

Moral motivation in defending classmates victimized by bullying

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The study addresses factors that relate to defending of classmates victimized by bullying in early adolescence. Specifically, it examines whether moral motivation—measured as a combination of emotion attributions and their justifications in response to a hypothetical transgression—predicts defending in context of gender, social preference, perceived popularity and teacher support. We gathered single-time-point data on a sample of 512 sixth-graders (aged 11–13 years). A three-step hierarchical regression analysis showed that defending was positively predicted by: (1) moral motivation, when gender, social preference, perceived popularity and teacher support were accounted for; (2) interaction between moral motivation and social preference, when all other independent variables were accounted for. Simple slopes indicated that increased social preference strengthened the link between moral motivation and defending. The full model explained 40.5% of the variance in defending. The findings underscore the relevance of morality and its interplay with social preference in understanding defending.

Keywords: Adolescence; Defending; Moral motivation; Peer relations; Prosocial behaviour.

Within school bullying incidents, two behaviours have distinct moral relevance: bullying as a repeated aggressive behaviour directed towards somebody who cannot effectively defend himself/herself (Olweus, 1993) and defending as a prosocial behaviour that encompasses siding with victims, supporting them, consoling them, or actively intervening to stop bullying (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Prosocial behaviours such as giving money to an impoverished person are distinguished by moral worthiness, but are

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considered rather discretionary than obligatory (Kahn, 1992). Defending, however, not only refers to concerns about welfare and justice (Kollerová, Janošová, & Říčan, 2014), but follows a norm to help a person who is being hurt that has been understood as a moral obligation (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011). We address defending and its links to morality, as a crucial issue for investigation, because defending stops bullying and improves the adjustment of victims (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011).

The few studies on this topic brought insights useful for theories of sociomoral development and for educational practice. Basic moral emotions shame and guilt relate to prosocial behaviour consisting of consoling sad classmates and helping classmates (Menesini & Camodeca, 2008) and prosocial behaviour covering helping victims of bullying and empathic behaviour towards classmates (Olthof, 2012). Defending of victimized classmates associates also with empathy (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008)—an emotion that has been assumed to play a fundamental role in the development of morality and prosocial behaviour (e.g., Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000). Apart from basic moral emotions, defenders may be differentiated from other students by heightened moral sensitivity in terms of lower levels of moral disengagement (Gini, 2006), greater recognition of the harmfulness of bullying along with sympathy for the victim (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), and higher levels of moral condemnation of bullying (Kollerová et al., 2014). Prosocial behaviour consistently associates with moral emotions measured as emotions attributed to a hypothetical wrongdoer or to the self in his/her role (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). Several studies have combined these emotion attributions with their justifications to measure moral motivation, which was found to relate to prosocial behaviour consisting of sharing, helping and comforting (Gasser & Keller, 2009), and to prosocial behaviour including helping a person, who is hurt, upset or feeling ill (Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009).

Following on from these studies, we focus on moral motivation—a *willingness to do what one knows to be right even if that entails personal costs* (Nunner-Winkler, 2007, p. 399). A large amount of research has demonstrated that moral cognition is intertwined with moral emotion (Arsenio, 2010; Turiel & Killen, 2010). Emotion attributions refer to the strength of the moral motive and justifications of the attributions express its cognitive content (Nunner-Winkler, 2007). Combining emotion attributions and justifications has been consistently shown to be a valid measure of moral motivation (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Malti, Gummerum, & Buchmann, 2007; Malti, Gummerum, et al., 2009). Moral motivation may refer to morally relevant behavioural dispositions (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013), but it also depends on situational context. Moral emotions were found largely context dependent (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011), but to what extent moral motivation is trait-like and context-specific remains unclear. Nevertheless, compared to personality traits, moral motivation appears to vary more as a function of context (Nunner-Winkler, 2007).

