

Original Research

Bystander Responses to Bullying: The Role of Perceived Malice and Emotions in Protective and Passive Behaviors

Alejandro Borrego-Ruiz^{1,*}, Saulo Fernández¹¹Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, National University of Distance Education (UNED), 28040 Madrid, Spain*Correspondence: a.borrego@psi.uned.es (Alejandro Borrego-Ruiz)

Academic Editor: Chung-Ying Lin

Submitted: 27 October 2025 Revised: 12 January 2026 Accepted: 27 January 2026 Published: 26 August 2026

Abstract

Background: Bystander behaviors are widely recognized as exhibiting substantial potential to either mitigate or exacerbate bullying outcomes. However, the specific emotions underlying bystander responses to bullying remain relatively underexplored. This study examines how perceived malice in bullying incidents shapes the emotional responses of bystanders and how these responses, in turn, relate to distinct behavioral patterns. In addition, the study evaluates how emotions perceived in the victim (PV) may also contribute to bystander behavior. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 366 participants. Data were collected via online self-report surveys. Two structural models were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): one examining bystanders' self-experienced (SE) emotions and the other examining emotions PV. Analyses of gender differences were also conducted for exploratory purposes. **Results:** Across both models, perceived malice was significantly associated with all emotions and consistently exerted direct and indirect influences on bystander behaviors. Regarding SE emotions, anger was positively associated with protective behavior and negatively associated with passive behavior, whereas fear showed non-significant associations in the opposite direction. Regarding emotions PV, none were significantly associated with protective behavior. Conversely, perceived humiliation and anger were positively related to passive behavior. Analyses of gender differences revealed that males exhibited stronger associations between perceived malice and both SE and perceived emotions compared to females, with these emotions showing stronger links to protective and passive behaviors, respectively. **Conclusions:** In bullying settings, SE emotional responses arising from perceived malice, as well as emotions PV, appear to influence bystander behavior, modulating the likelihood of displaying protective or passive responses depending on the emotional configuration. Gender may further modulate these associations, with males exhibiting more polarized behavioral tendencies. Future research should explore these dynamics and patterns longitudinally, across diverse cultural contexts, and incorporate additional emotions and cognitive appraisals that may influence intervention.

Keywords: bullying; bystanders; perceived malice; emotional responses; behavioral tendencies

1. Introduction

Interpersonal violence is an escalating global concern, with bullying representing one of its most visible and normalized manifestations. Bullying is characterized by sustained behaviors intentionally directed to cause harm and reinforced by power imbalances (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). Strongly ingrained in school environments and predominantly studied within these contexts, this common social phenomenon exacerbates the vulnerability of individuals undergoing critical developmental transitions, which underscores its significance as a public health issue (Ariani et al., 2025; Rivers and Noret, 2010). However, bullying is not confined to educational settings and can also manifest in workplaces (Sun et al., 2025), within families (deLara, 2022), in public spaces (Tyler and Schmitz, 2021), and in digital environments (Yen and Chamanadjian, 2025). Across these contexts, bullying typically involves three key participants: perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (Camodeca and Nava, 2022; Chen et al., 2025; Milani and Carbajal, 2023; Mulder et al., 2014). Research on bullying has primarily focused on perpetrators and victims. How-

ever, bystander behaviors are widely recognized as presenting substantial potential to either mitigate or intensify bullying outcomes (Ada Manga et al., 2023; Evans and Smokowski, 2015; Itzkovich et al., 2021; Machackova and Pfetsch, 2016; Miranda et al., 2019; Parris et al., 2020). Despite their central involvement in these dynamics, the specific emotions underlying bystander behavioral responses to bullying remain relatively underexplored.

Experimental evidence indicates that bystander judgments of fairness, emotional reactions toward the situation, and willingness to intervene are significantly influenced by the severity of the bullying (Paull et al., 2012), which can range from repeated teasing to severe abuse (Armitage, 2021). Malice can be defined as deliberate aggressive intent characterized by the intention to cause suffering, lack of compassion, and premeditation (Quiles et al., 2010). Since malicious intent is a defining feature of bullying, involving deliberate behaviors aimed at causing unfair harm and reflecting the desire of the perpetrator to hurt and make the victim suffer (Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025), the severity of bullying can be substantially deter-



mined by the level of malice imposed by the perpetrator. In this context, perceived malice or cruelty has been identified as a crucial variable that can promote intense emotional responses in victimization settings, which may, in turn, influence the behavioral patterns of those who experience them (Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025). Furthermore, research indicates that bystanders' perceptions of the emotional states of victims can impact their responses through empathetic processes (Sokol et al., 2015). Considering that, in victimization contexts, certain cognitive appraisals, such as perceptions of injustice or cruelty, can predict specific emotions leading to either confrontational or nonconfrontational behaviors (Agudo et al., 2024; Fernández et al., 2015; Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025), it is plausible that, among bystanders, emotions such as humiliation, anger, or fear, which are common emotional responses in bullying settings (Borrego-Ruiz and Fernández, 2024; Jiang et al., 2025; Swartz et al., 2019; Vidourek et al., 2016), may mediate the relationship between perceived malice and behaviors aimed at supporting the victim or remaining passive. This mediation may occur through bystanders' own emotional experience or through their perception of the victims' affective responses (Barhight et al., 2013; Gini et al., 2008; Machackova and Pfetsch, 2016; Sokol et al., 2015; Trach and Hymel, 2020). Therefore, this study investigates how distinct key emotions, whether experienced or perceived, shape the behavioral responses of bystanders during bullying incidents.

1.1 Bystander Behavior in Bullying Dynamics

As previously noted, bystander behaviors play a pivotal role in counteracting or amplifying the negative effects of bullying (Parris et al., 2020; Tsang et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2017). The five-step intervention model (Latané and Darley, 1970) provides a framework for understanding these behaviors, proposing that effective intervention involves (i) noticing the event, with bystanders being more likely to recognize it when it is vivid and the victim is identifiable, whereas distractions or competing priorities can reduce the likelihood of noticing; (ii) interpreting the event as an emergency, whereby bystanders assess whether the event requires intervention, often influenced by the reaction of others and perceived as less urgent when the situation appears less dangerous; (iii) accepting responsibility to act, with group contexts potentially diffusing this responsibility and reducing the likelihood of intervention unless personal empathy or emotional responses motivate action; (iv) determining the most appropriate intervention, with bystanders evaluating available actions based on their knowledge, resources, and perceived costs or risks involved; and (v) implementing the chosen action, with perceived self-efficacy and perceived risks playing a pivotal role in whether bystanders intervene (Jenkins and Nickerson, 2017). Within this framework, three specific psychological factors are thought to reduce the likelihood of in-

tervention by bystanders: (i) pluralistic ignorance, defined as the belief that if no one else is intervening, the situation may not constitute an emergency; (ii) diffusion of responsibility, in which the presence of multiple bystanders leads to a reduced sense of personal responsibility to act; and (iii) evaluation apprehension, which is the fear of negative judgment from others when intervening (Hortensius and de Gelder, 2018). Although the model primarily focuses on cognitive processes, emotions also play a key role, particularly in the third step, as they can influence the likelihood of intervention. For instance, emotional responses such as fear, associated with personal distress, may lead to inaction or avoidance (i.e., passive behaviors) even if the event is interpreted as an emergency. In contrast, emotional responses such as anger, potentially arising from sympathy toward the victim, may lead to actions aimed at defending or supporting the victim (i.e., protective behaviors) and motivate bystanders to intervene (Hortensius and de Gelder, 2018). Moreover, skills such as assertiveness and cooperation influence engagement with the model (Darley and Latané, 1968), which has been applied across diverse age groups and contexts (e.g., bullying, sexual harassment) to examine how bystanders make judgments and decisions at each stage (Jenkins and Nickerson, 2017).

