

What Makes a Defender? A Multilevel Study of Individual Correlates and Classroom Norms in Explaining Defending Behaviors

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Abstract. This study examines the interplay between individual characteristics (social status, provictim attitudes, and family messages about conflict resolution) and classroom descriptive and injunctive norms (peer victimization behaviors and bullying-related beliefs, respectively) in explaining defending behavior. For this purpose, we used a representative sample of 2,050 Spanish primary school children (50.80% girls) from grades 3–6 ($M = 9.80$ years; $SD = 1.24$), nested within 103 classrooms in 27 schools. Multilevel modeling analyses showed that both individual and class characteristics helped to explain defending behavior. In addition, random slopes revealed that children with a high social status were more likely to support victims in classrooms where bullying was less accepted. These results expand previous findings in this field, demonstrating the need for a multilevel and interactive approach to the study of defending behavior.

Bullying is a major social problem affecting children and adolescents in all parts of the world. The term bullying refers to a specific subtype of peer victimization that involves repeated aggressive attacks toward a victim who finds it difficult to defend him/herself from the perpetrator(s) (Olweus, 1991; Salmivalli, 2010). In an international study recently conducted by the World Health Organization with 219,460 students from 42 countries, 11% of the students reported being a victim and 8.5% reported being a bully at least four times during the 2 months prior to the study survey (Inchley et al., 2016). When considering not only the victims and bullies but also the bystanders who view these interactions, the percentage of children involved in bullying can increase to 85%–90% (Pepler & Craig, 1995; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Bullying has serious effects on the psychological and academic adjustment of all the children that take part in these altercations (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Rivers, Potteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009; Ttofi, Farrington, Losel, & Loeber, 2011). Therefore, research on bullying must ultimately support interventions designed to reduce bullying behaviors.

In the past 2 decades, the focus of studies on bullying has gradually moved from studying only bullies and victims (often independent from their social context) to examining different ways bystanders can be involved in the bullying process (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). In fact, numerous recent models of bullying prevention and intervention have in some way incorporated the idea of changing the ways bystanders behave when witnessing bullying (Frey, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2010; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). For instance, some children can reinforce bullies' behavior by laughing or cheering, or even by silently witnessing it, whereas other students can intervene to help the victimized classmate (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Salmivalli et al., 1996). This study paid special attention to defending behaviors, defined as any action aimed at stopping the bullying, helping and consoling the bullied peer, or asking for adult intervention (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Importantly, research indicates that when bystanders adopt this type of behavior and stand up for the victim, the bullying stops immediately more than 50% of the time (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001).

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In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on predictors and effects of defending behavior. For instance, different studies have reported that children who defend are rarely aggressive, hold greater provictim attitudes, and have good theory of mind, low moral disengagement, high empathy, and a good social standing within their group (e.g., Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini et al., 2008; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Thornberg, Pozzoli, Gini, & Jungert, 2015). However, despite the increasing evidence, most of this research is not theoretically grounded. Meter and Card (2015) recently framed this defending research within the interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979). According to this theory, the relationship (i.e., defender–victim, victim–aggressor, victim–aggressor–defender) is what helps us to understand how concern for others is related to concern for the self and how this concern affects motivation to assist others. Thus, in bullying situations, peer relationships influence peer behavior because bystanders can be more supportive of either the victim or the aggressor, depending on their affiliation with the person in each role and other peers. Moreover, Meter and Card (2015) suggested that not only can this theory be used to organize hypotheses about individual, interpersonal, and contextual effects that can lead bystanders to defend, but it also encompasses previous theories on defending behavior (i.e., the bystander effect theory and the goal-framing approach; for more specific information see Meter & Card, 2015).

In the present study, provictim attitudes and sociometric status were chosen as individual and interpersonal variables to be studied, respectively. Provictim attitudes have been positively associated with defending (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). On the other hand, defenders have consistently been found to be socially preferred within their peer group (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). In this regard, it has been suggested that a high social status is needed to challenge bullies; otherwise, defenders could risk their own safety or status within the group (Juvonen & Galván, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010). This hypothesis has its roots in both the goal-framing approach and the interdependency theory, suggesting that individuals are expected to both maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative consequences for themselves through their interactions with others (Card, 2011; Huising, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014; Meter & Card, 2015).

