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# THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF BULLYING AT SCHOOL

## A Social-Ecological Process Perspective

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*“When will this bullying stop?”*

*“I do not know. When we are no longer together.”*

(Interview with a senior elementary school student who, together with his aggressive peers, has bullied a classmate for two years)

Despite a growing awareness that bullying at school has a moral dimension at its core, the bulk of relevant research and most prevention and intervention efforts do not systematically address or include the role of moral development and functioning in bullying. Hence, bullying is often not seen as a *moral* transgression and is not linked to notions of justice, fairness, and care. In the early 2000s, a few research groups started to consider the role of moral dispositions and processes like empathy, endorsement of moral values, or moral disengagement in the bullying dynamic (Hymel et al., 2005; Menesini et al., 2003). Researchers and theorists broadened their vision to explore the multilayered, intertwining, and interdependent interactions and relationships between peers. A few years earlier, Salmivalli et al.'s (1996) seminal paper characterized bullying as a group process involving different participant roles and thereby overcame conceptualizations of bullying as a dyadic process between the bully and the victim. This was also the time when bullying was increasingly being scrutinized from an ecological and a dynamic systems perspective, taking into account the social and institutional embeddedness of school bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Pepler et al., 1999) by, for example, investigating links with school climate (Cornell et al., 2015) and classroom climate (Thornberg et al., 2018). Both the enriched conceptualization of bullying as a group process and the inclusion of a social-ecological systems perspective have since informed the growing body of research on the contribution of moral development and functioning to the bullying dynamic.

The aim of this chapter is to integrate theoretical and empirical findings on bullying and morality in a social-ecological process model, which can be used to guide further research and approaches for preventing bullying. In brief, the model describes how, in the context of the social culture and climate of the classroom and the school, emerging bullying behaviors are reinforced by the initial reactions of peers and teachers and how subsequent moral distancing processes initiate a vicious cycle of intensification and, subsequently, the normalization of bullying and moral disengagement. Before introducing the model, we will briefly summarize previous research on

morality and bullying, which has focused predominantly on moral disengagement and empathy. Extensive reviews and meta-analyses regarding bullying and moral disengagement can be found in Gini et al. (2014) and Killer et al. (2019) and regarding bullying and empathy in Zych et al. (2016).

### **Bullying and Its Moral Core**

There is widespread agreement that bullying—a specific type of aggression—represents an intentional, targeted, and systematic abuse of power over time, consisting of repeated aggressive and often humiliating acts against a less powerful individual (Olweus, 1993). Aggressive acts may be direct, obvious, and visible and may include, for example, physical forms, like hitting or kicking, or verbal forms, like calling names or threats. Aggressive acts can also be indirect and may involve no clear confrontation—for example, spreading rumors or excluding someone, which makes it difficult to identify the aggressor (Olweus, 1993). There is considerable overlap between bullying and social exclusion (J. Wang et al., 2009). However, not all bullying necessarily includes acts of social exclusion, and isolated acts of social exclusion do not necessarily represent bullying unless they are embedded in a systematic and pervasive dynamic of peer abuse. For a more differentiated discussion, see Killen et al. (2013). Both direct and indirect forms of bullying can also be found in cyberbullying (i.e., bullying using electronic forms of communication). However, there is a significant amount of overlap in the involvement in offline and online forms of bullying (Kowalski et al., 2014; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). The grave psychosocial, health, and academic consequences of bullying (offline and in cyberspace) for victims have been extensively documented in reviews and meta-analyses (Kowalski et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017).

As an intentional, targeted, and systematic abuse of power to harm others, bullying can be seen as prototypical immoral behavior (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2021). According to this understanding, *morality* refers to what is “right and good”; humans are required to treat others with benevolence and kindness (Gibbs, 2003). The aim of such benevolence is to not harm the welfare of others and to protect or restore it in cases where it has been violated (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2018). This encompasses a normative, universal understanding of morality as a behavioral code which might be asserted by all rational individuals (provided certain requirements are met) and which relates to all humans (Gert, 2002). Consequently, we conceptualize bullying as pertaining to the moral domain—that is, to the display or omission of behavior that affects the rights and welfare of others (Smetana, 2006) and that safeguards or violates individual and social standards.

The violation of rights, welfare, and standards in the context of bullying can be linked directly to the notion of children’s rights (Lansdown et al., 2014). From the perspective of children’s rights, bullying constitutes a clear violation of their rights as stated in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), especially regarding the victim (see Ziemes & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2019). According to this understanding, the Convention of the Rights of the Child represents a universal ethical and legal code aiming to protect children “from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse [. . .] while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child” (United Nations, 1989, p. 5). The reference to the protective duty of all persons who provide caregiving to children emphasizes the central role of adults in the school system, especially teachers, in bullying in school. Taking a universalist stance, the moral core of bullying can be characterized as follows: systematically hurting, harassing, and humiliating someone again and again is wrong. It cannot be justified, even if that person is not a friend, does not belong to one’s family, or one does not like that person.

