



PARENTAL REJECTION AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT PREDICT ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS' BULLYING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine a series of predictors (i.e., moral identity, moral disengagement, perceived parental style, gender, and age) for verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying among adolescents in a cross-sectional study. The participants involved 225 Romanian adolescents (48% females), aged 11 to 19 ($M=14.45$, $SD=1.92$). We performed four hierarchical regression analyses. Results showed that for all forms of bullying (i.e., verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying), the most significant predictors in our final prediction models were parental rejection, moral disengagement, and symbolization. Additionally, results indicated that the most powerful associations were found between the dehumanization dimension and all bullying forms. Our findings emphasize the significant role of parental practices in explaining aggressive behaviors among youth. Results are discussed within the relevant literature related to moral disengagement and anti-bullying strategies.

Keywords: bullying; youth; rejection; symbolization; dehumanization

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Introduction

Bullying is increasingly present worldwide, especially during developmental periods such as adolescence (*e.g.*, AlBuhairan, Al Eissa, Alkufeidy, & Almuneef, 2016; Bar-Zomer & Brunstein Klomek, 2018; Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016; Kretschmer, Veenstra, Deković, & Oldehinkel, 2017). Romania ranks third in Europe on bullying in schools, according to a 2019 report of the World Health Organization. More than half of students in middle schools and high schools are subject to different forms of bullying aggressions (Popa, 2019). Although numerous studies have addressed this topic, there are still many question marks regarding intervention strategies that could reduce this phenomenon (Zych, Gómez-Ortiz, Touceda, Nasaescu, & Llorent, 2019). To implement an effective intervention program, it is essential to analyze the relationship between bullying and its associated factors, especially those related to parental practices, due to their significant importance in all aspects of children and youth's lives.

Though many definitions emerged along the way, most researchers agree that 1) bullying refers to an imbalance of power, where an aggressor intentionally and repeatedly engages in hurtful towards a victim; and 2) bullying is a phenomenon increasingly present in the educational and social environment, and that it has become a serious social problem that can cause health and psychological issues (Maynard, Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2016; Rigby, 2002). The detrimental consequences of bullying (*e.g.*, psychological pain, suicidal ideation) have been explored in various studies (*e.g.*, Duan et al., 2020) that unanimously suggest immediate, long-term intervention strategies for preventing and diminishing bullying behaviors (Bao, Li, Song, & Jiang, 2020; Nozaki, 2019; Yang, Nelson-Gardell, & Guo, 2018).

Verbal bullying is both a direct form (insulting a person) and an indirect form (persuading a person to insult another person or spreading rumors) of bullying (Rigsby, 2007). According to Fried and Fried (2003), verbal bullying may include gossip, spreading rumors, or imitating a person with the premeditated intent to laugh at him/her. Specifically, any use of language or words to injure someone would be classified as verbal bullying. *Emotional bullying* refers to acts meant to hurt the self-concept and self-esteem of another person (McGrath, 2007). This type of bullying can involve behaviors such as sarcasm, malicious remarks about sexual orientation, racism, harassment over the phone, or unwanted sexual remarks. The most recently studied type of bullying is *cyberbullying*, a negative

behavior meant to deliberately harm a person through computers, mobile phones, or other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Cyberbullying can involve behaviors such as sending offensive or rude messages to a person, stealing a person's online identity, or exposing embarrassing and compromising information about someone online (Willard & JD, 2005).

Bullying, moral identity, and moral disengagement

Moral identity refers to the degree to which the moral self is important for a person's identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Atkins, Hart, and Donnelly (2004) argue that moral identity is a commitment consistent with a person's sense of self toward the lines of action that support or protect others' well-being. Aquino and Reed (2002), who consider moral identity as a self- concept organized around a set of moral traits, divided the concept into two dimensions: a private dimension (*internalization*) and a public dimension (*symbolization*). Internalization is considered to be the extent to which morality is essential to an individual's self, while symbolization is thought to be the extent to which moral identity is publicly reflected through one's behavior.

