



## **Factors that Influence Emotional Disturbance among School Bullying Bystanders**

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This study aimed to ascertain how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortion, namely personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction, could predict or inform emotional disturbance in the reactions of bystanders when witnessing bullying behaviour. We utilised purposive sampling to select 10 bystanders of school bullying for participation in the study and performed convenient sampling to select a research site. We conducted interviews that were recorded on a voice recorder and transcribed thereafter. Qualitative data was analysed through inductive thematic analysis. Our findings revealed that personalisation evoked bystanders' self-blame and feelings of guilt, catastrophising amplified their anxiety and fear, overgeneralisation induced and exacerbated their negative perception of school safety, and selective abstraction led to indirect co-victimisation. Based on our findings, we recommend that school psychologists, counsellors and behavioural healthcare service providers should teach victims of bullying, especially bystanders, how to recognise, challenge and reappraise negative and unhelpful thoughts and feelings related to their experiences.

**Keywords:** bystanders, cognitive distortions, emotional reactions, emotional disturbance, school bullying.

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### **Introduction**

Bullying is regarded as one of the most serious challenges confronting learners in schools (Menard & Grotpetter, 2014). Bullying can be characterised as a group process that comprises not only the bullies and the

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victims, but also a group of observers or onlookers who are classified as bystanders. Salmivalli (2014) highlighted four main bystander roles, namely outsiders, defenders, assistants, and reinforcers. Outsiders withdraw from bullying situations, whereas defenders offer emotional support or protection to the victims. Assistants take part in the bullying and support the bullies, while reinforcers show their approval (e.g., laugh or cheer on the bullying).

Moral disengagement (Bandura, 2016) is a risk factor that occurs when a person views harmful or negative behaviour in a more positive light as a result of moral justification (Killer et al., 2019). The literature highlights how bystanders who take on the role of assistants to the bully or of reinforcers can apply moral disengagement mechanisms to justify their non-defending behaviour when witnessing bullying (Bjärehed et al., 2020). Bystanders who adopt the role of assistants to the bully or of reinforcers justify their non-defending behaviour by applying specific cognitive mechanisms. For instance, they blame or dehumanise the victim, they disregard/distort the negative impact of harmful behaviour, and they experience less guilt associated with their own non-defending behaviour (Caravita et al., 2014). Their distorted thinking may convince them that they are in fact 'doing the right thing'. This could be especially troubling, as it eliminates any significant motivation to change their behaviour and makes them more likely to repeat it (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). The moral disengagement mechanism of diffusion of responsibility also increases the possibility that non-defending bystanders will begin to assist the bullies or reinforce bullying behaviour by laughing and cheering the bully on. Diffusion of responsibility is a process that inhibits bystanders from intervening in bullying situations and has also been found to inhibit victim defending behaviour in school bullying situations (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014).

Bystanders who have the attributes of a defender, but who consider themselves to be outsiders, believe that it is morally right to defend the victim, but they also admit to not defending the victim because they are afraid of the reaction of the bullies or the peer group (Salmivalli, 2010). Hence, they may use moral disengagement mechanisms to self-justify their non-defending behaviour in a bullying scenario. In addition, moral disengagement has been found to be positively associated with pro-aggressive bystander behaviours (Gini et al., 2014; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). To be specific, bystanders who do not care to defend victims have been found to experience higher levels of moral disengagement than peers who are likely to help the victims in bullying episodes (Obermann, 2011).

Bystanders of school bullying are reported to be at an increased risk of experiencing negative emotional responses such as emotional health problems, social problems and long-term damage to self-esteem (Boyes et al., 2014). According to Greeff and Grobler (2008), 70% of learners in Grades 4 to 7 who experienced or witnessed bullying in school, exhibit symptoms of emotional health problems such as intrusive thoughts, sadness, emotional exhaustion, shame, anger, fear, anxiety, disbelief, numbing, distress, mood fluctuations, shock, outburst, worry and withdrawal. Hutchinson (2012) also suggests that bystanders might experience increased levels of stress and guilt for not having stood up to the bully on behalf of the victim. Barrett et al.

(2012) as well as Vidourek et al. (2016) found that bystanders witnessing bullying might react with fear and worry. Bystanders feel intimidated and hence they may have difficulty to focus and pay attention in class.

