An Examination of Differences in Moral Disengagement and Empathy Among Bullying Participant Groups

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This study examines how different roles in school bullying (e.g., bullies, victims, defenders) vary in cognitive and affective empathy and moral disengagement. Findings from this study revealed that levels of empathy and moral disengagement differed significantly among bullying groups for 702 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students in the United States. An analysis of variance showed differential patterns between bullying groups and outcome variables (i.e., cognitive and affective empathy and moral disengagement). In addition, the correlation between moral disengagement and empathy was statistically significant and negative. Affective empathy and cognitive empathy both significantly predicted moral disengagement; with every one unit increase in moral disengagement, affective empathy decreased by .38 and cognitive empathy decreased by .39. Students who scored higher in moral disengagement tended to score lower in empathy. The current findings confirm and extend the literature on the relation between moral disengagement, empathy, prosociality, and victimising behaviour. This information can inform school-wide and targeted intervention efforts.

■ **Keywords:** moral disengagement, empathy, bullying, bullying groups, aggression, victimisation, protective factors, risk factors, peer relationships

Long before the advent of experimental science, wisdom traditions around the world cautioned against instrumental aggression due to its deleterious effects for the victim, the aggressor, and the social order. Recognising blatantly aggressive and exploitative behaviour as critical impediments to the systems of reciprocity necessary for communal living, a key function of society and the state has been to institute and enforce social norms and laws aimed at curbing violence and promoting self-restraint (Elias & Jephcott, 1982; Pinker, 2011). Indeed, the regulation of such behaviour resides at the core of social contracts and constitutional law. Harmful, aggressive, and violent behaviour have been topics of interest for the human sciences since their inception, and investigating the psychosocial factors at play has motivated some of the field's most well-known studies (e.g., Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Milgram, 1963; Sherif, 1958; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). In recent decades, the persistent prevalence of school bullying has prompted modern social science to focus on these issues (e.g., Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006) in an effort to stem this pernicious problem and create safer, more supportive schools (Bryn, 2011; Osher, Dwyer, Jimerson, & Brown, 2012).

Bullying is a subcategory of interpersonal aggression traditionally defined as 'unwanted, intentional, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance that is often repeated over time' (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2013, p. 5; Olweus 1993, 1994, 2010; Smith & Morita, 1999; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Bullying takes a variety of forms, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, and social or relational aggression, such as exclusion and humiliation, with the 'systematic use and abuse of power' distinguishing bullying from other forms of aggressive behaviour (AERA, 2013, p. 5; Espelage, 2012; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). As such, bullying is best understood

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as a component of the broader phenomenon of violence in schools and communities (AERA, 2013). Bullying is a widespread problem that negatively affects youth around the globe, with some research indicating the prevalence of bullying behaviour peaking in the middle school years (Neiman, Devoe, & Chandler, 2009; Olweus, 1991, 2010). The aim of this study was to examine and further clarify the relation between differences in levels of empathy (cognitive and affective) and levels of moral disengagement, and different roles in school bullying (e.g., bullies, defenders, victims), as well as to examine the relation between levels of empathy and levels of moral disengagement.

Theoretical Perspective

In recent years, the social-ecological conceptualisation of bullying as occurring within the broader social context has gained purchase in the fields of psychology and education (Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2010). It is a theoretical perspective that understands bullying behaviour as influenced by both individual characteristics and the multilayered, proximal, and distal systems of families, schools, key caregivers, peer groups, neighbourhoods, cultural expectations, society, and the reciprocal interactions among and across these systems (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Individuals' participation in bullying situations can include victimising others, being victimised, and cooperating (i.e., defending the victim, staying uninvolved, or helping the bully; Rigby & Slee, 1993). In response to research examining bullying as a group phenomenon, Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1996) developed the participant role approach, which organises individuals involved in the bullying process into six distinct groups: victim, bully, reinforcer, assistant, defender, and outsider.

Research has suggested a variety of individual and group-level risk factors related to bullying participation (Barboza et al., 2009). Risk for involvement in bullying is associated with prior victimisation, poor school climate, parents and teachers with low expectations for academic achievement, and a lack of academic and emotional support from parents, teachers, and peers (Barboza et al., 2009). While some studies indicate that bullies have poor social problem-solving skills (Slee, 1993; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003), other studies indicate that bullies are perceived as having high social intelligence (Kaukiainen et al., 1999) and as being popular (Vaillancourt et al., 2003). Bullying behaviour is consistently associated with anger, aggression, and externalising problems (Olweus, 1993). As Gini, Pozzoli, and Hymel (2014) explain, youth with a positive attitude toward aggressive behaviour (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1993), an enhanced sense of self-efficacy in employing aggressive behaviours (Andreou & Metallidou, 2004),

and underdeveloped feelings of empathy for others (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011) are particularly predisposed to utilising aggressive behaviour instrumentally to achieve their goals. Rather than being reactive aggressors with social skills deficits (Crick & Dodge, 1994), some children who frequently bully appear to possess a well-developed understanding of social cues, moral norms, and the factors that guide moral judgments and adherence to moral norms (e.g., beliefs, values, impact on others; Dolan & Fullam, 2010; Gini, 2006; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). However, these social skills and moral reasoning abilities appear to be possessed in conjunction with low levels of empathy for victims' suffering (Gini et al., 2011) and a lack of motivation to act on that knowledge (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). From this perspective, bullies are conceptualised as aggressive children who value instrumental goals more highly than relational goals and utilise their social knowledge and skills in conjunction with aggressive behaviour for personal gain (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Polman et al., 2007). It is believed that such traits may facilitate bullying behaviour due to the lack of salience of others' distress cues and a concomitant lack of empathy and guilt (Beauchaine & Hinshaw, 2016; Frick, 2006).

