On the microfoundations of the link between classroom social norms and behavioral development

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Abstract

This article focuses on the link between social norms and behavioral development as presented in research on norms regarding bullying and aggression. The aim is to present a conceptual framework for how classroom norms may explain children's decisions to defend others or refrain from defending. Norms emerge from group consensus about what is appropriate in given social circumstances, and can also shape, constrain, and redirect behavior at the individual level. The study of norms has gained much attraction in peer relation research, and has turned attention to group-level processes, often defined at the classroom level, which create and sustain shared meanings that impact behavioral and social adjustment. Norm conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and power balance are presented as potential micro-level mechanisms for the link between classroom popularity (or rejection) norms and defending behavior. Directions for further research are discussed, including the need to assess and test the microfoundations directly, examine gender-specific versus common norms, focus on competing classroom norms, test developmental effects of norms, examine the impact of teachers on social norms, and pay attention to the influence of personal norms.

Keywords

Students are always in the proximity of others, and these others affect students' behaviors. An important way in which students' behavior is affected by their classmates is through classroom norms. Classroom norms shape and maintain students' behaviors in the school context, by conveying collective consensus about what is typical or appropriate. Students are usually rewarded with social approval, inclusion, and status if they conform to a norm, whereas they risk social sanctioning, exclusion, rejection, and victimization by their classmates if they deviate from a norm (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). Classroom norms can thus be of vital importance in students' behavioral development.

Norms are often defined at the macro-level (e.g., societal norms) or the meso-level (e.g., classroom norms). Relations between social macro-phenomena are investigated particularly by sociologists and economists, but can also be relevant for psychologists. Some researchers examine relations only at the macro-level, but others also examine micro-level mechanisms, the so-called microfoundations. As such, they attempt to explain how macro- or meso-level norms can develop, based on what occurs at the level of the individual or the dyad. To illustrate our conceptual way of thinking about the microfoundations of the link between classroom social norms and behavioral development, we focus on the classroom level of defending of victims. We formulate three micro-level mechanisms for the link between classroom social norms and the level of defending behavior: norm conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and power balance.

Different Types of Classroom Norms

Classroom norms can be defined in various ways (for an overview, see Table 1). A key distinction can be made between prescriptive and descriptive classroom norms (Cialdini et al., 1991). Prescriptive norms—also known as injunctive norms—reflect students' attitudes, what they approve and disapprove of (i.e., "what ought [not] to be done"). Descriptive norms reflect what students actually do (i.e., "what is done"). Prescriptive and descriptive classroom norms are typically examined by assessing the mean level of attitudes or behaviors in a group. Therefore, prescriptive and descriptive norms reflect what is considered appropriate or typical in a classroom.

Another key distinction can be made between what is normative across all classmates or across a subgroup of norm setters. It is likely that the behavior of popular peers is more salient in determining what behavior is appropriate than the collective behavior of all classmates together (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Henry

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Table 1. Common Types of Classroom Norms.

	Description	Common calculation	Example
Prescriptive or (injunctive) norms	Students' perceptions of how one should behave	Average of classroom for an attitude (Cialdini et al., 1991)	Anti-bulling attitudes: average of students' attitudes toward bullying
Descriptive norms	Students' behaviors	Average of classroom for a behavior (Cialdini et al., 1991)	Classroom bullying norm: average level of bullying behavior
Correlation-based norm salience	Association between social status and behavior	Classroom-level correlation between social status (e.g., popularity, acceptance, rejection) and behavior (Henry et al., 2000)	Classroom popularity norm for bullying: within-classroom correlation between popularity and bullying

