International Journal of Bullying Prevention (2020) 2:53–64
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-020-00062-7

ORIGINAL PAPER

# Moral Courage Fostering Bystander Intervention Against Workplace Bullying: Findings from an Exploratory Study with a Video-Vignette Procedure

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Published online: 28 January 2020


**Abstract**
Scholars are increasingly considering bystander intervention as a behavior that could be an effective solution to stop workplace bullying. Among the factors leading bystanders to intervene, scholars hypothesized that moral courage is a key concept supporting intervention. In this paper, an exploratory study is conducted to investigate the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention against workplace bullying. This study follows an innovative design in which the stimulus is a video-vignette representing an episode of workplace bullying. Moral courage was assessed using an ad hoc constructed scale for moral courage at work (Moral Courage at Work scale – MC@W scale), while bystander intervention was assessed along the dimensions of personal involvement and immediacy following Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly's indications (2005). A positive relationship was found between moral courage and bystander intervention, although results do not evidently support this main hypothesis. Taking as a moderator the engagement evoked by the video-stimulus, results showed that people with high-moral courage scores are more likely to manifest intervention with high-personal involvement. Despite the limitations of this study, results provide preliminary indications about the complex link between moral courage and bystander intervention, which needs further investigation. This contribution is included in the line of research seeking to understand how to mobilize bystanders in organizations. In this sense, actions and training programs could be planned to improve employees' moral courage and consequently promote interventions against bullying and a better organizational environment.

**Keywords** Workplace bullying · Bystander intervention · Moral courage · Moral transgression · Morality at work

## Introduction

In the last decades, there has been growing attention toward combatting workplace bullying and improving employees' working conditions. As a result, these topics have become a major issue for public opinion, scholars, and organizations. Most research on workplace bullying concerns the understanding of the phenomenon, from its antecedents to its negative consequences (see Nielsen and Einarsen 2018 for an overview). However, despite considerable advances in knowledge surrounding this issue, research is still needed to find an effective strategy for solving workplace bullying. Recently, researchers adopted a more solution-oriented approach (Watts 2017) and started to focus on the active role of colleagues–witnesses seen as a solution to stop bullying (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). On the basis of this interest, in this Article we aimed to explore bystander intervention from an individual-centered perspective adopted in the field of ethics in organizations (Sekerka 2015). According to this perspective, the concept of moral courage is a key factor that supports bystander intervention against workplace bullying. We wanted to provide a theoretical explanation of this relationship and a contribution to reason about the implication of moral courage at work. Before elaborating on our hypotheses, we will give a brief overview of the relevant concepts.

**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-020-00062-7) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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## Features of Workplace Bullying

A review of the different aspects of workplace bullying is necessary to understand the value of bystander intervention and moral courage in solving it. Scholars have developed several views on what characterizes workplace bullying (see Lemoine and Desrumaux 2012). As main criteria, scholars include the duration of the abusive conduct, the frequency of the perpetrator's actions, and the imbalance of forces between the perpetrator and the victim. Workplace bullying is defined as a situation where an employee is, repeatedly and over a prolonged time period, exposed to abusive behavior from one or more colleagues (including subordinates and leaders) and where the targeted person is unable to defend him/herself against this systematic mistreatment (Einarsen et al. 2011). The perpetrator has the power to decide the rules of the relationship, while the victim endures the consequences of the perpetrator's action. This asymmetry of resources could be facilitated by the different hierarchical status of perpetrator and victim, which blurs the distinction between bullying and the normal exercise of authority (Bowling and Beehr 2006). Following studies showed that workplace bullying is also characterized by a lack of support and intervention from the victim's colleagues, which contributes to the negative outcomes of this phenomenon (Desrumaux, 2007; van Heugten 2011). Beyond these specific indications, workplace bullying implies a certain amount of ambiguity, which impedes an easy interpretation of bullying episodes (Hirigoyen 2016). Actually, the perceived repetition of abusive actions could help bystanders to recognize bullying at work and enact a process of judgment. Despite this, in most cases, the low intensity of the perpetrator's actions and the ambiguity relating to power relations in the organization do not allow for an easy interpretation of the situation (Duffy 2009). Thus, different interpretations of the same situation are given by victims and witnesses, and this information discrepancy could explain low-coworker support and avoiding behavior (Lucas & Hellemans, 2016; Timming et al. 2019).

