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Bias-based harassment and bullying: a commentary

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ABSTRACT

This commentary provides some reflections on the studies included in the special issue and their findings, focusing on three topics in particular. First, moral disengagement as a factor associated with bias-based discrimination, harassment, and bullying is discussed. Second, the negative effects of bias-based victimization and factors that might mitigate them are contemplated, with special attention to peer defending. Finally, some implications for prevention and intervention are considered.

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Bullying has been studied for half a century, whereas research on bias-based harassment and bullying entered the peer relations/bullying literature in the early 1990s. Since then, research in this area has grown enormously. In the beginning, studies were often comparing the prevalence of (any kind of) victimization experiences among minority and majority youth (e.g., Moran et al., 1993). Nowadays, the concepts of bias-based, identity-based, prejudice-based, and stigma-based victimization are used to refer to the phenomenon where an individual is targeted by negative actions *on the basis of*, or *because* they belong to, or identify with, a vulnerable/stigmatized/minority group. The current special issue is not limited to bullying, but also includes other types of bias-based maltreatment, i.e., harassment and discrimination. In what follows, I will refer to all of these forms of maltreatment as bias-based aggression (as something the perpetrator does) or bias-based victimization (as something the targeted person experiences).

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When it comes to bias-based aggression, the bias behind the harmful behaviours can be inferred from aggressors *referring* (verbally or non-verbally) to the targeted person's group membership or identity in insulting and abusive ways, or the aggressors reporting that the *reason* for negative behaviours is the victimized person's group membership or identity. This is how the papers in the special issue approach bias-based victimization, whether by discrimination, harassment, or bullying. This operationalization is not without problems, but it is probably the best we can do – even if all people who discriminate or bully others due to their biased perceptions are not necessarily aware of, or willing to admit, the prejudice driving their behaviour. This causes some 'bias' in prevalence estimates, but it might lead to an even stronger bias if all victimization experienced by minorities was considered bias-based.

Most of the papers in the present issue focus on perpetration or victimization based on ethnic or sexual identities (probably the types of bias-based victimization that have been studied the most, for a good reason). One study (Meter et al., 2024) includes also weight-based and disability-based victimization, and yet another one (Basilici et al., 2024) focuses on the association between legal (citizenship) status and ethnic bullying and victimization.

Moral disengagement and perpetration

Moral disengagement is one of the most widely studied factors related to bullying and harassment, along with low empathy (van Noorden et al., 2015), endorsement of status or dominance (Olthof et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2023), and attitudes that are approving of bullying (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Several studies in the present issue deal with moral disengagement, and most create a composite score reflecting the average of different types of moral disengagement. As an exception, Rodríguez de Arriba et al. (2024) assessed both *general moral disengagement* and what they called *LGBTQ+ moral disengagement*, finding that although both were associated with harassment perpetration, the associations depended on the perpetrator and the type of harassment (general vs. targeted at LGBTQ+ individuals). Their findings are logical in the sense that general moral disengagement is always more strongly linked to general harassment, whereas LGBTQ+ moral disengagement has a stronger association with LGBTQ+ moral

disengagement. Perhaps, a more fruitful distinction would be to investigate the *different MD mechanisms*, rather than create new types of MD based on the target of aggression. The same thought crossed my mind when reading the other papers as well: are the mechanisms of moral disengagement different in bias-based bullying, as compared with 'general' bullying?

Bandura originally proposed eight mechanisms (see Bandura, 2016), which he grouped into four main domains: cognitive restructuring (e.g., re-labelling aggressive behaviour as joking, considering it serving moral purpose, or comparing it to an even more harmful act) minimizing one's agentic role (e.g., by emphasizing that other people's involvement, viewing one's behaviour as stemming from authorities), and disregarding or distorting the consequences (e.g., ignoring or minimizing the negative consequences of the act), and victim attribution (e.g., believing that the target deserves the negative treatment). Although only a few studies have investigated the unique effects of these mechanisms, the ones that did found that some of them were more strongly associated with bullying perpetration than others. Usually, cognitive restructuring is the mechanism most strongly associated with bullying – and the only one predicting bullying perpetration longitudinally (Thornberg et al., 2023; see also review by Thornberg, 2023). Would this be the case in bias-based aggression as well, or does victim attribution, for instance, play a more important role? Or do we need another mechanism of moral disengagement, where the aggressive act is justified by the targeted person's *membership in a group* that is of lesser value or threatens the status quo (whether in the classroom, community, or society at large)?