et al., 2000). The behavior of popular students is very visible and central, and can serve as a guideline for how to become popular. Other students may proactively try to fulfill their desire for popularity by following their popular classmates' example (Dijkstra et al., 2010). The norm that is derived from how popular classmates behave is called the popularity norm, also referred to as norm salience. Several experimental studies have shown that students conform to the popularity norm regarding health-risk behavior (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006), alcohol consumption (Teunissen et al., 2012), and prosociality (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015). Popularity classroom norms are typically operationalized as the within-classroom correlation between a particular behavior and perceived popularity (e.g., Garandeau et al., 2022; Rambaran et al., 2022). An alternative for the correlation-based popularity norm is a prevalence-based popularity norm, where the average behavior of popular classmates is computed (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Menesini et al., 2015; Velásquez et al., 2021), or a network-based weighted norm, referring to a measure that gives more weight to the behavioral scores of students who hold a central position in the classroom network, based on the number of direct and indirect relationships (Jackson et al., 2015).

Popular classmates may not be the only salient peers. Children strive not only to be popular, but also to avoid rejection and gain increased acceptance in the peer network (Rudolph et al., 2011; Veenstra et al., 2010). Thus, the behavior of classmates who are rejected and the behavior of classmates who are accepted or liked by others may also be relevant in shaping students' behaviors. A recent article examined the role of a correlation-based rejection norm (Garandeau et al., 2022); others have used a correlation-based social preference norm (Correia et al., 2022; Tieskens et al., 2022).

Prescriptive, descriptive, and popularity norms describe actual averages of attitudes or behaviors in the group, either at the classroom level or at the level of a significant subgroup. These norms are measured at the meso-level and can be regarded as social norms. In contrast, *perceived norms* are measured at the micro-level. Perceived norms reflect what individual students expect in terms of their classmates' attitudes or behaviors (e.g., Dillon & Lochman, 2022; Shin, 2022). Similar to social norms, perceived norms may reflect expected behavioral standards or attitudes at the meso-level. Different from social norms, perceived norms may be a projection at the micro-level of individuals' own attitudes on those of others. Perceived descriptive or prescriptive norms differ between individuals (for that reason, they are not included in Table 1 as a type of classroom norm), and are interesting to examine as part of the search for the microfoundations of the link between classroom social norms and behavioral development.

Microfoundations of Classroom Norms and Behavioral Development

This article focuses on the micro-level mechanisms for the link between classroom social norms and behavioral development as presented in research on norms regarding bullying and aggression. The aim is to conceptualize how norms at the classroom level may explain decisions of individual children to defend others or refrain from defending. In this article, we focus on the microfoundations of the relation between popularity norms and defending behavior. Popularity norms seem especially important in this relation, because adolescents' need for status may be a driving factor in bullying behavior and therefore also in defending behavior (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Sijtsema et al., 2009). That is, if students do not intervene against the behavior of popular bullies, they do not risk their status (Juvonen & Galván, 2008). Norm conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and power balance are presented as potential microfoundations, referring to micro-level mechanisms, for the link between popularity norms, external benefits, and behavioral development.

Norm Conformity to Popularity Norms

Models of norm conformity imply that students adjust their behavior to the norm to achieve (social) benefits or prevent social punishment. Norms can vary greatly between classrooms, and these variations can have consequences for students' social relationships, behavior, well-being, and status. The very same behavior can be socially approved and lead to external benefits (e.g., peer acceptance) in one group, but be socially disapproved and lead to external detriments (e.g., peer rejection) in another group; as also proposed by the person-group dissimilarity model (Wright et al., 1986). For example, bullies are rejected in classrooms with low levels of bullying, whereas they are accepted in classrooms with high levels of bullying (Sentse et al., 2007). These social rewards or punishments may drive norm conformity. Therefore, norms provide important guidelines for how adolescents should behave in order to align with peer expectations and to avoid being perceived as a social misfit.

