

The association between moral disengagement and bullying in early adolescence

Marlene Bjärehed



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Preface

This PhD thesis is a part of the project¹ “The social and moral processes of bullying – a four-year longitudinal study,” funded by the Swedish Research Council (Grant number 2013-07753). The project was carried out between the academic years 2015/16 and 2019/20, and entailed that participants answered a web-based questionnaire once each year. At the start of the project all students attended fourth grade and at the end of the project they attended eighth grade. This thesis used data from the first four waves of data-collection, along with data from a pilot study carried out in the spring of 2015, with students in grades 4 to 8.

This thesis adopted Bandura’s (1986, 2016) social cognitive theory as an overarching theoretical framework for understanding school bullying in early adolescence. According to social cognitive theory, bullying and bystander behaviors cannot be reduced only to individual variables, but have to be understood as results of a complex interplay between individual and environmental factors.

The overall objective of the project was to examine bullying, victimization, and bystander behaviors among school children in relation to social, cognitive, and moral factors – concurrently and over time. However, in this thesis I have examined only a limited part of the overall objective, more specifically the association between moral disengagement and bullying in early adolescence.

¹ Hereafter, the word thesis is used to refer to the entire dissertation, while the word study refers to the individual studies, and the word project refers to the longitudinal project.

Tack!

Först, tack till alla er elever som år efter år svarat på projektets enkät. Ni är alla viktiga! Tack även till era lärare, rektorer och övrig personal som såg till så att vi kunde besöka er i era klassrum.

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Till sist, men störst, tack till Jonas, Alfred och Hedda. Jonas, för att du alltid tror på mig och för att du finns vid min sida.

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Jonas, Alfred och Hedda – tillsammans är vi bästa laget!

Marlene Bjärehed
Stehag, December 2021

List of Studies

This thesis is based on the following four empirical studies:

Study 1

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2020). Mechanisms of moral disengagement and their associations with indirect bullying, direct bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 40(1), 28–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431618824745>

Study 2

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2021). Individual moral disengagement and bullying among Swedish fifth graders: The role of collective moral disengagement and pro-bullying behavior within classrooms. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(17–18), NP9576–NP9600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519860889>

Study 3

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2021). Moral disengagement and verbal bullying in early adolescence: A three-year longitudinal study. *Journal of School Psychology*, 84, 63–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.08.006>

Study 4

Bjärehed, M. (2021). Individual and classroom collective moral disengagement in offline and online bullying: A short-term multilevel growth model study. *Psychology in the Schools*, Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22612>

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Outline of this Thesis

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction, describes and discusses how to define bullying, and how bullying can be conceptualized as a social and moral issue. *Chapter 2* introduces social cognitive theory as this thesis' overarching theoretical framework, and reviews previous research on moral disengagement and bullying. *Chapter 3* outlines the overall aim, whereas *Chapter 4* provides information on method, including participants, procedure, and ethical considerations. *Chapter 5* summarizes the four empirical studies. *Chapter 6* discusses the main research findings, strengths and limitations, and concludes with thoughts on practical implications.

Introduction

School bullying is recognized as a global public health concern (UNESCO, 2019), with an adverse impact on the well-being and the psychological health of children and adolescents (Armitage, 2021; Klomek et al., 2015). Thus, it is a potential threat to children's rights, such as the right to learn and develop within a safe environment (Hymel et al., 2010; Rigby, 2012). For example, bullying victimization has been associated with poorer academic performance (Espelage et al., 2013), higher risk of depression and anxiety (Reijntjes et al., 2010), more headaches and sleep difficulties (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009), and with a higher risk of suicidal ideation and behaviors (van Geel et al., 2021). Bullying perpetration is also a risk factor, associated with violent behavior in adulthood (Farrington et al., 2012) and with psychosomatic problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009). Children and adolescents who bully are also at higher risk of substance use (e.g., drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; Vrijen et al., 2021).

Besides the negative consequences for the individuals involved, bullying also has societal costs. For instance, schools have to meet the direct costs of health initiatives, anti-bullying programs, and the costs of reporting and following up on bullying episodes (Nilsson Lundmark et al., 2016). There are also long-term societal costs to bullying, and childhood bullying victimization has been associated with increased use of mental health services through to midlife (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017). However, it has been argued that the direct costs to schools are marginal in comparison with the long-term societal cost if bullying is not counteracted in schools (Nilsson Lundmark et al., 2016)

Bullying seems to be a significant problem in schools all around the globe (Biswas et al., 2020; Cosma et al., 2020), although comparing prevalence rates for bullying across reports, studies, and countries is a challenging task. Prevalence rates may vary depending

on many factors, for instance related to methodology and how bullying and victimization are defined, operationalized, and measured (e.g., with or without a definition, including the word bullying or not, timeframe used), and may also depend on cultural differences (e.g., the meaning ascribed to and the perceptions of bullying in different countries; Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2014).

Still, the prevalence of bullying has been described as relatively low in Sweden in comparison to other countries (Cosma et al., 2020; Due et al., 2005), although the prevalence rates do seem to have increased during the last decade (Bjereld et al., 2020). Results from national reports suggest that 5–12% of students are victims of bullying in Swedish schools, with the highest proportion of victims being in upper elementary school (e.g., Friends, 2019, 2021; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2018). Additionally, the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2018) reported that 3–7% of the participants (aged 11 to 15) in its survey were bullied online. Taken together, these studies show that a significant proportion of students in Swedish schools acknowledge being bullied, and that students in elementary school seem to be at a somewhat higher risk than those in secondary school. In line with this, it has been suggested that bullying is most common between the ages of 11 and 13 (Eslea & Rees, 2001), and possibly somewhat later for cyberbullying (Sumter et al., 2012).

Given the above findings, research focusing on these years in a young person's life is clearly warranted. Thus, the age span in focus in this thesis was *early adolescence*, which is usually considered to extend between the ages of 10 and 14 (Lane et al., 2017). Early adolescence is also a period marked by change (e.g., the transition to upper elementary school at age 10 and to lower secondary school at age 13) and rapid personal development in several domains (e.g., biological, cognitive, and social development) (Blum et al., 2014). This suggests a need for longitudinal studies examining factors that contribute to decreases or increases in bullying, over and above normative developmental changes.

Given the established associations between bullying and several negative outcomes, it is worrying that bullying seems to be on the rise in Swedish schools (Bjereld et al., 2020). The prevalence of bullying also indicates that, despite very specific legislations (e.g., SFS 2010:800 [Education Act]; SFS 2008:567 [Discrimination

Act]), schools have problems in creating a safe environment for learning – free from violence, discrimination, and degrading treatment, including bullying – for all students. However, the findings from meta-analytical studies show that it is possible to reduce bullying perpetration and victimization through anti-bullying programs and interventions (Gaffney, Farrington, et al., 2019; Gaffney, Ttofi, et al., 2019). Overall, perpetration and victimization have been shown to decrease after such interventions by, on average, 15–20%, although there are variations in program effectiveness (Gaffney, Ttofi, et al., 2019). Because the effects are modest and heterogenous, one can argue that there is room for improvement, and research focusing on factors associated with bullying could further inform, and potentially improve, preventive work and anti-bullying interventions.

Defining Bullying

Bullying is most commonly defined among researchers as a subcategory of aggressive behavior, with distinctive components involving repetition and an imbalance of power between a perpetrator and a victim (see Hellström et al., 2021), although it should be noted that this definition is not universally agreed upon (e.g., Evans & Smokowski, 2016). The definition stems from Dan Olweus' early work in which he proposed that “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.” (1993, p. 9). Olweus specified *negative actions* as intentional acts with the aim of inflicting harm or discomfort upon another person, which is comparable to some definitions of *aggressive behavior* (e.g., as acts intended to inflict harm or discomfort upon others; Berkowitz, 1993).

In the literature a distinction is often made between reactive and proactive aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Little et al., 2003). In short, reactive aggression is conceptualized as a response to a perceived or real provocation, whereas proactive aggression is unprovoked and goal oriented (i.e., to attain social dominance or status; Hubbard et al., 2010). Both reactive and proactive aggression have been associated with bullying perpetration and victimization, but empirical findings suggest that proactive aggression may be

more strongly associated with bullying perpetration (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Furthermore, the criterion of repetition separates bullying from one-off aggression (Rodkin et al., 2015) and “one can then be more certain that the negative behavior is intended.” (Olweus, 2013, p. 757). Furthermore, Olweus (1993) added that, in order to classify a behavior as bullying, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator should be characterized by a power imbalance. It has been suggested that this power imbalance could include physical, psychological, economic, or hierarchical asymmetries (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014) and uniquely separates bullying from more general aggression, for instance fights between peers of equal or similar power (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Bullying behavior manifests through a variety of *types* or *forms* and involves different *modes* of delivery (Gladden et al., 2014). The *direct* mode of delivery consists of behaviors aimed directly against the victim, and possibly with other peers present (Salmivalli, 2010). When the mode of delivery is *indirect*, it refers to behaviors that are not directly communicated to the targeted individual (Gladden et al., 2014); for example, spreading rumors. In order to operationalize different types of bullying, researchers commonly include specific behaviors in their assessment (Casper, 2021). *Physical bullying* generally includes acts such as hitting, shoving, spitting, and pushing, and some researchers also include damage to property, such as stealing or destroying the victim’s property (Hunter et al., 2007; Olweus, 1993; Rivers & Smith, 1994). *Verbal bullying* generally includes verbal acts such as mean teasing, name calling, insults, intimidation, and making verbal threats to a peer (Casper, 2021; Gladden et al., 2014). The content of these acts may focus on aspects such as appearance, ethnicity, religion, or sexual identity. Mostly the acts are overt, but they can also be more covert, such as subtle jokes and sarcasm at the victim’s expense (Smith et al., 2019). In addition to physical and verbal forms of bullying, *relational bullying* refers to behaviors that aim to harm the victim’s reputation or social relationships (e.g., spreading rumors, peer-group exclusion) and can be both direct and indirect (Gladden et al., 2014). However, relational bullying is usually conceptualized as indirect (Archer & Coyne, 2005). The three forms of bullying outlined above are often labeled as *traditional* or *offline* bullying – in contrast to bullying that is conducted using technology or online social media (e.g.,

Instagram, Facebook), instant messaging apps, blogs or in online gaming. To describe the latter, several terms are used, including “electronic bullying,” “online bullying,” and “cyberbullying” (Scheithauer et al., 2021). *Cyberbullying* has been defined as bullying using electronic or digital means (Berne et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2014), whereas other scholars suggest that cyberbullying is a separate type of bullying with possibly distinct criteria for inclusion (see Scheithauer et al., 2021).

Although most commonly applied, Olweus’ definition of bullying is also widely debated (Eriksson et al., 2002; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Hellström et al., 2021; Horton, 2021; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2015), and alternative definitions have been proposed (e.g., Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013; Volk et al., 2014). Regarding the assumption that bullying consists of intentional acts with the aim of inflicting harm or discomfort, it has been questioned whether students who bully necessarily have this intention. It has also been queried how to assess the intent criterion. Firstly, intention to inflict harm requires meta-cognitive skills and sufficient self-awareness, which may be difficult to evaluate, especially in younger children (Greif & Furlong, 2006). However, Olweus (2013) has suggested that, if it could be assumed that the perpetrator recognizes or understands that the behavior is – or will be – perceived as unpleasant or hurtful from the victim’s perspective, this is sufficient to categorize the behavior as aggressive. Furthermore, the same situation(s) may be judged differently from the victim’s perspective than from the perpetrator’s (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014). For instance, the victim may perceive that there is an intention to inflict harm, whereas the perpetrator may not acknowledge the behavior as intending to cause harm (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002).

It has also been suggested that there may be other motives that are more important to consider in relation to bullying than harm; for example, striving for social status (Hamby, 2017). Such a motive could be the attainment of a specific social position within the peer group, without any particular intention to inflict harm. Indeed, some empirical studies show that when students are asked why others engage in bullying a common reason put forward is that the individual wants to gain or maintain high status or to be perceived

as cool (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Juvonen et al., 2003; Strindberg et al., 2020a; Thornberg, 2010).

The criterion of repetition is present in most definitions of bullying (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014), yet Olweus (2013) acknowledged that repetition is not necessary in all cases. This was also mirrored in a revised version of the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, which includes the phrase that the behaviors are “usually repeated” (see, Olweus, 2013). Nevertheless, the question of repetition can be essential when collecting data on prevalence, and questions to be raised are: When does one become a victim or a bully? How often does a behavior need to occur in order to be categorized as bullying? Because more systematic victimization is associated with a higher risk of mental health consequences, in comparison to being exposed to occasional events (Olweus & Breivik, 2014), some have argued for a cutoff point of 2–3 times a month or more (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). However, there is also evidence of severe consequences stemming from occasional incidents (Hellström et al., 2017), suggesting that one-time cases should also be taken seriously.

Olweus (1993) proposed that an asymmetry in power exists between victims and perpetrators of bullying when victims have difficulty defending themselves. For example, if an older student bullies a younger student there could be an asymmetry in verbal skills, physical strength, or body size. As briefly mentioned above, the perception of power and powerlessness may be different from the perspective of the perpetrator than from that of the target. Here, Olweus (2013) suggested that the question of whether there is a power imbalance or not resides within the victimized student. However, power is a complex issue, working at and through several levels. Thus, power is not merely inherent in fixed individual characteristics, such as strength and body size, but also includes changing and dynamic processes. For example, Horton (2021) suggested that bullying should be viewed as power relations and not as *involving* a power imbalance, because “the focus on power as something that is held and wielded by individuals reduces understanding of the ways in which power relations are situated and relational” (p. 67).

Power asymmetries can also be discussed in relation to cyberbullying. For example, power relations and status may differ

offline and online. This is a potential explanation for empirical findings suggesting that some students only engage in cyberbullying and not traditional bullying, and vice versa (Kubiszewski et al., 2015; Resett & Gamez-Guadix, 2017). It is possible that the online context (i.e., sense of anonymity) enables aggressive behavior (Pornari & Wood, 2010), and this in turn creates new opportunities for students who are not involved in offline bullying to become perpetrators.