Even though typical hypothetical transgressions, such as stealing another child's chocolate, have high construct and predictive validity (e.g., Arsenio, 2010; Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009a), their ecological validity may be limited. While moral reasoning about actual and hypothetical events does correspond (Turiel, 2008), typical hypothetical transgressions possess less complexity than real-life morally relevant situations (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Gasser, & Malti, 2010). Innovative hypothetical transgressions that better approximate the real world, through greater complexity and more vivid detail, may extend existing knowledge. To meet these requirements, we employed a real-life story about joining the social exclusion of a classmate, originally used as a case material in a study on moral choices by Feigenberg, King, Barr, and Selman (2008). The complexity and moral relevance of social exclusion incidents have been documented previously (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Malti, Ongley, Dys, & Colasante, 2012).

This study also took inspiration from the social–ecological approach that understands behaviours in bullying as the result of complex social exchanges among individuals, peer groups and their broader social environment (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Building upon this understanding and a recent call for complex models and examination of interactive effects (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014), this study examined the role of moral motivation in defending in the context of and in interplay with several other predictors.

First, we asked whether, if gender, peer status and teacher support were taken into account, moral motivation would positively predict defending. These factors were chosen as they present three diverse potential sources of influence on defending. While gender and peer status are proved correlates of defending (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996), teacher support (i.e., social support provided by teacher/s) was added mainly for theoretical reasons. We assume that teacher support may encourage defending, because students' willingness to disclose bullying to teachers positively associates with teacher support (Boulton et al., 2013) and students are more likely to decide in favour of defending, when they view the environment as welcoming positive change (Feigenberg et al., 2008).

Second, we examined whether the interactions of moral motivation with gender, peer status and teacher support would positively predict defending when all other independent variables had been accounted for. In a study by Malti et al. (2007), prosocial behaviour was predicted by an interaction between moral motivation and gender, such that moral motivation predicted prosocial behaviour only in boys, not girls. In two studies (Caravita et al., 2009, 2012), peer status was found to strengthen the links between defending and morality variables, namely empathy and acceptance of moral transgression. Our examination of interactions between moral motivation and gender, social preference, perceived popularity and teacher support complements these existing understandings.

METHODS

Sample and procedure

The sample consisted of 512 urban sixth-graders (269 boys and 243 girls) aged 11–13 years. Using convenience sampling, participants were retrieved from 25 classrooms of public elementary schools located in the capital city, Prague (6 schools), and a large regional town, Budweis (6 schools). We did not measure socioeconomic status or ethnicity. Amongst urban Czechs, middle-class socioeconomic background prevails and 98.2% of elementary school students are Czech (mostly Caucasian with some Roma) with only 1.8% being citizens of other countries (ÚIV, 2011).

Parental written informed consent was gathered and administrators informed students that participation was voluntary. The participation rate was 85%. Each classroom was assessed for two consecutive hours by trained psychologists and assistants.

To check for comprehensibility of the instruments, after the assessment of the first two classrooms, five students from each classroom were interviewed about the meaning of several sample items from each instrument. No student showed any comprehension difficulties.

Instruments

Defending was measured using a score computed as a mean of scores on 2 items covering classroom defending behaviours within an 11-item adaptation of a peer nomination method (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Students were asked to name classmates who fit well to particular behaviours or characteristics. Item scores were computed as the number of nominations divided by the number of nominators (i.e., classmates participating in the study). To minimize social desirability bias, the term *hurting* was used in place of the term *bullying* and a definition of *hurting* that met two basic criteria for bullying (repetitiveness and imbalance of power) was introduced to participants. The items on defending were as follows: *Who most often defends somebody who is being hurt by other classmates?* (Item 5) and *Who can best support or raise the spirit of those who need it?* (Item 10). The total defending score reached high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Moral motivation was registered as a binary variable based on emotion attributions and their justifications registered in response to a hypothetical scenario of moral transgression, namely, the social exclusion of a classmate. In the scenario, based on the story adopted from Feigenberg et al. (2008), the main protagonist (the wrongdoer)—matched to the respondent's gender—writes about his/her involvement in the exclusion of a classmate. The story starts by explaining that the wrongdoer was one of two or three people who were