Unfortunately, humans are capable of excusing and justifying harmful behavior toward others by making it appear less harmful, downplaying its consequences, or casting the victim in a negative light—in other words, by using strategies of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). Moral

disengagement theory describes how individuals can enact behaviors that do not correspond with their moral standards while at the same time claiming to adhere to those standards, thus avoiding feelings of conflict, guilt, or remorse—in other words, to disconnect moral thought from moral action (Bandura et al., 1996). This can be achieved by employing specific cognitive distancing mechanisms. Bandura et al. (1996) identify four general strategies of moral disengagement which are selectively activated to weaken moral control: first, to reconstruct the harmful conduct (“bad” becomes “good”); second, to obscure causal agency (“I did not do it”); third, to ignore or misrepresent injurious consequences (“no harm done”); and fourth, to blame and devalue the victim (“own fault”) (Bandura et al., 1996). Although the various strategies and associated mechanisms have been confirmed empirically, a lot of bullying research uses global measures of moral disengagement. This may be because in many studies, the factor analyses performed on Bandura et al.’s (1996) standard thirty-two-item self-report measure (i.e., indicating the degree of agreement to statements like “Kids who get mistreated usually do things to deserve it”) and further measures based on this self-report measure yield one global factor (see Gini et al., 2014).

Moral disengagement theory addresses the interplay between the affective and cognitive aspects of moral functioning and explains how reprehensible behavior like bullying can be both justified and maintained (Hymel et al., 2005). This is particularly important because bullies do not show cognitive moral deficits (theory of mind, rule understanding, moral judgment) but seem to have deficits in their moral emotions in that they do not associate harming someone with negative emotions like guilt and shame (Gasser & Keller, 2009).

In the past one and a half decades, a growing body of research has demonstrated systematic associations between children’s and adolescents’ involvement in bullying and their moral development and functioning, the latter including facets like moral distancing and disengagement (Killer et al., 2019), moral emotions (Menesini et al., 2003), basic moral sensitivity (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), empathy (Zych et al., 2016), moral judgments and emotion attributions (Perren et al., 2012), or moral distress (Gini et al., 2020). At the same time, this research has increasingly assumed an ecological systems perspective, thus including also teachers’, classrooms’, and schools’ moral characteristics and functioning as factors that influence a given bullying dynamic both directly and indirectly; this is the case in the context of Gini et al.’s (2020) research on collective moral disengagement in bullying and bystanding.

The empirical exploration of the multifaceted and complex relationships between bullying and moral functioning and their theoretical description can be characterized as a concentric process, with initial research and theorizing focusing on moral emotions and moral disengagement and stimulating predominantly quantitative research. This was followed by a gradual broadening of perspectives and approaches that addressed a wider array of areas of moral functioning and incorporated increasingly complex measurement approaches (both qualitative and mixed methods). Alongside this development, theoretical frameworks and paradigms like moral development (Kohlberg, 1981), moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 2016), the component model of moral action (Rest et al., 2009), empathy (Hoffman, 2000), and the happy victimizer paradigm (Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988) were used to establish more integrated descriptions and explanations of the methods, reasons, purpose, and context of the interrelationships being examined. However, attempts to develop more holistic, integrative theoretical syntheses that address more than one particular area of morality are rare (Ettekal et al., 2015). Our social-ecological process model of bullying and morality as presented in the following section offers a first step in that direction.

## **A Social-Ecological Process Model of Bullying and Morality**

Hitherto, theoretical models of the bullying process, its social dynamics, and its ecology have usually not incorporated the moral dimension. If they have, they have focused on individual areas like moral

disengagement or empathy but have not considered a combination of moral dimensions. A recent integrative review by Romera et al. (2019) combined several theoretical and empirical perspectives and research strands so as to explore more fully the role of morality in bullying. The authors emphasize the need for a holistic, multidimensional explanatory model of moral functioning that, in turn, allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the interplay between moral functioning and behavior in bullying situations. Romera et al. (2019) suggest using moral functioning as a starting point for that exploration. An alternative strategy involves using the bullying dynamic as a point of departure, and that is the strategy adopted in our model.

In the following pages, we present a social-ecological process model of bullying as it evolves over time, with a special focus on its sociomoral dimensions across different systemic levels (Figure 27.1).

The model relates to the concept of the “self in relationship” (Keller, 2004) and is grounded in a constructivist understanding of learning and development. The model combines insights from the social-ecological perspective of bullying research (Espelage & Swearer, 2010), the participant role approach to bullying (Salmivalli, 2010) and findings from research on the role of moral functioning in bullying, particularly relating to moral disengagement, moral judgment, moral emotions, empathy, and moral values. With some adaptations, the model could potentially apply to cyberbullying. In its present form, it refers to offline bullying.

