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The Role of Moral Emotion Regulation in Adolescents' Responses to Bullying

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Research Article

Keywords: moral emotions, guilt, empathic distress, emotion regulation, bullying, roles

Posted Date: November 19th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11133175/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Moral emotions do not automatically translate into moral action; how adolescents regulate them may be relevant to understanding their responses to bullying. Although guilt and empathic distress have been associated with defending, withdrawal, and pro-bullying behaviors, less is known about how the specific regulation of these emotions relates to such responses. This study examined direct and indirect associations among guilt, empathic distress, different forms of moral emotion regulation (prosocial regulation, avoidant regulation, and non-regulation), and prosocial, outsider, and pro-bullying roles.

The sample comprised 462 adolescents aged 10–14 years from Chile and Cuba. Participants completed standardized measures assessing guilt, empathic distress, moral emotion regulation, and bullying roles. Path analysis using factor scores examined the relationships among these variables.

The model showed excellent fit. Empathic distress was associated with prosocial behavior both directly and indirectly through prosocial regulation, whereas its association through non-regulation operated in the opposite direction, being positively associated with the outsider role. Pro-bullying behavior was primarily associated with lower levels of guilt and difficulties in regulating these emotions. The pattern of associations was broadly consistent across sex, although some structural coefficients differed between the Chilean and Cuban contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that understanding what happens to moral emotions once they are experienced provides a relevant perspective on adolescents' responses to bullying. Rather than translating directly into a particular behavior, guilt and, especially, empathic distress show different patterns of association with bullying responses depending on how these emotions are regulated.

Introduction

Emotions play a central role in how individuals interpret situations with moral implications and respond to the well-being or harm of others. Within this broader domain, moral emotions can be understood as affective responses related to the interests and well-being of others or society as a whole, as well as to shared norms and values (Haidt, 2003). From this perspective, the same emotion may acquire moral significance depending on the context in which it is experienced, particularly when it is elicited by situations affecting others or involving adherence to or violations of moral norms, and when it has the potential to motivate actions oriented toward others' well-being (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). Moral emotions thus reflect the internalization of moral standards and individuals' evaluations of their own or others' behavior in relation to social norms and expectations (Hoffman et al., 2014; Vaish & Hepach, 2020). Consistent with this view, experiencing moral emotions has been associated with greater prosocial behavior and lower levels of aggression among children and adolescents (Galarneau et al., 2022; Malti et al., 2019; Mazzone et al., 2021; Mazzone & Camodeca, 2016).

Moral emotions: empathic distress and guilt

In situations of moral conflict, empathic distress and guilt stand out as emotions that are particularly influential in subjective positioning and decision-making, favoring the emergence of prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg, 2000; Malti et al., 2019; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). Both develop progressively during childhood and require increasingly advanced levels of cognitive understnading, as they involve interpreting the affective and cognitive states of others, anticipating consequences, and making moral judgments about the actions involved (Romera et al., 2019). This developmental trajectory is particularly relevant during early adolescence, the period of interest in the present study, as at this stage adolescents expand their social interactions and face more complex moral dilemmas than in earlier periods, providing

unique opportunities to shape motivations, values, and emotions, and contributing to the development of a more differentiated identity, including the socio-moral and emotional domains (Malti et al., 2021).

Empathic distress is an emotional response that derives from another person's affective state and is more congruent with that state than with one's own (Hoffman, 2000). This attunement can arise automatically through emotional contagion or through perspective taking. In the literature, this phenomenon is often referred to as affective empathy (Blunden et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2022). However, affective empathy may consider all congruent emotions (such as joy, for instance), whereas Hoffman's term focuses on empathic reactions to suffering. The driver for this emotion lies in the other person’s suffering or discomfort, which can give rise to a moral dilemma as individuals may be torn between helping to alleviate the suffering of others or reducing their own discomfort. The way in which this emotion is regulated is decisive in its ability to promote or facilitate prosocial behaviors (Cameron et al., 2022).

Guilt is an unpleasant emotion that arises when perceiving a -moral transgression or harm caused, assuming responsibility for it (Hoffman, 2000; Malti, 2016; Tilghman-Osborne et al., 2010). Such healthy guilt feelings tend to be adaptive in nature, highlighting the importance of norms and promoting reparative and prosocial behaviors (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021; Tangney et al., 2011; Mazzone & Camodeca, 2016). However, some people try to avoid it when it conflicts with their interests or when they feel unable to make amends, which can cause discomfort and inhibit reparation (Lacerenza et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2022). When witnessing bullying situations, some individuals feel no guilt, while others feel guilt but do not act (Obermann, 2011). Thus, both empathic distress and guilt have a socio-moral dimension that distinguishes them from other emotions, and their regulation influences decisions with interpersonal and social impact.

Emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is understood as the process by which individuals modify the occurrence, intensity, or duration of their affective states to achieve certain goals or satisfy needs (Eisenberg, 2000; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Sheppes & Gross, 2012). Although these goals are usually individual, in the case of moral emotions, social norms and the needs of others must also be considered, which can sometimes create tensions. When experiencing these types of emotions, individuals often face moral dilemmas, as regulating them according to personal goals does not always align with the sociomoral principles they value (Scaffidi et al., 2022). For example, a student may try to remain calm and not intervene when witnessing a victim of bullying; in doing so, they regulate their emotions to protect themselves but conflict with principles of justice and care for others.

Several studies have examined the relationship between emotion regulation and moral emotions (Cameron et al., 2018; Laghi et al., 2018; Simon & Nader-Grosbois, 2025; Yavuz et al., 2024; Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2021). Overall, this body of evidence suggests the existence of different forms of regulation of these emotions. Based on their systematization, Angulo et al. (2025) proposed and empirically validated a theoretical model composed of three dimensions that synthesize these forms of regulation: dysregulation, avoidant regulation, and prosocial emotional regulation.

The lack of regulation of moral emotions occurs when individuals have difficulties managing the distress generated by empathic concern, which may lead them to feel overwhelmed and less capable of caring for or helping others (Spinrad et al., 2022; Vecchio et al., 2023), as well as to experience emotional exhaustion (Yavuz et al., 2024). In the case of guilt, its inadequate management may also generate maladaptive responses, characterized by self-contempt or a disproportionate emotional intensity relative to the situation (Leonardi et al., 2022; Waller et al., 2020).

