Moral Disengagement: A Framework for Understanding Bullying Among Adolescents

Shelley Hymel, Natalie Rocke-Henderson, and Rina A. Bonanno

Bullying, a subcategory of aggressive behavior, is encountered regularly by children and adolescents in the context of schools worldwide (for an overview see Smith et al., 1999; Whitney and Smith, 1993). In Canada, self-report data indicate that 8 to 9% of elementary school children are bullied frequently (i.e., once or more a week) and about 2 to 5% of students bully others frequently (Bentley and Li, 1995; Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler, 1995). Among adolescents, at the secondary school level, rates are somewhat higher, with 10 to 11% of students reporting that they are frequently victimized by peers, and another 8 to 11% reporting that they frequently bully others (Vaillancourt and Hymel, 2001). Observational studies show that, although peers are present in most bullying situations (85 to 88%), they seldom intervene on behalf of victims (11% to 25% of the time) (Atlas and Pepler, 1998; Craig and Pepler, 1997) and many students just watch, while others even join in (O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig, 1999).

Although bullying is a common experience for students around the world, it is a complex social problem that can have serious negative consequences for both bullies and victims (see Salmivalli, 1999; Smith and Brain, 2000). The negative effects of bullying are well documented, not only in terms of the psychological harm that is inflicted upon victims, but also in terms of the maladaptive outcomes for children who engage in bullying. Studies from countries around the globe tell us that bullying behavior predicts later criminality and delinquency (Olweus, 1991; Pulkkinen and Pitkanen, 1993) and is associated with both externalizing and internalizing difficulties (see Juvonen and Graham, 2001; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, and Rantanen, 1999; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, and Rimpela, 2000; Swearer and Doll, 2001). Victimization is associated with both physical and mental health difficulties (Rigby 2001; Slee, 1995) as well as school disliking and avoidance that, in turn, can affect academic performance (Hodges and Perry, 1996; Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham, 2000). A growing body of evidence further suggests that children who are *both* bullies and victims are at even greater risk than children who are *either* bullies *or* victims (Austin and Joseph, 1996; Haynie et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2001). Perhaps most alarming is the number of teens who have ended their own lives because of both bullying and victimization (see Marr and Field, 2001).

Researchers, educators, parents, and communities are struggling to understand how it is that our adolescents, most of whom we believe to be good, caring individuals, behave in ways that condone and maintain bullying, with a substantial number of students engaging directly in bullying behavior or failing to do anything to stop it. The picture that has emerged is a complicated one. A growing body of research suggests that bullying and peer harassment emerge as a result of a number of different factors, not just one (e.g., Baldry and Farrington, 2000; Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon, 2000; Pepler, Craig, and O'Connell, 1999; Swearer and Doll, 2001). Such problems are not *solely* the result of individual characteristics of the student, poor home environments, ineffective parenting and school practices, "bad influences," peer pressure, or exposure to violent media, etc. but rather, reflect a complex interplay among these factors.

In this regard, we concur with Swearer and Doll (2001) in arguing for an ecological perspective on bullying in an effort to understand how both individual characteristics of the bully and victim as well as family, peer, school, cultural, and community factors each contributes to the likelihood of bullying and peer harassment. In light of this perspective, we have become increasingly convinced of the importance of the peer group and the social climate of the school in terms of their contributions to bullying and peer harassment. Accordingly, we have worked directly with schools to examine how the school climate, as reflected by student attitudes and beliefs about bullying, contribute to the maintenance of bullying problems in schools.

Student attitudes and beliefs can play a significant role in supporting bullying behavior.

Positive attitudes towards aggression and violence have long been demonstrated among aggressive children and adolescents, as compared to their non-aggressive counterparts (e.g., Perry, Perry, and Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby and Guerra, 1988). More recently, results of several studies have shown that children who bully others also express more positive attitudes regard-ing the use of violence and aggression in res-ponse to social difficulties (e.g., Bentley and Li, 1995; Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon, 1999; Olweus, 1997). For example, Bentley and Li found that students who reported bullying others were significantly more likely to expect positive outcomes from bullying, to view aggression and victimization as the "only alternative", and to see aggression as a legitimate response, as compared with victims and students who were neither bullies nor victims. Similarly, Olweus as well as Bosworth and colleagues have demonstrated that children who bully others are more positive about the use of violence in addressing social difficulties. In the present study, we extend this research by examining more directly the processes by which student attitudes and beliefs contribute to student involvement in bullying behavior within the framework of moral disengagement.

