

Bullying and Protection: The Influence of Moral Disengagement

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ABSTRACT. Bullying is one of the most frequently discussed of social problems, which can be found in macro-, meso- or micro-communities, i.e. the family, public, higher education institutions or the workplace. Specialists increasingly put emphasis on the phenomenon of bullying, despite the fact that different types of bullying are prominent in the afore mentioned social institutions. The phenomenon can cause significant trauma to the victim, both psychologically and physically, which may lead to some form of isolation from society. However, the number of national and international studies on bullying in higher education is negligible. This study aims to answer the following questions: the relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement; if active defending and moral disengagement correlate; the type of correlation between active defending and victimisation; and gender differences from the perspective of active defending. The participants of the recent study were all Hungarian-speaking students of Babeş-Bolyai University. The research design applied in this study was a quantitative, correlational design.

The results of this research show that victimisation is positively correlated with moral disengagement. No relationship was found between moral disengagement and active defending. Victimisation and active defending were also positively correlated, and there is a significant difference between men and women when it comes to active defending.

The results of this research may be relevant for the implementation of various preventive and intervention programmes, for example the NAB IT! programme.

Keywords: active defending, student, moral disengagement, active bullying, victimisation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a social problem that affects us all, and we have all been involved in some form of it - whether as a perpetrator, victim or as a bystander. This raises the question, what is the reason? Given there are now a number of intervention programmes embedded into numerous institutional systems. Even so, the phenomenon is still prevalent today and causes significant harm, such as exclusion from peer groups. Often leading to low self-esteem or even depression (Parker & Asher, 1987), but also physical illness, insomnia and poor academic performance or even dropping out of Higher Education altogether (Sharp, 1995). In very serious cases, bullying can lead to tragic outcomes such as self-harm or even suicide (Irinzi & Németh, 2016). It is questionable, however, if bullying is causing serious problems, why is it still so common in so many micro-, meso-, and macro-environments? Individual dispositional factors such as moral beliefs and moral disengagement can be significant factors in both bullying and in protective behaviour. In addition, the experience of abusive behaviour and/or victimisation can also lead some people to become the perpetrators, and in some cases may be both victims and perpetrators of bullying simultaneously (Malta et al., 2010). It is also important to note that in the case of bullying there are significant differences between different age groups, bullying occurs in different forms in different age groups. In this light, it is even more interesting that relatively little research focused on university students in particular has been conducted (Isaacs et al., 2008). In any case, it can be argued that bullying is a complex social problem with individual and environmental factors, and for which deeper understanding can be achieved by examining the different factors, thus increasingly effective intervention programmes can be developed and implemented.

1.1. The roots of bullying

Contemporary abuse first began to draw attention in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s (Heinemann, 1969, 1972; Olweus, 1973a). "Bullying" was not a widely used term, initially the term 'mobbing' was used by P. P. Heinemann, a Swedish school doctor, in the context of inter-ethnic discrimination. Heinemann borrowed the term from the Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1963, 1968), in ethology, the term is used to describe the phenomenon where animals of the same species attack an individual of another species, which is usually larger and the natural enemy of the group. In his book, Lorenz (1963) used the term for when a class or a group of soldiers act together against a deviant individual. The term mobbing has also long been used in social psychology (Lindzey, 1954);

however, its use has also become somewhat widespread throughout English-speaking countries as ‘a relatively large group of individuals who share a common goal’. A ‘mob’ is randomly formed, poorly organised and lasts only a short time. Social psychology differentiates multiple ‘mobs’ such as the aggressive mob and the fear-driven mob. The “mobs” members experienced intense emotions, while their actions and behaviour tended towards irrationality (Lindzey, 1954). The term ‘bullying’ was established in large part by Swedish researcher Dan Olweus, who criticised the term ‘mobbing’ for over-emphasising the fact that the phenomenon only occurs over a short period of time. He lacked empirical research on the subject of bullying, and in the early 1970s he carried out what is still regarded as one of the first systematic studies of the phenomenon ‘peer bullying’. These findings were first published in Sweden in a book called “Whipping boys and bullies: research on bullying at school.” (Olweus, 1973a). An expanded version of this book was published in the United States in 1978 under the title “Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys” (Olweus, 1978). The main aim of the research was to gain a partial understanding of how the phenomenon works and to show empirical results that answered at least some of the key questions that have been at the heart of the Swedish debate.

His research and other subsequent work (Farrington, 1993) confirmed some of his earlier ideas about bullying, such as that members of a class community can vary widely in their levels of aggression, as well as varying in how stable they can be without any intervention, even over a number of years (Olweus, 1977, 1979).