Empathy, like other moral emotions (e.g., shame and guilt), has been seen as a mediator of moral standards and behaviour (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Moral emotions appear to enable individuals to anticipate how moral transgressions will lead to deleterious outcomes, which assists in altering behaviour for a more positive result (Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009). Empathy in particular has been shown to be a factor that can inhibit antisocial behaviour (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Hoffman, 2000; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). The construct of empathy has been defined in a variety of ways, but an inclusive definition conceptualises the construct as 'the ability to understand and share in another's emotional state or context' (Cohen & Strayer, 1996, p. 988). Defined in this way, empathy is regarded as both a cognitive process and an affective capacity. The cognitive dimension connotes the ability to understand another's emotional state or perspective, whereas the affective dimension of empathy is characterised by the ability to share another's emotional state or experience feelings of concern or sympathy toward others (Davis, 1994). At present, this multidimensional model of empathy is generally employed (e.g., Davis, 1994; Hoffman, 2001) with the understanding that while the cognitive and affective components of empathy can be studied in isolation, an accurate and comprehensive consideration of the construct integrates both dimensions (Hoffman, 2001).

The relation between bullying behaviour and empathy in childhood and adolescence is often asserted (Bernstein & Watson, 1997; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Olweus, 1993). Findings from

a study by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) indicated that low affective empathy was significantly related to frequently engaging in bullying for both male and female students and occasional bullying among females, but not males; however, students' levels of cognitive empathy demonstrated no significant association with bullying of any kind. Male students reporting low levels of overall empathy were more likely to engage in violent bullying, whereas female students reporting low levels of overall empathy were more likely to engage in indirect bullying. In another study, Jolliffe and Farrington (2011) found that, independent of a variety of individual social and background variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, parental supervision, family status), low affective empathy, but not cognitive empathy, was related to bullying by males. Similarly, Endresen and Olweus (2001) found a significant negative correlation between bullying behaviour and affective empathy for both males and females. A study by Espelage, Mebane, and Adams (2004) found significant negative correlations between bullying and affective empathy and cognitive empathy for young adolescent males and bullying and cognitive empathy for young adolescent females. Results from a 2009 study by Caravita, Di Blasio, and Salmivalli suggested that high levels of affective empathy inhibited bullying only among adolescent males; moreover, both males and females with high levels of cognitive empathy were less likely to bully. Gini et al. (2007) found that, among a sample of adolescents, low empathy was associated with bullying, whereas high empathy was positively associated with coming to the aid of bullied students.

It is important to note, however, that the relationship between low empathy and bullying has been called into question. A few studies that examined the relationship while controlling for other factors, such as socioeconomic status and intelligence (Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003), did not find that low empathy was independently related to bullying. Similarly, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) confirmed a positive relation between criminal offending and low levels of empathy, but found that controlling for socioeconomic status and intelligence caused the relationship to vanish. In response, the authors argued that further research employing better measures of empathy is needed.

There is evidence that defending behaviour is also related to levels of empathy. Warden and Mackinnon (2003) found that, in a sample of 9- and 10-year-olds, prosocial children had significantly higher levels of affective empathy compared to bullies. They further found that this association was moderated by gender: females had higher levels of empathy and were less likely to bully, whereas males had lower levels of empathy and were more likely to bully. There also appears to be a developmental component to the relation between prosocial helping behaviour and empathy, with research findings suggesting

that as children's prosocial competencies develop, their ability to interpret their own reactions to social situations improves and associations between indices of empathy and helping behaviour are strengthened (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Gini et al. (2007) found that empathy was positively associated with actively helping victimised students; however, in a follow-up study, Gini, Albiero, Benelli, and Altoè (2008) concluded that empathy alone was not powerful enough to predict defending behaviour, despite the fact that they again found that high levels of empathic responsiveness increased the likelihood of prosocial support in bullying situations. Like the results discussed above that found bullying was related to low levels of affective empathy but not cognitive empathy, similar results were found for defending behaviour. Pöyhönen, Juvonen, and Salmivalli (2010) found a positive association between affective empathy and defending behaviour, but the same was not true for the relationship between cognitive empathy and defending behaviour.

Negative relations between empathy and bullying behaviour are documented in the literature. Stavrinides, Georgious, and Theofanous (2010) found a negative relation between affective empathy and bullying though, like Pöyhönen et al. (2010), no significant impact of cognitive empathy and bullying. In a similar study, Gini et al. (2011) investigated differences between bullying participant roles (i.e., bully, victim, defender) on levels of knowledge of right and wrong ('moral competence') and levels of emotional awareness and sensitivity concerning moral transgressions ('moral compassion'). The study found that both bullies and defenders demonstrated advanced moral competence, but that bullies exhibited less moral compassion compared to victims and defenders. Consequently, the authors concluded that bullies appear to understand social norms and moral expectations, but lack the moral compassion or empathy that would curb their aggressive urges. These findings are consistent with research indicating that empathy orients individuals toward others' needs and feelings, which in turn facilitates higher level moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour (e.g., Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 2000).

