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Does Being Defended Relate to Decreases in Victimization and Improved Psychosocial Adjustment Among Victims?

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School bullying is a clear violation of children's rights to a safe education and is a major concern among school professionals and parents. Many antibullying interventions focus on enhancing peer defending of victims to combat bullying and to promote victims' psychosocial functioning. However, longitudinal studies on the effects of being defended on (a) diminishing victimization and (b) enhancing victims' psychosocial adjustment are lacking, and the role of the broader peer context has been largely unexplored. Therefore, this study examined whether being defended decreases victimization and improves victims' psychosocial adjustment, and whether defending peer norms moderate these effects. Data were derived from a nationwide Dutch study on the effectiveness of antibullying interventions, with $N = 5,415$ students ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.93$; 48.3% girls) from 238 classrooms (54.2% control classrooms) in 68 elementary schools. Findings indicate that victims with at least one defender at the start of the school year (Time 1) experienced higher feelings of belonging at the end of the school year (Time 2) compared with nondefended victims, but experienced lower feelings of belonging compared with nonvictims. Defended victims did not differ from nondefended victims in self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and severity of victimization at Time 2. Nonvictims were significantly better adjusted than defended and nondefended victims regarding these outcomes. Descriptive and popularity norms for defending did not moderate the links between being defended and victims' adjustment and severity of victimization at Time 2. Thus, being defended only partly relieves victims' plight, irrespective of how normative defending behaviors are in classrooms.

Educational Impact and Implications Statement

Bullying is a pervasive problem among school-aged youth, with disastrous effects on victims' psychosocial functioning. The recognition that bullying is a group process has led many interventions to promote peer defending (e.g., standing up against bullies, consoling victims) in the hope that it stops bullying and improves victims' psychosocial adjustment. But does being defended actually help victims? The current study indicates that being defended only partly relieves victims' plight by increasing their feelings of belongingness to the peer group. Being defended did not reduce victimization and depressive feelings, nor promoted victims' self-esteem. Thus, the beneficial effects of being defended may be more limited than currently assumed, and more research is needed on whether and how the effectiveness of peer defending can be increased.

Keywords: defending, psychosocial adjustment, victimization, bullying, peer norms

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Our hypotheses, sampling procedure, and strategy for main analyses were preregistered online at AsPredicted (<https://aspredicted.org/3ez9d.pdf>).

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 The preregistered design is accessible at <https://aspredicted.org/3ez9d.pdf>.

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The prevalence of bullying worldwide is high: One out of three children experience some form of peer victimization at least once in their lifetime (UNESCO, 2018). These high numbers are concerning, as victims of bullying are at increased risk of developing severe psychosocial problems with depressive symptoms (Christina et al., 2021), decreased feelings of belonging to groups (Laniga-Wijnen et al., 2021) and low self-esteem (Choi & Park, 2021; Van Geel et al., 2018) being among the most common consequences of victimization that may last even until adulthood (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2018). It is often claimed that it would help victims if they were defended by peers (e.g., Bellmore, 2016; Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015). First, being defended may offer “social protection” against the aggressive attempts of the bully, resulting in diminished victimization over time (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Second, stress-buffering theories of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985) postulate that being defended buffers against the development of psychosocial problems in victims, even if victimization continues. Being defended signals to victims that the bullying they experience is perceived as unacceptable by at least some of their peers, and that others care about them. This should enhance victims’ self-esteem and sense of belonging to their peer group and decrease depressive symptoms.

Not surprisingly, promoting the defending of victims has been a major focus of antibullying programs (see Gaffney et al., 2021; Yeager et al., 2018). Yet, only recently have researchers begun to examine whether being defended or receiving support from peers diminishes bullying and contributes to victims’ psychosocial functioning, and their findings vary considerably. Some studies found higher levels of defending within classrooms to relate to diminished bullying perpetration (e.g., Saarento et al., 2015), whereas other studies did not detect lower levels of victimization among victims who had more defenders (van der Ploeg et al., 2016). Moreover, some studies found that defended victims had better psychosocial adjustment than nondefended victims (e.g., Sainio et al., 2011), whereas other studies found no effects (Jones et al., 2015), or even adverse effects, where being defended related to increased depression and anxiety among victims (e.g., Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2011). It is unclear why findings diverge so much.

This study examines whether inconsistency in previous findings reflects contextual variations in the extent to which being defended diminishes victimization and promotes victims’ psychosocial adjustment. Based on social misfit theory (Wright et al., 1986), defending is more likely to work out positively for victims in classrooms where defending is considered appropriate and normative, and more likely to yield negative outcomes in classrooms where this behavior is non-normative. Therefore, the current longitudinal study aims to clarify the role of classroom defending norms in the extent to which being defended may help victims by lowering their victimization and improving their psychosocial adjustment over time.

The Role of Being Defended in Severity of Victimization and Psychosocial Adjustment

Defending refers to comforting and supporting victims or standing up for them (Caravita et al., 2009). It conveys the message that others do not condone the bullying that victims are subjected to. Therefore, bullies may be less likely to target those who are protected by other peers for fear of retaliation (Hodges & Perry,

1999). Moreover, being defended shows victims that they do not stand alone, which may increase their feelings of belongingness. Finally, defenders may offer emotional and informational support to victims of bullying. Emotional support enhances self-esteem by communicating to victims that they are valued for who they are. Informational support helps in coping with problematic events, which may decrease depressive thoughts or feelings (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Scardera et al., 2020). Thus, being defended by peers may reduce bullying and promote victims’ psychosocial adjustment over time.

Despite these clear theoretical arguments, findings of the few empirical studies on the role of being defended in diminishing severity of victimization and improving victims’ psychosocial functioning vary considerably. Regarding severity of victimization, one longitudinal study found higher classroom-levels of defending to decrease students’ self-reported bullying perpetration (Saarento et al., 2015). However, a naturalistic observation study showed that only two thirds of defending attempts were successful in stopping the bullying episodes (Hawkins et al., 2001). Moreover, an intervention study found that victims without a support group reported a decrease in frequency of victimization at the end of the school year, whereas victims with a support group did not report such a change. A third of victims with a support group even reported an increase in victimization—despite having more defenders (van der Ploeg et al., 2016). Mixed findings also emerged in studies examining the role of being defended in victims’ psychosocial functioning. Two cross-sectional studies indicated that defended victims had lower depression and anxiety (Ma & Chen, 2017; Sainio et al., 2011) and higher self-esteem (Sainio et al., 2011) than nondefended victims. Another study, however, found no effect of defending on victims’ distress (Jones et al., 2015).

One reason for these inconsistent findings may be that these studies examined concurrent data only. Further, a positive association between being defended and victims’ psychosocial functioning in some studies could also be an indication that better-adjusted victims are more likely to be defended. To our knowledge, the impact of being defended on victims’ adjustment has never been examined longitudinally. Still, three longitudinal studies have examined the moderating role of a related construct, namely friendship support (i.e., having friends one can trust and rely on), in the association between victimization and future adjustment. One study did not detect any significant role of friendship support in changes in victims’ psychosocial functioning (Burke et al., 2017). Results from the two other studies were counterintuitive; receiving emotional support from friends was found to enhance victims’ depressive symptoms (Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2011) and to increase maladaptive coping and distress among victimized girls (but not among victimized boys; Yeung Thompson & Leadbeater, 2013). Last, a recent meta-analysis indicated that interventions that included informal peer involvement (such as group discussions) and encouragement of defending were effective in reducing victimization—however, interventions that did not include encouragement of peer defending were more effective than interventions that did include this (Gaffney et al., 2021). Thus, prior findings are inconsistent, and most studies on defending were cross-sectional.

