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Bullying and Repeated Conventional Transgressions in Swedish Schools:
How Do Gender and Bullying Roles Affect Students' Conceptions?

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Abstract

Bullying is a moral transgression. Recognizing the importance of approaching bullying from a moral perspective, the present study examines whether children's judgments and reasoning to justify their judgments differ between bullying and repeated conventional transgressions. Our study also explores differences by gender and differences among bullies, victims and uninvolved students. Participants included 381 students from thirteen elementary schools in Sweden. Findings indicate that children judge bullying as more wrong than repeated conventional transgressions; use moral reasons more frequently in their justifications about bullying than about repeated conventional transgressions; and use conventional reasons more frequently to justify their judgments on repeated conventional transgressions as compared with bullying. Female students and non-bullies judged bullying and repeated conventional transgressions as more wrong and used moral reasons more frequently in their justifications of judgments of bullying than did male students and bullies. Male students reported bullying more than did female students. Implications for practice are also discussed.

Keywords: social domain theory; bullying; transgression judgment; moral reasoning

Bullying and Repeated Conventional Transgressions in Swedish Schools:

How Do Gender and Bullying Roles Affect Students' Conceptions?

Bullying is a serious societal problem with documented harmful consequences. Bullying victims are at a heightened risk of developing psychosomatic symptoms and psychological health problems such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and behavior (Farrington, Lösel, Ttofi, & Theodorakis, 2012; Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Because bullying is characterized by repeated harmful intention towards someone in a weaker position, it can be conceived as a *moral transgression* (Thornberg, Birberg Thornberg, Alamaa, & Daud, 2016). Therefore, it is important to approach bullying from a moral perspective in addition to other perspectives. The present study aims to replicate previous studies by exploring whether children's judgments and reasoning to justify their judgments differ between bullying and repeated conventional transgressions in hypothetical situations. In addition, we explored possible gender differences as well as those among bullies, victims and children not involved in bullying regarding their judgments and reasoning for justifying their judgments.

Morality and Social Conventions

Morality is defined as conceptions of human welfare, justice and rights, and regulation of actions that affect others in these terms (Nucci, 2001). Social domain theory (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983) postulates that children's social experiences influence the development and construction of their social knowledge in varying domains. Domains have been defined as cognitive structures developed and "organized within the boundaries of fundamental categories" (Turiel, 1983, p. 20), such as logical-mathematical thinking, moral judgment and others. The moral domain is constructed and developed through experiences of actions that have effects on the welfare of others or oneself, from the positions of being a victim, perpetrator, or witness.

Hence, these repeated social interactions, characterized by actions causing harm to other people, shape the moral domain structures that then become latent mental structures. These latent structures, if activated, inform and influence social information processing in a given situation (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). In contrast to morality, *social conventions* are based upon traditions, authority, and customs, and provide individuals with social norms and expectations regarding appropriate behavior in different social contexts. The actions they regulate do not include harm to other people (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983).

Previous research has shown that, from early preschool years, children distinguish between morality and convention. For example, they judge moral transgressions as wrong, regardless of whether rules exist, and as more seriously wrong than conventional transgressions. Moreover, children and adolescents tend to justify their judgments of moral transgressions in terms of the harm or unfairness these actions cause. On the other hand, they tend to justify their judgments of conventional transgressions by referring to social norms/rules, social expectations, customs, traditions, authorities, and social arrangements (Nucci, 2001). In line with the social domain theory, children consider bullying as highly immoral, wrong independent of the rules, and worse than conventional transgressions. They justify these judgments by referring to the harm bullying causes (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2016). Thornberg et al. (2016) examined 307 elementary students' judgments and reasoning about bullying and repeated conventional transgressions when school rules regulating such behaviors were removed. The students responded to twelve vignettes (hypothetical scenarios occurring in a school). Eight of them represent various bullying situations and four represent various repeated conventional transgressions (e.g., swearing, or speaking while the teacher was talking). The students were asked to judge the behavior in each vignette as well as to justify their judgment through an open-

ended question. We used Thornberg and colleagues (2016) vignettes but also examined whether there were possible gender differences or variations among bullies, victims and uninvolved students in judging and justifying their judgments of bullying as opposed to their judgments of repeated conventional transgressions.

