

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# When to intervene and take a stand: Evaluating bystander roles in intergroup name-calling contexts

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## Abstract

Children ( $n = 121$ ,  $M = 9.86$  years,  $SD = 0.64$ ) and adolescents ( $n = 101$ ,  $M = 12.84$  years,  $SD = 0.69$ ) evaluated proactive and passive bystander behaviour to intergroup name-calling ( $N = 222$ , 54% female). Scenarios depicted ingroup perpetrators and outgroup victims who were from a stigmatized group (ethnicity) or a non-stigmatized group (school affiliation), with bystanders depicted as being proactive (intervening to help) or passive (failing to challenge the aggression), counter to their own group's norm. Children and adolescents personally evaluated proactive bystanders more favourably than passive bystanders. However, adolescents, more than children, expected their peers to be more positive about proactive bystanders than passive bystanders in the stigmatized context. Results are discussed in terms of the complexities of bystander decisions and implications for anti-bullying interventions.

## KEYWORDS

bystander, children and adolescents, intergroup name-calling, norms, stigmatized victimization

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Bullying in childhood and adolescence is associated with numerous detrimental outcomes, including increased anxiety and depression, academic difficulties, and social withdrawal (e.g., Moore et al., 2017; Mulvey, Hoffman, Gönültaş, Hope, & Cooper, 2018). Intergroup bullying is a unique form of bullying in which victimization occurs to an individual perceived to be a member of an outgroup (or ingroup). This form of bullying is particularly harmful, with more negative outcomes for the victim compared to interpersonal bullying (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Russell et al., 2012). Part of what makes it more detrimental is that the bullying is an outcome of normative expectations that reflect prejudicial or exclusionary attitudes. However, peers who witness bullying, referred to as 'bystanders,' can help reduce bullying (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli, 2014).

Although children and adolescents typically hold negative attitudes towards bullying, this is not always reflected in their bystander behaviours. Passive bystander reactions, such as ignoring the aggressive act, are more common than proactive reactions such as helping or defending the victim (Eslea & Smith, 2000). Passive bystander reactions have also been shown to increase with age (Palmer, Rutland, & Cameron, 2015; Trach et al., 2010). Encouraging proactive bystander responses to bullying is a crucial component of successful anti-bullying programs (Abbott, Cameron, & Thompson, 2020; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). However, achieving this goal requires an examination of young people's evaluations of bystander behaviour, particularly in contexts that pit group membership against concerns for group loyalty (Palmer, Filippou, Argyri, & Rutland, 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021). The current research examines how evaluations of bystanders' decisions are affected by the participant's age, intergroup context (stigmatized vs. non-stigmatized), and whether the bystander contravenes a group norm for proactive or passive bystander behaviour.

## 1 | SOCIAL REASONING DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

The social reasoning developmental (SRD) model provides a theoretical framework to examine developmental variation in children and adolescents' bystander responses to bullying in schools (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021; Rutland et al., 2010). Drawing on theories of social identity development (Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009; Nesdale, Killen, & Duffy, 2013) and social domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006), the SRD approach highlights the roles of morality and group processes in children and adolescents' social decision-making across development (Rutland et al., 2010).

The SRD model stipulates that children and adolescents balance moral (what is right or fair), societal (related to group identity, group norms, and peer influence), and personal concerns (a developing sense of autonomy) to inform social decision-making in intergroup contexts (Killen & Rutland, 2011). For example, Palmer et al. (2015) examined the reasoning accompanying children's (8–10) and adolescents' (13–15) bystander reactions to intergroup name-calling. Moral reasoning, such as a concern for others' welfare and the wrongfulness of bullying, accompanied proactive bystander decisions to help victims. In contrast, personal reasoning, such as references to autonomy, justified passive bystander intentions to ignore the name-calling. In this study, children reported higher rates of helping than adolescents. In line with the social domain approach which stipulates that children and adolescents reason across moral, societal, and personal domains, the reasoning provided accompanied the evaluation or 'bystander intention' rather than the age group.

SRD research has also shown how, during intergroup contexts where group norms are salient, societal concerns are often prioritized (Hitti, Mulvey, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021). With age, children can become more adept at weighing up concerns across moral, societal, and personal domains to inform their evaluations of social situations (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Determining how children and adolescents reason about their evaluations of peer bystander behaviour to stigmatized and non-stigmatized victimization can therefore shed further light on the cognitive processes influencing developmental differences in

evaluations of different types of bystander behaviour within intergroup contexts. Furthermore, understanding how and whether reasoning differs in response to bystander reactions in stigmatized compared to non-stigmatized contexts can not only reveal differences in cognitive processes, but can also help inform interventions that promote active bystander behaviour.

## 2 | STIGMATIZED AND NON-STIGMATIZED INTERGROUP CONTEXTS OF VICTIMIZATION

Group membership can include ethnicity, race, nationality, gender and other meaningful social categories such as school groups (Palmer et al., 2015). Some intergroup bullying contexts are therefore more likely to deal with stigma, prejudice, and discrimination than others. Moreover, bias-based bullying has been recognized as distinctive to interpersonal bullying precisely because bias-based bullying indicates underlying issues of prejudice and discrimination (Formby, 2015; Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Killen, Rutland & Ruck, 2011). This is especially the case when stigmatized group members are victimized (Killen et al., 2013; Palmer & Abbott, 2018).

