



# The mediating role of domain judgement in the relation between the Big Five and bullying behaviours☆



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## ABSTRACT

Although many studies have shown that personality differences predict aggressive and antisocial behaviours, few studies have investigated how the Big Five (BF) affects involvement in school bullying and the mechanisms explaining this influence. Our aim was to investigate the relation between the BF and involvement in school bullying, hypothesising direct and indirect effects, through the mediation of judgement about rule-breaking in different domains (domain judgement). A sample of 339 adolescents (156 males and 183 females) completed the Big Five Questionnaire, a questionnaire evaluating moral, conventional and prudential domain judgement (D-RB) and self- and peer-reported measures of bullying. Our findings showed that adolescents higher on Neuroticism and Extraversion and lower on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are more involved in bullying. Moreover, it emerged that only moral domain judgement is independently associated with bullying and mediates the relation between Conscientiousness and Agreeableness and the outcome. It was concluded that certain personality characteristics may facilitate the involvement of adolescents in bullying and that domain judgement could in part explain this relation: lower Conscientiousness and Agreeableness seem to be responsible for lower sensitivity to the moral rules that, in turn, can lead adolescents to be more involved in bullying.

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## 1. Introduction

While a large amount of literature has evidenced a significant association between the Big Five (BF) personality factors and aggressive behaviour from childhood to adolescence, just a few studies have taken into account the relation between the BF and school bullying (Bollmer, Harris, & Milich, 2006; De Bolle & Tackett, 2013; Fossati, Borroni, & Maffei, 2012; Kodzopeljić, Smederevac, Mitrović, Dinić, & Čolović, 2014; Menesini, Camodeca, & Nocentini, 2010; Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003) leading to inconsistent results. While bullying is included in the more general category of aggressive behaviours, it nevertheless has its distinctiveness (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Following Olweus (2010), indeed, bullying can be considered a specific type of aggressive behaviour, characterised by 'repetitiveness and an asymmetric power relationship' (p. 11). Repetitiveness makes bullying an intrinsically dynamic relationship that unfolds over time, while power asymmetry characterises this relationship as abusive. The systematic practice of abusive power to the detriment of weaker victims makes bullying more morally repugnant with respect to other aggressive behaviours (Rodkin et al., 2015) and thus of particular moral relevance.

Most recent theorisations of the factors influencing bullying have underlined the need for integrating constructs across different perspectives, taking into consideration how multiple variables operate conjointly, in order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted causes of the behaviour (Ettetal, Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Ladd, in press). According to Arsenio and Lemerise's (2004) theorisation, moral processes are an integral part of bullying outcomes, because these behaviours directly involve issues of morality. In line with these considerations, the present study investigated, besides the direct association between BF and bullying, the possible mediating role of moral cognitions, more specifically of the rule-breaking judgement. Finally, following the domain theory framework (Nucci, 2001), we distinguished rule-breaking judgement into different domains, that recent research has found to be significantly associated with bullying (Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Caravita, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2009), as well as antisocial behaviour (Bacchini, Affuso, & De Angelis, 2013). This choice was also in line with Arsenio and Lemerise's (2004) assumption that social knowledge is organised in knowledge structures associated with different domains.

### 1.1. Big Five and bullying

Jones, Miller, and Lynam (2011) carried out a meta-analytic review of 53 studies regarding the relation between the BF, the predominant model of general personality functioning, and antisocial and aggressive behaviours. Results highlighted that Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism had the most robust relations – negative for the first

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two factors and positive for the third – with aggressive and antisocial behaviours. Extraversion and Openness, although to a lesser extent, showed a negative association with aggressive but not with antisocial behaviours. A more detailed analysis showed that the results vary as a function of gender, age and cultural context of subjects and, overall, as a function of the specific outcome taken into account.

Results from studies focused on the relation between the BF and bullying are only partially consistent. Evaluating children, higher Neuroticism and lower Agreeableness were found in bullies compared to defenders of the victims, and higher Extraversion with respect to the outsiders (Tani et al., 2003). Menesini et al. (2010) found similar results only in males, highlighting that Neuroticism and Agreeableness were direct predictors of school bullying, whereas Extraversion predicted bullying only indirectly, via involvement in sibling bullying. In other studies with children (Bollmer et al., 2006; De Bolle & Tackett, 2013) and in the only two studies involving adolescents (Fossati et al., 2012; Kodžopeljić et al., 2014), bullies were low in Conscientiousness, as well as in Agreeableness, while inconsistent results emerged regarding other factors.

