Health and Risk Behaviors of Bystanders: An Integrative Theoretical Model of Bystanders’ Reactions to Mistreatment

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**Abstract:** This article constructs a comprehensive theoretical model that outlines bystanders’ emotional and behavioral responses to mistreatment of adolescent peers. The model captures bystanders’ risk and health risk behaviors, which have been overlooked in the context of their reactions; when addressed at all in connection with bystanders of bullying among adolescents, they have been treated separately. Here, we present the emotional and cognitive routes that start with observation of mistreatment and lead to the bully/victim’s reactions. The model takes into account a set of responses that demonstrate risk and health risk behaviors and that are directed to the bystander as a victim by proxy. The theoretical framework is the conservation of resources theory, which posits that personal resources (i.e., potency and moral disengagement) and social resources impact the process that leads to bystanders’ reactions. Previous research has overlooked the integrative viewpoint of bystanders, and comprehensive models that explain bystanders’ behavioral and emotional responses have received little attention. Two recent models of workplace bullying overlook core features embedded in the current model, including the risk and health risk behaviors that it integrates. The findings of the present article enable a more comprehensive understanding of bystanders’ motivations and reactions.

**Keywords:** keyword 1; keyword 2; keyword 3

1. Introduction

Bullying among adolescents in schools has been widely addressed [1]. The plethora of research on the subject [2], however, has focused mainly on the dyadic interplay between bullies and victims [3,4]. As bullying rarely occurs without others observing it, a comprehensive viewpoint for the study of bullying should include bystanders, who are the most prominent group impacted by bullying by directly observing acts of bullying or by being exposed to bullying mediated by technology [5–7].

One approach to the study of bystanders of bullying considers bystanders as victims by proxy. This line of research has focused on how witnessing bullying acts impacts the well-being and psychological health of bystanders [7]. It has demonstrated a correlation between witnessing an act of bullying and suicide ideation [8], symptoms of depression among bystanders [9], repression of empathy of bystanders [10] and increased feelings of guilt [4]. The underlying assumption of this research approach is that, in the act of bullying, bystanders are passively victimized.

Other researchers have adopted a different perspective, noting that bystanders are not merely victims by proxy. The underlying assumption of this approach is that bystanders’ behaviors and actions can have pronounced effects on all elements of the bullying process and, more specifically, on the continuation or inhibition of bullying [11]. These impacts consist of various emotional and behavioral responses of the bystander, some of which are constructive (e.g., active or passive), driven by the bystander’s willingness to help the victim because of a sense of responsibility [11,7].

Other reactions are destructive [12,7]. While active-destructive behaviors are driven by a belief that the victim deserves to be mistreated and actively become part of the perpetration, passive-destructive behaviors are avoidance reactions that enhance the offender’s sense of control, power and position. In this sense, especially when adolescents who are shaping their identity are involved, the audience (i.e., passive bystanders) are used and needed, and as such they also shape their own identity as a mere audience (the sheep role).

Apart from a small number of attempts to adopt a broader perspective on the roles of bystanders, such as [12], which mentions all six roles of bystanders (including as victims), these two distinct viewpoints have for the most part been addressed separately. Moreover, the focus on bystanders as victims, beyond the mental implications noted, has resulted in a neglect of the behavioral responses of witnesses directed toward the bystanders themselves [13,14]. Conceptually, looking at risk and health risk behaviors as bystanders’ reactions to bullying can bridge the gap between the two separate perspectives mentioned above. It allows the integration of the view of bystanders as victims by proxy with the alternative view that bystanders are part of the process under a unified set of behaviors.

Looking at the complete portfolio of reactions raises two profound questions concerning the determinants of the different perspectives and the process that directs them. The first question focuses on the nature of the factors that determine the bystander’s choice, and the second concerns the process underlying this choice.

In response to the first question, scholars have focused on different determinants, although none has provided a complete model that addresses multiple antecedents. In this regard, Gaete et al. focused on former experience as an antecedent for substance abuse among bystanders [5]; Hutchinson focused on the social context of bystanders and the psychological costs of bystanding [4]; Knauf et al. focused on various determinants such as moral disengagement, empathy and self-efficacy, and feelings of responsibility as antecedents of bystanders’ reactions [6]; and Espelage et al. focused on age, gender, social context (i.e., norms), willingness to intervene and attitudes toward bullying [11]. There remains a need to adopt a more comprehensive viewpoint that takes full account of these antecedents.

