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# Bullying and Moral Disengagement

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# Social Cognition and Aggression/Bullying

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Attitudes and beliefs  
Empathy

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# Children who bully....

- ❑ express more positive attitudes regarding the use of violence and aggression in response to social difficulties (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Olweus, 1997)
- ❑ expect more positive outcomes from bullying, and tend to view aggression and victimization as a legitimate response and the “only alternative”, as compared with victims and students who were neither bullies nor victims (Bentley & Li, 1995)
- ❑ report lower levels of empathy (Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Espelage, Mebane & Adams, 2004; Funke, 2003; Roberts & Morotti, 2000; Olweus 1993, 1997), especially boys (Funke, 2003; Gini et al., 2007), though the magnitude of the relation varies.
  - with attitudes toward bullying mediating the relationship between empathy and bullying. Students high in empathy reported negative attitudes toward bullying and therefore were less likely to engage in such behavior (Endreson & Olweus, 2001; Espelage, Mebane & Adams, 2004).

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# Moral Disengagement

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# Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency (Bandura 1999, 2002)

- Psychological mechanisms by which ‘good people can do bad things’
- Links moral reasoning to moral action via self-regulatory mechanisms that affect moral agency (Gini, 2006)
- “Disinhibitory power of moral disengagement” (Bandura et al., 2001)
- Makes negative and inhumane acts more likely, as the individual is freed from self-censure and potential guilt (Bandura, 1999, Bandura et al., 2001)

# Moral Disengagement Strategies

(Bandura, 1999; 2001; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001)

## Four major categories:

### 1) Cognitive restructuring

- “moral justification”
  - portraying behavior as serving a worthy cause or moral purpose
- “euphemistic labeling”
  - using language that makes negative acts sound less negative
- “advantageous comparisons”
  - making a negative act seem less negative by comparing it to a more negative act

### 2) Minimizing one’s agentive role

- minimizing one’s personal responsibility
- deferring to another’s authority

### 3) Disregarding or distorting negative impact

### 4) Blaming or dehumanizing the victim

- seeing victim as partially responsible or “deserving”

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# Moral Disengagement & Aggression

Positive relationship between aggressive behavior and moral disengagement in both adults and children (e.g., Bandura, 1995; 2001; Capara et al., 1995, 1996; Paciello et al., 2008)

Greater moral disengagement associated with greater aggressive and violent behavior

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# Moral Disengagement & Bullying

Children who bully others (relative to victims or outsiders or nonbullies)

- are more likely to morally disengage (Barchia & Bussey, 2007; Dane et al., 2008; Gini, 2006; Hymel et al., 2005).
- are more likely to describe bullies as feeling pride or indifference (emotions associated with moral disengagement) as opposed to guilt or shame and tend to emphasize the personal consequences or advantages for the bully in explaining these feelings (Menesini et al., 2003).

Over the school year, high levels of moral disengagement are associated with greater aggression 8 months later, even after controlling for initial aggression (Barchia, 2008).



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## Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno (2005)

- students ( $N = 494$ ) in grades 8-10 (age 14-16)
- questionnaires about their experiences with bullying and victimization and their attitudes about bullying
- 18 items identified (post hoc) as reflecting moral disengagement

of students endorsing

- **Cognitive Restructuring**
  - Bullying is just a normal part of being a kid. 64%
  - Bullying is a criminal offense. (reversed) 60%
  - It's okay to join in when someone you don't like is being bullied. 29%
  - Sometimes it's okay to bully other people. 33%
  - In my group of friends, bullying is okay. 28%
- **Minimizing Agency**
  - Adults at school should be responsible for protecting kids from bullies. 51%
  - When I see another kid getting bullied, there's nothing I can do to stop it. (reversed) 46%
  - It's my responsibility to intervene or do something when I see bullying. 35%
- **Distortion of Negative Consequences**
  - Bullying gets kids to understand what is important to the group. 33%
  - Getting bullied helps to make people tougher. 44%
  - Some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson. 52%
  - Bullying can be a good way to solve problems. 21%
- **Blaming/ Dehumanizing the Victim**
  - Kids get bullied because they are different. 87%
  - Some kids get bullied because they deserve it. 67%
  - Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids. 79%
  - It's okay to pick on losers. 25%
  - If kids didn't cry or give in so easily they wouldn't get bullied so much. 70%
  - Most students who get bullied bring it on themselves. 56%

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## Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno (2005)

- positive attitudes and beliefs about bullying were significantly more likely among students who engaged in bullying
- 38% of the variance in reported bullying accounted for by the student's endorsement of only 5 moral disengagement statements
  - Sometimes it's okay to bully other people.
  - In my group of friends, bullying is okay.
  - Kids get bullied because they are different.
  - Some kids get bullied because they deserve it.
  - Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids.