Olweus’s research has also shown that a relatively small proportion of the class community can be considered more active participants in bullying than others, who in many cases are not directly involved in the bullying or are only marginally involved (Olweus, 1993, 2001). The reports of those who have been bullied also show that in the majority of cases only a very narrow group of two or three students are the bullies (Olweus & Solberg, 2003). However, a significant group of bullies, 25-30%, report being bullied by a single student (Olweus & Solberg, 2003).

1.2. The phenomenon of bullying

Bullying, a subcategory of aggressive behaviour, is a common occurrence in children and adolescents in school contexts worldwide (Whitney & Smith, 1993). It is a complex social problem that can have serious negative consequences, both for the abuser and the victims (Salmivalli, 1999; Smith & Brain, 2000). The negative effects of bullying are well documented, not only in terms of the psychological harm suffered by the victims, but also for the children who are

involved. Research from around the world has shown that abusive behaviour is a predictor of later delinquency (Olweus, 1991; Pulkkinen & Pitkanen, 1993), and is associated with both internalising and externalising difficulties (Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Adolescents who are part of the maltreatment and have negative coping strategies may become depressed (Duan et al., 2020).

It can be defined as the asymmetry associated with age, gender or racial differences that one or more individuals exploit to abuse or humiliate another individual (Olweus, 1993). Temporal repetition is also an important aspect of bullying (Berger, 2007), along with the involvement of the bully and the target of the aggression. Some individuals can be both bully and victim, and thus categorised as bullying-victims (Malta et al., 2010). Broadly speaking, bullying can be direct or indirect (Lopes Neto, 2005). Direct bullying is more attention-grabbing, as it involves overt aggression, including verbal bullying, pushing or hitting, or other types of physical aggression. Indirect bullying includes spreading negative rumours or accusations about a person who is not present to defend themselves, or making indirect comments in the presence of the victim (Lopes Neto, A. A., 2005). Bullying: aggressive behavior among students.

Bullying is better understood as a social phenomenon rather than a psychiatric illness (Lopes Neto, 2005). However, research has shown bullying has a severe negative impact on academic performance (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008), with consequences that can extend into adulthood for both victims and bullies (Malta et al., 2010). There are a number of roles that bullying involves, including bully, victim and bystander (Evans et al., 2019). Bullies are perfectionists (Farrell & Vaillancourt, 2019), have high levels of extraversion (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2019), and like to dominate (Volk et al., 2018). Meanwhile, victims tend to be adolescents with low self-esteem and self-efficacy (Silva et al., 2019; Hutson et al., 2019), students who have low academic achievement (Li et al., 2019) and students who have low perceived social support (Shaheen et al., 2019). Finally, bystanders are individuals who become bystanders or supporters of the abusive behaviour by not making any effort to stop the perceived abuse (Coloroso, 2003). The presence of bystanders who do not help the victim can trigger a feeling from the bully that he or she is receiving support, which may be a reason to increase the intensity of the bullying.

In the early bullying period, victims are usually sad or angry (Hamid & Daulima, 2019) and experience more physical problems (do Nascimento Andrade & Alves, 2019). Long-term effects can lead to drug abuse (Baiden & Tadeo, 2019) and a decrease in victims' life satisfaction (Nozaki, 2019). Adding to this, bullying can make victims depressed, anxious and may also lead to other psychological symptoms (Li et al., 2019; Radoman et al., 2019). And for perpetrators, bullying can

lead to criminal behaviour, drug abuse (Sangalang et al., 2016), reduced empathy (Wilford et al., 2015) and increased aggressive behaviour (Evans et al., 2019).

Several factors are involved in bullying, including various personality factors such as low empathy, manipulative personality, high extraversion and an unfriendly disposition (Dåderman & Ragnestål-Impola, 2019). However, environmental factors such as low social class and low age group support are also influential (Shaw et al., 2019) and norm systems specific to social groups are significant background factors in the occurrence of bullying (Pouwels et al., 2019). The phenomenon of abuse is also influenced by factors within the family, such as low support within the family and authoritarian parenting (Duggins et al., 2016).

Although the research was initially aimed at mapping traditional bullying, it is now increasingly looking at the phenomenon of bullying in a more diverse and in-depth manner. Increasingly, workplace bullying is being addressed, with relevant work by Hoel, Rayner, and Cooper, (1999), while the emergence of the Internet and cyberspace has also brought cyberbullying into the spotlight.

