

# Do Perceptions of Discrepancy Between Self and Group Norms Contribute to Peer Harassment at School?

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This study examined the extent to which adolescents systematically perceive a discrepancy between private and group norms about the acceptability of bullying and examined the association between norm estimation and actual bystander behavior. Ninety-one 8th graders (42 male and 49 female) described their personal attitudes about bullies and victims as well as their perceptions of their classmates' attitudes. Teachers rated adolescents' participant roles during bullying episodes at school. Results provided support for the premise that teens systematically perceive their peers to hold less prosocial views (e.g., to be more tolerant of bullies, less empathic toward victims, and less inclined to believe they have a responsibility to protect victims) than they themselves do. This tendency to perceive oneself as "out of step" with the group (i.e., pluralistic ignorance) was particularly salient among girls. In addition, there was a significant association between perceived self–other discrepancy in attitudes toward bullying and adolescents' actual bystander behavior when confronted by peer harassment. The more students viewed themselves as out-of-step with group norms about bullying, the higher their teacher-rated scores on passive bystander behavior. Potential implications of these findings and future directions are discussed.

Bullying, peer harassment, and exclusion in the school setting pose a significant challenge to children, parents, and educators. Over time, children who are actively victimized by their classmates begin to disengage themselves from classroom activities, participate less, and perform more poorly in school (e.g., Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Targets of bullying also report experiencing higher levels of loneliness, more suicidal ideation, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression than their nontargeted peers (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Despite an ever-growing number of school-based intervention programs designed to counteract bullying, the problem remains stubbornly entrenched. One part of the problem may be that children misperceive group norms about the

acceptability of bullying and then use these faulty estimations to guide their own behavior. This article examines the extent to which children systematically misperceive social norms about bullying as well as the extent to which such misperceptions are associated with children's bystander behavior when peer mistreatment occurs.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PROBLEM: WHY CLASSMATES FAIL TO PROTECT EACH OTHER

Observational studies in classrooms and playgrounds indicate that although peers are present during the vast majority of bullying episodes (85%), they actively intervene in an attempt to aid the victim in a very small percentages of cases, ranging from 10 to 20% (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). This

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pattern of passivity is mirrored in self-reports. In a participant-role survey in which children were asked to describe their own role in bullying episodes, only 17% of participants indicated that they actively defended the victim by intervening against the bully or providing direct support and/or consolation to the victim (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). This low rate of peer “defending” is particularly discouraging in light of the fact that such actions tend to be highly effective when enacted. A recent naturalistic study revealed that 57% of peer interventions were successful in stopping bullying episodes within 10 s (Hawkins et al., 2001). If children’s attempts to aid victims are so efficacious, then why is the rate of bystander action so low?

The most parsimonious explanation for why children do not defend victims is that they view bullying as an acceptable means of asserting dominance or achieving social goals. Studies assessing children’s attitudes toward bullying, however, do not support this premise. Surveys reveal that the vast majority of children do *not* support bullying (e.g., Menesini et al., 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1993) and that they find incidents of peer victimization unpleasant to watch (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995).

Another explanation for peer passivity in the face of bullying may involve fear of retaliation. Children may surmise that actively intervening on behalf of the victim could lead the bully to target them next. A related explanation, and the one of primary interest here, is that children’s behavior may be dictated by their sense of the prevailing norms in the classroom. When children decide whether to intervene, or wonder whether others would stand behind them if they did, they may look to group attitudes to shape their responses. We speculate that children’s perceptions of how well their own attitudes and beliefs about bullying and victimization “fit” with the attitudes of the larger peer group may become distorted by a process known as *pluralistic ignorance* (Miller & McFarland, 1991).

Pluralistic ignorance describes the phenomenon in which people understand that their own behavior may at times be discrepant with privately held beliefs while assuming that others’ (identical) behavior accurately reflects their inner sentiments (e.g., *I don’t speak out against racist jokes because I am worried about how others would react to my disapproval; Others don’t speak out because they agree with the sentiments that are being expressed*). According to Miller and McFarland (1991), the inability to recognize that others may be behaving in ways that contradict their private attitudes results in a false sense of discrepancy between one’s own attitudes and the perceived attitudes of the larger group.