We will first briefly describe the model before considering the individual components and phases in more depth. The model consists of three components: the social ecology of the school, which lies at the center of the model; the bullying dynamic as it evolves and becomes chronic over time (phases 1 to 7); and the long-term outcomes as they affect both the individuals involved and the classroom’s social ecology. The classroom’s social ecology includes the reciprocal relationships between the characteristics and behaviors of students and those of teachers and the relationship of these with the sociomoral culture and climate of the classroom. Naturally, when new classrooms are established, their culture and climate develop over time. The classroom social ecology is embedded within the school’s sociomoral culture and climate, encompassing the characteristics, behaviors, and interactions between relevant stakeholders, including associated specialized staff like school psychologists and

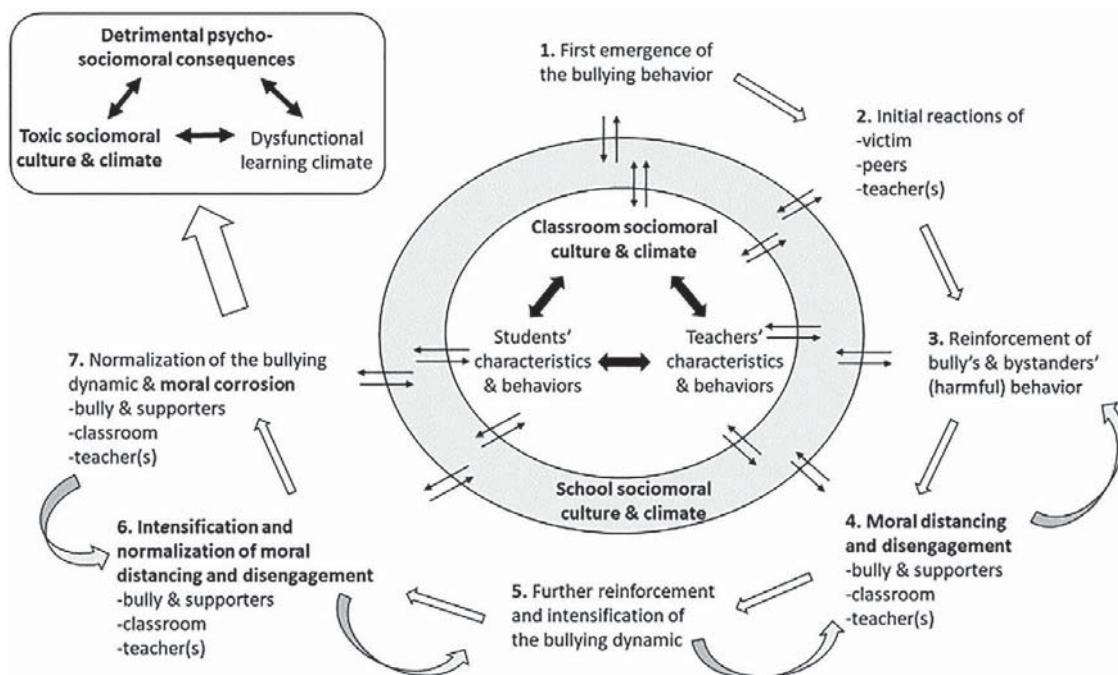


Figure 27.1 A social-ecological process model of bullying and morality.

also parents or guardians. Reciprocal relationships exist between the social ecology of the classroom and the sociomoral culture and climate of the school, indicating that classrooms do not function in isolation. Accordingly, the first emergence of the bullying dynamic (see Figure 27.1) occurs against the backdrop of both the classroom and the school social ecology (1). The early instances of targeted and intentional aggression provoke initial reactions on the part of the victim, the victim's peers, and the teacher (2). The reactions can vary in their degree of visibility, obviousness, and intensity. The nature of the reactions very often leads to a reinforcement of the bully's and the bystanders' harmful behavior (3). Examples of such reactions that reinforce harmful behavior are that some bystanders may cheer and laugh; the victim may show signs of distress but not defend himself/herself, or the teacher may not react. Such reinforcement of the harmful behavior makes it necessary for the bully and his/her supporters to morally disengage (4)—that is, to separate their immoral actions from any (potential) feelings of guilt, leaving little or no room for empathy toward the victim. For teachers and the classroom as a whole, such disengagement processes establish themselves to justify non-intervention, especially not helping the victim or not stopping the bully and his/her supporters. This moral distancing and disengagement further reinforce the bully's and the bystanders' harmful behavior (or non-behavior), also in a feedback loop, and will over time intensify the bullying dynamic (5). As a consequence, with repeated cycles of harmful behavior (and non-intervention), moral distancing and disengagement processes are intensified and become normalized (6), leading to a shift toward pro-bullying norms not only in the bully and his/her supporters but also on the levels of both the teacher and the classroom as a whole. Accordingly, the bullying dynamic becomes normative (7)—that is, the normal, expected, tolerated, or even accepted way to treat weaker peers in the classroom and school context. This is an indication of moral corrosion on all system levels as the systematic, repeated, and targeted peer abuse (and the victim's suffering) have become part of the (individual and collective) mindset of the individuals involved. The long-term outcomes of this persistent and normalized dynamic include grave detrimental psychosocial, academic, and health consequences not only for the victims but also for the bullies and the bystanders. The sociomoral culture and climate have become toxic, and the learning climate has become (sometimes highly) dysfunctional.

### **The Social Ecology of the School**

The social ecology of the school lies at the center of our model. In line with the social-ecological systems approach, both the classroom's (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2018) and the school's social culture and climate have been found to impact bullying, both as contextual and as process variables, whereby a *positive* climate and culture both reduces and prevents bullying (Guerra et al., 2011; see also the meta-analysis by Cook et al., 2010). For example, the study by Thornberg et al. (2018) of 1,540 fifth graders from 104 Swedish classrooms indicated that an authoritative classroom climate characterized by warmth, support, care, positive aspirations, and cohesion was related to less bullying victimization and less negative and more positive bystander reactions.