Figure 1 depicts an example of norm conformity as micro-level mechanism, and demonstrates why classroom norms may play a role in explaining the classroom level of defending (Peets et al., 2015). At the classroom level, the positive link between bullying and popularity, referring to a pro-bullying norm, is
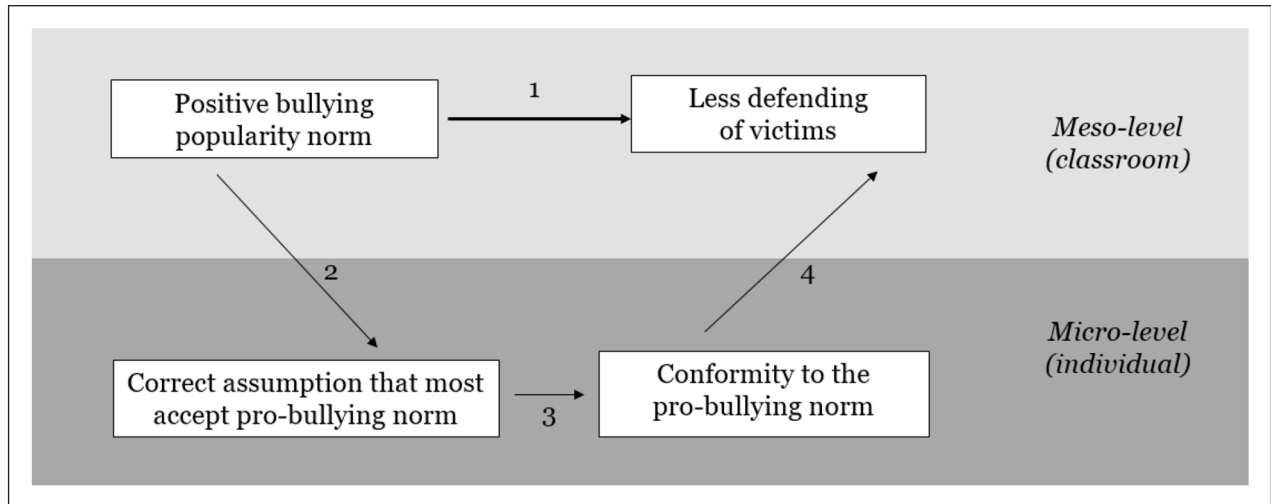
Figure 1. Norm Conformity as the Micro-Level Mechanism for the Link between the Classroom Popularity Norm and the Level of Defending.
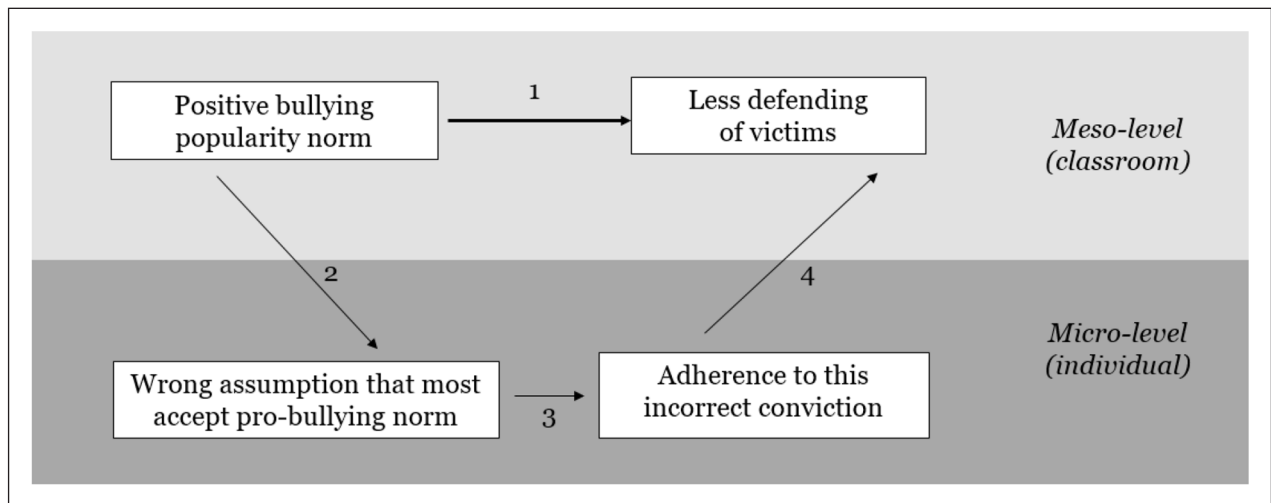

