



Peer Bullies and Victims' Perceptions of Moral Transgression versus Morally-Aimed Dishonesty

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Abstract

Previous studies suggest that people judge moral violation (interpersonal injustice of unprovoked harm) to be more serious, wrong, and punishable than acts of dishonesty and lying, thus classifying morality as a super-ordinate principle to acts of honesty. The present study examined whether or not the observed pattern of subordination of honesty to the moral principle of interpersonal harm would remain the same or change among aggressive (peer bullies), passive (bully victims) youths and those who are neither bullies nor bully victims. Two questionnaires were administered to examine the reasoning of 166 adolescents (9th to 12th grades), with self-identified experiences of having been peer bullies, bully victims, or neither bullies or victims, about moral transgressions (MT, involving gratuitous and deliberate harm to others) and morally-aimed dishonesty (MAD, involving lying or breaking promises to prevent unprovoked harm to others). Adolescents altogether viewed moral transgressions (MT), in comparison to morally-aimed transgressions (MAD), as less right and less subject to personal autonomy. Regression analysis, however, revealed that bullies more positively endorsed MT as a right act and judged MT acts to be subject to greater personal discretion of the protagonist. By contrast, victims more positively endorsed MAD as a right act, but victims' judgments of MAD being subject to the protagonist's personal discretion were nonsignificant. The results imply that the bullies minimize the inherent consequential harm in the straightforward moral transgressions and overextend protagonists' discretion in the transgressions. Victims, on the other hand, minimize protagonists' personal realm of legitimate autonomy utilized in judging multi-faceted moral dilemma.

Keywords: *adolescents, moral judgments, moral transgression, morally-aimed dishonesty, bullies & victims, social domain theory*

The present study examined how adolescents, who self-identified as having been peer bullies, victims, or neither a bully nor a victim, reason about the acceptability and personal right/discretion of moral transgressions, involving unprovoked, gratuitous harm to others, versus acts of dishonesty, involving dilemmas that entail prevention of harm to others by means of lying. Social-cognitive domain theory,¹ upon which the present study is based, has empirically defined morality as

1. Refer to "New Direction for Moral Education with a Theorized Morality" (Hasebe, 2021 In print) for the more detailed descriptions about 1. Domain theory of Social and Cognitive Development, 2. The empirical definition of morality (versus non-moral domains) and 3. The analyses of the premature support of the dualism from the

matters pertaining to welfare and gratuitous harm (e.g., slander, unprovoked violence) in interpersonal relationships embedded in the principle “gratuitous harm to another is wrong.” (Helwig, Tisak, & Turiel, 1990; Turiel, 1983, 2015). Domain research has found that people distinguish moral (i.e., welfare and harm on others) from conventional (e.g., dress codes, courtesies), personal (e.g., choice of friends), and prudential domains (i.e., acts involving consequential harm to the person such as substance abuse) when reasoning about social matters (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983, 2006). More recent domain studies have found that people view acts of honesty differently from acts of moral and personal concerns for interpersonal justices and inequalities (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). People view morality as absolute, universal, non-contingent on contextual or authority variation versus acts of honesty as relative to context, subjective, and alterable. People judge moral matters to be more important, and moral violation to be more serious, wrong, and punishable than acts of dishonesty and lying, thus classifying morality as a super-ordinate principle to acts of honesty (Perkins et al., 2007, Turiel, 2015).

In the context of moral/character education in general, however, honesty and truth telling are emphasized as the hallmarks of an individual’s *moral* probity. Youth and adults are encouraged to be honest and truthful to be trustworthy individuals in line with societal moral standards. In this absolute view of honesty, acts of dishonesty are overall considered morally wrong and truth-telling as morally right. However, these educational frameworks and absolutism of honesty are out of alignment with empirical studies. Studies involving both real-life and hypothetical scenarios suggest that people do not regard all lies as categorically wrong and consider lying as acceptable and even preferable in some situations but as wrong in other situations. Medical doctors judge that lying to insurance companies to secure treatment for patients, which the patients would otherwise be unable to afford, is acceptable to prevent harm to patients by securing payment for necessary medical treatment (Freeman, Rathore, Weinfurt, Schulman, & Sulmasy, 1999). Children, college students, and adults also judged that lying to prevent psychological harm to another is acceptable but lying for personal gain is unacceptable (Lindskold & Walters, 1983; Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983).