Recent evidence suggests that prior exposure to aggression or harassment increases the likelihood of bystander intervention, as individuals who have experienced or witnessed such events may be more aware of risk and more willing to assume responsibility and act (Milani and Carbaljal, 2023). In contrast, previous research suggests that children with a history of being bullied are less likely to intervene when witnessing bullying compared with their peers (Rigby and Johnson, 2006). This pattern may reflect a tendency among these children to prioritize their own safety, due to fear of further victimization, thereby reducing the likelihood of intervention. However, this tendency may vary depending on gender. Specifically, one study reported that girls with lower levels of prior victimization were more likely to perceive bullying situations as high-risk, whereas boys with higher levels of victimization were more likely to do so. In addition, girls who reported more passive bystander behavior showed lower knowledge of how to intervene, whereas boys exhibited the opposite pattern (Jenkins and Nickerson, 2017). In this context, prior research reveals mixed findings regarding gender differences in bystander behavior, with some studies reporting that females intervene more than males (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Trach et al., 2010), others reporting that males intervene more (Nickerson and Mele-Taylor, 2014), and still others finding no significant differences (Rigby and Johnson, 2006). These inconsistencies may be due to variations in how bystander behavior is defined, the measurement tools employed, and the age or grade level of participants (Jenkins et al., 2018). For instance, one study reported that the likelihood of bystander intervening in bullying situations varied by gender

and was also influenced by age (O'Connell et al., 1999). Specifically, older boys were significantly more likely to align with the bully than younger boys or older girls. In contrast, girls, regardless of age, were more likely to support the victim than older boys, highlighting a gender and grade level interaction in bystander behaviors. Moreover, additional findings suggest that although most adolescents express a willingness to help victims, they may lack the knowledge of how to intervene, highlighting the potential influence of certain measurement approaches (e.g., video-based scenarios) on research conclusions (Tamm and Tulviste, 2015).

In situations involving bullying, several contextual and social factors, including supportive school environments, positive relationships with adults and peers, and organizational cultures that promote prosocial norms, have been reported to enhance the engagement of bystanders, while unsupportive or violent settings have been associated with passivity or inaction (Hellemans et al., 2017; Miranda et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2017). Moreover, individual attributes such as empathy, self-efficacy, social problem-solving skills, and a positive identity have been shown to influence whether bystanders adopt different behavioral response patterns, with gender and relational closeness to victims or perpetrators also shaping intervention decisions (Eijgu and Teketel, 2021; Jenkins and Nickerson, 2019; Mulder et al., 2014; Parris et al., 2020; Yang and Kim, 2017). Collectively, these findings underscore that bystander behavioral tendencies in victimization contexts are shaped by both contextual and individual factors. However, the emotional dimension of bullying dynamics, particularly its potential implications for bystander intervention, has received comparatively less attention in the existing literature.

1.2 Emotional Responses and Bystander Behavior

Emotional states contribute to behavioral patterns by enhancing the ability to predict, learn from, and reappraise environmental stimuli and situations based on prior experiences (Šimić et al., 2021). The theory of emotion utilization (Izard et al., 2008) proposes that both positive and negative emotions can lead to adaptive actions, such as ensuring safety in the case of fear or confronting a situation in the case of anger (Barhight et al., 2013). In addition, the perception and recognition of emotions may also contribute to behavioral responses through empathy processes (Olderbak and Wilhelm, 2017). Theoretical literature distinguishes between two types of empathy: cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006). Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand the emotions of others, whereas affective empathy involves the ability to experience those emotions. In this context, research has reported that affective empathy, in particular, predicts bystander intervention in bullying situations (Gini et al., 2008; Machackova and Pfetsch, 2016).

In the context of bullying victimization, bystander behavior may therefore be influenced both by the emotional responses experienced by the bystanders themselves, which are more closely associated with affective empathy, and by the emotional states they perceive in the victim, which are more closely associated with cognitive empathy (Barhight et al., 2013; Sokol et al., 2015; Trach and Hymel, 2020). Specifically, emotions such as fear and anger have been shown to significantly influence bystander behavioral responses, with anger markedly increasing the likelihood of intervention (Barhight et al., 2013; Pozzoli et al., 2017; Trach and Hymel, 2020), whereas fear may decrease the likelihood of intervention (Mulder et al., 2014). This can be explained by the fact that anger serves as an adaptive response to perceived injustices, driving individuals to confront adverse situations and encouraging engagement (Sznycer et al., 2022; Williams, 2017), whereas fear serves as an adaptive response to perceived threat, driving individuals to avoid harm and prioritize safety (Jackson and Gray, 2010; McVeigh et al., 2024; Vidourek et al., 2016). However, fear has also been reported to be associated with bystander intervention in bullying situations (Trach and Hymel, 2020), which suggests that its effect on intervention may depend on the context and on how the threat is perceived. Despite the strong influence of self-experienced (SE) anger as a predictor of protective behaviors in bystanders during bullying victimization dynamics (Barhight et al., 2013; Pozzoli et al., 2017; Trach and Hymel, 2020), perceiving this emotion in the victim has been associated with lower intentions to intervene, possibly because bystanders view the victim as more capable of handling the situation, as an active participant in the conflict, or as less distressed (Sokol et al., 2015). Consistent with these findings, prior research has shown that victims who exhibit hostility are perceived as less friendly than those who ignore or downplay the harassment (Lightner et al., 2000; Scambler et al., 1998), and that sympathy toward the victim is associated with protective behaviors among bystanders of bullying (Hortensius and de Gelder, 2018). On the other hand, victims who respond passively and display emotional distress appear to evoke greater empathy from bystanders, thereby increasing the likelihood of intervention (Sokol et al., 2015). Regarding gender differences in bystander emotional responses in bullying settings, females have been reported to be significantly more likely to experience fear, while males are more likely to experience anger (Trach and Hymel, 2020). In addition, gender differences have also been found in how bystanders rated same-sex victims. Specifically, female bystanders rated angry victims less favorably, whereas no significant effect of victim response was observed among male bystanders (Sokol et al., 2015). This is consistent with prior findings in which females viewed aggressive victims as less friendly than passive ones, while males showed no such distinction (Scambler et al., 1998). These patterns may reflect the perception

that anger and aggression are often viewed as less acceptable in females (Underwood et al., 2001).

Conceptual models of bystander responses also suggest that witnessing bullying can trigger a range of behaviors driven by both cognitive appraisals and emotional responses (Itzkovich et al., 2021). Within this framework, emotions such as humiliation, anger, and fear have been identified as closely linked to bullying victimization dynamics (Borrego-Ruiz and Fernández, 2024; Jiang et al., 2025; Swartz et al., 2019; Vidourek et al., 2016), and the way bystanders experience and process these emotions may relate to the behavioral tendencies they adopt during bullying (Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Pozzoli and Gini, 2010). As previously noted, a potential underlying mechanism is the appraisal of malicious or cruel intent inherent in the intentional and harmful nature of bullying behavior (Dobry et al., 2013), which elicits emotional responses in victims (Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025) and might also shape, by extension, the emotions experienced by bystanders. Indeed, interpreting an act and its perpetrator as malicious could shape how bystanders respond to the situation, with such appraisals intensifying perceived severity and driving stronger emotional reactions (Wheat and Goodwin, 2025). Consequently, specific emotional patterns, whether experienced empathically or perceived in others, may contribute to the behavioral tendencies displayed by bystanders, such as protective or passive responses, potentially arising from the perceived malice of the bullying incident.

1.3 The Present Study

This study investigates the specific emotions underlying bystander responses to bullying, focusing on the influence of both emotions directly experienced by bystanders and those perceived in the victim (PV). Specifically, it examines how the cognitive appraisal of malice (i.e., perceived malicious intent inherent in the bullying incident) may shape the emotional responses of bystanders (i.e., anger and fear) and how these, in turn, relate to distinct behavioral patterns (i.e., passive behavior and protective behavior). In addition, the study considers how emotions PV (i.e., anger, fear, and humiliation) may also contribute to bystander behavior by influencing how they respond to the situation. Based on this conceptual framework, we hypothesized that (i) the appraisal of malice and the emotional responses under study were all expected to be significantly associated; (ii) regarding bystanders' own emotional responses, anger was expected to be positively related to protective behavior and fear to passive behavior, as anger may energize approach-oriented action, whereas fear may be more closely linked to withdrawal or behavioral restraint; and (iii) regarding emotions PV, fear was expected to be positively related to protective behavior, whereas both anger and humiliation were expected to be positively related to passive behavior. These patterns may

reflect that inferring fear in the victim could elicit empathic concern and a willingness to help, while anger might be perceived as a negative emotional reaction or interpreted as self-defensiveness, potentially reducing the perceived need for intervention. In turn, humiliation may contribute to the devaluation of the victim, potentially eliciting social withdrawal or avoidance due to both the victim's perceived low status and the socially aversive nature of the emotion.