As outlined in his social cognitive theory of moral agency, Bandura (1999, 2002; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, and Regalia, 2001) describes moral disengagement as the socio-cognitive processes through which the average person is able to commit horrible acts against others. Bandura (1999; 2002) describes four major categories of psychological mechanisms by which 'good people do bad things', including the cognitive restructuring of harmful behavior, obscuring or minimizing one's role in causing harm, disregarding or distorting the impact of harmful behavior, and blaming and dehumanizing the victim. *Cognitive restructuring* refers to beliefs and arguments that serve to frame harmful conduct in a positive light through such things as "moral justification" (portraying the behavior as serving a worthy cause or some moral purpose), "euphemistic labeling" (using language that makes negative acts sound less negative), and "advantageous comparisons" (making a negative act seem less negative by comparing it to a much more negative act). *Minimizing one's agentive role* refers to cognitive strategies that displace or diffuse responsibility for negative acts by minimizing or obscuring one's own personal responsibility in deference to a larger authority and/or group responsibility. *Disregarding/distorting the negative impact of harmful behavior* involves strategies that help to distance oneself from the harm or to emphasize positive rather than negative outcomes associated with the behavior. Finally, one can reduce the moral impact of negative behavior through *blaming and dehumanizing the victim*, seeing the victim as somehow deserving of these detrimental acts, or "bringing it on themselves" or being partially responsible for such maltreatment. According to Bandura, moral disengagement serves to dis-inhibit individuals, making negative and inhumane acts more likely, as the individual is freed from self-censure and potential guilt. In support of this theory, Bandura (1999, Bandura et al., 2001) reviewed a large body of social psychology research demonstrating the "disinhibitory power of moral disengagement" (Bandura et al., 2001, p. 126).

Of interest in the present study is whether Bandura's theory of moral disengagement provides a useful framework for understanding bullying and peer harassment behavior among youth. In one of the few studies to date that has examined the construct of moral disengagement in relation to school bullying, Menesini et al. (2003) investigated the degree to which peer-nominated bullies, as compared with victims and outsiders, emphasized emotions associated with moral responsibility (guilt, shame) versus moral disengagement (indifference, pride) in explaining bully behavior. After reviewing a prototypical bullying situation, illustrated with cartoon drawings, students in grades 4 (mean age = 9.7 years) and 8 (mean age = 13.1 years) from three cities in Italy and Spain were asked to explain, if they were the bully in this situation, whether they would feel guilty, ashamed, indifferent or proud, and why. Peer-identified bullies were significantly more likely to describe the bully as feeling pride than were victims or outsiders in 2 of the 3 samples (cities), and significantly more likely to describe the bully as feeling indifferent in the third sample. Bullies' explanations for bullying were also more egocentric in orientation, more likely to emphasize the personal consequences or advantages for the bully in this situation. Experience as a victim or outsider also mattered, making such children *less* likely to attribute emotions of disengagement (pride, indifference) to the bully. Thus, consistent with the construct of moral disengagement, bullies

emphasized morally disengaging emotional explanations and focused on benefits (or costs) for the self. Greater experience as a victim or outsider, however, would appear to make moral disengagement more unlikely.

Extending the research conducted by Menesini et al. (2003), we examined more directly the justifications, attitudes and beliefs of students who reported differential experiences with both bullying and victimization. Consistent with Bandura's (1999, 2002) theory of moral disengagement, we hypothesized that at least some student attitudes and beliefs about bullying can implicitly as well as explicitly support such behavior, contributing to its frequency and intensity. We wanted to find out if young adolescents who see themselves as bullies are more morally disengaged, justifying and rationalizing peer harassment behavior in ways that minimize the negative impact of such behavior, using strategies similar to those observed among soldiers, terrorists, and other individuals who are regularly engaged in harmful antisocial behavior. Of additional interest was whether experiences as a victim also impacted on student tendencies to morally disengage.