The current study extends upon prior work first by examining in a longitudinal design whether being defended decreases victimization

and attenuates victims' psychosocial maladjustment. Second, we examine whether decreases in victimization partly explain why defended victims may be better off compared with nonvictims, as it can be theorized that victims will feel better when the defending attempts of their peers are effective in decreasing their victimization (Laniga-Wijnen et al., 2021). Though prior findings are inconsistent, we hypothesize that being defended decreases victimization and promotes victims' psychosocial adjustment over time (Hypothesis 1) based on stress-buffer theories (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Moreover, the link between being defended and victims' psychosocial adjustment is expected to be mediated by diminished levels of victimization (Hypothesis 2).

The Moderating Role of Peer Norms in the Consequences of Being Defended

There may be strong variations between classrooms in the extent to which defending results in lower victimization and better adjustment for victims. An important classroom marker that may determine the effectiveness of defending behavior is the extent to which defending is regarded as normative among peers. Often, two types of norms are distinguished: descriptive norms and popularity norms (Dijkstra & Gest, 2015). Whereas descriptive norms of defending reflect the average perceived levels of defending in a classroom, popularity norms of defending represent the extent to which defending is associated with popularity in a particular classroom (cf. Laniga-Wijnen et al., 2021). When defending is the descriptive or popularity norm in a classroom, defending behaviors are considered appropriate and valuable (Henry et al., 2000). Social misfit theory (Wright et al., 1986) posits that youth who display behaviors that conform to the norm are more likely to be accepted in their peer group, and less likely to be a "social misfit." Consequently, defenders may be regarded favorably in classrooms with high defending norms (Pouwels et al., 2019), which could make classmates (even bullies) more inclined to listen to them and comply to their antibullying messages (Paluck et al., 2016). Therefore, being defended may only relate to decreased victimization and improved psychosocial adjustment of victims over time in classrooms characterized by strong norms for defending.

Moreover, the impact of defending norms may be particularly strong for popularity norms. Popularity reflects a child's central position in the peer group, accompanied by admiration, social power, and influence, and from late childhood onward, youth increasingly attach value to gaining popularity among peers (Dawes & Xie, 2014). Therefore, defending popularity norms in particular may enhance the valence of defending within a classroom (Hartup, 1996). Accordingly, social impact theory (Latane, 1981) argues that popular youth are particularly influential norm setters, because they are more visible, dominant, and central in the classroom and receive more attention from classmates than nonpopular youth (Laniga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020). Moreover, because bullying is considered to be an abuse of power as well as a demonstration of dominance to the peer group (Hawley, 2014; van den Berg et al., 2019), popular youth may be more able than others to threaten and stop bullying perpetrators (Laniga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020). In line with this reasoning, prior work on secondary school students of about 13 years of age indicated that popularity norms rather than descriptive norms for aggression and prosocial behaviors related to the acceptance and proliferation of

these behaviors in the classroom (Dijkstra & Gest, 2015; Laniga-Wijnen, Steglich, et al., 2020).

Being defended may thus be more effective in stopping bullying episodes and promoting victims' psychosocial adjustment when descriptive norms and—in particular, popularity norms for defending—are higher. At the same time, nondefended victims may feel worse in classrooms with high descriptive or popularity norms of defending, as they are the ones not benefiting from the positive behaviors around them. Indeed, research has shown that—paradoxically—victims feel worse in classrooms or schools with more positive or desirable characteristics, such as low levels of victimization, a phenomenon referred to as the healthy context paradox (e.g., Garandeau & Salmivalli, 2019; Laniga-Wijnen et al., 2021). The current study aims to clarify whether nondefended victims are worse off and defended victims better off in classrooms with higher defending norms.

Being defended in classrooms with low defending norms may have negative effects on victims by exacerbating their victimization and decreasing their adjustment over time. That is, when defending is not normative, bullies may be less intimidated by defending behaviors, as they know that other classmates likely perceive these behaviors as "inappropriate" or "uncool." Thus, in these classrooms, defending may not reduce victimization nor improve victims' adjustment, and could even make bullying situations worse (Healy, 2020). This again may particularly be the case in classrooms with low defending popularity norms, as in these classrooms it is more likely that unpopular students defend victims and these students may be less suitable for this role (Laniga-Wijnen et al., 2021). Victims may also feel worse when being defended by someone who is unpopular. As peer status tends to be contagious (Marks et al., 2012), victims may want to avoid being associated with lower-status students for fear that it may further damage their own status. Moreover, victims might feel guilty if the peer who defended them lost status as a result.

In sum, it is hypothesized that defended victims are better off in classrooms with high defending norms (descriptive and popularity norms) than in other classrooms (Hypothesis 3a), whereas nondefended victims may be worse off in classrooms with high defending norms than in other classrooms (Hypothesis 3b). In addition, we speculate that defending may be more likely to lead to beneficial outcomes in classrooms with high popularity norms (Hypothesis 3c), because popular peers are often admired by others and have more power to deter bullies. Yet, we formulate this hypothesis with caution, because the role of popularity norms in youths' school life has been investigated mostly in secondary schools when the desire for popularity peaks (Dawes & Xie, 2014). Parsing out the relative contribution of popularity and descriptive norms for defending in elementary school therefore provides a new and valuable contribution to the literature.

The Current Study

This prospective longitudinal study examines whether being defended decreases victimization and promotes victims' psychosocial functioning over time, and whether this depends on the defending descriptive norm (i.e., mean classroom level of defending) and the defending popularity norm (i.e., the extent to which defending is associated with being popular in the classroom). Based on theories about social protection (Hodges & Perry, 1999)

and social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), we expect that defended victims are better adjusted (lower depressive symptoms, higher feelings of belonging, and higher self-esteem) and are less severely victimized at the end of the school year compared with nondefended victims; and defended victims may be more similar to nonvictims in these outcomes than nondefended victims (Hypothesis 1).

In addition, we test whether decreased levels of victimization explain the link between being defended and improved psychosocial functioning (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, we expect that defended victims do particularly better compared with nondefended victims in classrooms where defending is typical (descriptive norm) or rewarded with popularity (popularity norms) than in classrooms without such norms (Hypothesis 3a and 3b). We expect a stronger effect of popularity norms than of descriptive norms (Hypothesis 3c), yet we formulate this hypothesis with caution given that most work on popularity norms has focused on secondary schools. In additional analyses, we will explore interactions with gender, as girls have been shown to respond differently to peer support than boys (Schacter & Juvonen, 2020), and age, as popularity norms may become more important due to youths' increasing desire for popularity from middle childhood to adolescence (Dawes & Xie, 2014).

Method

Recruitment and Procedure

Data stem from a nationwide Dutch study on the effectiveness of antibullying programs (de Castro et al., 2018). Specifically, we selected data from two randomized controlled and three quasi-experimental trials that examined the effectiveness of various universal antibullying programs implemented in the Netherlands in 2017 and 2018. We used data of two waves (T1 = beginning of school year, and T2 = end of the school year). Schools were either assigned to a waiting-list control condition or to an intervention condition. Data of schools in four interventions were included: Kanjertraining (Training I Go for Emotion well-being and Respect [TIGER]; Vlieg et al., 2014), PRIMA (van Verseveld et al., 2021), Program Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Domitrovich et al., 2007), and School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Bradshaw et al., 2008). All programs used a universal approach to prevent or reduce bullying by involving all actors within the classroom and school. TIGER and PRIMA are considered primarily antibullying programs, whereas PATHS and PBIS are primarily social-emotional learning programs directed at stimulating prosocial behavior and combatting negative behaviors—including bullying.

Active informed consent was obtained from schools and teachers, and a passive informed consent procedure was used for parents. The parents of 49 students objected to the participation of their children. At both waves, students completed a questionnaire (~45 mins) during regular school hours. Video clips informed students about the goal of the study and about the definition of bullying. Students were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and were notified that they could opt out of the study any time they wanted. The internal board of the University of Amsterdam provided ethical approval of the study.