Judgments regarding the acceptability of deception is domain-specific. Children and adolescents judge withholding information through non-disclosure to parents as more justifiable, particularly over personal domain matters (e.g., secrecy of the content of a diary), than moral (e.g., gratuitous harm to another such as slandering) and prudential domain (e.g., substance abuse) activities, which they normally view as subject to parents’ legitimate authority (Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). While adolescents regard lying to parents as more acceptable than lying to peers (owing to greater coercive power of parents), they consider lying to parents about prudential issues (e.g., use of illegal drugs) as unacceptable (owing to legitimate parental authority to regulate prudential issues for parental protection of children’s safety). Adolescents avoid parental directives that are in conflict with a moral principle (e.g., causing gratuitous harm to others) or viewed to be imposing on their privacy (Perkins, et al., 2007). These studies suggest that although people value honesty and regard lying as unacceptable in certain situations, they do not view honesty as an absolute imperative that transcends context, as they do moral violations concerning interpersonal injustices and inequalities that involve unprovoked harm to others. These previous studies, however, have not fully examined whether or not the observed pattern of subordination of honesty to the moral principle of interpersonal harm remains the same for diverse

groups of people and when multiple, competing moral considerations are involved in a given situation. Are there variations in social contexts (i.e., situations involving clear violation of straightforward morality such as gratuitous harm to another versus complex situations that involve violation of acts of honesty, such as telling the truth, to uphold moral principle to prevent gratuitous psychological harm on another) and individual characteristics (i.e., being a bully or victim) that may affect adolescents' moral judgments and how different moral factors are coordinated and given primacy? Could some groups judge honesty as super-ordinate to moral consideration of preventing gratuitous harm? In studies on prosocial behaviors, considerable evidence suggests that aggressive and passive youths display idiosyncratic perceptions of autonomy and interpretations of social-interpersonal matters (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004), both of which are vital factors that affect their moral judgements. Therefore, in the present study, two types of youths were included, bullies (aggressive) and victims (passive), to compare how their potentially opposite beliefs about personal discretion and interpersonal propensities may affect their judgements of moral transgression and acts of dishonesty.

Individual Autonomy versus Social Regulation in Moral Judgements

Examining how a person judges and reasons about the limits and boundaries of his or her autonomy and responsibilities and obligations to external/social/interpersonal regulations is important for understanding a person's moral judgements. As stated earlier, a moral principle of interpersonal fairness ("gratuitous harm to another is wrong") is a universally supported concept with a consensus. People's interpersonal-moral judgements, however, vary among individuals because moral judgements are influenced by and interplay with the ways an each person views and interprets the occurrences of the multiple domains in a life (personal, prudential, conventional domains). The ways s/he views and demarcates rights of the self and others and balances personal freedom with social-interpersonal responsibilities for the conduct of each domain likely vary among individuals. These variations, in turn, diversify each person's moral judgements that contain judgments of what is fair or unfair for people.

Social domain researchers have found that people's judgments of individuals' freedom and social obligations are not random but are systematic, domain-specific, and involve different reasoning that corresponds to the different domains of social interactions (Turiel, 2015). In particular, people normally view the conduct of personal domain (e.g., choice of friends, clothes) as matters subject to individual discretion and personal autonomy (individual action that is unregulated) where conduct should be up to the individual. People view the prudential (a person's welfare), conventional (social rules), and moral domains (welfare and interpersonal harm) as matters subject to social regulation and therefore, can be legitimately regulated by authorities (e.g., parents, teachers, lawmakers). Furthermore, "overlapping" issues are matters that do not fit precisely into a single domain (e.g., personal domain) and have multiple features. For example, a youth's decision to pierce his or her body has both personal and conventional aspects simultaneously, or wearing a coat on a very cold day has prudential and personal aspects, and so on. Decision-making regarding overlapping issues involves conflicts and compromises as the conduct involves dual aspects of personal discretion and social responsibility, and the boundary may not be always agreed upon (Nucci, 1996; Nucci & Smetana, 1996; Smetana, 2000).

Complexities arise from other aspects of social situations as well as how people with different life experiences and beliefs coordinate and reason about the complex nature of social situations. To repeat, individual freedom to act in moral situations is universally agreed upon and prescribed and proscribed in clear ways when gratuitous harm to others is involved (Nucci & Turiel,

1993). However, judgments are likely to vary about individual freedom and social obligations in specific contexts involving complex and multi-domain issues. Judgments, even within the normative pattern of what is to be personal and what is to be regulated, also vary by people's differentiating beliefs about the areas/degrees of freedom granted to the self and others in accord with specific features of a given situation, by people's personal experiences and social expectations and their views of effects of moral decisions on self and others (Sorkhabi, 2012; Wainryb & Turiel, 1994).