repeatedly excluded by a small elite group of classmates. It continues by narrating how, one day, the wrongdoer joined the elite group when laughing and reading aloud from a diary of another classmate who was even more excluded than him/her. The scenario ends with the description of the moral transgression: *I sat down and, laughing till my sides hurt, heard my voice finally blend with the others* (Feigenberg et al., 2008, p. 166). Compared to typical hypothetical transgressions, this scenario is more complex, because the wrongdoer excludes the classmate by joining the group that he/she had previously been excluded from. Similar aspects of smooth group functioning or personal positive emotions connected with acceptance by a group are often present in the real-life moral dilemmas of adolescents (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Incidents of social exclusion have been evident in a study (Janošová, Kollerová, & Řičan, in preparation) conducted in three classrooms retrieved from two schools that were included in this study, therefore our scenario appeared relevant to the everyday life of the participants. The hypothetical transgression was followed by a series of questions. For the purposes of this study, we coded the question on emotions attributed to the self-as-wrongdoer: *Imagine that you would do what (the name of the protagonist) did. How would you feel then?* (Question 1) and the question on justification of the emotion attribution: *Why would you feel that way?* (Question 2). Following Malti, Gasser, et al. (2009a), emotion attributions were coded as negative (e.g., *bad*), positive (e.g., *all right*) and mixed (e.g., *half well and half bad*) emotions. To cover all the responses, we added a category of missing/irrelevant emotions (e.g., *I don't know.*). The frequency of particular categories was as follows: 76% negative, 10% positive, 8% mixed and 6% missing/irrelevant. Based on social domain theory (Turiel, 2006), justifications of the emotion attributions were coded as moral (e.g., *I would feel sorry for the girl.*), conventional (e.g., *I would join with the clique.*) and personal (e.g., *It would be a relief for me.*). Of the justifications, 80% were moral, 12% were conventional and 8% were personal, which complies with existing findings on how children reason about hypothetical moral transgressions (Thornberg, Thornberg, Alamaaa, & Daud, 2014). All the protocols were coded by two raters who reached high inter-rater reliability for both emotion attributions ($\kappa = .99$) and their justifications ($\kappa = .94$). By combining the emotion attributions and their justifications, we created a binary variable, moral motivation. Negative emotion attributions accompanied by moral justifications were coded as 1 (high moral motivation) and all other cases were coded as 0 (low moral motivation). This procedure relied on the empirical evidence that moral motivation can be validly measured by a combination of emotion attributions and their justifications (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Malti et al., 2007; Malti, Gummerum, et al., 2009b).

Peer status, consistent with previous research (e.g., Caravita et al., 2009; Pöyhönen et al., 2010), was measured as two distinct variables: *social preference* and *perceived popularity*. Each of the variables was measured using a single item

from the classroom peer-nomination technique introduced earlier (when describing the defending measure). The question on social preference was: *Who do you like best?* (Item 2) and the question on perceived popularity was: *Who is most popular?* (Item 8). The scores were again computed as the numbers of nominations divided by the number of nominators.

Teacher support was registered using a total score on a 12-item scale called Teacher retrieved from the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale-Revised developed by Malecki, Demaray, and Elliott (2000). The questionnaire has high construct validity and internal consistency. On the scale Teacher, participants reported the frequency of social emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental support that they receive from their teacher(s). Answers were marked on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Always*). The instrument was translated into Czech by two independent translators, checked collectively by the authors of this article, and finally, checked again by a third independent expert. The internal consistency of the total score of teacher support computed as a mean of all 12 items was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis

The correlations of the variables along with their means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums are reported in [Table 1](#).

