized by the responses of these adolescents:

[The bystander would be] helping Bobby [the victim] and any other students suffering in the future. (Male, 17 years old)

She could stop the bullying. (Female, 14 years old)

Table 2. Potential Benefits of Intervening in Bullying Scenario.

	No response	“None” or “I don’t know”	Gaining a friend	Feeling good about himself or herself	Stopping the bullying	Gaining popularity/ more-liked
Verbal scenario	<i>n</i> = 4	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 29	<i>n</i> = 22	<i>n</i> = 44	<i>n</i> = 29
Cyber scenario	<i>n</i> = 4	<i>n</i> = 2	<i>n</i> = 33	<i>n</i> = 16	<i>n</i> = 38	<i>n</i> = 27
Relational scenario	<i>n</i> = 6	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 28	<i>n</i> = 14	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 20
Physical scenario	<i>n</i> = 11	<i>n</i> = 1	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 11	<i>n</i> = 40	<i>n</i> = 17
Total	25	9	113	63	168	93

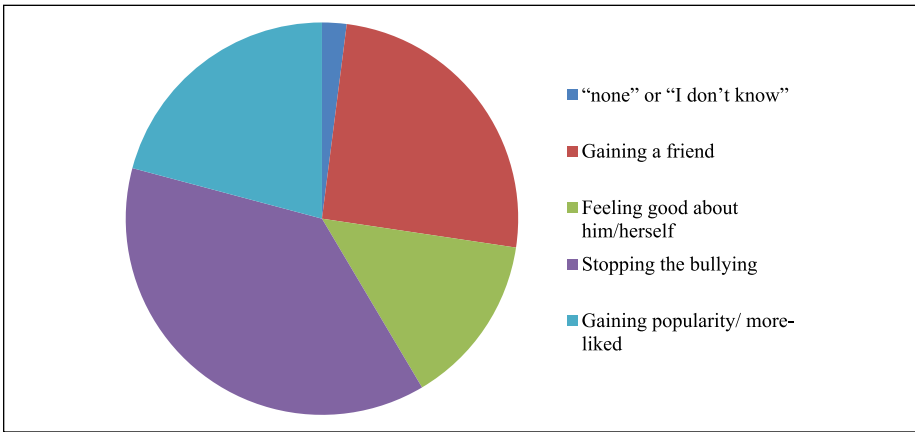


Figure 1. Totals of potential benefits of bullying intervention.

[The bystander would be] helping someone and making it known people care. (Female, 17 years old)

The bullying could stop. (Male, 14 years old)

It is interesting that another strong emerging theme is the idea that through standing up for the person being bullied, a benefit could be that the bystander and victim might become friends, as demonstrated in the following quotes:

Some potential benefits to Alina [the bystander] intervening could be that she makes friends with Kris [the victim]. (Female, 17 years old)

Riley [the bystander] could benefit by gaining a new friendship/respect from Dylan [the victim]. (Male, 15 years old)

The potential benefits to Blake [the bystander] for intervening would be gaining a new friend. Maybe for life. (Female, 17 years old)

The idea of gaining popularity or becoming more liked also emerged as a benefit, which is important given the emphasis on power dynamics within bullying situations. The following quotes illustrate this notion:

Taylor [the bystander] would be seen as a good guy and end up being more liked. (Male, 16 years old)

[The bystander would] gain some reputation for standing up for what is right. (Female, 17 years old)

He could become more popular. (Male, 16 years old)

Finally, the idea of doing the morally right thing and feeling good about themselves is an interesting theme as it shows that there are personal benefits to adolescents for intervening in a bullying situation as stated by these adolescents:

A benefit for Riley intervening is she can feel good about herself for doing the right thing. (14-year-old male)

[The bystander] will not feel guilty for not taking action when he could. (Male, 17 years old)

[The bystander could] have feelings of satisfaction for helping. (Female, 14 years old)

Through these quotes, it becomes evident that although many adolescents share the idea of intervening to help the victim, many also see personal benefits that could be gained as a result of intervention.

Costs. Through examining the responses focusing on the potential costs of intervening in a bullying situation, four themes also emerged including that the bystander could lose popularity and/or power, or become less liked, whereas the next theme was losing friends, both of which are related with the social dynamics of the individuals involved. Other themes included that by intervening in the bullying situation, he or she will become the target of bullying themselves or that they could potentially get into trouble by becoming involved in the bullying situation. Table 3 breaks down the responses of the participants when asked what the potential costs were for each of the four bullying scenarios. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the most predominant cost the adolescents noted when thinking about whether to intervene or not is the idea that if they intervene, then they will get made fun of or become the target of the bullying themselves. This sentiment is emphasized in the following quotes:

A potential cost to Riley [the bystander] for intervening could be that the names [Insults] could be aimed at her the next time around. (Male, 14 years old)

Potential personal cost to Blake [the bystander] for intervening could be that Kai [the bully] will get mad and exclude Blake from the group. (Female, 15 years old)

Table 3. Potential Costs of Intervening in Bullying Scenario.