Domain studies have found that variations in these normative patterns of reasoning about the four domains and overlapping issues diverge when examining the reasoning of aggressive youth with externalizing problems and youth with internalizing problems (Hasebe, Nucci, & Nucci, 2004; Nucci & Herman, 1982). This is not to suggest that aggressive and depressed youth do not make domain distinctions. Tisak & Jankowski (1996) found that like normative samples, adolescent criminal offenders (e.g., those with felony, misdemeanor) judged moral violations as most wrong, conventional violations as second most wrong, and violation of personal matters as least wrong. Nevertheless, adolescent felons did reason that personal rules are more important than moral or conventional rules and regarded violation of conventional rules as more deserving of punishment than moral violations. Furthermore, adolescents with both felony and misdemeanor provided justifications for their reasoning that diverged from normative samples. For example, only 33% of adolescents with criminal offenses utilized moral justifications (e.g., wrong to harm or cause gratuitous pain to others) for moral violations. The remainder of them utilized conventional justifications or justifications from several domains for moral violations. These findings suggest that in comparison to non-aggressive youth, aggressive youth do not reason about moral issues based solely on the deductive moral principles of preventing gratuitous harm and promoting human welfare.

By contrast, youth within the normative range distinguish between personal discretion and freedom in the personal domain versus social regulation and control in the moral, conventional, and prudential domains. Aggressive youths' expression of autonomy extends beyond the personal domain to include the three socially regulated domains (Nucci, et al., 1982; Tisak, et al., 1996). Adolescent criminal offenders interpreted conventional matters not only in conventional terms but also in personal terms such that 77% of those considered a decision to 'march in line' (which was intended as a conventional act in the study) to be personal (Tisak et al., 1996). Illicit drug use, which non-aggressive adolescents view as a prudential matter (Hasebe et al., 2004) was considered a personal matter among adolescents who use drugs (Nucci, Guerra, & Lee, 1991) and who approve of drug use (Tisak, Tisak, & Rogers, 1994). Previous studies, however, have not fully examined the ways in which aggression and passivity affect adolescents' judgments of acts of dishonesty versus moral transgression.

Adolescents who have been experiencing either long-term under- or over-controlling parenting display an atypical pattern of expression of personal discretion by either over-extending their personal freedoms into the socially regulated conventional, prudential, and moral domains or, conversely, truncating the typical areas of personal discretion that most adolescents claim (Hasebe, et al., 2004, Hasebe, 2011). This non-normative pattern of autonomy may well fit the participants of this present study in excessively over-extended autonomy associated with peer bullies and excessively truncated autonomy with victims. Several bully studies (Arsenio & Gold, 2006; Bandura, 1986) support the findings of domain theory in suggesting that aggressive, passive/reticent, and nonaggressive children differ in social skills (Crick & Dodge, 1994) and ways of perceiving social events and interpersonal communication (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Studies also support that both bullies and victims display problems in autonomy expression. Coercion and

domination are associated with bullies (Boldizar, Perry, & Perry, 1989; Gilbert & McGuire, 1998), and reflect bullies failure to circumscribe their arena of autonomy to curtail infringement on others' autonomy. Victims' problems with autonomy expression involves their incapacity to be self-reliant and to assert their legitimate independence, which may stem from their low self-esteem and self-efficacy (Boulton & Smith, 1994). However, as Arsenio & Lemerise (2004) suggest, these studies have not examined bullies' and victims' moral judgments within a theoretical paradigm that empirically defines morality as a distinct domain from other social domains. Therefore, studies that do not distinguish the moral domain from other domains of judgment and action have not offered sufficient, systematic explanation for how bullies and victims' moral decisions are considered atypical. Hence, it is important to apply the social domain distinction to understand how bullies and victims reason about and coordinate individual right to act freely with prevention of harm and promotion of others' welfare that undergird their moral judgments. It is also important to understand the manner in which bullies' reasoning in these aspects diverge from that of victims and those who are neither bullies nor victims (Henceforth, this group is referred to as Neithers).

Present Study

In the present study, we employed social domains to examine the judgments of bullies, victims, and neithers, regarding hypothetical scenarios that depict moral transgressions (protagonist causes gratuitous and deliberate harm) and morally-aimed dishonesty (protagonist lies or breaks the promises to prevent harm).

Multifaceted social issues involve instances where several considerations simultaneously impinge on a particular situation such that an actor may violate a principle no matter what action he or she takes. To compare youths' views of dishonesty in reference to their views of moral transgression, we presented scenarios in a way that multifaceted issues involved the choice and dilemma between being honest versus preventing gratuitous psychological harm on another. If the actor is honest, he or she will cause psychological harm (e.g., a person walks into a room and finds that everyone is laughing/giggling and is told that people were just ridiculing him prior to his entrance). Alternatively, if the actor prevents psychological harm, he or she will have been dishonest (e.g., a person walks into a room and finds that everyone is laughing/giggling and is told that people are laughing about the contents of a book they read). Dishonesty in order to prevent physical and psychological harm, or property damage/financial loss to another human being is referred to as a morally-aimed dishonesty in the present study. In the morally-aimed dishonesty scenarios, the protagonist violates the subordinate virtuous principle of honesty to uphold the more super-ordinate moral principle of preventing gratuitous harm.

