

What Were They Thinking?

Full Reference

Hymel, S., Rocke-Henderson, N., & Bonanno, R. A. (2005). Moral disengagement: A framework for understanding bullying among adolescents. *Journal of Social Sciences. Special Issue: Peer Victimization in Schools: An International Perspective*, 8, 1-11.

Keywords

Bullying, victimization, adolescents, moral disengagement, attitudes, beliefs

Main Question

Do students who engage in bullying behaviour differ in their beliefs about "right" and "wrong" (moral disengagement) from those who do not engage in bullying? Do these students justify their bullying behaviour in ways that allow for "moral disengagement"?

Background

The attitudes and beliefs an individual has can play an important role in how he or she chooses to behave. In particular, attitudes and beliefs can support bullying behaviour. In fact, previous researchers found that students who frequently bullied others were more likely to expect a positive end result from their bullying behaviour than students who rarely bullied others. One psychologist, Bandura, has proposed a theory to explain the tendency of individuals to view negative behavior in a positive light. He calls it 'moral disengagement'. Basically, individuals go through a series of thoughts that justify or rationalize doing bad things to others. Specifically, Bandura believes that individuals can change their way of thinking in a number ways that serve to reduce or eliminate its negative impact. They can justify their harmful behaviour (e.g., "They have to learn how things work here."), minimize their role in causing harm (e.g., "I was just going along with the others." "I did not mean to hurt him; I was kidding."), ignore or misrepresent the impact of their behaviour on others (e.g., "It wasn't that bad.", or blame the one they are victimizing ("He deserved it.")).

Therefore, it may help to think about bullying behaviour as occurring when children change their thinking in the ways mentioned above; that is, when they engage in moral disengagement.

Who Was Involved

The participants were 494 students (approximately half boys, half girls) in grades 8, 9, and 10 (approximately equal numbers across grades) in an urban, middle-class, Canadian community. The students filled out a survey during class time.

The survey included questions about experiences with bullying and victimization, as well as questions that tapped into the model of moral disengagement (e.g., "kids get bullied because they are different").

What We Found

Similar to previous studies, in this group 12% of students reported being victimized at least once a week or more and 13% of students reported bullying others at least once a week or more. Boys reported being victimized and bullying others more than did girls. As expected, a student's level of moral disengagement did predict that student's reported involvement in bullying behaviour. The more a student reported agreeing with the statements indicating moral disengagement (e.g., "some kids need to be picked on just to teach them a lesson" and "bullying is just a normal part of being a kid"), the more likely they were to report bullying other students.

Interestingly, the students' ability to disengage morally for the purpose of bullying someone changes depending on their own experiences of being victimized. When students bullied others frequently, they identified with high levels of moral disengagement regardless of their experiences with victimization. When students did not bully others at all, they identified the least with moral disengagement, regardless of their experiences with victimization. However, the majority of students who reported bullying others occasionally reported lower levels of moral disengagement the more that they had experienced victimization. If they had little or no experience with being the victim, they were more likely to morally disengage. This last group represents the majority of students – the ones who engage in some, but not much, bullying – and it may be that the experience of being bullied themselves makes it difficult to distort the consequences, minimize their own role, blame the victimized child, or justify their own behaviour when they do engage in bullying others.

Implications

This study confirms that Bandura's hypothesis of moral disengagement can be helpful in understanding how students can engage in harmful behaviour, such as bullying. It is unlikely that a child wakes up one day with the ability to disengage morally and consequently engage in negative behaviours such as bullying. Moral disengagement develops gradually over time. With bullying, it may well begin during the school years. Over time a child may begin to justify and rationalize his or her behaviour more and more, eventually leading to a variety of anti-social behaviours. This process may help to explain the connections other researchers have found between bullying behaviour in school and later criminal and delinquent behaviour in young adulthood.

The finding that level of moral disengagement varies among children who only sometimes bully others, depending on experiences of victimization, requires special attention. The experience of being victimized may make students less able to justify or rationalize their own bullying behaviour. Also, it is important to remember that, although 12% of students reported frequently bullying others, most students did endorse varying degrees of moral disengagement, even though they did not engage in bullying others. This is important because of the implications it may have for the behaviour of bystanders, those children who witness others being bullied. It is these children that may be the most important means for addressing bullying within school settings. Finding ways to empower this group, reduce their moral disengagement, and teach them skills for intervening in a positive way, may greatly decrease the reinforcement of bullying in our communities.