	No response	“None” or “I don’t know”	Loss of popularity/ less-liked	Loss of friends	Becoming a target of bullying	Getting into trouble
Verbal scenario	<i>n</i> = 5	<i>n</i> = 5	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 12	<i>n</i> = 55	<i>n</i> = 4
Cyber scenario	<i>n</i> = 4	<i>n</i> = 7	<i>n</i> = 12	N/A	<i>n</i> = 60	<i>n</i> = 1
Relational scenario	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 11	<i>n</i> = 41	<i>n</i> = 3
Physical scenario	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 4	<i>n</i> = 20	<i>n</i> = 16	<i>n</i> = 37	<i>n</i> = 3
Total	27	26	81	39	193	11

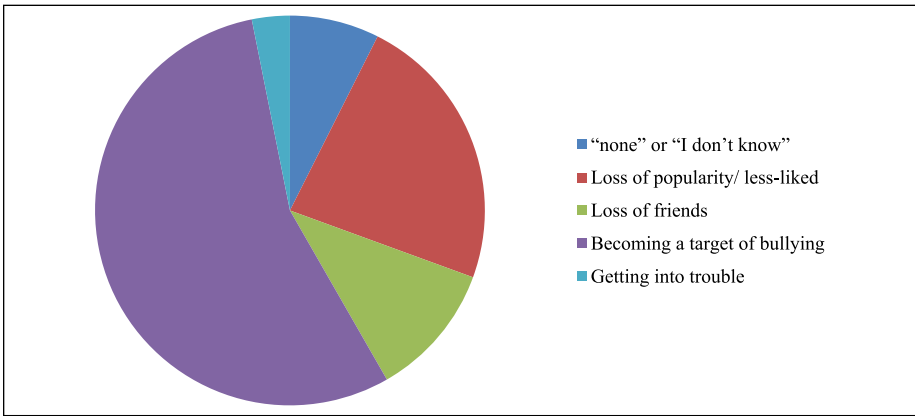


Figure 2. Totals of potential costs of bullying intervention.

he/she might get made fun of or bullied for helping someone who isn’t as popular.
(Female, 14 years old)

The quotes demonstrate the calculation that it is better for someone else to be bullied rather than himself while also highlighting the importance of social status within bullying dynamics. The next most common response was becoming less liked or losing popularity as a result of intervening in a bullying scenario as seen in the following quotes:

personal costs would be losing his status as a popular person. (Female, 14 years old)

She could look like a dork for trying to help. (Male, 17 years old)

[The bystander could] lose his social status. (Female, 15 years old)

It is important to note that while losing status/popularity was mentioned as a potential cost, gaining status/popularity was noted as a potential benefit, showing that perhaps

either is possible but it is dependent on the social status of the individuals involved in the situation. In addition, while gaining a friend was found as a potential benefit to intervention, depending on the situation, losing a friend also came out as a cost to intervention:

Potential personal cost would be Kai [the bystander] would stop being Blake's [the bully] friend and start bullying Blake instead and getting all of their popular friends to turn on Blake. (Female, 15 years old)

[The bystander would] lose a lot of friends. (Male, 12 years old)

Loss of popular status, loss of current friends. (Female, 17 years old)

This shows that depending upon the existing social landscape and friendship groups, it is possible for the bystander to lose friends if they chose to intervene in a bullying situation.

Finally, the idea of "getting into trouble" was mentioned, with adolescents stating that it is possible that by choosing to intervene just being associated with bullying they can run the risk of getting into trouble with an authority figure can be seen in these quotes:

He will be in trouble for getting into others business. (Female, 13 years old)

A potential cost for Riley [the bystander] intervening could be that he is the one blamed for the bullying. (Female, 17 years old)

He could get into trouble himself. (Female, 12 years old)

These quotes reinforce the role that fear plays in the bystander calculation on whether to intervene. Some adolescents fear that he or she will run the risk of getting into trouble with authority (generally the teacher) if they become associated with the bullying situation in any way.

