



Telling, Comforting, and Retaliating: the Roles of Moral Disengagement and Perception of Harm in Defending College-Aged Victims of Peer Victimization

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Abstract

Peer victimization is prevalent among college-aged students, yet no study to our knowledge has examined various strategies of defending peers from victimization among this population. This study investigated the associations between multiple defending strategies (i.e., direct, indirect, including prosocial and aggressive defending), how moral disengagement and perception of harm were associated with multiple defending strategies, and gender differences in these associations. Participants were 372 ethnically diverse college students (18–53 years old, $M = 21.24$, $SD = 4.13$; 76% women) from a medium-sized university who watched two short videos depicting events of peer victimization and answered questions about how they would respond. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the associations between key variables, and multi-group modeling was used to assess gender differences in defending responses predicted by moral disengagement and perception of harm. Results showed that college students used both prosocial and aggressive defending strategies. Moral disengagement and perception of harm were associated in generally expected ways with defending strategies, but the associations differed across victimization scenarios and participant gender. Interventions to encourage college students to defend should stress the use of prosocial rather than aggressive strategies and be tailored to differences in defending responses based on form of victimization.

Keywords Peer victimization · Defending · Moral disengagement · Perception of harm

Peer victimization and bullying are pervasive problems among college students (Brody and Vangelisti 2016; Oh and Hazler 2009). Peer victimization occurs when individuals are targeted for aggression by their peers. It can take different forms including the receipt of physical assault, verbal aggression, or aggression aimed at harming social relationships such as gossip or social exclusion, referred to as social, relational, or indirect aggression (Buss and Perry 1992; Card et al. 2008; Forrest et al. 2005). Bystanders to peer victimization have the

potential to stop peer victimization situations from continuing and decrease the negative impact for victimized youth (Salmivalli et al. 1996). In Salmivalli et al.'s (1996) original study of different roles associated with peer victimization, defending entailed prosocial as well as aggressive forms of defending. In a reiteration of the study with a revised scale, defending was considered purely prosocial (Salmivalli et al. 1998). Since then, almost all studies of defenders of peer victimization have characterized these individuals as prosocial, striving to help those who are victimized, albeit through a variety of strategies that range from direct defending such as targeting the aggressor, to passive defending that focuses on comforting or getting help from an authority for the victim (Pronk et al. 2013). However, while growing evidence suggests that defenders may aim to help peer victims through prosocial and aggressive means (Meter 2015), evidence showing whether both forms of defending exist among college students is missing. The only previous study examined defending in a college sample focused solely on men and investigated just one defending response (e.g., McCreary

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2012). Therefore, little is known regarding the various strategies defenders employ across different forms of victimization they witness, and whether there are gender differences.

Peer Victimization Among College-Aged Students

Although the rate of bullying and peer victimization peaks in adolescence, it remains quite prevalent in higher education. In one study of over 1000 college-aged participants, almost 25% had witnessed students being bullied by their peers (Chapell et al. 2004). Among another sample of over 2000 of college freshman, 43% reported experiencing bullying at school, which could include traditional forms of bullying as well as cyberbullying and being targeted by negative peer pressure and practical jokes the target did not find funny (Rospenda et al. 2013). These authors found that those who were bullied as freshmen were more likely to engage in alcohol consumption and problematic drinking, even after accounting for other stressors. A negative association between bullying victimization and academic performance is well-documented among youth before they reach college age (Delprato et al. 2017; Ladd et al. 2017; Nakamoto and Schwartz 2010). In an experimental study in which college students were manipulated to feel socially excluded by being told they would end up alone in life, performance on a GRE-type test and ability to perform a recall task were negatively affected (Baumeister et al. 2002). The authors suggested that feelings of social exclusion may impair individuals' ability to engage in active reasoning.

Understanding the role college students can potentially have in curbing the effects of each other's peer victimization is therefore vital. Although research on this topic is limited, among college students who had been bullied prior to college, friend social support during college buffered the effect of prior bullying on anxiety over time (Reid et al. 2016). Research in adolescence also demonstrated that victims who were defended were better adjusted and reported less depression than those who were not defended (Jones et al. 2015; Ma and Chen 2017; Sainio et al. 2010). Because of the prevalence of bullying among college students and the possible negative effects on adjustment to college, it is important to understand which factors predict students supporting their victimized peers in helpful, prosocial ways and which individuals may be at risk for defending their victimized peers in ways that continue the cycle of aggression among college students. This study investigated associations between defending strategies college students report they would use in response to viewing videos of two scenarios: one depicting physical aggression and one relational aggression. We investigated how moral disengagement and perception of harm are associated with different strategies of defending and the gender differences in these associations.

Defending in Peer Victimization

Bystander Theory According to the theory of the bystander effect, if bystanders are to intervene, they (a) must recognize the event of another in distress, (b) interpret it as an emergency, and then (c) decide that intervening is their responsibility (Latané and Darley 1968). Previous research has shown that defending peer aggression is not necessarily predicted by a bystander's interpretation of the situation as an *emergency*, but instead is predicted by the perception of the victim's distress in these situations (Pronk et al. 2014). Bystanders who report emotional arousal and show signs of physiological arousal when witnessing peer victimization are more likely to defend (Barhight et al. 2013). The last piece of bystander theory is that once individuals notice another in distress and interpret it as a potentially harmful situation, if not indeed an emergency, they must take personal responsibility for helping (Latané and Darley 1968; Meter and Card 2015).

