



Situating moral disengagement: Motivated reasoning in meat consumption and substitution



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ABSTRACT

This work advances towards an increased understanding of moral disengagement and individual differences in the maintenance of widespread and cherished harmful behaviors. Drawing on meat consumption and substitution as an opportunity to study the process of moral self-regulation in situ, it presents a measure of selective deactivation of moral self-regulatory processes when considering the impact of meat consumption (i.e. the Moral Disengagement in Meat Questionnaire – MDMQ). The MDMQ developed from four sequential studies following a mixed-methods approach. Two preliminary studies (40 and 410 participants, respectively) provided input to develop the construct and initial pool of items. Two additional studies (1016 and 318 participants, respectively) allowed the assessment of item selection, factor structure, reliability, convergent and concurrent validities, predictive ability, and measurement invariance. The MDMQ was associated with a variety of individual differences concerning moral self-regulation (i.e. propensity to morally disengage; moral identity; empathy; moral emotions) and endorsement of dominance ideologies (i.e. social dominance orientation; speciesism; human supremacy beliefs). In a sequential mediation model, frequency of meat consumption affected willingness towards meat substitution indirectly via meat attachment and moral disengagement. We offer an interpretation of moral disengagement as a motivated reasoning process which is triggered by loss aversion and dissonance avoidance.

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1. Introduction

Why do good people do bad things? The theory of moral disengagement provides some insight into this timeless question. This theory explains the exercise of moral agency through self-regulatory processes (Bandura, 1991; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Put briefly, it proposes that the process of moral self-regulation can be selectively deactivated in order to reduce dissonance, in light of the consideration of the damage associated with one's own conduct. This allows engaging in self-serving detrimental behaviors without incurring self-evaluative emotional reactions, such as guilt (Bandura, 1999, 2007). In particular, this theory provides a coherent framework tying together the array of different cognitive mechanisms that serve to deactivate moral self-regulation, and putting them under a single overarching construct of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008).

Specifically, it describes how a set of eight cognitive mechanisms falling in four broader categories operate together to allow one to support or perpetrate harmful acts while maintaining a positive self-image (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). The first category refers

to the cognitive reconstrual of the conduct so it is not viewed as immoral in spite of the harm it entails. It includes moral justification (i.e. making detrimental behavior acceptable by portraying it as means to serve higher ends), euphemistic labeling (i.e. using euphemistic language so that harmful activities are downplayed and seemingly in agreement with moral standards) and advantageous comparison (i.e., comparing one's harmful conduct to worse inhumanities). The second category consists in obscuring personal responsibility to minimize one's role in causing harm. It includes diffusion (i.e. projecting responsibility into the larger group) and displacement of responsibility (i.e. framing behaviors as the result of situational pressures or other people's demands). The third category consists in misrepresenting injurious consequences that flow from one's behavior (i.e. through selective inattention, avoidance and dissociation, or minimization). Finally, the fourth category focuses on the recipients of detrimental conduct and includes dehumanization (i.e. viewing the recipients as unable to experience feelings and unworthy of moral consideration) and victim blaming (i.e. viewing victims as accountable for the harm).

1.1. Moral disengagement: stable trait vs. situated process

Empirical work to date has generally supported moral disengagement theory, which has seen an increase of research interest in recent

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years (Page & Pina, 2015; Reynolds, Dang, Yam, & Leavitt, 2014). For instance, it has been found that scores of moral disengagement associate with a wide variety of aggressive and unethical behaviors in different contexts, such as counterproductive work behavior (Fida et al., 2014), workplace harassment (Claybourn, 2011), bullying (Obermann, 2011), acceptance of violence against animals (Vollum, Buffington-Vollum, & Longmire, 2004), support of military force (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007), violations of civic duties (Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009), unethical consumer attitudes (Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015), and aggressiveness towards others (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008). However, there have been concerns with one critical issue that clouds its contributions: moral disengagement is originally theorized as a situated cognitive process, but its measure and empirical operationalization has so far focused on an individual's propensity to morally disengage from a set of different forms of detrimental conduct, reporting at the same time to diverse contexts and interpersonal relationships. In other words, there is a sharp disconnection between theorizing a situated cognitive process while measuring a stable trait which seems to be more related to a general lack of concern for others, rather than an indicator of actual disengagement processes (Reynolds et al., 2014).

In spite of the strengths of the moral disengagement framework (i.e. putting several cognitive mechanisms that deactivate moral self-regulation under an overarching construct of moral disengagement), this issue limits the theory's contributions in at least three critical ways. First, it ends up suffering from one of the main limitations it originally meant to address, which was to move beyond the study of morality in terms of abstract principles measured under decontextualized or fabricated circumstances. Second, as its measure refers to a general trait of propensity to morally disengage, it does not actually anchor the disengagement process in specific disengagement mechanisms with reference to a given behavior, making it impossible to test the core of the theory. Third, the central but vague claim that these mechanisms operate in everyday situations in which people routinely perform self-serving activities at injurious costs to others remains accepted as a truism, without ever having been clarified. To overcome these limitations, we suggest that moral disengagement theory may benefit with research which is grounded in its main conceptual propositions. To achieve this aim, opportunities to measure and observe moral disengagement as a situated process are needed.