In addition, we asked participants to think about a time they had personally chosen to not intervene in a bullying situation that he or she had been witness to and state why they had chosen to not intervene. Many of their responses provide further evidence that adolescents are engaging in an explicit calculation when making their decision to intervene as they are able to clearly articulate their reasoning retrospectively:

The person being bullied was not my friend and didn't like me. (Female, 14 years old)

The guy was big so I couldn't step in. Next time I will bring friends. (Male, 16 years old)

I did not want to be the next target is what I was thinking. (Male, 16 years old)

There are some really rude people at my school and those people are sometimes made fun of. I don't intervene because they are older than me and I feel like they somewhat deserve to get called names back. (Female, 14 years old)

Mostly it was because I did not know the person so I wasn't sure if it was bullying and I would not risk my neck for a possible save for someone I don't know. (Male, 16 years old)

I didn't intervene because I would've been risking a lot, and it may not have been worth it. I felt I'd be endangering myself and getting involved in someone else's business. (Female, 16 years old)

I didn't intervene in a situation one because it was the kind of person that would turn against me. (Female, 16 years old)

Discussion

The goal of our study was to apply an adaptive framework to qualitatively explore the potential costs and benefits that adolescents may consider when making the decision to intervene in a bullying situation. Our findings help confirm what factors are indeed relevant costs and benefits for adolescents, offer new and convergent evidence with some of the discussed quantitative evidence (i.e., van der Ploeg et al., 2017), and demonstrate that adolescents are surprisingly cognizant of these costs and benefits and weigh them adaptively.

Although much of the previous research on motivations of bystander intervention has not explicitly explored the costs and benefits of the decision-making process, many themes found in previous research were consistent within our study. Thornberg et al. (2012) conceptualize social evaluating as bystanders considering social relationships and positions, such as friendship and social rank, and found this to be associated with one's decision to intervene in a bullying situation. Through the responses in our study, the theme of popularity and power came up consistently, as both a cost (i.e., losing popularity) or a benefit (i.e., gaining popularity). This is in line with previous studies that have found loss of social status as a cost (i.e., Pozzoli & Gini, 2012) or gaining social status as a benefit of defending (i.e., Pouwels et al., 2018; van der Ploeg et al., 2017). The desire for social status often motivates a perpetrator to engage in bullying actions (Salmivalli, 2014), and this study shows that this desire may also be playing a role when it comes to the decision-making process of a bystander.

The potential for the bystander to become friends with the victim was found as a relatively novel benefit of intervening, whereas the potential for the bystander to lose friends by failing to defend emerged as a cost. The latter aligns with research by Forsberg et al. (2014) who found a desire to maintain an existing friendship with the perpetrator to be a factor in the decision to intervene. Social status (i.e., a popular bystander standing up for a nonpopular victim to a powerful bully) and existing relationships (i.e., friends with the bully) of the individuals involved seem to relate to the way in which these potential costs and benefits are perceived. This illustrates the reciprocal relationship of these social levers where bystanders have to weigh delicate social situations and various social rankings of the individuals involved within each individual scenario. This is further supported by Pouwels et al. (2018) who found that adolescents' evaluations of the roles and the status of the individuals involved in the bullying situation had an effect on their decision to intervene or not. Our results emphasize that adolescents are particularly

aware of the potential to lose or gain social status as a result of their actions when faced with a bullying situation. These data speak favorably toward the notion that adolescent social behavior is goal-directed, and that adolescents are often consciously aware of the goals that they are pursuing (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009; Volk et al., 2014). This further implies that measures that ask adolescents to self-report their social goals may indeed be valid as adolescents in our study seemed to be quite consciously aware of what their social costs, benefits, and goals were (Sijtsema et al., 2009; Volk et al., 2017).

The idea of simply not wanting to get involved or escalate the situation was another emerging theme in the present study, which is consistent with research by Cappadocia et al. (2012) who found that among students who chose to intervene, the strongest factor motivating them to not intervene was feeling that it was not their place to do so, as the situation may not have directly involved them. Previous research has found empathy to be a predictor of defending (i.e., Thornberg et al., 2012; van der Ploeg et al., 2017), and our study similarly found that adolescents reported that a potential benefit to intervening is that they would be stopping the bullying and helping the victim. Adolescents also reported that a potential cost to intervening is a fear of being bullied or hurt as a result of choosing to intervene. This agrees with findings by Thornberg et al. (2012) showing that witnessing a bullying situation can evoke emotional reactions such as a fear of being victimized. What is surprising about our results is the specificity with which adolescents can explicitly discuss the nature of, and potential solution to, a bully's imbalance of power (e.g., "the guy was so big I couldn't take him alone, next time I'll bring friends"). This is particularly revealing not only for theory (e.g., the importance of power; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014) but again our data shed light on measurement issues in support of measures that assume that adolescents are aware of, and can accurately report, the size and nature of power imbalances (Volk et al., 2017).