School (and classroom) culture and school (and classroom) climate are closely interrelated but refer to differential levels of description. Schoen and Teddlie (2008) define school culture as the “shared basic assumptions and espoused beliefs that exist in the Professional Orientation, Organizational Structure, Quality of the Learning Environment, and Student-Centered Focus of the school that determine and sustain the norms of behavior, traditions, and processes particular to a specific school” (p. 139; capitalization reproduced as used in the original text). Accordingly, school *culture* refers to what is being lived, done, and implemented and is thus more closely related to actions and behaviors. School *climate*, in turn, can be said to represent a specific level of school culture (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). In this sense, school climate relates to individuals' perceptions and subjective impressions of the quality of relationships and of the way of living together. The school climate is thus one

result of a particular type of school culture as experienced by students and teachers. When considering the moral life in schools and classrooms in the context of bullying, this differentiation helps us to distinguish between *what is actually happening* from *how what is happening is being perceived* by students, teachers, and other adults in the system. However, very often no clear distinction is made between culture and climate, and variations in definitions complicate this conceptual ambiguity (Thornberg et al., 2018). Nevertheless, based on Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) conceptualization, we may assume that the classroom's and the school's sociomoral *climate* are at least partly a result of the sociomoral *culture* in the classroom and the school; this enables us to recognize that bullying and victimization are behavioral expressions of and contributions to such climate and culture.

It seems that hardly any studies have explicitly addressed the moral dimensions of classroom and school climate and culture in bullying. Such research is particularly relevant from the perspective of moral socialization (Grusec et al., 2014) as we may assume that peers and teachers, for example, do not only independently impact children's and adolescents' moral development and behavior but may have conjoint or synergistic effects on both (Ettekal et al., 2015). Research often includes conceptualizations and assessments of climate and culture, which inherently involve moral aspects, like the authoritative school climate discussed previously (Cornell et al., 2015), or moral norms and values as encompassed in the concept of moral atmosphere (Foà et al., 2012). Thornberg et al. (2017), for example, investigated the relationship between class relational climate and class moral disengagement in bullying on the one hand and self-reported peer victimization on the other hand in a sample of 1,899 elementary schoolchildren aged 9 to 13 years from 43 classrooms. The authors defined class relational climate as "having more caring, warm, supportive, and respectful relationships and interaction patterns between teachers and students and among students" (pp. 525–526) and used these characteristics in their twenty-three-item self-report measure (e.g., "We care about each other in our class"). Especially the reference to care suggests that this conception of class relational climate captures at least in part what we would call the sociomoral climate of a classroom in its positive manifestation. The inclusion of class moral disengagement—that is, the aggregated mean level of self-reported proneness to morally disengage in bullying situations (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013)—can be seen as a very specific measure of the negative manifestation of a classroom's sociomoral climate. Thornberg et al.'s (2017) results showed that both (aggregated) class relational climate and (aggregated) class moral disengagement in bullying uniquely contributed toward explaining the between-class variance in victimization level. Children from classrooms with a poor sociomoral climate (i.e., poor relational climate in combination with high levels of class moral disengagement) had higher average victimization scores than children in classrooms with a more positive sociomoral climate (i.e., good relational climate in combination with lower levels of class moral disengagement). Interestingly, the assessment of classroom relational climate also included descriptions of behavior ("The teachers listen to the students when they have problems"; p. 529), suggesting that aspects of classroom *culture* were captured as well. In sum, the sociomoral culture and climate in the school and in the classroom prepare the ground for an emerging bullying dynamic.

### **Emerging Bullying Behavior and Initial Reactions (Phases 1 and 2)**

We posit that the bullying dynamic evolves and intensifies over time. In our model, we differentiate seven phases. Phases 1 and 2 refer to the emergence of bullying behavior and initial reactions to it. Drawing on group socialization theory (Harris, 1995) and an established body of bullying research such as observational studies by Hawkins et al. (2001) or Pepler et al. (1999), it appears that the initial emergence of the bullying dynamic typically takes place in the context of ongoing, naturally evolving group processes (Hymel et al., 2014; Salmivalli, 2010). In their pursuit of social status and power in the group (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), so-called ringleader bullies enact first instances of targeted and intentional aggression against a peer they presume to be weak. These acts provoke initial reactions on

the part of the victim, the peers, and the teacher. These reactions can vary in their degree of visibility, obviousness, and intensity.

*Passive* victims do not (effectively) defend or assert themselves and often withdraw from the situation, whereas *aggressive* victims try to retaliate and display (mostly ineffective) reactively aggressive behavior (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010). The reactions shown by bystanders vary: *assistants* side with the bully and actively participate in the aggression, *reinforcers* support the bully more indirectly by drawing attention to the harassment (for example, by cheering or laughing), *defenders* are bystanders in the group who try to help the victim and offer support, and *outsiders* form a considerable part of the group that remains passive or unconcerned and sometimes even steps away (Salmivalli et al., 1996). This latter group is problematic in that its behavior can be interpreted in different ways (for example, as tacit consent or as a lack of interest in the victim's plight).

