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A Meta-Analytic Review on the Social–Emotional Intelligence Correlates of the Six Bullying Roles: Bullies, Followers, Victims, Bully-Victims, Defenders, and Outsiders

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Bullying is one of the most common peer-relational problems experienced by children and adolescents worldwide. One reason bullying is so widespread is that it is a dynamic, group process that involves multiple roles—namely, bullies, followers, victims, bully-victims, defenders, and outsiders. Given the profoundly negative impact of exposure to bullying on well-being across development, researchers have sought to identify the social–emotional intelligence profiles of the different bullying roles to develop effective interventions. The present meta-analysis integrated findings from 128 studies involving 187,454 children and adolescents between 3 and 18 years of age to investigate how four interrelated but distinct facets of social–emotional intelligence—affective empathy, cognitive empathy, affective theory of mind (ToM), and cognitive ToM—relate to different bullying roles. Significant associations were found for bullies, followers, and defenders, but not for being the victim, bully-victim, or outsider. For bullies and followers, we found negative relations with both affective and cognitive empathy (rs = −.11 to −.22), but no relation with either type of ToM. For defending, we found positive relations with all four facets of social–emotional intelligence (rs = .18–.32). These findings suggest that a successful antibullying program may entail a combination of motivating children and adolescents with bullying tendencies to care about others' feelings, and empowering their classmates to become strong perspective-takers who can stand up for those in need of help.

Public Significance Statement
This meta-analysis reveals that children and adolescents who bully their peers are capable of taking other people's perspectives, but may be motivated to engage in antisocial acts due to deficits in empathy. Children and adolescents who defend the victims of bullying have both insights into other people's perspectives and empathy toward others in need.

Keywords: theory of mind, empathy, bullying, victimization, defending

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Bullying is a ubiquitous form of antisocial behavior that, unfortunately, many school-aged children and adolescents experience during development. Although there has been debate over the definition of bullying (for reviews, see Smith, 2016; Volk et al., 2014), it is most widely regarded as a type of aggression that is characterized by its goal-directed and typically repetitive nature. Critically, the harmful or distressing behavior is inflicted on a victim of lesser power or strength (Olweus, 1993). Three main subtypes of face-to-face bullying in children and adolescents have been identified (Kennedy, 2020; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Olweus, 1993): Physical bullying involves direct bodily attacks (e.g., hitting, kicking, shoving). Verbal bullying includes oral and/or written communications designed to harm (e.g., insults, teasing, and name calling). Relational bullying takes the form of indirect psychological attacks that aim to sabotage the victims' relationships or social standing (e.g., exclusion, humiliation, spreading rumors).

The problem of bullying is worldwide and remains an issue throughout development. It is found in all countries where it has been investigated (Biswas et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2009; Jimerson et al., 2010), beginning in children as young as preschool age, continuing through the teens, and even into adulthood (for reviews,

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see Modecki et al., 2014; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Vlachou et al., 2011). A meta-analysis based on 80 studies that reported the prevalence of bullying found that, on average, around 35% of adolescents are involved in bullying situations either as the perpetrator or the victim (Modecki et al., 2014). A similar average figure (30.5%) was found in a recent global survey completed by adolescents from 83 countries of varying socioeconomic levels, although prevalence rates varied considerably between regions and countries (Biswas et al., 2020). While these large-scale studies focused on bullying perpetration and victimization as separate constructs, other studies have found that a subset of children and adolescents (typically less than 10%) are involved in bullying situations as bully-victims—that is, they have experienced being both the perpetrator and the victim of bullying (Eslea et al., 2004; Haynie et al., 2001; Jadambaa et al., 2019; Nansel et al., 2001).

Furthermore, in up to 85% of episodes, bullying occurs in group settings where multiple individuals are present (Pepler & Craig, 1995). Therefore, an even larger proportion of children and adolescents are involved in bullying situations beyond the roles of the perpetrator and the victim. For a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of bullying behavior, it is essential to study children and adolescents who adopt each of the various roles in bullying situations (Salmivalli et al., 1996). To do so, Salmivalli et al. (1996) originally identified six different roles: The *bully*, sometimes referred to as "ringleader bully," is the lead perpetrator of the harmful behavior toward the victim. The *assistant* joins and aids the bully's efforts, but is not the instigator of the harmful acts. The *reinforcer* encourages the bullying behavior by providing positive feedback (e.g., through laughing or cheering). The *victim* is the target of the harmful behavior. *Defenders* are those who attempt to help the victim by shielding, mediating, or consoling. Finally, *outsiders* witness the bullying episode but choose not to get involved in the bullying situation as the perpetrator or supporter of the bully, victim, or defender.

While much of Salmivalli et al.'s (1996) taxonomy of roles is still used in the literature, many recent studies combine the assistant and reinforcer roles into a single *follower* role based on the substantial overlap in underlying constructs (e.g., Goossens et al., 2006; Pouwels et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers have argued the importance of examining *bully-victims*—that is, perpetrators who are also targeted for being victimized by other bullies—as a separate role, based on findings that point to psychosocial factors that uniquely predict this role (e.g., Cook et al., 2010; Haynie et al., 2001). Although followers and bully-victims engage in bullying, researchers have noted the importance of distinguishing them from ringleader bullies, as this delineation may provide unique insights into why bullying is sometimes associated with poor—but in other instances, superior—social–emotional intelligence (Peeters et al., 2010). Therefore, in the present study, we examined six different roles that are of theoretical importance in the current literature: the bully, follower, victim, defender, outsider, and bully-victim.

Given the pervasiveness of bullying and its well-known negative effects on children's and adolescents' well-being (for a review, see Moore et al., 2017), researchers have sought to understand a range of individual, peer-relational, and contextual factors that predict involvement in this type of behavior (for a review, see Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Some of the research on individual factors has focused on links between personality dimensions and bullying behaviors (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015; Tani et al., 2003; van Geel et al., 2017), whereas other studies have focused on children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence. In particular, the literature on children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors concerning empathy and theory of mind (ToM; also known as "mindreading") has grown immensely in the last 2 decades.

Although empathy and ToM are considered to be interrelated facets of social–emotional intelligence, recent evidence on the neural basis of these constructs suggests they should not be conflated (Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014; Kanske et al., 2016). Additionally, these processes develop independently during childhood, with longitudinal studies showing positive but weak associations at best (Dunn et al., 1991; Eggum et al., 2011). Thus, a child who is high on empathy could be relatively poor at mindreading, with implications for social behavior (Lonigro et al., 2017; Wang & Wang, 2015), including how children and adolescents behave in bullying situations.

However, to date, nearly all studies of children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors and social–emotional intelligence have focused on empathy *or* ToM, with only a handful examining the two alongside each other (e.g., Caravita et al., 2010; Cassetta, 2014; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies on empathy compared to those on ToM, largely rely on different measurement techniques—namely, empathy has been measured using questionnaires whereas ToM has been assessed using performance-based tasks. Given this divide in the current literature, below we outline the findings and theories on the association of children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors for empathy and ToM, separately.

Empathy and Bullying Behaviors

Traditionally, empathy has been seen to consist of affective and cognitive components (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987), and researchers have proposed numerous definitions for both. One widely accepted definition of *affective empathy* is that it is one's emotional response appropriate to the perceived situation of another (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). It can sometimes include "affective resonance" in which the empathizer vicariously experiences the same emotion that the other person is experiencing (Henry et al., 2016). Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, is commonly defined as the ability to objectively make inferences about others' emotional states (Cox et al., 2012). These distinct processes are thought to rely on different underlying mechanisms and on overlapping but distinct brain networks. Specifically, affective empathy is often seen to involve simulation and to engage similar brain regions to those that mediate one's own emotional experiences, whereas cognitive empathy is seen to require propositional thinking and thus involves regions that are implicated in memory, attention, and social information processing (Henry et al., 2016).

Affective and cognitive empathy have both been theorized to influence children's and adolescents' behaviors in bullying situations. In particular, cognitive empathy could enable children and adolescents to mentally construe the negative emotional impact of being victimized, whereas affective empathy may allow them to further simulate and experience the victim's feelings, which could deter antisocial action or motivate prosocial action (Fredrick et al., 2020). Deficits in these separate but interrelated processes are thought to contribute to the perpetration of bullying; conversely, high levels of affective and cognitive empathy are proposed to support the defense of victims in bullying situations

(Gini et al., 2007). Based on these theories, empathy development has been considered a critical element of numerous bullying intervention programs (e.g., KiVan antibullying program; Garandeau et al., 2021), and dozens of studies over the last several decades have investigated links between children's and adolescents' empathy and their behavior in bullying situations. To date, four meta-analytic reviews have been conducted on these relations between empathy and bullying (see also van Noorden et al., 2015 for systematic review), with a large focus on bullying perpetration and defending behaviors.

Of these meta-analytic reviews, two have reported findings on bullies. Despite the purported theoretical link between empathy and bullying, Mitsopoulou and Giovazolias (2015) found weak negative associations between both affective and cognitive empathy (rs = −.16 and −.08, respectively) and perpetration of bullying by children and young adults between 8 and 25 years of age. The mean effect of cognitive empathy was larger for younger children compared to older individuals. For both types of empathy, the magnitude of the relations was greater for studies with girls than boys. This meta-analysis, however, was based on just 16 studies. More recently, Zych et al. (2019) used meta-analysis to investigate affective and cognitive empathy in relation to children's and adolescents' (up to age 18) involvement in school bullying, defined as bullying episodes involving students at school. Based on a larger sample of 33 studies, Zych et al. (2019) replicated the finding that bullying perpetration was negatively associated with both affective and cognitive empathy (rs = −.18 and −.14, respectively), though the effect was significantly larger for the former. The magnitude of the mean effect sizes did not differ for studies that reported findings for boys and girls separately.

Three meta-analytic reviews have examined the link between children's and adolescents' empathy and defending of victims in bullying situations. Nickerson et al. (2015) focused on school-aged children (defined as those enrolled in kindergarten to Grade 12) and found a significant positive association between defending and empathy (r = .33). In their study, findings on affective and cognitive empathy were combined, precluding conclusions on whether the two types of empathy similarly or differentially impact children's defending behavior. Subsequently, Zych et al.'s (2019) meta-analytic review revealed that defending was positively associated with both affective and cognitive empathy (rs = .26 and .20, respectively), although the mean effect was significantly larger for the former.

Finally, in the largest meta-analytic review to date on the individual and peer-relational correlates of defending behavior (36 and 20 effect sizes for affective and cognitive empathy, respectively), Ma et al. (2019) found positive associations between school defending and both affective and cognitive empathy (rs = .15 and .12, respectively) in children and adolescents up to 18 years of age. Their meta-analyses included findings on both actual and hypothetical defending behavior (i.e., reports of intentions to defend when presented with hypothetical bullying scenarios via vignettes). Due to the relatively large number of studies included, Ma et al.'s (2019) study could investigate the role of potential moderators in the relation between children's and adolescents' empathy and defending behavior. They found that, compared to studies that used peer nomination, those that relied on bullying vignettes and self-report measures yielded larger effect sizes for the associations of affective and cognitive empathy with defending behavior. Furthermore, the strength of association between affective empathy and defending was greater for studies conducted in the USA compared to other Western and non-Western countries.

Finally, in the only meta-analytic review to date to examine the link between empathy and children's and adolescents' behavior in bullying situations beyond the roles of the bully and defender, Zych et al. (2019) found no association between affective or cognitive empathy and being a victim of bullying (rs = −.003 and −.04, respectively). The magnitude of the mean effect sizes did not differ for studies that reported findings for boys and girls separately. They also reported that bully-victims were low on empathy but, for this analysis, they combined effect sizes based on affective and cognitive empathy measures due to not having identified enough studies that had examined bully-victims (k = 8). Zych et al.'s (2019) study did not synthesize findings on empathy in the two additional roles that have been identified in bullying situations: followers and outsiders.