One explanation for the negative responses associated with witnessing bullying is that bystanders may experience cognitive dissonance in a bullying situation. They may intend to intervene on behalf of the victim but are unable to defend the latter for fear of becoming the next victim (Midgett & Dumas, 2019). Salmivalli (2014), as well as Twemlow and Sacco (2013) argue that many bystanders of bullying may be conscious of the fact that bullying is wrong, and they may even like to intervene on behalf of the victim. At the same time, bystanders are conscious of their own safety and vulnerability, and thus they may become fearful to intervene. The result is that bystanders can experience feelings of guilt and self-blame for not intervening in support of the victims or for not knowing what to do in such instances (Salmivalli, 2010; Twemlow & Sacco, 2013).

Rivers et al. (2009) alongside Glew et al. (2005) concur with the viewpoint that witnessing bullying has the potential to cause emotional and psychological consequences for bystanders. In addition, they assert that it is not the witnessing of the bullying per se, but the anxiety caused by the fear of subsequent direct victimisation that contributes to bystanders' emotional insecurity and uncertainty. For instance, research findings by Juvonem et al. (2011) contrast sharply with most research reports on bystanders' reactions when they witness bullying. The authors found that sixth-grade bystanders did not experience common negative emotions such as anxiety and loneliness to the same degree as the direct victims. Glew et al. (2005) also found that bystanders were less likely to feel unsafe in their school and less likely to frequently feel sad.

The commonalities and discrepancies in bystanders' emotional reactions to witnessing bullying could be connected to the thinking patterns that they demonstrated after the bullying incident (Rivers et al., 2009; Werth et al., 2015). Since bystanders apparently processed their responses on a cognitive as well as emotional level, cognition may be deemed a determinant factor in their individual emotional reactions to events. Thus, cognitive theory could be employed usefully as a lens to understand bystanders' responses in situations as outlined here.

A fundamental principle of cognitive theory is that individual cognitive processes such as perception, interpretation, appraisal and assessment of an event play a determining role in the triggering and sustaining of emotional responses to events (Dozois & Beck, 2008; Beck, 2011, Dobson & Dobson, 2016). The principle also applies to the exacerbation of maladaptive emotional responses (Clark & Beck, 2010; Dobson & Dozois, 2010). Barriga and Morrison (2010) argue that the latter is influenced by thinking patterns that precede the interpretation of the event. Negative emotional reactions might be produced and maintained by irrational beliefs and deleterious thinking patterns that are also known as self-debasing cognitive distortions (Clark & Beck, 2010)

A self-debasing cognitive distortion can lead to a preoccupation with negative thoughts and tension that does not necessarily conform to reality and that can create a maladaptive belief system that serves as a framework to interpret and understand events (Barriga & Morrison, 2010; Esbensen & Benson, 2007). Negative thoughts that could induce bystanders' negative emotional reactions when witnessing bullying stem

from clear errors in their cognitive patterns, including personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction (Beck, 2011; Fenell et al., 2004).

Personalisation is a form of emotional reasoning that involves taking excessive responsibility and self-blame for the occurrence of an unpleasant event, and as such it may lead to feelings of guilt and depression (Beck, 2011). Due to their inability to intervene or stop the bullying, bystanders who are prone to personalisation may blame themselves and assume responsibility for the consequences of bullying for victims.

Catastrophising is a form of cognitive distortion that amplifies anxiety, thereby intensifying the severity of the negative emotional responses experienced by a victim. An individual who engages in catastrophising always expects the worst to happen, regardless of the situation. Witnessing bullying can cause bystanders to fear that they might become the next victim, thus causing them to anticipate their own bullying (Rivers et al., 2009).

Overgeneralisation is another form of self-debasing cognitive distortion that might contribute to problematic emotional responses when witnessing a traumatic event (Dozois, 2007; Iacoviello et al., 2006). Overgeneralisation is described as making up a general rule based on a negative interpretation of one or a few incidents or events (Beck, 2011; Wenzel et al., 2016). Bystanders may perceive their inability to stop or intervene in bullying as incompetence, and they then begin to believe that their efforts to have an effect on the outcomes of other situations will be futile as well (Roth et al., 2002). Feelings of incompetence may affect the self-esteem of bystanders negatively and lead to a greater likelihood of anxiety (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).

Selective abstraction is the tendency to focus on the negative details of an event while making an evaluation of that event (Donely, 2014). Bystanders who are prone to selective abstraction may be more likely to view the bullying they witness as a serious threat to their wellbeing and, as a consequence, may respond with negative emotions. Selective abstraction can therefore contribute to psychological re-victimisation and indirect co-victimisation for bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009).