Gender Differences in Transgression Judgment and Judgment Justification

In general, both male and female students tend to judge moral transgressions as more wrong than conventional transgressions, and use moral reasons to explain their judgments of moral transgressions. They refer to conventional reasons in justifying how they judge conventional transgressions (Nucci, 2001). However, findings on gender differences in this field have been inconsistent. Some studies have found female students to be less accepting than male students toward breaking both moral (Caravita, Giardino, Lenzi, Salvaterra, & Antonietti, 2012; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012) and conventional rules (Caravita, Giardino, et al., 2012; Caravita, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2009). In contrast, other research did not find any gender differences in students' ratings of the seriousness of moral and conventional transgressions (Banerjee, Bennett, & Luke, 2012), or in accepting moral transgressions (Caravita et al., 2009). Specifically considering the moral domain, other studies have revealed that male students are more likely than female students to judge aggression (e.g., Rose & Rudolph, 2006), including bullying (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999), as less wrong. In general, male students are more apt to engage in bullying (for a meta-analysis, see Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010) and display less empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a; Garaigordobil, 2009), greater moral insensitivity (You, Maeda, & Bebeau, 2011) and fewer emotion recognition skills (Maguire, Niens, McCann, & Connolly, 2016), and higher levels of moral disengagement (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014) than female students. The core of moral reasoning refers to harm and well-being

(Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983), and it is likely that female students would be more likely than male students to use moral reasons when justifying their judgments about bullying).

Differences in Transgression Judgment and Justification of Judgment among Bullying Subgroups

A recent meta-analysis revealed that, among children and adolescents, the more frequently conduct problems arise, the greater likelihood of bullying (Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016), suggesting that youth who bully more often than peers also tend to violate rules and display oppositional and other types of antisocial behavior. Conduct problems entail “the violation of the basic rights of others, societal norms or rules” (Baker, 2013, p. 24), including aggression, property destruction, lying for personal gain, stealing, and serious rule violations (Baker, 2013). In a number of longitudinal studies, bullying has also been found to predict delinquency, criminality, and other antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Farrington et al., 2012). The higher prevalence of conduct problems and antisocial behavior among bullies, including aggression and rule violation in general, might indicate a greater acceptance of both moral and conventional transgressions, compared to non-bullying peers. Supporting this proposition, De Angelis, Bacchini and Affuso (2016) have recently shown that among adolescents, greater bullying was associated with a weaker tendency of judging both moral and conventional transgressions as wrong.

Study Hypotheses

Based on previous research, we proposed the following hypotheses about transgression judgments and judgment for the whole sample independent of the actual role played in bullying. In a hypothetical school context in which rules that regulate the pertinent behaviors have been removed, children are likely to (1) judge bullying as more wrong than repeated conventional

transgressions; (2) use moral reasons more frequently in their justifications of how they judge bullying, compared to how they judge repeated conventional transgressions; (3) use conventional reasons more frequently in their justifications of the judgments they make of repeated conventional transgressions, compared to those about bullying; (4) use moral reasons more frequently than conventional reasons in their judgments of bullying, and (5) use conventional reasons more frequently than moral reasons in their judgments of repeated conventional transgressions.

In addition, we tested possible gender differences, hypothesizing that: in a hypothetical school context in which rules that regulate the pertinent behaviors have been removed, (6) female students are more likely to judge bullying as more wrong than male students; (7) female students are more likely to judge repeated conventional transgression as more wrong than male students; (8) female students are more likely to use moral reasons more frequently in their justifications of judgments of bullying than male students, and (9) male students are more likely to be engaged in bullying than are female students.