Teachers' reactions can also vary. Teachers who are not involved in any bullying prevention or intervention program display two basic reactions: they either intervene in some way or another or do not intervene (Yoon et al., 2011). The latter is a frequent response despite inconsistencies in teachers' and students' perceptions (Fekkes et al., 2005). Where teachers do intervene, disciplinary sanctioning of perpetrators is a frequent response (Burger et al., 2015). That said, teachers also use strategies that involve the whole classroom (e.g., group discussions) or interventions directed specifically toward the victim (e.g., consoling); for a broader description of teachers' reactions, see Campaert et al. (2017).

### **Reinforcement of Harmful Behavior and Onset of Moral Distancing (Phases 3 and 4)**

In phases 3 and 4 of our model, harmful behavior is reinforced and moral distancing emerges. Both peers' and teachers' initial reactions directly influence whether bullies continue with or desist from their actions, indicating that immediate intervention can successfully stop bullying (Hawkins et al., 2001; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Veenstra et al., 2014). Accordingly, peers' pro-bullying behaviors (assisting, reinforcing) and teachers' non-intervention, in particular, can contribute to an increase in bullying and victimization (O'Connell et al., 1999; Yoon et al., 2011). Both pro-bullying behavior and non-intervention represent immoral behavior because these behaviors contribute toward harming someone (violation of a negative duty) or fail to protect or help someone in need (violation of a positive duty), respectively. For a fuller discussion of positive versus negative duties in the context of bullying, see Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Perren (2020).

When the bully's and the bystanders' harmful behaviors are reinforced, the bullying dynamic continues. However, in order to maintain their aggressive behaviors, the bully and his or her supporters need to come to terms with their own morality; in other words, they need to deal with the fact that they are engaging in what they clearly know to be inappropriate, unacceptable, and immoral behavior. Research has shown that children and adolescents are well aware that it is not acceptable to bully others (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Gini et al., 2011), and a vast body of research in the social domain tradition has indicated that even very young children make appropriate moral judgments in the context of harming someone (Smetana et al., 1991). One way for bullies to reconcile their actions with their own morality is to use strategies that help divorce moral thought from moral emotions, as described in moral disengagement theory.

The endorsement of moral disengagement strategies is systematically and positively related to children's and adolescents' active antisocial behavior, such as bullying (Gini et al., 2014), online bullying (Chen et al., 2017), and assisting the bully (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Defending (as prosocial behavior) has been shown to be negatively related to moral disengagement, whereas passive bystanding (as an outsider) seems to be unrelated to moral disengagement (see the meta-analysis by Killer et al., 2019). Additionally, the relationship between moral disengagement and bullying and bystanding has been confirmed longitudinally (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015; Sticca & Perren, 2015). Moral

disengagement also operates at the classroom level: both collective (Gini et al., 2015) and class-level moral disengagement are positively related to bullying and bystander behavior (Pozzoli et al., 2012a). From the start, researchers have been searching for answers for why peers do not quickly and reflexively defend victimized peers, particularly because even children of preschool-age know that bullying is wrong (Gasser & Keller, 2009). Qualitative and mixed-methods research has offered insights into bystanders' meaning-making of bullying incidents. Apart from motives like the need for self-protection, the fear of becoming a target themselves, a lack of effective strategies, and explanations relating to "not being friends" with the victim and "not caring about" or "disliking" the victim were offered (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Thornberg, 2015). Personal dislike or not being friends might be indicators of a particularistic moral orientation (Smetana et al., 1991). Accordingly, these bystanders might not include victims in their circle of caring because they are "not seen as deserving of protection, forgiveness, or aid" (Hymel et al., 2014, p. 21). Such reasoning resonates of moral disengagement at a very basic level—that is, preventing feelings of guilt arising from a lack of intervention by excluding that person from one's circle of responsibility and caring.

Not caring about the victim is indicative also of a lack of empathy or moral compassion (Gini et al., 2011). Empathy, particularly empathic concern, has been shown to be systematically associated with both bullying and bystander behavior. Higher levels of empathy predict less bullying (Zych & Llorent, 2019), less assisting in the bullying (Gini et al., 2008), less ignoring (Nickerson et al., 2008), and more defending or helping the victim (Caravita et al., 2009). Moreover, empathy is negatively associated with moral disengagement (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger & Perren, 2020). Accordingly, the various behaviors and roles of children and adolescents in the establishment of a given bullying dynamic are linked to moral factors. The adults in the system, particularly teachers, contribute considerably to this dynamic.

Research has recently started to delineate teachers' contributions to the interrelationship between moral disengagement and bullying in their classrooms. Drawing on a sample of 609 fifth and seventh graders from 34 classrooms, Campaert et al. (2017), for example, investigated whether the relationship between teachers' reactions to incidents of bullying and victimization (as reported by students) on the one hand and students' bullying, on the other hand, was mediated by students' moral disengagement. Multilevel mediation modeling yielded the following results: teacher non-intervention was positively, and sanctioning was negatively related to student bullying through moral disengagement. With regard to teachers' responses to victimization, non-intervention was positively, and victim support was negatively related to student bullying through moral disengagement (Campaert et al., 2017). These findings suggest that teachers send moral messages through the way they react to bullying. If teachers make it clear through their reactions that they will not condone bullying, students may be less inclined to justify such behavior (Campaert et al., 2017). However, if teachers do not give out clear messages, students can only make guesses about teachers' attitudes (Yoon & Kerber, 2003) and may not change their negative bullying and bystander behavior.