Figure 2. Pluralistic Ignorance as the Micro-Level Mechanism for the Link between the Classroom Popularity Norm and the Level of Defending.

associated with less defending of victims (Arrow 1). A possible individual-level microfoundation for this link may be that the popularity norm leads to the *correct* assumption that most students accept the pro-bullying norm (Arrow 2). Students experience that increased conformity creates external benefits, such as social approval and inclusion. For that reason, most students conform to the pro-bullying norm (Arrow 3). Alternatively, nonconformity creates a so-called *misfit effect*, leading to external detriments, such as social sanctioning (e.g., becoming a victim oneself), exclusion, and rejection (see also Bass et al., 2022). When students observe that bullying results in external benefits, and not-bullying (or keeping others from bullying) results in external detriments, this will lead to conformity and result in less defending at the classroom level (Arrow 4).

Pluralistic Ignorance about Popularity Norms

Pluralistic ignorance may exacerbate the process that students adjust their behavior to the norm to achieve (social) benefits or prevent social punishment, in that students may reject a norm privately (personal prescriptive norm), but have the *incorrect* conviction that most others accept it (perceived prescriptive norm), and therefore go along with it publicly (Miller & McFarland, 1991). Students systematically perceive their peers to hold more pro-bullying norms (e.g., to be more tolerant of bullies, less empathic toward victims, and less inclined to believe they have a responsibility to defend victims) than they themselves do. The more individuals misperceive that most others accept pro-bullying norms, the more they refrain from intervening in bullying situations or defending victims (Juvonen & Galván, 2008; Sandstrom & Bartini, 2010), because they crave approval and avoid disapproval.

Figure 2 illustrates that pluralistic ignorance can also be the micro-level mechanism for the link between the positive bullying-popularity norm and less defending in a classroom (Arrow 1). It is likely that most students reject bullying privately, but that they *wrongly* assume that most accept the norm (Arrow 2) and adhere to this incorrect conviction because they have a need for social
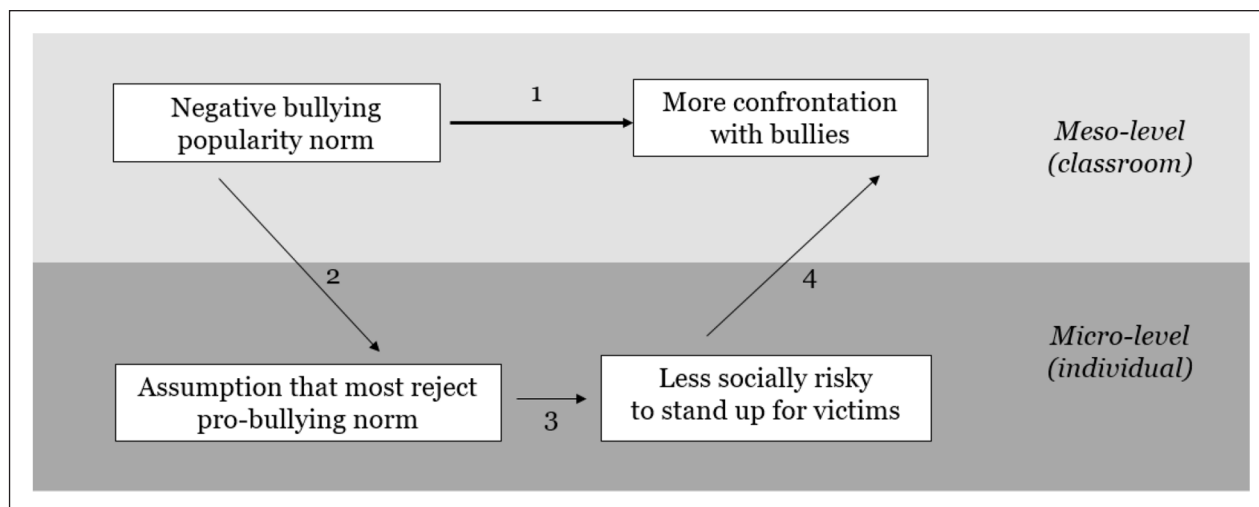
Figure 3. Power Balance as the Micro-Level Mechanism for the Link between the Classroom Popularity Norm and the Level of Bully-Oriented Defending.