Participants

In total, we had information on 6,114 elementary school students who participated in at least one of the two waves (T1 $n = 6,022$, T2 $n = 5,755$). We excluded data of 187 students from nine classrooms because these classrooms no longer participated at T2. Moreover, the peer nomination data of 464 students were not collected correctly and were therefore removed as well. Two students switched classrooms and were also excluded from the analyses. Finally, we only included classrooms of at least 10 students at T1 (cf. Garandeau et al., 2021), to have sufficient information to reliably assess classroom-level norms. This led to the exclusion of five classrooms ($n = 46$ students in total across both waves).

The final sample thus consisted of 5,415 students who participated in at least one wave. In total, 69 students (1.3%) were absent at T1, 85 students (1.6%) were absent at T2 (15 students were non-present at both waves, but the peer-nominated data of these students were available, so we kept them in our sample). Moreover, 152 students (2.8%) left school half-way through the school year, whereas 69 students (1.3%) were new at school at T2. We kept these students in our data as peer nominations were available for these students. The 5,415 students (48.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.93$, $SD = 1.19$) came from 238 classrooms (including 129 control classrooms) in 68 elementary schools (including 34 control schools). Among the 238 classrooms, 47 were third grade, 26 were combination classes of third and fourth grade, 42 were fourth grade, 17 were combination classes of fourth and fifth grade, 41 were fifth grade, 22 were combination classes of fifth and sixth grade, and 43 were sixth grade classes. Most students (92.9%) were born in the Netherlands. Based on their parents' country of birth, 74.1% of the students could be considered as native Dutch (e.g., person without migration background; cf. Laninga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020), 17.7% are considered students with a migration background and 8.2% could not be determined due to missing information.

Measures

Victimization

Victimization by peers was assessed at T1 and at T2 with two items of the Olweus Revised Bullying/Victimization Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). After watching a video describing the three defining features of bullying (intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance), participants were asked to respond to a question regarding the frequency of their victimization (i.e., "How often have you been bullied since the start of the school year?") using a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *two or three times a month*, 4 = *about once a week*, 5 = *multiple times a week*). If students answered at least once or twice on this question (≥ 2), they were asked about the duration (chronicity) of their victimization: "Since when have you been bullied?" (1 = *since the beginning of this school year*, 2 = *during the previous school year*, 3 = *multiple years*). At T1, students were considered a "victim" when they scored 2 or higher on the first item (i.e., frequency of victimization) and when they scored a 2 or higher on the item "since when are you being bullied?" (i.e., chronicity of victimization). At T2, peer victimization was again assessed with Olweus' frequency item of victimization. The scores at T2 were used as a continuous outcome variable in the analyses testing the role of being defended on victims' adjustment and future victimization.

Defending T1

If students indicated at T1 that they had been victimized at least once or twice (victimization $T1 \geq 2$), they were asked: “Which classmates help you when you are being bullied?” They could nominate as many or as few classmates as they wanted. Defended victims were the ones who nominated at least one classmate on this question ($n = 1,098$), whereas nondefended victims nominated no one ($n = 207$). We created two dummy variables to categorize students among nonvictims, nondefended victims, and defended victims (which were the reference category so that we could compare them with both nonvictims and nondefended victims).

Descriptive Norms of Defending at T1

In order to calculate descriptive norms, we used one peer-nomination item that captures general defending: “Some children help others who are being bullied. They can comfort them or defend them. Which classmates do this?” This question was posed to all students, even to nonvictims. Nominations were unlimited, yet self-nominations were not possible. For each student, we calculated the number of nominations received and divided it by the number of potential nominators. That is, for each student we computed the proportion of participating classmates who nominated them for that item. The descriptive norm for defending was operationalized as the aggregated score for peer-nominated defending across all classmates and these scores were Z standardized (cf. Laninga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020).

Popularity Norm of Defending at T1

Popularity was assessed by asking “Who is most popular?” and “Who is least popular?” (cf. Laninga-Wijnen, Harakeh, et al., 2020). Again, all students could nominate as many or as few classmates as they wanted. As for descriptive norms of defending, proportion scores were calculated by dividing for each student the number of received nominations by the number of potential nominators. A composite score for popularity was computed by subtracting the least popular proportion score from the most popular proportion score (Van den Berg et al., 2020). This score could theoretically vary from -1 (nominated by all voters as least popular and by none as most popular) to 1 (nominated by all voters as most popular and by none as least popular). We calculated for each classroom the correlation between peer-nominated popularity and peer-nominated defending (based on the general peer-nominated defending question). These within-classroom correlations between defending and popularity were transformed into Fisher z scores in order to obtain a relatively normally distributed measure, with the formula: $z' = .5[\ln(1 + r) - \ln(1 - r)]$ (Fisher, 1925).

Feelings of Belonging

We assessed the extent to which students felt connected to their classroom using the fifth scale of the Classroom Peer Context Questionnaire (CPCQ; Boor-Klip et al., 2016) at T1 and at T2. The scale consisted of four items, such as “In this classroom, I can be myself.” Children rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*completely true*). A composite score was created by averaging the four items ($T1 \alpha = .83$, $T2 \alpha = .86$). Higher scores indicated higher feelings of belonging to the classroom.

Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms were assessed at both time points using the Major Depressive Disorder Scale (Chorpita et al., 2000) consisting of nine items, such as “I do not like anything” and “I feel that I am not valuable.” Answers were given on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *always*). A composite score was created by averaging the nine items ($T1 \alpha = .76$, $T2 \alpha = .78$), with higher scores indicating more depressive symptoms.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured at both time points with one scale of the Dutch version of the Harter Scales (Veerman et al., 1996), consisting of six items, such as “I am content with the person who I am.” Children rated the degree to which each item was true for them on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). Reversed items were recoded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of self-esteem. A composite score was created by averaging the six items ($T1 \alpha = .77$, $T2 \alpha = .84$).

Control Variables

We controlled for students' gender (0 = girl, 1 = boy), country of birth (0 = born in the Netherlands, 1 = born outside the Netherlands), age, and psychosocial adjustment at T1 at the individual level. We controlled for intervention status (1 = intervention condition, 0 = control condition), number of students per classroom (cf. Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2021), and average levels of bullying in classrooms. This latter variable was retrieved by aggregating proportion scores of peer-nominations of the item, “Which classmates bully others?”

Analytic Strategy

We conducted missing data analyses to compare whether students with partially missing data differed from students with complete data. Cross-tabulations revealed that students with partially missing data were more likely to be students with a migration background, $\chi^2(1) = 15.73$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .054$, and boys, $\chi^2(1) = 6.53$, $p = .011$, $\phi = .035$. An analysis of variance indicated that students with partially missing data had lower self-esteem at T1 and T2, higher levels of depression at T2, and lower feelings of belonging at T1 (all $ps < .01$). It is important to bear in mind, however, that minor differences can reach significance in a large sample size—indeed, the differences detected between students with partially missing data and students with complete data were far from substantial (with η_p^2 varying from .000 to .003). Moreover, according to Enders (2010) and McNeish (2017), with a sample size of 5000; a loss of 40% of observations has a minimal effect on one's power to detect true non-null effects. Our sample was above 5,000 students, and our missing percentages were very low (i.e., 3.1% at Wave 1, and 4.7% at Wave 2). We chose to use full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation to handle missingness in endogenous variables, which rests on less restrictive missing at random assumptions. Moreover, to test whether FIML produced similar findings to a missing imputation technique, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using multiple imputation as a robustness check. All findings were highly similar to the ones obtained with FIML (reported in the Sensitivity Analyses subsection, under Results).

