Bystander behaviors in peer victimization:

Associations with moral
disengagement, efficacy beliefs, and
student-teacher relationship quality

Björn Sjögren

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Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science No. 224
Faculty of Educational Sciences
Linköping 2020

Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science • No. 224

Distributed by:
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning
Linköping University
SE-581 83 Linköping

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Edition 1:1
ISBN 978-91-7929-728-2
ISSN 1654-2029

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Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, 2020

Printed by: LiU-tryck, Linköping 2020

Preface

This thesis is the result of my doctoral studies carried out between 2015 and 2020 at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden. The thesis was part of the project “The Social and Moral Processes of Bullying – A Four-Year Longitudinal Study”, funded by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2013-07753). The project used the social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) as guiding frameworks. Accordingly, bullying was considered a social phenomenon resulting from the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors at different levels (e.g., peer, classroom, school, family, community, and societal). The overall aim of the project was to investigate how bullying-related behaviors among school children are associated (both concurrently and longitudinally) with social, cognitive, and moral factors. In this thesis, I limited my focus to students’ bystander behaviors and the factors moral disengagement, efficacy beliefs, and student-relationship quality. Beyond these variables, the project also collected data on online and offline bullying behaviors, student-student relationship quality, and social classroom climate. In the project, students answered a web-based questionnaire five times, with one-year intervals. The first data collection wave took place in the school year of 2015/16, when the students were in fourth grade, and the last data collection wave took place in the school year of 2019/20, when the students were in eighth grade. Furthermore, a pre-study was carried out at the end of school year 2014/15. This thesis used data from the pre-study and from the first three data collection waves of the longitudinal study. In sum, I focused on a subset of the variables and data collection waves of the project and, thus, the findings of this thesis should be interpreted accordingly: as pieces of a larger picture.

Björn Sjögren
Norrköping, December 2020

Acknowledgements in Swedish¹

Så var doktorandresan över. En resa som har varit lång och kort, stimulerande och frustrerande, trivsam och arbetsam, och som har känts meningsfull och meningslös. Väl framme vid mållinjen dominerar känslan av tillfredsställelse över att jag fick möjligheten att under flera år lära mig så mycket om forskning och vetenskap i allmänhet och om mitt forskningsområde i synnerhet. Men mållinjen hade aldrig nåtts utan hjälp och stöd från er som har funnits där runt omkring.

Först vill jag tacka min huvudhandledare Robert Thornberg. Det har varit en ynnest att få ta del av dina insikter i forskarvärlden och, mer specifikt, din kunskap om mobbningsforskningsfältet. Detta, i kombination med din alltid så pragmatiska och konstruktiva inställning, har varit mig ovärderlig. Tack också till mina biträdande handledare Linda Wänström och Gianluca Gini. Särskilt tack Linda för allt du har lärt mig om statistik och akademisk engelska. A Gianluca: grazie per i tuoi preziosi commenti, che mi sempre sono arrivati con incredibile rapidità!

Min avhandling är resultatet av ett större projekt, och vad skulle jag ha gjort utan er andra projektmedarbetare? Marlene Bjärehed. Tack för allt samarbete, från start till mål, med alltifrån förberedelse och genomförande av datainsamling till kappakommentarer. Stora tack också till Sarah Alsaadi, Camilla Forsberg och Ylva Bjereld. (Ylva, du må vara blåvit men det var himla gött att få in en medgöteborgare i projektet!) Tack även till alla inblandade kommuner, skolor, rektorer, lärare och, inte minst, alla er barn som var med och svarade på projektets (inte så jättekorta) enkät. Jag vill också tacka för värdefulla externa granskningar från Tomas Jungert (vid mitt halvtidsseminarium), Kristina Holmqvist Gattario (vid mitt slutseminarium) och Michael Rosander (i min läsgrupp).

Tack också till er andra kollegor vid Avdelningen för Pedagogik och Didaktik för stöttning, givande samtal och social samvaro. Ett särskilt tack till Michael Tholander; för utläggningar och diskussioner om alltifrån Foucault till FPL och andra viktiga saker i livet, för kritiska frågor och – såklart – för gött inbandylir. Och så har vi min främsta promenadkompis Johan Forsell. Hade jag nått fram utan vårt snack och

¹ e un po' in italiano

ventilerande? Tack också till min pizzabro Henrik Lindqvist för äventyr i USA (men fasen vad kassa Flyers var du). Vidare har det varit fantastiskt att dela kontor med/è stato bello condividere l'ufficio con Marlene, Ylva, Margaretha Grahn, Angela Mazzone och Laura Borello, tack/grazie! Slutligen vill jag också tacka Marlene, Johan, Anja Rydén Gramner, Emilia Åkesson och Cecilia Björkhammer för korrekturläsningen i slutskedet av avhandlingsarbetet.

Även om jag har genomfört min forskarutbildning under de senaste åren finns förstås många personer att tacka för saker längre tillbaka i tiden. För mig, med en icke-akademisk familjebakgrund, tror jag mina lärare genom åren har haft en extra stor betydelse. Särskilt vill jag tacka två klasslärare: Susanne Kallanvaara under högstadiet och Charlotta Bennshagen under gymnasiet. Ert kunniga, lugna och stödjande sätt gav mig två stabila ben att stå på under åren som skulle komma. Jag är också synnerligen tacksam till mina uppsatshandledare Ben Kenward och Marek Meristo och till min tidigare kollega Stefan Ekman, som alla gav mig en inblick i – och uppmuntrade mig att själv söka mig till – forskarvärlden. Vidare finns det självklart många vänner som har betytt mycket för mig genom alla år. Ni vet vilka ni är. Ett särskilt tack dock till mina barndomsvänner Henrik och Patrik. Förutom vår vänskap var ni i unga år viktiga inspirationskällor och förebilder för mig i skolan.

Hemifrån må jag inte ha haft med mig en akademisk bakgrund, men mamma och pappa: OJ vad mycket ni har gett mig, OJ vad mycket ni har betytt för mig. Det kanske allra viktigaste, vid sidan av kärlek och värme, är att ni alltid har gett mig känslan av att vad jag än gör och hur jag än presterar så är jag bra som jag är (eller ”störst, bäst och vackrast” som du alltid har sagt, mamma). Det har varit ovärderligt när doktorerandet har kärvat.

Till sist: Adina, August och Alma, min egen, älskade, familj. Adina – mitt livs kärlek – tack för all stöttning under doktorandåren, inte minst under slutfasen. Till August och Alma vill jag säga att även om doktorerandet tidvis var tungt och tidskrävande så gjorde jag allt för att alltid prioritera er högst. Tack alla tre för att ni varje dag påminner mig om vad som är viktigast i livet.

List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers:

I.

Sjögren, B., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2020). Bystander behaviour in peer victimisation: Moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy and student-teacher relationship quality. *Research Papers in Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2020.1723679>

II.

Sjögren, B., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2020). Associations between individual and collective efficacy beliefs and students' bystander behavior. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(11), 1710–1723. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22412>

III.

Sjögren, B., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2020). Associations between students' bystander behavior and individual- and classroom collective moral disengagement. *Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2020.1828832>

IV.

Sjögren, B. (submitted). Reciprocal longitudinal associations between defender self-efficacy and defending bystander behavior in peer victimization.

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Introduction

Peer Victimization: Definition, Prevalence, and Consequences

This thesis concerns students' bystander behaviors in *peer victimization*. The concept of peer victimization has been widely used in previous research into negative peer interactions involving harmful behaviors (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010; Ma et al., 2019). In an attempt to bring clarity to how previous research has defined peer victimization, I conducted a literature review including 63 peer-reviewed articles (Sjögren, 2020). Despite the widespread use of the term, I found that previous research characterized it in widely varying ways. However, there was a general trend toward defining peer victimization in broad terms to refer to various types of negative peer interactions that cause any kind of harm or distress for any of the involved parties. For instance, peer victimization was defined as "harm caused by other persons, in this case, peers, acting outside of the norms of appropriate conduct" (Finkelhor et al., 2012, p. 273); "the experience of being a target of peers' aggressive behavior" (Fitzgerald et al., 2012, p. 942); or as a situation in which "a child is the target of negative actions from her or his peers" (Velásquez et al., 2010, p. 284). Most studies acknowledged that peer victimization can take different forms, including physical (e.g., hitting, punching), verbal (e.g., name-calling, teasing), and relational (e.g., social exclusion, spreading rumors). Furthermore, another aspect of the definition of peer victimization regards whether it refers to being the target of peers' harmful behaviors or, more broadly, to a situation involving social interactions (including the harmful behaviors). Both approaches were represented in the reviewed studies, though the former approach (e.g., "the experience among children of being a target of the aggressive behavior of other children", Maniglio, 2015, p. 254), was more common than the latter (e.g., "peer victimization is when an individual or a group of people directs aggression toward a peer", Do et al., 2019, p. 132). It should be noted that some studies included *aggression* in their definition of peer victimization. However, although aggression conventionally refers to behaviors intended to cause harm to

others (Berkowitz, 1993), only a few studies (Do et al., 2019; Hellström et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2019; Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2020) explicitly adhered to such an intention criterion. Overall, most studies focused on interactions or behaviors that *caused* harm, rather than behaviors that were *intended* to harm.

In addition to peer victimization, another commonly used concept by researchers interested in negative peer interactions is *bullying* (Finkelhor et al., 2012). Although there is no universal definition of bullying, a common view (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017) is that bullying refers to “aggressive, intentional acts carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Olweus, 1993, p. 48). Thus, according to this view, bullying acts are (1) repeated, (2) intended to harm the target, and (3) occur in the context of a power imbalance between the involved parties. In my literature review (Sjögren, 2020), I identified two broad perspectives among the studies that related peer victimization to bullying. According to the first perspective, peer victimization and bullying refer to the same phenomenon. Within this perspective, peer victimization was most often referred to as the experience among students of being victims of bullying. Seen from this point of view, peer victimization can be said to denote bullying victimization, that is victimization that meets the bullying criteria. In contrast, according to the second perspective, peer victimization was used as an umbrella term to cover a wide range of negative social interactions or behaviors, including but not limited to bullying. That is, bullying was considered a special form of peer victimization (e.g., “bullying is recognized as a subset of peer victimization that is intentional, chronic, and characterized by an imbalance of power between victim and aggressor”, Felix et al., 2011, p. 234). Students who are targets of bullying victimization, compared to students who are targets of peer victimization, fare worse on several dimensions (Hunter et al., 2007; Malecki et al., 2015; Oblath et al., 2019; van der Ploeg et al., 2015; van Noorden et al., 2016; Ybarra et al., 2014). Even so, critical voices have been raised that being overly adherent to or focused on the concept of bullying might lead researchers to ignore children’s negative social interactions that do not meet the three bullying criteria (Finkelhor et al., 2012; Fry et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2015). Indeed, empirical findings suggest that being involved in such non-bullying situations brings negative consequences as well (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Hellström

et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2005; Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2020; Turner et al., 2015; Ybarra et al., 2014).

In this thesis, peer victimization was thus broadly defined as negative social interactions in which one or more students cause harm or distress to another student through physical, verbal, or relational means. This broad definition is also in line with the general trend observed in my review (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen et al., 2019; Noret et al., 2018). Because bullying can be considered a special form of peer victimization, this thesis relates to the bullying literature as well (see also Barchia & Bussey, 2011a; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Ma et al., 2019; Noret et al., 2018; Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015). In the following, I review prevalence rates and consequences of peer victimization and bullying.

Peer victimization seems to be a universal phenomenon affecting students all over the world (Brown et al., 2008; Craig & Harel, 2004; Eslea et al., 2003; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Mok et al., 2014), although reported prevalence rates vary as a function of many factors, for instance across countries, age groups and methodological approaches (Cook et al., 2010). In Sweden, it has been estimated that 5-12% of students are targets of bullying, and 16-29% of students are targets of peer victimization (Friends, 2019; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2018; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Regarding the measurement of bullying, it should be noted that only the definition used by the Public Health Agency of Sweden included all three bullying criteria, whereas Friends excluded the intentionality criterion and the Swedish National Agency for Education excluded the power imbalance criterion. As for the measurement of peer victimization – which was not studied by the Public Health Agency of Sweden – the intentionality criterion was included by Swedish National Agency for Education, whereas none of the bullying criteria were included by Friends. A closer examination of the numbers reveals that younger students seem to be victimized more often than older students. Friends (2019) found higher victimization rates for students in grades 3-6 (29% and 12% for peer victimization and bullying, respectively) compared to students in grades 7-9 (24% and 9% for peer victimization and bullying, respectively). In the study by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2018), however, the only grade-related difference found was that 15-year-old girls (6%) were less likely to be bullied than 11-year-old girls (10%). International comparisons suggest that the prevalence of peer victimization and

bullying in schools is relatively low in Sweden (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2016), though the prevalence has increased in recent years (Bjereld et al., 2020). Still, peer victimization and bullying are rather common features of children's school lives, which bring negative consequences, both at the individual and the societal level.

A large body of longitudinal research has established that targets of peer victimization and bullying suffer from various negative consequences, both in the short- and long term (for a review and meta-analysis, see Moore et al., 2017). Short-term consequences of peer victimization include poorer academic achievement (e.g., Buhs et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2005), psychosomatic problems (for a meta-analysis, see Gini & Pozzoli, 2013), externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression and delinquency, see Hanish & Guerra, 2002), and various symptoms of mental health problems (for a meta-analysis, see Reijntjes et al., 2010; for a review, see Arseneault et al., 2010), including depression and anxiety (Fekkes et al., 2006) and psychotic symptoms (for a meta-analysis, see Cunningham et al., 2015). In addition, studies employing cross-sectional designs suggest concurrent associations between being bullied and suicidal ideation and behavior (for a meta-analysis, see van Geel et al., 2014). Moreover, various types of mental health problems are also long-term adult outcomes of peer victimization during childhood and adolescence (for a review, see McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). For instance, adults who were victimized as children are at higher risk of depression (for a review and meta-analysis, see Ttofi et al., 2011), anxiety (for a review, see Klomek et al., 2015), and suicidal ideation and behavior (for a review, see Klomek et al., 2015).

Furthermore, longitudinal studies suggest that there are negative consequences for those who victimize others (often referred to as "bullies" in the context of bullying, but also as "perpetrators" and "aggressors" more generally), and for those who both victimize and are victimized (often referred to as "bully-victims") as well. For both bullies and bully-victims, short-term consequences include poor school adjustment, delinquent behavior, depression (not significant for girls who bully), and suicidal ideation and behaviors (for reviews, see Holt et al., 2015; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). In the long-term, bullies and bully-

victims have trouble making or keeping friends, have trouble keeping a job, are more likely to have low education levels, and are at a higher risk of criminality (for reviews, see Klomek et al., 2015; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Furthermore, bullies are more likely to use illicit drugs, and bully-victims are at a higher risk of poorer health, depression, and suicidal behavior (for a review, see Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Finally, a few cross-sectional studies even suggest that witnessing bullying is associated with negative mental health problems (Rivers et al., 2009) and emotional isolation (Hutchinson, 2012).

Peer victimization and bullying also have negative economic implications, both at the individual and the societal level. Being the target of bullying during childhood is associated with durable individual and societal economic consequences (Brimblecombe et al., 2018). Individual consequences include lower income, less savings, and greater risk of being unemployed, whereas societal consequences include higher employment-related costs and higher health service costs. The Swedish anti-bullying organization Friends (2016) has estimated that school bullying affecting students in Sweden during one school year will cost Swedish society about SEK 17.5 billion (approximately EUR 1.6 billion or USD 1.7 billion) over the next 30 years.

Taken together, peer victimization and bullying in schools are widespread phenomena that can have severe short- and long-term consequences for all involved parties. In response to this, researchers have made efforts to develop effective intervention and prevention programs, which can focus on a wide variety of aspects. Some may focus on individual characteristics of those who victimize and those who are victimized, whereas others may take a whole-school approach targeting the entire school context (see Richard et al., 2011). Meta-analyses have concluded that many programs are effective, with an average decrease of bullying victimization by 15-20% (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Gaffney et al., 2019; Langford et al., 2015). Given the relatively high prevalence rates of peer victimization, such a reduction rate seems practically significant in that these programs can have a huge impact at a population level. Nevertheless, to further improve intervention and prevention programs, there is a need for more research into how various individual and contextual factors are associated with students' behaviors in peer victimization. In this thesis, I focused particularly on the peer ecology of peer victimization.