Taken together, findings from prior meta-analytic reviews on the link between children's and adolescents' empathy and behaviors in bullying situations are consistent in suggesting that both types of empathy are negatively related to perpetration of bullying and positively related to defending the victim. Nevertheless, the associations appear to be somewhat stronger for affective than cognitive empathy. Results thus far suggest that empathy is not related to being a victim of bullying. Yet little is known beyond these relations. Specifically, the questions of if and how empathy is linked to other bullying roles—namely, the follower, bully-victim, and outsider—remain largely unclear. Furthermore, Ma et al.'s (2019) study has provided insights into the potential role of methodological factors on the association between children's and adolescents' empathy and behaviors in bullying situations, but only concerning the defender role. Given that there are mixed findings in the literature on how children's and adolescents' empathy relates (or does not relate) to their bullying perpetration and being victimized (for an overview, see Zych et al., 2019), exploring the effects of potential moderators on the relations of empathy and the other bullying roles is the next important step in this literature.

ToM and Bullying Behaviors

Although not as extensively studied as empathy, ToM or "mindreading" is considered an important, interrelated aspect of social–emotional intelligence that influences children's and adolescents' behavior in bullying situations. ToM broadly refers to the ability to understand other's mental states and involves predictions and explanations of behavior based on inferred mental states. Explicit, verbally mediated ToM, which is most commonly measured and is relevant to social functioning including involvement in bullying, emerges between the ages of 2 and 4 years (Wellman, 2014) and becomes increasingly sophisticated through adolescence (Miller, 2012).

Research on ToM and bullying began with a challenge to the popular stereotype of bullies as "physically powerful yet intellectually simple or backward" (Sutton et al., 1999a, p.118). Before this research, it was often assumed that children engage in bullying because they are poor at mindreading and, hence, are unaware of the psychological consequences of their negative actions (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Many studies in this tradition revealed that aggressive children had difficulty understanding the intentions of real people and story characters, often misperceiving benign intentions as hostile (e.g., Dodge & Crick, 1990). Subsequently, based on a more nuanced understanding of bullying that recognized its forms beyond direct

aggression (e.g., relational bullying), researchers began to consider the possibility that bullies may, in fact, have *superior* mindreading skills that allow them to systematically manipulate and abuse others (Sutton et al., 1999a). Moreover, because bullying is defined as a repeated behavior, children may hone their ToM skills through contriving increasingly sophisticated ways to inflict harm on their victims over time (Sutton et al., 1999a). While some empirical findings support these views of a positive relation between children's ToM and bullying perpetration (e.g., Gini, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999b), others have reported negative or null associations instead (e.g., Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018; Monks et al., 2005).

In addition, there are varying ideas regarding the links between children's and adolescents' ToM and involvement in the other bullying roles. In general, researchers have suggested that children who have relatively poor mindreading skills are more likely to be victimized, potentially due to their being more easily manipulated (Sutton et al., 1999b) or because they are often rejected by their peers (Salmivalli et al., 1996; see also Slaughter et al., 2015). Nonetheless, most empirical studies in the literature appear to show no significant association between being a victim of bullying and ToM (e.g., Caravita et al., 2010; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018).

With regard to the defender and outsider roles, researchers have hypothesized that the ability to predict others' behaviors based on mental states empowers children to plan and carry out effective interventions instead of passively remaining an outsider when they encounter bullying situations. In other words, defending behavior is thought to be positively linked to ToM, whereas outsider behavior may be negatively associated. Consistent with findings of a positive relation between ToM and prosocial behavior in children more generally (Imuta et al., 2016; Underwood & Moore, 1982), empirical studies suggest that children who defend victims in bullying situations have high levels of ToM (e.g., Caravita et al., 2010; Gini, 2006; Monks et al., 2005).

In sum, over the last 2 decades, researchers have proposed numerous theories on the influence of ToM on children's and adolescents' behaviors in bullying situations—some of these theories challenge one another, and the empirical evidence in the literature is also mixed. To date, researchers have yet to integrate findings across studies to objectively establish how children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors and ToM are related.

One possible explanation for the conflicts in this literature is that researchers have largely conceptualized ToM as a singular construct. Recent findings from the neuropsychological literature suggest that ToM—akin to empathy—consists of both affective and cognitive components (e.g., Coundouris et al., 2020; Demichelis et al., 2020). While cognitive ToM refers to the understanding of "cool" mental states such as beliefs and intentions, affective ToM represents the ability to infer "hot" mental states such as hidden emotions that one tries to disguise from expressing, and is theorized to require the integration of cognitive ToM and empathy (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2010). Indeed, affective ToM engages regions of the brain involved in emotion processing (e.g., ventromedial prefrontal cortex) in addition to those implicated in cognitive ToM (e.g., Bodden et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2012).[1]

Theories on the role of ToM on children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors typically conceptualize ToM as "mindreading" more broadly and do not make explicit delineations between the affective and cognitive components. Nevertheless, a close examination of the empirical studies on this topic reveals that most have in fact assessed the two components separately (albeit analyzing the results using scores that collapse across the two). Given that many previous studies have reported data on both affective and cognitive ToM, separately, and informed by insights from the neuropsychological literature on the importance of differentiating between the two components, in the present meta-analysis, a distinction was made between affective and cognitive ToM.

The Current Meta-Analysis

Empathy and ToM have both been of profound theoretical interest in understanding the social–emotional intelligence profiles of children and adolescents who take the different roles in bullying situations and, in turn, in designing effective bullying interventions. Research on the two constructs, however, has largely been conducted under divergent traditions. To gain a more unified view, we must examine the associations of bullying behaviors with each of the facets of social–emotional intelligence in relation to one another, and explicitly build in the variance introduced by systematic differences in how each of these constructs is typically operationalized.

In our study, therefore, we present the first meta-analytic review of associations between ToM and school-aged children's and adolescents' behaviors in bullying situations. Additionally, we conducted the most up-to-date meta-analytic synthesis of the relation between empathy and bullying behaviors, involving over twice as many primary studies compared to the latest meta-analytic review on this topic (Zych et al., 2019). Whereas their meta-analysis included 49 studies, ours included 128. Furthermore, unlike any previous meta-analysis, we examined (a) the relation between bullying and ToM understanding, and (b) links between empathy/ToM and all six bullying roles: bully, follower, victim, bully-victim, defender, and outsider. Finally, the large number of studies that we included allowed us to investigate, for the first time, the important question of what influence methodological variables (e.g., self-report vs. objective assessment) may have in moderating the strength of the associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and behaviors in bullying situations.

To this end, for each bullying role, we first examined the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and engagement in the behavior. By synthesizing across all findings for each role, we were able to statistically establish the presence of significant heterogeneity in the contributing effect sizes that warranted subsequent metaregression moderator analyses. Following examination of the overall associations, we conducted a series of metaregression analyses on four primary moderator variables: (a) the facet of social–emotional intelligence (affective empathy, cognitive empathy, affective ToM, cognitive ToM); (b) the means of measuring social–emotional intelligence (self-report, parent-report, performance-based task); (c) form of bullying (physical, verbal, relational); and (d) reporter of the bullying behavior

[1] Given that both affective ToM and cognitive empathy require abstract, propositional inference about others' emotional states, researchers have frequently noted the difficulty in distinguishing between these two constructs (e.g., Bensalah et al., 2016; Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014; Preckel et al., 2018). At the conceptual level, however, these two constructs have been separated (see Singer, 2006) and, in the developmental literature, they have traditionally been measured using different approaches. For these reasons, we have treated affective ToM and cognitive empathy as distinct for this study.

(self, adult, peer). Below, we provide more detail about each of these moderator variables.

Facet of Social–Emotional Intelligence

The associations between children's and adolescents' bullying behavior and four key facets of social–emotional intelligence—affective empathy, cognitive empathy, affective ToM, and cognitive empathy—were examined both separately and in relation to one another. Although these four constructs are considered interrelated and to interact during social functioning, they are supported by different neural systems (Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014; Kanske et al., 2016; Sebastian et al., 2012). On one hand, given the overlap in the neural basis and proposed underlying mechanism for cognitive empathy and the two types of ToM, associations between children's and adolescents' bullying behavior and these three facets of social–emotional intelligence may be more similar than relations with affective empathy. On the other hand, given that the two types of empathy are typically measured using questionnaires and the two types of ToM via performance-based tasks, the associations of bullying behavior may be more similar for affective and cognitive empathy versus affective and cognitive ToM.

Measurement of Social–Emotional Intelligence

The source of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence falls into three main categories: self-report questionnaires completed by the children and adolescents, questionnaires completed by adults (i.e., parents and teachers), and performance-based tasks. The most common method for indexing empathy is via self-report questionnaires (e.g., Interpersonal Reactivity Index [IRI]; Davis, 1983), which typically contain statements that enquire about the degree to which warm, concerned, or compassionate feelings are experienced in relation to others. Issues such as lack of self-awareness, as well as biases driven by demand characteristics and social desirability (e.g., participants realizing that the questionnaire is assessing empathy and that certain responses are regarded more favorably), may result in inaccurate reflections of their empathic tendencies (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Adult-report questionnaires overcome the issue of self-awareness but may still be biased by factors such as social desirability and gender stereotypes (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). The concordance between self-report and adult-report measures of empathy is often low (Cliffordson, 2001; Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014), suggesting the importance of examining them separately. Furthermore, ToM is most commonly indexed by children's and adolescents' performance on problem-solving vignettes, such as tests of false-belief reasoning (e.g., Sally–Anne task; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Compared to questionnaire measures, which rely on one's perceptions of their competence, performance-based tasks represent a more objective measure of one's actual abilities. Given this evidence, the patterns of associations with children's and adolescents' bullying behaviors may vary depending on how social–emotional intelligence is measured.

Form of Bullying

We examined how the links between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying behaviors may differ for the three main forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. In particular, involvement with relational bullying may be most strongly linked to social–emotional intelligence, given that this form of bullying largely revolves around the manipulation of mental states of not only the victim, but also of peer group members. In contrast, involvement with physical bullying may not be linked to social–emotional intelligence, given that this form of bullying does not necessarily require the understanding of social dynamics for execution (Sutton et al., 1999a).

Source of Report on Bullying Behavior

Children's and adolescents' behaviors in bullying situations were reported by three main sources: the children and adolescents themselves, the adults close to them (i.e., parents and teachers), or their peers. The concordance rate for reports of bullying behavior from the children and adolescents themselves versus others (peers, teachers, parents) has been found to vary (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). For the role of the bully, children and adolescents may not faithfully report their own engagement in this behavior to psychologically distance themselves from their moral transgressions and avoid negative feelings (Obermann, 2011b; Olweus, 1993). This sense of moral disengagement may also apply to outsiders (Obermann, 2011a) who witness bullying situations but choose not to defend the victim to avoid being the target of the attack themselves (Camodeca & Coppola, 2016). Additionally, children and adolescents who are victimized may feel hesitant to report the extent of their experience (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Therefore, self-report measures of bullying behaviors may be particularly prone to yielding an inaccurate portrait of children's and adolescents' involvement, leading to weaker associations with their social–emotional intelligence.

