

A Review of Research on the Antecedents of Moral Disengagement

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Abstract: The progress of today's times and the rapid development of science and technology have led to the basic satisfaction of people's material life, and the pursuit of spiritual life has become higher and higher. However, the rich material life does not make the construction of spiritual civilization smooth, on the contrary, the major media nowadays often report some immoral behaviour in society. Immoral behaviour is defined as behaviour by individuals that violates the moral standards of the society and culture in which they live for their own benefit, to the detriment of the interests of others and the public good. Moral disengagement play a mediating role in explaining unethical behaviour. Moral disengagement are specific cognitive tendencies that individuals develop that include redefining their behaviour to make it appear less harmful, minimising their own responsibility in the consequences of their behaviour and reducing their identification with the suffering of the harmed target. In this paper, we will consider and explore the antecedents of moral disengagement based on existing theory and research in terms of the factors that influence moral disengagement.

1. Introduction

In recent years, malignant phenomena such as the "Qingyang jumping girl incident", "pregnant woman tripping over a child incident" and "Red Yellow Blue kindergarten child abuse incident" have occurred frequently, triggering public concern and debate. The public has been concerned about these incidents and they have been hotly debated, and people are divided in their opinions. Most of the time, however, people only stand on the sidelines and try to solve the problem from the perspective of the incident itself, which tends to ignore the essence of unethical behaviour. The best explanation for unethical behaviour lies in the underlying psychological processes^[1]. Moral disengagement, as proposed by Bandura, can play an important mediating role in explaining unethical behaviour. At the same time, our research and understanding of the antecedent variables of moral disengagement is still insufficient, and this 'black box' state is not conducive to a deeper understanding and research of the concept of moral disengagement, so in this paper, a series of thoughts and discussions on the antecedents of moral disengagement will be conducted based on existing theory and research.

2. The concept of moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a concept originally developed by Bandura in 1986 from the perspective of social cognitive theory to explain the immoral behaviour of individuals. Moral disengagement are specific cognitive dispositions that individuals develop, or can be described as a form of cognitive dissonance, which refers to a series of excuses that individuals use to save themselves from self-condemnation when they do something unethical. These cognitive tendencies include redefining one's negative, harmful or unethical immoral behaviour to make it appear less harmful, thereby minimising one's responsibility for the consequences of the act and reducing one's identification with the pain of the injured target^[2].

Bandura argues that an individual's decision to behave ethically is influenced primarily by moral

mechanisms and moral disengagement. Moral mechanisms drive individuals to behave morally; moral excuses induce individuals to act morally. Most individuals have their own standards of moral behaviour, and their internal moral mechanisms play a self-regulatory role in inhibiting unethical behaviour and reinforcing ethical behaviour, so that individuals behave in accordance with their internal moral standards. However, moral disengagement can be used to 'bypass' the constraints of internal moral mechanisms through eight excuses that allow individuals to commit more unethical acts with a clear conscience. These eight excuses are moral justification, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, displacement of responsibility, euphemistic labeling, dehumanization of victim, attribution of blame, and distortion of consequences.

To put it succinctly, we can understand moral deference as a mechanism of individual self-regulation and protection from guilt and self-blame by disabling the moral self-regulatory function. Thus, individuals with high moral disengagement are more likely to behave immorally^[3].

3. The antecedents of moral excuses

Since there is no evidence as to how moral disengagement works, it is debatable whether moral dispositions are mediating or moderating variables, and whether they are psychological processes or psychological dispositions. In this paper, we will analyse both external and internal factors, discussing it primarily as a mental process and also briefly discussing the factors that influence it as a mental disposition.

3.1 External factors

3.1.1 The influence of environment on moral disengagement

The environment in which an individual lives, such as family, work and regional culture, is an important factor in their level of moral disengagement.

An individual's home environment can significantly influence their level of moral excuses, with positive parenting styles having a significant negative impact on children's moral disengagement^[4] and a significant positive correlation between the moral excuses of juvenile zui offenders and their lack of stable accommodation after detention^[5].

Parental conflict can have a significant impact on adolescent aggression^{[6][7]}. This is because violent marital conflict provides children with a range of poor interpersonal patterns, children acquire poor beliefs about aggression as a primary problem-solving strategy by observing such interpersonal patterns in their parents, and parental behaviour and consequences in conflict indirectly reinforce this misconception in adolescents, leading them to engage in more aggressive behaviour^[8]. As a result, adolescents who grow up in an environment of high parental conflict show more nervousness, timidity or shyness, misbehaviour and rejection by peers, and exhibit more aggression in their behaviour^[9]. At the same time, a higher frequency of parental conflict can also make adolescents more likely to choose video games with violent content and to develop addictive tendencies^[10]. Secondly, parental abuse significantly increases the level of moral disengagement of juvenile offenders^[11], while positive parenting significantly decreases the level of moral disengagement of adolescents^[4].

Studies of prison officers have found that as their caseload increases, there is a significant increase in the average level of moral disengagement for both those who work with offenders and those who work with victims^[12].

The culture of a particular area has a subtle influence on the psychology and behaviour of the people in that area, and South C·R's research found that there is a positive correlation between prison culture and moral disengagement, making the process of prisonisation a process whereby prisoners are gradually inculcated with distorted values as a result of being in a prison environment for a long period of time, and these distorted perceptions are conducive to the creation of moral disengagement. Some inmates who bully others believe that their bullying is not justified because it is only done to gain a higher status in prison^[13].

