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## Self-Debasing Cognitive Distortions Restructuring Intervention Down Regulate Bystanders Emotional and Behavioural Reactions to Witnessing School Bullying

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### Abstract

Self-debasing cognitive distortion influences a person's interpretation and increases the likelihood of negative reactions to events. Despite the theoretical support for the significant influence that cognition has in the onset and maintenance of behavioural and emotional reactions to victimisation, little research has been done on proactive cognitive strategy to down regulate negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying. For this reason, a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design was utilised to explore 10 early adolescent bystanders' reactions to school bullying following a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention. Findings indicated that there were reductions in bystanders' negative reactions to witnessing bullying that resulted from challenging the validity and reality of distortions in their thinking patterns. The study recommended that bystanders should be equipped with self-debasing cognitive distortions restructuring skills to root out the source of bias in their thought patterns with a view of down regulating their emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying.

### Keywords

Early Adolescent, school bullying, bystanders, self-debasing cognitive distortions, emotional and behavioural reactions, descriptive exploratory

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### Acknowledgements

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# Self-Debasing Cognitive Distortions Restructuring Intervention Down Regulate Bystanders Emotional and Behavioural Reactions to Witnessing School Bullying

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Self-debasing cognitive distortion influences a person's interpretation and increases the likelihood of negative reactions to events. Despite the theoretical support for the significant influence that cognition has in the onset and maintenance of behavioural and emotional reactions to victimisation, little research has been done on proactive cognitive strategy to down regulate negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying. For this reason, a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design was utilised to explore 10 early adolescent bystanders' reactions to school bullying following a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention. Findings indicated that there were reductions in bystanders' negative reactions to witnessing bullying that resulted from challenging the validity and reality of distortions in their thinking patterns. The study recommended that bystanders should be equipped with self-debasing cognitive distortions restructuring skills to root out the source of bias in their thought patterns with a view of down regulating their emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying.

*Keywords:* early adolescent, school bullying, bystanders, self-debasing cognitive distortions, emotional and behavioural reactions, descriptive-exploratory

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## Introduction

Research undertaken by Batsche and Porter (2006) and Ortega et al. (2009) indicates that bystanders react to witnessing bullying incidents with negative emotions and common symptoms of secondary trauma such as intrusive thoughts, sadness, emotional exhaustion, shame, anger, fear, anxiety, disbelief, numbing, upset, mood fluctuations, shock, outburst, worry, and withdrawal. After the bullying incident is over, intrusive thoughts and images in the minds of the bystanders may cause bystanders to identify with the pain and suffering of the victim which could lead to co-victimisation or re-victimisation for bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009). Bystanders to bullying may also encounter cognitive dissonance in a situation whereby the bystanders intend to intervene on behalf of the victim but are unable to defend the victim because of fear of becoming the next victim (Midgett & Dumas, 2019).

The discrepancy between bystanders' willingness to intervene, and their inability to do so, could induce bystanders' negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying (Rivers et al., 2009). As a result, bystanders may experience feelings of guilt and self-blame for not intervening for the victims or not knowing what to do in such instances (Salmivalli, 2010; Twemlow & Sacco, 2013).

Rivers et al. (2009) alongside Glew et al. (2005) concurred with the viewpoint that witnessing bullying has the potential to cause emotional and psychological implications for bystanders. In addition, they asserted that it is the anxiety caused by the patterns of thoughts and fear of subsequent, direct victimisation that contributes to bystanders' emotional insecurity and uncertainty and not mere witnessing of the bullying, *per se*. Bystanders, therefore, appear to process their responses on a cognitive as well as emotional level. Cognition may be deemed to be a determinant factor in individual behavioural and emotional reactions to events. Cognitive theory, therefore, could usefully be employed as lens to understand bystander responses in situations such as outlined herein.

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

A self-debasing cognitive distortion is defined as unhelpful thoughts that can debase an individual in a direct or indirect way, which in turn can evoke or strengthen negative emotional and behavioural responses to events (Barriga, et al., 2008). Self-debasing cognitive distortion influences a person's interpretation and appraisal of events and increases the likelihood of negative reactions to events (Akkoyunlu & Turkcapar, 2012; Clark, 2014).