The interplay between bullying, bystander behavior, and morality—as represented by moral disengagement and empathy—described so far offers some insight into the complexity of the processes and dynamics involved. The intricacies of these dynamics and processes are too complex to describe in more detail here. Nevertheless, the different components of moral development and functioning on the part of adults and children are relevant for explaining the establishment of the bullying dynamic. If we posit that a bullying dynamic that occurs over a sustained period of time provides a context for socialization, we may expect that the ongoing experience of and exposure to bullying and the gradual acceptance of bullying as "normal," particularly if no one intervenes (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), may impact moral development; this is also suggested by Falla et al.'s (2020) longitudinal findings. However, such longitudinal relationships with moral development and functioning as an outcome have not been intensively studied so far, and results are mixed (Sticca & Perren, 2015).



## **Reinforcement and Intensification of the Bullying/Moral Distancing Dynamic (Phases 5 and 6)**

The ongoing interplay between moral disengagement and bullying in the classroom leads to a shift of class norms toward condoning and accepting bullying. Bullying the loser, picking on weaker students, and not helping the victim become normal and thus potentially normative behavior, the expected way to behave in the classroom (Pozzoli et al., 2012b). Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) found in their study of 1,220 Finnish fourth to sixth graders that the degree of antibullying norms in a classroom predicted bullying and bystanding: bullying and reinforcing the bully were negatively related and defending was positively related to antibullying norms. In an extension of this research, Menesini et al. (2015) found that both class levels of pro-bullying behaviors and class levels of bullying by accepted peers (as representing the normative way to behave) were associated with bullying at the classroom level. Additionally, the study by Pozzoli et al. (2012b) indicated that defending was positively and passive bystanding was negatively related to class-level peer injunctive norms (i.e., perceived pressure for intervention). The latter finding shows that when peers' expectation of intervention is weak, defending behavior decreases and passive bystanding increases.

Accordingly, we may assume that once norms in a classroom favor bullying—for example, by observing that a highly popular classmate often bullies another classmate (Salmivalli, 2010)—and pro-bullying behavior and impede defending, there will be an even greater need for bullies, their supporters, and passive bystanders to morally disengage from their behavior so as to be able to live with themselves. Furthermore, there is a danger that even those students who had previously tried to help the victim and to take a stand will start to endorse these new norms and help establish a pro-bullying culture. This dynamic may offer a potential explanation for Salmivalli et al.'s (2011) finding that defending decreases over time. The normative power of peers within the classroom may become so strong that teachers' actions or behavior may no longer matter. This assumption is partly supported by findings from the study by Pozzoli et al. (2012b), which yielded a negative relationship between defending and class-level teacher injunctive norms (i.e., perceived teacher pressure for intervention).

The processes and dynamics described previously lead to an intensification of the bullying dynamic over time. As a consequence, with repeated cycles of harmful behavior and non-intervention, moral distancing and disengagement processes are intensified and become normalized.

## **Normalization and Moral Corrosion (Phase 7)**

When the bullying/moral disengagement dynamic has become normative, moral corrosion has definitely set in. Systematic, repeated, and targeted peer abuse and the victim's suffering have become part of the individual and collective mindset of the individuals involved. We may assume that a generalized moral numbness also on the part of teachers—for example, through seeing bullying as normative behavior (Hektner & Swenson, 2012)—has established itself, leaving the victim in a position of helplessness and despair (Moore et al., 2017).

Bandura (2016, p. 97–98) describes the “transformative powers of progressive moral disengagement” in his summary of three decades of moral disengagement research:

Conditions conducive to moral disengagement will not instantly transform considerate individuals into cruel ones. Rather, the personal change occurs through progressive disengagement of self-censure for acts of cruelty. Initially, individuals perform mildly harmful acts they can tolerate with some twinges of guilt. After their self-reproof has been diminished through repeated enactments, the level of ruthlessness increases until eventually acts they originally regarded as abhorrent can be performed with little anguish or self-censure. At this point, inhuman practices become thoughtlessly routinized. Because of the gradualness

of the transformation, individuals may not even recognize the changes their moral selves have undergone.

Bandura's (2016) reference to the moral self documents that the moral transformation in an individual results from ongoing cycles of perpetration and the use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Romera et al. (2019) suggest that in order to better understand the bullying dynamic, it is necessary to investigate the role of moral identity in explaining both individual and group factors in bullying. As moral identity refers to the commitment of one's identity toward moral norms and values and a related sense of responsibility and accountability (Krettenauer, 2011), this concept enables us to study bullying from a more holistic moral developmental perspective. A study by Pozzoli et al. (2016) drawing on a sample of 279 Italian middle school students showed that moral identity, conceptualized as the self-importance of moral values, was associated negatively with bullying and positively with defending behaviors. Moreover, a stronger moral identity was meaningfully associated with less moral disengagement, suggesting that a strong moral identity might help activate an individual's sense of personal responsibility and thereby prevent the use of strategies of moral disengagement.