Secondary Moderators

In addition to the four primary theoretically driven moderators, we investigated the influence of participant sample characteristics that may moderate the associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and behaviors in bullying situations. In particular, we examined the potential moderating role of age, gender, and culture of the sample. Previous meta-analyses have reported mixed findings on the moderating influence of these variables (Ma et al., 2019; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015; see Zych et al., 2019). We examined the potential moderating effect of age using two methods: (a) mean age of sample; and (b) age category, subdivided by school level of the sample (elementary school, middle school, and high school). We decided to categorize age group based on school level, given that shifts in bullying dynamics have been found as children transition into the middle school years, and then again into the high school years (e.g., Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). The culture of the samples was divided into three categories: Western (USA), Western (non-USA), and non-Western. In line with Henrich et al.'s (2010) classification, we classified countries located in the northwest of Europe (e.g., the United Kingdom, France, Germany) and former British colonies (e.g., Canada, Australia) as "Western (non-USA)," and the remaining countries as "non-Western." Studies based on samples from the USA were examined separately based on Henrich et al.'s (2010) conclusions that Americans are "outliers among

outliers" (p. 33). Indeed, Ma et al. (2019) found in their meta-analysis that studies on empathy and defending behavior conducted in the USA yielded larger effect sizes compared to other Western and non-Western countries.

Overview of Research Questions

To summarize, in the present study we integrated findings across 128 studies to present the largest ever meta-analysis on the associations between school-aged children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and behaviors in bullying situations. We addressed the following questions:

1. What is the overall association between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and behavior for each of the six bullying roles (bully, follower, victim, bully-victim, defender, and outsider)?
2. For each bullying role, how do the following four primary moderating variables influence the strength of association?
    a. Facet of social–emotional intelligence: affective empathy versus cognitive empathy versus affective ToM versus cognitive ToM
    b. Measurement of social–emotional intelligence: self-report questionnaire versus adult-report questionnaire versus performance-based task
    c. Form of bullying: physical versus verbal versus relational
    d. Source of report on bullying behavior: self versus peer versus adult
3. How do sample characteristics influence the strength of associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and behaviors in bullying situations?

Method

Transparency and Openness

This study was not preregistered, given that the project was started before it was common practice in our laboratory to do so, but we have provided in the Supplementary Materials: (a) all search terms in each of the search engines that were used; (b) list of all articles reviewed for full-text screening and eligibility decisions that were made by the two coders; (c) R codes; and (d) the full data set that was used for analyses. These files are also available on the OSF database at (https://osf.io/pgwjz/?view_only=8a95450ed2b548288925f8719e0a26e1). We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic and Meta-analytic Reviews (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009) reporting guidelines for the final report.

Literature Search

A systematic search of the existing literature on the associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying roles was completed in January 2020. Identification of studies eligible for inclusion was achieved by searching the *Web of Science Core Collection* (Thomson Reuters), *PsychInfo* (American Psychological Association), *Scopus* (SciVerse), and *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global* (ProQuest) databases. The keywords searched were: "bully*," "bullies," "bullied," "ostraci?*," "victim*," "defender," "bystander," "ring leader," "outsider," "reinforcer," "assistant," in combination with "theory of mind," "mindreading," "mentali?ing," "false belief," "mental representation*," "mind understanding," "mental state*," "empathy," "empathic concern," "social understanding," and "perspective taking" (see Supplemental Information for search term combinations used for each database). These search terms were identified with the guidance of a university librarian. Database searches were followed up with cross-referencing from the studies identified by the principal search and screening of references cited in previous meta-analyses on the topic (Ma et al., 2019; Nickerson et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2019). Authors of recent publications were contacted requesting any unpublished findings.

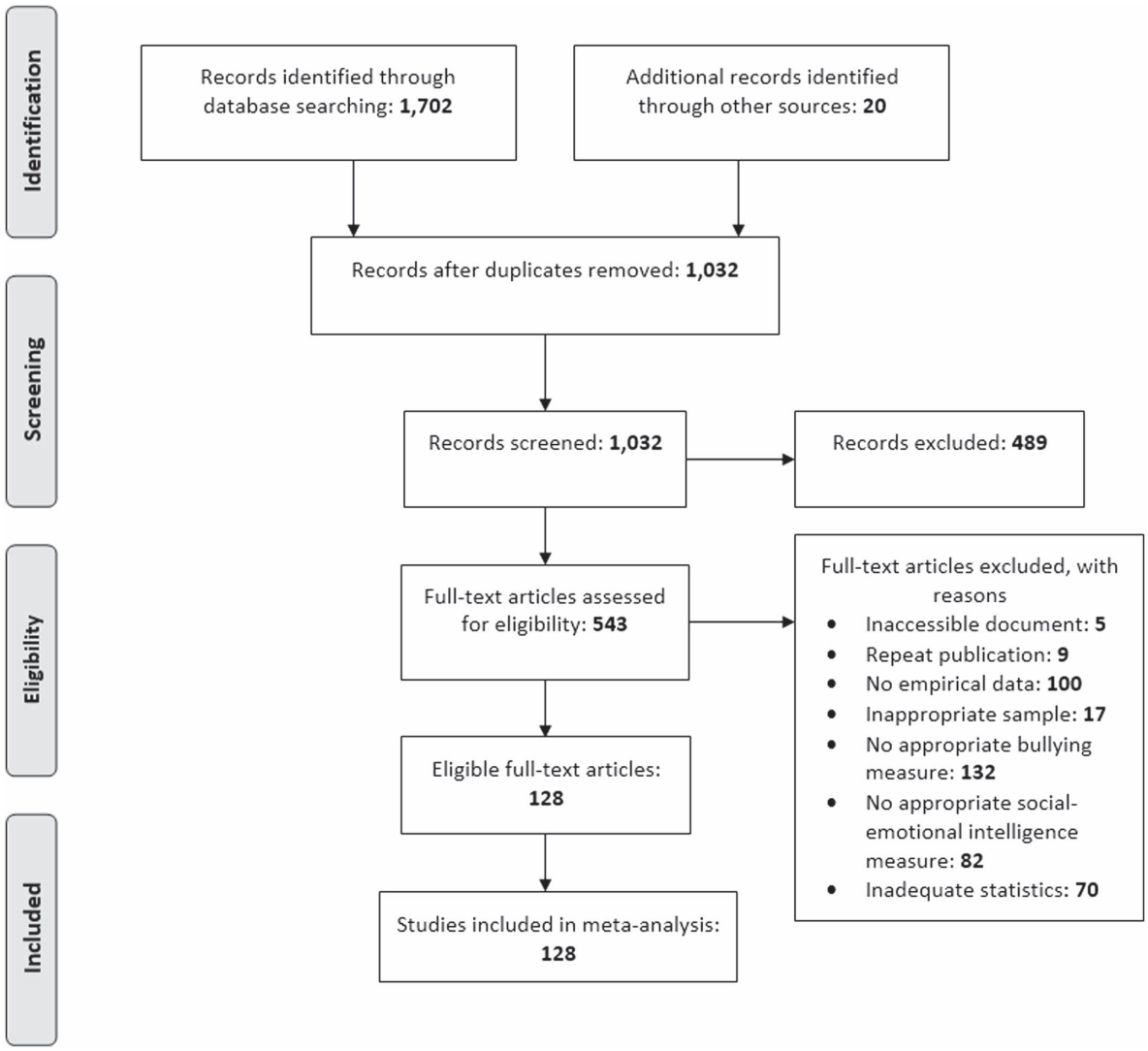
In total, 1,722 articles were initially identified through the literature search. After duplicates were removed, a single researcher screened 1,032 articles for relevance based on their title and abstract. Of these articles, 543 were identified as potentially relevant or their relevance was uncertain; therefore, two researchers independently assessed these articles for eligibility by reviewing their full text. Interrater reliability was high ($\kappa = .92$; see Supplemental Data file for eligibility decisions made upon full-text review). Any discrepancies in eligibility decisions were resolved through discussions by the research team. A total of 128 published and unpublished studies conducted between 2000 and 2021 were determined to have met the inclusion criteria outlined below, and were included in the present meta-analysis. A flow diagram of the sequence of exclusion and inclusion of studies can be found in Figure 1.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Published in languages that the authors were able to translate or have translated. These included English, Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.
2. Involved preschool, primary, and secondary school-aged children and adolescents (i.e., 18 years and under) who were not reported to have been diagnosed with any neurodevelopmental disorders, including acute or chronic neurological, psychological, sensory, or intellectual impairment. We chose to focus on school-aged children and adolescents, given the substantial discontinuity in bullying experiences reported between the school years versus in adulthood (e.g., Smith et al., 2003). Studies that included adults over 18 years of age were only included if they provided data separately for individuals 18 years and younger. For three studies that were published within the last decade that reported data for a sample with an age range that spanned beyond 18 years, authors were contacted requesting data involving only the individuals aged 18 years and under. Studies that investigated nontypically developing children and adolescents were included only if they reported data separately for a typically developing control group, in which case, only the control group data were included in this meta-analysis.

Figure 1

Flow of Study Reports Into the Research Synthesis



3. Administered a measure of ToM and/or empathy, as well as a measure of bullying behavior at the same time point. For studies that tested participants at multiple time points, only those that reported concurrent relations were included. For studies that tested participants at multiple time points to assess the effects of an intervention, only data from preintervention or the no-intervention control group were included if reported.

4. Studies measured cognitive and/or affective empathy using questionnaires that were completed by the participants themselves or by their parents or teachers. The majority of studies used validated questionnaires such as the Basic Empathy Scale (BES; Bryant, 1982), Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (IECA; Bryant, 1982), and IRI (Davis, 1983). ToM was most often measured using tasks that assessed children's understanding that people can have and act on mental states that differ from reality or one's own mental states (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Most studies used vignettes or tasks from Wellman and Liu's (2004) Theory of Mind scale. Tests of basic emotion recognition or identification were not included (e.g., matching the terms "happy," "sad," and "angry" to expressions shown in pictures).

5. Studies assessed participants' involvement in face-to-face bullying situations based on their past experiences through questionnaires, role nomination tasks, or observations completed by the participants themselves, adults (parents, teachers, experimenters), or their peers. Studies that measured constructs such as aggression, externalizing behaviors, violence, peer rejection, and peer victimization more broadly without a specific focus on bullying situations were excluded. Additionally, studies that examined only cyberbullying or those that presented participants with hypothetical bullying scenarios to predict how likely they would engage in certain behaviors were excluded.

6. Studies reported statistics that were readily convertible into effect sizes. Studies that reported correlations between the two key-dependent measures were only considered to be eligible where raw correlations were reported (i.e., those reporting partial correlations only were excluded). Studies that reported means and *SD*s were included, provided the study divided the sample of children into those who passed or failed the ToM task, or those who were involved in bullying situations versus those who were clearly defined as "uninvolved." Studies that collapsed children who were not involved in bullying situations at all with those who were involved as outsiders, or studies that provided an unclear definition of the "uninvolved" group (e.g., "not a bully or a victim") were excluded from the meta-analysis. Studies that categorized both bullying behavior and ToM as dichotomous variables (i.e., involved or uninvolved; passed or failed) were considered eligible provided they identified counts of participants who belonged to each group. For studies published within the last decade that did not present all necessary statistics, authors were contacted to request the relevant data ($k = 42$). We were able to obtain data for 20 of these studies.

Coding

The 128 published and unpublished studies included in the meta-analysis are identified with asterisks in the References section. The four primary moderating variables that were the focus of our meta-analysis (facet of social–emotional intelligence, measurement of social–emotional intelligence, form of bullying, source of report on bullying behavior), along with the corresponding sample sizes and effect sizes were coded. For facet of social–emotional intelligence, effect sizes based on measures that could not be strictly categorized into affective versus cognitive ToM/empathy (because the measure tapped into both affective and cognitive elements) were classified as "undifferentiated" ToM/empathy. Similarly, for form of bullying, effect sizes based on bullying measures that did not differentiate between physical versus verbal versus relational forms were classified as "undifferentiated." Secondary moderators on sample (mean age, sex, culture) and article (year of publication, publication status, grant funding) characteristics were also coded from each study.