Multiple Strategies of Defending Before educators develop successful interventions targeting peer victimization among college students, they need to understand the different strategies of defending adults may endorse. Some defenders help in a prosocial yet non-aggressive way, such as standing up to the aggressor assertively, while others indirectly help victims though comforting them or getting help on their behalf, such as alerting an authority (Bellmore et al. 2012; Pronk et al. 2013). In a study of children and young adolescents, Hawkins et al. (2001) recorded detailed information about the target of the defender's behavior during peer victimization situations (i.e., the victim, the aggressor, or both), and whether defenders used assertion or aggression in defending the victim. This study, along with the original participant role study (Salmivalli et al. 1996), provided early evidence that some individuals engage in aggressive behavior as a means of defending. A previous study including a sample of early-to-late adolescents found that defenders may yell at the aggressor (i.e., verbal aggressive defending) or gossip about the aggressor (i.e., relational aggressive defending, Meter 2015). Another study differentiated between victim-oriented and bully-oriented defending, comparing those who supported victims in a friendly way or through getting help from those who "chased the bully away." The authors concluded that there is evidence that bully-oriented defending, in their case, 10-year-olds who chase away a bully, does not reflect the prosocial interventions adults may condone, although a subgroup of high-status girls did use this form of defending to fulfill prosocial goals (Reijntjes et al. 2016). How these different forms of defending relate among college students has not been established.

Factors That Affect Defending

Previous research has established many predictors of defending (Meter and Card 2015). We next describe three of these factors: moral disengagement, perception of harm, and forms of victimization. Because the literature on defending of peer victimization includes mostly adolescent samples, we cite this research, with the assumption that the underlying theory should hold across development.

Moral Disengagement Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory mechanism that involves disengaging immoral conduct from moral self-sanctions. This process involves suspending (or inhibiting) one's moral obligations, often because it allows the individual to engage in morally questionable thoughts and behaviors. There are different mechanisms of moral disengagement including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, and dehumanization (Bandura et al. 1996). Those who put their wellbeing at risk in order to defend victimized peers are thought to engage less in moral disengagement. In general, defenders score lower on scales of moral disengagement (Thornberg et al. 2015), whereas adolescents and young adults who increasingly morally disengage over time are more aggressive (Paciello et al. 2008). Adolescents who display less moral disengagement have more positive attitudes towards defenders (Almeida et al. 2009). In a study of college students, individuals with higher levels of moral disengagement were less likely to defend using prosocial strategies (McCreary 2012). Despite these important findings, there is limited research on whether moral disengagement is *similarly* negatively associated with all defending strategies or whether it is *differentially associated* with prosocial and aggressive defending during young adulthood. If morally disengaged college students are willing to defend, yet in a socially unacceptable way (i.e., defend aggressively), then intervention should be focused less on how to prompt defending and more on how to discourage aggressive defending and encourage prosocial defending. To our knowledge, there has been no investigation of the effect of moral disengagement on different forms of defending simultaneously.

Perception of Harm The potential defender's perception of harm may be associated with defending, and this perception may be a driving motivation for defending, according to the bystander effect. If an individual does not believe that the incident they are witnessing poses a meaningful threat to the victim, they may not feel a need to intervene (Latané and Darley 1968). Alternatively, ambiguous situations in which the bystander is ambivalent about the potential for harm to the victim may undermine individuals' intentions to defend that person. In a sample of adolescents, the perceived severity

of the incident was linked to whether or not one would defend, but not to the form of defending (Bastiaensens et al. 2014). In another adolescent sample, awareness of the victim's severe distress was associated with defending (Pronk et al. 2014). It is not yet clear if perception of harm is associated with multiple forms of defending strategies among college-aged students.

Forms of Victimization Whether an individual defends may also be dependent on the form of harassment a victim is experiencing. Oh and Hazler (2009) found that victims were less likely to be defended if multiple types of victimization co-occurred. Pozzoli et al. (2012) found that direct defending (e.g., telling the bully to stop) was common during physical victimization incidents whereas indirect defending (e.g., comforting the victim) was prevalent in episodes of relational victimization (Pozzoli et al. 2012). Ma and Chen (2017) found that direct defending was employed more commonly in reaction to general victimization, whereas indirect defending by comforting the victim was more likely to be reported in response to relational victimization. These studies, however, did not include aggressive forms of defending in their investigations. The current study examines if predictors of aggressive and other forms of defending vary across forms of victimization witnessed to shed light on how to refine intervention about defending across victimization contexts.