Albert Bandura's theory of moral disengagement may help explain the connection between empathy and bullying behaviour. Moral disengagement seeks to articulate the psychological mechanisms at play when individuals, whether acting alone or in groups, commit inhumane acts, with emphasis on the process by which affective self-regulatory mechanisms mediate the link between moral reasoning and behaviour (Bandura, 1990, 1991, 1999, 2002). According to the theory of moral disengagement, as individuals are socialised, they construct and internalise an understanding of the moral standards of their community, which subsequently serves to guide their behaviour (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Once these moral norms are internalised, most people regulate their actions in accordance with

the internalised standards because doing so is satisfying, enhances one's sense of self-worth, and enables one to avoid 'self-censure' (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 364). Utilising affective self-regulatory processes (e.g., empathy), such mechanisms or self-sanctions motivate and enable the cognitive regulation of behaviour that conforms to established moral norms.

However, these self-regulatory functions only have an impact on actual behaviour when they are activated and, according to the theory of moral disengagement, a variety of psychosocial processes exist that effectively disengage self-sanctions from inhumane conduct, in effect freeing the individual from self-censure and potential guilt (Bandura et al., 1996). As a result, individuals are able to selectively activate and disengage internal control to allow 'different types of conduct with the same moral standards' (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 364). In other words, one need not relinquish one's moral standards in order to transgress against them since through the process of moral disengagement, it is possible to maintain one's moral standards while at the same time justifying actions that violate those standards by convincing oneself that the standard does not apply to a particular situation or person.

The theory of moral disengagement posits that this can occur via eight distinct mechanisms clustered within four broad strategies. The four major strategies are: (1) cognitive restructuring of immoral behaviour, (2) obscuration of personal responsibility, (3) misrepresentation of injurious consequences, and (4) blaming the victim. *Cognitive restructuring* operates by framing the behaviour itself in a positive light through the mechanisms of (1) moral justification, (2) advantageous comparison, or (3) euphemistic labeling. *Obscuration of personal responsibility* involves the mechanisms (1) displacement of responsibility and (2) diffusion of responsibility. The third broad set of strategies, *misrepresentation of injurious consequences*, operates via the mechanisms (1) minimising, disregarding, or distorting the consequences of one's action, allowing individuals to distance themselves from the harm caused or to emphasise positive rather than negative outcomes. The fourth disengagement strategy, *blaming the victim*, employs the mechanisms (1) dehumanisation of the victim and (2) attribution of blame, or framing aggression as provoked by the victim (Gini et al., 2013). In sum, these strategies and mechanisms facilitate inhumane behaviour via a process of moral disengagement that insulates individuals from the negative feelings (e.g., guilt or shame) typically associated with acts that violate common moral norms.

The construct of moral disengagement may be a helpful framework for understanding school violence and victimisation, particularly as it relates to bullying (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Rocke Henderson, 2010). Since the mid-1990s, when Bandura first developed the theory of moral disengagement to understand

historical and present-day atrocities, many studies have been conducted applying the theory of moral disengagement to understand bullying and aggressive behaviour among youth. Gini et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies examining the association between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour, which reported data on 17,776 participants aged from 8 to 18. The findings revealed a small-to-medium mean effect size for the association between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour. Let us now take a closer look at some of the most important findings from these studies.

Obermann (2011b) examined the relation between moral disengagement and different self-reported and peer-nominated roles in school bullying among a group of 6th- and 7th-grade students in Denmark. The study found that both types of bullying were related to moral disengagement, and that bullies and bully-victims displayed higher moral disengagement than uninvolved students. Relatedly, results of a study by Gini (2006) demonstrated that bullies, reinforcers, and assistants all exhibited a significantly higher tendency to activate moral disengagement mechanisms, whereas defenders displayed higher levels of moral engagement. Unlike victims, bullies showed no difficulty on social cognition tasks. In a follow-up study, Gini et al. (2011) found that both defenders and bullies exhibited advanced moral competence relative to victims and that, according to their measures, victims showed delayed moral competence. Moreover, bullies displayed significant deficits in moral compassion (e.g., empathy) relative to victims and defenders. Similarly, Menesini et al. (2003) examined the role of moral emotions (e.g., empathy) and reasoning in relation to children's behaviour in bullying situations. Results indicated that bullies, as compared to victims and uninvolved students, showed a higher level of disengaged emotions and motives when asked to put themselves in the role of bully. Closer analyses of the specific mechanisms of moral disengagement indicated that bullies reasoned more egocentrically. Finally, Hymel et al. (2005) specifically investigated whether the construct of moral disengagement improves our understanding of bullying among adolescents. Results indicated that bullies were significantly more likely to report positive attitudes and beliefs about bullying, with 38% of the variance in reported bullying accounted for by the students' endorsement of moral disengagement mechanisms. Thus, there appears to be growing evidence that the theory of moral disengagement may enhance our understanding of the relationship between students' moral standards, affective self-regulatory mechanisms, and bullying behaviour.

Summary

Given the negative effects of and deleterious outcomes associated with bullying behaviour, continued research

aimed at understanding the processes that undergird the development of bullying behaviour and aggressive children's social and emotional cognition (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Sutton et al., 1999) is needed to inform the creation of effective interventions. Research exploring the link between affective self-regulatory mechanisms, like empathy, and moral disengagement mechanisms is needed to improve our understanding of the various participant roles assumed in the bullying situation. The present study aims to contribute to this developing literature by examining differences in moral disengagement and empathy among bully participant groups.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based upon a review of the relevant literature on the interrelations between moral disengagement, empathy, and bullying, the study addressed the following questions.

Research question 1: Do males and females demonstrate differences in levels of moral disengagement and empathy?

