Aggressive Attitudes and Prevalence of Bullying Bystander Behaviors in Middle Schools

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Abstract
Bystanders are considered to play a pivotal role in deterring or facilitating bullying behavior. The current study hypothesized that the prevalence of aggressive attitudes among individuals and among peers would deter students from standing up to bullying and encourage them to reinforce bullying behavior. Middle school students (n = 16,862) in 421 schools completed a statewide survey that included an aggressive attitudes scale and self-reports of responses to a recent episode of bullying. Student responses to bullying were categorized as upstanding, reinforcing, or passive. Multi-level logistic regressions indicated that higher aggressive attitudes were associated with less upstanding behavior and more reinforcing at the student level, and less upstanding behavior at the school wide level, while controlling for other school/student demographic variables.

Rationale
Many anti-bullying programs encourage students to become “upstanders” who stand up to bullying and try to stop it (NSCC, 2010). Studies have shown that student attitudes regarding the desirability of aggressive behavior influence student involvement in bullying; the prevalence of such attitudes might also influence bystander behavior (McConville & Cornell, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010).

Study Questions
In a school climate characterized by high levels of aggressive attitudes:
1. Are students less likely to report upstanding behavior in response to bullying?
2. Are students more likely to report reinforcing behavior in response to bullying?

Method and Results
The analytic sample included 16,862 7th and 8th grade boys (52%) and girls from 421 Virginia public schools. Racial/ethnic breakdown was 8,482 (50%) White, 3,476 (21%) African American, 2,247 (13%) Hispanic, 652 (4%) Asian American, 2,372 (14%) multiracial, and 1,880 (11%) another ethnicity.

The school climate survey was administered online, anonymously, and statewide in all public middle schools (98% school participation rate) in 2013 as part of the state’s safety audit program (Konold et al., 2014).

Measures. A previously developed 6-item Aggressive Attitudes scale measured the prevalence of student support for aggressive behavior (Huang, Cornell, & Konold, under review).

Aggressive attitudes scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you agree or disagree with these statements?</th>
<th>Percent Agree or Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-Strongly Agree, 2-Moderate Agree, 3-Strongly Disagree, 4-Disagree</td>
<td>1-Strongly Agree, 2-Moderate Agree, 3-Strongly Disagree, 4-Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If someone threatens you, it is okay to hit that person.</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It feels good when I hit someone.</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying is sometimes fun to do.</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who are bullied or teased mostly deserve it.</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you fight a lot, everyone will look up to you.</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you are afraid to fight, you won’t have many friends.</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cronbach’s alpha = .79

The pie chart depicts the distribution of students into three bystander groups: (1) students who reported “I did something to try to stop it when it was happening” and/or “I asked a teacher or another adult at school for help about it” displayed upstander behavior (8,350 students, 49%), (2) students who selected “I laughed along with others who saw it” exhibited reinforcer behavior (819 students; 5%), and (3) students who endorsed “I ignored it” and/or “I did nothing at the time, but tried to stop it from happening again” displayed passive behavior (7,693 students, 46%).

The bar chart illustrates a decrease in upstander behavior and an increase in reinforcer behavior as the level of Aggressive Attitudes increases.

Multi-level logistic regressions (see table) examined differences between students who described (1) upstander behavior versus passive behavior and (2) reinforcer behavior versus passive behavior.

At the school level, higher aggressive attitudes were associated with a decreased likelihood of upstander behavior (OR = 0.93, p < .05).

At the student level, female students were more likely to report reinforcer behavior (OR = 1.19, p < .001). Students with higher levels of parental education, our proxy for socioeconomic status, were less likely to report upstander behavior (OR = 0.97, p < .05). In comparison to Caucasian students and using passive response as the reference group, Asian students had an increased likelihood of reporting reinforcer behavior (OR = 1.52, p < .05), Hispanic students had an increased likelihood of reporting both upstander and reinforcer behavior (OR = 1.15, p < .05; OR = 1.74, p < .001), and students who identified as multiracial or other had an increased likelihood of reporting both upstander and reinforcer behavior (OR = 1.32, p < .001; OR = 1.43, p < .001).

Note. *p < .05; **p < .001; OR = odds ratio

Discussion
There was a relatively modest association between aggressive attitudes and upstanding behavior at both individual and school levels. Although relatively few students in a school (typically < 10%) reported reinforcing behavior, it was associated with aggressive attitudes at the student level.

Two study limitations are that the link between bystander responses and aggressive attitudes may be influenced by social desirability and shared method variance. Future studies might include independent assessment of student bystander behavior by peers or teachers. Race differences also need careful examination and further study.

The strong association between aggressive attitudes and reinforcer behavior was entirely at the individual level, suggesting that it may be more appropriate to use secondary interventions programs as opposed to relying on universal bystander interventions. Only a relatively small number of students endorsed multiple aggressive attitudes; it might be useful to help these students understand that the vast majority of their peers do not share these beliefs.

References

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