School Bullying: Belief in a Personal Just World of Bullies, Victims and Defenders

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Abstract
This paper applies just world research to the analysis of bullying at school and examines the relation between the belief in a personal just world (BJW) and self-reported behaviour in bullying situations. The hypotheses tested were that the more strongly students endorse the personal BJW, the less likely they should be to bully others, the less likely they should see themselves as victims, and the more likely they should be to defend victims of bullying. The participants were 187 Portuguese students in the 7th to 9th grade. The results showed that the stronger the adolescents’ endorsements of the BJW the less likely they were to engage in bullying behaviour and this association persisted when controlled for emotional empathy. Defending the victim or becoming a victim was unrelated, however. The implications of these results for further studies on bullying and victimization are discussed.

Key words: bullying; just world beliefs; empathy; victimization; adolescence
School Bullying: Belief in a Personal Just World of Bullies, Victims and Defenders

Bullying is acknowledged to be a common and widespread form of violence in the school context in many countries (Smith et al., 1999). In his pioneering work, Olweus (1993) defined bullying as a subtype of aggressive behaviour in which an aggressor intentionally and repeatedly over time harms a weaker victim either physically and/or psychologically.

Bullying has been shown to have detrimental consequences for both victims and aggressors. Effects on victims include low self-esteem, depression, and school failure (for a review, see Hawker & Boulton, 2000); implications for aggressors include delinquent behaviour (Rigby & Cox, 1996) and low levels of happiness (Rigby & Slee, 1993).

The belief that events in one’s life are just, as reflected in the personal belief in a just world (BJW), seems to be of particular relevance to development at school. It serves as a resource that bolsters subjective well-being in adolescents and at school in particular (e.g., see Correia & Dalbert, 2007 for a review). It provides trust to be treated justly by one's teachers; and the trust in teacher justice fosters achievement at school (e.g., Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006).

Against this background, the study presented in this paper investigated the association between personal BJW and the self-reported behaviours of victim, bully and defender in the context of bullying.

Bullying

According to Olweus (1993) “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more others students” (p. 9) and “there should be an imbalance of strength” (p. 10) where the victim is not capable of defending him/herself effectively. These negative actions are intentionally inflicted by the aggressor, as in other forms of aggression. It is the power imbalance, as well as the repetition of the action over time, which distinguishes bullying from other forms of aggressive behaviour. Bullying can take many forms, such as physical aggression, verbal aggression or social isolation. It can be either direct, where the bully directly attacks the victim, physically
or verbally, or indirect, where the bully can remain relatively anonymous while manipulating
the way other people respond to the victim (Olweus, 1993).

The first large scale studies conducted by Olweus (for a review see, Olweus, 1993) in
Norway and Sweden showed that bullying is pervasive in the school milieu. Smith et al.
(1999) obtained the same result for many other European countries. The roles school students
can take in bullying situations were formerly identified by Olweus (1993) as bullies, victims
and the followers of the bully (those who do not start the bullying episode but participate in
designated the followers of the bully as assistants of the bully, and identified three more roles:
the reinforcers of the bully, who do not actively attack the victim but positively reinforce the
bully, for example, by laughing; the outsiders who do not get involved and pretend not to
notice the bullying episodes; the defenders who support the victim and try to stop the bullies.

Bullies have been regarded as skilled individuals who try to reach personal benefits
through bullying (Gini, 2006). In the same line, Hawley (2003) found that aggression can
sometimes be adaptive and accepted by others when combined with prosocial behaviours (i.e.,
bistrategic controllers). Males are more likely to be bullies than females (e.g., Salmivalli et
al., 1996) although it is well-known that forms of bullying by girls are more subtle and
indirect - such as, for example, social exclusion - than forms of bullying by boys (Olweus,
1993). Bullies are socially rejected by their peers, but this pattern seems to change according
to the sex of the bully: boys are concurrently not chosen in a sociometric measure but
contrarily girls are chosen (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Victims are children who are more socially rejected and less socially accepted by their
peers (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 1996). Social rejection of the victim can be considered both as a
cause and a consequence of bullying: the victim is chosen among the most rejected and the
fact that s/he is bullied reinforces the low status (Olweus, 1991). Gini (2006) found that
victims showed a decreased performance on a social cognition task, which supports the thesis
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that they lack social skills. Defenders are socially accepted and less socially rejected (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Furthermore, research has shown that these children are competent at understanding cognitions and emotions of other people (Gini, 2006). Salmivalli et al. (1996) found more defenders among girls than among boys and offered the explanation that this difference can be due to the different roles males and females are expected to fulfil in society (Eagly, 1987) or due to greater empathy on the part of girls (Hoffman, 1977). Therefore, bullies, victims and defenders differ not only on sex, but also on social acceptance by peers and social cognitive processing.