In addition, as suggested by the view of bullying as a social process within a social–ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Salmivalli, 2010; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010), contextual variables can influence behavior in the classroom above and beyond individual and interpersonal characteristics. Indeed, some studies have confirmed that the context of where the bullying takes place is likely to influence children's perceptions, attitudes, and behavior (e.g., Gini et al., 2015; Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, Kiesner, & Griffiths, 2008; Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Sentse, Veenstra,

Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2015). In this regard, one of the most relevant social contexts of school-aged children is the classroom, as nearly all children spend a large portion of their day interacting with their classmates (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, most episodes of bullying occur in school among classmates. Indeed, when a multilevel approach has been adopted to analyze the simultaneous effects of individual- and class-level variables, considerable variability in the prevalence of bullying (i.e., 11%; Sentse et al., 2015) and peer victimization (i.e., 4%–12%; Kärnä et al., 2011) has been found between classrooms.

Researchers have only recently analyzed the role played by contextual variables in influencing defending behavior during bullying episodes (e.g., Barhight, Hubbard, Grasseti, & Morrow, 2017; Gini et al., 2015; Peets et al., 2015; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2017). The few studies that have taken on this task have reported between-classroom variance ranging from 6% (Gini et al., 2015) to 36% (Peets et al., 2015). Although quantitatively different, these results provide some evidence that classroom-level variables may play a role in promoting defending behavior and therefore inhibiting bullying. Specifically, these multilevel studies have shown that children are more likely to defend in classrooms where bullying is less frequent (Peets et al., 2015), children hold stronger antibullying beliefs (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), and children perceive stronger peer pressure to intervene (Pozzoli et al., 2012). Together, these results highlight the impact of group norms on group members' attitudes and behaviors.

Among the different types of group norms that can be identified in a classroom context, two of them have been studied extensively with regard to aggression: descriptive and injunctive norms (Henry et al., 2000). Descriptive norms refer to how widespread a certain behavior is within a group (Henry et al., 2000). Consistent with previous studies, the greater the prevalence of a behavior, the more likely individuals are to believe that this behavior is normative and legitimate (Rimal & Real, 2003). Hence, the extent to which peer victimization (i.e., being targeted by peers' aggressive acts) and bullying (i.e., being targeted repeatedly by peers' aggressive acts in an abusive manner) behaviors are displayed on average by children in a classroom might explain why a child is more likely to defend, as recent studies have shown (Peets et al., 2015). Injunctive norms, or the degree to which a particular behavior is accepted within the peer group (Henry et al., 2000), can also determine how normative and legitimate a behavior is in the group. It can be assumed that children are more inclined to defend when their context is less permissive about peer victimization and bullying behaviors. For instance, Pozzoli et al. (2012) found that defending behavior was more likely in classes with higher levels of provictim attitudes compared to classes with shared attitudes that generally favored bullying. In this study, we examined the influence of these two types of norms on defending behavior.

Another salient social context that impacts children's socioemotional development is the family (Bronfenbrenner,

1979). Although an extensive body of research has examined the families of bullies and victims (Duncan, 2004), less is known about the characteristics of bystanders' families. For example, Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon (2000) found that the likelihood of bullying was significantly reduced for students who spent time with adults who suggested nonviolent strategies to manage conflicts. The effect of adult influences on bullying behavior was independent of the effect of peer influence. Thus, it is possible that students with defending behavior are more exposed to these kinds of adults and messages. Consistent with this hypothesis, Nickerson, Mele, and Princiotta (2008) found an association between defending behavior and security attachment to the mother. It is likely that through better communication with parents (especially with mothers), children can observe role models for how to help others and better internalize prosocial messages (Nickerson et al., 2008).

The Present Study

In light of these findings and guided by the social-ecological perspective on bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Swearer et al., 2010), this study was undertaken to expand our understanding of how classroom-level variables might strengthen or weaken individual-level associations with defending behavior. First, at the individual level, we investigated the role of students' attitudes, and we hypothesized that provictim attitudes would be positively associated with participants' defending behavior. Second, we analyzed participants' sociometric status, hypothesizing that having a good social status within the group would be positively associated with students' defending behavior. Third, we analyzed participants' family messages about violence, and we expected that receiving messages from significant adults about solving interpersonal problems in a nonviolent manner would be positively associated with defending behavior. To our knowledge, this possible correlate has never been considered in previous multilevel studies on defending behavior. We controlled for the effects of grade, gender, and class size (i.e., the number of students in class), which are all potentially related to defending behavior. For instance, prior research has found that girls and primary school students scored higher than boys and secondary school students, respectively, on defending behavior (Pozzoli et al., 2012). To the best of our knowledge, very few studies have examined the impact of class size on defending behavior. Moreover, whereas some studies have shown that class size is negatively associated with defending (Peets et al., 2015; Salmivalli et al., 2011), others have not found this effect (Thornberg et al., 2017).