What is more relevant to public opinion is that workplace bullying becomes very evident in its negative consequences for targets, organizations, and society. At an individual level, workplace bullying has negative effects on victims' personal health, stress perception, and suicide tendencies (Rex-Lear et al. 2012). At an organizational level, workplace bullying has negative effects in terms of lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, and higher turnover intentions (Samnani and Singh 2012 for a review). Negative consequences concern the dyad made of victim and perpetrator (Jennifer et al. 2003) but also people close to the victim, such as colleagues and members of the family (Soares 2002). In sum, workplace bullying is a conduct that may be harmful to individuals, groups, the organization, the surrounding environment, or society at large, and which is not morally accepted by the larger society (Russell et al. 2017). For this reason, workplace bullying has been considered as an example of moral transgression at work that needs to be addressed to improve employees' working conditions (Hodgins et al. 2014).

## A Shift in the Strategy to Solve Workplace Bullying

Initial strategies elaborated by scholars involved the main characters of a workplace bullying episode and the dyadic relationship between them, with slightly less attention given to other individuals involved in the situation. After that, scholars broadened their perspective by including the social environment surrounding the dyad and recognized its relevance in determining bullying episodes (Desrumaux 2012; Desrumaux et al. 2016; Salin and Notelaers 2018).

This line of research derives from studies about bystander intervention, which is a well-known topic in social psychology (Latané and Darley 1968). Several studies have been conducted into this phenomenon in different contexts and situations, such as bullying at school (Pozzoli and Gini 2013) and sexual harassment (Katz and Moore 2013). In the case of workplace bullying, the actors of this social environment are those colleagues witnessing bullying and scholars have started to investigate them.

As reported by Paull et al. (2012), there are different typologies of bystanders based on different possible coping behaviors. For example, in the category of avoiding bystanders, people tend to walk away from the situation, or in the category of abdicating bystanders, they silently allow bullying to continue despite being in position to stop it. Similarly, Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) proposed a typology of bystanders' intervention behavior against sexual harassment at work, which has been successfully adapted to the study of workplace bullying (Hellemans et al. 2017). This typology is based on two levels of two dimensions crossed: high/low immediacy of behavior and high/low level of personal involvement. The dimension of immediacy differentiates interventions occurring in a current situation (high immediacy) from interventions occurring at a later point in time (low immediacy). The dimension of personal involvement explains how much bystanders are immersed in the incident. High levels of involvement are likely to generate direct and publicly evident interventions as opposed to strategies in which bystanders do not react in the first person against the perpetrator.

Hence, the authors distinguished four types of bystander intervention, from covertly helping the victim to openly confronting the perpetrator. Employees included in this last category, defined as the intervening bystanders, have been considered as a valuable resource to halt bullying and support an ethical organizational context in which there is zero tolerance of interpersonal abuse (Davey-Attlee and Rayner 2007).

In line with these studies, scholars argue that encouraging witnesses to take action on behalf of the victims can be a valid strategy for organizations to counter workplace bullying (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011; Mulder 2015; Paull et al. 2012; Rayner and Bowes-Sperry 2008; van Heugten 2011). In particular, D'Cruz and Noronha (2011) maintain that intervention makes bullying everyone's problem, holding each individual accountable for the behaviors around them.

This idea comes principally from bystander intervention research in the school bullying literature, which indicates preliminary positive results concerning this strategy (Polanin et al. 2012). In line with this perspective, organizational scholars are studying which factors mobilize bystanders and using new findings to promote this behavior (Lutgen-Sandvik and Fletcher 2013).

Scholars focused on personal and contextual factors impeding bystanders to intervene (Mulder 2015). Intervention is not an obvious behavior when people deal with organizational contexts because it is discouraged by the hierarchical constraints and the culture of fear permeating organizational social structures (Ashkanasy and Nicholson 2003). The fear of a probable revenge on the part of the bully or the fear that acting in a public setting may potentially expose bystanders to wide scrutiny if their behavior is seen as inadequate (MacCurtain et al. 2018). Fear comes also from the low capacity to understand bullying episodes due to the ambiguity of the situation and from feeling powerless (Paull et al. 2019). These impediments discourage the personal involvement of bystanders.

## Moral Courage as a Key to Act

Beyond impediments, scholars focused on what motivates interveners, especially at a personal level. In studies about positive behavior and ethics in organizations (Stansbury and Sonenshein 2011), concepts related to morality (e.g. moral sensitivity, moral identity and moral courage) have been considered as helping employees to express their moral convictions at work. These "moral" employees are motivated to maintain or restore acceptable behavioral standards around them by addressing immoral conducts (moral transgressions), which include workplace bullying. Therefore, scholars affirm that moral concepts are factors that underlie employees' attitudes against workplace bullying and foster bystander intervention behaviors (Burford et al. 2016; McFerran et al. 2010).

