

Pedagogische Wetenschappen

# Bachelor-thesis

Social Competence in Bullies, Defenders and Neutrals:  
A Comparison

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# Social Competence in Bullies, Defenders and Neutrals: A Comparison

## Abstract

**Objective:** The goal of this study was to investigate whether or not bullies, defenders and neutrals differ regarding various indicators of social competence (i.e., strategy use (prosocial and coercive), resource control, perceived popularity, social preference, connectedness to classmates, and self-perceived social acceptance), considering both the traditional and the more modern view of social competence. **Method:** The sample consisted of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $N = 1230$ ) from different schools throughout the Netherlands. Data were collected from several informants: peer nominations were used, as well as self- and teacher-reports. **Results:** Bullies scored highest, and neutrals lowest, on Prosocial strategy use, Coercive strategy use, Resource control and Perceived popularity. Defenders scored highest on Social preference and Connectedness to classmates. Bullies scored lowest on Social preference and were overrepresented in the bistrategic controller type (Hawley, 2003). **Conclusions:** This study provides most evidence for the more modern view of social competence, in which bullies are seen as socially competent individuals. Results of the study could be used for interventions. However, further research into this subject is needed.

Bullying is a widespread phenomenon that occurs in different contexts and throughout different stages of life. It can be defined by three characteristics that seem to be universally accepted: 1) intent to harm, 2) repetition over time and 3) imbalance of power between bully and victim (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Considering the characteristic of repetition over time, bullying can occur in every context of a person's life in which people are together in groups for a longer period of time. Examples of these contexts are schools (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003), homes (Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland, Coyne, 2009; Wolke & Samara, 2004) and the workplace (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000). Bullying in the school context has received most attention in the literature and is recognized as a pervasive problem in many countries (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). That is why it is important that attention is being paid to this subject. The more information is attained, the better this problem can be understood, which is needed to develop and implement successful interventions. Since bullying is typically unprovoked and deliberate, it is considered a subtype of proactive aggression (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009), which can be defined as goal-directed,

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harmful behavior, controlled by external reinforcements (Little, Henrich, Jones & Hawley, 2003; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Children who used this type of aggression were found to be effectual aggressors, whereas children who used reactive aggression (that is, aggression in response to a perceived threat or social provocation) were not (Perry, Perry & Kennedy, 1992; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Also, the latter group was more likely to experience problems. Children can be categorized into different groups regarding the role they play in the bullying process (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman & Kaukiainen, 1996). The 'bully' is the one that starts the bullying and displays active, leader-like bullying behavior. A peer may actively follow the bully in his behavior ('assistant') or may reinforce the bullying behavior through watching, laughing and being present ('reinforcer'). The 'victim' is the target of the bullying. A 'defender' displays supportive, consoling side-taking with the victim, as well as active efforts to make others stop bullying. An 'outsider' does nothing and stays outside the bullying situations (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Children who cannot be assigned to any of these groups are called 'non-involved' or 'neutrals' and can serve well as a control group in research (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2008).

Bullying is known to have both immediate and long-term negative effects on the victims and the general school climate (Arseneault, Bowes & Shakoor, 2010; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Also bullies themselves may experience negative outcomes from their own behavior. For example, they may report more problem behavior, more injury and worse school attitudes than the neutral group (Dukes, Stein & Zane, 2009; Stein, Dukes & Warren, 2007). For a long time research has suggested that bullies are likely to experience problems in other areas too, e.g., they have a lack of social skills, low self-esteem and other adjustment problems (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). However, a consistent amount of research indicates that bullies do not perceive these problems. Gini (2008), for example, found that bullies manifested the fewest number of adjustment problems among children involved in bullying. Further, recent studies show that bullies do not lack social competence, but instead possess good social skills (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Thus, it can be argued that there has been a shift in the way bullies are perceived. This shift seems to be related to a change in the view of social competence.