Over time, the false sense that one’s private views are discrepant from those of the larger group may

encourage individuals to continue engaging in counterattitudinal behavior, or even to shift their private attitudes toward the false norm. In the case of college-wide alcohol consumption, for example, research indicates that students believe their classmates are more accepting of heavy drinking than they actually are (e.g., Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Prentice & Miller, 1993). Further, these misperceptions are predictive of students’ actual drinking behavior and alcohol-related problems (e.g., Thombs, Wolcott, & Farkash, 1997).

Although the perception of an illusory discrepancy between personal and group norms has been applied to a wide variety of social behaviors in the adult literature, it has not yet been extended to the phenomenon of school bullying. There is quite a bit of literature on children’s private attitudes toward bullies and victims (e.g., Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Rigby, 1997; Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999) but far less is known about children’s perceptions of how their own attitudes “fit” with those of the larger group, or the extent to which children may conform to a perceived group norm about the appropriate response to bullying.

#### LOOKING TO THE GROUP AS A GUIDE

How do group norms about bullying influence children’s behavioral choices? In one investigation, Henry (2001) found that students’ overall beliefs about the acceptability of aggression (averaged across all classmates) influenced individual children’s normative beliefs about aggression as well as their actual level of aggressive behavior over time. Taking this finding one step further, Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) assessed students’ shared standards about the consequences of specific bully/victim/bystander behaviors (e.g., whether students believed these behaviors would be rewarded or punished by the peers in the classroom). As predicted, between-classroom differences in bystander behavior could be partially explained by children’s perceptions of classroom norms.

Although the association between actual norms and bullying behavior is clear, there are virtually no data on the *accuracy* of children’s perceived norms about bullying or the extent to which misperceived norms might encourage passivity in the face of peer harassment. In the only study to tangentially address this issue, Rigby and Johnson (2006) reported that although a large majority of children believed that adult authority figures expected them to support a victim during a bullying episode, a significantly smaller proportion (ranging 35–74%) believed that their *peers* expected them to do so. Indeed, up to one fourth of participants endorsed the belief that their peers expected them to support the bully.

Of interest, children's beliefs about the expectations of their peers incrementally predicted their intent to be an active and helpful bystander, even after controlling for gender, age, and prior bullying or helping behavior. Children who believed their peers expected them to help a victim were more likely to do so. Although this study revealed the importance of children's *perceptions* of group norms, it did not assess the discrepancy between perceptions of private and group attitudes or the association between such a discrepancy and bystander behavior.

### DO STUDENTS PERCEIVE THEMSELVES TO BE OUT OF STEP?

The primary issue that remains unexamined is the extent to which children perceive their private attitudes about the acceptability of bullying and desirability of protecting victims to be in keeping versus out of step with the attitudes of their peers. Although prior research has examined both actual group norms and perceptions of group norms in separate studies, there have been no systematic assessments of both constructs within the same sample. As a result, little is known about the extent to which a perceived discrepancy between personal versus group attitudes might influence bystander behavior over time.

We speculate that when children witness bullying episodes at school, they quickly scan the reactions of their peers for clues about the prevailing social norms in the classroom. Because many classmates remain passive in the face of bullying (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997; Hawkins et al., 2001; Salmivalli et al., 1996), children may incorrectly perceive their peers as more supportive of bullying, less empathic toward victims, or less inclined to respect attempts to protect victims than they actually are. According to Miller and McFarland's (1991) description of pluralistic ignorance, children are able to recognize their own behavioral passivity as contradictory to their private (prosocial) attitudes but fail to afford their peers the same possibility. Instead, children assume that their peers' passivity reflects something more fundamental and diagnostic of their true attitudes. Over time, such a warped representation of overall tolerance for peer harassment could lead to increased passivity in the face of peer mistreatment.