Two studies in the present issue – both concerned with moral disengagement – investigated individual x context interactions. Bayram Özdemir et al. examined whether moral disengagement is more or less strongly linked to perpetration of ethnic victimization in some classrooms, as compared with others. The classroom factor of interest was typical bystander responses to ethnic victimization – whether classmates tend to reinforce ethnic victimization perpetration, or support and defend those who are targeted. Both types of bystander responses had main effects on the perpetration of ethnic victimization: reinforcing exacerbated it, whereas defending mitigated it. The cross-level interactions, even if in expected directions, were not significant. This means that moral disengagement was equally likely to be associated with perpetration of ethnic victimization, regardless of the classroom characteristics studied.

Papotti and Caravita (2024), on the other hand, focused on prestige norms of moral disengagement, finding that individual adolescents' xenophobic attitudes were associated with ethnic bullying perpetration only in classrooms where popular students were high on moral disengagement. The latter finding suggests that the cognitions and behaviours of popular students might be more important signals for others than the average cognitions or behaviours of classmates at large. This is likely to be the case especially when students within a classroom differ from each other a lot. Bayram Özdemir and colleagues studied seventh-graders, and assuming this is the first grade in middle school, it could be that 1) social influence processes have not yet had enough time to increase similarity between students within classrooms and thus make the classrooms homogeneous, and/or 2) students have not yet had enough time to observe, and thus be aware of, each others' responses to ethnic victimization (which would allow these responses to affect their own behaviour). The lower-than-usual intra-class correlations (e.g., in comparison with Kärnä et al., 2010) indeed suggest that this might be the case. Perhaps, the findings will be different in the next waves of this longitudinal study.

Reflecting a bit on moral disengagement research in general, it is most often studied as a (trait-like) tendency explaining individual (trait-like) differences in immoral actions such as discrimination, harassment, or bullying. It would be great to expand this line of research to studying moral disengagement *in relation to particular real-life transgressions*. For instance, I would be delighted to see a daily (or weekly) diary study in which youth are asked to report whether they '... did or said something to a peer today/this week that was perceived harmful by the peer', and if yes, to report what they think about that now (after the school day/week), including questions on the extent to which they feel moral emotions of guilt or shame, as well as the extent to which they agree with statements reflecting MD, such as 'It was just a joke and therefore not that bad', 'The person did something to hurt me first', or 'Other peers made me do it'. This way, we would gain more understanding into the dynamics of moral (dis)engagement, the extent to which such mechanisms actually serve the function of dampening moral emotions, and their co-development with aggressive behaviour.

Consequences of bias-based victimization

There is plenty of evidence that bias-based victimization has adverse effects on well-being and mental health. Such effects can be detected at the between-person level (individuals reporting lower well-being than others if they experience more bias-based victimization than others) as shown by Wenzing et al. (2024) and Strohmeier and Gradinger (2024) in the current issue, as well as at the within-person level (individuals reporting lower well-being, in comparison to their own usual level on days when they experience more bias-based victimization, again in comparison to their typical experience) as shown in the review by Civitillo and Jugert (2024).

It is unclear, and perhaps not even a meaningful question, whether bias-based victimization is *more detrimental* than other types of victimization. One of the studies in the present issue (Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2024) provided evidence that this might be the case, and so did the Introduction paper by Bayram Özdemir et al. (2024). In any case, many individuals identifying with a marginalized minority group experience discrimination and harassment across diverse contexts, and they may be struggling with additional challenges and stressors related to their minority status (such as recent move to another country, not being out with their sexual identity). For this reason alone, bias-based victimization can be considered as particularly harmful for the targeted individuals. It is also harmful for the group, community, or society where it takes place, because it reinforces the norms regarding who is valuable and who is not; who are accepted and who are marginalized and excluded. Ethnic bullying in schools, for instance, might create and reinforce racist norms, especially when high-status individuals engage in it (see Dijkstra et al., 2008). It would be worthwhile to study how prejudice and xenophobic or homophobic norms spread in a peer group over time.

