

Risks and Rewards of Defending

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Short overview of my work areas

2020: PhD Defense, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Topic:
Antecedents and Consequences of Classroom Peer Norms

2020 – 2021: Postdoc, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Topic:
Evaluating Meaningful Roles Intervention

2021 – present: Senior Research Fellow, University of Turku, Finland
Social Relationships and Mental Health in Adolescence

School bullying research

My research mission: combat school bullying worldwide!

In Finland, schools have legal obligation to have an anti-bullying policy. Over 90% of schools implement anti-bullying program (KiVa or Olweus).

But: schools vary largely in implementation of these programs (Herkama et al., 2024).

The Problem of School Bullying

Definition of school bullying:

"It is bullying when someone is intentionally and repeatedly hurt. It is difficult for the bullied person to defend themselves. Bullying can be: saying mean things, calling nasty names, leaving someone outside the group, hitting, pushing, telling mean things or telling lies, other acts that offend another. It is also bullying when a pupil is repeatedly teased in a mean and offensive way. Friendly and playful teasing is not bullying, nor when two roughly equally strong pupils argue or fight."



The Problem of School Bullying

1 out of 10 children repeatedly bullied at school



The Problem of School Bullying



The Problem of School Bullying



The Problem of School Bullying



Risks & Rewards of Defending



Key questions

- 1) **Is it safe to defend victims of bullying?**
- 2) **Numbers:** How often is bullying a group process? And how often are youth being defended?
- 3) **Who** is being defended?
- 4) Can bystanders **stop bullying?**
- 5) Does defending make victims **feel better?**

Q & A



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1) Is it safe to defend victims of bullying?



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Social risks:

Associated with victim -> not so cool

Risk to become next victim

Emotional risks:

Witnessing can elevate distress

Social risks

Inefficacy



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Emotional risks:

Witnessing can elevate distress

Social risks

Inefficacy



Peer Defending

Recent work has shown:

Defending is typically safe behavior for defenders!!

Journal of Youth and Adolescence
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-025-02168-x>

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Defending Behavior and Victimization: Between- and Within-Person Associations

Sarah T. Malamut¹ · Claire F. Garandeau¹ · Christina Salmivalli¹

Received: 20 November 2024 / Accepted: 11 March 2025
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Abstract

Anti-bullying interventions often encourage peer bystanders to defend their victimized peers. However, concerns have been raised that defending could put youth at risk for being victimized themselves. Despite these concerns, there is limited research on the longitudinal links between defending and victimization. Addressing limitations of previous research, the current study examined bidirectional associations between three types of peer-reported defending (comforting defending, assertive defending, reporting to authority) and (self- and peer-reported) victimization, teasing apart between- and within-person associations using random-intercept cross-lagged panel models. Participants included 5123 Finnish adolescents (45.9% self-identified as a boy; $T1 M_{age} = 13.06$, $SD = 1.69$, 93.5% born in Finland) in grades 4 to 9. There was a significant, negative between-person association only between comforting defending and self-reported victimization. There were no significant prospective within-person associations between any type of defending and self- or peer-reported victimization. The findings did not indicate that defending was a risk factor for subsequent victimization.

Keywords Defending · Victimization · Longitudinal · Within-person associations

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DOI: 10.1111/jora.12847

EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

Does defending affect adolescents' peer status, or vice versa? Testing the moderating effects of empathy, gender, and anti-bullying norms

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Funding information

Abstract

This study examined bidirectional associations between students' bully-directed defending behavior and their peer status (being liked or popular) and tested for the moderating role of empathy, gender, and classroom anti-bullying norms. Three waves of data were collected at 4–5-month time intervals among 3680 Finnish adolescents ($M_{age} = 13.94$, 53.0% girls). Cross-lagged panel analyses showed that defending positively predicted popularity and, to a larger degree, being liked over time. No moderating effect of empathy was found. Popularity was more strongly predictive of defending, and defending was more strongly predictive of status among girls than among boys. Moreover, the positive effects of both types of status on defending were—albeit to a limited extent—stronger in classrooms with higher anti-bullying norms.

Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology (2021) 49:1197–1210
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-021-00822-z>

Examining the Potential Mental Health Costs of Defending Victims of Bullying: a Longitudinal Analysis

Sarah T. Malamut^{1,2} · Jessica Trach¹ · Claire F. Garandeau¹ · Christina Salmivalli¹

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Abstract

It has been speculated that defending victims of bullying is stressful for youth, and may contribute to poor mental health among those who regularly intervene to defend their victimized peers. However, the extant literature is thus far primarily limited to correlational, single-informant studies. The current study examined the concurrent and prospective mental health costs (e.g., social anxiety, depressive symptoms) of peer-reported defending among 4085 youth (43.9% boys; $M_{age} = 14.56$, $SD = 0.75$). Moreover, we examined two potential moderators (victimization and popularity) of the association between defending and internalizing problems. Analyses revealed that there was no evidence of a direct, positive relationship between defending and internalizing symptoms. However, a positive, concurrent association was found between defending and social anxiety, but only among youth who reported that they were also victims – the association was negative among non-victimized youth. In addition, both peer-reported victimization and social status were found to moderate the longitudinal relationship between defending and later symptoms of depression. Specifically, among low-status highly victimized youth, defending was associated with an increased risk of experiencing symptoms of depression, whereas high-status youth who were rarely seen as victims reported decreased symptoms of depression at T2 if they also had a reputation for defending others. The findings suggest that defending others is likely not a risk factor for youth who are not already vulnerable and/or have the protection