A few strategies to decrease the likelihood of negative emotional and behavioural reactions of bystanders to witnessing bullying have been studied and reported (Janson et al., 2009; Kanetsuna et al., 2006; Rivers et al., 2009). Proactive strategies, however, such as correcting self-debasing cognitive distortion, which probably modifies bystanders thinking patterns and reactions, have received less attention (Cook et al., 2010; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Owens et al., 2014).

Using cognitive theory to view such strategies, we address theoretical gaps which extend the knowledge of this field, and cognitive theory itself. Using the novel confluence thus of our data and a different theory, we intend to substantiate empirically the claim of Covin et al. (2011) and De Oliveira (2012) that bystanders could be coached to recognise, challenge, and reappraise negative and unhelpful thoughts and feelings related to their experiences.

The efficacy of such cognitive approaches in reducing or even preventing negative emotional and behavioural responses among victims of other samples in other contexts has been reported (Roman et al., 2012). It is, therefore, important to ascertain whether the efficacy of cognitive approaches in changing the thinking patterns and reducing or preventing negative emotional and behavioural reactions to events, could be applicable to culturally diverse samples, specifically, early adolescent school bullying bystanders in the age group bracket of 11 to 13 year.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is rooted in cognitive theory and can be instrumental in restructuring bystanders' self-debasing cognitive distortions. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a therapeutic intervention that is known to be effective in reducing negative responses of victims that witness similar traumatic events (Bernal et al., 2009; Nicolas et al., 2009). The goal of CBT is to facilitate change in distorted cognition through a process of reappraisal also known as cognitive restructuring (Nebolsine, 2012).

## **Understanding the Context: Bystanders' Reactions to Witnessing Bullying**

The expression of negative emotions which includes sadness, fear, depression, anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem seems to be the most significant reaction of bystanders to witnessing bullying in school (Hutchinson, 2012; Visconti et al., 2013). In recent research, Midgett and Doumas (2019) investigated the correlation between witnessing bullying, depressive symptoms, and anxiety among intermediate phase school learners. One hundred and thirty Grade 6 to 8 learners responded to questionnaires assessing bystanders' experiences of witnessing school bullying, depressive symptoms and anxiety.

The result of the study revealed that even after controlling for the frequency of being a bully-victim, witnessing bullying accounts significantly for depressive symptoms and anxiety in the eyewitness of bullying. Research findings of similar study conducted by Lambe et al. (2017) in Canada indicated that learners who observe bullying experience internalising symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

In addition, research as discussed herein, suggested that bystanders reacted to witnessing with feelings of insecurity at school because of fear of subsequent, direct victimisation (Dinkes et al., 2009; Nansel et al., 2008). For instance, Arostegui and Arraez (2006), as well as Beaty and Alexyev (2008), reported that bystanders who witnessed bullying might not feel safe in the school and might also show reluctance to attend school because they foresee being the next victim.

However, there were differences in the report of the few studies on the emotional and behavioural reactions of bystanders to witnessing bullying (Glew et al., 2005; Juvonen et al., 2011). For instance, Juvonen et al. (2011) found that sixth-grade bystanders did not experience common negative emotions such as anxiety and loneliness to the same degree as the direct victims. Also, Glew et al. (2005) reported from their study that bystanders were less likely to feel unsafe in their school and less likely to frequently feel sad, unlike findings from other studies.

The discrepancy in the findings of these studies with regards to bystanders emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying may be due to several causal factors such as thinking patterns, that is, how bystanders perceive and appraise the bullying they witness (Ttofi & Fingleton, 2011). We support the views of Barriga and Morrison (2010) as well as Freeman et al. (2004) that negative bias in thinking can lead a person to misinterpret or misperceive a situation or event and consequently may contribute to responses that are emotionally and behaviourally maladaptive (Barriga & Morrison, 2010).

### **Self-Debasing Cognitive Distortion**

Negative thoughts that could induce bystanders negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying stems from certain self-debasing cognitive distortions including personalisation, catastrophising, over-generalisation and selective abstraction (Beck, 2011; Fennell et al., 2004). Personalisation is a form of emotional reasoning that involves taking excessive responsibility and self-blame for the occurrence of an unpleasant event, which leads to feelings of guilt and depression (Beck, 2011).