We further hypothesized that at the classroom level, in addition to the aforementioned individual factors, class levels of peer victimization or descriptive norms would be negatively associated with students' defending behavior. We also anticipated that students' perceptions of their classmates' acceptance of bullying (or injunctive norms) would be

negatively associated with defending behavior. We tested whether these injunctive norms moderated the association between the individual-level variables and our dependent variable. Beyond its direct effects, the perceived classmates' acceptance of bullying behavior might also moderate the relationships between intra- and interpersonal characteristics and students' behavior. For instance, even if children think bullying is wrong, have a high social status among their classmates, or receive messages about nonviolent ways of solving conflicts from their families, they may be reluctant to actively intervene if they perceive that bullying is legitimated within their class group. Therefore, we tested for the moderating role of the perceived acceptability of peer bullying in the relationships between attitudes, sociometric status, and family messages and defending behavior. To our knowledge, only one recent multilevel study has examined such cross-level interactions. This study was conducted with a sample of Finnish primary school children (Peets et al., 2015). Findings indicated that popular children were more likely to defend others in classrooms where bullying was less accepted, and such behaviors were strongly associated with high social costs. Thus, more research is needed to increase our understanding of the way individual and contextual factors can enhance defending behavior in other samples, which would lead to reconsidering bullying prevention efforts to focus more effectively on supporting the bystander's role in reducing bullying behaviors. Optimally strengthening bystander intervention would ultimately improve the lives of children suffering from persistent bullying attacks.

With this purpose in mind, this study examined the direct and interactional effects between individual variables (social status, provictim attitudes, and family messages about conflict resolution) and classroom descriptive and injunctive norms (peer victimization behaviors and bullying-related beliefs, respectively) in explaining defending behavior. To do so, we used a representative sample of Spanish primary school children.

METHOD

In this section we describe the participants of our study and how they were selected. The measures we used and the procedure we followed are also presented.

Participants

Participants were 2,050 children aged 8–13 years ($M = 9.80$; $SD = 1.24$) from 103 classrooms in 27 primary schools in the Community of Madrid in Spain. The overall sample was designed to represent all the students in grades 3–6 in both public and private schools. Participants were selected using a stratified cluster-sampling design in one step, proportional to the school's size (i.e., the number of classrooms in a school). The sampling framework was the database of primary schools in the Community of Madrid. The variables used to stratify the sample were school location (central, northern, southern, eastern, and western regions of the

Community of Madrid) and school status (public or private). The assignment of the schools was proportional to the size of the strata. The sample was 50.80% female ($n = 1,041$) and approximately evenly divided among grades 3–6, with 22.9% (471) in Grade 3; 25.1% (514) in Grade 4; 26.6% (545) in Grade 5; and 25.4% (520) in Grade 6. The sample consisted of 17 public (58.2%) and 10 private schools (42.8%).

Measures

Defending Behavior

Defending behavior was measured by means of the Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). The defender scale consists of three peer nomination items that describe defending and supporting the victim of bullying (e.g., “tries to make others stop bullying”; “comforts the victim”; “tells others to stop bullying”). Participants were asked to nominate an unlimited number of classmates who fit the description in an item. To obtain each participant’s score on every item, the nominations received were divided by the number of total nominations made within the same class for the specific item. Then the total defending score was computed as a regression factor score. The internal consistency of the scale was adequate ($\alpha = .71$; 95% CI [.68, .73]).