3.1.2 The influence of education on moral disengagement

Educational attainment is also an important factor in individual moral disengagement, with the lower the level of education, the higher the level of moral disengagement ^[14].

Research on ways to reduce moral disengagement has also begun in the field. For example, McAlister found that giving students a simple description and explanation of the principles and processes of moral disengagement was effective in reducing individual levels of moral disengagement.

3.1.3 The influence of video game products and violent audio on moral disengagement in Life

One of the interesting studies in the literature on moral turpitude examines the role of video games in increasing moral disengagement and how it can amplify the negative effects. This study shows that there is a positive correlation between the frequency of exposure to violent video games and changes in the morality of individuals, such as the game GTA5 ^[15]. Furthermore, after playing such games, players show lower levels of self-control and higher levels of cheating tendencies and aggression ^[16]. There are many hints of moral disengagement in violent video games (such as killing zombie targets and similar dehumanisations), changing the game's cover story (invaders defending their country or fighting to liberate concentration camps as the "righteous"), which serve as moral justifications, influence the gamer's feelings of guilt and remorse, and They enhance the enjoyment of the game. Thus, when virtual violence is packaged as morally justified, gamers carry less guilt and experience fewer negative emotions, and the game becomes a cue that influences the level of moral justification for the individual's emotional response to the violence ^[17].

3.2 Internal factors

3.2.1 The influence of age and gender on moral disengagement

Studies have shown that gender differences significantly affect the level of individual moral disengagement, and the level of moral disengagement of men is significantly higher than that of women. In addition, Paciello et al. 's (2008) follow-up study also found that the gender difference of moral disengagement did not change significantly with age, but the overall level of moral disengagement decreased significantly with the increase of individual age (14-20 years old).

However, the study of Jiping YANG ^[18] found that the level of moral disengagement of adolescents increased significantly with age. This difference is related to the different cultures of the East and the West. Two different conclusions can prove that age has a certain impact on the level of moral disengagement.

3.2.2 The influence of behavior on moral disengagement

In the best batch of moral inference tests to date, Shu LL et al. ^[19] found that cheating led to increased levels of moral inference and also reduced an individual's ability to remember moral rules. Gino and Galinsky extended this finding by showing that having someone in close proximity to a cheated person increased their level of moral disengagement ^[20]. These studies provide first-hand evidence for moral disengagement as a motivated cognitive process: it is in the interest of participants to disengage from internalised anti-cheating standards when individuals are more likely to do so as participants.

In related work, Paharia et al. also found that the reasoning process of moral disengagement is generated by a motivated process, with its finding that people are more likely to support goods produced without meeting internalized standards of morality or services given by bad labour than to consider the same goods or services produced under more standard working conditions when considering the use of the goods or services they want ^[21].

On the other hand, Barsky found that greater involvement in the setting of performance goals at work can lead to individuals being less likely to engage in moral justification and shirking of responsibility in moral disengagement ^[22].

In the context of sport, Hodge and Lonsdale found that strict control over supervising athletic coaches induced higher levels of moral disengagement in athletes, which increased subsequent

more antisocial behaviour by athletes towards their teammates and opponents. However, if supportive supervision was used it caused lower levels of moral disengagement among athletes [23].

3.2.3 The influence of individual thinking mode on moral disengagement

In 2015, Bustamante and Chaux found that critical thinking intervened and reduced students' levels of moral disengagement in a study of ninth graders [24]. This study suggests that appropriate educational teaching methods are more effective in producing students with high moral standards.

In contrast, Kish-Gephart et al. found that highly egoistic behaviour was detrimental to moral regulation mechanisms, i.e., highly egoistic behaviour caused significant increases in individuals' levels of moral disengagement [25].

3.2.4 The influence of psychological state on moral disengagement

Chugh and his colleagues found that when people feel anxious and upset, they are more susceptible to moral disengagement and the consequences of their behaviour [26].

Gino and Galinsky 's found that developing close relationships and deeper interactions with people who behave unethically increases the level of moral disengagement [20].

For adolescents, psychological abuse and neglect will not only increase aggressive behavior, but also affect the individual 's moral cognitive tendency, so that individuals morally consider aggressive behavior is normal [27]. Similar studies have found that parental abuse has a significant positive impact on individual moral disengagement, and abused individuals have impaired moral cognition [28]. They have similar levels of moral maturity with non-abused individuals, but will regard their own moral deviant behavior as acceptable [29].

3.3 The influencing factors of moral disengagement as a psychological trait

As a mediator, moral disengagement seems to act as a facilitator in less ethical environments: in the right environment, high moral disengagement amplifies unethical behavior. White-Ajmani and Bursik found that morally superior proponents who were insulted in this environment were more likely to harm those who insulted them, such as giving them hot sauce [30].

Detert et al. (2008) argued that individual empathy and moral identity have a significant negative impact on the level of individual moral disengagement, the luck factor of cynicism and locus of control have a significant positive impact on individual moral disengagement, while the internal factor and power factor of locus of control have no significant impact on moral disengagement.

4. Conclusion

Through literature review, this paper finds that moral disengagement plays an intermediary role between the external environment and aggressive behavior, namely ' external environment → moral disengagement → aggressive behavior ' model [31]. The generation and degree of moral disengagement are related to factors such as the individual 's environment, education level, family environment, and the mode of dealing with parents.

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