Finally, it is reasonable to postulate that judgements and justifications of moral and conventional transgressions differ according to the role children play in the bullying process. Therefore, our final hypotheses examined group differences among bullies, victims, and children uninvolved in bullying. More specifically, in a hypothetical school context in which rules that regulate the pertinent behaviors have been removed, we expected that (10) bullies are more likely to judge bullying as less wrong than victims and uninvolved peers; (11) bullies are more likely to judge repeated conventional transgressions as less wrong than victims and uninvolved peers, and (12) bullies are more likely to use moral reasons less frequently in their justifications of judgments of bullying than do victims and uninvolved peers.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from thirteen elementary schools (eleven public schools and two private schools) in Sweden, using a non-probability two-step sampling process. In the first step, thirteen schools were included through a purposive sampling of schools, which resulted in the inclusion of two schools in the countryside, one school in a small town, one school in a large-sized Swedish city, and nine schools in different neighborhoods within two medium-sized Swedish cities. In the next step, we conducted a convenience sampling of students in grade 5–6 in each school was conducted. These grades were selected because Swedish national surveys have reported the highest prevalence of bullying in this age group of students (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). The original sample consisted of 458 students. Parental consent letters were sent to all the families. In addition to obtaining parental consent, we asked all of the participants for consent. Twenty-four students did not participate because they chose not to or because they did not obtain parental consent. Thirty-two students did not participate because they were ill when the data were collected. Furthermore, 21 students were excluded from the analyses because of missing data (more than 50% of missing data in the entire questionnaire or in each single scale). Given the small number of missing data among the included participants (5.25 % cases and 0.33 % values), a simple mean imputation was performed (i.e., each missing value was replaced with the mean of the observed values for the actual variable). The final sample consisted of 381 students (183 females and 198 males; 175 in grade 5 and 206 in grade 6; age range = 10.0-13.5 years, $M = 12.0$, $SD = .73$), resulting in a participation rate of 83.2%.

Procedures

The participants completed an anonymous questionnaire during an entire class lesson in their regular classrooms. Trained graduate students in psychology were present in the classrooms during the survey administration (one graduate student in each classroom). They explained the study procedure, reassured students that their participation was confidential, and assisted those who needed help. They also assured participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure anonymity, the participants were instructed to move away from each other and separate their desks. The procedure took about 20 to 30 minutes in each classroom. The study received ethical approval from the Regional Ethical Review Board at Linköping, which is similar to the Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Hypothetical scenarios. The first part of the questionnaire was adopted from Thornberg and colleagues (2016), a modified and expanded version of the questionnaire used in Thornberg (2010). On the first page, this introductory text was presented: “This questionnaire is about a school, called Aspen Grove School, and it is like your own school. There are many rules at Aspen Grove School. Here are some examples of rules that Aspen Grove School has”, followed by a list of rules (e.g., be quiet in classroom during deskwork, don’t swear when talking; see Thornberg et al., 2016 for the full list)

The list of school rules was followed by a general statement and a few instructions, “Now the teachers at Aspen Grove School have decided to take away some rules at the school. In this questionnaire, we ask you what you think about this. When you answer, try to ignore what the teachers or other adults at your school think. We want to know what you as a student think”. After this instruction, twelve vignettes (hypothetical scenarios) that occurred in school were presented, describing both prototypical examples of bullying (i.e., cases of repeated moral

transgressions) and repeated conventional transgressions. Thus, to control for the repeated nature of bullying behavior, conventional transgressions were portrayed as repeating over time. The structure of each vignette was similar: beginning with the teachers telling the students of the fictional school that a specific school rule has been repealed. Later, the scenario describes an incident in which one or more students behaved in the way that was previously forbidden by the repealed rule. Specifically, four vignettes represent direct bullying (two for physical bullying and two for verbal bullying), four vignettes represent relational bullying (two for negative rumor-spreading and two for ostracizing), and four vignettes represent repeated conventional transgressions. Below is an example of a physical bullying vignette from the questionnaire.

The teachers told the students that they have taken away the rule about no beating one another. During the next months, some students are beating the same student during the breaks, several times a week.

The direct bullying stimuli were “beating” (DB¹), “teasing” (DB²), “verbal threatening” (DB³), and “hair pulling” (DB⁴). The relational bullying stimuli were “spreading false rumor about theft” (RB¹), “ignoring the student” (RB²), “excluding the student from the football game” (RB³), and “spreading false rumor” without a specific content (RB⁴). The repeated conventional transgression stimuli were “talking during seatwork” (C¹), “swearing” (C²), “wearing a cap in classroom” (C³), and “speaking when teacher is talking to the class” (C⁴). In order to cope with the order effect and carry-over effect, we used an A-B-C-B-C-A-A-C-B-C-B-A research design, which means that the twelve vignettes were presented in following order: RB¹, C¹, DB¹, C², DB², RB², RB³, DB³, C³, DB⁴, C⁴, and RB⁴.

