

Lenka Kollerová, Pavlína Janošová,
Pavel Říčan
Czech Republic

Moral Disengagement from Bullying: The Effects of Gender and Classroom

Abstract

We examined the effects of gender and classroom membership on moral disengagement–cognitive justifications of detrimental conduct. Sixth-graders aged 11 to 13 years ($N = 273$) participated in the study. Bullying was registered using the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire and moral disengagement was measured on a 14-item scale designed for this study. The study showed that moral disengagement related to bullying and varied as a function of gender, which supports the relevance of considering gender in moral education anti-bullying programs. Next, the study revealed significant differences in moral disengagement between classrooms. This finding points to the need to elucidate associations between moral disengagement and classroom characteristics.

Keywords: adolescence, aggressive behavior, bullying, moral cognition, moral disengagement

Introduction

School bullying—an aggressive behavior characterized by repetitiveness, imbalance of power, and intentionality—is a harmful and common problem of early adolescence (Olweus, 2011). Approximately 11% of early adolescents report having been bullied at school two or three times a month (e.g., Janošová, Kollerová & Zábrodská, n.d.; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Examination of pro-bullying behaviors and attitudes in this age period presents a crucial research task, because as children

enter adolescence their acceptance of aggressive behavior increases, probably because of their heightened tendency to challenge the norms of adults (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Furthermore, because it violates universal ethical principles, bullying can be understood as immoral behavior. Within the literature addressing the links between behaviors in bullying situations and personal morality, substantial attention has been paid to moral reasoning, moral emotions, and recently also to a promising construct of moral disengagement (for review cf., Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Henderson, 2010).

Moral Disengagement and Bullying

Moral disengagement has been formulated by Bandura, Barbaranelli, and Caprara (1996) and refers to cognitive selective deactivation of the moral self-regulation that disinhibits detrimental behavior. This construct can explain the often observed gap between moral attitudes and immoral behaviors. Through moral disengagement justifications, an individual can behave in contradiction to his/her own moral attitudes, while feeling little or no guilt. The self-justification moral disengagement mechanisms comprise four categories: *cognitive restructuring*—moral justification, sanitizing language, or advantageous comparison; *disavowal of a sense of personal agency*—diffusion or displacement of responsibility; *disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of one's own actions*; and *blaming or dehumanizing the victim* (Bandura, 1999). The relevance of this construct is emphasized by the fact that similar concepts have emerged in methodological paradigms far different from the socio-cognitive theory prevailing in aggression research. For example, ego-defense mechanisms developed in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1914/1957) or themes of moral condemnation of the target of bullying or failure to recognize the injury proposed by critical and interpretative paradigms (Zabrodzka, Ellwood, Zaeemdar, & Mudrak, 2014) seem to partly overlap with moral disengagement. Our study aims to extend the branch of the socio-cognitive tradition that has applied moral disengagement in the context of bullying.

Multiple studies have revealed that the more children and adolescents bully others, the more morally disengaged are the attitudes they adopt (e.g., Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Gini, 2006; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno 2005). A consistent positive link between these two variables has also been confirmed in a recent extensive meta-analysis (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). The authors point

out that although time predictive relationships of these variables have not been studied, bidirectional associations, such as that moral disengagement disinhibits future bullying and involvement in bullying increases future moral disengagement, can be expected.

Moral Disengagement in Relationship to Gender and Classroom

Bandura (2002) stated that as children grow older, a gender difference in moral disengagement emerges, but past research on adolescent samples obtained somewhat mixed results. In most studies, boys were found to be more morally disengaged than girls (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Caravita et al., 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), while in others, no significant gender differences appeared (Gini, 2006; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011). More data from diverse samples would broaden the existing picture on gender differences in moral disengagement, and its magnitude.

To our knowledge, the existing research has paid limited attention to another demographic variable of theoretical importance, namely the classroom (as membership in a fixed group of students). In the Czech Republic, as well as in many other countries, students spend the majority of their lessons within one classroom. As many as 70–80% of students who have become targets of bullying report that they were harmed by their own classmates (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Classrooms as stable groups with ascribed membership can be assumed not only a primary context for school peer interactions, but also a crucial normative context that may influence how students view bullying and how they behave in bullying incidents (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). If this assumption is accurate, we can expect that individual moral disengagement from bullying will vary across classrooms.