The breakdown of information from each study is detailed in the Supplemental Data. A second, independent researcher coded 25% of the studies. Cohen's κ was calculated for each of the categorical variables (i.e., facet of social–emotional intelligence, measurement of social–emotional intelligence, form of bullying, source of report on bullying behavior, sex, culture, publication status, grant funding). Interrater reliability for each of the categorical variables was high (mean $\kappa = .94$; range = .80–1.00). Intraclass correlations were calculated for each of the continuous variables (i.e., effect size, sample size, mean age, year of publication,). Interrater reliability for each of the continuous variables was also high (mean intraclass correlation = .99; range = .98–1.00). All disagreements were discussed to reach agreement between the two coders.

Statistical Analysis

We used Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) to represent the association between children's social–emotional intelligence and bullying behaviors. In cases where this value was not provided by the study, the comprehensive meta-analysis (CMA) software (Borenstein et al., 2005) was used to calculate r values from test statistics reported. To approximate a normal sampling distribution, we further transformed the Pearson r correlations into Fisher's z correlations to use in the analyses. For ease of interpretation, we transformed the Fisher's z correlations back to Pearson r correlations for presentation of our findings.

Given that the majority of the studies included in this meta-analysis (94%) reported multiple, dependent effect sizes, it was critical that we used an analytic approach that accounted for dependency in the data. We used the three-level meta-analytic approach to calculate the overall effect size and perform moderator analyses for the associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying roles. The three-level meta-analytic approach overcomes issues of dependency by accounting for three sources of variance: sampling variance of observed effect sizes (Level 1), variance in effect sizes reported within studies (i.e., within-study variance; Level 2), and variance in effect sizes reported between studies (i.e., between-study variance; Level 3).

We followed Assink and Wibbelink's (2016) procedures to conduct a three-level meta-analysis in the R environment (Version 4.0.2; R Core Team, 2020; see Supplemental Information for R scripts used in analyses). We used the rma.mv function in the *metafor* package (Viechtbauer, 2021), which can be used to fit meta-analytic multilevel linear models. Given that our primary studies were considered to represent a random sample of the population of studies, a random-effects meta-analysis was appropriate. We specified a random-effects structure that accounted for nonindependence in the data that were grouped at the outcome level and study level. The t distribution was used to test individual regression coefficients and for calculating confidence intervals by applying the Knapp and Hartung (2003) adjustment, and the restricted maximum likelihood estimation method was used to calculate all model parameters.

Heterogeneity Analyses

To determine if the within-study variance (Level 2) and between-study variance (Level 3) were significant, two separate one-tailed log-likelihood-ratio tests were performed. These tests compared the fit of the three-level model (where variance at Levels 2 and 3 was accounted for) to the fit of a two-level model in which variance at only one of the levels was freely estimated. If there was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- and between-study levels ($ps < .001$), we used Cheung's (2014) formula to find the percentage of the total variance attributable to sampling variance, within-study variance, and between-study variance, respectively. Moderator analyses were warranted to explain the within- and/or between-study variance when heterogeneity in effect sizes was greater than what was expected based on sampling error alone.

Moderator Analyses

Three-level metaregression analyses were conducted to identify moderating variables that could explain the heterogeneity in associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional

intelligence and bullying behaviors. Before conducting the moderator analyses, all categorical variables were coded into dichotomous dummy variables, and continuous variables were centered around their mean. To determine whether each of the potential moderators had a significant effect on the overall association between social–emotional intelligence and bullying behavior, we conducted a series of omnibus tests of the null hypothesis based on the *F* distribution.

We followed up our univariate moderator analyses with multiple moderator analyses for exploratory purposes. According to Hox (2010), researchers should be selective about which moderator variables to include in multiple variable metaregression analyses, given that many study characteristics (i.e., moderators) are typically correlated. That is, the issue of multicollinearity is common in multiple variable metaregression, making it difficult to identify which moderators have meaningful impact. For this reason, in our multiple moderator analyses, we only included the moderators that were identified as significant in the univariate analyses.

Sensitivity Analyses

A leave-one-out analysis did not identify any studies that influenced the overall findings for any of the bullying roles. To check for extreme effect sizes within the studies that may disproportionately influence the results, we screened for those with standardized scores larger than +3.29 or smaller than −3.29 (Tabachnik & Fiddell, 2013). Two outliers were identified for the bully role and one for the victim role, but analyses excluding or including these effect sizes one-by-one revealed the same pattern of findings; therefore, we report our findings from analyses that included these values.

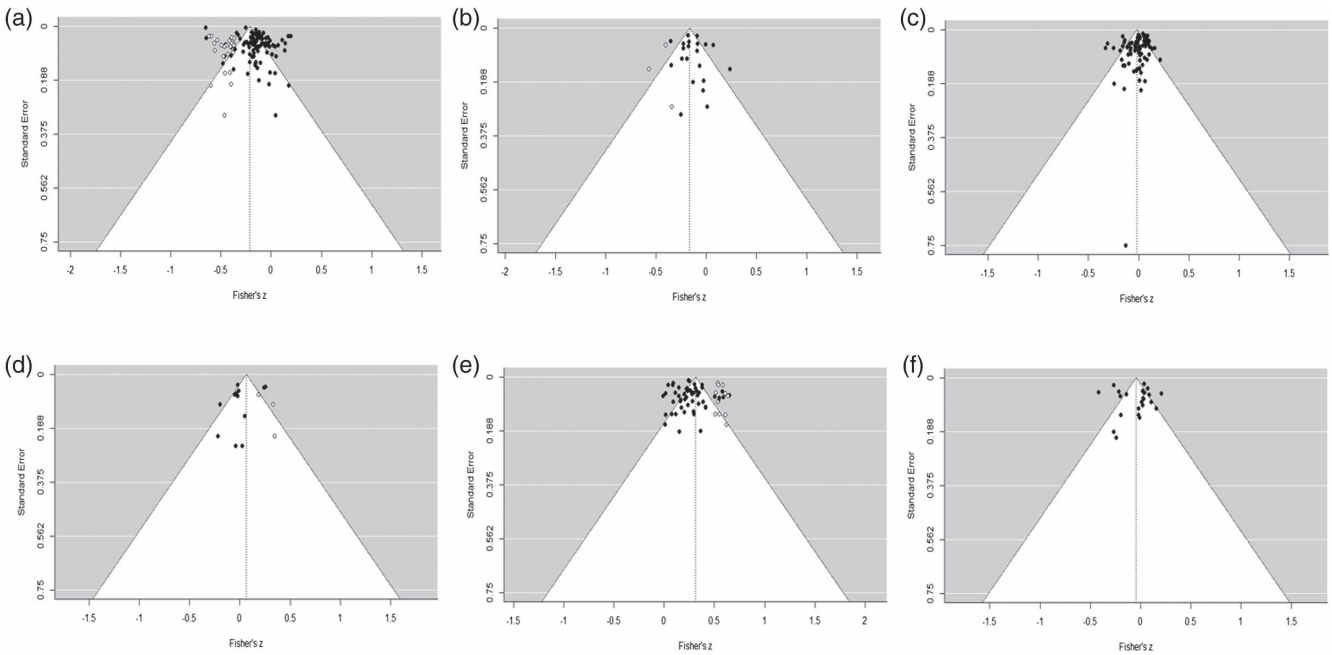
Tests for Publication Bias

Several validity threats have been identified that may lead to imprecise conclusions in both nonquantitative and meta-analytic reviews. Particularly problematic is "the file drawer problem" (Rosenthal, 1979), which refers to the fact that significant results are more likely to be published than nonsignificant results; this problem, in turn, could lead to larger estimations than the true effect size (Ferguson & Heene, 2012). Reliable tests for publication bias have not yet been developed for three-level meta-analyses (Assink et al., 2018; Fernández-Castilla et al., 2021), so we aggregated the effect sizes within each study and used methods that are established for traditional two-level meta-analyses. Using the aggregated data, we constructed a funnel plot that provides a visual representation of the effect sizes plotted against its precision. When there is publication bias, an asymmetry in the funnel plot is expected, where there are few small studies that failed to show significant results. The funnel plots for each of the six bullying roles are illustrated in Figure 2.

We used two methods to statistically test for funnel plot asymmetry. First, we used Egger's method of regressing, the standardized effect size on precision of the effect size (Egger et al., 1997). We ran the Egger's test for funnel plot asymmetry for each of the six bullying roles—the findings from these analyses suggest that none of these funnel plots had significant asymmetry. Second, we used Duval and Tweedie's (2000) trim-and-fill procedure. In this procedure, the number of missing studies contributing to the funnel plot asymmetry is estimated, and an adjusted mean effect size is calculated by imputing values from the hypothetical missing studies. The trim-and-fill procedure identified missing studies for each of the bullying roles (*k*s = 1–23 studies), with the exception of the victim

Figure 2

Funnel Plots for Publication Bias Analyses for Each of the Six Bullying Roles



Note. Funnel plots plotting the Fisher's *z* correlations against the standard error from the studies included in the meta-analysis (filled circles) and from missing studies imputed by the trim-and-fill analysis (empty circles) for the (a) bully; (b) follower; (c) victim; (d) bully-victim; (e) defender; and (f) outsider roles.

and outsider roles. When estimated effect sizes from the hypothetical missing studies were imputed in the analyses, the strength of the associations for each role increased. This evidence suggests that the findings based on our meta-analyses may be underestimations of the true effect size (i.e., overestimation from publication bias is likely not an issue). The statistical output from each of the funnel plot asymmetry analyses is provided in Supplemental Table S1. The findings from these publication bias analyses should be interpreted with caution, however, given that multiple populations of effect sizes likely exist in the data for each of the bullying roles based on the significant heterogeneity found in them (Johnson, 2021).

To supplement the findings from the funnel plot analyses, therefore, we conducted metaregression analyses to assess the potential moderating effects of publication characteristics: year of publication, publication status (published vs. unpublished), and grant funding (funded vs. unfunded). None of the publication characteristics were significant moderators of the associations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying roles (see Supplemental Table S2 for statistical output), with one exception: For the outsider role, year of publication was a significant moderator wherein studies that were published more recently reported negative associations between social–emotional intelligence and outsider behavior of greater magnitude, $B_1 = -.02$; 95% CI [−.04, −.001].

Results

Sample Characteristics

There were 187,454 children between 3 and 18 years of age who participated in the 128 studies included in our meta-analysis. The studies were conducted between 2000 and 2021 in 31 countries: Albania ($k = 1$), Argentina ($k = 1$), Australia ($k = 4$), Austria ($k = 1$), Belgium ($k = 1$), Canada ($k = 6$), Colombia ($k = 2$), Cyprus ($k = 2$), Czech Republic ($k = 2$), Egypt ($k = 1$), Finland ($k = 2$), France ($k = 1$), Germany ($k = 1$), Greece ($k = 6$), Hong Kong ($k = 2$), Italy ($k = 14$), Japan ($k = 1$), Korea ($k = 8$), Mexico ($k = 1$), the Netherlands ($k = 7$), New Zealand ($k = 1$), Norway ($k = 1$), Pakistan ($k = 1$), Poland ($k = 2$), Portugal ($k = 3$), Spain ($k = 7$), Switzerland ($k = 3$), Taiwan ($k = 2$), Turkey ($k = 3$), the United Kingdom (including England and Wales; $k = 4$), and the United States ($k = 43$). Of the studies that reported information on the ethnicity of participants, most were White (or Anglo European): 62 studies, Asian: 10 studies, Black (or African American): five studies, and Hispanic: four studies. Most children were recruited from day care centers, kindergartens, preschools, and primary schools in the cities in which data were collected. Children were from working-class families, middle-class families, and upper class families, with the majority from middle-class backgrounds.