Peer Ecology of Peer Victimization

For a long time, research on peer victimization and bullying limited its interest to those who are directly involved in the victimization episode: those who victimize and those who are victimized. Reasons for the occurrence of bullying were to be found in the individual characteristics of the bullies (Olweus, 1978) and the victims (Björkqvist et al., 1982; Lagerspetz et al., 1982). For instance, research found that bullies typically had low levels of empathy and tended to be highly impulsive (Olweus, 1993), whereas victims typically had low self-esteem and were physically weaker (Lagerspetz et al., 1982). Thus, early works on bullying adopted an individual psychology perspective, narrowing peer victimization to an isolated matter between those who victimize and those who are victimized. However in recent decades, research into bullying has become more heterogeneous. In order to fully grasp the phenomenon of bullying, and to develop efficient prevention and intervention programs, bullying should be considered a socially complex phenomenon that must be investigated from numerous perspectives (Espelage, 2014; Thomas et al., 2018). In this thesis, I look beyond the dichotomy of those who victimize and those who are victimized and adopt a peer ecology perspective. The peer ecology is the immediate ecology “that involves children interacting with, influencing, and socializing one another” (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003, p. 385). Thus, peer ecology perspectives emphasize the crucial role of the peer group in peer victimization (see Rodkin, 2004; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015).

One of the first empirical studies that investigated bullying from a peer ecology perspective was the work by Salmivalli et al. (1996). In this seminal study, they asked 573 Finnish students to fill out a questionnaire in which they were to evaluate how well each classmate fitted 50 descriptions of bullying situation behaviors. They assumed that all students in the class were somehow involved in or aware of the bullying process, and wanted to investigate what peers do when witnessing bullying. Based on the questionnaire answers, they derived six *participant roles*. The two roles that research at that time focused on, namely the bully and the victim role, constituted a modest 20% of all students. In addition to the bully and the victim, they outlined four other participant roles: the *assistant*, the *reinforcer*, the *outsider*, and the *defender* role. Assistants actively join in and assist those who bully, but compared to bullies their behaviors are less leader-like. Reinforcers

encourage or incite the bullies, for instance by laughing or cheering. Outsiders remain passive or stay away from bullying situations, and defenders intervene on behalf of the victims or otherwise provide them support. Because both assistants and reinforcers side with those who victimize they are sometimes combined into a category called pro-bully or pro-aggressive bystanders (e.g., Bjärehed et al., 2020; Nocentini et al., 2013), a categorization that has been validated through factor analysis (Jungert et al., 2016; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). The participant role approach has been widely adopted by later research, which commonly use *bystanders* as an umbrella term for assistants, reinforcers, outsiders (also referred to as passive bystanders) and defenders. The term bystander sometimes refers to passive bystanding (e.g., as with research on the *bystander effect*, see Fischer et al., 2011). In this thesis, however, bystanders refer to students who witnessed peer victimization, regardless of whether they acted pro-aggressively, passively, or acted on behalf of the victims (see also Polanin et al., 2012).

The results of Salmivalli et al. (1996) suggested that bullying is a group process, a notion that has been corroborated by later research (for reviews, see Lambe et al., 2019; Pouwels, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2018; Saarento, Garandeau, & Salmivalli, 2015). Peer victimization most often occurs in the presence of bystanders, and most students – rather than victimizing or being victimized – take a bystander role (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2015; Hawkins et al., 2001; Nishina & Bellmore, 2010; O’Connell et al., 1999). Furthermore, peer victimization is less frequent in school contexts where bystanders tend to side with those who are victimized, and more frequent in contexts where bystanders tend to side with those who victimize (Denny et al., 2015; Kärnä et al., 2010; Menesini et al., 2015; Saarento, Boulton, & Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). Moreover, one observational study found that when bystanders intervene on behalf of the victims, they are often successful in stopping the victimization episode (Hawkins et al., 2001). In other words, peer victimization is most often witnessed by peers, who can either exacerbate or discourage the episode. In addition, having friends or supporters in the classroom seems to protect victims from the negative consequences of peer victimization (Boulton et al., 1999; Flaspohler et al., 2009; Hodges et al., 1999; Ma & Chen, 2019; Sainio et al., 2011). For instance, defended victims – as compared to

undefended victims – have higher self-esteem and social status (Sainio et al., 2011), and experiencing general social support from peers buffers the negative effects of victimization on well-being (Flaspohler et al., 2009).

In order to explain the high presence and crucial role of bystanders in peer victimization, researchers have emphasized that victimizing peers can be considered an instrumental behavior. More specifically, findings suggest that victimizing others can be a means of gaining and maintaining status or reputation in the peer group (e.g., Ellis et al., 2012; Houghton et al., 2012; Juvonen & Ho, 2008; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pouwels, van Noorden, et al., 2018; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Sijtsema et al., 2009; Volk et al., 2014). The peer group can reward those who victimize in at least two ways: “by expressing approval (or by not expressing disapproval) during actual bullying situations, and by providing the perpetrators with the position of power and status in the long run” (Salmivalli, 2014, p. 288). Bystanders who take the assistant or reinforcer role express approval by joining in or encouraging the victimization episode. Although bystanders who take the passive bystander role are not quite as clear in their position taking, their (in)action can be regarded as silent approval of the victimization (Carroll, 2014; Cowie & Jennifer, 2008).

In this light, it makes sense that peers so often are present as bystanders. Without an audience that provides positive feedback to those who victimize, there is little to gain. Furthermore, one would expect those who victimize to selectively choose their victims in order to increase their status in the peer group. Indeed, findings suggest that those who victimize are more inclined to choose victims who are submissive (Schwartz et al., 1998), insecure of themselves (Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005), physically weak (Hodges & Perry, 1999), socially rejected (Schuster, 1999; Veenstra et al., 2013), and who have a low social status (Pouwels et al., 2016; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Just as bystanders can provide exacerbating positive feedback, they can also provide negative feedback that discourages peer victimization. By siding with the victims, bystanders who take the defender role dispute and challenge the behavior and status of those who victimize. Thus, defenders make peer victimization less socially rewarding, which can explain the finding from Hawkins et al. (2001) that peer victimization episodes often end quickly when peers support the victims, and why peer victimization is less frequent in school contexts

where bystanders tend to side with victims (e.g., Denny et al., 2015; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011).

Unfortunately, considering that students typically judge bullying as wrong and sympathize with the victims (Boulton et al., 2002; Eslea & Smith, 2000; Gini, Pozzoli, et al., 2008; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2016; Whitney & Smith, 1993), they are rather unwilling to act on behalf of victimized peers. Studies have found that 17% to 28% take the defender role, whereas 13% to 28% take the assistant or reinforcer role, and 12% to 29% take the passive bystander role (Gini, 2006; Goossens et al., 2006; Pouwels et al., 2016; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). One possible explanation for this attitude-behavior gap is that students refrain from defending victims because of its risky nature; defenders might themselves become future targets of peer victimization (Gini, Albiero, et al., 2008; Huitsing et al., 2014). Indeed, fear of retaliation and being the next victim is a common reason reported by students for not being willing to intervene as a bystander (Forsberg et al., 2014; Forsberg et al., 2018; Strindberg et al., 2020; Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018). Such a retaliation hypothesis was also supported by a longitudinal social network study where defenders were more likely to be subsequently victimized by the same students who victimized the defended victim in an earlier situation (Huitsing et al., 2014). Thus, defenders may constitute a threat toward the status of those who victimize, who therefore retaliate in an attempt to maintain their own or their group's status position. Humans' need to belong leads to a strong desire to be included as well as a strong fear of being excluded (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Søndergaard, 2012). Remaining passive, or even engage in pro-aggressive behavior, can represent ways to fit in and belong with peers (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006), especially in classrooms with higher levels of aggressive norms (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2018) and status hierarchy (Garandeau et al., 2014). This tendency is also exacerbated by the fact that those who victimize, although disliked (Caravita et al., 2009; Sentse et al., 2014), are perceived as popular and powerful (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006; Sijtsema et al., 2009).

Thus far I have discussed students' bystander behaviors in terms of fixed social roles. In this respect, it should be emphasized that previous research has addressed students' bystander behaviors using two different approaches. The first approach conceptualizes bystander

behaviors as typologies by categorizing each student into *one* bystander role according to certain selection criteria (e.g., Gini, 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). This approach allows researchers to estimate the distribution of bystander roles and to investigate, among other things, how students who are categorized as defenders differ from students who are categorized as passive bystanders. However, even though a moderate consistency in bystander behaviors over time has been suggested (Salmivalli et al., 1998), there is extensive evidence indicating that students' bystander behaviors vary between and within peer victimization episodes depending on the social context (DeSmet et al., 2014; Frey et al., 2014; Gumpel et al., 2014; Huitsing et al., 2014; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; Levy & Gumpel, 2018). Hence, research using the first approach obscures the fluid and dynamic nature of bystander behaviors. In contrast, the second approach does not regard bystander roles as mutually exclusive but conceptualizes bystander behaviors as a continuous dimension (see also Lambe & Craig, 2020; Levy & Gumpel, 2018). In this thesis, I adhered to the second approach using the measure of bystander behaviors as continuous rather than categorical variables.

Bystanders in Prevention and Intervention Work

An important practical implication of considering the peer ecology of peer victimization is that it generates new ideas on how prevention and intervention programs should be designed. Whereas programs inspired by Olweus' early research mainly would target individual characteristics of those who victimize and those who are victimized, programs embracing a peer ecology perspective place focus on the entire peer group (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015). As reviewed above, bystanders are not neutral observers but active agents who influence the prevalence and course of peer victimization. Bystanders have even been pointed out as having "the power to enable or disable bullying" (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015, p. 201). Importantly, it has been argued that bystanders – as compared to those who victimize – might be easier to influence since they often consider bullying wrong and would like to do something to help (Charach et al., 1995; Padgett & Notar, 2013; Palladino et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2010). Furthermore, bystanders seem to be more supported by their teachers and peers than those who victimize or are victimized, suggesting that bystanders may possess important social resources that

prevention and intervention programs could take advantage of (Flaspohler et al., 2009).

Programs focusing on the peer ecology of peer victimization can target students' bystander behaviors, aiming at increasing their defender behaviors while decreasing their passive behaviors and pro-aggressive behaviors (Polanin et al., 2012; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2014). During the last decades, several programs that focus on changing bystander behaviors have been designed and implemented (Gaffney et al., 2019; Polanin et al., 2012). Among these, one of the most used and evaluated is the KiVa antibullying program, originally developed in Finland where it is being used in the vast majority of elementary schools (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). KiVa is based on two central tenets: (1) that bullying can be a social and functional behavior motivated by a pursuit of high status, and (2) that bullying is a group process in which bystanders have an effect on its maintenance and on the adjustment of the victims (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011). Consequently, one of the crucial components of KiVa is to increase the prevalence of defender behaviors and to decrease the prevalence of the other bystander roles. The lessons of the KiVa program adapted for children in grades 4-6 seek to "(a) raise awareness of the role that the group plays in maintaining bullying, (b) increase empathy toward victims, and (c) promote children's strategies of supporting the victim and thus their self-efficacy to do so" (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011, p. 313).

KiVa has been proven effective in reducing bullying victimization and bullying perpetration (for a meta-analysis, see Gaffney et al., 2019). In an evaluation of Finnish students in grades 1-9 that used an age cohort design, KiVa reduced bullying victimization in grades 1-6 and 8 and bullying perpetration in grades 1-6 (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alanen, & Salmivalli, 2011). On average, the odds of being a victim or a bully for students in the control group were about 1.2 times that of students in the intervention group. Findings from studies using a randomized controlled trial design support the effectiveness of KiVa in Finnish schools, particularly for students in grades 1-6 (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011; Kärnä et al., 2013). Moreover, KiVa has been shown to work in contexts outside Finland as well. A randomized controlled trial evaluation of KiVa in Italy found

reductions in bullying victimization and bullying perpetration in Italian fourth- and sixth-grade students (Nocentini & Menesini, 2016).

Although KiVa and other programs have been proven effective in changing students' bystander behaviors, the effect sizes of the programs have been rather small for kindergarten through eighth grade students (for a meta-analysis, see Polanin et al., 2012). Notwithstanding the growing body of empirical research on correlates of bystander behaviors during the last two decades (for a meta-analysis, see Ma et al., 2019; for a review, see Lambe et al., 2019), researchers still need to fully grasp the complex pattern of individual and collective factors that influence how students act as bystanders when witnessing peer victimization. The better we understand this complex pattern, the better we know how to improve existing prevention and intervention programs targeting bystander behaviors. This thesis, based on four studies, investigated how factors derived from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) are associated – both cross-sectionally and longitudinally – with students' bystander behaviors.

Outline of this Thesis

The rest of this thesis is organized as follows. *Chapter 2* describes how social cognitive theory is used as the guiding framework in the thesis, and how factors derived from this framework have been studied by previous research. *Chapters 3* and *4* outline the overall aim and the general method of this thesis, respectively. *Chapter 5* summarizes the studies included in the thesis. The thesis concludes with *Chapter 6*, where main findings, strengths, limitations and implications of the thesis are discussed, and suggestions for future research are offered.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

This thesis used social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) as its theoretical framework. A central tenet of this theory is that humans are able to intentionally influence their lives and environment, referred to as human agency. Rather than being entirely autonomous agents, however, social cognitive theory posits that human agency depends on reciprocal interactions among individual factors (e.g., cognitions such as self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies), the social environment (e.g., the classroom climate), and behaviors (Bandura, 1986). This model is called *triadic reciprocal causation* (Bandura, 1997), referring to the notion that behaviors, intrinsic factors, and extrinsic factors influence and are influenced by each other. Social cognitive theory thereby “subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175) in its view that humans are neither entirely controlled by the environment, nor entirely autonomous.

Empirical findings have linked bystander behaviors to various individual (e.g., cognitive, affective, and moral) factors, but recently there has also been increasing interest in social environment factors and how factors at different levels interact in explaining variation in bystander behaviors (Ettekal et al., 2015; Lambe et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2019). Social cognitive theory with triadic reciprocal causation as its core concept is well-suited to address such socially complex phenomena, and has previously been used as a theoretical framework in the study of students’ bystander behaviors (Allison & Bussey, 2016, 2017; Carroll, 2014; DeSmet et al., 2014; Kim, 2014). More specifically, social cognitive theory conceptualizes bystander agency in peer victimization as a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood in terms of unidirectional causality. To understand why bystanders sometimes act pro-aggressively or passively while at other times they defend the victims, one needs to address (1) their individual characteristics, (2) the characteristics of the social environment in which they operate, and (3) how these characteristics interact. Moreover, according to social cognitive theory, acting or watching others acting as bystanders can alter characteristics of the individual or the social environment. This triadic reciprocal causation of bystander agency in peer victimization is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Illustration of triadic reciprocal causation of bystander agency adapted from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory

This thesis investigated how both individual and social environment factors are associated with bystander behaviors among students in early adolescence. Focusing on this age group (i.e., 10-14 years of age, Sawyer et al., 2012) is particularly important because peer victimization seems to be most prevalent during these years, both in Sweden (Friends, 2019) and elsewhere (Due et al., 2005). During this period, children also experience rapid and significant developmental changes in various domains (i.e., cognitive, emotional, social, and physical) and begin to establish their identities and striving for independence (Sawyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, peers increasingly become a stronger social influence on individuals' development and behavior (Brown & Larson, 2009; Harris, 1995; Marsh et al., 2006; Reitz et al., 2014). Hence, it should be especially important to include social environment factors when studying early adolescents. Regarding social environment factors, the classroom was chosen as the level of analysis in this thesis. Here, the classroom context does not refer solely to the physical environment but to the social settings in which peers interact with each other or with their teachers. The classroom level has been identified as an essential group context to address in order to better understand and counteract peer victimization (Doll et al., 2004; Gini et al., 2015; Frey et al., 2009; Kuppens et al., 2008; Oldenburg et al., 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Importantly, the classroom should be a crucial context to consider when investigating students' bystander behaviors, given that in Sweden, as in many other countries, elementary school students remain with the same

classmates and teachers throughout the day and for at least one school year. Thus, the classroom can be said to constitute a primary context for children's social interactions (Barth et al., 2004; Chang, 2004). In support of this claim, empirical research has found a higher variability in bullying behaviors between classrooms than between schools (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Saarento et al., 2013). In addition to the classroom, another important socialization context is the informal peer group based on voluntary friendships (Rubin et al., 2008). Indeed, empirical findings suggest that this type of peer group has a socialization effect on behaviors (e.g., Espelage et al., 2003) and cognitions (e.g., Caravita et al., 2014) related to peer victimization. However, while not downplaying the importance of smaller peer groups, there were at least two reasons for focusing on the classroom level in this thesis. First, informal peer groups are fluid in that their composition and characteristics are constantly changing (Cairns et al., 1998) and, thus, are difficult to study. Rather than collecting self-report data once a year, as in the project that this thesis was a part of, investigations of such dynamic groups call for study designs characterized by dense data collection waves of sociometric data (Bronfenbrenner, 1944). Second, prevention and intervention work aiming at reducing peer victimization is often implemented at the classroom level. Thus, it should be important to learn about social environment factors at this level of analysis.

