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Belief in a just world, prosocial behavior, and moral disengagement in adolescence

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Abstract

This research examined the relationship among belief in a just world, prosocial behavior, and moral disengagement in a group of Sicilian adolescents, using the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert et al., 1987), Moral Disengagement Scale and Prosocial Behavior Scale (Caprara et al., 1991, 1995). Results showed that the youngest adolescents and boys tended to use the mechanisms of moral disengagement more than the others and girls. Boys were less likely to behave in prosocial way than girls; the more the adolescents believed in a just world the more they tended to realize prosocial behaviors. Additionally, the more the adolescents were inclined to behave in prosocial way the less they used almost all the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this research is to analyze the relationship among the belief in a just world, the tendency to act in prosocial way, and the use of moral disengagement strategies in a sample of Sicilian adolescents. According to the just world hypothesis, introduced by Lerner (1980) and developed by Dalbert (1999), individuals have the need to believe in a just world in which “everyone receives what they deserve and deserves what they receive” (see Bègue et al., 2008). This belief serves an adaptive social function and motives to defend personal attitudes toward just world when it is threatened by injustice, either experienced or observed. The personal belief in a just world (PBJW) has been correlated with prosocial and altruistic behavior: individuals with high levels of PBJW were more likely to help others in need, perceive the altruism in others, scored higher on interpersonal trust than individuals with low levels of PBJW (Bierhoff, Klein, & Kramp, 1991; Bègue, 2002). Specifically, prosocial behavior is termed as “voluntary behavior that benefits others or promotes positive relationships with others” (e.g., Denham, Mason, & Couchoud, 1995; Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999; Jackson & Tisak, 2001; Bergin, Talley & Hamer, 2003). Recently, in a focus group study with young adolescents, Bergin, Talley and Hamer (2003) found that standing up for others, encouraging and helping others to develop their own skills, including others who are left out, and facilitating emotional regulation of others emerged as the most important components of prosocial behavior. These behaviors are prompted by empathy (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg, Valiente, & Champion, 2004; Eisenberg,

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Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006), prosocial moral reasoning (Carlo & Randall, 2002), and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for personal advantage. For example, Carlo and Randall (2002) found the existence of different typologies of situation-specific actions including public (in front of others and self-interested), anonymous (actor remains unknown), dire (in crisis situation), emotional (in response to another's emotional cues), compliant (only when it is requested), and altruistic prosocial behaviors. The authors demonstrated that adolescents who reported high levels of public prosocial behavior showed more hedonistic and approval-oriented moral reasoning and less sympathy than their peers: on the contrary, adolescents who scored high on the emotional or compliant prosocial behaviors showed higher levels of prosocial moral reasoning, more sympathy, and better perspective taking than their peers.

Both in relation to antisocial and prosocial behaviors (Bandura et al., 1996; Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010), scholars analyzed another important issue involved in the moral development, that is, moral disengagement. It is considered in terms of the tendency to justify own 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 included eight different mechanisms useful to reduce the severity of behaviors activating the self-censure: 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 to refer to behaviors valued more severe in order to dislocate the attention from negative effects of individual outcomes; the *diffusion and displacement of responsibility* allows individuals to share the responsibility for deleterious actions with the ingroup to minimize the severity of behaviors realized by the single person; the *euphemistic labeling* is linked to the verbal manipulation in order to reduce the cruelty of committed 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 behaviors as caused by the victim; the *distortion of consequences* is used to alter the effects of deleterious actions in order to reduce personal misconduct. The more the children and adolescents were likely to behave in prosocial way the less they adopted the mechanism of moral disengagement (Pan et al., 2009; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012).

Regarding gender and age differences both in relation to moral disengagement and to prosocial behavior, research demonstrated that boys and younger adolescents were more likely to use mechanisms of moral disengagement than girls and older ones (Falanga, De Caroli & Sagone, 2009; Sagone & De Caroli, *in press*) and to engage in public prosocial behavior more than did girls (Carlo & Randall, 2002). On the contrary, girls typically were found to be more prosocial than boys (Fabes et al., 1999; Eisenberg, 2003) and reported emotional and altruistic prosocial behaviors more than boys (Carlo & Randall, 2002).

2. Methodology

This study examined the relationship among personal belief in a just world, prosocial behavior, and moral disengagement in a group of Sicilian adolescents. We hypothesized that:

- boys and girls will express a different belief in a just world (H_{1a}) and the youngest adolescents will differ from the others in relation to this belief (H_{1b});
- girls will tend to behave in prosocial way more than boys (H_{2a}) and the youngest adolescents will differ from the others in relation to prosocial behaviors (H_{2b});
- boys will be likely to use mechanisms of moral disengagement more than girls (H_{3a}) and the youngest adolescents will be likely to adopt these mechanisms more than the others (H_{3b});
- the more the adolescents will believe in a just world, the more they will adopt prosocial behaviors (H_{4a}) and the less they will use the mechanisms of moral disengagement (H_{4b});
- the more the adolescents will be likely to behave in prosocial way the less they will use the mechanisms of moral disengagement (H_{4c}).

2.1. Participants

The sample was composed by 112 Sicilian adolescents, 60 boys and 52 girls, aged between 11 and 15 years ($M=12.4$, $sd=.92$). Participants were randomly recruited from the first ($n=36$), the second ($n=38$), and the third classes ($n=38$) of two Public Secondary Schools in Catania, Sicily (Italy). Parental consent was obtained for the participation to this study. All measures were administered in individual setting and during school time.