Wright and Wachs (2024) reported that perceived support received from school-based gay-straight alliances can moderate the negative effects of homophobic bullying involvement. They also found a *negative* correlation between homophobic bullying involvement and perceived support from gay-straight alliances, which they interpreted as an indication of such alliances making victimization less likely. Another interpretation, however, is that those who are victimized the most perceive receiving the least support. Unfortunately, this is what we sometimes find; even in classrooms characterized by defending norms (high levels of victim defending), the most highly victimized youth do not necessarily

benefit from such norms at all (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2024). In contrast to the above interpretation provided by the authors, in their path model they nevertheless include a path from victimization to perceived support, suggesting that they believe victimization explains variation in perceived support, rather than vice versa. The estimates indicating the strength and direction of this effect are not reported in the paper, but its presence in the model makes it difficult to fully understand the main findings regarding moderation.

Unlike they expected, Wenzing et al. (2024) did *not* find a strong identification with one's ethnicity or religion to be protective against the negative effects of ethno-religious discrimination. It should be noted, however, that a strong ethnic identification was related to less depressive symptoms overall, and a strong religious identification was associated with a higher self-esteem. But when the young muslim participants faced discrimination, strong identification to one's ethnic group or religion tended to exacerbate the effects, rather than mitigate them. Also, the experience sampling studies reviewed by Civitillo and Jugert (2024) seem to have mixed effects regarding ethnic identity as a potential protective factor. These authors also point out how different dimensions on identity, but also varying outcomes (e.g., whether stress responses or mental health problems are focused on) can explain the inconsistencies.

Evidence of the benefits of defending is growing

A few years ago, Healy (2020) questioned whether being defended by peers is helpful for victimized youth – actually, she argued that it might be harmful, providing three argument. First, according to Healy, defending could disempower victims by making them dependent on their peers and encouraging the belief that they cannot solve problems themselves. Second, defending could provoke additional bullying attempts if enacted in inappropriate ways – it might elicit *revanche* of bullies. Third, being defended might stigmatize victims by making them stand out from other peers as the ones not being able to stand up for themselves. So far, there is no support for any of these hypotheses. In contrast, all literature on defending points to its beneficial effects, including studies in the current issue.

Research has shown that bystanders' responses to bullying have an impact on the level of bullying in classrooms. In other words, there is less bullying in classrooms where students do not reinforce the bullies'

behaviours but instead support those who are victimized (Nocentini et al., 2013; Salmivalli et al., 2011). Bystander responses can also have an impact on whether or not at-risk children end up being victimized (Kärnä et al., 2010) or bullying others (Pan et al., 2023). In the current issue, Meter and colleagues (Meter et al., 2024) showed that defending from peers, but especially defending from part of the teachers, can increase subjective well-being via perceived anti-victimization school climate. Bayram Özdemir et al. (2024), in turn, found that classroom levels of defending were associated with lower, and classroom levels of reinforcing with a higher likelihood of ethnic victimization perpetration.

Defending and supporting those who are in a vulnerable position or maltreated is a core citizen skill that should be reinforced in schools and in the society. Such support in the case of frequent victimization at school might mean sitting together with them in the lunchroom; walking home from school together; telling there is nothing wrong with them; just being kind to them. In other words, defending does not imply aggressive responses targeted at the perpetrator, or heroic public acts that could be socially risky. It is advisable for teachers to discuss with students about safe yet effective ways to help someone who is victimized, feels lonely, or finds it difficult to fit in the group. Unlike sometimes suspected, defending does not lead to an increased risk for victimization (Malamut et al., 2022) – quite the contrary, it leads to increases in peer status (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2023), so it is beneficial not only for children who are defended and supported but also for those defending them. And of course, it reinforces the norm that *this is what we should do*.