Furthermore, research on bystanders in peer victimization has mainly regarded bystander behaviors as an outcome variable (e.g., Caravita et al., 2009; Gini, 2006; Lambe et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2019; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). In other words, the focus has been on investigating which factors are associated with and determinants of pro-aggression, passive bystanding, and defending. Three of the studies of this thesis (Studies 1-3) were cross-sectional (i.e., the study variables were measured concurrently). In these studies, bystander behaviors were considered as the outcome variables. However, in one study (Study 4), I examined potential reciprocal longitudinal associations between the investigated bystander characteristic (i.e., defender self-efficacy) and the investigated bystander behavior (i.e., defending).

In this thesis, the studied bystander characteristics were defender self-efficacy and individual moral disengagement, and the studied social environment characteristics were collective efficacy to stop peer

aggression, collective moral disengagement, and student-teacher relationship quality. Next, these factors will be addressed.

Efficacy Beliefs

Self-efficacy can be defined as the belief in one's ability to successfully carry out the actions needed to reach a certain goal (Bandura, 1997). In contrast to global constructs such as self-esteem and self-confidence (i.e., general feelings and concepts about oneself across actions and situations), self-efficacy is context specific (Pajares & Miller, 1994). Self-efficacy beliefs are not necessarily accurate accounts of people's true ability, but perceived competence for executing a certain activity. However, while some overestimate and others underestimate their true ability, self-efficacy beliefs are important determinants of action or inaction (Goddard et al., 2004; Schunk & Miller, 2002) through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selective processes (Bandura, 1997).

In the context of peer victimization, *defender self-efficacy* (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2013) refers to the belief in one's ability to successfully intervene on behalf of the victim. Although self-efficacy beliefs are central to human agency in general (Bandura, 1997, 2000), this should be particularly true for defender self-efficacy beliefs because defending victims of peer victimization is a difficult and risky project. Defending is difficult because it requires various strategies depending upon the situation (e.g., Lucas-Molina et al., 2018; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010), and it is risky because defenders might themselves become future targets of peer victimization (Gini, Albiero, et al., 2008; Huitsing et al., 2014). Defender self-efficacy beliefs influence students' actions as bystanders through different internal processes (Bandura, 1997). For example, students high in defender self-efficacy should be more likely to intervene on behalf of victims since they to a greater extent will visualize successful scenarios (cognitive process), persist when encountering obstacles (motivational process), cope better with stress in peer victimization (affective process), and choose to get into peer victimization (selective process). Thus, without a strong belief in one's ability to help victims, bystander intervention is more unlikely.

During the last decade, researchers have started to pay attention to defender self-efficacy in relation to students' bystander behaviors. In line with social cognitive theory, defender self-efficacy has been

positively associated with defending (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; Peets et al., 2015; Pronk et al., 2013; Pöyhönen et al., 2010, 2012; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; van der Ploeg et al., 2017; Thornberg et al., 2020), and negatively associated with passive bystanding (Pronk et al., 2013; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). In a similar manner, *social self-efficacy* – a more general self-perception of being competent in social situations – has been positively linked to defender behavior (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Gini, Albiero, et al., 2008) and negatively linked to passive bystanding (Gini, Albiero, et al., 2008). Beyond concurrent associations, two studies have investigated whether defender self-efficacy is longitudinally associated with defending (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; van der Ploeg et al., 2017). In their two-wave longitudinal studies, defender self-efficacy at time 1 was found to be positively associated with defending several months later (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; van der Ploeg et al., 2017). However, for Barchia and Bussey (2011b), the effect disappeared in the regression models when controlling for other factors (e.g., moral disengagement, empathy, and aggression efficacy). Furthermore, compared to defending and passive bystanding, less is known about the possible relationship between defender self-efficacy and pro-aggressive bystanding. The few available findings have been mixed, with both negative (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg et al., 2020) and null (Pöyhönen et al., 2012) associations reported.

Peer victimization is embedded in a social context (Hong & Espelage, 2012), and often occurs in the presence of bystanders (e.g., Atlas & Pepler, 1998; O'Connell et al., 1999). Therefore, along with other human social activities (Bandura, 2000), students' bystander behaviors will not only depend on individual bystander characteristics, but also on characteristics of the social environment. In this way, human agency does not solely operate at the individual level but also at the collective level when attainments are achievable only through interdependent efforts (Bandura, 2000). A key element of collective agency is collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997; 2000), which refers to the shared beliefs of the capacity of a group to work together to produce given attainments (see also Hymel et al., 2015; Sampson et al., 1997). Group members might be individually skilled (e.g., high in defender self-efficacy) but still unsuccessful when it comes to tasks that require them to work together as a unit (Bandura, 2000). Importantly, then,

collective efficacy cannot be considered the sum of the personal efficacy beliefs of the group's members but should be regarded as an emergent group-level property (Bandura, 2000; Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002). Collective efficacy has been found to have positive effects on group performance in various domains, such as organizational, educational, sports, and military settings (Bandura, 2000; Stajkovic et al., 2009).

Regarding collective efficacy beliefs in the context of peer victimization, Barchia and Bussey (2011a, b) developed a scale to measure collective efficacy to stop peer aggression (henceforth referred to as just "collective efficacy"). The scale asked respondents to evaluate how well the students and the teachers in the school can work together to stop different types of peer aggression (e.g., "...to stop students teasing each other"). At the individual level, this scale measures individual perceived collective efficacy. Findings suggest that individual perceptions of collective efficacy are positively associated with defending (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b) and negatively associated with peer aggression (Barchia & Bussey, 2011a). However, used in this way, the scale does not reflect the *shared beliefs* of the capacity of the group (i.e., the school) to work together to stop peer aggression, which would be more in accordance with the concept of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Hymel et al., 2015). In order to study collective efficacy as a group characteristic, the individuals' answers need to be aggregated at the group level. To my knowledge, only one previous study has examined bystander behaviors in relation to group-level collective efficacy, suggesting that collective efficacy at the classroom level is positively associated with defending and negatively associated with reinforcing (Thornberg et al., 2020).

In sum, several studies have investigated how bystander behaviors relate to defender self-efficacy, and a few studies have investigated how bystander behaviors relate to collective efficacy at the classroom level. In this thesis, bystander behaviors were investigated in relation to both defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy. These investigations add to the literature in several ways. Even though previous research has firmly established an association between defending and defender self-efficacy, only two previous studies have been longitudinal (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; van der Ploeg et al., 2017). This thesis extended these studies in two ways. First, the previous longitudinal studies included only two data collections within a short period of time. By including

three data collections over two years, this thesis provides a deeper insight into the nature of the association between defending and defender self-efficacy. Second, the two previous studies only examined whether defender self-efficacy predicted defending, and not vice versa. Such a unidirectional focus is not consistent with the triadic reciprocal causation model of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Accordingly, this thesis (Study 4) investigated whether there were longitudinal unidirectional associations from defender self-efficacy to defending, from defending to defender self-efficacy, or whether the associations were reciprocal. Furthermore, this thesis extended the current limited body of knowledge on how defender self-efficacy is associated with pro-aggressive and passive bystanding. Findings of two studies conducted in Sweden with participants in the same age group as in this thesis suggest negative associations with both pro-aggressive (Thornberg et al., 2020) and passive bystanding (Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017). Moreover, this thesis added to the limited knowledge (Thornberg et al., 2020) of how collective efficacy conceptualized as a group characteristic is associated with students' bystander behaviors. Beyond main effects, this thesis also examined potential interaction effects in order to gain a more detailed understanding of how defender self-efficacy relates to bystander behaviors. For instance, does the potential association between defender self-efficacy and defending depend on the classroom level of collective efficacy?

Moral Disengagement

Within the social cognitive theory, Bandura (1991) put forward a theory of moral agency in order to explain how ordinary people can commit negative acts against their moral standards without experiencing discomforting feelings such as guilt or shame. As children grow up and socialize, they develop moral standards that help them to distinguish right from wrong and guide their behaviors within their culture. However, individuals' moral standards and their reasoning about moral issues are not always in accordance with their moral conduct. For instance, as I reviewed in the previous chapter, students generally consider bullying wrong (e.g., Thornberg, 2010) but they often do not act on behalf of victimized peers (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 1996). Thus, there is a difference between moral cognition and moral action (see also

Blasi, 1980). Students having the same moral standards may behave differently depending on their cognition and the social context surrounding them. Nevertheless, students will generally refrain from victimizing peers because they anticipate that behaving in line with their moral standards will bring positive consequences such as personal satisfaction or a sense of self-worth, whereas behaving against those standards will result in self-sanctions in the form of discomforting feelings such as guilt or shame (Bandura, 2016).

According to social cognitive theory, however, there are socio-cognitive maneuvers, that is *moral disengagement* mechanisms, which allow people to sidestep their moral standards and act immoral without experiencing negative sanctions. In particular, Bandura has described eight moral disengagement mechanisms, divided into four broader clusters (referred to by Bandura as *loci*), upon which the moral disengagement process can be centered (Bandura, 2016). The first locus is the *behavioral locus*, which refers to turning reprehensible behavior into supposedly good, or at least less bad, behavior. Three disengagement mechanisms belong to the behavioral locus: *moral justification*, *euphemistic labeling*, and *advantageous comparison*. Moral justification means viewing the immoral act as serving a higher moral purpose (e.g., “it would be okay to ostracize him because otherwise he will cause bad atmosphere in the group”). Through euphemistic labeling, students label the conduct in a way that makes it sound less negative (e.g., “it would be just a joke”). Advantageous comparison occurs when students compare the conduct to an even worse, hypothetical, conduct (e.g., “it would not be that harmful compared to...”). The second locus is the *agency locus* and regards minimizing one’s agentive role, by any of the two disengagement mechanisms *displacement of responsibility* (e.g., “it would be Erik’s fault, not mine”) or *diffusion of responsibility* by which the responsibility is diluted among several peers (e.g., “it wouldn’t be my fault because I would be just one of the involved parties”). The third locus is the *effects locus*, which refers to the disengagement mechanism that deals with *disregard or distortion of the consequences* of one’s action. Thus, students might disengage by minimizing the consequences of their actions (e.g., “it wouldn’t really hurt her that much”). The fourth and final locus is the victim locus, which puts responsibility on the victims, and comprises the two disengagement mechanisms *attribution of blame* (e.g., “if you can’t be like everybody else, you have to blame

yourself if you get bullied”) or *dehumanization*, that is, stripping the victim of human qualities (e.g., “she would deserve to be treated as she was nothing”).

High levels of moral disengagement have been linked to aggressive behaviors among children and youths (for a meta-analysis, see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014), including bullying (Gini, 2006; Mazzone et al., 2016; Perren et al., 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). Importantly, findings show that moral disengagement is longitudinally associated with bullying, suggesting that initial levels of moral disengagement predict the development of bullying over time (Sticca & Perren, 2015; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, & Hong, 2019; Wang et al., 2017). Regarding bystander involvement in peer victimization, empirical findings indicate that students high in moral disengagement are more likely to assist and reinforce peer victimization (e.g., Gini, 2006; Pozzoli et al., 2012b; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). As proposed in the social cognitive framework (Bandura 2016), moral disengagement makes it easier for people not only to personally do harm, but also to refrain from helping and protecting a person in need as it becomes easier for them to interfere with their moral judgement and deactivate their moral self-sanctions. Indeed, findings indicate that students high in moral disengagement are less likely to defend victims of peer victimization (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Gini, 2006; Gini et al., 2011; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg et al., 2015; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong & Espelage, 2017). Regarding passive bystanding, findings are mixed (for a meta-analysis, see Killer et al., 2019), with both positive associations (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017), negative associations (Gini, 2006; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), and null results (Gini et al., 2015). Nevertheless, research suggests that passive bystanders have higher levels of moral disengagement than defenders (Gini, 2006; Levasseur et al., 2017; Obermann, 2011).

Most previous research on moral disengagement has investigated how individuals differ in their propensities to morally disengage, and how these differences are associated with their behaviors (Schaefer & Bouwmeester, 2020). However, moral disengagement should not be considered a static individual characteristic. Although moral disengagement can develop into habitual patterns that are relatively stable over time (Bandura, 2016; Wang et al., 2017), individuals’ propensities to morally disengage decrease from early adolescence to

early adulthood (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014; Paciello et al., 2008) and can be altered through interventions (e.g., Wang & Goldberg, 2017). Furthermore, beyond individual morality, students' behaviors in peer victimization may vary as a function of the social moral context (Hymel et al., 2010). According to social cognitive theory, the propensity to disengage from one's moral standards is embedded within the system of triadic reciprocal causation, which emphasizes that human behavior is the result of both personal characteristics and the social environment. For instance, refraining from victimizing peers may bring positive or negative *social* consequences, depending on the norms and values of the social group (Bandura, 2016). Students may anticipate whether victimizing peers will result in approval or disapproval from the group, and then assimilate their behaviors accordingly. Despite this, research on peer victimization and aggressive behavior has primarily investigated moral factors at the individual level (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Hymel et al., 2010). A few studies have investigated how students' behaviors are associated with the classroom mean of individual moral disengagement, labeled as *class moral disengagement* (Pozzoli et al., 2012b; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017). Pozzoli et al. (2012b) did not study class moral disengagement as one aggregated unit but split it into the four loci upon which the disengagement can be centered. They found that pro-bullying behavior was positively associated with disengagement mechanisms belonging to the agency and victim locus, and negatively associated with mechanisms belonging to the effect locus. However, in their study, pro-bullying behavior did not solely refer to bystander behavior (assistant and reinforcer behavior), but also comprised bullying behavior. Therefore, one cannot draw any clear conclusions from their results regarding possible associations between class moral disengagement and bystander behaviors. In contrast, Thornberg et al. (2017) focused solely on bystander behaviors (defending and passive bystanding), and studied class moral disengagement as a unidimensional construct. They found no main effects of class moral disengagement on either defending or passive bystanding. However, the interaction terms between class moral disengagement and individual moral disengagement and between class moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy were significantly associated with passive bystanding. The former interaction term implied that the positive association between passive bystanding and individual moral disengagement was stronger in classrooms with higher class

moral disengagement. The latter interaction implied that the negative association between passive bystanding and defender self-efficacy was stronger in classrooms with lower class moral disengagement.

However, class moral disengagement does not properly capture the collective aspect of moral disengagement. Rather than being the sum of students' individual moral disengagement, collective moral disengagement refers to an emergent group-level construct that arises from the interactions of individuals within a group (White et al., 2009). Thus, collective moral disengagement can be defined as "the beliefs in justifying negative actions that are – to some extent – shared within a significant social group" (Gini et al., 2015). Importantly, individual and collective moral disengagement differ from each other when it comes to the unit of agency (i.e., the individual versus the group), but they operate through the same moral disengagement mechanisms (Gini et al., 2014; Gini et al., 2015). In response to this, Gini et al. (2014) developed and validated a scale for measuring collective moral disengagement at the classroom level in the context of peer victimization. Respondents are asked to estimate how many classmates agree with moral disengagement justifications (e.g., "In your classroom, how many kids think that ... kids who get mistreated usually do things that deserve it"). The scale can be used at the individual and the group level. At the individual level, it refers to individuals' beliefs about the extent to which their classmates use moral disengagement mechanisms, labeled as *student perceived collective moral disengagement*. At the group level, it refers to a classroom-level construct that reflects the extent to which moral disengagement mechanisms are shared by all classmates, labeled as *classroom collective moral disengagement*. Classroom collective moral disengagement is obtained by averaging the score of all classroom members. Results from two studies suggest that classroom collective moral disengagement is positively associated with passive bystanding (Gini et al., 2015) and negatively associated with defending (Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová et al., 2018). In addition, one study suggests a positive association between passive bystanding and student-perceived collective moral disengagement (Gini et al., 2020). In order to capture the proper essence of collective moral disengagement as an emergent group-level construct that arises from interactions among classmates, this thesis focused on classroom collective moral disengagement (henceforth referred to as just "collective moral disengagement").