In view of the substantial consensus on the impact of cognition on emotional responses, developing negative emotional responses to situations may also result from the way in which an individual perceives, interprets and appraises an event (Beck, 2011, Dobson & Dobson, 2016). In such instances, different individuals may witness or experience the same traumatic incident – such as bullying, but their emotional reactions may differ, based on thinking patterns that precede the interpretation of the event (Barriga & Morrison, 2010). Although researchers have studied a number of moderators including gender and help seeking behaviour (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004), a greater understanding of the predicting factors in explaining the heterogeneity of emotional reactions of bystanders might be a worthwhile avenue of investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortions, namely personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction could predict or inform emotional disturbance in the reactions of bystanders who witness bullying. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question: How can self-debasing cognitive distortion influence (or not) bystanders' emotional disturbance in reactions to witnessing bullying?

## **Methodology**

### *Research Approach, Paradigmatic Perspective and Design*

We adopted a qualitative research approach for this study (Creswell, 2014) because we strove to uncover multiple perspectives of beliefs, thoughts and meanings that bystanders ascribe to their experience of school bullying as bystanders. The philosophical assumption underpinning our study emanated from an interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand the world from the perspective of people's experiences (Morgan & Pretorius, 2013; Sefotho, 2015). Our choice of the interpretivism paradigm was guided by the aim of our research, namely to gain a qualitative and in-depth understanding to describe bystanders' interpretation of the bullying incident they witnessed.

We also adopted a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is appropriate when the aim of a research study is to investigate an issue that has vast social and contextual meaning, especially when the phenomenon investigated is not easily quantifiable and new insights are needed. In line with the intent of our study – to listen, understand and interpret the meaning bystanders ascribe to their experience of witnessing school bullying – we concur with Creswell (2014) that a phenomenological design should be used to explore the phenomenon as narrated by the participants.

### *Research Participants*

The research participants for this study were 10 bystanders of school bullying who indicated interest in participating in the study and were therefore purposefully selected. All participants were in Grade 6 and between the ages of 11 and 12. The 10 participants were five girls and five boys. Interviews were conducted in a familiar classroom to increase the likelihood that participants would respond in a genuine and honest manner. We utilised one of the primary schools in Mamelodi, a township in Gauteng (one of the nine provinces in South Africa). This particular school was conveniently selected to minimise possible disruption for the participants.

Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to recruit participants for this study: All Grade 6 learners who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were included in the first phase of the sampling process.

*Phase 1: Collecting Grade 6 learners' written narratives.* During the first phase, 60 Grade 6 learners were approached to describe in written form the bullying incidents they witnessed at their school. The same set of instructions and guidelines were given and explained to each of the two Grade 6 classes at the school that was utilised as research site.

Table I. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners who attended the primary school selected as the research site.</li> <li>● Learners who have not experienced bullying as a direct victim, but only witnessed bullying in school.</li> <li>● Bystanders within the age range of 11 to 12 years and who were in Grade 6.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Participants who could not understand or communicate in the English language.</li> </ul>

*Phase 2: Selecting participants for the interview.* Altogether 35 of the 60 stories that were collected did not meet one of the inclusion criteria (e.g., narrating stories from the perspective of a bully or a direct victim). We selected the final 10 participants to be interviewed based on the level of details and self-reflection evidenced in the stories they wrote about the bullying incidents they had witnessed.

*Instrumentation*

A primary source of data collection in a qualitative phenomenological study is the interview (Yin, 2016). Hence, a face-to-face individual, open-ended semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate and describe the participants' experiences of school bullying as bystanders. Although probing questions were used as they generally allow a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, we commenced the interview by asking questions that required a simple "yes" or "no" response. For example, we started off with questions such as "Have you witnessed bullying in your school recently?"

The participants had ample opportunity to discuss their opinions, views, ideas, beliefs and the meaning they attached to their experiences of witnessing bullying. For instance, they were asked to narrate how being a witness to bullying in school generally affected them. The questions were presented in a way so that one would lead to the next. We obtained the permission of the participants and recorded the individual semi-structured interviews on a voice recorder. We also kept written notes as a backup. During the interview, field notes and a reflective research journal were used to document our observations while interacting with the participants. An interview session lasted about 45 minutes and participants were asked a uniform set of open-ended questions that had been prepared based on the information from our review of the literature, the research questions for the study and the purpose and objectives of this study (Burton & Jones, 2008).