SRD stipulates that group membership increasingly plays a role in decision-making with age. This is because, as children move into adolescence, they become more aware of the status and stigma attached with certain group memberships, and this informs their decision-making (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Mulvey, Boswell, & Niehaus, 2018; Mulvey, Hoffman, et al., 2018; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021). When stigma or status is not apparent, research suggests that bystanders are less likely to help with age unless the victim belongs to the ingroup. For example, adolescents (13–15 years) demonstrated higher intentions to challenge victimization of school-ingroup members than outgroup-school members whereas children (8–10 years) report equally high helping intentions to help ingroup or outgroup members (Palmer et al., 2015). However, other research suggests, with age, bystanders are more likely to challenge exclusion of stigmatized outgroup members.

In line with SRD, there is increasing awareness of the wrongfulness of prejudice into adolescence, and this is reflected in developmental research on bystander responses. Mulvey and colleagues (2018) showed that 10–11 year olds challenged the social exclusion of outgroup-language members more than 8–9 year olds. Yüksel et al (2021) extended this work further, showing adolescents (13–15 years) reported higher helping intentions than children (8–10 years) for outgroup-immigrant victims. These developmental trends reflect children's increasing experience and knowledge of groups (e.g., Abrams et al., 2009). As children get older, they are more aware of different group memberships and relative status attached to them. In non-stigmatized intergroup contexts such as the inter-school context in Palmer et al. (2015), adolescents' decisions not to intervene were predicted by their expectations that the peer group would not intervene. However, in the Mulvey, Boswell, and Niehaus (2018), Mulvey, Hoffman, et al. (2018) and Yüksel et al (2021) studies, age-related *increases* in intervention may be driven by the stigmatized status of the victim. In these stigmatized contexts, adolescents' increased understanding of moral concerns may drive an increase in helping intentions. The present study therefore directly compared developmental differences in bystander responses to bullying of members from stigmatized versus non-stigmatized outgroups.

## 3 | PROACTIVE AND PASSIVE BYSTANDER GROUP NORMS AMONG INGROUP AND OUTGROUP MEMBERS

Despite children and adolescents often reporting anti-bullying attitudes, proactive bystander reactions are less common than passive reactions (Hawkins et al., 2001; Pronk et al., 2013; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Moreover, research shows that passive, but not proactive, bystander reactions become more frequent with age (Gonultas & Mulvey, 2020; Mulvey, Palmer, & Abrams, 2016; Palmer et al., 2015; Trach et al., 2010). Group norms (i.e., peers' expectations for bystander responses) are important predictors of bystander reactions,

particularly into adolescence. Studies show that adolescents who believe their peers would not challenge bullying are also less likely to intervene (Palmer et al., 2015; Thornberg et al., 2022). Across adolescence, proactive responses can also be perceived as riskier and more likely to result in negative repercussions from the group (Mulvey et al., 2016). Therefore, a bystander has to weigh up what they personally would like to do against what they think their group wants them to do.

Group norms are attached to group memberships and are therefore influential for how group members make decisions (Rutland, Hitti, Mulvey, Abrams, & Killen, 2015). Typically, in the absence of group norms, children and adolescents express a preference for ingroup over outgroup peers when evaluating similar behaviours (Abrams et al., 2003). However, research shows that adherence to group norms are crucial in informing children's intergroup evaluations of peers (Abrams et al., 2009; Killen et al., 2013; McGuire, Rizzo, Killen, & Rutland, 2019).

When group norms are attached to group memberships, preference for ingroup over outgroup peers can occur (Abrams et al., 2003, 2009; Hitti et al., 2014). When ingroup members go against ingroup norms, they are evaluated more negatively. Moreover, ingroup members who go against group norms are evaluated more harshly than outgroup members who go against group norms, because their behaviour can potentially impact the functioning and cohesiveness of the group (Abrams et al., 2009). The present research examined how children and adolescents evaluated ingroup and outgroup peers who go *against* group norms, because this approach provides us with an insight into the challenges presented to bystanders who either want to intervene when their group prefers not to get involved, or do not want to intervene when their group believes it is important to do so. Based on the aforementioned research we therefore expected group norms for bystander behaviour to influence bystander decision-making over and above group identity.

## 4 | PERSONAL AND GROUP EVALUATIONS OF BYSTANDER BEHAVIOUR

Examining children and adolescents' personal evaluations indicates ideal or preferred bystander responses to intergroup bullying and victimization (e.g., Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Palmer et al., 2015). Examining peer group evaluations of bystanders can be a robust indicator of what participants would actually do during intergroup bullying contexts (Mulvey et al., 2016; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021). As such, measuring personal and group evaluations of bystanders is one way to test for age-related differences in bystander perceptions and behaviour in intergroup contexts, and, importantly, to investigate the processes that underpin them (Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021; Palmer et al., 2022). In the present study, we asked participants how they thought their group would evaluate bystander behaviour. Research shows that children often think about their own ('personal') and their peer groups' ('group') evaluations of peers similarly, whereas adolescents increasingly report differences between these (McGuire et al., 2019). This can reflect the increasing awareness, with age, of group norms and group-related repercussions for not behaving in line with norms (Abrams et al., 2009; Mulvey et al., 2016). Group norms and group-related repercussions can therefore override moral concerns when the peer group is present. Indeed, personal evaluations could reflect what children and adolescents individually think or want to do (I personally think it is ok to help), whereas peer group evaluations could reflect what children and adolescents think their group would want them to do (My group does not want us to help, so we should do what they say). As both personal and peer group evaluations are important precursors for children's and adolescents' decision-making, we examined both in the present study.