The second question concerns the process that directs the different perspectives. Thus far, various studies have adopted the model proposed by Latané and Darley [15], which sets out a five-step orbit for bystander intervention: (1) noticing an event, (2) recognizing the need for action, (3) taking personal responsibility, (4) choosing an intervention and (5) implementing the intervention. This model has been utilized in social abuse situations, namely bullying [6], and it was recently applied to bystanders’ roles [16]. Nonetheless, as noted by Knauf et al. [6], there remains a need for a profound understanding of the affective and cognitive process underlying bystanders’ decisions.

In this respect, two models have been proposed concerning bystanders’ reactions to workplace bullying that have the potential to address this gap and that integrate different responses into a single model [17,18]. These models provide a more integrative view of bystanders’ reactions by seeing them in terms of active/passive constructive/destructive responses. In a recent study [18], Niven et al. answered Knauf et al.’s call [6], outlining a cognitive-emotional process triggered by witnessing acts of bullying and igniting a set of active/passive, constructive/destructive responses driven by emotions. Although this illuminating approach captures a broader range of reactions, it has three lacunas. First, the authors overlook the dynamic nature of emotions as a trigger to a dynamic set of responses, as described by Dolev et al. [19]. Second, they neglect the implications of these reactions for future events beyond the repeated bully–perpetrator interaction, including hypervigilance of the bystander in future unrelated events. Lastly, their model ignores the behaviors of the bystander that affect the bystander himself/herself, namely risk and health risk behaviors. Ng et al. presented an advanced version of this approach, proposing a dynamic model that considers the transformation of behaviors over time in a continuous bullying episode [17]. Their groundbreaking model embedded Bandura et al.’s conceptualization of moral disengagement [20], as suggested by Knauf et al. [6]. However, it fails to capture behaviors directed toward the self, namely the risk and health risks behaviors of bystanders [21,14], overlooking the role of emotions in the ongoing process and the impact on bystanders’ future hypervigilance in future distinct episodes of bullying.

Thus, to address these gaps, the present article presents a comprehensive model that integrates two separate perspectives on bystanders, namely, as victims by proxy and as bystanders, with a view to providing a comprehensive model that includes risk and health risks behaviors as representations of the victims by proxy approach. The proposed model will also illustrate an ongoing process that follows bystanders’ reactions in a continuous circular process. Unlike its predecessors, the model takes account of feelings and the dynamicity of behaviors over time.

1. The Framework of the Proposed Model

Conservation of resources (COR) theory, used here as a theoretical framework, proposes a dynamic model of stress that helps us to understand how individuals’ coping resources function in the process of reducing their exposure to stressors [22–25]. Studies have consistently shown that individual psychological differences lead to the adoption of different coping strategies and other emotional and regulatory resources in the face of difficult situations [19]. In 30 years of research, COR has been used in a wide array of stress-related situations, mostly in organizations [23], but also to explain social rejection among adolescents [26].

The underlying assumptions of COR make it appropriate for understanding the drivers and underlying process of bystanders’ reactions based on individual response to a complicated sequence of stressful conditions that occur over time [23]. In that sense, it takes into account the dynamicity of stress and the process underlying it. Moreover, as well as explaining reactions to a stressful event, it can predict future behavior (i.e., bystanders’ behavioral response to their bystanding).

COR theory is based on four underlying assumptions. First, it recognizes that people are motivated by resource loss more than they are motivated by resource gain. Second, it postulates that people must invest resources to protect against resource loss, recover from loss or gain resources. Third, it emphasizes that resource gain is more prominent in the context of resource loss. Fourth, it notes that when their resources are overstretched or exhausted, individuals enter a defensive mode to preserve the self, and that this is often defensive or aggressive in form, and may become irrational [23]. Moreover, the authors stress that, over time, loss of resources impacts the level of resources in hand that could be used in future stressful iterations, thus illustrating both the dynamicity of processes and their predictive power.

Although COR was initially used in organizational settings, it has been embraced by scholars to explain social rejection among adolescents [26]. In this respect, potency (a personal resource) and social support (a social resource) have been considered as resources that buffer the interrelations between social rejection, depression and post-traumatic stress drivers. In the COR framework, these resources will explain bystanders’ cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions.