Goals of the Presented Study

The presented study investigated moral disengagement in relationship to bullying and two demographic variables (gender and classroom) in early adolescence. Drawing upon the literature reviewed above, we formulated three hypotheses: (1) Moral disengagement would positively correlate with bullying; (2) Boys would report higher moral disengagement than girls; (3) Moral disengagement would vary as a function of the classroom. Unlike the existing studies addressing mostly

general moral disengagement (measured by items referring to general harmful behaviors) we, inspired by the study by Hymel et al. (2005), focused specifically on moral disengagement from bullying (measured by items directly referring to bullying).

Since classroom anti-bullying efforts may benefit from including a moral education component that cultivates moral motivation (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Kollerová, Janošová, & Říčan, 2014), examination of moral disengagement from bullying in association with gender and classroom may provide practically relevant information.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Using convenience sampling, we recruited 273 sixth-graders (125 boys and 148 girls) aged 11 to 13 years from 13 classes of public elementary schools located in large urban areas: five schools in Prague, one in České Budějovice, and one in Liberec. The urban population in the Czech Republic covers a wide range of social classes, but is relatively homogeneous, with the middle class prevailing. The sample composition by gender and classroom is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample composition by gender and classroom

Classroom	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	Total
Boys	12	9	10	6	5	8	8	8	7	10	11	13	18	125
Girls	11	10	11	10	15	11	11	12	11	18	9	15	4	148
Total	23	19	21	16	20	19	19	20	18	28	20	28	22	273

Note. The 13 classrooms involved in the study are labeled with the letters a-m.

The students participated voluntarily and oral informed consent was obtained from their parents during the parents' evening for each classroom. Data collection took place in classroom settings and was conducted by the researchers and trained assistants.

Measures

Bullying. We used a 6-item Czech adaptation of the most widely used self-report measure of bullying and victimization—the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1986). At the beginning of the questionnaire, a thorough

definition of bullying is introduced to participants. For the purpose of this study, we used the score on Item 5 as an indicator of bullying. This item asked adolescents to mark, by choosing 1 of 5 options, how often they had been involved in bullying other students at school during the past couple of months. The resulting score ranged from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating higher involvement in bullying others.

Moral disengagement. We used a score on a Disengagement scale designed for this study. The scale consisted of 14 items, mostly adapted from the unidimensional instrument developed by Hymel et al. (2005). The participants marked their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all true” to “totally true”. Each answer was scored 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating higher moral disengagement. The items referred to Bandura’s four moral disengagement clusters: *cognitive restructuring* (4 items; e.g., Sometimes it’s okay to bully.), *disavowal of a sense of personal agency* (3 items; e.g., It is adults’ responsibility to stop bullying.), *disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of one’s own actions* (3 items; e.g., Bullying is sometimes the best way to solve a problem.), and *blaming or dehumanizing the victim* (4 items; e.g., The people that get bullied usually deserve it.). The instrument produced a single scale score that reached high internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of moral disengagement and bullying in the total sample and across genders are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of moral disengagement and bullying in the total sample and across genders

	Total (N = 273)			Boys (N = 125)	Girls (N = 148)
	Min.	Max.	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Moral disengagement	14	61	26.65 (8.33)	29.44 (9.35)	24.30 (6.53)
Bullying	1	5	1.24 (0.57)	1.36 (0.73)	1.13 (0.36)

Means and standard deviations of moral disengagement and bullying across classrooms are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of moral disengagement and bullying across classrooms

	Moral disengagement	Bullying
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Classroom a	25.33 (6.25)	1.28 (0.54)
Classroom b	26.74 (7.47)	1.08 (0.25)
Classroom c	32.14 (12.95)	1.19 (0.40)
Classroom d	30.06 (9.35)	1.13 (0.34)
Classroom e	23.84 (5.15)	1.20 (0.41)
Classroom f	23.50 (4.29)	1.16 (0.69)
Classroom g	22.32 (5.32)	1.11 (0.32)
Classroom h	28.95 (10.74)	1.32 (0.58)
Classroom i	28.69 (8.94)	1.39 (0.78)
Classroom j	23.77 (6.61)	1.23 (0.42)
Classroom k	27.79 (8.06)	1.50 (1.15)
Classroom l	24.94 (5.42)	1.07 (0.26)
Classroom m	30.05 (9.38)	1.45 (0.67)

Because normal probability plots and normality tests indicated non-normal distributions of both moral disengagement and bullying (Shapiro-Wilk tests, $p < .001$), we further analyzed the data using non-parametric statistical techniques.