### DEVELOPMENTAL WINDOW

The manner in which children perceive their private attitudes relative to the attitudes of their peers may change over the course of development. To date, there is no available data on developmental trends in this regard. We speculate, however, that as children become more skilled at masking their private attitudes about

bullies and victims across middle childhood, the resulting decrease in transparency will lead to an increase in perceived discrepancy between personal and group attitudes across development.

Research on conformity and peer pressure suggests that children are most susceptible to peer influence during the preadolescent and adolescent periods. For example, research examining children's tendency to conform to peer pressure demonstrates a peak in overall conformity between the ages of 11 to 13 (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966) and a peak in conformity to *antisocial* behavior in particular (including aggressiveness) a few years later (Berndt, 1979). Given this literature, we chose to survey eighth graders in the current study.

### POTENTIAL GENDER DIFFERENCE IN PERCEIVED DISCREPANCY

Research in the domain of alcohol consumption has revealed that female individuals demonstrate a greater discrepancy between self- and other-perceptions about attitudes toward drinking than male (Hines, Saris, & Throckmorton-Belzer, 2002; Prentice & Miller, 1993). We speculate that we may see a similar gender difference in perceived discrepancy between personal and group attitudes about bullying for several reasons. First, prior research has demonstrated that adolescent girls report more empathy than boys on self-report measures (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Olweus & Endresen, 1998). Higher levels of perceived empathy may encourage girls to view their personal attitudes about bullying as more prosocial than those held by the group as a whole.

Second, there are important differences in the way aggression is manifested by boys and girls. Although boys engage in higher levels of physical aggression than girls, there is mounting evidence to suggest that girls rely on relational strategies as a means of targeting their peers (e.g., excluding, gossiping, spreading rumors; see Underwood, 2003, for review). It is clear that these relational strategies often emerge in the context of friendships (Grotzinger & Crick, 1996) and are frequently employed by the most popular and influential girls in the peer group (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). The intermingling of bullying behavior with intimacy and high status may leave girls particularly vulnerable to the misperception that such behaviors are socially sanctioned and a legitimate way to gain or maintain power in adolescence.

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

This study is the first to examine whether adolescents *do*, in fact, misinterpret their peers' private beliefs about

bullies and victims. The study has three interrelated goals: (a) to determine whether students misperceive group norms in the context of school bullying, (b) to explore potential gender differences in this process during adolescence, and (c) to examine the extent to which a perceived discrepancy between private and groups norms is associated with bystander behavior.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants were 91 eighth graders (42 male, 49 female) from a semirural New England school system in which 11% of students were of minority background and 13.5% were designated as coming from low-income families (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009). All eighth graders were invited to participate; 80% returned signed parental consent forms allowing them to take part in the study.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were presented with a self-report attitude questionnaire to assess their private attitudes about bullies and victims as well as their perceptions of classmates' attitudes. In addition, an eighth-grade English teacher rated participants' bystander behavior during bullying episodes at school.

*Personal attitudes and perception of norms.* To assess private attitudes about bullies, victims, and responsibility to help classmates who are being mistreated, as well as perceptions of *group* attitudes about these issues, participants were presented with 12 statements about bullying that were adapted from a previous measure of children's moral disengagement in the context of bullying (Hymel et al., 2005). Statements targeted attitudes about bullying behavior (e.g., *Bullying is just a normal part of being a kid; Picking on other kids is always wrong, even if they are losers; It can be funny to see people being picked on*), attitudes about victims (*Kids who get picked on a lot usually deserve it; I feel bad when I see another student being bullied; Most kids who get bullied bring it on themselves*), and attitudes about bystander behavior (*I like it when someone sticks up for kids who are being bullied; When a bully is picking on somebody, it's all right to stand there and watch; Students who try to stop bullying are brave; Students should not try to stop other kids from bullying; When a kid is getting picked on, other kids should try to stop it; Kids who tell an adult when someone is being bullied are snitches*). In keeping with prior research on social norms estimation (e.g., Prentice & Miller, 1993; Shelton & Richeson, 2005), participants

were asked to (a) rate the extent to which *they* agreed with each statement, and (b) rate the extent to which they thought *most other kids in their grade* would agree with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). A subset of items was reverse scored, so that a higher score always indicated a more prosocial attitude (i.e., less tolerance for bullies, more empathy for victims, and greater expectation that bystanders should come to the aid of victims). The total scale showed strong internal consistency for personal attitudes ( $N = 12$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ) as well as for perceptions of others' attitudes ( $N = 12$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ). As a result, composite scores for *self* and *other* attitudes were calculated by averaging ratings across all 12 items.

