

# “WHAT, ME ASHAMED?” SHAME MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL BULLYING

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*This study focuses on the prediction of self-initiated bullying from family, school, personality, and shame management variables. Reintegrative shaming theory provided a theoretical framework for data gathered from students (n = 1,401) and their parents (n = 978). To test the importance of shame management in relation to bullying, the MOSS-SASD instrument (Management of Shame State–Shame Acknowledgment and Shame Displacement) was developed. Bullying was related to a child’s unacknowledged shame and its displacement to other-directed blame and anger. The results of path analysis indicated that shame management partially mediated the effects of family, school, and personality variables on bullying. The implications of these findings for creating a safer school environment are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *shame management; shaming; bullying*

Past research has shown an impressive link between children’s bullying behavior and family variables (e.g., Bowers, Smith, and Binney 1994; Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon 2000; Shields and Cicchetti 2001), school variables (e.g., Olweus, Limber, and Mihalic 1999; O’Moore and Hillery 1991; Slee 1993), and personality variables (e.g., Boulton and Smith 1994; Rigby, Cox, and Black 1997). Children’s psychological well-being has also been found to be associated with bullying (Rigby and Cox 1996; Slee 1995). What is poorly understood, however, is the emotion of shame, and the role it may play in explaining these well-established interrelationships. The current study considers the multivariate influence of shame management variables, family variables, school variables, and personality variables in developing bullying.

The relevance of shame management to an analysis of bullying is supported by a body of clinical, developmental, and criminological literature that suggests a relationship between shame, anger, and criminal behavior (Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, and Braithwaite 2001; Gilligan 1996; Lewis 1971; Scheff and Retzinger 1991). For example, Lewis (1971) has argued

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that unacknowledged shame provoked anger and angry reactions in her clients during psychotherapeutic sessions. Support for unacknowledged shame triggering anger can also be found in other studies using a variety of methodologies, such as video taping of facial expressions (Retzinger 1991). Shame was not only found to be related to hostility and a tendency to blame others (Tangney et al. 1992) but also to feelings of unworthiness, helplessness, and depression (Lewis 1971; Tangney 1990, 1993), and threatening behaviors such as carrying a gun (Shapiro, Dorman, and Burkey 1997) and violent offending (Gilligan 1997).

While focusing on the maladaptive aspects of shame, none of these researchers has denied adaptive aspects of shame. Indeed, some have conceded the possibility that shame acknowledgment plays a central role in maintaining adaptive interpersonal relationships (e.g., Retzinger 1996). In acknowledging shame, an individual accepts that they feel shame, comes to terms with their responsibility for what has happened, and takes steps to make amends for the harm done. Once these three elements combine together within the individual's belief system, they create an internal sanctioning mechanism helping the individual discharge shame. Discharged shame has been discussed in the clinical literature using different modes of expression, such as moral shame (Green and Laurenz 1994) and a mature sense of modesty (Schneider 1977).

Although discharged shame makes us collectively better off in maintaining adaptive interpersonal relationships, it may sometimes make us individually worse off if we are unable to overcome negative self-related feelings. A pervasive shame experience is often related to feelings of inferiority, helplessness, a loss of self-esteem (Cook 1996; Lewis 1971), and a fear of social exclusion (Elias 1994). Cook reported that shame and low self-esteem are highly correlated, but that shame is a more intense affect that constitutes feelings of humiliation and indignity. Shame is an emotion of self-contempt that leaves individuals feeling exposed as defective in the eyes of others (Wurmser 1987). In such circumstances, individuals become occupied with self-critical thoughts and face difficulty in discharging shame even if shame is acknowledged. Goldberg (1991) picks up on this persistent shame when he describes "impotent rage," which is a self-directed anger. The notion of persistent shame is also in accord with Schneider's (1977) disgrace, shame in which individuals are absorbed with thoughts of humiliation and mortification.

Debilitating feelings of persistent shame can be avoided by finding ways to protect oneself. The individual may feel that he/she has no responsibility for the situation or that there is nothing that needs to be rectified. In this context, shame cannot be discharged. Instead, an expression of externalization and hostility toward others may become evident. Scapegoats are found for any tell-tale signs that injury has occurred and harm done. Researchers have

recognized a range of options for those who find the path of shame acknowledgment too difficult. By-passed shame can manifest itself as denial that anything of significance has gone wrong (Scheff 1990). Or the course followed can reveal shame that is less under control. Overt-unidentified shame (Scheff 1990; Scheff and Retzinger 1991) with its other-directed anger and hostility can result in individuals' withdrawing from significant others and distancing themselves from any reminders of what has happened.

It should be noted that the idea of denial that may be present in displaced shame is not new. In their classic study of delinquency, Sykes and Matza (1957) drew attention to techniques for justifying and excusing wrongdoing, and how these were used as defense mechanisms to avoid facing consequences of actions. Learning such techniques provided delinquents with cognitive coping strategies that were personally adaptive. They could rationalize their acts as legitimate and neutralize their negative self-evaluation through their distortion of the facts. The term *neutralization* is a much broader concept than the concepts of *shame acknowledgment* and *shame displacement* used in this article. Neutralization is used to refer to a range of techniques or strategies for removing shame from wrongdoing, providing a dictionary of rationalizations and justifications that are deemed as culturally plausible. Those who are trying to displace shame may draw on this dictionary but what they use is not of central importance in this article. The central issue is failure to acknowledge shame and the consequences of unresolved shame for one's relationships with others.