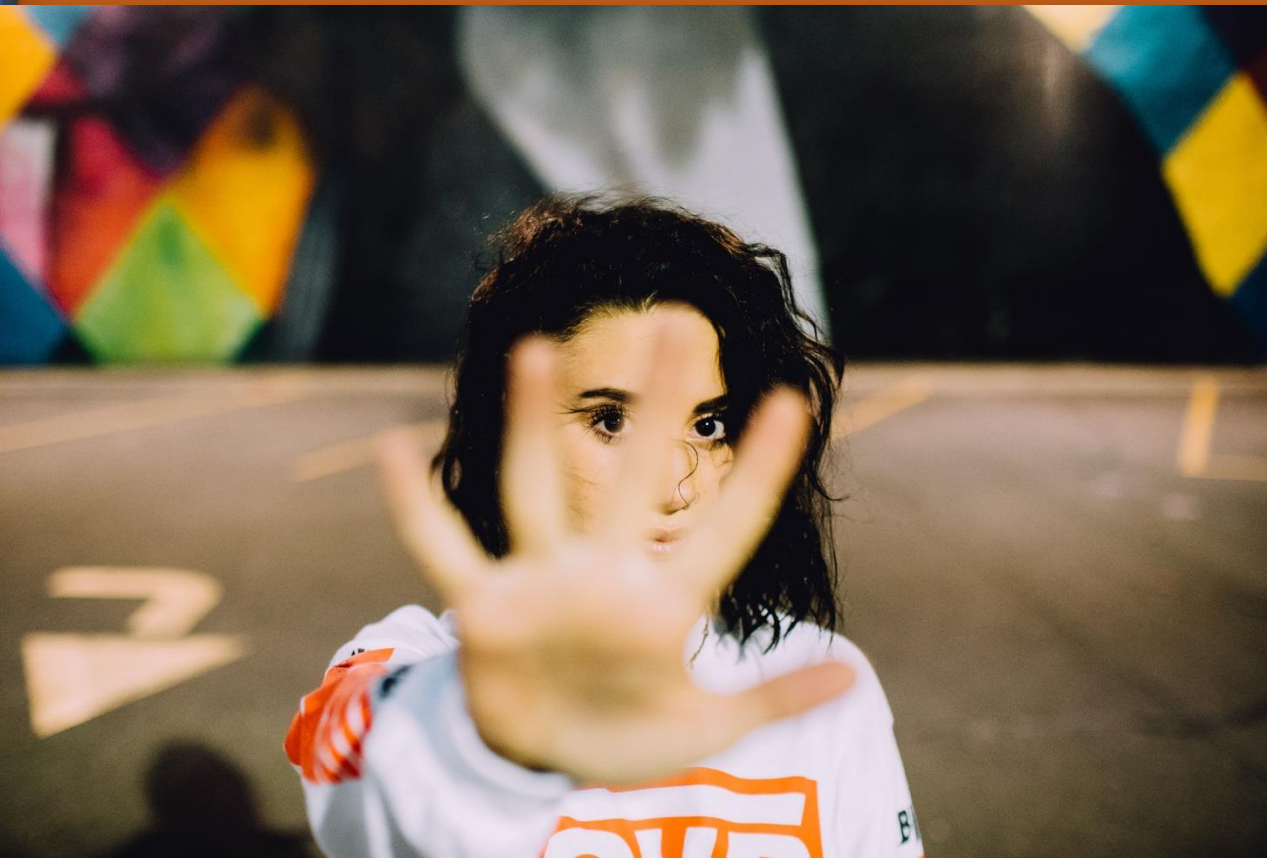
Key questions

- 1) Is it safe to defend victims of bullying?
- 2) **Numbers:** How often is bullying a group process? And how often are youth being defended?
- 3) **Who** is being defended?
- 4) Can bystanders **stop bullying**?
- 5) Does defending make victims **feel better**?



Q & A

Key findings SOLID Project: Does it help victims of bullying to be defended?!



Identify Success factors that
**Optimize the Long-term Impact of
Defending (SOLID)** on decreasing
bullying and improving victims'
psychological adjustment.

The SOLID Project: data collected

SOLID SURVEY



W1: September

W2: January

W3: April

Cohort 1: 2022-2023,

Cohort 2: 2023-2024

Solid Survey:

$n = 6,470$ Finnish

4th – 9th grade students from 51 schools

The SOLID Project: data collected

SOLID SURVEY



W1: September

W2: January

W3: April

Cohort 1: 2022-2023,

Cohort 2: 2023-2024

SOLID DAILY



10 schooldays in January

Cohort 1: 2023

Cohort 2: 2024

Solid Survey:

$n = 6,470$ Finnish

4th – 9th grade students from 51 schools

Solid Daily:

$N = 1,669$ 7th to 9th grade students from
31 schools, about 10 days (but some
more!)

Measures

Developed measure to assess being defended

- *bully-oriented ways (5 items)*
- *Victim-oriented ways (3 items)*
- *Teacher (1 item)*

- In survey: administered among all classmates. Prompt: The past few months, when someone was mean to you or bullied you... (1=yes, 0= no, -99= not appl).
- In daily diary: only administered among students who had experienced some level of peer aggression / bullying that day

Key question 2: Prevalences

How often is bullying a group process?

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Fact:

1. Students report on average 3.22 bullies (30% reports 1 bully in class).

Key question 2: Prevalences

How often are victims of bullying defended by their peers?