To test our hypotheses, we specified two models grounded in the adopted theoretical framework and collected data through self-report instruments. Participants were first asked to recall a personal experience of witnessing a bullying incident in school or other contexts, which served as the basis for measuring all the variables included in the models. The sample, drawn from a large and diverse population across Spain, provided retrospective reports of these experiences. In addition, potential gender differences in the variables of interest were assessed, with these analyses conducted purely for exploratory purposes.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 366 individuals, with a mean age of 35.11 years (standard deviation [SD] = 15.5), and 58% identified as women. The research was conducted at a large public distance-learning university in Spain, characterized by a more diverse student population than traditional institutions, including a wider age distribution and a high proportion of students who combine their studies with responsibilities such as employment and family life. Moreover, because the university operates nationwide through affiliated centers across Spain, participants were drawn from both rural and urban areas throughout the country. The sample included 57 undergraduate psychology students who participated voluntarily and received course credit as part of a practical course assignment. In addition, 309 volunteers were recruited by these students from their personal networks as part of the same assignment. After initial screening, 23 observations were excluded due to entirely or substantially incomplete responses or overly consistent answering patterns, resulting in a final sample of 366 participants. With this sample size, the study was constituted with sufficient statistical power to identify medium to large effect sizes using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), fulfilling the commonly recommended ratio of 20 participants per estimated parameter (Kline, 2015). Post hoc analyses revealed a statistical power of 0.99 for the first model and 0.95 for the second model, indicating that the sample size was adequate to detect medium-sized statistically significant effects in both models.

2.2 Procedure

Data were collected using a self-report survey, with all responses obtained at a single time point over the course of several months. The data collection period spanned from

November 2023 to May 2024. Participants completed the survey via an online link to a Qualtrics form. Participants first received detailed instructions and a brief explanation of the study, including a definition of bullying at the beginning of the survey. Bullying was described not only as a dynamic that commonly occurs in educational settings (e.g., primary and secondary schools, or higher education), but also as a phenomenon that can arise in other contexts, such as workplaces, neighborhoods, digital environments, or within the household. This conceptualization allowed for the inclusion of individuals who had not witnessed bullying in school but had observed it in other settings. The definition of bullying aligned with its foundational framework (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli et al., 2021), which characterizes it as deliberate, repeated aggression involving an imbalance of power. To minimize recall bias, participants were instructed to vividly recall a specific incident in which they had witnessed bullying as bystanders. They were then asked whether they could recall and describe such an event based on their direct experience. Subsequent measures were thus based on this recalled experience. Two separate models were constructed to analyze the data: one focusing on the emotions experienced by bystanders themselves, and another on the emotions PV that may motivate bystander intervention. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and the voluntary nature of the study was clearly stated. The research complied with established ethical standards and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university where it was conducted.

2.3 Measures

All survey items, presented in Spanish, were measured using Likert-type agree/disagree statements, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.3.1 Perceived Malice

Perceived malice was conceptualized as a cognitive appraisal reflecting the attribution of intentional harm and malevolence in the bullying incident. The construct was measured using four brief items designed to concisely capture its core dimensions. In developing these items, prior measures were consulted to inform the conceptualization of the scale (Chen et al., 2012; Felix et al., 2011). Participants were asked whether they perceived the bullying incident as “malevolent”, “cruel”, “unjust”, or “deliberately malicious”. Internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

2.3.2 Emotions Experienced by Bystanders

Emotions experienced by bystanders were measured with a single-item scale, consistent with previous research that has successfully used single-item assessments for discrete emotional states in similar contexts (Fernández et al., 2015; 2022; 2023). Although multi-item scales are often

preferred for capturing complex constructs, this approach was selected for its efficiency and its ability to capture well-defined and unambiguous emotional responses. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt “anger” or “fear” in response to the bullying incident.

2.3.3 Emotions PV

Emotions PV (i.e., those inferred or interpreted by bystanders from the observed situation) were also measured with a single-item scale, following previous research supporting single-item assessments for discrete emotional states (Fernández et al., 2015; 2022; 2023). This approach allows for clear and unambiguous capture of their responses. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the victim appeared to feel “anger”, “fear”, or “humiliation” during the bullying incident.

2.3.4 Bystander Behaviors

Bystander behaviors were measured using three-item scales for each construct, developed to capture the behavioral roles of witnesses during bullying incidents. Two distinct behavioral patterns were assessed: protective behavior (i.e., actions aimed at defending or supporting the victim) and passive behavior (i.e., inaction or avoidance in response to the bullying incident). The items were informed by prior research measuring related aspects of similar bystander roles (Álvarez-García et al., 2021; Thornberg and Jungert, 2013). Participants were asked to indicate how they responded behaviorally during the bullying incident. For protective behavior, the items were: “I tried to support the victim”, “I sought external help”, and “I took a stand against the bully or bullies”. For passive behavior, the items were: “I just observed”, “I avoided getting involved in the situation”, and “I did nothing and only witnessed what was happening”. Internal consistency was satisfactory for both protective behavior (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.76$) and passive behavior (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.82$).

2.4 Data Analysis

For both models, descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize the data and provide an overview of the main variables. This was followed by simple regression analyses to examine the extent to which perceived malice explained variance in emotions, and how these variables, in turn, explained variance in bystander behaviors. We then used SEM, implemented with the lavaan package in R software, version 4.4.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria), to test the hypothesized pattern of relationships and the corresponding indirect effects. For model estimation, the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) estimator was used. The goodness of fit for the measurement model was assessed via Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), after which the hypothesized structural model was fitted, with perceived malice as the predictor, emotions as mediators, and bystander behaviors as outcome vari-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the measured variables.

	Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Perceived malice	4.03 (1.02)							
2	SE Anger	3.80 (1.37)	0.58***						
3	SE Fear	2.80 (1.50)	0.36***	0.43***					
4	Anger PV	3.53 (1.20)	0.46***	0.41***	0.31***				
5	Fear PV	3.60 (1.34)	0.56***	0.51***	0.59***	0.44***			
6	Humiliation PV	4.00 (1.20)	0.68***	0.53***	0.36***	0.55***	0.65***		
7	Protective behavior	3.09 (1.22)	0.36***	0.43***	0.17**	0.16**	0.32***	0.25***	
8	Passive behavior	2.40 (1.18)	-0.01	-0.08	0.06	0.14**	0.03	0.12*	-0.51***

SD, standard deviation; SE, self-experienced; PV, perceived in the victim. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Data points without any symbol indicate non-significant results.

ables. Collinearity diagnostics were conducted using variance inflation factors (VIFs). Missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). For exploratory purposes, invariance analyses were conducted to compare the models across gender groups. Specifically, unconstrained multigroup models were first estimated, followed by tests of metric and structural invariance. Separate models for females and males were additionally estimated to explore potential gender differences in the relationships among the variables.

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses

In order to provide an overview of the data patterns, Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (i.e., means and SDs) for all variables included in both models (i.e., perceived malice, emotions experienced by bystanders, emotions PV, and bystander behaviors), as well as the bivariate correlations among them.

SE anger had a significantly higher mean than SE fear ($t[357] = 12.32, p < 0.001, d = 0.65$). Regarding emotions PV, there were no statistically significant differences between the means of anger and fear ($t[358] = -0.40, p = 0.726, d = -0.20$). In contrast, anger had a significantly lower mean than humiliation ($t[358] = -7.40, p < 0.001, d = -0.39$), and fear had a significantly lower mean than humiliation ($t[358] = -7.50, p < 0.001, d = -0.40$). Furthermore, protective behavior had a significantly higher mean than passive behavior ($t[350] = 6.40, p < 0.001, d = 0.34$).

3.2 The Role of Emotions Experienced by Bystanders

To provide an initial estimate of the effects among variables, we conducted simple linear regression analyses examining the effects of perceived malice on SE emotions and bystander behaviors, as well as the effects of SE emotions on bystander behaviors. Table 2 presents the regression coefficients and R-square values for each analysis.