In the more classical view, social competence is related to solely positive behaviors and traits that are assumed to support and attract others (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Socially competent individuals are those who behave in a socially accepted manner and are liked by peers. From this view, bullies are regarded as disliked, unpopular individuals who are not socially competent and do not have many friends (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Sutton, Smith &

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Swettenham, 1999a). After all, they use proactive aggression, which is not seen as positive and supportive behavior. Because of their negative behavior, bullies were believed to lack social skills (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Sutton et al., 1999a). They were thought to have inadequate social information processing skills and to misinterpret what others think and feel, due to a weak Theory of Mind [ToM]. However, little empirical evidence exists to support this notion with respect to bullies. More recent studies show that bullies do possess social skills and have high social intelligence (Gini, 2006; Kaukiainen et al., 1999). In addition, Sutton, Smith and Swettenham (1999b) found that bullies, as well as defenders (Simona, Di Blasio & Salmivalli, 2010) have a very well developed ToM. Therefore, bullies are able to manipulate and understand the mind of others. Also, bullies were found to score high on popularity (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Nevertheless, few studies do provide support for part of the classical view. The fact that most bullies are popular does not mean that they are also liked by their peers (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). In fact, popularity and likeability seem to be different constructs. Research showed that aggression, although related to high peer-perceived popularity, is associated with low likeability among peers (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindeberg & Salmivalli, 2009). This indicates that bullies are disliked by their peers indeed, as stated by the more classical view.

In the more modern view, social competence is defined as having the ability to be successful at achieving one's goals in social settings (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). These goals are not necessarily attained in a prosocial way, proactive aggression may be used quite skilfully too (Garandean & Cillessen, 2006). From this view, bullies are regarded as socially competent, for they know how to effectively use their social skills (Gini, 2006) to attain agentic goals (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). A large amount of research confirms this idea. Research conducted among middle-school students proved that bullies indeed are good at attaining their goals. Goals that bullies may strive for are dominance over their peers, being visible in the group, prestige and popularity (Sijtsema et al., 2009). In other words, bullies strive after social status within the peer group (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). An extensive body of research shows that this seems to work out relatively well. For example, bullies are likely to be perceived as popular, powerful and 'cool' among their classmates (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike & Afen-Akpa, 2008; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Witvliet et al., 2010), especially when they are good looking and have a sense of humor (Xie, Swift, Cairns & Cairns, 2002; LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002). However, as discussed above, although bullies are perceived popular, they are found to be low in likeability (Witvliet et al., 2010). Furthermore, research showed that bullies have many friends (Barboza et al., 2009; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009).

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From an ethological point of view, Hawley (1999) referred to the ability of achieving one's goals in social settings as 'resource control', i.e. having access to social resources. This term is central in Resource Control Theory (RCT) (Hawley, 1999). The focus in RCT is on the function of behavior in stead of its structure (Hawley, 2007). It assumes that aggression and prosociality are functionally similar, but phenomenologically distinct. In line with this distinction, two different resource control strategies can be distinguished; prosocial and coercive strategy use. The strategy is called prosocial when a goal is attained via socially acceptable behavior, e.g. trading or requesting politely; it is called coercive when taking, threatening or bullying are involved. Hawley (2002) investigated these two resource control strategies and it turned out that indeed both prosocial behavior and aggression can serve as an effective resource control strategy.

Based on their strategy use, Hawley (2003) categorized children into five different types of resource controllers; bistrategic controllers, coercive controllers, prosocial controllers, non-controllers and typicals. Individuals with a high score on prosocial- and a low one on coercive behavior received the designation 'prosocial controller'. This type of controllers are, for example, agreeable, socially appealing, popular and they possess good social skills (Hawley, 2003, 2007). They have good relationships with their peers and are not being rejected. Because they are above average on resource control, they are presumed to have a higher than average social dominance status. 'Coercive controllers' are those individuals who score high on coercive control and low on prosocial control (Hawley, 2003). These children score higher than average on resource control, but are, unlike prosocial controllers, aggressive, socially unskilled and unpopular (Hawley, 2003, 2007). Coercive controllers tend to be rejected by their peers and not have many friends. Children who score high on both strategies are called 'bistrategic controllers' (Hawley, 2003). Individuals belonging to this type of controllers have characteristics in common with both preceding types. They have a high desire for recognition of their accomplishments and score high on aggression (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). At the same time they attract peers, impress teachers and are socially skilled. Bistrategic controllers are effective resource controllers and maintain high-status reputations (Hawley, 2003, 2007). They are perceived as highest socially dominant, by themselves as well as by their peers. The group of children that scored low on both prosocial and coercive strategies consists of 'non-controllers' (Hawley, 2003). These children are low on resource control. 'Typical controllers' comprise the remainder, which is the largest group (Hawley, 2003; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009).