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to verifying the three main hypotheses, we performed two preliminary steps. First, we examined whether the two demographic variables of interest—gender and classroom membership—are related. A chi-square test indicated no differences in the gender composition of the classrooms, $\chi^2(12, n = 273) = 18.51$, $p = 0.10$.

Next, we investigated whether these two variables have effects on bullying behavior. Based on previous research (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), we hypothesized that boys would report more bullying than girls. Due to a lack of past studies, we did not state any specific hypothesis concerning the effect of classroom on bullying. The Kruskal-Wallis tests with bullying as a dependent variable and the gender and classroom as grouping factors showed (1) a significant gender difference, $H(1) = 8.92$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, indicating that boys bullied others more than girls, and (2) no difference between classrooms, $H(12) = 14.56$, $p = .27$ (for means and standard deviations cf., Table 2).

Moral Disengagement in Association with Bullying, Gender, and Classroom

We verified our first hypothesis that moral disengagement would positively correlate with bullying. We found a significant positive Spearman correlation coefficient, $r_s = .17, p < .01$, indicating that the more adolescents reported being involved in bullying others, the more morally disengaged attitudes they showed.

Next, we tested the second and the third hypotheses on inter-gender and inter-classroom variability in moral disengagement. Figure 1 shows means of moral disengagement across genders and classrooms. (For means and standard deviations for boys and girls cf., Table 2. For means and standard deviations for classrooms cf., Table 3.)

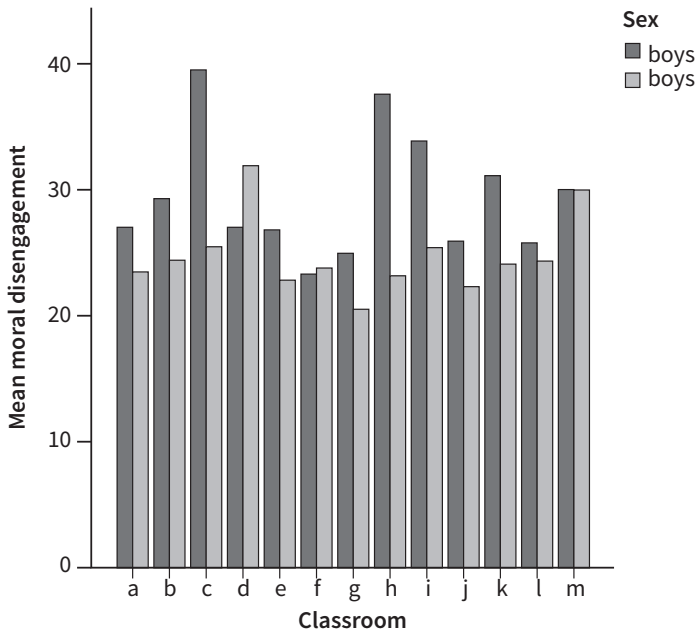


Figure 1. Means of moral disengagement in boys and girls across classrooms

First, we hypothesized that boys would be more morally disengaged than girls. The Kruskal-Wallis test results, $H(1) = 22.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$, showed that the inter-gender differences in moral disengagement reached statistical significance. Second, we hypothesized that moral disengagement would vary as a function of classroom membership. This hypothesis was also confirmed. The Kruskal-Wallis

test revealed that there was a significant effect of classroom on moral disengagement $H(12) = 26.25, p < .01, \eta^2 = .10$.

To sum up these findings together with the results of the preliminary analyses, significant effects of gender were found on both bullying and moral disengagement while classroom proved to have a significant effect on moral disengagement and no significant effect on bullying.