Bullying can be divided into several categories, such as:

1. Physical aggression, which is committed by hitting, kicking, strangling, restraining or damaging the victim's property.
2. Verbal bullying, which occurs by threatening, insulting, abusing or humiliating the victim.
3. Social exclusion, which occurs by excluding or isolating the victim from the group.
4. Indirect bullying, which occurs through gossiping, spreading fake news or influencing the opinions of others in a negative direction (Dixon & Smith, 2011).

1.3. Bullying as a social problem

In the context of school bullying, Salmivalli (2010, 2014) has highlighted that it is a social phenomenon in which a number of roles are involved that go beyond the strict bully-bullied relationship and can be seen as a phenomenon within a broader range of age group dynamics. Salmivalli (2014) points out that bullying is considered a social phenomenon with a high frequency for the reason that usually bystanders are also present during bullying, whether online or offline. These bystanders tend to support the bully in the form of social reinforcement such as laughter, but also find it amusing to humiliate the victim. Bystanders thus reinforce the bully's behaviour, whether intentional or not, simply by witnessing the events. However, there may be several reasons why bystanders choose not to intervene when bullying occurs (Salmivalli, 2010).

First, bullies are often viewed positively by their peer group, so bystanders fear that if they intervene, they themselves may become victims. Second, bystanders' ignorance may also stem from the fact that if they see that no one intervenes to help the victim, it may give the impression that the majority supports the bullying. However, it is also important to note that bullies tend to target vulnerable people, those of low status within the age group, so this can also create an attitude that it would not be 'profitable' to intervene. According to Salmivalli (2014), bystanders have considerable power to prevent, or even stop the bullying, especially in terms of the fact that they generally do not feel that it is right to bully someone. In their research, Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) found that 17% of schoolchildren generally take an active role as bystanders. What these children had in common was that they had compassion for the victims and wanted to do something to support them. Salmivalli argues that it would probably be much more effective in curbing bullying if the focus was not on changing the behaviour of the bullies, but on making the group more supportive towards the victims.

From a socio-economic perspective, the perpetration of bullying and victimisation are intertwined, maintained and changed as a result of the ongoing, reciprocal and complex relationship between individuals and environmental factors (Hong & Espelage, 2012). A socio-economic perspective highlights how abuse is rooted in four interrelated systems, namely micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The difference between bystander intervention and the "Bystander effect": Bystander intervention is not the same as the "bystander effect". In bystander intervention, there is a bystander who becomes an upstander in necessary situations. The "bystander effect" refers to the psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to help or intervene due to the ambiguity of the situation, the paralysing effect (distribution of responsibility) of other bystanders present, and the social influence of others' inaction (Henson et al., 2020; Madden & Loh, 2020; Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019).

1.4. The relationship between abuse and morality

Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) speculated on how morality might be related to different forms of aggression. They concluded that it is most strongly associated with instrumental aggression, which could be seen as a synonym for bullying, a type of aggression where aggression is not an emotional response such as anger, but is a behaviour of the individual to obtain a reward. This is consistent with Crick et al's 2002 study in which they found that young people categorised as

aggressive are more likely to engage in a more hostile form of behaviour and to put aggressive responses in a positive light. Conversely, children who prefer prosocial behaviours are more likely to adapt to achieve their relational goals (e.g., to be my friend) as opposed to their instrumental goals.

However, Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) point out that the complexity of the relationship between moral justification and proactive aggression is hard to define, and in many cases the mechanism is paradoxical. Other findings indicate that although many aggressive children show signs of deficits in the area of social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1999) other findings, in contrast, suggest that the bully may in many cases be characterised by sophisticated social expression and high social intelligence (Sutton et al., 1999). Thus, the social and cognitive roots of the nature of bullying remain hidden.

In 1999, Schonert and Reichl examined the relationship between moral justification and bullying in 108 Canadian elementary school students and found significant differences between boys and girls. For girls, no significant relationship was found between aggressive behaviour towards peers and morality. In contrast, for boys, a significant and positive relationship was found between moral justification and peer aggression, with those who applied moral justification more effectively being more aggressive. The explanation for this contradictory finding was found by Schonert and Reichl to be that boys may seek to justify aggressive behaviour and find it acceptable if it is done for the 'right' reason. Pepler and Craig (2005) found that for boys, this is normative as long as aggression occurs in the form of wrestling among adolescent boys.

Murray-Close and colleagues (2006) also investigated the extent to which children perceived physical and relational aggression as a moral problem (right or left leaning), a social convention problem (driven by social norms in order to maintain social order), or a personal problem (a matter of personal choice). Girls were more likely to view relational and physical aggression as moral problems. Boys, especially those who showed signs of aggressive behaviour, were more likely to use conventional or personal reasoning when discussing physical or relational aggression. It was also shown that girls who were perceived as relationally aggressive were more likely to develop a social convention orientation towards relational bullying.