Bullying and conventional transgression judgments. As in Thornberg’s (2010) and Thornberg and colleagues’ (2016) studies, the participants were asked to judge the behavior of

the transgressor(s) after each vignette, using a five-point scale, from 0 = “absolutely OK” to 4 = “very bad” (Thornberg, 2010). We performed an exploratory principal component factor analysis on children’s responses to the twelve scenarios, using maximum likelihood, rotated using Oblimin with Kaiser normalization. Two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00 emerged. The factor structure was distinct and reliable (KMO = .84). Consistent with the social domain theory, the eight judgments of the repeated moral transgressions (i.e., bullying scenarios) loaded into one factor and the four judgments of the repeated conventional transgressions loaded into another factor. Cronbach’s alpha reliability across the judgments of repeated moral transgressions (bullying) was .77 and .74 for the judgments of repeated conventional transgressions. A global index of bullying judgment was therefore computed as the mean of the transgression judgment ratings of the eight bullying vignettes. A global index of repeated conventional judgment was the mean of the transgression judgment ratings of the four repeated conventional transgression vignettes.

Reasons for transgression judgments. In order to assess justifications of their transgression judgments, the students were asked an open-ended question to provide reasons for each judgment, “Why do you think so? I think so _____” (followed by five blank lines). Working together, two raters coded the reasons, adopting the coding scheme used in Thornberg (2010), which consists of moral, structuring, protecting, indifference, socio-normative, personal choice, pleasure, impulse, and other reasons. *Moral reasons* refer to the effects of the action on the well-being of the others, to point to the harmful or unfair consequences that the behavior have for others. *Structuring reasons* refer to the need to maintain the activity such as a lesson, or promote the smooth running of the social group during the activity. *Protecting reasons* refer to preventing self-harm or accidental injury. *Indifference reasons* refer to the insignificance,

meaningless or arbitrariness of a rule in itself. *Socio-normative* reasons refer to an individual's preferences or prerogatives, that is, it is up to the people involved to decide for themselves. *Pleasant reasons* refer to pleasure, wants or amusement, having fun or avoiding boredom, difficult circumstances or other unpleasant things. *Impulse reasons* refer to a lack of impulse control in a situation and inability to impose self-control or a spontaneous act without thinking. *Other reasons* refer to various reasons, such as negative role modeling, bad influence, etc. (for a more detailed description of the content of reason categories, see Thornberg, 2010, Table 2).

Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached and then the consensus was coded. This negotiated consensus procedure of coding coordination through mutual adjustment (Hall, Long, Bermbach, Jordan, & Patterson, 2005) enhances the coding reliability, compared with coding by a single coder. For the analyses, only the presence of moral reasons and conventional reasons were used. According to the social domain theory (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983), *moral reasons* are based on conceptions of human welfare, justice and rights, which are a function of the inherent features of interpersonal relations and produce moral judgements about unprovoked harm or unfair treatment. *Conventional reasons*, in turn, are based on conceptions of agreed-upon uniformities, regulations and smooth running of activities and depend on authority, traditions, customs or consensus and are determined by the social system in which they are formed. A written response was coded as conventional reasons if it consisted of at least one of the following reasons: socio-normative reasons, structuring reasons or indifference reasons. (Nucci & Herman, 1982; Nucci & Weber, 1995; see Table 1). Coder reliability of the moral and conventional reasoning codes was checked on a random subsample (90 participants) of the total sample. The written data in these cases was coded by a third rater (the first author), and a comparison of the two coding outcomes revealed 97% agreement.

A global index of *moral reasons in bullying* was calculated by using the sum of the presence of moral reasons across the eight bullying vignettes (i.e., eight dichotomous variables in which 0 = absence of moral reasons, and 1 = presence of moral reasons) divided with two. For example, if a participant had used moral reasons in six of the eight bullying vignettes, the value of the “moral reasons in bullying” variable would be three ($6/2=3$). If a participant instead used moral reasons in all eight bullying vignettes, the variable value would instead have been four ($8/2=4$). A global index of *conventional reasons in bullying* was calculated by using the sum of the presence of conventional reasons across the eight bullying vignettes, which were also divided by two. A global index of *moral reasons in repeated conventional transgressions* was calculated by using the sum of the presence of moral reasons across the four repeated conventional vignettes. For example, if a participant had used moral reasons in three of the four vignettes, the value of the “moral reasons in repeated conventional transgressions” variable would be three. If a participant instead used moral reasons in all four bullying vignettes, the value of the variable would instead have been four. A global index of *conventional reasons in repeated conventional transgressions* was calculated by using the sum of the presence of conventional reasons across the four repeated conventional vignettes. The reason why the sum was divided by two when constructing the first two variables (based on eight vignettes) was to make them comparable with their corresponding variables in the repeated conventional transgression condition (based on four vignettes), a process that was for testing hypotheses 2–3.

