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Individual and collective moral influences on intervention in cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Despite their potential to reduce or remedy the impact of cyberbullying, most bystanders do not intervene in witnessed incidents. Social cognitive theory suggests this response is due to interactive influences of personal, behavioural and environmental factors, and further shaped by the social and cultural context. However, this has not been empirically tested in cyberbullying bystanders. In this study, 563 grade 7 and 9 students completed a survey to examine the associations between intervention and morality, at the individual and peer-group levels. Results revealed that intervention was significantly associated with gender, grade, previous experiences of cyberbullying, and the interaction between individual and collective moral variables. More frequent intervention was reported by females, grade 7 students, and those with more experience as victims and witnesses of cyberbullying. Finally, collective moral disengagement moderated the effects of individual morality. In disengaged classes, higher moral standards were associated with more frequent intervention; furthermore, in extremely morally disengaged classes, higher moral disengagement was associated with more frequent intervention. These results suggest that consistent with social cognitive theory, individuals' perceptions of social norms moderate the influence of individual morality on intervention.

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1. Introduction

Bystanders of cyberbullying have the potential to alter the course of the situations which they witness. In particular, they may stop or reduce the impact of cyberbullying incidents by confronting bullies, supporting victims, or reporting incidents to adults (Bastiaensens et al., 2015; DeSmet et al., 2012; Salmivalli, 2010). However, the majority of witnesses do not intervene; previous studies have indicated that 50–90% of bystanders remain passive when faced with cyberbullying, across a range of surveys (Lenhart et al., 2011; Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014) and experimental paradigms (Dillon & Bushman, 2015; Freis & Gurung, 2013; Shultz, Heilman, & Hart, 2014). Researchers have therefore begun to investigate factors which influence witnesses' responses, so that programs to increase intervention may be developed. Thus far, most studies have examined independent predictors, such as personality (Freis & Gurung, 2013), incident severity (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; DeSmet et al., 2012) or the number of witnesses present

(Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2014). However, researchers have yet to adopt a theoretical model that satisfactorily integrates these factors, while also considering their interactions and social context. This study will explore the interactive roles of individual and collective morals in shaping witnesses' responses to cyberbullying, using a social cognitive theoretical framework.

Cyberbullying is defined as a repeated, intentional act of aggression against a victim who is less able to defend themselves, and which is enacted through an electronic medium (Smith et al., 2008). Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying typically occurs within established peer groups (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013); those involved often know each other in real life, and thus their mediated interactions may have consequences for their offline relationships (DeSmet et al., 2012; Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013). This implies that cyberbullying incidents- and by extension, witnesses' responses- are shaped by the previous interactions, attitudes and norms of the peer group where the incidents occur. Van Cleemput et al. (2014) note that researchers have struggled to explain cyberbullying bystanders' inaction because of the many socio-cognitive and contextual factors that are implicated in this response. This implies that a broad theory may be needed to account for the many complex and interactive influences on

witnesses' responses (Allison & Bussey, 2016).

1.1. Social cognitive theory, morality, and bystander inaction

Bandura (1971, 1986)'s social cognitive theory proposes that an individual's development is shaped by personal, behavioural and environmental factors, which reciprocally influence each other and interact with the social and cultural context. This theory is inherently broad, but can be adapted to explain specific phenomena. For example, aggressive acts (including cyberbullying perpetration) are often explained by applying social cognitive theory to moral behaviour (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). This approach may also be useful in exploring passive responses to witnessed acts of aggression such as cyberbullying (Allison & Bussey, 2016). Bandura (1986, 1990, 1991) proposes that individuals' interactions with others are crucial to the development and refinement of their moral standards. These standards serve as a moral compass, guiding subsequent behaviour. Engaging in moral behaviours increases satisfaction and self-esteem; immoral behaviour that violates these standards invokes self-condemnation, guilt, and shame.

Moral standards may directly motivate witnesses to respond: those with stronger beliefs that cyberbullying is wrong should feel more compelled to intervene, as inactivity would invoke a greater sense of guilt or shame. However, few studies have investigated the role of moral standards in peer aggression, and those which do tend not to focus on cyberbullying bystanders. Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger's (2012) survey of German-speaking adolescents found that lower moral standards and emotions were associated with increased cyberbullying *perpetration*. Additionally, Obermann's (2011) survey of Danish adolescents identified a subset of passive cyberbullying witnesses who subsequently felt guilty about their inaction. However, most studies have focused on individuals who appear to have moral standards but fail to act accordingly. The discrepancy between moral standards and actions (or lack thereof) appears to be primarily mediated by moral disengagement and self-efficacy (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Bussey & Fitzpatrick, 2015). This study focuses on moral disengagement, particularly as it relates to the social context of the peer group.