Building on previous literature on shame, a measurement scale "MOSS-SASD" (Management of Shame State—Shame Acknowledgment and Shame Displacement; for details see Ahmed 2001) was developed to assess how individuals manage their shame following wrongdoing. Shame acknowledgment represents responses that are thought to serve adaptive functions in maintaining interpersonal relationships. These are feeling shame, feeling like hiding oneself, taking responsibility, facing up to others' rejection, and making amends. In contrast, shame displacement is considered as maladaptive from the perspective of good interpersonal relationships. It consists of distancing strategies in response to shame: externalizing blame, having unresolved shame, feeling anger, retaliatory anger, and displaced anger. All these variables represent attempts to deflect shame through displacing the felt shame into other-directed anger.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This study attempts to theoretically integrate important constructs from the disciplines of criminology (e.g., Braithwaite 1989; Sherman 1993) and

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psychology (e.g., Baumrind 1971; Hoffman 1975; Weiner 1979, 1993) into a model of bullying behavior. It furthers the development of an integrative conceptualization of shame by incorporating a third prominent literature, clinical psychology (e.g., Lewis 1971; Scheff and Retzinger 1991). Four clusters of variables are considered to have an impact on bullying: (a) family variables, (b) school variables, (c) personality variables, and (d) shame management variables.

The main focus in this study is on the shame management variables and their contribution to bullying above and beyond the contributions of other variables. Earlier work linking unacknowledged shame and anger (Lewis 1971; Scheff and Retzinger 1991) led to the expectation of a link between unacknowledged shame and bullying. In particular, children who do not acknowledge shame were expected to be more likely to engage in bullying peers. In addition, children who displaced their shame were considered to have a greater desire to retaliate against others and, hence, were expected to be more involved in bullying activities.

This study also provided an opportunity to extend some of the well-known links between family functioning and children's bullying behavior. Authoritarian, dominant, and inconsistent parenting has been shown to lead to bullying (Ahmed and Braithwaite in press; Espelage et al. 2000; Shields and Cicchetti 2001). A related aspect of family functioning explored in the present study is parental use of shaming in response to a child's wrongdoing. From the reintegrative shaming theory perspective (Braithwaite 1989), shaming needs to be accompanied by actions that will reestablish the bond between the authority figure and the wrongdoer, that is, shaming needs to be reintegrative. Should stigmatizing shaming occur, wrongdoers are treated as outcasts and the shaming is likely to provoke a defiant reaction from them. Other criminological studies have highlighted the dangers of stigmatizing shaming. According to Agnew (1985), coercive interpersonal relationships (often involving parental rejection) are most likely to produce a strong sense of anger in children. Instead of producing conformity, such coercive treatment creates greater defiance of authority (Sherman 1993). Thus, the extent to which shaming is stigmatizing or nonstigmatizing should have an effect on children's shame-management skills and their bullying behavior.

Another family variable in this study is the extent to which the child is enmeshed in a network of social support. This variable was measured through positive parent-child affect and family disharmony. It was expected that children from a nonsupportive family, where love, care, and support are short in supply, will have feelings of unworthiness and of being held in low regard. Nonsupportive family environments are likely to leave children vulnerable to developing poor shame-management skills and to adopt bullying behavior. This proposition derives from previous studies suggesting that

bullies come from families with low concern and unclear communication (Rican 1995).

Although the connection between school-related variables and bullying has been less extensively examined, the link has been established in several related studies. For example, students with behavioral problems (who tend to bully) were found to experience more dissatisfaction (Rigby and Slee 1993b) and hassles (Dubois et al. 1992) at school.

Personality disposition as a forerunner of bullying behavior is another critical issue. Some studies provide information that children's bullying behavior is negatively related to internal locus of control (Slee 1993) and an empathic concern for the victims (Rigby and Slee 1991). There is some evidence that impulsivity is an important contributor to antisocial behavior (Loeber 1990; Moffitt 1993). There has also been increased effort to understand how shame-proneness and guilt-proneness relate to psychopathology (Tangney et al. 1992). Self-esteem has long been implicated in bullying behavior although past findings have provided conflicting results on the nature of its role (O'Moore and Hillery 1991; Rigby and Cox 1996).

A final objective of this article is to test a mediational hypothesis concerning the link between parental, school, and personality variables and bullying behavior. The mediator examined is children's shame-management skills. The expectation that children's shame-management skills mediate the link between bullying and other variables arises from research traditions, involving convergent findings that (a) family functioning influences shame (e.g., Fossum and Mason 1986; Høglund and Nicholas 1995; Potter-Efron 1989; Pulakos 1996), (b) personality variables are related to shame (e.g., Stipek 1983; Tangney 1990, 1991), and (c) bullying hinges on incompetent or poorly developed social skills (Olweus 1997; Pulkkinen 1996).

There is evidence to suggest that individuals experiencing abuse within the family develop low self-esteem and maladaptive shame (Fossum and Mason 1986; Potter-Efron 1989), and shame triggers deviant outcomes (Lewis 1971). This research has led us to examine whether shame is a mediator in the association between family variables and bullying. Families in which arguments are commonplace, and children are ignored and not valued, are likely to provide foundations for unhealthy levels of shame in the child. In the model proposed here, experiences with stigmatizing shaming at home and a disharmonious family environment are thought to influence shame-management skills, which in turn relate to bullying behavior.

Similarly, because the incapacity to feel empathy for others (one type of personality measure) relates to maladaptive shame (Tangney 1991), it is possible that less empathic concern accounts for less skill in managing shame adaptively, which in turn leads to more bullying activities. A similar argument could be made in the case of impulsivity and locus of control.

Finally, children who feel uncomfortable at school, either because the school does not “manage” its bullying problem or because the child “does not fit in,” are likely to have feelings of shame and inadequacy, which are blamed on the school. Thus, the shame management variables also have the potential to mediate the relationship between school experiences and bullying.