It is interesting to note that while previous research has found defending to be associated with psychosocial difficulties (Lambe et al., 2017), this was not a salient theme within our results. This is likely due to the cognitive nature of our approach, whereby we asked adolescents to consider what they felt were potential personal costs and benefits. As can be seen, adolescents more prominently noted personal costs of loss of popularity and/or friendship or potential physical harm, as opposed to considering that there could be more long-term effects. This emphasizes that while there may be further costs to an individual for defending in a bullying situation, adolescents seem to be more concerned with the potential direct personal effects that they may encounter as a result of their choosing to intervene.

Our study confirms that adolescents who are in the role of the bystander in a bullying situation are undergoing a calculated decision, considering the potential costs and benefits that they could attain. Moving forward, it might be important to consider this notion when developing bullying intervention programming. As Ellis et al. (2016) discuss, teaching students to not bully may be telling them to give up the benefits they could be attaining through the action and therefore not be seen as a viable option on its own. Our study illustrates that this same understanding can be applied to the role of the bystander, emphasizing the importance of further exploring the adaptive approach within this role in bullying situations.

Limitations and Future Direction

Although the present study has strong findings, there are some limitations to be discussed. First, the sample of the present study was fairly homogeneous, as all participants were accessed through extracurricular teams and clubs within the same region, mostly stating that their socioeconomic status was “about the same” as the average Canadian. Second, while the measures used were self-report, the goal of our study was to gather an understanding of what adolescents considered as potential costs and benefits, and if indeed, they were aware of this decision-making process. As well, self-report has been a valid means of data collection for investigating bullying in the past (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Given that this study was exploratory in nature, future research should continue to gather a deeper understanding of the cognitive adaptive decision-making process of adolescent bystanders in which they weigh both the costs and benefits, which the adolescents seem to be rather cognizant of. Although the use of the adaptive framework utilized in this study seems to be quite informative in illuminating the decision-making process of adolescent bystanders in bullying situations, we acknowledge that this may not be the only mechanism to explain these processes. There may be other psychological or sociological mechanisms that could also explain the decision-making process of adolescent bystanders. We chose to apply an adaptive framework as one avenue to explain the decision-making process of adolescent bystanders, whereas other studies have used other perspectives. Moving forward, it might be useful to further integrate across theories to further our understanding of adolescent bystanders (e.g., Marini & Volk, 2017; Thornberg, 2015).

Relevance to the Practice of School Psychology

If bullying is considered an adaptive action through which adolescents can attain benefits, then we must also consider adopting this perspective to the role of the bystander. Moving forward, it is important to understand that bystanders may adaptively weigh the potential costs and benefits of intervention before making a decision whether or not to do so. Our results have provided evidence that intervening may not be a neutral action and may come at a personal cost for the bystander. It is therefore important for authority figures teaching children and youth about bullying (i.e., teachers, parents, social workers) to understand that the choice an individual makes when faced with the decision to intervene could be an adaptive strategy, and that there are potential costs and benefits involved. Given that adolescents seem to be aware of many of the factors within their environment that may contribute to their social decisions, teachers and other school staff may be able to have more straightforward, honest discussions with students regarding their social situations.

Specifically, within adolescent relationships, it appears to be increasingly important to evaluate the roles of social status and using bullying actions as a strategy for social dominance. Bullying interventions are found to be less effective among adolescents (Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015), underscoring that perhaps new perspectives to bullying intervention need to be adopted, specifically tailored for this age group. Especially within

schools, it is important to not only focus on peers as contributing to the issue of bullying but also understand that the success of bullying prevention/intervention efforts can be directly affected by how well peer bystanders are used in the scenario, as can be seen through effective peer-based intervention programs such as KiVa (Salmivalli et al., 2012).

It might be important to evaluate bullying interventions that are based on an adaptive perspective, as opposed to other interventions that do not take this perspective into consideration. As Ellis et al. (2016) suggest, at the secondary school level, it might be beneficial to create bullying interventions that are focused on giving adolescents who are involved in bullying alternative activities to enhance his or her status. Our study seems to support this idea within the role of the bystander, highlighting that personal costs and benefits are playing a significant role in the decision-making process.

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Supplemental Material

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