1.1.1. Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is the process by which individuals may justify or excuse immoral behaviours, by reasoning that their moral standards do not apply under certain circumstances. Bandura (1986, 1990) described eight moral disengagement mechanisms, which fall into four clusters. Through *cognitive restructuring,* individuals may frame their actions as serving a higher purpose (moral justification), compare them to worse behaviours (advantageous comparison) or describe them in understated ways (euphemistic language). They may *downplay their responsibility* if they were pressured by others (displacement of responsibility) or part of a group (diffusion of responsibility). Individuals may also *downplay the effects* of their actions by denying or understating the impact on victims (distortion of consequences). Lastly, individuals may *shift focus to victims* by claiming provocation (attribution of blame) or denying victims' humanity (dehumanisation). Thus, cyberbullying witnesses who can morally disengage may excuse their inaction by using these mechanisms to reason that intervention is unnecessary.

Moral disengagement appears to enable the perpetration of aggressive acts, including traditional and cyberbullying (Gini et al., 2014). It also predicts intervention in traditional bullying: Barchia and Bussey's (2011) survey of Australian students found that moral disengagement was negatively associated with intervention. It is possible that moral disengagement similarly influences witnesses' responses to cyberbullying. Qualitative researchers have

noted that the findings of their studies of cyber-bystanders suggest the use of moral disengagement mechanisms (DeSmet et al., 2014; DeSmet et al., 2012; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Adolescents' explanations for their inaction particularly implicate strategies which blame victims, minimise witnesses' responsibility, and distort consequences. For example, adolescents attribute blame for cyberbullying to victims (Holfeld, 2014), and identify peers whom they consider deserving of victimisation (DeSmet et al., 2012). Many participants deny that they are responsible for intervening (Huang & Chou, 2010; Van Cleemput et al., 2014); some attribute this responsibility to victims' friends (DeSmet et al., 2012; Macháčková et al., 2013; Price et al., 2014) or more popular peers (DeSmet et al., 2014). Lastly, some participants dismiss the impact of cyberbullying by claiming it is "no big deal" (Huang & Chou, 2010, p. 1588).

Despite these indications that moral disengagement influences witnesses' responses to cyberbullying, quantitative studies have failed to evidence this effect. Bussey and Fitzpatrick's (2015) survey of Australian students found no association between moral disengagement and intervention in cyberbullying. This parallels research on cyberbullying perpetration, where the role of moral disengagement is less consistently evidenced than in traditional bullying (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger (2012) attribute these inconsistent findings to the nature of mediated communication, which they argue is sufficiently distinct from face-to-face communication to involve different moral processes. It is generally agreed that socio-emotional cues (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice) are integral parts of offline communication that are absent online, which complicates the interpretation of mediated messages and disrupts processes involving empathy and moral disengagement (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Runions & Bak, 2015). However, it is unclear whether media facilitate (Runions & Bak, 2015) or obviate (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012) moral disengagement mechanisms, and what the implications are for cyberbullying and witnesses' responses. Thus, further research is needed to clarify whether moral disengagement is relevant to cyberbullying bystanders, and under what circumstances.

1.1.2. Collective moral disengagement

Bandura (1971, 1986)'s social cognitive theory suggests the individual's tendency to morally disengage may be influenced by social factors- for example, whether peers consider these strategies to be acceptable or normative. Researchers should therefore consider collective moral disengagement- a concept which captures the individual's perception of their *classmates'* tendency to morally disengage (Bandura, 2002; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). Collective moral disengagement has been implicated in the tendency to intervene in traditional bullying. Gini, Pozzoli, and Bussey (2015) found defending victims was positively associated with perceived collective moral disengagement, but negatively associated with actual collective moral disengagement. That is, defending was less common in objectively disengaged classes, but students who perceived their peers to be disengaged were *more* likely to intervene.

Interestingly, individual and collective moral disengagement may have an interactive influence on behaviour. Gini et al. (2015) note that collective moral disengagement appears to moderate the association between individual moral disengagement and traditional peer aggression. In their study, higher levels of moral disengagement were only associated with more frequent aggression at higher levels of collective moral disengagement: individuals were more likely to disengage their moral standards and act aggressively if they believed these processes to be normative. Although this interaction did not appear to predict defending