

PSYSOC 2013

# Mechanisms Of Moral Disengagement: An Analysis From Early Adolescence To Youth

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## Abstract

Moral disengagement is known as a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to justify their reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions in order to preserve the self-image (Bandura, 1986). The goals of this study were to analyze the development of moral disengagement mechanisms from early adolescence to youth and to deepen the differences for age and sex in Italian context. The sample was formed by 1083 participants, aged between early adolescence and youth, randomly recruited from Public Junior and Senior High Schools and Psychology Degree Courses at the University of Catania (Sicily, Italy). We used the Italian version of Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara et al., 2009) in order to explore the eight mechanisms of disengagement. Results demonstrated that early and middle-late adolescents were more likely than university students to use all the mechanisms of moral disengagement; additionally, boys were more likely than girls to adopt moral disengagement to justify their own actions. Future research could deepen the relationship between moral reasoning (Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992) and the use of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 2001) from adolescence to youth in Italian context.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.

*Keywords:* Moral disengagement, adolescence, psychology students;

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## 1. Introduction

The deepening of moral disengagement is considered as one of the most relevant themes of developmental and educational psychology, also for its relationships with other important socio-cognitive processes, such as moral reasoning and prosocial behavior. Moral disengagement is considered as a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that

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allow individuals to justify their reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions in order to preserve the self-image (Bandura, 1986), alleviating the cognitive dissonance (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). It is known as “the tendency to justify one’s actions damaging the social safety with the goal of self-esteem preservation, minimizing the individual responsibility for the injury to the others” (Caprara et al., 2006; Caprara et al., 2009). This construct was analyzed in various countries and in relation to other psychological dimensions, such as prosocial behaviour and prosocial moral reasoning (Carlo & Randall, 2002; De Caroli & Sagone, 2013), aggression (Bandura et al., 2001; Paciello et al., 2008), antisocial behaviours in sport (Boardley & Kavussani, 2009), bullying and cyberbullying (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Bauman, 2010; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012), approval of violence toward animals (Vollum, Buffington-Vollum, & Longmire, 2004), and so on. As reported by Carlo and Randall (2002), the more the children and adolescents were likely to behave in a prosocial way, the less they adopted the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Bauman (2010) found that moral disengagement was predictor of cyberbullying behavioural tendencies in response to a hypothetical scenario, but not of self-reported engagement in cyberbullying. As noted by Pornari and Wood (2010), the nature of cyberbullying (that is, distance from the victim, lack of visibility, secrecy of cyberbullying perpetration) does not activate the need to self-regulate and moralize behaviour in the same way in which traditional bullying would do. Furthermore, Vollum et al. (2004) analyzed that individuals who tended to adopt the mechanisms of moral disengagement in regard to the treatment of animals displayed less concern about violence against animals and were less punitive in their attitudes toward such acts; dehumanization and property attitudes were the strongest predictors of concern about animal cruelty and abuse and punitive attitudes toward those who committed acts of violence against animals. Finally, De Caroli and Sagone (2013) found that the more the adolescents were likely to behave in a prosocial way, the less they adopted mechanisms of moral disengagement; in addition, the more the adolescents believed in a just world, the more they tended to behave in a prosocial way.

Moral disengagement grouped eight different mechanisms useful to reduce or minimize the severity of behaviours activating the self-censure in each individual: 1) moral justification, 2) advantageous comparison, 3) diffusion of responsibility, 4) displacement of responsibility, 5) euphemistic labeling, 6) dehumanization of victim, 7) attribution of blame, and 8) distortion of consequences. The moral justification is a process in which damaging behavior is considered acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy. The advantageous comparison is referred to behaviours valued as more severe in order to dislocate the attention from negative effects of individual outcomes. The diffusion and displacement of responsibility allow individuals to share the responsibility for deleterious actions with the ingroup in order to minimize the severity of behaviours realized by the single person. The euphemistic labeling is linked to the verbal manipulation to reduce the cruelty and severity of actions. The dehumanization of victim allows individuals to deprive the victim of human characteristics. The attribution of blame is a mechanism that allows individuals to consider his or her own detrimental behaviours as caused by the victim. Finally, the distortion of consequences is used to alter the effects of deleterious actions in order to reduce personal misconduct. Considering the importance of these mechanisms operating in moral disengagement and engaging the moral growth of each individual, we decided to analyze the cross-age development of moral disengagement in a widespread sample of participants, from early adolescence to youth and recruited in several cities of Sicily (Italy), and to deepen the differences for age and sex.

### *1.1. Hypotheses*

According to previous researches carried out in Italian context, we hypothesized that: early and middle-late adolescents will be likely to adopt mechanisms of moral disengagement more than young adults ( $H_1$ ); boys will be more likely to use these mechanisms than girls ( $H_2$ ).

### *1.2. Sample*

The sample of this research was formed by 1083 participants, divided in 453 boys and 630 girls, gathered in three age-groups from early adolescence to youth: n.545 early adolescents (50,3% of sample: 11-13 yrs.), n.342 middle-late adolescents (31,6% of sample: 14-18 yrs.), and n.196 young adults (18,1% of sample: 19-34 yrs.). Early and

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