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### *The present study*

As is demonstrated above, considerable research has been devoted to several bullying roles that can be assigned to children, different views of social competence and strategies of resource control. However, rather less attention has been paid to the combination of those different constructs. Do bullies, defenders and neutrals differ in social competence, considering both the traditional and the more modern view, and is there some sort of regularity in the way these groups attain social competence? This area was the focus of the current study. More specific, the goal of this study was to investigate whether or not bullies, defenders and neutrals differ regarding various indicators of social competence (i.e., strategy use (prosocial and coercive), resource control, perceived popularity, social preference, connectedness to classmates, and self-perceived social acceptance). Next to bullies, defenders were included in the study, because not much attention has been paid to the social competence of this group in research. Also, this group was considered an interesting group because of their presumed prosocial behavior, which might be an important aspect in future research and interventions. Neutrals were considered to be a good comparison group. Based on the literature study and considerations described above, it was expected that bullies would score higher than both defenders and neutrals on prosocial and coercive strategy use, resource control, perceived popularity and self-perceived social acceptance. Defenders usually do not show coercive behaviors and are in general well liked by their peers (Simona et al., 2010). Since they dare to stick up for the victim, it can be argued they are socially skilled children in a prosocial way. Therefore, defenders were expected to score highest on social preference and connectedness to classmates. Also, they were expected to be more popular and self-perceived socially accepted and possess greater resource control than neutrals. Neutrals were expected to score lowest on all indicators, except for social preference and connectedness; it would be likely that bullies score lower on these variables.

In addition, bullies, defenders and neutrals will be compared with respect to resource control strategies, using Hawley's (2003) taxonomy described above. Since bullies are socially dominant and are expected to use both prosocial and aggressive strategies quite skilfully, it was expected that they will be overrepresented in the category of bistrategic controllers. Defenders were expected to fall mainly in the category of prosocial controllers, because of their use of prosocial skills and their likeability. Neutrals were expected to be overrepresented in the category typicals, since they are regarded as the 'normal' group, and thus are expected not to score especially high or low on prosocial and coercive behavior.

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To test these hypotheses, research was conducted among 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. Data were collected from several informants: peer nominations were used, as well as self- and teacher-reports.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 1230$ ) were recruited from 53 fourth, fifth and sixth grade classrooms in elementary schools throughout the Netherlands. The sample consisted of 394 fourth graders ( $M_{age} = 10.3$ , 49% boys), 445 fifth graders ( $M_{age} = 11.2$ , 51% boys) and 391 sixth graders ( $M_{age} = 12.3$ , 52% boys). Most of the participants (79%) had Dutch parents, whereas the others had at least one parent originating from Turkey, Morocco, Surinam, or a European country other than the Netherlands. Participants were approached by sending out letters to their parents, informing them about the study. Both parents and children could refuse participation, still 96% of all children participated.

#### *Procedure*

The data used for the current study were part of data collected by the Dutch Consortium On Bullying [DCOB] (2006). Research assistants, unfamiliar to the children, were trained to administer self-reports and individual interviews. To ensure the correct procedure, written research protocols were developed and interviews were administered using laptop computers. Firstly, self-reports were completed during group testing sessions of approximately 30 minutes. Instructions were given to the group and were provided per questionnaire section. Secondly, pupils were individually interviewed (peer nominations and peer ratings) by one of the research assistants. The interview comprised two separate 30-minute sessions and took place in a quiet room. For the peer nominations, children received a list with the names of their classmates. No limit was set to the number of nominations, however, children were not allowed to nominate themselves. If they could not think of anyone meeting the description, children were permitted to answer with 'nobody'. For peer ratings, the names of classmates were presented in a random order, thus preventing presentation order from affecting the results. During the whole procedure, confidentiality of the provided information was stressed by the research assistants. Children could stop their collaboration whenever they felt inclined to do so, but none of them actually did. Finally, teachers completed questionnaires of every single child.