Batsche and Porter (2006) argue that a bullying bystander may take excessive responsibility for the bullying, leading to self-blame for not intervening on behalf of the direct victim. Meanwhile, Salmivalli (2010) research suggested that the low likelihood of bystanders intervening in a bullying event is generally attributed to a factor called bystander effect and not necessarily the bystanders' fault.

Another self-debasing cognitive distortion which manifests in persons who experience negative emotional and behavioural responses to events is catastrophising (Beck, 2011;

Dobson & Dobson, 2016). Catastrophising entails exaggerating the potential or real consequences of an event, causing the victim to anticipate more difficulties, and become more fearful (Kottler & Shepard, 2008). Witnessing peer victimisation can cause bystanders to fear that they might become the next victim, thus leading to anticipating bullying of themselves (Rivers et al., 2009). However, de-catastrophising techniques can help bystanders realise that the probability of a worst-case scenario eventuating might be generally low (Dobson & Dobson, 2016; Wenzel et al., 2016).

Over-generalisation is another type of self-debasing cognitive distortion which might contribute to problematic emotional and behavioural responses to witnessing a traumatic event (Dozois & Beck, 2008; Iacoviello et al., 2006). Over-generalisation occurs when a person makes a general and overarching statement about an event or situation and draws a conclusion about all situations based on his or her view on one or a few trivial incidents (Bernard, 2009; Wendland, 2004). According to Rock and Baird (2012), bystanders fail most of the time to intervene on behalf of the victims. Bystanders may then begin to overgeneralise their inability to intervene or to affect the outcome of the bullying they witness as general incompetence (Roth et al., 2002). Consequently, bystanders may perceive feelings of incompetence which could affect their self-esteem negatively and lead to a greater likelihood of anxiety (Smokowski & Halland, 2005).

Selective abstraction is another self-debasing distorted thought that can feed on negative emotions. Selective abstraction occurs when a person focuses on one negative aspect of an event and makes a biased judgement without considering the larger context (Freeman et al., 2004). Bystanders who are prone to selective abstraction may be more likely to view the bullying they witness as a serious threat to their wellbeing and, consequently, respond with negative emotions. Selective abstraction can, therefore, contribute to psychological re-victimisation and indirect co-victimisation for bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009).

Self-debasing cognitive distortions can thus evoke and strengthen the reoccurrence of symptoms of psychological disturbances in bystanders (Dozois & Beck, 2008; Hunter et al., 2006). In other words, irrational beliefs can play a major role in the evolution and maintenance of maladaptive psychophysiological responses to events (Dobson & Dobson, 2016). Therefore, self-debasing cognitive distortions or biased thinking patterns serve as the basis for generating or triggering negative emotional and behavioural responses to events.

Although we acknowledge that personalisation, catastrophising, over-generalisation and selective abstraction could trigger adverse emotional and behavioural reactions for bullying bystanders (Newman et al., 2005), we do, also, acknowledge that an important factor in explaining the heterogeneity of behavioural and emotional reactions of bystanders might be the ability to identify and correct self-debasing thoughts which precede negative reactions to events (Hofmann et al., 2012).

To this end, it is our view that the ability to identify and restructure negative or faulty thinking patterns can help bystanders discard negative automatic thoughts, thereby leading to positive change in bystanders' emotional and behavioural expression to witnessing bullying (Covin et al., 2011). In line with this, a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention (SDCDRI) could be designed to teach bystanders to apply the principles of cognitive restructuring which require learning to refute irrational thoughts while reacting to witnessing bullying. We describe the SDCDR intervention given its standing as the main unit of our analysis.

## Present Study

### *The SDCDRI*

The self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention was prepared according to the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy. In summary, it consists of certain cognitive restructuring techniques used to facilitate change in thought patterns namely, Socratic questioning, challenging automatic thoughts, guided discovery, coping cards, decatastrophising, and homework. The intervention consists of 11 sessions, 45 minutes each, with two sessions a week. The first 10 min of each session was allocated to forming connections to the previous session and the discussion of homework. Later, the daily subject was discussed for 30–35 min.

