

PSYSOC 2013

# Mechanisms Of Moral Disengagement: An Analysis From Early Adolescence To Youth

Maria Elvira De Caroli <sup>a\*</sup>, Elisabetta Sagone <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Catania, Department of Educational Sciences, via Casa Nutrizione, 95124 Catania, Sicily (Italy)*

---

## Abstract

Moral disengagement is known as a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to justify their reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions in order to preserve the self-image (Bandura, 1986). The goals of this study were to analyze the development of moral disengagement mechanisms from early adolescence to youth and to deepen the differences for age and sex in Italian context. The sample was formed by 1083 participants, aged between early adolescence and youth, randomly recruited from Public Junior and Senior High Schools and Psychology Degree Courses at the University of Catania (Sicily, Italy). We used the Italian version of Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara et al., 2009) in order to explore the eight mechanisms of disengagement. Results demonstrated that early and middle-late adolescents were more likely than university students to use all the mechanisms of moral disengagement; additionally, boys were more likely than girls to adopt moral disengagement to justify their own actions. Future research could deepen the relationship between moral reasoning (Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992) and the use of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 2001) from adolescence to youth in Italian context.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.

*Keywords:* Moral disengagement, adolescence, psychology students;

---

## 1. Introduction

The deepening of moral disengagement is considered as one of the most relevant themes of developmental and educational psychology, also for its relationships with other important socio-cognitive processes, such as moral reasoning and prosocial behavior. Moral disengagement is considered as a set of social-cognitive mechanisms that

---

\*Corresponding Author: Maria Elvira De Caroli. Tel.: +39-095-2508021  
*E-mail address:* [m.decaroli@unict.it](mailto:m.decaroli@unict.it)

allow individuals to justify their reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions in order to preserve the self-image (Bandura, 1986), alleviating the cognitive dissonance (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). It is known as “the tendency to justify one’s 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 was analyzed in various countries and in relation to other psychological dimensions, such as prosocial behaviour and prosocial moral reasoning (Carlo & Randall, 2002; De Caroli & Sagone, 2013), aggression (Bandura et al., 2001; Paciello et al., 2008), antisocial behaviours in sport (Boardley & Kavussani, 2009), bullying and cyberbullying (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Bauman, 2010; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012), approval of violence toward animals (Vollum, Buffington-Vollum, & Longmire, 2004), and so on. As reported by Carlo and Randall (2002), the more the children and adolescents were likely to behave in a prosocial way, the less they adopted the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Bauman (2010) found that moral disengagement was predictor of cyberbullying behavioural tendencies in response to a hypothetical scenario, but not of self-reported engagement in cyberbullying. As noted by Pornari and Wood (2010), the nature of cyberbullying (that is, distance from the victim, lack of visibility, secrecy of cyberbullying perpetration) does not activate the need to self-regulate and moralize behaviour in the same way in which traditional bullying would do. Furthermore, Vollum et al. (2004) analyzed that individuals who tended to adopt the mechanisms of moral disengagement in regard to the treatment of animals displayed less concern about violence against animals and were less punitive in their attitudes toward such acts; dehumanization and property attitudes were the strongest predictors of concern about animal cruelty and abuse and punitive attitudes toward those who committed acts of violence against animals. Finally, De Caroli and Sagone (2013) found that the more the adolescents were likely to behave in a prosocial way, the less they adopted mechanisms of moral disengagement; in addition, the more the adolescents believed in a just world, the more they tended to behave in a prosocial way.

Moral disengagement grouped eight different mechanisms useful to reduce or minimize the severity of behaviours activating the self-censure in each individual: 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 referred to behaviours valued as more severe in order to dislocate the attention from negative effects of individual outcomes. The diffusion and displacement of responsibility allow individuals to share the responsibility for deleterious actions with the ingroup in order to minimize the severity of behaviours realized by the single person. The euphemistic labeling is linked to the verbal manipulation to reduce the cruelty and severity of 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 behaviours as caused by the victim. Finally, the distortion of consequences is used to alter the effects of deleterious actions in order to reduce personal misconduct. Considering the importance of these mechanisms operating in moral disengagement and engaging the moral growth of each individual, we decided to analyze the cross-age development of moral disengagement in a widespread sample of participants, from early adolescence to youth and recruited in several cities of Sicily (Italy), and to deepen the differences for age and sex.

