



‘What about bullying?’ An experimental field study to understand students’ attitudes towards bullying and victimisation in Italian middle schools

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Background. Attitudes towards bullying at school are influential in understanding and preventing bullying behaviour but they should be measured with reference to the particular conditions under which bullying takes place.

Aims. To establish how far positive and negative judgments of bullying and victims and blaming of the victim vary according to the gender of observers, gender of bullies and of victims and whether the bullying took place alone or in group.

Sample. Participants were 117 students (49 boys and 68 girls), aged 11–12, recruited from a middle school in Italy randomly allocated to one of four independent groups according to experimental condition: bullying alone among girls, bullying alone among boys, bullying in groups among girls, bullying in groups among boys.

Method. Participants watched one of four versions of a video according to experimental condition showing a brief standardized bullying episode taking place at a school; they then had to fill in a self-report questionnaire measuring the dependent variables: respondents’ positive or negative judgments towards the bully and the victim shown in the video and how far the victim was blamed for what had happened.

Results. Overall, results indicate students have positive attitudes towards the victims of bullying and tend not to blame them for what has happened. However, same gender identification lead girls to blame male victims more than female victims and the reverse applies in case of boys providing their judgments. A bully acting alone is considered stronger and braver than when acting in a group.

Conclusions. The limits and potential of the study are presented with special attention to implications for intervention strategies in school by focusing on the role observers could play in supporting the victims and discouraging the bullies.

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Bullying has been extensively defined as an action or set of actions where one person or a group of persons verbally, physically or psychologically harass another person over a prolonged period of time; bullying implies an imbalance of strength and power between the bully and the victim (Farrington, 1993). Being stronger does not only mean physical strength; being more powerful could also imply having a stronger personality or being more determined (Rigby, 1996).

Studies conducted to measure the nature and prevalence of bullying in schools revealed the magnitude of this phenomenon that affects students from primary to high school in many Western and Eastern countries (Hoffman & Summers, 2001; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 1999). To understand causes and correlates of bullying, studies have looked at personal characteristics of those involved but also at the family environment (Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). The school environment is also important to explain these behaviours as well as attitudes students have towards bullying (Eslea & Smith, 2000; Rigby, Slee, & Cunningam, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

The studies conducted so far on attitudes towards bullying have measured positive (or negative) beliefs students have about the victim or the bully. The dimensions usually taken into consideration are those included in Olweus's original questionnaire (Olweus, 1978; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Menesini *et al.*, 1997); these are: (1) getting help from teacher or peers; (2) thoughts and feelings towards the bully and the victim and (3) inclination to intervene to assist someone being bullied. Rigby and Slee (1991) further developed a more extensive 'Pro-victim Scale' that was subsequently adopted by Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, and Cowie (2003) in the Italian context. Eslea and Smith (2000) further extended a 'Pro-victim' scale and developed the 'Children's Attitudes to Bullying Scale' which measures: (1) pro-violence attitudes, i.e., justification of bullying behaviour and victim blame; (2) disapproval of bullying, i.e., negative attitudes towards bullies; and (3) pro-victim attitudes, i.e., empathy and support towards the victim.

All these measures are important for learning about the general attitudes students have towards bullying, but they do not tell us whether they vary under certain conditions. For instance, judgments might differ according to those who have to express them, if the bullies act alone or in group or if the bully (or the victim) is a boy or a girl. Attitudes should be measured at an appropriate level of specificity to predict the intention to perform a particular behaviour and subsequently predict the behaviour; changing these attitudes might then help changing the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In this regard, the present study adopts an experimental design to determine under which specific condition of a bullying episode presented, students are more inclined to express positive (or negative) feelings towards a bully or a victim presented to them on video.

Attitudes towards bullying

Pupils, in general, express positive, pro-social and supportive thoughts, especially towards the victim and, overall, they do not like bullying (La Fontaine, 1992; Menesini *et al.*, 1997; Pervin & Turner, 1994; Smith & Levan, 1995). The study conducted by Mooney, Creeser, and Blatchford (1991) with junior school children on their perception of teasing and fighting in school also shows that 83% of all children disliked or hated fighting because it caused distress and often because there is no way to stop it. Whitney and Smith (1993) also reported that 50% of children were upset by it and found it difficult to understand why others bullied.