Overall, the more aggressive children were less inclined to approach aggression as a moral issue. Although there is relatively little research made on the relationship between morality and aggression, it can be argued that the relationship is very complex and difficult to see, that gender differences are fundamentally present, as is the variable relationship between different forms of aggression.

1.5. Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is defined as a cognitive process that individuals use to justify their own actions, even when they know they are wrong (Bandura, 2016). Bandura's theory is used to explain why people exhibit behaviours that violate their own moral norms. This theory explains that most people develop their own moral norms to act as a kind of self-regulatory mechanism, thereby controlling behaviour and reducing the occurrence of immoral behaviours. In this way, individuals can avoid violating their own moral beliefs. In 2021, Romera and colleagues showed a positive relationship between moral disengagement and bullying behaviour. However, the relationship between moral disengagement and victimisation also tends to be positive (Killer et al., 2019).

Moral disengagement was initially studied in terms of its relationship with aggression, and only later linked to other deviant behaviours. Moral disengagement is also reflected in Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, which identifies it as a capacity of human behaviour to understand the world around them and themselves, and to control their behaviour. While examining the self-regulatory mechanisms of behaviour, Bandura paid particular attention to the functioning of morality, thus creating the theory of moral agency.

Within the framework of the moral agency (Bandura, 1990), he described the mechanisms of moral disengagement, explaining why individuals sometimes act in ways that go against their own moral beliefs, without any feeling of guilt or shame. In general, people rely on their own moral convictions to avoid undesirable behaviours that go against their own ethical perspective. At the same time, it is important to note that one should not expect unyielding adherence to one's moral standards. Bandura hypothesised that moral disengagement influences behavioural regulation by disabling the controlling function of moral norms, allowing individuals to avoid emotional reactions that are associated with certain moral content.

However, the interpretation of moral disengagement as a cognitive distortion (Gibbs et al., 1995) is correct in that it presents the aggressive behaviour and its negative consequences committed by the individual in a socially endorsed, or at least accepted way, without the need to abandon personal and social principles. Moral disengagement works through eight mechanisms that operate in four main areas: behaviour, agency, outcome and inclusion (Bandura et al., 1996). The eight mechanisms are namely moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, minimising agency, responsibility allocation, ignoring or misconstruing consequences, dehumanisation and the attribution of blame (Bandura, 1990, 2016).

In moral justification, an immoral act is seen as one that serves some moral purpose (Bandura, 2002).

Bandura (2016) describes euphemistic language as highlighting the importance of language in deciding how others will view an event or action, historically it has been used in many cases, for example in wars when civilian casualties were recorded as 'collateral damage' or as a consequence of war.

Advantageous comparison occurs when unacceptable behaviour is explained by comparing it to even less acceptable behaviour, thereby reducing its severity (Bandura, 1990; Hsu et al., 2021). For example, when someone does not attend one class and claims that they still act more acceptable than those who do not attend classes at all (Hsu et al., 2021).

Displacement and diffusion of responsibility are two mechanisms very close to each other, both aiming to avoid taking responsibility for unethical behaviour by projecting it onto an authoritarian person or group in order to downplay their own role (Bandura, 1999, 2016). When examined alone, deflection has been shown to predict unethical decision making (Barsky, 2011), and attribution predicts support for aggressive behaviour by observers (Bjärehed et al., 2020).

Disregarding or distorting the consequence of action is a process through which individuals can avoid guilt by focusing on the positive consequences of their unethical behaviour as opposed to the negative, or by minimising the true extent of the harmful effect (Bandura, 1999, 2016). Consequence distortion is also associated with abusive behaviour (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014) and predicts support for abusive behaviour from bystanders (Bjärehed et al., 2020).

The last two mechanisms, dehumanisation and blaming, aim to change the perpetrator's perspective of the victim (Bandura, 1999, 2016). Dehumanisation is a process whereby the victim becomes less and less seen as human (Bandura et al., 1975). During dehumanization, empathic responses to others cease to exist (Bandura, 2002), and as a consequence, it is likely that dehumanization plays a relevant role in most forms of aggression, such as bullying, institutionalized discrimination, sexual assault, various aggressive attitudes, coercive sexual behavior, and cyberbullying (Bandura, 2002; Runions & Bak, 2015; Van Noorden et al, 2014; Zhou et al., 2021). Blaming others is a process whereby the perpetrator places him/herself in the role of the victim, denying the impact of his/her unethical behaviour (Bandura, 2002). However, part of the process is also to hold the victim or victims responsible for what happened to them (e.g., he/she brought it on him/herself) thereby tricking the perpetrator's sense of responsibility (Bandura, 1990; Bandura et al., 1996). This mechanism has been positively associated with bullying (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), involvement in organised crime (Alleyne & Wood, 2010), and domestic violence (Bryant & Spencer, 2003).

