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Reintegrative Shaming Theory, Moral Emotions and Bullying

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This article investigates the usefulness of Reintegrative Shaming Theory (RST) in explaining the bullying of siblings in families and peers in schools. Questionnaires were completed by 182 children aged 11–12 years in ten primary schools in Nicosia, Cyprus, about sibling and peer bullying. A vignette-based methodology was used to investigate children's expectations of the type of shaming their parents would offer in response to their possible wrong doing. Children were also asked questions about the emotions they would have felt (i.e. shame, remorse, guilt or anger) if they were in the position of the child in the vignette. The level of bonding toward each parent was also examined. In agreement with the theory, a path analysis showed that mother bonding influenced children's expectations of the type of shaming offered by parents. Disintegrative shaming (i.e. shaming offered in a stigmatizing or rejecting way) had a direct effect on the way children managed their shame. Shame management directly influenced sibling and peer bullying. Father bonding had no direct or indirect effects in the model. Against the theory, reintegrative shaming (i.e. shaming offered in the context of approving the wrongdoer while rejecting the wrongdoing) did not have a direct effect on shame management. Beyond the postulates of RST, mother bonding—a plausible indicator of family functioning—had a direct effect on sibling and peer bullying. Mother bonding had a stronger effect for boys than for girls. It is concluded that RST is useful in explaining the link between family factors and bullying, and that RST has cross-cultural applicability. Aggr. Behav. 34:352–368, 2008. **© 2008 Wiley-Liss, Inc.**

Keywords: sibling/peer bullying; reintegrative/disintegrative shaming; parental bonding; shame management; moral emotions

INTRODUCTION

Despite the large number of studies indicating a strong relationship between parenting and bullying [for a review, see Smith, 2005], there have been few attempts to elucidate the mechanisms underlying this association [Ahmed and Braithwaite, 2004; Unnever et al., 2006]. This article aims to operationalize and empirically test the basic postulates of Reintegrative Shaming Theory (RST) [Braithwaite, 1989], paying special attention to the *intervening processes* that—according to the theory—should occur between family factors and bullying.

Given the strong link between family factors (such as parental bonding and parenting practices) and child problem behavior—in this case, bullying—we aim to explain how RST elucidates this association through its emphasis on the *mediating effects of moral emotions*; and how, on the theoretical level, these effects can be understood by reference to the mechanism of shaming, which is what triggers different shame management techniques.

This article also aims to assess the *cross-cultural applicability of RST* by testing the theory with a sample of Cyprus students adding, in this way, confidence to the validity of the theory [Botchkovar and Tittle, 2005; p 402]. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that RST has been tested in Cyprus.

Finally, an attempt is made to extend the theoretical framework of the theory through using *neutralization techniques* to measure shame management. We argue that neutralization techniques can help in the understanding of how individuals manage their shame, especially with regard to maladaptive forms of shame management.

RST, Parenting, Moral Emotions and Aggressive Behavior

The pivotal concept of RST is reintegrative shaming [Braithwaite, 2000; p 281], a nonstigmatizing

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