approval, inclusion, and status (Arrow 3). Thus, they suppress their dissent and copy the behavior of (popular) classmates. Others, in turn, observe this behavior, and through fundamental attribution error attribute the observed behaviors to traits rather than situational circumstances (Dillon & Lochman, 2022). In other words, seeing others display pro-bullying behaviors confirms the mistaken belief that others must approve of bullying, and this self-reinforcing mistaken belief in turn leads to less defending of victims (Arrow 4).

Consistent with the idea of incorrect convictions, a recent study (Dillon & Lochman, 2022) examined whether personalized normative feedback could reduce misperceptions of peer attitudes toward bullying. In this intervention, individuals' perceptions of the attitudes of their peers were compared with their peers' true attitudes; the aim was to reduce pluralistic ignorance and reduce the normativity of bullying as acceptable behavior. The findings showed that personalized normative feedback on bullying attitudes led to significant changes in perceived peer attitudes in the direction of the actual social norm. This is an important finding because misinterpretations of norms can cause students to refrain from positive behaviors such as defending, or increase negative behaviors such as bullying, aggression, or risk-taking.

Power Balance

Whereas in some cases, norms may encourage negative behaviors in a group, such as bullying, in other cases, norms may encourage positive behaviors, such as defending. For example, only in classes where bullies were less popular, popularity was associated with confronting bullies (Garandeau et al., 2022). In such classes, bullies received less social approval by peers. This might prompt popular peers to use their high social position to support the victims. Thus, the balance of power, in terms of social approval or perceived popularity, was more in favor of defenders than of bullies. Figure 3 depicts why the power balance may be the micro-level mechanism of the link between classroom norms and the level of defending. At the classroom level, the negative

link between bullying and popularity is associated with a greater likelihood of students confronting bullies (Arrow 1). The underlying mechanism at the level of the individual student may be a negative link between bullying and popularity, which may lead to the assumption that most students reject the pro-bullying norm and that the balance of power is not in favor of the bullies (Arrow 2). In classrooms where bullies are popular, the costs of defending are high as this may result in loosing status or becoming victimized. This is not so much the case in classrooms where bullies are unpopular. When perpetrators are not dominant, it thus seems less socially risky to stand up for victims (Arrow 3). The less socially risky it is to stand up for victims, the more popular students confront the bullies (Arrow 4).

Directions for Future Research

Direct Tests of the Microfoundations

Norm conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and power balance have not been tested directly as micro-level mechanisms for the link between popularity norms, external benefits, and behavioral development. Future research is needed to examine whether these concepts mediate the relation between social norms and outcomes, and whether these are competing or complementary mechanisms. Such research should include measures of social goals (e.g., demonstration-approach goals to receive approval and demonstration-avoidance goals to avoid disapproval; see Rudolph et al., 2011), because all mechanisms presume that students decide to adhere to classroom norms because doings so would lead to external benefits and not doing so would thwart social goals. The mechanisms described all presume that students are aware of the social norms in their classroom, but individuals may differ in how they perceive norms, and this may affect the likelihood of students adjusting their behavior (Dillon & Lochman, 2022). Therefore, closer attention should be paid to the link between perceived norms (e.g., Shin, 2022) and classroom norms. Furthermore, future research may include a measure of the perceived external benefits and detriments of behavior, as