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Answer:

Daily: if there are witnesses, in about 50% of the cases

Across months: about 75% of victimized students indicated that a bystander helped them (provided support, or defended them)

Key question 2: Prevalences

How often are victims of bullying defended by their peers?

Answer:

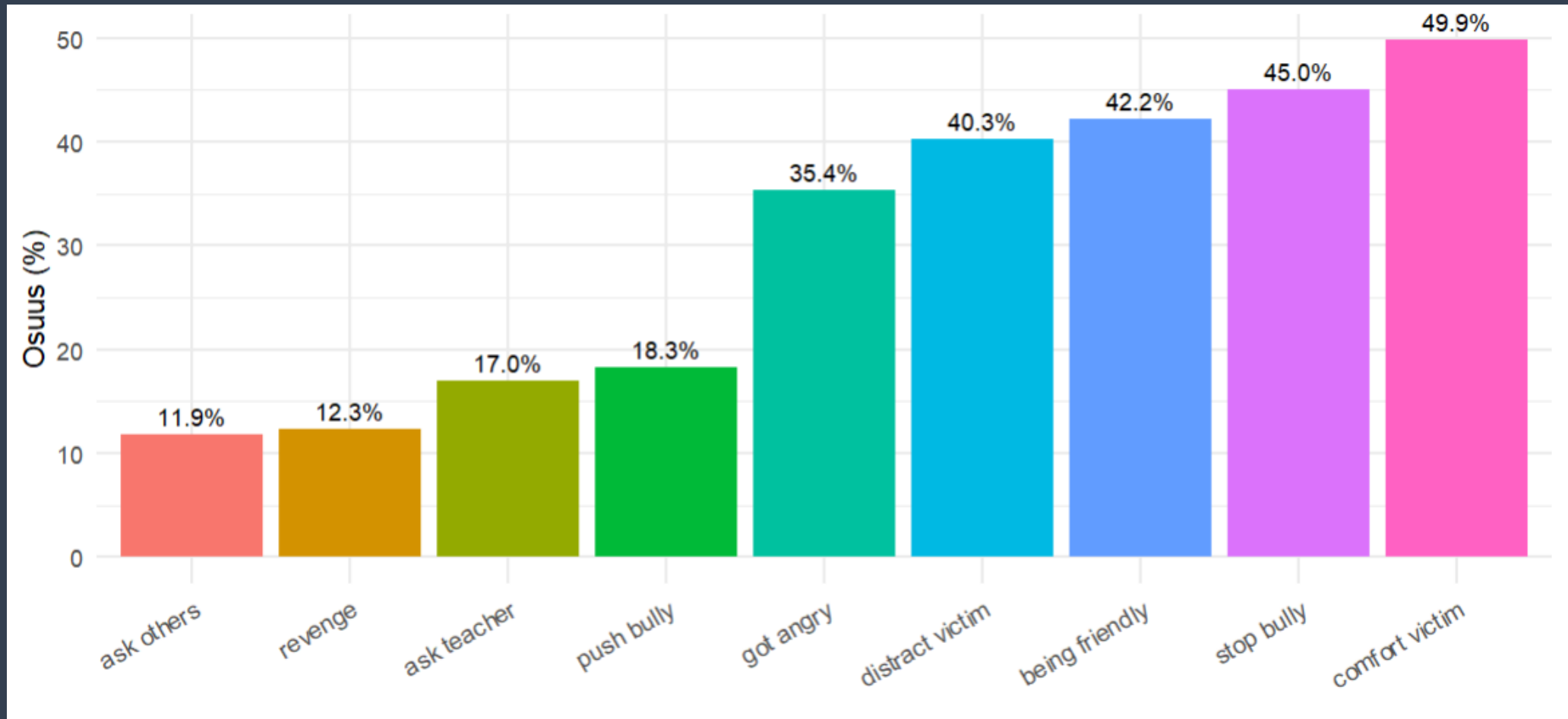
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Across months: about 75% of victimized students indicated that a bystander helped them (provided support, or defended them)

Facts:

1. Students are often helped in various ways simultaneously (3 ways)
2. On average, students nominate 2 defenders

Types of support/defending



Item-based percentage of victims* indicating that they were defended in January (n = 1303 victims)

*Victimization based on scoring at least once or twice on at least one of five specific items

Key finding 2: Victims are quite often defended!

- Bullying is a group process (but not necessarily every day!)
 - So perhaps it is important to also target the days without bystanders – how can bullying be stopped on those days? *Would it for instance help to also teach children how to stand up for themselves?*
- Victims of bullying are quite often defended by their peers!
 - Perhaps quite often, defending does occur in 'negative ways' – what might be optimal ways to help victims?

Key question 3: Who is being defended?

75% of victims are being defended. So 1 out of 4 *lacks defenders*...

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For teachers it may be useful to know who these non-defended victims are!

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75% of victims are being defended. So 1 out of 4 lacks defenders...

What characteristics may these non-defended victims have?

Laninga-Wijnen, L., Garandeau, C. G., & Salmivalli (accepted). Which victims of bullying are being defended and how? The role of victimization intensity and victims' adjustment. *Journal of School Psychology*.

Key question 3: Who is being defended?