Prevention and intervention of bias-based harassment and bullying

If we look at risk and protective factors investigated in the current studies, what should be done about bias-based victimization? Moral disengagement seems like a good candidate to be targeted when attempting to reduce any type of victimization. A recent study (Tolmatcheff et al., 2023) found that it is possible to reduce bullying perpetration with a relatively short intervention targeting moral disengagement mechanisms. In the intervention, students were explained how people often justify their hurtful behaviours by morally disengaging, and asked to identify the various moral disengagement mechanisms from stories told to them, while also emphasizing that they are bad excuses for one's immoral

behaviour. The intervention was successful in reducing moral disengagement, which in turn made bullying less likely.

How students respond when they witness bias-based victimization is another important factor to be addressed by interventions. Studies suggest that bystander responses can be affected by interventions (Kärnä et al., 2011), and when students observe changes such as increasing defending behaviour in their classmates, they are likely to decrease their own bullying behaviour (Saarento et al., 2015).

Specific to the theme of the current issue, prejudice is certainly (and by definition) a factor associated with bias-based bullying. The special issue papers are heavily focused on schools (and thereby on peers and teachers), but also parents have unique effects on the development of ethnic (Bobba et al., 2024) and probably also on other types of prejudice. Children learn about social categories and stereotypes, paving the way for prejudice, from their proximal environment (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

Interestingly, although prejudicial attitudes are associated with bias-based aggression, there are some studies showing that changes in prejudice attitudes are not necessary for changes in prejudicial behaviours to take place. Actually, (intergroup contact) interventions may change the latter *without* affecting the former, suggesting that attitude change is not necessary for behavior change (Mousa, 2020; Scacco & Warren, 2018). These studies were done with adults, and I am not aware of whether differential effects on prejudice attitudes vs. behaviours have been found (or tested) in interventions targeting children. This would be important, for both theoretical reasons and potential practical value.

Increasing intergroup contact is an often-mentioned strategy to reduce prejudice, and it has been shown that even imagined contact (Vezzali et al., 2012) can improve both explicit and implicit attitudes towards immigrant peers among children. There is also a very recent literature on interventions based on modern technologies, such as utilizing digital intergroup contact (Pereira da Costa et al., 2024) and virtual reality (Tassinari et al., 2022) to reduce prejudice. Despite some encouraging findings, overall it looks like there is a lot to be done in the area of innovative, theoretically based intervention development as well as stringent evaluation of intervention aiming to reduce prejudice (Paluck et al., 2021).

Developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2007), for instance, suggests that the saliency of social categories is one building block in the

development of prejudice, and we should aim at fading, rather than emphasizing social categories. When social categories are salient, they activate mechanisms that may lead to stereotyping, ingroup favouritism, and prejudice. How does that fit with the current trend, which seems to advocate categorizing everyone – and when a suitable category does not exist yet, creating and labelling that?

It is clear that there are groups that have been marginalized and maltreated in many societies during the course of history, and we need to bring to light the injustice in derogating some people just because they belong to a certain group. But what about victimization of those who are considered physically less attractive, those who are less socially skilled, those who have challenges in regulating their emotions, those who are shy and anxious? None of these characteristics are salient social categories in the society (they are considered individual characteristics) but we know that if we categorize individuals on the basis of these characteristics (for research purposes), we find more victimization among those who fit the above descriptions.

Any characteristic may become a salient social category, if we emphasize it and assign attributes to people belonging in the category. Shyness can become a salient social category, if we start to talk about it as such and present it as such. Would this advance the treatment of shy people in classrooms as well as in the society, or would it increase the saliency of yet another social category and create prejudice against, and out-grouping of shy people? The question is, is it adaptive to encourage thinking of people in terms of social categories in the first place, or try and emphasize a common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) and things that make us all similar, instead of factors that are distinctive. Literature suggests that increasing the salience of similarities, rather than differences (Nassir & Diesendruck, 2023), reduces ingroup bias.

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