Hypothesis 1: Males will demonstrate significantly higher levels of moral disengagement, and females will exhibit significantly higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy.

Research question 2: Do participants' levels of moral disengagement differ significantly by bully participant role?

Hypothesis 2: Levels of moral disengagement will significantly differ among the bullying participant groups, with mean levels of moral disengagement emerging as significantly higher for bullies than for defenders and a comparison group (i.e., students reporting no involvement in any bullying participant role). In contrast, defenders will exhibit significantly lower levels of moral disengagement in relation to all other groups.

Research question 3: Do participants' levels of empathy differ significantly by bully participant role?

Hypothesis 3: Mean levels of empathy will significantly differ among the bullying participant groups, with (1) mean levels of both cognitive and affective empathy emerging as significantly lower for bullies than for victims, defenders, and a comparison group and (2) mean levels of both cognitive and affective empathy emerging as significantly higher for defenders and victims than for bullies.

Research question 4: How well are levels of moral disengagement predicted from levels of both affective and cognitive empathy?

Hypothesis 4: Students scoring higher in moral disengagement will score lower in both cognitive and affective empathy.

TABLE 1

Summary of Participants

Category	N	%
Gender		
Male	322	45.8
Female	380	54.2
Grade		
6th	44	6.3
7th	327	46.6
8th	331	47.2

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 702 students across 6th ($n = 44$), 7th ($n = 327$), and 8th grade ($n = 331$) attending school in the United States. The sample was 45.8% male ($n = 322$) and 54.2% female ($n = 380$). The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 37.8% Hispanic ($n = 265$), 42.3% White ($n = 297$), 6.6% Asian ($n = 46$), 2.1% African American ($n = 15$), 1% Native American ($n = 5$), and 10.5% multiracial ($n = 74$). Although socioeconomic status was not directly measured, the sample included students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. See Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were recruited as part of a school-wide bullying prevention program, P3R Promoting Positive Peer Relationships (Faull, Swearer, Jimerson, Espelage, & Ng, 2008). Data collection occurred before the program was implemented. With the approval of school administration, researchers employed passive parental consent adhering to state educational policy and in line with the research project's Institutional Review Board. All students in the sample were provided an opportunity to participate anonymously in order to assure them the confidentiality of their responses. Students completed the questionnaire anonymously using online survey software in a single administration. Classroom teachers oversaw survey administration at school during regular school hours. Teachers instructed students to keep their answers private and complete the survey in silence.

Aware of societal expectations for behaviour, youth tend to exaggerate positive behaviours on self-report surveys (Carifio, 1994; Cornell, Klein, Konold, & Huang, 2012; Furlong, Sharkey, Felix, Tanigawa, & Green, 2009). To attend to this issue, the survey included social desirability questions in order to reduce the chance that students provided more socially acceptable responses to questions about bullying than is in fact true for them. Twice, students responded to the statement 'I am telling the truth on this survey' on a 4-point scale ranging from *totally false* to *totally true*.

TABLE 2

Bullying Groups Across Gender and Grade

	Role						
Category	Bully	Victim	Defender	Outsider	Bully/victim	Victim/defender	Comparison
Gender							
Male	21	19	23	98	10	11	140
Female	19	15	46	89	9	22	180
Grade							
6th	3	5	2	9	3	4	18
7th	15	11	33	90	5	17	156
8th	22	18	34	88	11	12	146
Total	40	34	69	187	19	33	320

The cut-score methodology was employed to assign participant roles to students (Summers & Demaray, 2009). Groups of students were classified by participant role (bully, victim, bully/victim, defender, victim/defender, outsider, and comparison) in order to conduct comparative analyses. Students scoring in the top 15th percentile of all students on the Bully Participant Role Survey (BPRS) subscales compose the categories. In order to be classified into one of the combined groups (bully/victim *or* victim/defender), the student had to score in the top 15th percentile on both subscales. The 15th percentile cutoff provides a stringent criterion for group membership that ensures only students who report frequent engagement in these behaviours are included in the analysis. Based on the subscale correlations in the development of the BPRS (Summers & Demaray, 2009), evidence exists that the outsider group is mutually exclusive from other groups. Consequently, students in overlapping groups that included the outsider group were only placed in the outsider group. Students whose scores were below the top 15th percentile on all participant role subscales were placed in the comparison group. As such, a total of 320 (45.6%) students were in the comparison group, 40 (5.7%) were in the bully group, 34 (4.8%) were in the victim group, 19 (2.7%) were in the bully/victim group, 69 (9.8%) were in the defender group, 33 (4.7%) were in the victim/defender group, and 187 (26.6%) were in the outsider group (see Table 2).

Measures

Measures in this study included established self-report surveys to differentiate bully participant roles and to assess moral disengagement and empathy. Bully participant roles were designated using the BPRS (Summers & Demaray, 2009); the roles were differentiated with the BPRS because the measure was already in use as a component of the evaluation of the bullying prevention program. The BPRS was developed for use with children in 5th to 8th grades, based on the Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ) developed by Salmivalli et al. (1996) and the Revised Olweus Bully-victim Question-

naire (Olweus, 1996), as well as the corresponding factor structures. The BPRS measures students' perceptions of bullying in their school and, based on students' responses on 48 items, assesses four different participant roles: bully, victim, defender, and outsider. Each subscale consists of 12 items. The bully and victim subscales can be combined to identify students in the bully-victim participation role. Students were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in relevant activities in the past 30 days; responses are given according to a 5-point scale (*never, 1–2 times, 3–4 times, 5–6 times*, and *7 or more times*). Question stems inquire about bullying behaviours (e.g., I have ignored another student) and victimisation behaviours (e.g., I have been pushed or shoved). There is evidence to support the psychometrics of the BPRS to accurately assess various participant roles in the bullying situation (Summers & Demaray, 2009). Summers & Demaray (2009) conducted item level analysis and exploratory factor analysis to examine the instrument. Exploratory factor analysis resulted in a four-factor solution that accounted for 55% of the variance with factor loadings ranging from .428 to .863. As evidence of reliability, alpha coefficients ranged from .90 to .93.