Sociometric Ratings

A widely used method to assess sociometric status is children’s ratings of their peers (Maassen, Akkermans, & Van der Linden, 1996). In this procedure, children are asked to rate each of their peers on a single scale of likeability, anchored on one end by 1, reflecting acceptance (*like him/her very much*), and on the other end by 5, reflecting rejection (*dislike him/her very much*). The mean sociometric rating received from respondents reflects an individual child’s level of social acceptance within the group. A higher sociometric rating reflects lower or less popular social status among classmates. The advantage of this method over other sociometric methods (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982) is that it collects information about every child from all the other children (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Provictim Attitudes

This scale is based on the Pro-Victim Scale (Rigby & Slee, 1991). It consists of six items related to unfavorable attitudes toward peer victimization and bullying (e.g., “It makes me angry when a kid is picked on for no reason,” “I like it when someone sticks up for kids who are being bullied”). Students respond on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *really disagree*, 4 = *really agree*). The internal consistency of the scale was adequate ($\alpha = .73$; 95% CI [.71, .75]).

Family Messages about Violence

Three items selected from the Positive Adult Messages About Violence scale (Dahlberg, Toal, & Behrens, 1998) were used to assess students’ reports of what adults tell them about fighting. Students were asked to think about the adults with whom they live (e.g., parents, grandparents) and indicate how

many of them tell them things like: “If another kid from school wants to hit you, tell your teacher” and “If another kid from school wants to fight, try to talk to him to avoid the fight.” Students responded on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *none*, 4 = *all*). The Cronbach alpha was .68 (95% CI [.65, .70]).

Class Injunctive Bullying Norms

Class aggregates of children’s perceptions of the group’s support for bullying were used as a measure of class injunctive norms. Children’s perceptions of their group’s class norms related to bullying were obtained through an eight-item self-report (e.g., “My classmates think that kids who get picked on a lot usually deserve it,” “My classmates think that kids should not complain about being bullied”). This scale was based on the Attitudes Toward Bullying scale (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), but the children were asked whether they thought their classmates held these attitudes rather than if they held them themselves. Children were asked to respond to these statements on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *really disagree*, 4 = *really agree*). Higher scores on class injunctive norms indicate more probullying norms. The internal consistency was .74 (95% CI [.73, .76]).

Class Victimization

The classroom level of peer victimization or of being the target of peer aggression (descriptive norm) was derived by averaging individual victimization scores for each classroom. These scores were obtained using a self-report questionnaire that asked students to indicate the number of times in the past two months that they had experienced 11 different types of victimization (e.g., “I have been kicked,” “I have been excluded from a group”). Students responded to items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *a lot of times*). This scale was adapted from another measure used previously in a large-scale study of Spanish primary school children (Defensor del Menor de la Comunidad de Madrid [Children’s Ombudsman of the Community of Madrid], 2006). The internal consistency of the scale was good ($\alpha = .91$; [95% CI [.90, .92]).

Procedure

School principals were first asked for consent. Then, active parental consent was obtained for all the students in the study (acceptance rate = 97%), in compliance with the institutional review board requirements of the overseeing university and school districts. The students completed the measurement instruments in a group session during a standard 1-hour class. Administration of the instruments was always carried out under the supervision of a researcher. Although all the participants had reached the required reading level for these instruments, questions were read aloud to the children aged 8–10 years old. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. No incentive was provided for their participation. Confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants. After the study, reports on the school’s data, with no identifying information, were provided to every participating school.

Data Analyses

First, descriptive analyses and correlations among the study variables were conducted in IBM SPSS 22.0 (IBM, 2013). Second, as both the data (students nested within classes) and the hypotheses (the role of individual- and class-level factors on students' defending behavior) were multilevel in nature, a Hierarchical Linear Modeling analysis was performed (HLM 7.01; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2013). Multilevel modeling adjusts standard errors to correct for nonindependence of data (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Defending served as the criterion variable. Grade, gender, sociometric rating, provictim attitudes, and family messages served as Level-1 (within-, individual-) variables. The following class characteristics were modeled as Level-2 (between-, class-) variables: class size, class victimization, and class injunctive norms. All the individual- and class-level variables were grand centered, with the exception of gender (boy = 0, girl = 1), which was uncentered. Additionally, prior to HLM analysis, all the continuous latent variables obtained as regression factor scores (i.e., provictim attitudes, family messages, and defending behavior) were transformed into *t* scores to facilitate interpretation and the comparison of different unstandardized HLM coefficients.