Avoidant regulation involves avoiding or suppressing moral emotions. In the case of empathic distress, it has been suggested that individuals may emotionally or cognitively distance themselves from others' suffering in order to reduce their own discomfort, without assuming moral responsibility (Hoffman, 2008). When distress is very intense, individuals may feel the need to avoid the situation altogether, thereby blocking genuine empathic concern. Although Batson (2017) considers these responses a form of dysregulation, they may also be enacted intentionally. From a motivational perspective, some individuals avoid these emotions due to their high emotional or material costs, and may even structure their environments to prevent them (Cameron et al., 2018, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2021).

Prosocial emotional regulation involves the use of strategies aimed at managing distress arising from sociomoral emotions through helping or reparative interpersonal behaviors. These responses integrate both the alleviation of one's own distress and the enactment of actions perceived as right or beneficial to others (Angulo et al., 2025). Within this framework, individuals may engage in situation modification (Gross & Thompson, 2007), that is, reducing or eliminating the conditions that generate these emotions. In empathic distress, this entails addressing the victim's suffering (Hoffman, 2008), whereas in guilt it relates to remorse for harm caused, mistakes made, or omissions (Vaish & Hepach, 2020). Thus, actions aimed at alleviating others' suffering or repairing harm not only reduce personal distress but also promote prosocial behavior. What distinguishes this form of regulation is that individuals cannot achieve relief independently of what they consider morally appropriate and of others' well-being, in contrast to avoidant regulation, in which individuals seek to reduce their own discomfort without considering its implications for others

Taken together, these different forms of regulation highlight that experiencing a moral emotion does not necessarily lead individuals to act accordingly. A gap may exist between the experience of moral emotions and action, suggesting that understanding moral behavior requires considering the processes that intervene between experiencing these emotions and ultimately acting (Tangney et al., 2007; Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). From this perspective, emotion regulation may constitute one relevant process for understanding how emotions such as empathic distress and guilt are associated with different behavioral responses.

This issue becomes particularly relevant in bullying situations, in which adolescents are confronted with harm experienced by a peer and may respond in different ways toward the victim and the aggression.

Roles toward the victim in bullying situations

El bullying es un fenómeno ampliamente extendido a nivel global, con efectos negativos en el bienestar de los estudiantes. Según la UNESCO (2023), cerca de un tercio de la población escolar mundial ha experimentado algún tipo de acoso. En el caso de Chile, datos del SIMCE indican que un 64% de los estudiantes de sexto básico reportan haber sido objeto de burlas o molestias en su establecimiento, por lo que constituye un tema central en la política educacional chilena (MINEDUC, 2024; Varela et al., 2024), mientras que en Cuba la información disponible es más limitada, con menor reconocimiento institucional del problema (Rodríguez Abrahantes et al., 2015; Angulo Gallo et al., 2024; Rodney & García, 2020).

Bullying is understood as a harmful social process, sustained by social and institutional norms, characterized by an imbalance of power between those who attack and those who are attacked. It is often repetitive and manifests itself in unwanted interpersonal behavior among students or school staff, causing physical, social, and emotional harm to those affected and to the educational community as a whole (UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying at Dublin City University, 2024). Su mayor incidencia se observa en la adolescencia temprana, una etapa en la que la

pertenencia y posicionamiento en los grupos de pares adquieren un papel central y el bullying puede convertirse en una vía para estos fines (Espelage et al., 2014; Riggs & Brown, 2017).

From this perspective, Salmivalli (2014) and colleagues conceptualize bullying as a group phenomenon in which bystanders' responses can either contribute to perpetuating aggression or support victims' well-being through defending and supportive behaviors (Kärnä et al., 2013; Van der Ploeg et al., 2017; Malamut et al., 2023). How peers position themselves in relation to the victim thus represents an important moral decision, encompassing a broad spectrum of responses that can be grouped into three general patterns: pro-bullying roles (including the aggressor and those who encourage, assist, or reinforce the aggression), prosocial roles (helping, protecting, or comforting the victim), and outsider roles (characterized by non-intervention and distancing from the situation) (Belacchi & Benelli, 2020; Demaray et al., 2016).

Although previous research has identified several factors associated with roles to bullying ((Riley et al., 2019; Baumgartner et al., 2021)), less is known about the role of moral emotion regulation in these responses. Examining how adolescents regulate moral emotions may therefore help clarify why emotions such as guilt and empathic distress are associated with different ways of positioning themselves toward the victim. These processes may also vary across individual characteristics, including sex, given documented sex differences in bullying roles, moral emotions, and emotion regulation.

Sex differences in bullying roles, moral emotions and emotional regulation

Previous research has documented sex differences in prosocial and aggressive behaviors, emotion regulation, and the experience of moral emotions (Cohen et al., 2011; Luengo Kanacri et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2023). In bullying contexts, boys tend to be overrepresented in roles such as aggressor, assistant, and reinforcer, whereas girls are more frequently found in defender and outsider roles (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017). However, findings regarding indirect forms of bullying are mixed, with some studies reporting higher prevalence among girls (Bjärehed et al., 2020; Boutin et al., 2021), while others find no significant sex differences (Leadbeater et al., 2006).

Regarding moral emotions, girls generally report higher levels of guilt and empathy (Cohen et al., 2011; Tangney, 2011; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). They also tend to show greater emotional expression and differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies (Wang et al., 2015). In line with this, Sanchis-Sanchis et al. (2020) found that girls score significantly higher than boys on rumination and on external emotion regulation strategies, including expression and social support.

The present study

This study examines the regulation of moral emotions as a set of alternative pathways through which guilt and empathic distress (ED) are associated with the roles adolescents assume during bullying. Specifically, we assess whether strategies aimed at reducing the causes of guilt or ED (e.g., repairing harm or alleviating the suffering of others) are positively associated with prosocial actions, and whether non-regulation or the use of avoidance strategies show distinct patterns of association with these behaviors. The main research question guiding the study is how guilt, empathic distress, and the regulation of these emotions relate to the roles adolescents assume in bullying situations.