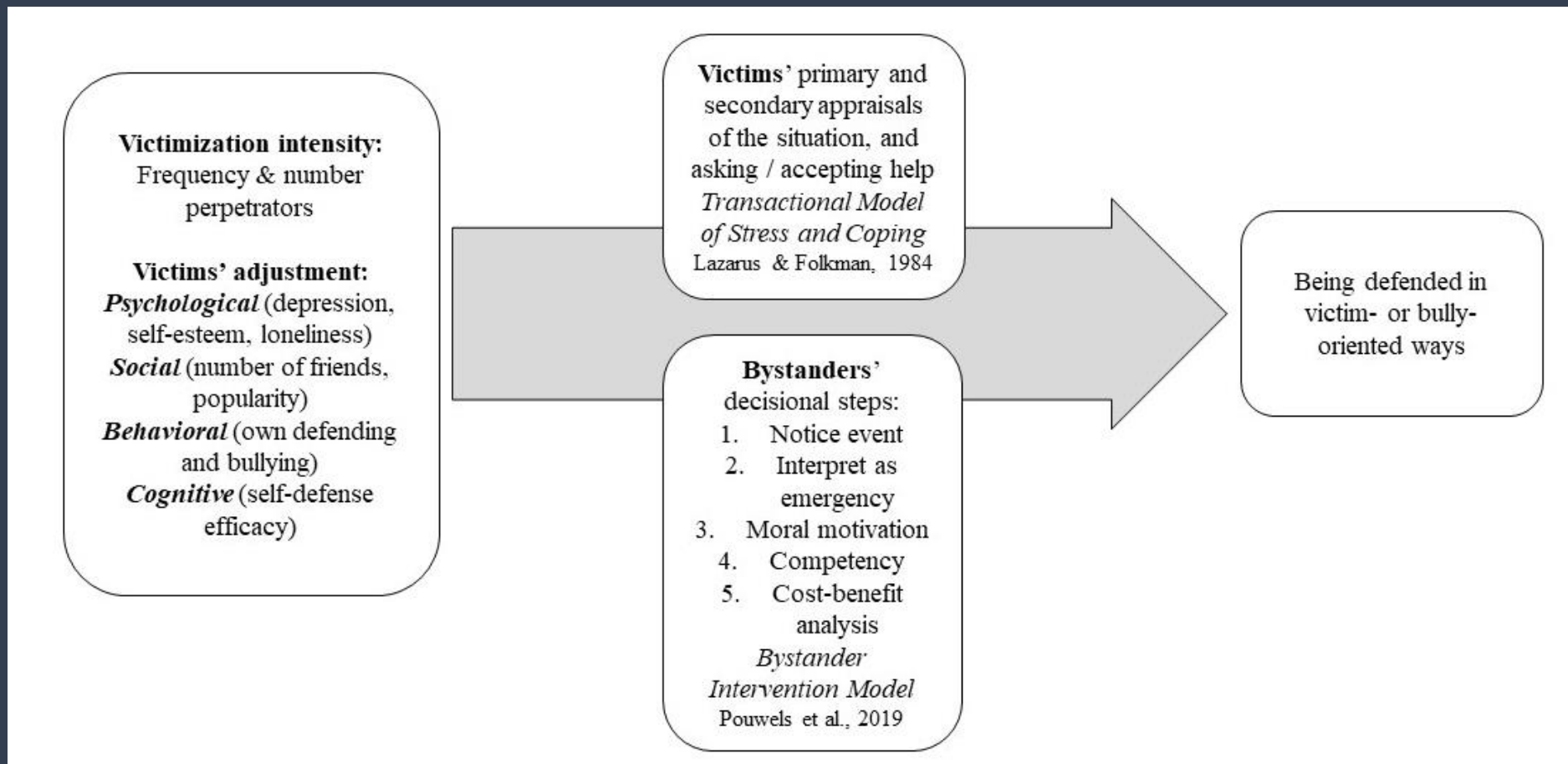
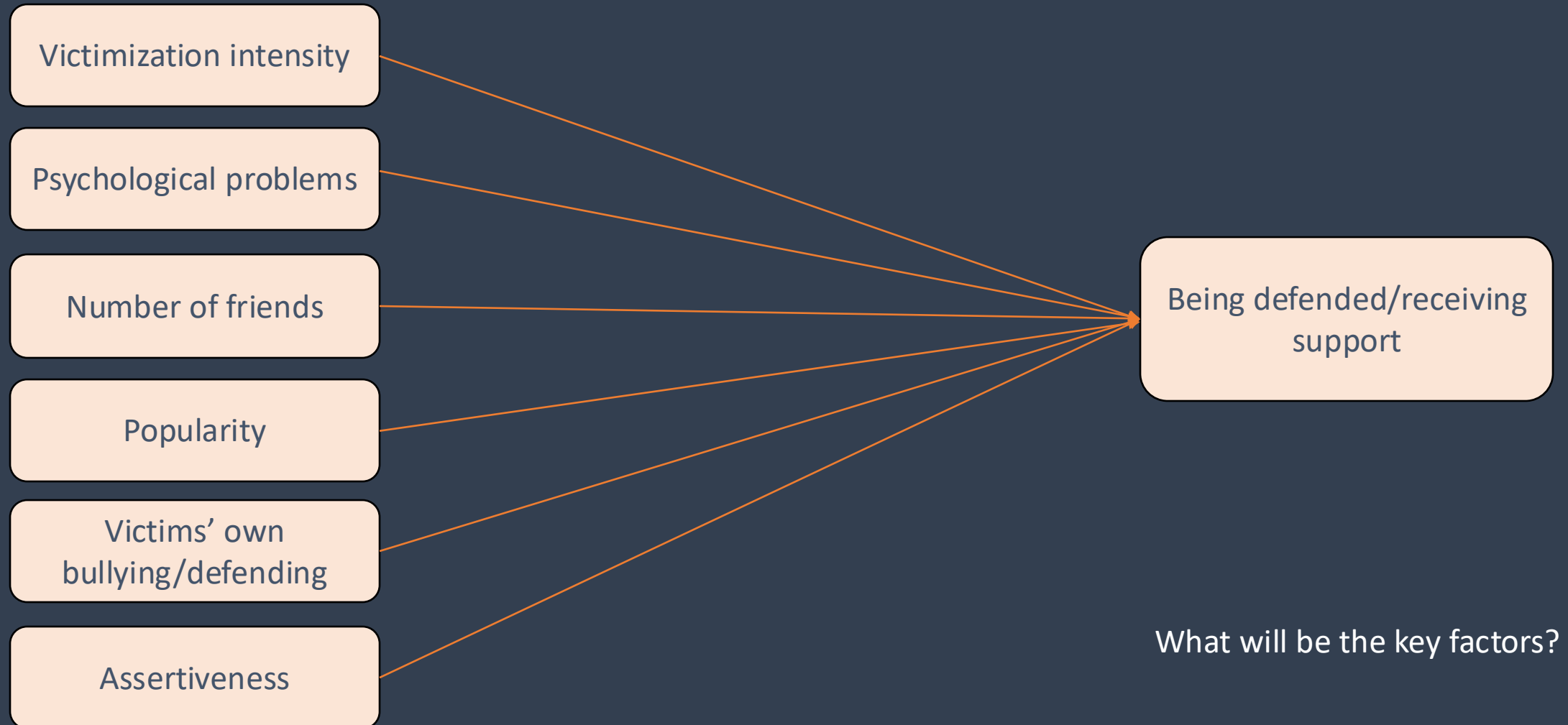