Discussion

The presented study addressed moral disengagement in early adolescents. We found that moral disengagement positively related to bullying others and varied as a function of gender and classroom.

Moral Disengagement and Bullying

In compliance with our first hypothesis, the more involvement in bullying adolescents reported, the more morally disengaged attitudes they adopted. The nature of the association conforms to the evidence brought by earlier research (e.g., Gini, 2006; Hymel et al., 2005), but its magnitude ($r_s = .17$) is lower than that ($r = .28$) found in a recent meta-analysis (Gini et al., 2014). This may be an artefact of the methodological specifics of our study (usage of self-report measures of bullying and applying non-parametric statistics) or it may reflect the younger age of our participants. Age was found to moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and bullying, i.e., with getting older, the link becomes stronger (Gini et al., 2014). Given that most of the existing research, including the presented study, used unidimensional operationalization of moral disengagement, further studies may broaden our understanding by exploring differential links of various moral disengagement clusters to bullying (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014).

Moral Disengagement, Gender, and Classroom

Next, we confirmed our second hypothesis that boys would show higher moral disengagement than girls, a finding that complies with the existing research (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Caravita et al., 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). Gender accounted for 9% of the variance in moral disengagement, while it explained only 3% of the variance in bullying. Further studies are needed to examine whether the uneven distribution of bullying across genders distorts results on the association between gender and moral disengagement. The underlying mechanisms of the development of gender difference in moral disengagement have not yet been

elucidated. Peer influence might be at work, because boys' peer culture has been shown to lead boys to presenting themselves as tough and to hiding their prosocial concerns (Naylor et al., 2006). Given the found gender difference, there arises the issue of whether the associations between moral disengagement and bullying differ between boys and girls. So far, no significant moderating effect of gender on this link has been found (Gini et al., 2014).

Our third hypothesis was also confirmed. The classroom proved to have a significant effect on moral disengagement from bullying. The classroom accounted for 10% of the variance in moral disengagement. This finding probably cannot be explained as an artefact of undesired effects of gender and bullying, because gender and bullying did not vary as a function of the classroom. Future research should investigate the classroom characteristics that underpin this relationship. In particular, the role of classroom norms, including classroom moral disengagement, should be taken into account (Pozzoli et al., 2012; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014). Next, as one of the reviewers of this study suggested, the influence of peer group relationships (e.g., dyadic friendships or cliques) may be crucial. The effect of peer friendships has already been demonstrated in a unique study by Caravita, Sijtsema, Rambaran, and Gini (2014), reporting that early adolescent friends tend to show similar levels of moral disengagement over time due to social influence. From a theoretical perspective, the inter-classroom variability of moral disengagement found in our study conforms to Bandura's interactionist perspective in which moral cognition is affected by an interplay of personal and social influences (Bandura, 2002). Even though they require further confirmation, our results have supported the idea that classroom characteristics should be explored in connection with moral disengagement.

Limitations and Conclusions

Four main limitations of the findings should be acknowledged. First, the results should be validated with other age ranges, because we worked with a narrow age cohort of sixth-graders. Second, we examined only main effects, not interactive ones. Third, time predictive relationships also remain a question for further research, because the variables were registered at a single time point. Finally, other unregistered variables, such as socioeconomic status, might have influenced the results. To minimize similar problems common in the moral disengagement correlational research, complex studies tapping longitudinal main and interactive effects of multiple factors are warranted (Gini et al., 2014).

Despite these limitations, the presented study supported the notion that anti-bullying programs may be more effective if they are focused not only on strength-

ening social competencies, but also on cultivating morality—understanding and care for ethical principles associated with rejection of bullying (Caravita et al., 2012; Gasser & Keller, 2009). As Thornberg and Jungert (2014) point out, it remains a task for future research to verify whether such moral education interventions result in a decline of bullying behavior. Next, our findings underscore the need to consider gender in designing interventions aimed at reducing moral disengagement, because in accordance with earlier research, boys showed a higher tendency to adopt morally disengaged attitudes than girls. Finally, the findings point to the importance of elucidating associations between moral disengagement and classroom characteristics, because the various classrooms showed different levels of moral disengagement. In sum, we believe that challenging moral disengagement and cultivating morally responsible attitudes within anti-bullying programs may improve the “safeguards built into social systems that uphold compassionate behavior and renounce cruelty” (Bandura, 2002, p. 101).