Based on this question, the following hypotheses are proposed. H1: Guilt and empathic distress are differentially associated with the roles assumed in bullying situations, showing positive associations with the prosocial role and negative associations with pro-bullying and avoidance roles. H2: Regulation strategies aimed at modifying the

situation that causes guilt or empathic distress, whether altruistically or not, are positively associated with adopting the prosocial role in bullying situations. H3: Forms of regulation characterized by non-regulation or avoidance of guilt and empathic distress are negatively associated with the prosocial role and positively associated with pro-bullying and avoidance roles. H4: Different forms of regulation of moral emotions act as differential pathways through which guilt and empathic distress are linked to the roles assumed in bullying, producing indirect effects on prosocial, pro-bullying, and avoidance behaviors.

Furthermore, considering the sex differences in emotional regulation and the experience of moral emotions previously noted, the study examines whether the observed effects remain invariant across these groups. In addition, based on the differences in bullying dynamics between Cuba and Chile described earlier, together with their shared Latin American cultural background, the model is tested for invariance across these sociocultural contexts.

Method

Participants

Intentional convenience sampling was used. The sample consisted of 462 preteens: 262 (56.7%) from Cuba and 200 (43.3%) from Chile, aged between 10 and 14 years (M = 12.11, SD = 1.19); 51.3% were male. Participants were recruited from two public schools in urban areas of the Santiago Metropolitan Region in Chile and two schools in the central region of Cuba (municipality of Santa Clara). The inclusion of these countries was supported by existing institutional collaborations, which facilitated access to the sample and enabled a feasible cross-context comparison. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and assent was obtained from students, along with institutional authorization from the participating schools in both countries. The study and all procedures were approved by the ethics committees of the sponsoring universities [Anonymized].

Instruments

Adolescents' roles in school bullying were assessed using the Eight Participant Roles Questionnaire (8PRQ; Belacchi, 2008). This instrument evaluates the roles assumed by participants in school bullying situations. It builds on the Participant Roles Questionnaire (PRQ; Salmivalli et al., 1996), integrating the abbreviated version by Sutton and Smith (1999) and the Italian adaptation by Menesini and Gini (2000). The 8PRQ consists of 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). In the adaptation for Chilean and Cuban adolescents (Angulo et al., 2025), the original latent structure of the instrument was confirmed, comprising four macro-roles that encompass the eight participant roles involved in school bullying. Specifically, the pro-bullying macro-role includes the bully, assistant, and reinforcer; the prosocial macro-role comprises the defender, mediator, and consoler; the victim role refers to students who are targets of bullying; and the outsider role represents observers who remain uninvolved or avoidant. Reliability estimates were satisfactory for all macro-roles (pro-bullying $\alpha = .87$, prosocial $\alpha = .89$, victim $\alpha = .75$, outsider $\alpha = .65$). Model fit indices indicated an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2(269) = 737.29$, $p < .001$, CFI = .961, TLI = .957, RMSEA = .061, 90% CI [.056, .067], SRMR = .078). In the present study, the full scale was administered. However, the victim role was not included in the results analyses, as the focus of the study was on participants' roles in relation to the victim rather than on victimization itself.

Sociomoral emotion regulation was assessed using the Sociomoral Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (SERQ; Angulo et al., 2025), developed to examine the strategies adolescents use to regulate two moral emotions: empathic distress and guilt. The instrument presents two standardized hypothetical vignettes: (Situation 1) "Imagine that you feel bad for a classmate who is suffering. However, helping him/her would be difficult for you at that moment"; and (Situation 2)

“Imagine that you feel bad about something wrong you did, but admitting it would have negative consequences for you.” The use of hypothetical vignettes is supported by prior research indicating that responses to hypothetical scenarios can predict actual behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016).

Both situations were designed to recreate plausible sociomoral dilemmas while holding situational characteristics constant, thereby allowing comparisons across self-reported regulation strategies. Following each vignette, 16 items (empathic distress) and 12 items (guilt), respectively, describe potential emotion-regulation strategies (e.g., “I would find it hard to stay calm”; “I would focus on how happy they would feel if I helped them”; “I would distract myself by doing another activity to forget about the matter”; “I would try to support them in whatever way possible to stop worrying”). Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Impossible; 2 = Almost impossible; 3 = Possible; 4 = Yes, very possible). In the validation study (Angulo et al., 2025), four factors were identified: non-regulation (α_r = .91), prosocial regulation (α_r = .80), empathic distress avoidance (α_r = .74), and guilt avoidance (α_r = .54). The model demonstrated good overall fit, as well as configural, partial metric, and scalar invariance across countries, and full invariance across sex.

Guilt proneness was assessed using the Guilt Proneness Scale (Angulo et al., 2025), developed based on the Five-Item Guilt Proneness Scale (GP-5; Cohen et al., 2014). The original scenarios were adapted to be developmentally appropriate for adolescents, and two additional items related to peer bullying were incorporated. Example items include: “While other students at your school are bullying a classmate with some difficulty, how likely is it that you would feel remorse for doing nothing to stop the situation or help them?” and “Imagine that you hit or offend another person who had not mistreated you. How likely is it that you would feel bad for having caused harm to them?” Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Impossible) to 4 (Yes, very possible). The scale assesses a single latent guilt factor and demonstrated good fit to the data: $\chi^2(14) = 17.87$, $p = .213$ (robust fit), CFI = .998, TLI = .997, RMSEA = .024 (90% CI [0.000, 0.054]), and SRMR = .024. Internal consistency was satisfactory (α_r = .88).