Gender Differences Among Defenders

Across almost all studies of defending, female participants have been found to defend more than male participants (e.g., Espelage et al. 2012; Pozzoli et al. 2012; Pöyhönen et al. 2012). Salmivalli et al. (1996) suggested that when girls act prosocially towards victimized peers, they demonstrate stereotypical feminine characteristics of caretaking and helping. Girls also report believing that their peers expect them to engage in defending behavior more so than do boys (Rigby and Johnson 2006), suggesting that defending may be a gender-typical and expected behavior among girls. The selection of a defending strategy might reflect the defender's awareness of the risk of inadvertently eliciting harassment directed towards them. Direct defending, and in particular aggressive defending such as yelling at an aggressor to try to make them stop victimizing a peer, may put the defender at risk of being the aggressor's next victim. With this in mind, defending strategies might vary as a function of gender. Men, who tend to be physically larger and stronger, may be more likely to engage in more aggressive or assertive defending, particularly when an aggressor is also a man. The studies mentioned above demonstrated gender differences in specific defending strategies, yet it is unknown whether associations between predictors of defending and defending strategies are the same for men and women. This study also addresses this gap.

Current Study

To increase knowledge about defending strategies endorsed among a college sample in an important developmental context, this study aimed to fulfill three research aims: First, we investigated the existence of multiple forms of defending and the associations between them among a college sample. Direct defending includes verbal, assertive strategies such as telling the aggressor to stop in a non-aggressive way. Indirect defending strategies include getting help from others or comforting the victim. Aggressive defending could take the form of over aggressive defending, such as yelling at the aggressors, or relational aggressive defending, such as spreading gossip about the aggressors. Previous research has demonstrated that adolescents defend using direct prosocial strategies, indirect defending strategies, and aggressive defending strategies (Bellmore et al. 2012; Meter 2015; Pronk et al. 2013) but it was not clear if these defending forms exist among college-aged defenders. Understanding the existence of both positive and negative forms of defending is crucial because it expands defending literature by depicting a full picture of possible arrays of strategies college defenders may endorse. We also expected some of these defending forms to be associated such that the prosocial strategies would be positively associated, the aggressive strategies positively associated, and the prosocial and aggressive strategies negatively associated with each other. Correlations between defending strategies will illuminate where groups of behaviors may be encouraged or discouraged. The second goal of this study was to assess the effects of moral disengagement and perception of harm on the defending strategies endorsed. We expected that moral disengagement would be negatively associated with the prosocial defending strategies and positively associated with the aggressive defending strategies and that perception of harm would be positively associated with all defending strategies. Last, we explored gender differences in the proposed models.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 372 college students from a medium-sized university outside a large metropolitan city in the southern United States. They were recruited through the University SONA system. Some introductory undergraduate Psychology classes gave students the option to participate in research studies for credit through this system. Because some of these classes are general education classes open to all students, the sample was not restricted to Psychology majors. There were 97 freshmen, 68 sophomores, 122 juniors, and 85 seniors ranging in age from 18 to 53 ($M = 21.24$, $SD =$

4.13). The sample was 76% women and ethnically diverse (34% Asian, 30% White, 19% Hispanic/Latino, 7% Black or African American, 5% bi- or multi-racial, 3% Middle Eastern, and 1% Native American). Participants received class credit for participating.

Procedures and Measures

All participants provided their informed consent before participation. The University Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. This study was conducted in compliance with APA ethical standards in the treatment of human participants. Participants watched two short videos (physical victimization scenario [PVs] less than 30 s, relational victimization scenario [RVs] less than 60 s). The PVs depicted an emerging adult man being pushed around by same-aged men. The target is minding his own business when a group of three others begin verbally taunting and shoving the target. The scene takes place in a public park, and there are passersby present in the background of the scene. The RVs depicted an emerging adult woman being verbally and socially harassed by another woman and some assisting bystander peers in the classroom context. The scene begins with a verbal altercation outside of a classroom door, and when the target enters the classroom, the ringleader aggressor and others laugh at and make mean faces at the target. There was no sound in either of the videos to control for the potentially confounding difference in background noise between the two videos. Both videos were chosen due to their naturalistic settings in places where bystanders were present. After viewing the videos, participants responded to a number of questions concerning their perceptions of the victim in the video, and how they might respond in real life.

Defending Behavior Participants were asked to imagine that what they witnessed in the video happened in their own neighborhood or school and to respond on a scale from 0 to 4 whether they agreed they would or would not engage in a number of bystander behaviors: direct defending (2 items, tell the aggressors to stop, tell the aggressors it's not right to treat people like that), indirect defending (1 item, comforting the person), relationally aggressive defending (1 item, gossiping about the aggressors), or verbal aggressive defending (1 item, yelling at the others). These items were modeled after items used in previous research (blinded for peer review; Pronk et al. 2013). Participants rated on a scale from 0 to 4 from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* whether they endorsed each statement. For direct defending in the PVs, $\omega_h = .75$, and for the RVs, $\omega_h = .79$ (McDonald's omega used as a measure of internal consistency due to the use of latent variables in the models; McDonald, 1999).

Moral Disengagement Participants self-reported moral disengagement using a version of Bandura et al.'s (1996) scale, adapted for college students by changing the language from “kids” to “people.” Subscales (moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting the consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization, 4 items each, 0 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) served as indicators of the moral disengagement latent construct. For both scenarios, $\omega_h = .86$.

Perception of Harm Participants rated on a scale from 0 to 4 from *definitely not* to *definitely yes* whether the men in the video meant to physically or emotionally harm the PVs victim and whether the woman and peers meant to physically or emotionally harm the RVs victim.