such consequences are presumed to be the driving force behind adjusting one's behavior. In addition, research may include a measure of power imbalance, referring to whether students perceive a bully as being stronger or more popular (Kaufman et al., 2020), and a measure of perceived risk of defending, referring to whether bystanders fear becoming victimized themselves (Thornberg et al., 2018). Thus, research is needed that captures these micro-level mechanisms and examine how norms at the classroom level may explain decisions of individual children to defend others or refrain from defending.

Differential Effects of Different Types of Norms

Research may assess the differential effects of different types of norms. A social network study found that friendship selection and influence processes related to aggression depended on the popularity norm rather than the descriptive classroom norm (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2017). Other research found that popularity norms (especially prevalence-based rather than correlation-based popularity norms) better predicted overt and relational aggression trajectory membership than did perceived prescriptive norms (Velásquez et al., 2021), and that classroom popularity norms for aggression moderated the relation of overt and relational aggression with social preference (peer likeability) more strongly than did classroom descriptive norms (Jackson et al., 2015). More insight is needed into what operationalization of norms is best in predicting individual students' behaviors, as this would allow us to pinpoint what type of intervention is required to adjust students' behaviors. For instance, if behavior is mostly driven by what popular classmates do, training such classmates as role models might be fruitful (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2022), whereas an intervention to influence ideas about peer attitudes might be more fruitful if perceived norms are the driving force (Dillon & Lochman, 2022).

Gender-Specific or Common Classroom Norms

More research is needed on the significance of gender-specific or common classroom norms. Gender-specific classroom norms are important because students are mainly influenced by their same-gender peers with regard to physical and relational aggression (Rohlf et al., 2016). Other studies suggest that girls can be more prominent in a classroom than boys. For instance, girls set the tone in shaping the perceived norms and aggressive behavior of both boys and girls (Busching & Krahé, 2015). Another study found that rejected students were more likely to be victimized when girls stimulated pro-bullying norms (Isaacs et al., 2013). Future studies may also wish to examine whether gender moderates the likelihood of adhering to specific social norms. For instance, some research suggests that gender may affect the likelihood of following certain classroom norms (Correia et al., 2022; Garandeau et al., 2022), whereas other research found no gender differences (Bass et al., 2022). Thus, gender may play a role both in who sets and who follows the norms.

Competing Classroom Norms

Future research may also examine competing classroom norms. One study showed that in classrooms where both aggression and prosociality were linked to popularity, the aggressive popularity norm prevailed; the prosocial popularity norm prevailed (by encouraging prosocial friendship processes) only in classrooms without an aggressive popularity norm (Laninga-Wijnen, Steglich, et al., 2020). Thus, the aggressive popularity norm may overrule the prosocial popularity norm in classrooms with both norms. This finding is consistent with earlier findings on the relative impacts of aggression and prosociality. Aggression is usually more visible and impactful than prosociality. For instance, aggression may gain attention due to heightened fear or create admiration and may be easier to imitate. Therefore, students may use the aggressive popularity norm rather than the prosocial popularity norm to guide their behavior. A competing classroom norm may indicate, on the one hand, that some popular students are aggressive and others are prosocial or, on the other hand, that the same students combine these different behaviors (Hawley, 2003). Because only a few classmates are popular, it may be that the same students establish the norm for both prosociality and aggression (Laninga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020). If so, a bi-strategic norm is a more appropriate label than multiple norms. Future research should take the diversity of behaviors associated with popularity into account and examine multiple (competing) norms or bi-strategic norms.