*Participant role behavior.* A teacher-report version of the Participant Role Questionnaire (Salmivalli et al., 1996) was completed for each participant. This questionnaire comprises 15 items describing different ways children behave in bullying situations. The teacher was asked to evaluate how often each student behaved in the ways described using a 3-point Likert scale ranging 0 (*never*), 1 (*sometimes*), and 2 (*often*). The Participant Role Questionnaire consists of five subscales: *Bully* (e.g., starts bullying; gets others to join in the bullying), *Assistant* (e.g., joins in the bullying), *Reinforcer* (e.g., laughs; incites the bully), *Defender* (e.g., comforts the victim; tells others to stop bullying), and *Passive Bystander* (e.g., stays outside the situation; does not take sides with anyone). Original research using a peer nomination version of the measure documented strong reliability and validity of the scales (Salmivalli et al., 1996). The teacher-report version of the measure created for the current study resulted in Cronbach's alpha values of .99 for the Bully scale, .91 for the Assistant scale, .85 for the Reinforce scale, .67 for the Defender scale, and .99 for the Passive Bystander scale.

As depicted in Table 1, some of the subscales were intercorrelated with each other. Particularly strong intercorrelations among the Bully, Assistant, and Reinforcer scales suggested the utility of creating one

TABLE 1  
Intercorrelations Among Primary Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Bullying		.79**	.85**	.03	-.62**	-.26*	-.21*
2. Assisting			.76**	.02	-.57**	-.27**	-.20
3. Reinforcing				.02	-.72**	-.45**	-.14
4. Defending					-.25*	.08	.01
5. Passive Bystander						.33**	.05
6. Personal attitude							.18
7. Perceived attitude of group							

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

TABLE 2  
Factor Structure of Teacher-Rated Social Behavior

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Starts the bullying	.77		
Gets others to join	.90		
Thinks of new ways to pick on victim	.86		
Joins in the bullying	.90		
Assists the bully	.85		
Help bully by catching or holding victim	.83		
Comes around to watch	.80		
Laughs at victims	.81		
Encourages the bully	.84		
Comforts the victim			.63
Tells others to stop bullying			.76
Tries to make others stop bullying			.88
Misses the whole thing	-.72	.60	
Stays outside the situation	-.70	.65	
Doesn't take sides	-.70	.65	

Note. Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Quartimax with Kaiser normalization. Coefficients with absolute values less than 0.5 are suppressed from table.

composite Bullying scale from these three components. To confirm the effectiveness of this strategy, we submitted all 15 original items to factor analysis using principal component analysis and quartimax rotation. Table 2 depicts the three-factor structure produced by this procedure. As shown, Factor 1 included all of the original items from the Bully, Assistant, and Reinforcer scales. Factor 2 contained the three original items from the Bystander scale, and Factor 3 contained the 3 original items from the Defender scale. Thus we collapsed the Bully, Assistant, and Reinforcer scales into a single Bullying scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ). It is also worth noting that the three Bystander items loaded negatively on the Bully factor in addition to loading positively on their own factor. We chose to keep these factors distinct in order to preserve the clear conceptual distinction between them.

## RESULTS

Table 3 presents descriptive information on personal and perceived group attitudes as well as teacher-rated participant role behavior. Exploratory analyses revealed that the teacher-rated behavior variables were positively skewed; therefore, we used log10 transformations to approximate a more normal distribution. As suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), we present descriptive information in the unit of the untransformed scales but use the transformed values for subsequent analyses.