Bullying and peer victimization. The Swedish version (Olweus, 1996a) of the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ; Olweus, 1996b) was used to measure frequency of bullying and peer victimization. The response “two or three times a month” was used as the cut-off point (Solberg & Olweus, 2002); that is, participants who reported being bullied two to three

times a month or more often (but not reporting bullying others that often) were coded as “victims” ($N = 69$). Participants who reported bullying others two or three times a month or more often (independently of reporting being bullied that often or not) were coded as “bullies” ($N = 30$; in this bully sample, 18 participants were “pure” bullies and 12 participants were bully/victims. Because of the small sample size in these two sub groups, we merged them into one bully group). Participants who did not report being bullied or bullying others two to three times a month or more often were categorized as “uninvolved” ($N = 281$).

Calculating Effect Size

When we performed independent ANOVAs and Welch F , Cohen’s d was calculated as effect size, based on means and standard deviations. In repeated ANOVAs, both partial eta square and Cohen’s d_z (the latter was calculated from t -value using a dependent t -test and N ; see Lakens, 2013) have been reported to make comparing effect sizes across the outcomes easier.

Results

Judgments across the Transgression Conditions and Reasoning for Judgments in Bullying

Mean responses for each transgression condition (Bullying and Repeated Conventional Transgression) were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA with repeated measures on transgression judgments across the two transgression conditions (bullying judgment: $M = 3.67$, $SD = .42$; judgment of repeated conventional transgressions: $M = 2.29$, $SD = .82$). Results indicated that the students judged bullying as more wrong than repeated conventional transgressions ($F[1, 380] = 1390.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .79$, Cohen’s $d_z = 1.91$).

The use of moral reasons in justifying judgments of bullying and repeated conventional transgressions were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA with repeated measures. The results revealed that moral reasons were significantly more frequent when justifying judgments of

bullying ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.17$) than when justifying judgments of repeated conventional transgressions ($M = .33$, $SD = .56$; $F[1, 380] = 1597.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .81$, Cohen's $d_z = 2.05$). Moreover, the use of conventional reasons in justifying judgments of bullying and repeated conventional transgressions were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA with repeated measures. The results revealed that conventional reasons were significantly more frequent when justifying judgments of repeated conventional transgressions ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.25$) as opposed to justifying judgments of bullying ($M = .69$, $SD = .79$; $F[1, 380] = 1116.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .75$, Cohen's $d_z = 1.71$).

Finally, we examined justifying judgments within each condition, using two one-way ANOVAs with repeated measures, one for each condition. The results of the first ANOVA revealed that moral reasons ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.17$) were significantly more frequent than conventional reasons ($M = .69$, $SD = .79$) when justifying judgments of bullying ($F[1, 380] = 577.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .60$, Cohen's $d_z = 1.23$). The results of the second ANOVA showed that conventional reasons ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.25$) were significantly more frequent than moral reasons ($M = .33$, $SD = .56$) when justifying judgments of repeated conventional transgressions ($F[1, 380] = 1424.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .79$, Cohen's $d_z = 1.93$).

Gender Differences

We analyzed gender differences in transgression judgments and justifying judgments of bullying and repeated conventional transgressions using a series of one-way ANOVAs (see Table 2). Levine's test indicated that the assumption for equality of variances was violated for bullying judgments, moral reasons in bullying, and bullying perpetration. Therefore, we used Welch F for these. The analyses revealed that female students were significantly more prone than male students to judge bullying as wrong ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .44$), use moral reasons

when justifying their bullying judgments ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .36$). Male students were significantly more engaged in bullying ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .38$). However, the effect sizes of the significant gender differences were rather small. Although female students judged repeated conventional transgressions as more wrong than male students, the difference was not significant and the effect size was small ($p = .07$, Cohen's $d = .17$).

<<Insert Table 2, about here>>

Differences among Bullies, Victims, and Uninvolved Peers

Differences among bullies, victims and uninvolved students in transgression judgments and justification of judgment in bullying and repeated conventional transgressions were analyzed using a series of one-way ANOVAs (see Table 3). Levine's test indicated that the assumption for equality of variances was violated for judgments of bullying, and moral reasons in bullying when testing group differences among bullies, victims, and those uninvolved. Therefore, Welch F was used for these conditions.