In the present thesis, bullying is defined as a subcategory of aggression, including some repetition and a real or perceived power asymmetry (e.g., physical strength, status, verbal skills) (Olweus, 1993). Cyberbullying² is defined as bullying that occurs through electronic devices and online media. Thus, bullying and cyberbullying, in this view, share some attributes, such as a power imbalance (Slonje & Smith, 2008), but differ in other ways, mainly due to the specific features of the cyber-context (e.g., lack of face-to-face interaction, constant access, an enormous audience, perception of anonymity, permanence of content, and a tendency toward more vicious acts due to the online disinhibition effect; Campbell & Bauman, 2018).

The focus in this thesis is on bullying *perpetration*, although it should be noted that I do not classify the participants as “bullies,” but have examined the level of bullying perpetration measured as a quantitative variable. This allowed for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of bullying involvement (Demaray et al., 2021; Gini et al., 2021). Furthermore, all four studies examined bullying among early adolescents (age span 10–14) and focused on the school context and bullying among students. Study 4 also included an examination of cyberbullying perpetration among students. To further enhance the knowledge of factors associated with different modes and types of bullying, Study 1 distinguished between direct bullying (including physical and verbal items) and indirect bullying (including relational items), whereas Study 3 focused on the verbal type of bullying. Together the four studies paint a nuanced picture of factors associated with bullying among early adolescents in Sweden.

² Note that in Study 4 the term “online bullying” is used, whereas the word cyberbullying is used in the summarizing chapters in this thesis. These terms are, however, viewed as interchangeable.

The Classroom Context and Participant Roles in Bullying

In this thesis, bullying is understood as a complex phenomenon in which both individual and social environmental factors interact (Bandura, 1986; Ettekal et al., 2015; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Swearer et al., 2014). I have focused, in particular, on social environmental factors at the classroom level. Here, the word *classroom* refers not only to the direct physical and material setting, but also includes the social setting in which students and teachers interact and reciprocally influence each other's attitudes and behaviors (Barth et al., 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

There are several reasons to focus on the classroom as the unit of analysis. For instance, previous research has found that students tend to be targeted by their classmates (van der Ploeg et al., 2015). This may be especially problematic in Sweden because most children remain with the same group of students and teachers for several years (i.e., during upper elementary school). Previous research has also found great variation in prevalence rates between classrooms. For example, Atria et al. (2007) found that victimization and bullying rates ranged between 0% and 54.5% in their study, which included 86 classrooms in grades 4 to 9, whereas the mean levels for the whole sample were 12% and 6%, respectively. There are, of course, several potential factors that could contribute to explaining variations in bullying prevalence at the classroom level. For instance, studies have found a less authoritative classroom climate (Thornberg, Wänström, & Jungert, 2018) and more pro-bully classroom norms (Košir et al., 2020) to be associated with more self-reported victimization. Furthermore, the classroom context might play a significant role not only for bullying, but also for cyberbullying (for a review, see Lambe et al., 2019). Thus, including aspects related to the classroom context when examining factors associated with bullying is warranted.

In line with the above, scholars have argued that one cannot focus solely on the dyad of a *bully* and a *victim* in order to grasp the complexity of bullying (Salmivalli & Peets, 2018). Indeed, bullying is commonly described as a group phenomenon (Salmivalli, 2010), in which most individuals within a group or classroom take on, or are attributed, different *social roles* (for reviews, see Lambe et al.,

2019; Salmivalli, 2010). In one of the first studies examining social roles in bullying within a classroom context, Salmivalli et al. (1996) collected self-reported and peer-reported data about students' behavior in bullying situations. Based on this data, the authors identified six *participant roles* in school bullying, and found that 87% of the students could be assigned to one of these six roles. In addition to the roles of bully and victim, Salmivalli et al. outlined four more roles, namely the roles of *assistant*, *reinforcer*, *defender*, and *outsider*. Assistants join in and assist the bully, whereas reinforcers show their approval, for instance by laughing. Defenders support the victim by comforting them or standing up to the bully, whereas outsiders remain passive or withdraw from the situation.

When students report their involvement in bullying, the two roles of assistant and reinforcer have been shown to have similar characteristics (e.g., status and behavioral profile) (Pouwels et al., 2016) and to psychometrically load on a single factor in empirical research (e.g., Sutton & Smith, 1999; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). These two roles are therefore commonly combined under the term *pro-bullying bystander behavior* (e.g., Troop-Gordon et al., 2019) or *pro-aggressive bystander behavior* (e.g., Sjögren et al., 2020). In the studies in the present thesis, the two terms “pro-aggressive bystander behavior” (student level, Study 1) and “pro-bullying behavior” (classroom level, Study 2) were used, both referring to the combined bystander behaviors of assisting and reinforcing.

The conceptualization of bullying as a group phenomenon, involving peers who take on different bystander roles, is supported in empirical research (e.g., Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2015). Cyberbullying also seems to occur within the context of, and in the presence of, bystanders (e.g., Mishna et al., 2009). However, many children and adolescents take on a passive bystander role and do not intervene when observing bullying (e.g., Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli, 1999) or cyberbullying (e.g., Campbell et al., 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2019). How peers act as bystanders has been shown to play a significant role in facilitating and maintaining bullying. For instance, the more often classmates reinforce bullying and fail to defend the victims, the higher the prevalence of bullying in the school class, whereas greater defending at classroom level is associated with less bullying (Saarento, Boulton, et al., 2015; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). Furthermore,

classmates' bystander behavior can have an impact on the negative effects of school bullying for the victim. For instance, research has shown that, in classrooms where more peers stand up for the victim, targeted children express fewer negative health consequences (Sainio et al., 2011).

Bystander roles, like the roles of bully and victim, should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Bystanders can take on different roles depending on the situation (e.g., Frey et al., 2014). For instance, Forsberg et al. (2014) found that students referred to their understanding of the situation (e.g., its seriousness) when reasoning about their bystander behavior. Furthermore, although some consistency and stability in participant roles over time have been suggested (e.g., Mazzone et al., 2018; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, et al., 1998), children and adolescents are likely to be involved in bullying situations in more than one way (Demaray et al., 2021; Zych, Ttofi, et al., 2020). As previously noted, while I sometimes use the terms victim, bully, and pro-aggressive bystander in this thesis, the focus is on students' bullying and bystander *behaviors*.

Bullying as A Moral Issue

Considering the damaging consequences, the intent to harm, and the power asymmetry in bullying, it can also be considered a moral issue, involving judgements of right and wrong and ethical behavior (Ettedal et al., 2015; Hymel et al., 2010). Therefore, moral processes are essential for understanding early adolescents' involvement in bullying (Romera et al., 2019). Research from Sweden has shown that early adolescents tend, by referring to its harmful consequences, to judge bullying as a severe moral transgression, irrespective of social conventions or school rules (Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2016; Thornberg, Pozzoli, et al., 2017). One could thus ask; do those who bully have the moral knowledge and awareness of the harmful consequences of bullying, but override moral standards and reasoning when engaging in bullying? For instance, Gini (2006) found no significant difference between those who bullied and those not involved in bullying regarding the ability to understand the intentions and goals guiding behavior, whereas Menesini et al. (2003) found that those who bullied were capable of identifying harmful intent when acts were directed towards themselves but at the

same time tended to judge their own behavior as having less harmful intentions. This may suggest that students who engage in bullying access moral knowledge selectively, when it is beneficial to themselves (Ettetal et al., 2015). Furthermore, while a small percentage of those who bully show high levels of psychopathic characteristics (e.g., callous-unemotional responses, narcissism, impulsivity; Fanti & Kimonis, 2013; van Geel et al., 2017; Zych et al., 2019), other findings indicate that a much larger percentage of the total population admits to occasionally bullying others (Baldry, 2004).

One theory that addresses this potential inconsistency between the enactment of behavior (bullying) and moral standards (bullying is wrong) is social cognitive theory, and in particular the theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2016). Because acting against inner moral standards tends to bring self-condemnation in the form of unpleasant feelings such as guilt or shame, individuals generally act in accordance with internalized moral standards (Bandura, 2002). However, there are social cognitive maneuvers, in the form of *moral disengagement mechanisms*, which enable “the overriding of moral standards to allow conduct contrary to those standards without feeling any remorse or guilt for behaving immorally or antisocially” (Bussey, 2020, pp. 306–307). These mechanisms include restructuring bullying as something more socially acceptable, diminishing its severity, and putting blame on the victim (Bandura, 2016).

During the last two decades, Bandura’s theory has been increasingly applied in studies examining aggression and bullying among school children and adolescents (for meta analyses, see Chen et al., 2017; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al., 2019). Findings within this literature are quite consistent, indicating a positive association between moral disengagement and bullying. However, simply knowing that the overall tendency to morally disengage is associated with bullying may not be enough to fully comprehend this association or to guide in the development of successful interventions and preventive work targeting school bullying (for a discussion, see Runions et al., 2019). Given the complexity of school bullying, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of this association. Therefore, the overall aim of this

thesis is to enhance our understanding of the association between moral disengagement and bullying in early adolescence.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

The theoretical framework that guided this thesis and its research questions was Bandura's social cognitive theory. This theory has its foundation in social learning theory and focuses on the development of human behavior and the processes regulating behavior (Bandura, 1986; Swearer et al., 2014). Bandura's social cognitive theory has been applied to the research field of bullying by directing the focus towards cognitive, emotional, and moral processes at both the individual and at the classroom level (Ettekal et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2018). One of the core principles of social cognitive theory is the understanding of humans as active agents. Bandura (2006) stated that: "To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances." (p. 164). Part of the broader conceptualization of human agency is moral agency, which includes both the ability to refrain from acting immorally and the ability to act humanely (Bandura, 1999). Moral agency includes the acquisition of moral standards and reasoning, as well as motivational and self-regulatory mechanisms. Furthermore, individuals do not act in a manner that is detached from the social context, nor are they pure products of situational factors. Instead, moral agency is assumed to be produced as a result of reciprocal interactions between personal factors (e.g., cognition, emotions, motivation), social environmental factors (e.g., peer groups' and other people's reactions and behaviors), and behaviors. Through this *triadic codetermination*, Bandura (2016) proposed that individuals intentionally influence their (im)moral behaviors.

Bandura's theoretical framework is adopted in this thesis, and thus bullying understood as a complex phenomenon in which both individual and social environmental factors interact (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Rodkin et al., 2015). Accordingly, bullying is

addressed as being embedded within the social context where it occurs. Hence, it is essential to examine both the individual factors and the social environmental factors associated with school bullying (Ettekal et al., 2015). In this thesis, the focus is on the role of moral disengagement in bullying, examined both as a characteristic at the individual level and as a characteristic of the classroom. Moral disengagement has been proposed as a risk factor for an assortment of negative and anti-social behaviors, including general aggressive behavior, bullying, and delinquency (Moore, 2015) and has been further explored in different areas of research (e.g., sports, at work; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2011; Newman et al., 2020). Next, moral disengagement theory will be described more thoroughly.

Moral Disengagement

As children grow, the control of behavior shifts from external control (e.g., social reprimands) to more internal control (e.g., self-sanctions), and children increasingly have “to live with themselves” (Bandura, 2016, p. 33). In the process of developing a moral self, children adopt and internalize moral standards, influenced by a variety of sources, such as family, the media, and peers (Bandura, 2016). These moral standards then serve as guidance for future behavior. However, school bullying is a complex phenomenon and moral agency has to be understood within the model of triadic codetermination; for example, as influenced by the social goals pursued by early adolescents (e.g., status, friendship) and their outcome expectations, such as the possibility of being perceived as cool by peers (Strindberg et al., 2020a). Consequently, students with the same moral standards might behave differently depending on their cognition and the surrounding social context. Nevertheless, because acting against inner moral standards typically brings self-condemnation in the form of unpleasant feelings, individuals tend to act in line with their personal moral standards (Bandura, 2002). According to social cognitive theory, individuals can avoid the negative self-sanctions that potentially follow immoral conduct through the use of psychological strategies; that is, *moral disengagement* mechanisms. Moral disengagement mechanisms permit an individual to put inner moral standards aside in a given

situation, facilitating engagement in harmful and/or immoral behavior without experiencing inner negative self-sanctions, thus maintaining their self-conception as a moral person.

Specifically, Bandura (2016) has described eight moral disengagement mechanisms organized into four broader categories (referred to by Bandura as *loci*), depending on whether they focus on (a) the behavior, (b) agency, (c) the effects of the behavior, or (d) the victim. Briefly, the behavioral locus refers to how the individual reconstrues harmful acts more positively as a result of *moral justification, euphemistic labeling, or advantageous comparison*. Moral justification refers to viewing a behavior as something that serves a greater moral purpose. Bandura proposed that there are several ways of sanctifying the rightness of harmful acts; for instance, religious, ideological, social, or economic justifications. In the case of school bullying, ostracizing a classmate could be justified by the victim's negative impact on the peer relations within the group. In euphemistic labelling, the behavior is linguistically manipulated in to more sanitizing language to reduce the severity of the conduct; for example, stating that mean rumors are just meant to be a "joke." Through advantageous comparison, the seriousness of a behavior is softened by contrasting it with something worse. For example, by comparing verbal insults with hitting or kicking someone, the verbal acts may be made to sound less negative.

The agency locus includes mechanisms by which the individual minimizes their own agentive role, thus weakening their personal responsibility by either *displacement of responsibility* or *diffusion of responsibility*. When displacing responsibility, the individual shifts the blame for their own immoral behavior onto someone with greater influence or authority. For example, a student who takes on a pro-aggressive bystander role might put the blame on the student who initiated the bullying. Diffusion of responsibility refers to the minimizing of personal agency when other people are also present or involved. Thus, the responsibility for the negative behavior is spread among the members of a group (Bandura, 2016).

The third locus, the effect locus, entails *disregarding or distorting the consequences* of one's behavior by minimizing, denying or ignoring the harmful effects. For example, an individual

might downplay the consequences of bullying as “not actually harmful.”