**Table 1**

*The Summary of Each Session of the SCDDRI*

<b>Session 1</b>	General orientation to the intervention
<b>Session 2</b>	Connecting thoughts, feelings, and behaviour
<b>Session 3</b>	Identifying positive and negative thought patterns
<b>Session 4</b>	Common self-debasing cognitive distortions
<b>Session 5</b>	Personification
<b>Session 6</b>	Catastrophising
<b>Session 7</b>	Overgeneralization
<b>Session 8</b>	Selective abstraction
<b>Session 9</b>	Interpreting situations and events
<b>Session 10</b>	Learning to make less thinking errors
<b>Session 11</b>	Conclusion, reflection and feedbacks

The motive of advancing the use of Self-debasing Cognitive Distortion Restructuring (SDCDR) as a strategy for down regulating bystanders' negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying emerged from the core premise of Cognitive theory. We acknowledged that an intervention to modify the thinking patterns, emotions and behaviour directed at late childhood or early adolescents' learners may have a more lasting impact than those aimed at late adolescents or adults. This may be because early adolescence is considered as formative years and patterns of appraisal and interpreting events acquired during this stage could be consolidated upon during late adolescence and sometimes during adulthood. This, again, strengthens the rationale for directing the intervention in this study towards Grade 6 and 7 learners in the age bracket of 11 to 13 years.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question: How can self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring possibly down regulate bystanders' behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying?

## Methodology

### Research Approach, Paradigmatic Perspective and Design

We adopted a qualitative research approach for this study (Creswell, 2014) because we strived to uncover multiple perspectives of beliefs, thoughts, and meanings that bystanders ascribe to their experience of school bullying as bystanders. The philosophical assumption underpinning our study emanated from an interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand the world from the perspective of people's experiences (Morgan & Pretorius, 2013; Sefotho, 2015). Our choice of the interpretivism paradigm was guided by the aim of our research, namely, to qualitatively explore and describe early adolescent experiences of school bullying as bystanders before and after a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring.

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

### Research Participants

We used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to select the participants for the study. We adopted convenience sampling technique to select one of the school, which was the research site located in Mamelodi, Gauteng province of South Africa. This school was conveniently selected to minimise possible disruption for the participants. The research site is located within the locality of participants. As such, the proximity of the school to participants home further motivated participants to attend the interview and intervention sessions.

The research participants for this study were 10 early adolescents' bystanders who indicated interest in participating in the study and were purposefully selected. Of the 10 participants, 5 were girls while 5 were boys. All participants were in Grade 6 and between the ages of 11 and 13. Interviews and intervention sessions were conducted in the classroom to increase the likelihood that participants would respond in a genuine and honest manner. Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to recruit participants for this study

**Table 2**

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners who were in primary school located within the research site.</li> <li>● Learners who have not experienced bullying as a direct victim but only witnessed bullying in school were identified by means of a request to participate in a research study through an invitation letter.</li> <li>● Bystanders who were early adolescents (within the age range of 11 to 13 years), and who were in Grades 6 or 7.</li> <li>● Learners who indicated that they have not previously been exposed to a similar intervention</li> </ul>	<p>Participants who could not understand or communicate in the English language were exempted from participating in the study</p>

### **Phase 1: Collecting Grade 6 Learners' Written Narratives**

During the first phase, 60 Grade 6 learners were approached to describe in written form the bullying incidents they witnessed at their school. The participants were asked to reflect on the cognitive interpretation and the meaning they attached to the bullying incidences they witnessed in school. The same set of instructions and guidelines were given and explained to each of the two Grade 6 classes at the school that was utilised as research site.

### **Phase 2: Selecting Participants for the Interview and Intervention**

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

### **Instrumentation**

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

The data was collected in two stages. The first stage was the pre-intervention stage where data was collected through semi structured interview to explore participants' thinking patterns and how it influenced their emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying. We conducted open-ended semi-structured interviews to evaluate participants' experiences of school bullying as bystanders before the implementation of the Self debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention. The responses of the participants in the pre-intervention interview were analysed and interpreted. The themes that emerged at the first stage with the use of thematic analysis informed the common concepts that were addressed in the SDCDRI.