Plan of Analyses

First, two confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were used to assess the model fit of the latent constructs of multiple forms of defending for each scenario. This analysis verified if a measurement model of multiple forms of defending fit the data well before proceeding to examine the regressive paths. Another CFA inclusive of manifest and latent variables was used to test correlations among defending strategies and predictors. Next, two structural equation models (SEMs) were used to test, for each peer victimization scenario separately, associations between moral disengagement, perceived harm to the victim, and defending strategies. Last, we tested gender differences in these associations using multi-group modeling in two additional SEMs. The χ^2 difference test assessed measurement invariance in differences in associations between women and men in the model (Little 2013); CFI > .90 and RMSEA < .08 were considered acceptable fit (Little 2013). Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle the less than 2% missing data on any of the variables. We tested the models with a more traditional college-aged student subsample by removing 13 participants over the age of 30 ($N = 359$, $M = 20.7$, $SD = 2.54$) and found a similar pattern of results; we chose to present the results with our larger, more inclusive sample.

Results

The Existence of Multiple Forms of Defending and the Associations Between Them

Defending Physical Victimization The loadings for the two-indicator construct in the PVs were equated to assist in model convergence. The CFA robust model fit for the latent constructs was satisfactory ($\chi^2 (35) = 89.47$, $p < .01$, CFI = .95,

RMSEA = .07 [.05, .09], scaling correction factor = 1.18). Table 1 provides the correlations between constructs. Direct prosocial defending was positively associated with the two indirect prosocial defending strategies, negatively related to relationally aggressive defending, and positively related to verbal aggressive defending. The two indirect defending strategies were positively associated with each other, negatively associated with relationally aggressive defending, and positively associated with verbal aggressive defending. Relationally aggressive defending was negatively associated with verbal aggressive defending.

Defending Relational Victimization The CFA robust model fit for the RVs was satisfactory ($\chi^2 (34) = 88.40$, $p < .01$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07 [.05, .09], scaling correction factor = 1.21). Correlations between variables from the RVs are available in Table 1. Direct defending was positively associated with the two indirect defending strategies, telling an authority and comforting the victim, and verbally aggressive defending, and was negatively associated with relationally aggressive defending. The two indirect forms of defending were negatively related to relationally aggressive defending and positively related to verbally aggressive defending. Verbally and relationally aggressive defending were not significantly associated.

Associations Between Moral Disengagement, Perception of Harm, and Defending Strategies

Physical Victimization Scenario The robust model fit of the regression SEM was satisfactory ($\chi^2 (75) = 159.01$, $p < .01$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .05 [.05–.07], scaling correction factor = 1.09). Moral disengagement was negatively related to indirect defending through comforting, but positively related to relationally aggressive defending. Those who perceived the situation as more harmful were more likely to report they would defend using indirect defending by comforting the victim and relationally aggressive defending. Other associations in the PVs model were not significant. Results are reported in Fig. 1, but note gender moderation reported below.

Relational Victimization Scenario The RVs SEM robust fit was satisfactory (see Fig. 2). All loadings were significant at the $p < .01$ level. Significant regressive paths are depicted in Fig. 2. Those who endorsed moral disengagement to a higher degree reported less agreement with using direct or indirect defending strategies and more agreement with using relationally aggressive strategies of defending. Those who perceived more emotional or physical harm reported more agreement with using direct defending or indirect defending through comforting the victim, but this factor did not affect agreement with relationally aggressive strategies. Neither moral

Table 1 Correlations between latent and observed variables for each scenario

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Physical victimization scenario						
1. Direct defending	1.00					
2. Indirect, tell authority	.27**	1.00				
3. Indirect, comfort	.45**	.36**	1.00			
4. Relational aggressive defending	-.22**	-.11*	-.15*	1.00		
5. Verbal aggressive defending	.72**	.19**	.30**	-.15**	1.00	
6. Perception of harm	-.01	.05	.19**	.09*	-.02	1.00
7. Moral disengagement	-.07	-.10	-.15*	.26**	.04	-.01
Relational victimization scenario						
1. Direct defending	1.00					
2. Indirect, tell authority	.37**	1.00				
3. Indirect, comfort	.43**	.32**	1.00			
4. Relational aggressive defending	-.37**	-.23**	-.11*	1.00		
5. Verbal aggressive defending	.43**	.21**	.20**	-.02	1.00	
6. Perception of harm	.20**	.07	.14*	-.07	.07	1.00
7. Moral disengagement	-.30**	.19**	-.26**	.28**	.09	-.08

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

disengagement nor perception of harm significantly predicted verbally aggressive defending.

Gender Differences

Physical Victimization Scenario Gender differences in estimated regression paths were tested for PVs model. First, measurement invariance across groups was tested. Loading invariance held across groups (see Table 2 for fit statistics); however, when regression estimates were equated across groups, there was a significant change in X^2 from when the regressions were allowed to be freely estimated within each group. The model with women’s data only fit as follows: $X^2(75) = 124.09$, $p < .01$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05 [.03, .07], scaling correction factor = 1.08. All loadings were significant at the $p < .01$ level. Moral disengagement negatively predicted direct defending ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$), indirect defending by telling an authority ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$), and indirect defending by comforting the victim ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$). Moral disengagement positively predicted relationally aggressive defending ($\beta = .38$, $p < .01$). Perception of more emotional or physical harm was positively associated with comforting the victim ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$).