A Welch F indicated a main effect of bullying judgment across the groups. Bonferroni post hoc test procedures revealed that bullies were significantly less prone than victims to judge bullying as wrong ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.38$) or those uninvolved ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.63$). In addition, victims were significantly less likely to judge bullying as wrong than were uninvolved youth ($p = .038$), although the effect size was rather small (Cohen's $d = .37$). A one-way ANOVA indicated a main effect of judgment of repeated conventional transgressions across the groups. Bonferroni post hoc test procedures revealed that bullies were significantly less likely to judge repeated conventional transgressions as wrong than were victims ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.09$) or those not involved ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.18$). A Welch F indicated a main effect of moral reasons when justifying judgment of bullying across the groups. Bonferroni post hoc test

procedures revealed that bullies were significantly less prone to use moral reasons to justify their judgment of bullying than were victims ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = .97$) and the uninvolved ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.17$).

<<Insert Table 3, about here>>

Discussion

The present study examined whether children's judgments and reasoning to justify their judgments differ between bullying and repeated conventional transgressions. The study also examined whether there were gender differences and differences among bullies, victims and uninvolved children regarding their judgments and reasoning to justify their judgments. In accordance with our five first hypotheses, the findings showed that children judge bullying as more wrong than repeated conventional transgressions. Children also use moral reasons more frequently in their justifications of judging bullying than they do for repeated conventional transgressions. They use conventional reasons more frequently in their justifications of judgments of repeated conventional transgressions than for those of bullying. They use moral reasons more frequently than conventional reasons in their judgments of bullying, and use conventional reasons more frequently than moral reasons in their judgments of repeated conventional reasoning. Hence, the current findings support the distinction between morality and social convention assumed in the social domain theory (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983) and previous research (Nucci, 2001) which found that children judge moral transgressions, including bullying (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2016) as more wrong than conventional transgressions. Children also tend to use moral reasons when justifying their judgments of moral transgressions and conventional reasons when justifying their judgments of conventional transgressions. As in Thornberg's (2010) and Thornberg and colleagues' (2016) studies, the vast majority of the

children judge bullying as wrong, independently of the rules, and justify their bullying judgments by referring to the harm bullying causes.

Role of Gender

Three of our four hypotheses on gender differences (hypotheses 6, 8, and 9) were also supported by our findings. Female students judged bullying as more wrong and used moral reasons more frequently in their justifications of judgments of bullying than did male students. On the other hand, male students were more engaged in bullying than were female students. Thus, our findings significantly add to the literature on gender differences in moral reasoning and bullying. They support previous research showing that female students are less accepting than male students about breaking moral rules (Caravita, Giardino et al., 2012; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012). Moreover, our findings confirm previous studies revealing that male students judge aggression as less wrong than do female students (Boulton et al., 1999; Rose & Rudolph, 2006), but contradict other studies that found no gender differences in accepting moral transgressions (Banerjee et al., 2012; Caravita et al., 2009). Possible explanations for our findings might be that female students tend to have higher levels of affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a; Garaigordobil, 2009), moral sensitivity (for a meta-analysis, see You et al., 2011), and emotion recognition (Maguire et al., 2016) than do male students. Female students are also less likely to be morally disengaged (Gini et al., 2014). Female students' more frequent use of moral reasons when judging bullying and their stronger tendency to judge bullying as wrong could explain their lower prevalence of bullying, compared to male students.

In contrast to hypothesis 7, female students in the present study did not judge repeated conventional transgressions as more wrong than male students. This result contradicts previous findings, which show that female students are less accepting than male students of breaking

conventional rules (Caravita, Giardino et al., 2012; Caravita et al., 2009). Possible explanations for the inconsistent findings might concern cross-cultural or methodological differences among the studies. Another possible explanation for our current findings might, at least partly, be due to gender differences in affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a). Whereas moral transgressions like bullying appeal to empathy (Hoffman, 2000), conventional transgressions do not (Nucci, 2001). Although female students' higher levels of affective empathy should make them more inclined to judge moral transgressions as wrong as compared to male students, it should not influence their judgements of conventional transgressions. Further research is needed to deeply examine possible reasons for underlying gender similarities and differences in moral and conventional transgressions.