The ability of individuals to achieve specific goals is conditioned by their personal resources, which are defined as traits that enable them to deal with adverse life events and stressful situations [27–29]. These traits include potency [30], which is defined as self-control, self-confidence, belief in society as significant and just, and belief in social support. Unlike self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience, which refer mainly to a person’s intrapersonal resources and are manifested through a sense of mastery, the concept of potency beyond its self-centered focus concerns the individual’s commitment to a social environment that is perceived as basically meaningful, predictable and just [28]. In addition, moral disengagement explains risk and health risk behaviors as part of the model.

Moral disengagement (MD) theory focuses on the processes by which self-regulatory mechanisms are deactivated to maintain a moral image of oneself, eliciting unethical behaviors without violating internal standards of morality [31], and without producing feelings of remorse, guilt or shame [32]. As ethical and unethical behaviors are products of the reciprocal interplay between personal and social influences and are thus socially embedded [31], it is to be expected that once MD is activated it will be socially learned by others. Bandura has argued that the relationship between moral reasoning and action is mediated by MD, a self-regulatory process that enables moral agency and helps individuals to reduce tensions associated with unethical behaviors [31]. In particular, Bandura suggested eight mechanisms that enhance MD by distortion of moral judgment: moral justification; euphemistic language; advantageous comparison; distortion of consequences; diffusion of responsibility; displacement of responsibility; attribution of blame; and dehumanization [31]. We suggest that bystanders may use some of these mechanisms to justify their reactions toward the victim and perpetrator and their self-risk and health risk behaviors in connection with their inventory of resources.

[1]

Personal and social resources

Moral disengagement

Active

Passive

Hypervigilance

Supporting the perpetrator

Active constructive

Passive constructive

Passive destructive

Active destructive

Destructive

Health and risk behaviors

Active constructive

Passive constructive

Passive destructive

Active destructive

Ignoring the victim

Active constructive

Passive constructive

Passive destructive

Active destructive

Witnessing mistreatment

Emotional reaction

Cognitive appraisal

Supporting the victim actively

Active constructive

Passive constructive

Passive destructive

Active destructive

Supporting the victim passively

Active constructive

Passive constructive

Passive destructive

Active destructive

Constructive

**Figure 1.** Process and dynamics of bystanders’ reactions in the framework of COR: The proposed model.

Figure 1 provides an overview of our model, which starts with the suggestion that the observation of bullying triggers a process leading to bystanders’ responses. Once bullying is observed, a cognitive appraisal process is triggered [17,18], followed by an emotional response [18]. Emotions provide invaluable self-information and information about various interactions between individuals and their environments [33], and the cognitive appraisals underlying emotions and emotional responses are crucial to the study of emotional experiences [34]. According to Lazarus’s theory of the cognitive appraisal of emotions [29], cognitive appraisal is a process by which individuals assess why and to what extent social encounters are stressful. At the same time, coping is the processes by which individuals manage the demands of person–environment relationships and their emotions [34]. According to Lazarus and Folkman [29], psychological stress occurs when individuals appraise relationships with their environments as potentially damaging to their well-being. In particular, it has been argued that negative appraisals of an experience (i.e., observing an act of bullying) induce negative emotions that trigger bystander reactions.

 In this respect, active emotions such as anger, which are based on high levels of personal resources, have been found to lead to actions aimed at supporting the?, while passive emotions such as fear lead to avoidance [19]. Passive and active emotions may coexist as part of a single reaction and change over time [19]. Thus, we can, with Ng et al. [17], view emotions in a way that recognizes appraisal as an ongoing dynamic process. In this connection, other scholars have emphasized that fear can lead to withdrawal behavior, and that anger can lead to active support for the victim. Niven et al. [18] also noted that schadenfreude may lead to the revictimization of the victim and that sympathy may lead to passively helping the victim.

The COR framework can contribute to the theory of the cognitive appraisal of emotions in two ways [34]. First, it can deepen understanding of the process that underlies the decision concerning coping strategy. Second, it enables the prediction of future behavior based on current perceived stress and correspondence with future implications for the individual’s resource inventory [23].