**Figure 1**  
*Sample Cognitive Restructuring Worksheet*

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING WORKSHEET				
THOUGHTS TO BE QUESTIONED	EVIDENCES IN SUPPORT OF THE THOUGHTS	EVIDENCES AGAINST THE THOUGHTS	JUDGEMENT ON THE VALIDITY OF THE THOUGHT	REALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS
I am afraid that the bully will also bully me.	I saw another child that is bullied.	I told my mom about it and my mom came to report to the principal. The principal warned the bully.	I don't think I should worry too much because the principal has warned the bully.	I will not miss school. I will go to school. If the bully come to me I will tell the principal to beat him.

During the intervention sessions, participants completed some cognitive restructuring exercises such as filling a dysfunctional thought record worksheet, a cognitive restructuring worksheet (see Figure 1), Thoughts-Feeling-Action worksheets (see Figure 2) and participating in reframing self-talk exercise and role play. At the end of each session, a homework assignment was given to the participants in which they had to practise the lessons learnt at the session. At the end of the intervention, all exercises completed by the participants were collected and analysed which formed part of the second stage of data collection. The second stage was the post-intervention stage where data was also collected, using semi structured interview, after the implementation of the intervention to assess changes (if any) in participants' reactions to school bullying following participation based on an 11 session self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention.

**Figure 2**

Sample ABCD Worksheet

The ABCD WORKSHEET	
<p><b>(A) Activating events</b> The situation</p> <p>I saw how my friend was bullied in school. They wrote some bad words on the wall for her like stupid</p>	<p><b>(C) Consequences</b> How did you react</p> <p>I feel guilty I feel weak</p>
<p><b>(B) Beliefs about the events</b> What did you tell yourself about the situation</p> <p>I told myself that it is my fault because I should have fought her</p>	<p><b>(D) Disputing the beliefs</b> Alternate thoughts</p> <p>I don't think it is good to call myself weak because I believe that I am not weak it is just that I can't face the boys that bully alone because they are many</p>

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

### **Procedure**

We did an initial visit to the school identified as a convenience site. The principal of the school confirmed that learner to learner bullying is not only rampant in the school, but learner to teacher bullying is also on the increase. The principal, therefore, expressed his willingness to allow us to conduct the research study in the school. After obtaining ethical clearance from the respective Department of Education and necessary written approval from the participants and their parents, we arranged for a meeting with the prospective participants to explain the objectives of the study and the potential benefits of participating in the research. Prior to commencement of the interviews, we provided a detailed document informing the participants about the nature of the interview, the intervention, the type of questions to expect and the purpose of the study. By doing this, we created good rapport with the participants and managed to make them feel at ease and relaxed, so that they were able to share their experiences with no fear of intimidation. The interviews were specifically conducted after school hours to avoid the disruption of any school activities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

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

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed through inductive thematic analysis. This is a common form of analysis in qualitative research, and according to Braun and Clarke (2006), its aim is to pinpoint, examine and record patterns in data. Our analysis included transcription of the notes and audio recordings of our interviews. To establish and create meaningful patterns, we analysed the themes through a coding method that started by familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, checking for themes, scrutinising the themes, and defining and naming the identified themes. We carefully read through the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the information provided in each session of the interview until a point of saturation was reached. We thereafter looked for relevant data that could provide answer to the research question. After reading and re-reading the transcript of the

interviews, there was enough information to identify and label codes which were emblematic of themes from the data. We, then, gave relevant data quotations a code. We continued to search for candidate themes by listing all the codes. Similar codes were grouped and named. We compared all candidate themes to provide a review of the themes.

The themes generated offered useful answers to our research question. Three different and independent coders were employed to cross-validate the emergent themes. This process increased the validity of the identified themes and reduced subjectivity. The first and second coders met to compare their findings after each interview. Discrepancies were resolved by a third coder who reviewed the undecided response and assigned an appropriate category without knowing the choices of the other two coders.

To ensure that all participants' views were adequately captured in the themes, we had a further review of the original transcripts to see if there could be new themes that we had not included in our summaries. We also incorporated comments from our reflective journals in formulating the themes. We illustrated each theme with verbatim quotations. Lastly, to further ensure effective data control, additional two processes were followed. First, the participants were made to verify the data results to prevent misrepresentation or misinterpretation of meaning of the content or context of the data. Second, we compared data results with existing literature, to identify similarities or discrepancies that could necessitate further verification.