The formation of moral identity occurs predominantly through adolescence (Krettenauer, 2011), although a study by Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger et al. (2010) indicated that even preschool and young schoolchildren have a desire to see themselves as morally good persons, suggesting that a moral identity has been at least partially established at a very young age. Accordingly, developmental considerations need to be addressed when including moral identity in bullying research.

### **Long-Term Outcomes**

The long-term outcomes of this intensified and normalized negative dynamic include detrimental psychosocial, academic, and health consequences not only for victims but also for bullies and bystanders (Kowalski et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017; Werth et al., 2015). We may further assume detrimental consequences regarding sociomoral development and functioning. Basically, the establishment and intensification of bullying and pro-bullying behavior over time is both an outcome and a risk in itself, the latter because bullying is a long-term predictor of further aggression, violence, and delinquency (Lösel & Bender, 2014). Thus, immoral behavior engenders more immoral behavior. Additionally, findings showing that moral disengagement contributes to the transition from being a victim to becoming a bully (Falla et al., 2020) imply that even the targets of bullying are affected by the moral corrosion in the classroom. The shift in classroom norms toward condoning and accepting bullying in conjunction with the perpetuation of both bullying and moral distancing may result in a toxic sociomoral culture and climate, particularly at the classroom level. However, systematic longitudinal research is needed that addresses the long-term sociomoral outcomes of bullying, both at individual and at the classroom and school level.

### **Conclusions**

The model presented here is a first attempt to describe a social-ecological process model that outlines the moral dimensions of school bullying and emphasizes the contribution of the moral characteristics and functioning of students and teachers to the emergence, maintenance, and entrenchment of bullying. The model can be used to guide further research and approaches for preventing bullying.

We would like to highlight two main strengths of our model. First, the model emphasizes the importance of intervening early in the process because the vicious cycle of bullying and behavior change intensifies over time. When bullying and moral disengagement have become the normalized way in which students treat each other, intervention efforts become more challenging. Moreover, observations from intervention practice have shown that removing the victim does not interrupt an

entrenched bullying dynamic but simply shifts the target toward another individual in the class. This finding further indicates that the moral compass of the classroom has deviated.

Second, the model includes the sociomoral school ecology and highlights the relevance of considering the sociomoral climate and culture of classrooms and schools when developing and implementing prevention and intervention programs and initiatives. This becomes especially important when the responsible adults in the system are involved in prevention and intervention efforts. A study by O'Brennan et al. (2014) indicated that staff connectedness (i.e., the degree to which school staff feel connected with each other) was linked to their willingness to intervene in bullying situations. Furthermore, school staff felt more comfortable intervening when more resources and training in the school's bullying policy were available and when schools as a whole were more involved in preventing bullying. We may relate the sociomoral components of staff connectedness to the concept of the circle of caring and argue that it is important to promote school staff's capacity to include each and every student in their circle of caring. That this might be necessary is suggested by findings indicating that teachers will not intervene if they feel no sympathy for the victim, which is particularly true for victims of social exclusion (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Thus, although the victim is a student at the teacher's school and despite being harassed and suffering, the victim is not deserving of the teacher's sympathy or help. Why then, if even a teacher does not intervene, should students do so when they witness the bullying? Teachers' behaviors and attitudes clearly influence the quality of relationships between students (Hamm et al., 2011), as expressed by the concept of the "invisible hand of the teacher" (Farmer et al., 2011). Students may interpret a teacher's lack of sympathy toward a victim as an indication that the teacher is not likely to intervene in bullying situations involving that specific victim. Thus, students may perceive an indirect or tacit encouragement to continue the bullying. We may link this perceived encouragement directly back to the shift in students' classroom norms resulting from the ongoing, unmitigated bullying as discussed in phases 5 and 6.

As to the limitations of our model, the processes involved in bullying and victimization are complex, and the model does not capture all of this complexity. It does not include all possible moral dimensions and characteristics that are being researched in the context of school bullying. One such additional characteristic that seems to be systematically related to bullying and victimization is students' justice sensitivity, which is the ease with which injustice is perceived and reacted to (Bondü et al., 2016). Bondü et al. (2016) showed that bullying experiences affected students' development of justice sensitivity. For example, experiences of victimization predicted an increased sensitivity for a victim's plight in girls and a decreased sensitivity in boys. These findings support a socialization view of bullying whereby bullying affects moral development, and thus, they underline the importance of preventing individual and classroom moral corrosion.

In addition, future extensions and improvements of the model will have to include a more differentiated view of each phase and of the interplay of processes between phases and the role of contextual factors and individual characteristics and behaviors as moderator and mediator variables (e.g., gender, age, sociocultural factors). One important area to consider is stigma-based bullying—that is, bullying directed at young people living with or identifying with socially devalued characteristics, like minority sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, or disability (Earnshaw et al., 2018). The ethnic composition of classrooms, for example, has been shown to impact adolescents' experiences of bullying differentially for majority and minority young people (Vervoort et al., 2008). However, research addressing the relationship between prejudice or stigma and moral development and functioning has mostly focused on social exclusion rather than bullying and has revealed a competition between moral and group-based norms that sometimes results in a preference for the latter, particularly in adolescence (cf. Mulvey, 2016).