Empathic distress proneness was assessed using the Empathic Distress Scale (Angulo et al., 2025). This instrument measures adolescents’ tendency to experience empathic distress in response to others’ suffering. It consists of eight items describing everyday situations in which other people are in difficulty (e.g., “I feel distressed when someone I know is suffering,” “I feel bad when someone cries near me”). Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree), indicating the extent to which each statement represents the adolescent. The scale was developed through a systematic synthesis of the literature on empathic distress and related constructs, which informed the generation of an initial pool of items. Content validity (relevance and clarity) was evaluated by an expert panel, and cognitive interviews followed by a pilot study with adolescents were conducted to refine item wording and response format. In the validation study, a unifactorial model demonstrated highly satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(20) = 22.04$, $p = .164$, CFI = .999, TLI = .999, RMSEA = .026 (90% CI [0.000, 0.050]), and SRMR = .037. Ordinal internal consistency was excellent (α_r = .89).

Procedure

The study was conducted in person in classrooms at schools between January and May 2025, ensuring privacy. The application was carried out at times agreed upon with each institution so as not to interfere with academic activities. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted simultaneously for all students in each group, ensuring consistent conditions. The instruments were administered by two researchers, one in each country.

Data analysis

The analyses were performed in R (version 4.4.1) using the lavaan 0.6–19 package (Rosseel, 2012). A path analysis model was estimated using factor scores derived from previously validated confirmatory factor models for each instrument. Factor scores were calculated using the regression method, which incorporates the estimated factor loadings of the items rather than assigning equal weight to all items (DiStefano et al., 2009). These scores, expressed as standard deviations from the sample mean, were subsequently used as observed variables in the path model. This approach was selected to retain information from the previously established measurement models while limiting the number of parameters to be estimated, given the complexity of a fully latent model relative to the available sample size.

In the proposed model, guilt and empathic distress (ED) were specified as independent variables (IVs). Four forms of regulation of moral emotions were included as mediators: prosocial regulation, non-regulation, avoidant regulation in response to guilt, and avoidant regulation in response to empathic distress. The dependent variables (DVs) were the three bullying roles: prosocial role, pro-bullying role, and outsider role. A single path model was estimated in which all IVs, mediators, and DVs were included simultaneously.

Estimates were obtained using robust maximum likelihood (MLR), using FIML for the treatment of missing data. Standardized coefficients (β) and indirect effects with 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (BCa) (5,000 resamples) are reported. Model fit was evaluated using robust indices (χ^2, CFI, TLI, RMSEA with 90% CI, and SRMR), considering good fit when CFI and TLI ≥ .95, RMSEA ≤ .06, and SRMR ≤ .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

To explore differences by sex and country, a multigroup stepwise analysis was performed: first a configural model (same path structure in all groups) and then a model with regression coefficients restricted to equality. The comparison was made using the Satorra-Bentler scaled χ^2 difference test (Satorra & Bentler, 2010) and changes in CFI and RMSEA (ΔCFI ≤ .010, ΔRMSEA ≤ .015 as evidence of invariance; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). When the restricted model did not worsen the fit, structural invariance was concluded.

Results

Structural relationships between guilt, empathic distress, emotional regulation, and roles in bullying situations

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table S1 (see Supplementary Material). A structural equation model was estimated to examine the proposed direct and indirect associations linking moral emotions (guilt and empathic distress), their regulation, and bullying roles (prosocial, pro-bullying, and outsider). The model allowed covariances among residuals within each domain (emotions, regulation, and roles). The initial specification showed acceptable incremental fit (CFI = .985, TLI = .927) but an elevated RMSEA (.189, 90% CI [.000, .371]; df = 2), which, given the low degrees of freedom, suggested potential model misspecification and the need for greater parsimony.

To test the specific hypotheses and improve model fit, eight structural paths were examined. Six non-significant paths were removed: the effects of prosocial regulation on the pro-bullying (p = .920) and outsider roles (p = .779); the effects of avoidant regulation in response to guilt on the three roles (p > .10); and the effect of avoidant regulation in response to empathic distress on the prosocial role (p = .294). Removing these paths increased the degrees of freedom and reduced the RMSEA, resulting in a more parsimonious model. Two non-significant paths were retained due to their theoretical relevance—guilt → prosocial role (p = .131) and empathic distress → pro-bullying role (p = .237).

The respecified model showed an adequate fit: robust Satorra–Bentler χ^2 (5) = 12.30, p = .031; robust CFI = .995; robust TLI = .969; robust RMSEA = .062, 90% CI [.020, .106]; SRMR = .028. It explained the following proportions of variance in roles during bullying situations: prosocial role (R^2 = .358), pro-bullying role (R^2 = .121), and outsider (R^2 = .155). Standardized regression coefficients and significant indirect effects are detailed in Figs. 1–3 (this is a single model that was divided into three panels for visualization purposes).

Figure 1 shows that the prosocial role was significantly predicted by empathic distress, whereas guilt did not have a direct effect on prosocial behavior. However, guilt had a positive indirect effect through prosocial emotional regulation: higher guilt was associated with greater use of prosocial regulation strategies, which in turn was positively associated with the prosocial role. Empathic distress, in contrast, operated through two distinct indirect pathways. First, prosocial regulation mediated the association between empathic distress and the prosocial role, such that higher empathic distress was associated with greater prosocial regulation, which, in turn, predicted greater prosocial behavior. Second, non-regulation also mediated this association, but in the opposite direction: higher empathic distress was associated with greater emotional non-regulation, which in turn predicted lower levels of the prosocial role. Taken together, these findings indicate that empathic distress promotes prosociality both directly and indirectly, depending on the regulatory strategy activated, whereas guilt operates only indirectly through prosocial regulation.

<< Insert Fig. 1 about here >>

Figure 2 shows that the outsider role was negatively predicted by guilt and empathic distress, indicating that these variables have significant direct effects on the reduction of this type of behavior. Both the use of avoidant strategies and emotional dysregulation positively predicted this role. In addition, greater experience of guilt positively predicts non-regulation, although in the case of empathic distress this effect is more significant. This latter emotion was negatively associated with the use of avoidant strategies, suggesting that individuals who are more likely to identify with others' suffering are less likely to rely on such strategies to alleviate their discomfort.

Regarding the indirect effects on the outsider's role, guilt does not have a significant effect through non-regulation. In contrast, empathic distress shows two opposite and significant trajectories: a positive indirect effect via non-regulation, suggesting that lack of regulation can transform distress into a more passive response; and a negative indirect effect via avoidant strategies, indicating that less avoidance associated with empathic distress contributes to reducing the likelihood of adopting an outsider role.

