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Published online: 18 Nov 2023.

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Prestige norms of moral disengagement, prejudice, and ethnic bullying: a study among Italian early adolescents

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to explore the association between prestige norms of moral disengagement and ethnic bullying among Italian early adolescents. Prestige norms of moral disengagement were also examined as possible moderator of the association between individual prejudice and ethnic bullying. Participants were 742 sixth to eighth graders attending multiethnic schools in Italy (49.7% girls), all of Italian heritage, who answered peer and self-report measures. In multilevel models, individual levels of moral disengagement were associated with ethnic bullying, and prestige norms of moral disengagement (classroom level) moderated (cross-level interaction) the association between xenophobic prejudice and ethnic bullying was significant only for high levels of prestige norms. Results highlight the importance of individual prejudices in ethnic bullying and suggest that the processes of socialization of cognitive distortions within peer groups are complex, providing useful insights for interventions.

With the increase of migratory influxes, the multiethnicity of European schools has also increased, and the phenomenon of ethnic bullying (targeting children belonging to minority ethnic groups because of their migratory background) has spread (Strohmeier et al., 2019). Within the Italian context, some recent studies have shown that ethnic bullying is linked to specific risk factors (prejudices and low tolerance towards ethnic outgroups), which are not overlapping with risk factors for general bullying (Caravita et al.,

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2020, 2021; Papotti & Caravita, 2020). Moreover, in Europe, including Italy, ethnic bullying has been found to be associated with self-justification processes of moral disengagement (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2020; Lo Cricchio et al., 2022) and contextual factors related to the perception of school climate (Caravita et al., 2021) and interethnic contact norms (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2022; Papotti & Caravita, 2020).

According to the literature (Pouwels et al., 2018), bullying in general is a group phenomenon, and the individual behaviour of participation in bullying is influenced by a network of attitudes and behaviours based on peer popularity, which may or may not be sanctioned by classmates. In the case of ethnic bullying, however, except for a few studies (e.g., Caravita et al., 2021), the ways in which contextual factors can interact with risk factors at the individual level to explain ethnic bullying behaviour have not been explored, but we need to investigate this possibility to develop effective evidence-based interventions. Furthermore, moral disengagement is a type of cognitive distortion that can be connected to prejudicial attitudes. Previous studies have shown that prestige norms of bullying related to peer popularity status are associated with higher rates of classmates' bullying (e.g., Berger & Caravita, 2016). This suggests that popular peers can socialize behaviours within the peer group. However, this hypothesis has never been explored in relation to cognitive distortions of moral disengagement, even if there is evidence that also moral disengagement can be socialized among peers in early adolescence (Caravita et al., 2014). This study aimed to explore whether prestige norms of moral disengagement can be associated with individuals' ethnic bullying and moderate the association between ethnic bullying and prejudicial attitudes towards the ethnic outgroup at the individual level. We examined these hypotheses in a sample of Italian early adolescents belonging to the majority ethnic group, as prejudicial attitudes in this population have been shown to be relevant in explaining ethnic bullying (Caravita et al., 2020, 2021).

Prejudice and ethnic bullying

The role of negative attitudes has been studied extensively in relation to the phenomenon of discrimination. In research regarding attitudes towards ethnic groups, tolerant people are often described as 'persons without prejudice' (e.g., Allport, 1958, pp. 398–401). Therefore, tolerance and prejudice are two related constructs. Adolescence is considered a critical period when changes of attitudes towards ethnic outgroups

happen (e.g., Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001). As a result, in contemporary multi-ethnic Europe, adolescents are expected to develop attitudes towards people of other ethnicities. During this process, some adolescents adopt more tolerant attitudes towards ethnic outgroups, which can counteract racism and ethnic violence (Paluck, 2011). Conversely, others may develop negative attitudes, such xenophobia (Kuhn, 2004), that are associated with ethnic bullying (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2018; Caravita et al., 2020).

Graham et al. (2009) found that ethnic bullies show little tolerance towards people with different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, studies (mostly carried out in Italy) indicate that prejudicial attitudes are a risk factor for ethnic bullying, even more powerful than other risk factors identified for traditional bullying, particularly peer status and perceived school climate (Caravita et al., 2020, 2021). According to Allport (1958), prejudices towards the outgroup can decrease or increase in certain circumstances, including having different positions within a social group. Hence, it is reasonable to suppose that the conduct associated with such attitudes, such as ethnic bullying, also varies depending on whether it occurs in contexts that encourage or discourage prejudicial attitudes. In the case of bullying, the peer-group context and its informal norms (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) can be particularly influential.