The How I Feel in Different Situations (HIFDS) questionnaire was utilised to assess two different dimensions of empathy: cognitive and affective (Caravita et al., 2009; Feshbach et al., 1991). Five items describing the understanding of others' feelings measure cognitive empathy (e.g., 'I'm able to recognise, before many other children, that other people's feelings have changed'), and seven items about sharing others' feelings measure affective empathy (e.g., 'When somebody tells me a nice story, I feel as if the story is happening to me'). Participants evaluate the extent to which each item is true for them using a 4-point scale (ranging from *never true* to *always true*). Scores for both scales are summed across items; higher scores indicate greater empathy. The internal consistency of the cognitive empathy subscale was .71, and the internal consistency of the affective empathy subscale was .80 (Bonino, Lo Coco, & Tani, 1998; Caravita et al., 2009).

Bandura's Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) was employed to measure the individual's tendency to use cognitive mechanisms that can disengage self-sanctions that typically serve to regulate behaviour and justify the use of violent and aggressive behaviours (Bandura, 1996). This scale is the most commonly used measure of moral disengagement around the world (Gini et al., 2014). The MDS is a 32-item questionnaire designed to assess a child's proneness to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1995). Items are rated on a 3-point scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *not sure*, and 3 = *agree*). Examples of the types of items included in this scale include 'It is alright to fight to protect your friends', 'Teasing someone does not really hurt them', and 'Kids cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it'. The MDS assesses the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement described above (Bandura et al., 1996). Research has shown that the MDS taps into each of these eight mechanisms. The scale has shown good reliability (α = .82 and .86; Bandura et al., 1996). Factor analysis (Bandura et al., 1996) has suggested that a one-factor structure can account for 16.2% of the variance.

Data Analyses

Power This study employed strategies to increase its power and sensitivity (Rossi, 1990). To determine the necessary sample size for this study, power analyses for the design were calculated a priori using G*Power 3.1 (Buchner, Erdfelder, & Faul, 1997). Based on Myors & Wolach's (2014) recommended power statistic of 0.80, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with fixed effects, omnibus, one-way was conducted. Given an effect size of 0.14 (low effect size), alpha level of 0.05, power statistic of .80, seven groups, and three response variables, the study's sample size of 702 possesses sufficient power to determine whether there is a relationship between the independent variable and outcome measures if such a relationship exists and is robust enough to detect.

Multivariate data analysis An multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilised to evaluate differences in patterns of mean scores of the quantitative outcome variables across the bully participant groups in a non-experimental research situation (Warner, 2008). The independent variables consisted of the bully participants' roles (Bully, Victim, Outsider, Defender, Bully/Victim, Victim/Defender, Comparison) as measured by the BPRS. The outcome variables consisted of moral disengagement, cognitive empathy, and affective empathy, as measured by the MDS and HIFDS respectively. These outcome measures embody the theoretical dependent variable (Hancock & Mueller, 2010). The goal was to see whether the set of means for the bullying groups differed significantly across either of the two outcome variables.

Bivariate linear regressions Bivariate linear regressions were conducted to evaluate how well moral disengagement could be predicted from both affective and cognitive empathy.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Gender See Table 2 for the BPRS groups disaggregated by gender. An independent samples *t* test was performed to assess whether mean moral disengagement, cognitive empathy, and affective empathy scores differed significantly between males and females. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was assessed by the Levene test for each outcome variable, and indicated a significant violation of the equal variance assumption for moral disengagement and no significant violation of the equal variance assumption for the empathy variables. Consequently, equal variances were not assumed for moral disengagement when examining differences in mean scores between males and females. The mean moral disengagement score differed significantly between males (M = 48.27, SD = 9.57) and females (M = 45.19, SD = 8.42), $t(647.143)$ = 4.49, $p < .001$, two-tailed. The effect size, as indexed by Cohen's d, was .34, which suggests a small-to-medium effect of gender on moral disengagement when compared to the effects of all other uncontrolled variables on moral disengagement. The mean cognitive empathy score differed significantly between males (M = 12.7, SD = 3.63) and females (M = 14.18, SD = 3.38), $t(701)$ = −1.49, $p < .001$, two-tailed. The effect size, as indexed by Cohen's d, was .42, which suggests a medium effect of gender on cognitive empathy when compared to the effects of all other uncontrolled variables on cognitive empathy. The mean affective empathy score differed significantly between males (M = 12.46, SD = 3.99) and females (M = 16.91, SD = 4.04), $t(701)$ = −4.44, $p < .001$, two-tailed. The effect size, as indexed by Cohen's d, was 1.11, which suggests a large effect of gender on affective empathy when compared to the effects of all other uncontrolled variables on affective empathy.