In sum, several studies have investigated how bystander behaviors relate to individual moral disengagement, and a few studies have investigated how bystander behaviors relate to moral disengagement at the classroom level. In this thesis, bystander behaviors were investigated in relation to both individual moral disengagement and collective moral disengagement. Whereas previous research has found a consistent association between pro-aggressive bystanding and individual moral disengagement, no previous study has investigated how students' pro-aggressive bystander behaviors relate to collective moral disengagement conceptualized as a group characteristic. This thesis contributed in filling this gap, while also building on the still limited exploration of how collective moral disengagement relates to defending and passive bystanding. The only two studies available suggest that collective moral disengagement is positively associated with passive bystanding and negatively associated with defending, but they were conducted in other countries – Italy and the Czech Republic – and their participants were older than the participants in this thesis. Furthermore, this thesis investigated potential interaction effects. In doing so, it provided answers to whether, among other things, the potential association between moral disengagement and pro-aggressive behavior depends on the quality of students' individual relationships with their teachers.

Student-Teacher Relationship Quality

Another characteristic of the social environment included in this thesis was student-teacher relationship quality, which referred to the degree of caring, warm, supportive, and respectful student-teacher relationships and interaction patterns (see also Jungert et al., 2016; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In contrast to collective efficacy and collective moral disengagement, student-teacher relationship quality is a characteristic that has not been greatly elaborated within the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory. Still, it is a characteristic of relevance to students' bystander behaviors that fits well with the triadic reciprocal causation model of social cognitive theory, which suggests that students' bystander behaviors affect and are affected by both individual characteristics and characteristics of the social environment.

In the classroom context, teachers are influential agents of students' social cognition and behaviors (e.g., Chang 2003; Eliot et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2014; Ladd et al., 2012; McAuliffe et al., 2009). It has

been argued that students' relationships with their teachers can function as a support system that helps students to navigate in novel situations and to foster the development of social skills (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Empirical research has found that student-teacher relationship quality is positively related to academic engagement and achievement (for a meta-analysis, see Roorda et al., 2011), and to the behaviors of, and relationships between, students (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Driscoll & Pianta, 2010; Howes et al., 1994; Obsuth et al., 2017; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991; Rudasill et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies even suggest that the quality of student-teacher relationships is associated with students' behaviors years later. For instance, students with more positive relationships with their teachers are subsequently more likely to act prosocially and less likely to engage in aggressive and risky behaviors (Obsuth et al., 2017; Rudasill et al., 2010).

Furthermore, previous research has found a negative association between positive student-teacher relationships and peer victimization (Elsaesser et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2011; Murray-Harvey & Slee 2010; Raskauskas et al., 2010; Richard et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2015, but see null results in Wang et al., 2016). Furthermore, one study found that, at the classroom level, caring, warm, and supportive student-teacher relationships were associated with positive student-student relationships, which in turn were linked with lower levels of peer victimization (Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, & Gini, 2017).

Student-teacher relationship quality is a dyadic-level variable in that it refers to interpersonal relationships between a student and his or her teacher(s), and thus can be considered a characteristic of the social environment. In contrast to collective efficacy and collective moral disengagement, however, it does not constitute a classroom-level characteristic. Therefore, in this thesis, student-teacher relationship quality was conceptualized as students' individual perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their teachers (see also Jungert et al., 2016). To my knowledge, only two previous studies have investigated how students' perceptions of their individual relationships with their teachers are linked to bystander behaviors (Jungert et al., 2016; Longobardi et al., 2018). Longobardi et al. (2018) found negative student-teacher relationships to be associated with pro-bullying bystander behavior. Jungert et al. (2016) used structural equation modeling to test relationships between student-teacher relationship quality, students' motivations (autonomous, introjected, and extrinsic)

to defend victims, and bystander behaviors. In their model, negative student-teacher relationships were directly associated with passive bystanding and indirectly (mediated through extrinsic motivation) associated with pro-bullying, whereas positive relationships were indirectly (mediated through autonomous motivation) associated with defending.

In sum, the importance of the quality of student-teacher relationships for students' academic and social behaviors is well-established in previous research. However, when it comes specifically to students' bystander behaviors, much less is known. The only two available studies (Jungert et al., 2016; Longobardi et al., 2018) that address this issue suggest that student-teacher relationship quality is positively associated with defending and negatively associated with pro-aggressive and passive bystanding. This thesis added to this limited body of knowledge. First, both previous studies were carried out in Italy. This thesis examined whether previous findings are transferable to a Swedish context. Second, unlike previous studies, this thesis also included other factors that are known to be associated with bystander behaviors. By simultaneously examining student-teacher relationship quality, defender self-efficacy, and moral disengagement, this thesis evaluated their relative importance in explaining variability in bystander behaviors. Furthermore, this thesis tested for possible interaction effects between these constructs. Third, beyond estimating overall effects of the constructs, the constructs were also broken down into effects between and within classrooms, thereby investigating, for instance, whether pro-aggression was more frequent among students who (1) have more negative student-teacher relationships, (2) in comparison to their classmates have more negative student-teacher relationships, and (3) belonged to classrooms with lower mean levels of student-teacher relationship quality.

Overall Aim

The overall aim of this thesis was to investigate how students' bystander behaviors in peer victimization are associated with moral disengagement, efficacy beliefs, and student-teacher relationship quality. Moral disengagement and efficacy beliefs were investigated at both the individual and the classroom level. None of the four studies in this thesis included all types of bystander behaviors (i.e., pro-aggressive, passive, and defender behaviors) and all social cognitive factors. Instead, each study covered different aspects of the overall aim by focusing on a subset of variables, using various analytical methods, and by including different age groups. The specific aims of the studies were as follows (see Chapter 5 for comprehensive summaries of the studies):

- Study I aimed at examining how reinforcing, passive bystanding, and defending were associated with individual moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy, and student-teacher relationship quality.
- Study II aimed at examining how passive bystanding and defending were associated with defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy to stop peer aggression.
- Study III aimed at examining how pro-aggressive bystanding, passive bystanding, and defending were associated with individual and collective moral disengagement.
- Study IV aimed at examining whether there were longitudinal unidirectional associations from defender self-efficacy to defending, from defending to defender self-efficacy, or whether the associations were reciprocal.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This thesis was part of the project “The Social and Moral Processes of Bullying – a four-year longitudinal study”. In the project, students answered a web-based questionnaire five times, with one-year intervals. The first data collection wave took place in the school year of 2015/16, when the students were in fourth grade, and the last data collection wave took place in the school year of 2019/20, when the students were in eighth grade. Furthermore, a pre-study aimed at testing the instruments and procedure was carried out at the end of school year 2014/15. In the pre-study, the web-based questionnaire was answered by fourth to eighth grade students. This thesis used data from the pre-study and from the first three data collection waves of the longitudinal study, and thus focuses mainly on students in grades 4 to 6 (see Table 1 for an overview of the four studies).

In Sweden, students typically remain in the same school from fourth to sixth grade, and then switch to another school in the municipality for seventh to ninth grade. To obtain formal access to the schools from fourth to eighth grade in the longitudinal project, we sought and gained approval from the head of the elementary schools in five municipalities. School principals and teachers were then informed about the study and gave access to the classrooms. In addition, we recruited some additional schools located in areas geographically close to the five municipalities. These schools, along with the participating schools in the pre-study, were contacted directly without approval at the municipality level. Both written informed parental consent and student assent were obtained from all participants. Participating students answered a web-based questionnaire on tablets in their ordinary classroom setting. Either a member of the research team or a teacher was present throughout the sessions, in order to explain the study procedure and assist participants who needed help (e.g., give reading support and clarify particular items or words in the questionnaire). Involved teachers were provided information about the project and guidelines on how to act during the sessions. The average completion time of the questionnaire was about 30 minutes. However, the completion time was negatively associated

with participants' age; older students completed the questionnaire more quickly than younger students.

The first study used data from the pre-study, which was carried out in spring 2015. Through a convenience sample, participants were recruited from four schools located in middle-class neighborhoods in towns with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. We also collected school-level data about the education level of the students' parents through the Swedish National Agency for Education (2020). On average, 47% of the students in the schools included in the first study had at least one parent with post-secondary education, compared to 56% in Swedish schools in general. From the four schools included, 547 students in grades 4-8 were invited to participate. Our final sample consisted of 317 students, as 185 students did not get parental consent; eight students had insufficient language or reading skills; 21 students were absent of the day of data collection; and 16 students left all items unanswered on at least one of the study scales. Regarding ethnicity, 88% of the sample, compared to 78% of the whole population (Swedish National Agency for Education 2016), had a Swedish ethnic background (i.e., born in Sweden and having at least one Swedish-born parent).

Table 1

Overview of Participants, Data Collection, and Design of the Four Studies Included in the Thesis

Study	Participants	Data collection	Design
I	317 students from 23 classrooms in four schools	Pre-study, May 2015	Cross-sectional, grades 4-8
II	1467 students from 100 classrooms in 63 schools	Wave 1, November 2015-May 2016	Cross-sectional, grade 4
III	1577 students from 105 classrooms in 64 schools	Wave 2, November 2016-May 2017	Cross-sectional, grade 5
IV	1083 students from 100 classrooms in 64 schools	Waves 1-3, November 2015-May 2018	Longitudinal, grades 4-6

Studies 2-4 used data collected within the longitudinal project. Recruitment of participating students of the longitudinal project started in spring 2015. Participating schools were selected based on a strategic sampling technique in order to obtain a heterogeneous sample in terms of geographic locations and socio-demographic characteristics. Thus, the study samples of studies 2-4 included students from schools located in rural areas to mid-size and large cities, ranging from lower to upper-middle socioeconomic areas. The participating schools in studies 2-4 were located in ten municipalities in the middle and south of Sweden. The number of inhabitants in the municipalities ranged from approximately 10,000 to 160,000. Five of the municipalities had 10,000-50,000 inhabitants, two had 50,000-100,000 inhabitants, and three had more than 100,000 inhabitants. One of the municipalities belonged to the metropolitan area of Stockholm. On average, 53-55% of the students in the schools included in studies 2-4 had at least one parent with post-secondary education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020). These rates were fairly representative of Swedish schools during the school years of 2015/16 (56%), 2016/17 (57%), and 2017/18 (58%). There was a large between-school variation of the educational level of the students' parents. The proportion of students with at least one parent with post-secondary education ranged from 22-91%, indicating heterogeneity in the sample. Regarding ethnicity, 80-82% of the participants in studies 2-4, compared to 78% of the whole population (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016), had a Swedish ethnic background (i.e., born in Sweden and having at least one Swedish-born parent).

The second study used data from the first data collection wave, when students were in fourth grade. In fourth grade, the original sample consisted of 2408 students from 116 classes in 74 schools. Seven hundred and eighty-two students did not participate, either because they did not get parental consent (599 students) or because they were absent on the day of data collection or chose not to participate (183 students). A further 159 students were excluded because they did not complete all of the scales used in the second study (89) or belonged to mixed-grade classrooms (70). We excluded students in mixed-grade classrooms because these are atypical in Sweden and would introduce within-classroom age difference as a possible confounder in the study. Thus, the final sample of the second study included 1467 students (52% girls,

$M_{\text{age}} = 10.55$ years, $SD = 0.35$) from 100 classrooms in 63 schools. The mean participation rate in each classroom was 69%, ranging from 32% to 100%. In 57 of the 100 classrooms, at least two-thirds of the students participated, and in 85 of the 100 classrooms, at least half of the students participated.

The third study used data from the second data collection wave, when students were in fifth grade. New students who had joined the participating classes in fifth grade were invited to participate in the project. Moreover, four new schools joined the project whereas five schools dropped out. Hence, the original sample in fifth grade consisted of 2534 students from 114 classes in 73 schools. Eight hundred and forty-nine students did not participate. Most of the non-participating students did not participate because they did not get parental consent, whereas a few did not participate because they were absent on the day of data collection. A further 108 students were excluded because they did not complete all of the scales used in the third study (46) or belonged to mixed-grade classrooms (62). Thus, the final sample of the third study included 1577 students (53% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 11.55$ years, $SD = 0.33$) from 105 classrooms in 64 schools. The mean participation rate in each classroom was 67%, ranging from 28% to 100%. At least two-thirds of the students participated in 55% of the classrooms, and at least half of the students participated in 78% of the classrooms.

The fourth study used data from the first, second, and third data collection waves. In fourth grade, 1536 students completed the scales used in this study. The attrition rates across time were 15% between fourth and fifth grade, and 17% between fifth and sixth grade. Thus, the final sample included 1083 students (52% girls) from 64 schools who answered the questionnaire in fourth ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.55$ years, $SD = 0.34$), fifth ($M_{\text{age}} = 11.54$ years, $SD = 0.31$), and sixth grade ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.57$ years, $SD = 0.34$).

Measures

This section describes how the variables included in the studies of this thesis were operationalized (see Table 2 for an overview of the study variables).

Bystander Behaviors

Bystander behaviors were measured using a 15-item scale, covering the four types of bystander behaviors outlined by the participant role approach by Salmivalli et al. (1996). The scale was expanded from the 8-item Student Bystander Behavior Scale (SBBS), which has demonstrated acceptable factorial validity and reliability (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). In the scale used in this thesis, participants were asked: “Try to remember situations in school in which you have seen one or more students harm another student (for example teasing, ridiculing, threatening, beating or ostracising). What do you usually do?” Then followed the 15 items: three items depicted assisting (e.g., “I start to harm the victimized student too”); two items depicted reinforcing (e.g., “I encourage those who harm the student by cheering and laughing”); five items depicted passive bystanding (e.g., “I just walk away”); and five items depicted defending (e.g., “I help the victimized student”). Students indicated how well the described behaviors corresponded with their own acting as bystanders on a four-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) in the pre-study, and on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) in the longitudinal study. Composite scales were created by averaging the items representing each type of bystander behavior. Assistant behavior was not investigated in this thesis. In the first study, it was left out due to low variation in the three items depicting assistant behavior. In the third study, assistant and reinforcer behaviors were combined into pro-aggressive bystanding, a categorization that has been validated using factor analysis (Jungert et al., 2016; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). As outlined above, bystander roles are fluid in that students’ bystander behaviors may vary between and within victimization episodes depending on the social context (e.g., Gumpel et al., 2014; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012). Therefore, the participants of the four studies of this thesis were not categorized as belonging to a specific bystander role. Instead, the bystander roles were used as continuous variables (see also Levy & Gumpel, 2018).

Table 2*Overview of the Variables Used in the Thesis*

Variable	Items	Study
<i>Bystander behaviors</i>	15	
Pro-aggression	5	3
Reinforcing	2	1
Passive bystanding	5	1-3
Defending	5	1-4
<i>Bystander characteristics</i>		
Defender self-efficacy	5/6 ^a	1, 2, 4
Individual moral disengagement	18	1, 3
Age		1
Gender		1-4
<i>Social environment characteristics</i>		
Collective efficacy	10	2
Collective moral disengagement	18	3
Student-teacher relationship quality	9	1
Class size		2
Proportion of boys		3

Note. ^aDefender self-efficacy was measured with five items in Study 1, and with six items in Studies 2 and 4.

The first study in this thesis included reinforcing (Spearman-Brown = .64), defending (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), and passive bystanding (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). The second study included defending (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) and passive bystanding (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$). The third study included pro-aggression (a composite scale of the three items depicting assisting and the two items depicting reinforcing, Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$), defending (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$), and passive bystanding (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). The fourth study of this thesis included defending in grade 4 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$), grade 5 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), and grade 6 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) supported the two-dimensional solution in the second study and the three-dimensional solutions in the first and third study, respectively. In the fourth study, CFA supported the unidimensionality of the defending scale across grades 4 to 6 (for fit indices of the CFA, see Table 3).

Table 3*Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) models*

CFA	Study sample	χ^2	df	CFI	RMSEA [90% CI]
BB	I	183.85	51	.990	.065 [.06, .08]
	II	360.02	34	.993	.056 [.05, .06]
	III	1026.59	87	.988	.060 [.06, .06]
	IV _{grade 4}	96.11	5	.996	.072 [.06, .09]
	IV _{grade 5}	128.39	5	.995	.086 [.07, .10]
	IV _{grade 6}	58.15	5	.998	.056 [.04, .07]
DSE	I	9.61	5	.999	.026 [.00, .05]
	II	200.18	9	.999	.059 [.05, .07]
	IV _{grade 4}	144.39	9	.999	.056 [.05, .07]
	IV _{grade 5}	136.26	9	.999	.057 [.05, .07]
	IV _{grade 6}	182.72	9	.999	.064 [.06, .07]
CE	II	334.02	24	1	.037 [.03, .04]
IMD	I	356.14	128	.987	.056 [.05, .06]
	III	1005.32	135	.989	.045 [.04, .05]
CMD	III	1566.29	135	.994	.053 [.05, .06]
STRQ	I	72.60	27	.999	.042 [.03, .05]

Note. BB = bystander behaviors. DSE = defender self-efficacy. CE = collective efficacy. STRQ = student-teacher relationship quality. IMD = individual moral disengagement. CMD = collective moral disengagement.

