

Defending by Opposing the Bully or Supporting the Victims:

Does it Make a Difference for Victims' Anxiety?

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### Abstract

This study investigated whether the association between victimization and anxiety differed depending on the type of received defending (bully-oriented or victim-oriented). It was hypothesized that having victim-oriented defenders would be associated with less anxiety, whereas having bully-oriented defenders would be associated with either less or more anxiety for the victim. The sample consisted of 250 students between the age of 11 and 14 from 14 classes of various education levels in seven Dutch middle schools ( $M_{age} = 12.96$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). Four regression analyses were conducted. Findings showed that the association between victimization and anxiety was moderated by having victim-oriented defenders, but not by having bully-oriented defenders. Strikingly, this interaction was not in the expected direction. For students who were highly victimized, having more victim-oriented defenders was related to more anxiety. Having more victim-oriented defenders was only associated with lower anxiety when victimization was low. The results and implications are discussed and suggestions are made for further research.

*Keywords:* Bullying, Victimization, Defenders, Anxiety, Adolescents

### **Types of Defending: Does it Make a Difference for Victims' Anxiety?**

Bullying is a phenomenon seen in many countries over the world (Craig et al., 2009; Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008). On average, 12.6% of children from over 40 countries aged 11 to 15 years reported being victims of bullying (Craig et al., 2009). It is commonly defined as a form of aggression which is intentional, repeated over time, and involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This imbalance of power can be either caused by physical strength or higher status of the perpetrator (Olweus, 1993). Bullying can be both direct (e.g. name calling, insults, threats, assault) and indirect (e.g. exclusion from the peer group, spreading rumors, cyberbullying; Graham, 2016). Being a victim of bullying puts children at risk for developing a wide variety of problems including physical problems such as headaches, backaches, and difficulty sleeping, as well as psychological symptoms such as loneliness, helplessness, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Due et al., 2005; Juvonen, & Graham, 2014). It has also been associated with having more suicidal thoughts and making more suicide attempts (Arango, Opperman, Gipson, & King, 2016; Marschall-Lévesque et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that these symptoms extend throughout childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017; McDougall, & Vaillancourt, 2015; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to understand factors that may provide help for victims.

The negative consequences of victimization on adjustment have been shown to be moderated by various contextual factors such as the number of victims in a classroom (Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2012), belonging to the ethnic majority (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004), having emotionally supportive teachers (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010), and having at least one friend (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). Another factor that has been shown to improve victims' adjustment, is having defenders (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011). Defenders are classmates who take sides with the victim. Defending can occur in two ways: They can console and support the victim or they can directly confront the bully (Reijntjes et al., 2016). However, it remains unknown whether these two types of defending have the same effect on victims' adjustment. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine whether the association between victimization and anxiety differs depending on the type of defending.

### **Bystanders' Behavior and Victims' Adjustment**

Researchers increasingly acknowledge that bullying is a group phenomenon (Salmivalli, 2010): Peers are present in over 85% of bullying situations (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). According to Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1996) four participant roles can be distinguished in addition to being a bully or a victim: Assistants are those who follow the bully, reinforcers adopt behaviors that

provide positive feedback to the bully (e. g., cheering or laughing), outsiders withdraw from bullying situations, and defenders take sides with the victims by either comforting the victim or standing up to the bully.

The frequency of bullying in a classroom is positively associated with reinforcing and negatively associated with defending behavior (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Bystanders' reactions not only influence the frequency of bullying but also play a moderating role in the victim's adjustment. According to the stress-buffering hypothesis, social support lessens the damaging effects of stressful events because it leads individuals to believe that they are cared for, loved, and protected (Cobb, 1976). Furthermore, defenders may provide emotional and informational support to victims of bullying (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Emotional support enhances self-esteem by communicating to persons that they are valued for their own worth and experiences, whereas informational support helps with defining, understanding and coping with problematic events. Thus, having defenders could enhance self-esteem and make victims feel better able to cope (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