<< Insert Fig. 2 about here >>

On the other hand, the pro-bullying role was negatively predicted by guilt and showed no direct effect of empathic distress. In turn, both non-regulation and the use of avoidant regulation were positively associated with this role (see Fig. 3). The indirect effects indicated that empathic distress increases pro-bullying behavior by favoring non-regulation, while the pathway through avoidant strategies was not significant. In the case of guilt, the indirect effects were not significant. Overall, the model suggests that higher guilt is directly associated with lower pro-bullying behavior, whereas emotion regulation difficulties are positively associated with this role.

<< Insert Fig. 3 about here >>

Invariance of the model according to sex and country (Cuba, Chile)

To evaluate the invariance of the structural model, multigroup analyses were performed according to sex and country, comparing a configural model (free parameters between groups) with a model in which equality was imposed on all regression coefficients, the results of which are shown in Table 1. In the case of sex, the configurational model showed an excellent fit, and when imposing equality of regression coefficients between males and females, the change in fit

indices was minimal (ΔCFI ≈ + .001; ΔRMSEA ≈ − .005), and the likelihood ratio test was not significant (p(Δχ²) = .837). These results indicate that the structural relationships of the model can be considered invariant across sex.

Table 1

Multigroup invariance tests of the model (sex and country)

Variable	Model	χ²	gl	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	ΔCFI	ΔRMSEA	p(Δχ²)
Sex	Configural (free)	27.38	25	.337	.999	.997	.020	.037	—	—	—
	Invariant model	27.43	26	.387	.999	.998	.015	.037	+ .001	−.005	.837
Country	Configural (free)	67.86	25	< .001	.975	.944	.086	.062	—	—	—
	Invariant model	72.79	26	< .001	.973	.941	.088	.061	−.002	+ .002	.043

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual. ΔCFI and ΔRMSEA are calculated using the configural (free) model within each grouping variable as a reference. p(Δχ²) corresponds to the comparison between the configural model and the model with equal regressions within each grouping variable.

With regard to country, when regressions were restricted to be equal, the fit decreased slightly (ΔCFI ≈ − .002; ΔRMSEA ≈ + .002). However, the comparison between models using the likelihood ratio test was significant (p(Δχ²) = .043). Taken together, this suggests that, although the differences in CFI and RMSEA are very small, at least some regression coefficients may vary between countries.

<< Insert Table 1 about here >>

Tables S2 and S3 in the supplementary material present the standardized regression coefficients of the structural model for both sexes and for the two countries considered. In general, the predictors showed very similar patterns of significance and were associated in the same direction in males and females, as well as in Chile and Cuba. Only in the country-by-country analysis was there a relevant difference in the prediction of the outsider role based on guilt, where the effect was significant and of moderate magnitude in Chile (β = −.189, p < .01), but weaker and not significant in Cuba (β = −.086, p = .191), suggesting a weaker link between guilt and the reduction of the outsider role in the latter context.

Although the structural relationships between the variables in the model were very similar for males and females, this does not imply that there are no differences in the mean levels of the constructs involved. In fact, descriptive analyses and comparisons of means (see Table 2) show that females score, on average, above the sample mean in prosocial role (M = 0.14, SD = 1.00), while males score below (M = − 0.14, SD = 0.98), a difference that is significant (t(≈ 457) = 3.24, p = .001, d = 0.30). In contrast, males score higher on pro-bullying role (M = 0.18, SD = 0.98) and Outsider role (M = 0.15, SD = 0.96) than females (M = − 0.11, SD = 0.99; M = − 0.10, SD = 1.02, respectively), with also significant differences, t(≈ 458) = − 3.63, p < .001, d = − 0.34, and t(≈ 454) = − 3.26, p = .001, d = − 0.30. Likewise, females show higher levels of empathic distress, prosocial regulation, and non-regulation in response to this emotion, while males show greater use of avoidant regulation strategies in response to empathic distress; in all cases, the differences were small, although statistically significant (d between 0.25 and 0.36). It is important to note that these scores correspond to standardized factors (factor scores), so that positive values indicate deviations above the sample mean and negative values reflect deviations below the mean.

Table 2

Comparisons of roles, emotions, and forms of regulation by sex and country

Variable	t	gl	p	d	t	gl	p	d
	Sex				**Country**			
Prosocial role	3,239	457.41	**.001**	0.302	−1.175	422.14	.241	−0.111
Probulllying role	−3,629	458.33	**.000**	−0.338	−2,174	419.46	**.030**	−0.205
Outsider role	−3,263	453.98	**.001**	−0.304	−0.718	400.48	.473	−0.068
Culpa	1.192	459.25	.234	0.111	0.713	438.51	.476	0.066
Empathic distress	3,889	458.68	**.000**	0.361	−2,244	428.59	**.025**	−0.211
Prosocial regulation	3,295	459.15	**.001**	0.306	−1,824	441.22	.069	−0.170
No regulation	2,829	457.68	**.005**	0.263	1,383	431.77	.167	0.130
Avoidant regulation in response to empathic distress	−2,657	446.48	**.008**	−0.248	4,632	452.61	**.000**	0.427

Note. T-test results for comparisons between groups. Column “sex”: comparison between females and males. Column “country”: comparison between Chile and Cuba. *d* = Cohen’s effect size. *P* values rounded to three decimal places; *.000* indicates *p* < .001.

<< Insert Table 2 about here >>

On the other hand, with regard to differences between countries, although the structural model showed very few variations between the parameters of the relationship between variables, significant differences were observed in some individual constructs. Specifically, the analysis of mean comparisons reveals that adolescents in Cuba have significantly higher mean scores in pro-bullying role (M = 0.11 in Cuba vs. M = -0.06 in Chile; t(419) = -2.17, p = .030, d = -0.21) and empathic distress (M = 0.06 in Cuba vs. M = -0.13 in Chile; t(429) = -2.24, p = .025, d = -0.21) compared to their Chilean peers. On the other hand, Chilean adolescents show significantly higher values in avoidant regulation in response to empathic distress (M = 0.19 in Chile vs. M = -0.15 in Cuba; t(453) = 4.63, p < .001, d = 0.43).