Correlations A Pearson correlation was performed to examine the relationship among moral disengagement, cognitive empathy, and affective empathy. The correlations between moral disengagement and both cognitive and affective empathy were statistically significant and negative, with a small effect size. The correlation between cognitive empathy and affective empathy was statistically significant and positive, with a large positive effect. See Table 3.

Multivariate Analyses

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The assumptions of a MANOVA include independence of cases, normality, and homogeneity of

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Moral Disengagement, Cognitive Empathy, and Affective Empathy

Measure	Moral disengagement	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy
Moral disengagement	1.00	−.15*	−.19*
Cognitive empathy		1.00	.59*
Affective empathy			1.00

Note: *$p < .001$.

variances. Examination of histograms for each of the outcome variables indicated that scores were approximately normally distributed. Prior to the analysis, the Levene test for homogeneity of variance was used to examine whether there were serious violations of the assumption of homogeneity of variance across groups. No violations were detected for the outcome variables. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 4. Results are displayed in Table 5. In addition, all possible pairwise comparisons were made using the Tukey HSD test (using $\alpha = .05$).

Based on Tukey HSD post-hoc test, significant differences were found among the bullying participant groups on the outcome variables (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations of outcome variables across participant roles). On moral disengagement, bullies were significantly more morally disengaged than defenders and the comparison group, and outsiders were significantly more morally disengaged than defenders, victim/defenders, and the comparison group. Outsiders' elevated level of moral disengagement approached significance in relation to victims. Defenders and victim/defenders had significantly higher levels of cognitive empathy than the comparison group. Defenders and victim/defenders had significantly higher levels of affective empathy than outsiders and the comparison.

Using a Bonferonni correction, an appropriate alpha value was obtained by dividing the error rate ($\alpha = .05$) by the number of significance tests performed (in this case, three). Thus, a p value less than .0166 was required for the F test to be statistically significant. By this more conservative criterion, most of the individual variables noted above

still showed statistically significant differences across the bullying participant groups, with the exception of the difference between victim/defenders and the comparison group on affective empathy ($p = .19$), the difference between bullies and defenders on moral disengagement ($p = .023$), and the difference between outsiders and victim/defenders on moral disengagement ($p = .049$).

Bivariate Linear Regressions

Bivariate regressions were performed to evaluate how well moral disengagement could be predicted from both affective and cognitive empathy (see Table 3). Correlations between moral disengagement and both affective and cognitive empathy were statistically significant and negative. Affective empathy significantly predicted moral disengagement, $b = −.381$, $t(701) = −5.191$, $p < .001$. Affective empathy also explained a statistically significant proportion of variance in moral disengagement, $r^2 = .04$, $F(1, 701) = 26.94$, $p < .001$, suggesting a small effect (Cohen, 1988). The results indicate that a negative relationship exists between affective empathy and moral disengagement; with every one unit increase in moral disengagement, affective empathy will decrease by .38. The correlation between cognitive empathy and moral disengagement was statistically significant. Cognitive empathy significantly predicted moral disengagement, $b = −.392$, $t(701) = −4.126$, $p < .001$. Cognitive empathy also explained a statistically significant proportion of variance in moral disengagement, $r^2 = .02$, $F(1, 701) = 17.022$, $p < .001$, suggesting a small effect (Cohen, 1988). The results indicated that a negative relationship

TABLE 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Outcome Variables Across Participant Roles

Role	Moral disengagement		Affective empathy		Cognitive empathy	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Bully	49.35	9.46	14.63	4.82	13.72	3.80
Victim	46.32	7.07	14.56	4.30	14.47	3.49
Defender	43.81	7.58	17.09	3.99	14.72	3.33
Outsider	50.84	9.26	14.34	4.54	13.49	3.37
Bully/Victim	49.05	8.62	14.16	4.76	13.89	3.00
Victim/Defender	46.00	9.33	17.24	3.67	15.33	3.27
Comparison	44.34	8.48	14.54	4.64	12.90	3.65

Note: Range for moral disengagement = 32–96; Range for affective empathy = 6–24; Range for cognitive empathy = 5–20.

TABLE 5

Analysis of Variance for Outcome Variables Across Participant Roles

	SS	df	MS	F
Moral disengagement	5966.325	6	994.387	13.27*
Cognitive empathy	366.624	6	61.104	4.94*
Affective empathy	627.334	6	104.556	5.138*

Note: *$p < .001$.

exists between cognitive empathy and moral disengagement; with every one unit increase in moral disengagement, cognitive empathy will decrease by .39. In sum, students scoring higher in moral disengagement tended to score lower in both types of empathy.

Discussion

This study examined the relation between participant roles in bullying and moral disengagement, cognitive empathy, and affective empathy. Based on self-report measures, participant roles in bullying involvement were identified and levels of outcome variables were assessed. Participation in bullying was categorised according to seven different groups: bully, victim, defender, outsider, bully/victim, victim/defender, and comparison. Findings revealed twice as many females than males in the defender group and the victim/defender group, suggesting that females may be more likely to defend than males, which is consistent with the previous literature (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Initial analyses further revealed that females had significantly higher levels of affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Gender exhibited a large effect on affective empathy and medium effect on cognitive empathy. In general, the empirical evidence is mixed concerning sex differences in empathy. As Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) and Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) have pointed out, meta-analyses examining the empirical data found effect sizes were inconsistent across studies, ranging from small to large. Self-report measures consistently find the largest effect sizes for sex differences in empathy, which Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) have suggested may result from demand characteristics that prompt gender-stereotyped responses.