Defender Self-Efficacy

Defender self-efficacy was measured using a five-item scale (Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017) in the pre-study and a six-item scale (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019) in the longitudinal study. The scales started with “I feel that I’m very good at...” followed by the items. In the scale used in the longitudinal study, two items focused on physical aggression (e.g., “...stopping students from hitting or kicking others”), two items focused on verbal aggression (e.g., “...telling off/standing up to students who tease another student”), and two items focused on relational aggression (e.g., “...stopping a

group from ostracizing another student”). In the scale used in the pre-study, the items did not correspond to the three types of aggression, but were more general in nature (e.g., “...telling off/standing up to students who are mean to another student”, “...helping students who are bullied”). The response options for each item were on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). A composite scale was created by averaging the items representing defender self-efficacy.

Defender self-efficacy was investigated in the first, second, and fourth studies of this thesis. In the first study, defender self-efficacy was measured by five items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$), and in the second and fourth studies, defender self-efficacy was measured by six items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91-.92$). The unidimensionality of the defender self-efficacy scales was supported (for fit indices of the CFA, see Table 3).

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy to stop peer aggression was measured using a Swedish-language version (Wänström et al., 2019) of the ten-item scale for measuring collective efficacy at the school level developed by Barchia and Bussey (2011a, b), but adapted to the classroom level. Thus, the scale asked, “How well can the students and teachers in your class...”, followed by the same items as in Barchia and Bussey (2011a, b). Example items included “Work together to stop students slapping each other”, “Work together to stop students spreading rumors about each other”, and “Work together to stop students saying mean things to each other”. The response options for each item were on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Collective efficacy at the classroom level was obtained by averaging the item scores for each individual, and then calculating the classroom mean.

In the studies of Barchia and Bussey (2011a, b), a principal axis factor analysis supported a one-dimensional scale. Thus, they aggregated the ten items and used the scale as a global collective efficacy construct. In a later validation study that included an Italian and a Swedish version of the collective efficacy scale, a one-factor solution was only supported in the Swedish sample (Wänström et al., 2019). However, both a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional solution fitted the data well and were invariant across the Swedish and Italian samples. The two-dimensional scale corresponds to the distinction between physical (items 2-4) and non-physical aggression (items 5-10),

whereas the three-dimensional scale corresponds to the distinction between physical (items 2-4), relational (items 5-7), and verbal (items 8-10) aggression (see Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Coyne et al., 2011; Olweus, 1993). The first item, a general item about bullying, was excluded in these two- and three-dimensional scales.

Collective efficacy was investigated in the second study of this thesis. A one-factor solution including all ten items did not fit the data well. Instead, we excluded the first item and carried out a higher order CFA with the global construct of collective efficacy as a general factor and the three types of aggression as first-order factors. A CFA supported this three-factor solution (for fit indices, see Table 3).

Individual Moral Disengagement

In the pre-study, individual moral disengagement was measured using the previously validated 18-item Moral Disengagement in Bullying Scale (MDBS, Thornberg & Jungert, 2014, see also Bjärehed et al., 2020). In the longitudinal study, individual moral disengagement was measured using a different 18-item scale (Bjärehed et al., 2019), the Moral Disengagement in Peer Victimization Scale (MDPVS). This scale was developed to measure moral disengagement in peer victimization, which is in line with the situatedness emphasized in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2016). Both the MDBS and MDPVS asked participants to rate to what extent they agreed or disagreed (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with each of the items. Example items of the MDPS included “If my friends begin to bully a classmate, I can’t be blamed for being with them and bullying that person too”; “If students are having a hard time at home, they can’t be blamed for bullying others”; and “If people are weird, it is their own fault if they get bullied”. Example items of the MDPVS included “People who get teased don’t really get too sad about it”; “Talking badly about someone is okay because he/she wouldn’t notice it”; “If my friends begin to tease a classmate, I can’t be blamed for being with them and teasing that person too”; “Pushing or kicking someone hard is just about ‘joking a little’ with the person”; and “If you can’t be like everybody else, it is your own fault if you get bullied or frozen out”. Although the scales covered the four loci and eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, I was interested in students’ overall tendencies to morally disengage and therefore a composite scale was created by averaging all 18 items.

Individual moral disengagement was investigated in the first and third studies of this thesis. In the first study, moral disengagement was measured using the MDBS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). In line with Thornberg & Jungert (2014), the mechanisms of dehumanization and attribution of blame were merged into one factor, resulting in a seven-factor solution. A higher order CFA supported the global construct of moral disengagement as a general factor and the seven mechanisms of moral disengagement as first-order factors for the sample of the first study. In the third study, moral disengagement was measured using the MDPVS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), and a CFA supported a one-factor structure (for fit indices, see Table 3).

Collective Moral Disengagement

Collective moral disengagement was measured through an 18-item scale (Bjärehed et al., 2019). The scale used the same items as those measuring individual moral disengagement in the MDPVS scale in order to avoid the risk of test effects due to different items when comparing individual and collective moral disengagement. However, following the original procedure proposed by Gini, Pozzoli, and Bussey (2014) to capture the collective dimension of the construct, this scale asked, "How many students in your classroom agree with the following?", and offered five response categories ("none", "about a quarter", "about half", "about three quarters", "all"). The individual score on this scale represents students' perception of the degree to which moral disengagement mechanisms are shared by peers in their classroom. The aggregate score at the classroom level – that is, the average score of all classroom members – provides the measure of collective moral disengagement used in this thesis. Collective moral disengagement was investigated in the third study of this thesis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$), and a CFA supported a one-factor structure (for fit indices, see Table 3).

Student-Teacher Relationship Quality

To measure student-teacher relationship quality, our research team developed a 9-item scale. In this thesis, the concept of student-teacher relationship quality referred to the degree of caring, warm, supportive, and respectful student-teacher relationships and interaction patterns. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with each of the items (e.g.,

“My teachers really care about me” and “My teachers don’t like me”). Some items, as the latter example, were inversely coded so that high scores corresponded to positive relationships. A composite scale was created by averaging the nine items representing student-teacher relationship quality. Student-teacher relationship quality was investigated in the first study of this thesis (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$), and a CFA supported the unidimensionality of the scale (for fit indices, see Table 3).

Control Variables

In addition to the main variables of interest, the studies included control variables that potentially could affect the associations between bystander behaviors and the social cognitive factors. Gender was included as a control variable in Studies 1-3, and in the fourth study, I examined whether the investigated associations differed across gender. In all studies, participants indicated their gender (“I am... girl/boy”). Age was included as a control variable in the first study (in Studies 2-4, participants were of the same age). Participants indicated their birth year and birth month. Class size and proportion of boys were included as control variables in the second and third study, respectively. Information on class size and proportion of boys was obtained from the class lists from the schools. Previous research has found defending to be more common among girls and younger students (Lambe et al., 2019) and pro-aggression to be more common among boys (Pöyhönen et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017). Findings on gender differences for passive bystanding have been mixed; some studies has found passive bystanding to be more common among girls (e.g., Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), while others has found passive bystanding to be more common among boys (e.g., Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). A few studies also suggest that defending is negatively related to the number of students in the classroom (Peets et al., 2015; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; but see null result in Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017), and that pro-aggression is positively related to the proportion of boys in the classroom (Pozzoli et al., 2012b; Thornberg, Wänström, & Jungert, 2018).

Statistical Analyses

The four studies in this thesis used quantitative data analysis methods. Most statistical analyses were performed using R version 3.3.1 or later. SPSS version 21 or later was used occasionally. Because the studies differed in their focus and aims, different inferential statistical techniques were used across the studies. All studies used latent variables with multiple indicators. Therefore, factor analyses were conducted to confirm the dimensionality of the scales (for fit indices of the CFA, see Table 3). Because the scales were ordered categorical, diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS, see Li, 2016) and robust estimation were used for estimating the CFA models. Furthermore, in the regression analyses in Studies 1-3, the factor scores were used for the latent variables in order to give more weight to the items with higher factor loadings.

The first study aimed at examining how bystander behaviors were associated with individual moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy, and student-teacher relationship quality. To account for the non-independence in the data (i.e., students nested in classrooms), random intercept model analyses (Bickel, 2007) in which the regression intercepts were allowed to vary between classes were performed for each type of bystander behavior. Because we wanted to examine whether the associations held between classes, within classes, or both, we also conducted a second set of analyses in which each of the predictors was split into a between variable and a within variable. The between variable constituted the class mean and the within variable constituted the difference between each student's individual score and his/her class mean.

The second and third studies aimed at examining how bystander behaviors were associated with efficacy beliefs and moral disengagement, respectively. Efficacy beliefs and moral disengagement were investigated both at the individual level (defender self-efficacy and individual moral disengagement) and the classroom level (collective efficacy and collective moral disengagement). Because the students were nested within classrooms and we were theoretically interested in examining classroom-level effects, we used multilevel modeling techniques (Bickel, 2007) to analyze the data. When students are clustered in classrooms, one might expect that two randomly selected individuals from the same classroom will tend to be more similar than

two individuals selected from different classrooms. Such dependencies call for multilevel modeling. If single-level models had been used, standard errors would have been too small, leading to a higher risk of type I error, and I would not have been able to assess between-group variation (Bickel, 2007; Kline, 2011). Separate analyses were run for pro-aggression (Study 3), defending (Studies 2 and 3), and passive bystanding (Studies 2 and 3).

The fourth study aimed at examining whether there were longitudinal unidirectional associations from defender self-efficacy to defending, from defending to defender self-efficacy, or whether the associations were reciprocal. These longitudinal associations were tested through autoregressive cross-lagged panel analysis, which is an appropriate analysis technique for identifying relations between variables across time (Selig & Little, 2012). For an illustration of the model, see Figure 2. Autoregressive effects represent the stability of the constructs from one occasion to the next (i.e., paths a-d in Figure 2). For instance, if a small autoregressive coefficient is found for defending between fourth and fifth grade, it would mean that students' standings on defending had changed to a large degree during that year. In contrast, if a large autoregressive coefficient is found, it would indicate minor changes in their standings on defending. Cross-lagged effects represent the effect of a construct on another measured at a later occasion (i.e., paths e-h in Figure 2). For instance, if a small cross-lagged coefficient is found from defending in fourth grade to defender self-efficacy in fifth grade, it would mean that students' standings on defender self-efficacy in fifth grade have little to do with their standings on defending in fourth grade. In contrast, if a large cross-lagged coefficient is found, defending in fourth grade would be highly related to defender self-efficacy in fifth grade. An important feature of the autoregressive cross-lagged panel models is that cross-lagged effects are estimated controlling for the stability of the constructs through the autoregressive effects. Consequently, in this type of model, a significant cross-lagged effect (e.g., between defending at time 1 and defender self-efficacy at time 2) cannot be simply due to the fact that the constructs were associated at time 1. On the contrary, if the model had not included the autoregressive effects, the estimations of the cross-lagged effects would likely have been biased (Gollob & Reichardt, 1987; Cole & Maxwell, 2003).

Figure 2

Cross-lagged panel model examining longitudinal associations between defending (DEF) and defender self-efficacy (DSE).

Note. Ovals denote the latent variables, boxes denote their indicators. At time point 1 (_{t1}), defending and defender self-efficacy were allowed to covary, and at time points 2 (_{t2}) and 3 (_{t3}), their residuals were allowed to covary. The residual variances among the corresponding indicators were allowed to covary over time (omitted here due to space limitations.)

Another important concern to stress regarding the statistical analyses of the fourth study is the concept of measurement invariance. In longitudinal studies, using the same scale does not guarantee that the same construct is being measured over time (Isiordia & Ferrer, 2018; Little, 2013). For example, as participants get older or because the nature of the assessment varies across occasions, their interpretations of the scales' items may change. Thus, in order to evaluate whether the scales of defending and defender self-efficacy assessed the same construct at each wave, I tested for measurement invariance across time prior to estimating the autoregressive cross-lagged panel models.

In line with the standard significance level in the behavioral and social sciences, a p -value below .05 was considered to indicate a significant effect throughout the thesis. To increase transparency and interpretability of the results, more detailed p -values ($<.01$, $<.001$ or exact p -value) and effect sizes were reported, which is also in line with recommendations from American Psychological Association (Wilkinson & TFSL, 1999). Effect sizes were computed as $b'_k = b_k * s_{xk} / s_y$ where b_k is the unstandardized coefficient for variable k , s_{xk} is the sample standard deviation for the explanatory variable k , and s_y is the sample standard deviation for the dependent variable. Thus, the effect size represents the expected change in standard deviations in the dependent variable followed by a one standard deviation change in the independent variable.

Ethical Considerations

Peer victimization is a sensitive subject. Conducting studies in which participants answer questions about, among others, bystander behaviors and moral reasoning raises ethical considerations. Answering such questions may arouse negative emotions, such as anxiety and discomfort. The project of which my thesis is a part follows the ethical principles for research suggested by the Swedish Research Council (2013) regarding information, consent, confidentiality, and use of research data. The project was reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Linköping before empirical work was initiated. In the following, I outline how ethical issues were considered and applied in this thesis.

After recruiting schools to participate in the project, we visited students in the relevant grade (e.g., grade 4 in the first wave of data

collection). They were informed about the research project and the survey. We invited them to participate, but it was emphasized that participation was voluntary. A letter of consent, including appropriate information of the study, was shared with the students, and they were asked to take it home to their parents. We clearly stated that participation required that the student him- or herself wanted to participate, and that one parent consented by reading and signing the letter.

After obtaining informed consent from parents, we returned to the classrooms for conducting the data collection. Before handing out the survey, it was again emphasized that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to pull out at any time and for any reason, without having to explain why. Furthermore, we informed the students that the survey questions could bring up negative emotions and memories. If so, we encouraged them to talk about this with appropriate school personnel (e.g., members of the school's antibullying team, welfare officer, specific teachers). In the event that they would like to talk to someone outside the school, we distributed cards containing contact information for BRIS, a non-profit children's rights organization which supports children and young people in distress. Furthermore, we informed the participants that their answers would only be used for research purposes and be protected by confidentiality. Results would only be presented at an aggregate level, so that it would not be possible to identify participants, their classrooms or their schools.

Summary of the Studies

Study I

Bystander behaviour in peer victimisation: Moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy and student-teacher relationship quality.

Björn Sjögren, Robert Thornberg, Linda Wänström, and Gianluca Gini (2020). *Research Papers in Education*. Advance online publication.

The aim of this study was to examine how reinforcing, defending, and passive bystanding (referred to in the study as “outsider behavior”) were associated with individual moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy, and student-teacher relationship quality. Based on tenets of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and previous research, we had several hypotheses. First, we hypothesized moral disengagement to be positively associated with reinforcer behavior and negatively associated with defender behavior. Second, we hypothesized defender self-efficacy to be positively associated with defender behavior and negatively associated with passive bystanding. Third, we hypothesized student-teacher relationship quality to be positively associated with defender behavior and negatively associated with reinforcer behavior. Because social cognitive theory posits that behaviors are the results of interdependent associations between individual and contextual factors, we also examined possible interaction effects.

We collected self-report survey data from 333 Swedish students ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.62$ years, $SD = 1.35$, age range: 10-15 years) in fourth to eighth grade from 23 classes in four elementary schools. Active parental consent was obtained from all participating students. The study variables were measured by multiple-item scales. All scales were evaluated by confirmatory factor analyses, and fit indices suggested acceptable fit of the data. Random intercept models, in which the regression intercepts were allowed to vary between classrooms, were performed in order to test our hypotheses.

The hypotheses were mostly supported. We found that students high in moral disengagement, both overall and compared to their classmates, were more inclined to reinforce peer victimization. Furthermore, two interaction effects were found for reinforcer behavior. Students were particularly unlikely to take the reinforcer role if they simultaneously

were low in moral disengagement and high in defender self-efficacy. On the contrary, students were particularly likely to take the reinforcer role if they simultaneously, in comparison to their classmates, were high in moral disengagement and had poorer relationships with their teachers. In sum, the results indicate that student-teacher relationship quality and defender self-efficacy function as protective factors by weakening the positive association between moral disengagement and reinforcing.