With respect to the first question of differences among judgments of bullies, victims, and neithers, hypothetical vignettes involving clear moral transgressions (e.g., causing unprovoked harm such as peer bullying) versus hypothetical vignettes involving morally-aimed dishonesty (e.g., breaking a promise) done with the aim of upholding a super-ordinate moral value (e.g., ensuring safety and preventing physical harm to others) were used to examine whether participants in the three groups distinguished between the two types of transgressions. Participants' moral judgments were examined by asking them whether they thought the two types of transgressions, moral (henceforth referred to as MT) and morally-aimed dishonesty (henceforth referred to as MAD) were right or wrong. Their judgments were examined in a second way by asking them whether the protagonist is personally entitled or has a right to take the action in the scenario.

Hypotheses: Bullies*MT Scenarios*

Bullies would be more likely than the other two groups to positively endorse violations in the MT scenarios and to ascribe a personal right to the transgressor, because they are more inclined to engage in antisocial acts that cause interpersonal harm than the other two groups.

MAD Scenarios

Endorsement of MAD scenarios would be negatively related to bully status, because bullies have been found to ignore or minimize harmful outcomes to victims and to focus on conventional rules intended for social-organization and punishments intended to maintain such order. Although importance of conforming to social conventions and the principle of honesty are not isomorphic, they are both taught socially and in current character education, through a method of indoctrination, and emphasized by authorities (e.g., parents, teachers) as important values and behaviors to which all must conform (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). Therefore, we reasoned that bullies would more easily identify violation of the principle of honesty which is socially emphasized than moral transgression that involves complexity of discerning different types of harm including psychological harm, coordinating the higher principle of harm with the principle of honesty, and finally subordinating honesty (a much taught value) to uphold the principle of refraining from causing psychological harm to others. Furthermore, bully status may not be significantly related to judgments of personal right or entitlement of the transgressor to engage in morally-aimed honesty violation, because of bullies' lack of concern for preventing physical and psychological harm to others.

Hypotheses: Victims*MT Scenarios*

Victims lack a clear sense of agency, boundary between self and other, and assertiveness. Therefore, our hypotheses are exploratory with respect to how victims may judge moral violation in MT scenarios or the extent that victims will accord personal entitlement/right to the transgressor in MT scenarios.

MAD Scenarios

Victim status was expected to be positively related to endorsement of violations in the MAD scenarios because victims would be more sensitive to the higher moral principle of physical and psychological harm prevention compared to the subordinate acts of honesty. Hypotheses regarding judgments about the personal right/entitlement of the transgressor in MAD scenarios was exploratory because of victims' diminished sense of agency and lack of self-reliance and assertiveness.

Method

Participants

Adolescents ($N = 166$, Male = 91, Female = 74) in grades 9 and 12 (M age = 16.0 years, $SD = 1.26$ years) were selected from four classrooms (40 students from each class) in a high school in an urban city in Illinois. Ethnicity of participants were 88% European American, 9.8% Hispanic, 0.9% multi-ethnic, 0.6% African American, 0.4% Native American, and 0.3% Asian. Graduation rate for the high school was 90%, and 20% of the students were receiving free or reduced price lunch.

Instruments

Bully-Victim Questionnaire

Adolescents responded to a self-report questionnaire that assessed their experiences of having been victimized by their peers or having bullied their peers. Questions are “How often have you been bullied by your peers in the past of couple years?” and “In the past couple of years, how often have you taken part in bullying other students or peers?” Adolescents’ rated their experiences on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = ‘not at all’ and 6 = ‘all the time’). Self-assessments of bully and victim status are common in similar studies (e.g., Olweus, 1989). Self-assessment in the present study was proper because the aim of the present study was to identify adolescents’ self-perceptions of their status. Direct questions regarding bully or victim status have been effectively used in past studies (e.g., Fandrem, Ertesvag, strohmeier, & Roland, 2010).