Lastly, the victim locus refers to processes by which feelings of guilt, shame, or remorse can be avoided by either *dehumanizing* the victims by taking away their human or equal value or by *attribution of blame*, in which the victim is viewed as contributing to his or her own situation. Dehumanizing occurs when the victim is stripped of human qualities or viewed in derogatory terms, because, as Bandura stated: “It is difficult to inflict suffering on humanized persons without experiencing distress and self-condemnation” (Bandura, 2016, p. 84). For example, a student involved in bullying a classmate may detach human value and characteristics from the victim by labelling them as a “nerd” or “idiot.” Additionally, attribution of blame refers to putting blame on the victim and viewing them as causing their own bullying, for instance due to their appearance or behavior. See Figure 1 for an overview of the moral disengagement mechanisms at different loci.

Figure 1

Moral Disengagement Mechanisms at Different Loci

The Behavior Locus	The Agency Locus	The Effects Locus	The Victim Locus
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moral Justification• Euphemistic Labelling• Advantageous Comparision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Displacement of Responsibility• Diffusion of Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disregarding or Distorting the Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dehumanization• Attribution of Blame

As noted earlier, social cognitive theory posits that, during the course of development, regulation of behavior shifts from external to mainly internal self-regulation (Bandura, 1986, 2016). At first, children use justifications in order to avoid external sanctions, and to rely more on appearing good than on a desire to maintain one's self-concept as a moral person (Bandura, 2016; Bussey, 2020). Consequently, it is with the shift to self-regulation of behavior that moral disengagement comes into play, and Bandura further stated that: "the developmental progression proceeds from neutralizing social censure to neutralizing self-censure, with the complexity of moral disengagement increasing with social and cognitive development" (2016, p. 34). Thus, the child learns over time to weaken the self-censure by overriding moral standards in a given situation. Moral disengagement has also been found to function as a coping strategy for dealing with negative emotions after learning about the consequences of one's own transgression (Tillman et al., 2018). Bandura (2002) described the development of moral disengagement as a gradual process. At first, milder acts that are considered to be wrong may be justified and conducted with manageable feelings of self-blame, and: "The continuing interplay between moral thought, affect, action and its social reception is personally transformative" (Bandura, 2002, p. 110).

In line with this reasoning, one meta-analysis has found that, although moral disengagement was positively associated with aggressive behavior both in the age group 8–11 and in the age group 12–18, the effect size was greater for the older participants in comparison to the younger (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). Although moral disengagement can develop into cognitive patterns that tend to be relatively stable over time (Bandura, 2016; C. Wang et al., 2017), it should not be considered a static personality trait (Thornberg, Gini, et al., 2021). Only a few studies have examined the development of moral disengagement over time, and findings from these studies support the notion that it may be changeable, and affected by both normative development and the social context. One study found that moral disengagement decreased on average between the ages of 14 and 17 in a sample of male juvenile offenders (Shulman et al., 2011), while another study found that, whereas children's (age 9–10) moral disengagement decreased over a period

of one year, early adolescents' (age 11–14) moral disengagement increased, on average, over the same time period (Caravita et al., 2014). Interestingly, the change was significantly associated with friends' levels of moral disengagement in early adolescence, and friends became more similar over time, something that was not found among the younger participants. Among the older participants, bullying was also indirectly influenced by friends' moral disengagement. Furthermore, one study examined trajectories of moral disengagement in a normative sample between the ages of 14 and 20 (Paciello et al., 2008). They found that, although most individuals showed a declining moral disengagement trajectory, not all followed the same normative decrease. In particular, one group remained at stable – medium to high – levels over time. Thus, changes in moral disengagement are likely not only related to normative developmental changes, but also influenced by significant socialization agents and other environmental factors (Hyde et al., 2010; Sijtsema et al., 2014), as suggested within social cognitive theory.

Bandura (2016) theorized that the same moral disengagement mechanisms are used in childhood and adulthood, although their variety and complexity may increase during adolescence as a result of social and cognitive development. Bandura also suggested that gender differences in moral disengagement are not present in young children, but as they grow, boys become more prone to showing higher levels of self-reported moral disengagement in comparison to girls (Bandura et al., 1996; Romera et al., 2021; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). However, this gender difference may in part be explained by the sphere of activity under study (e.g., physical aggression and delinquency) and relate to socialization effects rather than inherent differences between boys and girls (for a discussion see Bussey, 2020; Bandura, 2016).

Collective Moral Disengagement

Theories and research on human agency have mostly focused on personal agency (Bandura, 2001, 2016). However, social cognitive theory emphasizes that the concept of moral agency, in addition to personal agency, also includes other modes of agency as key features of the self-regulatory process. Through *collective agency*, “people

pool their knowledge, skills, and resources, provide mutual support, form alliances, and work together to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own” (Bandura et al., 2011, p. 422). Indeed, group functioning has been shown to be more than just the sum of the behaviors of its individual group members. For instance, individuals are more likely to behave aggressively in a group than in situations where they are alone (Bandura et al., 1975).

Specifically, *collective moral disengagement* is defined as “an emergent group-level property arising from the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic group dynamics” (White et al., 2009, p. 43). Collective moral disengagement is viewed as operating through similar processes as individual moral disengagement, but to differ with respect to the mode of agency (Bandura, 2016). That is, it includes the same four loci and eight mechanisms as individual moral disengagement but emerges through social environmental processes (see Bussey, 2020). In schools, collective moral disengagement may emerge at the classroom or school level, whereas it may operate more broadly in other contexts (e.g., social systems, community; Bussey et al., 2020). The role of collective moral disengagement in immoral or unethical behavior has been empirically examined in different contexts; for instance, in school contexts (Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2021), work contexts (Newman et al., 2020), and in the context of team sports (Danioni et al., 2021), although the amount of research is small in comparison to research on individual moral disengagement. Collective moral disengagement might be particularly relevant to study in early adolescence, given that peer influence becomes more important during this stage of a young person’s development (e.g., Juvonen & Galván, 2008).

Research on Moral Disengagement and Bullying

During the last two decades an increasing body of research has examined the role of individual moral disengagement in relation to bullying among children and adolescents, with results consistently showing a positive association (Chen et al., 2017; Killer et al., 2019;

Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). Results from meta-analyses have suggested medium-sized effects on bullying ($r = .31$, Killer et al., 2019) and on cyberbullying ($r = .28$, Chen et al., 2017).

In most empirical research, moral disengagement has been operationalized and measured as a global construct. Only a handful of studies have aimed at disentangling whether the four loci (Pozzoli et al., 2012; Romera et al., 2021), or the mechanisms of moral disengagement, operate differentially in bullying, for instance in relation to participant roles (Runions et al., 2019; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014) or context (Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Thornberg et al., 2020). Although a composite measure of moral disengagement may be well suited to capturing overall involvement in bullying, the loci or mechanisms of moral disengagement may better capture situational features (Kish-Gephart et al., 2014). Examining the specific mechanisms of moral disengagement in relation to different types of bullying, participant roles, and contexts could potentially enhance both the theoretical and empirical understanding of these processes (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014) and better aid and inform school interventions and preventive work against bullying (Runions et al., 2019).

Findings from the few studies examining differential associations between the mechanisms of moral disengagement and bullying are somewhat inconsistent. Pozzoli et al. (2012) found that only the behavioral locus was significantly associated with pro-bullying behaviors (including both those who initiate bullying and reinforcers/assistants). In line with this finding, Romera et al. (2021) found the behavioral locus to be the strongest predictor of both bullying and cyberbullying. Furthermore, the mechanisms of the agency locus and the effects locus were also associated with bullying and cyberbullying in their study. In a Swedish study, Thornberg and Jungert (2014) found that moral justification and victim attribution were the only mechanisms that predicted bullying. This was in part consistent with Robson and Witenberg's (2013) findings; however, the latter study also found that diffusion of responsibility was associated with bullying. In addition, although focusing on peer aggression, Pornari and Wood (2010) found moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and displacement of responsibility to be significantly associated with aggressive behavior. In sum, these findings indicate that individuals selectively endorse distinctive

moral disengagement mechanisms, dependent, for example, on their role in bullying or on the context. Because the number of studies is still small and the findings inconsistent, it is important to continue to examine the role of distinct mechanisms of moral disengagement in relation to bullying.

In addition, situational or social environmental factors can potentially either amplify or reduce the need to morally disengage in order to engage in immoral behavior, independent of an individual's overall tendency to morally disengage (Bandura, 2016). For example, Caravita et al. (2019) examined the influence of the immigrant status of a new classmate in hypothetical bullying situations. Their findings showed that moral disengagement was lower when the classmate was described as an immigrant, whereas it was higher when the newcomer was described as belonging to the social majority. In addition, Gino and Galinsky (2012) found that feeling close to someone who behaves immorally amplifies a person's own moral disengagement, which in turn was associated with more unethical behavior. Since social cognitive theory posits that internal factors (e.g., moral disengagement), the behavior itself, and environmental influences are all determinants of each other (Bandura, 1986, 2016), there are of course many factors that may strengthen or diminish the association between moral disengagement and bullying (see Ettekal et al., 2015). In particular, there is a need to consider the social environment (e.g., classroom) in which bullying is embedded, as this has been given less attention in previous research (Killer et al., 2019). Accordingly, factors at the classroom level may be both directly associated with bullying, and suppress or strengthen the association between an individual's social cognitive processing and involvement in bullying (Ettekal et al., 2015; Gini et al., 2015; Saarento, Garandeanu, et al., 2015). In the present thesis, two of the four studies take a multilevel stance by including the socio-moral characteristics of the classroom, both as unique predictors and as potential moderators of the association between moral disengagement and bullying.

Furthermore, most studies on moral disengagement and bullying are cross-sectional (see Killer et al., 2019; Lo Cricchio et al., 2021), although there is a growing number of studies that have examined this association within a longitudinal design (Marín-López et al., 2020; Romera et al., 2019; Sticca & Perren, 2015; Teng et al., 2020;

Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2019; C. Wang et al., 2017). Also, the findings are not clear-cut (e.g., moral disengagement predicting bullying; bullying predicting moral disengagement; bi-directional association). The divergent findings may be explained by cultural, conceptual (i.e., aggression/bullying), measurement, and age differences, which motivates further longitudinal studies.

Research on Collective Moral Disengagement and Bullying

Whereas most previous research has examined moral disengagement as an individual process (see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al., 2019), it is likely that individuals' involvement in bullying also varies depending upon collective disengagement processes (Ettetal et al., 2015; Gini et al., 2015; Hymel et al., 2010)—especially in early adolescence when peers become more significant socialization agents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). During this period, it may be particularly important to “fit in” and to conform to peer attitudes and norms (Knoll et al., 2015). According to social cognitive theory, outcome expectancies are important for the regulation of behavior (Bandura, 2016). That is, children and adolescents are more likely to bully if the behavior is thought to bring positive consequences (e.g., social status), whereas a behavior is less likely to occur when it is assumed to bring negative consequences. For example, an individual may refrain from defending in a bullying episode for fear of social consequences, such as exclusion (Forsberg et al., 2014; Strindberg et al., 2020b). Classrooms can differ in moral climate and classroom characteristics may also influence an individual student's involvement in bullying, even when the perceived moral climate does not align with their personal attitudes (Espelage et al., 2003; Juvonen & Galván, 2008).

To gain more insight into whether school bullying is also linked to collective moral disengagement processes, a few studies have used a multilevel analysis approach to examine whether bullying and victimization are associated with *class moral disengagement* (Pozzoli et al., 2012; Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2017; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2018). In these studies, class moral disengagement was operationalized as classroom-aggregated levels

of the individual students' moral disengagement. In Thornberg et al.'s (2018) study, they found lower class moral disengagement to be associated with a lower prevalence of victims. Class moral disengagement was also positively associated with peer victimization in another Swedish study (Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2017) involving upper elementary students (grades 4–6). However, in both these studies, moral disengagement was measured using a scale with six items, and it is unclear whether this approach captured all the mechanisms present.

Moreover, it has been argued that the aggregation of students' individual moral disengagement to form a class moral disengagement fails to capture the collective dimension inherent in Bandura's (2016) conceptualization of collective moral disengagement, in which the total of a group's beliefs is more than simply the sum of the individual group members' attributes (for a discussion see Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; White et al., 2009). Following this line of reasoning, Gini, Pozzoli, and Bussey (2014) developed a scale with the aim of measuring collective moral disengagement within school classrooms. Their scale asked students to estimate how many students in their classroom agreed with moral disengagement statements (e.g., "In your classroom, how many kids think that...[item]?"). At the individual level, this scale measured *student-perceived collective moral disengagement*, whereas the aggregated score of all the students within a classroom represented *classroom collective moral disengagement*. Shifting the focus from each individual student's own moral disengagement to the group as unit of reference has been argued to better reflect collective moral disengagement. Indeed, in Gini et al.'s study, the amount of variance that could be attributed to the classroom level was three times larger than the variance of individual moral disengagement aggregated to the classroom level. Findings from studies adopting this latter approach indicate that, in addition to individual moral disengagement, both student-perceived moral disengagement and classroom collective moral disengagement play significant roles in bullying (Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2021), as well as aggressive behavior more generally (Gini et al., 2015, 2021). Classroom collective moral disengagement has also been found to be negatively associated with

defending, and positively associated with passive bystanding (Gini et al., 2015; Sjögren et al., 2021a) and with pro-aggressive bystander behavior (Sjögren et al., 2021a).

Collective moral disengagement may also influence cyberbullying perpetration. In an Australian study, Allison and Bussey (2017) found defending in cyberbullying to be associated with the interaction between individual morality factors and student-perceived collective moral disengagement. Thus, both from a theoretical point of view and with reference to the relatively small body of available research, classroom collective moral disengagement seems to be a relevant factor to examine with regard to bullying behaviors among early adolescents. Furthermore, and to the best of my knowledge, only one study has examined this association within a longitudinal design (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019), whereas no study has examined the longitudinal association for cyberbullying perpetration.

In Thornberg, Wänström, and Hymel's study, initial levels of classroom collective moral disengagement were found to be positively associated with students' involvement in bullying, whereas a change in classroom collective moral disengagement between fourth and fifth grades was not associated with a change in bullying. In addition, one Italian study has examined the role of both student-perceived collective moral disengagement and classroom collective moral disengagement in both reactive and proactive aggression over the course of six months (Gini et al., 2021). The results of Gini et al.'s study suggest that students who perceive the mechanism of moral disengagement to be more common among classmates also tend to engage in more aggressive behavior themselves. Furthermore, the authors found that aggressive behavior, even after controlling for its stability over time, was more common at the second timepoint in classrooms that were characterized by higher levels of classroom collective moral disengagement. That is, classroom collective moral disengagement predicted both reactive and proactive aggressive behavior over time.