Moral disengagement

Recent research has highlighted that moral disengagement is also relevant in explaining ethnic bullying (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2020). Moral disengagement consists of self-regulation mechanisms that allow people to reduce their emotional distress when they are aware that they have not behaved in accordance with their moral standards (Bandura, 1986). Moral disengagement mechanisms work by cognitively reconstructing the conduct, the victim's status (dehumanizing or blaming the victim), responsibility for the action, and the outcome, so that the immoral conduct appears justifiable (Bandura, 1986).

Bullying is associated positively with moral disengagement at the individual and peer-group levels (for a meta-analysis, see Killer et al., 2019; Thornberg et al., 2017), and some recent studies indicate that moral disengagement is associated with ethnic bullying, too (e.g., Bayram Özdemir et al., 2020). Moreover, moral disengagement moderates the relations between traditional bullying and individual (e.g., moral identity) and peer-context (e.g., friends' bullying or defending behaviours)

dimensions (Sijtsema et al., 2014). Moral disengagement can be socialized among peers in adolescence (Caravita et al., 2014). From this perspective, peers can exert a strong influence on the application of moral standards (Ojanen et al., 2023), and this influence may be even stronger when they possess a high status within the class group.

Prestige norms of moral disengagement

Literature has consistently shown that bullying behaviour stems from the interaction of individual and contextual characteristics (e.g., Yun & Juvonen, 2020), supporting the ecological model proposed by Hong and Espelage (2012). Among context factors possibly affecting bullying are informal norms about behaviours, which are set within the peer group and usually assessed at the classroom level. In 2004, Salmivalli and Voeten found that students showed more bullying behaviours in classrooms with pro-bully norms. Most of the research on bullying has been focussed on injunctive (beliefs about which behaviours shared within the group are acceptable) and descriptive norms (behaviours frequently enacted by the group members and therefore perceived as typical of the group). More recently (e.g., Dijkstra & Gest, 2014), it has been hypothesized that popular peer group members' behaviours set models for the classmates as so-called *popularity norms, prestige norms* (Berger & Caravita, 2016), or *norm salience* (Veenstra & Lodder, 2022). During adolescence, popularity is a priority (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), and the most popular classmates' behaviours can become particularly salient, providing models to perform to acquire or keep peer status. Prestige norms in school are calculated by measuring the average behaviour of the most popular members within a peer group, such as a classroom (Veenstra & Lodder, 2022). Classrooms' prestige norms for bullying have been associated with higher rates of individual bullying (Berger & Caravita, 2016). Besides affecting individual behaviour, informal norms may give varied degrees of support to ideas and attitudes that motivate the behaviours. This hypothesis may be true in particular for the cognitive processes of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement processes have been conceptualized as mechanisms learnt within social contexts, and in early adolescence, they can be socialized among peers (Caravita et al., 2014). According to this literature, (self-)justifications of bullying performed by members of the peer network can be shared during ordinary interactions, making the use of moral disengagement and individual bullying more likely. Moral disengagement

can be learnt from peers (Caravita et al., 2014) and from popular class-mates, who set prestige norms within classrooms through their behaviour and perspectives. That is, our hypothesis is that in classrooms where popular students tend to use moral disengagement to (self-)justify bully-ing, this way of thinking can become normative, subsequently increasing the likelihood that the other students learn to self-justify bullying and bully more. This hypothesis can be even stronger in the case of ethnic bullying, further strengthening the association between prejudicial atti-tudes towards an ethnic outgroup and ethnic bullying. That is, early adolescents with higher levels of prejudices towards ethnic outgroups may be even more prone to ethnically based bullying in classrooms where popular peers (who are also attractive models) justify the ethnic bullying, setting a normative way to think. This hypothesis is in line with the conceptualization of bullying as an expression of the interaction of indi-vidual (e.g., having prejudices) and contextual (e.g., peer norms) factors, already supported by other studies (Berger & Caravita, 2016). Furthermore, the contiguity between prejudices as negative attitudes towards the outgroup and moral disengagement processes (including dehumanization and blaming the victim) makes this interaction effect in favour of ethnic bullying even more likely.