## 5 | THE CURRENT STUDY

In the present study we operationalized the stigmatized intergroup context as an interethnic one in which the victim of name-calling was a 'Traveller'. In the U.K., 'Traveller' is an umbrella term that broadly applies to people with

Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller identities (Bhopal, 2011; Lloyd & Stead, 2001). There are approximately 120,000–300,000 Travellers living in the UK making it numerically comparable to other ethnic minority groups in the U.K., including Bangladeshi and Chinese (Commission for Racial Equality, 2006; van Cleemput, 2010). Travellers are one of the most stigmatized groups in British society, experiencing widespread prejudice (Hutchison, Chihade, & Puiu, 2018; Monbiot, 2003; van Cleemput, 2010). In a study examining school-aged Travellers' experiences of discrimination, participants reported experiences of racist name-calling and physical aggression (Lloyd & Stead, 2001).

For the non-stigmatized group context, we examined school affiliation where participants read about name-calling between their own school and another ostensibly local school. Children and adolescents rate school membership to be an important group identity, making this a meaningful intergroup context without a societal-level form of stigmatization (Palmer et al., 2015).

Children in Grades 4–6 (9–11 years) and adolescents in Grades 8–10 (12–14 years) were presented with an intergroup name-calling scenario between an ingroup perpetrator and outgroup victim. Bullying can encompass a range of behaviours but name-calling is one of the most common forms of bullying experienced by both children and adolescents and is therefore an age-appropriate bullying behaviour to examine (Smith & Shu, 2000; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). In addition, name-calling facilitates experimental control over the severity of the bullying act (Palmer et al., 2015; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002).

We investigated children and adolescents' evaluations of bystanders' counter-normative bystander behaviours in the context of: (1) stigmatized or non-stigmatized intergroup contexts; (2) proactive or passive bystander reactions; and (3) when bystanders were ingroup or outgroup members. We measured participants' personal evaluations of bystanders and how they thought the ingroup and outgroup would evaluate bystanders. As well as understanding how children and adolescents evaluate peer bystanders who challenge norms, the SRD model posits that children's reasoning for their evaluations can highlight the key concerns informing their evaluations (e.g., Killen & Rutland, 2011; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021). As such, we asked participants to provide reasoning for their personal evaluations.

## 6 | HYPOTHESES

### 6.1 | Personal evaluations

**H1:** As children and adolescents view the infliction of harm on others as wrong, we hypothesized that participants would personally evaluate proactive bystander behaviour more positively than passive bystander behaviour, and that this would be the case across both stigmatized and non-stigmatized contexts.

**H2:** When proactive bystanders are evaluated positively, and passive bystanders evaluated negatively, reasoning about personal evaluations would focus on moral concerns (e.g., for others' welfare). When passive bystander reactions are viewed positively, and proactive bystanders are viewed negatively, reasoning would focus on societal concerns (e.g., group loyalty concerns) and personal choice.

### 6.2 | Group evaluations

**H3:** Participants would report that proactive bystander behaviour would be more positively evaluated by the group than passive bystander behaviour.

**H4:** Further, ingroup proactive bystanders would be evaluated more positively than ingroup passive bystanders. It is an open question as to how participants would expect the outgroup to evaluate outgroup proactive and passive bystanders.

**H5:** As adolescents become more sensitive to moral concerns around discrimination (e.g., Mulvey, Boswell, & Niehaus, 2018, Mulvey, Hoffman, et al., 2018; Thijs, 2017; Yuksel et al., 2021), we expected adolescents to think that group evaluations of proactive bystander reactions in stigmatized contexts would be more positive compared to children.

## 7 | METHOD

### 7.1 | Participants

Participants ( $N = 222$ ; 54% female) were children ( $N = 121$ ; age range = 9–11 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 9.86$  years,  $SD = 0.64$ ) and adolescents ( $N = 101$ ; age range = 12–14 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 12.84$  years,  $SD = 0.69$ ) from a low- to middle- income area in the South East of England where a significant number of Gypsy/Travellers reside (Jenkins, 2010). Participants were White British ( $n = 190$ ), Irish Traveller/Gypsy/Roma ( $n = 5$ ), White Polish ( $n = 4$ ), Black African, Black British or Black Caribbean (total  $n = 6$ ), 'mixed race' ( $n = 5$ ) or 'other' ( $n = 11$ ). These numbers do not include participants who failed manipulation checks ( $n = 8$ ), who were dropped from analyses.

Power analysis was conducted in G\*Power to determine the appropriate sample size for a repeated measures ANOVA with 16 groups based on an alpha of 0.05, power of 0.95, and to achieve a medium effect size (0.25). Based on these assumptions we required a sample of 211 participants (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

### 7.2 | Design

The study used a 2 (Age: Children, Adolescents)  $\times$  2 (Intergroup context: Stigmatized, Non-stigmatized)  $\times$  2 (Bystander group membership: Ingroup, Outgroup)  $\times$  2 (Bystander behaviour: Proactive, Passive) mixed-participant design, with age, intergroup context, and bystander behaviour as between-participant variables and group membership as within-participant. The main dependent variables were (1) personal evaluations (2) group evaluations, and (3) reasoning about personal evaluations.

### 7.3 | Procedure

We received ethical approval from the University of Kent's ethical review board. Children worked one-to-one with a trained researcher, or in small groups of no more than six participants per researcher. Adolescents worked individually within their classrooms. Class teachers indicated students who identified as Gypsy/Roma/Traveller ( $n = 5$ ) and these students were automatically assigned to read about the intergroup school context. Remaining participants were randomly assigned to either read about an intergroup school context (final  $n = 112$ ) or the inter-ethnic context of name-calling ( $n = 110$ ).