In addition, analyses revealed that males had significantly higher levels of moral disengagement than females and a small-to-medium effect size of gender on moral disengagement. Higher levels of moral disengagement have been consistently found in male as compared to female samples and after controlling for other demographic variables (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status; Bandura et al., 1996; Čermák & Blatný, 1995; Obermann, 2011b; Yadava, Sharma, & Gandhi, 2001). Studies have further suggested stronger links between moral disengage-

ment and aggression in males than females (Bussman, 2007; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008). However, the results from a recent meta-analysis challenge this link, as it found no significant effect for sex, with identical effect sizes for both males and females (Gini et al., 2013).

Consistent with the hypotheses, several significant differences among the bullying participant groups were detected on moral disengagement, affective empathy, and cognitive empathy. Given that a student who disagreed with all items on the MDS would earn a score of 32 and a student who agreed with all items would earn a score of 96, bullies' mean score of 49.35 on the MDS suggests that they were significantly more unsure about the rightness of the actions, beliefs, and attitudes described in the items on the MDS than defenders and the comparison group, as hypothesised. This is consistent with research that has shown that children and youth with elevated levels of moral disengagement are more likely to engage in both general aggression (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Caprara, Pastorelli, & Bandura, 1995) and peer bullying (e.g., Gini, 2006; Hymel et al., 2005). Similarly, outsiders were significantly more unsure about the rightness of the actions, beliefs, and attitudes described by the items in the MDS than defenders, victim/defenders, and the comparison group. Put another way, defenders and victim/defenders were significantly more certain that the actions, beliefs, and attitudes described in the MDS were wrong than bullies and outsiders, as predicted. Defenders and victim/defenders had significantly higher levels of cognitive empathy than the comparison group, as hypothesised, but not the other participant groups. Defenders and victim/defenders had significantly higher levels of affective empathy than outsiders and the comparison group. Contrary to the hypotheses, mean levels of both types of empathy were not significantly lower for bullies in relation to the other groups.

The results of this study are similar to findings by Obermann (2011a) that indicated that outsiders, like passive bystanders, may activate and employ more of the moral disengagement mechanisms. While this study found that bullies' mean level of moral disengagement was significantly higher than the comparison group and defenders, the outsiders indicated the highest level of moral disengagement, significantly higher than nearly all other groups.

In contrast to studies that have found lower levels of empathy among bullies (e.g., Gini et al., 2011), including emotional empathy (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001) and cognitive empathy (see Crick & Dodge, 1999 and Espelage et al., 2004 for discussion), this study did not find significant differences in bullies' levels of empathy — only in levels of moral disengagement. Bullies' higher levels of moral disengagement relative to their peers suggests that they view the use of aggressive behaviour

instrumentally to achieve social goals as more permissible than other groups. These results provide support for Bandura's social cognitive theory of moral behaviour, which posits that moral reasoning is linked to moral behaviour through a series of self-regulatory mechanisms through which moral agency is exercised (Bandura, 2002). In this study, bullies appeared to possess normal to slightly higher levels of cognitive and affective empathy relative to their peers in conjunction with significantly higher levels of moral disengagement. As such, it does not appear that bullies necessarily lack empathy as some research suggests (e.g., Gini et al., 2007; Gini et al., 2011), but that, consistent with Bandura's theory, they may more readily employ moral disengagement mechanisms to override their empathic feelings and justify their use of instrumental aggression with some of their peers (Bandura et al., 1996). It is not that they fail to emotionally recognise the pain and suffering they are inflicting on others, but that they disengage from self-regulatory mechanisms that would normally cause them to feel guilty about such actions.

According to Bandura, this is precisely how 'good' people behave 'badly'. It is not that they are incapable of an 'emotional response that emanates from the emotional state of another individual' (Feshback, 1997, p. 35), but that they are able to employ psychological manoeuvres that disengage moral self-sanctions and short-circuit emotional responses like empathy under certain circumstances (Bandura, 1999). As Bandura clarifies, empathetic responsiveness to the plight of others is most salient and arousing for those with whom we identify and has a 'powerful self-restraining effect' (Bandura, 1999, p. 200). The dehumanisation of the other decreases victimisers' sense of personal distress and self-condemnation when committing harmful acts (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). In this way, students engaging in bullying may hold moral standards that they deem applicable to some but not all of their fellow students.

This study did find that defenders and defenders who had been bullied (i.e., victim/defenders) possessed significantly higher levels of cognitive empathy than the comparison group and significantly higher levels of affective empathy than outsiders and the comparison group. By contrast, Pöyhönen and colleagues (2010) found that defenders indicated significantly higher levels of affective, but not cognitive, empathy. Findings from this study suggest that individuals who intellectually understand or have knowledge about the victim's suffering and also emotionally identify with it will be more likely to defend victims in bullying situations. Along with empathy and moral engagement, other factors that contribute to the likelihood that a bystander will actively intervene in a bullying situation include prosocial attitudes, a sense of personal responsibility, a strong sense of self-efficacy for defending, and higher levels of social status among peers (Pöyhönen et al., 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study suffered from many of the normal limitations inherent to quantitative descriptive research designs that use convenience samples and self-report surveys. While the large sample size is a strength, the convenience sample used raises issues regarding external validity, generalisability, and bias. The use of self-reports to ask children questions about bullying and empathy also introduces construct validity issues related to reactivity (e.g., social desirability), which could confound the true effects. For example, defending behaviour is likely perceived as expected and prosocial by students, which may have influenced their responses and inflated the size of the defender group. Moreover, since the results of this study are based on self-assessments, the results are dependent upon whether or not the participants answered honestly and were subsequently placed in participant role groups that accurately reflected their participation in bullying, which cannot be conclusively determined. Validating the results through independent assessment of participants' roles (e.g., peer nominations, teacher nominations) would improve the validity of the data through triangulation.

