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Abstract for IZEW Workshop: „Can psychology replace ethics"

**Moral argumentation skills and bullying roles:
How social psychology might rescue ethics**

Moral judgments in simplified situations, e.g. judgments about trolley cases, are experimentally accessible. Opposed to this, actual moral judgment and behaviour in complex social contexts are hard to measure. Consequently, much of the recent work in moral psychology focuses on moral judgment in hypothetical situations that do not require action at all. Studies that investigate behaviour tend to focus on short-term behaviour that is not embedded in social relations. This may lead to a distorted view on what guides moral behaviour in general, or so I will argue.

In our research we use bullying at schools as an ecologically adequate model for immoral behaviour that is embedded in real social environments. Bullying is obviously morally wrong. It leads to significant and sustainable physical and psychological harm, in extreme cases to suicides. In our current study we investigate the link between bullying-roles and different aspects of individual moral competence (moral argumentation skills, tendency to accept pseudo-moral rationalization and theory of mind skills). Bullying roles are determined by a well-established peer-nomination procedure.

Recently there has been a strong tendency in moral psychology to attribute effective moral judgment to intuitive, implicit and widely inaccessible processes and to claim that most moral reasoning amounts to ineffective post-hoc rationalization. Counter to this tendency, we find evidence that controlled moral cognition also plays a significant role in explaining long term moral and immoral behaviour. For example, moral reasoning and argumentation skills correlate with (morally good) defender behaviour in bullying situations.

In the presentation, I will elaborate the hypothesis that moral reasoning may not be highly effective in isolated one-shot actions that require spontaneous reactions, but may play a more important role for long-term behavioural tendencies in complex social contexts. I will argue that many real life moral problems have much in common with school bullying. Explicit moral reasoning may therefore be much more effective and important for an actual moral practice than many proponents of the intuitionist turn in moral psychology claim. If this is true, not only folk moral reasoning, but also normative ethics as a philosophical discipline are far from being replaced. Ethics cannot simply give up and admit that implicit processes will override its recommendations anyway. However, as reasoning is certainly not the only determinant of moral behaviour, ethics must to take seriously the empirical results, be aware of biases in its own activity and try to make demands that are reasonable given the psychological constraints of its addresses.