Belief in a Just World

According to the just world hypothesis, "people want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future" (Lerner, 1980, p. 14). Three functions of this BJW have been identified (Dalbert, 2001), two of which are relevant here. The first one is to compel individuals to behave justly. In a just world, a positive future is not the gift of a benevolent world, but a reward for the individual’s behaviour and character. Consequently, the more individuals believe in a just world, the more compelled they feel to strive for justice themselves. Thus, BJW is indicative of a personal contract (Lerner, 1980), the terms of which oblige the individual to behave fairly. For example, strong just world believers are more likely to help people in need (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991), and the obligation for reciprocity is stronger for those with a strong BJW (Edlund, Sagarin, & Johnson, 2007). Furthermore, BJW has been shown to be one of the important correlates of social responsibility as a trait (Bierhoff, 1994), and to be significantly related to the commitment to just means (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). In addition, BJW was associated with less rule-breaking behaviour (Otto & Dalbert, 2005), and less delinquent intentions (Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Finally, motive-incongruent behaviour is censured, for example, by a decrease in self-esteem (Dalbert, 1999). In sum, high just world-believers seem to avoid own unjust behaviour and to strive more for
justice themselves. Bullying can be seen as a specific type of aggressive and rule-breaking behaviour. Such behaviour should constitute a breach of the personal contract and thus should be avoided by students with a strong BJW. As a result, we expected BJW to be negatively associated with bullying behaviour: students with a strong BJW should be less likely to bully other students. In the same vein, as high just world believers strive for more justice in their own behaviour, we expect students high in BJW to be more likely to defend the bullying victims in an attempt to restore justice. Taken collectively, we see behaviour in bullying as at least partly justice-motivated behaviour which cannot be fully understood without taking the justice motive into account.

As a second function, BJW provides a conceptual framework that helps individuals interpret the events of their personal life in a meaningful way. Because BJW serves important adaptive purposes, individuals are motivated to defend this belief in the face of threat (e.g., Dalbert, 2001). Being confronted with an injustice, either observed or experienced, threatens the belief that justice prevails in the world, thus leading high BJW individuals to attempt to restore justice either literally or figuratively. When they experience unfairness they do not believe can be resolved in reality, they try to assimilate this experience to their BJW. This can be done by justifying the experienced unfairness as being at least partly self-inflicted (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977), by playing down the intention of the harm-doer or the unfairness, and by avoiding self-focused rumination (see Dalbert, 2001, for a review). Thus, a justice judgment depicts the individual evaluation of a situation as more or less just. In this view, justice is not a fixed characteristic of a situation; in fact, justice judgments are always subjective (Mikula, 2005), and are influenced by past experiences and personality (Lerner & Goldberg, 1999). As a consequence of this assimilation process, individuals with a strong BJW are less likely to see themselves as victims (Lipkus & Siegler, 1993). Therefore, we expected students with a strong BJW to describe themselves as less likely to be victims.
Recent investigations have shown that it is necessary to distinguish the belief in a personal just world from the belief in a general just world (Dalbert, 1999). The personal BJW reflects the belief that, overall, events in one’s life are just, whereas the general BJW reflects the belief that, basically, the world is a just place. It has been shown that individuals tend to endorse the belief in a personal just world more strongly than the belief in a general just world and that the personal compared to the general BJW is a better predictor of well-being (e.g., Correia & Dalbert, 2007), the reactions to own injustice (e.g., Strelan, 2007), including delinquent intentions (Sutton & Winnard, 2007) and the assimilation of injustice (e.g., Dalbert, 1999); whereas the general BJW better explains harsh social attitudes (e.g., Bègue & Muller, 2006). We therefore focus on personal BJW in the present study.

