Withstanding moral disengagement: Attachment security as an ethical intervention ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We propose an ethical intervention with the potential to reduce unethical decision-making.
- We challenge the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making.
- We use attachment theory as the basis for the ethical intervention.
- Individuals primed with attachment anxiety experience the usual effects of moral disengagement.
- However, individuals primed with attachment security are able to withstand moral disengagement.

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ABSTRACT

We propose an ethical intervention leading to improved ethical decision-making. Moral disengagement has long been related to unethical decision-making. We test an ethical intervention in which this relationship is broken. Our ethical intervention consisted of priming individuals to be securely-attached, in which they recalled a past instance of relational support and acceptance. We predicted and found an interaction between attachment state and moral disengagement, in which individuals primed with attachment security were able to withstand moral disengagement. In Study 1, we demonstrate that the securely attached behave more ethically than the anxiously attached in an achievement context. In Study 2, we show that secure attachment overrides one's natural propensity to morally disengage. In Study 3, we find that secure attachment minimizes the impact of the propensity to morally disengage through the mechanism of threat construal. Within both student and working adult samples and using both judgment and behavioral dependent variables, we show that the priming of secure attachment is a relatively simple and effective intervention that managers, educators, and organizations can use to reduce unethical behavior.

"Nothing good ever happens after moral disengagement."— The psychologist's amendment to Mama's old saying about nothing good ever happening after midnight.

Introduction

While Albert Bandura (1986) never actually said those words, he did first put forth the notion of moral disengagement and perhaps, the subsequent literature on moral disengagement is captured in that hypothetical quotation. Moral disengagement enables ordinary people to do unethical things, free from the stomach-churning and self-flagellation that such behavior usually evokes (Bandura, 1990). Much like the hours after midnight, the mind after moral disengagement seems to welcome transgressions, both the everyday and trivial sort as well as the cruel and egregious (ranging from taking home office supplies to perpetuating genocide: Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Fiske, 2004; Moore, 2007; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Ntayi, Eyaa, & Ngoma, 2010). The current paper investigates a condition under which this seemingly tight linkage between moral disengagement and ethical transgressions might not hold. Specifically, we hypothesize and test an ethical intervention based on attachment theory that enables individuals to withstand moral disengagement.

Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a psychological process by which individuals engage in sanctionable behavior without distress or self-condemnation (Bandura, 1990). More specifically, moral disengagement refers to a set

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of eight cognitive mechanisms which serve to disinhibit an individual's unethical behavior (Bandura, 1986): moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. When an individual morally disengages from an action through any of these (interrelated) mechanisms, the action becomes morally palatable and thus, the individual is able to engage in unethical behavior without the self-censure such an act would normally provoke (Bandura, 1999). The trait-based tendency to use these cognitive mechanisms varies by individual and can be measured (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008); this individual difference is also sometimes referred to as the propensity to morally disengage (Moore et al., 2012).[1]

Moral disengagement is often discussed in the context of war, genocide, and terrorism, and has been shown to lead to greater aggression (Bandura et al., 1996), more deviant behavior (Ntayi et al., 2010), more violent behavior (Bandura, 1999), and less humane conduct (Fiske, 2004). Moral disengagement also plays a critical role in the processes of organizational corruption (Moore, 2007). Moore et al. (2012) demonstrate that the propensity for moral disengagement predicts a broad range of work-related behaviors above and beyond individual difference constructs commonly associated with unethical behavior (e.g. Machiavellianism, moral identity, cognitive moral development), such as self-reported unethical behavior, decisions to commit fraud, self-serving decisions in the workplace, and co-worker and supervisor-reported unethical work behaviors. Similarly, Detert et al. (2008) find that moral disengagement explains variance in unethical decision making beyond that explained by empathy, moral identity, trait cynicism, and chance locus of control orientation. Bandura (1990, p. 43) articulated the importance of moral disengagement to more "ordinary" ethical behavior early on: "Such mechanisms operate in everyday situations in which decent people routinely perform activities having injurious human effects, to further their own interests or for profit." This paper investigates this relationship between moral disengagement and ethical behavior, leveraging the learnings of attachment theory to diminish the impact of moral disengagement.