To evaluate this hypothesis, we accessed data from an extensive bullying survey, completed as part of a school's own self-evaluation that was ideally suited to examining the relationship between reported bullying behavior and reported attitudes and beliefs about bullying. Within a 73-item self-report questionnaire that had been completed in one junior secondary school, we identified (post hoc) 18 items that reflected, to various degrees, each of the four moral disengagement strategies described by Bandura (1999, 2002). Consistent with Bandura's theory of moral disengagement, we hypothesized that those students who reported greater involvement in bullying others would endorse these beliefs to a greater degree than students who did not bully others. Of additional interest was whether the experience of being victimized was also related to the extent to which students could morally disengage.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 494 junior secondary students[1] (216 girls, 261 boys; 17 students had missing data for gender) in grades 8 ($n = 153$), 9 (n = 164), and 10 ($n = 173$) who were asked to complete a self-report survey during a single group-testing session conducted by classroom teachers. All students that were present on the day of testing completed the questionnaires and did so anonymously in order to assure them of the confidentiality of their responses.[2] The school served an urban community in Western Canada that included adolescents from predominantly Caucasian, upper and middle class neighborhoods.

Materials

As part of a collaborative school-university project, we worked with several elementary and secondary schools in a large urban center in Western Canada, to help them to determine the extent to which students felt safe in school, and the frequency with which peer harassment and bullying occurred within the schools. To this end, an initial, prototypical survey was developed in consultation with students, counselors, teachers, and administrators from several schools, with school staff and administrators making final decisions regarding exact content of the survey administered in each school. In the sample considered here, a 73-item student survey was used, tapping student perceptions about their experiences with bullying and harassment, where bullying occurred in the school, and how students responded to bullying. Of interest in the present study were two items tapping student reports of their experiences with both bullying and victimization (i.e., "How often have you been bullied in school?" and "How often have you been part of bullying other students?"). Students provided ratings on a 5-point scale (1 = it has not happened at all, 2 = it has happened only a few times, 3 = it happens once in a while, 4 = it happens about once a week, 5 = it happens many times a week). For the present study, student responses to these items provided single-item indices of victimization and bullying, respectively.

In this same survey, an additional 51 items were included to tap student attitudes and beliefs about bullying (e.g., "Adults at school know how much bullying goes on" "Girls are bullies just as often as boys" "There are consequences for bullying in my school").[3] Student responses to these attitude items were indicated on a 4-point scale (NO, no, yes, YES), reflecting the degree to which students agreed or disagreed with the statement. In a post hoc manner, the authors

reviewed the items in order to identify those that reflected each of the four broad categories of moral disengagement outlined by Bandura (1999; 2002). A total of 18 items were identified that reflected these categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Moral disengagement regarding school bullying: Post hoc items

Category of moral disengagement	Item
Cognitive Restructuring	1. Bullying is just a normal part of being a kid. 2. Bullying is a criminal offense. (reversed) 3. It's okay to join in when someone you don't like is being bullied. 4. Sometimes it's okay to bully other people. 5. In my group of friends, bullying is okay.
Minimizing Agency	6. Adults at school should be responsible for protecting kids from bullies. 7. When I see another kid getting bullied, there's nothing I can do to stop it. 8. It's my responsibility to intervene or do something when I see bullying. (reversed)
Distortion of Negative Consequences	9. Bullying gets kids to understand what is important to the group. 10. Getting bullied helps to make people tougher. 11. Some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson. 12. Bullying can be a good way to solve problems.
Blaming/ Dehumanizing the Victim	13. Kids get bullied because they are different. 14. Some kids get bullied because they deserve it. 15. Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids. 16. It's okay to pick on losers. 17. If certain kids didn't cry or give in so easily they wouldn't get bullied so much. 18. Most students who get bullied bring it on themselves.

RESULTS

Of initial interest was an examination of student responses to the survey items tapping both bullying experiences and attitudes and beliefs. At a descriptive level, student responses to the two items tapping current experiences with both bullying and victimization (Table 2) indicated that a substantial number of students within this school could be classified as bullies as well as

victims, with figures comparable to those reported in other Canadian studies of secondary students (e.g., Vaillancourt and Hymel, 2001). Specifically, 12% of the students in the sample reported being victimized at least once a week or more, and 13% of students reported bullying others at least once a week or more.

For each item (reported bullying, reported victimization), a 2 (sex) by 3 (grade) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to determine if responses differed significantly across male and female students and students in grade 8, 9, and 10. For reported bullying behavior, results indicated significant variations as a function of grade, $F(2,468) = 4.63$, $p = .01$, with post hoc analyses indicating that grade 10 students reported significantly more bullying behavior than grade 8 students. There was also a significant effect of gender, with male students reporting significantly more bullying than female students, $F(1,468) = 52.25$, $p < .001$. For victimization, results indicated significant variations as a function of gender, $F(1,465) = 17.30$, $p < .001$, with male students reporting significantly more victimization than female students. No significant variations were observed in victimization as a function of grade level. No sex by grade interactions were observed for either bullying or victimization.

