Moral disengagement, the dark triad, and unethical consumer attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Bandura's theory of moral disengagement explains how otherwise ethical persons can behave immorally. We examined whether a trait model of general personality and the "dark triad" underlay moral disengagement, the relationship these constructs have to unethical consumer attitudes, and whether moral disengagement provided incremental validity in the prediction of antisocial behaviour.
Methods: Self-report data were obtained from a community sample of 380 adults via an online survey that administered all measures.
Results: Correlations between unethical consumer attitudes, lower Agreeableness, lower Conscientiousness, higher moral disengagement, higher psychopathy, and higher Machiavellianism were captured by a single factor. When this broad factor was examined using regression, demographic, personality and the dark triad traits all predicted moral disengagement, specific influences being age, education, Intellect, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. A similar model examining predictors of unethical consumer attitudes again found all blocks contributed to the outcome, with specific influence provided by age, Intellect, and moral disengagement, the latter showing incremental validity as a predictor of unethical consumer attitudes.
Conclusions: Moral disengagement is based on low Agreeableness, Machiavellianism and psychopathic-type traits, but provides incremental validity in predicting antisocial attitudes to a trait model alone. Narcissism is neither related to moral disengagement, nor unethical consumer attitudes.

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While people generally know right from wrong, some find it easier to disengage from their ethical principles than others. This behaviour is called moral disengagement. A common example of moral disengagement is consumer dishonesty, which is defined as: "the moral principles and standards that guide behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services" (Muncy & Vitell, 1992, pp. 298). Apparent "petty" dishonesty (Egan & Taylor, 2010) harms UK businesses to the cost of at least £294 million pounds per annum (National Fraud Authority., 2011). The current study examined general and darker personality traits underpinning moral disengagement, using unethical consumer attitudes as a specific criminological outcome.

Moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986) provides a specific model to explain how persons breach their personal ethics. Individuals generally seek consistency in held moral beliefs to avoid a discrepancy between what they believe to be right, and how they actually behave. This is because conflicts between inconsistent behaviours and beliefs classically produce feelings of psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). If one can disengage from personal moral standards, it becomes easier to justify engaging in behaviours normally considered immoral. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) described eight mechanisms by which disengagement of morals may occur; moral justification (justifying a wrongful act as virtuous in terms of the perceived potential outcome); euphemistic labelling (using language to conceal guilt by distorting what happened, as when a thief says they "found" a stolen item); advantageous comparison (justifying a wrongful act by fallaciously comparing it to another's more egregious acts); displacement of responsibility (when an individual's wrong-doing is attributed to being under pressure or orders from another); diffusion of responsibility (where a shared decision to behave immorally means no individual involved in the wrongful act believes they are fully culpable for the events which occur); disregarding or distorting the consequences (ignoring or minimising the outcome of the wrongful action); dehumanisation (rejecting the human qualities of one's opponent and seeing them as bestial); and attribution of blame (suggesting the blame for wrongful action lies in the provocation of the victim who

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brought the trouble on themselves). Such moral disengagement is seen in rationalisations for antisocial and delinquent acts (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011).

Moral disengagement is significantly and positively correlated with unethical workplace decision making and behaviour, and is an indirect proxy for risk of white-collar offending (Barsky, 2011; Christian & Ellis, 2013). For example, Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008) found higher-order qualities of personality such as empathy and moral identity (the degree moral concerns are perceived as part of your own identity; Aquino & Reed, 2002) correlated negatively with an individual's propensity to morally disengage, whereas general cynicism and chance locus of control orientation (the belief that chance determines an individual's outcome) were positively correlated with the construct. They also found the relationship between higher-order personality and unethical decision making mediated by moral disengagement. Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, and Mayer (2012) subsequently found positive significant associations between moral disengagement, self-reported unethical behaviour, and self-reported decisions to commit fraud. While these results are salutary, few studies have examined more fundamental influences underpinning moral disengagement or it's correlates, for example, the Five-Factor/Big Five Models of personality (FFM/BFM; Goldberg, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992), or the negative dispositional traits found within the dark triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002)