This assumption was partly confirmed in a cross-sectional study with 355 sixth- to eighth-grade students (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). Support from classmates moderated the association between victimization and internalizing problems, but only for boys. That is, victimized boys who perceived more support from classmates reported less internalizing distress than victimized boys who perceived less classmate support (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). In another cross-sectional study involving 784 seventh to twelfth graders, a moderate level of social support was related to less anxiety and depression in victimized students (Holt & Espelage, 2007). However, both low and high social support was related to more anxiety and depression. A possible explanation for this finding is the measurement that was used. Both studies measured general social support by asking their participants to answer statements such as "my classmates treat me with respect" and "I have fun with my classmates". These measures of social support are questionable in the case of bullying because these statements mostly measure the bullying itself: those being bullied inevitably scored low on general social support. The presence or absence of defending by specific individuals is a different concept and should be measured differently. One longitudinal study measured (a lack of) social support by measuring if the victim felt isolated. Adolescent victims who felt less socially alienated were less anxious than those who felt highly isolated (Newman, Holden & Delville, 2005). Thus, social support and perceived isolation moderate the association between victimization and internalizing problems.

As social support and feeling included lessen the negative consequences of stressful events, it may be that having defenders lessens the negative consequences of victimization. Only one study examined the direct effect of having defenders on victims'

adjustment. Sainio et al. (2011) conducted a cross-sectional study with 7481 children aged 10 to 12. They found that victims who were defended by one or more classmates experienced less anxiety, were less depressed and had higher self-esteem than victims without defenders.

### **Different Types of Defending**

Reijntjes et al. (2016) specified the defenders' role into two different types of defending: bully-oriented defenders, who primarily defend by actively confronting the bully, and victim-oriented defenders who primarily support and console the victim afterwards. Consoling and supporting the victim may enhance the self-esteem of the victim and help the victim feel better able to cope and therefore decrease the victim's anxiety.

Actively confronting the bully may have two different effects. First, it is possible that it provides negative feedback (i.e., bullying is not accepted in this group) to the bully. Bullying is a strategic behavior which is often used to acquire or maintain status (Salmivalli, 2010). Defending the victim by confronting the bully challenges the status and the power of the bully. Consequently, this should reduce the bullying by making it an unsuccessful way of achieving status (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). If the victimization decreases, the anxiety of the victim may also decrease (Williford et al., 2012). In addition, when a victim is defended by one or more classmates, the dissimilarity between the victim and the group becomes smaller. The victim might become more 'normative' in the eyes of its peers. This might increase the social status of the victim (Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli & Voeten, 2007) and consequently reduce anxiety.

On the other hand, actively confronting the bully is also associated with less peer-perceived liking and more symptoms of depression and social anxiety in defenders (Meter & Card, 2015; Wu, Luu & Luh, 2016). It is possible that the victim may feel that he or she caused these negative effects for the defender and therefore feel guilty. This may cause the victim to feel even worse than before the defender intervened. Thus, it could be that both types of defending have different effects on victims' adjustment.

### **The Present Study**

To our knowledge, no research has been done of the differential effects of these two types of defending. It remains unclear whether the different types of defending have a similar influence on victims' adjustment. Therefore, this study examines if the association between victimization and anxiety differs depending on the type of defending. It was hypothesized that victims would be less anxious when they reported having at least one victim-oriented defender, because being consoled and supported may enhance their self-esteem and cause the victim to feel more adapt in his or her coping ability. We did not have a directional hypothesis regarding bully-oriented

defending because on the one hand we expected bully-oriented defending to be related to less anxiety in victims, because this type of defending may decrease the frequency of the bullying by making it an unsuccessful way of achieving status and power, and by increasing the social status of the victim. On the other hand, bully-oriented defending could be related to more symptoms of anxiety if the victim feels guilty about the negative consequences for the defender.

## Method

### Sample

For this study, 383 students from 14 classrooms in seven Dutch high schools have been approached to participate. Among them, 250 students (65%) aged 11 to 14 ( $M_{age} = 12.96$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) agreed to participate. Of the participating students, 96.4% were born in the Netherlands, 0.4% in the Netherlands Antilles/Aruba, and 3.2% elsewhere. In addition to self-reports, the participants provided data on a total of 383 classmates through peer nominations<sup>1</sup>. Among the participants 44.2% were boys. The classes were from all different academic levels, resulting in 26.6% vmbo, 7.6% vmbo/havo, 21.9% havo, 7.8% havo/vwo, 30% vwo and 6% gymnasium. Respectively, this is the order of the Dutch secondary school education levels, ranging from more practical to more academic. All students were first- to third year-students. In Dutch schools, students remain together for most of their classes in their first two or three years of high school. Therefore, the classes are identifiable units of which the students within each class know each other well.