Among these moral concepts, moral courage has become subject to scientific inquiry in the last decade (Brandstätter et al. 2016). Although there are several conceptions of this construct (Hannah et al. 2011; Kidder 2005; Miller 2002; Osswald et al. 2011; Serrat 2017), scholars define it as "acting correctly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal or discouragement" (Serrat 2017, p. 489). This definition implies that morally courageous people are conscious that there will be negative social consequences to their actions. These people can endure the expected negativity from their actions to achieve a greater good, which is the restoration of an acceptable level of morality in the situation (Sekerka and Bagozzi 2007). Also, these individuals can ignore contingencies and risks to act (Pedersen et al. 2018) and sustain a protracted campaign to achieve ethical goals (Comer and Sekerka 2018; Kohn 2011).

Moral courage is related to different typologies of concepts. It is positively related to concepts regarding to the appraisal of morality in situations, such as justice sensitivity (Baumert et al. 2013) and the perception of control over one's own emotions and performance, such as emotional self-regulation (Brandstätter et al. 2016) and self-efficacy (Sekerka 2015). In addition, moral courage has been assessed as a second-order construct that emerges from the moral basic capacities and behaviors, such as moral agency, endurance of threats, and going beyond compliance (Sekerka et al. 2009).

Organizational scholars recognized the benefit of moral courage at work in supporting positive behaviors (see Culiberg and Mihelič 2016 for a review), such as whistleblowing (Kohn 2011) and 'employee voice behavior' (Priesemuth 2013). In line with this view and considering workplace bullying as a moral issue to employees (Linstead 2013), moral courage can help bystanders to address the complexity of the organizational environment and workplace bullying.

## Moral Courage and Bystander Intervention

Scholars promoted the idea of building moral courage among colleagues and empowering them to take a stance against bullying (Comer and Vega 2011; Salin 2013). To better explain this proposition, we provide more information about why moral courage could support bystander intervention. Indeed, moral courage addresses most of impediments to intervention.

First, moral courage is sustained by a moral motivation, which is directed toward maintaining good moral standards in our environment by stopping moral issues (Hannah et al. 2011). Since bullying can be considered as a form of moral violation (O'reilly and Aquino 2011; Pouwels et al. 2019), moral courage can then be considered as a resource to stop bullying.

Second, both in situations related to moral courage and bystander intervention people must face the social costs of their actions. At work, colleagues' fear of these costs inhibits personal involvement against bullying. Giving that moral courage involves the capacity to overcome impediments to action and endure hardship (Kidder 2005), it seems that bystander intervention could benefit from this ability.

Third, the moral component involved in moral courage could lead people to more likely interpret and recognize when

something wrong is occurring (Baumert et al. 2013). Hence, people high in moral courage could more likely detect workplace bullying because of their specific attention to moral issues. This attention seems to be functional to enact the process leading to bystander intervention, which otherwise could be inhibited by the ambiguity related to workplace bullying episodes (O'reilly and Aquino 2011; Timming et al.2019).

These considerations, while supporting the idea of a relationship between these two concepts, suggested we should investigate whether moral courage supported bystander intervention against workplace bullying. For this reason, additionally to our theoretical considerations, we elaborated an empirical contribution to validate this hypothesis.

## Aims and Hypotheses

The main aim of our paper is to verify whether moral courage is positively related to bystander intervention against workplace bullying. We treated moral courage as a distal variable that a-contextually influences bystander behavior, as proposed in a previous study by Hellemans et al. (2017). Our main hypothesis is:

H1: Moral courage is associated with bystander intention to intervene against workplace bullying.

We defined bystander intervention behavior through the two dimensions, namely the level of involvement and the immediacy of the intervention, identified by Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005). According to this conceptualization, a high level of moral courage should correspond to bystander intervention with high involvement or high immediacy. Following these assumptions, we aimed to verify these sub-hypotheses:

H1a: Moral courage is associated with bystander intervention categorized into different levels of personal involvement.

H1b: Moral courage is associated with bystander intervention categorized into different levels of immediacy.