We conducted multilevel regression analyses in Mplus Version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2016), using the maximum likelihood robust estimator (Yuan & Bentler, 2000). As a preliminary step, we

tested empty models and examined intraclass correlations of victimization and psychosocial outcomes at T2. Next, we conducted a series of models to test our hypotheses. The first preregistered model (“main model”) included the main effects of both individual-level predictors and classroom-level predictors and was used to test our first hypothesis that being defended at T1 would relate to better psychosocial adjustment and lower levels of victimization at T2. In this model, we entered two dummy variables (nondefended victims T1 vs. defended victims T1, and nonvictims T1 vs. defended victims T1; so defended victims were the reference category) as predictors of T2 victimization severity and T2 psychosocial adjustment. We did not center these dummy variables to facilitate interpretation. We group-mean centered continuous individual-level variables so that the relative position of individuals within their classroom is taken into account. We grand-mean centered continuous classroom-level variables so that all regression coefficients could be interpreted as being conditional on average levels of all other coefficients. In order to test our second hypothesis that being defended contributes to psychosocial adjustment by reducing victimization, we estimated a preregistered additional main model using the MODEL INDIRECT function. We decided to run this model only if conditions for mediation processes would be met; for instance, if the link between being defended at T1 and victimization severity T2 would be significant.

Two preregistered additional models were run to test our third hypothesis. First, we ran a model including random slopes for the two dummy variables at T1 on severity of victimization at T2 and psychosocial adjustment at T2. These slopes were included simultaneously, to take potential covariation between them into account and to prevent capitalization on chance. Significant random slopes would indicate between-classroom variation in the associations between the dummy variables at T1 and severity of victimization and psychosocial functioning at T2 (LaHuis & Ferguson, 2007), which would justify examining whether classroom-level moderators explain this variation. Second, we ran a model with cross-level interactions to predict these random slopes with descriptive and popularity norms as classroom-level moderators (Hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c). We only interpreted the model including cross-level interactions if it had a better fit compared with the main model, and if cross-level interactions were significant. Model fit was assessed based on a decrease in Akaike’s information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC); we put more weight on a decrease in AIC, as the BIC has been shown to be very conservative which may be problematic when power to detect effects is limited. We conducted simple slopes analyses with the Preacher and Hayes method for multilevel analyses (Preacher et al., 2006) to interpret significant cross-level interactions. In non-preregistered additional analyses, we explored two-way and three-way cross-level interactions with gender and age.

Results

Descriptive Results

In Table 1, descriptive statistics are provided for nonvictims, defended victims, and nondefended victims separately. For all three groups, concurrent correlations between feelings of belonging and self-esteem were moderate, significant, and positive,

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Psychosocial Adjustment and Victimization for Nonvictims, Defended Victims, and Nondefended Victims

Variable	Nonvictims (n = 3,789) M (SD)	Defended vic- tims (n = 1,039) M (SD)	Nondefended victims (n = 191) M (SD)	F																
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9							
1. Age	10.03 (1.18)	9.63 (1.15)	9.56 (1.14)																	
2. Victimization (continuous) T1	1.13 (.54) _a	3.15 (1.29) _b	3.20 (1.33) _b	2,910.48*	.046/-.083*	-.136*	.071*	-.014	-.104*	-.135*	.032	-.025	-.135*							
3. Feelings of belonging T1	4.33 (.76) _a	3.73 (.99) _b	3.35 (1.16) _c	296.67*	-.100/-.064*	-.301*/-.250*	-.165*	-.109*	.102*	.260*	-.151*	-.093*	.260*	-.151*						
4. General self-esteem T1	4.38 (.70) _a	3.93 (.90) _b	3.79 (.91) _c	188.25*	-.132/-.077*	-.265*/-.137*	.516*/.505*	.428*	-.342*	-.219*	.490*	.372*	-.219*	.490*						
5. Depressive symptoms T1	1.59 (.41) _a	1.85 (.52) _b	1.91 (.58) _b	155.54*	-.042/-.053	.202*/.192*	-.226*/-.339*	-.265*/-.339*	-.422*	-.161*	.313*	.628*	-.161*	.313*						
6. Victimization T2	1.37 (.87) _a	2.51 (1.46) _b	2.53 (1.58) _b	502.57*	-.032/-.132*	.277*/.289*	-.072/-.179*	-.471*/-.476*	.144*/.230*	.176*	-.283*	-.375*	.176*	-.283*						
7. Feelings of belonging T2	4.34 (.78) _a	3.90 (1.01) _b	3.51 (1.11) _c	178.84*	-.087/-.081*	-.219*/-.160*	.388*/.468*	.309*/.335*	-.235*/-.280*	-.286*/-.371*	-.473*	.473*	-.286*/-.371*	-.473*						
8. General self-esteem T2	4.39 (.68) _a	4.04 (.89) _b	3.97 (.85) _b	124.58*	-.040/-.076*	-.123*/-.112*	.182*/.381*	.520*/.606*	-.422*/-.413*	-.223*/-.286*	.449*/.545*	-.449*/.545*	-.223*/-.286*	.449*/.545*						
9. Depressive symptoms T2	1.57 (.41) _a	1.76 (.49) _b	1.87 (.53) _b	99.27*	-.074/-.061	.183*/.133*	-.102/-.297*	-.301*/-.342*	.466*/.468*	.196*/.305*	-.313*/-.408*	-.558*/-.550*	.196*/.305*	-.313*/-.408*						

Note. Correlations for nonvictims are presented above the diagonal, correlations presented are of nondefended victims/defended victims. Means with different subscripts within a row differ significantly from each other as tested with a multivariate analysis of variance (covariates gender and age). **p* < .05.

Table 2
Stability of Victimization Categories Across Control- and Intervention Schools

Victimization category	Control schools			Total	Intervention schools			Total
	Nondefended victim T2	Defended victim T2	Nonvictim T2		Nondefended victim T2	Defended victim T2	Nonvictim T2	
Nondefended victim T1	19 (.7%)	36 (1.4%)	33 (1.3%)	88 (3.3%)	13 (.5%)	50 (2.1%)	40 (1.6%)	103 (4.2%)
Defended victim T1	25 (1.0%)	313 (11.9%)	174 (6.6%)	512 (19.5%)	49 (2.0%)	324 (13.4%)	160 (6.6%)	533 (22.0%)
Nonvictim T1	68 (2.6%)	338 (12.9%)	1,624 (61.7%)	2,030 (77.2%)	75 (3.1%)	314 (12.9%)	1,400 (57.7%)	1,789 (73.8%)
Total	112 (4.3%)	687 (26.1%)	1,831 (69.6%)	2,630 (100%)	137 (5.6%)	688 (28.4%)	1,600 (66.0%)	2,425 (100%)

whereas correlations between these variables and depression were moderate, significant and negative. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with gender and age as covariates indicated that nondefended victims scored lower on self-esteem and feelings of belonging, and higher on depressive symptoms compared with nonvictims and defended victims, except for depressive symptoms at T1 and self-esteem at T2. Defended victims did not differ from nondefended victims in terms of frequency of victimization at T1 and T2.

Stability of the three categories (nonvictim, defended victim, nondefended victim) over the school year was surprisingly low (Table 2 and Table 3). In Table 2, we present the stability of these categories in intervention- and control schools separately. Only 32 nondefended victims (16.8%) remained nondefended across the two time points, whereas 45.0% of the initially nondefended victims became defended victims at T2 and 38.2% were no longer victimized. Of the defended victims at T1, 61.0% still reported being defended as victim at T2, whereas 32% were no longer victimized, and the rest became a nondefended victim.

In Table 3, we report on the psychosocial adjustment of students categorized based on the extent to which they were (non-)victimized and (non-)defended across the two time points. A MANCOVA (covariates gender and age) indicated that students who were a nondefended victim at T1 and became a defended victim at T2, did not differ significantly in their feelings of belonging at T2 compared with stable nondefended victims. Those who were a stable defended victim had higher feelings of belonging at T2

compared with stable nondefended victims, but not higher compared with those who initially were a nondefended victim and became a defended victim. Stable nonvictims had highest feelings of belonging at T2, and these feelings of belonging were equally high compared with those who were a defended victim at T1 and who became a nonvictim at T2. At the same time, those who initially were a nonvictim at T1 and became victimized at T2 more strongly decreased in their feelings of belonging at T2 if they did not have defenders than when they had defenders. Regarding self-esteem, those who were a nondefended victim at T1 and became a defended victim at T2, did not have higher self-esteem at T2 compared with stable nondefended victims. Those who were stable defended victims scored equally high on self-esteem as victims who were defended at T1 but not at T2. Moreover, those who initially were a nonvictim at T1 and became victimized at T2 had lower self-esteem at T2, irrespective of whether they were being defended at T2. For depressive symptoms, students who were stable nonvictims, or defended victims who were no longer victimized at T2, felt best compared with all (or most) other groups at T2, whereas other groups were largely similar; for F-test statistics, see Table 3. This MANCOVA was not preregistered, but we conducted it to be transparent and provide more insight in our data given instability of victim categories.