Until the age of seven or eight, children typically believe in immanent justice, and are convinced that wrongdoings are automatically punished (Piaget, 1932/1965). As they grow older, however, they slowly abandon this belief in immanent justice. As a result of cognitive development, older children and adults have no difficulty in identifying random events. Nevertheless, they sense that a random fate is unjust, and when given the possibility to justify a random fate they will do so (e.g., Jose, 1990). Children thus develop a belief in a just world, which can be interpreted as a more mature version of their belief in immanent justice—as the belief that people in general deserve their fate, but accompanied by the cognitive ability to identify causality and randomness. During adolescence a differentiation into the personal compared to the general BJW can be observed. The strength of both beliefs seems to decrease slightly over adolescence and young adulthood (Dalbert, 2001). Even after this initial decline, the belief in a personal just world tends to be positive. Thus, we can see the personal BJW as a resource explaining adolescents’ reactions like bullying behaviour.

Empathy

Emotional empathy can be defined as the “vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experience of others” (Bryant, 1982, p. 414) and has been shown to be
positively associated with helping behaviour (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Females tend to score higher on emotional empathy measures than males (Hoffman, 1977) and are more empathic toward the victims of aggression than males (Frodi, Macauley, & Thome, 1977). Furthermore, Poteat and Espelage (2005) found that empathy is negatively associated with bullying behaviour, Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) observed that emotional empathy is negatively associated with the frequency of bullying behaviours. Thus, we expected emotional empathy to be negatively associated with bullying behaviour and positively associated with defender behaviour. We are not aware of any empirical data concerning the association between BJW and empathy, however as BJW and harsh social attitudes towards the societal disadvantaged people are usually positively associated (e.g., Appelbaum, 2002), empathy and BJW might by negatively associated. If empathy would be associated with BJW on the one hand and behaviour in bullying on the other, it could cause associations between BJW and bullying. We therefore controlled for emotional empathy in the analyses.

Aim of the Study

Our study is among the first to apply just world research to the analysis of bullying (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000) and was designed to test the following hypotheses: The more strongly students endorse the personal BJW, (a) the less likely they would be to bully others, (b) the less likely they would be to describe themselves as a victim, and (c) the more likely they would be to defend victims of bullying. (d) These associations would hold when controlled for empathy.

Victim, bully, and defender behaviour are not seen as three mutually exclusive categories; indeed, these behaviours are not always at opposite poles (Olweus, 1993). Therefore, we will not define victims, bullies and defenders in absolute terms (see Solberg & Olweus, 2003), but will describe self-reported behaviour on each of this dimensions for all of the participants.

Method
Procedure and Sample

The participants were 187 Portuguese students aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 14.51$; $SD = 1.40$); 90 (48.1%) were female and 97 (51.9%) male. Students were attending the 7th to 9th grades of two different schools; 41 (21.9%) in the 7th grade, 78 (41.7%) in the 8th grade, and 67 (35.8%) in the 9th grade. One participant did not report the grade level. The assessment was conducted in the classroom during lesson time and participants were guaranteed anonymity.

Measures

BJW was measured using the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, 1999). The scale comprises 7 items designed to capture the belief that, overall, events in one’s life are just ($\alpha = .77$; sample items: “I am usually treated fairly,” “Overall, events in my life are just”) with a 6-point answer scale ranging from 1 (“totally disagree”) to 6 (“totally agree”). Emotional empathy was measured using the Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (Bryant, 1982), which comprises 22 items ($\alpha = .78$; sample item: “Seeing a girl who is crying makes me feel like crying”), also answered with a 6-point answer scale ranging from 1 (“totally disagree”) to 6 (“totally agree”). Self-reported behaviour in bullying was assessed using the Rigby and Slee (1993) 12-item measure of dimensions of interpersonal relations. Responses were given on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 6 (“very often”). Each kind of self-reported behaviour was assessed with 4 items. Victim behaviour was assessed by 4 items ($\alpha = .85$; sample item: “How often do you get picked on by other kids?”); bully behaviour was measured with 4 items ($\alpha = .77$; sample item: “How often do you enjoy upsetting wimps?”); and defender behaviour was assessed by 4 items ($\alpha = .78$; sample item: “How often do you help harassed children?”). Scores were computed by averaging across items, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the construct. Sex was coded as a dummy variable, with 0 indicating “female” and 1 indicating “male.”

Results
First, zero-order correlations between all the variables were inspected (see Table 1). Personal BJW and emotional empathy were independent of each other, and personal BJW correlated negatively with the bully behaviour. The more strongly the students endorsed the personal BJW, the less likely they were to bully others. Personal BJW did not correlate with either victim or defender behaviour. Emotional empathy correlated positively with defender behaviour and negatively with bully behaviour. Boys were more likely than girls to perpetrate bullying, whereas girls were more empathic and more likely than boys to defend victims of bullying.