To summarize, earlier studies have shown that moral disengagement is a significant correlate to bullying and cyberbullying. There are, however, several pieces of the puzzle that are less well understood, pieces that could enhance our understanding of the association between moral disengagement and

bullying. Firstly, moral disengagement has predominantly been examined as an omnibus construct, therefore losing information about the role of specific moral disengagement mechanisms in bullying. In this thesis, this was elaborated in Study 1. Secondly, most previous research has focused on the association between moral disengagement and bullying from the individual perspective, hence neglecting the potential influence of classroom moral processes on bullying (Gini et al., 2015). In the present thesis, classroom collective moral disengagement and its role in bullying were examined in two of the four studies (Studies 2 and 4). Thirdly, most studies examining the association between moral disengagement and bullying have used cross-sectional data, and longitudinal studies focusing on the role of classroom collective moral disengagement in bullying are particularly rare. In this thesis, longitudinal links between moral disengagement and bullying were examined in Study 3 and Study 4, with the focus on *change* in moral disengagement.

Overall Aim

The overall aim of this thesis was to enhance our understanding of the association between moral disengagement and bullying in early adolescence. The four studies all contributed to this aim, by covering different aspects:

Study 1 examined the degree to which the different mechanisms of moral disengagement were associated with indirect bullying, direct bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior. Furthermore, the study examined potential gender differences in these associations.

Study 2 examined whether moral disengagement at the individual level, and classroom collective moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystander behavior at the classroom level, were uniquely and interactively associated with bullying among fifth grade students (age 11).

Study 3 modeled verbal bullying changes across individuals over a period of three years (grades 4–7, ages 10–13), and examined moral disengagement as a factor longitudinally associated with this type of bullying.

Study 4 examined whether individual and/or classroom collective moral disengagement were associated with offline and/or online bullying over the course of one school year, and whether changes in individual and/or classroom collective moral disengagement from fifth grade to sixth grade were associated with changes in online and/or offline bullying.

Method

Participants

This thesis was part of the longitudinal project “The social and moral processes of bullying – a four year longitudinal study,” initiated in the academic year 2015/16 (with grade 4) and finishing in 2019/20 (with grade 8). Before the start of the longitudinal project, a pilot study was carried out in spring 2015 with students in grades 4 to 8, with the aim of testing the study procedure and the measures included in the questionnaire.

In Study 1, data from the pilot study were analyzed. For this pilot study, four schools were recruited through a convenience sample. All four schools were located in small towns having 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, in the central and southern parts of Sweden. Through the Swedish National Agency for Education, school-level data regarding student composition in terms of educational level of the students’ parents was obtained. The percentage of students with at least one parent with post-secondary education varied between 37% and 55% ($\bar{X} = 47\%$) across the four schools, figures that are somewhat lower than the national average of 56% (2014/2015; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021). In total, we invited 547 students in fourth to eighth grade to participate in the pilot study. Of the original sample, 317 students answered all of the study’s measures. Reasons for not participating in the study varied among students (e.g., did not obtain parental consent, lacked sufficient language skills, absent on the day of data collection) and are described in detail in Study 1. The distribution of students in each grade was as follows: 24% in grade 4, 19% in grade 5, 27% in grade 6, 15% in grade 7, and 15% in grade 8. Sixty-two percent of the participants were girls, and the vast majority (88%) reported a Swedish ethnic background (students were classified as having a non-Swedish ethnic background if they were not born in Sweden or if neither of their parents were born in Sweden), compared with the

national average of 78% (2014/2015; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021).

In Studies 2–4, data from the longitudinal project was analyzed. Recruitment of participants for the longitudinal project was initiated in spring 2015. In the school recruitment process, a strategic sampling procedure was applied, with the overall goal being to include a heterogeneous sample in terms of geographically diverse (e.g. rural areas to large cities) and socio-demographically diverse (e.g. low- and high-income areas) sites. In total, schools from ten municipalities in the central and southern parts of Sweden participated in the longitudinal project. Five of the municipalities comprised of 10,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, two comprised of 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, and three comprised of more than 100,000 inhabitants. One of the municipalities was located in the metropolitan area of Stockholm. The proportion of students within the schools with at least one parent with post-secondary education varied between 23% and 92%, with an average percentage of 53–55% across the first four data-collection waves. The national average ranged between 56% in 2015/2016 to 58% in 2018/2019. Furthermore, a majority (81–82%) of the students in studies 2–4 reported a Swedish ethnic background, compared to 78% of the whole population (2015/2016, Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021). As students moved up through the grades, the majority of the students remained in the same school, and mostly with the same classmates, across grades 4 to 6. They then enrolled in a new school with new classmates in grade 7.

In Study 2, individual and classroom-level data from the second wave (grade 5) of data collected within the longitudinal project was analyzed. The original fifth-grade sample included 2,448 students from 105 classrooms in 64 schools. Out of the original sample, 1,577 students (53% girls) completed the study's measures. Reasons for not participating were absence on the day of data collection (40 students), or lack of parental consent (785 students). Furthermore, 46 students were excluded prior to the analysis due to missing answers on complete scales; the reasons for this were mainly technical issues of failing to transmit or store answers online. The mean age of the students in the final sample was 11.55 years ($SD = 0.33$) and 81% reported a Swedish ethnic background. There were variations in participation rates between classrooms, with the lowest

participation rate being 32% and the highest being 100%. On average, the participation rate across the 105 classrooms was 69%.

In Study 3, individual-level data from the first four waves (grades 4 to 7) of data collection was used. In total 2,408 fourth grade students (48% girls) from 74 different schools were invited to participate in the longitudinal project. Most students then remained in the same school across grades 4–6, while the transition from grade 6 to grade 7 was associated with a change of school, from relatively small elementary schools to larger secondary schools. When entering secondary school in Sweden, it is common for students from several elementary schools in the area to merge together in new classroom constellations. Consequently, the original sample in grade 7 included fewer schools ($n = 42$) but more students ($n = 3,372$) in comparison to earlier grades. New students (i.e., those not previously participating in the project) were invited to participate at the start of each wave of data collection. Students with complete answers on the study's measures, *on at least one* of the four data collection waves, were included in the analyses. This resulted in a final sample of 2,432 students (52% girls). Altogether, 889 students participated in all four waves, 534 in three waves, 311 in two waves, and 698 in just one wave. Out of the students participating only once, the majority participated in grade 7. A majority of the students had a Swedish ethnic background (grades 4–6 = 82%; grade 7 = 81%).

In Study 4, individual and classroom-level data from the second and third waves (grade 5 and grade 6) of data collection was analyzed. As in Study 2, the original sample included 2,448 fifth grade students from 105 classrooms. As the focus in Study 4 was on changes in both individual and classroom-level variables, only classrooms that remained stable over time were included in the analyses. A classroom was defined as stable if it did not merge with other classrooms or split (e.g., due to reorganization of schools or classrooms). Furthermore, only classrooms with a response rate above 50% were included. These criteria for inclusion resulted in a reduction of the original sample size to 1,718 students within 68 classrooms. Of the available students within these classrooms, a total of 1,048 students (54% girls) completed the study's scales in both fifth and sixth grade. The mean age of the participants in fifth grade

was 10.54 years ($SD = 0.32$). Eighty-two percent of the participants reported a Swedish ethnic background.

For an overview of the original samples, year of data collection, and study participants in the four studies, see Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of the Original Sample, Year of Data Collection, and Number of Participants in the Four Studies

	Pilot study		Longitudinal project		
Year of data collection	2014/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19
Grade	4 – 8	4	5	6	7
Original sample					
Sample size	547	2408	2534 ^a	2384	3372
Number of schools	4	74	73	70	42
Study participants					
Study 1	317				
Study 2			1577		
Study 3		1626	1685	1487	1748
Study 4			1048	1048	2432 ^b

Note.

^aThe lower number of 2448 presented in studies 2 and 4, for the fifth grade sample, represent the original sample subtracted by the number of students attending mixed grade classrooms.

^bThe number of students completing the measures in Study 3, at least once, across grades 4 to 7.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

In the longitudinal project, students were followed over time, and the period included the last three years of elementary school and the first two years of secondary school. As mentioned above, in Sweden it is common for students to stay within the same classroom (i.e., with the same classmates) and school across grades 4 to 6 and then change school when transitioning to secondary school. In order to be able to follow as many students as possible over time, and across the school transition, we reached out to the head of the compulsory schooling in five municipalities as a first step. This allowed us to gain approval for all of the years of the longitudinal project. In the next step, school principals and teachers were informed about the study and gave access to their classrooms. Although most schools within these five municipalities participated in the longitudinal project, there were

also a few schools that chose not to participate. In addition to the schools in the five municipalities, a small number of schools were recruited in municipalities geographically close to the included municipalities. For the latter, we reached out directly to school principals as a first step. Schools also had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point during the data collection.

The design of the overall research project, including the pilot study, was reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Linköping, before any of the data collection was conducted. At the beginning of the longitudinal project, the students were approximately 10 years old (grade 4), and in the pilot study students were younger than 15 years old. Therefore, active written consent from legal guardians was obtained for all students participating in both the pilot study and the longitudinal project. Students were informed orally of the study by a member of the research team during information sessions at the participating schools. At these sessions, an information and consent letter was handed out to the students. The students were asked to take the letter home to their caregivers and to return the signed form to their teacher *if the student* wanted to participate and his or her caregivers approved of their participation. In order to increase the probability of students with non-Swedish-speaking parents taking part and the parents fully understanding the aim of the study and their child's participation, the information letter was translated into 15 different languages (needs identified by teachers). Only students who handed in a signed consent form and who themselves wanted to participate then took part in the pilot study or in the longitudinal project. On each data collection occasion, the students were orally informed of the study's procedure and purpose. Furthermore, some wordings and questions were explained and illustrated on the blackboard. We also highlighted that it was voluntary to participate and that they could skip answering a scale or withdraw at any time, without having to explain why. If a student chose to withdraw, we asked whether it was okay for us to ask them again, at the start of the next wave, if they wanted to participate, and the answer was noted. Students also had the opportunity to enter the longitudinal project during any of the following waves, even if they had not participated in the previous wave/s. In grades 5 and 6, teachers handed out a new information and consent letter if a student stated that he or she now wanted to participate. In grade 7, there were

students merging together from different schools, some of which had not participated earlier. Therefore, information letters were sent to legal guardians of these students, or handed out by a member of the research team when visiting classrooms to inform students about the study.

In both the pilot study and the longitudinal project, the students answered a web-based questionnaire on tablets administered by members of the research team.³ This process was chosen in order to guarantee similar instructions and procedures in all classrooms. Participants were asked to address all queries about the questionnaire (e.g., wording or items) directly to the researcher or the teacher (and not classmates). Teachers also identified special needs beforehand, and a number of students were assisted by a mother-tongue teacher or special education teachers (e.g., reading help). The students filled out the questionnaire in their ordinary school environment (e.g., classroom) and were seated so that they could not see other students' answers. The questionnaire was constructed so that missing answers were highlighted before moving on to the next scale. This procedure was chosen in order to make sure that questions were not skipped unintentionally. However, it was emphasized by the member of the research team present that the students did not have to answer items or scales if they did not want to. On average, the students in fourth grade completed the whole questionnaire in approximately 45 minutes and in seventh grade the completion time was approximately 20 minutes.

Answering questions about bullying and victimization can be a sensitive subject. Firstly, thinking about situations of bullying may evoke distress or other negative emotions that the student may not be able to foresee before choosing to participate. At the start of each data-collection wave, we emphasized that participation was completely voluntary and that students could withdraw from the study at any time. We also underlined that the questions in the survey might bring up memories and emotions that they may not be

¹I visited approximately one-third of the schools throughout all five waves. In one municipality, teachers administered the questionnaire. We recorded a video tutorial for how to fill in the questionnaire addressed to the students, and in addition teachers were informed about the study and the procedure through a 20-minute video.

prepared to handle by themselves. We informed students about appropriate school personnel (e.g., members of schools' antibullying teams, school counselors, teachers) and suggested that students reach out to them where necessary. If they preferred to talk to someone outside school, we encouraged them to contact BRIS⁴ (by telephone, chat, or email). Accordingly, contact information for BRIS was handed out to all students in the classrooms, not only the participating students.

The students were also informed that the results were only to be used for research purpose, together with summary reports to the municipality or school with answers aggregated to the classroom or school level. However, so that we could follow individuals over time, all students were given an identifying number. In theory, this procedure makes it possible for the researcher to identify an individual's answers, which highlights an ethical aspect that needed to be taken into consideration. For example, a student who answered the questionnaire indicating that he or she is a victim of bullying might hope that this would lead to some action being taken by the researcher. However, it was stressed that we would not examine their individual answers, and therefore would not be able to assist or reach out to participants who, for example, reported being victimized. Furthermore, we explained that their identifying number would only be accessible by the research team and that neither parents nor teachers would have access to their individual answers.

Measures

Bullying

An 11-item self-report scale (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2019) was used to measure bullying perpetration within a school setting. In the scale, the word "bullying" was not included in order to minimize the risk of students underreporting bullying due to social desirability bias or conceptions related to their own associations. Instead, power

⁴ BRIS, Barnens rätt i samhället [Children's Rights in Society], is a non-profit politically and religiously independent children's rights organization that supports children and young people in distress.

imbalance was built into the main question to distinguish bullying from more general peer aggression, and operationalized as follows: “Think about the past three months. How frequently have you done the following things towards one or more students who are weaker, less popular, or less in charge in comparison to you?” The items following the main question portrayed direct physical bullying (e.g., “Held someone against their will,” 5 items), direct verbal bullying (e.g., “Teased and called the person mean names,” 3 items), and relational bullying (e.g., “Spread mean rumors or lied about the person,” 3 items). For each item, the students answered on a 5-point scale, from 1 = “*I have never done that,*” 2 = “*Only a few times,*” 3 = “*2 or 3 times a month,*” 4 = “*Once a week,*” to 5 = “*Several times a week.*” Mean scores were computed for the composite measure, or sub-scales, depending on the aim of the respective study.