To set-up the stigmatized intergroup context participants read about a group of friends who identified as 'Travellers'. A description was read aloud describing what ethnicity is, and who might be described as a 'Traveller': 'When thinking about what race/ethnicity means, you might think about the color of your skin, the country you live in, or the country you or your parents were born in. Some people, such as Irish Travellers and Roma Gypsies, belong to a bigger group called Travellers. This is their race/ethnicity. These days, some Travellers live in the same place and

some Travellers don't. Travellers generally have their own special traditions and rules.' We provided an accessible and broad definition to ensure children understood the intergroup context (Bhopal, 2011). Participants in the non-stigmatized group context were not given this definition.

## 7.4 | Independent variables and manipulation checks

### 7.4.1 | Group membership

Participants read about a group of peers (gender-matched, with gender-neutral names) that they belonged to. Those in the interschool condition read about their group of [name of school] friends. Those in the interethnic condition read about their group of White British friends. Following similar procedures used elsewhere, to enhance group identification participants were instructed to select a name for their group, choose an event for their group to attend at the end of the school year, and select a symbol to represent their group (Hitti et al., 2014; Mulvey, Hitti, Rutland, Abrams, & Killen, 2014). Participants were introduced to the outgroup. In the interschool context this was the 'Meadow Park' group of friends. In the interethnic context this was the group of 'Traveller' friends.

To confirm these were meaningful group memberships, participants rated the groups. In both intergroup contexts, participants preferred their ingroup to the outgroup (interschool:  $t(117) = 13.19, p < .001$ ; ethnic intergroup context:  $t(104) = 15.03, p < .001$ ).

### 7.4.2 | Ingroup and outgroup norms for bystander behaviour

Participants either read that the ingroup had a proactive norm and the outgroup had a passive norm, or vice versa, that the ingroup had a passive norm and the outgroup had a proactive norm. This was counterbalanced.

The proactive norm condition read: *In the past your/their group has said that it is important to help with other people's problems. In the past, if your/their group has seen other people having problems they try to get involved with them. Your/their group thinks it's important to get involved, and to help other people sort out their problems.*

The passive norm condition read: *In the past, your/their group has said that it is important not to interfere with other people's problems. In the past, if your/their group has seen other people having problems they try not to get involved with them. Your/their group thinks it is important not to get involved, and to let other people sort out their problems.*

Norms were presented alongside illustrations of the relevant group of friends together with a reminder arrow pointing to the drawing stating, 'Your/Their group; [Name of group] of friends'. To ensure participants understood they completed a manipulation check. Participants who failed were not included in analyses ( $N = 8$ ).

### 7.4.3 | Name-calling scenario

The scenario was based on other intergroup bystander study scenarios (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2015; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021). For the stigmatized intergroup context participants read:

*It's the end of the school day and everyone is on the school playground. Your group of friends is there. The other group of Traveller friends is there too.*

*Then, in front of your group and the other group, you see something happening with 2 other students, one student who is British and one student who is a Traveller.*

*A student called Alex, who is British, starts saying nasty things to a different student called Casey, who is a Traveller. Alex calls Casey names, threatens Casey, and makes fun of Casey in front of your group of friends and the other group of friends. Alex and Casey are in the same year group as you. This has happened after school before—Alex calls Casey horrible names, and threatens and teases Casey in a nasty way. Other than your group and the other group there does not seem to be anyone else around.*

See Supporting Information for the non-stigmatized intergroup context.

#### 7.4.4 | Bystander behaviour

Participants read about an ingroup bystander who wanted to go against the ingroup's bystander norm. For example, if the ingroup norm was to be proactive, participants read, '[Bystander] who is in your group of friends, wants to be different from the other members of your group. [Bystander] says your group should not get involved, but that your group should let [bully] and [victim] sort out their own problems.' Participants also read about an outgroup bystander who wanted to go against the outgroup's norm for bystander behaviour. The presentation of the ingroup and outgroup bystanders was counterbalanced.

### 7.5 | Dependent measures

#### 7.5.1 | Personal and group evaluations of bystander behaviour

In line with previous research (Hitti et al., 2014; Mulvey et al., 2014) we measured personal evaluations of the ingroup and outgroup bystander by asking, 'Do you think [name of bystander] was OK or not OK to do what they did?' Participants selected 'OK' or 'Not OK' and were then asked, 'How OK or not OK?' and responded on a 1 (Really Not OK) to 6 (Really OK) scale. Participants were asked, 'why?' and provided reasoning for their personal evaluation of each bystander.

To measure perceptions of ingroup evaluations of the ingroup bystander and outgroup evaluations of the outgroup bystander participants were asked, 'How do you think your/their group feels about having [name of bystander] in your/their group?' Participants responded on a 1 (Very bad) to 6 (Very good) scale.

#### 7.5.2 | Reasoning categories

To examine participants' reasoning a coding framework was developed based on social domain theory (Smetana, 1995; Turiel, 1983) and prior research employing a social reasoning developmental approach to examine reasoning in intergroup contexts (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013; Mulvey et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2015). Three categories were identified: *Concerns for other's welfare* (moral domain), *Group (dis)loyalty* (societal domain), and *Personal choice* (personal domain). See Table 1 for examples. Inter-rater reliability was conducted on 25% of the reasoning data across four coders. The lead coder achieved Cohen's Kappa of 0.90 with coder two, 0.83 with coder three, and 0.82 with coder four. Due to high agreement, remaining data were shared across coders.