Bandura (1999, 2002) describes four different categories of these psychological mechanisms: cognitive reconstructing of harmful behaviour, masking or reducing the role of the individual in causing the harm, distorting or ignoring the impact of the harm, and blaming or dehumanising the victim.

Cognitive restructuring provides insights and arguments by which negative affect can be presented in a positive light, including mechanisms such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and favourable comparison.

Minimising agency has cognitive strategies that remove responsibility for committing unethical behaviour by reducing or obscuring personal responsibility by shifting it to an authoritarian person or group.

Distorting or ignoring the consequences of harmful behaviour to help the individual move away from the harm caused or to highlight the positive aspects of the behaviour.

Dehumanisation and blaming, as mentioned in the mechanisms of moral disengagement, reduces the impact of negative behaviour by presenting the victim as deserving of his fate or by making him responsible for the harm he has suffered. According to Bandura, moral disengagement disinhibits individuals, making negative or even inhuman behaviour more common, by freeing the individual from inhibitions and guilt (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 2001).

Ultimately, a number of studies have concluded that the stronger the moral disengagement, the more likely one is to violate individual and corporate norms and values (Bandura et al., 2000; Detert, Treviño & Sweitzer, 2008; Fida et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2012).

Further research has also shown a link between gender and moral disengagement. Men are more prone to moral disengagement than women (Almedia et al., 2010; Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Barchia & Bussey, 2010; Obermann, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

The potentially difficult or dangerous nature of abusive situations makes active defending partly distinct from everyday prosocial behaviour. For this reason, it is particularly important to analyse the role of coping strategies in monitoring bullying rather than in problematic situations. In the child maltreatment literature, some research has analysed coping strategies used by maltreated children (Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Salmivalli et al. 1996; Smith et al. 2001). However, despite the importance of observers' responses to maltreatment (Gini et al. 2008), coping strategies used by outsider students who witness peer maltreatment have received surprisingly little attention. In other words, no prior research has examined the coping strategies of children who witnessed the negative life events of others (e.g., being abused by other peers), only their own personal events.

2. THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research is to investigate the phenomena described above and to explore the dynamics between them, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of bullying as a social problem. This research seeks to answer the question of how morality influences active intervention in bullying, and whether the victimisation of bullying shapes individuals' views on bullying, and if so, does that contribute to moral disengagement or even promote active protection. However, it is important in this research, to investigate this amongst university students, as less academic research has been conducted on bullying in higher education.

3. HYPOTHESES

H1. There is a positive relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement.

Research on moral disengagement is quite contradictory, in terms of negative correlations (Pornari & Wood, 2010), positive correlations (Allison & Bussey, 2017), and non-significant correlations (Gini, 2006; Pozzoli et al., 2016). Two opposing theories have attempted to explain the relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement (Perren et al., 2012). First, experiencing victimisation may lead individuals to become more sensitive to moral responsibility and to have a more sophisticated perception of moral violations (Perren et al., 2012). Conversely, due to chronic victimisation, individuals may develop a tendency towards self-blame, which may lead to a perception that abuse is acceptable and therefore may exhibit a stronger moral disengagement argument (Perren et al., 2012).

H2. There is a negative correlation between moral disengagement and active defending.

The number of studies conducted on the relationship between intervention and moral disengagement is negligible compared to the number of studies conducted on the relationship between bullying and moral disengagement (Pozzoli et al., 2016). However, the studies conducted have concluded that there is a negative relationship between moral disengagement and defending (Caravita et al., 2012; Gini, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2017), but there have also been findings where this relationship was weak (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Sijtsema et al., 2014) or not significant at all (Allison & Bussey, 2017; Gini et al., 2015). It has been shown that defenders show lower levels of

moral disengagement than perpetrators of abuse, as their actions do not go against their own moral convictions (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015). However, further research is needed to see whether differences in the different subtypes of defensive behaviour and, in turn, in the level of moral disengagement may emerge (Belacchi & Farina, 2012).

H3. There is a positive correlation between victimisation and active protection.