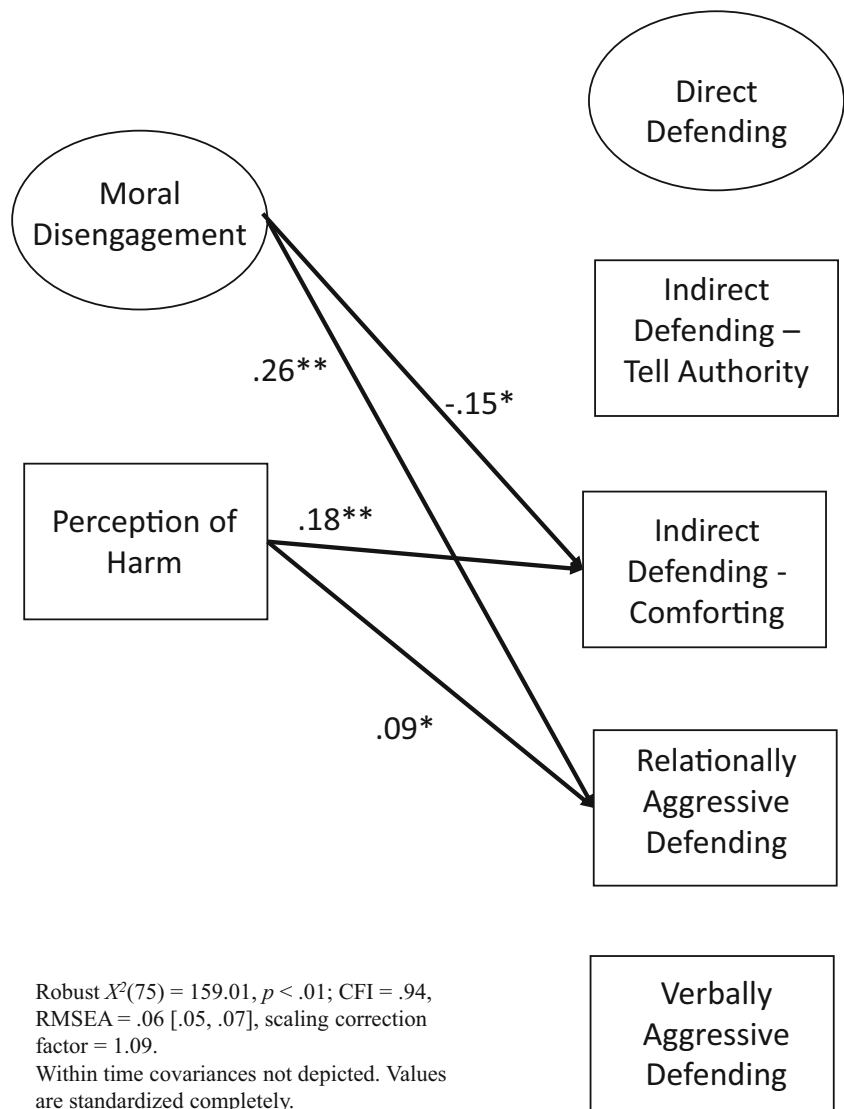
The model with men’s data only fit as follows: $X^2(75) = 93.23$, ns , CFI = .95, RMSEA = .05 [.00, .08], scaling correction factor = .97. All loadings were significant at the $p < .01$ level. For men, the only significant association was moral disengagement predicting verbally aggressive defending ($\beta = .25$, $p < .05$). We next equated each significant path between groups independently to assess whether each regression coefficient was significantly different between women and men. There was a significant difference between women and men in the negative association between moral disengagement

and direct defending (change $X^2(1) = 8.09$, $p < .01$), with the association non-significant for men. There was no significant difference between women and men in the association between moral disengagement and telling an authority (change $X^2(1) = 3.13$, ns). This association was negative for women and non-significant for men, but the regression coefficients are not significantly different from each other.

There was a significant difference between women and men in the association between moral disengagement and comforting the victim (change $X^2(1) = 5.96$, $p < .05$); the association was negative for women and non-significant for men. We also tested for gender differences in the association between perception of harm and comforting the victim, which was significant for women, but not for men. The X^2 difference test suggested that the estimates for women and men were not significantly different from each other (change $X^2(1) = .32$, $p = .57$). Last, we tested whether there was a difference between women and men in the association between moral disengagement and verbally aggressive defending, which was only significant in the men’s model. There was a significant difference in X^2 between the unconstrained and constrained models (change $X^2(1) = 6.80$, $p < .01$), suggesting this association was only significant for men.

Relational Victimization Scenario For the RVs, strong invariance held across gender groups (see Table 2 for fit statistics). When regression estimates were equated across groups, there was no significant difference in chi-square from when they were estimated freely within each group, indicating no significant differences in associations between predictor and outcomes for women and men in the RVs model.