In line with previous research (Hitti et al., 2014; Hitti & Killen, 2015; Palmer et al., 2015; Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021), proportional values were used to code participants' reasoning. For example, if a participant's reason crossed only one category, they were assigned 1 and zeros in the remaining categories. When participants provided reasoning that spanned two categories, 0.50 was entered in each of these reasoning categories and a zero in those not mentioned. Double coding occurred in 4.35% of cases. This procedure allows coding to be conducted and to



**TABLE 1** Reasoning categories and examples

Others' welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because it is very bad for [bully] to call [victim] names</li> <li>• She's bullying people</li> <li>• Because I do not want anyone to get hurt</li> </ul>
Group (dis)loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is going against our group</li> <li>• Because it seems like [bystander] is betraying them</li> </ul>
Personal choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People have different thoughts they can do what they want</li> <li>• It does not matter if he believes different, everybody has their own opinion</li> </ul>

Note: All categories used more than 10%; both positive and negative references to each category are included within each category.

avoid representing participants who used double codes more than once in data analyses, and has been used extensively (e.g., Hitti & Killen, 2015; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001).

## 7.6 | Analytic plan

To measure personal and group evaluations of bystander behaviour two separate 2 (Age: Children, Adolescents)  $\times$  2 (Intergroup context: Stigmatized, Non-Stigmatized)  $\times$  2 (Bystander behaviour: Proactive, Passive bystander)  $\times$  2 (Bystander group membership: Ingroup, Outgroup) ANCOVAs were conducted with repeated measures on the last factor and gender as a covariate. Non-significant effects are not reported. Follow-up tests for significant main effects and interaction effects were Bonferroni-corrected.

Participants' reasoning was examined via four repeated measures ANCOVAs. The four separate analyses enabled us to examine differences in reasoning for each of the four targets (1) ingroup stigmatized (2) ingroup non-stigmatized (3) outgroup stigmatized (4) outgroup non-stigmatized. Bystander behaviour (Proactive vs. Passive) and Evaluations (OK or Not OK) were between-participant variables, and Reasoning (Others' Welfare, Group [Dis]loyalty, Personal Choice) was entered as the repeated-measures factor. Greenhouse-Geisser estimates and Bonferroni-corrected follow-ups are reported.

## 8 | RESULTS

### 8.1 | Personal evaluations of bystander behaviour

In line with H1, there was a main effect of bystander behaviour,  $F(1, 212) = 6.40, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , showing that proactive bystanders were evaluated more positively ( $M = 4.35, SE = 0.10$ ) than passive bystanders ( $M = 3.18, SE = 0.10$ ). There were also no age effects, as predicted.

Furthermore, a bystander behaviour by intergroup context interaction was also observed,  $F(1, 212) = 9.45, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . Unexpectedly, pairwise comparisons showed that proactive bystanders were evaluated more positively in the non-stigmatized context ( $M = 4.78, SE = 0.13$ ) compared to the stigmatized context ( $M = 3.93, SE = 0.14$ ),  $p < .001$ .

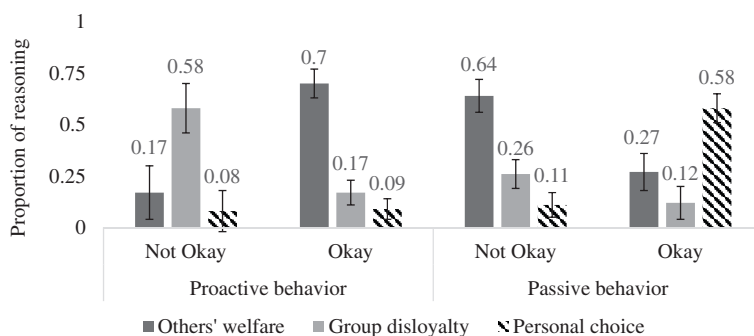
There were no differences across contexts for evaluations of passive bystander behaviour (Non-stigmatized intergroup context:  $M = 3.18, SE = 0.13$ ; Stigmatized intergroup context:  $M = 3.18, SE = 0.14$ ),  $p = .996$ .

### 8.2 | Reasoning for evaluations of four targets

Due to the nature of our design, four bystanders were individually evaluated (1) ingroup bystander stigmatized context, (2) ingroup bystander non-stigmatized context, (3) outgroup bystander stigmatized context, (4) outgroup

**TABLE 2** Pairwise comparisons for reasoning × evaluation × bystander behaviour interactions across four targets

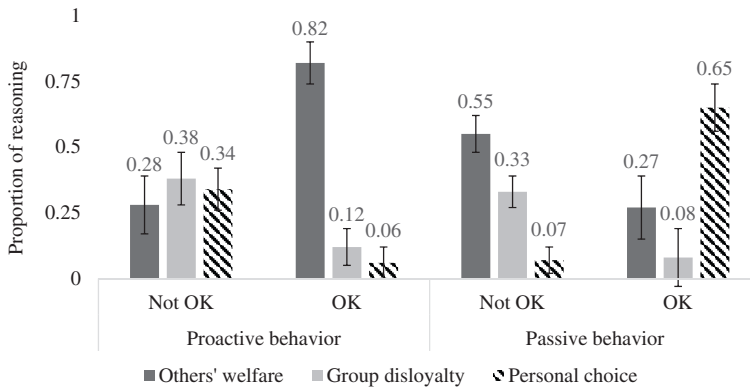
Target	Reasoning comparison	Ok		Not ok	
		Pro	Pass	Pro	Pass
Non-stigmatized ingroup bystander	Others' welfare-group disloyalty	<0.001	<0.315	0.066	0.066
	Others' welfare-personal choice	<0.001	0.028	0.684	<0.001
	Group-disloyalty-personal choice	0.087	<0.001	0.066	0.145
Stigmatized ingroup bystander	Others' welfare-group disloyalty	<0.001	0.356	0.617	0.066
	Others' welfare-personal choice	<0.001	0.036	0.702	<0.001
	Group-disloyalty-personal choice	0.553	<0.001	0.881	0.005
Non-stigmatized outgroup bystander	Others' welfare-group disloyalty	<0.001	0.773	1.00	0.058
	Others' welfare-personal choice	<0.001	<0.001	0.129	0.003
	Group-disloyalty-personal choice	0.066	<0.001	0.081	0.355
Stigmatized outgroup bystander	Others' welfare-group disloyalty	<0.001	0.569	0.116	0.001
	Others' welfare-personal choice	<0.001	<0.001	0.703	<0.001
	Group-disloyalty-personal choice	0.468	<0.011	0.157	0.157