Three nested models were estimated in HLM. The model-building process began with the estimation of an unconditional or null model with no variables in order to ascertain an estimation of the intraclass correlation coefficient (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). The next step was to fit the model with Level-1 variables. The coefficients resulting from this analysis can be interpreted in a similar way to traditional regression coefficients when the outcome variable is standardized, as in this case. We then included the Level-2 variables, as well as

cross-level interactions between three individual-level variables (sociometric rating, provictim attitudes, and family messages) and a class-level variable (injunctive norms). To evaluate the improvement in fit between models, the deviance statistic was compared: the smaller the index, the better the model.

Patterns of missing data were examined prior to multilevel analyses using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 Missing Data Module. The percentage of individuals omitting items (nonresponse) was small, as it was below 5% across all items. Data were determined to be missing at random (MAR), as missing data analyses indicated that missing values were unrelated to student demographic information or other study variables. Under the assumption of MAR, missing data can be analyzed using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), which allows for analysis of the full sample of child respondents.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations of the study variables are reported in Table 1. Boys scored higher on sociometric rating ($M_{\text{boys}} = 2.13$; $SD_{\text{boys}} = .66$; $M_{\text{girls}} = 2.06$; $SD_{\text{girls}} = .57$; $t = 2.69$; $p < .05$). By contrast, girls scored higher than boys on provictim attitudes ($M_{\text{boys}} = 49.43$; $SD_{\text{boys}} = 10.24$; $M_{\text{girls}} = 50.55$; $SD_{\text{girls}} = 9.73$; $t = -2.52$; $p < .05$). In addition, we ran an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for mean differences among the four grades. The Brown-Forsythe statistic was used because the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met. There were significant grade differences in mean baseline provictim attitudes ($B-F = 12.06$; $p < .001$) and family messages ($B-F = 4.35$; $p < .05$). A posteriori contrasts (Games-Howell test) revealed that the mean of provictim behavior was

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	<i>M</i> /%	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Student-level variables (N = 2,050)</i>				
Age	9.80	1.24	8.00	13.00
Female gender	50.8%			
Sociometric rating	2.10	0.69	0.00	4.89
Provictim attitudes	50.00	10.00	8.85	69.12
Family messages	50.00	10.00	23.47	60.69
Defending behavior	50.00	10.00	30.23	128.46
<i>Classroom-level variables (N = 103)</i>				
Class size	19.90	4.70	8.00	38.00
Class injunctive norms ^a	50.17	4.15	41.48	60.08
Class victimization ^b	50.16	3.21	42.16	60.44

^aClass mean for individual scores on "Children's perceptions of the group's support for bullying." The descriptive statistics for this variable were $M = 50$; $SD = 10$; Min = 31.10; Max = 78.02. ^bClass mean for individual scores on "Peer victimization." The descriptive statistics for this variable were $M = 50$; $SD = 10$; Min = 37.67; Max = 87.63.

Table 2. Student-Level Correlations Between the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Defending behavior	—			
2. Grade	-.01	—		
3. Sociometric rating	-.33***	.02	—	
4. Provicitim attitudes	.15***	.13***	.09***	—
5. Family messages	.18***	.07**	.15***	.18***

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

significantly higher in Grade 6 ($M = 51.32$) compared to Grade 3 ($M = 47.84$) and Grade 4 ($M = 49.68$) and that, in higher grades (i.e., grades 5–6), the mean of family messages was significantly higher (M s = 49.14, 49.33, 50.27, 51.16, in grades 3, 4, 5, and 6, respectively).

Within- and between-level correlations between the study variables are reported in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. Small to modest correlations were found between defending behavior and the other study variables. Defending behavior was negatively associated with sociometric rating, class size, class injunctive norms, and class victimization and positively associated with provictim attitudes and family messages. Notably, grade (which also serves as an indication of age) was only weakly or not significantly related to any of the study variables. Class size was negatively associated with class victimization, whereas class injunctive norms and class victimization were positively and highly correlated.

Multilevel Analyses

We first estimated a null model (without any individual- or classroom-level variables) for defending behavior to see how much variance existed at the individual level and at the classroom level. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) indicated that a significant amount (3.8%) of the total variance could be explained at the classroom level ($\chi^2 = 186.40$; $p < .001$), which justified the use of multilevel modeling with

predictors at both the individual and classroom levels. Although this percentage was relatively low, because it is above zero, it indicates that there is some difference in defending behavior depending on which class a student attends. Additionally, the nested nature of these data indicates that the data are multilevel in structure and should be analyzed as such (Snijders & Bosker, 2012), regardless of the extent to which defending behavior varies between classrooms.