Descriptive norms for defending varied from .02 to .40 ($M = .17$, $SD = .07$). Fisher z scores for popularity norms varied from $-.71$ to 1.13 ($M = .27$, $SD = .33$). The nonstandardized averages of classroom-level bullying varied from .00 to .22 ($M = .07$, $SD =$

Table 3
Psychosocial Adjustment of Nine Groups of Youth, Distinguished on the Basis of Being Victimized or Not and Being Defended or Not Over Time

Victimization trajectory groups	Feelings of belonging		General self-esteem		Depressive symptoms	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Stable nondefended victim ($n = 32$)	2.99 (1.21)	2.97 (1.20) _a	3.80 (1.01)	3.81 (.89) _{abd}	1.84 (.53)	1.82 (.45) _{abc}
Nondefended victim T1 > defended victim T2 ($n = 86$)	3.45 (1.09)	3.49 (.96) _{abc}	3.66 (.91)	3.86 (.86) _{abd}	1.95 (.60)	1.94 (.53) _a
Nondefended victim T1 > nonvictim T2 ($n = 73$)	3.46 (1.23)	3.76 (1.17) _{bcd}	4.04 (.79)	4.17 (.79) _{acd}	1.81 (.52)	1.82 (.56) _{ad}
Defended victim T1 > nondefended victim T2 ($n = 74$)	3.43 (1.08)	3.11 (1.22) _a	3.73 (.86)	3.64 (1.02) _b	1.96 (.58)	1.89 (.60) _{ad}
Stable defended victim ($n = 634$)	3.65 (1.00)	3.75 (1.00) _c	3.86 (.92)	3.93 (.90) _d	1.90 (.53)	1.83 (.49) _a
Defended victim T1 > nonvictim T2 ($n = 334$)	3.97 (.91)	4.35 (.76) _e	4.11 (.83)	4.32 (.74) _c	1.74 (.45)	1.60 (.41) _b
Nonvictim T1 > nondefended victim T2 ($n = 142$)	3.80 (.94)	3.66 (1.01) _{bc}	4.05 (.81)	4.03 (.81) _{ad}	1.80 (.47)	1.79 (.45) _{ad}
Nonvictim T1 > defended victim T2 ($n = 649$)	4.07 (.86)	3.90 (.97) _d	4.20 (.76)	4.12 (.79) _a	1.73 (.43)	1.75 (.45) _{cd}
Stable nonvictim ($n = 3,014$)	4.42 (.69)	4.47 (.67) _c	4.44 (.66)	4.47 (.62) _c	1.55 (.38)	1.52 (.38) _c
<i>F</i>		126.03*		68.34*		57.97*

Note. Groups that have the same subscript across columns do not significantly differ from each other in outcomes at T2 as tested with a multivariate analysis of variance (covariates age and gender). The “>” sign refers to a transition from the one group to the other over time.

.05). Nonstandardized popularity norms for defending varied from $-.61$ to $.81$ ($M = .24$, $SD = .28$). Descriptive norms and popularity norms for defending correlated significantly yet weakly ($r = .16$, $p = .013$). Intervention schools did not differ from control schools with regard to descriptive norms and popularity norms for defending at T1, $F(1, 236) = .217$, $p = .642$ and $F(1, 236) = .512$, $p = .475$, respectively.

The Role of Being Defended in Severity of Victimization and Psychosocial Adjustment

The intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) for T2 feelings of belonging, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and frequency of victimization were $.087$, $.046$, $.076$, and $.076$, respectively. This justifies the use of multilevel analyses to explain this variance at the classroom level (we checked ICCs at the school level, they were all quite low).

Next, we ran the main model including individual- and classroom-level predictors to test our first hypothesis that being defended at T1 would relate to decreased victimization and improved psychosocial adjustment at T2. This model was analyzed in accordance with our preregistration. Model fit was good, with $RMSEA = .021$, $CFI = .999$, $TLI = .976$, $SRMR_{within} = .000$, $SRMR_{between} = .032$ (see Table 4). Results indicate that victims who had at least one defender at T1 scored relatively higher on feelings of belonging at T2 than victims without defenders, after controlling for initial feelings of belonging ($B_{nondefendedvictims} = -.238$, $SE = .073$, $p = .001$; Table 4). However, the feelings of belonging of defended victims were still significantly lower than those of nonvictims ($B_{nonvictims} = .113$, $SE = .032$, $p < .001$). Next, victims who were defended at T1 did not differ from nondefended victims in self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and severity of victimization at T2. Nonvictims at T1 had higher self-esteem, lower depressive symptoms, and lower victimization at T2 compared with defended victims. Thus, findings indicate that being defended did not decrease victimization and only partly improved the psychosocial adjustment of victims at T2, which is partially in line with Hypothesis 1. As there was no direct effect of being defended on severity of victimization at T2, we considered it not justified to test whether being defended could contribute to better psychosocial functioning via the indirect effect of diminished victimization (Hypothesis 2). Thus, we did not conduct the preregistered analyses to further examine potential mediation effects.

Regarding control variables, boys had higher self-esteem at T2 than girls, and older children had lower levels of depression and were less likely to be victimized at T2 (see Table 4). Children who were not born in the Netherlands had lower self-esteem. Initial psychosocial adjustment significantly predicted T2 psychosocial adjustment and victimization.

Classroom-level main effects were also analyzed in the main model. Popularity norms for defending were unrelated to classroom-level psychosocial outcomes and levels of victimization at T2. Defending descriptive norms predicted higher classroom-level feelings of belonging at T2, but were unrelated to classroom-levels of self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and victimization at T2. Regarding control variables, children in intervention classrooms experienced increased self-esteem and decreased depressive symptoms at T2. Classroom-level bullying at T1 was negatively linked

with T2 feelings of belonging and self-esteem, and positively linked with T2 depressive symptoms and severity of victimization. Children had greater feelings of belonging, higher self-esteem, and fewer depressive symptoms in larger classrooms.

The Moderating Role of Peer Norms in the Consequences of Being Defended

To examine the moderating role of classroom norms in the links between being defended at T1 and severity of victimization at T2 as well as psychosocial adjustment at T2, we examined whether the model including cross-level interactions was preferred over the main model, based on the criteria described in the analytic strategy and in our preregistration. Although the random slopes of the dummy variables varied significantly across classrooms (with the exception of the random slope of the nonvictim dummy on depressive symptoms), none of these random slopes were significantly predicted by descriptive norms or popularity norms for defending, hence there were no significant cross-level interactions. Moreover, though the model with cross-level interactions had a better model fit compared with the main model in terms of AIC ($AIC_{mainmodel} = 39487.21$; $AIC_{crosslevelintmodel} = 39363.96$, $\Delta AIC = -123.25$), it did not have a favorable model fit in terms of the BIC ($BIC_{mainmodel} = 40078.09$; $BIC_{crosslevelintmodel} = 40348.77$, $\Delta BIC = 270.68$). Consequently, we did not find evidence supporting the hypotheses that descriptive and—in particular—popularity norms would moderate the extent to which being defended benefits victims at T2 (Hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c; results are reported in Table S1 of the online supplemental material).