### *Measures*

**Involvement in bullying and victimization.** For the individual interview, an adapted version of the peer nomination procedure described by Goossens, Olthof and Dekker (2006) was used, which was itself an adaptation of the procedure introduced by Salmivalli et al. (1996). The procedure distinguishes between the roles of ringleader bully, assistant, reinforcer, outsider, defender, and victim (these roles are described in the introductory section of this article). Instead of asking about bullying in general, as has been done in previous research, five forms of bullying were included: physical (e.g., hitting), possession-directed (e.g., damaging belongings of other children), verbal (e.g., calling names), direct relational (e.g., turning one's back on someone who wants to play) and indirect relational (e.g., gossiping or saying mean things about someone). In doing so, preventing underestimation of female bullying and victimization was aspired (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

First, children were given a general definition of bullying and an introduction into the interview: *"Behavior is called bullying, when one or several children deliberately annoy and humiliate another child time and time again, by hurting that child. This can be done in several ways: (1) by hitting, kicking, or pinching; (2) by taking belongings or by destroying or losing them; (3) by ridiculing, name calling, or insulting; (4) by making the child being excluded from games or activities; (5) by making other children think bad of the child or by gossiping. Thus, bullying is not a conflict between children of equal power and strength, nor it is playing jokes. No, bullying is bothering a child over and over again, in order to hurt or distress that child. Now I'm going to tell you about how children may bully others and then I want to know from you whether or not there are children in your class who bully in this way. But I also want to know whether or not there are children in your class who are being bullied that way. You can use this list with names as a reminder. All questions are about the current situation, that is, today and the past weeks, but not, for instance, last year"*. Next, they were interviewed about each form of bullying successively. A description of the particular form of bullying was given and the child was handed a list with the various behavioral manifestations belonging to that form. To elicit victim nominations the interviewer 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)?"*. To elicit bully nominations the interviewer asked: *"Do you know which classmates carry out that particular form of bullying?"*. To be able to distinguish between ringleader bullies and assistants, the interviewer asked: *"You have just mentioned X. Do you think X is someone who initiates this form of bullying or is X someone who joins in after this form of bullying has started?"*. This procedure was repeated for each form of bullying.



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Overall bullying scores were computed as follows. First, continuous scores, ranging from 0 to 1, were computed for each form of bullying by dividing the number of times a child had been nominated as a ringleader bully by the number of nominators (i.e., classmates present). Overall bullying scores were then computed as the mean of the two highest scores (e.g., physical and verbal). This was done as children may not use all forms of bullying; computing a grand mean over all forms may thus underestimate the bullying. Overall victimization scores were computed in a similar way. The overall bullying and victimization scores were used as dependent variables representing the degree of bullying and victimization, respectively (Witvliet et al., 2010).

In addition to the nomination of bullies, assistants and victims, pupils were asked to nominate peers who act as a defender. The interviewer asked which classmates try to help the victim by comforting that person, being kind to him or her, or by talking about the bullying to a teacher. Also, the interviewer asked which classmates get mad when someone is being bullied and try to help the victim by chasing away the bully. Further, pupils were asked to nominate outsiders and reinforcers. Based on all these nominations, children were assigned to one of the six bullying roles. If a child received no, or very few, bullying role nominations, this child was assigned the role 'non-involved' or 'neutral'. For the current study, I was interested in bullies, defenders and neutrals only. A 15% criterion was used for assigning both the bully and the defender role, as recommended by Goossens and colleagues (2006). This means that a role is assigned to a child when s/he received most nominations for this role and from at least 15% of the classmates. For assigning the neutral role, a 10% criterion was used. Using this more stringent criterion for the neutral role assured that only the most non-involved children were assigned to the neutral group. In this way, all three groups contained a fairly equal number of children (142 bullies, 206 defenders and 160 neutrals).

