

Moral disengagement and bullying among children and adolescents

There is a growing body of research examining child and youth bullying from a moral perspective. In general, children judge bullying as a severe moral transgression by referring to the harm it causes to the victim. Within the social-cognitive theoretical framework, Bandura has introduced the concept of moral disengagement, which might contribute to explain the moral attitude-behavior gap in bullying. Moral disengagement refers to social and psychological maneuvers (e.g., moral justification, euphemistic labeling, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization, and victim blame) by which self-regulated mechanisms can be deactivated and moral self-sanctions can be disengaged that, in turn, facilitates behaviors that harm others without feelings of remorse or guilt. The keynote will review cross-sectional and longitudinal research on how these social-cognitive distortions through which an individual can justify immoral conduct, thus avoiding feelings of guilt and remorse, are related to bullying perpetration and various bystander behaviors in peer victimization in childhood and adolescence. Research on individual and contextual variables that might mediate the association between moral disengagement and participant roles in bullying will be discussed as well, as recent studies examining moral disengagement as a group-level property.

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