To clarify the relationship between BJW and behaviour, multiple regression analyses were performed for the bully behaviour and the defender behaviour, respectively. Because the victim behaviour was independent of personal BJW, empathy, and sex, no regression analysis was run for this variable. In each regression analysis, sex, empathy, and personal BJW were entered blockwise (Table 2). Overall, 19 percent of the variance in bully behaviour was predicted by the main effects of emotional empathy and personal BJW. The more empathic the students were and the more strongly they endorsed the personal BJW, the less likely they were to bully others. Twenty-five percent of the variance in defender behaviour was predicted by empathy. The more empathic the students were, the more likely they were to defend victims of bullying. The pattern of results confirmed our first hypothesis that a strong personal BJW should be associated with less bullying behaviour, even when controlled for empathy. Our second and third hypotheses were however not confirmed by our study as BJW and the victim and the defender behaviour were not related.

Discussion

The study presented in this paper was designed to explore the association between personal BJW and bullying behaviour. Work on the motive function of just world beliefs
(Dalbert, 2001; Lerner, 1980) provides a key to understanding why people engage in aggressive behaviour. In extension of just world reasoning, we hypothesized that the BJW depicts an intuitive justice motive that can contribute in explaining bullying behaviour and the pattern of results was in line with this reasoning. We observed that the more students endorsed the personal BJW, the less likely they were to bully others. This finding evidenced our reasoning that the BJW reflects a justice motive and thus should be negatively associated with unjust behaviour that constitutes a breach of the personal contract--only by acting justly can individuals rely on others being just to them (Lerner, 1980). Bullying clearly violates the personal contract, and students high in BJW thus seem to avoid this kind of behaviour. In the same vein, although with a different type of aggressive behaviour, Otto and Dalbert (2005) found a negative association between BJW and disciplinary problems in young male prison inmates.

From an educational perspective, it is worth noting the special role of justice experiences in school. In a longitudinal study with adolescents, Dalbert and Stoeber (2006) highlighted the interplay between personal BJW, on the one hand, and domain-specific justice experiences, on the other hand. In line with the proposed assimilation function, the more justly adolescents felt treated the more they believed in a personal just world. Judgments about justice in two spheres of life, at school and in the family, did not affect one another, however. This pattern of results indicates that domain-specific judgments about justice are relatively independent of each other when controlled for the implicit justice motive. Furthermore, the domain-specific judgments about justice can at least partly be explained by the implicit justice motive. The belief in a personal just world increases the likelihood of school being evaluated as a just place, and was related with less distress (Correia & Dalbert, 2007), and less bullying behaviour at school. The experience of being treated in a fair and respectful manner contributes to the sense of being a valued member of a group. Justice experiences thus promote the feeling of social inclusion (Lind & Tyler, 1988). This sense of
belonging to a group reinforces the personal obligation to behave in accordance with the group's rules and thus can be seen as an important precondition for rule-abiding behaviour (Emler & Reicher, 2005). Consequently, the justice motive is more important in the in-group compared to the out-group (Lerner, 1980). School is the first societal institution children are confronted with. At school, they learn about the legitimacy of authority, and the more justly they feel treated in school, the more legitimate they consider the school authorities to be and they may generalize these experiences to the broader society (Gouveia-Pereira, Vala, Palmonari, & Rubini, 2003). Being treated justly at school may thus signal belongingness to the society as a whole and consequently strengthen rule-abiding behaviour in general. It is thus of prime importance for adolescents to feel they are treated justly at school to support their legal and civic socialization. When it comes to the role of justice in explaining adolescence development and social behaviour at school, school-specific justice experiences should be considered in addition to the justice motive.

Nevertheless, BJW and justice experiences may not be sufficient to explain rule-breaking or delinquent behaviour. For example, Otto and Dalbert (2005) failed to discern a negative association between personal BJW and criminal behaviour itself and the authors speculate that adolescence is a period in life characterized by conflicts with parents, moodiness, and reckless, norm-breaking, and antisocial risk behaviour (e.g., Arnett, 1999). Young men are at particular risk of committing crimes for reasons including testing possible identities or peer pressure (e.g., Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997). These risks are unlikely to be neutralized by the personal BJW. The preventive function of the BJW may be greater when faced with less serious antisocial behaviour like bullying.