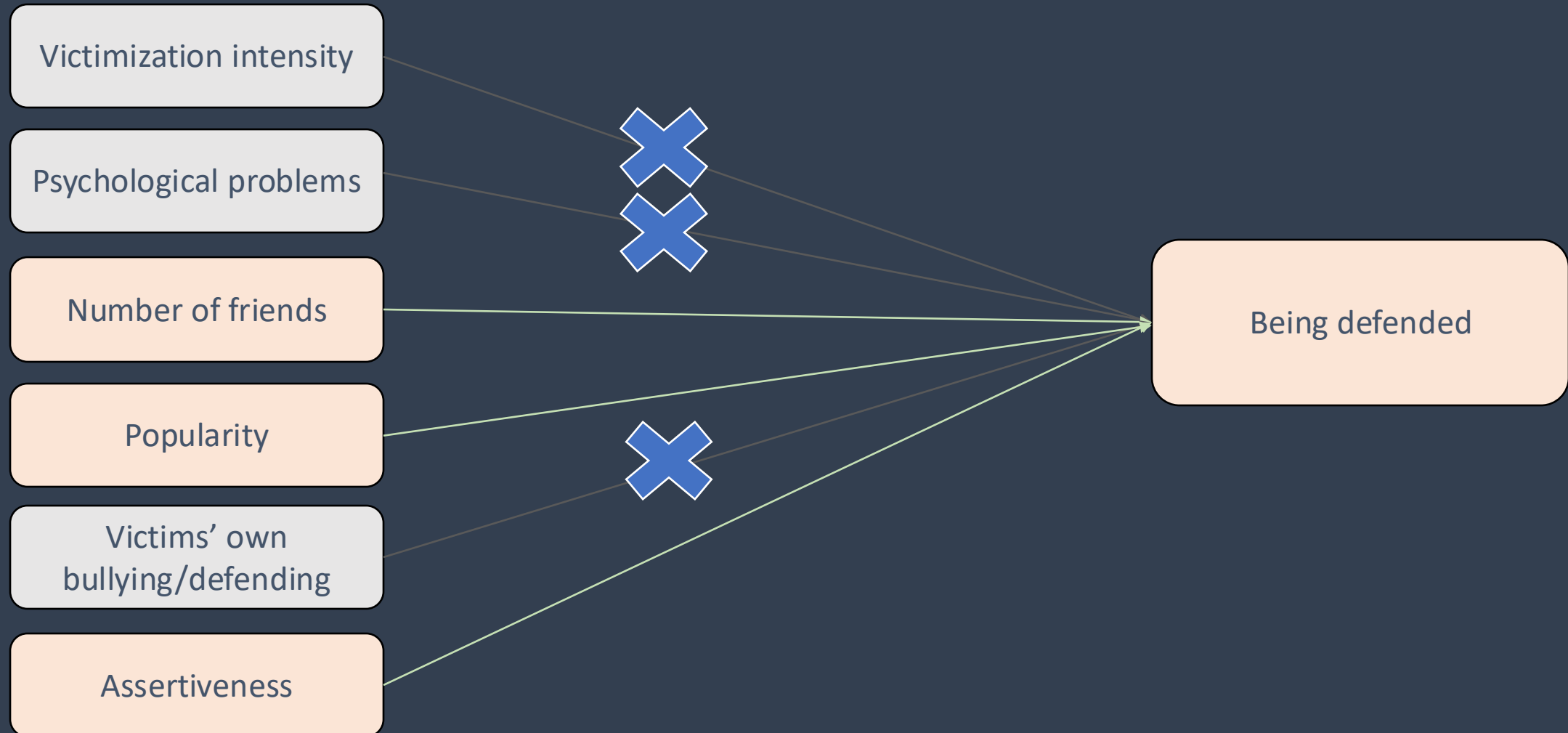