## *METHOD*

### *Sample*

Participants in the Life at School Survey (<http://crj.anu.edu.au/school.html>) were 1,401 students (54 percent girls) from grades four to seven (mean age = 10.86, *SD* = .90) and 978 of their primary caregivers (89 percent were mothers). The sample was drawn from 32 public and private schools in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). All these schools were co-educational. Participation for students was voluntary in this study. Only children whose parent or guardian had given written permission for their child to participate were eligible for inclusion. The overall rate of participation was 47.3 percent. It should be emphasized that both parent and child were required to give consent for this study. In similar studies where an ethically stringent participation criterion has been used, response rates typically range from 40 percent to 60 percent (Donovan, Jessor, and Costa 1988; Severson and Biglan 1989).

The sample was representative of the ethnic diversity in the region: 25 percent of students were born either in a non-English-speaking country or in an English-speaking country with one or both parents born in a non-English-speaking country. The sample was biased, however, toward families where the parents had post-school qualifications (88 percent of caregivers had post-school qualifications) and where the primary caregiver was in the workforce (75 percent worked part time or full time). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996, 1997), the proportion of females who had completed post-school education in the Australian Capital Territory was 39 percent. Labor force participation was estimated as 54 percent for this population. This bias may be in part due to our requirement that parents sign the consent form in order for the children to take part in the study. Such procedures possibly create more alarm and suspicion among parents who are less familiar with the quasi-legal paper processes that accompany ethics committees in the university and public sectors. By the same token, it is of note that the prevalence of bullying and victimization in our data is on a par (see Ahmed 2001) with the Australian findings (Rigby 1996) as well as with the overseas findings (Boulton and Underwood 1992; Olweus 1991). In accord

with these studies, our data showed that more than half of all students had bullied others in the last year, boys bullied more than girls, and younger students are bullied more than older students.

### *Procedure*

The data were collected in the second half of the school year to give students time to get to know each other and settle into relatively established patterns of interaction. Letters were sent home through schools asking students and their parents to take part in this study of school bullying. The voluntary and confidential nature of the study was emphasized. Only those students who had been given written permission to participate by a parent or guardian completed self-report questionnaires in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> The survey took approximately 25 to 40 minutes to complete for the older groups, and 35 to 65 minutes for the younger groups.

Upon completion, the students were given an additional envelope containing an explanatory cover letter, a parent questionnaire booklet, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope in which parents returned their completed questionnaires. Of the original sample of 1,401 students, 978 parents returned the completed questionnaires, resulting in a return rate of 70 percent.

### *Measures and Scales<sup>2</sup>*

#### DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable measured in this study was self-initiated bullying.<sup>3</sup> Previous work has drawn a distinction between children who bully others in a one-to-one situation and children who join in to bully in groups (Rigby 1996). From the perspective of understanding triggers for bullying, there is merit in focusing on the children who take the initiative and bully of their own accord, rather than those who follow others for reasons that may be totally unrelated to the bullying action itself. Furthermore, self-initiated bullying is likely to involve hard-core bullies who are possibly at a higher risk for future delinquency, crime, and psychopathology.

Self-initiated bullying was measured by a single item (Rigby and Slee 1993a): "How often have you, on your own, bullied someone during the last year?" ( $M = 1.43$ ;  $SD = .72$ ). There were 5 response categories: (1) "I haven't, on my own, bullied anyone during the last year," (2) "it has happened once or twice," (3) "sometimes," (4) "about once a week," and (5) "several times a week." The majority of the students (66.3 percent) reported not being involved in bullying in a one-to-one situation.<sup>4</sup>

*Independent Variables*

## FAMILY VARIABLES

*Stigmatizing and nonstigmatizing shaming.* The extent to which parents employ stigmatizing and nonstigmatizing shaming in response to their child's wrongdoing was measured with the Attributional Shaming Instrument (ASI; Ahmed 1996). The ASI presents parents with stories describing hypothetical incidents in which their own child transgressed in a peer group situation. It comprised eight scenarios of bullying at school (scenarios are given in the appendix), corresponding to those scenarios used in the MOSS-SASD.

For each scenario, parents were asked to what extent would you agree or disagree with the following: (1) I would say that my child should not be blamed for the behavior (responsibility), (2) I would say that my child will never repeat this behavior in future (stability), (3) I would say that my child meant to do what he/she did (intentionality), and (4) I would say that the behavior was under my child's control (controllability). Items concerning responsibility and stability across scenarios were reverse scored so that a high score represented responsibility (rather than release from responsibility) and stability (rather than changeability) respectively.

Parents answered the above questions on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Questions on stability and intentionality reflected parental expressions of stigmatizing shaming. Responses on these questions correlated quite highly across the eight scenarios (median was .82 for stability and .72 for intentionality), and therefore, were averaged to construct stability and intentionality scales. To construct an index representing stigmatizing shaming attributions, both the stability and intentionality scales were combined ( $r = .16$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = .72$ ).

The expression of nonstigmatizing shaming was measured through two questions reflecting responsibility and controllability. Responses on these questions correlated quite highly across the eight scenarios (median was .61 for responsibility and .80 for controllability) and therefore were averaged to construct responsibility and controllability scales. To construct an index representing nonstigmatizing shaming attributions, the responsibility and controllability scales were combined ( $r = .22$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $M = 4.35$ ;  $SD = .57$ ).

*Family support.* Family support was measured with two scales. The first was based on parents' perceptions of positive parent-child affect assessed through seven items taken from the Child Rearing Practices Report (CRPR; Block 1965). The items were as follows: (1) My child and I have warm, intimate times together; (2) I express affection by hugging, kissing and holding

my child; (3) I find some of my greatest satisfactions in my child; (4) I joke and play with my child; (5) I am easy-going and relaxed with my child; (6) I often feel angry with my child (reverse score); and (7) There is a good deal of conflict between my child and me (reverse score). Response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6), with a high score representing positive affect between parent and child ( $M = 4.89$ ;  $SD = .59$ ;  $\alpha = .75$ ).