Furthermore, we hypothesized moral disengagement to be negatively associated with defender behavior. Indeed, we found a negative bivariate correlation between these variables. However, when controlling for the other predictors in the models, moral disengagement was no longer a significant correlate of defending. It might be that defender self-efficacy, compared to moral disengagement, is a far more important individual characteristic to explain defending (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). As expected, defender self-efficacy was found to be strongly positively associated with defender behavior and negatively associated with passive bystanding.

A final aspect of our findings regards student-teacher relationship quality, here defined as the degree of caring, warm, supportive, and respectful student-teacher relationships and interaction patterns. Positive student-teacher relationship quality has previously been linked to various student outcomes and behaviors (e.g., Pianta, 2006), including less peer aggression (Henry et al., 2011). Although we found a weak negative bivariate correlation between the relationship quality and reinforcer behavior, there were no unique main effects of the relationship quality in the final models. Nevertheless, as stated above, we found an interaction effect implying that students who, in comparison to their classmates, scored higher on moral disengagement and had poorer relationships with their teachers were especially inclined to reinforce peer victimization. Furthermore, student-teacher relationship quality was positively associated with defender behavior, although this effect was weak.

Study II

Associations between individual and collective efficacy beliefs and students' bystander behavior. Björn Sjögren, Robert Thornberg, Linda Wänström, and Gianluca Gini (2020). *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(11), 1710–1723.

The aim of this study was to examine how passive bystanding and defending were associated with defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy to stop peer aggression. Previous research has found that defender self-efficacy is positively associated with defending and negatively associated with passive bystanding (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Compared to defender self-efficacy, much less attention has been devoted to efficacy beliefs at the classroom level (but see Barchia & Bussey, 2011b), although efficacy beliefs operate at collective levels (Bandura, 2000). Our study was the first to examine simultaneously whether defending and passive bystanding in peer victimization were associated with defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy at the classroom level.

We hypothesized defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy to be positively associated with defending and negatively associated with passive bystanding. Furthermore, social cognitive theory emphasizes the interplay between individual and contextual factors. Therefore, we examined whether there was a cross-level interaction effect between defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy on defending and passive bystanding.

Self-report survey data were analyzed from 1467 fourth-grade students (52% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 10.55$ years) from 100 classrooms in 63 schools. Written informed parental consent and student assent were obtained from all participants. All scales were evaluated by confirmatory factor analyses, and fit indices suggested acceptable fit of the data. The data were analyzed using multilevel modeling. In all models, the intercepts were allowed to vary, and in the final models the coefficients of gender and defender self-efficacy were allowed to vary between classes.

Consistent with our hypotheses, we found defender self-efficacy to be associated with greater defending and less passive bystanding. Thus, students who perceive that they lack sufficient ability to stop peer victimization would refrain from helping victims and instead stay

passive. Furthermore, collective efficacy was associated with greater defending and less passive bystanding. These associations remained when controlling for the other variables in the multilevel models, although the effect sizes were considerably lower for collective efficacy than for defender self-efficacy. Because our results suggest that bystander behaviors are associated with efficacy beliefs both at the individual and classroom level, prevention programs (e.g., the KiVa program that aims at increasing students' defender self-efficacy, see Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, & Salmivalli, 2011) could benefit from also encompassing the concept of collective efficacy. Students, even those high in defender self-efficacy, might refrain from defending as it could result in an increased risk of becoming future targets of peer victimization (Gini, Albiero, et al., 2008; Huitsing et al., 2014). Establishing a high level of collective efficacy to stop peer victimization could be a part of creating a positive and supporting classroom climate (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019) in which students are encouraged to take the defender role.

Study III

Associations between students' bystander behavior and individual and classroom collective moral disengagement. Björn Sjögren, Robert Thornberg, Linda Wänström, and Gianluca Gini (2020). *Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication.

The aim of this study was to examine how pro-aggressive bystanding, passive bystanding (referred to as “outsider behavior” in the study), and defending were associated with individual and collective moral disengagement. Only a few previous studies had investigated bystander behaviors in relation to collective moral disengagement defined as the perceptions of the degree to which moral disengagement is shared by classroom members (Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová et al., 2018). According to social cognitive theory, members of a group do not simply operate as autonomous moral agents but are, at the same time, “acting together on shared beliefs” (White et al., 2009, p. 43). We hypothesized that both individual and collective moral disengagement were associated with greater pro-aggression and less defending. We also hypothesized a positive association between collective moral disengagement (but not individual moral disengagement due to inconsistent findings in the

literature) and passive bystanding. Furthermore, because social cognitive theory emphasizes the interplay between individual and contextual factors, it was also examined whether variability in pro-aggression, defending, and passive bystanding could be attributed to a cross-level interaction effect between individual and collective moral disengagement.

Self-report survey data were analyzed from 1577 fifth-grade students (55% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 11.55$ years) from 105 classrooms in 64 schools. Written informed parental consent and student assent were obtained from all participants. All scales were evaluated by confirmatory factor analyses, and fit indices suggested acceptable fit of the data. The data were analyzed using multilevel modeling. In all models, the intercept was allowed to vary, and in the final models the coefficients of gender and individual moral disengagement were allowed to vary between classes.

In line with our hypotheses, we found individual and collective moral disengagement to be negatively associated with defending, and positively associated with pro-aggression, although the main effect of individual moral disengagement disappeared in the final models. Nevertheless, and in line with social cognitive theory, we found a significant cross-level interaction effect between individual and collective moral disengagement on pro-aggression. Specifically, the interaction effect implied that there was a positive association between individual moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystanding, but only for those students who belonged to classrooms high in collective moral disengagement. Furthermore, we found a positive association between passive bystanding and collective moral disengagement, as expected by our hypothesis. Findings of previous research have been mixed regarding an association between passive bystanding and individual moral disengagement, and thus we did not hypothesize an association, but in this study we found them to be positively associated.

In sum, our findings suggest that moral disengagement beliefs both at the individual and at the classroom-level contribute to explain variability in bystander behaviors in peer victimization. Interestingly, the findings suggest that moral disengagement beliefs at the classroom level, as compared to individual beliefs, are more strongly associated with pro-aggression. In contrast, individual moral disengagement was the stronger correlate for defending and passive bystanding. Involving bystanders is an important aspect in prevention programs (Salmivalli,

2014), with the aim to increasing students' defender behaviors. The results of this study suggest that moral disengagement beliefs both at the individual and at the classroom level might be essential components in such endeavors. Challenging and counteracting the tendency to morally disengage could steer bystanders away from pro-aggressive and passive bystanding (see also Wang & Goldberg, 2017). For instance, it could be beneficial to increase students' awareness of people's widespread tendency to morally disengage in a wide range of situations (see Bandura 2002, 2016), including peer victimization contexts. Students could also be engaged in activities (e.g., discussions, role-play) aimed at increasing their moral engagement in their relationships with peers.

Study IV

Reciprocal longitudinal associations between defender self-efficacy and defending bystander behavior in peer victimization. Björn Sjögren (submitted).

Previous research has firmly established a positive association between defending and defender self-efficacy (Lambe et al., 2019). However, the lack of longitudinal studies has resulted in a limited understanding of how the relationship between defending and defender self-efficacy unfolds over time. Furthermore, researchers studying students' bystander behaviors in peer victimization have usually been interested in determining how individual characteristics and characteristics of the social environment influence behavior. However, social cognitive theory proposes reciprocity between behavior, personal factors, and external environment (i.e., triadic reciprocal causation; Bandura, 1986, 1997). Thus, from a theoretical point of view, it is assumed that defender self-efficacy will influence defending, but it is also assumed that defending can increase or decrease self-efficacy beliefs.

The present study addressed these gaps by examining potential longitudinal associations between defending and defender self-efficacy at three time points, covering grades 4 to 6. More specifically, the aim of this study was to examine whether there were longitudinal unidirectional associations from defender self-efficacy to defending, from defending to defender self-efficacy, or whether the associations were reciprocal. Based on social cognitive theory, a reciprocal relationship between the constructs was hypothesized.

Self-report survey data were analyzed from 1083 students (52% girls) in 63 schools who answered the questionnaire in fourth (mean age = 10.55), fifth (mean age = 11.54), and sixth grade (mean age = 12.57). Written informed parental consent and student assent were obtained from all participants. The data were analyzed using autoregressive cross-lagged panel models, which is an appropriate analysis technique for identifying relations between variables across time (Selig & Little, 2012).

The results supported the hypothesis that there is a positive reciprocal relationship between defending and defender self-efficacy. More specifically, higher levels of defender self-efficacy in grade 4 predicted higher levels of defending in grade 5, and higher levels of defending in grades 4 and 5 predicted higher levels of defender self-efficacy in grades 5 and 6, respectively. However, the association between defender self-efficacy in grade 5 and defending in grade 6 was not significant. The reciprocal relationship found in this study has potential implications for prevention and intervention work. On the one hand, it suggests that interventions should aim to increase students' defender self-efficacy, for instance by teaching students effective intervention strategies. On the other hand, the findings suggest that interventions – through other means than strengthening efficacy beliefs – could also focus on increasing students' defending, which in turn would increase their defender self-efficacy, potentially leading to a virtuous circle of defending and defender self-efficacy.

General Discussion

In this final chapter, I will discuss the main findings of this thesis in relation to previous research and social cognitive theory. The chapter will also address the strengths and limitations of this thesis, and suggest directions for future research. The thesis ends with some conclusions and practical implications.

Main Findings

Although peer victimization is an old phenomenon (Koo, 2007), it relatively recently entered the research arena. Early works (e.g., Olweus, 1978) predominantly adopted an individual psychology perspective in that the focus was narrowed to encompass only those who were victimized and those who victimized (but see e.g., Evans & Eder, 1993; Merten, 1996). During the last decades, the research field of peer victimization has become more diversified, with an increasing focus on social psychological and sociological perspectives (e.g., Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Maunder & Crafter, 2018; Salmivalli, 2010). One of the most apparent trends in the field in recent decades has been to address the peer ecology of peer victimization (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015). For instance, findings indicate that peer victimization most often occurs in the presence of bystanders (e.g., Atlas & Pepler, 1998), and that when bystanders intervene on behalf of the victims, they are often successful in stopping the victimization episode (Hawkins et al., 2001). Furthermore, peer victimization is less frequent in school contexts where bystanders tend to defend the victims, and more frequent in contexts where bystanders tend to reinforce those who victimize (e.g., Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Given the crucial role of the peer group, researchers have increasingly investigated how bystander behaviors are associated with various factors at different levels (Lambe et al., 2019).

The aim of this thesis was to add to this current knowledge by investigating how students' bystander behaviors in peer victimization are associated with moral disengagement, efficacy beliefs, and student-teacher relationship quality. In keeping with the common typology in the literature (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015), this thesis grouped students' bystander behaviors into three categories: pro-aggressive

bystanding, passive bystanding, and defending. In sum, pro-aggressive bystanding was most strongly associated (positively) with moral disengagement, whereas passive bystanding and defending were most strongly associated (negatively and positively, respectively) with defender self-efficacy beliefs. All three types of bystander behaviors were associated with both individual- and classroom-level characteristics, but a classroom-level characteristic – collective moral disengagement – was the strongest correlate only for pro-aggressive bystanding (Study 3). Table 4 summarizes the main findings of the four studies. Next, these findings will be discussed in relation to previous research and social cognitive theory.

Table 4

Overview of Significant Effects of the Four Studies Included in the Thesis

Study	Reinforcing/ pro-aggression	Passive bystanding	Defending
I	+ IMD – DSE – IMD*STRQ + IMD*DSE	+ IMD – DSE	+ DSE + STRQ
II		– DSE – CE	+ DSE + CE
III	+ CMD + IMD*CMD	+ IMD + CMD	– IMD – CMD
IV			+ DSE

Note. IMD = individual moral disengagement. CMD = collective moral disengagement. DSE = defender self-efficacy. CE = collective efficacy. STRQ = student-teacher relationship quality.

* denotes interaction effect.

+ denotes significant positive association in the final model.

– denotes significant negative association in the final model.

Bold denotes strongest significant association in the final model for each bystander behavior per study.

Pro-Aggressive Bystanding

Students who act pro-aggressively as bystanders either assist or reinforce those who victimize, and thus may extend and exacerbate the victimization episode (Salmivalli, 2014). In this thesis, pro-aggressive bystanding was mainly investigated in relation to the concept of moral disengagement (Studies 1 and 3). The findings of this thesis were mostly in line with previous research that has found that the tendency among children and youths to morally disengage is positively associated with aggressive behaviors (for a meta-analysis, see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014), including bullying (for a meta-analysis, see Killer et al., 2019) and pro-aggressive bystanding (e.g., Pozzoli et al., 2012b). Moreover, the findings of the first study extended previous research in two ways. First, we investigated whether the positive association between individual moral disengagement and reinforcing held between classes, within classes, or both. The within-effect was significant, indicating that students who, in comparison to their classmates, were high in moral disengagement were more likely to reinforce peer victimization. The between-effect was not significant. However, the small sample size and large standard errors urge caution when interpreting the non-significant results (Miles & Shevlin, 2001). Second, beyond the main effect, we found two significant interaction effects. These effects imply that reinforcing was especially likely for students who, in comparison to their classmates, were high in moral disengagement and had poorer relationships with their teachers, and especially unlikely for students who were low in moral disengagement and high in defender self-efficacy. In other words, defender self-efficacy increases students' tendencies to defend victims rather than acting pro-aggressively or passively (as will be elaborated later on), whereas positive student-teacher relationships seem to function as a protective factor that weakens the positive association between reinforcing and moral disengagement. This is in line with previous research that has found that positive student-teacher relationships predict higher levels of prosocial behavior (Obsuth et al., 2017) and lower levels of externalizing and aggressive behaviors (Rudasill et al., 2010; Silver et al., 2005). More generally, positive student-teacher relationships can help students to navigate in their social environment (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999), and has been associated with less hierarchical peer ecologies and less peer aggression (Hendrickx et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015).

Beyond individual moral disengagement, students' bystander behaviors may vary as a function of moral disengagement tendencies at collective levels (Bandura, 2016; White et al., 2009). In Study 3, pro-aggressive bystanding was found to be associated with both individual and collective moral disengagement at the classroom level. However, the main effect of individual moral disengagement disappeared in the final regression model which included the cross-level interactions terms. Still, the results of the final model suggest an interdependent relationship between individual moral disengagement and collective moral disengagement; there was a positive association between individual moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystanding, but only for those students who belonged to classrooms high in collective moral disengagement.

These findings contribute to the current body of knowledge of how the concept of moral disengagement relates to pro-aggressive bystanding. Study 3 was the first to demonstrate a positive association between pro-aggressive bystanding and collective moral disengagement, although Gini et al. (2015) found that collective moral disengagement was positively associated with aggression more generally. Furthermore, even though Pozzoli et al. (2012) found an association between *class moral disengagement* and *pro-bullying behavior*, their findings are difficult to compare with the findings of this thesis. This is partly because their pro-bullying behavior scale comprised bystander behaviors (assisting and reinforcing) and active, more leader-like, bullying behavior (e.g., "starts bullying"), and partly because class moral disengagement was conceptualized as individual moral disengagement aggregated to the classroom level. Congruent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2000, 2002), this thesis conceptualized collective moral disengagement as the perceptions of the degree to which moral disengagement is shared by classroom members. According to social cognitive theory, collective constructs such as collective moral disengagement and collective efficacy are considered emergent group-level constructs that arise from the interactions of individuals within a group (White et al., 2009). Therefore, collective moral disengagement is not simply aggregations of individuals' tendencies to disengage from their moral standards (Bandura, 2000; Gini et al., 2015). Consistent with the triadic reciprocal causation model (Bandura, 1997), the perceptions of the degree to which moral

disengagement is shared by classroom members may influence and be influenced by students' individual tendencies to morally disengage.