3.2.1 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The CFA demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 119.749, df = 46, p < 0.001$; Comparative Fit Index

(CFI) = 0.97; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.95; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07; and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.04. Robust standard errors were computed for all parameter estimates as part of the MLR estimation procedure. All factor loadings were statistically significant. Although anger and fear were modeled as latent variables, each construct was represented by a single indicator due to the nature of the measurement instruments used. The factor loadings for the items of each construct are presented below. Perceived malice: item 1 ($b = 0.93, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.89, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), item 3 ($b = 0.84, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), and item 4 ($b = 0.61, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$). Anger: single indicator ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001$). Fear: single indicator ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$). Protective behavior: item 1 ($b = 0.91, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.54, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), and item 3 ($b = 0.75, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$). Passive behavior: item 1 ($b = 0.90, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.59, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), and item 3 ($b = 0.86, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$). Collinearity diagnostics were conducted for both mediators, anger and fear. For anger, the VIFs for each item of perceived malice were as follows: item 1 (4.22), item 2 (3.77), item 3 (2.85), and item 4 (1.53). For fear, the VIFs for each item of perceived malice were as follows: item 1 (4.51), item 2 (4.12), item 3 (2.93), and item 4 (1.56). Therefore, the results did not indicate issues with multicollinearity. Missing data rates for each item are presented below. Perceived malice: item 1 (1.37%), item 2 (1.09%), item 3 (1.09%), and item 4 (1.91%). Anger: single indicator (1.64%). Fear: single indicator (1.64%). Protective behavior: item 1 (3.55%), item 2 (4.37%), and item 3 (4.64%). Passive behavior: item 1 (4.64%), item 2 (4.37%), and item 3 (4.92%). To test our hypotheses, we fitted a SEM that included all potential pathways between variables. This approach allowed us to estimate both direct and indirect effects. To ensure the robustness of our findings, sensitivity analyses were performed by including age as a control variable. Model fit indices showed no significant changes, and the relationships among key variables remained stable, with only minor variations observed in a limited number of coefficients. Fig. 1

Table 2. Linear regression analyses of the effects among variables.

	Anger	Fear	Protective behavior	Passive behavior
Perceived malice	0.79 ($p < 0.001$)	0.53 ($p < 0.001$)	0.23 ($p < 0.01$)	0.03 ($p = 0.734$)
Anger			0.31 ($p < 0.001$)	-0.12 ($p < 0.050$)
Fear			-0.04 ($p = 0.325$)	0.09 ($p < 0.100$)
R square	0.34 ($p < 0.001$)	0.13 ($p < 0.001$)	0.21 ($p < 0.001$)	0.02 ($p = 0.117$)

The coefficients are not standardized.

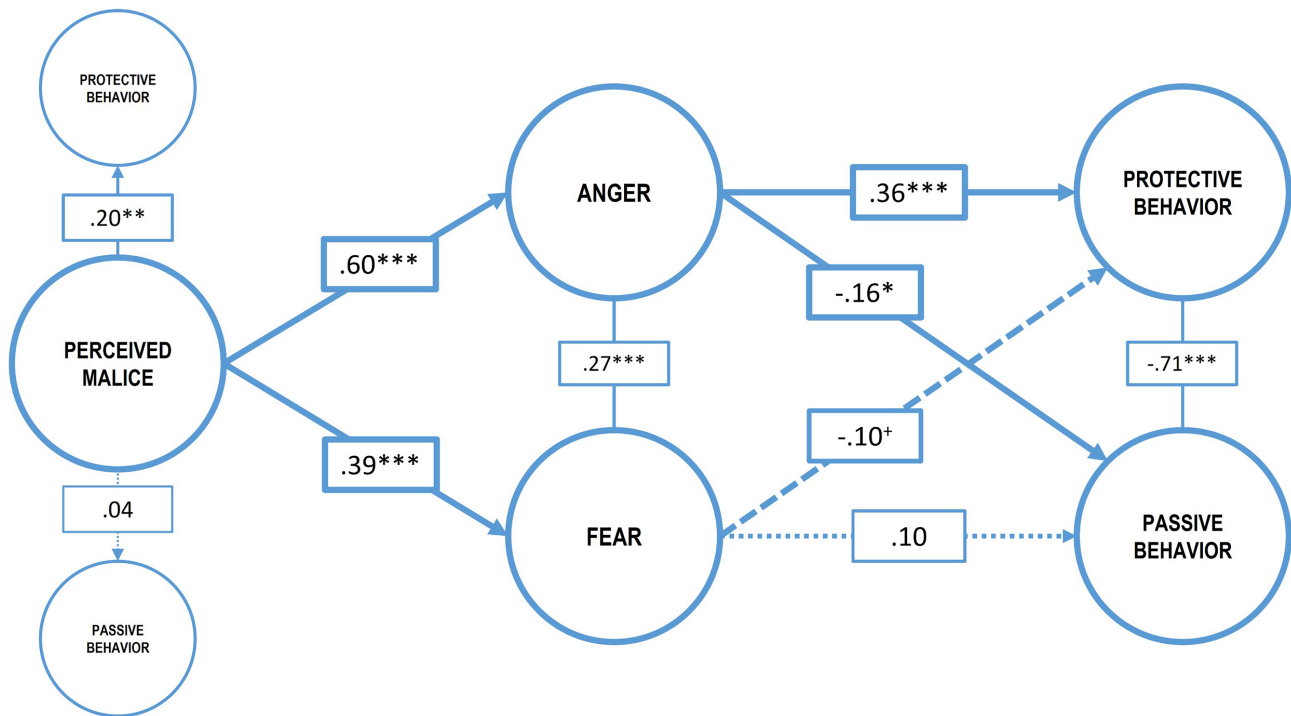


Fig. 1. Model of the effects of perceived malice on bystander behaviors via the SE emotions. For clarity, the direct paths from perceived malice to bystander behaviors are displayed above and below the circle representing the corresponding construct. Coefficients are standardized: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.10$. Solid lines: significant effects. Dashed lines: marginal trends. Dotted lines: non-significant effects. SE, self-experienced.

presents the tested SEM, which focuses on emotions experienced by bystanders in a bullying incident.

The relationships between perceived malice, emotions, and bystander behaviors revealed several significant pathways. Consistent with our hypothesis, perceived malice was significantly positively associated with both anger ($b = 0.60$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$) and fear ($b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). Anger was significantly positively related to protective behavior ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly negatively related to passive behavior ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). Although the relationship between fear and passive behavior did not reach statistical significance ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.14$), it was positive, as expected. In contrast, the relationship between fear and protective behavior showed a marginal trend ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.10$), with a negative coefficient approaching statistical significance. Perceived malice showed a significant positive direct effect on protective behavior ($b =$

0.20 , $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), while its direct effect on passive behavior was not significant ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.59$). Regarding indirect effects, perceived malice was significantly positively associated with protective behavior via anger ($b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.13, 0.30], $p < 0.001$), and significantly negatively associated with passive behavior via anger ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.01], $p < 0.05$). The indirect pathways via fear on protective behavior ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.01], $p = 0.11$) and passive behavior ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.09], $p = 0.15$) did not reach statistical significance, but both were consistent with the hypothesized relationships.

3.2.2 Exploratory Analyses of Gender Differences

Comparing the unconstrained multigroup model with the metric invariance model revealed no significant difference in model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(7) = 9.41$, $p = 0.23$), indicating

Table 3. Linear regression analyses of the effects among variables.

	Anger	Fear	Humiliation	Protective behavior	Passive behavior
Perceived malice	0.53 ($p < 0.001$)	0.74 ($p < 0.001$)	0.78 ($p < 0.001$)	0.41 ($p < 0.001$)	-0.23 ($p < 0.050$)
Anger				-0.04 ($p = 0.489$)	0.15 ($p < 0.050$)
Fear				0.20 ($p < 0.001$)	-0.06 ($p = 0.387$)
Humiliation				-0.11 ($p = 0.192$)	0.22 ($p < 0.050$)
R-square	0.21 ($p < 0.001$)	0.32 ($p < 0.001$)	0.47 ($p < 0.001$)	0.17 ($p < 0.001$)	0.05 ($p < 0.010$)

The coefficients are not standardized.

that factor loadings were invariant across genders. Separate CFAs for each gender showed similar and acceptable fit for both models (females/males: CFI = 0.96/0.97; TLI = 0.95/0.95; RMSEA = 0.07/0.06; SRMR = 0.05/0.05). The changes in CFI ($\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.005$) and RMSEA ($\Delta\text{RMSEA} = 0.000$) were both within acceptable ranges. Structural invariance analysis indicated a marginal deterioration in fit ($\Delta\chi^2(14) = 22.73, p < 0.10$), suggesting potential variations in structural relationships between genders. The analyses included 211 females and 152 males. Three participants who identified as “other” regarding gender were not included in these analyses.

Several noteworthy differences in structural paths were observed between genders. The path linking perceived malice to anger was stronger for males ($b = 0.69, SE = 0.09, p < 0.001$) than for females ($b = 0.53, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001$), and the path linking perceived malice to fear was also stronger for males ($b = 0.46, SE = 0.10, p < 0.001$) than for females ($b = 0.35, SE = 0.11, p < 0.001$). Regarding the paths linking emotions to bystander behaviors, males exhibited a stronger association between anger and protective behavior ($b = 0.51, SE = 0.11, p < 0.001$) compared with females ($b = 0.26, SE = 0.08, p < 0.01$). The paths linking anger to passive behavior and fear to both protective and passive behaviors were not significant for males. For females, the paths linking anger to passive behavior and fear to protective behavior were also non-significant. Conversely, they showed a significant positive association in the path linking fear to passive behavior ($b = 0.19, SE = 0.06, p < 0.05$).