Level 1: Student-Level Analysis

Our first model only included Level-1 predictors to analyze the relation between some individual variables and defending behavior while controlling for students' class membership. Results are reported in Table 3. Family messages and provictim attitudes positively predicted defending behavior, whereas sociometric rating was negatively associated with defending behavior. Gender and grade did not significantly add to the prediction of defending behavior. Individual variables entered in Model 1 explained 7.6% of the variance in participants' defending behavior.

Level 2: Classroom-Level Analysis

In the second predictive model (see second column of Table 4), the class size, classroom level of victimization, and class injunctive norms were added to the previous model. Bigger classes and classes with higher levels of victimization and class injunctive norms were associated with lower defending behavior. The classroom-level variables entered in Model 2 explained 67.8% of the variance in defending behaviors between classes.

Additionally, we regressed the random slopes on class injunctive norms, which revealed that class injunctive norms moderated the effects of sociometric rating on defending behavior. Simple slope analysis for low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) levels of class injunctive norms revealed that, in classrooms with high class injunctive norms, lower sociometric ratings were associated with decreases in defending behavior ($b = .08$, $SE = .04$, $t = 2.37$, $p < .05$), whereas the defending behavior in classrooms with low class injunctive norms did not vary as a function of sociometric rating ($b = -.03$, $SE = .03$, $t = -.99$, $p = .32$; see Figure 1). The deviance of Model 2 decreased significantly compared to that of Model 1 ($\chi^2(2) = 38.54$, $p = .001$), indicating that Model 2 fit the data better than Model 1.

We also tested these two interactions: Provictim Attitudes $\times$ Class Injunctive Norms and Family Messages $\times$ Class Injunctive Norms. Neither of them was significant ($p = .682$ and $p = .328$, respectively), and both were eliminated from Model 2 because the deviance fit was bigger with them than without them (15,215.69 vs. 15,199.49).

The proportional reduction in variance (PRV) when each student- or classroom-level predictor was excluded from the full model is also provided in Table 4. This variance reduction statistic is a local effect size that can be used in multilevel analyses (Peugh, 2010), and it is equivalent to the reduction in total Level-1 (student) or Level-2 (classroom) variance, respectively.

Table 3. Classroom-Level Correlations Between the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Defending behavior	—		
2. Class size	-.51**	—	
3. Class injunctive norms	-.20*	-.15	—
4. Class victimization	-.21*	-.21*	.53**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

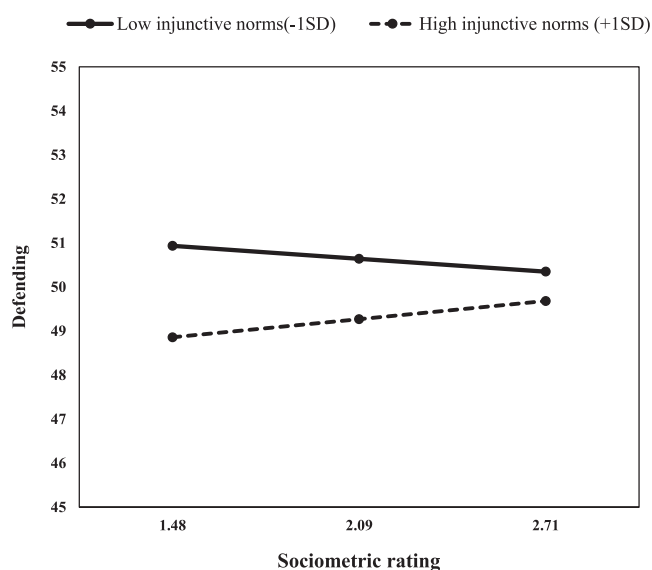
Table 4. Multilevel Modeling Predicting Defending Behavior

Predictors	Model 1 Student Level			Model 2 Student and Class Level			Proportion Reduction in Variance (PRV) ^a
	<i>C</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> Ratio	<i>C</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> Ratio	
Student-level							
Grade	−0.16	0.25	−0.64	0.05	0.22	0.22	
Gender	−0.63	0.44	−1.44	−0.61	0.43	−1.44	
Sociometric rating	−0.84	0.36	−2.30*	−0.68	0.34	−2.02*	4.28%
Provicim attitudes	0.04	0.02	1.97*	0.04	0.02	2.11*	0.82%
Family messages	0.08	0.02	3.92***	0.08	0.02	3.67***	1.89%
Classroom-level							
Class size				−0.31	0.07	−4.80***	46.67%
Class injunctive norms				−0.17	0.06	−2.65**	2.16%
Class victimization				−0.15	0.07	−2.08*	2.24%
Cross-level interactions							
Class Injunctive Norms × Sociometric Rating				−0.19	0.10	−1.97*	2.21%
Deviance	15,238.03			15,199.49			

Note. Variables at student (except gender) and classroom level are centered around the grand mean. C = coefficient estimate from the population-averaged models with robust standard errors.