## Findings

The findings of this study responded to the research question through describing bystanders' reactions to witnessing bullying following a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention. The outcomes of the SDCDRI on bystanders' reactions to witnessing bullying were recorded and categorised into three themes.

### (a) Reduced Errors in Bystanders' Thinking Patterns

Participants understood that irrationality in their thinking patterns could exacerbate and fuel negative behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. As such, concerns about susceptibility to attacks were reduced as the participants learned to make fewer cognitive errors. The responses from most participants during the post-intervention semi-structured individual interviews and responses, as extracted from the activities completed in the intervention's sessions, indicated that there were fewer expressions of the negative perceptions of school safety and feelings of insecurity. The reason was that participants could now test the validity and reality of thoughts that underlay faulty thinking patterns. For instance, we asked participants if they still feel scared of going to school when they witness bullying and after informing their parents or guardians about it. Participant 6 had this to say: "No, I don't feel scared to go to school because my uncle told me that he is going to come to school and talk to the principal and the principal will suspend that bully."

Most participants no longer focus on the experience of one or a few incidences of bullying witnessed while making an appraisal of school safety, instead they were analysing their thoughts to ascertain their reality and validity based on evidence. The same question was directed to the tenth participant. She also said: "It is possible that no one bullies me in school and if one day the bully tries to bully me, I will fight for myself."

We asked participants to describe how they feel when they see one of the bullies coming towards them. Having considered an alternative interpretation, the third participant stated that: "I am not scared because I think the bullies and his friends are going their own way and I know they will not touch me because they are scared of my brother." A conducive

school environment is imperative for effective teaching and learning. Therefore, it is necessary for learners to feel secure in school to enhance concentration on studies.

### **(b) Appropriate Interpretation of an Event**

From the participants' responses to the post-intervention interview questions, we observed a qualitative difference in how participants expressed the misappropriation of self-blame and feelings of guilt, and this could be traceable to the replacement of personification thoughts with positive and more realistic thoughts following participation in the SDCDRI. Participants articulated how to give an appropriate interpretation to an event and express emotions in more rational and realistic ways.

From the coding and analysis, we saw that many participants realised and refrained from the distorted thoughts of personification. Hence, they no longer apportioned self-blame for their inability to defend the victims of bullying especially when it is obvious that the situation is beyond their power. We asked participants if they blame themselves for not being able to rescue the victims despite their efforts to do so. Participant 1 explained that: "No, I don't blame myself because when I went to them and shouted at them and threatened them that I am going to tell the principal, they just ignored me and continued bullying that victim."

Most of the participants disengaged from ascribing excess responsibility and self-blame for situations which are out of their control. When participants were asked to state if they still feel they were the cause of the bullying they witnessed because they could not intervene, the fifth participants also replied by saying:

No, I don't see myself wrong and it is no longer affecting me because when I was busy thinking about it, I try to understand it. I try to help that person but those people were too many so I can't defend that person.

From the response of the eighth participant, it seems she has learnt to challenge and replace a personalisation thought with a more rational one. The same question was directed to her, and she stated as follows: "No, I don't feel guilty. I check the situation first; if the bullies are too many and I don't have the power to stop them then I can't blame myself for not helping."

The responses of the participants reported above suggested that participants refuted distorted thought with a view of looking for evidence in support for or against their thoughts. The participants were no longer attributing the cause of an external event unduly to themselves. Rather, they searched for evidence in support or against their decision and carefully examined and criticised their thoughts to root out the source of bias in their thinking that caused them to ascribe excess responsibility to themselves for events over which they had little control.

### **(c) Modified Bystanders' Negative Behavioural and Emotional Responses to Witnessing Bullying**

There were decreases in negative emotions and behaviours of participants in reactions to witnessing bullying. Participants were able to draw a direct link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour and this effort contributed to the reduction of negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying. The participants realised the distorted thoughts of catastrophising. They could replace catastrophising thoughts with positive and more realistic thoughts and this led to a decrease in negative emotions and behaviours associated with

witnessing bullying in school. We asked participants if they still feel unhappy in school because of something that they think will happen to them. The third participants stated thus:

No, I don't feel scared at all going to school because I told my parents and even those bullies might not come to me. They might be scared of me, or they might not be scared of me, but I am no longer scared of going to school.