Extending upon our preregistered plan, we explored three-way cross-level interactions with gender and age, respectively (e.g., Gender \times Nondefended Victim \times Defending Popularity Norm). We did this for each outcome separately, to prevent the simultaneous testing of a too large number of cross-level interactions, which would result in more parameters than data. None of these three-way cross-level interactions, nor two-way cross-level interactions (e.g., Gender \times Norms or Age \times Norms) were significant. Results are available upon request with the first author.

Sensitivity Analyses

We checked our results for robustness in a number of ways. First, we ran analyses for intervention and control schools separately. This was the only sensitivity analysis that was preregistered. Findings for the main models are reported in Tables S3 and S4 the online supplemental material. In general, they suggested that defending worked out more positively in intervention schools. Specifically, in intervention schools, nondefended victims had lower feelings of belonging ($B = -.247$, $SE = .094$, $p = .009$) and higher depressive symptoms ($B = .109$, $SE = .050$, $p = .031$) at T2 than defended victims. Nonvictims had higher feelings of belonging than defended victims and were less likely to be victimized at T2 but did not differ from defended victims in terms of T2 self-esteem and depressive symptoms. In control schools, the difference between defended victims and nondefended victims in terms of feelings of belonging was marginally significant ($B_{nondefendedvictims} = -.216$, $SE = .111$, $p = .052$). All other findings remained the same, except that nonvictims did not differ significantly from defended victims in terms of feelings of belonging and self-esteem.

Table 4
Main Multilevel Regression Model Including Individual-Level and Classroom-Level Variables to Predict Students' Feelings of Belonging, Self-Esteem, Depressive Symptoms and Severity of Victimization at T2

Predictors	Feelings of belonging			Self-esteem			Depressive symptoms			Severity of victimization		
	B	CI	β	B	CI	β	B	CI	β	B	CI	β
Individual-level												
Boy	.004	[-.033, .041]	.003	.080***	[.050, .110]	.055	-.017	[-.039, .005]	-.020	.023	[-.032, .077]	.010
Age	-.020	[-.047, .008]	-.028	-.018	[-.038, .001]	-.030	-.042***	[-.053, -.030]	-.117	-.094***	[-.125, -.063]	-.098
Feelings of belonging T1	.380***	[.343, .418]	.376	.076***	[.049, .103]	.086	-.035***	[-.053, -.016]	-.067	-.133***	[-.185, -.081]	-.097
Depressive symptoms T1	-.206***	[-.266, -.146]	-.105	-.222***	[-.272, -.173]	-.131	.380***	[.342, .419]	.382	.273***	[.182, .365]	.103
Self-esteem T1	.102***	[.067, .137]	.091	.492***	[.462, .523]	.504	-.063***	[-.083, -.043]	-.110	-.070*	[-.128, -.012]	-.046
Country of birth	-.089 [†]	[-.185, .006]	-.026	-.069*	[-.137, -.001]	-.023	.044 [†]	[-.002, .091]	.026	.057	[-.080, .194]	.012
Nondefended victim	-.238**	[-.382, -.095]	-.055	.017	[-.093, .126]	.004	.070 [†]	[-.006, .146]	.032	-.044	[-.265, .177]	-.008
Nonvictim	.113***	[.050, .175]	.058	.053*	[.004, .103]	.032	-.038*	[-.067, -.008]	-.038	-.897***	[-.992, -.802]	-.341
Class-level												
Intervention condition	-.028	[-.099, .042]	-.052	.062*	[.010, .114]	.162	-.035*	[-.067, -.003]	-.148	-.028	[-.098, .041]	-.073
Descriptive norm for defending	.061**	[.025, .096]	.221	.023 [†]	[-.003, .049]	.121	-.017 [†]	[-.034, .001]	-.139	-.032 [†]	[-.068, .162]	-.164
Popularity norm for defending	-.054	[-.161, .053]	-.065	-.030	[-.119, .060]	-.051	-.012	[-.070, .046]	-.033	.010	[-.099, .119]	.017
Classroom size	.010*	[.002, .017]	.180	.008*	[.002, .015]	.226	-.008**	[-.012, -.004]	-.357	-.004	[-.012, .003]	-.117
Average levels of bullying	-.144***	[-.182, -.106]	-.526	-.058*	[-.092, -.024]	-.303	.035***	[.016, .054]	.297	.115***	[.068, .162]	.590
Residual variance within	.511***	[.479, .544]		.312***	[-.293, .332]		.134***	[.125, .143]		1.011***	[.934, 1.088]	
Variance explained within	.051***	[.038, .064]		.030***	[.021, .039]		.011***	[.007, .015]		.024***	[.010, .039]	
Variance explained between	27.0%			41.2%			26.4%			21.4%		
Variance explained between	31.8%			17.0%			22.8%			35.6%		
Variance total explained	29.8%			42.0%			28.1%			24.1%		

Note. Time 1 (T1) $n = 5,247$; Time 2 $n \approx 5,037$; CI = confidence interval.
[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The sensitivity analyses presented below were not preregistered - they were based on valuable feedback from reviewers or motivated by questions that emerged while conducting preregistered analyses. Complete findings of all these sensitivity analyses can be requested from the first author. First, we conducted exploratory analyses on the sample of victims only, to examine whether the large proportion of nonvictims in our data prevented us from detecting significant effects. Results remained exactly the same, with one exception: defended victims had lower depressive symptoms at T2 compared with nondefended victims (B nondefended victim = .081, SE = .040, p = .041). Second, we examined whether the number of defenders predicted decreased victimization and improved victims' adjustment. This analysis was also conducted on solely the victimized students, as they were the only ones who could report having defenders. Results were highly similar to those presented in the article: the number of defenders was positively associated with victims' feelings of belonging (B = .019, SE = .006, p = .003) but not with victims' self-esteem (B = .010, SE = .006, p = .076), depressive symptoms (B = .006, SE = .004, p = .144) or levels of victimization at T2 (B = -.003, SE = .011, p = .772).

Third, we conducted an exploratory sensitivity analysis to test whether results would be similar if we chose a cut-off for victimization of two or three times a month on the frequency item only. This cut-off is more commonly used and is recommended by Solberg and Olweus (2003). Using this alternate cut-off yielded n = 750 victims, of whom n = 121 were nondefended. Results were almost identical to findings rendered by the cut-off used in our main analyses (based on a combination of the frequency item and chronicity item). Again, nondefended victims experienced lower feelings of belonging compared with defended victims (B = -.294, SE = .110, p = .007) whereas nonvictims had higher feelings of belonging compared with defended victims (B = .118, SE = .043, p = .006). Nonvictims were less likely to increase in depression or to become victimized at the end of the school year compared with defended victims (B = -.045, SE = .021, p = .030; and B = -1.079, SE = .067, p < .001, respectively). However, there was one difference with the previous analyses: nonvictims did not score significantly higher than defended victims on self-esteem (B = .040, SE = .033, p = .224). This could be because the group of defended victims was slightly smaller when using this two or three times a month cut-off.

Fourth, we ran analyses again with a modified measure for the popularity norm. We computed unpopularity norms based on the within-classroom correlation between unpopularity (who is least popular) and defending, and popularity norms based on the within-classroom correlation between popularity (who is most popular) and defending and examined whether these norms would separately contribute to (victims') psychosocial functioning. Neither popularity norms, nor unpopularity norms, were predictive of our outcome variables of interest. Fifth, we tested whether using Multiple Imputation to handle the missingness in our data would yield similar results as FIML for the for the main analyses. This was the case, with one exception: defended victims scored lower than nondefended victims on depressive symptoms (B nondefended victim = .078, SE = .037, p = .037).