Previous research has shown that there is a link between self-reported victimisation and higher willingness to intervene (Batanova et al., 2014) and that victims of bullying tend to protect each other (Huitsing et al., 2014). However, there is some insight into the affective and social cognitive processes of victim defending. It has been suggested that victims defend each other because they are friends (Pozzoli & Gini, 2013) or because they are targets of the same bully (Huitsing et al., 2014).

H4. There is a significant difference in active defending between men and women.

Several studies have examined gender as a variable in its relationship with bullying. Gender is a structure of social practice that creates power relations, attitudes and hierarchies, not only between people, but also between groups and institutions, which would simply override any analysis or individual perception of being female or male. This category allows for an understanding of the socially predetermined roles of men and women as perpetrators of unequal hierarchical relations (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Gender has also been addressed in the literature, particularly in the case of school bullying. Research has shown that men are more likely to appear in both roles of bullying, as bully and bullied, while women are more prone to indirect bullying as peer gossiping. However, research has also shown a link between gender and moral disengagement. Males are more prone to moral disengagement than females (Almedia et al., 2010; Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Barchia & Bussey, 2010; Obermann, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

4. METHODS

4.1. Participants

To test the first three hypotheses, a Pearson correlation test was used, which required 115 participants with 95% statistical power and a medium effect size ($r = 0.3$), based on the G*Power program.

To test the fourth hypothesis, an independent sample t-test was used, which required 210 participants (105 in the women's group and 105 in the men's group) at 95% statistical power and medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.5$), and 128 participants (64-64 in both groups) at 80% statistical power and medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.5$).

The questionnaire used in the recent study was completed by 160 Hungarian-speaking students of Babeş-Bolyai University, from 34 different majors and undergraduate and master's degree programmes. The sampling procedure applied was convenience sampling, including snowball sampling.

The sample was composed of participants aged 18-55 years ($M=20.55$ $SD=4.20$), of which 115 (71.9%) were female and 44 male (27.5%) and 1 other (0.6%) who identified themselves as male. The totality of the respondents consists of: 28.1% of students in psychology (44 individuals), 8.8% of students in education (14 individuals), 5% of students in special education (8 individuals), 3.1% of students in social work (5 individuals), 0.6% of students in human resource management (1 individual), 6.9% of students in management (11 individuals), 2.5% of students in banking and finance students (4 individuals), 4.4% of students in economics (7 persons), 3.8% of students in law (6 persons), 3.1% of students in history (5 persons), 2.5% of students in international relations (4 persons), 1.9% of students in philosophy (3 persons), 0.6% of students in anthropology (1 person), 1.3% of students in mathematics (2 persons), 0.6% of students in geography (1 person), 2.5% of students in tourism and spatial development (4 persons), 3.1% of students in cultural tourism (5 persons), 1.3% of students in geology (2 persons), 0.6% of students in agricultural engineering (1 person), 0.6% of students in chemical engineering (1 person), 1.3% of students in physical engineering (2 persons), 3.8% of students in engineering (6 persons), 1.3% of students in computer science (2 persons), 0.6% of students in Hungarian comparatistics (1 person), 0.6% of students in Hungarian-Japanese (1 person), 1.3% of students in Hungarian-Romanian (2 person) 0.6% of students in Hungarian-English (1 person), 0.6% of student in Hungarian-German (1 person), 1.9% of students in applied foreign languages (3 persons), 2.5% of students in communication and public relations (4 persons), 0.6% of students in tourism geography (1 person), 0.6% of students in sociology (1 person), 2.5% of students in biology (4 persons), 0.6% of students kinesiotherapy (1 person), 0.6% of students kinesiology (1 person). This represents a total of 34 different subjects in all. The questionnaire pack was sent to 101 first-year students (63.1%), 31 second-year students (19.4%), 18 third-year students (11.3%), 3 first-year Master's students (1.9%) and 7 second-year Master's students (4.4%).

4.2. Instruments

A total of 4 questionnaires were used in the study, which were completed once by each participant. The 4 questionnaires used were the Demographic Questionnaire, Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, The Moral Disengagement Regarding School Bullying and Participant Role Questionnaire.

In the demographic questionnaire, we asked for information regarding gender, age, major, year and the average grade of the last semester.

The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (hereafter OBVQ) is the most commonly used tool as a measure of bullying, so we too opted to use it. The questionnaire is based on self-reports and includes a 23-item victim scale and a 23-item bully scale. In the study, we used 17 items from the victim scale, where respondents were asked to choose on a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) how often they experience the given statement. Overall, the OBVQ scale had a reliability value of .87 based on Cronbach's alpha, indicating good internal consistency.

The Moral Disengagement Regarding School Bullying scale consists of 18 items, where respondents were asked to reflect on how much they agree or disagree with a statement on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The internal reliability of the full scale is .78 based on Cronbach's alpha, which indicates an acceptable internal consistency.