TABLE 3  
Descriptive Information for Primary Variables

	Male		Female		<i>t</i> Test
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Personal attitude	2.85	.52	3.19	.44	$t(89) = -3.31^{**}$
Perceived attitude of group	2.66	.51	2.60	.45	$t(89) = 0.62$
Bullying behavior	0.17	.29	0.22	.43	$t(89) = -0.59$
Defending behavior	0.06	.18	0.14	.26	$t(89) = -1.68$
Bystander behavior	1.49	.59	1.37	.63	$t(89) = 0.97$

\*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 3, female participants reported more prosocial attitudes than male,  $t(89) = -3.31$ ,  $p < .01$ . There were no significant gender differences in participants' perceptions of group attitude, or in teacher-rated social behavior.

## Misperception of Classmates' Norms

To determine whether children systematically misperceive social norms about bullies and victims, as well as to identify potential gender differences in this phenomenon, we conducted a 2 (Attitude: Own vs. Peers)  $\times$  2 (Gender: Boys vs. Girls) mixed model analysis of variance with attitude as a repeated measures factor.

Results yielded a significant main effect of attitude,  $F(1, 89) = 37.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$  with participants rating their own stance on bullying as more prosocial ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SE = .05$ ) than that of their peers ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SE = .05$ ). There was no main effect for gender,  $F(1, 89) = 2.93$ , *ns*. There was, however, a significant Attitude  $\times$  Gender interaction,  $F(1, 89) = 9.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . As depicted in Figure 1, female participants showed a larger discrepancy between self-other

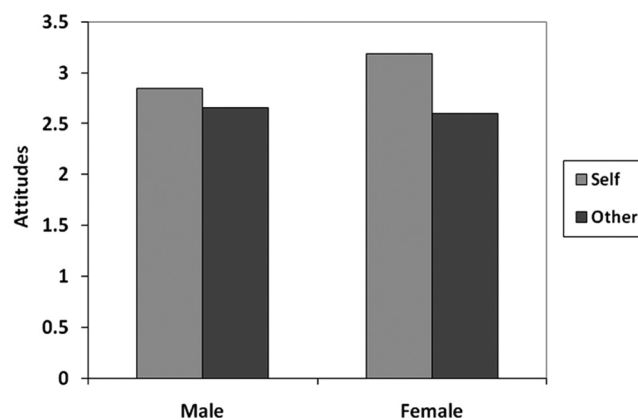


FIGURE 1 Misperception of norms varies as a function of gender. Note. Higher scores on the Attitude scale indicate more prosocial attitudes (i.e., disapproval of bullies, empathy/support toward victims, and a belief that intervening to protect victims is admirable).

TABLE 4  
Regression Analyses: Impact of Gender and Self-Other Discrepancy Scores on Teacher-Rated Social Behavior

	Step 1 (Gender)	Step 2 (Discrepancy Score)	Step 3 (Interaction)
Bullying	$F(1, 89) = 0.21$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 88) = 3.18$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 87) = .01$
Defending	$F(1, 89) = 2.94$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 88) = 0.00$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 87) = 0.96$
Bystander	$F(1, 89) = 0.90$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 88) = 6.97^{**}$	$F_{\text{Change}}(1, 87) = 0.09$

Note. Teacher-rated behavior scores were recomputed using log10 transformations.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

attitudes,  $t(48) = 7.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI: 0.43, 0.74, than did male,  $t(41) = 1.82$ ,  $ns$ , 95% CI:  $-0.02$ , 0.40.

### Association Between Perceived Discrepancy in Norms and Teacher-Rated Social Behavior

Next, we were interested in examining the association between children's perceptions of a discrepancy between private and group attitudes about bullying and their own behavior when witnessing bullying episodes at school. To this end, we conducted a set of hierarchical regression analyses in which gender was entered in Step 1, discrepancy between perceptions of private and group attitudes were entered in Step 2, and the interaction between the gender and discrepancy terms was entered in Step 3. Separate regression analyses were conducted for the three teacher-rated social behaviors: Bullying, Defending, and Bystander.