Moral identity is significantly associated with prosocial behavior, and therefore can be considered a significant, negative predictor for antisocial conduct, such as bullying-related acts. In this regard, Hertz & Krettenauer (2016) conducted a meta-analysis, aiming to examine the relationship between moral identity and prosocial behaviors, analyzing over one hundred research articles. Their results suggested that people who scored high on moral identity were more likely to engage in prosocial and ethical behaviors, simultaneously refraining from antisocial behaviors, compared to individuals who scored low on moral identity. Other authors also support this assumption, showing that moral standards are an essential element of their self-concept for people with a high level of moral identity. Thus, moral identity becomes a significant predictor of prosocial behaviors (Stets & Carter, 2011; Hardy, Bean, & Olsen, 2015; Teng, Nie, Zhu, & Guo, 2020; Winterich, Aquino, Mittal, & Schwartz, 2013), and implicitly a negative predictor of bullying, in all its forms.

According to Bandura et al. (1996), moral disengagement allows people to justify the correctness or incorrectness of their behavior, through a mechanism that enhances the perceived morality of less ethical, immoral acts. Bandura (2002) argues that moral standards do not primarily regulate one's behavior; therefore, internal self-regulation mechanisms only work when and if activated. The selective

self-sanction disengagement generates different behaviors in individuals with similar moral standards. In this regard, Bandura et al. (1996) defined eight mechanisms through which moral disengagement is explained. The first one is *moral justification*, according to which people do not engage in immoral behavior until they self-justify the morality of their behavior. Thus, immoral behavior is accepted because its goal is considered moral (Bandura, 2002). The second mechanism is *euphemistic language*, and according to it, one's immoral conduct may have different meanings depending on what its author calls it. Euphemistic language is generally used to change the meaning of unethical behavior and reduce its responsibility.

The advantageous comparison allows, using a contrast effect, a transformation of immoral acts into moral acts. People compare immoral behavior with more severe consequences, making the first behavior seem moral compared to the other behavior. Additionally, the *diffusion of responsibility* and *displacement of responsibility* implies that legitimate authority, or several other people, and not the agent, are considered responsible for one's immoral conduct (Bandura, 2002). The *distortion of the consequences* minimizes the effects of immoral behavior, while *dehumanization* implies that, when people exhibit immoral behavior, they tend to dehumanize their victims (Bandura, 2002). Blaming opponents or circumstances (*attribution of guilt*) is another way for aggressors to explain their unethical behaviors. For example, the aggressors consider themselves victims because they usually claim that they were provoked by the victim to behave immoral (Bandura, 2002).

A series of studies linked moral disengagement and bullying behaviors. Most of them suggested that high levels of moral disengagement predict high bullying behavior (*e.g.*, Obermann, 2011; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Wang et al., 2017). Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, and Hymel (2012) suggested a significant association between moral justification, bullying, and cyberbullying, while van Noorden et al. (2014) confirmed a significant link between dehumanization and bullying among children and adolescents. Additionally, Gao, Liu, Wang, Yang, Wang, and Wang (2020) suggested that adolescents with a high level of moral disengagement are more likely to engage in cyberbullying perpetration, especially among females. Susilawati, Wibowo, and Sunawan (2019) suggested that dehumanization and moral justification are linked to lower social responsibility among high school students. Finally, Tanrikulu and Campbell (2015) found a significant association between anger, moral disengagement,

bullying, and cyberbullying. Moreover, they suggested that interparental conflicts, moral disengagement, and school connectedness were associated with being a victim of bullying, emphasizing both schools' and parents' implications in preventing and reducing the bullying phenomena.

Parental practices and bullying

We already know that parents play a significant role in modeling their children's behavior (*e.g.*, Charalampous et al., 2018; Chen, Ho, & Lwin, 2016; Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2015; Larrañaga et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2017; Leraya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013; Njagi, Mwanja, & Manyasi, 2018). Nevertheless, what do we know when it comes to bullying? Cerezo, Sanchez, Ruiz, and Arense (2015) suggested that aggressors perceive their parents as neglectful, while victims perceive them as authoritarian. Njagi, Mwanja, and Manyasi (2018) suggested that inadequate advice, indifference to children's concerns, or parents' weak role in shaping children's conduct can significantly impact children's proneness to violent behaviors. A generous amount of research (*e.g.*, Georgiou, Ioannou, & Stavrinides's, 2017; Ortiz, Apolinario, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019) showed that authoritarian parental practices were positively associated with both the aggressors' and the victims' bullying experiences, while an authoritative parental style was negatively associated with bullying-related experiences. When it comes to the role played by social support from family and friends in bullying victimization among adolescents, Shaheen et al.'s results (2019) emphasized on their importance, suggesting that the perceived family support significantly predicted lower bullying victimization, in line with several other studies related to all types of bullying (*e.g.*, López-Castro & Priegue, 2019; Nocentini et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014; Elsaesser et al., 2017).