Another participant realised that the probability of a worst-case scenario eventuating might be low, and, therefore, stopped engaging in unnecessary worries: "Now I feel ok going to school because I know the principal make the rule that whoever bully another kid will be suspended even the bully knows that rule and he is afraid of suspension" (P2).

Participants realised the common errors in thinking and their influences on mood, feelings and behaviour. Hence, the reduction in participants' negative emotions and behaviours connected with witnessing bullying. Participant 4 responded to the question meant to inquire if he still experiences nightmares when he witnessed bullying by saying: "Now I sleep well because I know that there are other people at school who will help us if the bully tries to bully us."

From all indications, it appeared that most of the participants understood the reciprocal connections among thoughts, feelings, and behavioural and emotional response reactions to events. The quotation from the transcript of the post- intervention interviews revealed that the SDCDRI has a positive impact on down regulating bystanders' negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying. Going by the post-intervention interviews we have conducted and comparing it with the excerpt from the worksheet used in completing activities during the sessions, we have the impression that participants were able to apply newly discovered information to modify previously held beliefs and, in some cases, generated a new belief. While we reflected on the responses of the participants, we made the following remark in our research journal:

It seems participants have learnt to check their thinking patterns in line with reality based on evidence and not just feelings, presumptions, or assumptions. They have realised the reciprocal relationship among thought, feelings, and reactions. Therefore, they were able to exert more control over their thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviours. (Research journal 25/9/19)

## Discussion

The literature described self-debasing cognitive distortion as unhelpful thoughts that can directly or indirectly undermine a person and in effect elicit or reinforce negative behavioural and emotional responses to events (Barriga et al., 2008). Following participation in the SDCDRI, participants were able to identify distortions in their thinking patterns. This led to a reduction of error in their thinking patterns. The participants realised that irrationality in their thinking pattern could intensify and fuel negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying. The participants used the cognitive restructuring techniques such as challenging automatic thoughts, decatastrophising and guided discovery to question the reality of their automatic thoughts and gather evidence to contradict irrationalities in their thinking patterns. Hence, they looked for evidence in support for or against their beliefs while reacting to the bullying they witnessed. This facilitated an appropriate interpretation of events.

This present study extended the findings on the efficacy of cognitive restructuring interventions in reducing thinking error while reacting to events (Boschen & Ludvik, 2015; McManus et al., 2012; Shikatani et al., 2014). Furthermore, the findings of this study are in accordance with the report of Motevalli et al. (2013), who stated that applying cognitive restructuring techniques is effective in facilitating re-appraisal of negative thoughts linked with the expression of negative emotions such as anxiety, nervousness, restlessness, and fear among school learners.

The SDCDRI equipped participants to exert control on their emotions and behaviours. This led to a reversal of the negative emotions and behaviours they earlier expressed in reaction to witnessing the bullying. The various tasks and activities given to participants using worksheets such as the cognitive restructuring worksheet and homework assignments enabled them to role-play new adaptive behaviour that was described at the intervention sessions. The participants were able to replace thoughts that were not necessarily valid or accurate with realistic thinking, thereby leading to an observable reduction in negative emotions and behaviour associated with witnessing bullying in school. It appeared that commitment and completion of the homework assignment and exercises facilitated positive results in reducing negative emotions and behaviours associated with witnessing bullying in school. This finding extended previous findings on the efficacy of using cognitive behavioural techniques in reducing negative emotions and behaviours attributed to witnessing unpleasant events (Bernal et al., 2009; Hwang, 2009; McMain et al., 2015; Nicolas et al., 2009).

The participants' responses to post intervention interview questions confirmed Beck's cognitive theory of emotions and behaviour as discussed in the introduction which asserted that individual cognition plays a significant and primary role in the development and maintenance of emotional and behavioural responses to stressful life situations (Beck, 2011). The insights gained from the teaching learning principles derived from cognitive theory in relation to emotional and behavioural modification is that emotional and behavioural responses to events is a learning product and that whatever is learnt is an outcome of past conditioning and it can be unlearned through cognitive restructuring (James et al., 2015). In other words, irrational thoughts and maladaptive behaviour are learned; therefore, it can be modified and unlearned.

