



Bullying and defending behavior: The role of explicit and implicit moral cognition

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ABSTRACT

Research on bullying has highlighted the role of morality in explaining the different behavior of students during bullying episodes. However, the research has been limited to the analysis of explicit measures of moral characteristics and moral reasoning, whereas implicit measures have yet to be fully considered. To overcome this limitation, this study investigated the association between bullying and defending, on one hand, and both explicit (moral disengagement, self-importance of moral values) and implicit (immediate affect toward moral stimuli [IAMS]) moral components, on the other hand. Young adolescents ($N = 279$, mean age = 11 years, 9 months, 44.4% girls) completed a series of self-report scales and individually performed a computer task investigating the IAMS. Two hierarchical regressions (bootstrapping method) were performed. Results showed that moral disengagement was associated with bullying and defending behavior at high levels of IAMS, however not when IAMS was low. In contrast, self-importance of moral values was not significantly associated to the two behaviors when IAMS was high whereas both associations were significant at low levels of IAMS. These results significantly expand previous knowledge about the role of morality in bullying and defending behavior. In particular, they highlight the role of the interaction between explicit and implicit moral dimensions in predicting bullying and defending behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Bullying can be defined as intentional and repeated aggressive behaviors enacted toward a peer that may inflict harm or cause distress on the targeted youth, including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Given that morality refers to “issues of human welfare, justice, and rights” (Nucci, 2009, p. 8) and moral judgments are based on “an act’s harmful consequences” (Turiel, 1998, p. 904), bullying inherently represents immoral behavior because of its instrumental nature and the deliberate harm caused to the victim (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Rocke Henderson, 2010). In line with this, studies have shown that children tend to judge bullying as a serious transgression, wrong independently of school rules, and they justify their judgments by referring to its harmful consequences toward the victim (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg, Thornberg, Alamaa, & Daud, 2016). Moreover, bullying conflicts with the fundamental rights of children to live in a safe place and to not be humiliated (European Society for Developmental Psychology, 2007; Hymel et al., 2010).

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Fortunately, when bullying occurs, not all classmates behave in an immoral way. Indeed, some of them take responsibility for helping the bullied peer, for example, by actively intervening and trying to stop the bullying in an assertive way (e.g., telling the bully to stop), as well as consoling and befriending the victim, or calling for adult intervention and support (Meter & Card, 2015; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Taking care of a weaker peer who is victimized, in the attempt to diminish his/her distress and to increase his/her sense of safety at school, can be no doubt conceived as a moral behavior (Tisak, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2006).

Given this premise, it is not surprising that research on bullying has recently broadened its scope and purpose in order to better understand the role of morality as a key factor in relation to the different behavior of students during bullying episodes (e.g., Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). However, to date, empirical findings specifically focused on individual moral functioning associated with bullying, and even more apparently with defending behavior, are still limited. An exception is represented by the use of moral disengagement mechanisms by youths who bully (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014).

Furthermore, research carried out so far on bullying and morality has been restricted to the analysis of explicit measures of moral characteristics and moral reasoning, primarily with the use of self-report scales, whereas implicit measures have not yet been considered. This is quite surprising given that, in the last three decades, several studies that have adopted a dual process model of moral reasoning have shown that both automatic (or implicit, impulsive, or System 1) and controlled (or explicit, deliberative, or System 2) processes play an important role in moral judgments and moral behavior. For example, Haidt (2001, 2007) suggested that explicit moral reasoning should be considered as a post-hoc process used to support or alter automatic responses. Similarly, Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, and Cohen's (2001) fMRI studies confirmed the interplay between automatic and controlled processes in solving moral dilemmas. From a methodological point of view, while explicit forms of moral reasoning can be investigated with self-report scales or interviews, in order to grasp the automatic nature of implicit processes we need to use measures that prevent people from controlling the outcome of the measure itself.

In an attempt to overcome these limitations and to expand the understanding and comprehension of the link between morality, bullying, and defending behavior, this study aimed to analyze the relations between young adolescents' moral functioning and two different forms of participation in bullying, namely bullying others and defending victims of bullying. In particular, we investigated the interplay of different moral dimensions (i.e., moral disengagement, self-importance of moral values, and immediate affect toward moral stimuli) by adopting a multi-method approach, including both explicit and implicit measures. Specifically, the goal of this research was twofold: (a) expanding the study of explicit moral dimensions related to bullying and defending behavior by investigating the role played by self-importance of moral values, above and beyond moral disengagement, one of the moral constructs that has been more widely studied in bullying literature; (b) analyzing, for the first time in this field, the potential interaction between explicit and implicit (i.e., immediate affect toward moral stimuli) moral dimensions in predicting behavior in bullying.

1.1. Moral disengagement and bullying

Social cognitive theories have been widely applied to the study of the aggressive behavior of youths, including peer bullying, and to a lesser extent, pro-social behavior. This framework suggests that individuals' cognitions and emotions about a behavior or a social situation play a central role in their aggressive acts (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1994), as well as in their position as bystanders, that is, when they witness bullying episodes and they should decide to support the bully, defend the victim or do nothing (Pronk, Goossens, Olthof, Mey, & Wilemen, 2013; Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015). One important tenet of these theories is the idea that the experience of people throughout their lives leads them to memorize certain knowledge structures ("schemas" or "scripts," Huesmann, 1988; "database," Crick & Dodge, 1994) that affect their behavior in everyday situations. Such structures guide moral behaviors through self-regulatory psychological processes. Empirical research has indicated that behind people's decisions to act morally or immorally several processes can be implicated, both on the cognitive (Gibbs, 2010; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003; Stams et al., 2006) and on the affective side (Hoffman, 2000; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009).

A theory within the social cognitive framework that has explicitly addressed the role of self-regulatory moral processes in the enactment of negative behaviors is Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory of moral agency. In particular, Bandura proposed the concept of moral disengagement to refer to socio-cognitive processes through which an individual can justify immoral conduct, thus avoiding feelings of guilt that should typically follow from such conduct (e.g., Bandura, 2002). Briefly, in his theory, Bandura described eight self-regulatory mechanisms, clustered into four broad categories, which represent the link between moral reasoning and (im)moral behavior: (a) cognitive restructuring (moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling); (b) obscuring or minimizing one's agentive role; (c) minimizing, disregarding or distorting the consequences of one's behavior; and (d) dehumanizing or blaming the victim (see Bandura, 1990, for a detailed description). Through these psychological mechanisms, people can morally justify their immoral behavior without the constraint of negative self-sanctions, such as guilt or shame, which usually follow immoral conduct (e.g., Bandura, 1990; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Gini, 2006; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Obermann, 2011a).

The concept of moral disengagement has received increasing attention in the literature on bullying. Almost two decades of research have indicated that the more youths endorse moral disengagement mechanisms, the more they tend to engage in different types of aggressive behavior (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008; Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004; Pornari & Wood,

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