The study conducted by Menesini *et al.* (1997) is a cross-national comparison of

Italian and English children's attitudes towards bully/victim problems. Results showed that, overall, most children reported sympathetic attitudes towards victims of bullying. In particular, of the 1,379 Italian pupils recruited from primary and middle schools in two cities in the central and in the southern part of the country, girls tended to be more upset by bullying than boys, and the same applied for victims compared to bullies and bully/victims. As expected by the authors, Italian victims tended to help a child being bullied more than English ones. This result could be related more to a collectivistic and altruistic general attitude present in the Mediterranean country compared to England.

Rigby and Slee (1991, 1993a) found that most Australian children sympathized with the victims, supported intervention and disapproved of bullies whom they did not understand. The same trend of results was found in England by Eslea and Smith (2000) who reported that most children expressed overall supportive attitudes towards the victims of bullying: 63% said they would try to help the victim, 72% would not join in the bullying, and 32% said they were upset by the bullying. Rigby (1996), however, highlights an important aspect: there is still a high proportion of students (almost half of the entire sample) who indicated that they could understand why some children enjoy bullying and thought that kids should stand up for themselves. Attitudes can therefore also be negative towards the victims and positive towards the bully: students approve of bullies because they are tough, brave and admired by peers; being a bully, moreover, makes someone feel stronger, more powerful and better than others (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991, 1993a).

According to Olweus (1978), even if children say they do not like peers who bully, they might be positively impressed by them because they are perceived as brave, strong and self-confident. Many of the social norms in Western societies support a 'macho stereotype' culture where aggression is tolerated and often encouraged and submission is seen as a weakness, especially for boys (Askew, 1989; Matúšová 1997).

Rigby (1996, 1997) showed that between 10% and 20% of all Australian students interviewed reported that they felt negatively towards victims. They thought that children who are bullied deserved what happened to them, and reported that they did not like to interact with them because they considered them weak and 'sissies'. The prevailing model experienced among students (especially boys) is that of being strong, powerful and able to control others: if pupils get picked on, it means they deserve it.

Attitudes therefore might change according to the gender of bullies and victims because of the norm expectations attached to such behaviours. Askew (1989) indicates that socio-cultural stereotypes relegate girls to a passive and submissive role, whereas boys are expected to be aggressive and dominating. Burr (1998), in her review, shows how norm beliefs and stereotypes are based on gender roles. Societies condone male aggressive behaviour; it is within the social expectation that men should act and react aggressively. Men and boys not conforming to this social expectation are judged negatively as weak and cowards. Women and girls, on the other hand, are not expected to react to any provocation or aggressive act; they are perceived as emotional and weak and submissive (Archer & Parker, 1994; Campbell, Muncher, & Coyle, 1992).

The literature on attitudes towards bullying fails to show how these vary according to the interaction between the gender of those who are involved and the gender of respondents whose opinions are measured. Gumpel and Meadan (2000) are among the few authors who have measured children's perceptions of school-based violence by using specific scenarios presented to elementary and middle school children in Jerusalem. These authors found that 'boys are generally more likely to see direct verbal aggression as more intentionally harmful than girls', whereas 'girls tended to see

indirect verbal aggression (e.g., gossiping) as more intentionally harmful than boys' (p. 399). Because indirect verbal aggression is more often reported among girls, and direct forms of verbal aggression are more often reported by boys (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988), it is likely that the perception of the negativity of bullying is higher when it takes place among students of the same gender as respondents.

Gender differences indicate that girls, overall, are more positive and supportive towards victims than boys (Menesini *et al.*, 1997; Rigby, 1996; Rigby & Slee, 1993a, 1993b); this might be due to the fact that girls are by upbringing perceived as more empathic than males (Burr, 1998; Keise, 1992). Eslea and Smith (2000), however, did not find any significant gender differences. Girls might not want to stick to the stereotype that relegates them to a submissive role and they themselves might think that girls should stand up for themselves and therefore judge negatively other girls who are bullied and positively those girls who bully others. Only an experimental design can address these issues.