TABLE 1
Correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD	Min	Max
1. Defending						.12	.11	.00	.79
2. Moral motivation (0 = low, 1 = high)	.15**					.68	.47	.00	1.00
3. Gender (0 = boys, 1 = girls)	.32***	.10*				.47	.50	.00	1.00
4. Social preference	.54***	.09*	.19***			.18	.12	.00	.68
5. Perceived popularity	.49***	.00	.06	.64***		.13	.16	.00	.76
6. Teacher support	.10*	.10*	-.01	.09*	.01	4.42	.89	1.00	6.00

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

[Table 1](#) shows that defending positively correlated with all other variables—entered as predictors into the consequent regression analysis. The correlation between defending and moral motivation—the variable of our primary interest—was rather weak ($r = .15$, $p < .01$). Because a large correlation ($r = .64$, $p < .001$) appeared between social preference and perceived popularity, collinearity diagnostics in the subsequent regression analysis seemed warranted.

Prediction of defending by moral motivation, gender, peer status and teacher support

To examine our two research questions, we computed a three-step hierarchical regression analysis. In Step 1, gender, social preference, perceived popularity and teacher support were entered as predictors. In Step 2, moral motivation was added to the equation. In Step 3, we added the interaction between moral motivation and social preference to the model. All the independent variables were mean-centred and the interaction term was computed as a product of the centred variables.

The interaction of moral motivation and social preference was included in the model, because it proved to be the only significant interaction in preliminary analyses. These analyses comprised a stepwise model selection using backward elimination of non-significant interactions. The first model included all four interactions of moral motivation: moral motivation \times sex, moral motivation \times social preference, moral motivation \times perceived popularity and moral motivation \times teacher support. Then, we eliminated nonsignificant interactions—a single interaction with the highest p -value at a time (moral motivation \times sex, moral motivation \times perceived popularity, and moral motivation \times teacher support, respectively). The final model included the only significant interaction across the models—the moral motivation \times social preference interaction (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Results of hierarchical regression analysis on defending

<i>Independent variables</i>	ΔR^2	B	t	p
Step 1	.385***			
Gender (-.47 = boys, .53 = girls)		.25	6.60	.000
Social preference		.30	6.13	.000
Perceived popularity		.27	5.65	.000
Teacher support		.07	1.80	.072
Step 2	.011**			
Moral motivation (-.68 = low, .32 = high)		.10	2.80	.005
Step 3	.009*			
Moral motivation \times social preference		.09	2.54	.011
Total R2	.405***			

After Step 1, the model explained a marked portion of the variance in defending, $\Delta R^2 = .385$, $F(4, 444) = 69.61$, $p < .001$. As seen in Table 2, gender, social preference and perceived popularity positively predicted defending ($p < .001$), while teacher support reached only marginal statistical significance ($p = .072$). Importantly, Step 2 demonstrated that when the four preceding variables were accounted for, moral motivation positively predicted defending ($\beta = .10$, $p < .01$) and explained a unique portion of its variance, $\Delta R^2 = .011$,

$F(1, 443) = 7.86, p < .01$. Finally, adding the moral motivation \times social preference interaction in Step 3 showed that this interaction also positively predicted defending ($\beta = .09, p < .05$) and explained a unique portion of its variance, $\Delta R^2 = .009, F(1, 442) = 6.48, p < .05$, when all the other independent variables were accounted for. All predictors were checked for collinearity. The maximum VIF of 1.78 indicated no multicollinearity problems.

To interpret the interaction between moral motivation and social preference, we analysed simple slopes of moral motivation on defending at low, moderate and high levels of social preference (-1 SD, 0 SD, and $+1$ SD) following the procedure by Aiken and West (1991). The slope ($\beta = .00, p > .05$) derived for adolescents with low social preference indicated that, in this group, defending was not significantly predicted by moral motivation. The slopes found for moderate social preference ($\beta = .03, p < .01$) and high social preference ($\beta = .05, p < .001$) suggested that, in these groups, defending was positively predicted by moral motivation and the predictive association increased with higher levels of social preference (see Figure 1).