### Procedure

Data was collected at 14 high schools in different cities across the Netherlands. The questionnaires were administered during regular teaching hours by third-year bachelor students of the University of Utrecht, who visited one to four classrooms, either as a pair or by themselves. Schools were approached by the bachelor students themselves. Parents received a letter in which the purpose and the procedures of the study were explained. The parents were asked to sign the letter and indicate whether they gave consent for participation of their child. This form was to be handed in before students were allowed to fill in the questionnaire.

In some occasions, the data was collected in the presence of the teacher. In other occasions, only the university bachelor students who administered the questionnaires were present in the classroom. After the administrators introduced the study and questionnaires, the students were asked to fill in a consent form. When consent was obtained from both parents and the student, the student received a printed copy of the

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<sup>1</sup> The participants could nominate any of their classmates, even when these classmates did not participate themselves, either because they were absent or because they did not give consent or have parental consent to participate.

questionnaire and a printed list of their classmates. An individual number was assigned to each student's name on the list. This number consisted of a combination of four two-digit numbers referring to the administrators (i.e., university bachelor students), the school, the class, and finally the individual student. The students were asked to fill in numbers instead of names, when referring to a classmate. The administrators explained that the list would be destroyed afterwards to ensure the anonymity of the participants. It was emphasized that the students should fill in the test by themselves. The students' tables were then set apart from each other when possible to avoid distraction and discussing between students. The students who did not give consent or whose parents did not give consent were given a different paper-and-pencil questionnaire (with the same front page but with questions about general knowledge) so participating students could not be distinguished from those who did not. This was done to make sure they would not feel pressured into participating.

### **Measures**

Printed questionnaires were used to collect the data. The constructs measured by the questionnaire included among others: bullying, defending behaviors, victimization, anxiety, likeability and perceived popularity. Only defending behaviors, victimization, and anxiety were used in the current study and are presented in the rest of this section.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the following description of bullying was provided: Bullying occurs when one or more students repeatedly harass and humiliate another student by hurting him or her. Bullying consists of the following behaviors: (1) hitting, kicking or pinching someone; (2) taking objects from someone, destroying the objects or losing the objects. (3) ridiculing, calling someone names or offending someone, (4) excluding someone by making sure that he or she is not allowed to participate in games or activities and (5) making sure others are talking bad about him or her or spreading false rumors. It was then made clear that bullying is not a fight between two youths that are approximately of the same height and strength and that bullying is also not playful teasing but that bullying is instead repeatedly harassing someone to hurt them or to make them sad. Participants were asked to keep this definition in mind when answering the questions.

**Victimization.** To assess bullying and victimization, an adapted version of the bullying role nomination procedure (BRNP; Olthof et al., 2011, adapted by Reijntjes et al., 2016) was used. Victimization was measured by 4 peer-reported items. Each item measured a different type of victimization including (1) physical victimization (i.e., being kicked, hit, pushed, or pinched); (2) verbal victimization (i.e., being ridiculed, humiliated, or called names); (3) direct relational victimization (i.e., being ignored, excluded, or blocked on social media); and (4) indirect relational victimization (i.e., others spreading rumors about the victim, or others telling to block the victim on social

media). After the description of a form of bullying with its various behavioral manifestations was described, the following questions were asked: "Do you know anyone in your classroom who is being bullied in this particular way? If so, could you give us the name(s)?" The students then filled in the numbers linked to their classmates. For each peer-reported item, the number of nominations received were divided by the total number of possible nominations. Subsequently, the four items were averaged into one general victimization variable. This general victimization variable has been used in the analyses (The Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha=.65$ ). This value is satisfactory but relatively low because different types of victimization have been averaged together. Our goal was not to investigate differences between physical and verbal/relational types. Therefore, we decided to maintain these 4 items as our measurement of victimization.

**Having victim-oriented defenders.** Two types of defending were assessed: victim-oriented defending and bully-oriented defending. Victim-oriented defending behaviors were described as actions such as "helping the person that is victimized by telling the person to ignore the bullying", "comforting the victim", and "being kind to the victim during recess". It was measured by self-reports. After asking participants if they had been bullied in the last couple of months, they were asked in 1 item "Which of your classmates then helps you by consoling you?". Participants then wrote down the code numbers of the classmates showing this behavior. The extent to which participants received victim-oriented defending was operationalized as the number of victim-oriented defenders each of them reported.