As mentioned, attitudes towards bullying might be affected by the ways in which it takes place. According to what is defined as bullying, this set of behaviours performed repeatedly with the intention of harming a weaker person can take place alone or in group. Children who bully in group seek a social status among their peers (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterdan, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Being in a group of friends rather than alone might facilitate bullies to act undisturbed because they feel legitimized and supported by their group peers.

Pupils who bully in group, however, could be held more responsible, blamed more and liked less. In a legal context, committing a crime in group is considered an aggravating factor because victims are less capable of defending themselves (Brown, 1999). Bullying, therefore, would be judged differently if perpetrated by one bully alone or by a group of bullies (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Lagerspetz, & Renfors, 2000).

The present study aims to empirically investigate Italian middle schools students' attitudes towards bullies and victims according to the way in which bullying took place (alone or in group), and whether the gender of bullies and victims of which a judgment is required was the same as or different from that of respondents.

In this respect, specific hypotheses were formulated:

- (1) Because of gender identification, male respondents would think that a girl being bullied deserves more what has happened to her than a boy; conversely, female respondents would think that a boy being bullied deserves more what has happened to him than a girl.
- (2) Male respondents would judge more positively boys being bullied and female respondents would judge more positively their same gender victim.
- (3) Students who bully in a group would be perceived more negatively than those who bully alone because bullying in a group is perceived as an aggravating factor by observers (since victims are less likely to be capable of defending themselves).

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 117 students, 49 boys and 68 girls, with a mean age of

11.5 years ($SD=.72$), recruited from the first and second school year of a middle school in Rome. Middle schools in Italy consist of three years: first (11–12 years old), second (12–13), and third year (13–14).

The socioeconomic status of the family was assessed by taking into account the occupation of the father and that of the mother; according to this criterion 64.6% of all students fell into the category of the middle socioeconomic class, 19.5% to the upper class, and the remaining 15.9% to the lower one.

Independent variables

The independent variables were selected according to the review of the literature and the hypotheses formulated: gender of bullies and victims (bullying among girls vs. bullying among boys) and mode of bullying (alone or in group). Gender of respondents was used as a design variable.

The video stimuli

The independent variables were incorporated in a videotaped script. Four versions of the video were created according to the different experimental conditions, as defined by the combination of the levels of the two independent variables. The videos were professionally created with actors recruited from a drama class of an Art school in Italy. The actors were of the same age as participants in the study; they had to act as bullies and victims in four different scenarios according to a script that was provided to them by the author. The episode they had to act in each case was the same one and was chosen according to a review of the literature and the results of focus group discussions previously conducted with another group of students of the same age (Baldry, 1998). The episode was chosen to represent a typical scenario that could occur quite frequently among boys as well as among girls, alone or in group, since it was important that the only differences between the four versions were those relating to the manipulation of the independent variables. This is an essential requirement for high internal validity, in order to determine possible causal effects due to the independent variables and no other intervening factors.

The bullying episode, chosen as a baseline stimulus, was played in four different ways according to the experimental conditions:

- (1) A girl bullied by a group of five girls;
- (2) A girl bullied by one girl alone;
- (3) A boy bullied by a group of five boys;
- (4) A boy bullied by a boy alone.

The episode did not make use of sounds or words; it included a victim (a girl or a boy according to the experimental condition) and a bully (acting alone or in group, according to the experimental condition). The video begins with a student (a girl or a boy victim) walking alone along the hallway of a school. The student is holding her/his satchel when another girl, alone or in group (or a boy alone or in group), bumps into her/him and messes up all her/his belongings, throwing them around. Subsequently the bully (or bullies) wants some money from her/him and makes funny gestures to her/him shoving her/him around.

To validate the video stimuli, a panelling procedure was adopted (Thorndike, 1982). This procedure is used to assure face and content validity. The videos were watched by

a group of three independent raters: graduate students in psychology with an expertise in the field of bullying in school. They had to establish whether the four episodes were similar to each other apart from differences manipulated (gender, number of people involved). To reach full agreement by raters, the scenarios were played and recorded three different times before the final four versions were decided.

For the purpose of this study, only same gender bullying episodes were created because they are those most likely to occur. Though bullying across gender does occur, especially with regard to boys bullying girls, only same gender episodes were studied for clarity and simplicity of interpretation of results and to check for the effects of gender as an independent variable over the dependent ones.