Beyond that, we also wanted to test two other hypotheses that are consequent to the video-vignette methodology that we chose for this study. Indeed, differently from vignette methodology that is commonly used in studies about bystander intervention (e.g. Coyne et al. 2019), we conducted a study in which the stimulus is a video-vignette representing an episode of workplace bullying. Reasoning about this methodology, we wanted to take into account the influence of the engagement evoked by the use of such a video as a stimulus. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H2: The perceived engagement from the video moderates the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention, defined by the categories of personal involvement (H2a) and immediacy (H2b).

Before testing these hypotheses, we verified the factor structure of the MC@W scale that we used to measure moral courage. We also checked its convergent and divergent validity with other scales about concepts related to moral courage. We made this choice because of the recent development and lack of numerous utilizations of the MC@W scale.

## Study

### Method

#### Participants

For this study, we used a sample of 100 students from the Faculty of Psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Participants have an average age of 19.76 (17–34; $sd = 2.31$) and the majority are women (58.1%).

#### Procedure

Research into bystander intervention at work tended to use the vignette methodology (Mulder 2015). To avoid the criticisms related to the ecological validity of this methodology and following suggestions from ethical-decision-making research (Aguinis and Bradley 2014), we adopted a video-vignette methodology, in which the main stimulus is a video. The video-vignette methodology implies a more authentic engagement of the participants which is a relevant factor in situations related to moral courage and bystander intervention (Hortensius et al. 2016). Through this innovative procedure, we wanted to provide a contribution for future studies implying these constructs.

The ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) approved the study and its procedure. We conducted the study in the computer room of the faculty of Psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and administered it through the LimeSurvey program. The different measures and the video were showed individually and with the support of personal computers. The procedure was composed of three steps: in the first step, the participants completed a first questionnaire including a moral courage scale and three scales for convergent (emotional intelligence and self-efficacy) and divergent (social dominance orientation) concepts to moral courage.

In the second step, we invited the participants to watch the video-vignette. After that, in the third and final step, we administered a second questionnaire containing questions about the video and individual reactions about the situation depicted in it. At the end of the procedure, we debriefed the participants about the video and our study, explaining to them that what they had watched was a fictional situation represented by actors. After a brief discussion about the study, we invited them to send us further questions if they had any. The entire procedure lasted almost 40 min.

## Material

At the beginning of this section, we provide a special focus on the video-stimulus:

**Video-Vignette of Workplace Bullying** We developed a video following the legal and psychological definitions of workplace bullying, with the support of consultants about health at work (Dal Cason 2018). To have a realistic representation, in the script (see Annex B), we included all the aspects of workplace bullying, such as the duration and the repetition of the abusive actions. To include a certain degree of ambiguity, we represented a case of upwards workplace bullying (from a subordinate toward a superior), which is less common and clear than other forms of bullying (horizontal or downwards) but equally detrimental for victims and organizations (Branch et al. 2018). After the finalization of the script, we shot the video with the contribution of semi-professional actors. The video lasts 20 min and is composed of four sequences in which the bullying is manifested through repetitive actions conducted by the perpetrator over a prolonged period.

For the questionnaire administered before the video, we used the following scales:

**Moral Courage at Work** Despite the existence of several and very different instruments to measure moral courage, we felt we needed a tool that was specific to the organizational context and developed it using the existing literature as a starting point. Therefore, we constructed a new ad hoc scale drawing from contributions coming both from studies about ethical behavior and organizational dynamics. Then, we extrapolated theoretical fundamental factors for moral courage in order to elaborate a number of items that could be associated with these contents. The Moral Courage at Work (MC@W) scale measured the tendency to express moral courage at work (Dal Cason 2018). This measure is composed of 6 items rated on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "always" (see Annex A for the scale). The scale shows a three-factor structure: a first factor about experiencing strong emotions from others' pain ("beyond sadness, seeing somebody in pain makes me angry"); a second factor related to coherence of one's conduct ("if I feel that my position is right, I maintain it even if it causes great dissatisfaction among my colleagues"); a third factor related to the likelihood of risk/agency ("at work, I would be willing to sacrifice my time for a colleague in difficulty"). In the first validation of this scale on a sample of Belgian workers (Dal Cason 2018), the authors showed evidence of convergent validity with measures of emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, while divergent validity was manifested with a measure for social dominance orientation (SDO). We provide a brief overview of these concepts, explain why and how they are related to moral courage and illustrate which scales were used to measure them.