Bullies

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying was calculated from the 260 effect sizes reported in 91 studies (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The analysis revealed a small, but significant negative relation between social–emotional intelligence and bullying, $r = -.15$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [−.18, −.12]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- (18.22%) and between- (76.45%) study levels ($ps < .001$). Thus, moderator analyses were warranted to explain the within- and between-study variance.

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses for the social–emotional intelligence and bullying association is presented in Table 1. For moderators concerning the social–emotional intelligence measure, there was a significant moderating effect of the facet of social–emotional intelligence. For both affective and cognitive ToM (as well as undifferentiated ToM), the mean effect sizes were close to zero, whereas both affective and cognitive empathy (as well as undifferentiated empathy) yielded small but significant negative mean effects. Affective empathy, $r = -.18$; 95% CI [−.21, −.14], and undifferentiated empathy, $r = -.17$; 95% CI [−.24, −.11], yielded similar effects, but only affective empathy was significantly more strongly related to bullying than cognitive empathy, $r = -.14$; 95% CI [−.18, −.09]. Additionally, there was a significant moderating effect of the measurement of social–emotional intelligence. The mean effect for studies that used performance-based tasks was virtually zero, $r = .01$; 95% CI [−.08, .09]. Studies that used self-reported questionnaires, $r = -.16$; 95% CI [−.20, −.13], and adult-reported questionnaires, $r = -.20$; 95% CI [−.35, −.04], yielded modest but significantly negative mean effects of similar magnitude.

For moderators relating to the bullying measure, form of bullying was not a significant moderator of the association of social–emotional intelligence and bullying—each form of bullying yielded small but significant negative relations. Although, source of report of bullying behavior was a significant moderator. Studies that used self-reported questionnaires, $r = -.17$; 95% CI [−.20, −.13], and adult-reported questionnaires ($r = -.14$; 95% CI [−.25, −.03], yielded modest but significantly negative mean effects of similar magnitude. Studies that relied on peer-report measures yielded the smallest effect, $r = -.07$; 95% CI [−.14, .001], which was significantly smaller than the effect size based on self-reported questionnaires.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

Mean age (in years) was a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and bullying association. The negative relation between the two constructs strengthened with age, $\beta_1 = -.01$; 95% CI [−.03, −.003]. Findings on age as a categorical variable—subdivided by level of schooling—also revealed that the effect sizes increased in magnitude from the elementary, $r = -.12$; 95% CI [−.17, −.06], middle, $r = -.16$; 95% CI [−.20, −.11], to high, $r = -.23$; 95% CI [−.30, −.15], school years. None of the other secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and bullying association (see Table 1 for all statistical output).

Multiple Moderator Analysis

When controlling for the moderating effects of age and source of bullying report, facet of social–emotional intelligence remained a significant moderator, $F(8, 251) = 3.57$, $p < .001$. Consistent with the findings from the univariate analysis, studies that examined ToM

Table 1
Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Bully Role

Moderator variable	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderators						
Facet of SEI	$F(5, 254) = 4.89^{***}$					
Affective empathy		−.18	−.21	−.14	9.07***	
Cognitive empathy		−.14	−.18	−.09	6.33***	2.44*
Undifferentiated empathy		−.17	−.24	−.11	4.99***	0.07
Affective ToM		−.04	−.16	.08	0.72	2.10*
Cognitive ToM		−.003	−.13	.13	0.04	2.56*
Undifferentiated ToM		.06	−.07	.19	0.92	3.67***
Measurement of SEI	$F(2, 256) = 8.36^{***}$					
Performance-based task		.01	−.08	.09	0.19	
Questionnaire (self)		−.16	−.20	−.13	9.44***	3.86***
Questionnaire (adult)		−.20	−.35	−.04	2.52*	2.51*
Form of bullying	$F(3, 256) = 0.04$					
Undifferentiated		−.15	−.18	−.12	8.82***	
Physical		−.15	−.24	−.06	3.30**	0.05
Verbal		−.14	−.24	−.04	2.67**	0.25
Relational		−.14	−.23	−.06	3.36***	0.13
Source of bully report	$F(2, 257) = 3.05^{*}$					
Self		−.17	−.20	−.13	9.37***	
Adult		−.14	−.25	−.03	2.52*	0.43
Peer		−.07	−.14	.001	1.93	2.47*
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 258) = 5.88^{*}$	−.01	−.03	−.003		2.43*
Age category	$F(2, 219) = 3.06^{*}$					
Elementary school		−.12	−.17	−.06	4.44***	
Middle school		−.16	−.20	−.11	6.74***	1.23
High school		−.23	−.30	−.15	5.99***	2.47*
Gender	$F(2, 257) = 0.76$					
Both		−.16	−.19	−.12	7.86***	
Male		−.14	−.21	−.08	4.45***	0.31
Female		−.12	−.19	−.06	3.82***	0.87
Culture	$F(2, 256) = 0.89$					
Western (USA)		−.18	−.24	−.12	6.04***	
Western (non-USA)		−.13	−.18	−.08	5.51***	1.33
Non-Western		−.15	−.22	−.07	3.65***	0.72

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A negative r value represents a negative association between children's social–emotional intelligence and bullying—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to lower bullying scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; ToM = theory of mind; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable; CIs = confidence intervals.
[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

yielded mean effect sizes close to zero, and affective empathy was more strongly related to bullying than cognitive empathy. Source of report of bullying behavior and age were not significant moderators when accounting for the effects of the other moderators (see Supplementary Table S3 for all statistical output).

Followers

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being a follower of bullying was calculated from the 64 effect sizes reported in 21 studies (see Supplemental Data, for a study-by-study breakdown). The analysis revealed a small, but significant negative relation between social–emotional intelligence and being a follower, $r = -.13$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [−.19, −.06]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- (60.24%) and between- (25.53%) study levels ($ps < .001$ and .01, respectively).

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses for the social–emotional intelligence and follower association is presented in Table 2. For moderators concerning the social–emotional intelligence measure, there was a significant moderating effect of the facet of social–emotional intelligence. For both affective and cognitive ToM, the mean effect sizes were close to zero, whereas both affective and cognitive empathy yielded small but significant negative mean effects. Affective empathy, $r = -.22$; 95% CI [−.29, −.15], was significantly more strongly related to being a follower than cognitive empathy, $r = -.11$; 95% CI [−.20, −.01].

Additionally, there was a significant moderating effect of the measurement of social–emotional intelligence. Studies that used self-reported questionnaires, $r = -.17$; 95% CI [−.23, −.12], yielded a modest but significantly negative mean effect. The mean effects for studies that used performance-based tasks, $r = .07$; 95% CI [−.04, .19], and adult-reported questionnaires, $r = -.15$; 95% CI [−.32, .04], were not significantly different from zero.

For moderators relating to the bullying measure, form of bullying was not examined, given that all effect sizes on the association between social–emotional intelligence and being a follower were based on studies that did not differentiate between the different forms of bullying. Furthermore, source of report of being a follower was not a significant moderator.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

Mean age (in years) was a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and follower association. The negative relation between the two constructs strengthened with age, $\beta_1 = -.02$; 95% CI[−.04, −.002]. Findings on age as a categorical variable also revealed that the effect sizes significantly increased in magnitude from the elementary, $r = -.04$; 95% CI [−.13, .06], middle, $r = -.15$; 95% CI [−.25, −.04], to high, $r = -.31$; 95% CI [−.45, −.14], school years. None of the other secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and follower association (see Table 2, for all statistical output).

Multiple Moderator Analysis

When controlling for the moderating effect of age, facet of social–emotional intelligence remained a significant moderator, $F(5, 58) = 4.90$, $p < .001$. Consistent with the findings from the univariate analysis, studies that examined ToM yielded mean effect sizes close to zero, and affective empathy was more strongly related to being a follower than cognitive empathy. Age was not a significant unique moderating variable (see Supplementary Table S4, for all statistical output).

Victims

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being victimized was

Table 2
Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Follower Role

Moderator variable	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderators						
Facet of SEI	$F(4, 59) = 5.28^{**}$					
Affective empathy		−.22	−.29	−.15	6.45***	
Cognitive empathy		−.11	−.20	−.01	2.32*	2.08*
Undifferentiated empathy		−.06	−.23	.10	0.77	1.75
Affective ToM		.07	−.07	.21	1.02	3.78***
Cognitive ToM		.08	−.08	.23	0.99	3.50***
Measurement of SEI	$F(2, 61) = 7.54^{**}$					
Performance-based task		.07	−.04	.19	1.29	
Questionnaire (self)		−.17	−.23	−.12	6.00***	3.87***
Questionnaire (adult)		−.15	−.32	.04	1.58	2.02*
Source of bully report	$F(2, 61) = 1.48$					
Self		−.17	−.25	−.09	4.03***	
Adult		−.15	−.37	.09	1.24	0.20
Peer		−.06	−.16	.04	1.19	1.71
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 62) = 4.72^{*}$	−.02	−.04	−.002		2.17*
Age category	$F(2, 49) = 4.18^{*}$					
Elementary school		−.04	−.13	.06	0.78	
Middle school		−.15	−.25	−.04	2.82**	1.55
High school		−.31	−.45	−.14	3.67***	2.82**
Gender	$F(2, 61) = 1.38$					
Both		−.17	−.26	−.07	3.38**	
Male		−.13	−.23	−.02	2.37*	0.59
Female		−.06	−.16	.05	1.13	1.52
Culture	$F(2, 61) = 0.55$					
Western (USA)		−.17	−.28	−.06	3.04**	
Western (non-USA)		−.11	−.19	−.02	2.46*	0.93
Non-Western		−.07	−.29	.16	0.63	0.78

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A negative r value represents a negative association between children's social–emotional intelligence and being a follower of bullies—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to lower follower scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; ToM = theory of mind; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable; CIs = confidence intervals.

[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

calculated from the 226 effect sizes reported in 74 studies (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The association of social–emotional intelligence and being victimized was close to zero, $r = -.02$, $p = .14$; 95% CI [−.04, .01]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- (22.46%) and between- (59.65%) study levels ($ps < .001$).

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses for the social–emotional intelligence and victim association is presented in Table 3. Both facet and measurement of social–emotional intelligence were not significant moderators of the link between social–emotional intelligence and being victimized. The form of bullying was a significant moderator of the association. Being a victim of physical bullying, $r = -.05$; 95% CI [−.10, .001], was more strongly negatively related to social–emotional intelligence compared to being a victim of verbal, $r = -.000$; 95% CI [−.05, .05], and relational, $r = .01$; 95% CI [−.04, .06], bullying. None of the different forms of bullying were significantly linked to social–emotional intelligence. Source of report of being victimized was not a significant moderator.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

Mean age of the sample (in years) was a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and victim association. The negative relation between the two constructs strengthened with age, $\beta_1 = -.01$; 95% CI [−.02, −.001]. None of the other secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and victim association (see Table 3, for all statistical output).