Procedure

Parents' and students' consent was obtained and further clarification of the aim of the study provided if required. Students were approached in their own class by a research assistant with the help of an undergraduate student and they were told about the general aim of the study.

Participants from each class were randomly allocated to one of the four experimental conditions corresponding to one version of the video; they were brought into another classroom to watch, three at a time to avoid conferring and talking during the experiment. After viewing they were kept apart from students who had still to watch the video.

Each version of the video lasted about 5 minutes. Once the video ended, students had to fill in a self-completed anonymous questionnaire measuring the dependent and the socio-demographic variables.

Random allocation to one of the four groups was made to reduce any contaminating effect of intervening variables over the dependent variables. Mean and frequency comparisons between the four groups were conducted with regard to gender, age and SES level to check that no significant differences existed between the four groups. As shown in Table 1, none emerged.

Students were told to watch the video very carefully because they would be asked questions on what they thought of it. They were told that the story presented in the video was a 'true' one that dealt with things that happen quite often at school among peers; however, they were not told that roles were played; this was revealed during the

Table 1. Comparisons between the four experimental groups with regard to socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and socioeconomic status)

	Gender		Frequency ^a		Age ^b		SES ^c	
	Male	Female	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Girl bullied by a group of girls	9	16	11.72	.94	1.92	.50		
2. Girl bullied by one girl alone	13	16	11.66	.55	2.10	.67		
3. Boy bullied by a group of boys	12	18	11.90	.80	2.03	.57		
4. Boy bullied by a boy alone	15	18	11.61	.56	2.06	.63		

^a $\chi^2(3) = 6.75, ns < .05$; ^b $F(3, 113) = .985, ns$ ^c $F(3, 109) = .461, ns$

debriefing stage that took place after completing the questionnaire. Moreover, students were not aware of the fact that there were four different versions of the video.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (a) measuring the dependent variables, and (b) the socio-demographic variables of respondents such as gender, age and level of SES.

The literature review did not reveal existing measures useful for the purpose of the present study that could be used as dependent variables though they could be derived from pre-existing measures. Two sets of items were used to measure (a) 'blaming the victim' (4 items); and (b) positive and negative judgment towards the victim and the bully presented in the video.

Blaming the victim was measured by asking respondents on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'certainly' whether they thought the victim: (1) provoked the bully (bullies), (2) was guilty for what had happened, (3) was at fault, or (4) was to blame for what had happened. The measure for attribution of responsibility was partly derived from a previous study conducted by Baldry, Winkel, and Enthoven (1997) on rape victims.

Feelings towards the victim and the bully were measured with two semantic differential scales, one for the victim and one for the bully (bullies), consisting of 9 items each, measuring strength and activity and positive and negative feelings towards the victim or the bully. These were derived and adapted from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) translated into Italian and validated by Terracciano, McCrae, and Costa (2003), and already used with school age students by Winkel and Baldry (1997). The dimensions used included the following pairs of adjectives, used for both the bully and the victim: 'ugly-beautiful', 'fearful-brave', 'stupid-intelligent', 'boring-funny', 'weak-strong', 'incapable-capable', 'bad-good', 'anxious-calm', 'unpleasant-pleasant'.

The words 'bully' and 'victim' were never used in the questionnaire in order not to influence respondents in a socially desirable way.

Results

Psychometrics properties of the subscales

Before testing the research hypotheses, psychometric properties of the dependent variables were ascertained. A principal component analysis was performed on the 4 items measuring *blame towards the victim*. According to the scree test procedure only one component was extracted ($\lambda=2.03$) explaining 44.5% of the total variance (Example item: 'Do you think that the girl' (or boy, according to the experimental condition) 'who was holding the satchel deserved what happened?'). All four items were added together to obtain a single measure ($\alpha= .67$).

To measure *positive and negative judgments of the victim and of the bully* two separate principal component analyses were performed on all items for victims and bullies separately. In order to obtain comparable dimensions for the victim and the bully, only the items loading on both the components were included in the analyses.