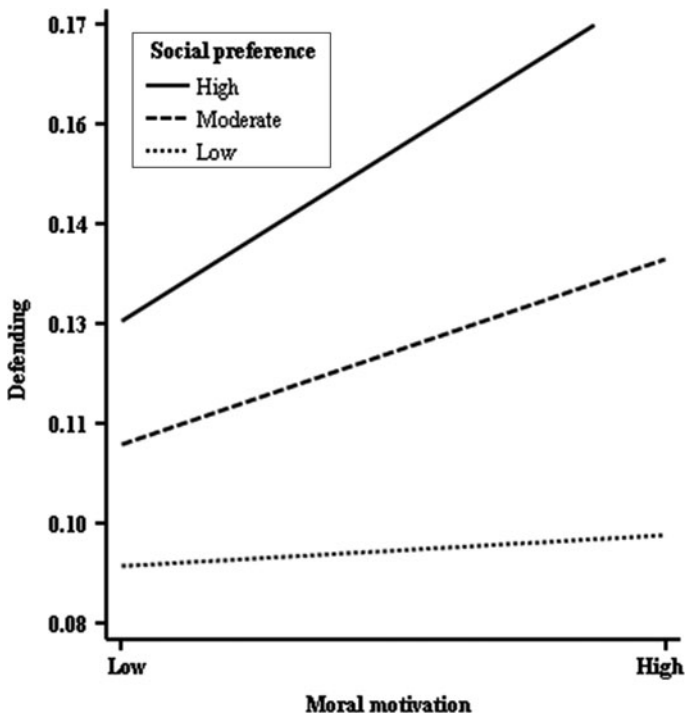


Figure 1. Interaction of moral motivation and social preference on defending.

DISCUSSION

This study addressed the links between moral motivation and the defending of classmates victimized by bullying in early adolescence. Regression analysis of cross-sectional data provided support for main and interactive effects of moral motivation on defending, when gender, peer status (social preference and perceived popularity) and teacher support were accounted for. Since this complex of predictors had not yet been studied, our findings contribute to existing knowledge. Moreover, we explored a partly innovative way to assess moral motivation by using a hypothetical transgression based on a real-life story reported by Feigenberg et al. (2008). Because the story describes an insider's experience with a common transgression of social exclusion of a classmate, our findings are likely to have higher ecological validity than those based on more typically used hypothetical transgressions.

First, we found that moral motivation positively predicted defending, when gender, social preference, perceived popularity and teacher support were accounted for. In line with past research, gender, social preference and peer popularity were significant predictors of defending (Caravita et al., 2009; Caravita et al., 2012; Pöyhönen et al., 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). The effect of teacher support was marginally significant, which supports the notion that this so far understudied variable deserves greater research attention (Boulton et al., 2013). The result of our main interest—the link found between moral motivation and defending—showed that the previously documented association between moral motivation and prosocial behaviour (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Malti, Gummerum, et al., 2009b) holds for defending, even when a broader range of predictors are taken into account. This is particularly relevant, as the correlations between moral motivation and prosocial behaviour found in our study and in past research (e.g., Malti, Gummerum, et al., 2009b) have been of a rather modest magnitude. Interpretation of this association is difficult, because we collected single-time-point data. Based on the predominating theory and empirical evidence reviewed in the introduction (e.g., Eisenberg, 2000; Nunner-Winkler, 2007), we understand moral motivation as a prerequisite for defending. However, bidirectional associations are likely, because experience can shape morality (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Turiel & Killen, 2010). As Malti, Gummerum, et al. (2009b) explain, through practice of prosocial behaviour, empathy and moral reasoning may be cultivated. To elucidate the directionality of the association found here, longitudinal studies seem warranted. It should be noted that our full model explained a considerable portion (40.5%) of the variance in defending, which supports the suitability of the social–ecological approach to behaviours in bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer & Doll, 2001).