One might also reflect on the relative importance of individual characteristics and characteristics of the social environment. In Study 3, pro-aggressive bystanding was most strongly associated with collective moral disengagement (whereas defending and passive bystanding were most strongly associated with individual moral disengagement). Peers exert considerable influence on the behavior of one another (Farrell et al., 2017), including aggressive and prosocial behaviors in the context of peer victimization (Rodkin, 2004). Students' behaviors can be influenced not only by peer behaviors, but also by perceptions and beliefs about peer attitudes (Henry et al., 2000; Farrell et al., 2017). Collective moral disengagement can be said to constitute an injunctive norm in that it refers to the moral rules of the group (see Cialdini et al., 1991). Such norms inform students about which attitudes and behaviors are approved, or socially sanctioned, in the group. Thus, students in classrooms high in collective moral disengagement should be more likely to anticipate that joining in or encouraging the victimization episode will result in approval rather than disapproval among their peers. Under such conditions it can conversely be socially rewarding for students to act pro-aggressively while socially punishing for students if they engage in defending (Bastiaensens et al., 2016; Gini et al., 2015; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Why could it be that collective moral disengagement seems to play a stronger role than individual moral disengagement in pro-aggression? A possible explanation is that pro-aggression, compared to defending and passive bystanding, constitutes a more severe and troublesome behavior, and that therefore, to take place, it requires a greater degree of normative influence rooted in a poor sociomoral climate (see also Mucherah et al., 2004; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

Establishing the relative importance of individual characteristics and characteristics of the social environment can provide valuable theoretical and practical insights. However, as emphasized by social cognitive theory and other prominent theories of children's behavior and development – such as the transactional model of development (Sameroff, 2009), the child-by-environment perspective (Ladd, 2004), and the social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) – understanding how individual characteristics and characteristics of the social environment interact is key. In this sense, individual and collective

moral disengagement (or defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy) do not compete but rather complement each other when it comes to explaining variability in students' bystander behaviors (Ettekal et al., 2015; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015). As previously mentioned, an interaction effect between individual and collective moral disengagement was found in Study 3, suggesting a positive association between students' individual moral disengagement and their pro-aggressive behaviors, but only for those who belonged to classrooms that were high in collective moral disengagement. This echoes the findings of the longitudinal study by Busching and Krahé (2015), who found a positive association between students' initial individual acceptance for peer aggression and their aggressive behavior one year later, but only for those who belonged to classrooms with a high normative acceptance of aggression. It seems that classrooms with low normative acceptance of aggression create a positive moral climate that, at least to some extent, is capable of buffering the association between individuals' positive attitudes toward aggression and their aggressive behavior. Furthermore, the opposite can happen when individuals with positive attitudes toward aggression encounter a negative moral climate. In such a case, they can act in accordance with their attitudes without risking social sanctions and, thus, aggressive behaviors (e.g., pro-aggressive bystanding) are likely to increase.

Passive Bystanding

Passive bystanders passively observe or avoid peer victimization. Whereas pro-aggressive bystanders may extend and exacerbate peer victimization by actively expressing approval, the (in)actions of passive bystanders can function as a silent approval of the victimization (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Salmivalli, 2014). In this thesis, passive bystanding was investigated in relation to the concepts of efficacy beliefs (Studies 1-2) and moral disengagement (Studies 1 and 3). With regard to a potential relation between passive bystanding and individual moral disengagement, findings of previous research have been inconsistent (for a meta-analysis, see Killer et al., 2019), revealing positive (e.g., Thornberg et al. 2017), negative (e.g., Gini 2006), and null (e.g., Gini et al., 2015) associations. In this thesis, however, passive bystanding was consistently found to be positively associated with individual moral disengagement; students with higher levels of moral disengagement,

both overall (Studies 1 and 3) and in relation to their classmates (Study 1) reported that they more often remained passive when witnessing peer victimization. Whereas students typically judge bullying as wrong and sympathize with the victims (e.g., Eslea & Smith, 2000; Forsberg et al., 2014), students often remain passive as bystanders (e.g., O'Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2016), bystanders who consider taking the passive role will anticipate that acting against their moral standards will result in self-sanctions in the form of discomforting feelings such as guilt or shame, which can push potential passive bystanders to take the defender role. However, moral disengagement mechanisms allow students to decouple their moral standards from their behaviors, which minimizes or even deactivates self-sanctions. Consequently, the positive association between passive bystanding and moral disengagement found in this thesis makes sense in that students who remain passive as bystanders need to cognitively rationalize their behavioral transgressions (see also Killer et al., 2019).

One possible explanation for the inconsistencies in the literature may be due to the fact that passive bystanding constitutes a rather heterogeneous role. For instance, Obermann (2011) suggested that passive bystanders can be divided into two broad subgroups: *unconcerned* bystanders who passively witness peer victimization without feeling responsible, and *guilty* bystanders who passively witness peer victimization but think they ought to help. Obermann (2011) found that unconcerned bystanders had higher levels of moral disengagement than guilty bystanders, and that there was no difference in the levels of moral disengagement between guilty bystanders and defenders. Thus, the inconsistent findings may be due to differences in study samples and measurement methods. For instance, some studies may have included samples that to a greater extent were constituted of unconcerned passive bystanders (than guilty passive bystanders), or that may have made use of measurement instruments that were more sensitive to this subgroup of passive bystanders. Other potential explanations for the inconsistencies in the literature may be that the nature of the association differs by age or across cultures. The meta-analysis of Killer et al. (2019) included 14 studies from seven countries that investigated passive bystanding in relation to individual moral disengagement. Most countries were represented by only one or two studies, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about potential cultural

differences. Regarding the most scrutinized country, Italy, represented in five studies, the findings were mixed with positive, negative, and null associations. As for potential age differences, the two studies that found the strongest negative associations had participants aged 16-17 years old (Song & Oh, 2018; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Among the studies with participants aged below 13, as was the case for the participants in this thesis, there is a trend toward positive associations. This may reflect that the proneness to disengage from one's internal moral standards is more important for younger, compared to older, passive bystanders. As students grow older, their tendency to morally disengage decreases (Paciello et al., 2008), especially between 14 and 16 years of age. During this developmental period, from early adolescence to adolescence, peers strongly influence each other's development and behavior (Brown & Larson, 2009). Thus, characteristics of the social environment (e.g., group norms, moral atmosphere, peer pressure) may come to play an increasingly important role for students' bystander behaviors.

One such characteristic of the social environment included in this thesis was collective moral disengagement. In line with one previous study (Gini et al., 2015), this thesis suggests that passive bystanding is positively associated with moral disengagement beliefs at the classroom level. In contrast to my findings, however, Gini et al. (2015) did not find support for a significant association between passive bystanding and moral disengagement at the individual level. Notably, their participants were sixth to tenth grade students (mean age = 14.1 years), whereas the participants in Study 3 were fifth-grade students (mean age = 11.55 years). Among these fifth-grade students, moral disengagement was a significant correlate of passive bystanding both at the individual and classroom level. All in all, these findings support the supposition outlined above that characteristics of the social environment, at least when it comes to moral disengagement, may be more important with increasing age, and in some circumstances even more important than individual characteristics.

Regarding efficacy beliefs, previous research has consistently found that students who doubt their ability to successfully intervene on behalf of victims are more likely to remain passive when witnessing peer victimization (Pronk et al., 2013; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Such a negative association between passive bystanding and defender self-efficacy was confirmed in this thesis. One reason as to why students act passively as

bystanders, even if they feel guilty about it (see Obermann, 2011), is that they might anticipate that intervening on behalf of those who are victimized is associated with social risks. For instance, students might stay passive because they anticipate that they will look foolish or be embarrassed in front of their peers (Thornberg, 2007), also known as the audience inhibition effect (Latané & Nida, 1981). This social influence is likely exacerbated among students low in defender self-efficacy as they will visualize failure scenarios when anticipating potential defender behaviors. However, students might stay passive because they anticipate that their peers will evaluate bystander intervention negatively, regardless of whether or not the intervention will be successful in stopping the victimization event. By not intervening, students can socially distance themselves from the victims, potentially lowering the risk of becoming future victims (Huitsing et al., 2014). In this way, students' passive bystanding can be seen as a means of protecting their social selves (Strindberg et al., 2020) and fitting in with peers (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). Given humans' fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it may be to ask too much of students to intervene individually. Defender behaviors – at least under certain circumstances – may be achievable only through interdependent efforts (see Bandura, 2000). If students do not perceive that they have the capacity to work together as a collective unit to stop peer victimization, passive bystanding likely increases. The second study of this thesis was the first to investigate whether and, if so, how passive bystanding is associated with collective efficacy to stop peer aggression. The findings suggest that passive bystanding is negatively associated with efficacy beliefs at the classroom level, even when including defender self-efficacy in the model. Thus, both defender self-efficacy and collective efficacy to stop peer aggression uniquely explain variability in passive bystanding. The significant association between passive bystanding and collective efficacy points to the importance of considering the two building blocks of collective efficacy, namely (1) social cohesion and trust among the group members (i.e., students and school personnel), and (2) the willingness of the group members (i.e., students and school personnel) to intervene on behalf of victims of peer victimization (Williams & Guerra, 2011). Williams and Guerra (2011) found that collective efficacy – conceptualized as a combination of these two constructs – was negatively associated with the frequency of bullying over time. Moreover, experimental findings suggest that

people's tendency to act passively as bystanders decreases when there is a high degree of cohesiveness among the group members (Rutkowski et al., 1983).

Overall, this thesis found that passive bystanding is associated with both bystander characteristics (i.e., individual moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy) and characteristics of the social environment (collective moral disengagement and collective efficacy to stop peer aggression) derived from social cognitive theory. These findings are in line with the fundamental assumption of social cognitive theory that behaviors are the result of an interplay between personal and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Still, it should be stressed that the findings of this thesis suggest that passive bystanding is most strongly associated with individual characteristics, especially defender self-efficacy (see next section for a discussion about defender self-efficacy as a differentiating factor for passive bystanding and defending).

Defending

Defenders intervene on behalf of the victims or otherwise provide them support. By siding with the victims, defenders can discourage peer victimization by making it less socially rewarding for those who victimize (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015; Salmivalli, 2014). In this thesis, defending was investigated in relation to the concepts of efficacy beliefs (Studies 1, 2 and 4), student-teacher relationship quality (Study 1), and moral disengagement (Studies 1 and 3). Seen from the social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 2016), students' proneness to disengage from their moral standards not only facilitates pro-aggressive bystanding, it may also decrease the probability of defending. An important prerequisite of prosocial behavior in general and of defending victims of peer victimization in particular should be a sense of moral responsibility and feelings of guilt and shame for not doing anything (Bandura, 2016; Olthof, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010, 2012). Students' sense of moral responsibility may be diminished by, for instance, the two moral disengagement mechanisms of the agency locus: displacement of responsibility and diffusion of responsibility (Bandura, 2016). Results from other research fields show a link between diffusion of responsibility and passive bystanding (Darley & Latané, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011), suggesting that the presence of others can reduce

the psychological cost of not intervening. Thus, in order to defend victims of peer victimization – an event that most often is witnessed by several peers (e.g., O’Connell et al., 1999) – students may need a strong propensity to stay morally engaged in general and a high sense of moral responsibility in particular. Indeed, results from Thornberg and Jungert (2014) suggest a negative link between students’ defending and diffusion of responsibility. In Thornberg and Jungert (2014), defending was also negatively associated with other moral disengagement mechanisms, such as the two mechanisms of the victim locus: dehumanization and attribution of blame. Students who are less prone to blame or dehumanize victims may be more likely to defend victims because pro-aggressive and passive bystanding should bring them self-condemnation in the form of discomforting feelings such as guilt or shame (see also Cohen et al., 2012).

Furthermore, some previous studies have found defending to be negatively associated with individual and collective moral disengagement measured as unidimensional concepts (e.g., Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Gini, 2006; Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová et al., 2018; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). This thesis partly supports the earlier studies. In Study 3, defending was found to be associated with moral disengagement both at the individual and the classroom level. However, when controlling for defender self-efficacy and student-teacher relationship quality in Study 1, individual moral disengagement was not a significant correlate of defending. Moreover, a recent meta-analysis (Killer et al., 2019) found a significant negative association between defending and individual moral disengagement, but the effect size was weak ($r = -0.11$). This calls into question the importance of moral disengagement in explaining students’ defending bystander behavior. Although defenders in general possess a propensity to stay morally engaged, this alone seems insufficient to ensure intervention on behalf of victimized peers (Obermann, 2011; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

In social cognitive theory, self-efficacy – the belief in one’s ability to successfully carry out the actions needed to reach a certain goal – is seen as a key determinant of behavior (Bandura, 1997, 2000). This supposition has been confirmed in meta-analyses covering different domains of human behavior (Holden 1991; Holden et al., 1990; Multon et al., 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). In the context of peer victimization, defender self-efficacy (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2013)

refers to the belief in one's ability to successfully intervene on behalf of the victim. In line with previous research (for a meta-analysis, see Ma et al., 2019; for a review, see Lambe et al., 2019), a positive association between defending and defender self-efficacy was found throughout this thesis (Studies 1, 2 and 4). In Studies 1 and 2, which controlled for other factors, defender self-efficacy was the strongest correlate of defending. Thus, this thesis adds more evidence to the positive association between defending and defender self-efficacy. Research suggests that students refrain from intervening on behalf of victims because they fear that if they intervene they might become future targets of peer victimization (e.g., Forsberg et al., 2014; Huitsing et al., 2014). Furthermore, students may refrain from defending victims because they regard it as difficult in that it requires various strategies depending upon the situation (Lucas-Molina et al., 2018; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Consequently, because defending is a risky and difficult task, students are likely to remain passive if they lack a strong belief in their ability to help victims effectively. Given the consistent findings in the literature showing that defender self-efficacy is positively associated with defending and negatively associated with passive bystanding, defender self-efficacy seems to be an important differentiating factor between these two types of bystander behaviors.

Furthermore, efficacy beliefs also operate at collective levels (Bandura, 2000). In Study 2, defending was investigated in relation to efficacy beliefs at the classroom level. In line with the only available previous study (Thornberg et al., 2020), the findings suggest a positive association, that held even when defender self-efficacy was included in the same model. Given that peer victimization is a group process (Salmivalli, 2010) that often occurs in the presence of bystanders (e.g., Atlas & Pepler, 1998), characteristics of the social environment, such as collective efficacy beliefs to stop peer aggression and collective moral disengagement tendencies at the classroom level, will also influence whether bystanders intervene or remain passive. Even students high in defender self-efficacy may not defend victims unless they belong to a supportive environment (e.g., classrooms characterized by high levels of collective efficacy and/or low levels of collective moral disengagement). For instance, in the short-term longitudinal study of Barchia and Bussey (2011), collective efficacy at time 1 – but not defender self-efficacy – was found to predict defending at time 2. Barchia and Bussey theorized that students will not defend unless they

are supported in doing so, which is also in line with the results of another study which found that defender self-efficacy was positively associated with defending only for students that were medium to high on perceived popularity (Pöyhönen et al., 2010). Again – given that the participants of the study of Barchia and Bussey (2011) were in seventh to tenth grade compared to fourth grade in Study 2 – it is reasonable to assume that characteristics of the social environment, in this case collective efficacy, come to play an increasingly important role for students' bystander behaviors.

Another essential aspect of a supportive school environment is the quality of students' relationships with their teachers (e.g., Hendrickx et al., 2016). This thesis found a positive association between relationship quality and defender behavior, which is in line with the only available study in the peer vicimization literature (Jungert et al., 2016). Although teachers are not part of the peer ecology, they exert considerable influence on it through their interactions with the students (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Hughes et al., 2014). Establishing a positive classroom climate and high quality relationships between students and teachers can lead to an increase in prosocial peer interactions in general (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Luckner & Pianta, 2011), and possibly to an increase in defending bystanding in particular. However, it should be noted that the effect size of the significant association between defending and student-teacher relationship quality was rather small. In line with most previous research, this thesis conceptualized defending as a unidimensional construct. However, defending has recently been conceptualized as a heterogenous construct encompassing direct (bully-oriented) and indirect (victim-oriented) behaviors (Reijntjes et al., 2016). Indirect behaviors include telling teachers (or other school personnel). It is plausible to expect that this type of defender behavior, compared to other subtypes of defender behavior, is more strongly associated with the student-teacher relationship quality. Thus, a possible reason for the small effect size between defending and student-teacher relationship quality obtained in this thesis is that defending was measured as a unidimensional construct. Therefore, I returned to the dataset of the first study and examined the bivariate correlations between student-teacher relationship quality and each of the five items that constituted defender behavior. Indeed, student-teacher relationship quality was most strongly correlated with the only item that involved telling teachers ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), whereas it was not

significantly correlated with the two items that tapped direct defender behaviors.