Fig. 1 Results from the physical victimization scenario SEM, standardized completely



Discussion

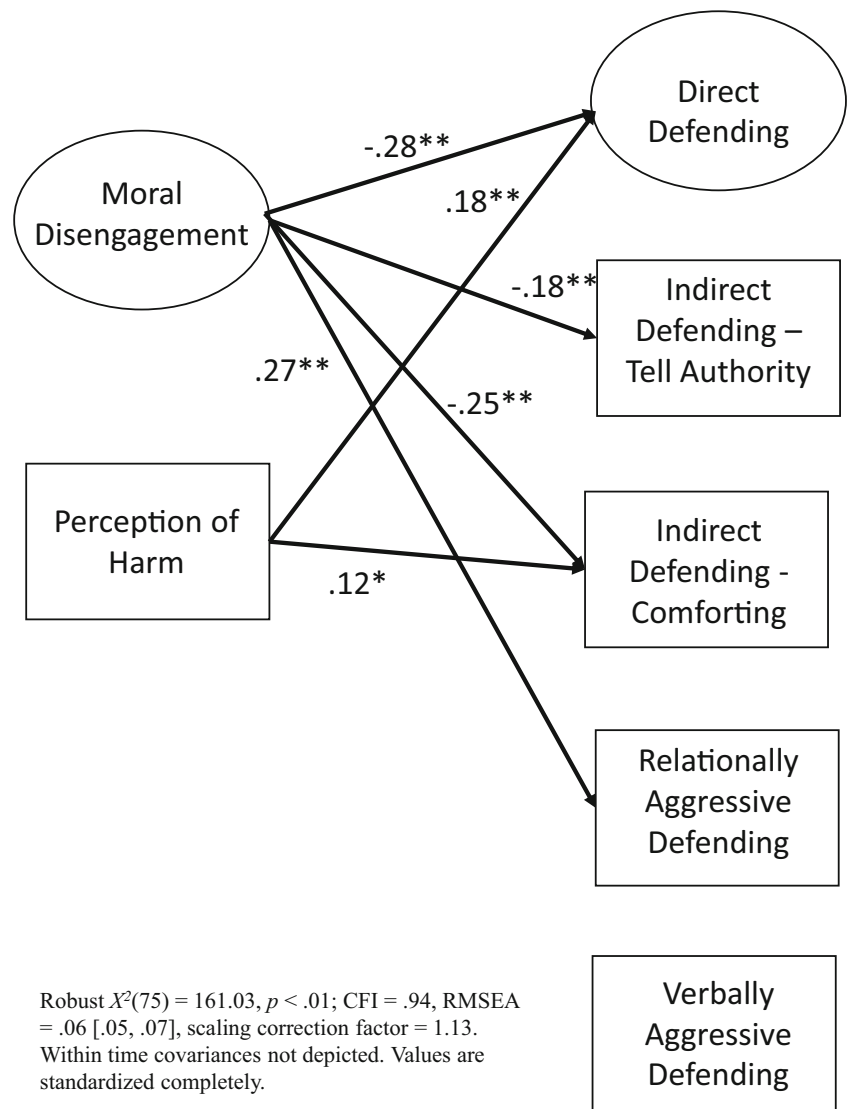
The Existence of Multiple Forms of Defending and the Associations Between Them

Our results suggest that multiple defending strategies, inclusive of both prosocial and aggressive defending strategies, are enacted by college-aged students. This result echoes the previous research findings in the adolescent literature (Bellmore et al. 2012; Meter 2015; Pronk et al. 2013) and suggests that both prosocial and aggressive forms of defending may be carried over from adolescence to the college years. Although most defending is considered to be prosocial, this study provides additional evidence that some individuals endorse aggressive defending, fighting aggression with both verbal and relational aggressions (Hawkins et al. 2001; Salmivalli et al. 1996). This result is important to consider given most

interventions conceptualize defending as a universally positive action. More attention needs to be paid to direct bystanders to defend prosocially and to dissuade defending behaviors that may continue the vicious cycle of aggression.

Regarding the associations among defending strategies, our results are consistent with our hypotheses and showed that prosocial defending strategies are positively associated with each other and negatively associated with relationally aggressive strategies. College-aged defenders who were prone to defend directly or indirectly in socially acceptable ways were also less likely to endorse relationally aggressive defending, such as gossiping about the aggressor. Notably, the relation between verbally aggressive defending and the other defending strategies countered our expectations. In both victimization scenarios, verbally aggressive defending was positively associated with the prosocial defending strategies and negatively associated with relationally aggressive defending.

Fig. 2 Results from the relational victimization scenario SEM, standardized completely



Verbal aggression among college-aged individuals seems to be utilized in conjunction with other prosocial defending strategies. Although aggressive, this verbal assault on an aggressor may be perceived as a useful and perhaps necessary reaction to another’s physical or social harm (see also Hawkins et al. 2001; Salmivalli et al. 1996).

Drawing attention to the event by yelling at the perpetrators, as morally disengaged men responded they would do in response to the physical victimization scenario, may be perceived as more effective than some prosocial techniques such as attempting to comfort an individual, as recorded in some of the adult literature when victimization off campus was examined (Ferreira et al. 2016). The sizeable correlation between direct defending and aggressive verbal defending in the physical victimization scenario suggests that participants who engage in assertive defending may perceive verbal aggression as just as acceptable of a way to confront an aggressor to directly intervene on behalf of a victim,

in that those who endorsed both strategies to a higher degree tended to be the same individuals.