The second scale, family disharmony, was based on Groube's (1987) Daily Hassles instrument. Students were asked: How often do you experience (1) parents ignoring you, (2) parents checking up on you, (3) difficulties among family members, and (4) arguments or disagreements in the family. Response categories ranged from *never* (1) to *a lot of the time* (3), and a high score indicated that the family was plagued by conflict, disinterest, and disagreement ( $M = 1.75$ ;  $SD = .43$ ;  $\alpha = .65$ ).

#### SCHOOL VARIABLES

*Liking for school.* The extent to which children like their school was measured with two sets of drawings. The first was a pictorial representation of the Smiley Face Scale (Mooney, Creeser, and Blatchford 1991) ranging from "Ugh, I hate it" (1) to "Great, I love it" (5). The second set, the School Engagement-Withdrawal scale (Braithwaite 1996), depicted a series of five drawings of a boy and a girl bearing the postures of children ranging from "absence of belongingness" (1) to "presence of belongingness" (5) at school. Students were asked to shade the child who is most like them when they are at school. The Smiley Face Scale and School Engagement-Withdrawal Scale were intercorrelated ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Scores were averaged to construct the Liking for School Index ( $M = 3.90$ ;  $SD = .79$ ;  $\alpha = .63$ ), a high score indicating greater liking and belongingness.

*Perceived control of bullying.* This measure consisted of seven items taken from the Peer Relations Questionnaire (Rigby and Slee 1993a). Students answered the following two questions on a 4-point rating scale: (1) In your view, is this school a safe place for young people who find it hard to defend themselves from attack from other students? (2) Do you think that teachers at this school are interested in trying to stop bullying?

Five additional questions with a 3-point response format were presented to the students as follows: (1) How often would you say that bullying happens at this school? (2) Have you noticed bullying going on in this school in any of these places: (a) in the classroom, (b) at recess/lunch, (c) on the way to school, and (d) on the way home from school? Items were scored so that higher scores indicate that students perceived their school as more effective

in controlling bullying problems. Because of differences in the response categories of the items, item scores were standardized before being averaged to form a composite variable ( $M = .00$ ;  $SD = .57$ ;  $\alpha = .66$ ).

*School hassles.* School hassles were measured by eight items taken from Groube's (1987) Daily Hassles instrument. Four items related to the student role were (1) failing a test or exam, (2) feeling unsure about what is expected of me at school [e.g., schoolwork], (3) doing worse in schoolwork than I expected, and (4) failing to do my homework. Four items related to the social role were (1) having no friends, (2) having things go wrong in my relationships with friends, (3) having to make new friends, and (4) disagreements or misunderstandings with friends. Items were scored on a 3-point scale from *never* (1) to *a lot of time* (3) with a high score indicating high levels of hassles ( $M = 1.79$ ;  $SD = .32$ ;  $\alpha = .71$ ).

#### PERSONALITY VARIABLES

*Shame, guilt, and pride proneness.* These variables were measured by using the Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Children (TOSCA-C; Tangney, Wagner, and Gramzow 1989). The TOSCA-C measures consist of 15 brief scenarios (10 negative and 5 positive in valence), which are relevant to the everyday contexts of respondents. Participants indicate how likely it is that they would respond to the incident in a particular way, answering on a 5-point scale of *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (5). The sample means were 2.88 for shame-proneness ( $SD = .65$ ;  $\alpha = .82$ ), 3.72 for guilt-proneness ( $SD = .60$ ;  $\alpha = .83$ ), and 3.62 for pride-proneness ( $SD = .67$ ;  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Self-esteem.* The Short Form of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg and Simmons 1971) was used to measure self-esteem. It consists of six items (e.g., I feel I have a number of good qualities). The participants responded to each statement on a 4-point scale ranging from *disagree a lot* (1) to *agree a lot* (4) ( $M = 2.86$ ;  $SD = .56$ ;  $\alpha = .70$ ).

*Empathy.* Children's empathic concern for victims was assessed using three items,<sup>5</sup> which had a focus on the capacity to feel for the victims of bullying (Rigby and Slee 1991). These were (1) I feel like standing up for kids who are being bullied, (2) I feel like helping kids who can't defend themselves, and (3) I feel like being angry when a kid is picked on without reason. The participants responded to each statement on a 4-point scale ranging from *disagree a lot* (1) to *agree a lot* (4) ( $M = 3.35$ ;  $SD = .62$ ;  $\alpha = .73$ ).

*Impulsiveness.* Impulsivity was measured by five items taken from two separate scales. Three items have been used in the Junior impulsiveness scale (Eysenck and Eysenck 1977). These were as follows: (1) I often get involved in things I later wish I could get out of, (2) I often get into trouble because I do things without thinking, and (3) I often do and say things without stopping to think. Two items were taken from Buss and Plomin's (1975) EASI-III Temperament Survey: (1) I tend to hop from interest to interest quickly and (2) I get bored easily. For this measure, items were endorsed on a 4-point scale ranging from *disagree a lot* (1) to *agree a lot* (4). All items were highly correlated and therefore, averaged to obtain the impulsivity score ( $M = 2.73$ ;  $SD = .61$ ;  $\alpha = .65$ ). Higher scores reflected a greater deficiency in impulse control.

*Internal locus of control.* Two items from the Multidimensional Measure of Children's Perceptions of Control (Connell 1985) were used to examine children's locus of control in the cognitive domain: (1) If I want to do well in school, it's up to me to do it; and (2) If I don't do well in school, it's my own fault. These two items were positively correlated ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and showed a similar pattern of relationships to the dependent variable. Responses were made on a 4-point scale ranging from *disagree a lot* (1) to *agree a lot* (4). Although the alpha coefficient for the cognitive domain is low in this sample ( $\alpha = .33$ ), the scale was retained pending further analyses ( $M = 3.47$ ;  $SD = .58$ ).