**Having bully-oriented defenders.** Bully-oriented defending behaviors were described as "getting angry when another student is being bullied", "going after the bully when bullying occurs", and "trying to drive the bully away". After asking participants if they had been bullied in the last couple of months, they are asked in 1 item "Which of your classmates then helps you by stopping the bully?". Participants wrote down the code numbers of the classmates showing this behavior. This item measures the number of defenders displaying bully-oriented defending. The extent to which participants received bully-oriented defending was operationalized as the number of bully-oriented defenders each of them reported.

**Anxiety.** To measure anxiety, the General Anxiety subscale of the Dutch version of the Screen for Children Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED-NL; Muris, Bodden, Hale, Birmaher, & Mayer, 2007) was used. There were 9 self-reported items consisting of questions as "I worry about others not liking me" and "People tell me I worry too much". The possible answers were "almost never" (0), "sometimes" (1) and "often" (2). These 9 items were averaged into one anxiety variable. The cronbach's alpha of this scale was  $\alpha=.86$ .

## **Analyses**



After creating the composite variables for victimization and anxiety, the descriptive statistics and correlations were computed for these variables. Independent sample t-tests were run to test for gender differences. To assess the size and direction of the associations between the variables, bivariate Pearson's correlations were calculated. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether having bully-oriented or victim-oriented defenders moderated the association between victimization and anxiety. A total of four regression analyses were performed with anxiety as the dependent variable. There were two regression analyses for each type of defending. Per defending type, a first model was run to analyze the main effects of victimization, and of having that type of defenders on anxiety. Age and gender were added as covariates. A second model included the same variables as the first models as well as the interaction between victimization and having (bully-oriented or victim-oriented) defenders.

### Results

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the main study variables. T-tests were performed to test for gender differences. Girls scored significantly higher than boys on anxiety ( $p < .001$ ), numbers of bully-oriented defenders ( $p < .001$ ), and numbers of victim-oriented defenders ( $p < .001$ ). Girls and boys did not differ on victimization.

Table 1

*Means (and standard deviations) for the whole sample and by gender*

Measure	Total	Minimum	Maximum	Girls	Boys	<i>t</i>
Victimization	0.01 (0.04)	0.00	0.32	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	1.55
Anxiety	0.62 (0.48)	0.00	1.89	0.73 (0.53)	0.49 (0.37)	4.14***
Number of bully-oriented defenders	0.65 (2.17)	0.00	28.00	0.94 (2.77)	0.30 (0.94)	4.81***
Number of victim-oriented defenders	0.67 (2.24)	0.00	28.00	1.06 (2.90)	0.19 (0.68)	4.82***

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Correlations

To assess the size and direction of the associations between the variables, bivariate Pearson's correlations were calculated. They are presented in Table 2. As expected, victimization was positively related to anxiety,  $r(248) = .17$ ,  $p = .007$ . That is,

being nominated as a victim was related to higher levels of anxiety. In addition, the number of victim-oriented defenders was positively associated with the number of bully-oriented defenders,  $r(257)=.85, p<.001$ . That is, having a higher number of victim-oriented defenders was related to having a higher number of bully-oriented defenders. Strikingly, the number of victim-oriented defenders was also positively related to anxiety,  $r(243)=.13, p=.046$ . Thus, having a higher number of victim-oriented defenders was related to higher levels of anxiety.

No significant associations were found between age and victimization, between age and anxiety, between age and the number of bully-oriented defenders, and between age and the number of victim-oriented defenders. In addition, no significant correlation was found between the number of bully-oriented defenders and anxiety.

Table 2

*Correlations matrix for the study variables*

	1	2	3	4
1. Age	—			
2. Victimization	.09	—		
3. Bully-oriented defending	.02	.10	—	
4. Victim-oriented defending	-.04	.07	.85**	—
5. Anxiety	.05	.17**	.04	.13*

*Note.* \* $p<.05$  \*\* $p<.01$ , \*\*\* $p<.001$

### Regression Analyses

Regression analyses were conducted to examine whether having bully-oriented defenders or having victim-oriented defenders moderates the association between victimization and anxiety. A series of four regression analyses were performed. Two models (Model 1 and Model 3) only include the main effects and two models (Model 2 and Model 4) include both the main effects and the interaction effect. The variables age and victimization were centered before running the analyses. The first two models included the number of victim-oriented defenders as a predictor of anxiety, whereas the last two models included the number of bully-oriented defenders as a predictor of anxiety. The unstandardized regression coefficients (B), standard errors (SE) and standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for each predictor are presented in Table 3 (number of victim-oriented defenders) and Table 4 (number of bully-oriented defenders).