It can be argued that a behavior-based approach, such as the one used in the present study, is suitable when examining the degree or *level* of use of various bullying *behaviors*, whereas it may be less appropriate if the aim is to estimate prevalence rates of bullying (Hunter et al., 2021). A note also needs to be made about the timeframe used. In order to prevent students from reporting situations that happened during the summer break, the data-collection occasions were conducted during the period from of November to March (May for the pilot study). If a shorter timeframe had been used (i.e., the last 30-days), this could potentially have included the Christmas break (approximately three weeks), or the sports holiday (one week), or been affected, for example, by a student’s absence (i.e., sickness), thus running the risk of being less representative of a student’s behavior. However, there are also risks associated with using longer recall periods that rely on autobiographical memory, especially with younger children (Hunter et al., 2021).

In Study 1 *indirect* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$) and *direct* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$) bullying were examined. An index of indirect bullying was calculated as the mean score of the measure’s three relational items, whereas direct bullying was calculated as the mean score of the measure’s direct verbal and direct physical items. In Study 2 and Study 4, overall involvement in *bullying* was examined. Therefore, the mean score for all of the measure’s eleven items was computed

as an index of bullying in both studies. In Study 2, Cronbach's α was .87 in the grade 5 sample, and in Study 4 Cronbach's α was .86 in both fifth and sixth grade. Study 3 focused on *verbal bullying* and changes in verbal bullying over time. Therefore, the mean score for the measure's verbal items was calculated as an index depicting verbal bullying. Cronbach's alphas were .73, .73, .69, and .78 in grades 4 to 7, respectively.

Cyberbullying

A 6-item self-report measure developed for the purposes of this longitudinal project was used to measure cyberbullying perpetration among students. The measure was introduced to the questionnaire in grade 5. In line with the measure of bullying, an a-priori definition of cyberbullying was not given. Instead, the students were asked to: "Think about the past three months. How frequently have you done the following things towards one or more students who are weaker, less popular, or less in charge in comparison to you, using a *mobile phone, computer, or tablet*? Consider situations both in school and outside school." The main question was then followed by six behavioral items and included a wide range of online behaviors (e.g., "Posted pictures or videos of the person against her or his will," "Spread mean rumors about the person"). For each item, the respondent answered on a 5-point scale, from 1 = "*I have never done that*," 2 = "*Only a few times*," 3 = "*2 or 3 times a month*," 4 = "*Once a week*," to 5 = "*Several times a week*."

The cyberbullying measure was used in Study 4. An index was created by averaging the six items and further used as a continuous variable in the analyses. For the sample analyzed in Study 4, Cronbach's alphas were .79 in fifth grade and .82 in sixth grade.

Individual Moral Disengagement

Two different measures were used to operationalize moral disengagement at the individual level.

In the pilot study, the 18-item Moral Disengagement in Bullying Scale (MDBS; Sjögren et al., 2021b; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014) was used to measure moral disengagement. This scale has previously been found to capture moral disengagement as seven distinct factors (with dehumanization and blaming the victim merged into one

factor). This seven-factor solution was also confirmed by a factor analysis conducted on the data used in Study 1. Here, a higher-order model with the global construct of moral disengagement as a second-order factor and the seven mechanisms of moral disengagement as first-order factors fitted the data best. In the MDBS, two items depicted moral justification (e.g., “It’s okay to harm another person a couple of times a week if you do it to protect your friends”). Two items depicted euphemistic labeling (e.g., “Saying mean things to someone a couple of times a week is no big deal. It’s just about joking a little with him or her”). Two items depicted advantageous comparison (e.g., “Teasing a person a couple of times a week is no big deal because it’s much worse to give the person a beating every week”). Two items depicted diffusion of responsibility (e.g., “If my friends begin to bully a classmate, I can’t be blamed for being with them and bullying that person too”). Three items depicted displacement of responsibility (e.g., “If students are having a hard time at home, they can’t be blamed for bullying others”). Four items depicted distortion of consequences (e.g., “People who get teased don’t really get too sad about it”). Three items depicted victim attribution (e.g., “If people are weird, it’s their own fault if they get bullied”). The respondents rated each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = “*strongly disagree*” to 7 = “*strongly agree*.” Mean scores were computed for each of the seven mechanisms of moral disengagement.

For the longitudinal project, the MDBS was further developed to bring into better alignment with the broader aim of the longitudinal research project. Within the longitudinal project, both bullying and bystander behaviors in peer victimization were examined. As the MDBS portrays moral disengagement in bullying situations specifically, the measure used in the pilot study was evaluated as being too limited for the project as a whole. Therefore, the measure used in Studies 2–4 was the Moral Disengagement in Peer Victimization Scale (MDPVS; Sjögren et al., 2021a). In a validation study that included data from the first three waves of the longitudinal study, the unidimensional structure of the scale was verified and the analyses demonstrated factorial invariance across gender and over time (Alsaadi et al., 2021). As in the MDBS, participants were asked to rate, on a 7-point scale, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (1 = “*strongly disagree*,” to 7 = “*strongly*

agree”) with each of the 18 items that followed (e.g., “People who get teased don’t really get too sad about it”; “If my friends begin to tease a classmate, I can’t be blamed for being with them and teasing that person too”). The items included in the measure depicted all four loci of moral disengagement and the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement (see Bandura, 2016). CFAs supported a one-factor structure in the samples analyzed in Studies 2–4, as well as in other studies using data from the longitudinal project (e.g., Sjögren et al., 2021a; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2019). Thus the mean score of all items was computed and used as an index of individual moral disengagement in the analyses. In Studies 2 and 4, Cronbach’s alphas were .87 for the fifth grade samples and .90 in sixth grade (Study 4). In Study 3, Cronbach’s alphas at the four time points were .79, .87, .89, and .93, respectively.

Classroom Collective Moral Disengagement

Classroom collective moral disengagement was measured through an 18-item scale (Sjögren et al., 2021a; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019). To capture the collective dimension, the unit of reference was the *classroom* instead of the individual’s own moral disengagement. Thus, the participants were asked the following overall question: “In your class, how many students think that...[item]?”. To avoid test effects between measures, the main question was followed by the very same items as in the MDPVS. Thus, the items included in the classroom collective moral disengagement scale represented all four loci and eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. However, and in line with the validation of the Italian classroom collective moral disengagement scale (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014), evidence of a unidimensional factor structure was found in the validation study conducted on data from the longitudinal project (Alsaadi et al., 2021). Furthermore, invariance across genders and timepoints (grades 4 to 6) indicated that the classroom collective moral disengagement scale is suitable when comparing means and covariances – between boys and girls, as well as over time.

In line with the original procedure proposed by Gini, Pozzoli, and Bussey (2014), the students rated each item on a 5-point scale consisting of the alternatives: “*none*”; “*about one quarter*”; “*about*

half”; “*about three quarters*”; and “*everyone*”. To make the interpretation of fractions easier, especially for the younger students, each alternative was also presented visually with a picture showing a group of people. To illustrate “*everyone*,” all the people were shaded, whereas to illustrate “*about three quarters*,” three fourths of the people in the picture were shaded. At the individual level, this scale represented a student’s perception of the extent to which moral disengagement mechanisms are common among classmates (cf., student-perceived collective moral disengagement; Gini et al., 2021). Classroom collective moral disengagement was obtained by computing the average score for each student within the classroom, and then computing the classroom mean. Cronbach’s alphas were .93 in the grade 5 sample analyzed in Study 2, and .92 in both fifth and sixth grade samples in Study 4.

Pro-Aggressive Bystander Behavior

Pro-aggressive bystander behavior was measured using five items from a 15-item measure, developed within this research project (Sjögren et al., 2021a). This measure consists of an developed version of the Student Bystander Behavior Scale (SBBS; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). In contrast to the SBBS, but consistent with our measure of bullying, the word bullying was not used, and items were added in order to increase the number of items for each category of bystander behaviors. The participants were asked the following question: “Try to remember situations in school in which you have seen one or more students hurting another student in school (e.g., teasing, taunting, threatening, beating, or excluding). What do you usually do?” followed by 15 items portraying all four bystander behaviors (i.e., assisting, reinforcing, passive bystanding, and defending; Salmivalli, 1999). In previous studies, the bystander behaviors of assisting and reinforcing have loaded on the same factor (Jungert et al., 2016; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Given these empirical findings, and the theoretical interest in Study 1, the two participant roles assistant and reinforcer were combined and labelled pro-aggressive bystander behavior (5 items: e.g., “I also start to hurt the student”; “I encourage those who are hurting the student by laughing and cheering them on”) (see also Sjögren et al., 2021a). In the pilot study, the students indicated how well the depicted

behaviors corresponded with their own behavior as bystanders on a 4-point scale (1 = “*strongly disagree*” to 4 = “*strongly agree*”), and in the longitudinal project they were indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = “*strongly disagree*”, to 7 = “*strongly agree*”). Cronbach’s α was .78 for the items representing pro-aggressive bystander behavior in Study 1, and .79 in Study 2. In Study 1, the mean score was calculated and used as an index for pro-aggressive bystander behavior at the individual level. In Study 2, pro-aggressive bystander behavior as a classroom-level characteristic was obtained by computing each individual’s mean score and then calculating the classroom mean. Note however, that the term Pro-Bullying Behaviors (PBB) was used in Study 2 for the aggregated classroom score of pro-aggressive bystander behavior.

Main Analyses

Quantitative questionnaire data was analyzed as part of all four studies included in this thesis. The main analyses were conducted using the R software and RStudio, whereas for descriptive statistics and data preparation, both SPSS (versions 22–25) and RStudio (version 1.0.44 or later) were used.

Study 1 used cross-sectional data collected in the pilot study. As the dependent variables (indirect bullying, direct bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior) were moderately correlated, multivariate multiple regression analysis (Afifi et al., 2004) was chosen as the main method of analysis in Study 1. This method generates the same parameter estimates and standard errors as separate univariate analyses, but also multivariate test statistics for the included predictor variables. Although students were nested within classrooms ($m = 23$), multilevel modeling was not used. Before conducting the analyses, we examined random intercept models for each dependent variable. The results of the analyses indicated that the means for the dependent variables did not vary significantly (all $p > .05$) between classrooms and Intraclass coefficients (ICCs) varied between .003 and .028. Based on these findings it was determined that multilevel modeling was not needed.

In Study 2, cross-sectional data from the second wave of data collection was analyzed. As students ($n = 1,577$) were nested within classrooms ($m = 105$), and the focus was on both individual-level

and classroom-level effects, as well as cross-level interactions, multilevel modeling techniques were used to analyze the data (Bickel, 2007). Examination of the ICC showed that 8.5% of the total variance in the dependent variable (bullying) could be attributed to differences between classrooms, lending support to a dependency among observations. A strength of the multilevel model is that the groups (classrooms) are modeled as having been randomly drawn from a larger population of groups, making it possible to draw inferences beyond the included classrooms (Bickel, 2007).

In Study 3 and Study 4, multilevel growth modeling (MLGM; Peugh & Heck, 2017; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was chosen as the main method of analysis. In MLGM, change over time is conceptualized as a continuous process captured by an individual's underlying growth trajectory. This modeling technique is well suited to capturing change at both the student (individual) and the classroom (group) level (Bickel, 2007). Other advantages of the MLGM are the ability to incorporate time-varying predictor variables, to handle dependence due to both repeated observations and clustering, and to handle unstructured data (e.g., participants not participating at all time-points) (Peugh & Heck, 2017). In Study 3, two levels (Level 1 = measurement occasion; Level 2 = student) were modeled, while in Study 4, a third level (classroom) was also included. These choices were based on the aim of the particular study and examinations of the intraclass coefficients.

Summary of the Studies

Study 1

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2020). **Mechanisms of moral disengagement and their associations with indirect bullying, direct bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior.**

Journal of Early Adolescence, 40(1), 28–55.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0272431618824745>

The aim of this study was to examine the degree to which the different mechanisms of moral disengagement (seven in total because dehumanization and blaming the victim were merged into one mechanism labelled victim attribution) were associated with indirect bullying, direct bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior. Furthermore, we examined whether these associations differed depending on gender. Firstly, as previous research has shown a positive association between moral justification and bullying perpetration (Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), we expected moral justification to be positively associated with both direct and indirect bullying perpetration. Secondly, diffusion of responsibility has been positively associated with bystanders who do not help victims (Latané & Darley, 1970) and it has been suggested that classrooms with higher levels of diffused responsibility may be at greater risk of supporting bullying (Pozzoli et al., 2012); therefore, we expected diffusion of responsibility to be positively associated with pro-aggressive bystander behavior. Thirdly, victim attribution was expected to be positively associated with pro-aggressive bystander behavior and both forms of bullying perpetration. Victim attribution has been positively associated with bullying (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014) and findings from qualitative studies show that it is common to put blame on the victim or to see the victim as odd or deviant (Thornberg, 2010,

2011). Three hypotheses regarding gender differences were also formulated; we hypothesized that boys would be more prone to engage in direct bullying (Cook et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2019) and pro-aggressive bystander behavior (Demaray et al., 2016; Rigby, 1997) whereas girls were expected to be more prone to engage in indirect bullying (Card et al., 2008).

The original sample consisted of 547 students (23 classrooms, in four schools) in grades four to eight. The four schools were located in small towns with less than 20,000 inhabitants. Active parental consent was required in order to participate in the study. A number of students were absent on the day of data collection, and in addition, 16 students were excluded from the analysis due to technical issues (internet connection issues). Thus, cross-sectional data from 317 students (62% girls; $M = 12.62$ years; $SD = 1.35$) was analyzed in the study.

Variables of interest for the study's aim were the mechanisms of moral disengagement (seven in total), direct bullying, indirect bullying, and pro-aggressive bystander behavior. All variables were multiple-item measures and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to evaluate their fit with the current sample. In analyzing the data, we performed multivariate multiple regression analyses to account for the moderate correlations between the dependent variables. These multivariate regressions were followed by separate univariate regression analyses for each dependent variable.