The dark triad (DT) comprises three constructs; psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Though scores on the DT correlate with traits derived from both FFM and BFM conceptualisations of general personality (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Pailing, Boon, & Egan, 2014), Agreeableness has the greatest relative importance for DT prediction (O'Boyle, Donelson, Banks, Story, & White, in press). Exemplifying O'Boyle et al.'s observations, Egan, Chan, and Shorter (2014) found Machiavellianism and psychopathy driven by low Agreeableness alone, whereas narcissism presented a much more complex FFM profile. This finding reiterated narcissism as the 'lightest' dimension of the DT (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). When measured concurrently with narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism are better predictors of unethical and antisocial outcomes (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Tang, Chen, & Sutarso, 2008). O'Boyle et al. (in press) argue that given Machiavellianism and psychopathy are highly correlated, and show a similar pattern of correlations in relation to the FFM, these two constructs may be better regarded as a single psychopathic entity, albeit one differentially expressed. This view has a precedent in the work of McHoskey, Worzel, and Szyarto (1998).

There have been a number of specific studies using models from social psychology examining aspects of moral disengagement. Neutralisation, false-returning purchased items as "faulty" or "unwanted" (associated with thrill-seeking and less self-consciousness), anticipated guilt following unethical consumer activity, and the influence of guilt and opportunism on receiving too much change at a supermarket checkout have all been examined (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2011; Harris, 2008; Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2005, 2006). Moore et al.'s (2012) systematic studies into moral disengagement in occupational settings measured Machiavellianism alongside measures of empathy and perspective-taking, finding these predictors associated with a greater ability to morally disengage, their effect was replicated across two studies, while a fourth study found dispositional guilt negatively correlated with the propensity to morally disengage. All of these studies touch on aspects of the relationship between general personality, moral disengagement, the dark triad, and unethical consumer activity, but none studied the dispositional foundations upon which their findings arguably stand.

Bandura (1986) suggested the cognitive pathways by which moral disengagement shapes antisocial behaviour are similar to those generally rationalising interpersonal aggression and delinquent conduct. The current study explores the relationship between general personality, moral disengagement, the dark triad, and unethical consumer behaviour, examining two questions. Firstly, how much is moral disengagement driven by more basic dispositional traits, in particular low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness, and the dark triad. Secondly, does the addition of moral disengagement provide incremental validity to a basic trait model predicting unethical consumer attitudes in which low Agreeableness, low Conscientiousness and the DT are expected to explain most of the variance?

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

This study used a within-subjects correlational design, and was approved by the research ethics committee. G-Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) suggesting 108 persons were needed for a medium effect size at a statistical power level of 0.8 when using a .05 criterion for statistical significance of $P < .05$. The study was administered on-line via GoogleDocs and 382 persons participated. Having oversampled, neither type 1 nor type 2 errors were a concern, and our effect size became more important. To focus on the most important effects, we adopted a significance criterion of $P < .01$ or above.

A convenience participants sample were recruited through social media, the internal email of several businesses, word of mouth, and a university student participation resource in exchange for course credits. All persons gave informed consent. Two participants were identified as outliers on the psychopathy and general personality measures, and were excluded from the data set, giving a final sample of 380 participants (271 females, 109 males). Over half the final sample (51.90%) was employed (41.1% full-time, 10.8% part-time). Under a third of the cohort were students (28.2%), 11.3% were retired, and 1.8% unemployed. The mean age was 37.99 years (SD = 16.50, range 18–83, median age = 34).

2.2. Measures

In all cases, scales used Likert responding, with items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 ("strongly agree"), 3 being a neutral response. Some items in the scales were reverse-keyed; items were corrected as necessary before analyses.

The International Personality Item Pool: (IPIP-50: Goldberg, 1999). The IPIP is a 50-item measure of the "Big Five" personality dimensions; extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Intellect. Each of the five scales was measured using 10 items, with a mean reliability of 0.84 for the five scales (Goldberg, 1999). Greater scores indicated higher levels of the dimension measured.

The Muncy–Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale: (CES: Vitell & Muncy, 2005). The CES is a 31-item measure with seven subscales, all of which are reliable and valid. Four of the subscales relate to unethical consumer attitudes; actively benefiting from illegal actions (ACT; 5 items), passively benefiting (PAS; 6 items), questionable but legal actions (QUEST; 5 items) and media downloading (DL; 2 items). (The other three CES subscales relate to positive ethical behaviours; recycling (4 items), behaving in an honest way (4 items), and activities perceived as involving no harm (e.g., recording a programme off the TV rather than buying the DVD; 5 items)). For the purpose of this study, greater unethical consumer behaviour was defined by higher scores on the sum of three of