Within the current research, we were interested in the role played by perceived parental styles in bullying behavior. According to Arrindell, Emmelkamp, Brilman, and Monsma (1983), there are four dimensions of perceived parental style: *Rejection*, *Emotional warmth*, *Overprotection*, and *Favoring subject*. *Rejection* refers to the parental style focused on physical punishment, hostility towards the child, lack of respect for his/her opinions and need, or ridicule when other people are present. *Emotional warmth* refers to parents focused on paying more attention to the child's needs, helping him/her and offering support, listening to the child's point of view, praising adaptive behaviors, and interested in intellectual stimulation. The *protection* dimension refers to parents

focused on protecting the child in an unpleasant way for him/her, driven by the desire always to know everything the child does and imposing strict rules and the requirement to obey them. The fourth dimension, *favoring subject*, refers to parents who differentiate between their children: for example, a child may consider that his parents love another sibling more than him/her (Arrindell et al., 1998).

Previous studies exploring the links between perceived parental styles and bullying suggested that bullying behavior was related to low perceived parental warmth and high perceived parental neglect (van der Watt, 2014). Additionally, both victims of bullying and aggressors generally seem to perceive high parental punitiveness (Hong, Kim, & Piquero, 2017; Myron-Wilson, 1999). Other studies suggested that children who are bullied tend to perceive their parents as overprotective (Bowers et al., 1994), while children who bully usually come from families using harsh and punitive strategies (Gómez-Ortiz, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2016). Parental rejection seems to lead to bullying other peers in school, while parental responsiveness seems to be negatively associated with children and adolescents' aggressive behavior (Malm & Henrich, 2019; Van der Graaff, Branje, De Wied, & Meeus, 2012).

Aims of the current study

Zych, Gómez-Ortiz, Touceda, Nasaescu, and Lorent (2019) explored the relationship between parental practices, bullying, and moral disengagement in children and adolescents. Their results suggested that parents' moral disengagement was significantly related to children's similarly motivated bullying and cyberbullying behaviors. Basically, children who witnessed their parents justifying their immoral acts by resorting to moral disengagement mechanisms were more likely to exhibit bullying behaviors. In line with these findings, our primary aim was to explore the link between moral identity, perceived parental style, moral disengagement, and bullying (verbal bullying, emotional bullying, and cyberbullying). Specifically, we wanted to investigate whether moral identity, age, gender, mechanisms of moral disengagement, and perceived parental style predict bullying-related behaviors in its various forms.

Additionally, we explored gender differences for each of the three dimensions of bullying, assuming that males would score significantly higher in all three types of bullying than girls. Finally, we explored the associations between each mechanism of moral disengagement and the three bullying dimensions. We

assumed significant, positive associations between each moral disengagement dimension and bullying, with higher correlations involving the dehumanization dimension, in line with Noorden et al. (2014).

Method

Participants

Our sample was formed by 225 teenagers aged 11 to 19 ($M=14.45$; $SD=1.92$, 48.4% females), students from three public educational settings placed in two large Romanian cities. The sample was socio-economically heterogeneous, and we only included children coming from two-parent families.

Measures

We used the back-forward translation method for all instruments and pretested them in a sample of 28 teenagers aged 11 to 17 ($M=13.9$, $SD=1.61$). In both the pretesting and the research sample, all instruments proved a satisfying internal consistency. No issues were found within the scales' items in the translation procedure, where two independent researchers, other than the authors, were involved in the process. All instruments were self-report questionnaires.

The Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1996) measures the various mechanisms people use to justify their immoral behaviors. The scale consists of 32 items, to which respondents were asked to answer on a 3-point Likert-type scale, from 0 (disagree) to 2 (agree). We were interested in both the global dimension of moral disengagement and the scores for each of the eight dimensions. Examples items include: *It is all right to fight to protect your friends* (Moral justification); *Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking* (Euphemistic language); *Damaging some property is no big deal when you consider that others are beating people up* (Advantageous comparison); *A kid in a gang should not be blamed for the trouble the gang causes* (Diffusion of responsibility); *If kids are living under bad conditions they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively* (Displacement of responsibility); *It is okay to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm* (Distorting consequences); *Some people deserve to be treated like animals* (Dehumanization); and *If kids fight and misbehave in school it is their teacher's fault* (Attribution of blame). Cronbach's alpha indicated good reliability ($\alpha=.748$).

EMBU Scale (s-EMBU) - short form (Arindell et al., 1999) consists of 23 items, developed from the original 81-item version. Participants were asked to think about the relationship they have with both their parents and respond to the scale's items on a 4-point Likert-type scale, from 0 (no, never) to 3 (yes, most of the time). The s-EMBU assesses three distinct dimensions of the perceived parental style: *rejection*, *emotional warmth*, and *protection*. Examples items include: *It happened that my parents were sour or angry with me without letting me know the cause* (Rejection); *My parents praised me* (Emotional warmth); and *It happened that I wished my parents would worry less about what I was doing* (Protection). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas for the EMBU subscales were .761 for the parental *rejection* dimension, .707 for *emotional warmth*, and .690 for the *protection* dimension.

The Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) measures moral identity using ten items and allows the analysis of two distinct dimensions, namely internalization and symbolization. Participants were introduced to a number of traits (e.g., fair, forgiving, friendly, generous, generous, hardworking, gentle, trustworthy, or understanding) and were invited to think about these traits while responding to the ten items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1- total disagreement, to 5- total agreement). The *internalization* dimension includes items such as "*It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics*", while the *symbolization* dimension includes items such as: "*I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics*". In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha indicated an internal consistency of .689.

The Bullying Scale (Doğruer & Yaratan, 2014) assesses the bullying behaviors associated with aggressors only. Though the scale also measures the victim and bystander-related behaviors, we were only interested in exploring the aggressor's related factors within the current research. Therefore, participants answered to 17 items divided into three dimensions: verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying. We were interested in both the global score as well as the score for each dimension. Example items include *I swear at others* (Verbal bullying); *I send malicious text messages to some students via my cell phone* (Cyberbullying); *I do not treat people well because of their color* (Emotional bullying). The internal consistency of the subscale was high (verbal bullying: $\alpha=.946$; emotional bullying: $\alpha=.906$; cyberbullying: $\alpha=.875$).

Procedure

We contacted the principals of three Romanian educational settings (one school and one kindergarten located in two different towns from the eastern side of the country and obtained their agreement to recruit students to participate in our research. Both teenagers and their parents agreed to participate in our study. We informed the teenagers and their parents about the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that all answers would be kept confidential. The examination took around 20 minutes, in students' usual classrooms, on a regular school day. Two different experimenters conducted the study. Data collection lasted for approximately eight weeks (March-May 2019). The research was conducted following the ethical standards of the responsible committees on human experimentation and with the 2013 Helsinki Declaration. Data were collected in 2019, and, before the data collection began, the protocol was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Psychology, where the authors are affiliated. Our study was non-experimental and cross-sectional.

Results

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, v.20) software to explore our data. Using a series of preliminary analysis, before computing the multiple linear hierarchical regressions, we assured the necessary conditions for the intended analysis (normality, multi-collinearities, variance inflation factor (VIF) values, and homoscedasticity conditions (Coakes, 2005; Hair et al., 1998; Pallant, 2001). We also explored the associations between the variables (*see* Table 1) to identify highly correlated variables.