**FIGURE 1** Participants' use of others' welfare, group loyalty, and personal choice reasoning for personal evaluations of the ingroup bystander during the non-stigmatized context. A significant three-way interaction between reasoning × bystander behaviour × evaluation was observed for this target:  $F(1.83, 206.52) = 12.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta squared symbol = 0.102. Greenhouse Geisser estimate reported as Mauchly's test of sphericity was not met. Passive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 22.2% of participants and not ok by 28.2%. Proactive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 39.3% of participants and not ok by 10.3%.

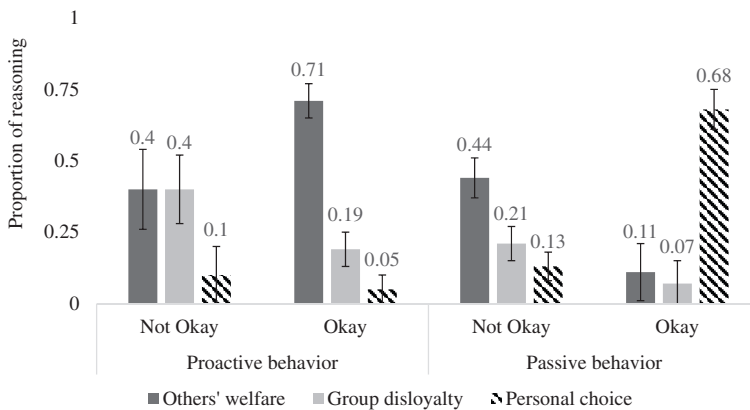
bystander non-stigmatized context. As expected, three-way interactions between reasoning (others' welfare, group (dis)loyalty, and personal choice), evaluations (ok, not ok) and bystander behaviour (proactive, passive), were observed for each target (all  $ps < .001$ ; see Figures 1–4 for  $F$ -values and descriptive statistics for each target).

In line with H2, participants prioritized moral reasons (e.g., referring to others' welfare) above other reasons when rating proactive behaviour 'ok' (all  $ps < .001$ ). When rating passive bystander behaviour 'not ok', moral reasoning was prioritized for all bystanders (see Figures 1–4). This was significant for the non-stigmatized ingroup and stigmatized outgroup bystanders (both  $ps < .01$ ), and marginal for the stigmatized ingroup bystander and non-stigmatized outgroup bystander (Table 2). As expected, participants almost exclusively applied personal reasoning (e.g., referencing personal choice) when rating passive behaviour as ok, across all targets ( $ps < .01$ , see Table 2 and Figures 1–4).

We also predicted that reasoning about proactive bystander behaviour as 'not ok' would focus on societal (e.g., group (dis)loyalty) concerns. This pattern was only observed for non-stigmatized ingroup bystanders and was



**FIGURE 2** Participants' use of others' welfare, group loyalty, and personal choice reasoning for personal evaluations of the ingroup bystander during the stigmatized context. A significant three-way interaction between reasoning  $\times$  bystander behaviour  $\times$  evaluation was observed for this target:  $F(1.85, 184.81) = 16.52, p < .001$ , partial eta squared symbol = 0.14. Greenhouse Geisser estimate reported as Mauchly's test of sphericity was not met. Passive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 12.5% and not ok by 40.4% of participants. Proactive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 31.7% of participants and 15.4% rated it as not ok.

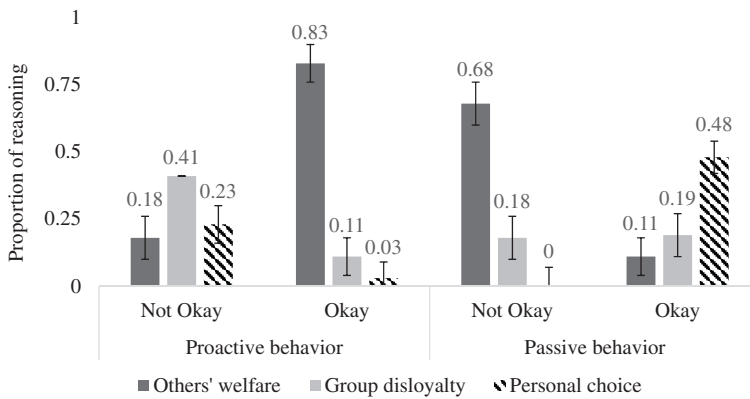


**FIGURE 3** Participants' use of others' welfare, group loyalty, and personal choice reasoning for personal evaluations of the outgroup bystander during the non-stigmatized context. A significant three-way interaction between reasoning  $\times$  bystander behaviour  $\times$  evaluation was observed for this target:  $F(1.76, 199.27) = 4.91, p = .008$ , partial eta squared symbol = 0.04. Greenhouse Geisser estimate reported as Mauchly's test of sphericity was not met. Passive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 18.8% and not ok by 30.8%. Proactive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 41.9% of participants and not ok by 8.5%.