^aProportion Reduction in Variance (PRV) was computed based on this equation (Peugh, 2010): $PRV = (\text{var}_{\text{NoPredictor}} - \text{var}_{\text{Predictor}}) / \text{var}_{\text{NoPredictor}}$, where the “NoPredictor” subscript represents the variance estimate (student-level estimate variance or classroom-level intercept variance, respectively) from the model prior to adding a predictor, and the “Predictor” subscript represents the corresponding variance (student-level estimate variance or classroom-level intercept variance, respectively) from a model that contains a predictor variable.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Association Between Students' Sociometric Ratings and Defending as a Function of Injunctive Norms for Bullying

DISCUSSION

Guided by the social–ecological conceptualization of bullying, this study was designed to analyze the roles of individual and classroom variables on students' defending behavior. Moreover, this study examined whether classroom norms influence the degree to which children's defending behavior depends on their provictim attitudes, sociometric status, and family messages. Consistent with previous findings (Peets et al., 2015) and theoretical perspectives (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Swearer et al., 2010), our findings suggest that classroom norms can influence whether children use their social status to defend their peers, underlining the importance of moving beyond main effects models to the study of interactive processes among individual and contextual influences.

In line with previous studies (Peets et al., 2015; Pozzoli et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), both provictim attitudes and sociometric ratings had a unique effect on defending behavior. Nonetheless, the attitude–behavior link was rather small, which was not surprising, as attitudes usually only explain up to 10% of the variance in behavior (Augoustinos &

Walker, 1995). The results for social status support the idea that defenders may need to be socially preferred within their group to challenge bullies (Juvonen & Galván, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010). In addition, these results could be framed within both the goal-framing approach and the interdependence theory on defending by suggesting that status may contribute to whether or not individuals defend victims and stand up to aggressors (Huitsing et al., 2014; Lindenberg, 2008; Meter & Card, 2015). In addition, nonviolent messages about fighting that children received from their families were positively associated with defending. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine this variable in a multilevel study on defending behavior. This result is consistent with studies that have shown a positive association between secure attachment to mothers and defending behavior (Nickerson et al., 2008). In a trustful relationship, children are more likely to communicate openly and seek advice from their parents. These children would, in turn, be more willing to help others in need because they have received this type of model at home (Nickerson et al., 2008). On the other hand, contrary to other studies (e.g., Pozzoli et al., 2012), our findings show that general levels of defending do not vary by gender and grade.

Consistent with our expectations and the results of previous research (Pozzoli et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), we found that descriptive and injunctive classroom norms for peer victimization and bullying were negatively associated with individual defending behavior. Classes with higher levels of peer victimization and bullying acceptance had lower levels of defending behavior. These findings suggest that children, when it comes to defending, are affected by their classmates' behavior and the bullying climate in the class, with both group behavior (descriptive) and attitudes (injunctive) being influential. The number of children per class also influenced defending behavior. In line with the few studies that have included this variable (Peets et al., 2015), bigger classes showed lower levels of defending behavior. One possible explanation for this result is that increased teacher monitoring and warmer teacher–student relationships are possible with fewer children in the classroom, which, in addition, may enhance the probability that students will defend their victimized peers because they feel supported by their teachers (Jungert, Piroddi, & Thornberg, 2016). Hence, this result should also be considered in any policy designed to tackle bullying behavior in school.