**Emotional Intelligence** Emotional intelligence – the ability to identify, process, and manage emotions, in both oneself and others (Salovey et al. 1999) – can be considered as related to moral courage. Scholars include the ability to recognize emotions (Sekerka & Godwin, 2010) and emotional self-regulation (Brandstätter et al. 2016) in those abilities supporting moral courage. To measure emotional intelligence, we relied on the Short Profile of Emotional Competence test (S-PEC) ( Mikolajczak et al. 2014) which is composed of 20 items ("I can easily manage to calm myself down after a difficult experience") assessed on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "always."

**Self-Efficacy** Self-efficacy is a psychological concept and refers to the confidence one has to perform a specific behavior in a particular situation. Hannah and Avolio (2010, p. 297) define self-efficacy as a relevant element of moral courage because it confers to individuals "a sense of perceived control over their behaviors and their capabilities to perform," thereby promoting behavior that accords with moral intentions. This factor was assessed using the French version of the Self-Efficacy Scale (SES; Sherer et al. 1982). The scale was made up of 21 items ("when I make plans, I am certain I can make them work") rated on 5-point scales ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree."

**Social Dominance Orientation** Social dominance orientation (SDO) is an individual attitudinal that reflects an individual's "degree of preference for inequality among social groups" (Pratto et al. 1994, p. 741). People high in SDO perceive the world to be a highly competitive place, where the way to success is through power and dominance (Sibley and Duckitt 2008). Social dominance orientation is a construct related to hostile and antisocial behaviors (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). This point suggests the idea that social dominance orientation is contrary to moral courage. Social dominance orientation (SDO) was measured using a 16 items ("some groups of people are simply not the equals of others") scale developed by Pratto et al. (1994) and translated into French (Duarte et al. 2004). This scale uses a 7-point Likert response format ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree."

For the questionnaire administered after the video, we provided the following measures:

**Perceived Dynamics** We asked which kind of dynamic they had seen in the video. The three possible responses were as follows: nothing at all, dynamics of conflict, and workplace bullying. This question aimed at making clear the typology of social dynamics that they just watched.

To assess employees' intentions to intervene, we decided to use a scale that precisely focuses on bystander interventions in case of issues at work. Literature about bystander behaviors often uses measures that are specific to the issue given the

diversity of factors that are related to specific behaviors and situations (Cascardi et al. 2018). In our case, we decided to avoid a direct question about intervening or not because it could have been biased by social desirability, which has a strong impact in studies involving the expression of moral intentions (Tappin and McKay 2017). We wanted to assess the possible intervention according to the behavioral categorization provided by Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005). Therefore, we used a two-step question composed of an open-ended question and a closed-ended one. The open-ended question was supposed to help the participants to have a clearer idea when they had to choose an option relating to the intervention behavior. Since we chose to treat only quantitative data in this paper in order to make inferences about the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention, open-ended data are not included here.

**Solution (Open-Ended Question)** We asked the participants what they would have done if they were witnessing the same situation shown in the video but in the real world. We presented this question as an open-ended question so that participants had to express their thoughts freely in a few lines. Our intention was for this open-ended question to serve uniquely as an introductory tool to facilitate the choice in the following related closed-ended question.

**Solution (Closed-Ended Question)** We presented the participants with 9 behavioral options and let them choose which one best match their behavioral intentions, in relation to the description given in the open-ended question. The behavioral options were categorized according to Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly's (2005) instructions and examples: the behavioral options were distributed across the four cases defined by crossing the two values (high-low) of immediacy and involvement dimensions. For example, a behavioral option with low levels of immediacy and involvement is "I wait for the situation to calm down, and I try to do something but without getting personally involved", while an option with high levels of the two dimensions is "I tell the perpetrator to stop."

**Video Engagement Scale (VES)** Viewers' engagement caused by watching the video was assessed through the Video Engagement Scale (Visser et al. 2016). The construct of engagement is used to assess the extent to which a reader becomes immersed in a narrative. Narrative engagement is defined as someone's experience of a narrative and is known to influence the persuasive effect (e.g. on a reader's beliefs and attitudes) of a narrative (de Graaf et al. 2012). The relative Likert scale contains 15 items ("when I was viewing the video, I was in the world of the video in my thoughts") evaluating the viewers' perception of the video as engaging. The items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree."

# Results

## Descriptive Analysis

Analyzing the preference of participants for the categories provided by Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005), we considered the two dimensions separately. The majority of the participants indicated their preference toward interventions with high immediacy and high involvement (44%) and only 4% indicated the behavioral options with low immediacy and low involvement (34% for the options with high immediacy and low involvement: 27% for the option with low immediacy and high involvement).