#### *Shame Management Variables*

Shame management variables were measured using the Management of Shame State: Shame Acknowledgment and Shame Displacement (MOSS-SASD; Ahmed, Braithwaite, and Braithwaite 1996). Previous studies have shown that children ages 7 to 8 years are able to distinguish between shame and guilt (Berti, Garattoni, and Venturini 2000; Ferguson, Stegge, and Damhuis 1991). Having viewed success in measuring shame and guilt using hypothetical scenarios with young children (e.g., Ferguson et al. 1991; Tangney et al. 1990), we decided to develop the MOSS-SASD to measure shame-management capacity of children ages 9 and above. In piloting the MOSS-SASD, students of different grades were tested for their ability to complete the MOSS-SASD. Researchers observed the students completing the task and a discussion followed about what was involved and how easy the task was. The pilot study justified the age-appropriateness of the MOSS-SASD.

The MOSS-SASD was designed to capture the responses that individuals make when they encounter a situation where they are caught performing an act of social and/or moral wrongdoing. It comprises eight scenarios (see

appendix) each describing a bullying incident at school.<sup>6</sup> Following each bullying scenario, the students are given 10 questions, asking them to indicate how they would feel if they were the one doing the bullying. A total of 80 items (8 scenarios  $\times$  10 questions) make up the MOSS-SASD scale, using a “yes” (1) / “no” (2) scoring format.<sup>7</sup> Following a series of principal components analyses with varimax rotation on scenarios individually and collectively, two scales were constructed: Shame Acknowledgment ( $M = 1.72$ ;  $SD = .22$ ;  $\alpha = .70$ ) and Shame Displacement ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .21$ ;  $\alpha = .66$ ) (for details on MOSS-SASD’s psychometric properties, see Ahmed 2001).

For Shame Acknowledgment, the following questions were asked after each scenario: (1) Would you feel ashamed of yourself? (2) Would you wish you could just hide? (3) Would you feel like blaming yourself for what happened? (4) Do you think others would reject you? (5) Would you feel like making the situation better?

For Shame Displacement, the questions were as follows: (1) Would you feel like blaming others for what happened? (2) Would you be unable to decide if you were to blame? (3) Would you feel angry in this situation? (4) Would you feel like getting back at that student? (5) Would you feel like doing something else, for example, throwing or kicking something?

### *FINDINGS*

Results are presented in three parts. First, we report the relationships between shame-management variables (shame acknowledgment and shame displacement) and other sets of independent variables (family, school, and personality). Second, we present the relationships between all independent variables (family, school, personality, and shame management) and the dependent variable (self-initiated bullying). Third, we test models to examine the extent to which the relationship of self-initiated bullying to other sets of independent variables (family variables, school variables, and personality variables) is mediated by shame-management variables (shame acknowledgment and shame displacement).

#### *Are Family, School, and Personality Variables Associated with Shame Management Variables?*

Table 1 shows how the explanatory variables of family, school, and personality variables are related to the mediating variables of shame management, controlling for the child’s sex and age.

**TABLE 1: Partial Correlation Coefficients of the Family, School, and Personality Variables with Shame Management Controlling for Child's Sex and Age**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Shame Acknowledgment (minimum n = 889)</i>	<i>Shame Displacement (minimum n = 871)</i>
<b>Family</b>		
Stigmatizing shaming attributions	.00 (ns)	-.04 (ns)
Non-stigmatizing attributions	-.01 (ns)	-.03 (ns)
Positive parent-child affect	.09**	-.08*
Family disharmony	.02 (ns)	.15***
<b>School</b>		
School hassles	.15***	.14***
Liking for school	.04 (ns)	-.09**
Perceived control of bullying	.12***	-.18***
<b>Personality</b>		
Guilt-proneness	.47***	-.11***
Shame-proneness	.37***	.15***
Pride-proneness	.23***	-.03 (ns)
Self-esteem	-.12***	-.14***
Empathy	.26***	-.06*
Impulsivity	-.04 (ns)	.19***
Internal locus of control	.06*	-.09**

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

The adaptive shame response of high acknowledgment along with low displacement is more prevalent among children who have positive parent-child affect, who have high empathy, who have an internal locus of control, who are guilt-prone, and who perceive bullying as behavior that is well-controlled at their school.

The other variables that have been linked to bullying in past research show a variety of patterns of relationships with the shame-management variables: shame acknowledgment and shame displacement. Children with low self-esteem, who are shame-prone and troubled by hassles at school both acknowledge their shame and displace it. Displacement characterizes children who are impulsive and who experience family disharmony and dislike school, whereas acknowledgment is more likely among children who are prone to experience pride on achievement.

These results point to the important role that both shame acknowledgment and shame displacement play in the integrative shame-management model of bullying. The patterns of the relationships between the explanatory variables (family, school, and personality) and the mediating variables (shame acknowledgment and shame displacement) suggest greater complexity in the interrelationships than initially anticipated.

**TABLE 2: Partial Correlation Coefficients of the Family, School, Personality, and Shame Management Variables with Self-Initiated Bullying Controlling for Child's Sex and Age**

<i>Correlates</i>	<i>Self-Initiated Bullying (minimum n = 925)</i>
<b>Family</b>	
Stigmatizing shaming attributions	.05 (ns)
Non-stigmatizing shaming attributions	-.04 (ns)
Positive parent-child affect	-.06 (ns)
Family disharmony	.18***
<b>School</b>	
School hassles	.17***
Liking for school	-.14***
Perceived control of bullying	-.25***
<b>Personality</b>	
Guilt-proneness	-.13***
Shame-proneness	.04 (ns)
Pride-proneness	-.09**
Self-esteem	-.14***
Empathy	-.08**
Impulsivity	.22***
Internal locus of control	-.07*
<b>Shame management</b>	
Shame acknowledgment	-.14***
Shame displacement	.24***

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

*Are Family, School, and Personality Variables  
Associated with Bullying?*

Table 2 shows the relationships between the explanatory variables (family, school, personality) and mediating variables (shame acknowledgment and shame displacement), and the dependent variable (self-initiated bullying), controlling for child's sex and age.