 In terms of COR, a cognitive appraisal is focused on both the current threat to one’s resources and the implications that any reaction has for these resources [22,23]. On the one hand, witnessing the act of bullying itself threatens two components of potency, namely the personal perception of self-control and the belief in a just and ordered society [26]. Thus, it calls for action to defend these resources. On the other hand, any future reaction by the bystander may have implications for these and other components of potency, such as individual self-confidence and the individual’s perception of his/her relationship with society. In this sense, we posit that four types of responses can be elicited from the cognitive evaluation and emotional stimuli following it, all of which depend on the inventory of personal and social resources, namely potency and social support. In line with the work of Paull et al. [35], these reactions can be divided into four categories of responses on two dimensions: active-passive and constructive-destructive.

Individuals with high potency (i.e., high self-confidence, a heightened sense of control, and belief in the existence of a just and supportive society) will be motivated and cognitively tuned to supporting the victim actively. Such support is shaped by their potency [28], will help them to maintain their future potency, especially in relation to their view of society, and will presumably restore a peaceful life, plausibly identified as a resource [22]. In this regard, especially if individuals have social support, they can actively confront the perpetrator or call for external assistance [11]. This notion leans on the social setting and personal resources nourished from the social environment [22]. Previous research has identified various antecedents of active support toward the victim, including empathy [36], willingness to intervene [11], gender (which is considered to be an antecedent of empathy) [11,36], and taking responsibility [2], all of which can be regarded as components of potency.

When individuals cognitively evaluate that active confrontation with the perpetrator will jeopardize some of their resources, they can still support the victim passively [17]. In such cases, they can maintain their potency regarding their commitment to society and their belief in a just world without jeopardizing other potency components, such as their self-confidence, that might be required when confronting a strong perpetrator.

The two other types of reactions suggested in our model can be categorized as destructive. First, bystanders can actively support the bully in a set of responses identified in the literature as reinforcers [2]. We posit that such behavior is more prevalent among individuals with low potency who do not believe in a just world or in their own ability to make the world just. Previous studies have identified a higher correlation between MD and ?

 However, we believe that low resources (i.e., potency) are not sufficient to explain the willingness to help the perpetrator and to overlook the feelings and overall experience of the victim. We emphasize that the use of MD is also necessary. An individual who assists a bully or ignores an act of bullying is likely to develop guilt and remorse, which will impact his/her future self-esteem resources. This notion relies on the work of Hutchinson [4], who found that bystanders’ feelings of guilt due to their inaction challenge their self-esteem. To avoid the loss of such resources, these individuals may use MD as a defensive shield. Findings from various studies indicate a connection between moral disengagement and passive- or active-destructive bystanders’ reactions explained through MD [37]. Although these findings help us to understand the interrelations among various antecedents and bystander reactions, they are not grounded in a comprehensive theoretical framework.

The difference between active- and passive-destructive behavior may depend on the use of different mechanisms of disengagement. Attribution of fault to the victim (“Some kids get bullied because they deserve it”) or cognitive restructuring (“It’s okay to join in when someone you don’t like is being bullied”) can allow the bystander to cooperate with the bully. Avoiding the victim may depend on a distortion of the negative consequences (“Getting bullied helps to make people tougher”) or on a minimization of agency (“Adults at school should be responsible for protecting kids from bullies”) [37] (p. 5).

Using COR and MD allows us to explore a further set of passive-destructive bystander behaviors, namely risk and health risk behaviors. Incorporating risk behaviors into a unified model of bystanders’ reactions makes it possible to encompass two distinct viewpoints that have so far been addressed only separately, namely the bystander as a victim by proxy and the bystander as a player in the act of bullying and a part of its process.

1. Health and Risk Behaviors of Bystanders in the Framework of COR and Moral Disengagement

In our proposed model, we suggest another set of bystander responses to bullying that have so far been overlooked. These reactions can be categorized as passive-destructive, although they are in some respects distinct from other responses in that category. Unlike the other passive-destructive behaviors presented here, these behaviors are directed toward the bystander himself/herself.

Various studies have found a link between bullying behaviors and substance use among adolescents. Specifically, findings indicate a strong association between legal substance use and being a victim of bullying [38], which is in line with studies that have identified the use of illegal drugs, such as marijuana, as a reaction to victimization from bullying [39].