About the results on the perception of the video, we initially reported that the VES scale showed high scores for the video ($M = 3.64$, SD = .61). At the same time, more than a half of the participants recognized that an episode of bullying was occurring (51%), while almost the entire other half claimed that the video was reproducing a conflict (45%). Only 4% of the participants reported that nothing was happening in the video. This result confirms that the video implies in some extent ambiguity, which is a typical characteristic of workplace bullying episodes, as previously mentioned.

## Assessment of the MC@W Scale

We verified the hypothesized factor structure of the MC@W scale and tested the divergent and convergent validity. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis that yielded a three-factor model with 6 items in line with the structure before described. This structure demonstrated a good fit with the data with $\chi^2(17) = 18.3$, CFI = .97, and RMSEA = .025 with a 90% CI of .000–.096 (Hu and Bentler 1999).

Convergent validity of MC@W was confirmed by the positive and statistically significant scores of Pearson's correlation between the moral courage scale and the scales about emotional intelligence and self-efficacy (see Table 1). Divergent validity was assessed by examining the correlation of moral courage scale with social dominance orientation. As a result, we obtained a low and negative score that confirm in

**Table 1** Correlations matrix among the MC@W scale and related measures with reliability (Dillon-Goldstein's rho between parentheses).

| | Mean | SD | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. MC** | 3.69 | .45 | *(.73)* | | | |
| **2. EI** | 3.59 | .43 | .25* | *(.80)* | | |
| **3. SE** | 3.38 | .48 | .27** | .54** | *(.85)* | |
| **4.SDO** | 2.11 | .79 | -.05 | .12 | .09 | *(.87)* |

*Note.* * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

MC = moral courage; EI = emotional intelligence; SE = self-efficacy; SD = social dominance orientation

part the divergent sense of the two measures. We also checked the reliability of the used scales by calculating the Dillon-Goldstein's rho (DG's rho) coefficient. We made this choice because of the recurrent criticisms about Cronbach's value (e.g. Sijtsma 2009), in which authors claim that this value yields a lower bound estimate of reliability, especially in case of a scale made of few items. Indices of reliability are reported in Table 1, and they show a good level for each presented measure (DG's rho > .70).

### Checking the Relationship Between Moral Courage and Bystander Intervention

Based on the risk-taking nature of moral courage (Kidder 2005), in our expectations, high levels of moral courage should correspond with bystander intervention with high immediacy or high personal involvement. Consequently, people low in moral courage should indicate intervention with low immediacy or involvement. To test these ideas, we ran two logistic regressions having the two dichotomous variables – involvement and immediacy dimensions – about bystander intervention as dependent variables and moral courage as an independent variable.

In the first logistic regression, we considered moral courage as the independent variable and bystander intervention as the dependent one, modulated according to the two values of the immediacy dimension (high/low). This analysis did not provide significant results ($\beta = -.48$; $p = .91$).

Similarly, the second logistic regression, in which the dependent variable was modulate according to the values of the involvement dimension, did not present statistically significant results ($\beta = .68$; $p = .16$). These results present no evidence of the association between moral courage and bystander interventions according to the dimensions of personal involvement and immediacy. Thus, hypotheses H1, H1a, and H1b results were disconfirmed.

### Checking the Effect of the Video Perception

We conducted a moderation analysis following the idea that the engagement generated as a result of having watched the video could serve as a moderator in the relationship between antecedents and bystander behaviors. We conducted the moderation test using the Hayes's (2012) tool PROCESS.

In the first moderation analysis, we considered moral courage as the independent variable, the intervention behavior along the immediacy dimension as the dependent variables, and the scores from the VES scale as the moderator variable (model 1 of Hayes's template). As a result, the moderation effect on the link between moral courage and immediacy of the intervention showed a value that was not significant ($\beta = -.25$; $p = .06$; LLCI = -.51; ULCI = .00).

Differently from the first moderation analysis, in the second one we considered the bystander intervention variable according to the involvement dimension. As a result, we found a statistically significant moderation effect of the video engagement on the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention ($\beta = 2.64$; $p = .01$; LLCI = .62; ULCI = 4.67). Moderation is represented by the significant interaction term between moral courage and the video engagement (see Table 2).

We plotted these results in a graph (see Fig. 1) by developing two separate slopes using one standard deviation above and below the mean of involvement in intervention to represent high versus low values in VES scale. The graph presents two slopes derived from low (M - 1 SD) and high (M + 1 SD) values of the VES scale.