Associations Between Moral Disengagement, Perception of Harm, and Defending Strategies

Moral Disengagement In line with our expectation was the negative association between moral disengagement and direct defending in the RVs. Given that relationally aggressive episodes are often more socially sophisticated and nuanced than physical aggression episodes, it is not surprising that moral disengagement predicted less direct defending. Moral disengagement is characterized by distancing oneself from moral responsibility and a victim’s plight (Bandura et al. 1996). If morally disengaged individuals are less likely to empathize with a victim, we might expect that a situation in which the

Table 2 Robust model fit of invariance testing across women and men

	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	CFI	RMSEA and 95% CI	Scaling correction factor	Change in χ^2	Change in χ^2 df	Passed?
Physical victimization scenario									
Configural invariance	204.59	135	< .01	.95	.05 [.04, .07]	1.04	–	–	–
Loading invariance	217.17	147	< .01	.95	.05 [.04, .07]	1.06	13.33	12	Yes
Strong invariance	235.73	155	< .01	.94	.05 [.04, .07]	1.05	18.87	8	No
Variances/covariances (compared to loading invariance)	245.15	182	< .01	.94	.05 [.04, .07]	1.07	27.48	15	Yes, move on to SEM
SEM (loading invariance)	233.04	163	< .01	.95	.05 [.03, .06]	1.04	–	–	–
SEM with regression equality constraints	254.56	173	< .01	.95	.05 [.04, .06]	1.03	22.18	10	Significant differences between groups
Relational victimization scenario									
Configural invariance	215.88	132	< .01	.94	.06 [.05, .08]	1.08	–	–	–
Loading invariance	233.21	146	< .01	.94	.06 [.04, .07]	1.08	17.61	14	Yes
Strong invariance	247.77	154	< .01	.93	.06 [.04, .07]	1.08	14.69	8	Yes
Variances/covariances (compared to strong invariance)	263.21	169	< .01	.93	.06 [.04, .07]	1.08	15.20	15	No, groups equal
SEM (strong invariance)	274.32	171	< .01	.93	.06 [.05, .07]	1.08	–	–	–
SEM with regression equality constraints	283.08	181	< .01	.93	.06 [.04, .07]	1.07	7.3	10	Groups equal

victimization itself may be ambiguous would not elicit a direct or prosocial response from these individuals.

However, it was interesting that highly morally disengaged individuals nonetheless exhibited a willingness to defend the victim, albeit employing an aggressive strategy. We would expect those who morally disengage not to defend at all, in line with previous research (Meter and Card 2015); however, prior studies did not measure aggressive defending, a form of defending that would require one to disengage from moral self-sanctions in order to successfully engage in the behavior. In both peer victimization scenarios, moral disengagement predicted the likelihood of defending the victim via relationally aggressive behavior and a low likelihood of defending by providing comfort to the victim, although this was true only for women in the PVs. In the scenario depicting relational victimization, in particular, moral disengagement negatively predicted seeking help from an authority figure or directly confronting the aggressor in a prosocial way. These findings are in line with previous research suggesting that moral disengagement negatively predicts prosocial forms of defending in both youth and adults (McCreary 2012; Obermann 2011).

Perception of Harm Perception of harm positively predicted indirect defending through comforting the victim for women in the PVs scenario and among men and women in the RVs scenario, but it predicted direct defending *only* in the scenario depicting relational victimization. Although direct defending may be crucial to disrupting physical victimization, the

bystanders' perception of harm might directly relate to concerns about their own risk of defending. Perception of harm was not related to direct or indirect defending in the PVs in our sample. This finding suggests that other factors excluded from this study may play crucial roles in eliciting direct help in an episode of physical victimization (e.g., defending self-efficacy; Barchia and Bussey 2011).

Gender Differences

When evaluated in separate models for women and men, the perception of harm in the PVs was a focal predictor for women's defending, but not for men's. Women may feel less equipped to defend a victim of physical victimization unless they perceive a serious threat to the victim. Interestingly, no gender differences were found in the RVs. This finding suggests that gender differences in defending may be contingent upon the form of victimization witnessed.

Other existing gender differences emerged in the PVs model. For women, moral disengagement predicted less involvement in all of the prosocial defending strategies, and more relationally aggressive defending. In contrast, moral disengagement among men was only related to verbally aggressive defending, an interesting finding considering men are more willing to engage in verbal aggression in general (Verona et al. 2008). The gender differences in responding to physical aggression might be a result of the higher prevalence of physical aggression among males (Card et al. 2008). Since moral

disengagement involves the suspension of moral self-sanctions, perhaps, it is easier for women to dissociate from involvement in physical aggression, leading them instead to engage in relational aggression towards the aggressor, without attempting to deal with the aggressive event itself. Such results indicate that interventions to promote prosocial defending among those who morally disengage should target different types of aggressive strategies for women and men bystanders who witness physical victimization.

