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Adolescents' Compassion is Distinctively Associated With More Prosocial and Less Aggressive Defending Against Bullying When Considering Empathic Emotions and Costs

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Adolescents who witness bullying often stand by passively rather than supporting their victimized peers with prosocial defending. In this study, we investigated whether compassion, as unique from empathic distress and anger and social costs, related to more prosocial and less aggressive defending and passivity.

Method: Australian adolescents ($N = 210$; $M_{age} = 14.66$, SD = 1.11, age range = 13–17 years; 56% girls) completed surveys that also included embedded film clips portraying peer social bullying. Adolescents reported their compassion, empathy, perceived costs, and intended defending following each clip, and reported their recent experience with bullying and defending.

Results: A multivariate path model revealed that adolescents higher in compassion, but also in empathic distress and empathic anger, intended more prosocial defending. Yet, only compassion was associated with less aggressive defending and empathic anger was associated with more aggressive defending. Empathic distress and social costs associated with more passivity, but compassion and empathic anger associated with less passivity.

Conclusion: This study provides the first evidence of unique and differential associations of empathic distress, empathic anger, compassion, and perceived social costs with different bystander behavior intentions among adolescents. Importantly, the findings support the distinctive role of compassion in constructive prosocial and lower aggressive defending.

Peer bullying among children and adolescents remains a widespread social issue (Menesini and Salmivalli 2017), despite ongoing efforts to reduce it and its associated negative health effects (Arseneault 2017; Ttofi et al. 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2019). Peer bullying occurs when individuals are intentionally and repeatedly targeted by one or more powerful peers, through physical aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking), verbal aggression (e.g., threats, name calling), or relational/social aggression (e.g., exclusion, rumor spreading) (Smith 2016). Importantly, witnesses (i.e., bystanders) are often present and they can play a crucial role in preventing and stopping bullying by intervening to support their victimized peers (Menesini and Salmivalli 2017; Sainio et al. 2010). Many interventions therefore aim to reduce bullying by increasing what has been called bystander defending (Polanin et al. 2012). However, witnesses commonly remain passive, taking no action to intervene (Hawkins et al. 2001; Pozzoli et al. 2017; Salmivalli 2010).

Therefore, as a step towards preventing bullying behaviors, research is needed to understand which factors support, and which ones inhibit, bystanders' ability to defend their victimized peers.

In recent years, researchers have found value in distinguishing between aggressive and prosocial defending in response to peer bullying (e.g., Bussey et al. 2020; Lambe and Craig 2020; Steinvik et al. 2023), rather than considering defending in general as has been done in the majority of past research (Lambe et al. 2019). Prosocial defending includes comforting the victimized peer, involving an adult for help, or using assertive communication directed at the person bullying. Aggressive defending includes retaliation and a motivation to attack or threaten the person bullying, either indirectly (e.g., gossiping about the person bullying) or directly (verbal or physical attacks or threats) (Lambe and Craig 2020). Prosocial defending, rather than aggressive defending, is preferred because it can support constructive conflict resolution and help the victimized peer to feel supported, whereas aggressive defending may exaggerate retaliation as a means of resolution and place the defender and others involved at risk of future conflict or bullying (e.g., Jung and Schröder-Abé 2019; Lambe et al. 2017; Sainio et al. 2010).

Despite evidence that adolescents sometimes defend, there has been little research identifying the individual or social circumstances that yield prosocial as compared to aggressive defending in peer bullying (Lambe and Craig 2020). Thus, the goal of this study was to identify the correlates of adolescents' prosocial and aggressive defending, as well as their passivity. Based on past theory and research (e.g., Eisenberg et al. 2010; Hoffman 2001; Steinvik et al. 2023; Stevens and Taber 2021), we specifically extend on emerging evidence that compassion for others would be a unique correlate of prosocial defending, above and beyond other empathy-related factors (i.e., empathic distress, empathic anger) and social costs of defending (Steinvik et al. 2023).

1 | Empathic Responses and Defending Behaviors in Peer Bullying

Consistent with theory (e.g., Lemerise and Arsenio 2000; van Kleef and Lelieveld 2022), research has shown that individuals who report more cognitive and emotional empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the emotional states of others, respectively, are also more likely to notice difficulties experienced by others and engage in prosocial behaviors (e.g., Decety et al. 2016; Eisenberg et al. 2010). Similar research findings have emerged when studying peer bullying, with empathy positively associated with defending (for a systematic review, see Lambe et al. 2019). However, theories of empathy and prosocial behavior (e.g., Eisenberg et al. 2010; Hoffman 2001; Stevens and Taber 2021) postulate that witnessing other's distress can lead to empathic distress (also referred to as personal distress), empathic anger, and/or compassion. These three forms of empathy-related responses are relevant to defending against peer bullying because they have been described as uniquely and differentially related to different bystander intentions and behaviors, ranging from passivity to prosocial and aggressive action (e.g., Klimecki 2019; Steinvik et al. 2023; Vitaglione and Barnett 2003).

1.1 | Empathic Distress and Anger

Theory has outlined how empathy can be experienced as empathic distress, described as intense negative arousal and feelings of distress because of sharing the distress of others (Batson et al. 1987; Eisenberg and Fabes 1990; Singer and Klimecki 2014). However, empathy can instead (or also) lead to feelings of anger on behalf of others when witnessing intentionally harmful and unfair treatment, a moral emotional response referred to as empathic anger (Hoffman 2001). These two forms of empathy are likely to yield different defending behaviors.