The slope of the relationship between moral courage and involvement in intervention decreases for students with low scores in terms of engagement with the video (effect = -.25, $p = .05$), whereas the slope increases for students with high scores in the VES scale (effect = .26, $p = .05$). Both slopes were marginally significant given that they showed a $p$ value of .05. This graph explains that for those who judged the video engagement as high there is a positive relationship between moral courage and involvement in intervention. While for those who judged the video as less engaging, the link between moral courage and involvement in intervention had a negative value. These results confirm in part our hypotheses according to which the engagement evoked by the video has an effect on the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention. This moderation effect is evident only considering bystander intervention on the basis of the involvement dimension (H2a), while results show no moderation effect when the immediacy dimension is considered (H2b).

## Discussion

Before discussing the results, we want to make clear the exploratory value of our study, which indeed has some novelties in its methodology, including the video-stimulus and the ad

**Table 2** Moderation estimates of video engagement on the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention categorized on the level of personal involvement

| Moderation estimates | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 95% Confidence interval | | |
| | Estimate | SE | Lower | Upper | $p$ |
| MC | 0.00706 | 0.1018 | -0.193 | 0.207 | 0.945 |
| VE | -0.01034 | 0.0756 | -0.159 | 0.138 | 0.891 |
| MC ✻ VE | 0.42627 | 0.1329 | 0.166 | 0.687 | 0.001** |

*Note.* * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

MC = moral courage; VE = video engagement

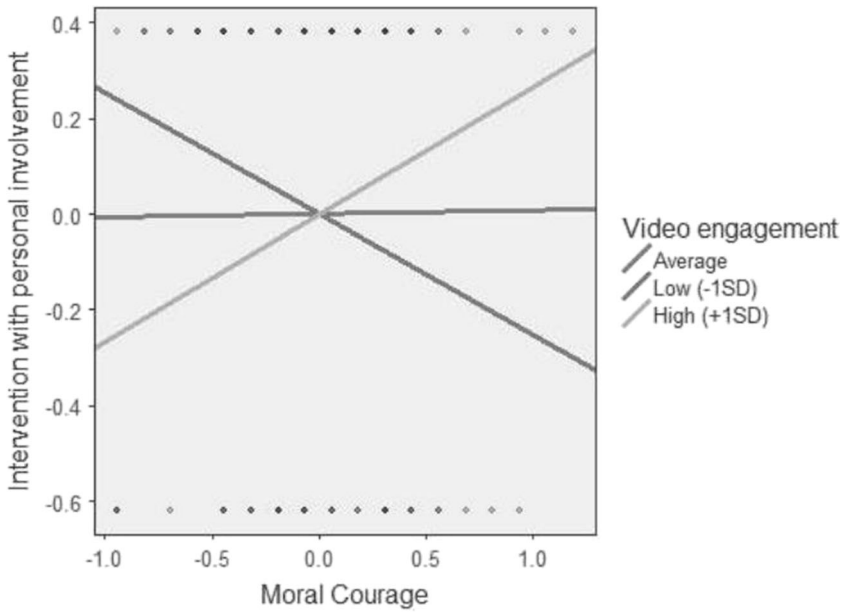


**Fig. 1** Simple slope plot from moderation analysis

hoc constructed scale for moral courage and bystander intervention.

Regarding the MC@W scale, results confirmed the validity of a three-factor structure and the convergent and divergent validity of the scale. In particular, the confirmation of the scale's structure is in line with other scales measuring moral courage in different situations. For example, Chapa and Stringer (2013) developed a measure of moral courage specifically built on firefighter's moral courage at work, in which they found a factor related to risk-taking behavior. Specifically, we consider that coherence and emotions are the main factors related to moral courage against workplace bullying. The coherence factor is relevant because of its reflexive nature helping bystanders while they endure their intention to intervene despite impediments. The emotional factor is also needed to recognize mistreatment and maintain the motivation to achieve the moral goal, but in a more automatic way (Baumert et al. 2013).

Despite this, MC@W is a tool that is limited by a scarce knowledge of moral courage mechanisms at work, and it needs further validation. For example, future studies could take into account comparisons among the MC@W scale and other measures about bystander intervention against different typologies of moral violation at work, such as sexual or racial harassment.