As expected, self-initiated bullying was related to children's reports of family disharmony, having hassles at school, not liking school, and not seeing school control in relation to bullying. All of these findings are consistent with previous research. Furthermore, children who bullied others were more likely to be impulsive, to lack an internal locus of control, to lack empathy, and to lack high self-esteem. Again previous work has described the personality disposition of children who bully others in these terms.

What is new, and consistent with our predictions, is the relationship of shame acknowledgment and shame displacement to bullying. Children who bullied others were less likely to acknowledge shame and more likely to

displace shame. They were also less likely to experience guilt for wrongdoing and pride for an achievement.

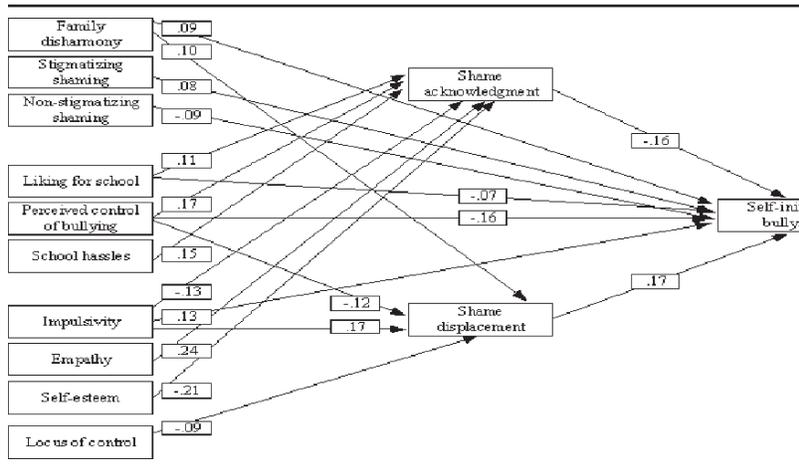
The absence of a significant relationship between bullying and shame-proneness is of interest. Additional analyses revealed a positive relationship between shame-proneness and bullying when guilt-proneness (a proxy for shame acknowledgment) is controlled. Shame-proneness appears to be a construct that encompasses both high acknowledgment (a protector against bullying) and high displacement (a trigger towards bullying).

#### *Mediational Analysis*

The mediational analysis was essentially exploratory because some of the earlier hypotheses (e.g., link between shaming, shame, and bullying) were not supported. Those relationships that were supported became the starting point for this analysis.

Variables that were included in the initial modeling exercise had to satisfy the following criteria: (1) had theoretical salience in the context of bullying research, (2) appeared as significant correlates and/or predictors in the earlier analyses, and (3) did not overlap either theoretically or empirically with other measures. On this basis, 12 variables from the 4 domains (family, school, personality, and shame management) were selected for modeling self-initiated bullying: (1) family disharmony, stigmatizing shaming attributions, and nonstigmatizing shaming attributions<sup>8</sup>; (2) liking for school, perceived control of bullying, and school hassles; (3) self-esteem, impulsivity, empathy, and internal locus of control; and (4) shame acknowledgment and shame displacement.

We hypothesized that the shame-management variables (shame acknowledgment and shame displacement) would mediate, partially if not fully, the relationships between the above explanatory variables (e.g., family, school, and personality variables) and bullying. To evaluate the hypothesis, three separate models were estimated: (1) a saturated model that included all direct and indirect paths to bullying, (2) a mediational model that included only paths from the explanatory variables to bullying through the shame-management variables, and (3) a nonmediational model that included all paths from explanatory variables and shame-management variables to bullying. Both the saturated model and the nonmediational model were compared with the mediational model. The chi-square differences were significant, indicating that at least some direct and some indirect paths are required to adequately represent the data. Therefore, a partial mediational model was supported to explain self-initiated bullying. Figure 1 shows the diagrammatic representa-



**Figure 1: Results of a Path Analysis Showing the Relationships Among Family Variables, School Variables, Personality Variables, Shame Management Variables, and Self-Initiated Bullying**

tion of this final (partial mediational) model,<sup>9</sup> using AMOS version 4.0 with maximum likelihood estimation (Arbuckle and Wothke 1999).

#### *Mediational Model with Self-initiated Bullying<sup>10</sup>*

Table 3 presents the significant paths in the final model with the standardized beta coefficients, including the overall fit indices for the model.

First and foremost, shame acknowledgment and shame displacement predicted self-initiated bullying. As hypothesized, shame acknowledgment reduced the prospect of bullying, and shame displacement increased the prospect of bullying.

All three family variables (family disharmony, stigmatizing shaming, and nonstigmatizing shaming attributions) have shown their direct effects on self-initiated bullying. Both family disharmony and stigmatized shaming attributions increased bullying whereas nonstigmatizing shaming attributions decreased bullying. Family disharmony also increased shame displacement which, in turn, increased bullying.