The final two components solution extracted with the scree plot procedure for the victim, obtained with oblimin rotation (due to the correlation of the components),

explained 59.3% of the total variance. The first component measured *evaluative dimension for the victim* and consisted of two pairs of adjectives ('unpleasant-pleasant', 'bad-good', $\alpha=.60$). The second component measured *judgment of activity and strength of the victim* and consisted of three pairs of adjectives ('fearful - brave', 'weak - strong', 'incapable - capable', $\alpha=.63$).

The final two components solution for the bully obtained with oblimin rotation and extracted with the scree plot procedure explained 61.9% of the total variance. The same pairs of adjectives as for the victim were used to measure *evaluative dimension of the bully* ($\alpha=.60$) and *judgment of activity and strength of the bully* ($\alpha=.61$).

For all of the four new dimensions obtained, high values indicate a more positive judgment of the victim and of the bully and a higher judgment of strength and activity of the victim and the bully.

Before testing the experimental hypotheses, in order to analyse the relationship between all dependent variables, partial correlations, controlling for gender, were carried out. These are presented in Table 2. Partial correlations are used here to control for any confounding effect due to a third variable (Dwyer, 1949).

Correlations indicate a strong positive association between blaming the victim and positive evaluation of the bully. The more respondents blame the victim, the more the bully is liked and the victim disliked. In addition, the more bullies are considered strong, brave and capable, the more the victim is considered weak, fearful and incapable.

Table 2. Partial correlation of all dependent variables controlling for gender

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Positive evaluation of the victim	–				
2. Positive evaluation of the bully	–.22*	–			
3. Judgment of strength of the bully	.07	.02	–		
4. Judgment of strength of the victim	–.03	.07	–.37**	–	
5. Blame of the victim	.17	.30**	.09	.00	–

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

Blaming the victim

The next step in the analyses was to test how different attitudes and judgments towards victims and bullies varied according to the experimental conditions. First, to test under which condition respondents blamed the victim more, a 2 (bullying alone vs. bullying in group - factor 'A') \times 2 (bullying among girls vs. bullying among boys - factor 'B') \times 2 (gender of respondents: male vs. female - factor 'C') analysis of variance was used (see Table 3 for a summary of results).

Overall, low mean values indicate that students think that the victim is not to be blamed for what has happened. No main effects emerged, while all first order interactions were significant. The first effect was due to the interaction of gender of respondents and that of bullies and victims shown in the video, $F(1, 109) = 5.15$, $p < .05$: female respondents blame the boy victim in the video more than the girl victim, M (boy victim) = 1.61 vs. M (girl victim) = 1.38, whereas male respondents blame the girl

Table 3. Means, *F* values and measure of effect size for blaming the victim according to gender of respondents, of bullies and victims and mode of bullying (in group or alone)

		Blame the victim	<i>F</i> (1, 109)	MES
A	Single	1.52	.01	.000
	Group	1.53		
B	Boys	1.52	.01	.000
	Girls	1.53		
C	Male	1.56	.39	.004
	Female	1.50		
AxB			4.00*	.035
AxC			10.88***	.091
BxC			5.15*	.045
AxBxC			.57	.005

Key: A (mode of bullying: alone vs. in group). B (gender of bullies and of victims: bullying among girls vs. bullying among boys), C (gender of respondents: male vs. female). MES= Measures of effect size, Partial ETA squared

p*< .05; *p*< .01; ****p*< .001

victim in the video more than the boy victim, *M* (girl victim) = 1.64 vs. *M* (boy victim) = 1.43.

Another significant interaction effect emerged between gender of respondents and mode of bullying (alone or in group), *F* (1, 109) = 10.88, *p*< .001. Male respondents blame the victim more when she or he is bullied by a group of bullies rather than by a bully alone, *M* (bullying in group) = 1.71 vs. *M* (bullying alone) = 1.38. Female respondents, on the other hand, blame the victim more when she/he is bullied by a bully alone rather than by a group of bullies, *M* (bullying alone) = 1.68 vs. *M* (bullying in group) = 1.33.