The present study

In this study, we examined two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 is that in class-rooms where popular classmates show and express higher levels of moral disengagement for ethnic bullying (i.e., classrooms with higher prestige norms of moral disengagement) individual levels of ethnic bullying are higher. Hypothesis 2 (moderation hypothesis) is that in classrooms with higher prestige norms for ethnic bullying the associations between pre-judicial attitudes towards ethnic outgroups and ethnic bullying are stron-ger. We examined these hypotheses in a sample of 742 Italian (ethnic majority group) early adolescents because the link between prejudicial attitudes and ethnic bullying has been established among adolescents of the majority group (Caravita et al., 2020, 2021), as well as the socialization of moral disengagement among peers in early adolescence (Caravita et al., 2014). In the multilevel models, classroom prestige norms of moral disengagement (assessed at the classroom level) and their cross-level interaction with prejudicial attitudes towards immigrants (assessed at the individual level) were included as predictors of the variance of

ethnic bullying. To control for the opportunity effect (i.e., ethnic bullying being more likely in classrooms with higher presence of the ethnic out-group; Peguero et al., 2015), the percentage of students with migratory backgrounds was included among predictors at the classroom level. The effects of individual moral disengagement, gender, and age were controlled as well.

Method

Participants

Participants were 742 early adolescents (Mage = 11.66 years; SD = .73; 49.3% males, 49.7% females[1]) of Italian heritage: Participants and their parents were all born in Italy. Participants attended 56 classrooms (from 14 to 28 students per class) in four middle schools (Grades 6 to 8) in the provinces of Brescia and Mantova, in Northern Italy. Participants' classrooms were multiethnic, with 34.8% of the pupils reporting an immigrant background (i.e., at least one of their parents was born outside of Italy). Initially, 1,846 informed consent forms were distributed, and 1,633 students from 71 classrooms in four schools (88.46%) received consent from their parents or guardians and agreed to participate in the study. As peer nominations can be considered reliable only when 60% of the group members respond (Cillessen, 2009), we selected 56 classes with at least 60% of the students participating in the data collection. Of the resulting 1,153 students, 31 students (2.69%) were excluded because of incomplete questionnaires or excessive amounts of missing data (more than 20% of items per questionnaire), as well as 23 students (1.99%) who did not provide information about their ethnic background. Among the remaining 1,099 students, the 742 Italian students with Italian heritage were included in the final sample.

Measures

Demographic questions
Participants were asked to indicate their date of birth, gender, and country of birth for themselves and their parents.

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[1]Six participants did not report their gender. Four did not define themselves as male or female; for them, gender was treated as a missing data in the analyses including gender as dichotomic variable.

Ethnic bullying

One item from the Participant Role Questionnaire was adapted (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Respondents answered (via unlimited peer nominations) the question: 'Which classmates bully others belonging to a different ethnic group?' The sum of the received nominations was standardized for the number of students in the classroom who answered the questionnaire.

Prejudice and tolerance

We administered the Tolerance and Prejudice Questionnaire (van Zalk et al., 2013; in Italy; Piumatti & Mosso, 2017) to measure xenophobia and tolerance towards immigrants. This self-report measure includes four items reporting negative and generalized statements about immigrants, such as 'Immigrants increase criminality' to assess xenophobic prejudice, and four items concerning equality between immigrants and non-immigrants (e.g., 'Immigrants and non-immigrants should have equal rights') to assess tolerant attitudes. For each item, participants assessed to what extent they agreed with the statement on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *don't agree at all*, 4 = *completely agree*; xenophobia α = .73, tolerance = α = .72; two-factor confirmatory factor analysis with Maximum Likelihood estimator: Chi-square(14) = 20.846, *p* = .106; *CFI* = .99; *RMSEA* = .026).

Moral disengagement of ethnic bullying

We administered a self-report measure to assess self-justifications of ethnic bullying (Caravita et al., 2019). First, participants read a short scenario about a new child in the classroom, an immigrant from a different country, who was bullied by their classmates. In the scenario, the newcomer had a non-Italian name: Hamir in the male scenario and Elissar in the female scenario. Participants read the scenario that aligned with their gender and answered 16 items (two items for each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement; Bandura, 1986: moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labelling, displacing responsibility, diffusing responsibility, minimizing the consequences, victim dehumanization, and blaming the victim), reporting self-justification statements regarding the ethnic bullying scenario (e.g., 'Ruining Hamir/ Elissar's books is just a joke'). The total score for moral disengagement was the average of the 16 items (α = .83).