Discussion

The present study tested the relationships between moral emotions (guilt and empathic distress) and the roles assumed in bullying situations in adolescence, considering the mediating effects of different forms of emotional regulation.

Empathic distress emerged as the strongest direct and indirect predictor of victim-helping behavior, in line with studies showing that affective identification with others’ suffering mobilizes actions of comfort, support, and defense (Kamas & Preston, 2021; Malti & Speidel, 2024). However, our data show that this emotion does not always lead to prosocial responses but may follow different pathways depending on how it is regulated. When empathic distress is channeled through prosocial regulation, adolescents attempt to alleviate the other person’s problem, simultaneously reducing their own distress. In contrast, when this emotion is not adequately regulated, it may hinder orientation toward others’ needs and favor self-focused responses, such as withdrawal or inaction.

As Eisenberg et al. (2014) and Yavuz et al. (2024) point out, emotional regulation is crucial for overcoming the "empathy gap" and transforming the initial emotional reaction into sympathetic concern. Consistent with this, our results show that prosocial regulation, the only form of regulation positively associated with the prosocial role,

functions as the mechanism that drives empathic distress into helping behavior. Other forms of regulation, such as avoidance, had no effect on prosociality, although they contributed to decreasing the adoption of the outsider role, providing relevant insights into its function in socio-emotional dynamics.

Regarding guilt, unlike studies that have reported direct effects of this emotion on prosociality (Molho et al., 2025; Scaffidi Abbate et al., 2022), our findings suggest that its influence operates indirectly through the activation of reparative strategies. This implies that guilt alone does not guarantee prosocial responses; rather, its effect is contingent on how it is regulated. In this sense, the findings indicate that promoting the experience of guilt may not be sufficient to foster reparative behaviors unless it is accompanied by the development of emotion regulation skills that enable individuals to channel it into constructive actions. Thus, guilt appears to translate into prosocial behavior only when it is managed through other-oriented regulatory strategies. This pattern is consistent with Hoffman's (2000) proposal of anticipatory guilt, according to which individuals act prosocially to avoid the discomfort associated with violating their moral standards.

With respect to the role of the avoidant observer, both empathic distress and guilt tended to decrease the likelihood of adopting avoidance behaviors, while non-regulation and emotional avoidance of ED increased it. ED showed a dual pattern: on the one hand, it increased avoidance when it was not regulated; on the other hand, it had an indirect negative effect through avoidant strategies, suggesting that when ED is managed more adaptively, it contributes to reducing the likelihood of assuming a passive role.

This pattern is consistent with research indicating that motivation and the perceived cost of empathic involvement influence how affective response is regulated (Cameron et al., 2022). In this sense, resorting to avoidance strategies to diminish or evade EA may favor the adoption of a passive observer role. Strategies such as distraction or cognitive reappraisal are often functional for other emotions (Sheppes & Gross, 2012), but in the context of bullying they can diminish the empathic activation necessary to initiate supportive behaviors. Along these lines, Brethel-Haurwitz et al. (2020) showed that reappraisal can promote helping, although its effect depends on the motivational content of the reinterpretation: certain forms of reappraisal facilitate prosociality, while others can lead to indifference or inaction.

On the other hand, pro-bullying behavior emerged as a response more closely associated with deficits in emotional regulation than with a lack of empathy. This pattern is consistent with previous findings documenting the central role of dysregulation in aggressive or pro-aggressor behaviors (Baumgartner et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2019). However, it differs from studies that have highlighted low empathy as the main predictor of aggressive behavior (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Van Noorden et al., 2015). A plausible explanation is the existence of different types of aggressors, widely documented in the literature. For example, a distinction is made between reactive aggressors—who are more impulsive and dysregulated—and proactive aggressors—who are colder and less empathetic (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002; Vitaro et al., 2006). Our results seem to align with a reactive-dysregulated profile, a nuance that reinforces the importance of considering the heterogeneity of bullying profiles and how different combinations of empathy and emotional regulation shape different roles in this regard.

Regarding the variability of the results between the Chilean and Cuban samples, the only association that differed between contexts was that between guilt and the outsider role. In the Chilean sample, anticipated guilt for not helping was negatively associated with outsider behavior, whereas this association was not significant in the Cuban sample. Descriptively, Cuban adolescents also reported higher levels of empathic distress and lower use of avoidance strategies, but higher levels of pro-bullying behavior. This pattern is consistent with previous research conducted in Cuban contexts documenting greater normalization and lower institutional visibility of some forms of peer aggression (Angulo Gallo et al., 2024; Rodney Rodríguez et al., 2020). These contextual characteristics may represent one possible interpretation of the observed differences, although the present design does not allow them to be attributed

to broader country-level cultural characteristics. Given that participants were drawn from two schools in each country, these findings are better understood as evidence of some contextual variability within an otherwise largely similar pattern of associations across the two samples.

Regarding sex differences, the findings revealed that the relationships between moral emotions, regulation, and roles are similar for boys and girls. However, as expected and documented in the literature, average differences were observed in several study variables. Females showed greater prosociality, ED, and prosocial regulation, while males reported higher levels of pro-bullying behavior, avoidant role, and emotional avoidance, distinctions that had already been reported in the literature (Cohen et al., 2011; Malti et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023). In this regard, the study is in line with research proposing that despite the differences in these variables, more empathetic boys act as prosocially as girls (Kamas & Preston, 2021).

Although in our study the relationship between ED and bullying did not vary by sex, longitudinal evidence suggests evolutionary nuances. Devleeschouwer et al. (2025) found that, for boys but not girls, empathy is negatively associated with interpersonal bullying. Although not directly comparable to our results, these findings suggest that sex differences may emerge over time, underscoring the need for further longitudinal studies.

Another finding not entirely consistent with previous studies is that females scored higher on non-regulation. Earlier research indicates that being female is associated with greater overall emotional self-regulation (Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2021). However, our assessment focused on the specific regulation of ED. Given that females tend to experience more intense ED, it might be that regulating it might be more challenging, which would be reflected in higher levels of non-regulation.