The last significant interaction effect occurred between gender of bullies and victims and mode of bullying (alone vs. in group), *F* (1, 109) = 4.00, *p*< .05. When bullying is perpetrated by a bully alone, respondents blame the victim more when boys are involved rather than girls, *M* (bullying among boys) = 1.65 vs. *M* (bullying among girls) = 1.42. On the other hand, when bullying is perpetrated in group, respondents blame the victim more when girls rather than boys are involved, *M* (bullying among girls) = 1.56 vs. *M* (bullying among boys) = 1.40. This means that the male victim is blamed more when bullied by one single bully, whereas the female victim is blamed more when bullied in group.

Judgment of the victim and of the bully

Overall, mean values on *positive evaluation* of the victim are significantly higher than that of the bullies. Within-subject analysis showed significant mean differences within groups, *M*=3.87 vs. *M*=1.86, *F*(1,116)=471.97, indicating that the victim is liked more than the bully regardless of the experimental conditions. With regard to the *judgment of strength*, the reverse applies meaning that the bully is judged as more strong and brave than the victim, *M*=3.50 vs. *M*=2.50, *F*(1,116)=49.29.

Regarding variation in the *evaluative judgment* of the victim and of the bully, and

the *judgment of strength and activity* of the bully and of the victim between experimental conditions, analyses of variance were conducted with a 2 (bullying alone vs bullying in group 'A') \times 2 (bullying among girls vs bullying among boys 'B') \times 2 (male respondent vs. female respondent 'C') design (See Table 4).

Regarding *positive evaluation of the victim*, no univariate main effects emerged. A significant interaction effect, shown in Figure 1, emerged due to the gender of respondents and the mode of bullying (alone or in group), $F(1, 109) = 4.08, p < .05$, indicating that male respondents judged the victim more positively when bullied by a bully alone rather than by a group of bullies. Female respondents, on the contrary, judged the victim more positively when bullied by a group of bullies rather than by a bully alone.

Regarding *positive evaluation of the bully*, no main or interaction effects emerged. Regarding *judgment of strength and activity of the victim*, a main effect due to the gender of bullies and victims emerged, $F(1, 109) = 12.12, p < .001$, indicating that

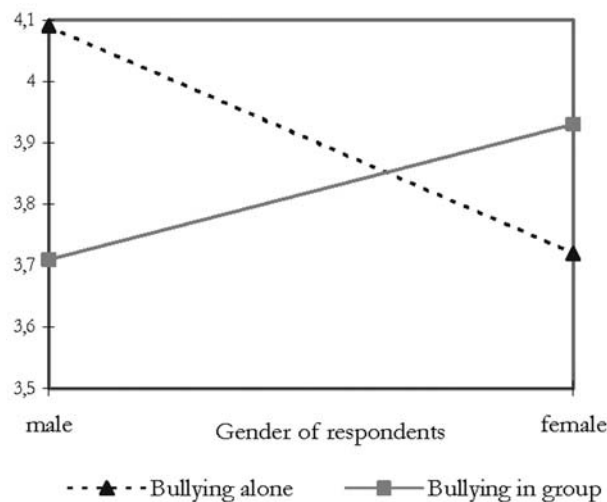


Figure 1. Positive evaluation of the victim

female victims are perceived as more active and stronger than male victims. Regarding *judgment of strength and activity of the bully* there was only a main effect due to the mode of bullying (alone or in group), $F(1, 109) = 3.81, p < .05$. According to respondents, the bully is perceived stronger and more active when bullying alone.

Discussion

This study is innovative because it addresses attitudes towards bullying by adopting an experimental design that enables measurement of changes in specific attitudes towards bullies and victims under certain conditions according to the gender of those involved, the way in which bullying took place (alone or in group) and in relation to the gender of those making these judgments. To learn about attitudes towards bullies and victims, measurements should refer to specific bullying episodes. Clearly, when asked about perceptions of bullying and victims in their school in general, children might reply with

Table 4. Mean, *F* values and measures of effect size of the evaluative (positive) judgment and of the judgment of activity of the victim and of the bully in different experimental conditions and according to the gender of respondents