The results also revealed that the injunctive norms moderated the effects of individual social status on individual defending behavior. Children were more likely to use their social status in prosocial ways (the link between social status and defending behavior was positive and stronger) in classrooms where bullying was less accepted (lower injunctive norms). Thus, interestingly, in a probullying class, popular children seemed to engage less in defending behavior, probably as a result of conforming to the bullying group norms and being afraid of losing their position in the peer group (Huitsing et al.,

2014; Peets et al., 2015; Pozzoli et al., 2012). On the other hand, less accepted children (children with higher sociometric rating) showed the same levels of defending behavior, regardless of the class injunctive norms. This result might indicate that less accepted children are less aware of, or act less in accordance with, the bullying group norms (Nesdale et al., 2008). Thus, when examining the behavioral correlates of social status, it is desirable to understand the classroom norms.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of several limitations. First, the present results are based on a cross-sectional design, so we cannot draw any conclusions about the direction of the effect. Future studies should examine these relationships with longitudinal data, as in a recent study carried out on bullying behavior (Sentse et al., 2015). Second, the sample is limited to Spanish primary school children, which impacts the generalizability of the study's findings. Third, the assessment of some of the study variables (e.g., student's provictim attitudes, family messages) was based solely on the children's capacity to report on their own experiences and behaviors, which could have contributed to socially desirable responding. In addition, the internal consistency of some of the study measures met the minimum standards for reliability research (i.e., internal consistency around .70), an aspect that should be taken into consideration. Moreover, in our measure on positive family messages, we asked about the parents or guardians at home rather than all adults in general, which may have affected the response options in some way. Finally, this study focused on two types of norms. More insight is needed into how other contextual factors might influence the degree to which children act on their inclinations to defend. For instance, further studies could consider the effect of other school- and class-level variables, such as the level of disruption and problem behaviors in schools and classrooms, teachers' characteristics (e.g., classroom-management strategies), and the quality of teacher relationships with students. Some previous studies have found teacher support to be associated with reductions in peer victimization (Elledge, Elledge, Newgent, & Cavell, 2016) and increases in defending behavior (Jungert et al., 2016). Therefore, future studies should consider these variables and relationships.

Implications for Practice

Despite its limitations, this study adds some important knowledge to the limited literature about students involved in bullying dynamics as defenders, clearly supporting the need for a social–ecological approach. Our findings suggest that classroom injunctive norms can have an influence on the degree to which children use their popularity to defend victims of bullying. In this regard, it could be interesting to support students in vocalizing their private attitudes, which are often against bullying (Rigby & Slee, 1991), to reduce the

development of false norms. For instance, this study has shown that children are less likely to defend others in classes where the students attribute probullying attitudes to their classmates. One way to change these attitudes and reduce bullying behavior could be through the Steps to Respect program, a bullying-prevention program that has been extensively tested (Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011). This program is aligned with the social-ecological model of bullying (Swearer et al., 2010), and it is designed to reduce bullying by changing attitudes about the acceptability of bullying, increasing empathy for students who are bullied, and educating students about their responsibilities as bystanders.

In addition, the results indicate that significant adults (e.g., parents, grandparents) may play a role in the development of defending behavior. In designing prevention and intervention programs, school psychologists should include parents in their interventions to make them aware of their influence on their children's behavior and the importance of emphasizing prosocial ways of solving interpersonal conflicts. To achieve this, parents should primarily be proper models of empathy and prosociability for their children (Nickerson et al., 2008). In this regard, school psychologists could design role-playing and role-reversal activities so that parents can learn, for example, how to interact daily with their children and teach them how to share, cooperate, and handle interpersonal conflicts.

Furthermore, our findings imply that supporting teachers in creating a positive classroom environment where bullying is not acceptable is necessary in the context of bullying prevention and intervention. Indeed, both parents and teachers should be involved in building an antibullying culture to help children internalize prosocial norms and acquire the skills to interact competently with peers. One way to achieve this could be through mentoring programs. In these types of programs, the teacher organizes the classroom in such a way that every child is both mentor and mentee. Therefore, each student is in charge of giving and receiving socioemotional support to or from another specific student. This type of intervention promotes not only children's levels of empathy and positive social skills, but also more positive relationships with peers, teachers, and family (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Finally, unlike previous studies that have used an incidental sample (e.g., Peets et al., 2015; Pozzoli et al., 2012), this study was conducted with a representative sample of primary students from grades 3–6 in Spain.

The current study contributes important insights to the literature by showing that bystanders intervene more often when they have a more favorable social status and provictim attitudes, have been exposed to more family messages against the use of violence in peer conflicts, and belong to smaller classrooms where bullying is less common and less accepted by their peers.

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