Table 3

Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Victim Role

Moderator variables	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderators						
Facet of SEI	$F(5, 220) = 1.93$					
Affective empathy		−.01	−.04	.02	0.63	
Cognitive empathy		−.04	−.07	−.01	2.50*	2.41*
Undifferentiated empathy		−.04	−.10	.02	1.23	0.85
Affective ToM		.06	−.03	.15	1.29	1.43
Cognitive ToM		.04	−.06	.14	0.82	0.96
Undifferentiated ToM		−.05	−.15	.05	0.99	0.81
Measurement of SEI	$F(2, 221) = 0.56$					
Performance-based task		.01	−.05	.08	0.34	
Questionnaire (self)		−.02	−.05	.004	1.66	0.93
Questionnaire (adult)		−.06	−.25	.13	0.62	0.71
Form of bullying	$F(3, 222) = 3.51$*					
Undifferentiated		−.02	−.04	.01	1.49	
Physical		−.05	−.10	.001	1.93	1.21
Verbal		−.000	−.05	.05	0.01	0.71
Relational		.01	−.04	.06	0.55	1.30
Source of bully report	$F(2, 221) = 1.60$					
Self		−.02	−.05	.01	1.51	
Adult		−.07	−.14	.002	1.93	1.37
Peer		.005	−.05	.06	0.18	0.87
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 224) = 4.36$*	−.01	−.02	−.001		2.09*
Age category	$F(2, 193) = 2.51$					
Elementary school		.01	−.03	.05	0.31	
Middle school		−.04	−.08	.001	1.93	1.59
High school		−.07	−.14	−.01	2.34*	2.15*
Gender	$F(2, 223) = 1.72$					
Both		−.01	−.04	.02	0.60	
Male		−.05	−.09	−.003	2.11*	1.44
Female		−.03	−.07	.02	1.16	0.64
Culture	$F(2, 223) = 2.74$					
Western (USA)		−.03	−.07	.01	1.32	
Western (non-USA)		.002	−.03	.03	0.14	1.14
Non-Western		−.07	−.13	−.01	2.43*	1.27

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A negative r value represents a negative association between children's social–emotional intelligence and being a victim of bullying—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to lower victim scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; ToM = theory of mind; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable.

[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).

* $p < .05$.

Multiple Moderator Analysis

Mean age of sample remained a significant unique moderator when accounting for the form of bullying, $F(4, 221) = 3.87, p = .005$. When controlling for the moderating effect of age form of bullying was not a significant moderator (see Supplementary Table S5, for all statistical output).

Bully-Victims

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being a bully-victim was calculated from the 29 effect sizes reported in 12 studies (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The association of social–emotional intelligence and being a bully-victim was zero, $r = -.000, p = 1.00$; 95% CI [−.10, .10]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at the between-study level (82.42%; $p < .001$), but not at the within-study level (0%; $p = 1.00$).

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses is presented in Table 4. Facet of social–emotional intelligence was not a significant moderator of the link between social–emotional intelligence and being a bully-victim. The moderating effects of measurement of social–emotional intelligence, form of bullying, and source of report of being a bully-victim were not analyzed due to the lack of effect sizes in all but one level of each of the moderators. For measurement of social–emotional intelligence, all but two effect sizes were based on self-report empathy questionnaires. For form of bullying, all but two effect sizes each for the physical, verbal, and relational bullying categories were based on undifferentiated bullying measures. Similarly, for source of report of being a bully-victim, only two effect sizes each contributed to the adult- and peer-report categories; the rest were based on self-report.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

None of the secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and bully-victim association (see Table 4, for all statistical output).

Multiple Moderator Analysis

Following Hox's (2010) recommendation, we did not run a multiple moderator analysis for the bully-victim role, given that none of the moderators were identified to be significant in the univariate analyses.

Defenders

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being a defender in bullying situations was calculated from the 141 effect sizes reported in 53 studies (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The analysis revealed a modest but significant positive

Table 4

Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Bully-Victim Role

Moderator variable	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderator						
Facet of SEI	$F(2, 26) = 1.24$					
Affective empathy		−.02	−.14	.10	0.39	
Cognitive empathy		−.07	−.20	.06	1.12	1.06
Undifferentiated empathy		.07	−.08	.23	0.95	0.99
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 27) = 0.22$	−.004	−.02	.01		0.47
Age category	$F(2, 22) = 1.57$					
Elementary school		−.10	−.18	−.02	2.44*	
Middle school		−.02	−.10	.05	0.69	1.41
High school		−.07	−.17	.03	1.42	0.52
Gender	$F(2, 26) = 2.27$					
Both		.07	−.04	.18	1.30	
Male		−.10	−.24	.04	1.46	1.95
Female		−.12	−.25	.03	1.69	2.13*
Culture	$F(2, 26) = 2.81$					
Western (USA)		−.09	−.23	.05	1.28	
Western (non-USA)		−.07	−.24	.10	0.87	0.15
Non-Western		.11	−.02	.23	1.80	2.14*

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A negative r value represents a negative association between children's social–emotional intelligence and being a bully-victim—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to lower bully-victim scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable; CIs = confidence intervals.

[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).

* $p < .05$.

relation between social–emotional intelligence and defending, $r = .25$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [.21, .29]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- (30.37%) and between- (61.13%) study levels (ps $< .001$).

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses is presented in Table 5. Facet of social–emotional intelligence was a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and defending association. Cognitive empathy was most weakly related to defending behavior; its mean effect, $r = .18$; 95% CI [.12, .23], was significantly smaller than that of affective empathy, $r = .26$; 95% CI [.21, .30], and undifferentiated empathy, $r = .32$; 95% CI [.23, .41]. The magnitude of the relation for all types of ToM (rs = .24–.27) did not differ significantly from the associations for all types of empathy. The measurement of social–emotional intelligence was not a significant moderator. The moderating effect of form of bullying was not analyzed given that all the studies we identified reported relations using only undifferentiated bullying measures. Source of report of being a defender was a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and defending association. Peer report of defending yielded the smallest mean effect, $r = .19$; 95% CI [.14, .25]; this association was significantly smaller than the mean effect for studies that had the participants themselves report on their defending, $r = .28$; 95% CI [.24, .33]. The magnitude of mean effects for self- report versus adult report, $r = .34$; 95% CI [.09, .54], of defending did not differ significantly from each other.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

None of the secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and defending association (see Table 5, for all statistical output).

Multiple Moderator Analysis

Facet of social–emotional intelligence and source of being a defender were identified to have significant unique moderating effects on the association between children's and adolescents'

Table 5

Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Defender Role

Moderator variable	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderators						
Facet of SEI	$F(5, 135) = 3.19^{**}$					
Affective empathy		.26	.21	.30	10.92^{***}	
Cognitive empathy		.18	.12	.23	6.42^{***}	3.63^{***}
Undifferentiated empathy		.32	.23	.41	6.57^{***}	1.17
Affective ToM		.26	.10	.42	3.13^{**}	0.07
Cognitive ToM		.24	.07	.40	2.73^{**}	0.19
Undifferentiated ToM		.27	.04	.47	2.32^{*}	0.07
Measurement of SEI	$F(2, 138) = 0.00$					
Performance-based task		.25	.12	.37	3.80^{***}	
Questionnaire (self)		.25	.21	.29	11.62^{***}	0.01
Questionnaire (adult)		.25	.04	.43	2.39^{*}	0.01
Source of bully report	$F(2, 138) = 3.51^{*}$					
Self		.28	.24	.33	11.56^{***}	
Adult		.34	.09	.54	2.68^{**}	0.45
Peer		.19	.14	.25	6.63^{***}	2.54^{*}
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 139) = 0.00$	−.000	−.02	.02		0.04
Age category	$F(2, 120) = 0.48$					
Elementary school		.22	.15	.29	6.06^{***}	
Middle school		.26	.21	.31	9.61^{***}	0.96
High school		.23	.05	.40	2.53^{*}	0.10
Gender	$F(2, 138) = 0.48$					
Both		.25	.20	.30	9.87^{***}	
Male		.26	.19	.32	7.24^{***}	0.17
Female		.23	.16	.30	6.42^{***}	0.44
Culture	$F(2, 138) = 1.05$					
Western (USA)		.24	.18	.30	7.39^{***}	
Western (non-USA)		.27	.21	.32	9.51^{***}	0.63
Non-Western		.17	.05	.29	2.76^{**}	1.00

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A positive r value represents a positive association between children's social–emotional intelligence and being a defender in bullying situations—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to higher defender scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; ToM = theory of mind; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable; CIs = confidence intervals.

[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).

$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

social–emotional intelligence and defending, $F(7, 133) = 3.30$, $p = .003$. Consistent with the findings from the univariate analysis, affective empathy was more strongly related to defending than cognitive empathy. Additionally, peer report of defending yielded a significantly smaller effect than self-report of defending (see Supplementary Table S6, for all statistical output).

Outsiders

Overall Association

The mean effect size for the overall association of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being an outsider in bullying situations was calculated from the 52 effect sizes reported in 23 studies (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The association between social–emotional intelligence and being an outsider was close to zero, $r = -.04$, $p = .20$; 95% CI [−.11, .02]. There was significant variance in effect sizes reported at both the within- (9.82%) and between- (77.31%) study levels ($ps = .02$ and $<.001$, respectively).

Primary Moderator Analyses

The statistical output from each of the primary moderator analyses is presented in Table 6. Facet of social–emotional intelligence was not a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and outsider association. There was a significant moderating effect of the measurement of social–emotional intelligence. The mean effect for studies that used adult-reported questionnaires, $r = -.25$; 95% CI [−.45, −.02], was significantly more negative compared to the mean effect for performance-based tasks, $r = .09$; 95% CI [−.13, .30], and self-reported questionnaires, $r = -.04$; 95% CI [−.11, .03]. It is important to note, however, that only four effect sizes were based on adult-reported questionnaire and all of these effect sizes originated from a single study. The moderating effect of form of bullying was not analyzed for outsiders given that all of the studies we identified reported relations using only undifferentiated bullying measures. Source of report of being an outsider was not a significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and outsider association.

Secondary Moderator Analyses

None of the secondary moderators of sample characteristics were significant moderators of the social–emotional intelligence and outsider association (see Table 6, for all statistical output).

Multiple Moderator Analysis

Univariate analyses revealed that measurement of social–emotional intelligence was the only significant moderator of the social–emotional intelligence and outsider behavior relation. Given this outcome, in line with Hox's (2010) recommendation, we did not run a multiple moderator analysis for the outsider role.

Discussion

The prevalence of children's and adolescents' experiences with bullying situations worldwide (Jimerson et al., 2010; Modecki et al., 2014), and the profound impact on their well-being (for a review, see Moore et al., 2017), have led many researchers to investigate the psychological factors that predict involvement in these situations through the various bullying roles (i.e., bully, follower, victim, bully-victim, defender, outsider). In particular, the literature on the influence of social–emotional intelligence—namely, empathy and ToM—has experienced exponential growth over the last 2 decades. In fact, of the 128 studies included in this meta-analysis, 105 were published in the last decade; of these, 61 were from the past 5 years (see Supplemental Data for a study-by-study breakdown). The present meta-analysis, therefore, provides a timely integration of these studies' findings on the associations between children's social–emotional intelligence and involvement in bullying situations.

Overall Associations

In line with the findings from previous meta-analyses on children's and adolescents' empathy and bullying roles (Ma et al., 2019; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015; Nickerson et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2019), we found a significant negative overall association between social–emotional intelligence and bullying, and a significant positive overall association between social–emotional intelligence and defending. Previous meta-analyses that have examined these two roles only synthesized across a maximum of 36 studies. In comparison, the present meta-analysis included 91 studies for bullying and 53 studies for defending. Despite the notably greater number of studies included in our meta-analysis, the magnitude of effect sizes found in our study was largely consistent with those reported previously: namely, a small association was found for bullying, and a slightly larger—but still modest—association was found for defending.

The small overall associations are not surprising given that a host of individual, social, and contextual factors are thought to jointly contribute to predicting bullying behavior (for reviews, see Cook et al., 2010; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Although previous meta-analyses have identified a handful of predictors that have yielded larger associations with bullying perpetuation (e.g., peer influence, moral disengagement), the magnitude of overall relation found between social–emotional intelligence and bullying in our meta-analysis is similar to that reported for other predictors that are theorized to be of critical importance (e.g., quality of home and school environment). Furthermore, for defending behavior, the modest association we found with social–emotional intelligence is, in fact, one of the largest overall effects reported in the meta-analytic literature on predictors of children's and adolescents' propensity to defend the victim in bullying situations (see Supplementary Table S7, for findings from previous meta-analyses on various predictors of bullying and defending).