Condition		Positive evaluation of victim	<i>F</i> (1, 109)	MES	Judgment of strength of victim	<i>F</i> (1, 109)	MES	Positive evaluation of bully	<i>F</i> (1, 109)	MES	Judgment of strength of the bully	<i>F</i> (1, 109)	MES
A	Single	3.90	.40	.003	2.54	.25	.002	1.42	.82	.007	3.69	3.81*	.033
	Group	3.80			2.50			1.54			3.32		
B	Girls	3.73	2.47	.022	2.77	12.12**	.100	1.58	2.15	.019	3.58	.65	.005
	Boys	3.97			2.25			1.38			3.42		
C	Male	3.87	.10	.000	2.43	1.02	.009	1.52	.31	.002	3.53	.01	.000
	Female	3.82			2.58			1.44			3.47		
AxB			.01	.000		1.93	.017		1.07	.009		.32	.002
AxC			4.08*	.036		.40	.003		1.81	.016		.40	.003
BxC			3.34	.030		.73	.006		2.99	.027		3.04	.027
AxBxC			.11	.001		.07	.000		1.62	.014		1.26	.011

Key: A (bullying alone vs. bullying in group), B (bullying among girls vs. bullying among boys), C (male respondent vs. female respondent). MES= Measures of effect size, Partial ETA squared.

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

reference to their own representation of a particular bully or victim they have in mind, but unless these specifications are addressed it is not possible to know to what students' attitudes refer. Attitudes are context related and they vary according to certain conditions. To understand attitudes and predict behaviour, contextual measures of attitudes should be adopted. This might help shed some light on some of the contradictory findings about attitudes towards bullying (Eslea & Smith, 2000). The present research has shown that attitudes towards bullying change according to who holds them (boys or girls), towards whom (boys/girls, bullies or victims) and under which condition (bullying alone or in group).

Overall, this research supports once more the finding that students have pro-victim attitudes; students' judgment of the victim presented in the video is more positive than that of the bully regardless of the experimental condition under which participants had to make their judgments (Rigby, 1996). However, bullies are considered stronger and braver than victims, but this does not mean that they are liked more; this in fact might be the reason why previous studies on attitudes towards bullies have reported mixed results. Students do admire bullies because they are perceived as strong and brave since they behave in such a way towards their peers or even teachers; it could be seen as a sign of courage that leads to admiration especially in boys (Olweus, 1978; Rigby, 1996). This, however, does not mean that students actually like bullies and would stick around with them unless for affiliation or to gain status. In fact, when it comes to expressing more evaluative judgments, then a pro-victim attitude prevails. These results shed some light on the issue of what students think about peers bullying others. In the first place, it has to be argued that when a student is asked a general question on whether he or she likes or understands bullies or victims, the respondent might very likely base his or her judgment on his or her own experience, therefore results might be affected by underlying variables not taken into account by the researcher. When asked about feelings towards a specific bully or victim, as in the present study with the use of a video, then respondents will base their answers on what they have seen. Variations in the judgments provided according to the different experimental conditions confirm that it is easier to measure attitudes towards a specific target rather than towards general ones.

More specifically, the present study revealed, in accordance with the first hypothesis, that male respondents blame the victim less when the bullying takes place among boys rather than among girls; female respondents, on other hand, blame the victim less when the bullying takes place among girls rather than among boys. This implies that when something negative happens to someone from the same in-group (e.g., victim of the same gender) then respondents tend to protect their identity by positively judging others similar to themselves (Capozza & Brown, 2001). The attribution bias of blaming others for what has happened is more likely to occur when judging members of the out-group (victims of a different gender). Gender differences also indicated that when a girl is bullied by a group of students rather than by a student alone, she is blamed more; the reverse applies in case of male victims. This could be due to the fact that bullying in group is a socially accepted behaviour when it takes place between boys because member group affiliation is a way to gain and keep a status among the peer group in a male culture (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

Male respondents blame the victim more when she (or he) is bullied by a group; female respondents, instead, blame the victim more when a bully acts alone rather than in group. This could be due to the fact that female respondents judge the victim more positively when she (or he) is bullied by a group of bullies rather than by a bully alone.

Male respondents, on the other hand, like the victim more (and are more sympathetic towards her or him), when she or he is bullied by a bully alone. Female respondents seem to feel more sorry and empathic with a victim of group bullying, whereas male respondents dislike more the victim of group bullying. It is not clear why this is so. However, it could be that female respondents identify themselves more with a typical way of bullying that takes place among girls (Baldry & Farrington, 1999).