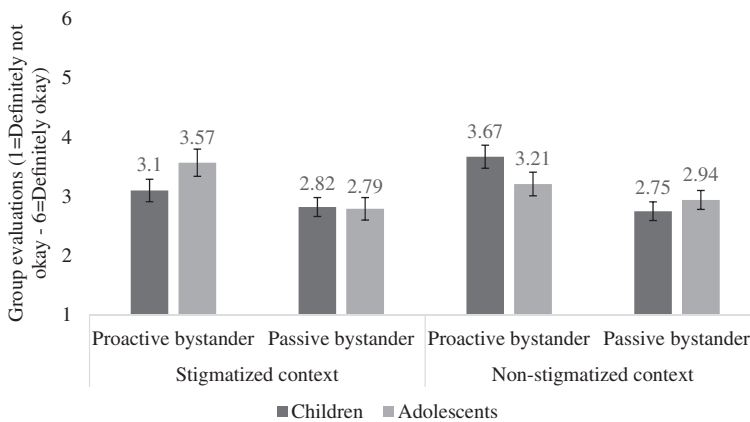
marginal ( $p = .066$ ; see Figure 1). For all other contexts and group conditions, there were no significant differences in the use of reasoning when evaluating proactive and passive bystander behaviour (see Table 2 for all pairwise comparison  $p$  values).

### 8.3 | Group evaluations of bystander behaviour

As predicted (H3) there was a main effect of bystander behaviour,  $F(1, 213) = 21.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$ . Participants thought proactive bystanders would be rated more positively ( $M = 3.39, SE = 0.10$ ) compared to passive bystanders ( $M = 2.82, SE = 0.08$ ).



**FIGURE 4** Participants' use of others' welfare, group loyalty, and personal choice reasoning for personal evaluations of the outgroup bystander during the stigmatized context. A significant three-way interaction between reasoning  $\times$  bystander behaviour  $\times$  evaluation was observed for this target:  $F(2, 200) = 11.40, p < .001$ , partial eta squared symbol = 0.10. Passive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 26% of participants, and not ok by 21.2%. Proactive bystander behaviour was rated as ok by 26% of participants and not ok by 21.2%.



**FIGURE 5** Children's and adolescents' group evaluations of proactive and passive deviant bystander behaviour in stigmatized and non-stigmatized contexts

A two-way interaction between bystander behaviour and group membership was also observed,  $F(1, 213) = 12.30, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . In contrast to expectations (H4), participants thought the ingroup would evaluate ingroup proactive ( $M = 3.16, SE = 0.14$ ) and passive ( $M = 3.03, SE = 0.12$ ) bystanders similarly,  $p = .42$ . However, they thought the outgroup would evaluate the proactive outgroup bystander ( $M = 3.61, SE = 0.14$ ) more positively than the passive outgroup bystander ( $M = 2.62, SE = 0.12$ ),  $p < .001$ .

In line with H5, an interaction between age, bystander behaviour, and intergroup context was observed,  $F(1, 213) = 5.58, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Children in the non-stigmatized condition thought that groups would evaluate proactive bystanders ( $M = 3.67, SE = 0.20$ ) more positively than passive bystanders ( $M = 2.75, SE = 0.16$ ),  $p < .001$ , but that bystanders in the stigmatized context would be evaluated similarly (proactive  $M = 3.10, SE = 0.19$ ; passive  $M = 2.82, SE = 0.16$ ),  $p = .214$ . In contrast, adolescents thought that both groups would evaluate bystanders in the non-stigmatized context similarly (proactive  $M = 3.21, SE = 0.20$ ; passive  $M = 2.94, SE = 0.16$ ),  $p = .253$ , but that the proactive bystander in the stigmatized context ( $M = 3.57, SE = 0.23$ ) would be viewed more positively than the passive bystander ( $M = 2.79, SE = 0.19$ ),  $p = .005$  (see Figure 5).

## 9 | DISCUSSION

Understanding when and why children and adolescents evaluate proactive and passive bystander behaviours as acceptable is important for informing research on social development, bystander behaviour, and anti-bullying initiatives. This study provided a novel examination of children and adolescents' bystander reactions to the name-calling of victims from stigmatized or non-stigmatized groups. For the first time, we demonstrated how stigmatized versus non-stigmatized contexts influenced children and adolescents' personal and group evaluations of counter-normative bystander behaviour. We discuss our key findings below.

First, children and adolescents personally viewed proactive bystander behaviour more positively than passive bystander behaviour. This is important, as bystanders who exhibited proactive behaviour did so *despite* their group having a common expectation not to get involved in others' problems (e.g., Palmer et al., 2015). Second, we showed that, although participants personally viewed proactive bystander behaviour more favourably than passive bystander behaviour, the extent to which they did so varied based on the intergroup context. Children and adolescents personally endorsed proactive bystander behaviour more when bullying was directed towards a non-stigmatized (outgroup school) victim, compared to a stigmatized (interethnic) victim. That is, intervening to help a victim from a different school was viewed as being more acceptable than intervening to help a victim from a different ethnic group. Possibly, participants felt more able or prepared to challenge interschool bullying compared to the bullying of a Traveller victim (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2016; Wallrich, Palmer, & Rutland, 2021). It is also possible that participants may have held more stereotypes or biases towards the Traveller victim, thus contributing to the lower endorsements of intervening in the stigmatized compared to non-stigmatized context.

Third, we found differences in reasoning based on bystander behaviour, in line with the SRD model (Killen & Rutland, 2011). When participants endorsed proactive bystander behaviour their reasoning focused on protecting others' welfare (moral), recognizing the moral obligation to intervene and prevent harm. Participants who endorsed passive bystander behaviour referenced personal choice reasoning whereby it was the bystander's personal choice as to what course of action to take. This supports earlier findings (Palmer et al., 2015).