### *Procedure*

After obtaining ethical clearance from the respective Department of Education and necessary written approval from the participants and their parents, we arranged for a meeting with the prospective participants to explain the objectives of the study and the potential benefits of participating in the research. Prior to commencement of the interviews, we provided a detailed document informing the participants about the nature of the interview, the type of questions to expect and the purpose of the study. By doing this, we created good rapport with the participants and managed to make them feel at ease and relaxed, so that they were able to share their experiences with no fear of intimidation. The interviews were specifically conducted after school hours to avoid the disruption of any school activities.

### *Ethical Considerations*

We ensured that ethical procedures were strictly adhered to in conducting this research. We obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education and permission from the Department of Education to undertake our research study in the selected school. Informed assent in written form was obtained from the participants, as well as a letter of consent from the parents or legal guardians of the learners who participated in the research.

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative data was analysed through inductive thematic analysis. This is a common form of analysis in qualitative research, and according to Braun and Clarke (2006), its aim is to pinpoint, examine and record patterns in data. Our analysis included transcription of the notes and audio recordings of our interviews. In order to establish and create meaningful patterns, we analysed the themes through a coding method that included familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, checking for themes, scrutinising the themes, and defining and naming the identified themes. Three different and independent coders were employed to cross-validate the emergent themes. This process increased the validity of the identified themes and reduced subjectivity. The first and second coders met to compare their findings after each interview. Discrepancies were resolved by a third coder who reviewed the undecided response and assigned an appropriate category without knowing the choices of the other two coders.

### **Findings**

The findings were presented according to the themes generated from the data. These themes revealed how negative thinking patterns could trigger bystanders' negative emotional responses to witnessing bullying. They captured the contributions and roles of thought patterns in the aetiology and maintenance of negative emotional responses to witnessing bullying. Other sub themes emerged but were rolled into the four main themes. For instance, a sub theme such as *willingness to intervene*, which proved participants to be defending bystanders,

was discussed under personification.

*Theme 1: Personalisation: evoked bystanders' self-blame and feelings of guilt*

We observed that the majority of bystanders who participated in this study indulged in taking excessive responsibility for the bullying they witnessed, even when the evidence suggested that there was little they could do to stop the bullying. Hence, apportioning undue blame to themselves for not being able to defend the victims evoked the feelings of guilt. Our observations are supported with verbatim extracts from the individual semi-structured interviews. For instance, Participant 7 blamed herself for not being able to rescue the victim, despite declaring that she had made attempts to do so by telling the bully to stop:

I don't feel good at all because if I couldn't help the victim and she get injured, to me is like I failed her. Meanwhile, she earlier noted that:

I did intervene because I went there and told the bully that it is not good to fight. I came in between them and I told them that it is not good to fight. I went to them and shouted at them and threatened them that I am going to tell the principal, they just ignored me and continued bullying that victim.

Participant 1 also assumed responsibility for not having stood up to the bully on behalf of the victim. Consequently, she blamed herself and experienced anger. She said:

I feel angry at myself because I let the bully hit my friend.

When we questioned her about the reason why she had failed to defend the victim, she replied:

I want to help the other children but I can't because I am afraid.

Participant 3 revealed that she was heartbroken for not having been able to stand up for her friend when she was bullied and because of that, she felt guilty. She said:

I feel heartbroken and I feel bad because I can't defend the victim.

When we asked why she had not intervened when she witnessed bullying, she actually stated:

I wish I can do that but I am scared to defend the victim.

Participant 8 had a similar response and stated that she felt unhappy because she could not help the person who was bullied. Meanwhile, as good as her intention was to do something about the bullying, she too admitted that she had not had the strength to stand up to the bullies:

I really want to defend my friend that was bullied but the boys that bully her were many and stronger than me. I can't fight them.

It appeared that the bystanders in this study took responsibility for the bullying that they witnessed without considering other factors which prevented them from intervening in the bullying situation. Bystanders who are prone to personalisation may ascribe excessive responsibility to themselves for events over which they have little or no control, and this leads to self-blame and a feeling of guilt. Engaging in personalisation while reacting to events can have a seriously negative influence on one's emotions and behaviour (Beck, 2011).



### *Theme 2: Catastrophising: amplified bystanders' anxiety and fear*

This theme demonstrated how catastrophising not only amplified participants' anxiety, but also instilled fear of subsequent direct victimisation in them. Once they witnessed a bullying incident, many of the participants expressed fears of being the next victim. As a result, they became nervous, worried, restless, scared and afraid to go to school. This is because most of the participants were imagining a worst-case scenario that caused them to anticipate being the next bullying victim.