Prestige norms

We asked for (unlimited) peer nominations of perceived popularity: 'Who are your most popular classmates?'. Respondents provided the codes of the nominees. Classroom prestige norms (Dijkstra & Gest, 2014) were computed following the procedure proposed by Dijkstra and colleagues (2008). A popularity score was calculated for each participant as the sum of all nominations received from classmates, divided by the number of nominators. Nominees who scored 1 *SD* above the mean were considered popular. Then, for each classroom, we computed the average score of moral disengagement obtained by the popular students in the classroom.

Procedure

Data were cross-sectional and collected between 2020 and 2021. The questionnaires were administered in electronic or paper format in classrooms during regular school time. Before starting the questionnaire, researcher assistants explained the aims of the study and answered participants' questions during the administration. Participation in the study was authorized by participants' parents or legal guardians, and both signed the informed consent letter sent through the schools. Participants also gave their written consent before answering the questionnaire and after being informed about the study aim, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Considering the nature of the questions, which might have caused discomfort, a debriefing followed the questionnaire administration, and participants were given the opportunity to talk to professionals who could help them. The research project was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart.

Analytical strategy

We computed correlations, means, standard deviations, skewness indices and kurtosis as descriptive statistics. We tested three robust hierarchical linear models by means of the robustlmm package of RStudio version 4.2.3 (robust HLM; students nested within classrooms; robust estimation to control for data nonnormality), with ethnic bullying as a criterion variable. The first model included all Level 1 predictors (xenophobia, tolerance, moral disengagement, gender, age). In the second model, we

added the prestige norms of moral disengagement and the percentage of students with ethnic backgrounds within the classroom as second-level predictors. In the third model, we added the cross-level interactions between tolerance and xenophobia and the prestige norms of moral disengagement. Analysis of missing data indicated that missing data was random: All items had missing data less than 5% (between 1.5% and 3.5%). Little's MCAR test was not statistically significant ($\chi2(10) =$ 9.04, $p = .53$) confirming that the missing data were at random.

Results

Correlations, means, standard deviations, and normality indices are displayed in Table 1. Ethnic bullying was not normally distributed (skewness and kurtosis higher than three) and was significantly associated with being male, being older, and having xenophobic prejudice towards ethnic diversity.

Table 2 reports the results for the robust HLM models. The 16% of the variance in ethnic bullying was attributable to classroom differences. In Model 1 (predictors at level 1: age, gender, tolerance, xenophobia and moral disengagement), ethnic bullying was associated with being older, being male, and having high levels of moral disengagement. In Model 2 (predictors at level 2: popularity norms of Moral Disengagement and percentage of student with migratory background), predictors at Level 1 were associated with ethnic bullying, but not predictors at Level 2. In Model 3, the cross-level interaction of xenophobic prejudice by prestige norms of moral disengagement was significantly and positively associated with ethnic bullying. Follow-up analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) showed that the association between xenophobic prejudice and ethnic bullying was nonsignificant ($b = -.001$; $p = .733$) for low (-1 SD) and average levels ($b = .005$; $p = .10$) of prestige norms of moral disengagement, but significant for high levels ($+1$ SD) of prestige norms of moral disengagement ($b = .011$; $p = .006$) (Figure 1).

Table 1. Correlation indices and descriptive statistics of ethnic bullying, demographic variables, and tolerance.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Ethnic bully	-					
2. Female = 0; Male = 1	.188**	-				
3. Age	.126**	.059	-			
4. Tolerance	−.054	−.049	.054	-		
5. Xenophobic prejudice	.096*	.036	.143**	−.215**	-	
6. Moral disengagement	.135**	.082*	.041	.234**	−.254**	-
Mean(SD)	.041(.07)	-	11.67(.73)	3.35(.86)	1.97(.87)	1.75(.60)
Skewness	2.735	-	.053	−1.265	.763	1.394
Kurtosis	9.539	-	.191	.657	−.341	3.196

**$p < .01$.

Table 2. Multilevel models for ethnic bully.