**Strategy use.** [Employment of prosocial and coercive strategies.] For both strategy types, six peer nomination items adapted from Hawley (1999) were used (e.g., for prosocial "Which child promises friendship to get something done?", for coercive "Which child fools others to get something done?" ) (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Van der Meulen-van Dijk & Aleva, 2008). As described above, continuous scores ranging from 0 to 1 were computed for each item and then averaged for both the prosocial and the coercive scale (Cronbach's alpha = .70 and .91 respectively). One item of the prosocial scale was deleted in order to increase Cronbach's alpha (.80).

Based on these two resource control strategies, five different subtypes of resource control were distinguished following Hawley's (2003) procedure. A child received the

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allocation 'prosocial controller' when s/he scored in the upper 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile on prosocial strategies and the lower 66<sup>th</sup> percentile on coercive strategies. 'Coercive controllers' scored in the upper 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile on coercive strategies and in the lower 66<sup>th</sup> percentile on prosocial control. 'Bistrategic controllers' employed both strategies in the upper 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile, 'non-controllers' in the lower 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile. The last group, comprising the remainder, were called 'typical controllers'.

**Resource control.** Two separate resource control scores were created. Each score was based on the same six items adapted from Hawley (1999), but the formulation of the items was adjusted to the informants concerned. For the score based on peer nominations (e.g., "Which children in your class usually play with the favored toys?"), as described above, continuous scores ranging from 0 to 1 were computed for each item and then averaged (Cronbach's alpha = .90). For the score based on teacher-reports (e.g., "How often does this child get the best roles in class activities?"), the scores of the six items were averaged (Cronbach's alpha = .95).

**Perceived popularity.** [Perceived popularity is a measure of social visibility.] Children nominated classmates for the questions reading "Which children in your class are popular?" and "Which children are not popular?". A continuous measure was determined by subtracting the standardized number of unpopular votes from the standardized number of popular votes and again standardizing the result within school class (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

**Social preference.** Children rated each classmate on a 7-point interpersonal liking scale ranging from -3 (strongly dislike) to +3 (strongly like). Sympathy and antipathy scores were then computed as the total of all positive numbers received and the total of all negative numbers received, respectively (Maassen, Akkermans, & Van der Linden, 1997). Social preference was determined by subtracting the standardized antipathy score from the standardized sympathy score and again standardizing the result within school class (cf. Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982).

**Connectedness to classmates.** Children rated how much they hung around with each of their classmates on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). The score for connectedness was the average rating received.

**Self-perceived social acceptance.** This variable was created using the relevant subscale of the Dutch version of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985). Six items were used (e.g. "Some children would like to have more friends, but, others have as much friends as they want"), of which scores were averaged (Cronbach's alpha = .78).

## Results

A one way MANOVA was conducted to test main effects of bullying role (bully, defender, neutral) on various indicators of social competence (i.e. strategy use (prosocial and coercive), resource control, perceived popularity, social preference, connectedness to classmates, and self-perceived social acceptance). Before conducting this analysis, the variables ‘prosocial strategy use’, ‘coercive strategy use’ and ‘resource control based on peer nominations’ had been transformed into normal scores using SPSS’s Rankit procedure, because they departed from normality. The results reported below are based on these transformed variables. Because the assumption of statistically independent observations was violated, generalization of the findings to the whole population is restricted.

All dependent variables were tested in one MANOVA, as suggested by Van de Bercken and Voeten (2002). Table 1 provides an overview of the correlations between those eight variables. All variables were correlated (see Table 1 for the direction of this correlation), except for ‘Connectedness’ x ‘Coercive Strategy use’ ( $r = -.05, p = .08$ ) and ‘Social Preference’ x ‘Resource control (teacher)’ ( $r = .00, p = .88$ ). In Table 2, means and standard deviations of the dependent variables are displayed per bullying role. The multivariate test showed a main effect of group (Wilks’  $\lambda = .45, F(16,932) = 28.32, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .33$ ).