Attachment theory

In its original form, attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982) captured the idea that early close-relationships experienced by children shape the psychological template for the relationships that the child will eventually form as an adult. Attachment orientations are characterized as secure (anticipating that one's needs will be met), anxious (uncertain if one's needs will be met), avoidant (withdrawing so that the dependence on others for meeting needs is less), or fearful (combining both avoidant and anxious orientations) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Although attachment was traditionally treated as a dispositional construct, the current literature conceptualizes and empirically tests both the trait-based and the state-like aspects of attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Different attachment-related feelings can be made salient due to situational triggers, and thus, temporary attachment states can be dynamically aroused (Lee & Thompson, 2011). Both in trait and state forms, attachment predicts a wide range of relational and emotional outcomes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), as well as work-related, organizational outcomes (Lee & Ling, 2007). Within the work domain, attachment theory has been extended to non-close relationships (Lee & Thompson, 2011).

Attachment, ethics, and threat construal

Attachment orientation has been linked to ethical beliefs and behavior (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008; Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Van Ijzendoorn & Zwart-Woudstra, 1995). For example, attachment security generated the most ethical beliefs in a consumer context (Albert & Horowitz, 2009) and attachment security enhanced authenticity and honesty in relational contexts (Gillath et al., 2010). In this paper, we explore why the anxiously attached behave less honestly than the securely attached, focusing on the achievement context as our setting. We propose that part of the explanation can be found in how secure versus anxious attachment affects a wide variety of psychological processes, including how people construe the achievement setting.

The construal of an achievement setting is surprisingly relevant to attachment theory. In fact, one of the more pernicious features of attachment anxiety is its tendency to not only affect how an individual views a particular relationship but also to more broadly shape the individual's construal of his or her circumstances, even those unrelated to the particular relationship. Elliot and Reis (2003) describe how attachment anxiety leads individuals to "imbue achievement settings with diverse personal meanings" (p. 327). One implication of this tendency is that the securely attached view achievement situations as challenges while the insecurely attached view the same situations as threats and as evaluative of their competence (Elliot & Reis, 2003).

This "threat construal" is a perception that the situation holds potential for harm or loss (Lazarus, 1991; McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Threat construal has been shown to mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and achievement motivation; specifically, anxiously-attached individuals were more likely to construe situations as threats, and subsequently, to be motivated to avoid doing poorly (as opposed to motivated to perform well) (Elliot & Reis, 2003, Study 4). Construing a situation as a threat has a profound effect on subsequent behavior, and we will propose that the relationship between anxious attachment and threat construal has important ethical implications.

Bowlby, 1982 originally described the attachment system as a system that is activated by environmental threats that endanger an individual's survival, thus creating a need for protection from other people and proximity-seeking behavior. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) describe, "In (Bowlby's) view, a combination of attachment-unrelated sources of threat and lack of access to an attachment figure compounds distress and triggers the highest level of attachment-level activation" (p. 60). In other words, lack of secure attachment is a threat in and of itself, and secure attachment is also a response to other threats. Attachment security is the condition of being protected from threat and the condition of perceiving fewer threats while attachment anxiety leaves individuals exposed to more threats and perceiving more threats. We propose that it is this condition that leaves the anxiously-attached individual ethically vulnerable.

We argue that the tendency for the anxiously attached to feel more threatened relates to their tendency to be less ethical, and the feeling of threat experienced by the anxiously attached is the mechanism behind their moral lapse. We expect that priming attachment anxiety leads individuals to view situations as threats, and subsequently, to behave more unethically. In three studies, we investigate this relationship. First, we hypothesize that, consistent with previous studies, priming attachment security will generate more ethical behavior than priming attachment anxiety in an achievement context (Study 1). Second, we hypothesize that secure attachment overrides one's natural propensity to morally disengage (Study 2). Finally, we hypothesize that secure attachment will minimize the impact of the propensity to morally disengage, by reducing the construal of the achievement situation as a threat (Study 3). We conclude by discussing the opportunities that this mechanism offers in the form of ethical interventions.

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[1] Readers should note that some earlier work, such as Detert et al. (2008), uses the term "moral disengagement" to refer to what Moore et al. (2012) define as propensity for moral disengagement. Our work here refers to the individual difference measure.