Overall, the results support Bandura's (2016) proposal that moral disengagement mechanisms used by individuals are likely to differ between "spheres of activity." As hypothesized, we found that girls tended to score higher on indirect bullying in comparison to boys, whereas boys tended to score higher on direct bullying and pro-aggressive bystander behavior. However, when the mechanisms of moral disengagement were included in the final models, the association was non-significant for direct bullying. Furthermore, we found that moral justification was significantly and positively associated with direct bullying, and that diffusion of responsibility was significantly and positively associated with pro-aggressive bystander behavior. We also found that the effects on the dependent variables differed between boys and girls for some of the moral disengagement mechanisms. Firstly, the results revealed a significant and positive association between victim attribution and

direct bullying for girls, whereas this association was not found to be statistically significant for boys. Secondly, distortion of consequences was significantly and positively associated with pro-aggressive bystander behavior for boys, but not for girls.

The results thus indicate that it is important to take gender into consideration when studying the association between moral disengagement and various forms of bullying and bystander behavior. Here, gender norms (e.g. direct aggression being more acceptable for boys than girls) might contribute to interpreting the result that girls seem to feel a greater need to morally disengage in comparison to boys when engaging in direct bullying.

In sum, the results support the notion that differences between acting as a bully and acting as an assistant or reinforcer of the aggressor (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, et al., 1998) could, at least in part, be related to different moral disengagement mechanisms. Based on these findings, we propose that it may be useful to design interventions and preventive work to help early adolescents to recognize, reflect upon, and to discuss personal responsibility and perceptions of bullying in school, and to focus particularly on strategies of moral disengagement and how these processes facilitate school bullying. Here, victim attribution seems to play a role in pro-aggressive bystander behavior as well as in both indirect and direct bullying. In contrast, a focus on diffusion of responsibility may be addressed when aiming to reduce pro-aggressive bystander behavior.

Study 2

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2021). **Individual moral disengagement and bullying among Swedish fifth graders: The role of collective moral disengagement and pro-bullying behavior within classrooms.**

Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36(17–18), NP9576– NP9600.

<https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/0886260519860889>

The overall aim of this study was to examine whether individual moral disengagement, classroom collective moral disengagement, and pro-aggressive bystander behaviors (e.g., reinforcing and assisting) at the classroom level were associated with bullying

perpetration among Swedish fifth graders. Given that bullying perpetration has been shown to be more common in classrooms in which more students act as pro-aggressive bystanders (Nocentini et al., 2013; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018) and in classrooms with higher levels of collective moral disengagement (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014; Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018), we expected the classroom-level constructs to be uniquely and positively associated with bullying perpetration. Furthermore, with reference to social cognitive theory and triadic determinism (Bandura, 2016), we also expected the classroom-level factors to influence the association between individual moral disengagement and bullying perpetration.

Study 2 was a cross-sectional study and the original sample consisted of 2,448 fifth-grade students in 105 classrooms within 64 schools. Active parental consent was required in order to participate in the study and 68% of the original sample handed in such parental consent. Forty students were absent on the day of data collection and, in addition, 46 students were omitted from the analysis (e.g., for missing answers on complete measures). Thus, data from 1,577 students (53% girls; $M_{age} = 11.6$ years, $SD = 0.3$) were analyzed in Study 2. Variables of interest for the study's aim at the individual level were gender, individual moral disengagement, and bullying perpetration, while variables at the classroom-level were pro-bullying bystander behavior and classroom collective moral disengagement. All variables (except gender) were measured using multiple-item self-report measures. Because the students were nested within classrooms, we used multilevel modeling to account for the nested data.

The second study moved beyond the characteristics of the individual in terms of moral disengagement by also including classroom-level moral processes and behaviors in the form of classroom collective moral disengagement and pro-bullying bystander behaviors, when examining students' bullying perpetration. Previous research has shown that bullying prevalence is influenced by features at the classroom level (e.g., Saarento, Boulton, et al., 2015). This is also in line with social cognitive theory, in which individual and environmental factors are assumed to interact to produce immoral behavior (Bandura, 2016). Consistent with prior research (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al.,

2019), individual moral disengagement was positively associated with bullying perpetration at the individual level. That is, those with a greater tendency to endorse moral disengagement were also more likely to score higher on bullying perpetration. Furthermore, when including all variables in the final model, we found that girls tended to score somewhat lower than boys on bullying perpetration, but the effect size was rather small, leading us to question the practical significance of this finding. Furthermore, and as hypothesized, our results also show that both classroom collective moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystander behaviors at the classroom level were positively associated with bullying perpetration. The first result suggests that, in classrooms where students more commonly perceive that classmates justify peer aggression in different ways, bullying is more common. This is a salient result that supports the emerging theorizing of moral disengagement as not merely an intrapsychic phenomenon, but also a phenomenon that occurs across individuals within groups (see Gini et al., 2015, 2021). Additionally, our results support the hypothesis that students were more prone to bully others in classrooms where classmates more commonly reported that they assisted and reinforced bullying, a finding that is coherent with earlier studies (Nocentini et al., 2013; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018).

Regarding the moderating role of the two classroom-level constructs, only the interaction between pro-aggressive bystander behaviors and individual moral disengagement was significantly associated with bullying perpetration. Here, students who showed a greater tendency to morally disengage were even more prone to engage in bullying behaviors when classmates tended to join in or support bullying. Taken together, our findings support the social cognitive view of school bullying as a complex problem influenced by and interacting with both personal factors (e.g., moral disengagement) and the social context of the classroom. Although we acknowledge that it may be premature to draw firm conclusions based on the few studies on classroom collective moral disengagement and bullying, we encourage future studies to continue to examine the role of shared cognitions and how groups (e.g., classrooms or smaller peer-groups) morally reconstrue bullying.

Study 3

Bjärehed, M., Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., & Gini, G. (2021). **Moral disengagement and verbal bullying in early adolescence: A three-year longitudinal study.**

Journal of School Psychology, 84, 63–73.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.08.006>

The aims of Study 3 were to model changes in verbal bullying across individuals over a period of three years (grades 4–7, ages 10–13), and to enhance the understanding of moral disengagement as a factor longitudinally associated with bullying. Study 3 extended previous research in two important ways, by; (a) specifically assessing the growth of verbal bullying, and (b) differentiating among between-person effects (i.e., trait-like moral disengagement; some have, in general, greater moral disengagement than others) and within-person effects of moral disengagement (i.e., state-like moral disengagement, individual changes in moral disengagement over time) (Hoffman & Stawski, 2009). We argue that focusing on verbal bullying specifically is warranted because previous research has consistently reported verbal bullying to be the most common form of school bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Craig et al., 2009; J. Wang et al., 2009). Differentiating between types of bullying is especially relevant when studying changes over time; for example, involvement in direct physical bullying tends to decrease during adolescence, whereas verbal bullying may increase (for a review, see Poling et al., 2019).

In Study 3, longitudinal, individual-level self-reported data from a total of 2,432 students, collected over the course of three years, was analyzed. All participants with parental consent who participated in at least one of the four waves were included in the analyses. Participants had the opportunity to take part in each consecutive year and of the 2,432 students included in the analyses, 889 participated in all four waves, 534 in three waves, 311 in two waves, and 698 in a single wave. Mean age for the respondents at T1 was 10.55 years ($SD = 0.35$), at T2 = 11.55 ($SD = 0.33$), at T3 = 12.58 ($SD = 0.35$), and at T4 = 13.65 ($SD = 0.36$). Note that out of the rather large number of participants answering the questionnaire in only one wave, most students participated in grade 7, due to the formation of

new classrooms at new schools that is inherent in the transition from grade 6 to 7 within the Swedish school system. Variables of interest for the study's aim were gender, individual moral disengagement, and verbal bullying perpetration. All variables (except gender) were measured by multiple-item self-report measures. Multilevel growth modeling (Level 1 = measurement occasion; Level 2 = student) was used to model individual trajectories of verbal bullying. This method of analysis enabled the investigation of both within-person and between-person effects of moral disengagement on verbal bullying.

The results of Study 3 show that individuals' verbal bullying scores, on average, increased slightly between grades 4 and 7, and that verbal bullying scores were positively associated with moral disengagement over time. The first finding is in line with previous research on verbal *aggression*, which has found an increase during early adolescence (for a review, see Poling et al., 2019). The second finding, that between-person differences in the propensity to morally disengage already explained a significant amount of variation in verbal bullying in fourth grade, is in line with previous findings suggesting that the tendency to morally disengage is associated not only with bullying as a composite concept but also with verbal forms specifically (Paciello et al., 2008; Rubio-Garay et al., 2016; Travlos et al., 2021). Regarding gender differences, the results show that boys tended to score somewhat higher than girls on verbal bullying at all four time-points. This direct effect of gender, however, was not significant in the final multilevel growth model, nor was there any significant effect of gender on the growth of verbal bullying.

Furthermore, the verbal bullying trajectories of participants with higher average levels of moral disengagement were steeper than those of students with lower average levels of moral disengagement. Bandura (2002, 2016) suggested that moral disengagement tends to develop into cognitive patterns over time. At first, milder acts that are considered to be wrong may be justified and conducted with manageable feelings of self-blame, and then gradually become more severe or frequent due to habituation. A novel finding in Study 3 was that an individual's deviation from his or her own average level of moral disengagement was positively associated with a concurrent deviation in verbal bullying, over and above the mean level of moral disengagement. A plausible interpretation is that it is not only those

students who are “high disengagers” (i.e., trait-like moral disengagement) who engage in verbal bullying, but that temporary increases are also associated with more verbal bullying at that timepoint. Thus, making children and adolescents aware of and resistant to moral disengagement processes may be beneficial to all, not only those who show high levels of moral disengagement.

Study 4

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In Study 4, the main aim was to examine whether individual and/or classroom collective moral disengagement were associated with offline and/or online bullying over the course of one year, and whether changes in individual and/or classroom collective moral disengagement from fifth to sixth grade were associated with changes in online and/or offline bullying. Based on previous research, it was expected that initial levels of individual moral disengagement would be positively associated with offline and online bullying (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al., 2019; Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that initial levels of classroom collective moral disengagement would be positively associated with offline bullying perpetration (Gini et al., 2015; Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019). Although no previous research has examined the role of classroom collective moral disengagement in online bullying in particular, a positive association was hypothesized (cf. Gámez-Guadix & Gini, 2016). Furthermore, it was expected that changes in individual moral disengagement between the two time points (from grade 5 to grade 6) would be associated with changes in both offline and online bullying. However, given the low number of studies examining changes in classroom collective moral disengagement, these associations were examined in an exploratory manner.

In Study 4, longitudinal self-report data from a total of 1,048 students, collected at two time-points (grade 5 and grade 6) were

analyzed. The original sample included 2,448 fifth-grade students from 105 classrooms. However, given the current study's research focus, only classrooms that were stable between the fifth and sixth grades were included. A classroom was defined as stable if it did not merge with other classrooms or split over time. Furthermore, only classrooms with a response rate above 50% were included. This excluded 37 classrooms and reduced the original sample size to 1,718 students. In total, 1,048 students (54% girls) answered the study's measures in both the fifth and sixth grades. Mean age for the participants when in fifth grade was 10.54 years ($SD = 0.32$).

Variables of interest for the study's aim were individual moral disengagement, classroom collective moral disengagement, offline bullying, online bullying, and gender. All of these variables except gender were measured using multiple-item self-report measures. Because measurement occasions (Level 1) were nested within students (Level 2) and students were nested within classrooms (Level 3), multilevel growth modeling with three levels was used to analyze the data. Calculations of intraclass correlation coefficients also indicated that modeling three levels was appropriate: approximately 6% (online) and 9% (offline) of the variance in bullying could be attributed to differences between classrooms.

The results of Study 4 show that individual moral disengagement and classroom collective moral disengagement were associated with bullying perpetration both offline and online. That is, individuals were more prone to bully others if they also showed a greater tendency to morally disengage and belonged to classrooms in which the students collectively considered their class to be more prone to morally disengage. The first finding is consistent with other studies examining the association between bullying (online and offline) and moral disengagement at the individual level (for meta-analyses and reviews, see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al., 2019; Lo Cricchio et al., 2021; Zych et al., 2015). The latter finding is in line with the few prior studies examining the role of classroom collective moral disengagement in bullying (Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2021). The finding of a positive association between classroom collective moral disengagement and online bullying perpetration, however, is a novel finding. Together, these findings suggest that the classroom context affects the bullying

of other students not only offline, but also online. This is not unexpected because online communication and other online activities with friends and classmates is a substantial part of daily life for young people, in Sweden and elsewhere.

Furthermore, the results show that students who, in comparison to other students, increased more in individual moral disengagement over time tended to engage in more offline and online bullying. One similar study has found that children who increased in individual moral disengagement engaged in more offline bullying over time (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019). The current study adds to Thornberg et al.'s study in showing a similar effect with a slightly older age group. In addition, whereas prior longitudinal studies suggest that high levels of individual moral disengagement predict greater involvement in online bullying perpetration over time (Marín-López et al., 2020), the findings of Study 4 link changes in individual moral disengagement to changes in online bullying. Lastly, changes in classroom collective moral disengagement were not significantly associated with changes in either online or offline bullying perpetration. This may suggest that classroom collective moral disengagement has a more long-term effect on offline and online bullying than individual moral disengagement, which instead may have more influence on change (for a discussion, see Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019).

General Discussion

Previous research has shown that moral disengagement is a salient risk factor associated with bullying. However, in order to develop appropriate interventions and anti-bullying programs, merely knowing that students who bully also tend to morally disengage may not be enough (Runions et al., 2019). In particular, three areas emerged that could enhance the current understanding. Therefore, in this thesis, I set out to further explore the association between moral disengagement and bullying in early adolescence in relation to these identified areas. Firstly, most previous research has examined moral disengagement as an omnibus construct and information about the relative importance of the distinct mechanisms of moral disengagement in bullying could add to that understanding. As suggested from a theoretical standpoint, focusing on moral disengagement as a multi-dimensional construct may provide more precise information regarding which components to include when designing interventions to reduce bullying (Runions et al., 2019).

In relation to the second area, most previous research has focused on the association between moral disengagement and bullying from an individual perspective, hence neglecting the potential influence of moral processes at the group (i.e., classroom) and community levels. Gaining knowledge about classroom moral processes in bullying is warranted, and can shed light on whether moral disengagement should be addressed in interventions targeting individual students (i.e., “bullies”), or more broadly directed at students in general (i.e., a whole-school approach). Therefore, this thesis examined, in particular, classroom collective moral disengagement, referring to students’ perceptions of the extent to which moral disengagement mechanisms are common among classmates.