Table 1. Means, standard deviation and Pearson correlation matrix for the main variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	14.45	1.92											
2. Gender			-.01										
3. Rejection	4.52	4.18	-.08	.02									
4. Overprotection	11.98	4.91	-.15*	.06	.59**								
5. Emotional warmth	10.88	3.86	-.04	-.08	-.50**	-.27**							
6. Internalization	20.67	3.28	.05	-.12	-.20**	.17**	.25**						
7. Symbolization	15.54	4.70	-.08	-.05	.14*	.00	-.00	.10					
8. Moral disengagement	28.32	9.94	-.03	.15*	.42**	.34**	-.25**	-.31**	-.05				
9. Verbal bullying	22.84	10.01	.04	.06	.34**	.21**	-.22**	-.17*	.06	.53**			

Table 1. Means, standard deviation and Pearson Correlation matrix for the main variables - *continued*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
10. Emotional bullying	11.12	5.81	.01	.03	.36**	.20**	-.24**	-.16*	.12	.49**	.91**		
11. Cyberbullying	6.14	3.58	-.02	.02	.24**	.15*	-.15*	-.13*	.05	.40**	.87**	.86**	
12. Overall bullying (total score)	40.11	18.75	.02	.05	.34**	.21**	-.22**	-.16*	.08	.51**	.98**	.96**	.92**

Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; $N = 225$

We then conducted a four-stage multiple regression with each type of bullying (*i.e.*, verbal, emotional, cyber, and overall bullying) as dependent variables. We were interested to see whether gender and age (stage one), moral identity (symbolization and internalization) - stage two, perceived parenting styles (*i.e.*, rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection - stage three), and moral disengagement (stage four) significantly predict bullying behaviors. Regression statistics are detailed in Tables 2-5.

Verbal bullying

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at Stage one, age and gender did not contribute significantly to the regression model, $F(2, 222) = .738$, $p = .479$ and accounted for 0.7% of the variation in verbal bullying. Introducing the moral identity variable explained an additional 3.6% of the dependent variable variation, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(2, 222) = 4.17$, $p = .017$. Adding the rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection variables to the regression model explained an additional 10% of the variation in verbal bullying, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(3, 217) = 8.41$, $p < .001$. Finally, adding the moral disengagement measurement explained an additional 17.1% of the variation in verbal bullying, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(1, 216) = 53.63$, $p < .001$. When all eight independent variables were included in stage four of the regression model, the only significant verbal bullying predictor was moral disengagement ($\beta = .48$). Together, the eight independent variables accounted for 31.3% of the variance in verbal bullying.

Table 2. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting verbal bullying ($N = 225$)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Age	.243	.347	.047	.332	.344	.064	.431	.333	.083	.387	.299	.075
Gender	.134	.133	.067	1.00	1.33	.050	.906	1.27	.045	-.188	1.15	-.009
Internalization				-.543	.204	-.178*	-.306	.202	-.100	.004	.186	.001
Symbolization				.199	.142	.094	.092	.138	.043	.162	.124	.076
Rejection							2.91	.889	.292*	1.37	.825	.138
Overprotection							.280	.793	.028	-.250	.715	-.025
Emotional warmth							-.094	.194	-.036	-.092	.174	-.036

Table 2. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting verbal bullying ($N=225$) - continued

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
MD										.484	.066	.480**
R^2	.007			.043			.143			.313		
F for change in R^2			.738			4.17			8.41			53.63

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Emotional bullying

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at Stage one, age and gender did not significantly contribute to the regression model, $F(2, 222)=.179$, $p=.836$) and accounted for 0.02% of the variation in emotional bullying. Introducing the moral identity variable explained an additional 4.7% of the dependent variable variation, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(2, 220)=5.39$, $p=.005$. Adding the rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection variables to the regression model explained an additional 10.5% of the variation in emotional bullying, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(3, 217)=8.94$, $p<.001$. Finally, adding the moral disengagement measurement explained an additional 14.1% of the variation in emotional bullying, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(1, 216)=43.19$, $p<.001$. When all eight independent variables were included in stage four of the regression model, three significant predictors of emotional bullying emerged: moral disengagement ($\beta=.43$), followed by perceived parental rejection ($\beta=.16$) and symbolization ($\beta=.12$) Together, the eight independent variables accounted for 29.4% of the variance in emotional bullying.

Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting emotional bullying ($N=225$)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SEB	β									
Age	.053	.202	.017	.117	.199	.039	.156	.192	.052	.133	.176	.044
Gender	.423	.779	.036	.258	.771	.022	.198	.735	.017	-.380	.678	-.083
Internalization				-.317	.118	-.179*	-.172	.117	-.097	-.008	.110	-.005
Symbolization				.179	.082	.145*	.113	.080	.092	.150	.073	.122*
Rejection							.175	.513	.303*	.944	.486	.16*
Overprotection							-.041	.458	-.007	-.321	.421	-.055
Emotional warmth							-.100	.112	-.067	-.099	.102	-.066
MD										.256	.039	.437**
R^2	.002			.048			.153			.294		
F for change in R^2			.179			5.39			8.94			43.19

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Cyberbullying

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at Stage one, age and gender did not significantly contribute to the regression model, $F(2, 222)=.128$, $p=.880$) and accounted for 0.01% of the variation in cyberbullying. Introducing the

moral identity variable explained an additional 2.2 % of the dependent variable variation, but this change in R^2 was not significant, $F(2, 220)=2.50, p=.084$. Adding the rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection variables to the regression model explained an additional 4.7% of the variation in cyberbullying, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(3, 217)=3.66, p=.013$. Finally, adding the moral disengagement measurement explained an additional 10.3% of cyberbullying variation, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(1, 216)=26.88, p<.001$. When all eight independent variables were included in stage four of the regression model, the only significant predictor of cyberbullying was moral disengagement ($\beta=.37$). Together, the eight independent variables accounted for 17.3% of the variance in emotional bullying.

Table 4. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting cyberbullying (N=225)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β
Age	.125		-.026	-.023	.124	-.013	.000	.124	.000	-.012	.117	-.007
Gender	.480		.022	.057	.481	.008	.032	.474	.004	-.272	.451	-.038
Internalization				-.155	.074	-.142*	-.097	.075	-.089	-.011	.073	-.010
Symbolization				.050	.051	.066	.024	.051	.081	.043	.049	.057
Rejection							.719	.331	.20*	.292	.324	.082
Overprotection							.056	.295	.016	-.091	.280	-.026
Emotional warmth							-.026	.072	-.028	-.025	.068	-.027
MD										.134	.026	.373**
R^2			.001		.023			.070			.173	
F for change in R^2			.128			2.503			3.66			26.88

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Overall bullying

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at Stage one, age and gender did not significantly contribute to the regression model, $F(2, 222)=.361, p=.697$ and accounted for 0.03% of the variation in overall bullying. Introducing the moral identity variable explained an additional 3.8 % of the dependent variable variation, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(2, 220)=4.41, p=.013$. Adding the rejection, emotional warmth, and overprotection variables to the regression model explained an additional 9.6% of the overall bullying variation, and this change in R^2 was significant, $F(3, 217)=8.05, p<.001$. Finally, adding the moral disengagement measurement explained an additional 15.9% of the overall bullying variation, and this change in R^2 was also significant, $F(1, 216)=48.65, p<.001$. When all eight independent variables were included in stage four of the regression model, the only significant predictor of overall bullying was moral disengagement ($\beta=.46$). Together, the eight independent variables accounted for 29.6% of the variance in overall bullying.

Table 5. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting overall bullying (N=225)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SEB	β									
Age	.249	.652	.026	.426	.645	.044	.586	.626	.060	.507	.567	.052
Gender	.192	2.51	.051	1.32	2.49	.035	1.13	2.39	.03	-.841	2.18	-.022
Internalization				-1.01	.38	-.178*	-.575	.380	-.101	-.015	.354	-.003
Symbolization				.429	.266	.108	.229	.259	.057	.355	.235	.089
Rejection							5.39	1.67	.288*	2.61	1.56	.140
Overprotection							.295	1.49	.016	-.662	1.35	-.035
Emotional warmth							-.220	.364	-.045	-.217	.330	-.045
MD										.874	.125	.463**
R ²		.003			.042			.138			.296	
F for change in R ²			.361			4.41			8.05			48.65

Note: *p<.05; **p<.001

In all four regression analyses, the second most powerful predictor following moral disengagement was parental rejection. We further explored the associations between the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement and the four dependent variables (see Table 6).