Second, we found that social preference moderated the association between moral motivation and defending, such that it strengthened the link. Similar interactions with peer status have been previously documented for empathy and

acceptance of moral transgression (Caravita et al., 2009, 2012). Because defending may be perceived as risky in terms of being liked and popular among peers, a high level of peer status may raise the likelihood of defending a victimized peer (Pöyhönen et al., 2010). Thus, our finding indicates that with increasing social preference, students can increasingly afford to behave in compliance with their moral motivation. Another explanation is that peer status works as a “magnifying lens”, because students may be motivated to enhance their status via defending (Caravita et al., 2012). Finally, it is possible that students who defend others in accordance with their moral motivation become more socially preferred. Early adolescents appreciate defending in terms of admirable, courageous, cool, caring and fair behaviour (Kollerová et al., 2014). We lack longitudinal studies that could shed light on these issues, but from a theoretical perspective, high peer status may not only be an antecedent to, but also a consequence of, defending (Salmivalli, 2010).

We identify three main limitations of the study. First, as one reviewer pointed out, our hypothetical transgression was close to a bullying context, which may have increased the correlation between moral motivation and defending. Moral motivation has been conceptualized as partially a trait-like and partially a context-dependent characteristic (Nunner-Winkler, 2007). As some studies have found the context dependency of moral emotions to be high (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011), it remains uncertain whether the link between moral motivation and defending would be replicated if a hypothetical transgression more distant from the bullying context had been used. Second, even though we studied multiple predictors of defending, no internal or personality variables other than moral motivation were included. It would be particularly interesting to examine whether moral motivation predicts defending when, for example, empathy, values, or social self-efficacy are accounted for. As indicated by past research (e.g., Malti et al., 2007), interactions between moral motivation and some of these variables may be salient. Third, we acknowledge that while defending has been considered prosocial behaviour (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 1996), motivation for prosocial behaviour is often complex and does not necessarily include prosocial motives (Puka, 2004). Moreover, some researchers suggest that even understanding defending as a purely prosocial behaviour should not be taken for granted. Defending involves challenging the bully (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010) and adolescents’ moral emotion expectancies in relation to defending have been found to be situated between positive expectancies elicited by prosocial scenarios and negative expectancies elicited by antisocial scenarios (Krettenauer & Johnston, 2011).

Despite these limitations, this study provided evidence that moral motivation has main and interactive effects on defending in early adolescence even when several other factors are taken into account. In sum, our findings imply that moral motivation can be considered a relevant variable to explain defending and that future research should address not only its independent role, but also its interplay

with other factors. Furthermore, we demonstrated the link between morality and defending in an unusual cultural context—a post-communist and traditionally highly atheist Central European country with weakened civil ethos (Klicperová-Baker, 2003), underscoring thereby the robustness of the examined phenomena. Moral motivation presents a promising focus for moral education—an important component of anti-bullying efforts—because it seems modifiable by contextual factors (Nunner-Winkler, 2007). Our findings support the view that promoting adolescents' morality, especially the feeling of responsibility, may encourage defending (Menesini & Camodeca, 2008). As Malti, Gummerum, et al. (2009b, p. 445) put it: *high moral motivation expresses a sense of moral responsibility and thereby constitutes a key motive to act morally*. Educators can encourage responsibility by initiating the democratic participation of students (Nunner-Winkler, 2007) and supporting a school and classroom atmosphere that welcomes discussion and students' positive actions, including defending (Feigenberg et al., 2008). Finally, our results comply with the notion that the intervention in morality should be accompanied by targeting social competencies (Gini, 2006). Social skills training or group activities improving classroom friendships may benefit social preference, a factor that in this study strengthened the link between moral motivation and defending.

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