In support of previous findings on the links between empathy and the victim and bully-victim roles (Zych et al., 2019), we found no significant overall associations with social–emotional intelligence for these two roles. The same result appeared in the current review, even though it was based on a substantially larger sample of studies (i.e., 74 vs. 23 studies for victim; 12 vs. 8 studies for bully-victim). Additionally, we examined the two roles identified in bullying situations that previous meta-analyses had not included: followers and outsiders. We found that the overall association for followers resembled that for the bullies—that is, there was a significant negative association between social–emotional intelligence and being a follower. Finally, we found

Table 6
Primary and Secondary Moderator Effects of the Association Between Children's and Adolescents' SEI and the Outsider Role

Moderator variable	$F(df_1, df_2)$	Mean r	95% CIs		t_0	t_1
			Lower	Upper		
Primary moderators						
Facet of SEI	$F(4, 47) = 2.34$					
Affective empathy		−.04	−.12	.04	0.90	
Cognitive empathy		−.001	−.09	.09	0.02	1.03
Undifferentiated empathy		−.18	−.31	−.04	2.52*	1.76
Affective ToM		.10	−.11	.30	0.99	1.25
Cognitive ToM		.15	−.08	.37	1.29	1.52
Measurement of SEI	$F(2, 49) = 3.76$*					
Performance-based task		.09	−.13	.30	0.83	
Questionnaire (self)		−.04	−.11	.03	1.16	1.15
Questionnaire (adult)		−.25	−.45	−.02	2.18*	2.73**
Source of bully report	$F(2, 49) = 1.56$					
Self		−.07	−.16	.02	1.61	
Adult		−.25	−.54	.09	1.46	1.02
Peer		.02	−.09	.13	0.33	1.27
Secondary moderators						
Mean age[a]	$F(1, 50) = 0.77$	.01	−.01	.04		0.88
Age category	$F(2, 41) = 0.04$					
Elementary school		−.07	−.20	.06	1.14	
Middle school		−.05	−.16	.06	0.93	0.25
High school		−.07	−.27	.14	0.67	0.04
Gender	$F(2, 49) = 2.57$					
Both		−.08	−.16	.01	1.81	
Male		.05	−.07	.17	0.88	1.82
Female		−.02	−.14	.10	0.34	0.78
Culture	$F(2, 49) = 0.27$					
Western (USA)		−.08	−.20	.05	1.24	
Western (non-USA)		−.02	−.12	.08	0.44	0.70
Non-Western		−.07	−.26	.13	0.66	0.08

Note. For each category of moderator variable, the reference variable is listed first. A negative r value represents a negative association between children's social–emotional intelligence and being an outsider in bullying situations—that is, higher social–emotional intelligence scores linked to lower outsider scores—and vice versa. $F(df_1, df_2)$ = omnibus test; SEI = social–emotional intelligence; ToM = theory of mind; t_0 = difference in mean r with zero; t_1 = difference in mean r with reference variable; CIs = confidence intervals.
[a] For continuous variables, we report here the regression coefficient (β_1) instead of the mean r. Given that continuous moderators were centered around their means for analysis, the regression coefficients and their significance are most informative in interpreting the direction of the effect (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

no relation between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and outsider behavior.

Moderators of the Social–Emotional Intelligence and Bullying Behavior Associations

Although several previous meta-analyses have focused on the association between children's and adolescents' empathy and bullying behavior, the relatively small number of studies included and the meta-analytic technique used (i.e., two-level meta-analyses instead of our three-level approach which accounts for both within- and between-study variance) limited the exploration of potential methodological moderators of the associations. Our meta-analyses of the overall associations for each role revealed that there was considerable heterogeneity in this literature that warranted systematic examination. Thus, in the present meta-analysis, we examined four theoretically motivated moderating variables; namely, facet of social–emotional intelligence, measurement of social–emotional intelligence, form of bullying, and source of report on bullying behavior.

Facet of Social–Emotional Intelligence

In contrast to previous meta-analyses that only focused on children's and adolescents' empathy, for the first time, we synthesized across findings on children's ToM understanding in relation to their bullying behaviors. For the three roles which revealed significant overall associations (bully, follower, and defender), we found that the strength of effects differed based on the facet of social–emotional intelligence that was under investigation.

For the two bully roles (i.e., "ringleader" bully and follower), we found a clear delineation in findings between the two types of empathy compared to the two types of ToM (see Tables 1 and 2). Specifically, consistent with findings from Zych et al.'s (2019) previous meta-analysis, we found that both affective empathy and cognitive empathy were negatively associated with bullying for both "ringleader" bullies and followers. In contrast, neither affective ToM nor cognitive ToM was related to bullying.

One possible explanation for the null associations identified between ToM and bullying is the heterogeneity in the social intelligence profiles of bullies. According to Peeters et al. (2010), some adolescents who bully do so to manipulate others and gain

social power—a combination of superior social intelligence and peer popularity appears to enable these bullies. Although, others may engage in bullying more reactively in response to perceived social threats; these adolescents seem to have slight deficits in social intelligence and low social standing. The polarization in the social intelligence of children and adolescents who bully, therefore, may have "canceled out" any meaningful associations between bullying and ToM that may exist. The possibility remains, therefore, that ToM plays a role in *at least some* children's and adolescents' engagement in bullying.

The finding that bullying was related to low empathy but not to ToM aligns with studies that have shown that psychopathic individuals and aggressive criminal offenders display deficits in empathy but not in their ability to mentalize. Specifically, these individuals fail to experience spontaneous emotional responses that are appropriate to others' situations (e.g., Meffert et al., 2013; Winter et al., 2017)—this particular inability to feel appropriate emotions in response to others is in line with our finding that the negative relation with bullying was stronger for affective relative to cognitive empathy.

Nevertheless, cognitive empathy was also negatively linked to bullying. This pattern of finding is markedly different from the null associations yielded for the two types of ToM, despite the overlap in the neural basis and proposed underlying mechanism between these three facets of social–emotional intelligence (Henry et al., 2016; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2010; Sebastian et al., 2012). In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that all the studies included in the present meta-analysis examined empathy using questionnaire measures. Cognitive empathy in this literature, therefore, represented *perceptions* of children's and adolescents' ability to understand other people's emotions (as reported by themselves or their parents and teachers). This may be quite distinct from their actual cognitive empathy capacity, as demonstrated in a recent meta-analysis that found that self-reported levels of cognitive empathy accounted for only approximately 1% of variance in behavioral assessments of this ability (Murphy & Lilienfeld, 2019; see also Wright et al., 2021). Instead of the actual capacity to understand other people's emotions, "cognitive empathy" measured via questionnaires may more strongly reflect children's and adolescents' motivations to comprehend how others are feeling (Urbonaviciute & Hepper, 2020). In other words, children and adolescents who score lowly on cognitive empathy questionnaires may lack the *inclination* to understand others' emotions, even if they are capable of doing so. In contrast, all of the studies that were included in the present meta-analysis examined ToM using performance-based tasks. The findings on ToM, therefore, are likely based on children's and adolescents' *actual* capacities to make mental state inferences.

Taken together based on this interpretation, our findings may suggest that, overall, children and adolescents who engage in bullying are neither "oafish" nor particularly "skilled manipulators" (Sutton et al., 1999a). They appear capable of understanding other people's cognitive and affective mental states, but what they may critically lack is the motivation to take other people's perspectives. These findings align with the growing evidence that bullies' personality profile is marked by callous-unemotional traits—they do not seem to care about other people's feelings (e.g., Muñoz et al., 2011). Furthermore, given that affective empathy functions to inhibit or mitigate aggression (Garandeau et al., 2021), the deficits in bullies' propensity to experience negative emotions in response to victims' distress may enable them to unhesitatingly engage in and perpetuate this antisocial behavior.

Whereas bullying was negatively related to both types of empathy but neither type of ToM, defending was related positively to all four facets of social–emotional intelligence—affective empathy, cognitive empathy, affective ToM, and cognitive ToM (see Table 5). These findings are in line with the idea that genuinely altruistic acts like defending victims of bullying (which could sacrifice the defender's well-being) may be motivated by empathy (Fredrick et al., 2020) but, additionally, a mature ToM is needed to successfully enable the act (de Waal, 2008). Indeed, a more sophisticated ToM has been linked to greater propensity and capacity to engage in prosocial behavior more generally (for reviews, see Imuta et al., 2016; Underwood & Moore, 1982). In bullying situations, a good ToM may allow children and adolescents to not only identify situations in which peer victims are in need (Gini et al., 2008), but also to devise effective strategies for thwarting the bully (Monks et al., 2005; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Furthermore, the association between ToM and defending may be mediated by peer popularity. Indeed, well-developed sociocognitive skills for understanding others' minds (for a review, see Slaughter et al., 2015) and the propensity to engage in defending behavior (Romera et al., 2019), have both been linked to greater peer popularity. On the one hand, having a better ToM may lead to greater peer popularity which, in turn, may afford children and adolescents the social power to defend victims in bullying situations (Yun, 2020). Alternatively, the act of defending victims may be rewarded by peer popularity (van der Ploeg et al., 2017) and the resulting increase in positive and constructive peer interactions, in turn, may grant children and adolescents increased social opportunities to develop more sophisticated mindreading abilities.

For the three bullying roles that were not linked to social–emotional intelligence (i.e., victim, bully-victim, outsider), facet of social–emotional intelligence was not a significant moderator either. Rather than the ability or motivation to empathize and take other people's perspectives, children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations through these roles may be predicted by other individual and social factors. For instance, victims and bully-victims typically have unfavorable perceptions of themselves (e.g., self-esteem, self-respect), display internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression), have poor relationships with their peers, and experience instability in their home and school environments (for reviews, see Cook et al., 2010; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). With respect to outsiders, it appears that situational factors play an important role in determining whether children and adolescents defend the victim versus staying uninvolved. For example, perceptions of the bullying situation being not severe enough or too severe, feeling disengaged from the situation (via lack of relational closeness with the victim, no implications to their own well-being, etc.), and low social self-efficacy may be predictive of children's and adolescents' outsider behavior (e.g., Cappadocia et al., 2012; Oh & Hazler, 2009).

Measurement of Social–Emotional Intelligence

For the victim, defender, and outsider roles, regardless of whether social–emotional intelligence was measured via performance-based tasks, self-report questionnaires, or adult-report questionnaires, the associations with empathy or ToM were of similar magnitude.

For bullying perpetuation, the type of social–emotional intelligence measure used influenced whether a significant link was found (see Table 1). Bullying was negatively related to social–emotional intelligence when measured via questionnaires, but not when indexed via performance-based tasks. As noted previously, all of the studies included in the present meta-analysis that examined empathy relied on questionnaires, whereas those that measured ToM exclusively used performance-based tasks. This overlap between facet and measurement of social–emotional intelligence meant that it was not possible to conduct multiple moderator analyses to separate the two. Therefore, we cannot conclude whether the moderating effect of measurement of social–emotional intelligence stemmed from a genuine difference in what questionnaires versus performance-based tasks reveal, or reflect empathy and ToM being genuinely distinct correlates of children's and adolescents' bullying.

Nevertheless, the finding that self- and adult-report questionnaires yielded consistent effect sizes across the different bullying roles is noteworthy, given that self- and adult-report measures of empathy are not always strongly correlated with one another at an individual-study level (Cliffordson, 2001; Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). When integrated across the many studies that contributed to this data set, self- and adult-report questionnaires of empathy may function similarly in their relations with the various bullying roles. The findings on adult-report questionnaires, however, were based on a limited number of studies; therefore, caution should be taken before definitively concluding on the equivalence of these two measures. Nonetheless, the lack of difference in the pattern of findings for self- versus adult-report questionnaires identified by our meta-analyses may be especially surprising in relation to affective empathy, which focuses on emotional states that may not always be readily visible to others. This finding may be in line with the idea that the self-presentation bias influences self-report questionnaires of empathy (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Specifically, children and adolescents who care to report themselves as empathic individuals may also be the ones who overtly display their empathic responses to others in day-to-day situations.