Developmental Effects

Developmental effects related to norms need to be examined as well, including research on the extent to which the impacts of norms change over the course of the school year (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), as well as across different age groups. A systematic review or meta-analysis may examine whether findings regarding classroom norms are unique to specific age groups or can be generalized throughout childhood and adolescence. We expect the impact of social norms on behavior to be stronger in adolescence than in childhood, because affection and status—as benefits of norm conformity—become increasingly important in adolescence (Sijtsema et al., 2020). Neurological developments in the social brain when young people enter adolescence enhance their capacity to take different perspectives into account (Crone & Fuligni, 2020), which is important for both affection (referring to the deepening of adolescent peer relationships in terms of intimacy and trust) and status (referring to their position in the broader peer context and their worries about what peers think about them). Another explanation underlying the increased importance and valence of peers in adolescence is socio-structural (Laninga-Wijnen & Veenstra, 2021). The adult-determined environment of childhood is making way for adolescents' freedom to go where they want and to spend time with whom they wish. Norm conformity may be the way to avoid becoming a social misfit (Wright et al., 1986).

The Impact of Teachers on Social Norms

The findings suggest that the development of students' behavior and well-being in the classroom depends on the classroom norms. However, students are not the only ones responsible for the norms in a classroom. Sometimes it may even be hard for them to change the norm, and then teachers may support students, because teachers can also construct and reinforce norms (Veenstra

et al., 2014). For teachers and school mental health workers, it is thus important to be aware of not only social network dynamics (Kaufman et al., 2021), but also classroom norms, to understand students' development. A monitoring tool may be helpful to increase teacher attunement to these dynamics and norms (Farmer et al., 2011; Hamm et al., 2011). Future research may examine not only which teacher characteristics increase the likelihood of teachers having a positive effect on the social norms, but also which social circumstances (e.g., the popularity structure in a classroom) increase the likelihood of teachers having a meaningful effect on classroom norms.

The Impact of Personal Norms

Social norms may also be based on wanting to do what is right (Lindenberg et al., 2021). Some students may deliberately choose not to adhere to classroom norms, if these stray too far from their personal norms. For instance, earlier research indicated that students with higher levels of empathy were more likely to engage in defending of victims (Barchia & Bussey, 2011). It would be interesting to examine which personal characteristics drive students to seek internal rather than external benefits. Higher empathy may indicate a stronger effect of the desire to do what is right and to be influenced by internal rather than external benefits, even in adolescence. We conceptualized the microfoundations of the link between popularity norms, external benefits, and behavioral development. This may need to be extended by a focus on how prescriptive norms and internal benefits impact behavior and when rules work as personal norms (Lindenberg et al., 2021). We expect that personal norms become more important in late adolescence.

Norm-Based Interventions

An examination of when and how those developmental effects occur will also inform interventions aimed at generating positive transformations in students through changing social norms (Miller & Prentice, 2016; Perkins et al., 2011). Interventions are increasingly acknowledging the importance of peers (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2022). For instance, popular peers were used as role models to set the norm and to spread perceptions of conflict as less socially normative in an anti-conflict intervention (Paluck et al., 2016). In addition, some norm-based interventions may aim to enhance conformity to the (actual) norm, whereas other interventions may aim to reduce the perceived pressure to conform to the (misperceived) norm (Prentice, 2008). A way to expand the effectiveness of such interventions is by investigating the microfoundations of change (see for a related test of the microfoundations of the healthy context paradox: Pan et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Social norms shape individual students' behaviors in various ways. Individual behaviors are affected by what other classmates do, by what specific subgroups of classmates (e.g., popular or rejected classmates) do, and by what students perceive as normative in a group. To receive benefits or avoid detriments, students tend to adjust their behavior to what is normative (norm conformity). This can be based on actual norms or on shared misperceptions of those norms (pluralistic ignorance). Moreover, whether

behavior is adapted may depend on the power structure in a group. Social norms play a crucial role in individual students' behaviors. There is much to be discovered about which micro-level mechanisms drive this influence. These discoveries can deepen theories on social norms and maximize the impact of norm-based interventions.

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