Moral Transgression and Dishonesty Questionnaire

Hasebe (2021) devised a questionnaire with 8 hypothetical vignettes to assess adolescents’ judgements about moral dilemmas involving interpersonal conflict. Five of the vignettes depict moral transgressions (MT) or behavior that involves an intentional breach of a moral principle (i.e., unprovoked harm such as bullying or stealing). Three of the vignettes depict acts of dishonesty aimed for prevention of harm to others (i.e., telling a white lie to prevent psychological harm to another person; breaking a promise because of safety considerations) which we will refer to as Morally-aimed Dishonesty (MAD). Adolescents answered two questions for each vignette that assessed (1) whether the adolescents thought that the protagonist’s action was correct or right from a moral standpoint and (2) whether the protagonist had the right to act, as he or she had been depicted. The adolescents answered the two following questions: (1) “Is the person’s act right to do?” (Act-Rightness) and (2) “Does he or she have a right to do the act?” (Personal-Right) and recorded their answers for each question on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “the act is absolutely wrong” or “the person has absolutely no right to do that,” and 5 = “the act is absolutely right” or “the person absolutely has the right to do that”).

Procedures

Parents’ and adolescents’ written consent was obtained, as well as that of school administrators and classroom teachers. Questionnaires were administered in the classroom by their teach-

ers. Their teachers read a script, written by the first author, to the participating adolescents regarding the proper completion of the questionnaires and their rights as participants. Adolescents' responses to the questionnaires were anonymous.

Results

Table 1

Scenario Act-Rightness and Personal Right Descriptive Statistics for Victims, Bullies, and Total Sample

Scenario	Transgression Type	Act-Rightness M (SDs)					
		Victims		Bullies		Total	
1) Teasing	MT	1.18	(0.40)	2.11	(0.96)	1.55	(0.70)
2) CD money	MT	1.45	(0.93)	1.72	(1.02)	1.35	(0.70)
3) Letter	MT	1.64	(0.92)	2.28	(1.02)	1.80	(0.86)
4) Sneakers	MT	1.18	(0.40)	1.67	(1.03)	1.27	(0.67)
5) Car defect	MT	1.27	(0.47)	2.61	(1.50)	1.72	(0.96)
6) Car	MAD	4.27	(1.27)	4.17	(1.29)	4.17	(1.25)
7) T-Shirt	MAD	2.64	(1.03)	2.67	(1.14)	2.79	(1.17)
8) White lie	MAD	3.55	(1.04)	2.94	(1.39)	2.84	(1.18)

Scenario	Transgression Type	Personal Right M (SDs)					
		Victims		Bullies		Total	
1) Teasing	MT	1.73	(1.27)	2.28	(1.13)	1.77	(1.00)
2) CD money	MT	1.55	(1.04)	1.83	(0.99)	1.34	(0.71)
3) Letter	MT	1.55	(0.93)	2.39	(1.24)	1.86	(1.02)
4) Sneakers	MT	1.18	(0.40)	2.00	(1.28)	1.31	(0.72)
5) Car defect	MT	1.73	(1.27)	2.89	(1.81)	1.99	(1.28)
6) Car	MAD	3.73	(1.35)	3.89	(1.45)	4.08	(1.29)
7) T-Shirt	MAD	2.45	(0.93)	2.83	(1.42)	2.91	(1.22)
8) White lie	MAD	3.18	(0.87)	2.94	(1.39)	2.82	(1.33)

As displayed in *Table 1*, adolescents reported being a bully ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.13$) somewhat more often than being a victim ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.94$). Adolescents' reports of being a bully or a victim were largely uncorrelated, $r = .14$, $p = .08$, and no adolescent reported being *both* a bully and a victim often (score of 4 or greater for each). Because few participants scored 4 or greater on being a victim ($n = 9$, 5.4%) or a bully ($n = 13$, 7.8%) which would signify 'often' or 'all the time', response distributions were positively skewed and a log transformation was applied

to improve distributional properties of these ratings for all subsequent analyses. Overall, adolescents were more likely to endorse Act-Rightness and Personal-Right for the 3 MAD vignettes than the 5 MT vignettes.

This finding suggests that when a virtuous transgression takes place to prevent harm, adolescents endorse such an act as morally correct and as within the individual's right to act. However, when an act is a moral transgression that causes harm, such acts are not endorsed as morally correct or as within the individual's right to act. It should be noted that the mean averages for bullies for both Act-Rightness and Personal-Right on the MT vignettes was higher than that of victims, which indicates that bullies appear to endorse moral transgressions more than victims do. However, the bullies' mean averages for Act-Rightness (2.08) and Personal-Right (2.28) reflect overall relative disapproval of bullies for moral transgressions.