Distorted reality influences a person's interpretation of a given situation. Such an interpretation feeds negative emotions which eventually culminate in full-blown emotional health problems. Catastrophic thoughts were expressed in the response of Participant 2 who said:

I feel a bit worried when I am supposed to come to school. I always think that what if the bullying that happened to the other learners also happens to me. I am always worried in the morning when it is time for school.

Exaggerating the potential or real consequences of an event amplifies negative reactions to such an event, as was observed in the reaction of Participant 9:

Yaa I do think that bullying can happen to me also, what if it happens to me and I get killed.

Participant 4 stated clearly that she did not feel safe and secure in school. She kept wondering when it might be her turn to be bullied and this made her scared, anxious and nervous:

It also makes me to be scared because that bully can come to me too anytime. When I am supposed to wake up I am thinking about that.

Participant 6 also expressed a substantial fear of going to school as a result of concerns about being attacked or harmed:

I feel like it can happen to me or they can do what they did to other victims to me also. My heart beat fast. I feel shaking and I freeze because I get scared of what they are going to do to me.

Catastrophic thinking triggers unhelpful emotions as, after witnessing bullying, most of the participants believed their own negative thoughts regarding their safety in school, instead of taking a balanced view of the situation. Engaging in catastrophic thoughts narrows down participants thinking, reducing their range of options to manage the situation – one of which is to report the bullying incident to the principal.

### *Theme 3: Overgeneralisation: induced and exacerbated bystanders' negative perception of school safety*

During individual semi-structured interviews, overgeneralised beliefs were evidenced in the descriptions that participants provided regarding their experiences of school bullying. Most of the participants made an unjustified generalisation on the basis of a small number of incidences of bullying they witnessed. Participant 2 stated:

I think a lot of things. Sometimes I can't even imagine how I am walking through; my mind just gets lost because I will be thinking that I am going to a place where bullying is happening.

Participant 5 came to a broad conclusion about his own safety in school and the possibility of also being

bullied, based on the few incidences of bullying he witnessed. When asked to describe how he felt about his safety in school after he had witnessed bullying, he stated:

No, I feel like in school there are no more good people, there are only bad people at school. That is how I feel.

Participant 10 had this to say:

No, I don't like going to school because I always think that this bully can come and take his stress out from me. No, I don't feel safe because someday it will happen to me.

It seemed participants made a general rule based on their negative interpretation of one or two incidences of bullying that they witnessed. Thus, they came to a broad conclusion that their own safety and wellbeing in school was not guaranteed and they feared the possibility of also being bullied.

#### *Theme 4: Selective abstraction: indirect co-victimisation*

Participants in this study selectively filtered the available evidence. This led them to make interpretations that seemed not fully accurate, which contributed to their psychological re-victimisation and indirect co-victimisation.

Participant 5 recounted an incident where she witnessed a learner being bullied. She stated that afterwards she became frustrated, and she was scared of going to school as a result of the thought of becoming a next victim:

I feel scared during the whole break. Sometimes during break I can't even go out. My other friend will see me and ask me; why are you not going out with us? When I think about that bullying, sometimes I don't get out of class even in break time. I feel so scared. It is so frustrating.

In a similar vein, Participant 4 described an instance where she watched a learner being bullied, and after that she became scared and suffered nightmares:

It affects me so much because sometimes I dream about this boy bullying other kids. I can't sleep because I think it can happen to me.

A parallel view was echoed by Participant 3 who experienced difficulty sleeping as a result of focusing on the experience of one or more incidences of bullying witnessed:

I have bad dreams and I keep on thinking of how they beat other kids. Most times I don't sleep well at night. I also don't feel confident about myself because I think of who is going to be bullied next. It takes my confidence when I think about the things that happened to other kids.

The responses of the participants revealed that focusing on or making an appraisal of a small number of negative events witnessed or experienced could contribute to indirect co-victimisation. It could be argued that conceptualising an entire experience of an event, while making an appraisal of that event on the basis of a fragment, could feed negative emotions.

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortion – personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralising and selective abstraction – served as the basis for generating and triggering a variety of emotional disturbances in reaction to witnessing bullying. In specific terms, the findings of this study revealed the contributory role of the train of thoughts that predisposes bystanders to react in a particular way.