It has been established that victimization triggers a similar emotional and physical impact on victims and on bystanders of bullying. In particular, repetitive abuse can affect bystanders and victims when the events occur later in life [10]. Thus, it can be assumed that bystanders may also consume substances after exposure to bullying. Indeed, Gaete et al. observed that bystanders used legal and illegal substances following their bullying experience [5], and they concluded that distress and helplessness are rooted in these risk and health risk behaviors. Supporting evidence is found in the interrelation of bullying with suicide ideation [8].

In the COR framework, although low potency makes these bystanders reluctant to defend victims of bullying, they still have to deal with their helplessness and feelings of sympathy toward the victim. They are morally distressed, as they feel the need to help but lack the ability (or courage) to do so [5]. Despite their empathy for the victim, their lack of social self-efficacy resources serves to elicit feelings of fear and empathy combined [40]. Byers argues that bystanders tend to use MD due to anxiety and frustration as a coping mechanism [40]. Yet, our model indicates that, to cope with the frustration, they may engage in substance use and justify that use in terms of MD. This claim finds support in the work of Basharpoor and Ahmadi, who found MD to be a compelling factor in predicting a tendency toward high-risk behaviors among students [41].

In the framework of COR, we see two additional paths that enable a developmental view of the process. Once risk and health risks behaviors are employed, self-confidence and self-perception are damaged, as Hutchinson implied [4], noting that the inaction is, by itself, enough to trigger the bystander’s shame. In terms of resources, we expect that the chances of such bystanders taking constructive action in recurrent experiences of bullying bystanding are reduced, as their resource inventory in terms of their place in society and a sense of worth is reduced, with an impact on subsequent cognitive evaluation.

Furthermore, as COR is an ongoing process, it can also account for future events unrelated to the current bullying incident. Recently, Salin and Notelaers have shown that being a bystander to bullying can be seen as a violation of a psychological contract [42]. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the process underlying psychological contract violation will explain a bystander’s future reactions. In her illuminating model, Rousseau suggests that, once the contract has been violated, hypervigilance is triggered in the individual whose contract was violated [43]. This in turn triggers future bystanding according to the individual’s level of sensitivity to future violence, and, thus, more incidents are to be expected.

1. Discussion

Our model offers a novel perspective on bystander reactions. It accounts for all bystander reactions, including those typically not discussed as part of bystanders’ responses, namely risk and health risk behaviors. This is the first model to provide a complete account of reactions in the framework of COR.

As a framework, COR allows us to account for various types of responses and the process of bystanding, suggesting a rationale for the different reactions and a developmental viewpoint of the process as a whole. Although Latané and Darley also used COR as a framework for understanding bystander reactions [15], their model had limited ability to explain the underlying rationale of the various types of responses, and it overlooked the implications of bystanding beyond the current incident. Our proposed model explains the risk and health risk behaviors of bystanders that have received little attention, incorporating them into a model that illustrates the complete range of bystanders’ behaviors. This is also the first time that the two dimensional typologies of reactions commonly used in workplace bullying research have been used to describe bullying in educational settings [17,35].

Our model also takes account of the dynamic nature of bullying and the dynamic nature of emotions and reactions. Only one previous model has attempted this [18], and it failed to incorporate the risk and health risk behaviors that are the main contribution of our model. There has been little exploration of bystanders and health and risk behaviors [5]; the few studies that have addressed the subject lacked an integrative framework.

It should be noted that our model, although it provides a novel perspective on bystanding, is theoretical. Future research should therefore seek to validate its components and to develop the comprehensive view that it offers.

**Author Contributions:** For research articles with several authors, a short paragraph specifying their individual contributions must be provided. The following statements should be used “Conceptualization, X.X. and Y.Y.; methodology, X.X.; software, X.X.; validation, X.X., Y.Y. and Z.Z.; formal analysis, X.X.; investigation, X.X.; resources, X.X.; data curation, X.X.; writing—original draft preparation, X.X.; writing—review and editing, X.X.; visualization, X.X.; supervision, X.X.; project administration, X.X.; funding acquisition, Y.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.”, please turn to the CRediT taxonomy for the term explanation. Authorship must be limited to those who have contributed substantially to the work reported.

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