Victims' and Bullies' Perceptions of MT and MAD Vignettes

A pair of hierarchical regression analyses was used to predict victim and bully status based on the Act-Rightness ratings for MT and MAD vignettes (Blocks 1 and 2, respectively), the Personal-Right ratings for MT and MAD vignettes (Blocks 3 & 4, respectively). The overall regression model for (log of) victims' ratings with Act-Rightness and Personal-Right as predictors was significant, $R^2 = .16$, $F(6, 149) = 1.74$, $p = .045$. As can be seen in *Table 2*, ratings of Act-Rightness of MAD vignettes explained a significant amount of unique variance in victimness status, Block 2 $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $\Delta F(3, 157) = 5.19$, $p = .002$. None of the other three blocks were significant.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression of Victims' Experiences on Moral Transgression and Morally-aimed Dishonesty and Act-Rightness/Personal Right Ratings by Predictor Block

<i>Block</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Predictors in Block</i>	ΔR^2	ΔF	<i>p</i>
1)	<i>MT Act-Rightness</i>	5	.04	1.42	.22
2)	<i>MAD Act-Rightness</i>	3	.09	5.19	.002
3)	<i>MT Personal Right</i>	5	.02	0.83	.53
4)	<i>MAD Personal Right</i>	3	.01	0.32	.81

Note. $n = 166$. MT = Moral Transgression, MAD = Morally-aimed Dishonesty

The overall regression model predicting (log of) bullies' ratings with Act-Rightness and Personal-Right was significant, $R^2 = .17$, $F(6, 149) = 1.88$, $p = .03$. Act-Rightness of MT was significantly related to bulliness in Block 1, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $\Delta F(5, 160) = 3.55$, $p = .004$, but none of the other three blocks were significant. Although Block 3, which was marginally significant ($p = .07$), explained 6% of the variance in bulliness ratings.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression of Bullies' Experiences on Moral Transgression and Morally-aimed Dishonesty and Act-Rightness/Personal Right Ratings by Predictor Block

<i>Block</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Predictors in Block</i>	ΔR^2	ΔF	<i>p</i>
1)	<i>MT Act-Rightness</i>	5	.10	3.55	.004
2)	<i>MAD Act-Rightness</i>	3	.01	0.48	.70
3)	<i>MT Personal Right</i>	5	.06	2.10	.07
4)	<i>MAD Personal Right</i>	3	.00	0.12	.95

Note. $n = 166$. MT = *Moral Transgression*, MAD = *Morally-aimed Dishonesty*

Bullies, Victims, and Neither Group's Ratings of MT and MAD Vignettes

Discriminant function analysis was utilized to examine the pattern of responses to the various vignettes between the groups of bullies, victims, and neithers. Three subgroups were formed to compare responses on Act-Rightness and Personal-Right ratings: (1) Victims, who rated being victimized two or more units more than bullies on the 6-point scale ($n = 11$), (2) Bullies, who rated bullying their peers two or more units more than victims on the 6-point scale ($n = 18$), and (3) Neithers, who reported equally low victim and bully experiences (Rating of 1 = not at all or Rating 2 = a little bit; $n = 61$).

Table 4

Group Means and Discriminant Function Loadings for the MT/MAD and Act-Rightness/ Personal Right Ratings

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Scenario Type</i>	<i>Question Type</i>	<i>Mean Rating</i>			<i>F(2, 87)</i>	<i>Standardized Loading</i>	
			<i>Victims</i>	<i>Neithers</i>	<i>Bullies</i>		<i>Func. 1</i>	<i>Func. 2</i>
<i>Sneakers</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Personal</i>	1.18	1.15	2.00	11.45*	.58	.04
<i>Car defect</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	1.27	1.59	2.61	10.94*	.55	-.22
<i>Teasing</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	1.18	1.41	2.11	10.55*	.54	-.23
<i>CD money</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Personal</i>	1.55	1.16	1.83	7.79*	.43	.38
<i>Letter</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Personal</i>	1.55	1.60	2.39	5.83*	.41	-.04
<i>Letter</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	1.64	1.57	2.28	5.72*	.41	.06
<i>Teasing</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Personal</i>	1.73	1.51	2.28	5.20*	.38	.16
<i>Sneakers</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	1.18	1.15	1.67	4.22*	.35	.04

