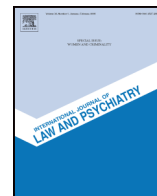




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Investigating the relationships between antisocial behaviors, psychopathic traits, and moral disengagement

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relations between morally disengaged attitudes, psychopathic affective traits, and a variety of antisocial and risky behaviors in a sample of adults ($N = 181$). A second aim of the study was to examine the unique contributions of moral disengagement and psychopathic traits in predicting problematic behavior while the other construct is statistically controlled. Results indicated that whereas psychopathic traits and moral disengagement were both uniquely predictive of non-violent antisocial behaviors, only remorselessness was uniquely predictive of violence and only morally disengaged attitudes were uniquely predictive of academic cheating. Differing relationships also emerged by gender.

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1. Introduction

A great deal of research effort has been dedicated to understanding why some individuals behave antisocially, and why others do not. A portion of this research has focused on morality and the phenomena of violations of individuals' rights and welfare (Turkel, 1983). A particularly fruitful explanation for individual differences in amoral acts has been focusing on moral reasoning and several self-serving cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to *morally disengage* from the consequences of their harmful actions (Bandura, 1991). A somewhat separate line of research has examined traits associated with psychopathy in attempting to explain individual differences in harmful behavior. The shallow-affect traits associated with psychopathy, such as reduced remorse and empathy, have been associated with aggressive behavior and delinquency (Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003). Each of these lines of research has had success in the prediction of antisocial behavior, however few studies have addressed the relative contributions and interactions of these traits and cognitions, especially in non-adjudicated populations.

In attempting to explain why ordinary or "good" people perpetrate malicious, sometimes extraordinarily atrocious, actions against others, Bandura (1990, 1991) focused on the relationship between an individual's moral reasoning and their behavior towards others. Throughout maturation, children develop guides of conduct that delineate right from wrong and acceptable from unacceptable. Typically, individuals engage in behaviors reasoned as appropriate and provide a sense of self-worth, and avoid those behaviors that would lead to

negative evaluations of self. Whereas this process ostensibly seems quite simple, Bandura (2002) elaborates that this behavior regulation process allows for either activation or disengagement of these self-sanctions through both social and psychological processes. Because of this selective activation, individuals who normally behave in socially appropriate, moral ways may engage in behaviors that are truly harmful to others, yet face no internal feelings of self-condemnation. Bandura referred to this process as selective moral disengagement in the exercise of individual moral agency.

1.1. Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement, as described well by Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, and Rock Henderson (2010), often centers around four categories which have been theoretically and empirically broken down further into eight mechanisms. Each of these four larger categories allows individuals to behave hurtfully while avoiding negative self-perceptions, both during and after the act. In one category, individuals can change their perceptions of the victim by *assigning blame to the victim* for provoking the aggression, or *dehumanizing* the victim in some way. This latter mechanism has been further delineated in research as animalistic or mechanistic dehumanization (Van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2014). Another category allows individuals to *distort or disregard the consequences* of their harmful actions by minimizing or misconstruing the potential or occurred outcomes. Thirdly, individuals may *minimize their agentive role* in the behavior by displacing responsibility to a third party or diffusing responsibility across a larger group or context. Lastly, individuals may *cognitively restructure* the behavior itself. Here, individuals make moral justifications for their actions, create an advantageous comparison between their action and a more harmful potential or previous act, or

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utilize euphemistic labeling of a behavior, allowing a decrease in the perceived severity of the act.

Much of the research on moral disengagement has examined children and adolescents, and has found a significant positive relationship between those who exhibit moral disengagement and engage in aggressive behavior (for a recent meta-analysis, see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). In studies examining both the peer-nominated and self-reports of youth bullying, moral disengagement has emerged as a significant predictor of aggressive behavior (Obermann, 2011). Additionally, researchers have shown associations between moral disengagement and cyberbullying, video game cheating, and aversive behaviors directed towards others in experimental settings (Robson & Witenberg, 2013; Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman, 2014).

Researchers have also found that morally disengaged cognitions are not only related to young adult and adult aggression, but that these cognitions may interact with other factors to increase antisocial behaviors. Kiriakidis (2008) found higher levels of moral disengagement in youth offenders compared to a community sample, and also suggested that moral disengagement influences delinquency in this sample over and above most social, family, and lifestyle characteristics. Other researchers have investigated moral disengagement as a mediator, finding that in late adolescent and young adult samples moral disengagement mediates the relationship between peer rejection and later criminal behavior (Fontaine, Fida, Paciello, Tisak, & Caprara, 2014), as well as hostile rumination and violence (Caprara, Tisak, Alessandri, Fontaine, Fida, & Paciello, 2014).