First, when empathic distress occurs, individuals are motivated to reduce personal feelings of distress that can emerge as avoidance or minimization. These responses then interfere with helping or defending others (e.g., Batson et al. 1987; Cialdini et al. 1987). Such a pattern suggests that empathic distress should be associated with more passive bystanding and less defending in any form, especially in situations where avoidance or escape is possible. Indeed, research has shown that the experience of negative affect is more likely to predict avoidance than helping in a range of situations (e.g., helping someone who is injured) (e.g., Eisenberg et al. 1989; Hein et al. 2010).

Second, in contrast to the expected positive impact of empathic distress on passive bystanding and avoidance of defending, empathic anger should be related to less passive bystanding and more defending, especially more aggressive defending. Hoffman's theory of empathy (2001) postulates that empathic anger prevents passivity by acting as a motivational trigger of action to help those who have been treated in a harmful or unfair way. However, this reaction is more likely to involve retaliation and aggression, suggesting aggressive defending.

We located a handful of past studies that have addressed some of these associations in peer bullying among adolescents or university students. One study found that youth higher in empathic distress were more passive in response to witnessing bullying (Rieffe and Camodeca 2016), but another study reported that empathic distress was associated with more aggressive defending (Lambe and Craig 2022). In a third study, adolescents' dispositional level of empathic anger was negatively associated with passivity and positively associated with defending (i.e., not differentiating between aggressive and prosocial defending; Pozzoli et al. 2017). Finally, in the only study that measured empathic distress and empathic anger (plus compassion), university students who reported more empathic distress were higher in passive bystanding, but empathic distress was not significantly associated with either prosocial or aggressive defending in response to witnessing cyberbullying (Steinvik et al. 2023). Youth who reported more empathic anger were less passive and reported more aggressive and prosocial defending. Some of these mixed findings may have occurred because compassion, as a third form of empathic responding that could be the one most linked to prosocial action, was not considered.

2 | Compassion as a Third and Unique Form of Empathy

Empathy in response to witnessing the distress or difficulties of others can also take the form of compassion. Compassion (or compassionate empathy) has been described as the tolerance of empathic emotions, such as distress or anger, which allows the experience of empathy without becoming overwhelmed or reactive (Strauss et al. 2016; Stevens and Taber 2021). There is not one universally agreed-upon definition of compassion. However, recent conceptualizations (e.g., Gilbert et al. 2017; Pommier et al. 2020) have focused on compassion as characterized by the ability to 1) remain engaged and tolerate other's distress/suffering without suppression or overidentification, 2) respond with concern/kindness when witnessing other's distress/suffering, and 3) approach others' distress and difficulties with non-judgment. Applying this conceptualization, research has shown that compassion (self-report and experimental induction) is positively associated with positive affect, generosity, cooperation, and prosocial helping (e.g., Stevens and Taber 2021; Weng et al. 2015), a concern for all people, as well as disliked others (e.g., Oveis et al. 2010; Sprecher and Fehr 2005), and less punishment of individuals who have offended self and others (e.g., Condon and DeSteno 2011; McCall et al. 2014). In the context of bullying, compassion may enable bystanders to focus on the victimized peer rather than on personal aversive feelings, which in turn could facilitate feelings of warmth and concern, allowing for more constructive helping. Compassion may also mitigate against fight-flight-freeze responses when witnessing the unfair treatment of a victimized peer (Gu et al. 2017; Stevens and Taber 2021).

The above theoretical ideas and research suggest that compassion should uniquely result in less passivity, more prosocial defending, and less aggressive defending against peer bullying. However, to date, only one study has examined these associations in the context of peer bullying (Steinvik et al. 2023). In this study, university students' dispositional level of compassion was uniquely associated with greater intentions for prosocial defending and lesser intentions for aggressive defending in response to witnessing cyberbullying. Most notably, compassion, but not empathic distress or empathic anger, was the one aspect of empathy that related to more prosocial but less aggressive defending responses. However, this study included university students, focused on cyberbullying, and it did not consider the social costs of defending that are known to interfere in adolescents' defending.

3 | Social Costs of Defending

The empathy-related responses of empathic distress, empathic anger, and compassion are not the only determinants of passivity and defending behavior. Social circumstances, such as the social costs of defending, can also matter to defending actions. Social costs can include fear of becoming the next victim, and fear of losing popularity, status or friends. All these perceived social costs have also been associated with bystander behavior intentions and reported behaviors among youth (Padilla-Walker et al. 2018; Spadafora et al. 2020). Social costs can be relevant because individuals who bully often hold a powerful position in the peer group (Duffy et al. 2017; Juvonen and Galván 2008; Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck 2010), whereas victimized individuals typically carry less power and more social stigma (Forsberg et al. 2014; Pellegrini and Long 2002). Additionally, adolescence is a period where social acceptance and approval from peers are important influences on their behaviors (e.g., Pozzoli et al. 2012). Research indicates that bystander defending is less likely if adolescents' status and/or sense of security and belonging within the group is threatened by defending bullied peer (e.g., Spadafora et al. 2020; van der Ploeg et al. 2017). However, it remains unknown whether empathic responses or compassion following witnessing bullying will account for adolescents' intended defending behaviors over and above any perceived social costs of defending. Thus, to better understand the unique roles of empathic responses and compassion alongside social costs in defending intentions in response to witnessing bullying, they should be simultaneously examined in a single predictive model.