Sixth, we explored whether our method of centering our covariates mattered for our findings. We centered our continuous covariates at the group mean, which takes into account that individuals within the same classroom are more similar to each other. However, centering them at the grand mean allows to control for their

level of adjustment relative to all other individuals in the sample. Analyses with T1 psychosocial adjustment measures centered at the grand mean (rather than the group mean) produced highly similar results. There were two exceptions. First, the effect of being a nonvictim compared with a defended victim on self-esteem became a trend (B = .043, SE = .025, p = .079). Second, on the classroom level, there was no significant effect of descriptive norms for defending on feelings of belonging anymore (B = .022, SE = .015, p = .154), and intervention status (as covariate) no longer predicted classroom-level self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Analyses including cross-level interactions were highly comparable to those reported in Table S1 of the online supplemental material.

Exploratory Analyses: Concurrent Association Between Norms and Adjustment

As the various categories based on being (non)victimized and being (non)defended were unstable over time, we decided to examine—in an exploratory way—the concurrent role of descriptive and popularity norms in the psychosocial adjustment of nondefended victims, defended victims, and nonvictims at T1. These analyses were not preregistered. Intervention condition was not included in this analysis, because T1 was the preassessment before any intervention was being implemented. The ICCs for feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms at T1 were .072, .038, and .058, respectively. For cross-sectional analyses, the model with cross-level interactions had a lower AIC value (31251.44) compared with the main model (AIC = 31265.18) but not a lower BIC (cross-level interaction model: BIC = 31875.56; main model: BIC = 31633.07). Two out of the six tested interactions were significant. Both models are presented in Table S2 of the supplemental material.

Concurrently, defended victims were better off than nondefended victims in terms of self-esteem and feelings of belonging but not in terms of depressive symptoms. Nonvictims were better off than defended victims in all psychosocial outcomes (feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms). Popularity norms for defending were unrelated to classroom-level psychosocial outcomes, whereas defending descriptive norms predicted higher feelings of belonging and higher self-esteem at T1 on average. Classroom-level bullying at T1 was negatively linked with feelings of belonging and self-esteem, and positively linked with depressive symptoms.

No significant cross-level interactions for popularity norms emerged, whereas two out of the six interaction effects for descriptive defending norms were significant. These two interactions emerged for the moderating role of descriptive norms in the relative impact of being a nonvictim versus a defended victim on feelings of belonging and depressive symptoms. As shown in Figures S1 and S2 in the online supplemental material, the difference in psychosocial adjustment between nonvictims and defended victims was smaller in classrooms with higher defending descriptive norms. Defended victims felt better in classrooms with higher defending descriptive norms than in classrooms with lower defending descriptive norms, whereas these differences between classrooms were less pronounced for nonvictims.

Discussion

The assumption that defending victims would help decrease bullying and improve their psychosocial adjustment has led many anti-bullying interventions to promote peer defending in situations of bullying (Polanin et al., 2012). However, longitudinal studies on the effects of being defended for victims are lacking, and it remains uncertain whether promoting defending of victims is indeed beneficial for them (see Healy, 2020). Therefore, the current study used a large-scale, longitudinal, nationwide study to investigate whether being defended predicted a decrease in victimization and improvements in victims' psychosocial adjustment, and whether these effects depended on classroom defending norms. Our study indicates that victims with at least one defender at the start of the school year were better off in terms of feelings of belonging at the end of the school year compared with nondefended victims, though they still scored lower on feelings of belonging compared with nonvictims. Defended victims did not differ from nondefended victims in terms of self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and severity of victimization at the end of the school year, whereas nonvictims were significantly better adjusted regarding these outcomes. Descriptive and popularity norms for defending did not moderate the associations of being defended with victims' psychosocial adjustment and with severity of victimization at T2. Thus, we found only partial empirical support to indicate that being defended elevates victims' plight and no indication that the benefits of defending vary depending on classroom defending norms.

The Role of Being Defended in Severity of Victimization and Psychosocial Adjustment

Our longitudinal analyses showed that defended victims felt better connected than nondefended victims, but did not report less depressed feelings or higher self-esteem. Moreover, defended victims were not more likely to experience a decrease in victimization over time than nondefended victims. These findings only partly support our first hypothesis that being defended would work out beneficially for victims, which was based on social protection (Hodges & Perry, 1999) and social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985) theories. A potential explanation for why we only detected such a limited effect of being defended, could be that some of the benefits of being defended are partially cancelled out by equally strong adverse effects that may also occur. In a recent commentary (Healy, 2020), it is theorized that defended victims may be even worse off than nondefended victims because defending could disempower victims by making them dependent on their helpers and encouraging the belief that these victims cannot solve problems themselves. It can also be reasoned that defending could provoke additional bullying attempts if this defending is enacted in inappropriate or aggressive ways—this could elicit revenge of bullies or stigmatize victims by making them stand out from other peers as the ones needing special treatment in contrast to those who can stand up for themselves. Importantly, we did not find any adverse effects of being defended, and our findings on enhanced feelings of belonging are at odds with this theorizing on potential adverse effects. Nevertheless, it is possible that potential benefits induced by heightened perceived emotional and instrumental support (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015) may not have been detected

due to the co-occurrence of equally strong disadvantageous effects for victims (Healy, 2020).

Another explanation for the nonsignificant findings on depressed feelings, self-esteem, and victimization, could be that the effectiveness of being defended varies as a function of individual or relational moderating factors that could not be considered in the current study. For instance, defending may lead to better outcomes for victims when they are defended by their best friends, because these are the peers that presumably mean the most to them and from whom they expect a certain level of support (Healy, 2020; Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019). The effect of being defended could also depend on the type of defending, or on the combination of these types. Our study included a general measure of defending, without distinguishing between direct (confronting the bully) and indirect (comforting the victim) forms. Prior work has suggested that direct confrontation of the bully might result in more beneficial outcomes for victims than comforting the victim (Yun & Juvonen, 2020). Direct confrontation of bullies may convey the message that bullies are to blame for the bullying. This, in turn, could decrease victims' tendency for self-blame and the internalizing problems associated with self-blaming attributions (Schacter & Juvonen, 2019). It is also possible that the effects of being defended depends on whether the defender engages in one or both types of defending. For instance, if victims are being comforted in private but no classmate stands up for them in public, the benefits of private comforting may be undone by the humiliation of not being defended publicly, which may aggravate psychosocial problems. Future studies should examine whether the moderators we propose here may contribute to the effectiveness of defending to inform the development of interventions by clarifying what works for whom.

The Moderating Role of Peer Norms in the Consequences of Being Defended

Contrary to our expectations, we did not detect a significant moderating role of defending descriptive norms or popularity norms in the extent to which defending affected victims' adjustment and victimization. Based on social misfit theory (Wright et al., 1986); we expected that defending norms would make defending an appropriate, accepted behavior in the classroom, which would increase the effectiveness of defending attempts for victims. There are several possible explanations for these nonsignificant effects. Most work on peer norms focuses on secondary schools, where peers and peer norms may be more influential. Compared with elementary schools, secondary school students have less personal contact with teachers and youth form their own "peer culture" within their classroom. Also, compared with children, adolescents are less exposed to teacher supervision (they see up to 15 teachers a week, one per subject) and strive for more independence, and are therefore less inclined to follow rules or regulations from adults (Laninga-Wijnen & Veenstra, in press). Youth in elementary school may be insufficiently aware of what their classmates are doing or attach less value to what is happening in their classroom as a whole, which may make the role of norms less important or salient to them. Consequently, peer norms may matter more for secondary school students than for elementary school students.

Alternative explanations should also be considered. Our measurement of descriptive norms (i.e., taking the classroom-level average) does not assess with precision the extent to which

defending is a norm. High mean levels of classroom defending can be due to few students displaying high levels of defending, or to many students displaying some defending. Therefore, there can be strong variations around this average level of defending that may determine whether this behavior really can be considered a norm or rather represents a group of students that stands out from the rest with regard to their defending behavior.

The nonsignificant findings could also be related to our assessment of defending as a unidimensional construct. Indeed, a recent study found that classroom descriptive norms for bully-oriented (i.e., direct, assertive) defending were positively associated with victims' adjustment, whereas descriptive norms for victim-oriented (i.e., indirect, comforting) defending were not (Yun & Juvonen, 2020).