Form of Bullying

The form of bullying (physical, verbal, relational) did not influence the link between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and being a bully or victim. This finding was somewhat surprising since we had anticipated that stronger associations with social–emotional intelligence would emerge for relational bullying, which has been theorized to require greater social sophistication (Sutton et al., 1999a). However, these data do align with a growing literature showing that perpetrators and victims of bullying are often involved in many forms of bullying. In fact, recent findings suggest that involvement in multiple forms of bullying is not only restricted to the "traditional" forms of bullying assessed in the present study (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational), but also extend to cyberbullying (e.g., Johansson & Englund, 2021).

Although numerous studies have examined how the associations of children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence with being a bully or victim differ between the specific forms of bullying, only a limited number have investigated this association in followers, bully-victims, defenders, and outsiders. Given the insufficient number of effect sizes, in the present meta-analysis, we were not able to assess the moderating role of form of bullying for these roles. Indirect evidence from individual studies points to the value in examining this association further. For example, children and adolescents may perceive situations that involve multiple forms of bullying to be more threatening and difficult to resolve—this may impact their propensity to defend the victim or be an outsider instead (Oh & Hazler, 2009).

Source of Report on Bullying Behavior

For bullying and defending, the strength of associations with social–emotional intelligence did not differ between self- and adult-report measures of those behaviors. On one hand, this finding may be surprising, given that self-report measures of bullying behavior are prone to self-presentation biases that can yield a downplayed (for bullying and following) or exaggerated (for defending) portrayal of children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations relative to reports made by parents and teachers (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). On the other hand, the self-presentation biases that influence children's and adolescents' reports may also manifest how they overtly demonstrate or talk about their involvement in bullying situations to their parents and teachers—this factor, in turn, may explain the concordance in pattern of findings for self-report and adult report. For example, a child who feels the need to conceal their bullying behavior when asked to report on it may also be more careful not to engage in the behavior in front of their teacher or parent. By contrast, a child who is not motivated to present themselves in a better light when asked to report on their bullying behavior may unhesitatingly and blatantly engage in antisocial behavior in the presence of others. Similarly, for defending, children and adolescents who inflate their engagement in this behavior via self-report may also be the ones who make the effort to display their prosociality.

The pattern of findings based on self- and adult-report measures of bullying and defending differed markedly from those based on peer-report measures. Specifically, self- and adult-report yielded larger mean effects (more negative and positive for bullying and defending, respectively) compared to peer-report measures (see Tables 1 and 5). One possible explanation for the discrepant findings is that self- reports and adult reports of bullying behavior reflect a different construct to that tapped by peer-report measures. In particular, peer reports of bullying and defending may be more reflective of peer-relational biases (e.g., popularity, reputation) than children's and adolescents' actual behaviors in bullying situations (Bouman et al., 2012; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). These confounding factors could detract from revealing genuine associations between social–emotional intelligence and bullying behaviors.

Alternatively, the effect sizes based on peer-report measures of bullying and defending may have yielded lower correlations compared to self- and adult-report measures due to differences in measurement factors. First, peer-report measures of children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations are typically based on the number of nominations they get for the different bullying roles. This procedure thus likely reveals those who prominently take on the roles, but may not precisely differentiate between those who are more marginally involved versus not involved at all (Bouman et al., 2012). The failure to capture the variance in levels of children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations may result in weaker links with social–emotional intelligence. Second, given that the source of measurement for social–emotional

intelligence was exclusively the children and adolescents themselves or their parents and teachers (i.e., no peer-based measures of social–emotional intelligence), the stronger associations revealed via self- and adult-report measures of bullying and defending compared to peer-report measures may be largely a by-product of measurement concordance.

Secondary Moderators

In addition to the four primary moderators of theoretical interest, we explored the potential influence of secondary moderators of participant characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and culture). For both bully and victim roles (although the overall association was nonsignificant for the latter), studies with older children yielded more strongly negative mean associations between those behaviors and social–emotional intelligence (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). There are several possible explanations for these findings.

First, the lower correlations in younger children may result from the less defined categorization of bullies and victims in early childhood due to fighting and arguing being a normative part of the preschool and early school years (Raikes et al., 2013). Additionally, younger children have a more inclusive concept of "bullying," failing to discriminate between bullying and general aggression (Vlachou et al., 2011). Second, the weaker links in younger children may have been due to challenges in accurately capturing varying levels of social–emotional intelligence in early childhood, given nuances in individual differences may not become evident until they develop more complex social communication in the elementary school years and beyond (Jenkins, Mulvey, et al., 2017). Third, the moderating effect of age may also be explained by the accumulating bidirectional influence of social–emotional intelligence on being a bully or victim (and vice versa) as children and adolescents grow older. While deficits in empathy may motivate children to begin engaging in bullying (or being victimized) in the first place, the repeated involvement in the antisocial behavior can also exacerbate the social–emotional impairment (Malti et al., 2010; Stavrinides et al., 2011; Williford et al., 2016). Given that long term, repeated involvement is a defining characteristic of bullying (Olweus, 1993), it is not surprising that the associations of social–emotional intelligence with being a bully or victim strengthen across childhood and into adolescence.

Although rates of bullying may be higher in boys than girls, and boys and girls may engage in different forms of bullying (Cook et al., 2010; Craig et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2019), the strength of associations between social–emotional intelligence and the different bullying roles were consistent across gender. For both boys and girls, bullying was negatively linked to empathy but not ToM, and defending was positively linked to both empathy and ToM; being a victim, bully-victim, or outsider was not associated with social–emotional intelligence. These findings are consistent with the view that gender-based differences in levels of empathy may be the mediating factor that could explain the higher rates of bullying in boys compared to girls (Topcu & Erdu-Baker, 2012), and may also have relevance for understanding gender differences in (prosocial) defending behaviors, which girls are found to engage in more often than boys (Ma et al., 2019).

We did not find a moderating effect of culture (Western [U.S.], Western [non-U.S.], non-Western) on the relations between children's and adolescents' social–emotional intelligence and bullying behaviors. In the process of our systematic search, we found that the prevalence of bullying worldwide (Jimerson et al., 2010) was reflected in the number of studies conducted in non-English speaking countries. Therefore, we made the effort to employ speakers of multiple languages (13 in addition to English) to translate non-English documents that were identified in our search. Even with the inclusion of numerous non-English publications, which allowed our meta-analysis to capture work from 31 different countries, we found that culture was not a significant moderator. Thus, although rates of bullying can vary considerably by country (Craig et al., 2009), it might be that social–emotional intelligence is a relatively consistent correlate across cultures for each of the six bullying roles.

Limitations and Future Directions

We found a clear dissociation in the pattern of findings for empathy and ToM in relation to children's and adolescents' engagement in bullying, but we cannot firmly conclude if this finding reflects a true delineation in the constructs of empathy versus ToM. On one hand, our findings align with the growing evidence in the neuropsychological literature that point to empathy and ToM playing interrelated, yet differentiated, roles in social-cognitive functioning (e.g., Coundouris et al., 2020; Demichelis et al., 2020). On the other hand, as noted above, the divide between empathy and ToM in our meta-analytic findings may be explained by the different measurement approaches used in the primary studies to assess the constructs—namely, questionnaires for empathy and performance-based tasks for ToM. The use of distinct ways of indexing empathy versus ToM is an important limitation, not just in relation to bullying behavior, but also in the broader literature on children's and adolescents' social-cognitive development. Although we endeavored to interpret our findings by taking into consideration the different biases that likely impacted what each facet of social–emotional intelligence represented, future research that uses the same type of assessment approach is now needed to directly compare how empathy and ToM are linked to children's and adolescents' bullying. Understanding how each facet of social–emotional intelligence is associated with bullying behavior will contribute to recent calls for interventions that systematically impact the multiple cognitive and affective processes that lead to children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations (Fredrick et al., 2020; Garandeau et al., 2021).

Additionally, we found negative links between bullying and empathy, and positive links between defending and both empathy and ToM; yet given the focus of our meta-analysis on concurrent correlational data, we cannot decipher the direction of the relations. That is, individual differences in social–emotional intelligence may facilitate bullying and defending; alternatively, individual differences in experiences with bullying and defending may facilitate the development of social–emotional intelligence. Indeed, findings from longitudinal studies suggest that the influence is bidirectional (e.g., Stavrinides et al., 2011; Williford et al., 2016). Although, these studies have almost exclusively focused on empathy instead of ToM (see Fink et al., 2020), and on bullies and victims but not defenders (see Troop-Gordon et al., 2019). In light of our meta-analytic findings that ToM and empathy are equally related to defending, and given the substantial empirical evidence on the malleability of ToM (Hofmann et al., 2016), a fruitful future avenue of research

may be to investigate how ToM training can impact children's and adolescents' propensity to defend victims in bullying situations.

In the present study, we report findings using the three-level meta-analytic approach, which allowed us to include multiple effect sizes from each study while accounting for within-study dependence in the data (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016). Although this approach has been found to yield reliable findings, especially given the large number of studies included in this meta-analysis (Moeyaert et al., 2017; Park & Beretvas, 2019), it is only one of several methodological approaches to handling dependence in the data (e.g., robust variance estimation; generalized least squares). The findings from this meta-analysis, therefore, should be considered in light of the specific approach that we have taken. To address this limitation, we additionally ran our analyses using a more recently introduced method that considers both hierarchical and correlated effects structures within the data (Pustejovsky & Tipton, 2021). Even when using the version of this alternative approach which yielded the most conservative results by integrating the robust variance estimation technique to protect against model misspecifications, the broad pattern of findings was consistent with our findings based on the original three-level meta-analytic approach reported in the article (see Supplementary Tables S8–S13).

Finally, although we investigated the potential moderating influence of eight different methodological and participant factors, a large proportion of the variance in associations between children's and adolescents' bullying involvement and social–emotional intelligence remained unexplained. This finding highlights the role of a myriad of other individual (e.g., self-esteem), peer-relational (e.g., social status), and contextual (e.g., classroom bullying norms) factors that influence children's and adolescents' engagement in these behaviors (for reviews, see Cook et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2019; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Future studies should, therefore, build on research that examines how these factors and social–emotional intelligence drive children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying situations, both independently and by interacting with each other (e.g., Caravita et al., 2009; Lucas-Molina et al., 2018; Peets et al., 2015).

Conclusions

The present study provided the first meta-analytic integration of studies that have investigated the associations between children's and adolescents' bullying roles and ToM, as well as in relation to empathy. In the bullying literature to date, the conceptual delineation between empathy and ToM is often muddied, wherein findings from studies using performance-based ToM tasks are discussed in the same light as those based on empathy questionnaires (particularly with regard to cognitive empathy). The findings from the present study provide cautionary evidence for this common practice, revealing that the associations of bullying with empathy versus ToM are strikingly different: Bullies appear to be capable of mentalizing, but not so much empathizing. The associations for defending were consistent across empathy and ToM, pointing to the value in developing bystander interventions that not only target children's and adolescents' empathic proclivities, but also their abilities to understand what other people are thinking and feeling (Fredrick et al., 2020; Garandeau et al., 2021). A successful antibullying program, therefore, may be borne through motivating children and adolescents with bullying tendencies to care about other people's feelings, combined with empowering their classmates to care, comprehend, and stand up for those in need of help.

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*References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the meta-analyses.

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