3.3 The Role of Emotions PV

First, simple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the effects of perceived malice on perceived emotions and bystander behaviors, as well as the effects of perceived emotions on bystander behaviors. Table 3 presents the regression coefficients and R-square values for each analysis.

3.3.1 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The CFA demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 131.359, df = 53, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.06; and SRMR = 0.04. Robust standard errors were computed for all parameter estimates as part of the MLR estimation procedure. All factor loadings were

statistically significant. Although anger, fear, and humiliation were modeled as latent variables, each was represented by a single indicator due to the nature of the measurement instruments used. The factor loadings for the items of each construct are presented below. Perceived malice: item 1 ($b = 0.93, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.90, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), item 3 ($b = 0.84, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001$), and item 4 ($b = 0.61, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$). Anger: single indicator ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001$). Fear: single indicator ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001$). Humiliation: single indicator ($b = 1.00, SE = 0.03, p < 0.001$). Protective behavior: item 1 ($b = 0.91, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.54, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), and item 3 ($b = 0.75, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$). Passive behavior: item 1 ($b = 0.90, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$), item 2 ($b = 0.59, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001$), and item 3 ($b = 0.86, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001$). Collinearity diagnostics were conducted for all three mediators: anger, fear, and humiliation. For anger, the VIFs for each item of perceived malice were as follows: item 1 (4.41), item 2 (3.88), item 3 (2.88), and item 4 (1.56). For fear, the VIFs for each item of perceived malice were as follows: item 1 (4.35), item 2 (3.83), item 3 (2.89), and item 4 (1.56). For humiliation, the VIFs for each item of perceived malice were as follows: item 1 (4.39), item 2 (3.83), item 3 (2.90), and item 4 (1.56). Therefore, the results did not indicate issues with multicollinearity. The missing data rates for items of the constructs perceived malice, protective behavior, and passive behavior are presented in section 3.2.1. The missing data rates for emotions PV are detailed below. Anger: single indicator (1.37%). Fear: single indicator (1.37%). Humiliation: single indicator (1.37%). To test our hypotheses, we fitted a SEM that accounts for all potential pathways among variables, allowing for the estimation of both direct and indirect effects. To assess the robustness of our findings, sensitivity analyses were conducted by including age as a control variable. Model fit indices showed no significant changes, and the relationships between key variables remained stable, with only minor variations observed in a limited number of coefficients. Fig. 2 presents the tested SEM model, which focuses on bystanders' perceptions of the emotions of the victims during a bullying incident.

In this model, the relationships among perceived malice, emotions, and bystander behaviors also revealed several significant pathways, although they differed from those in the other model in key aspects. Consistent with our hy-

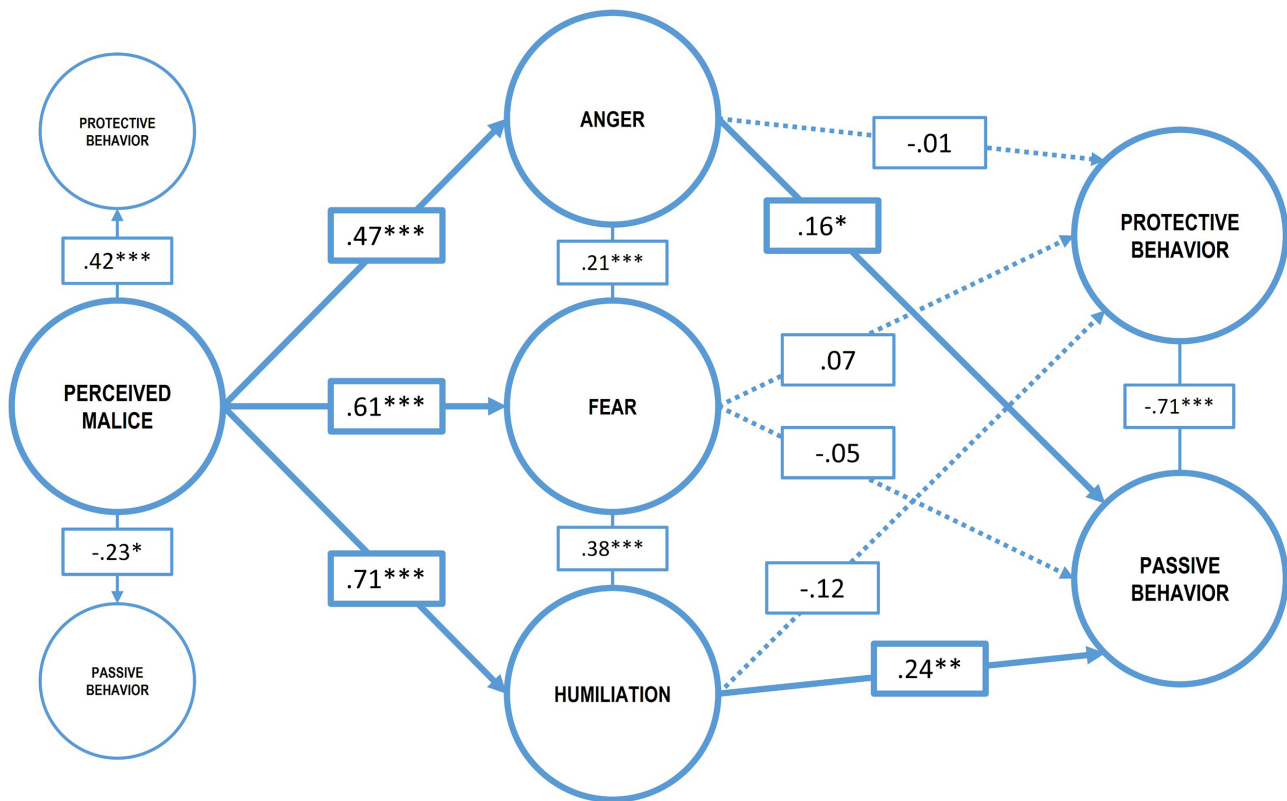


Fig. 2. Model of the effects of perceived malice on bystander behaviors via emotions PV. For clarity, the direct paths from perceived malice to bystander behaviors are displayed above and below the circle of the corresponding construct. Coefficients are standardized: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Solid lines: significant effects. Dotted lines: non-significant effects.

pothesis, perceived malice was significantly positively associated with anger ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), fear ($b = 0.61$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$), and humiliation ($b = 0.71$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding protective behavior, none of the emotions (i.e., anger, fear, and humiliation) showed significant associations. Regarding passive behavior, anger was significantly positively related ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$), humiliation was significantly positively related ($b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$), and fear exhibited a non-significant association. However, the effect of humiliation on passive behavior was not significantly stronger than that of anger ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.08$, $p = 0.77$). Perceived malice showed a significant positive direct effect on protective behavior ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant negative direct effect on passive behavior ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$). Regarding indirect effects, perceived malice was significantly positively associated with passive behavior via anger ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.14], $p < 0.05$) and significantly positively associated with passive behavior via humiliation ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.30], $p < 0.05$).

3.3.2 Exploratory Analyses of Gender Differences

Comparing the unconstrained multigroup model with the metric invariance model revealed no significant decre-

ment in model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(7) = 8.81$, $p = 0.27$), indicating that factor loadings were invariant across genders. Separate CFAs for each gender showed similar and acceptable fit for both models (females/males: CFI = 0.96/0.97; TLI = 0.95/0.95; RMSEA = 0.07/0.06; SRMR = 0.05/0.05). Variations in CFI ($\Delta CFI = 0.004$) and RMSEA ($\Delta RMSEA = 0.001$) were both within acceptable ranges. Comparison with the structural invariance model showed a marginal deterioration in model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(14) = 21.98$, $p < 0.10$), suggesting potential differences in structural relationships across genders. Analyses included 211 females and 152 males. Three participants who identified as “other” regarding their gender were not included in these analyses.