Involvement in Bullying

De Angelis and colleagues (2016) demonstrate that bullies judge both moral and conventional transgressions as less wrong than do their peers. Congruent with their study and with our hypotheses 10–11, we found that bullies judge bullying and repeated conventional transgressions as less wrong than do victims or uninvolved peers. Bullies tend to bully others and also engage in oppositional and antisocial behavior more often than peers (Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016). Our findings, together with those of De Angelis and colleagues (2016) indicate that this might be, at least in part, explained by bullies' greater acceptance of moral transgressions (including bullying) and conventional transgressions.

Moreover, and in line with our final hypothesis (12), bullies used moral reasons less frequently in their justifications of judgments of bullying than did either victims or uninvolved peers. This might, in turn, explain their greater acceptance of bullying, compared to their peers. The fact that bullies were less prone to refer to the victim's harm and judge bullying as wrong

might indicate their inclination to morally disengage (Gini et al., 2014), and low levels of affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006b). If children are more sensitive to the distress of victims, they would be more inclined to recognize and empathize with the victim's harm and suffering (Hoffman, 2000). Such sensitivity to social and emotion cues, as well as affective empathy, is, in turn, likely to influence the child's processing of information by priming and retrieving moral knowledge and values in the moral domain (cf., Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Therefore, children would be more prone to use moral reasons and judge a moral transgression (bullying) as wrong, independent of whether rules in that particular context are present or absent (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983). In contrast, higher levels of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2016) and less affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006b) can reduce the likelihood of sensitivity to the victim's harm. Bullies' less frequent use of moral reasons when judging bullying, and their weaker tendency to judge bullying as wrong might explain why they are more likely to bully than are victims or uninvolved peers. Our findings may be comparable to a recent meta-analysis of cyberbullying which shows that cyberbullying perpetration is positively associated with aggressive cognition (e.g., moral approval of violence and positive attitudes towards aggressive behavior) and negatively associated with other-related cognition (Guo, 2016).

Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be noted. The variables are assessed through self-reporting, which might have inflated associations among them due to shared method variance. Moreover, the estimates might have been biased due social desirability and/or intentionally exaggerated responses (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Second, because we opted for a cross-sectional research design, we were unable to pinpoint the direction of the effects. To further expand these results, future research would need to adopt a longitudinal research design. Hence,

identified associations, as well as causal conclusions based on these associations, need to be considered with great caution. Third, investigating how children respond to hypothetical scenarios is not the same as investigating how they actually respond to real-life situations. The ecological validity is therefore threatened (Cicourel 1982). However, the vignette technique is widely used in the literature because it enables researchers to collect responses from all of the participating children with regards to the same situations and to manipulate such situations experimentally (impossible to do in real-life). Indeed, some studies have demonstrated that children judge transgressions in real-life situations similar to in the way they react to hypothetical situations (e.g., Smetana, Schlagman, & Adams, 1993), thus addressing concerns about ecological validity.

Implications and Conclusion

These limitations aside, the current findings have practical implications. Bullying prevention and intervention programs should address the moral deficit, found among bullies, of not linking bullying with its inherent harmful effects. Educational interventions targeting children's aggression "would be benefited by emphasizing 'moral training' to target immoral conceptions" (Kokkinos et al., 2016, p. 266), including the capacity of understanding the harm one's aggressive behavior inflicts on the victim and the concern for fairness and the welfare of others when judging behaviors toward them. The association between deficit or poor moral reasoning and aggression has been found in other studies (for meta-analyses, see Gini et al., 2014; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013; cf., Van Vugt, Gibbs, Stams, Bijleveld, Hendriks, & van der Laan, 2011). A disciplinary strategy that teachers, school psychologists and other school staff can use to promote empathy and moral development is *induction*. In induction, the adult explains why a certain behavior is unacceptable by emphasizing the other's perspective and pointing out

the consequences of the misbehavior for others by drawing the attention to the harm or distress and making it clear that the child's action caused it (Hoffman, 2000). A teacher, school psychologist or school counselor might say, for example, "How would you feel if someone did that to you?", "You really hurt Sarah and made her sad when you all run away from her", and "How do you think Pete felt when you pushed him down in front of the others?" Induction encourages empathy, harm-effect moral reasoning, and other-oriented moral concerns (Hoffman, 2000). There is a need to educate all students to firmly recognize bullying as a moral transgression by making them sensitive to others' well-being, victims' suffering, and the harmful consequences of all forms of bullying. Thus, school psychology and teacher training programs should emphasize moral development and education as a part of understanding and counteracting school bullying.