The mechanism of blaming a victim (of bullying) refers to a general causal attribution model where observers tend to blame the victim because they have external cues on which base their evaluation, and not internal ones, in order to protect themselves. The present study showed, instead, overall supportive and positive attitudes towards victims of bullying. As discussed before with reference to pro-victim attitudes, also with regard to attribution of blame, overall low mean values of attribution of blame implies that students are sympathetic towards the victim and do not think that she (or he) is to blame for what has happened. This result could also be due to the type of bullying episode that was chosen for the present study, which clearly shows performance of harassing behaviour against the victim who does not provoke the bully in any way. It could be the case that respondents could not see anything in the victim's behaviour prior or during the bullying that could have justified the bullying behaviour. Most studies on perception and attribution of blame to the victim have been conducted with victims of serious crimes (e.g., rape) and showed that observers tend to blame victims for what has happened to them (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). This self-defence mechanism of internal attribution bias is adopted when a serious violent event takes place, reassuring observers that the victimisation occurred to the victim because of an internal (precipitating) factor. Results from the present study, instead, indicate that there are circumstances when respondents do not have to protect themselves from threats to their safety. In this respect, a victim of a less serious event (like bullying) is blamed less and held less responsible because in this case attributions are based on external cues.

These results should be further investigated by looking at how attitudes towards bullying vary according to the type of bullying episodes in which boys and girls are involved. Studies on the nature and prevalence of bullying indicate that boys are more likely to be involved in direct bullying and girls in indirect-relational bullying; judgments might vary according to whether girls are performing in a typically 'female' way and the same holds true for boys (Baldry & Farrington, 1999; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1988; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

As with most research, the present study has some limitations. As the sample was based on one school, it is hard to know how far these findings can be generalized; to reduce this possible error, efforts were made to conduct an experimental design with randomized allocation of participants to the different conditions. Future studies should include a wider number of schools from different areas and larger samples to ensure even more representativeness of the sample. Another limit of the study is related to the subscales used to measure the dependent variables which were only partly derived from pre-existing well-developed measurements, but this was done to address a specific topic and research design. As a consequence, the reliability of some of the scales used as dependent variables was just above limit of acceptance due to the small number of items in each scale. More extensive scales for the measurement of attitudes, consisting of multiple items, therefore, should be developed and adopted to reach higher internal consistency.

In order to better understand attitudes towards bullying, future research should also take into consideration other independent variables related to students or to their

family context to check for the influence of these dimensions on judgments about bullying.

In the present study we only used same gender bullying episodes, avoiding mixed sex conditions. This is a limitation though most bullying happens among same gender pupils (Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1988). It would have been interesting, however, to measure attitudes towards bullies and victims by taking into account scenarios with mixed gender bullying episodes.

These results have potential for setting up and developing relevant intervention programmes for middle school students for the prevention and reduction of bullying in school. Judgments and acceptance of bullying are related to gender of both 'observers' (*bystanders* in the literature, Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996) and those acting as bullies and victims. Clearly, there is a same gender identification mechanism taking place in students when exposed to a bullying episode, meaning that victims of a different gender from the observer's are blamed more for what has happened to them. Recent attention has been focused on bystanders' behaviour in bullying episodes showing how peers witnessing bullying episodes most of the time do not intervene whereas they have a high potential for discouraging the bullying or even helping the victim (or seeking help), instead of withdrawing, doing nothing or even supporting the bully (Sutton & Smith, 1999). Intervention programmes should therefore focus on the group identification concept where only members of the same 'in-group' are positively judged. Bullying per se has a harassing component and it is often condoned among boys. Early intervention strategies should encourage mixed gender activities, cooperative games and teaching mediation skills where both boys and girls can benefit from the help and support of the different gender peers in case of need of support. Gender-role stereotypes should also be addressed because in schools and societies there is still the tendency to relegate girls to a submissive role and boys to an aggressive one. This, however, could be a particular aspect of the Italian culture, where the macho stereotype model is still quite strong also in the school setting. Cross-cultural studies are again encouraged (Menesini, Eslea, Smith, Genta, & Giannetti, 1997) in order to establish if findings from the present study are applicable in other cultural contexts.

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