Most recent theorisations of the factors influencing bullying, point out that only by taking into consideration how multiple variables work conjointly, can we obtain an adequate understanding of the multifaceted causes of the behaviour (Ettekal et al., in press). Among the above-mentioned research about BF and bullying, only one evaluated the role of possible mediators (Bollmer et al., 2006). The study took into account affective (guilt and arousal while telling about their bullying behaviours) and cognitive variables (blame for the victim and rationalisation of bullying behaviours), finding that guilt mediated the relation between Agreeableness and bullying while arousal mediated the association of Conscientiousness with bullying. No significant mediating role emerged with respect to the cognitive variables. However, authors have focused on very specific cognitive variables, leaving out the majority of the most studied cognitive constructs, such as judgement, normative beliefs, perspective taking and moral disengagement, which nevertheless have demonstrated to be important predictors of bullying (e.g., Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). In light of these considerations and given the moral relevance of bullying, investigating the role of moral cognitions seems particularly interesting.

### 1.2. Moral judgement and bullying

Studies evaluating the association between moral cognitions and bullying have so far taken into consideration mainly the perspective of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002), showing a significant association between the two variables (Gini et al., 2014). On the other hand, although classical approaches to morality, like earlier cognitive-developmental models, claim that behavioural choice stems from individuals' attempts to understand social events, just a few studies have focused on judgement as a predictor of bullying, evidencing inconsistent results (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011; Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel, 2012). However, more consistent findings have emerged from studies evaluating judgement in the perspective of domain theory (Caravita et al., 2012; Caravita et al., 2009). According to this model, social rules can be distinguished into moral (issues of welfare, justice and rights), conventional (issues regarding arbitrary, shared social rules aiming to improve interactions), personal (issues that only affect the actor) and prudential (issues potentially harmful for health and safety). However, domain theorists have long acknowledged that many, maybe even most, social events include elements from multiple domains (e.g., Smetana, 1982). Moreover, the theory asserts that individuals make different judgements about rule-breaking depending on the domain to which the rule belongs.

In line with studies evidencing an association between judgement about rule-breaking in different domains and involvement in deviant conduct (Bacchini et al., 2013), research focusing on school bullying has highlighted that bullies tend to consider different types of violations

more in terms of the conventional domain (Caravita et al., 2009). Moreover, although the study showed that during early adolescence, bullies judge only the violations of conventional rules as more acceptable, subsequent research has proven that in this developmental period, the acceptability of rule-breaking in the moral domain was significantly related to bullying (Caravita et al., 2012).

### 1.3. Big Five and moral cognitions

Moral cognitions have been proven to be related to the BF, even if only in a few studies not focusing on judgement in different domains. More specifically, moral reasoning, in some cases, showed a positive relation only with Openness (Dollinger & LaMartina, 1998), in some other cases also with Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Athota, O'Connor, & Jackson, 2009) or Conscientiousness (Williams, Orpen, Hutchinson, Walker, & Zumbo, 2006). In addition, self-transcendence values, including a clear reference to the need to preserve and enhance the welfare of other people, showed a positive association with Agreeableness and Openness and a negative association with Extraversion (De Raad & van Oudenhoven, 2008; Von Collani & Grumm, 2009). So far, no study has taken into consideration the BF, domain judgement and bullying jointly.

### 1.4. The present study

The aim of the present study was to investigate, in a sample of adolescents, the relation between the BF, judgement about rule-breaking in different domains (hereafter 'domain judgement') and bullying, testing a model in which the BF affects bullying both directly and indirectly, through the mediation of the domain judgement. We focused on adolescence because this developmental period is particularly relevant for the considered variables.

Our first research question was whether the BF affects involvement in school bullying during adolescence. Even if previous studies with adolescents have agreed about the role of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, they showed inconsistent results for Neuroticism and Extraversion (Fossati et al., 2012; Kodžopeljić et al., 2014).

A second research question was whether the BF affects the domain judgement. First, we tried to specify the generic category of rule-breaking using the framework of the domain theory. We hypothesised that the violations of rules presented to our subjects were representative of different domains (see below). Then, based on the research on moral reasoning and values (Athota et al., 2009; De Raad & van Oudenhoven, 2008; Von Collani & Grumm, 2009), we could expect associations between all of the BF traits and the moral domain judgement.

A third research question was whether domain judgement affects involvement in school bullying. Given the moral relevance of bullying, a significant relation with the moral domain judgement was expected.

Finally, we evaluated our explanatory model of the relation between the BF and bullying, according to which the BF is differently associated with judgements about rule-breaking in different domains that, in turn, are differentially related to bullying. More specifically, taking into account the moral relevance of bullying, the moral domain judgement was expected to mediate this relation. Moreover, as the moderating role of gender emerged in previous studies (Jones et al., 2011; Menesini et al., 2010), we analysed our model separately in males and females.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample included 339 adolescents, 156 males ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15.32$  years,  $SD = 1.14$ ) and 183 females ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15.60$  years,  $SD = 1.17$ ), attending public secondary schools in the city of Naples, in Southern Italy.

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