Table 1. *Correlations between the dependent variables included in the MANOVA*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Prosocial Strategy use	–							
(2) Coercive Strategy use	.63**	–						
(3) Resource control (peer-nominations)	.50**	.65**	–					
(4) Resource control (teacher-reports)	.28**	.39**	.49**	–				
(5) Perceived Popularity	.28**	.43**	.68**	.49**	–			
(6) Social Preference	-.35**	-.44**	-.08**	.00	.20**	–		
(7) Connectedness	-.07*	-.05	.20**	.17**	.42**	.60**	–	
(8) Self-perceived social acceptance	.08**	.12**	.23**	.23**	.39**	.24**	.31**	–

Note: \*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

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Table 2. *Descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation and Sample Size) of the Social Competence Indicators per Bullying Role*

Indicators of Social Competence	Bullying role								
	<u>Bully</u>			<u>Defender</u>			<u>Neutral</u>		
	(a)			(b)			(c)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Prosocial Strategy use	.88 <sub>bc</sub>	.86	138	.00 <sub>ac</sub> <sup>^</sup>	.81	198	-.24 <sub>ab</sub> <sup>^</sup>	.80	140
Coercive Strategy use	1.22 <sub>bc</sub>	.77	138	-.05 <sub>ac</sub>	.77	198	-.32 <sub>ab</sub>	.66	140
Resource control (peer-nominations)	.91 <sub>bc</sub>	.88	138	.18 <sub>ac</sub>	.93	198	-.35 <sub>ab</sub>	.81	140
Resource control (teacher-reports)	2.32 <sub>bc</sub>	.95	138	1.90 <sub>ac</sub>	.77	198	1.53 <sub>ab</sub>	.76	140
Perceived Popularity	.77 <sub>bc</sub>	.95	138	.29 <sub>ac</sub>	.80	198	.32 <sub>ab</sub>	.91	476
Social Preference	-.78 <sub>bc</sub>	1.17	138	.50 <sub>ac</sub>	.68	198	.12 <sub>ab</sub>	.70	140
Connectedness	1.51 <sub>b</sub>	.53	138	1.86 <sub>ac</sub>	.47	198	1.44 <sub>b</sub>	.52	140
Self-perceived social acceptance	3.12	.67	138	3.05	.64	198	2.95	.64	140

*Note:* The subscripts provide the results of the Post-hoc test. Each subscript represents a subgroup (a = bully; b = defender; c = neutral). Means with a subscript are significantly different from those groups represented by the subscripts at  $p < .01$ . Subscripts followed by <sup>^</sup> were significant at  $p < .05$ .

Subsequent univariate analyses (Table 3) revealed significant group differences for all dependent variables, except for 'Self perceived social acceptance' ( $F(2,473) = 2.26, p = .106, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ). This means that bullies, defenders, or neutrals differ regarding strategy use (prosocial and coercive), resource control, perceived popularity, social preference and connectedness to classmates. The proportion variance explained by bullying role is largest for the variable 'Coercive strategy use' ( $\eta_p^2 = .43$ ). This is a large effect.

Table 3. *Results of the univariate analyses per dependent variable*

	<i>F(2,473)</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Prosocial Strategy use	73.27	.000	.24
Coercive Strategy use	175.66	.000	.43
Resource control (peer-nominations)	71.25	.000	.23
Resource control (teacher-reports)	32.02	.000	.12
Perceived Popularity	33.90	.000	.13
Social Preference	92.70	.000	.28
Connectedness	34.02	.000	.13
Self-perceived social acceptance	2.26	.106	.01