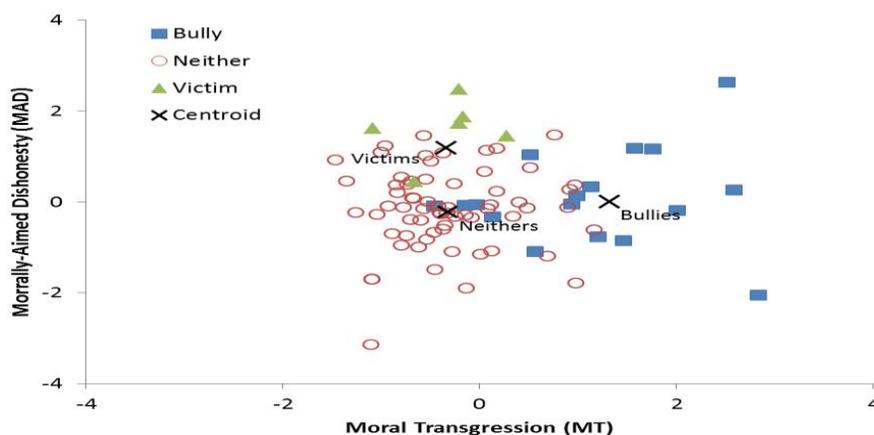
<i>Car defect</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Personal</i>	1.73	1.93	2.89	4.13*	.34	-.10
<i>CD money</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	1.45	1.23	1.72	3.89*	.31	.22
<i>White lie</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	3.55	2.70	2.94	2.29	.04	.44
<i>T-shirt</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Personal</i>	2.45	2.92	2.83	0.70	-.00	-.25
<i>Car</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Personal</i>	3.73	4.15	3.89	0.60	-.07	-.20
<i>White lie</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Personal</i>	3.18	2.77	2.94	0.50	.04	.20
<i>T-shirt</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	2.64	2.79	2.67	0.12	-.04	-.08
<i>Car</i>	<i>MAD</i>	<i>Act-R</i>	4.27	4.16	4.17	0.04	-.01	.06

Note. Group sizes were $n = 11$ Victims, 61 Neithers, and 18 Bullies. The function loading with the highest absolute loading is shaded. MT = Moral Transgression, MAD = Morally-aimed Dishonesty; Act-R = Act-Rightness; Personal = Personal Right. $p < .05$.

Two discriminant functions were significantly related to membership in the bully, victim, and neither groups, $Wilks' \Lambda = .44$, $\chi^2(32) = 64.67$, $p = .001$. Function 1 correlated strongly with the 10 MT vignettes and accounted for 75% of the between-group variance. After the removal of Function 1, no significant relations between group membership and the predictors remained, $Wilks' \Lambda = .79$, $\chi^2(15) = 18.58$, $p = .23$. Function 1 was the primary source of mean differences across the bully, victim, and neither groups with bullies' ratings being the highest for all of the 10 MT vignettes (see Table 4). Function 2 loadings, which correlated highly with the 6 MAD vignettes, were inconsistently patterned across groups, and no significant differences emerged.

Figure 1

Scatterplot of Victims ($n = 11$), Bullies ($n = 18$), and Neithers ($n = 61$) on two discriminant functions derived from the 16 morality items. Function scores were standardized to facilitate comparison. Function 1 was the primary source of discrimination between groups (75% vs. 25% for Function 2).



Reflecting their consistently higher MT ratings, bullies' Function 1 mean score was 1.65 *SDs* greater than that of the neither group and 1.66 *SDs* greater than that of the victim group (see Figure 1). Function 2 differences were also notable, with victims scoring an average of 1.41 *SDs* greater than neither group and 1.19 *SDs* greater than the bully group. Of the 90 total cases, 82% were correctly classified from their discriminant function scores (vs. 57% chance level agreement). Accuracy was satisfactory for bullies (67%) but was substantially lower for victims at 36%. All 16 misclassifications involved the neither group; no victims were misclassified as bullies or vice versa. As can be seen in *Figure 1*, the most notable differences were between bullies and the other two groups; discrimination between victims and neithers was less clear.

Discussion

Overall, adolescents irrespective of bully or victim status judged violations in MT scenarios as more wrong than the violations in MAD scenarios and conferred less personal right or entitlement to the transgressor in MT scenarios than MAD scenarios. These findings suggest that all participants, irrespective of bully or victim status, subordinate dishonesty to the super-ordinate moral principles of preventing physical and psychological harm (see Nucci, 1982; Tisak et al., 1996 for conceptually similar results). Despite this general pattern, the judgments of bullies and victims did significantly differ.

Bullies

Moral Transgressions

As hypothesized, bullies in comparison to victims and neithers judged that moral transgression that causes clear harm to others is alright (act rightness). This result is concordant with previous research on the cognitive precursors of aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that those who are aggressive use rationalizations to justify or legitimize their aggressive behavior. Bullies also granted greater personal freedom (personal right) to the transgressor—indicating that a moral transgression that will cause harm to others is within the realm of personal jurisdiction of the aggressor. This result is concordant with previous studies that suggest that aggressive youth reason about socially regulated conduct (i.e., conventional, prudential matters) in personal terms (Tisak et al., 1996). Bullies' attribution of personal autonomy to actions that are not within the realm of individual discretion because they entail harm to others may reflect their expansive sense of personal rights that may be insufficiently inclusive of consideration for others' needs, rights, and perspectives.