Table 6. Means, standard deviation and Pearson correlation matrix for the bullying and moral disengagement variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Moral justification	4.92	2.48											
2. Euphemistic	2.30	1.95	.37**										
3. Advantageous comparison	2.06	1.98	.16**	.40**									
4. Displacement of responsibility	3.92	2.19	.24**	.23**	.29**								
5. Diffusion of responsibility	4.88	1.89	.24**	.10	.07	.15*							
6. Distorting consequences	3.07	2.52	.14*	.31**	.27**	.28**	.04						
7. Attribution of blame	4.40	1.75	.13*	.17**	.12	.29**	.20**	.16*					
8. Dehumanization	2.74	2.27	.34**	.52**	.38**	.30**	.13**	.35**	.24**				
9. Verbal bullying	22.84	10.01	.37**	.36**	.23**	.29**	.15*	.35**	.24**	.40**			
10. Emotional bullying	11.12	5.81	.30**	.32**	.30**	.26**	.15*	.30**	.19**	.42**	.91**		
11. Cyberbullying	6.14	3.58	.27**	.23**	.20**	.22**	.15*	.25**	.17**	.31**	.87**	.86**	
12. Overall bullying (total score)	40.11	18.75	.34**	.34**	.34**	.27**	.15*	.33**	.22**	.40**	.98**	.96**	.92**

Note: **p<.01; *p<.05; N=225

Results indicated that the most powerful associations were found between the *dehumanization* dimension and bullying: overall bullying ($r=.40$, $p<.001$); verbal bullying ($r=.40$, $p<.001$), emotional bullying ($r=.42$, $p<.001$), and cyberbullying ($r=.31$, $p<.001$).

Discussion

The present study examined a series of associations between overall bullying, three specific forms (verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying), parental

practices, moral disengagement, and demographic factors (gender and age). We performed a series of regression and correlational analyzes to explore the specific connections between the variables. Our results revealed some interesting findings related to parental practices, mostly related to the rejection dimension, and dehumanization as the most important moral disengagement factor in all forms of bullying.

The final regression models for all four dependent variables (overall, verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying) suggested that parental rejection and moral disengagement were the most significant predictors for our participants' bullying behaviors. The parental rejection was measured using a self-reported questionnaire, which adolescents in our sample used to specify the perceived parental style. The parental rejection was widely studied and found to be significantly associated to depression and aggression in adolescents (*e.g.*, Espelage, 2014; López-Castro & Priegue, 2019; Nocentini et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014; Elsaesser et al., 2017), and our results seem to confirm these previous findings.

The emotional link between adolescents and their parents was found to be highly important in both preventing and determining bullying behavior (*e.g.*, Elsaesser et al., 2017; Kowalski et al., 2014), and our current findings confirm the predictive power of parental rejection for emotional bullying. However, we found significant positive correlations between parental rejection and all forms of bullying, confirming that adolescents who feel rejected by their families tend to engage in more bullying-related behaviors, regardless of the bullying type. In contrast, we found significant, negative associations between emotional warmth and all forms of bullying.

Our results did not confirm previous results suggesting that male adolescents are more prone to bullying behavior (*e.g.*, Del Ray et al., 2016; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Sentse, Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015; Tustin, Zulu, & Basson, 2014). We explored the differences between girls and boys for all types of bullying, and no significant data emerged for neither the verbal, emotional, cyber, or overall bullying. Moreover, age was not found to be a significant predictor for neither of the bullying categories we explored, contrasting previous results in this area (Festl & Quandt, 2014; Mishna, Khoury, Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012).

Moral disengagement was found to be the most powerful predictor for all types of bullying within the current sample of teenagers, confirming previous studies on the matter (*e.g.*, Gao et al., 2020; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011;

Menesini et al., 2003; Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel, 2012). Teenagers with high moral disengagement were more likely to engage in verbal, emotional, or cyberbullying behaviors. Our most interesting finding was related to *dehumanization*, which was found to be the most powerful correlate to all types of bullying, in line with the rather small amount of previous findings that investigated this particular link (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; van Noorden et al., 2014).

According to van Noorden et al. (2014), dehumanization refers to “the denial of full humanness-in children, using distinctions of forms (*i.e.*, animalistic vs. mechanistic) and social targets (*i.e.*, friends vs. nonfriends)” (p. 320). Pozzoli, Gini, and Vieno (2012) found that children who are either bullies, reinforcers, or bystanders are more likely to see others as less human. However, dehumanization was not significantly linked to pro-bullying attitudes when the other moral disengagement mechanisms were controlled. Bastian and Haslam (2010), for example, found that adults who were excluded from a group seem to see others as less human after being excluded, while other studies suggested that children dehumanize outgroups more than in-groups (*e.g.*, Costello & Hodson, 2014; Martin et al., 2008). In van Noorden et al.’s study, results suggested that children dehumanized nonfriends more than their friends. Given these findings and our present data, it is important to emphasize the role of moral education (*i.e.*, reducing moral disengagement) in preventing and reducing bullying behavior. Parents, teachers, and adults, in general, should promote empathy, equality, and prosocial judgments and behaviors among children and adolescents, using targeted educational and intervention programs anti-bullying, and the present findings may serve as a valuable, relevant point.