In this model, several notable differences in the structural paths were also observed between genders. The path linking perceived malice to anger was stronger for males ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$) compared with females ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). The path linking perceived malice to fear was also stronger for males ($b = 0.65$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$) than for females ($b = 0.56$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the path linking perceived malice to humiliation was stronger for males ($b = 0.74$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$) than for females ($b = 0.65$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding the associations between emotions and bystander behaviors, a significant negative association was observed only among

males, specifically between humiliation and protective behavior ($b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, only males exhibited a significant positive association between anger and passive behavior ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between humiliation and passive behavior ($b = 0.44$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the emotional mechanisms underlying bystander responses to bullying, focusing on both the emotions directly experienced by witnesses and those PV, as well as the role of cognitive appraisals of malice in shaping these responses. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the relationships among these variables in a comparable context, highlighting the foundational contribution of the present research. The findings generally supported the hypothesized associations, indicating that perceived malice consistently elicited strong emotional responses among bystanders. These associations are consistent with prior research showing that appraisals of cruelty can trigger specific affective responses, including anger and humiliation (Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025).

In the model assessing emotions experienced by bystanders, perceived malice exerted a direct positive effect on protective behavior, with indirect effects via anger further highlighting its potential role in motivating intervention, whereas its direct effect on passive behavior was not significant. Indeed, malice is a construct closely related to injustice and immorality (Gonzalez-Puerto and Fernández, 2025; Quiles et al., 2010), both of which can also elicit strong social reactions. These perceptions violate established social norms, potentially triggering emotional responses that are difficult to disregard. As a result, perceived malice may serve as a powerful stimulus, driving individuals to act in ways that aim to report or stop bullying behaviors, as these are viewed as deviations from socially accepted patterns of conduct. Anger was associated with increased protective behavior and decreased passive behavior, whereas fear showed non-significant associations in the opposite direction. These patterns align with prior evidence indicating that children who exhibit stronger emotional reactions to witnessed bullying are more likely to intervene, suggesting that heightened negative emotional arousal can promote protective actions (Barhight et al., 2013). In addition, recent research further supports that anger constitutes a particularly powerful predictor of bystander protective behavior, with bystanders being more than five times as likely to attempt to stop the bullying or comfort the victim if they experienced anger (Trach and Hymel, 2020). Therefore, anger appears to serve as an adaptive response to perceived injustices, signaling the need to confront adverse situations and facilitating assertive engagement (Sznycer et al., 2022; Williams, 2017). In contrast, the observed trend for fear is consistent with research showing that this emo-

tion often promotes withdrawal or avoidance when facing potential threats, reflecting an adaptive defensive mechanism (Labrenz et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the lack of significant effects for fear in this model may suggest that it is a complex emotion, which is associated with a range of behavioral reactions, such as aggression (Sattler et al., 2019), rather than being uniquely linked to passivity or withdrawal. Furthermore, its manifestation may be influenced by situational factors, individual differences, or the presence of other emotions.

In the model assessing emotions PV, none of the emotions (i.e., anger, fear, or humiliation) showed significant direct associations with protective behavior. Conversely, anger and humiliation were both positively associated with passive behavior. These results are consistent with prior evidence indicating that the perception of anger in victims of bullying elicits stronger negative reactions from bystanders, which may discourage protective intervention and contribute to passive responses (Sokol et al., 2015). Indeed, this could be explained by the fact that anger is often socially portrayed negatively due to its associations with antisocial tendencies (e.g., aggression and delinquency), as well as maladaptive psychological states (Fernandez and Johnson, 2016; Grünebaum et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2020; Ornstein et al., 1985). In addition, it is also plausible that bystanders interpret anger as a self-defensive signal (Zhang et al., 2024), potentially lowering their perceived need to intervene, or that it triggers avoidant responses, such as maintaining greater interpersonal distance (Lebert et al., 2024; Meisels and Dosey, 1971). In turn, the socially aversive nature of humiliation and its association with a threatened self-image may further promote passive responses among bystanders, as the social devaluation of the victim can elicit rejection and reduce the willingness of observers to intervene in a context characterized by public exposure (Borrego-Ruiz and Fernández, 2024; Fernández et al., 2015). Interestingly, experimental research indicates that the presence of observers during hostile or unfair incidents can amplify the sense of devaluation of the victim, reinforcing inaction among bystanders (Fernández et al., 2023). Similarly to the other model, fear did not show significant associations with bystander behavior. This may further reflect the complexity and variability of fear as an emotional response. Moreover, fear may be more difficult to attribute to the victim than other emotions, such as anger or humiliation, potentially limiting its impact on bystander behavioral tendencies.

With respect to the exploratory analyses by gender, males exhibited stronger associations between perceived malice and all SE emotional responses, and anger more strongly predicted protective behavior compared with females. In the model assessing emotions PV, males also displayed stronger associations between perceived malice and all victim-related emotions, and both anger and humiliation were more strongly related to passive behavior. These patterns suggest that gender may moderate the influence

of emotional responses on bystander behavior, with males showing a tendency toward more polarized responses, either intervention or withdrawal, whereas females may exhibit more context-dependent behavioral tendencies. One potential explanation for these gender differences may lie in societal expectations related to gender roles, with males potentially experiencing greater pressure to display assertive, protective, or even aggressive behaviors, whereas females may prioritize maintaining balanced social interactions, leading to more context-sensitive responses. This aligns with the cultural expectation that women should be caring and understanding, which may conflict with ideals of autonomy more strongly associated with masculine traits such as confidence and assertiveness (Proudfoot and Kay, 2023). In fact, males may experience social pressure to conform to traditionally masculine norms, and failure to do so may lead to negative psychological consequences. These expectations may contribute to more polarized responses to bullying situations, in order to affirm their masculine identity and avoid the psychological costs associated with not meeting societal standards of masculinity (Cole et al., 2019). Another potential explanation for these gender differences, which is closely related to the previous one, may be rooted in the distinct ways males and females are typically socialized to process and express emotions. Males may be more commonly socialized to respond more strongly to external threats or injustices with direct action, which could help explain their more polarized responses in situations involving perceived malice. In contrast, females may be more commonly socialized to adopt more relational approaches, in which consideration of social dynamics more strongly influences their behavior. Furthermore, another important factor that may help explain these gender differences relates to environmental influences, such as the types of activities individuals are exposed to during critical development periods. For instance, young males are more likely to engage in video games compared with young females (Leonhardt and Overå, 2021). In video games, players are often exposed to simulated situations of conflict, tension, and violence. By actively engaging in virtual environments and adopting roles that require action, these experiences may influence real-life behavior, potentially shaping their responses to bullying situations by providing models for how to behave in such scenarios (Borrego-Ruiz and Borrego, 2025).

This study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, its cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, allowing only the identification of associations among variables. Second, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases related to question wording, recall, and respondent characteristics. Third, some participants may not have directly witnessed bullying or may have misinterpreted reported situations, potentially leading to inaccuracies in identifying true bullying incidents. Fourth, variability across social contexts, including school, family, digital, and community environ-

ments, may have influenced participant responses. In this respect, the lack of a clearly defined context for bullying and bystander behaviors may have led to variability in participants' responses, potentially affecting the interpretation of the results. Fifth, although the items were carefully translated into Spanish by the authors and adapted for the study context, no formal procedures were conducted to ensure full equivalence in meaning between the Spanish and the original English scales, which may have affected the accuracy and consistency of the constructs measured. Sixth, although the items used to measure the constructs were developed by consulting previous scales, they were only partially based on the original items and the overall conceptual structure differs, which may limit the robustness of the measures employed and affect their validity. Seventh, the use of single-item emotional constructs as latent variables could represent an additional limitation, as it may reduce the reliability and stability of the measures due to an increased susceptibility to measurement error. Finally, comparisons between gender-based models are limited, as structural invariance was only marginally supported.

5. Conclusions

In a bullying context, SE emotional responses arising from perceived malice, as well as emotions PV, appear to influence bystander behavior, modulating the likelihood of displaying protective or passive responses depending on the emotional configuration. Anger may act as an affective signal that promotes protective engagement when experienced by bystanders, whereas fear might be associated with a greater propensity for withdrawal, and humiliation appears to inhibit intervention when PV. Gender may further modulate these associations, with males exhibiting more polarized behavioral tendencies than females. Overall, these findings underscore the role of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping bystander behavior, highlighting the potential for future research to explore these dynamics and patterns longitudinally, across diverse cultural contexts, and incorporating additional emotions and cognitive appraisals that may influence proactive intervention in bullying incidents.

Availability of Data and Materials

The authors had full control of all the primary data. The datasets used and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, ABR and SF; Methodology, ABR and SF; Investigation, ABR and SF; Writing—Original Draft, ABR; Writing—Review and Editing, ABR and SF; Supervision, SF. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. Both authors have participated sufficiently in the work and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All the procedures of this study were carried out in accordance with the ethical standards and guidelines of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and later amendments. The protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UNED (approval number: 01-SISH-PSI-2024). All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study.

Acknowledgment

Not applicable.