	Null model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Level 1				
Age		.002*	.001*	.001
Female (0) Male (1)		.001***	.010***	.010***
Tolerance		−.002	−.002	.001
Xenophobia		.002	.002	−.18*
Moral disengagement		.005*	.004*	.004*
Level 2				
Popularity norms of of Moral Disengagement			.011	−.006
Percentage of student with migratory background			.004	.005
Cross level interaction				
Popularity norms of Moral Disengagement X Tolerance				−.001
Popularity norms of Moral Disengagement X Xenophobia				.011**
Intercept	.024***	.027***	.005	.036
ICC	.16			

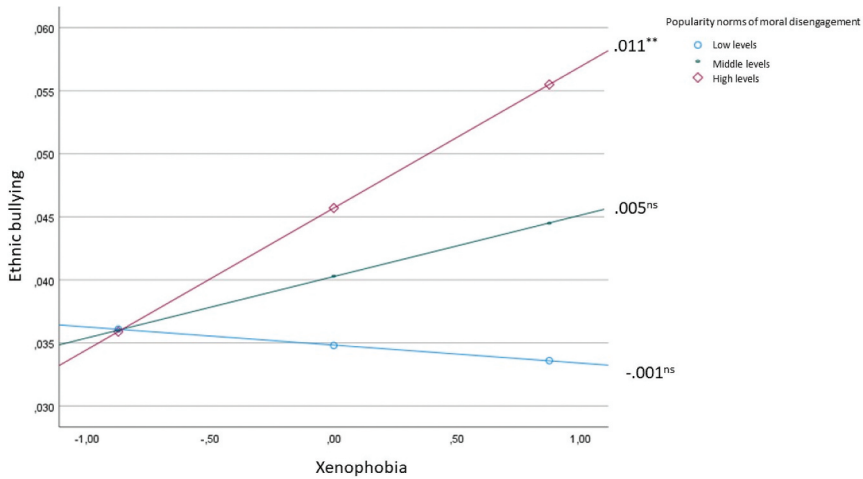*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$.

Figure 1. Moderation effect.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated prestige norms of moral disengagement as contextual risk factors for the perpetration of ethnic bullying. We hypothesized that in classrooms where popular classmates are more prone to self-justify ethnic bullying, individual instances of ethnic bullying are higher, as well as the probability that early adolescents with prejudicial attitudes (low tolerance or high xenophobia) towards ethnic out-groups are more likely to perpetrate ethnic bullying. From this perspective, this study contributes to the literature on ethnic bullying

and moral disengagement in several ways. Regarding ethnic bullying, first, our results support the centrality of individual distortions in attitudes and cognition as more relevant risk factors for this behaviour than peer-group dimensions (Caravita et al., 2020). Second, they also clarify that moral distortions diffused within the peer group play a role, increasing the probability that having prejudicial attitudes in early adolescence is linked to ethnic bullying. With regards to moral disengagement, the evidence that prestige norms of moral disengagement strengthen the association between prejudicial attitudes and ethnic bullying confirms the possible socialization of moral disengagement in early adolescence (Caravita et al., 2014) and suggests complex weaves of the cognitive distortions that need to be addressed in interventions.

Individual and contextual risk factors for ethnic bullying

Our first hypothesis, that ethnic bullying was more diffused in classrooms with higher prestige norms of moral disengagement for ethnic bullying, was not confirmed. However, this outcome confirms previous studies on ethnic bullying (Caravita et al., 2020, 2021) showing that when the effect of individual risk factors, particularly having prejudices, is considered, contextual dimensions cease to be risk factors by themselves. We assessed norms of moral disengagement at the classroom level, thus providing a more precise measure of peer-group contextual dimensions not limited to individual perceptions (such as for the school climate in Caravita et al., 2021) or individual characteristics (individual peer status as in Caravita et al., 2021). Hence, this study provides stronger evidence that ethnic bullying is more related to discriminative individual motives than to the nature of bullying as a group phenomenon. From this perspective, we found that ethnic bullying was associated with individual moral disengagement for ethnic bullying and, in classrooms with higher levels of prestige norms of moral disengagement, with xenophobic prejudice (our second hypothesis, moderation).

When considering prejudice, Allport (1958) has suggested that specific conditions can decrease or increase negative attitudes. We partially confirmed this suggestion; a peer group in which influential members self-justify ethnic bullying was the catalyst necessary for making prejudicial attitudes risk factors for bullying ethnic outgroups.