1.2. An opportunity to study moral disengagement processes in situ

Food practices are increasingly seen as providing a novel perspective from which to observe individuals' basic psychological processes associated with everyday moral action (e.g., Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Bratanova et al., 2015). Meat consumption in particular can be framed as a morally significant behavior and conceptualized as a moral choice (Bastian et al., 2012). For instance, overlapping the framings of meat as food and meat as animal seems to evoke dissonance in the moral domain (see the "meat paradox"; Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014), and it has been observed that a set of rationales resembling moral disengagement mechanisms (e.g., justifications; self-exonerations) arise when some consumers contemplate the consequences of meat production and consumption, and the possibility of changing habits (Graça, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2014). People who choose to reduce or avoid meat consumption often portray their decision as a moral choice (Ruby, 2012), and previous studies suggest that even meat eaters see vegetarianism as a morally admirable stance, although sometimes respond defensively to the presence of vegetarians (Rothgerber, 2014; Ruby & Heine, 2011).

According to moral disengagement theory, individuals will be particularly driven to employ disengagement mechanisms when adopting or maintaining harmful behaviors that are valued and desired (i.e., self-serving) (Bandura, 1999). Many studies reinforce the notion that meat occupies a central role in conventional western diets, and

tends to be invested with a higher status than other food items (Fiddes, 1991; Schösler, de Boer, & Boersema, 2012). However, meat's central place in the menu is being increasingly challenged, as a global shift towards reduced meat consumption and a more plant-based diet is endorsed as a means to promote environmental sustainability, improve public health, and minimize animal suffering (Pluhar, 2010; Tilman & Clark, 2014; van Dooren, Marinussen, Blonk, Aiking, & Vellinga, 2014; Westhoek et al., 2014). Assuming that individuals will be particularly motivated to use disengagement mechanisms when adopting or maintaining harmful but cherished practices, moral disengagement may indeed play a role among some consumers when prompted to consider the impact of their eating habits, and the possibility of change. Indeed, findings from recent studies on meat consumption and substitution fit some of the original propositions advanced in moral disengagement theory. For instance, it has been found that some consumers are prone to engage in rationalizations to justify meat consumption that have a guilt-alleviating function (Piazza et al., 2015), which may be seen as a form of cognitive reconstruction of the conduct. It has also been observed that many consumers tend to dissociate meat from its origin and find it difficult to eat animal products if the consumed animal closely resembles the live animal, which parallels avoidance and dissociation of the harmful consequences (Plous, 2003). Categorization as food has been found to reduce animals' perceived capacity to suffer and restrict moral concern for animals (Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011), which echoes viewing the recipients as unable to experience feelings and unworthy of moral consideration. Denying farm animals certain psychological characteristics has actually been identified as form of moral disengagement among meat consumers (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogoz, 2011), and previous exploratory findings suggest that consumers holding a pattern of meat attachment (i.e. a positive bond towards meat consumption which comprises hedonism, affinity, entitlement and dependence) are especially prone to morally disengage when considering the impacts of meat (Graça, Oliveira, & Calheiros, 2015). In sum, taken together, these findings indicate that the study of meat consumption and substitution may provide an opportunity for observing moral disengagement processes in situ.

1.3. Overview of aims and studies

The present work draws on the potential of food practices for observing psychological processes concerning everyday moral action. Specifically, it aims to expand knowledge on the process of moral disengagement as a situated cognitive process with reference to a given behavior. Likewise, it aims to provide insights about how moral disengagement operates in everyday situations in which people routinely perform self-serving activities at injurious costs to others. As a first step in this direction, we present the development and validation of an instrument measuring the selective deactivation of moral self-regulatory processes when considering the impact of meat consumption (i.e. the Moral Disengagement in Meat Questionnaire – MDMQ). The MDMQ was developed and validated in two sequential phases following a mixed-methods approach. In the first phase, qualitative data from two preliminary studies provided input for developing the construct and initial pool of items (Graça et al., 2014; Graça, Oliveira, et al., 2015). In the second phase, two further studies provided input for validating the questionnaire and examine moral disengagement as a situated cognitive process. The current article presents a brief overview of the process of developing the construct and initial pool of items (i.e. phase one), and a more thorough report on the two studies measuring moral disengagement as a situated process (i.e. phase two).

1.4. Phase one: construct and item preliminary development

To generate items for measuring moral disengagement as a situated cognitive process, we drew on qualitative data from two previous studies providing an in-depth approach to meat consumption and

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