Figure 1. Theoretical model explaining why victimization intensity and victims' adjustment may predict being defended in bully- and victim-oriented ways.

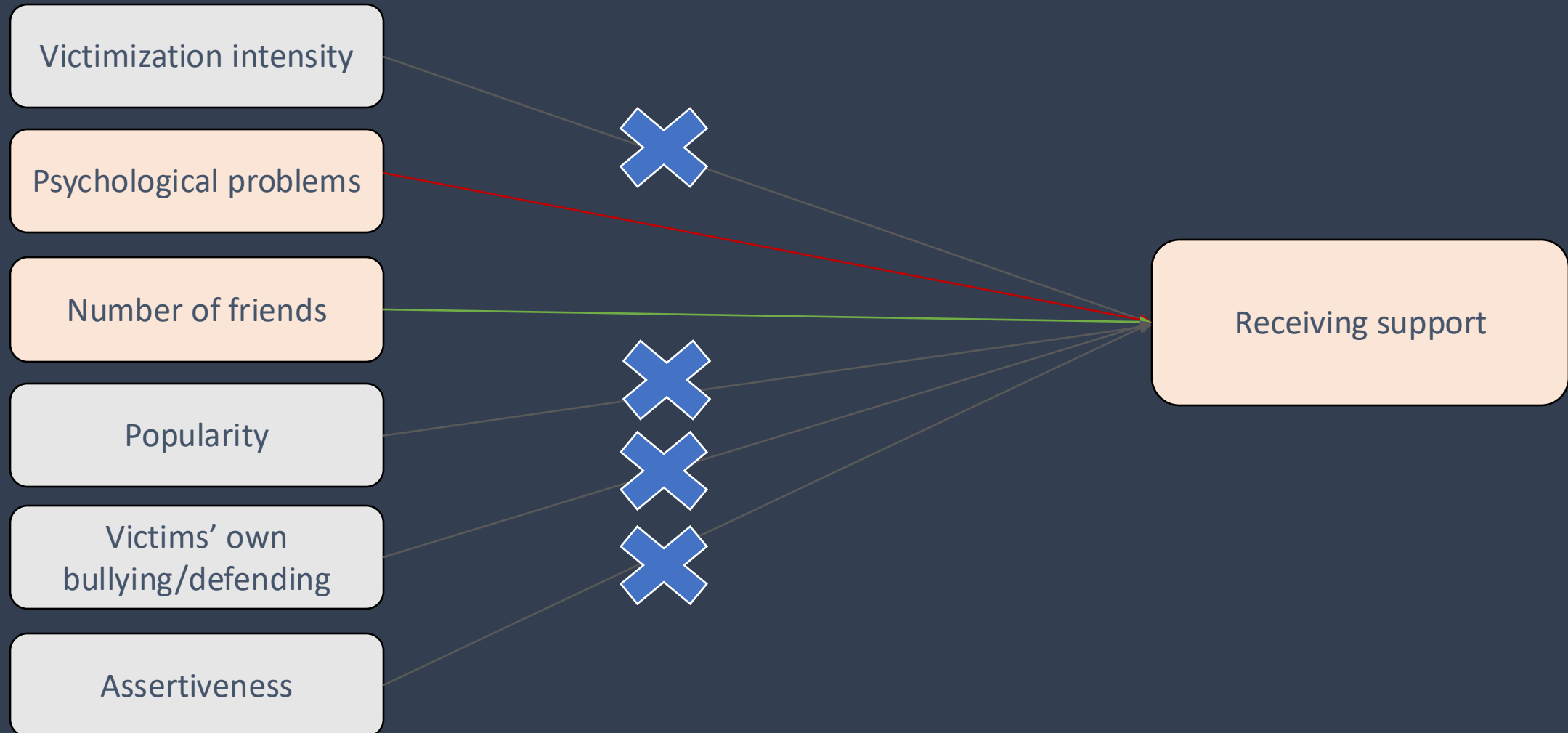
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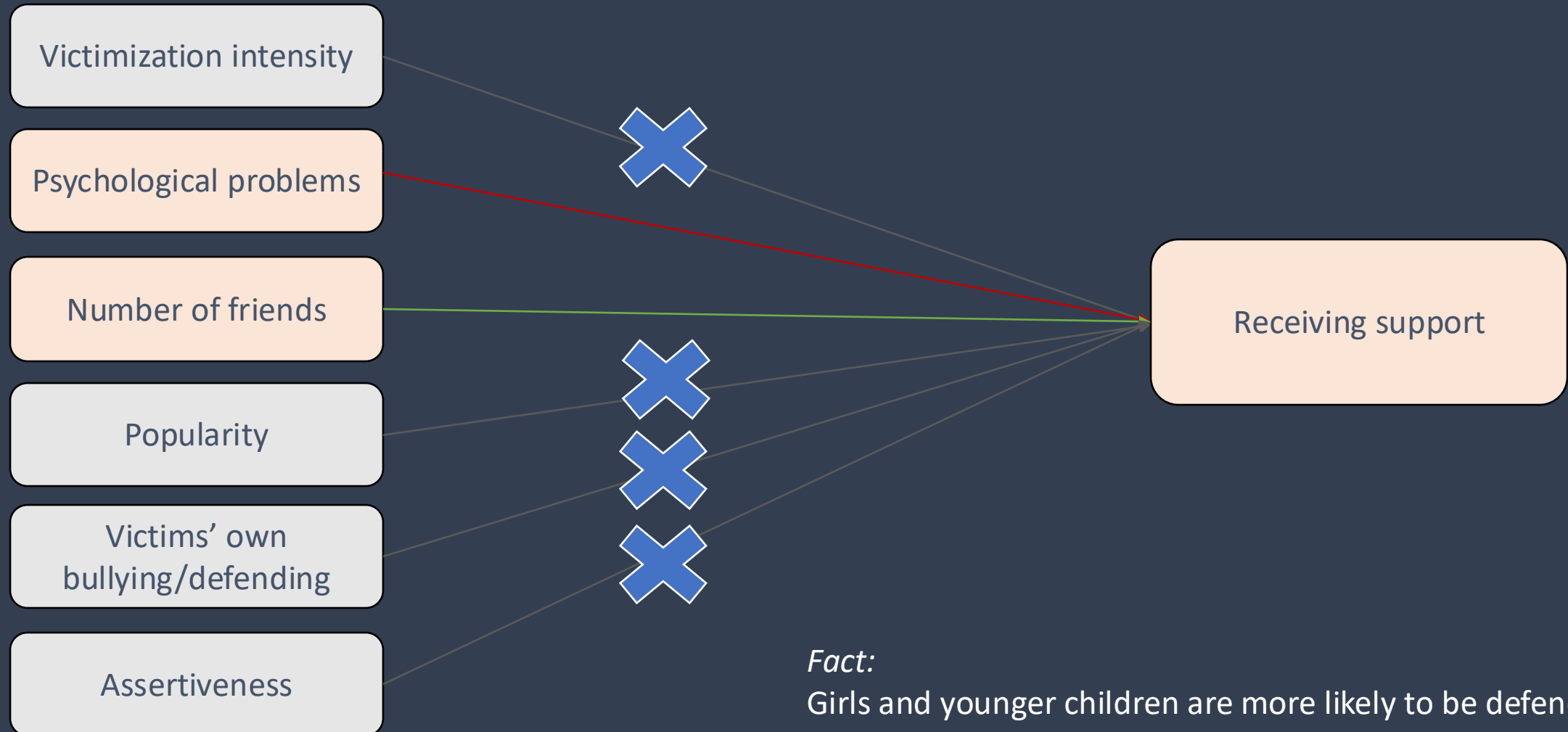
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Key question 3: Who is being defended?