Funding

This research and the preparation of this article were supported by the Research Fund Grant PID2022-138915NB-I00 from the Spanish State Research Agency, Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities. The research is part of the project “The study of humiliation in its context: social rejection, intergroup conflict, sexual harassment, and bullying”. The first author is a beneficiary of the aid for the formation of PhD associated with “Knowledge Generation Projects” [PRE2022-001066], financed by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the FSE+.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Ada Manga JP, Desrumaux P, N'dong Nguema W. Workplace Bullying Seen from the Perspective of Bystanders: Effects on Engagement and Burnout, Mediating Role of Positive and Negative Affects. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2023; 20: 6821. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20196821>
- Agudo R, Gaviria E, Fernández S. The humiliation of the abused woman: the internalization of self-devaluation as a key factor in victim inaction. *International Journal of Social Psychology: Revista De Psicología Social*. 2024; 39: 324–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02134748241249889>
- Álvarez-García D, Thornberg R, Suárez-García Z. Validation of a Scale for Assessing Bystander Responses in Bullying. *Psicothema*. 2021; 33: 623–630. <https://doi.org/10.7334/psicothema2021.140>
- Ariani TA, Putri AR, Firdausi FA, Aini N. Global prevalence and psychological impact of bullying among children and adolescents: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 2025; 385: 119446. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2025.119446>
- Armitage R. Bullying in children: impact on child health. *BMJ Paediatrics Open*. 2021; 5: e000939. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2020-000939>
- Barhight LR, Hubbard JA, Hyde CT. Children's physiological and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying predict bystander intervention. *Child Development*. 2013; 84: 375–390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01839.x>
- Borrego-Ruiz A, Borrego JJ. Adolescent Aggression: A Narrative Review on the Potential Impact of Violent Video Games. *Psychology International*. 2025; 7: 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psychoint7010012>
- Borrego-Ruiz A, Fernández S. Humiliation and its relationship with bullying victimization: A narrative review. *Psychology, Society & Education*. 2024; 16: 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.21071/pse.v16i2.17067>
- Camodeca M, Nava E. The Long-Term Effects of Bullying, Victimization, and Bystander Behavior on Emotion Regulation and Its Physiological Correlates. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2022; 37: NP2056–NP2075. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520934438>
- Chen LM, Liu KS, Cheng YY. Validation of the perceived school bullying severity scale. *Educational Psychology*. 2012; 32: 169–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2011.633495>
- Chen Q, Lin W, Wu Q, Chan KL. The Effectiveness of Interventions on Bullying and Cyberbullying Bystander: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*. 2025; 26: 938–954. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241297362>
- Cole BP, Baglieri M, Ploharz S, Brennan M, Ternes M, Patterson T, et al. What's Right With Men? Gender Role Socialization and Men's Positive Functioning. *American Journal of Men's Health*. 2019; 13: 1557988318806074. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988318806074>
- Darley JM, Latané B. Bystander intervention in emergencies: diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1968; 8: 377–383. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0025589>
- deLara EW. Family Bullying in Childhood: Consequences for Young Adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2022; 37: NP2206–NP2226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520934450>
- Dobry Y, Braquehais MD, Sher L. Bullying, psychiatric pathology and suicidal behavior. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. 2013; 25: 295–299. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijamh-2013-0065>
- Eijigu TD, Teketel SZ. Bullying in schools: prevalence, bystanders' reaction and associations with sex and relationships. *BMC Psychology*. 2021; 9: 183. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00685-5>
- Evans CBR, Smokowski PR. Prosocial Bystander Behavior in Bullying Dynamics: Assessing the Impact of Social Capital. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 2015; 44: 2289–2307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0338-5>
- Felix ED, Sharkey JD, Green JG, Furlong MJ, Tanigawa D. Getting precise and pragmatic about the assessment of bullying: the development of the California Bullying Victimization Scale. *Aggressive Behavior*. 2011; 37: 234–247. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20389>
- Fernandez E, Johnson SL. Anger in psychological disorders: Prevalence, presentation, etiology and prognostic implications. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2016; 46: 124–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.04.012>
- Fernández S, Gaviria E, Halperin E, Agudo R, González-Puerto

- JA, Chas-Villar A, et al. The protective effect of agency on victims of humiliation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 2022; 102: 104375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104375>
- Fernández S, Saguy T, Gaviria E, Agudo R, Halperin E. The Role of Witnesses in Humiliation: Why Does the Presence of an Audience Facilitate Humiliation Among Victims of Devaluation? *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. 2023; 49: 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211053078>
- Fernández S, Saguy T, Halperin E. The Paradox of Humiliation: The Acceptance of an Unjust Devaluation of the Self. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. 2015; 41: 976–988. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215586195>
- Gini G, Albiero P, Benelli B, Altoè G. Determinants of adolescents' active defending and passive bystanding behavior in bullying. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2008; 31: 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.05.002>
- Gonzalez-Puerto JA, Fernández S. The opposite roles of injustice and cruelty in the internalization of a devaluation: The humiliation paradox revisited. *The British Journal of Social Psychology*. 2025; 64: e12823. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12823>
- Grünebaum A, McLeod-Sordjan R, Pollet S, Moreno J, Bornstein E, Lewis D, et al. Anger: an underappreciated destructive force in healthcare. *Journal of Perinatal Medicine*. 2023; 51: 850–860. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jpm-2023-0099>
- Hellemans C, Dal Cason D, Casini A. Bystander Helping Behavior in Response to Workplace Bullying. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*. 2017; 76: 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1421-0185/a000200>
- Hortensius R, de Gelder B. From Empathy to Apathy: The Bystander Effect Revisited. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2018; 27: 249–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417749653>
- Itzkovich Y, Barhon E, Lev-Wiesel R. Health and Risk Behaviors of Bystanders: An Integrative Theoretical Model of Bystanders' Reactions to Mistreatment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021; 18: 5552. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115552>
- Izard C, Stark K, Trentacosta C, Schultz D. Beyond Emotion Regulation: Emotion Utilization and Adaptive Functioning. *Child Development Perspectives*. 2008; 2: 156–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2008.00058.x>
- Jackson J, Gray E. Functional Fear and Public Insecurities About Crime. *British Journal of Criminology*. 2010; 50: 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azp059>
- Jenkins LN, Fredrick SS, Nickerson A. The assessment of bystander intervention in bullying: Examining measurement invariance across gender. *Journal of School Psychology*. 2018; 69: 73–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2018.05.008>
- Jenkins LN, Nickerson AB. Bullying participant roles and gender as predictors of bystander intervention. *Aggressive Behavior*. 2017; 43: 281–290. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21688>
- Jenkins LN, Nickerson AB. Bystander Intervention in Bullying: Role of Social Skills and Gender. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. 2019; 39: 141–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431617735652>
- Jiang H, Jin Y, Yang Q. Traditional Bullying Victimization and Cyberbullying Perpetration: the Role of Anger Rumination and Self-Control. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*. 2025; 18: 877–886. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S507510>
- Jolliffe D, Farrington DP. Development and validation of the Basic Empathy Scale. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2006; 29: 589–611. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.08.010>
- Kline RB. Principles and practice of structural equation modeling. 4th edn. Guilford Press: New York. 2015.
- Labrenz F, Woud ML, Elsenbruch S, Icenhour A. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly-Chances, Challenges, and Clinical Implications of Avoidance Research in Psychosomatic Medicine. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. 2022; 13: 841734. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.841734>
- Latané B, Darley J. The unresponsive bystander: why doesn't he help? Appleton-Century Crofts: New York. 1970.
- Lebert A, Vergilino-Perez D, Chaby L. Keeping distance or getting closer: How others' emotions shape approach-avoidance postural behaviors and preferred interpersonal distance. *PloS One*. 2024; 19: e0298069. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298069>
- Lee C, Patchin JW, Hinduja S, Dischinger A. Bullying and Delinquency: The Impact of Anger and Frustration. *Violence and Victims*. 2020; 35: 503–523. <https://doi.org/10.1891/VV-D-19-00076>
- Leonhardt M, Overå S. Are There Differences in Video Gaming and Use of Social Media among Boys and Girls?-A Mixed Methods Approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021; 18: 6085. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18116085>
- Lightner RM, Bollmer JM, Harris MJ, Milich R, Scambler DJ. What Do You Say to Teasers? Parent and Child Evaluations of Responses to Teasing. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 2000; 21: 403–427. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0193-3973\(00\)00047-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0193-3973(00)00047-2)
- Machackova H, Pfetsch J. Bystanders' responses to offline bullying and cyberbullying: The role of empathy and normative beliefs about aggression. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. 2016; 57: 169–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12277>
- McVeigh K, Kleckner IR, Quigley KS, Satpute AB. Fear-related psychophysiological patterns are situation and individual dependent: A Bayesian model comparison approach. *Emotion*. 2024; 24: 506–521. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001265>
- Meisels M, Dosey MA. Personal space, anger-arousal, and psychological defense. *Journal of Personality*. 1971; 39: 333–344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1971.tb00046.x>
- Menesini E, Salmivalli C. Bullying in schools: the state of knowledge and effective interventions. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*. 2017; 22: 240–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2017.1279740>
- Milani R, Carbajal M. Experiences of Street Harassment and