4 | Current Study

In summary, there is solid theory but limited evidence linking new conceptualizations of multiple components of empathy with the diversity of adolescents' defending behaviors in peer bullying. Our general aim in this study was to test the unique association of adolescents' compassion especially, but also empathic distress, empathic anger, and perceived social costs of defending with the three bystander behavior intentions of passive bystanding, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending. Expanding on previous research that relied upon dispositional measures (Steinvik et al. 2023), measures in this study were completed by adolescents after they viewed bullying events via short film clips, to induce control over possible differences and recall errors that can emerge out of asking adolescents to recall their past experiences of defending. In addition, adolescents reported their personal experiences with victimization, bullying, and defending, so 1) reports of remembered bystander behaviors could be used to validate the primary defending measures from the analog film clip procedure, and 2) to control for personal history of bullying and victimization (and gender) in the analyses, given that personal experiences have been related to bystander defending behaviors (e.g., Bussey et al. 2020; Lambe and Craig 2020).

5 | Methods

5.1 | Participants

Participants were 223 Australian adolescents aged 13 to 17 years ($M_{age} = 14.66$, SD = 1.11; girls = 55.7%). Thirteen adolescents were excluded due to excessive missing data or identification as an extreme outlier, resulting in a final $N = 210$ for the analyses. The majority of adolescents (87.6%) reported their birthplace as Australia and 2.9% reported New Zealand. In addition, 51% identified as European, 9.5% Australian First Peoples/Torres Strait Islander/Pacific Islander, 4.8% Asian, 5.7% other ethnic groups, with the remaining 29% reporting no additional ethic group/background.

5.2 | Procedure

5.2.1 | Ethics, Recruitment, and Data Collection

After the procedures were approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee, 60 adolescents volunteered to participate in the study based on community advertising to parents and word of mouth due to COVID restrictions on school attendance and recruitment for research, and 50 completed the online protocol and survey. Adolescents accessed a separate survey on completion to provide their email so that they could be sent a small gift voucher as a thank you. Once school-based research was an option again, principal consent was obtained from three schools, in which 163 adolescent school students with parental consent participated in the online survey while in their regular classrooms during school hours, and 160 completed the survey. Adolescents were informed that it was voluntary to complete the survey and received a small gift voucher as a thank you. Cohort (community adolescent or school student) was considered in the below analyses as a potential covariate.

5.2.2 | Development of the Film Clip Stimuli

The online survey included demographic questions; an embedded analog procedure used successfully in past research (Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2009) that included four short (15-25 s) bullying film clips followed by items to measure empathic distress, empathic anger, compassion, perceived social costs of defending, and behavioral intentions of passive bystanding, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending; and questions about their personal experience with bullying, victimization, and defending in the past few months. The four bullying film excerpts were selected after conducting two pilot studies (see below). In the first pilot study, educational and youth-focused movies resulted in the selection of sixteen short depictions of bullying scenes that were clear and age-appropriate. The scenes were edited to be less than 30 s and face-validity was tested by collecting ratings of emotional responses, realism, and appropriateness for adolescent research from 50 undergraduate psychology students (ages 17-25). Based on the results, six videos that were not repetitive with each other were selected based on their high rating for realism and the range of emotional responses elicited. Most scenes portrayed social/verbal aggression with mild physical aggression, as participants rated physical bullying scenarios as highly distressing.

The second pilot study was conducted with a convenience sample of 30 adolescents (ages 13-17). The aim was to ensure that the selected bullying scenarios were salient to adolescents and elicited comparable feelings of empathy, distress, anger, and compassion, as well as perceived social costs of defending if participants were to witness the same scenario at their school. Additional verbal feedback from adolescents indicated that the video scenarios were clear, realistic, and that they were able to understand all the items that followed. Some adolescents also indicated that the survey was too long making it difficult to complete all of it in one session, so we reduced the six videos to four videos for the primary study. The final four videos depicted adolescent actors involved in a mix of relational (e.g., social exclusion), verbal (e.g., name-calling), and mild physical (e.g., throwing a paper/water on victim) aggression in the presence of bystanders. Specifically, two of the scenes depicted bullying towards a girl (i.e., making fun of the victimized girl, and throwing a piece of paper towards a victimized girl), while the other two scenes depicted bullying towards a boy (i.e., making fun of the boy being victimized, and pouring water on the victimized boy).

5.3 | Measures Following the Film Clip in the Primary Study

5.3.1 | Passive Bystanding, Aggressive Defending, and Prosocial Defending

Items were drawn from previous research (Pronk et al. 2018; Salmivalli et al. 1996) to measure passive bystanding (3 items; e.g., "I would ignore the situation"), aggressive defending (3 items; e.g., "I would attack or threaten the person doing the bullying"), and prosocial defending (3 items; e.g., "I would try to comfort the person being victimized"). Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *not likely at all*, 5 = *very likely*). Total scores were calculated by averaging the 12 responses for each subscale, Cronbach $\alpha = 0.95$ for passivity, 0.94 for aggressive defending, and 0.94 for prosocial defending.

5.3.2 | Compassion

Six items were developed for this study based on compassion items used in previous research (Gilbert et al. 2017; Pommier et al. 2020, e.g., "I would think about how the person being victimized is feeling, "I would feel concerned because of what was happening to the person being victimized", "I would think the person who did the bullying did a bad thing, but may not be a bad person"). Items responses were on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*). A total score was calculated by reversing some items and then averaging all 24 items, with a higher score indicating a higher level of compassion; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.92$.

5.3.3 | Empathic Distress and Empathic Anger

Items were drawn from previous studies of empathic distress (e.g., Batson et al. 1987; Davis 1983) and from the Trait Empathic Anger Scale (e.g., Vitaglione and Barnett 2003), selecting two items to measure empathic distress (e.g., "I would feel worried and upset") and two items to measure empathic anger (e.g., "I would feel angry because of what was happening to the person being victimized"). Following each film clip, adolescents completed all items using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*). Total scores were calculated by averaging the 8 items for each scale, with a higher score indicating a higher level of empathic distress or empathic anger; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$ and 0.94 for distress and anger, respectively.