Lastly, the third area centers on the fact that the vast majority of previous research has focused on the cross-sectional relationship

between factors. Longitudinal associations between moral disengagement and bullying have been analyzed to a much lesser extent. Including an examination of how changes in moral disengagement are linked to changes in bullying perpetration and how this relationship changes over time might be a more developmentally relevant approach, because the nature of both social relationships (like bullying) and cognitive functions (like moral disengagement) change as children age.

In the following sections, I summarize and discuss the findings of the four studies, in relation to these three areas. I also discuss strengths and limitations, make some suggestions for future research, and discuss potential practical implications.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Although the process of moral disengagement is assumed to operate in a similar way independent of context – by weakening the restraints over harmful behavior – the role of the distinct mechanisms may be more or less pertinent depending on the type of bullying or an individual’s participant role (Bandura, 2016; Bussey, 2020; Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Runions et al., 2019; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). According to social cognitive theory, the sphere of activity may trigger (or reduce) the use of different moral disengagement mechanisms (Bandura, 2016). This assumption was supported by the findings of the first study.

Given the findings of Study 1, the difference between acting as a bully and acting pro-aggressively as a bystander seem to be related, at least in part, to different moral disengagement mechanisms. An essential difference between bullying perpetration and pro-aggressive bystander behavior is that the bully role contributes more actively to the bullying, whereas pro-aggressive bystanders contribute more as responders within the group process (Salmivalli, 2010). In particular, the findings of Study 1 suggested that victim attribution (dehumanizing and blaming the victim) is a key moral disengagement mechanism in both bullying perpetration and pro-aggressive bystanding. This is in line with several other studies; dehumanizing and blaming the victim have been found to be associated with bullying in studies in Australia, Spain, and Sweden (Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Romera et al., 2021; Thornberg &

Jungert, 2014). Furthermore, the findings of Study 1 add to the literature by suggesting that victim attribution is a pertinent disengagement mechanism in both indirect and direct forms of bullying. However the latter association was only significant for girls, which will be discussed in more detail later in the discussion section.

The findings of Study 1 also pointed to some differential associations. For instance, we found that moral justification was significantly associated with bullying perpetration but not with pro-aggressive bystander behavior. Bandura (2016) argued that the mechanisms within the behavioral locus (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison) are the most salient mechanisms for disengaging moral control in daily life. Our findings suggest that early adolescents who engage in cognitive processes such as telling themselves that through their aggression they are in fact “doing the right thing,” tend to report higher scores on bullying perpetration, particularly more direct bullying. This may be especially problematic because moral justification impedes motivation to change the behavior, thus making students more likely to engage in this behavior in the future (Pornari & Wood, 2010). Additionally, the findings of the first study suggest that a student’s tendency to minimize personal responsibility when other students are also present or involved is related to acting pro-aggressively as a bystander in bullying situations. This might imply that, whereas bullies retain moral agency through moral justification, pro-aggressive bystanders instead reduce their sense of agency by minimizing their own responsibility, in addition to putting blame on the victim.

The Classroom Context

Collective Moral Disengagement and Pro-Aggressive Bystander Behavior

Social cognitive theory supports neither a straight dispositionalist nor a pure situationist approach to explain behavior. Instead, bullying behavior is understood as a result of the interplay between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2016). Hence, this interactionist approach suggests that it is likely that

school bullying, as well as the role of personal factors, will vary depending on environmental factors (Ettedal et al., 2015; Gini et al., 2015; Hymel et al., 2010). Although many factors have the potential to influence bullying perpetration (Álvarez-García et al., 2015), this thesis has emphasized factors found within a classroom context, referring to the social setting in which students and teachers interact. Classrooms can differ in moral climate, and an expansion of research on this topic has been called for (Gini et al., 2015; Killer et al., 2019). In particular, this thesis has examined the role of classroom collective moral disengagement, referring to students' collective perceptions of the degree to which moral disengagement mechanisms are common among classmates (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014), and the role of classroom levels of pro-aggressive bystander behaviors. Overall, the findings support the interactionist perspective that bullying is not an isolated matter between a "bully" and a "victim," but is influenced both by classmates' behaviors, as shown in Study 2, and by collective perceptions of other students' attitudes and beliefs (Henry et al., 2000; Thornberg, Pozzoli, et al., 2021), as shown in Studies 2 and 4.

Consistent with previous research, classroom collective moral disengagement was found to be positively associated with bullying scores (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014; Kollerová, Soukup, et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019; Thornberg, Wänström, et al., 2021) and contributed to explaining variations in bullying among classrooms (Studies 2 and 4). An additional finding was that classroom collective moral disengagement also contributed to explaining variations in cyberbullying, as found in Study 4. This implies that characteristics of the classroom, in the form of collective moral disengagement, influence not only students' behaviors in school but also their behavior online. Given that online communication and other online activities are an increasing part of the daily school and social life of young people (Andersson, 2021; Odgers et al., 2020), this is not unexpected. Previous research has, for instance, found a positive association between negative classroom social and moral climate, and cyberbullying (Aizenkot & Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018; Gámez-Guadix & Gini, 2016).

The finding in Study 2 that pro-aggressive bystander behavior within classrooms was associated with bullying is highly congruent with the social cognitive perspective and its foundation in social

learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Within this theory, children are assumed to “learn to bully,” both when observing others’ bullying behaviors being reinforced (vicarious reinforcement), and by direct reinforcement of their own behavior – which in turn is theorized to increase the likelihood that the behavior will persist, or even increase.

Furthermore, previous studies in the field of social psychology have shown that processes involving victim attribution (i.e., dehumanization and victim blaming) and diffusion of responsibility can influence group members to endorse, reinforce, or passively approve of harmful behavior (Bandura et al., 1975; Haslam, 2006). The findings of Studies 2 and 4 may imply that similar mechanisms also influence bullying behavior within classrooms. A particularly interesting, and perhaps novel, finding in the second study was that the anticipated effect of moral disengagement on bullying was strengthened in classrooms characterized by higher average levels of pro-aggressive bystander behavior. A plausible interpretation of this finding is that individuals who more easily lay moral standards aside, through the use of moral disengagement strategies, may be more vulnerable to negative peer pressure and normative influences.

The findings that both classroom collective moral disengagement and pro-aggressive bystander behavior were uniquely associated with bullying in Study 2 can also be discussed in the light of descriptive and injunctive classroom norms. Descriptive classroom norms refers to how classmates act; that is, what is commonly done, whereas injunctive classroom norms refers to what classmates commonly approve of, or what is socially sanctioned (Cialdini et al., 1991). Whereas classroom levels of pro-aggressive bystander behaviors may be more similar to a descriptive classroom norm (what students commonly do), classroom collective moral disengagement can be said to constitute an injunctive classroom norm (what student ought to do). Students’ perceptions of classmates’ attitudes – and moral disengagement (i.e., student-perceived collective moral disengagement) – are likely to influence their behavior (Cialdini et al., 1991). For instance, Sandstrom et al. (2013) found that students more commonly refrained from defending when they misjudged peers’ approval of bullying; that is, when they thought that it was more common to endorse pro-bullying attitudes than it actually was. Indeed, studies have shown that students’

perceptions of common attitudes and beliefs among classmates can be used both as an individual-level characteristic and as an aggregated classroom characteristic (Gini et al., 2015, 2021; Kollerová, Yanagida, et al., 2018). In this thesis, student-perceived collective moral disengagement, at the individual level, was not examined, given the theoretical interest in collective moral disengagement as “an emergent group-level property arising from the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic group dynamics” (White et al., 2009, p. 43). Future studies could continue to examine the role of classroom processes in conjunction with individuals’ perceptions. It would be particularly interesting to examine how individual moral disengagement, student-perceived collective moral disengagement, and classroom collective moral disengagement develop over time.

Longitudinal Findings

This thesis also adds to the existing literature on the role of individual and classroom-level moral factors associated with changes in bullying and aggression over time. The longitudinal design of this research enabled an estimation of the mean growth of (verbal) bullying scores (Study 3), as well as testing hypotheses regarding between-persons and between-classroom differences in both levels of bullying, and in the rate of change over time (Bickel, 2007). The findings suggest that individuals’ bullying behavior, on average, increased slightly over time among the students. Both bullying and cyberbullying scores increased, between grades five and six, as did individuals’ verbal bullying scores across the whole early adolescent period (grades 4–7). Because the increase was rather small, however, the practical significance of this may be questioned. Although the bullying scores were rather stable, the findings of Studies 3 and 4 suggested that differences in individuals’ moral disengagement – both between students and within individual students – were associated with changes in bullying over time.

In particular, the findings of the third study indicate that a student’s mean level of moral disengagement (i.e., trait-like moral disengagement) is positively associated with verbal bullying over time. This is in line with studies focusing on verbal aggression in general (Li et al., 2014; Paciello et al., 2008; Rubio-Garay et al.,

2016). Taken together, these findings indicate that moral disengagement is likely to play an important role in the development of verbal bullying and verbal aggression, throughout the whole adolescent period. Furthermore, the third study adds to the literature by showing that not only was a general proneness to morally disengage related to verbal bullying, but that time-specific changes in moral disengagement were associated with changes in verbal bullying. This latter finding contributes to the more theoretical discussion regarding the processes and development of moral disengagement over time. Although Bandura (2016) emphasized that moral disengagement tends to develop into cognitive habits and patterns over time, it should not be considered merely a static personality trait (Thornberg, Gini, et al., 2021). Indeed, our findings suggest that both trait-like moral disengagement (i.e. average level) and state-like moral disengagements (i.e. deviations from the average level) could be associated with (verbal) bullying.

In addition, Studies 2 and 4 show that classrooms differed in their levels of classroom collective moral disengagement in the fifth grade, and this difference partially explained differences in the offline and online bullying trajectories of individuals (Study 4). Note, however, that changes in classroom collective moral disengagement were not significantly associated with changes in either bullying or cyberbullying. Interestingly, in the validation study by Alsaadi et al. (2021), which was conducted on data from the first three waves of the longitudinal project, classroom collective moral disengagement was moderately correlated with classroom levels of bullying in grades four and five and weakly correlated with bullying perpetration at the classroom level in the sixth grade. Indeed, the classroom is only one significant socializing context and it is possible that informal peer groups or close friends become more influential than the classroom context as children enter adolescence and progress through it (Smetana et al., 2015). Future studies could continue to examine this issue, for instance by including collective moral disengagement among informal peer groups or close friends.

Additional Findings – The Role of Gender

Previous studies have indicated gender differences in bullying (Cook et al., 2010). In line with this, the findings of this thesis suggest that

boys tend to be more involved in “traditional” bullying perpetration (Beckman, 2013; Cook et al., 2010; J. Wang et al., 2009). It has been proposed that this gender difference is prevalent at all ages during early adolescence (Smith et al., 2019). However, the role of gender has also been shown to vary depending on the type of bullying, with boys being overrepresented in direct verbal and physical bullying, whereas the findings for indirect bullying and cyberbullying are less clear-cut (Smith, 2014). The findings of this thesis are in line with this latter suggestion. Examinations of mean level differences showed that boys in general scored higher on direct bullying (Study 1), verbal bullying (Study 3), and pro-aggressive bystander behavior (Study 1) in comparison to girls. In contrast, girls were somewhat more prone to score higher on indirect bullying (Study 1), although the effect was small. Additionally, no significant mean level difference was found for cyberbullying (Study 4). However, when including gender in the main analyses together with other potential predictors, one can conclude that the role of gender may be more complex (Underwood & Rosen, 2010).

For example, when gender was included in the longitudinal multilevel models in conjunction with moral disengagement, there was no significant direct effect of gender on either verbal bullying scores or the overall developmental trajectories of verbal bullying over time. This suggests that, when controlling for moral disengagement, girls seem to be as likely as boys to engage in verbal bullying. Furthermore, the results from the cross-sectional studies show that, when including moral disengagement in the analyses, boys were slightly more prone to score high on bullying (Studies 2 and 4), and on pro-aggressive bystander behavior (Study 1), and that girls were somewhat more prone to engage in indirect bullying than boys (Study 1).

In addition, this thesis includes analyses of the moderating role of gender. That is, whether the effect of moral disengagement on bullying perpetration varies between boys and girls. If not, it might be plausible to assume that moral disengagement functions in the same way independent of gender, which is in line with the findings of Gini, Pozzoli, and Hymel’s (2014) meta-analysis. In contrast, a later meta-analysis by Killer et al. (2019) found a stronger relation between moral disengagement and bullying for girls than boys, which may suggest that girls feel a greater need to morally disengage

when taking part in immoral behavior in order to “retain their sense of moral integrity” (Bandura, 2016, p.2). Furthermore, when examining the bivariate correlations between the specific mechanisms of moral disengagement and direct and indirect bullying (Study 1), the findings show that, although boys tended to score higher than girls on all the mechanisms (with the exception of victim attribution), none of these variables were significantly correlated in the bivariate analysis with either direct or indirect bullying for boys. In the final regression models, however, we found that the effect of victim attribution differed for boys and girls. For girls, victim attribution was a significant predictor of direct bullying, whereas the effect of victim attribution on direct bullying was not significant for boys. This may indeed suggest that girls feel a greater need than boys to morally disengage when taking part in direct bullying. Gender was also found to moderate the role of moral disengagement in verbal bullying (Study 3). In Study 3, both boys and girls who were more prone to morally disengage tended to score higher on verbal bullying. However, the effect of moral disengagement on verbal bullying was stronger for girls than boys. Note, however, that this finding contradicts that of Travlos et al. (2021), who found no differential effect of gender on this association. So, how can the differential effect of gender in this thesis be interpreted?