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Finally, the Post-hoc test Tukey HSD was used to examine pair wise comparisons. In Table 2 the pair wise comparisons of means are provided by subscripts (see *Note*). Bullies, defenders and neutrals differed significantly on most of the indicators of Social Competence. On 'Prosocial Strategy use', bullies scored significantly higher than defenders ( $p = .00$ ) and neutrals ( $p = .00$ ). Defenders scored higher than neutrals ( $p = .02$ ). The same was found for 'Coercive Strategy use', 'Resource control (peers and teacher)' and 'Perceived Popularity' ( $p = .00$  in all pair wise comparisons of means). On 'Social Preference', defenders scored significantly higher than both bullies ( $p = .00$ ) and neutrals ( $p = .00$ ). Neutrals scored higher than bullies ( $p = .00$ ). Defenders also scored significantly higher than bullies ( $p = .00$ ) and neutrals ( $p = .00$ ) on 'Connectedness'. Bullies and neutrals did not differ significantly in connectedness to classmates ( $p = .46$ ). Thus, bullies turned out to score highest, and neutrals lowest, on Prosocial strategy use, Coercive strategy use, Resource control and Perceived popularity. Defenders scored highest on Social preference and Connectedness to classmates. Bullies scored lowest on Social preference.

As described above, results of the MANOVA show that bullies, defenders and neutrals differed in both types of strategy use. Another way to examine whether bullies, defenders and neutrals differ in the way they try to attain resource control, is by testing the association with resource control subtype (Hawley, 2003). Results (Table 4) showed a significant association between bullying role and resource control type ( $\chi^2(8) = 202.13, p = .000$ ). Adjusted standardized residuals showed that bullies were overrepresented in both the bistrategic type of resource control ( $z = 12.4$ ) and the coercive controller type ( $z = 2.5$ ). They were less often present in the non-controller ( $z = -5.6$ ), the typical controller ( $z = -7.1$ ) and the prosocial controller ( $z = -3.2$ ) type than expected by chance. Defenders were less present than expected in the bistrategic controller type ( $z = -4.0$ ) and they were overrepresented in the typical controller type ( $z = 2.2$ ). Neutrals were overrepresented in the non-controller type ( $z = 4.9$ ) as well as in the typical controller type ( $z = 4.5$ ). In both the coercive controller type ( $z = -2.2$ ) and the bistrategic type ( $z = -7.8$ ), neutrals were less present than expected by chance. In short, these results confirm the results of the MANOVA, in that bullies had the highest scores on Prosocial and Coercive strategy use, and they were also overrepresented in the bistrategic controller type.

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Table 4. *Chi<sup>2</sup>-test (bullying role x resource control type) - adjusted standardized residuals*

Resource control type	Bullying role		
	Bully	Defender	Neutral
Non-controller	-5.6**	.4	4.9**
Typical controller	-7.1**	2.2*	4.5**
Coercive controller	2.5*	-.2	-2.2*
Prosocial controller	-3.2**	1.9	1.0
Bistrategic controller	12.4**	-4.0**	-7.8**

Note: \*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

### Conclusion and discussion

In the literature on bullying, two different views of social competence exist (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). In the more classical view, competent behavior comprises solely positive behaviors and behaving in a socially accepted manner. From this view, bullies are not thought to be socially competent. In the more modern view, where social competence is seen as being successful in achieving one's goals in social settings, this idea is contradicted (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Bullies are socially competent, since they know how to effectively use their social skills to attain agentic goals. In the present paper, both views of social competence are included. The aim of the study was to investigate whether or not bullies, defenders and neutrals differ regarding various indicators of social competence, considering both the traditional and the more modern view. These indicators were 'Strategy use' (prosocial and coercive), 'Resource control', 'Perceived Popularity', 'Social Preference', 'Connectedness to classmates' and 'Self-perceived social acceptance'.