The three school variables (liking for school, perceived control of bullying, and school hassles) increased a child's shame acknowledgment, which in turn, reduced bullying acts. Therefore, shame acknowledgment appeared to play a mediational role between the above three school variables and self-initiated bullying. The extent to which children liked their school and perceived their school as capable of controlling bullying was important in additional ways. Both liking for school and perceived control of bullying

**TABLE 3: Paths in the Final Model with Their Standardized Beta Coefficients Including the Overall Fit Indices for the Model**

<i>Paths in the final model</i>	<i>Standardized beta coefficients</i>
Shame acknowledgment → Self-initiated bullying	-.16***
Shame displacement → Self-initiated bullying	.17***
Family disharmony → Self-initiated bullying	.09**
Stigmatizing shaming → Self-initiated bullying	.08*
Non-stigmatizing shaming → Self-initiated bullying	-.09**
Perceived control of bullying → Self-initiated bullying	-.16***
Impulsivity → Self-initiated bullying	.13***
Liking for school → Self-initiated bullying	-.07*
Liking for school → Shame acknowledgment	.11**
Perceived control of bullying → Shame acknowledgment	.17***
School hassles → Shame acknowledgment	.15***
Impulsivity → Shame acknowledgment	-.13***
Empathy → Shame acknowledgment	.24***
Self-esteem → Shame acknowledgment	-.21***
Internal locus of control → Shame displacement	-.09**
Family disharmony → Shame displacement	.10**
Perceived control of bullying ? Shame displacement	-.12***
Impulsivity → Shame displacement	.17***
Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ )	14.93 (df = 14; $p < .38$ )
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	.999
GFI (Goodness of Fit Index)	.997
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	.01

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

showed direct effects on bullying. Children who disliked their school and perceived their school as condoning a bullying atmosphere were more likely to bully others. Perceptions of bullying being condoned also increased shame displacement.

The personality variables, self-esteem, empathy, impulsivity, and internal locus of control, affected bullying through the shame-management variables. Those with high self-esteem were less likely to acknowledge shame while those who had high scores on locus of control were less likely to displace shame. Both impulsivity and empathy were associated with shame acknowledgment, with impulsivity leading to low shame acknowledgment and empathy to high shame acknowledgment. Impulsivity increased shame displacement and showed a direct effect on self-initiated bullying.

The final model provided an excellent fit to the empirical data as evidenced by all the different goodness-of-fit indices considered. These tests provided a nonsignificant<sup>11</sup> chi-square ( $\chi^2_{14} = 14.93$ ,  $p < .38$ ;  $n = 785$ ), a Goodness of Fit Index<sup>12</sup> (GFI = .997), a Comparative Fit Index<sup>13</sup> (CFI = .999), and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation<sup>14</sup> (RMSEA = .01). Through

this analysis, moderate levels of variance are explained in shame acknowledgment ( $R^2 = .16$ ), shame displacement ( $R^2 = .09$ ), and self-initiated bullying ( $R^2 = .19$ ).

#### *DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION*

Results of the present study highlight the importance of shame-management variables in regulating school bullying, showing that shame acknowledgment reduces the occurrence of bullying whereas shame displacement increases it. The mediational analysis provides support for a partial mediational model and alerts us to the mix of protectors and triggers that surround children when they are immersed in a world of bullying encounters. Protectors and triggers for bullying come from all three domains investigated: the family, the school, and the personality of the child.

Among the unexpected findings was a direct relationship between parental attributions and bullying. Parental attributions did not work through the shame-management variables. As such, these findings do not integrate the developmental literature and the reintegrative shaming literature to the extent that we had hoped. Nevertheless, the findings remain consistent with one of the central tenets of reintegrative shaming theory, that is, parental attributions that are stigmatizing lead to bullying and this occurs regardless of how these attributions are interpreted by the child. The fact that stigmatizing and nonstigmatizing parental responses directly affect behavior is theoretically and practically important. If their effects are not mediated by the shame-management capacities of the child, one must concede that the stigmatizing responses of a parent may trigger childhood bullying in ways that are outside the control of the child. The data do not provide us with an explanation of how parental attributions affect children's behavior. Furthermore, alternative explanations cannot be discounted. It is possible that we are observing nothing more than children modeling their parents. Parents who are prone to resolve conflict through physical means are likely to recognize bullying as an intentional and commonly used measure to achieve the desired outcome. Their children may view the world in the same way and bully peers, not in defiance of their parents' treatment of them, but in accordance with their parents' behavior.

Teasing out these different interpretations involves addressing the issue of how children perceive their parents' reactions to bullying. Unfortunately, the question was not asked in this study. To understand the relationship between parental shaming and child shame management, perceptions of both parents and children on shaming strategies need to be measured.

In spite of this shortcoming, this study provides some evidence from another source that we should not be too hasty in abandoning our theoretical assertion of a relationship between shaming and shame management. Children who report that their school disapproves of bullying and looks after those who are victimized by bullying were more likely to acknowledge shame and were less likely to displace shame. Capacities to manage shame seem to be shaped at least in part by external signals about what is acceptable and how much authority figures care about those for whom they are responsible. Internalizing social norms and values has been linked to a secure bond or attachment with significant others in a society (Bender and Loesel 1997; Hirschi 1969). It therefore remains plausible that secure social bonds enable authority figures to express disapproval and for this disapproval to be met by acknowledgment on the part of the wrongdoer. This sequence is likely to reinforce the socialization process and enhance self-regulatory capacities in the individual.

A second surprising finding was the positive association between school hassles and shame acknowledgment. Children who are aware that they are having difficulties with their school work and peer relations are likely to feel a sense of shame in terms of their poor performance, both academically and socially. Why then would such children be more likely to acknowledge that they have done wrong when caught in the act of bullying? The answer may lie in the child's style of self-presentation. Some children are disarmingly honest about everything. They see no reason to be defensive, whether the focus is on their school performance, their social life or their personal skills. Alternatively, these children may be a little hard on themselves, seeing and owning up to personal shortcomings more readily than they need to.

Related to this finding is that children with low self-esteem both acknowledge and displace shame more than other children. Recent work by Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) has suggested that self-esteem may not be as socially adaptive as has been assumed. Those with high self-esteem (in particular, unstable high self-esteem) may have difficulty in accepting criticism from others and in acknowledging shame and responsibility. If high self-esteem precludes acknowledgment of wrongdoing, as our data suggest, high self-esteem may have some socially destructive consequences. On the other hand, when high self-esteem protects against shame displacement, it reduces the likelihood of bullying.