As for descriptive norms of defending, our finding that popularity norms did not significantly moderate the link between being defended and adjustment or victimization could be due to the age and school level of our sample. Popularity norms tend to be more important after the transition to secondary school, because the social and pubertal changes of that developmental period increase sensitivity to peer influence and motivate adolescents to change their reputation in the peer group (Koski et al., 2015; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Whereas in elementary schools, teachers may be perceived as the ones on top of the social ladder, hierarchies in adolescence may be defined by which classmate is most popular, and therefore youth may be more susceptible than children to the influence of popular peers. Moreover, children differentiate less between popularity and social preference (peer acceptance) than adolescents do (Van den Berg et al., 2020). Children may still be in an 'orientation phase' by exploring what popularity means and how they can achieve it. This implies that children may answer questions on who is popular with different concepts of popularity in mind, which could complicate the detection of effects of popularity norms.

Nonstability of Victimization

Our analyses revealed that victimization was relatively unstable within individuals. This finding is surprising, as strong correlations between time points in victimization in variable-centered studies suggest that victimization is a rather stable construct (Pouwels et al., 2016). However, in our person-centered approach, in which we dichotomized victimization and being defended, victimization was found to be highly unstable over a period of eight months, and reports of being defended were also highly unstable over time. In many cases, victimization status ceased over time, either by itself or because an intervention other than defending took place. A potential reason for this fluctuation is that in our study, we chose a somewhat more lenient cut-off for the frequency of victimization compared with other work using the revised Olweus scale (e.g., see Sainio et al., 2011; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Specifically, we classified children as victims when they reported having been bullied once or twice since the start of the school year (data was collected about 6 weeks after the school year had started), and when they also indicated that they had been bullied the year before (chronicity item). Usually, a cut-off of two or three times a month is recommended when researchers use the frequency item only. Nevertheless, analyses with the other, more common cut-off yielded comparable findings (see sensitivity analyses).

The instability of victimization in the current study may have prevented us from detecting significant effects. It could be that once

students are not victimized anymore, their adjustment is relatively similar to those students who were not victimized across both time-points (thus, showing a certain level of "recovery"). Indeed, findings in Table 3 show a pattern in that direction where those who are not victimized anymore at T2 tend to do better compared with those who are still being victimized. Our cross-sectional analyses showed that defended victims were better off than nondefended victims in terms of both depressive symptoms and feelings of belonging. Therefore, it could be that being defended matters particularly for some aspects of victims' adjustment concurrently, or that better-adjusted victims are more likely to receive help. It is also plausible that the experience of being victimized immediately affects youth's psychosocial functioning, and that after controlling for their initial psychosocial functioning, no further effects on relative changes in psychosocial functioning could be detected.

Practical Implications

Knowledge of the consequences of defending for victims is strongly needed for both theory and practice, and the current study is, to our knowledge, the first to directly test the outcomes over time of receiving defending from peers. Despite potential alternative explanations, our findings put into question the general claim that being defended helps victims of bullying by contributing to a decrease in victimization. Importantly, as defending victims was found to promote victims' feelings of belonging and there was no indication that defending could be harmful for victims, the current findings do not suggest that antibullying programs should stop promoting defending of victimized children. However, they suggest that the benefits of defending for victims may be more limited than once assumed and they could indicate that encouraging peer defending may not be a primary sufficient driving factor in the success of antibullying programs in elementary schools. This is partly in line with a recent meta-analysis that evaluated the role of peer involvement on decreases in bullying and victimization. Even though interventions that included the encouragement of peer defending were successful in reducing victimization and bullying perpetration, studies that did not include this component were even more successful in reducing victimization. This seems to indicate that promoting peer defending indeed is not the strongest factor influencing intervention effectiveness. This does not imply that every form of defending is insufficiently effective. The same meta-analysis shows that the inclusion of informal peer involvement was a robust predictor of decreases in bullying (about 12.5%) and victimization (about 9%). Informal peer involvement included whole-class or small group discussions and other intervention activities that stimulate interactions with peers in natural ways. Thus, this intervention component does not directly target victims, bullies, or bystanders, but rather indirectly includes bystanders through discussions and activities that promote an appropriate classroom and school ethos. Consequently, before clear guidelines for intervention can be drawn from the current findings, it is important that future studies identify what type of defending may work under what conditions.

Limitations and Further Research

As any study, the current study has some limitations. First, we did not distinguish between different types of defending, which may be one reason why effects were less likely to be detected (Lambe & Craig, 2020). Moreover, the range of psychosocial consequences that

victims of bullying experience is much broader than the outcomes assessed in the current study. Victimization may for instance also evoke academic underperformance (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2009), social anxiety, developmental trauma (Idsoe et al., 2021), and suicidal ideation and attempts (Brunstein Klomek et al., 2019), and future researchers are encouraged to examine whether and how defending is linked with these outcomes.

Second, self-reports of being defended may not be perfectly reliable as they are prone to social desirability bias. That is, some children may report being defended even when they are not because they believe that having no defenders is socially undesirable and they wish to present a favorable self-image. Moreover, we did not consider the quality and quantity of defending, which will be an important step for future research.

Third, the current study focused exclusively on the role of peer defending in students' adjustment, but support from other sources such as victims' family may also matter (see for instance Vannucci et al., 2021). We encourage researchers to consider the role of other social, educational, and family factors in the adjustment of victimized students in future studies, as well as replicate this study across various educational stages and in other cultures, to provide insight into the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, sensitivity analyses suggested that defending seemed to have more positive effects on victims in schools where an intervention is being implemented. Though these findings should be interpreted with caution because—despite the large overall sample size—the number of nondefended victims was a bit too low for a reliable estimation of effects, it at least stands to reason that the implementation of interventions may promote factors that promote the effectiveness of defending. Examples of such factors are increased teacher support, increased feelings of empathy among students, or stronger peer norms that are disapproving of bullying. Future studies are encouraged to examine such potentially facilitating factors for defending in more detail.

Fourth, even though the current study extends upon prior cross-sectional work, it may not have fully captured the potential positive effects of being defended. That is, we identified defended victims as those who were both being victimized and defended at the start of the school year. Therefore, we may have mostly examined the role of noneffective defending attempts on victims' adjustment, as students were victimized despite having defenders at the same time. Many of the T1 nonvictims may have been former victims who already benefited from the defending attempts of their classmates, and it could be that we were only able to assess the adjustment of victims with less effective defenders. Daily diary studies or experimental designs may overcome these issues. An interesting avenue for future studies may also be the role of gender-specific norms in the effects of being defended, as elementary schools peer networks may be largely gender-segregated (Martin et al., 2013) and the norms of boys may matter particularly for the adjustment of victimized boys and norms of girls may matter specifically for victimized girls.

Conclusion

In a large prospective sample, we found that being defended predicted an increased sense of belonging among victims, but no improvements in victimization, depressed feelings or self-esteem. This study tested the prospective effects of defending on victimization and victims' psychosocial adjustment by examining whether each victim was defended or not, which extends upon previous

cross-sectional investigations of the link between average levels of defending in the classroom and victims' adjustment (e.g., Yun & Juvonen, 2020). It is also the first study to test whether differences in adjustment between defended and nondefended victims might be explained by decreases in victimization and whether classroom norms moderate the effectiveness of defending. Our findings contribute to a growing debate on the actual benefits of being defended for victims of bullying and on the value of promoting defending behavior in antibullying programs at elementary schools (Gaffney et al., 2021; Healy, 2020). We have proposed various directions for future research to better understand the factors that may affect the effectiveness of defending attempts and provide insights into who should defend whom, how, and under what circumstances. Our study provides a clarion call for more research in order to reach a conclusion on the actual effectiveness of being defended. Such knowledge is essential to further improve the effectiveness of antibullying interventions and better help a greater number of victims.

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