Limitations

These findings must be considered in light of methodological limitations. Participants were not exposed to real-world victimization scenarios, so their endorsement of particular defending strategies is purely hypothetical. Although these findings provide insight into the association between moral disengagement, the perception of harm, and intended defending strategies, rates of actual defending behaviors might be different. Adults might be more likely to enact defending strategies in a real-world situation compared to watching a video of a hypothetical scenario, as the salience of the experience might be more powerful. Alternatively, they might be less likely to enact defending strategies, as the personal risk of defending the victim (be it a physical risk in the PVs or the social consequences of inserting oneself into the RVs) might outweigh the benefit of enacting the behavior that follows an individual's hypothetical intention to help a victim.

When adolescents read vignettes about another's victimization, 89% of participants reported they would help the victim, but only about 52% of the participants defended in real peer victimization situations (Ma and Bellmore 2016). Witnessing victimization can be a highly arousing experience, but whether that arousal motivates someone to defend varies. It is difficult to anticipate how the perception of harm might affect individuals' defending strategies in a naturalistic context. To our knowledge, there have been no observational studies of defending of peer victimization among college students. There is a need to investigate how often the behaviors the participants reported they would enact are actually used when they witness peer victimization in their own lives.

Experimental research examining the bystander effect has been used to understand how adults would respond to situations when others were in distress (Latané and Darley 1968). Although it would be of interest to know how young adults would respond if the situation occurred in their natural environment, beckoning them to *actually* defend their victimized peer, this type of experiment would be fraught with ethical issues. Written vignettes have been used in defending research, but videos less commonly. Videos, due to their realistic and complex nature, may help provide a more naturalistic scenario about which participants can reflect. Future research could incorporate vignettes and videos to evaluate the

effectiveness of these different research methods. Meanwhile, collecting qualitative data could also help provide in-depth explanations to the psychological processes of college students' defending in different types of bullying incidence. Another limitation is that all of the assessed variables were limited to self-report assessments. This method creates the issue of analyzing hypothetical responses, as discussed above, but also may create problems with shared method variance.

A further limitation of this study is the absence of potentially critical contextual variables. The bystanders' relationship with the victim, demographic features of the aggressors and victims (e.g., age, gender), and the presence of other bystanders could all affect individuals' willingness to defend and defending strategy (Bellmore et al. 2012). This point could be especially important in this sample because most of the participants were women and the sample was racially and ethnically diverse. The videos of peer victimization included characters who could be perceived as young, traditional college-aged emerging adults and approximately the same age as most of the study participants. However, some individuals may have perceived the individuals in the videos as younger or older than themselves. They may have identified with the victim less because of a perception of differences in age or if they did not share the same gender or racial/ethnic background as the individual. Future research should vary these characteristics in the depicted victims to ensure these factors do not confound results.

Last, the participants in this study were college students who were currently taking a class in Psychology, although not necessarily majors. It is possible that their perceptions of the scenarios and their responses to survey questions were affected by their knowledge of these fields. A University sample of students who were not taking these courses might be more generalizable to the general college student population. Further, there were a large number of Asian students in the study sample. Whether the results generalize to other racial/ethnic groups is an important avenue for future research.

Conclusions

Future research should evaluate individuals' perceptions of verbal aggression as a socially acceptable form of defending. The positive correlation between verbally aggressive defending and direct defending in response to both scenarios suggests that these defenders who are not afraid of confrontation and may engage in aggressive defending could be encouraged to use more prosocial, direct defending strategies to ease peer conflict. The results suggest that verbally aggressive defending is qualitatively different from relationally aggressive defending, which should be carefully distinguished in future studies that assess various forms of defending. It is also

essential to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies and whether the use of verbally aggressive defending leads to a continued cycle of aggression.

This research is the first study we are aware of to examine the role of moral disengagement and perception of harm in college students' perceived willingness to engage in a variety of defending strategies. Although there is a growing body of research on defending behavior in the primary school environment, these findings shed additional light on defending among college students. This stage is an important developmental period to study defending behaviors; future research should examine defending in other contexts encountered frequently by college students. For example, scenarios involving bystanders' responses to witnessing unwanted sexual advances would be highly relevant given the growing focus on sexual assault on college campuses. Understanding what motivates bystanders to intervene and how they select defending strategies would illuminate intervention efforts to reduce sexual assault on college campuses.

Moral disengagement may serve as a critical indicator of risk for introducing more aggression into a situation in an attempt to defend a peer. Identifying potentially aggressive defenders could aid in the development of effective interventions to promote defending using socially acceptable strategies. Intervention to promote prosocial defending among those who morally disengage is crucial for bystanders to physical victimization.

Experimental research indicates that in addition to individuals noticing an event and interpreting it as an emergency, they must also see intervening or helping as their responsibility (Latané and Darley 1968). These findings suggest that when witnessing an individual being victimized, even adults characterized by high levels of moral disengagement feel compelled to enact some form of defending strategy. With this in mind, intervention strategies may not need to focus on encouraging college students to defend, but instead training those who already intend to defend to enact prosocial defending strategies. Our results also suggest that interventions aimed at increasing defending should go beyond encouraging standing up for a victim and be tailored towards differences in defending responses based on the form of defending witnessed and individuals' moral disengagement from aggression. Armed with prosocial strategies, college students can stand up and protect their victimized peers without contributing to a cycle of aggression.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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