Although further replication is required before drawing too strong a conclusion about regulating bullying through cultivating sensibility to shame management capacities, certain strengths of this study warrant mention. Strengths include (1) the large and heterogeneous sample, (2) the unique perspective of shame management for understanding the etiology of bullying,

and (3) the inclusion of parental shaming measures along with child shame-management measures.

At the same time, a couple of cautionary notes are important. First, the sample is largely self-selected because of the stringent ethical criteria used, and this may limit the generalizability of the results. More compelling support for the obtained findings awaits replication and extension of this research,<sup>15</sup> using measures with different samples (e.g., age, culture).

Second, understanding the link between shaming and shame management in relation to bullying requires both more detailed measurement and attention to context. Including an assessment of children's perceptions of shaming will uncover some of the unknown aspects of the shaming—shame-management relationships. A further extension to this study would involve conceptualizing the school's responses to bullying in terms of shaming (reintegration and stigmatization) and shame management (e.g., promotion of adaptive and nonadaptive strategies). Such an approach would invite an analysis of the social structure of masculinity (for details, see Messerschmidt 2000) that is undoubtedly implicated in bully-victim interactions. Specifically, one might ask whether masculine subcultures and discourses promulgate a style of shame management that increases the likelihood of bullying actions.

In conclusion, tackling school bullying is a multidimensional exercise (Tattum 1997): parents, teachers, and children are all important players. Children who are impulsive, who perceive their school as unable to control bullying, and whose families appear to be enmeshed in conflict are at greater risk of becoming bullies. At the same time, children who can manage their shame adaptively, that is through acknowledging wrongdoing and not displacing anger have a strategy that protects them from being a school bully. Adaptive shame management is more likely to take place if children can empathize with victims, control their impulsivity, and if they like school. But schools and parents have something to offer as well. They can provide the kind of environment where children feel it is safe to employ adaptive shame-management skills.

#### APPENDIX

##### **Bullying scenarios used in the ASI and MOSS-SASD**

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1. Imagine that you are walking along the corridor at school and you see another student. You put your foot out and trip the student. Then you realize that the class teacher has just come into the corridor and saw what you did.
2. Imagine that this is lunchtime at school and you see a younger student. You grab the sweets from his/her hand. Then you realize that the class teacher saw what you did.

3. Imagine that you are in the school playground and you get your friends to ignore another student from your class. You then realize that the teacher on duty has been watching you.
  4. Imagine that you are on the way home from school and see a younger student carrying something important that he/she has made at school. You knock the thing out of the child's hands. Then you realize that one of your teachers saw what you did.
  5. Imagine that you have been making rude comments about a student's family. You find out that your class teacher heard what you said.
  6. Imagine that a younger student is going to the canteen to buy something. You grab his/her money. You warn the student not to tell or else. Then you realize that your class teacher saw you and heard what you said.
  7. Imagine that you started an argument in class with another student. Then you exclude the student from doing the class project with you. Suddenly the teacher comes in and is told what you did.
  8. Imagine that you are left in the classroom alone with a student. You think that the teacher has gone and so you start teasing the student. Then you realize that the teacher is still in the classroom.
- 

### NOTES

1. In this study, we relied on children's self-reports. In the field of bullying, self-report methodology has received support in providing valid and reliable data for children's bullying involvement (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1996; Rigby 1996). In the absence of official information on bullying in our study, we correlated child self-report and parent self-reports of bullying. The inter-correlation coefficient was positive and significant ( $r = .22; p < .001; n = 978$ ). Given that children often do not report bullying incidents to their parents (Rigby 1996), this coefficient can be viewed as providing moderate support for the validity of the child and parent self-report measures of bullying.

2. For a detail description of each measure, see Ahmed (2001).

3. An earlier version of this article, which uses the dependent variable of general bullying can be seen at [www.crj.anu.edu.au](http://www.crj.anu.edu.au). The reported analyses show how serious bullying incidents differ from more common incidents of bullying.

4. Because of the skewness of the bullying scores, logarithmic and square-root transformations were performed on the variable before regression analysis. Results were not substantially different from those obtained when the variable was not transformed.

5. Minor modifications were made to frame the items as statements rather than questions so that they would be consistent with other items in the questionnaire.

6. In addition to these hypothetical incidents of school bullying, we asked children how they actually managed shame if they had bullied peers in reality. The MOSS-SASD items for an imagined scenario and a real-life experience were significantly and positively correlated ranging from .25 to .44. This provides support for the validity of using hypothetical situations with young children. Further support can be seen in a more recent study (Ferguson et al. 2000) in which a self-report questionnaire with hypothetical situations was successfully used with children aged 6 years to 13 years.

7. For analytic purposes, we recoded all items in the MOSS-SASD such that higher scores reflect affirmation of shame responses.

8. In the hierarchical regression analysis with self-initiated bullying, both stigmatizing and nonstigmatizing shaming attributions showed significant beta coefficients.

9. The covariances between the explanatory variables are not shown in the diagram, even though all covariances between the explanatory variables are included in the model.

10. This analysis was performed with those children whose parent data were available to us ( $n = 785$ ) using listwise deletion of missing data.

11. The chi-square statistic for which a significant value indicates that the model represents an inadequate fit.

12. Jöreskog and Sörbom's (1989) Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), for which values close to 1 indicate a very good fit (Arbuckle and Wothke 1999).

13. Bentler's (1990) Comparative Fit Index (CFI), for which values close to 1 suggest a very good fit (Arbuckle and Wothke 1999).

14. Browne and Cudeck's (1993) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which is a direct measure of the discrepancy between the estimated correlation matrix and the matrix implied by the specified model (Arbuckle and Wothke 1999). This index explicitly takes the parsimony of the model into account (i.e., the number of parameters fixed versus the number of parameters free to be estimated). Browne and Cudek (1993) suggested that a RMSEA of .05 or less indicates a close fit.

15. A recent study in Bangladesh has provided even stronger support for shame management and school bullying (Ahmed forthcoming).

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