Various methods are utilised to create groups and group membership in bullying and victimisation research. This study used cut-scores to classify students and define groups, which is a common method; however, this method may impose measurement inaccuracies and, as a result, introduce error into the assessment of outcome variables associated with those groups (Nylund, Bellmore, Nishina, & Graham, 2007). Latent class analysis represents an alternative method that assesses the existence of underlying categorical latent variables. As a result, LCA is able to empirically define unique profiles for mutually exclusive latent classes, such as bully or victim groups, and clarify nuanced patterns among students (Giang & Graham, 2007; Williford, Brisson, Bender, Jenson, & Forrest-Bank, 2011). Since behaviour associated with bullying and victimisation is complex, future research on moral disengagement, empathy and participation in bullying that utilises latent class analysis to adequately attend to this complexity is warranted.

Finally, Bandura's theory assumes that moral disengagement occurs when individuals bypass previously accepted and internalised social and moral standards. What is unclear is the degree to which bullies have in fact internalised these social and moral norms. Conversely, it may be the case that bullies are knowledgeable of such standards but have not personally internalised them. In such a scenario, there would be no moral standards to disengage, nothing to prevent one from transgressing against them. Laible, Eye, and Carlo (2008) investigated the relationship between the level of internalisation of moral values as one aspect of moral cognition and found that level of internalisation is negatively associated with bullying behaviour. Yet, the relationship between internalisation of moral values and bullying behaviour is still fairly unclear.

Future research should endeavor to discern the degree to which bullies have in fact accepted and internalised social and moral norms as opposed to simply possessing knowledge about them.

Implications

The results of this study hold implications for the promotion of prosocial behaviour and the reduction of bullying and victimisation among youth at school. The study's findings concerning levels of empathy and moral disengagement may contribute to our theoretical understanding of the bullying process. The levels of affective and cognitive empathy found for bullies diverge from studies that have found significantly lower levels of cognitive empathy (Crick & Dodge, 1999; Sutton et al., 1999) and, especially, affective empathy (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Gini et al., 2007) among bullies. In contrast, this study found similar levels of both types of empathy for bullies and other groups. In addition, the negative relation found between both types of empathy and moral disengagement coupled with the finding of higher levels of empathy and moral engagement among defenders suggests prosocial behaviour, and moral engagement may involve a critical interrelation between the two factors. In sum, it appears that while empathy may be necessary for the promotion of moral engagement and prosocial behaviour, empathy alone may not be sufficient. The findings of the present study seem to indicate that, for some aggressive individuals, certain psychological mechanisms articulated by Bandura et al. (1996) are capable of overriding normal levels of empathy and moral self-sanctions to justify the victimisation of others.

Given the study's focus on differences in moral disengagement and empathy among bullying participant groups, the implications for practice are critical. Defenders' levels of empathy and moral engagement stood out as different from the various bullying roles and the comparison group. If we take the defenders as the optimal outcome, and if a true relation exists between empathy and moral disengagement, it appears that both higher levels of empathy and lower levels of moral disengagement are necessary to prevent bullying and promote defending behaviour. Consequently, all students, not just bullies, likely stand to benefit from programs aimed at fostering empathy and, especially, moral engagement. The results of this study can also inform intervention. For example, if outsiders are employing displacement or diffusion of responsibility to justify not intervening when they witness bullying, interventions must take steps to directly counteract this type of thinking and effectively persuade outsiders that they are responsible. If bullies are using in-group/out-group thinking and dehumanisation to justify victimising others, interventions must address this by fostering students' perspective-taking abilities and a more inclusive sense of connection with the human commu-

nity. Such efforts can be undertaken in a variety of ways, ranging from targeted social skills groups and counselling to school- and classroom-based programs to community-based youth sports, community, and religious groups.

Cognitive and affective empathy and moral engagement can be fostered gradually and systematically by weaving social-emotional learning programming (Bowles et al., 2017) into school curriculums (e.g., Responsive Classroom; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014) and through universal, classroom-based interventions (e.g., Second Step; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elias & Arnold, 2006). Importantly, it is recommended that such programs be grounded in a developmentalist approach to moral development, such as domain theory (Nucci, 2009; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2006), rather than a traditionalist approach to 'character education' (e.g., Ryan, 1989; Wynne, 1989; on the debate between developmentalists and traditionalists, see Haddock, 2010). A developmentalist approach to moral education emphasises moral reasoning and the development of empathy and teaches emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills (Arsenio, 2002; Nucci, 2001, 2009; Turiel, 1983, 1989, 2002). From the developmentalist perspective, authentic moral education means transcending the socialisation of conventionally prosocial children toward fostering the development of the moral conceptions of fairness, human welfare, and rights coupled with a critical moral orientation toward their own conduct and the norms and mores of society (Turiel, 2002). In the words of John Holt, 'we do not want to mistake good behaviour for good character' (Holt, 1966, as quoted in Kohn, 1997). Rather, we want to employ practices that cultivate students' empathy for others, capacity to resist unjust conventions, and motivation to contribute to the ethicality of our social institutions. In sum, this study makes significant contributions to research on the relation between moral disengagement, affective and cognitive empathy, and bullying that hold important insights for effective prevention and intervention efforts in schools.

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