School psychologists should advocate and promote a positive *moral atmosphere* in the school and a prosocial moral development among students by their participation in school-based anti-bullying teams, consultations with educators and direct interventions with bullies. A positive moral atmosphere in schools and classrooms with warm, caring and just relationships among students and between teachers and students has been found to be associated with greater moral development (Power & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2006; Watson, 2014) and less bullying and peer victimization (Konold et al., 2014; Thornberg, Wänström, & Pozzoli, 2017). With reference to Watson (2014), crucial components for building a positive moral atmosphere in schools and classrooms that promote moral competence and prosocial behavior are: (a) warm, caring, supportive and mutually-trusting teacher-student relationships; (b) classrooms that are characterized as caring and democratic in which each student's needs for competence, autonomy, and belonging are met; (c) opportunities for students to discuss, develop and refine their

understanding of moral values and how to integrate them into everyday school life; and (d) teachers who give structure, guidance, and proper responses to misbehavior, particularly by induction and reasoning. *Developmental Discipline* (earlier termed “Child Developmental Project”) is a program that is based on these four components (Watson, 2014) and has been found to have positive effects on students’ social and moral development (Battistich, 2003; Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004). Building a caring community with a positive moral atmosphere by including induction as a significant discipline strategy could be considered as a vital component of bullying prevention as it promotes students’ moral competence and compassion. Finally, with reference to the significant gender differences found in the present study, there appears to be a need to individualize bullying prevention and interventions by gender. However, these findings are still not clear or conclusive and future research should further examine this aspect.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Research involving human participants All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee and with 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. The study received ethical approval from the Regional Ethical Review Board at Linköping.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. In addition, parental consent was obtained for all individual participants in the study.

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Table 1

Moral and conventional reasons

Category	Description	Examples
Moral reasons	Refer to the intrinsic effect of the act upon the well-being of the others or to moral values such as fairness, care, equality, or altruism. Points to the intrinsic negative consequences of the transgression of a rule in terms of harming others or unfairness.	“Because although the rule is removed, that would hurt people”, “Because if someone did that to you, you would become sad”, “Because the other guy get harmed”
Conventional reasons	Refer to (a) agreed-upon uniformities in social behaviour depended on authority, traditions, customs or consensus, i.e., non-moral social norms (socio-normative reasons); (b) the need to maintain the activity or promote the smooth running in the social group during the activity, including pointing to negative consequences in terms of interrupting or disrupting ongoing activities (structuring reasons); or (c) the unimportance, insignificance, meaningless or arbitrariness of a rule in itself by stating that the transgression does not result in any negative consequences or that it is acceptable to engage in the act because the rule has been removed (indifference reasons)	“Because you are not supposed to do so”, “It’s wrong to fight”, “You shouldn’t talk when others are working because you will disturb them”, “It’s important that it’s quiet so everyone can be concentrated”, “Swearing doesn’t hurt anyone”, “Because nothing happens if they do that”. “It’s okay because there is no rule about it anymore”

This is a revised version of Thornberg (2010, p. 590). The examples are from the current data.

Table 2

Gender differences in all variable (one-way ANOVAs)

Variables	Females: <i>M (SD)</i>	Males: <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Bullying judgment	3.76 (.28)	3.58 (.50)	18.71 ^a	<.001	.44
Conv. transgr. judgment	2.36 (.79)	2.22 (.85)	3.28	.071	.17
Moral reasons in bullying	3.02 (1.01)	2.60 (1.27)	12.38 ^a	<.001	.36
Bullying	.10 (.24)	.24 (.43)	14.04 ^a	<.001	.38

Note: ^a = Welch *F*

Table 3

Differences between bullies, victims and uninvolved regarding transgression judgments and judgment justifications (one-way ANOVAs)

Variables	Bullies <i>M (SD)</i>	Victims <i>M (SD)</i>	Uninvolved <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Bullying judgment	2.90 (.67)	3.64 (.34)	3.76 (.31)	56.93 ^a	<.001
Conv. transgr. judgment	1.36 (.97)	2.31 (.77)	2.39 (.76)	16.50	<.001
Moral reasons in bullying	1.53 (1.36)	2.77 (1.18)	2.95 (1.05)	10.05 ^a	<.001

Note: ^a = Welch *F*