The results of these regression analyses are depicted in Table 4. As shown, participants' gender and perceived discrepancy in personal versus group-based attitudes about bullying did not explain a significant amount of the variance in teacher-rated Bullying behavior or Defending behavior. A different pattern emerged, however, for teacher-rated Bystander behavior. Although there was no significant effect of gender at Step 1,  $F(1, 89) = 0.90$   $ns$ , there was a significant effect of perceived discrepancy in attitude between self and classmates at Step 2,  $F_{\text{Change}}(1, 88) = 6.97$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $R^2_{\text{Change}} = 7.3\%$ . This effect was driven by a positive association between discrepancy score and bystander behavior ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 2.64$ ,  $p = .01$ ), such that participants with larger discrepancies between their perceptions of their own versus classmates attitudes engaged in higher levels of teacher-rated passive bystander behavior. Results of Step 3 revealed that this association was not moderated by gender.

## DISCUSSION

These results provide initial support for the premise that adolescents view their own attitudes as "out of step" with their peers in the context of school bullying; they

exhibit an overarching tendency to view themselves as more prosocial than their classmates. This perceived discrepancy points to fundamental misperception at the group level. Members of a group cannot systematically hold more prosocial attitudes than the group as a whole. If we consider teens' self-reported attitudes as reflecting the true norm, then the group is clearly misperceiving that norm when they make judgments about the attitudes held by their classmates. Indeed, teens see themselves as more disapproving of bullies, more empathic toward victims, and more supportive of attempts to protect victims than they believe their classmates to be. Ironically, their classmates appear to believe the very same thing! Thus children are underestimating the extent to which their classmates share their prosocial views. Of interest, our results indicate that this tendency toward viewing oneself as a "minority opinion holder" is particularly evident among girls.

The finding that girls report a greater discrepancy between personal and group attitudes than boys is consistent with previous research on pluralistic ignorance with college students; female participants demonstrated a greater discrepancy between self- and other-perceptions about alcohol consumption than did male participants (Hines et al., 2002; Prentice & Miller, 1993). In the context of school bullying, the gender difference may be exacerbated, in part, by differences in the manifestation of aggression among boys and girls. Although boys engage in higher levels of physical aggression than girls, girls rely more heavily on relational strategies such as exclusion and gossip (see Underwood, 2003, for review). Prior research has demonstrated that relationally aggressive strategies are often employed within the context of friendships (Grotperter & Crick, 1996) and are associated with higher levels of popularity and dominance in the peer group (Rose et al., 2004). This overlap among aggression, intimacy, and high status may leave girls particularly vulnerable to the misperception that such behaviors are an acceptable way to gain or maintain power in adolescence. Future research across different grade levels will be useful in determining whether this gender difference can be replicated, and whether it generalizes across other developmental periods.

In addition to documenting a discrepancy between perceptions of personal and group attitudes about bullying, we were also interested in examining the association between this discrepancy and adolescents' actual behavior in the context of bullying episodes. As hypothesized, passive bystander behavior (e.g., doing nothing to aid targets of peer harassment) *was* associated with a perceived discrepancy between personal and group norms. The extent to which teens perceived themselves as "more prosocial" than their classmates was positively associated with teacher-rated passivity in the face of peer victimization; the more out of step they perceived their attitudes to be, the higher their passivity. In contrast, the discrepancy between teens' perceptions of their own and others' attitudes about bullying and victimization was *not* significantly associated with their frequency of engaging in other types of behavioral responses, such as supporting the bully or defending the victim.

Why is this perceived discrepancy linked to passive bystander behavior? We speculate that when teens perceive their own attitudes to be more prosocial than the mainstream, they downplay these attitudes and behave in a neutral fashion that does not directly contradict their perceptions of the group norm. Thus teens who mistakenly view their classmates as more tolerant of bullies or less supportive of potential defenders than they actually are may attempt to conform to the illusory norm by refraining from helping behavior. In short, doing nothing may feel like a safer and more popular option than helping a victim. Ironically, we speculate that teens are relying on a largely imaginary discrepancy between personal and group norms to shape their own behavioral choices.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although our findings are consistent with the notion that a perceived disconnect between personal and group norms actively shapes teens' public behavior, the correlational nature of our data make it impossible to draw any firm causal conclusions. It is equally possible that certain behavioral characteristics lead teens to develop warped perceptions of their classmates' attitudes over time, rather than the other way around. For example, passive individuals (who are unlikely to support or protect victims of peer harassment) may come to see themselves as increasingly alienated and distant from their peers over time, leading to higher levels of perceived discrepancy between personal and group attitudes. Future research combining experimental innovations (i.e., manipulating teens' perceptions of group norms and examining the impact on their bystander behavior), and longitudinal designs (i.e., gathering data on discrepancy between personal and group norms and