We used a subscale of the Participant Role Questionnaire (hereafter PRQ), the Self-Reported Abusive Behaviour subscale, of which 6 items were used. Again, on a scale from 1 (Not usual at all) to 5 (Very usual), respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would intervene or not. Internal reliability of the scale based on Cronbach's alpha .82 which indicates a good internal consistency.

4.3. Research design

The research used a correlational research design. This allowed us to examine the relationships between victimisation and moral disengagement, moral disengagement and active defending, and victimisation and active defending. Nevertheless, it is also an appropriate design because the research is considered to be basic research, and therefore aims to contribute to further in-depth studies to better understand and to handle the problem.

4.4. Procedure

Data provided their informed consent for the use of their data for statistical analysis. The questionnaire was administered via the Google Forms platform and required approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete per participant. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no randomization was applied.

4.5. Statistical analyses

As a first step, the samples were characterised into descriptive statistical indicators (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) and the normal distribution of the dependent variables was checked by means of the skewness and kurtosis. To test the first three hypotheses, Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement, moral disengagement and active defending, and victimisation and active defending. To test the fourth hypothesis, the gender difference in moral disengagement, we used an Independent Samples T-test.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Descriptive data processing results

The total study had 160 participants and the normality of the full sample for the dependent variables was tested. No individuals were excluded from the study. The distributions of the different variables were examined separately, where each value is related to the normal distribution, i.e. a curve is skewed to the right or left relative to the other, or is peaked or flattened in the analysis. For the sex distribution, the normal distribution is fulfilled, as for both skewness and kurtosis indicators lie within the error range -1 to 1, making it suitable for parametric analysis.

Sociodemographic variables of the participants

Variables							
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Gender	160	1.73	0.459	1	3	-0.854	-0.729
Age	160	20.55	4.201	18	55	6.35	44.13
Academic year	160	1.65	4,2	1	5	1.774	2.65
Victimisation	160	1.456	38	1	3	1.456	1.635
Moral disengagement	160	1.462	0.66	1	4	1.45	1.65
*Cognitive	160	1.3963	0.49	1	4	1.87	4.06
restructuring	160	2.76	0.48	1.33	4.33	-0.104	0.698
*Minimalising agency	160	1.55	0.67	1	4.50	1.658	3.429
*Distortion of cons.	160	2.15	0.54	1	4.17	0.760	1.25
*Dehumanisation	160	2.77	1.228	1	5	-0.138	-1.145
Active defending							

Note. *Subscales of moral disengagement

H1. Victimisation and moral disengagement are positively correlated.**Table 1.** *The correlation between victimisation and moral disengagement*

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1.Victimisation	160	1.67	0.463	—	
2. MD	160	1.91	0.408	0.158*	—

Notes. * $p \leq .05$. MD=Moral Disengagement

There is a positive, weak relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement $r(160) = 0.158$, $p = 0.046$. The higher the level of victimisation, the lower the level of moral disengagement.

H2. There is a negative correlation between moral disengagement and active defending.**Table 2.** *The correlation between moral disengagement and active defending*

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ActiveDef	160	2.77	1.228	—					
2.CogRestruct	160	1.39	0.498	-0.100	—				
3. MinAgency	160	2.76	0.484	-0.102	-0.007	—			
4. ConsRefl	160	1.55	0.670	-0.076	0.621	0.006	—		
5. DeHu	160	2.15	0.543	0.029	0.513	0.024	0.626	—	
6. MD	160	1.46	0.664	-0.091	0.760	0.050	0.787	0.673	—

Notes. MD= Moral Disengagement, Activedef= Active Defending, CogRestruct= Cognitive Restructuring, MinAgency= Individual Power Minimization, ConsRefl= Consequence Distortion, DeHu= Dehumanization

There is no significant relationship between moral disengagement and active defending $r(160) = -0.091$, $p = 0.354$.

H3. There is a positive relationship between victimisation and active defending.**Table 3.** *The correlation between victimisation and active defending*

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1.Victimisation	160	1.67	0.463	—	
2. Activedef	160	2.72	0.982	0.253*	—

Notes. * $p \leq .05$. Activedef=Active defending

There is a positive, weak correlation between victimisation and active defending, $r(158) = 0.253$, $p = 0.001$. The higher the level of victimisation, the lower the probability of the active defending.

H4. There is a significant difference in active defending between men and women.

