



## Bystander behavior in bullying situations: Basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy



Robert Thornberg\*, Tomas Jungert

Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

### A B S T R A C T

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The aim of the present study was to investigate how basic moral sensitivity in bullying, moral disengagement in bullying and defender self-efficacy were related to different bystander behaviors in bullying. Therefore, we examined pathways that linked students' basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement, and defender self-efficacy to different bystander behaviors in bullying situations. Three hundred and forty-seven teenagers completed a bullying survey. Findings indicated that compared with boys, girls expressed higher basic moral sensitivity in bullying, lower defender self-efficacy and moral disengagement in bullying. Results from the SEM showed that basic moral sensitivity in bullying was negatively related to pro-bully behavior and positively related to outsider and defender behavior, mediated by moral disengagement in bullying, which in turn was positively related to pro-bully behavior and negatively related to outsider and defender behavior. What differed in the relations between outsider and defender behaviors was the degree of defender self-efficacy.

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Bullying, defined as repeated aggression directed at students who are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the bully or bullies (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010; Olweus, 1993), is a pervasive problem in schools throughout the world (e.g., Eslea et al., 2003; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). Bullying is a social process, and in most school bullying situations, other students not directly involved as bullies or victims are present as bystanders (e.g., Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). According to the participant role approach (Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Östermalm, & Kaukiainen, 1996), students who observe bullying can assume a range of different roles: assistants, who join the bullies and begin to bully the victim; reinforcers, who support the bullies by cheering and laughing; outsiders, who remain passive or uninvolved with the bullying; and defenders, who try to help or support the victim. Nevertheless, findings from observational studies indicate that bystanders seldom act in ways that support the victims (e.g., Craig et al., 2000; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). In a recent study, former victims were asked what it was that made the bullying stop in their cases. Very few of them reported that bullying had stopped because of support from peers (Frisén, Hasselblad, & Holmqvist, 2012). At the same time, research has shown that bullying is more frequent in school settings where bystanders display more behaviors that reinforce bullying and less frequent when bystanders are more prone to defend the victims (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2011; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Research on bystander behavior in bullying has revealed that defender behavior is more or less associated with empathy, anti-bullying attitudes, pro-victim attitudes, a sense of social justice, low moral disengagement,

\* Corresponding author. Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, IBL, SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden. Tel.: +46 13 282118; fax: +46 13 282145.

E-mail address: [robert.thornberg@liu.se](mailto:robert.thornberg@liu.se) (R. Thornberg).

a high sense of responsibility, high social status, friendship with the victim, perceived peer pressure to help, and social and defender self-efficacy (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012; Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Obermann, 2011a; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Pozzoli, Ang, & Gini, 2012; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012b; Thornberg et al., 2012). The scope of the present study was to investigate how morality (basic moral sensitivity in bullying, and moral disengagement in bullying) and defender self-efficacy were related to different bystander behavior among adolescents in bullying situations.

### Basic moral sensitivity

According to social-cognitive domain theory, morality refers to “conceptions of human welfare, justice, and rights, which are functions of the inherent features of interpersonal relations” (Nucci, 2001, p. 7), and is cognitively structured around considerations of the intrinsic effects that an individual’s actions have on the well-being of other people. In contrast, social conventions are shared norms and expectations based on authority, traditions or customs regarding appropriate behavior in different social contexts (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983). Previous research has shown that children and adolescents judge moral transgression as more wrong and severe than conventional transgressions. They most often justify judgments of moral issues in terms of the harm or unfairness that actions cause, whereas they most often justify judgments of social conventions in terms of social norms, social expectations, customs and authority (e.g., Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Nucci, 1981; Nucci, Camino, & Sapiro, 1996; Tisak, Crane-Ross, Tisak, & Maynard, 2000; Thornberg, 2010; Turiel, 2008).

According to the four-component model of moral functioning (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999; Jordan, 2007; Narvaez & Rest, 1995; Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008; Rest, 1985), four psychological processes occur in normal moral functioning: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. Of interest in this study is the first component, *moral sensitivity*, defined by Jordan (2007) as “the ability to recognize moral issues in complex situations” (p. 325). It includes dimensions such as interpreting others’ reactions and feelings, having empathy and role-taking ability, understanding how actions can affect the welfare of the self and others, and making inferences from others’ behavior and responding appropriately to their reactions. Based on the core definition of morality in social-cognitive domain theory, we would like to propose the concept of *basic moral sensitivity* to refer to an individual’s readiness in morally simple situations to recognize moral transgressions and their harming consequences toward others, a sensitivity related to aroused moral emotions such as empathy, sympathy, or guilt. In normal moral functioning, such “hot” affective content is associated with the construction of moral-action schemas and has been integrated within the overall conceptual framework guiding the child or adolescent’s morality (Hoffman, 2000; Nucci, 2001).

In contrast to a morally complex situation in which moral ambiguity is created because of the presence of moral dilemmas (i.e., conflicts between different moral norms), a morally simple situation, as we define it, is a situation in which a moral transgression is unambiguously wrong because of its inherent harm toward a person in a weaker or socially disadvantaged position in relation to the perpetrator or perpetrators. Bullying, harassment and discrimination are all prototypes of a morally simple situation – it is easy to recognize the moral wrongness in the situation and become emotionally aroused without conscious, cognitive efforts but as a result of automatic information processing. Basic moral sensitivity can therefore be seen as an example of preconscious automaticity, that is, “involuntary activation of social constructs (e.g., schemas, scripts, plans, stereotypes, prototypes) outside of conscious awareness, as a result of a triggering event ... and [if chronically or easily accessible, it] exerts a pervasive interpretative influence over social information-processing and underwrites social judgments of all kinds” (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005, p. 144). Preconscious automatically is responsible for individuals’ strong feelings of certainty or conviction regarding their social judgments (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005). The moral domain structures, which are formed through repeated social interactions that share the core features of “actions that cause others harm,” are latent mental structures that – if activated – inform and influence children’s and adolescents’ social information processing in a given situation (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Whereas the majority of children and adolescents perceive bullying as something wrong by referring to its harming consequences, there are those who do not express that perception (Perren, Gutzwiller, Malti, & Hymel, 2012; Thornberg, 2010), which indicates individual variation in basic moral sensitivity. In line with that, Caravita, Miragoli, and Di Blasio (2009) found that bullies and assistants tend to attribute social-conventional characteristics to moral issues more than their peers do.

### Moral disengagement

As outlined in the social-cognitive theory of agency (Bandura, 1999, 2002), moral disengagement is a set of socio-cognitive processes through which people can disengage from humane acts and instead commit inhumane, harassing, harming, or horrible actions against other people. Specifically, Bandura proposed eight moral disengagement mechanisms clustered into four broad processes. The first, cognitive restructuring, refers to the re-construal of the conduct itself so that it is not viewed as immoral as a result of (a) using worthy ends or moral purposes to condone pernicious means (moral justification), (b) labeling the negative or harming act in a way that makes the act sound less negative or more respectable (euphemistic labeling), or (c) making a malicious act seem “less bad” by comparing it to a worse or more negative act (advantageous comparison). Minimizing one’s agentive role is the second main process and refers to detaching or obscuring oneself from personal responsibility for the act of harming (displacement or diffusion of responsibility). The third set of moral disengagement mechanisms operates by disregarding or distorting the consequences (minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the negative or harmful effects of actions), thus making it easier for the individual to avoid facing the harm

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