Morally-Aimed Dishonesty

Our hypothesis that level of being a bully would be negatively related to endorsement or affirmation of morally-aimed dishonesty was not supported. Level of being a bully was not significantly related to either judgments of act correctness or personal right to transgress in MAD scenarios. Our hypothesis was based on previous studies that found that bullies have tendencies to fail to identify the moral significance of moral events (e.g., gratuitous harm). For example, bullies judge the wrongness of moral events by focusing on violation of societal rules and accompanying punishment than on violation of moral principle by commission of harm (Tisak, et al., 1996). Although social conventions and honesty are not conceptually the same, they are both subordinate to

super-ordinate moral principles. Social conventions and honesty have been and continue to be the aim of socialization efforts as ends rather than moral implications of interpersonal harm and welfare that involve concrete observable outcomes, especially for older children (Nucci & Turiel, 2009).

However, it is important to note differences in judgments of bullies between MT scenarios and MAD scenarios. In MT scenarios, harm is directly and deliberately caused to another. In MAD scenarios, harm is prevented, and consequently, benefit is derived by another. Bullies' responses are clear and statistically significantly in MT scenarios, because they focus on the aggressor causing harm and having the freedom to behave like a bully, but they disregard or fail to take the perspective of the victim who sustains harm. However, in MAD scenarios, the transgressor is not behaving like a bully but is attempting to prevent harm to a potential victim—a moral perspective the bully tends to ignore. Thus, bullies' judgment about correctness of the act and the right of the transgressor to prevent harm is diluted and not clearly adjudicated in MAD scenarios, but clearly done in MT scenarios. The non-significance could also imply that bullies are uncertain and find it difficult to coordinate two conflicting principles (harm prevention and dishonesty) simultaneously to arrive at a conclusion regarding correctness of an act and the transgressor's right.

Victims

Moral Transgressions

We did not find an association between adolescents' victim status and their judgments of correctness of moral transgression that causes gratuitous harm to another or the personal right of the transgressor to cause harm. These nonsignificant findings may suggest victims' inability to clearly judge and evaluate gratuitous and deliberate interpersonal harm, which individuals in normative samples readily identify. However, victims who are subject to persistent relational maltreatment (e.g., parental psychological abuse or peer bullying) may have a diminished sense of autonomy of their personal domain (Hasebe, 2011) and may be hindered in clear cognitive interpretation of an abusive act as abusive or comprehension of abusive relationship contexts (Hasebe, 2011).

Morally-Aimed Dishonesty

As hypothesized, the regression analyses revealed that victims significantly endorsed the correctness of morally-aimed dishonesty by the protagonist to ensure interpersonal welfare and to gratuitous unprovoked harm. However, bullies did not. Bully status was not significantly related to endorsement of act correctness in MAD scenarios. With respect to whether the protagonist had a personal right to engage in morally-aimed dishonesty, victim status was not significantly related to personal right of the protagonist in MAD scenarios. Because victims may lack initiative to claim personal discretion over acts they view affirmatively, in this instance, they may have similarly not endorsed the personal right of the protagonist to take personal initiative even though they approve or accept the protagonist's action.

However, the discriminant function analyses, where the three groups of bullies, victims, and neither were directly compared, revealed no significant differences, among the three groups' endorsement of act-rightness or personal-right of the protagonist in MAD scenarios. These results suggest that all groups were capable of identifying and affirming the moral benefits inherent in

preventing harm in MAD scenarios. Similarly, Nucci (1982) and Tisak et al. (1996) also found that participants could identify the moral dimension of harm prevention.

The present study sheds light on how adolescents, who have potentially experienced different home environments and types of parenting and self-identified as having bullied or been victimized may reason about and ultimately act or fail to act to prevent harm to others. In the home, children's interactions with parents include moral, conventional, personal, and prudential matters. How parents behave in relation to these domains and the consequences that children sustain can contribute to how children reason about the role of authority figures, the extent of their own personal autonomy and that of others, and the moral problem of inaction in the face of harm. Educators in school settings might consider exploring how adolescents think about their relationships to their peers, friends, and adults in the school setting to prevent and ameliorate the harm associated with bullying and victimization.

The present study has the following limitations. All data were obtained from the same source; therefore, shared-source variance may explain some of the significant findings. The cross-sectional nature of the design precludes any causal conclusions about the experiences of the bullies and victims and their judgments about actual moral transgressions. Furthermore, the findings may not be generalizable to diverse ethnic and social-economic groups.

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