Fact:

Girls and younger children are more likely to be defended and receive support than boys and older children.

Key finding 4: Socially emotionally vulnerable youth are less likely to be defended!

- So, those who need it the most, seem to be “abandoned” by their peers
- How could students be stimulated to also defend these victims?

Key question 4: Can bystanders stop bullying?

What do you think?

Laninga-Wijnen, L., Yanagida, T., & Garandeau, C. F. (in press). Does defending help? The role of peer defending in reducing bullying victimization and enhancing victim's psychological adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*.

Key question 4: Can bystanders stop bullying?

What do you think?

Short answer: no.

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Key question 4: Can bystanders stop bullying?

Previous work on effectiveness of being defended: mostly cross-sectional

Only one previous longitudinal study - detected limited effects (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2023). We expand on this study by focusing on:

- 1) Within-person effects (Latent Change Score Models)
- 2) Bully- and victim-oriented defending
- 3) Number of defenders
- 4) Interactions with gender and age

Key question 4: Can bystanders stop bullying?

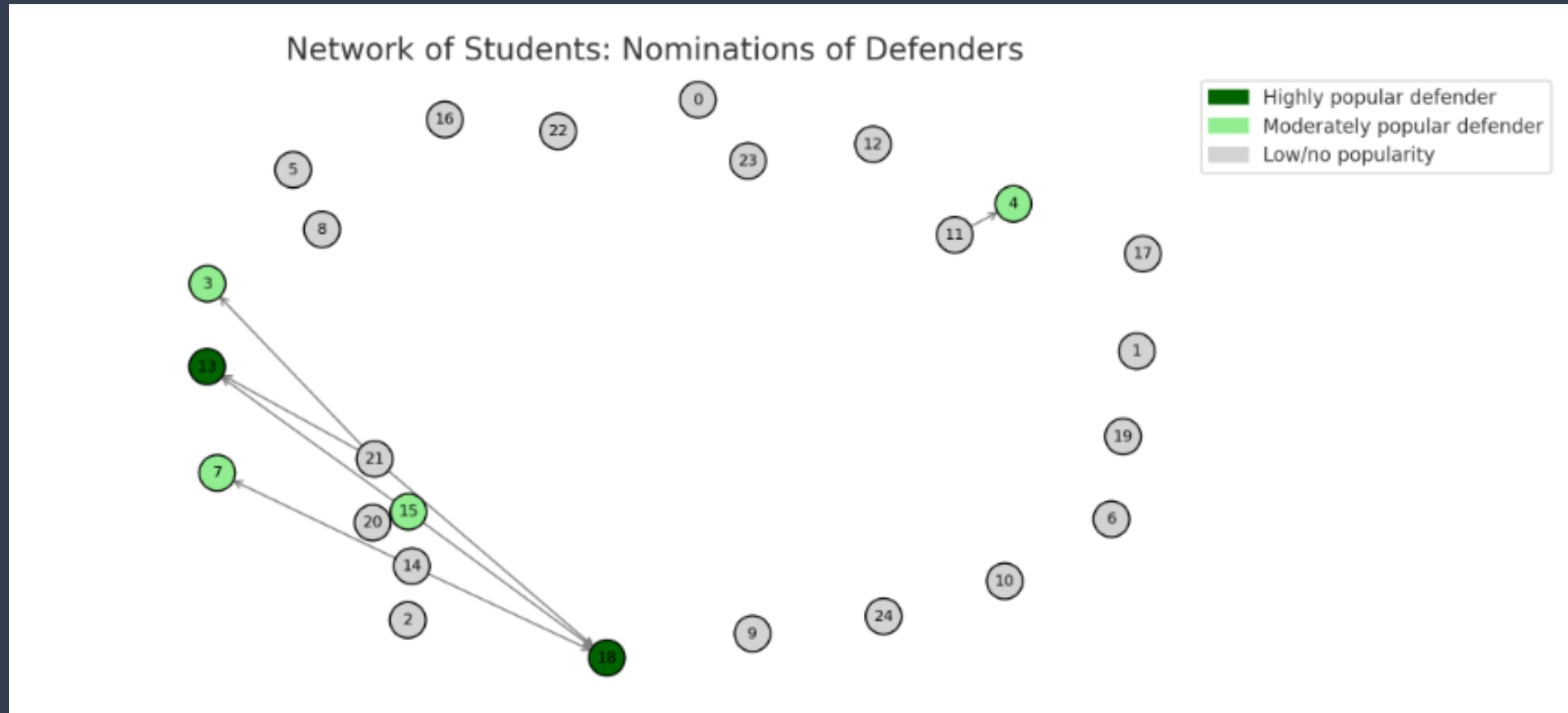
Being defended & victimization

In contrast to our hypothesis, results indicated that being defended was **unrelated to within-person changes in victimization**. These results were consistent across

- 1) types of being defended, i.e., being defended in general, in bully- and victim-oriented ways;
- 2) the categorical indicator of being defended *and* the number of defenders;
- 3) timepoints, i.e., change in victimization from T1-T2 and from T2-T3 respectively.

Barely interaction effects (only 2)

Who defends whom?



Richters, S., Van Zalk, M., Veenstra, R., & Laninga-Wijnen, L. (submitted). No Evidence that defending reduces bullying victimization among adolescents: A social network study.

Who defends whom?

Does the effectiveness of defending in reducing victimization depend on defenders' or victims' popularity?

Short answer: no.

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Short answer: no.

But: networks are very sparse, so hard to obtain convergence!

Key finding 4: Bystanders cannot stop bullying

Long answer:

- 1) Defended victims and non-defended victims both decrease in victimization over time, equally strongly
- 2) Even popular defenders do not seem to be capable of stopping the bullies
- 3) Teachers' belief that bystanders can stop victimization?
-> 85% of 100 teachers: sometimes, or a little bit

Key question 5: Does defending make victims feel better?



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Stress-buffer theories of social support (Cohen & Will, 1986)

Transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Support can affect **primary** and **secondary appraisals** of stressful situations

Key question 5: Does defending make victims feel better?

- 1) **Short-term:** Do victims feel better on days that they are defended than on days that they are non-defended?
- 2) **Long-term:** Do defended victims develop fewer psychological problems than non-defended victims?

Key answer 5: Does defending make victims feel better?

Short-term: Victims feel better on days that they are defended than on days that they are non-defended



Laninga-Wijnen, L., Pouwels, J. L., Giletta, M., & Salmivalli, C. (2024). Feeling better now? Being defended diminishes daily mood problems and self-blame in victims of bullying. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(4), 1294-1322.

Key answer 5: Does defending make victims feel better?



Long-term: Do defended victims develop fewer psychological problems than non-defended victims?

No clear evidence...

Laniga-Wijnen, L., van den Berg, Y. H., Garandeau, C. F., Mulder, S., & de Castro, B. O. (2023). Does being defended relate to decreases in victimization and improved psychosocial adjustment among victims?. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 115(2), 363-375.

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Key answer 5: Does defending make victims feel better?

***Cross-sectionally:** better adjusted. But longitudinal effects: more limited than often assumed.*

Why no longitudinal role?

NO RCT -> DEFENDING IS NOT RANDOM

- 1) Effects of being defended may occur more instantly (see daily diary study)*
- 2) Ceiling effects*
- 3) Opposing cognitive mechanisms cancel each other out*
- 4) Defending enacted in suboptimal ways*
- 5) Benefits of being defended may depend on who is defending or context*

Key answer 5: Does defending make victims feel better?

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Conclusion

- 1) Defending is quite prevalent
- 2) But socially emotionally vulnerable youth are often not defended
- 3) Defending cannot stop bullying
- 4) But it can elevate victims' psychological plight a bit
- 5) And defenders themselves reap social-emotional benefits!

How to integrate these insights into a component about defending?

What new studies are necessary to better understand benefits of being defended?!

Future directions

- 1) Perspective of the bullies: why does defending not deter them?
- 2) Deeper insight to effectiveness of defending for different types of victimization (including cybervictimization)
- 3) Reveal consequences of defending for youth in more vulnerable positions (e.g., LGBTQ+; Learning difficulties)
- 4) Examine consequences of defending **for defenders** from network perspective (replicate work of Huitsing et al., 2014)

Q & A