5.3.4 | Perceived Social Costs of Defending

Four items were developed based on qualitative descriptions of perceived social costs of defending (Padilla-Walker et al. 2018;

Spadafora et al. 2020; e.g., "if you chose to defend the person being victimized, how likely is it that you would be bullied yourself?"). Items responses were on a 5-point scale (1 = *not likely at all*, 5 = *very likely*). A total score was calculated by averaging all 16 items, with a higher score indicating greater perceived social costs of defending; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.97$.

5.4 | Personal Experience: Bullying, Victimization, and Past Defending

After reading a brief definition of bullying[1] adapted from the Olweus (1994) definition and used in previous studies (e.g., Callaghan et al. 2019), three items were used to measure how often in the past few months students had "bullied other students", "been the victim of bullying", and "witnessed bullying" on a 5-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very often/several times a week*). Adolescents who reported any witnessing of bullying in the past few months also completed a 9-item defending scale, containing the same items as the bystander behavior intention scale in response to the videos, using a 5-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very often/ several times a week*). Total scores for past passivity, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending were calculated by averaging the three relevant items for each behavior, respectively; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.85$ for past passivity, 0.73 for past aggressive defending, and 0.75 for past prosocial defending. Pearson's correlations testing the relationships between these bystander behaviors in the past few months with adolescents' intended passivity, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending reported in response to the videos of bullying revealed that each type of intention correlated significantly (and most strongly) with the corresponding behavior ($r = 0.67$, 0.75, and 0.70 for passivity, aggressive and prosocial, respectively, all p's < 0.001).

5.5 | Data Analytic Strategy

Some item level data were missing (range 1.9% to 4.3%) completely at random (Little's MCAR test: $\chi^2[150] = 138.81$, $p = 0.734$), and no highly influential outliers were identified. The expectation maximization algorithm in SPSS v27 was used to replace the item level missing data to maintain all 210 adolescents in all analyses. Means (*M*s), standard deviations (SDs), and zero-order correlations between all measures, and with gender (1 = girls, 2 = boys) and age, were examined in preliminary analyses. For the primary analyses, AMOS v27 was used to estimate all hypothesized associations, testing the paths from the measures of empathic distress, empathic anger, compassion, and perceived social costs of defending to the three bystander behavior intentions (the dependent variables of passive bystanding, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending) in response to the bullying videos. Gender (male or female), history of victimization and bullying, and cohort (community adolescent or school student) were included as covariates, freeing all significant associations between them and the independent and dependent measures in the model. As participants' age did not correlate with any of the dependent measures, it was not included in the multivariate model.

6 | Results

6.1 | Correlations

Correlations between all measures are shown in Table 1. As expected, adolescents' empathic distress, empathic anger, compassion, and social costs were positively intercorrelated with each other, as were measures of intended bystander behaviors. Also shown in Table 1, gender, history of victimization and bullying of others, and cohort (community adolescents or school students) were correlated with some measures (described in more detail below).

6.2 | Multivariate Path Analysis of Bystander Behavior Intention

The full multivariate path model had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(10) = 20.24$, $p = 0.027$, CFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.070 (90% CI 0.023 − 0.122), $p = 0.200$, and accounted for 38% of the variance in passive bystanding, 23% of the variance in aggressive defending, and 64% of the variance in prosocial defending. As detailed in Table 2, with primary associations illustrated in Figure 1, compassion was significantly and positively associated with intended prosocial defending but negatively associated with passive bystanding and aggressive defending. Compared to compassion, empathic distress and anger had different patterns of associations with passivity and defending. Empathic distress was positively associated with passivity and prosocial defending, but not significantly associated with aggressive defending, while empathic anger was associated with less passivity and more aggressive and prosocial defending. Also shown in Figure 1, perceived social cost of defending was positively associated with passive bystanding, but not significantly associated with defending. As detailed in Table 2, gender was associated with passivity and aggressive defending, with boys lower in passivity and slightly higher in aggressive defending than girls after accounting for empathy and social costs. Also, adolescents' personal victimization was positively associated with aggressive defending. Adolescents' self-report of their own bullying of others was not significantly associated with any of the dependent measures.

7 | Discussion

In the present study, we investigated the contribution of adolescents' compassionate response to witnessing peer bullying to their actions of passivity or defending, above and beyond the roles of empathic distress, empathic anger, social costs of defending, gender, and personal bullying and victimization history. Most findings were consistent with theories of prosocial action (Batson et al. 1987; Hoffman 2001; Lemerise and Arsenio 2000; Singer and Klimecki 2014; Stevens and Taber 2021; van Kleef and Lelieveld 2022). In a path model, compassion was uniquely associated with the preferred defending responses of more prosocial defending and less aggressive defending and passivity. Conversely, adolescents who reported more empathic distress reported they would be more passive, but also that they would respond with more