Inevitably, in our description of the model, we have left open several additional and relevant issues to be addressed in further work. For example, what happens to the victims' morality in the context of bullying? Findings by Falla et al. (2020) indicate that moral disengagement impacts the relationship

between victimization and the victims' propensity to exhibit bullying behavior themselves toward others at a later stage. These results suggest that it is possible that moral factors may play a role when victims later assume the role of the bully.

Another open question relates to the fuzzy boundaries or gray areas of morality. There are many situations in everyday life where the morally appropriate course of action is less obvious. An example would be when an individual is unexpectedly presented with the temptation of being given too much change, a so-called passive moral temptation (see Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger & Perren, 2020). The individual did nothing to cause the situation and did not intend to break a moral rule (here: keeping the money although it belongs to someone else). At the same time, the situation has a high affordance (the money is in the protagonist's hand), and the negative consequences for the shop assistant are not immediately clear. Such situations share similarities with the position of bystanders to bullying; they did not start the bullying or intend to harm someone. Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Perren (2020) showed that those participants who constructed a favorable interpretation of yielding to passive moral temptation (i.e., argued in favor of keeping the money) displayed higher levels of assisting the bully and higher levels of online bullying. These findings imply that the moral quality of a bullying situation might present itself differently and might thus be interpreted differently depending on the role of an individual in the bullying dynamic. Accordingly, the construction of such a situation (i.e., the sociomoral meaning-making) is another facet to be considered in future research.

### **Implications for the Prevention of Bullying and for Intervention**

The social-ecological process model of bullying and morality presented here emphasizes that bullying has a moral core, necessitating the inclusion of moral dimensions in the prevention of bullying and in interventions. From a universalist moral point of view, the core moral message can be formulated as follows: no one deserves to be hurt, harassed, and humiliated systematically again and again, even if that person is not a friend or does not belong to one's family or one does not like that person. This message concerns not only children and adolescents but also the adults in a school and community. Using the social-ecological process model presented in this chapter, we argue that while promoting a positive classroom and school sociomoral culture and climate helps to establish a "bullying-unfriendly" environment, phase 3 and its subsequent phases are especially crucial for preventing the establishment and intensification of bullying and moral corrosion. Once the bully's and the bystanders' harmful behavior is reinforced and subsequently entrenched, processes of individual (and later collective) moral distancing and disengagement start to alter the classroom's moral compass.

To date, most bullying prevention and intervention programs have not systematically and comprehensively addressed the moral dimensions of bullying; or if they have, they have often included isolated factors like empathy (Espelage et al., 2015) or moral disengagement (C. Wang & Goldberg, 2017). From a moral developmental and moral educational perspective, it is important to develop more holistic interventions based on a combined constructivist, social-interactionist, social-constructionist, and lifespan-related understanding of learning and development to promote sociomoral meaning-making, moral internalization, and moral identity and to move beyond conceptions of "mere" moral transmission (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2018).

Promoting the moral development of all individuals concerned and affected, both young people and adults, calls for developmentally and contextually sensitive initiatives and programs that can be implemented as a whole-school approach. However, as morality lies at the heart of bullying, it is key to bring this moral core to the fore rather than simply adding a few morally relevant elements to a given initiative or program. For example, simply promoting children's perspective-taking ability is not sufficient as this sociocognitive competence can be used both for prosocial and antisocial purposes. Accordingly, moral processes like empathy or moral judgment need to be systematically linked to perspective-taking activities in the context of bullying-related situations that address, for example,

the various roles that children might assume. In this way, children may acquire a deeper understanding about what it means to consider other people's welfare in specific situations. Moreover, taking a lifespan perspective, we argue that sociomoral development is not finished once an individual reaches adulthood (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2018). Therefore, the sociomoral development and functioning of teachers also need to be addressed in the context of bullying prevention and intervention. Accordingly, key questions in this regard are, first, whether teachers are sufficiently sensitized toward the moral core of bullying, and second, whether teachers are both prepared and willing to take moral responsibility and intervene, whether directly and immediately or by taking measures after the event.

Research on teachers' understanding of and behavior in the context of bullying has demonstrated that, indeed, teachers often do not perceive bullying as an inherently moral process, for example, by considering it as normative behavior that helps children acquire social norms (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Sometimes teachers do not consider the specific type of bullying they witness as particularly problematic, which is often the case in instances of relational bullying (Byers et al., 2011; Hazler et al., 2001). In addition, teachers often do not grasp the extent of a case of bullying (Fekkes et al., 2005; Smith & Shu, 2000). These (and other) attitudes and perceptions decrease the likelihood that teachers intervene (Yoon et al., 2011; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Therefore, teachers' moral development and functioning play an important role in promoting such development and functioning in their students and thus counteracting bullying. This needs to be addressed in prevention and intervention initiatives.

To conclude, considering the moral core of bullying in bullying prevention programs and everyday teaching behavior is key for successfully preventing and intervening in bullying and moral corrosion. In this way, educators may not only reduce bullying but may also contribute to positive social relationships in classrooms, warm and supportive school culture and climate, and a safe school environment. Thereby, teachers will help their students to flourish, and both teachers and students may be able to make a contribution toward a better world in general.

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