- the Active Engagement of Bystanders: Insights From a Swiss Sample of Respondents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2023; 38: 10640–10663. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231175912>
- Miranda R, Oriol X, Amutio A. Risk and protective factors at school: Reducing bullies and promoting positive bystanders' behaviors in adolescence. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. 2019; 60: 106–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12513>
- Mulder R, Pouwelse M, Lodewijkx H, Bolman C. Workplace mobbing and bystanders' helping behaviour towards victims: the role of gender, perceived responsibility and anticipated stigma by association. *International Journal of Psychology*. 2014; 49: 304–312. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12018>
- Nickerson AB, Mele-Taylor D. Empathetic responsiveness, group norms, and prosocial affiliations in bullying roles. *School Psychology Quarterly*. 2014; 29: 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000052>
- O'Connell P, Pepler D, Craig W. Peer involvement in bullying: insights and challenges for intervention. *Journal of Adolescence*. 1999; 22: 437–452. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1999.0238>
- Olderbak S, Wilhelm O. Emotion perception and empathy: An individual differences test of relations. *Emotion*. 2017; 17: 1092–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000308>
- Olweus D. *Bullying at school: what we know and what we can do*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, United Kingdom. 1993.
- Ornstein PH, Weissner CE, Balleweg BJ. Anger and violent behavior. In Hersen M, Bellack AS (eds.) *Handbook of Clinical Behavior Therapy with Adults* (pp. 603–629). Springer: Boston, MA. 1985.
- Parris L, Jungert T, Thornberg R, Varjas K, Meyers J, Grunewald S, et al. Bullying bystander behaviors: The role of coping effectiveness and the moderating effect of gender. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. 2020; 61: 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12564>
- Paull M, Omari M, Standen P. When is a bystander not a bystander? A typology of the roles of bystanders in workplace bullying. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*. 2012; 50: 351–366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-7941.2012.00027.x>
- Pöyhönen V, Juvonen J, Salmivalli C. What Does It Take to Stand Up for the Victim of Bullying?: The Interplay Between Personal and Social Factors. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*. 2010; 56: 143–163. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mpq.0.0046>
- Pozzoli T, Gini G, Thornberg R. Getting angry matters: Going beyond perspective taking and empathic concern to understand bystanders' behavior in bullying. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2017; 61: 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.09.011>
- Pozzoli T, Gini G. Active defending and passive bystanding behavior in bullying: the role of personal characteristics and perceived peer pressure. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. 2010; 38: 815–827. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-010-9399-9>
- Proudfoot D, Kay AC. Communal expectations conflict with autonomy motives: The western drive for autonomy shapes women's negative responses to positive gender stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2023; 124: 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000311>
- Quiles MN, Morera MD, Correa AD, Leyens JP. What do people mean when speaking of evilness? *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*. 2010; 13: 788–797. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1138741600002444>
- Rigby K, Johnson B. Expressed Readiness of Australian Schoolchildren to Act as Bystanders in Support of Children who are Being Bullied. *Educational Psychology*. 2006; 26: 425–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410500342047>
- Rivers I, Noret N. Participant roles in bullying behavior and their association with thoughts of ending one's life. *Crisis*. 2010; 31: 143–148. <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000020>
- Salmivalli C, Lagerspetz K, Björkqvist K, Österman K, Kaukianen A. Bullying as a group process: Participant roles and their relations to social status within the group. *Aggressive Behavior*. 1996; 22: 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1098-2337\(1996\)22:1<1::aid-ab1>3.0.co;2-t](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1098-2337(1996)22:1<1::aid-ab1>3.0.co;2-t)
- Salmivalli C, Laninga-Wijnen L, Malamut ST, Garandeau CF. Bullying Prevention in Adolescence: Solutions and New Challenges from the Past Decade. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 2021; 31: 1023–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12688>
- Sattler LJ, Thomas KA, Cadet TL. Reactive Protection? Fear, Victimization, and Fighting Among U.S. High School Students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2019; 34: 3666–3690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516672054>
- Scambler DJ, Harris MJ, Milich R. Sticks and Stones: Evaluations of Responses to Childhood Teasing. *Social Development*. 1998; 7: 234–249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00064>
- Šimić G, Tkalčić M, Vukić V, Mule D, Španić E, Šagud M, et al. Understanding Emotions: Origins and Roles of the Amygdala. *Biomolecules*. 2021; 11: 823. <https://doi.org/10.3390/biom11060823>
- Sokol N, Bussey K, Rapee RM. The effect of victims' responses to overt bullying on same-sex peer bystander reactions. *Journal of School Psychology*. 2015; 53: 375–391. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2015.07.002>
- Sun S, Chen H, He Y, Yu F, Yang Y, Chen H, et al. Workplace bullying and turnover intentions among workers: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Public Health*. 2025; 25: 2394. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-23339-2>
- Swartz JR, Carranza AF, Knodt AR. Amygdala activity to angry and fearful faces relates to bullying and victimization in adolescents. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. 2019; 14: 1027–1035. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsz084>
- Sznycer D, Sell A, Dumont A. How anger works. *Evolution and Human Behavior*. 2022; 43: 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2021.11.007>
- Tamm A, Tulviste T. The role of gender, values, and culture in adolescent bystanders' strategies. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2015; 30: 384–399. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514560000>

- Thornberg R, Jungert T. Bystander behavior in bullying situations: basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy. *Journal of Adolescence*. 2013; 36: 475–483. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.02.003>
- Trach J, Hymel S, Waterhouse T, Neale K. Bystander Responses to School Bullying: A Cross-Sectional Investigation of Grade and Sex Differences. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*. 2010; 25: 114–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573509357553>
- Trach J, Hymel S. Bystanders' affect toward bully and victim as predictors of helping and non-helping behaviour. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. 2020; 61: 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12516>
- Tsang SKM, Hui EKP, Law BCM. Bystander position taking in school bullying: the role of positive identity, self-efficacy, and self-determination. *TheScientificWorldJournal*. 2011; 11: 2278–2286. <https://doi.org/10.1100/2011/531474>
- Tyler KA, Schmitz RM. Bullying at School and on the Street: Risk Factors and Outcomes Among Homeless Youth. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2021; 36: NP4768–NP4787. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518794024>
- Underwood MK, Galenand BR, Paquette JA. Top Ten Challenges for Understanding Gender and Aggression in Children: Why Can't We All Just Get Along? *Social Development*. 2001; 10: 248–266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00162>
- Vidourek RA, King KA, Merianos AL. School bullying and student trauma: Fear and avoidance associated with victimization. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*. 2016; 44: 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2016.1132869>
- Wheat R, Goodwin G. The Relationship Between Judgments of Evil and Punishment Judgments. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 2025; 1552: 165–173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.70054>
- Williams R. Anger as a Basic Emotion and Its Role in Personality Building and Pathological Growth: The Neuroscientific, Developmental and Clinical Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2017; 8: 1950. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01950>
- Wong AHK, Wirth FM, Pittig A. Avoidance of learnt fear: Models, potential mechanisms, and future directions. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*. 2022; 151: 104056. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2022.104056>
- Wood L, Smith J, Varjas K, Meyers J. School personnel social support and nonsupport for bystanders of bullying: Exploring student perspectives. *Journal of School Psychology*. 2017; 61: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.12.003>
- Yang SA, Kim DH. Factors associated with bystander behaviors of Korean youth in school bullying situations: A cross-sectional study. *Medicine*. 2017; 96: e7757. <https://doi.org/10.1097/MD.00000000000007757>
- Yen JL, Chamanadjian C. Cyberbullying and Online Aggression. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*. 2025; 72: 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2024.09.004>
- Zhang J, Xiong Z, Zheng H, Ma X. The Moral Psychological Justification of Anger: An Exploration of Self-Respect and Recognition. *Behavioral Sciences*. 2024; 15: 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15010003>