bystander behavior across multiple time points) could begin to tease these possibilities apart.

In addition to the issue of causal direction, two alternative explanations for our pattern of results require some consideration. First, bivariate associations between variables indicated that although teens' personal attitudes were significantly associated with their teacher-rated social behavior, perceptions of group attitudes were not. Therefore, although our data are consistent with the premise that a *discrepancy* between personal attitudes and perceived attitudes of the larger group helps to determine bystander behavior, we cannot rule out the possibility that the association between perceived discrepancy and behavior is determined by teens' personal attitudes alone. Our data may reflect the fact that teens with prosocial attitudes are more likely to remain passive in the face of peer mistreatment (perhaps relative to their likelihood of behaving in ways that actively support the bully), regardless of the extent to which they see their own attitudes as "fitting in" or "out of step" with their classmates. Future studies documenting a positive association between bystander behavior and perceived *group* attitudes (as well as between discrepancy score and bystander behavior) would lend more definitive support to our premise that viewing the group to be significantly less prosocial than oneself acts to encourage passivity and constrain helping behavior.

Further, it is important to acknowledge that a perceived discrepancy between personal and group attitudes in the current study may reflect participants' strategic attempts to present themselves favorably, rather than reflecting an actual difference between their real attitudes and those they attribute to their classmates. The anonymous nature of the data collection should minimize social desirability concerns, because participants had little incentive to "look good" when researchers could not identify how specific individuals responded. Nevertheless, an internally driven motivation to present oneself favorably relative to peers (regardless of external validation) may have influenced participants' answers. Prior research has demonstrated that people do tend to view themselves as "holier than thou" across a variety of contexts (e.g., Epley & Dunning, 2000). One way to address this issue in future research involves the development of new methods for measuring the discrepancy between personal and group norms that downplay the impact of social desirability and direct comparative judgments, such as implicit paradigms. Another strategy involves including directly assessing social desirability so that it can be treated as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

Finally, the current study relies on a teacher rating of participants' behavioral responses when confronted with peer victimization. Ideally, this measure could be

augmented by other sources of information including behavioral observation by researchers, and peer rating strategies. Replication of the current study using multiple raters of participants' behavior would strengthen the conclusions that could be drawn.

### Implications

If future research does support a causal role for a perceived discrepancy between personal and group attitudes in the emergence and maintenance of passive bystander behavior, it could have exciting implications for school-based bully prevention programs. Most existing programs attempt to promote bystander helping behavior by changing children's private attitudes about bullies and victims or by teaching a set of behavioral skills for *how* to intervene (e.g., *Second Step*, Frey et al., 2005; *Bully Busters*, Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003; *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Perhaps another way to tackle bullying is to focus on revealing children's erroneous assumptions about the attitudes of their peers. There is growing evidence that experimental manipulation of individuals' knowledge of group norms *can* result in changed behavior (e.g., Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). In the case of school bullying, we hypothesize that providing concrete information about how mistakes in norm estimation develop (i.e., *Sometimes our private beliefs about bullies and victims are much more popular than we realize*), as well as offering accurate and specific information about the norms in real classrooms (i.e., *Nine out of ten students at your school believe that helping a victim is the right thing to do*), would give students a more clear view of shared norms among their classmates. This public "unmasking" of misperceived norms could, in turn, empower students to stand together to create a safer and more tolerant school community.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0841897. We are grateful to the students, teachers, and school administrators who participated in this study. We extend special thanks to Heather Bemis and Sheriney Frederick, who helped to orchestrate the data collection process.

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