Next, we considered student responses to the 18 moral disengagement items. As shown in Table 3, a substantial number of students appeared to be able to justify bullying behavior and generally endorsed attitudes that reflect all four categories of moral disengagement.

Of initial interest was which of these 18 items were most strongly predictive of reported bullying

Table 2: Student reports of bullying and victimization.

	n	Percentage (total sample)
How often have you been bullied in school?		
It has not happened at all	154	32%
It has happened only a few times/once in a while	275	57%
It happens about once a week/ many times a week	57	12%
How often have you been part of bullying other students?		
It has not happened at all	164	34%
It has happened only a few times/once in a while	263	54%
It happens about once a week/many times a week	62	13%

among adolescents. To this end, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, predicting self-reported bullying behavior from all 18 moral disengagement strategies. Results of this analysis indicated that about 38% of the variance in self-reported bullying could be accounted for by reported moral disengagement beliefs and attitudes, $R^2 = .41$, adjusted $R^2 = .38$, $F(18, 319) = 12.43$, $p < .001$.

Those moral disengagement items that emerged as significant predictors ($p < .05$) included efforts to justify bullying as "okay", and efforts to blame the victim (i.e., "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.").

Subsequent analyses examined whether adolescents in the present sample differentiated different forms of moral disengagement as distinguished in Bandura's theory (1999, 2002). Accordingly, a factor analysis (principal components, varimax rotation) was conducted on the 18 identified moral disengagement items. Results failed to distinguish the four conceptual categories of moral disengagement strategies. Instead, most items (13 out of 18) loaded on a single factor, as shown in Table 4 below. On the basis of the factor analytic results, a single

composite measure of moral disengagement was computed as the average of the 13 items that loaded significantly on this single factor, with relevant items reversed for scoring purposes, so that higher total scores reflected greater reported moral disengagement. The internal consistency estimate for this 13-item total moral disengagement scale was high (coefficient alpha = .81).

A final question addressed whether or not students' experiences with *both* bullying *and* victimization affected their degree of moral disengagement. Although results of regression analyses clearly demonstrated that students who bully engaged in greater moral disengagement, we proposed that experiences as a victim of bullying would also influence such attitudes, with greater victimization experiences making students less able to morally disengage. Accordingly, student responses to survey items tapping their involvement in bullying as well as their experience as a victim in school were used to categorize students into one of three bully groups as well as one of three victim groups, depending on whether they reported engaging in no bullying/victimization, some bullying/ victimization (once in a while, a few times) or extensive bullying/ victimization (every week or more).

A 3 (bully group) by 3 (victim group) between subjects ANOVA was then conducted, using total moral disengagement scores (computed as the

Table 3: Student responses to moral disengagement items

Item	% (yes, YES)
Cognitive Restructuring	
1. Bullying is just a normal part of being a kid.	64% agree
2. Bullying is a criminal offense.	60% agree (40% disagree)
3. It's okay to join in when someone you don't like is being bullied.	29% agree
4. Sometimes it's okay to bully other people.	33% agree
5. In group of friends, bullying is okay.	28% agree
Minimizing Agency	
6. Adults at school should be responsible for protecting kids from bullies.	51% agree
7. When I see another kid getting bullied, there's nothing I can do to stop it.	35% agree
8. It's my responsibility to intervene or do something when I see bullying.	46% agree (54% disagree)
Distortion of Negative Consequences	
9. Bullying gets kids to understand what is important to the group.	33% agree
10. Getting bullied helps to make people tougher.	44% agree
11. Some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson.	52% agree
12. Bullying can be a good way to solve problems.	21% agree
Blaming/ Dehumanizing the Victim	
13. Kids get bullied because they are different.	87% agree
14. Some kids get bullied because they deserve it.	67% agree
15. Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids.	79% agree
16. It's okay to pick on losers.	25% agree
17. If kids didn't cry or give in so easily they wouldn't get bullied so much.	70% agree
18. Most students who get bullied bring it on themselves.	56% agree

Note: For items 2 and 8, moral disengagement would be reflected by disagreement, rather than agreement.