**Having victim-oriented defenders.** The first model (Model 1) tested the main effects of victimization and the number of victim-oriented defenders on anxiety. Gender and age were added as covariates. This model explained a total of 10% of the variance ( $R^2=.10$ , adjusted  $R^2=.08$ ) in anxiety. There was a significant effect of gender on anxiety: girls reported more anxiety than boys,  $p<.001$ . Furthermore, victimization

positively predicted anxiety,  $p=.007$ . That is, students who were more victimized reported higher levels of anxiety. The second model (Model 2) included the same predictors as Model 1 as well as the interaction between victimization and the number of victim-oriented defenders. It explained 12.6% of the variance ( $R^2=.126$ , adjusted  $R^2=.107$ ) in anxiety. There was a significant interaction between victimization and victim-oriented defending,  $p=.009$ . For students who were highly victimized, having more victim-oriented defenders was related to more anxiety. Having more victim-oriented defenders was only associated with lower anxiety when victimization was low. A graphical representation of this interaction effect is shown in Figure 1.

**Having bully-oriented defenders.** Model 3 included the main effects of victimization and the number of bully-oriented defenders on anxiety – controlling for age and gender - and explained 9.5% of the variance ( $R^2=.095$ , adjusted  $R^2=.08$ ) in anxiety. Again, gender predicted anxiety,  $p<.001$ , that is, girls reported more anxiety than boys. In addition, there was a significant positive effect of victimization on anxiety: higher victimization was related to higher levels of anxiety,  $p=.005$ . Model 4 included the same predictors as Model 3 as well as the interaction between victimization and bully-oriented defending. It explained 9.6% of the variance ( $R^2=.096$ , adjusted  $R^2=.08$ ) in anxiety. However, there was no significant interaction effect between victimization and the number of bully-oriented defenders,  $p=.546$ .

Table 3

*Regression Analyses with Number of Victim-oriented Defenders Predicting Anxiety*

	Model 1: Main effects			Model 2: Interactive effects		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Intercept	0.51***	0.05		0.50***	0.04	
Age	0.03	0.04	.05	0.04	0.04	.07
Gender	0.22***	0.06	.23	0.21**	0.06	.22
Victimization	2.53**	0.93	.17	1.58	0.98	.11
Number of victim-oriented defenders	0.02	0.01	.07	0.03	0.01	.13
Victimization*Number of victim-oriented defenders				1.48**	0.56	.18

*Note.* The coding for gender was Male: 0; Female: 1.

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

Table 4

*Regression Analyses with Number of Bully-oriented Defenders Predicting Anxiety*

	Model 3: Main effects	Model 4: Interactive effects
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	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Intercept	0.50***	0.05		0.50***	0.05	
Age	0.03	0.04	.05	0.03	0.04	.04
Gender	0.24***	0.06	.25	0.23***	0.06	.24
Victimization	2.63**	0.93	.18	3.18*	1.30	.21
Number of bully-oriented defenders	-0.004	0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.04
Victimization*Number of bully-oriented defenders				-0.41	0.68	-0.05

Note. The coding for gender was Male: 0; Female: 1.

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

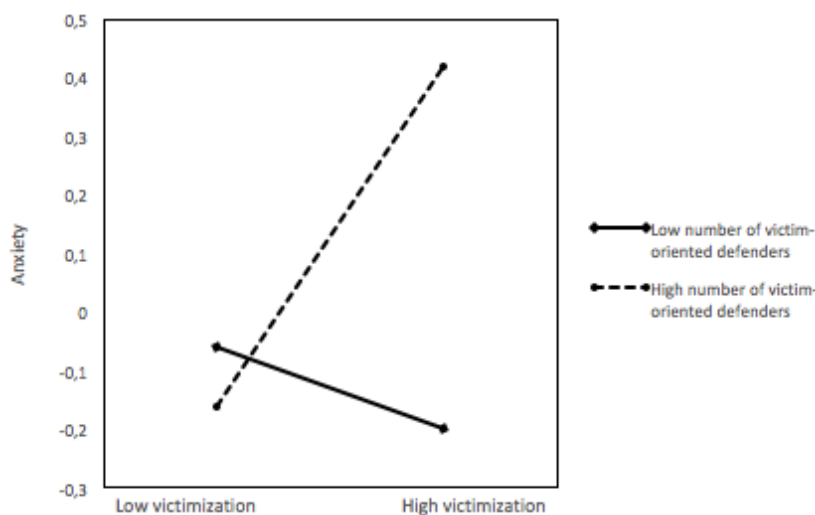


Figure 1. Moderating effect of having victim-oriented defenders on the association between victimization and anxiety.