1.2. Psychopathic affective traits

In these studies, the process of selective disengagement may explain why some youth and young adults who possess correlates to aggression perpetrate those acts, whereas others do not. To undergo this process of removing moral sanctions however, individuals must first assume that antisocial acts are indeed harmful and associate these acts with remorse, shame, or other negative self-evaluations. An individual who lacks empathy or remorse towards potential victims will not require the disengagement of self-sanctions to commit aggressive acts. Researchers investigating this socioemotional dysfunction have done so by measuring psychopathic affective traits, typically comprised of callousness, remorselessness, and unemotionality. When combined with antisocial behavior and impulsivity, these affective traits make up the core definition of psychopathy (Blair, 2013; Hare, 1994). This callousness, particularly lack of affective empathy, has been linked consistently with acts of physical aggression in adolescents (see Lovett & Sheffield, 2007 for review). The process by which this shallow affect leads to antisocial behavior is not completely known, but one possibility is that because individuals with these traits do not respond to punishment in childhood (Pardini, Lochman, & Frick, 2003), and are sometimes in fact labeled as “fearless” (Frick & White, 2008). Hence, they do not have a typical internalization for morality and understanding of moral behavior; they affectively do not experience a behavior as wrong (Blair, 2007). Additionally, youth with callous–unemotional traits expect more positive outcomes for aggressive responses in situations with peers (Pardini, Lochman, & Frick, 2003), cognitively priming them for antisocial behavior.

Whereas prior research has examined empathy (or lack thereof) and moral disengagement as predictors of antisocial acts in youth and adulthood, few studies have examined the unique contributions or the interaction of these two constructs in non-adjudicated samples. In one investigation of low-income boys, the association between parental rejection and antisocial behaviors was mediated by both empathy and moral disengagement (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2009). Here, empathy robustly predicted moral disengagement and mediated the relationship between other variables and moral disengagement, such as early parenting variables. Another large study of felony-offending male adolescents examined the relation between moral disengagement and

antisocial behavior while statistically adjusting for callous–unemotional (CU) traits (Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011). These researchers found that CU traits were highly correlated with moral disengagement, and moderately related to self-reported antisocial behavior. Furthermore, the relationship between moral disengagement and offending remained consistent both with and without the variance of CU; as the authors state “This finding suggests that the contribution of callousness to antisocial behavior is distinct from that of moral disengagement, in spite of the association between these variables” (pg. 1630).

In light of these findings, and the need to examine these relations in non-adjudicated samples, the current study aimed to investigate the unique contributions of psychopathic affective traits and moral disengagement processes on a variety of antisocial and risky behaviors of adults. Based on a previous research, we anticipated that callous–unemotional traits would be positively related to morally disengaged attitudes (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2009; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011), and that both callous–unemotional traits and moral disengagement would uniquely predict a variety of antisocial and rule-breaking behaviors in a university sample of adults. Additionally, because previous examinations have found sex differences in morally disengaged justifications (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012), regressions were computed separately for men and women.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 181 (51% female) adults attending either a four-year university (69%) or two-year vocational college (31%) in the Rocky Mountain region. These participants were part of a larger study of gene–environment interactions, and were recruited through either their introductory Psychology course or their College Success course. The average age at participation was 23, but participants' ages ranged from 16 to 61. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was similar to the region with 89% non-Hispanic Caucasian, 4% Asian American, 3% Native American, and 4% other. Twenty-nine percent of the sample indicated having no children, whereas the remainder of the participants indicated that they either had one or more biological or non-biological children.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Moral disengagement

The 32-item Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement scale was used to examine disengaged attitudes (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Participants responded on a four-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” to statements that justify negative social behavior. Example statements were: “It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble,” “Stealing some money is not too serious compared to those who steal a lot of money,” and “If people fight and misbehave at work, it is their superior's fault.” Higher summed scores indicated greater moral disengagement. A previous research utilizing this measure with young adults has indicated an acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$, Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008), and that items load on a single factor (Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011).

2.2.2. Psychopathic affective traits

Because the majority of these participants were young adults, callous–unemotional traits were measured using the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002). The scale included 15 self-report items assessing callousness (e.g. “I usually become sad when I see other people crying or sad (reverse coded),”) unemotionality (e.g. “I don't let my feelings affect me as much as other people's feelings seem to affect them,”) and

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