Table 4: Rotated factor pattern for moral disengagement items

Moral Disengagement Items	Loading
3. It's okay to join in when someone you don't like is being bullied.	0.771
2. Bullying is a criminal offense. (reversed)	0.543
4. Sometimes it's okay to bully other people.	0.808
9. Bullying gets kids to understand what is important to the group.	0.486
14. Some kids get bullied because they deserve it.	0.587
1. Bullying is just a normal part of being a kid.	0.654
16. It's okay to pick on losers.	0.762
10. Getting bullied helps to make people tougher.	0.618
11. Some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson.	0.684
12. Bullying can be a good way to solve problems.	0.702
8. It's my responsibility to intervene or do something when I see bullying. (reversed))	0.446
5. In my group of friends, bullying is okay.	0.744
18. Most students who get bullied bring it on themselves.	0.471
Items not loading significantly on this factor:	
6. Adults at school should be responsible for protecting kids from bullies.	
13. Kids get bullied because they are different.	
15. Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids.	
17. If certain kids didn't cry or give in so easily they wouldn't get bullied so much.	
7. When I see another kid getting bullied, there's nothing I can do to stop it.	

average across all 13 moral disengagement items) as the dependent variable. Results of this analysis revealed significant differences in moral disengagement as a function of bullying behavior, $F(2,459) = 69.57, p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between bullying and victimization groups, $F(4,459) = 3.04, p < .05$. As expected, and consistent with previous regression findings, results indicated significant differences in level of moral disengagement across bully groups, with students who reported bullying extensively showing greater moral disengagement ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .61$, $n = 61$) than students who bullied sometimes ($M = 2.44, SD = .59, n = 250$) or never ($M = 1.89, SD = .53, n = 157$). However, this main effect for bullying behavior was qualified by a significant bullying by victimization interaction, as shown in Table 5.

Results of this analysis revealed significant variations in moral disengagement as a function of one's experience with victimization as well as bullying. Consistent with the observed main effect of bullying, students who did not report engaging in bullying reported the lowest levels of moral disengagement whereas those students who repeatedly bullied others reported the highest levels of moral disengagement. Experience as a victim did not seem to affect the degree of moral disengagement reported by students in these two extreme groups. However, for those students who engaged in some, albeit limited, amounts of bullying, level of moral disengagement dropped as experience with victimization

increased. For what is likely the majority of students, those who engage in some but not frequent amounts of bullying, it seems that the actual experience of victimization makes it increasingly difficult to distort the consequences, minimize one's own agency, blame the victim, or somehow justify such behavior.

Table 5: Means (Standard Deviations) for moral disengagement scores as a function of both bullying and victimization behavior

		Reported Bullying Behavior		
		None (never happened)	Some (a few times, once in a while)	Extensive (once a week or more)
Average endorsement of 13 moral disengagement items				
No	M	1.87[a]	2.64[c]	3.32[b]
Victimization	(SD)	(.51)	(.63)	(.35)
	n	75	64	9
Some	M	1.90[a]	2.41[d]	3.07[b]
Victimization	(SD)	(.51)	(.54)	(.55)
	n	71	163	30
Extensive	M	2.03[a]	2.09[a,e]	3.11[b]
Victimization	(SD)	(.74)	(.64)	(.76)
	n	11	23	22

Note: Different superscripts denote significant differences across groups, as indicated by post hoc analyses, across both rows and columns.

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study echo and extend those reported by Menesini et al. (2003), and support the utility of applying Bandura's (1999, 2002) concept of moral disengagement to our

understanding of bullying behavior among youth. Despite the fact that the moral disengagement strategies considered in the present study were derived in a post hoc fashion, using data collected for other purposes, student responses to items reflecting moral disengage-ment accounted for 38% of the variance in reported bullying behavior. Clearly, processes of moral disengagement play a potentially significant role in the development of bullying. Future research is needed to unravel the processes involved and how they unfold with age, as well as to determine how such processes can be used to reduce and eliminate rather than promote such behavior.