Methodologically, unlike previous studies, our work did not assess general emotional regulation capacity, but rather specific ways of regulating moral emotions. Similarly, empathic distress was distinguished as a particular emotional experience, differentiating it from broad measures of affective empathy. This conceptual precision helps clarify the inconsistencies reported in the literature (Yavuz et al., 2024) regarding the relationships between these variables, given that many traditional scales mix optimal empathic experiences with reactions of personal distress. Likewise, widely used instruments to assess empathy, such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), mix empathic emotional experience with personal distress and even regulation difficulties, making these processes hard to disentangle. For example, an item from the Personal Distress (PD) subscale reads, “I tend to lose control during emergencies,” which primarily reflects self-regulation difficulties rather than empathy per se. In our study, distinguishing empathic distress from emotion-regulation difficulties was essential for accurate interpretation of the results.

Among the limitations of the study are the use of a convenience sample and the assessment of self-reported responses in hypothetical scenarios, which limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts the ability to draw causal inferences, particularly given the examination of mediation mechanisms. Although the proposed models are theoretically grounded, longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to more rigorously examine the temporal ordering and directionality of the relationships among emotions, regulation strategies, and roles in bullying situations. Future research could develop experimental designs that allow for the observation of how these emotions and strategies interact in real-life contexts. Likewise, the avoidant regulation dimension in response to guilt showed low internal consistency and non-significant effects; its inclusion impaired model fit, necessitating its removal. This suggests the need to revise and strengthen its measurement using more precise and conceptually delimited items in order to adequately examine its effects.

Nevertheless, the study makes important contributions by simultaneously examining multiple components, emotions, regulatory strategies, and roles, within a single model, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the patterns of association underlying adolescents' responses to bullying. By incorporating both guilt and empathic distress, along with prosocial, pro-bullying, and avoidance behaviors, the study helps address gaps in the literature regarding the affective and regulatory processes that may be involved in adolescents' adoption of different roles in these situations.

These findings have important implications for further investigating the affective and regulatory mechanisms underlying prosocial action tendencies. In particular, they suggest that school-based interventions should not focus solely on promoting moral emotions such as empathic distress or guilt. It is also essential to teach students how to manage discomfort associated with others' suffering or the awareness of having caused harm, and to promote prosocial emotional regulation as a key strategy for facilitating helping behaviors. Likewise, interventions should consider the motivational basis of emotional regulation, integrating perspectives oriented toward both individual benefit and collective well-being.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethics approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee on Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (No. 240129006; approved July 9, 2024). For the Cuban site, the study was reviewed by the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas, the institutional body responsible within the Faculty for reviewing and approving research, including research involving human participants; there is no separate ethics committee within the Faculty that performs this function. The Scientific Council certified that the study was conducted as part of the activities of Project PS223LH001-051, previously approved by this body, and that it complied with the established ethical standards and requirements for scientific research (Agreement No. 10, March 13, 2025).

Consent to participate

Informed assent was obtained from all adolescent participants, and written informed consent was obtained from their mothers, fathers, or legal guardians. The written informed consent included authorization for the publication of anonymized data.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Funding Statement

This work was supported by the National Agency for Research and Development (ANID), Chile, through the Doctoral Scholarship Program (ANID BECAS/DOCTORADO NACIONAL 21220143), awarded to Lisandra Angulo Gallo; ANID/FONDECYT Regular 1231271, awarded to Jorge Varela; and ANID/SCIA CIN250046 and ANID/FONDECYT 1260528, awarded to Christian Berger.

Author Contribution

LAG: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, validation, software, writing – original draft, visualization, project administration, resources.CBS: conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing – review & editing.TM: conceptualization, supervision, writing – review & editing.RS: supervision, formal analysis, writing – review & editing.AEVE: investigation, data curation.JV: supervision, writing – review & editing, funding acquisition.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the schools, families, and adolescents who participated in the study.

Data Availability

Data are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Figures

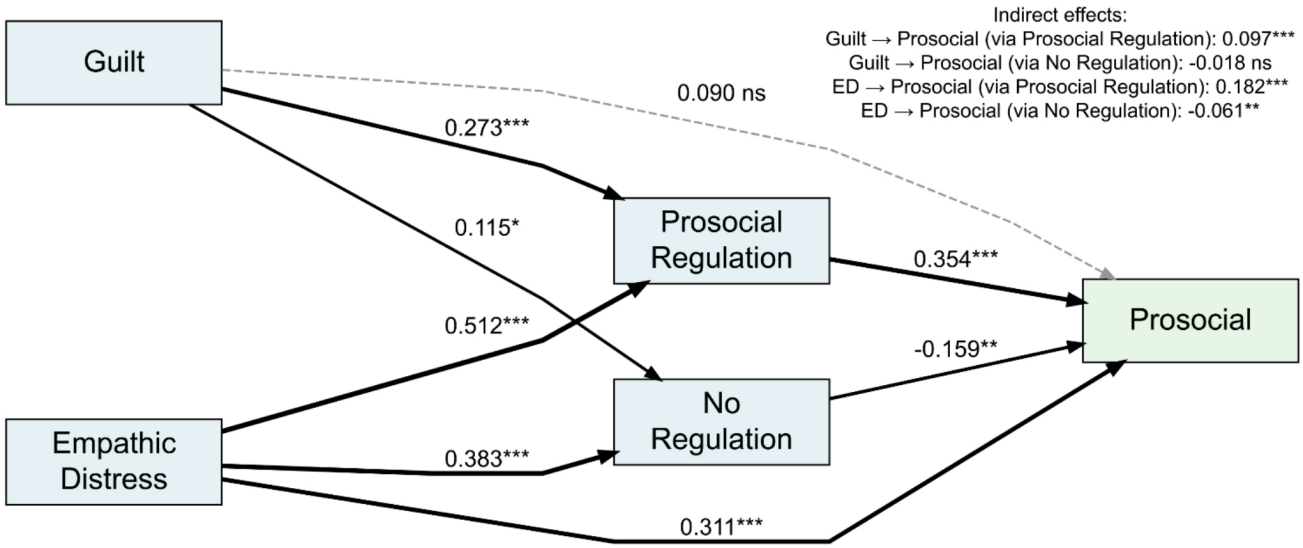


Figure 1

Direct and indirect effects of regulation and moral emotions on the prosocial role