Finally, we identified a moral identity dimension, namely symbolization, as a significant predictor for emotional bullying. Symbolization refers to the public dimension of moral identity, *i.e.*, “the degree to which people tend to convey their moral identity externally through their actions in the world” (Winterich et al., 2013). Therefore, a teenager high in symbolization generally engages in visible actions that emphasize his or her adherence to moral goals and ideals to others around. According to Aquino and Reed (2002), an adolescent low in symbolization typically engages in less such public displays. Previous findings suggested that symbolization promotes prosocial behavior (Stets & Carter, 2011; Hardy, Bean, & Olsen, 2015; Teng, Nie, Zhu, & Guo, 2020; Winterich, 2013). However, in the present study, we found symbolization to be a significant, positive predictor for

emotional bullying, contrary to previous findings and our assumptions related to the moral identity dimensions.

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead, 1934) and the realization of the self as a social entity (Schlenker, 1980), people high in moral identity symbolization may need to confirm their public moral identity in situations where others can acknowledge their behavior, and consequently, are more sensitive to public recognition. However, in our study, symbolization was a significant predictor of emotional bullying. That means that the need to display moral behaviors publicly predicted acts meant to hurt another person's self-concept and self-esteem (McGrath, 2007), which one may find odd and counterintuitive. One potential explanation for this result may lie in the core meaning of the moral traits symbolization was measured through, as understood by teenagers. We asked the adolescents to think about nine moral traits (*i.e.*, caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind) before answering the moral identity items. If *friendly*, for example, or *fair*, would reflect a modified, contextual version of these moral traits' general meaning, it would be easy to predict the associations we found. For example, if *friendly* or *friendship* means standing by the in-group members while emotionally harassing another peer and acting accordingly, then the moral identity symbolization would significantly predict a similar behavior, *i.e.*, emotional bullying.

Aquino and Reed (2002) mentioned that these nine moral traits used to measure and reflect the two moral identity dimensions are not exhaustive and that they may differ in relevance for each individual. However, teenagers may be more sensitive to friendship and its related factors, due to its high importance in their life (*e.g.*, Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009). As they grow to be more independent from their parents, teenagers put great value in close relationships with their peers, which in turn provides them with a sense of security, validation, and emotional support (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). Friendship instability can impact academic outcomes, as well as the overall psychological well-being (Chan & Poulin, 2009), especially after youth transition to middle school (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004); therefore, teenagers may be more prone to understand moral traits such as the ones used to measure moral identity in terms of in-group conceptualization and general views upon them. A future developmental intergroup approach is needed to better clarify the findings in the current study.

The present research has several limitations that should be noted. First, the study collected only self-reported information; therefore, our results may be

subject to response bias. Second, our sample was relatively small and comprised of adolescents from two Romanian regions only. Therefore, the ecological validity can be improved by future studies that would imply larger and more heterogeneous samples. Another limitation is related to the bullying role explored, *i.e.*, the aggressor only. Future studies would benefit from extending the associations between moral disengagement and moral identity in all three types of roles (*i.e.*, aggressors, victims, and bystanders). However, one of the strengths of the current study was exploring three forms of bullying and the overall bullying, allowing different comparisons and analyses to clarify the details of teenagers' bullying behaviors.

Previous researchers documented the significant importance of the parent-teenager relationship in preventing and reducing bullying behavior, through support, emotional warmth, and guidance. The present results emphasize these findings and promote communication and acceptance between parents and their children, encouraging parents to offer emotional security and actively participate in bullying prevention and intervention programs, to increase their efficiency. Additionally, the current findings encourage moral education programs and educational strategies to reduce moral disengagement and promote moral identity as a central factor associated with prosocial behavior.

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