To this end, an initial focus of future research must be to address the development of psychometrically sound approaches to measuring moral disengagement. Menesini et al. (2003) assessed moral disengagement through children's reported moral emotions (i.e., guilt and shame versus indifference and pride) while in the hypothetical role of a bully, reflecting their sense of moral responsibility and moral disengagement, respectively. The present study demonstrated the utility of a more direct approach, asking students about their rationalizations and justifications for bullying behavior. Although the moral disengagement attitudes assessed in the present study demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$) and were significantly related to reported bullying, these items, identified on a post hoc basis, were not designed a priori to tap the four distinct forms of moral disengagement as conceptualized by Bandura. Indeed, in the present sample, most of the items loaded on a single factor reflecting more benign forms of moral disengagement (e.g., viewing the victim as "deserving" such behavior rather than "dehumanizing" the victim). Interestingly, 3 out of the 5 items that *failed* to load significantly on this factor were those endorsed by a vast majority of the students in the present sample (e.g., 70% of the students agreed that, "If kids didn't cry or give in so easily they wouldn't be bullied so much," 79% agreed that, "Some kids get bullied because they hurt other kids" and 87% agreed that, "Kids get bullied because they are different"). The extensive endorsement of these items likely reduced their potential contribution to the factor structure in the present sample, but may simply reflect the climate of this particular school context, though such items may discriminate students in other samples. Further

research in the area of scale development across diverse school contexts would be welcomed.

In assessing the degree to which students can morally disengage from bullying, however, it will be important to adopt a lifespan developmental perspective in understanding the phenomenon. As noted by one of the anonymous reviewers for this paper, it is not yet clear whether or not moral disengagement strategies change with age or are equally available to individuals across the age range, nor is it clear whether some strategies for moral disengagement require particular levels of social or cognitive development before they emerge. In the present study the moral disengagement strategies that significantly predicted bullying behavior primarily reflected only two of the four strategies described by Bandura. Specifically, young adolescents in the present study who bullied others were more likely to see bullying as an acceptable behavior (as "okay") either generally or within their own group, which serves to minimize or distort the potential negative effects of such behavior (*cognitive restructuring*). Self-identified bullies were also likely to view the victims of bullying as somehow being different or deserving such treatment, in some cases because they are believed to have hurt others (*blaming the victim*). Developmental research is needed to determine whether access to and use of particular forms of moral disengagement strategies vary across the life span.

Although the present study tapped relatively benign forms of moral disengagement, it is important to highlight the fact that, like Bandura, we view the process of moral disengagement to be a gradual one. According to Bandura (2002),

"Disengagement practises 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 trans-formative. People may not even recognize the changes they have undergone as a moral self" (p. 110).

The fact that youth who bully others have already begun to justify their behavior through social cognitive strategies that permit moral disengagement is disconcerting. Gradual moral disengagement, beginning during the school years as a means of justifying and rationalizing bullying behavior, may well serve as a stepping stone to later, more antisocial acts. This may in part explain the documented links between bullying behavior during the school years and later criminal and delinquent behavior (Olweus, 1991; Pulkkinen and Pitkanen, 1993).

In understanding the processes involved, it is interesting to highlight the present finding of a significant interaction between bullying behavior and the experience of victimization. Consistent with Menesini and colleagues (2003) who found that bullies were more egocentric and were more likely to emphasize morally disengaging emotions in explaining bullying, students in the present study who reported that they frequently bully others also exhibited the highest levels of moral disengagement, while students who never bullied others displayed the lowest levels of moral disengagement, regardless of the degree to which they experienced victimization. Thus, for students at the ends of the spectrum, the links to moral disengagement are rather straightforward. Bullies show high levels of moral disengagement, non-bullies show the least, regardless of the degree to which they have been victimized. The impact of victimization was primarily evident in the majority of students who only occasionally engage in bullying. Students who sometimes bullied others but had not been victimized showed a fairly high level of moral disengagement. In contrast, students who sometimes bullied others, but who had themselves experienced the victim role showed diminished moral disengagement. Perhaps the experience of being a victim made these students less readily able to justify or rationalize their own bullying behavior. Further research on this possibility is needed.

Although students who admitted to bullying others in the present study were far more likely to morally disengage, they were not the only individuals who did so. Specifically, in the present sample, although only about 12% of students reported bullying others frequently, a majority of the students surveyed were found to endorse items that reflect different degrees of moral disengagement (see Table 3). Future research must also consider how socio-cognitive factors such

as moral disengagement contribute to the behavior of bystanders, who may well represent the most important avenues for addressing bullying within school settings. As noted previously, peers are present in about 85 to 88% of bullying episodes, but in most cases bystanders fail to intervene on behalf of victims (e.g., Craig and Pepler, 1997). Research by Salmivalli and colleagues (e.g., Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, and Lagerspetz, 1998) has demonstrated that the majority of students who witness bullying appear to act in ways that tend to maintain rather than counter bullying behavior. Indeed, Salmivalli and her colleagues have distinguished several distinct roles played by bystanders that can be identified by peers, including those who reinforce and/or assist or support the bully (22 to 30% of students), those who remain uninvolved (25 to 30% of students), and those who actually defend the victim (17 to 20% of students). Of interest in future research is whether level of moral disengagement also distinguishes bystander responses to bullying that they witness.