Moral disengagement was an even stronger risk factor for ethnic bullying than prejudice at the individual level. This is an important,

novel result. We assessed moral disengagement specific to ethnic bullying and, like for general bullying (Caravita et al., 2019), this type of moral disengagement was associated with the actual ethnic bullying behaviour. In another Italian study with an older sample, using only self-report measures (Lo Cricchio et al., 2022), ethnic moral disengagement and ethnic bullying were found to be associated. However, this is the first study confirming this association using a multi-informant (less potentially biased) approach: peer nominations assessing ethnic bullying and self-reports for moral disengagement, controlling for the effect of prejudicial attitudes. Therefore, this outcome highlights once more the relevance of moral disengagement as important risk factor for bullying (Killer et al., 2019), suggesting that it may be even more influential than prejudices in the case of ethnic bullying. Furthermore, one of the main novelties of this study is that this is the first study examining prestige norms of moral disengagement. Bandura (1986) described moral disengagement mechanisms as socialized within contexts, including peers. With few exceptions (e.g., Caravita et al., 2014), however, this hypothesis has not been examined. We assumed that, if moral disengagement can be socialized from liked peers in early adolescence (Caravita et al., 2014), at the age when being popular becomes a priority (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), popular classmates can become a source of socialization for these self-justification mechanisms. We also explored this possibility in relation to prejudicial attitudes that can be considered cognitive distortions connected with moral disengagement. In accordance with our assumptions, prestige norms of moral disengagement interacted with individual xenophobia in predicting ethnic bullying. This outcome highlights the value of further exploring how moral disengagement is socialized in connection with status hierarchies within a peer group. This result also suggests that further research should examine the interconnections of cognitive distortions underlying discriminative behaviours.

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations that should be considered. First, notwithstanding the large size of our sample, our data were cross-sectional, and we assessed ethnic bullying with a measure consisting of only one peer-nomination item. Future research should involve longitudinal data and more articulated measures to assess ethnic bullying to confirm our results and better explore the socialization of moral disengagement and

prejudicial attitudes in relation to ethnic bullying. Future researchers may also investigate other forms of cognitive distortions that can be socialized among peers and be risk factors for ethnic bullying, such as collective moral disengagement (e.g., Bjärehed, 2022).

Second, we only considered early adolescents belonging to the ethnic majority group in Italian society. Previous literature suggested that in the case of ethnic minority group members, bullying can express affiliation motives (Fandrem et al., 2009), and we cannot exclude the concept that contextual factors might be more relevant for members of ethnic minorities. Examining and identifying risk factors that may be specific to ethnic bullying when perpetrated by members of ethnic minorities is an important future line of research and will be relevant to designing interventions. Lastly, more studies are necessary investigating the processes that we explored across various age levels, in relation to other bullying roles and, above all, in European contexts other than Italy. Indeed, migration and ethnic diversity vary across European countries, and Italy has particularly intense migration influxes that may increase the specificity of the Italian context in comparison to other European countries.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides a unique, novel, and theory-based contribution to the literature on bullying, being the first study examining prestige norms of moral disengagement in connection with prejudices and ethnic bullying and providing important insights for the practice.

Implications for the intervention practice and future directions

This study is part of a larger research project granted to the second author (PRIN 2017, nr. 20173E3Z7W), intended to identify key mechanisms explaining ethnic bullying and develop and test evidence-based interventions addressing them. This study has provided important information for the development of future interventions. First, our outcomes have confirmed that in terms of moral disengagement mechanisms and prejudicial attitudes, discriminative cognition is the process to be addressed in interventions against ethnic bullying. For this type of bullying, addressing peer dynamics may be not enough. Nevertheless, our results also indicate that, even without direct influence, contextual dimensions can be catalysts that favour the transformation of prejudices in actual discriminative behaviour. A similar result was also found in a previous study

showing that the perception of a nontolerant school climate was associated with ethnic bullying only in interaction with individual prejudice (Caravita et al., 2021). This information is relevant for future intervention practice; if directly changing individual prejudices, often socialized within the family (Ioana et al., 2022), can be a difficult, long-term process, we can aim to develop school-based interventions addressing the socialization of cognitive distortions that support the transformation of individual prejudices in ethnic bullying. From this perspective, developing interventions addressing moral disengagement processes at the levels of individuals and classrooms, where these mechanisms can be socialized, is a promising way to mitigate ethnic bullying.

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