The findings confirm the expectations for the greater part. As expected, bullies scored higher on prosocial and coercive strategy use, resource control and perceived popularity than defenders and neutrals; defenders scored higher than neutrals. Against expectations, no differences seemed to exist between the three groups regarding self-perceived social acceptance. This might indicate that, although bullies are highly perceived popular, they themselves are not more secure about their social acceptance among classmates than are defenders and neutrals. This is an interesting finding, because it shows that bullying does not necessarily provides the bully with a feeling of security about social acceptance. This might raise questions about the reason why bullies behave that way. Results indicate that resource control is the most likely reason, since bullies score highest of all on this indicator of social

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competence. The evidence supporting the idea that bullies use both prosocial and coercive resource control strategies (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009), and thus are likely to be bistrategic controllers, is very strong. In addition, bullies were indeed overrepresented in the bistrategic controller type (Hawley, 2003). Even so, the results point out vividly that bullies possess a large amount of resource control. Both analyses confirmed these expectations, in a rather convincing manner. Defenders and neutrals are not likely to be bistrategic controllers; they were overrepresented in the typical type or the non-controller type. As expected, bullies did not score high on social preference and connectedness to classmates. This is in line with research that states that bullies are not liked by their peers (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Sijtsema & Veenstra, 2009). Apparently, bullies do not really care that they are not liked, because they continue their bullying behavior. An interesting topic for future research is therefore by whom exactly bullies are not liked.

Further, in accordance with the expectations, defenders scored highest on social preference and connectedness to classmates. This means that defenders, more than bullies and neutrals, are liked by their peers and spend more time with their classmates. They apparently do not use their prosocial skills to manipulate others. That might explain why defenders were not overrepresented in the prosocial controller type, as was hypothesized in the first instance. They do not use their social skills as a strategy to achieve certain goals, as bullies do, but they use it to invest in connectedness with classmates. Therefore, it is argued that prosocial behavior and prosocial strategy use are not the same constructs. This is an interesting topic for future research. For example, attention could be directed to the question which children use their social skill for what purpose, and why.

Altogether, this study provides most evidence for the more modern view of social competence, in which bullies are seen as socially competent individuals. They are capable of using both prosocial and coercive strategies to attain their goals, and remain popular among peers at the same time. They are not helpless children without any friends, but do have friends, as discussed in the introductory section. However, this study shows that the classical view is right in that bullies are not really liked by their peers.

### *Limitations and implications*

Several limitations of the current study can be mentioned. In the first place, the sample used in this study was not randomly selected and the assumption of statistically independent observations was violated. Therefore, generalization of the findings to the whole population is restricted. It should be noted though, that in research into bullying, children from the same

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class have to be included in the research to collect the needed information. Secondly, no distinction was made in gender. Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksmas & Dijkstra (2010) stated that in order to understand the processes involved in bullying, it is necessary to distinguish the gender of the bully and the victim. If gender would be included in future research, an interaction effect of gender might be found. Thirdly, social desirability might have played a role in the collection of the data. Because children were asked personal questions, about themselves as well as about their classmates, children might have been afraid to give completely true answers. However, a strong point of this study is that three different informants were included; self-reports, teacher-reports and peer nominations were used. Also, the way questions were asked about the five different types of bullying is very good. These procedures reduce the influence of biased answers. Finally, in this study no distinction has been made between defenders aimed at the victim and defenders aimed at the bully. These two forms of defending are different and future research should include those forms separately.

The results of this study are important for practical implications. Views about bullies are likely to form a basis for choosing and planning anti-bullying interventions. The knowledge that bullies are likely to be bistrategic controllers, can be important in combating bullying. Once this is known, teachers can be more aware of the fact that socially competent children can be bullies too, even though this is very hard to discover. However, it still will be difficult to stop bullying. Why would bullies stop their behavior, if they only profit from it and achieve their goals through resource control? Possibly defenders can play an important role in this. Since these children are also socially skilled, but then solely in a prosocial way, they might have more influence on the bully than the victim himself, or the teacher. Also, it might be a possibility to confirm bistrategic controllers in their talent of resource control and leadership and to challenge and encourage them to use it in a more prosocial way. A positive approach has been shown to work effectively before (Hampton, Roberts, Hammond & Carvalho, 2010).

To conclude, this study has contributed to the large amount of research that has been conducted into bullying, by incorporating two different views of social competence and by including defenders and neutrals as comparison groups. Results of this study are rather helpful and could be used by the development and implementation of future interventions. However, further research should be conducted to explore the findings in depth, which could lead to stronger conclusions.



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