In considering the implications of Bandura's theory of moral disengagement for intervention efforts aimed at reducing bullying in the schools, it is important to emphasize the fact that, in addition to the notion of moral disengagement, Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory posits both inhibitive and proactive aspects of moral agency, influencing both the power to stop inhumane behavior as well as the power enhance humane behavior. The effects of moral disengagement, as examined in the present study, are disinhibitory, making it easier for the individual to continue to act negatively toward others. Intervention efforts need to carefully consider strategies through which students' moral disengagement behavior is challenged, by peers, by the institutions in which our children function, and by society more broadly. To quote the 18th century British political philosopher, Edmund Burke, "All that is needed for evil to prosper is for people of good will to do nothing." Efforts to counter moral disengagement with strategies that inhibit such negative behavior need to be established, perhaps through efforts to enhance empathy for victimized students and/or raise bystanders' sense of moral *agency*, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will intervene on behalf of victims. Such effects may

be difficult to achieve. Our own experience working with children who bully others suggests that bullies seldom feel true empathy for their victims. Indeed, proponents of the "Pikas Method" and the "No Blame Approach" (see Sullivan, 2000 for summaries of each), both intervention approaches that emphasize developing an understanding of how victims feel and empathy for victims in bullies and bystanders, suggest that it may be easier to increase sympathy in bystanders than bullies.

In the past two decades, researchers, counsellors, and educators around the world have attempted to develop effective disciplinary, counselling, teaching as well as intervention and prevention techniques to address problems of bullying (e.g., Committee for Children, 2000; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, and Short-Camilli, 1996; Horne, Bartolomucci, and Newman-Carlson, 2003; Hoover and Oliver, 1996; Lajoie, McLellan, and Seddon, 1997; Newman, Horne, and Bartolomucci, 2000; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Sharp and Smith, 1994; Sullivan, 2000). These programs reflect a variety of approaches that have been adopted internationally and show tremendous promise, with efforts currently under way or needed to evaluate their effectiveness. However, few programs have the primary goal of empathy development and to date, none have considered the potential importance of developing in children and adolescents a capacity for greater prosocial moral agency.

Given the results of the present study, as well as those of Menesini et al. (2003), intervention strategies aimed at enhancing the prosocial aspects of moral agency and the development of true empathy in both bullies and bystanders may represent critical future directions for anti-bullying interventions.

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NOTES

1. Typically, students in grades 8 through 10 range in age from approximately 12 to 16 years.
2. Given that this survey was conducted as part of the school's own self-evaluation, parental permission was not obtained, with the school acting as *in loco parentis,* although parents were informed in the school newsletter about the survey.
3. Items can be obtained from the first author.

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KEYWORDS Bullying; victimization; adolescents; moral disengagement; attitudes and beliefs

ABSTRACT The present study examined whether the construct of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Bandura, 2001) contributes to our understanding of bullying among adolescents. Canadian students in grades 8-10 ($N = 494$) completed questionnaires about their experiences with bullying and victimization and their attitudes about bullying. Eighteen items were identified (post hoc) as reflecting major categories of moral disengagement. Results indicated high levels of frequent victimization and bullying (i.e., 12% and 13% of students, respectively). Reported positive attitudes and beliefs about bullying were significantly more likely among students who engaged in bullying, with 38% of the variance in reported bullying accounted for by the students' endorsement of strategies for moral disengagement. Interestingly, reported experiences of victimization were also related to moral disengagement, but only for those students who reported moderate levels of bullying. Discussion focuses on the implications of these findings for school-based interventions.

Authors' Address: **Dr. Shelley Hymel, Natalie Rocke-Henderson* and Rina A. Bonanno**,** Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education, University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z4, Canada

Phone 604-822-6022, *Fax* 604-822-3302

E-mail: shelley.hymel@ubc.ca, *rocke@interchange.ubc.ca, **rinaab@interchange.ubc.ca