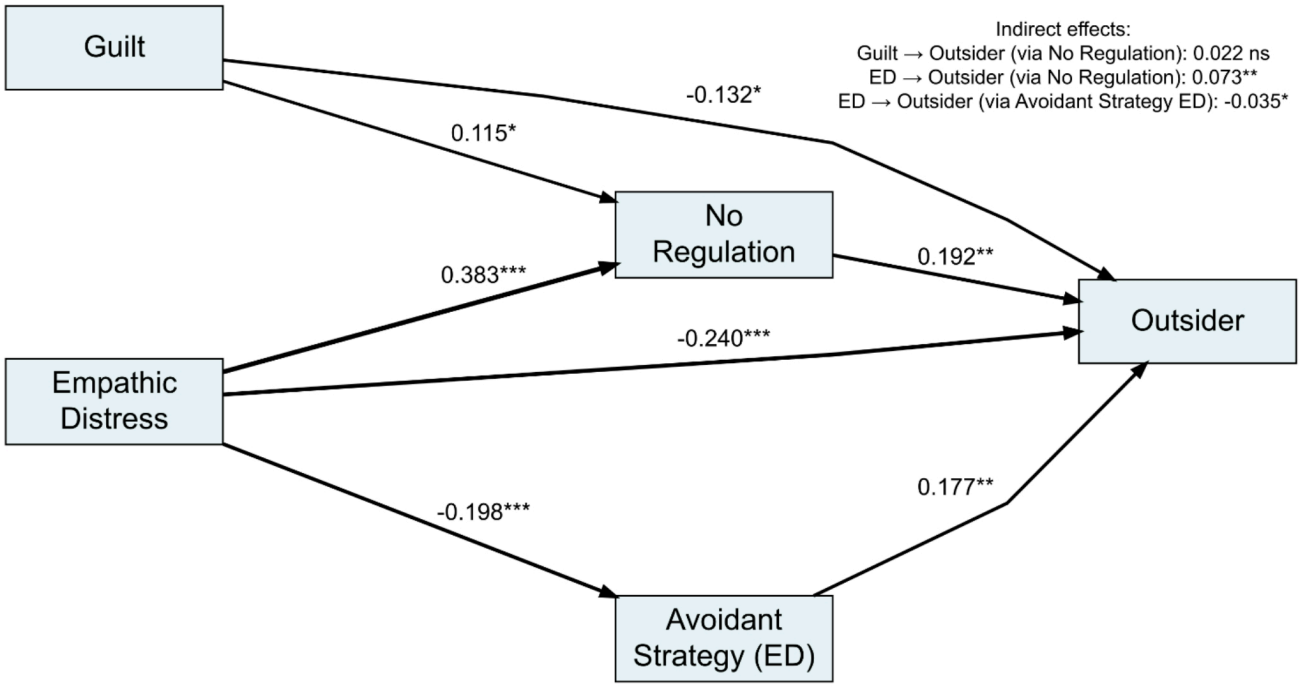


Figure 2

Direct and indirect effects of regulation and moral emotions on the role of outsider

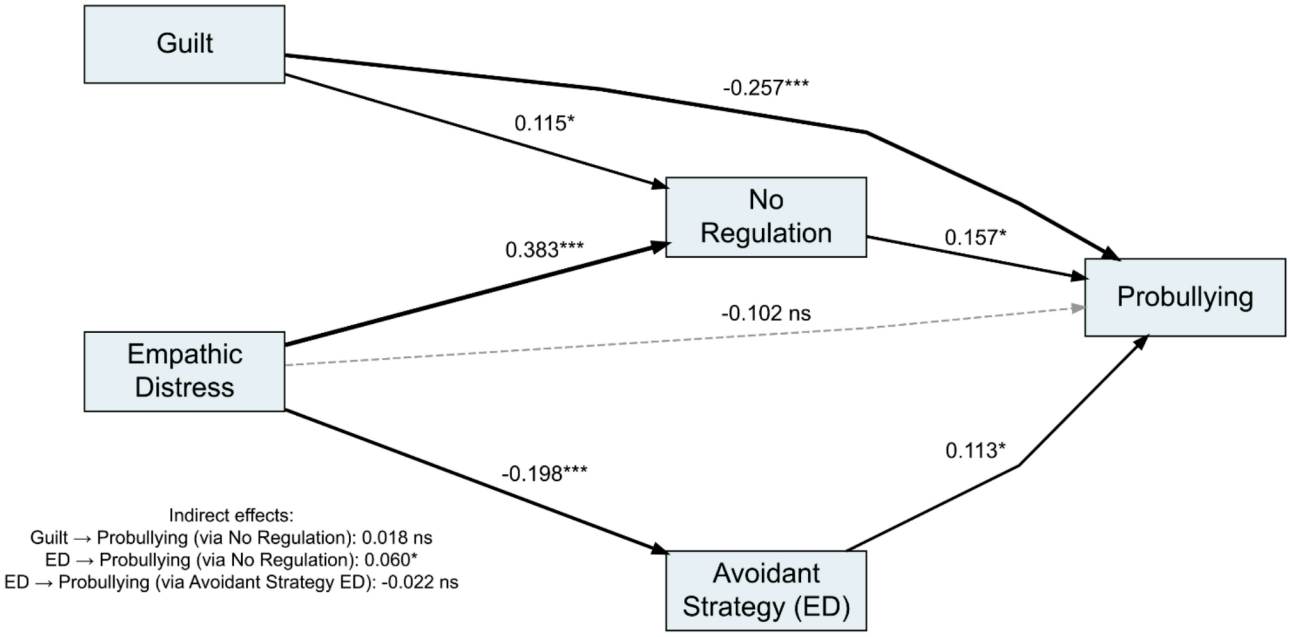


Figure 3

Direct and indirect effects of regulation and moral emotions on the pro-bullying role

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