2.2. Measures and procedure

2.2.1. Personal Belief in a Just World

The first construct was measured using the 6-item version of Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (PBJW: Dalbert, 1999). This scale valued the belief that events in one's life are just (e.g., "I am usually treated fairly", "Overall, events in my life are just") with 6-points Likert ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). Scores were computed by averaging across items, with higher scores indicating a stronger PBJW (Cronbach's $\alpha=.67$).

2.2.2. Prosocial Behavior Scale

The second construct was measured by the 15-item version of Prosocial Behavior Scale (PBS: Caprara et al., 1991). Using the 3-points Likert, ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (many times), this scale valued the tendency to act for the benefit of another person, in altruistic way, and with trust: e.g., "I try to help others", "I trust in others". Internal consistency for this scale was found to be satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha=.70$).

2.2.3. Moral Disengagement Scale

The third construct was valued by means of the 32-item version of Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS: Caprara et al., 1995): e.g., "it is alright to beat someone who bad mouths your family", "it is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble". This scale analyzed the following eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: 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. Internal consistency for the whole scale was found to be satisfactory in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out with the SPSS 15, using the following statistical tests: One Way ANOVA, t Students, and Pearson's linear correlation. Sex and classes were used as independent variables and mean scores obtained in each measure as dependent variables.

3. Results

Results showed that adolescents obtained mean scores in personal belief in a just world equal to $M=4.40$, $sd=.85$, without significant differences for sex and classes. In addition, adolescents attained mean scores in prosocial behavior equal to $M=2.28$, $sd=.27$, with significant differences for sex ($t_{(110)}=4.59$, $p<.001$): in fact, girls were more likely to behave in prosocial way than boys ($M=2.40$, $sd=.21$ vs. $M=2.18$, $sd=.27$). Finally, in relation to the moral disengagement, the youngest adolescents and boys tended to use almost all mechanisms of moral disengagement more than the oldest ones and girls. Specifically, the youngest adolescents were likely to use advantageous comparison, dehumanization of victim, displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences, euphemistic labeling, and moral justification more than the others (Table 1). These evidences constituted a confirmation of our hypotheses, except for H_{1a} and H_{1b} .

Table 1. Mechanisms of moral disengagement: differences for age groups

Mechanisms of moral disengagement	Classes	Means	Stand. Deviat.	F	Sig.
Advantageous comparison	I	2.17	.82	5.46	.006
	II	1.75	.69		
	III	1.67	.57		
Dehumanization of victim	I	2.61	.95	3.90	.023
	II	2.04	.77		
	III	2.40	.95		
Displacement of responsibility	I	2.61	.73	3.74	.027
	II	2.10	.91		
	III	2.32	.77		
Distortion of consequences	I	2.52	.80	3.33	.040
	II	2.12	.73		
	III	2.20	.57		
Euphemistic labeling	I	2.65	.75	9.28	.000
	II	1.97	.72		
	III	2.34	.53		
Moral justification	I	3.10	.92	5.01	.008
	II	2.47	.91		
	III	2.86	.79		

In addition, boys were likely to use attribution of blame, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, euphemistic labeling, and moral justification more than girls (Table 2).

Table 2. Mechanisms of moral disengagement: differences for sex

Mechanisms of moral disengagement	Sex	Means	Stand. Deviat.	T-test	Sig.
Attribution of blame	Boys	2.54	.82	2.59	.011
	Girls	2.17	.69		
Advantageous comparison	Boys	1.99	.79	2.09	.038
	Girls	1.71	.62		
Displacement of responsibility	Boys	2.52	.79	2.52	.013
	Girls	2.14	.83		
Euphemistic labeling	Boys	2.46	.75	2.31	.023
	Girls	2.15	.65		
Moral justification	Boys	3.00	.95	2.49	.014
	Girls	2.58	.81		

About the relationship among the three constructs, the more the adolescents believed in a just world the more they tended to realize prosocial behaviors ($r_{(112)}=.37, p<.001$), and specifically, for boys ($r_{(60)}=.44, p<.001$) and II and III classes (for both classes: $r_{(38)}=.37, p<.001$). Additionally, the more the adolescents were inclined to behave in prosocial way the less they used some of the mechanisms of moral disengagement (specifically, attribution of blame, $r_{(112)}=-.22, p=.02$; distortion of consequences, $r_{(112)}=-.28, p=.003$; displacement of responsibility, $r_{(112)}=-.37, p=.003$; moral justification, $r_{(112)}=-.21, p=.02$). These results confirmed the initial hypotheses.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study provided interesting indications for the relationship both between prosocial tendency and belief in a just world and between prosocial tendency and use of mechanisms of moral disengagement in adolescents. The more the adolescents expressed the tendency to help the others, without getting personal advantages, the more they were likely to believe that individuals receive what they deserve and deserve what they receive; in addition, the more the adolescents were inclined to act in prosocial way, the less they were likely to consider their harmful behaviors as caused by the victim, to modify the effects of deleterious actions with the

intention to reduce the personal misconduct, to share the responsibility for deleterious actions with the ingroup to minimize the severity of behaviors realized by the single person, and to estimate a damaging action as acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy. These evidences can be useful to realize educational interventions for the enhancement of social competence (specifically, related to prosocialness and altruism) and psychological adjustment overall in at-risk social situations (such as cyberbullying: Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012) characterized by the intense use of mechanisms of moral disengagement (see Sagone & Licata, 2009).

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