Although previous studies have found positive associations between BJW and assisting victims (e.g., Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991), no association emerged between BJW and defending victims in the present research. We can only speculate why this difference occurred. First of all, the self-reported defender behaviour is skewed to the positive
end and thus may not be a very realistic self-description. Secondly, BJW and the defender behaviour may be independent, because students with a strong BJW may react differently when confronted with an injustice as the victims of bullying. Some may be motivated to defend the victim, in order to protect their BJW and will do so. For them, the expected positive relation between BJW and the defender behaviour should be observed. Others with a strong BJW would be equally motivated to defend the victim, but do not believe they will be efficient in stopping the bully, as a consequence they assimilate the victim’s fate to their BJW by cognitively restoring the injustice (Lerner, 1980). For these students a negative association between BJW and the – no longer – needed defender behaviour should be observed. The crucial factor deciding which way to fulfil the intuitive justice needs would be the belief in defender efficacy.

In line with research on prosocial behaviour (e.g., Poteat & Espeleage, 2005), empathic concerns, however, seem to strengthen the motivation to defend victims of bullying. One suggestion for future studies would be to investigate if empathy predicts differently the defending of victims from same sex or other sex. In fact, Olweus and Endresen (1998) showed that girls reveal an increase in empathy towards both boys and girls as targets during adolescence, boys also revealed an increase in empathy towards girls as targets, however boys revealed a decrease in empathy towards other boys. This analysis could not be done in this study as the items for self-reported behaviour in bullying include both boys and girls as targets.

Finally, we did not observe the expected association between BJW and the victim behaviour. We hypothesized that the victims of bullying behaviour should assimilate their negative fate to their BJW by various cognitive coping reactions in particular by seeing oneself to be at least partly responsible the own fate. People strong in BJW should be motivated to defend their BJW by making internal attributions of negative outcomes as evidenced for negative university outcomes (Hafer & Correy, 1999). In contrast however,
victims’ BJW and internal responsibility attributions were found to be unrelated for victims of sexual violence (e.g. Fetchenhauer, Jacobs, & Belschak, 2005). In sum, the research on BJW and internal attributions by the victims themselves is not consistent. Nevertheless, Lipkus and Siegler (1993) evidenced that older adults described themselves less as a victim the more strongly they endorsed the BJW. Future studies should thus explore more in-depth the cognitive reactions mediating the BJW’s impact on the self-description as victim.

At least three shortcomings should be noted. Our data are cross-sectional, meaning that no causal conclusions can be drawn. Longitudinal studies would allow the causal direction to be better defined. Furthermore, all of our variables were assessed by self-report measures, leading to an overestimation of common variance and to possible distortion due to social desirability. Studies including observational data on social behaviour are needed to rule out this alternative explanation. Finally, we only controlled for emotional empathy as a competing resource. Future studies should control for additional factors explaining antisocial behaviour such as, for example, socioeconomic status, personality, or unjust peer behaviour.

To conclude, our results indicate that intuitive justice-driven processes can help to better understand bullying behaviour at school and that personal BJW can be interpreted as a resource for school students. The adolescents’ confidence that things in their life are usually just seems to strengthen their motivation to stay away from unjust and problematic social behaviour. The more the students believe in a personal just world, in which they are usually treated justly, the less likely they seem to engage in bullying behaviour. We assume that the adaptive relation between the personal BJW and the rule-breaking behaviour may be mediated by justice experiences at school. Future studies on rule-breaking behaviour in school and during adolescence should, therefore, take the BJW and school-specific justice experiences into account.
Acknowledgements

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References


Table 1

*Correlations and Descriptive Statistics (N = 187)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Defender</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal BJW</td>
<td>3.79</td>
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<td>-0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
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<td>-0.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.08</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Defender</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.88</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All scales range from 1 to 6, with higher values indicating stronger endorsement of the construct. For sex, 0 indicates “female” and 1 “male.”

* * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*
Table 2

*Regression of Self-Reported Behaviour on Sex, Personal BJW, and Empathy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.16</td>
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<td>-.32</td>
<td>-4.02</td>
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<td>Personal BJW</td>
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<td>-.20</td>
<td>-3.02</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defender ($F_{total}(3,183= 20.41; p &lt; .001; R^2 = .25$)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-.00</td>
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<td>.96</td>
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*Note. * $p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*