# Victimization experiences also matter....

(Hymel, Rocke-Henderson & Bonnano, 2005)

	<b>Never Bully Others</b>	<b>Some Bullying</b>	<b>Extensive Bullying (weekly or more)</b>
<b>No Victimization</b>	1.87	2.64	3.32
<b>Some Victimization</b>	1.90	2.41	3.07
<b>Extensive Victimization (weekly or more)</b>	2.03	2.09	3.11

Moral disengagement score range: 1(low) to 4 (high)

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# BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL:

# Bullying as a Group Phenomenon

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# Variations in School/Peer Community Attitudes/Beliefs about Bullying

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# Beliefs About Victims

## Empathy for Victims

**It bothers me that other kids get picked on by bullies. 70-81% yes**

## Perceptions of Victims

**Some kids get bullied because they deserve it. 40-71% yes**

**Most students who get bullied bring it on themselves. 37-58% yes**

**If certain kids didn't whine or given in so easily,  
they wouldn't get bullied so much. 58-72% yes**



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# Justifying Bullying

<b>Sometimes it's okay to bully other people.</b>	<b>16-31% yes</b>
<b>Bullying gets grudges out in the open.</b>	<b>65-72% yes</b>
<b>Getting bullied helps make people tougher.</b>	<b>29-44% yes</b>
<b>Some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson.</b>	<b>36-51% yes</b>
<b>Bullying gets kids to understand what is important to the group.</b>	<b>20-34% yes</b>
<b>Bullying can be a good way to solve problems.</b>	<b>10-21% yes</b>

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# Do Group Attitudes and Beliefs Matter?

(Vaillancourt, Hymel, Duku, Krygsman, Cunningham, Davis, Short, & Cunningham, 2006, ISSBD)

- Examines whether the level of moral disengagement reported in the school as a whole contributes to bullying beyond individual's beliefs and attitudes
- Participants: 16879 students (gr.4-12) in 116 Ontario schools

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# Moral Disengagement (6 items)

I Strongly Agree    I Agree    I Disagree    I Strongly Disagree

- It is okay to call some students nasty names.
- Students who get picked on a lot usually deserve it.
- It is okay to join in when someone you don't like is being bullied.
- Bullying is just a normal part of being a student.
- Getting bullied helps to make students tougher.
- If you're angry with someone, it's okay to keep them out of your group of friends.

$\alpha = .86$

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# Summary of Results

(Vaillancourt, Hymel, Duku, Krygsman, Cunningham, Davis, Short, & Cunningham, 2006, ISSBD)

- Individual level:
  - Greater moral disengagement associated with more bullying, more victimization
  
- Group level:
  - Over and above the contribution of individual levels of moral disengagement, students reported more bullying and more witnessing (but not more victimization) when the collective is morally *disengaged*

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# Moral Disengagement and Bullying: Challenges and Future Directions

## 1. Applicability to Children

### Developmental Considerations

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“Disengagement practices will not instantly transform considerate persons into cruel ones. Rather, the change is achieved by progressive disengagement of self-censure. Initially, individuals perform mildly harmful acts they can tolerate with some discomfort. After their self-reproof has been diminished through repeated enactments, the level of ruthlessness increases, until eventually acts originally regarded as abhorrent can be performed with little anguish or self-censure. Inhumane practices become thoughtlessly routinized. The continuing interplay between moral thought, affect, action, and its social reception is personally transformative. People may not even recognize the changes they have undergone as a moral self.”

**Albert Bandura, 2001**

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# Developmental Considerations

Where and when does it all begin?

Dunn & Hughes (2001) found that preschoolers who displayed violent pretend play

- expressed lower levels of moral sensibility toward others two years later
  - were less likely to provide empathy-related explanations for victims feelings at age 6
  - were more likely to focus on selfish explanations of aggressor's behavior at age 6
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- Differences in moral disengagement between those who bully and those who are victims/defenders/uninvolved increases with age from elementary to secondary school (Dane et al., 2008).
  - However, moral disengagement generally appears to decline as students move into young adulthood (Paciello et al., 2008)
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# Moral Disengagement and Bullying: Challenges and Future Directions

## 1. Applicability to Children

Developmental Considerations

## 2. Methodological Issues

Emotions vs. Beliefs

Reactive vs. Productive Measures

## 3. Applicability to Bystanders

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# Participant Role Approach

(Salmivalli et al., 1996, 1997)

Distribution of Finnish children across the various participant roles with respect to bullying episodes in 6th grade (adapted from Salmivalli et al., 1996)