When evaluating the bystander behaviours as wrong, we expected group (dis)loyalty to be referenced more as the bystander behaviour always went against the group's norm. However, participants instead equally considered others' welfare, group (dis)loyalty, and personal reasoning. The use of others' welfare reasoning indicates that participants recognized the harm that occurs from being a victim of harassment and the obligation to prevent harm when feasible. This suggests that participants recognize the necessity of 'taking a stand' even when they also felt uncertainty about it and reference group (dis)loyalty and personal choice. More research is needed to untangle children's social cognitions in these instances, particularly when proactive bystander reactions are counter-normative.

Future studies should include age in analyses of reasoning about bystander evaluations. The present study focused on how reasoning varied according to evaluation as we were interested in the cognitive processes underpinning participants' evaluations of bystanders, and how evaluations varied according to age. Although our developmental predictions were related to evaluations, we recognize that increased social experience, perspective-taking, and knowledge of group identities that accompany adolescence can also inform reasoning.

We observed age trends across how the group would perceive proactive and passive bystander behaviour in stigmatized and non-stigmatized contexts. Adolescents reported the group would favour proactive bystanders in stigmatized compared to non-stigmatized contexts, whereas children showed the opposite. This may be driven by an increased developmental awareness that bullying towards a stigmatized group member is discriminatory (Thijs, 2017), and therefore it is more necessary to challenge it compared to non-stigmatized contexts. This reaction also supports the sense of obligation that adolescents consider when witnessing harassment towards stigmatized groups. Adolescents may also increasingly expect their peer group to be supportive of a proactive bystander who goes against the norm of not intervening in a stigmatized context, as this behaviour may help enhance the group's image or reputation (Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). In the same vein, if a bystander does not intervene when a member of a stigmatized group is bullied and the group has a helping norm, this passive behaviour could

make the group appear supportive of discrimination. These self-presentation concerns should be explored in future research.

## 9.1 | Limitations and future directions

This study provided a novel examination of an understudied stigmatized group, referred to as 'Travellers' in the United Kingdom. We recognize that 'Travellers' are not a homogenous group within the United Kingdom, and it is important to be mindful that this is an umbrella term. The stigmatized status of Travellers is comparable to immigrant groups that experience social exclusion and discrimination in their host country. However, more research is needed to determine whether the current findings are specific to the 'Traveller' context, or would transfer to other stigmatized groups. Different social groups are affiliated with different levels of prejudice, group norms, and stereotypes, all which could inform evaluations. Travellers are an openly stigmatized ethnic group in the United Kingdom (Hutchison et al., 2018; Monbiot, 2003; van Cleemput, 2010), however children and adolescents may evaluate bystander decisions differently depending on how 'acceptably stigmatized' an ethnic group may be (Hutchison et al., 2018). Future research should examine how levels of prejudice, and attitudes towards different group identities influence consequent bystander reactions.

Contrary to expectations, participants believed that their group would evaluate ingroup proactive and passive bystanders similarly, whereas the outgroup would evaluate proactive bystanders more positively than passive bystanders. These evaluations may be driven by the ingroup perpetrator and outgroup victim roles. Future research should examine outgroup perpetrators targeting ingroup victims. This is an important future direction given research shows differences in bystander responses depending on victim and perpetrator group membership (Nesdale et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2015).

The phrasing for our personal evaluation question asked participants to evaluate bystander behaviour, whereas the phrasing for our group evaluation question focused on participants' perceptions of how the group would feel about having the bystander in their group. The latter question requires participants to take an additional step of perspective-taking. This is because we wanted to developmentally test the difference between personal evaluation and group evaluation (McGuire et al., 2019), expecting older participants to be more likely to differentiate between personal and group preferences. Recent research suggests perspective-taking is an important part of bystander decision-making during intergroup contexts (Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2021). Future studies should continue to examine differences between personal and group evaluations, both of the intergroup act and of how individuals and the group might feel about different bystander behaviours.

We chose to examine evaluations of different types of bystander behaviour (passive and proactive) which allowed us to experimentally test the effect of norms and intergroup contexts on children and adolescents' bystander reactions. There are multiple methodologies to use when studying bystander behaviour and our social-cognitive approach is just one strategy for understanding the motivation to intervene in victimization situations (see Palmer, Filippou, et al., 2021; Palmer, Mulvey, & Rutland, 2021 for a review). Measuring evaluations of peers can provide a strong indicator of what participants would actually do (Mulvey et al., 2016), compared to intentions or recalling past behaviour, which are more open to self-presentational concerns. However, future research should consider additional behavioural methods and use of multiple-methods to strengthen the reliability and replicability of these findings (Yuksel et al., 2021). Future research could also examine the importance of intergroup attitudes, intergroup contact, and perceived acceptability of prejudice towards the outgroup, in shaping bystander behaviour and evaluations of bystander behaviour.

## 10 | CONCLUSION

This study provided novel findings about the role of the bystander in adolescent peer interactions. Results provide a unique contribution to the literature by revealing psychological processes that underpin children's and adolescents'

evaluations of bystander reactions to bullying of stigmatized and non-stigmatized victims. This is the first study to compare these contexts directly, in two age groups, whilst also examining the important role of bystander norms.

Our results have important implications for anti-bullying programs which foster proactive bystander behaviour (Abbott et al., 2020; Polanin et al., 2012) and reiterate the need to consider the context when supporting children in how to effectively respond (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014; Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Being a member of a stigmatized group adds another layer of psychological harm and trauma to the bullying context. Bullying interventions therefore need to employ a more nuanced approach that promotes proactive bystander behaviour by focusing on moral concerns, unpacking personal concerns, and discussing group memberships and group dynamics. Developmental science has an urgent mandate to address the phenomenon of bullying behaviour, and to provide effective information for contributing to positive peer relationships and group dynamics in childhood and adolescence.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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