### Discussion

The present study examined whether the association between victimization and anxiety differed depending on the type of defending. Victimization was expected to be associated with less anxiety when having defenders. Furthermore, we examined whether this association is the same for having bully-oriented defenders and for having victim-oriented defenders. It was hypothesized that having victim-oriented defenders would be related to less anxiety in victims. Findings indeed showed that the association between victimization and anxiety was moderated by having victim-oriented defenders. However, this moderating effect was not in the expected direction. When victimization was high, having more victim-oriented defenders was related to more anxiety. Conversely, having less victim-oriented defenders was related to less anxiety when victimization was low. This implies that having more victim-oriented defenders could be detrimental for victims.

Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported.

An explanation could be that support victims receive is less in quantity or quality compared to support that non-victims receive. Therefore, the support would not be associated with less anxiety, as we expected. This idea is supported by the results of a study conducted by Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002). In their study, seeking social support was related to more loneliness and less peer-preference for boys. The students in our study with more victim-oriented defenders might tend to seek more social support, which could have resulted in more anxiety.

Another explanation could be that peers only defend when the victimization has reached a certain level. The perceived severity of a bullying incident has been shown to influence the willingness of bystanders to intervene (Chen, Chang, & Cheng, 2016). For example, when the bullying only happens occasionally peers may not intervene because they do not see the bullying as severe, whereas when the bullying happens every day and becomes severe, peers feel like they should intervene and defend the victim. The victimized students with victim-oriented defenders in our study might be more severely victimized to begin with and therefore experience more anxiety. More research is needed to examine this assumption.

In addition to victim-oriented defending, bully-oriented defending was examined as a possible moderator in the association between victimization and anxiety. There was no directional hypothesis regarding bully-oriented defending. No moderation effect was found for having bully-oriented defenders. This might be explained by qualitative studies on victims confronting bullies, of which the results have shown unpredictable outcomes (Danielson & Emmers-Sommer, 2016; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011). On the one hand, it is possible that confronting the bully is successful in degrading the status of the bully. This might make bullying less attractive for the bully, causing the bullying to decrease and hereby reduce the victim's anxiety. On the other hand, it could also lead to ridiculing the defender and continuation of the original victimization. The victim might feel guilty for the ridiculing of the defender. This guilt, in addition to the anxiety caused by the continuation of the victimization, might result in increased anxiety of the victim. It is possible that both type of situations occurred in our sample, which could have resulted in both higher and lower scores for victims' anxiety. Because these scores were averaged, the effects might have balanced each other out. This might explain why no clear direction of association or interaction was found for having bully-oriented defenders. More research is needed to understand the underlying processes and consequences of bully-oriented defending.

A unique strength of this study is that it is, to our knowledge, the first to distinguish the effects of two types of defenders on victims' adjustment. This provides more specific information about defending than when defending is examined as a

unidimensional construct. Moreover, peer-nominations were used to map victimization in classes, which increases the reliability of the provided information (Pellegrini, 2002). In addition, self-reports were used to measure anxiety and having defenders. When anxiety and victimization are both measured by self-reports, there could be a potential influence of shared method variance. Common method effects are caused by commonalities between the predictor and the response variable and artificially strengthen the association between those two variables. To lessen this influence, it is better to use both self-reports and peer-reports instead of just one measure (Bouman et al, 2012).

There are several limitations of this study. Firstly, most of the students were of Dutch origin. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to culturally diverse families remains unknown. Further research should include a more culturally diverse sample to address this issue. Secondly, this study has a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot examine causal relationships. Further research should use a longitudinal design to examine the direction and possible causality of the associations between victimization, having defenders and anxiety.

The present study gives insight in the relationship between victimization and anxiety with having (victim-oriented and bully-oriented) defenders as possible moderators. Having defenders has been shown to lessen negative consequences for the victim (Sainio et al., 2011). However, our findings indicate that this association differs depending on the type of defending. Therefore, interventions designed to reduce anxiety in victims should take the different defending behaviors into account.

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