Results from the investigation into the association between moral courage and levels of intervention do not provide confirmatory indications. There is no clear link between moral courage and intervention behavior considered according the two dimensions of immediacy and involvement. To explain this result, we could think that the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention in the case of workplace bullying is not that clear as hypothesized. It is plausible to assume that situational variables have a strong influence on these concepts, and future studies should not ignore them as we did in this work. Consistently, the observed moderator effect of the video engagement could be indicative of the relevance of external factors when investigating moral courage and bystander intervention.

On the contrary, results provide preliminary indications about the relevance of methodology in this kind of study involving morality and organizational context. The link between moral courage and intervention with different levels of personal involvement proved to be affected by the moderator role of the engagement generated by the video-stimulus. The same effect was not found for intervention with different levels of immediacy. This is partially in line with previous research in which involvement has shown to be a valuable dimension to discriminate among different kinds of helping behavior (Hellemans et al. 2017). Therefore, we invite scholars to focus on the involvement dimension in future studies about moral courage and bystander intervention, as has already been seen in studies about school bullying (Pronk et al. 2018; Reijntjes et al. 2016).

In discussing the effect of the video exposure, we think that in these kinds of studies on sensitive topics such as workplace bullying, the evoked engagement and the sense of realism could help to provide valid results. This is an added value that could contribute to the improvement of studies in which the perception of the norm violation is essential to trigger the reaction behavior (Niesta Kayser et al. 2010). Therefore, future research on ambiguous and risky behaviors could address new sorts of stimulus that generate high engagement in study participants.

In this sense, the development of new tools, even more sophisticated than video-vignettes (e.g. virtual reality

experiences), could yield results that allow a comparison with results from previous vignette studies investigating human behavior (van Vliet et al. 2013). In addition, together with innovative methodologies, we suggest a multi-method approach in which scholars could also use common methodologies. Considering both these designs could lead to a more complete understanding of complex behaviors and a methodological improvement of future studies.

**Limitations** Given the exploratory nature of our study, we want to list some limitations at theoretical and methodological levels. First, limitations are due to the sample of our study. We decided to use a relatively small sample made up of students because of the exploratory character of this study and the logistic impediments related to the video-vignette methodology (e.g. availability of personal computers to show the video). However, the small size of our sample could have hindered the possibility of obtaining significant results and could have limited the validity of our findings. Moreover, students may have a limited knowledge of the situational dynamics at work and, because of this lack, they might not be the appropriate study participants for investigating workplace bullying. On the contrary, employees could provide a richer interpretation of what was seen in the video since they may have experienced similar situations at work. Despite this, in organizational studies using samples made up of students is not a rare practice (Priesemuth 2013), and such studies could be considered as a first step toward designing more sophisticated and complete research in which employees are chosen as participants.

Second, we are conscious that we followed an individual-centered approach that partly neglects all other variables that could influence bystander intervention. There are personal, social, organizational, and cultural factors that concur to determine witnesses' conduct (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). For example, since findings from our study come from a Belgian sample, a cross-cultural design could be adopted in future studies in order to integrate what we found and provide a more solid validation to the methodological novelties presented in this work.

Third, in the video-stimulus we depicted a less stereotypical bullying situation in order to avoid predictable answers from the participants. This choice could have misled them in their interpretation of the bullying episode. In future studies, scholars could consider presenting more prototypical situations of workplace bullying to test bystanders' reactions and be more in line with the rich body of literature on this topic.

Furthermore, we should consider the flaws relating to the measurement tools and the procedure (such as the order of administration of the measures and the stimulus) used in this study, which could have undermined our analyses. Moreover, the use of self-reported measures can be sensitive to recall and response bias (e.g. Kawakami et al. 2009). Studying moral courage situations, Baumert et al. (2013) state that there is a reduced validity of self-reported measures given the scarce correspondence between what people say about themselves and what they do. A similar discrepancy is described by scholars who stress people's scarce precision when they must predict their behavior in a hypothetical future (Halmburger et al. 2016). For these reasons, complementary measures of moral behavior, such as implicit measures (Harms and Luthans 2012), should be proposed to contrast the flaws of self-report measures.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that the relationship between moral courage and bystander intervention needs further investigation because of its complexity. The video-vignette methodology, however, seems to be an interesting design that could help research that seeks to explain human behaviors and especially ethical-decision-making process.

Interesting findings from this line of research could be valuable not only to scholars but also to HR professionals who are working to help organizations in their mission to create safer workplaces. This article represents a step in that direction and aims to raise awareness about workplace bullying and its eradication in favor of employees' well-being.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study."

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