TABLE 1 | Pearson correlations between all Measures, and Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of all measures (N = 210).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Passive Bystanding	—								
2. Aggressive Defending	−0.01	—							
3. Prosocial Defending	−0.51**	0.24**	—						
4. Empathic Distress	−0.21**	0.17*	0.69**	—					
5. Empathic Anger	−0.39**	0.29*	0.68**	0.73**	—				
6. Compassion	−0.49**	−0.02	0.74**	0.68**	0.67**	—			
7. Social Costs	0.21**	0.20**	0.17**	0.41**	0.21**	0.18**	—		
8. Victimization	−0.02	0.25**	0.19**	0.24**	0.20**	0.11	0.36**	—	
9. Bullying	0.12	0.16*	−0.03	0.02	−0.01	−0.10	0.20*	0.33**	—
10. Gender	0.25**	0.00	−0.31**	−0.33**	−0.28**	−0.28**	−0.01	−0.08	0.01
11. Age	−0.08	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.16*	−0.09	−0.01	0.04
12. Cohort	0.13	0.04	−0.23**	−0.31**	−0.34**	−0.35**	−0.04	−0.12	−0.17*
M	2.33	1.99	2.84	2.52	2.98	3.36	2.27	2.20	1.63
SD	1.01	0.95	1.00	0.96	1.15	0.70	1.02	1.16	0.91

Note: Gender was coded 1 = girls, 2 = boys. Cohort was coded 0 = community, 1 = school students. All responses (i.e., variables 1–9) were on a 5-point scale. Passive bystanding, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending refer to intentions reported after the videoclip.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

prosocial defending (but not less aggressive defending). Empathic anger was associated with less passivity and both more aggressive and prosocial defending. Finally, social costs of defending played a role in more passivity but did not relate to defending when controlling for empathy-related responses.

7.1 | Compassion, Empathic Distress, and Empathic Anger

Compassion was uniquely associated with responding to peer bullying with the preferred pattern of defending through prosocial rather than aggressive responses (and less passivity overall). This finding is consistent with the view that compassion reflects a reduced threat/stress response to others' negative experiences and enhanced distress tolerance in the moment, which allows for prosocial helping behaviors. Although compassion may be positively correlated with both empathic distress and anger (as was found in the present study), compassion may be the primary response that assists with emotion management in situations that provoke empathy, reducing the desire to withdraw, escape or avoid the situation and/or reactive aggressively in response to feelings of anger (Stellar et al. 2015; Stevens and Taber 2021). Importantly, distress tolerance facilitates feelings of safety required for other-oriented feelings of warmth and concern, which in turn increases the chances of prosocial social engagement behaviors (e.g., Gilbert 2015; Stevens and Taber 2021). The negative link between compassion and aggressive defending is also consistent with research showing individuals with higher levels of compassion are less likely to use punishment (e.g., McCall et al. 2014), perhaps because compassion is characterized by a non-judgmental view of others (Oveis et al. 2010; Sprecher and Fehr 2005). While previous research has mainly focused on the relationship between empathy and bystander defending without reference to prosocial or aggressive defending (Lambe et al. 2019), this finding of compassion as a unique correlate of less aggressive defending adds novel information for isolating the correlates of different forms of defending behaviors in the context of bullying among adolescents.

Differing somewhat from the role of compassion, adolescents higher in empathic distress reported more passive bystanding, after accounting for compassion, empathic anger, and social costs, gender, and personal history of victimization and bullying. Consistent with research and theory more generally (Batson et al. 1987; Eisenberg and Fabes 1990), as well as emerging bystander defending research (Rieffe and Camodeca 2016; Steinvik et al. 2023), our findings support the view that aversive feelings in response to witnessing others' distress may lead to self-protective behaviors (e.g., avoidance), triggered by the motivation to reduce personal distress. However, adolescents higher in empathic distress also reported greater prosocial defending intentions. Thus, supporting past research on affect and prosocial behavior (Eisenberg and Fabes 1990; Eisenberg et al. 2010), some level of aversive arousal may be necessary to evoke prosocial motivation. Too little arousal may inhibit motivation whereas too much arousal may trigger heightened distress characterized by reduced prefrontal activity, attentional difficulties, and inhibition of the social engagement system, rendering individuals unable to direct resources to others in need (e.g., Harmon-Jones et al. 2012; Porges 1995). Such a pattern would be consistent with the positive link between distress and passivity. To better understand the effects of arousal levels on bystander behaviors, experimental and longitudinal research is needed, using measures tapping distress and arousal on a trait and state (e.g., physiological) level.

The findings for empathic anger are also consistent with theory, particularly Hoffman's (2001) theory of empathy, as well as previous defending research in the context of face-to-face (Pozzoli et al. 2017) and online bullying (Steinvik et al. 2023). Anger appears to mobilize action and prevent passivity.

TABLE 2 | Unstandardized (B) and Standardized (β) Associations of Empathic Distress, Empathic Anger, Compassion, Social Costs of Defending, and Covariates, with Bystander Behavioral Intentions (Passive Bystanding, Aggressive Defending, Prosocial Defending) in response to videos of peer bullying ($N = 210$).