Finally, Study 4 of this thesis constitutes an important contribution to the current body of knowledge of how defending relates to defender self-efficacy. Although previous research has firmly established an association between defending and defender self-efficacy (Lambe et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2019), most studies have been cross-sectional and therefore do not reveal the directionality of the association. The only two available longitudinal studies partly support a longitudinal association between defender self-efficacy and defending (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; van der Ploeg et al., 2017). Study 4 extended these by (1) including three waves of data collection over two years, and (2) examining potential reciprocal associations instead of the unidirectional focus from defender self-efficacy to defending as in the previous studies. In line with the triadic reciprocal causation model of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), the findings showed that there is a positive reciprocal relationship between defending and defender self-efficacy. This pattern of findings suggests that defender self-efficacy influences defending *and* that defending influences defender self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1986), the strongest source of self-efficacy is performance accomplishments (i.e., personal mastery experiences). Students who are successful in defending victims should increase their efficacy expectations for similar tasks in the future. Eventually, through repeated mastery experience, a sense of strong self-efficacy can emerge (see the concluding section for a discussion of practical implications of these findings). It should be noted that, although there was a relatively strong significant bivariate correlation between defender self-efficacy in grade 5 and defending in grade 6, this association was not significant in the panel model. A possible explanation for the non-significant effect in the model is that the association vanished after controlling for defending at time 2, which could imply that defender self-efficacy at time 2 influenced defending at time 3 via its relationship with defending at time 2 (see also Barchia & Bussey, 2011b). Another possible explanation is that there are other factors, presumably contextual factors (e.g., collective efficacy, see previous section), that are more important in explaining variation in defending as students grow older.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

This thesis was part of the project “The Social and Moral Processes of Bullying – A Four-Year Longitudinal Study”. In the project, students answered an extensive questionnaire that included scales for measuring cognitive, social, and moral factors of potential importance for bystander behaviors in peer victimization. Consequently, this thesis was able to simultaneously examine different factors in relation to bystander behaviors. This also allowed for testing potential interaction effects in order to gain a more detailed understanding – beyond main effects – of how these factors relate to bystander behaviors. Moreover, the thesis included factors both at the individual- and the classroom-level, making it possible to investigate the relative importance of different units of analysis as well as to test cross-level interactions. For instance, findings from Study 3 not only suggest that pro-aggressive bystanding is positively associated with collective moral disengagement, but also that the relationship between individual moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystanding depends on the classroom levels of collective moral disengagement.

Another strength is the large sample size which yielded statistical power to detect effects. I was also able to examine correlates of bystander behaviors across different age groups, with a main focus on students in grades 4-6. In Study 4, I capitalized on the longitudinal nature of the data by examining how the relationship between defending and defender self-efficacy unfolds over time, from fourth to sixth grade. This is a novel contribution to the literature because, in line with social cognitive theory, it suggests that efficacy beliefs *predict and are predicted* by defending. Furthermore, although the project used a non-probability sampling technique, which could have an impact on the representativeness of the sample, participating schools were selected based on a strategic sampling technique in order to obtain a heterogeneous sample in terms of geographic locations and socio-demographic characteristics. Still, the findings might suffer from non-response bias if the participating students were systematically different in the investigated characteristics from those in the original sample that did not participate (e.g., students who did not get parental consent). When it comes to univariate estimates (e.g., prevalence rates, socio-demographic characteristics), there is support for the existence of non-response bias (but see Gerrits et al., 2001). For instance, a study on

mental health determinants and outcomes among a large sample of pre-adolescents found that non-participants, among other things, are disproportionately boys, tend to live in low education households, and are more likely to display aggressive behaviors (de Winter et al., 2005). However, the aim of this thesis was not to estimate univariate distributions but to examine relationships between variables (see also Goudy, 1976). Findings from several studies show that, although there exists non-response bias in univariate estimates, there is no or little evidence of non-response bias in estimates of associations between variables (e.g., Cheung et al., 2017; de Winter et al., 2005; Rindfuss et al., 2015). Furthermore, concerns may be raised over the use of multilevel modeling despite that some classrooms (the level-2 unit) had only a small number of participating students (the level-1 unit). The minimum numbers of participants per classroom were seven in Study 2 and six in Study 3. However, rather than the number of observations per group, the number of groups is more important for unbiased estimates (Clarke, 2008; McNeish & Stapleton, 2016). A simulation study found that multilevel models can be reliably estimated with as few as five observations per group (Clarke, 2008).

All studies were based on a single data source, that is self-report data. Thus, the findings could have been biased due to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), that is spurious variance attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs of interest. In order to overcome this type of bias, it is recommended to rely on multiple reporting methods (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). It has been argued that peer victimization research could benefit from combining self-report and peer-report measures (Volk et al., 2017). Self-reports, compared to peer reports, are more likely to be biased due to social desirability (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). For instance, the participants of this thesis may have exaggerated their tendency to defend victims of peer victimization. In an attempt to overcome the social desirability bias in the studies of this thesis, the member of the research team or the teacher who was present throughout the data collection session encouraged the students to answer according to their actual standpoints and experiences, and informed them that their answers would only be used for research purposes and be protected by confidentiality. Furthermore, all self-report scales used in this thesis showed adequate psychometric properties and most of the scales have been used in other studies, indicating good reliability and validity.

Nevertheless, future research could benefit from using other reporting methods as well. In addition to peer reports, future research could also benefit from using observational reports in order to capture real-life situations and interactions as they occur (Attili, 1985; Volk et al., 2017). For instance, researchers could investigate whether the associations between social cognitive factors and bystander behaviors differ depending on whether the bystander behaviors are being measured through self-reports or observer reports.

One possible criticism of the bystander scale is that it did not specify a time frame but simply asked the participants to remember situations in which they had witnessed peer victimization (see Gray, 1955). Ideally, the scale should have emphasized that the participants were to recall recent events (e.g., “Try to remember situations during the last three months...”). Nevertheless, people are more likely to remember recent than remote events (Rubin & Schulkind, 1997), a tendency that applies to survey respondents as well (Persson, 2016; Tourangeau, 2000). One might object that another factor, in addition to recency, that enhances memory retrieval is the emotional valence of the memory (Bradburn et al., 1987). Thus, some students may have recalled remote bystander experiences that were emotionally intense. Still, because the scale asked participants to indicate what they *usually* do as bystanders, occasional experiences from the past should not have had too much of an impact. Furthermore, the bystander scale could be criticized for assuming that the participating students recently had witnessed peer victimization. However, considering that peer victimization is a rather common, and increasing, feature among Swedish school children (Bjereld et al., 2020; Friends, 2019; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2018; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011), it seems likely that the vast majority have had bystander experiences in the recent past. Nevertheless, future research could benefit from including a prescreening item to determine who has witnessed peer victimization, as in the newly developed Defending Behaviors Scale developed in Canada by Lambe and Craig (2020). In their study, 93% of the participating sixth to eighth-grade students had witnessed peer victimization over the past couple of months (L. J. Lambe, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Another limitation is that three of the four studies (Studies 1-3) relied on cross-sectional data. As such, the first three studies did not contribute to evaluate the reciprocity between bystander behaviors,

bystander characteristics, and characteristics of the social environment, as suggested by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). There is a tendency among researchers to consider peer victimization behaviors as dependent variables to be predicted by individual and contextual factors. As suggested by Study 4 and other longitudinal studies in the research field (e.g., Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Meter & Card, 2015; Sentse et al., 2015; Trépanier et al., 2015), however, associations between individual and contextual factors and behaviors can be both unidirectional and bidirectional. Whereas the findings of the first three studies increase the understanding of how social cognitive factors are associated with bystander behaviors, the findings do not increase the understanding of causal effects. In a review of the literature on peer group involvement in bullying about a decade ago, Salmivalli (2010) concluded that longitudinal research was desperately needed to increase the understanding of how associations between bystander behaviors and various factors unfold over time. Researchers have partly complied with this call, as suggested by the increasing number of longitudinal studies during the last decade. Indeed, longitudinal findings suggest that efficacy beliefs (Barchia & Bussey, 2011b; van der Ploeg et al., 2017) and moral disengagement (Barchia & Bussey, 2011a; Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010; Wang, Ryoo, Swearer, Turner, & Goldberg, 2017) are precursors of students' behaviors. As shown by a recent review (Lambe et al., 2019), however, cross-sectional studies still predominate and thus the need for more longitudinal studies remains. In particular, there is a need for longitudinal studies that investigate potential reciprocal relationships between bystander behaviors, bystander characteristics, and characteristics of the social environment. It should be emphasized that although longitudinal designs can be helpful for causal reasoning in that they reveal predictive relationships, results from longitudinal studies do not in themselves constitute conclusive evidence for causal relationships (Little, 2013). In particular, a longitudinal association between two variables (e.g., defending and defender self-efficacy) may be explained by other variables (e.g., collective efficacy) not included in the analyses. In order to strengthen any causal claim, it is important for researchers to interpret longitudinal findings in relation to theory and previous empirical research, and – when possible – to statistically control for plausible confounding variables (Duckworth et al., 2010; Little, 2013).

Finally, bystander behaviors and the social cognitive correlates studied in this thesis are complex constructs that are likely to influence and be influenced by a large number of factors. While – as argued above – this thesis adds to the current body of knowledge, no single empirical work can be wholly comprehensive and there are still many gaps in the literature to be addressed in future research. A recent review (Lambe et al., 2019) that synthesized empirical findings on correlates of defending used the social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage & Swearer, 2004) as its guiding framework. In doing so, they revealed that previous research has placed much emphasis on investigating correlates at the individual and peer levels (see also Horton, 2016). Thus, beyond deepening the knowledge about individual-, peer-, and classroom-level factors (e.g., investigating cross-level interactions, conducting longitudinal research), investigating bystander behaviors in relation to contextual factors at higher levels (e.g., school, family, community, and societal) seems to be one of the most important avenues for future research.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

The findings of this thesis add important insights to the literature on how students' bystander behaviors relate to social cognitive factors, which has potential implications for prevention and intervention work. Overall, the findings support the view that bystander behaviors can influence and be influenced by both bystander characteristics (i.e., individual-level factors) and characteristics of the social environment (i.e., contextual-level factors), as suggested by the triadic reciprocal causation model of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Although each type of bystander behavior – pro-aggression, defending, and passive bystanding – was associated with several factors, some associations were stronger than others. Pro-aggressive bystanding was most strongly associated with moral disengagement both at the individual and classroom level; students high in moral disengagement and students who belonged to classrooms high in moral disengagement were more likely to side with those who victimize. For defending and passive bystanding, efficacy beliefs were more important correlates than moral disengagement. These bystander behaviors were most strongly correlated with defender self-efficacy; students who perceive their ability to successfully intervene on behalf of victims as high were more likely to actually

defend victims, whereas students who perceive their ability as low were more likely to remain passive when witnessing peer victimization. Defender self-efficacy thus seems to be an important differentiating factor between defending and passive bystanding. Finally, this thesis adds evidence for a positive reciprocal relationship over time between defending and defender self-efficacy; higher levels of defender self-efficacy predicted more defending, and more defending predicted higher levels of defender self-efficacy.

Peer victimization is not an isolated matter between those who victimize and those who are victimized, but a complex social phenomenon that most often occurs in the presence of peers who can assume different types of bystander roles (Salmivalli, 2010). By increasing defending and decreasing pro-aggressive and passive bystanding, the prevalence and negative consequences of peer victimization can be reduced (e.g., Flaspohler et al., 2009; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015). Thus, prevention and intervention work can benefit from focusing on the peer ecology of peer victimization (see Salmivalli, 2014). There are several programs aimed at increasing students' defending bystanding and decreasing their pro-aggressive- and passive bystanding. In general, these programs have been proven effective in changing students' bystander behaviors, but the effect sizes have been rather small for K–8 students (Polanin et al., 2012). The findings of this thesis offer some suggestions for improving current efforts.

Given the strong associations found between pro-aggression and moral disengagement, along with previous longitudinal studies showing that moral disengagement predicts students' behaviors (e.g., Sticca & Perren, 2015; Wang et al., 2017), programs should develop and incorporate components that challenge students' moral disengagement and develop their moral engagement. In particular, engaging students in discussions, writing, and role-play activities based on children's storybooks that include bullying situations has been found to decrease moral disengagement and peer victimization among elementary school children (Wang & Goldberg, 2017). It could also be helpful to increase students' awareness of people's widespread tendencies to morally disengage in everyday life (see Bandura 2016), including peer victimization situations. One study found that awareness-raising activities involving printed materials, lectures, and interactive talks with students decreased moral disengagement among high school students (Barkoukis et al., 2016). Another study even found that students' levels

of moral disengagement were reduced by simply reading an informative text about moral disengagement (McAlister, 2001).

Beyond challenging and counteracting students' individual tendencies to disengage from their moral standards, the findings of this thesis suggest that it is important to also pay attention to moral disengagement tendencies at the classroom level (see also Gini et al., 2015; Pozzoli et al., 2012b). Thus, efforts aimed at reducing moral disengagement should target the entire peer group, and possibly the school community at large (see Espelage & Swearer, 2004), in order to foster a positive moral climate (Mucherah et al., 2004) in which students perceive each other as morally engaged. Here, teachers may play an important role. One study found that students whose teachers responded to bullying incidents with high-level disciplinary sanctions and a high degree of victim support were less likely to morally disengage, as well as less likely to bully others (Campaert et al., 2017). On the contrary, students whose teachers did not intervene or support the victims were more likely morally disengage and bully others. Furthermore, as suggested by the significant interaction effect in Study 1, positive student-teacher relationship quality can buffer the positive association between moral disengagement and reinforcing. In Study 1, there was also a main effect of student-teacher relationship quality on defending. Thus, reinforcing may decrease and defending may increase by creating caring, warm, supportive, and respectful student-teacher relationships. More generally, positive student-teacher relationships are associated with less hierarchical peer ecologies (Hendrickx et al., 2016) and have been shown to result in less aggressive and more prosocial behaviors among peers (Obsuth et al., 2017; Rudasill et al., 2010).

In line with previous research (for a meta-analysis, see Killer et al., 2019), this thesis found a negative but weak association between defending and moral disengagement. All in all, it seems like low levels of moral disengagement constitute a prerequisite for defending, but that this alone is not enough for intervening on behalf of victimized peers. In order to increase defending and decrease passive bystanding, the findings of this thesis suggest that programs should work for enhancing efficacy beliefs related to defending. Given that performance accomplishments are the strongest source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), students' defender self-efficacy can be increased through role-play exercises and other hands-on activities that give opportunities to practice different defending strategies (Abbott et al., 2020; Pfetsch et al.,

2011; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Ross & Horner, 2009). Students who fail in their attempts to defend victims are likely to reduce their defender self-efficacy, which in turn prevents them from making future attempts. Therefore, it is important to practice not only direct strategies (e.g., confront those who victimize) but indirect strategies (e.g., get help from teachers and other school personnel) that are subtle and safe. As suggested by Study 4, more defending predicts higher levels of defender self-efficacy, potentially leading to a virtuous circle of defending and defender self-efficacy. Furthermore, programs are likely to benefit from increasing teachers' efficacy beliefs as well. As noted earlier, teachers' non-interventions are associated with higher levels of bullying and moral disengagement among students (Campaert et al., 2017). Increasing teachers' self-efficacy beliefs to intervene is an important factor for enabling them to intervene in peer victimization (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014; Yoon et al., 2014). The findings of this thesis suggest that programs should also target efficacy beliefs at the classroom level. Defending victims can threaten the social status of the defenders, potentially increasing the risk of becoming future victims themselves (see Huitsing et al., 2014; Pöyhönen et al., 2012). Therefore, rather than solely focusing on how to increase individuals' defender self-efficacy and defending, it would be fruitful to also increase the capacity to work together as a collective unit to stop peer victimization (see also Barchia & Bussey, 2011b). Because collective efficacy beliefs operate through similar processes as self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997), collective efficacy could be increased through activities aimed at teaching and practicing possible ways of *collectively* defending and supporting victims. It should also be important to foster the development of a supportive classroom climate and positive student-teacher relationships that build cohesion and trust (e.g., Hymel et al., 2015; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Williams & Guerra, 2011). Furthermore, because there is an interplay between efficacy beliefs at different levels (Bandura, 1997), increasing students' defender self-efficacy can increase the collective efficacy of their classroom, and vice versa.

As a final remark, and in line with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), it should be stressed that this thesis highlights the importance of considering a complex pattern of factors at different levels when addressing students' bystander behaviors. Whereas each factor included in this thesis constitutes a potential component that can improve existing

programs, they should not be regarded as operating in isolation, neither from each other, nor from factors omitted from this thesis.

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FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

Linköping Studies in Behavioural Science No. 224, 2020
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning

Linköping University
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