Acknowledgements

The study was supported by a grant of the Czech Science Foundation (n. P 407/12/2325).

References

- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193–209.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 31(2), 101–119.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G.V., & Pastorelli, C. (1996). Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(2), 364–374.
- Caravita, S.C.S., Gini, G., & Pozzoli, T. (2012). Main and moderated effects of moral cognition and status on bullying and defending. *Aggressive Behavior*, 38(6), 456–468.
- Caravita, S.C.S., Sijtsema, J.J., Rambaran, J.A., & Gini, G. (2014). Peer influences on moral disengagement in late childhood and early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(2), 193–207.
- Freud, S. (1957). On the history of the psychoanalytic movement. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14)* (pp. 3–66). London: Hogarth. (Original work published 1914).

- Gasser, L., & Keller, M. (2009). Are the competent the morally good? Perspective taking and moral motivation of children involved in bullying. *Social Development, 18*(4), 798–816.
- Gini, G. (2006). Social cognition and moral cognition in bullying: What's wrong? *Aggressive Behavior, 32*(6), 528–539.
- Gini, G., Pozzoli, T., & Bussey, K. (2014). Collective moral disengagement: Initial validation of a scale for adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 11*(3), 386–395.
- Gini, G., Pozzoli, T., & Hauser, M. (2011). Bullies have enhanced moral competence to judge relative to victims, but lack moral compassion. *Personality and Individual Differences, 50*(5), 603–608.
- Gini, G., Pozzoli, T., & Hymel, S. (2014). Moral disengagement among children and youth: A meta-analytic review of links to aggressive behavior. *Aggressive Behavior, 40*(1), 56–68.
- Hymel, S., Rocke-Henderson, N., & Bonanno, R.A. (2005). Moral disengagement: A framework for understanding bullying among adolescents. *Journal of Social Sciences*, (Special Issue No. 8), 1–11.
- Hymel, S., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., Bonanno, R.A., Vaillancourt, T., & Henderson, N. (2010). Bullying and morality: Understanding how good kids can behave badly. In S.R. Jimerson, S.M. Swearer, & D.L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 101–118). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Janošová, P., Kollerová, L., & Zabrodska, K. (n.d.). Školní šikana v současnosti – její definice a operacionalizace. (School bullying nowadays – definition and operationalization). *Československá Psychologie*.
- Kollerová, L., Janošová, P., & Říčan, P. (2014). Good and evil at school: Bullying and moral evaluation in early adolescence. *Journal of Moral Education, 43*(1), 18–31.
- Naylor, P., Cowie, H., Cossin, F., de Bettencourt, R., & Lemme, F. (2006). Teachers' and pupils' definitions of bullying. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76*(3), 553–576.
- Olweus, D. (1986). *The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire*. Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Olweus, D. (2011). Bullying at school and later criminality: Findings from three Swedish community samples of males. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health, 21*(2), 151–156.
- Pozzoli, T., Gini, G., & Vieno, A. (2012). The role of individual correlates and class norms in defending and passive bystanding behavior in bullying: A multilevel analysis. *Child Development, 83*(6), 1917–1931.

- Salmivalli, C., & Peets, K. (2009). Bullies, victims, and bully-victim relationships in middle childhood and early adolescence. In K.H. Rubin, W.M. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 322–340). New York: Guilford Press.
- Solberg, M.E., & Olweus, D. (2003). Prevalence estimation of school bullying with the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire. *Aggressive Behavior, 29*(3), 239-268.
- Thornberg, R., & Jungert, T. (2014). School bullying and the mechanisms of moral disengagement. *Aggressive Behavior, 40*(2), 99–108.
- Zabrodska, K., Ellwood, C., Zaeemdar, S., & Mudrak, J. (2014). Workplace bullying as sensemaking: An analysis of target and actor perspectives on initial hostile interactions. *Culture and Organization*, DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2014.894514