Directional paths	*B*	*SE B*	β	*p*
Associations of Independent with Dependent Variables				
Empathic Distress → Passive Bystanding	0.28	0.10	0.26	0.006
Empathic Distress → Aggressive Defending	−0.01	0.11	−0.01	0.930
Empathic Distress → Prosocial Defending	0.27	0.08	0.26	< 0.001
Empathic Anger → Passive Bystanding	−0.23	0.08	−0.27	0.002
Empathic Anger → Aggressive Defending	0.44	0.08	0.53	< 0.001
Empathic Anger → Prosocial Defending	0.19	0.06	0.22	< 0.001
Compassion → Passive Bystanding	−0.74	0.11	−0.52	< 0.001
Compassion → Aggressive Defending	−0.45	0.12	−0.34	< 0.001
Compassion → Prosocial Defending	0.64	0.09	0.45	< 0.001
Social Costs → Passive Bystanding	0.28	0.06	0.28	< 0.001
Social Costs → Aggressive Defending	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.242
Social Costs → Prosocial Defending	−0.07	0.05	−0.07	0.142
Associations between Independent Variables[a]				
Empathic Distress, Empathic Anger	0.78	0.09	0.73	< 0.001
Empathic Distress, Compassion	0.45	0.05	0.67	< 0.001
Empathic Distress, Social Costs	0.36	0.06	0.38	< 0.001
Empathic Anger, Compassion	0.53	0.07	0.66	< 0.001
Empathic Anger, Social Costs	0.22	0.07	0.19	0.003
Compassion, Social Costs	0.12	0.04	0.17	0.009
Associations between Dependent Variables				
Passive Bystanding, Aggressive Defending	−0.02	0.05	−0.03	0.566
Passive Bystanding, Prosocial Defending	−0.14	0.03	−0.31	< 0.001
Aggressive Defending, Prosocial Defending	0.12	0.04	0.25	< 0.001
Associations between Covariates and Independent Variables[a]				
Gender, Empathic Distress	−0.15	0.03	−0.32	< 0.001
Gender, Empathic Anger	−0.15	0.04	−0.27	< 0.001
Gender, Compassion	−0.10	0.03	−0.28	< 0.001
Victimization, Empathic Distress	0.15	0.05	0.14	0.004
Victimization, Empathic Anger	0.14	0.06	0.11	0.027
Victimization, Social Costs	0.40	0.08	0.34	< 0.001
Bullying, Social Costs	0.18	0.06	0.20	0.002
Cohort, Empathic Distress	−0.12	0.03	−0.31	< 0.001
Cohort, Empathic Anger	−0.16	0.04	−0.33	< 0.001
Cohort, Compassion	−0.11	0.02	−0.35	< 0.001
Associations of Covariates with Dependent Variables[a]				
Gender → Passive Bystanding	0.26	0.12	0.13	0.029
Gender → Aggressive Defending	0.08	0.12	0.04	0.503
Gender → Prosocial Defending	−0.09	0.09	−0.05	0.287
Victimization → Passive Bystanding	−0.07	0.05	−0.09	0.163
Victimization → Aggressive defending	0.12	0.06	0.14	0.037
Victimization → Prosocial defending	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.198

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Directional paths	*B*	*SE B*	β	*p*
Bullying → Passive Bystanding	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.742
Bullying → Aggressive Defending	0.09	0.07	0.09	0.160
Bullying → Prosocial Defending	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.524
Cohort → Passive Bystanding	−0.19	0.14	−0.08	0.183
Cohort → Aggressive Defending	0.29	0.15	0.13	0.048
Cohort → Prosocial Defending	0.24	0.11	0.10	0.022
Associations between Covariates[a]				
Victimization, Bullying	0.32	0.07	0.31	< 0.001
Cohort, Gender	0.03	0.02	0.16	0.022

Note: χ^2 (10) = 20.24, p = 0.027, CFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.070 (90% CI 0.023−0.122), p = 0.200. Gender was coded 1 = Girls, 2 = Boys. Also see Figure 1 for an illustration of the main significant associations and correlations between distress, anger, compassion, and social costs of defending, and between types of defending.
[a]Nonsignificant associations of covariates with the independent variables were trimmed from the model, so only significant associations are reported here.

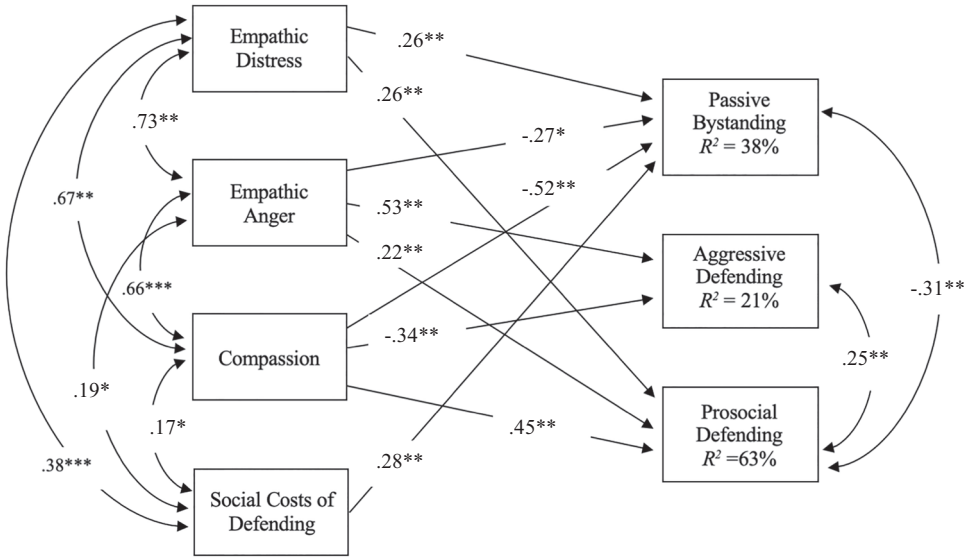

FIGURE 1 | Standardized (β) Significant Associations in the Hypothesized Model (Covariates not Depicted), and Correlations between Independent and Dependent Variables, Respectively (N = 210). *Note:* χ^2 (10) = 20.24, p = 0.027, CFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.070 (90% CI 0.023−0.122), p = 0.200. Participant gender, experience of personal victimization and bullying in the past few months, and cohort (community adolescent or school student) were included as control variables; all estimated associations are detailed in Table 2. *$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.001$.