According to social cognitive theory, we need to understand social and moral cognition and behaviors as being the results of reciprocal interactions between individual and environmental factors (Bandura, 2016). The environment includes both proximate and environmental influences across broad social networks and more globalized modes of influence (e.g., the internet and mass media). When studying bullying, it is crucial to understand the individual characteristics of the bully in relation to the multiple social systems of which the individual is an inseparable part (Barboza et al., 2009). The gender differences found in this thesis may, for example, be discussed in relation to gender norms and socialization processes (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), in which girls are generally socialized into more compliant, subordinate, and gentle roles, whereas boys are socialized to be more dominant (Eisner & Malti, 2015). If direct bullying and (direct) verbal forms of aggression are somewhat more in line with masculinity norms (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Reidy et al., 2009), this might explain the result that the effect of moral

disengagement on direct physical and verbal bullying was stronger for girls than boys. Taken together, the findings have potential practical implications when planning interventions and preventive efforts targeting bullying, especially since studies show that not all the components of anti-bullying programs are equally effective for boys and girls (Flygare et al., 2011).

Strengths, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the thesis' strengths is the large sample sizes. A large sample size increases statistical power to detect not only main effects at the individual level, but also interaction effects, and cross-level effects. Three of the empirical studies each included more than one thousand students ($1,048 \geq n \geq 2,432$), and the large sample size allowed us to use multilevel modeling techniques when analyzing the data. Students within a classroom share their classroom environment (e.g., teachers, timetable, classmates), experiences that are likely to affect behavior. This nesting creates a statistical dependency among students within a given classroom, and a failure to take this dependency into account may lead to biased estimates (Bickel, 2007). Thus, a strength of this thesis is the use of multilevel modeling techniques and the inclusion of classroom-level constructs (Studies 2 and Study 4). Examining classroom-level effects, within a multilevel framework, requires an adequate higher-level sample size for accurate estimates (Maas & Hox, 2005). In a simulation study, Maas and Hox concluded that the number of level two units needed in order to produce unbiased estimates should exceed 50. In this thesis, Study 2 included as many as 105 classrooms (Level 2).

Including social environmental factors in conjunction with individual factors is arguably more in line with social cognitive theory, in which it is emphasized that both personal and environmental factors interact in shaping behavior (Bandura, 2016). Indeed, we found that classroom collective moral disengagement and classroom levels of pro-aggressive bystander behavior contributed to explaining individual students' involvement in bullying – both in school and online. However, it has been proposed that the understanding and operationalization of collective moral disengagement is not yet sufficiently developed (Schaefer &

Bouwmeester, 2021) and future studies should continue to elaborate on the concept of classroom collective moral disengagement and the role it plays in bullying. To capture the changing and complex dynamics of social interactions involved in bullying, classroom and playground observations (Gumpel et al., 2014) and open-ended interviews may provide valuable insights into students' and classrooms' development of collective moral disengagement.

Another strength of this thesis is the use of longitudinal data in Studies 3 and 4. For example, in Study 3 we analyzed the first four waves of data, collected in grades 4–7. The use of multilevel growth models enabled us to describe patterns of change in verbal bullying, and also contributed with some knowledge about why patterns of change might differ between individuals (Bickel, 2007). Furthermore, this enabled an examination of both changing and more stable aspects of moral disengagement and its associations with verbal bullying across early adolescence. However, because the cyberbullying measure was introduced for the first time in grade 5, and that students transitioned to new schools in grade 7, Study 4 only included two time-points (grades 5–6). Therefore future studies could aim to include a longer time-span, especially in the light of the previous discussion suggesting that the classroom influence might decrease, whereas the influence of other socialization contexts might instead increase (Caravita et al., 2014). Including more time-points also enables an examination of more complex growth trajectories (e.g., quadratic, Bickel, 2007).

An additional limitation is that the analyses relied on a common source of data. Using self-reports as a single measurement source can increase the risk of shared method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and multiple sources of informants are often recommended in order to reduce this bias (Bovaird, 2010). However, teacher- and peer-nominations are not free of limitations. For example, there is a risk that such nominations more easily capture direct forms of bullying (e.g., verbal and physical) whereas relational bullying and cyberbullying perpetration may go unnoticed (Bovaird, 2010). Additional biases related to the use of self-reports include memory distortions and social desirability bias, which may increase the risk of both under- and over-reporting. When students are asked to think about the past three months, as in our bullying measures, their answers rely on autobiographical memory (Bovaird, 2010). As such,

there is a risk that answers will be impacted by how the individual constructs or reconstructs situations in the past. However, by not including the word bullying in the global question, and the inclusion of specific behavioral items, we strived to reduce the risk that students' potential reconstruction of themselves as a "bully" would impact upon their answers. Another reason for not using the word "bullying" in the questionnaire was to minimize the probability of respondents relying on their own understanding of the word (Felix et al., 2011). Indeed, students have been shown to vary in how they define bullying depending, for example, on age (Vaillancourt et al., 2008), an issue that is particularly relevant to this thesis because the same students were followed over time.

An additional question to be raised is; are the findings obtained in this thesis generally representative of early adolescents in Sweden? We did not use a randomized sampling procedure – which limits the generalizability of the findings. Instead, we applied a strategic sampling procedure that included municipalities from different socio-geographical locations (e.g., countryside to metropolitan areas). The aim of including all the schools within a municipality contributed to a heterogenous sample in terms of socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., parental educational level, ethnicity). To exemplify, in wave three, the percentage of students with at least one parent with post-secondary education varied between 28% and 91% ($M = 56\%$, $SD = 15$ percentage points) among schools. However, not all students in the participating classrooms took part in the longitudinal project or in the pilot study. Classrooms varied in their within-group response rates, with some classrooms having a response rate of 100%, while the lowest response rate was 32% (Study 2). It is possible that the students who did not participate differed systematically from those who did, which in turn may have affected the associations found in the four studies. For example, studies comparing students with active parental consent procedures to those with passive parental consent procedures have shown that students involved in problem behaviors, such as bullying, are underrepresented when using active parental consent procedures (e.g., Shaw et al., 2015). A comparison of gender composition between the original samples and the final samples in the four studies also indicates that more of the girls than of the boys handed in parental consent. Although we did not collect information regarding

the ethnic backgrounds of students who did not participate, a comparison with the overall national level indicates that students with other ethnic backgrounds than Swedish seem to be somewhat underrepresented in the studies. However, there is support from other research fields that, although nonresponse is likely to influence prevalence rates (of bullying), it seems that nonresponse has a more limited influence on the estimates when examining associations between individual-level variables (Cheung et al., 2017; de Winter et al., 2005). The coefficients of higher-level constructs (e.g., classrooms) constructed from the individual-level data may nevertheless be biased (Timmerman, 2005). Some concerns may also be raised regarding the classroom collective moral disengagement as a collective construct of shared perceptions. For instance, it is possible that two classrooms with the same mean level of classroom collective moral disengagement differ with respect to within-classroom consensus (Schweig, 2016), which in turn may lead to questions as to whether students act on *shared beliefs*, as suggested by theory (Bandura, 2016). Future studies could examine whether mean levels and within-classroom consensus influence the role of classroom collective moral disengagement on individual students' bullying (for a discussion see Schweig, 2016).

When discussing generalizability, it is important for the researcher to describe the circumstances under which the findings were generated (Cronbach, 1975), which I have aimed to do in the four studies. However, and as Cronbach argued: "When we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (1975, p. 125). It would therefore be beneficial to continue to examine whether the findings hold, both in similar samples, and in other countries than Sweden, or for different subgroups (e.g., different ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, abilities, and age groups). Also, the validity and generalizability of the findings in this thesis may be limited by the chosen set of variables analyzed. Bullying is a complex phenomenon in which individual and social environmental factors interact (Bandura, 1986; Ettekal et al., 2015; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Swearer et al., 2014) and the factors included in this thesis may be influenced by and influence other variables not examined in the thesis. Future studies could therefore include other relevant variables

in conjunction with individual and classroom collective moral disengagement.

Despite these limitations, the findings further support the need to consider bullying as an important moral issue in which moral disengagement plays a key role in early adolescence (for meta-analyses, see Chen et al., 2017; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Killer et al., 2019). Particularly since the findings indicate that not only do those students who are “high moral disengagers” tend to engage in more bullying, but that changes in moral disengagement are associated with changes in bullying, and that social contexts – like classroom collective moral disengagement and patterns of classmates’ bystander behaviors in peer victimization – matter as well.

Concluding Remarks and Thoughts on Practical Implications

In Sweden, the Education Act (*Skollag*, SFS 2010:800] and The Curriculum for Compulsory School, Preschool Class and School-Age Educare [Lgr11] (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) clearly stipulate that the young person’s development and well-being should permeate all activities in school. In Lgr11, it is further stated that: “The students should meet respect for their person and work in school. The school should strive to be a living social community that provides security and generates the will and desire to learn” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 9). A positive school experience is a protective factor and a resource for learning and well-being (Currie et al., 2012). Bullying has the potential to violate the rights of the child such as the right to learn and develop within a safe environment (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989; UNESCO, 2019). Young people who are more vulnerable, are at greater risk, such as students with disabilities, students who belong to a minority group, or students who just differ from their peer group in some way (Menesini, 2019). Although bullying rates in Sweden have been described as low (Cosma et al., 2020; Due et al., 2005), a significant proportion of students are bullied in school, and it has been suggested that this proportion has increased during the last few decades (Bjereld et al., 2020). This is indeed worrying because the association between bullying and

negative health consequences is well established. Consequently, it is of great importance to reverse this negative trend by providing effective preventive work and interventions that reduce bullying. In a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, Gaffney, Ttofi, et al. (2019) concluded that programs are effective, but often with modest effects and with great variation among studies and programs. Overall, such programs reduced the likelihood of bullying perpetration and victimization by approximately 15–20%, which can be considered effective with respect to the population level. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement and it is my hope that the findings of this thesis can provide some valuable insights concerning the components to consider in such efforts.

Firstly, beyond including activities that challenge individual cognitive processes, the findings presented in this thesis suggest that group moral processes and normative behavior within classrooms should be addressed, in particular students' perceptions' of their classmates' attitudes and beliefs. However, while changes in classroom collective moral disengagement were not associated with changes in bullying, students in classrooms with higher levels of classroom collective moral disengagement were still more prone to engage in bullying and cyberbullying perpetration. A plausible interpretation is that classroom collective moral disengagement should be addressed early on in the formation of a class or group, while still in elementary school, in order to inhibit the development of these processes in the first place (Thornberg, Wänström, & Hymel, 2019). Furthermore, because classrooms' collective perceptions have been found to affect the efficiency of anti-bullying interventions (Saarento, Boulton, et al., 2015), future studies could also include an examination of whether classroom collective moral disengagement has an impact on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs and interventions.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that individual proneness to morally disengage can be considered a fairly stable individual pattern, but also that moral disengagement is likely to be changeable, and changes seem to be closely linked to changes in bullying perpetration. This suggests that all students, not only those who have already developed a higher propensity to morally disengage in elementary school, would benefit from discussing and challenging moral disengagement processes. This also supports the idea that

universal preventions should be directed towards the whole school's student population (Gaffney et al., 2021), while also working with identified "bullies" (i.e., targeted interventions). Here, cognitive-behavioral interventions may provide a good approach, because such interventions commonly address thoughts and beliefs in conjunctions with behavior (Swearer et al., 2014). Furthermore, one meta-analysis has shown that anti-bullying interventions are more effective in reducing relational and physical types of bullying victimization than verbal bullying victimization (Kennedy, 2020), and an inclusion of features that address moral disengagement may be particularly relevant to verbal bullying, as suggested by the findings of the third study.

Teachers should aim to create a classroom environment in which the students perceive their classmates as morally engaged; for example, by encouraging informal peer interactions such as class or group discussions (Gaffney et al., 2021) about moral problems and everyday dilemmas. In particular, using children's literature as a starting point for discussions and role-play about bullying situations has been found to decrease individual moral disengagement and bullying victimization in elementary school children (C. Wang & Goldberg, 2017). Teacher education may therefore benefit from including content aimed at creating a greater awareness of the complexities of bullying and that helps student teachers to develop practical skills, for instance by providing methods for intervening (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014) and for leading classroom discussions about sensitive topics. In addition, one previous study has found that moral disengagement among high-school students were reduced through a school-based cyberbullying awareness-raising intervention (i.e., posters, and lectures). It is noteworthy that the awareness campaign was shown to influence some, but not all, of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms proposed by Bandura, indicating that the mechanisms of moral disengagement may operate differentially (Barkoukis et al., 2016). This was also supported by the findings of this thesis.

Hence, it is important for schools to gain knowledge about the content, prevalence, and frequency of bullying, as well as situational and social environmental factors relevant to the particular school (Gaffney, Ttofi, et al., 2019). For example, the findings presented in this thesis suggest that when direct bullying is common, it may be

most beneficial to discuss and be aware of how bullying is cognitively restructured through moral justifications or by attributing blame to the victim. Furthermore, reducing pro-aggressive bystander behavior seems warranted, given the finding of Study 2 that classroom levels of pro-aggressive bystander behaviors were associated with bullying. Making students aware of group processes and how bystanders influence bullying has proven promising (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012), and the findings of Study 1 suggest that including components that help students to recognize and counteract the moral disengagement mechanisms of diffusion of responsibility and blaming the victim may be particularly important in reducing pro-aggressive bystander behavior.

In addition, although not explicitly examined in this thesis, it is reasonable to assume that schools' preventive work against bullying could benefit from including information addressed to parents about the complexity of bullying and the role of moral disengagement. Indeed, previous research has suggested that students who perceive that their parents tend to justify transgression more easily increase their own moral disengagement. This in turn reduces moral emotions and increases the likelihood of bullying (Zych, Gómez-Ortiz, et al., 2020). Communicating information about bullying and interventions to parents (e.g., through take-home letters or leaflets) has been found to be associated with greater reductions in both victimization and perpetration (Gaffney et al., 2021).

This thesis has applied the social cognitive theory, and its concept of moral disengagement in particular, in order to understand some of the processes involved in bullying. It is crucial to understand how individual characteristics interact with the social environment (e.g., family, peers, school, community) in shaping young people's behavior and development, not only from a social cognitive perspective, but also as a central tenet of other prominent theories, such as the social ecological framework of bullying (Swearer & Espelage, 2010). Environmental influences at more distant levels of a child's ecology, such as the influence of societal norms and the structural aspects of institutions and cultures are also likely to play a role in bullying (for a discussion, see Horton, 2016). Consequently, the results generated in this thesis should be understood as pieces in the larger puzzle that constitutes bullying – and to be working hypotheses (Cronbach, 1975).

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Studies

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