Personalisation played a predictive role in apportioning undue self-blame. It turned out that bystanders in this study held themselves responsible and blamed themselves for their inability to defend the victim – despite there being no objective evidence to support such feelings. In most cases, it was apparent that there was absolutely no basis for the bystanders to apportion blame to themselves. Nevertheless, they assumed they were the sole cause of the bullying, and consequently reacted with feelings of guilt and self-blame. This finding resonates with the reports of Szentagotai and Freeman (2007) as well as Szasz (2011), namely that personalisation as a maladaptive thinking pattern debases an individual and can lead to self-blame.

The bystanders in this study appraised their experience of witnessing bullying and then automatically imagined and expected direct victimisation – which triggered a greater likelihood of anxiety. It was evident that their emotional reactions were based on “what if” and not on reality. Most of the participants erroneously believed that the fact they witnessed bullying heralds’ future tragedy for them, since the event is likely to reoccur. In reality, not every learner who witnessed bullying in school ever becomes a direct victim of bullying, as was anticipated by most participants. Therefore, there might be no basis for making up a general rule about school safety, based on their negative interpretation of a few incidents. Our findings in this study correspond with the views of Muris and Field (2008), who asserted that catastrophic thinking plays a definite role in the aetiology and maintenance of childhood anxiety disorders.

Unjustified generalisations served as the basis for misguided actions of bystanders and contributed greatly to bystanders’ negative perception of school safety. Bystanders in our study reached a broad conclusion that – in our opinion – emanated from ill-grounded beliefs and blanket judgement about their wellbeing and safety in school after witnessing bullying. This could probably be attributed to our study participants having been trapped in a polarised appraisal of the situation where they could see only this way of interpreting a situation or event. Our finding concurs with the report of other researchers such as Rehna et al. (2012) and Flouri and Panourgia (2011), whose studies confirmed that self-debasing cognitive distortions such as overgeneralisation could instigate individual perceptions of threat and danger.

Our study also indicated that bystanders pinpointed one or two incidences of bullying they witnessed and gave a biased interpretation of those experiences, which in turn contributed to their own psychological re-victimisation. It was further evidenced that attention bias could precipitate the development of co-victimisation and psychological victimisation. This theme upheld the findings of other studies as reported in the literature regarding the influence of selective abstraction in psychological re-victimisation for bystanders of bullying in school (Teo & Say, 2012). Lastly, the findings of this study support the cognitive vulnerability hypothesis of

cognitive theory, which asserts that individual cognition plays a significant and primary role in the development and maintenance of emotional linkage to events (Beck, 2011).

### *Implications for Emotional Education*

While empirical research suggests that bystanders experience emotional health problems (including sleeplessness) in reaction to witnessing bullying, a research study that shifts our attention to the cognitive processes that have a significant impact on the onset and maintenance of bystanders' emotional reactions to witnessing bullying is particularly significant. This is because cognitive distortion outlines the mechanism that generates distorted thoughts due to bias in the way that information is processed by the cognitive system, which in turn affects the cognition of and emotions displayed by an individual in reaction to events.

Our study findings revealed that self-debasing cognitive distortion predisposes bystanders who witnessed bullying to negative emotional reactions. Individuals are directly responsible for generating their own emotions. Therefore, it is possible for one to change the emotional reactions to events by changing one's appraisal and interpretation of that event. Bystanders could be taught how to recognise, challenge and reappraise negative and unhelpful thoughts and feelings related to their experiences. Hence, the findings of the study might assist school psychologists, counsellors and behavioural healthcare service providers to fully comprehend the predictive tendencies of self-debasing cognitive distortion as a determinant of emotional problems experienced by learners who witnessed bullying. Furthermore, our findings should give school counsellors and educational psychologists insight into possible cognitive strategies to apply in the design of treatment and interventions for victims of school bullying, especially bystanders. They may also help to make bystanders aware of the reciprocal relationship among their thoughts, feelings and emotional reactions when witnessing bullying at school. This awareness will hopefully reveal the irrationality of their thought patterns and its link with their reactions to witnessing bullying.

Anti-bullying programmes should be implemented without delay so that school psychologists and counsellors will have the opportunity to highlight the emotional, psychological and educational impact of bullying and reassure the students that the consequences of bullying extend to all who are exposed to it. Since most intervention studies have emphasised the importance of assertiveness training as a means for the victim of bullying to deal with the perpetrators (Nabuzoka et al., 2009), it is recommended that bystanders should be taught the same strategy to enable them to protect themselves and others by standing up against bullies. Lastly, as moral disengagement plays an important role in whether bystanders will respond with defending or pro-aggressive bystander behaviour, it also needs to be addressed in anti-bullying interventions.

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