However, when feeling anger on behalf of someone being bullied, adolescents were also more likely to intend aggressive defending strategies. Thus, expanding past research that has identified empathic anger as a correlate of more defending when witnessing adolescents' bullying (without distinguishing between aggressive and prosocial defending), the current findings underscore a problematic aspect of empathic anger linking it to more aggressive defending. This is troubling as aggressive strategies can reinforce aggression as a means of conflict resolution, as well as putting the people involved at further risk (Frey et al. 2015; Lambe et al. 2017).

7.2 | Perceived Social Costs of Defending as Related to More Passivity

As predicted, perceived social costs of defending was a unique correlate of more intended passivity as a bystander witnessing bullying. This finding supports theory (e.g., Cameron et al. 2019; Stevens and Taber 2021) and previous defending research (e.g., Spadafora et al. 2020; van der Ploeg et al. 2017) indicating that adolescents are less likely to intervene in response to witnessing bullying if they experience a fear of being victimized or losing popularity or friends. Yet, contrary to predictions, there was no negative association between perceived social costs and either form of defending (aggressive and prosocial), once other measures were accounted for in the multivariate model.

Future research is needed to understand whether adolescents' empathy (all forms) and perceived social costs may be altered by external social factors, such as the classroom norms of bullying (Peets et al. 2015). If the school climate promotes pro-bullying norms (e.g., perceived high bully popularity and passive bystanding) and the impression that bullying is acceptable (e.g., Juvonen and Galván 2008), adolescents' perception of social costs for defending might inhibit their action, regardless of their

empathy and compassion for victimized peers. Indeed, students are more likely to defend against bullying in classrooms with anti-bullying norms, where bullying others is associated with more social costs (i.e., low bully popularity) (e.g., Juvonen and Galván 2008). Given the important role of social influence on adolescents' decision making and behaviors, research is needed to understand whether social contextual factors (e.g., classroom-level norms) influence the unique associations of empathy-related factors and perceived social costs of multiple forms of defending in peer bullying.

7.3 | Gender, and Personal Experience of Victimization and Bullying Others

Gender was associated with most of the measures considered in the present study. Girls were more likely to report empathic distress, empathic anger, and compassion in response to the bullying videos, consistent with previous defending research showing that girls respond with more empathy for victimized peers than boys (Lambe et al. 2019). Moreover, gender was a significant correlate of passive bystanding and defending, with adolescent boys reporting less passivity and defending in the zero-order correlations, but more passivity and aggressive defending compared to girls once other measures were accounted for in the multivariate model. Previous research has also found that passivity (e.g., Thornberg and Jungert 2014) and aggressive defending (e.g., Bussey et al. 2020; Hawkins et al. 2001; Lambe and Craig 2020) in response to witnessing bullying are more likely among boys than girls. However, our findings suggest that these gender associations with defending responses may be partly explained by differences in empathy.

Personal experience of victimization and bullying of others also covaried with many measures included in the present study. Adolescents who reported personal victimization were more likely to report empathic distress, empathic anger, and perceived social costs of defending. In contrast, there was no significant link between personal victimization and compassion. Perhaps adolescents who have been victimized themselves are more focused on their personal distress and anger in response to witnessing bullying. In addition, supporting previous research (Bussey et al. 2020; Lambe and Craig 2020; Steinvik et al. 2023), the experience of personal victimization was a unique correlate of more aggressive defending. Thus, adolescents with more personal history of victimization may be more motivated to target the person bullying (e.g., aggressive defending) triggered by a need for justice. Consistent with previous research (Lambe et al. 2019), adolescents who experienced more personal victimization reported more bullying of others. Although bullying of others had fewer associations with other measures, adolescents who had bullied others in the past few months also reported more aggressive defending and perceived more social costs of defending, possibly due to their pro-bullying attitudes and perception of individuals who bully as more powerful or popular (e.g., Peets et al. 2015).

7.4 | Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

The findings should be considered alongside some limitations of the study design and the sample. First, although we had sound theoretical and empirical reasons to examine how empathy and social costs predict defending behaviors, the cross-sectional design limits conclusions regarding the direction of the effects. Thus, it may also be that behaviors prompt empathy and perceptions of social costs. Further, although we validated adolescents' reports of their intended behaviors in response to the videos with reports of their bystander behaviors in the past few months, we relied on adolescents' responses to film clips of peer bullying to gather all information included in the tested model. We did this because the aim was to directly link state (rather than trait) responses of compassion, empathy, and social costs with bystander behavior to specific bullying events. This raises limitations of how representative these responses are of real-life experiences and whether participants were able to imagine themselves witnessing the events. The next step could be intensive data collection methods, such as peer report measures along with experience sampling or observational methods, to capture responses to experienced events and to not only rely on self-report data only.

In addition, although our findings contribute to a multifaceted conceptualization of defending as including not only prosocial strategies of helping, but also aggressive strategies, empathy-related responses and costs of defending, these may be different for indirect and direct aspects of prosocial and aggressive defending. Future research is needed to get a more nuanced understanding of prosocial and aggressive defending types. Moreover, while this study accounted for significant amounts of variance in adolescents' intended bystander intentions in response to peer bullying, other factors may also be involved. For example, self-efficacy, moral disengagement, and school/classroom norms are significant correlates of bystander defending (e.g., Bussey et al. 2020; Peets et al. 2015), and may moderate the associations found in this study. An important avenue for future research is also to assess whether the associations found in this study differ across different types of bullying, such as direct or indirect forms or in-person versus cyberbullying. Finally, regarding the adolescent participants, the majority were white Australians. Conducting research in other regions is critical to examine associations of empathy-related and cost factors with bystander behaviors across different demographic groups.