The findings of this study provided an insight into how bystanders' thinking patterns could be a determinant factor in emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying. There was theoretical support for the significant influence that individual cognition has in the onset and maintenance of behavioural and emotional reactions to victimisation (Clark & Beck, 2010; Covin et al., 2011), though most available studies were based on international literature. Even if proven to be empirically true, the feasibility and adaptability of these findings being applicable within different environments and contexts needed to be ascertained.

Hence, the findings of this study contribute to providing support for cognitive restructuring as an effective cognitive and behavioural approach to modifying and effecting positive change in bystanders' self-debasing cognitive distortions. The study was further able to substantiate the efficacy of cognitive restructuring in facilitating re-appraisal of negative thoughts, which has not been tested before among bystanders of school bullying, as well as reducing negative behaviours and emotions associated with such thoughts. The study contributes to the literature on bullying bystanders. The bystander is relatively under-researched in bullying literature (Salmivalli, 2014). This is because most studies on bullying focus primarily on bullies or the direct victims of bullying. Yet, bystanders or witnesses of bullying are often equally affected by the bullying incidents but get neglected (American Psychological Association, 2009; Farrington et al., 2017).

In particular, the findings of the study might be helpful for school counsellors and educational psychologists to fully comprehend the nature and role of self-debasing cognitive distortions in the onset and maintenance of negative emotional and behavioural responses while designing strategies to help victims of bullying and bystanders in school. Furthermore, the findings of this study could provide school counsellors and educational psychologists with insight on possible cognitive strategies that could be applied in designing treatment and interventions for victims of school bullying, especially the bystanders.

In line with this, school counsellors should be trained in the use of cognitive restructuring techniques such as challenging automatic thoughts, decatastrophising and guided discovery needed to refute distortions in negative thought patterns. The rudiments of cognitive restructuring skills should be incorporated into the curriculum of teacher training programs. This will enable teachers to possess elementary knowledge of cognitive restructuring to support learners who are victims of bullying in their care. This is necessary as most primary schools do not have an educational psychologist readily available. In addition, government and the Department of Basic Education should organise seminars and workshops for in-service teachers on how to plan an intervention for victims of bullying based on the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy using cognitive restructuring techniques. In addition, the findings of this study might bring bystanders to the awareness of the relationship among their thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying in school. This awareness may reveal the link between irrationality in their thought patterns and their reactions to witnessing bullying.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study from the pre-intervention phase revealed that distorted thoughts could trigger bystanders' negative behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. In addition, bystanders experienced negative emotions and behaviours such as anger, panic, shock, sadness, worry, restlessness, disbelief, numbing, anxiety and fear because of catastrophising which amplifies negative emotions and behaviours. This informed the design and implementation of a self-debasing cognitive distortions restructuring intervention. The SDCDRI was designed based on assumptions from the principles of cognitive and appraisal theories which contend that the events of an individual experience or witness should not necessarily elicit negative emotional or behavioural reactions, but instead they are triggered by the appraisal or interpretation an individual attaches to such an event. The findings of this study from the post-intervention phase indicated the significant effect of the SDCDRI on modifying bystanders' negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying. By applying the techniques of cognitive restructuring to challenge the validity and reality of their thought patterns, bystanders were able to exert control on their emotions and behaviour, thereby leading to changes in their reactions to school bullying as bystanders. Following participation in the SDCDRI, firstly, the bystanders experienced less error in thinking pattern. Secondly, they experienced appropriate interpretation of events and lastly, they experienced reduction in negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying.

It is anticipated that the findings of this study will bring bystanders to the awareness of the reciprocal relationship between thoughts, feelings, and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. As we reflect on the findings of this study, we refer to the words of Ellis (2003, p. 34): "Emotions and behaviours significantly influence and affect thinking, just as thinking influences emotions and behaviours." These words made us conclude that individuals are directly responsible for generating their own emotions. Therefore, it is

possible for one to change the emotional and behavioural responses to events by changing the appraisal and interpretation one attaches to that event.

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