Table 4. *Difference analysis between men and women in moral disengagement*

Variables	Men		Women		$t(50.844)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
MD	44	0.531	115	0.256	4.568	>0.001	0.302

Notes. MD= Moral Disengagement

There is a significant difference in variances between the two groups. The condition for equality of variances is not met, F Levene = 31.165, $p < 0.001$. The Welch t test indicates a significant difference in moral disengagement between women ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.25$) and men ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.53$) $t(157) = 4.586$, $p < 0.001$. Gender as a quasi-independent variable has a significant effect on moral disengagement. Cohen's D effect size shows a value of 0.302, which indicates a weak effect of gender on moral disengagement is. Moral disengagement is more prevalent among men than it is among women.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The first hypothesis examined the relationship between victimisation and moral disengagement. Victimisation and moral disengagement are positively correlated and the strength was weak. As in other previous research, the correlation is positive (Allison & Bussey, 2017), although there have been studies that have found a negative correlation (Pornari & Wood, 2010). These results support the theoretical approach that, due to chronic victimisation and by developing a self-blame tendency, individuals come to the belief that bullying is acceptable and as a result, those who have experienced bullying become more prone to moral disengagement (Perren et al, 2012).

The second hypothesis investigated the correlation between moral disengagement and active defending, where no significant relationship was found. It is particularly interesting that no significant relationship was found for the subscales of moral disengagement, neither for cognitive reconstructing, nor for minimising individual agency, nor for distorting or disregarding consequences,

nor for dehumanisation. These results contradict previous research that has shown a negative relationship between moral disengagement and defensive behaviour (Caravita et al., 2012; Gini, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2017), but support previous research that has not shown a significant correlation (Allison & Bussey, 2017; Gini et al., 2015). One explanation for this may be that bullies typically do not lack social intelligence, so bullies may also assume the role of protectors in other cases. As Schonert and Reichl have described, bullying in many cases can be justified by individuals when it is done for the right reason. However, this does not preclude them from not intervening when they consider they should.

The third hypothesis indicated that there is a positive correlation between victimisation and active defending. In recent study, the results of this relationship showed a positive and weak correlation. Previous research has shown a relationship between self-reported victimisation and higher willingness to intervene (Batanova et al., 2014; Huitsing et al., 2014), the recent research is in line with these results, although the strength of the correlation is weak. This may be explained by one theory that the experience of victimisation could make individuals more sensitive to moral responsibility and thus to taking action against bullying (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012).

In the last hypothesis, we examined the gender difference in moral disengagement. These results suggest significant differences between men and women in moral disengagement, with men showing a higher tendency to engage in the process. These results support previous research showing similar results (Almedia et al., 2010; Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Barchia & Bussey, 2010; Obermann, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). One explanation for this may be that, as previous research has pointed out, boys may try to justify aggressive behaviour and for boys, when looking at adolescence, aggression is considered to be more normative (Pepler & Craig, 2005).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Research in this area is considered to be groundbreaking, as there are no significant studies that specifically investigate the phenomenon of bullying.

The gender distribution of the sample could be considered as a limitation (women are overrepresented compared to men), as it is a topic where gender is an important variable. In future research, it would be worth keeping in mind that gender should be represented in approximately equal proportions in order to get a more accurate perspective on the attitudes of both sexes on this topic.

The sample size can also be considered a limitation, as it is not large enough.

The sampling method we used (snowball sampling) is important to mention as a limitation, as it means that this research is not randomised, and consequently the results cannot be generalised to the whole of the university population, with some majors being underrepresented compared to others. Furthermore, since this method relies on initial participants forwarding the questionnaire to their acquaintances, who are likely to have similar beliefs, this may distort the results obtained, thus reducing their representativeness and external validity, i.e. their applicability to the population as a whole.

Further similarly specific research in the field will provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the phenomenon and will help to develop new intervention programmes to reduce its occurrence and thus its negative effects on individuals, such as anxiety, depression and social isolation. It is important to highlight the role of morality in bullying in order to develop programmes similar to NAB IT! for example, and to apply them to higher education institutions where appropriate. Further research could also include aggression, or even other forms of intervention and their prevalence, or try to replicate these results on a larger sample, or even conduct a factor analysis study to identify more background factors. In the future, it would also be important, in order to ensure the representativeness of the results, to carry out some kind of experimental design study on the subject. It is also important to note that adolescent girls tended to report relational and physical aggression as a moral problem, while boys, especially those who showed signs of aggressive behaviour, tended to use more conventional or personal reasoning when it came to physical or relational aggression (Murray-Close, 2006).

Statements and declarations

Declaration of competing interest - None.

All authors contributed substantially to the study and approved the submitted version.

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