7.5 | Practical Implications

The results of the present study indicate that interventions could focus on distress tolerance in response to feelings of empathy to prevent avoidance as a response to witnessing the maltreatment of peers. Compassion training might be a way to increase distress tolerance, as well as providing strategies to reduce judgment of others and increase individuals' understanding of the shared human experience (e.g., loving-kindness meditations) (for reviews see Hofmann et al. 2011; Kirby et al. 2017). In line with the view of compassion as characterized by non-judgmental concern for all people, regardless of differences and likability (e.g., Oveis et al. 2010; Sprecher and Fehr 2005), compassion training might help to facilitate concern and prosocial defending to support victimized peers, who

typically carry less power and more social stigma within the peer group (e.g., Forsberg et al. 2014; Pouwels et al. 2018) training may also mitigate against defending against those who bully in aggressive and harmful ways.

Regarding empathic anger and social costs of defending, they are related to less passivity and, for empathic anger only, more defending in both prosocial and aggressive ways. Thus, interventions could also focus on teaching skills to not avoid anger, but to manage and direct it in more constructive and prosocial ways to prevent further aggressive behaviors and ways to facilitate a school climate that prevents pro-bullying norms, which may reduce the social costs of defending (e.g., Peets et al. 2015).

While previous research has mainly focused on the relationship between empathy and bystander defending (Lambe et al. 2019), our findings provide evidence that interventions should focus on a balanced approach to enhance both empathy and compassion among adolescents as a path towards increasing prosocial defending and reducing passivity and aggressive defending. Although some level of empathic distress and anger could be important for evoking attention and motivation to intervene as a bystander, the current study provides the first evidence suggesting that compassion training might be helpful in increasing adolescents' capacity to have empathy that promotes prosocial action as opposed to aggression or passive bystanding. Yet, to inform bullying interventions for adolescents, future research is needed to examine the causal links and the differential effects of empathy training and compassion training across bullying contexts.

7.6 | Conclusion

Building upon previous research, this study provides the first evidence of unique and differential associations of empathic distress, empathic anger, compassion, and perceived social costs with adolescents' different bystander behavior intentions in the context of bullying. Passivity was more likely intended by adolescents who reported higher levels of empathic distress and social costs of defending, and lower levels of empathic anger and compassion. Regarding defending behavior intentions, empathic anger was a unique correlate of greater intended aggressive and prosocial defending, emphasizing the importance of understanding ways to direct anger to prosocial, constructive defending strategies. Importantly, compassion was a unique correlate of lower aggressive defending intentions and greater prosocial defending intentions, even when considering social costs of defending. This makes compassion distinctive in differentiating aggressive from prosocial defending. Future research is needed to investigate whether compassion training can enhance constructive bystander behaviors. Overall, our findings demonstrate a complex model of bystander behavior intentions, accounting for the unique role of empathy-related responses, as well as social costs of defending. The conclusions drawn from this study will be strengthened when findings are replicated longitudinally and experimentally across bullying contexts for diverse populations, while also accounting for further factors that may influence the associations found in this study.

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Ethics Statement

In conducting this study, we have complied with APA guidelines for the ethical conduct of research. Human Research Ethics Approval for this study was obtained from Griffith University (Australia, protocol 2019/811). In addition to parental consent, adolescents were informed that it was voluntary to complete the survey. We thank the schools and the students for their willingness to participate in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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

Endnotes

[1]The definition provided read: "...a student is being bullied when another student or group of students say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like or when he or she is deliberately left out of things. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight. It is also not bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way."

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Appendix

Items for empathic distress, empathic anger, and compassion

As a witness to this incident, I would:

1. Feel worried and upset (*empathic distress*)
2. Feel concerned because of what was happeing to the person being victimized (*compassion: concern vs indifference*)
3. Feel angry because of what was happening to the person being victimized (*empathic anger*)
4. Feel not much of anything (reversed; *compassion: engagement vs disengagement*)
5. Feel overwhelmed (*empathic distress*)
6. Feel outraged because of what was happening to the person being victimized (*empathic anger*)
7. Think about how the person being victimized was feeling (*compassion: engagement vs disengagement*)

8. Not care about the person being victimized (reversed; *compassion: concern vs indifference*)
9. Think the person (or people) who was bullying did a bad thing but may not be a bad person (or bad people) (*compassion: non-judgment/common humanity*)
10. Try to understand why someone would bully like that (*compassion: non-judgment/common humanity*)

Response options: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite*, 5 = *very*

Items for bystander intentions

As a witness to this incident, I would:

1. Ignore the situation (*passive bystanding*)
2. Try to comfort the person being victimized (*prosocial defending*)
3. Attack or threaten the person doing the bullying (*aggressive defending*)
4. Act as if nothing has happened (*passive bystanding*)
5. Encourage the person being victimized to report the bullying to the people in charge (e.g., teacher) (*prosocial defending*)
6. Gossip about the person doing the bullying to others (e.g., say mean things abou the person doing the bullying (*aggressive defending*)
7. Not get involved (i.e, mind my own business) (*passive bystanding*)
8. Try to sort out the problem by talking to th people involved in the bullying (*prosocial defending*)
9. Take revenge on the person doing the bullying (e.g., call the person doing the bullying names) (*aggressive defending*)

Response options: 1 = *not at all likely*, 2 = *a little likely*, 3 = *somewhat likely*, 4 = *quite likely*, 5 = *very likely*.