### *1.1. Hypotheses*

According to previous researches carried out in Italian context, we hypothesized that: early and middle-late adolescents will be likely to adopt mechanisms of moral disengagement more than young adults ( $H_1$ ); boys will be more likely to use these mechanisms than girls ( $H_2$ ).

### *1.2. Sample*

The sample of this research was formed by 1083 participants, divided in 453 boys and 630 girls, gathered in three age-groups from early adolescence to youth: n.545 early adolescents (50,3% of sample: 11-13 yrs.), n.342 middle-late adolescents (31,6% of sample: 14-18 yrs.), and n.196 young adults (18,1% of sample: 19-34 yrs.). Early and

middle-late adolescents were randomly recruited from Public Junior and Senior High Schools in Sicily; parental consent was obtained for the participation to this study. Young adults were enrolled from the Psychology Degree Courses at the University of Catania (Sicily, Italy).

### 1.3. Measure and procedure

To explore the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, we used the Italian version of Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara et al., 2009). This scale was composed by 32 statements for each of which participants judged their own degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 intervals (*strongly agree*) and used to measure the following eight mechanisms ( $\alpha$  from .75 to .87): *advantageous comparison* (e.g., “Young people cannot be blamed if they smoke some marijuana cigarette because most adults use much heavier drugs”); *dehumanization of victim* (e.g., “People who do not behave as human beings cannot be treated as such”); *attribution of blame* (e.g., “If people leave their things lying about it’s their fault if someone steals them”); *diffusion of responsibility* (e.g., “Employees are never responsible for illegal decision taken by their bosses”); *distortion of consequences* (e.g., “Evading taxes cannot be considered reprehensible considering the squandering of public money”); *displacement of responsibility* (e.g., “People cannot be held responsible for crimes committed at the instigation of others”); *moral justification* (e.g., “It is good to defend your family members, even when they are guilty of serious crimes in order to preserve the cohesion of the family”); *euphemistic labeling* (e.g., “Drawing graffiti on walls is the expression of the creative spirit”).

### 1.4. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out by means of SPSS 15.0 using t-tests, One-way ANOVA, and Pearson’s linear correlations. Age-groups and sex of participants were considered as independent variables, while mean scores obtained in the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement were counted as dependent variables.

## 2. Results

Descriptive analysis showed an interesting result regarding the moral disengagement mechanisms more or less used in each of the three age-groups (Table 1). Early and middle-late adolescents adopted greatly the diffusion and displacement of responsibility and less the attribution of blame and moral justification, whereas university students used greatly dehumanization of victim and less the distortion of consequences.

These differences in the use of moral disengagement underlined that all adolescents made use of mechanisms which allow them to share the responsibility for deleterious actions with their group in order to minimize the severity of behaviours realized by the single person; on the contrary, university students were more likely to use mechanisms which deprive the victim of human characteristics, damaging individually the target of misconduct.

Table 1: Mean scores of moral disengagement mechanisms

Mechanisms of moral disengagement	Early adolescents	Middle-late adolescents	University students
	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
Diffusion of responsibility	2,71 (.79)	2,72 (.63)	2,09 (.59)
Displacement of responsibility	2,71 (.75)	2,78 (.65)	2,04 (.57)
Euphemistic labeling	2,54 (.78)	2,58 (.66)	2,11 (.61)
Advantageous comparison	2,45 (.71)	2,48 (.63)	1,96 (.61)
Distortion of consequences	2,39 (.77)	2,42 (.68)	1,93 (.63)
Dehumanization of victim	2,34 (.74)	2,21 (.57)	2,31 (.65)
Attribution of blame	2,22 (.82)	2,08 (.67)	2,16 (.73)
Moral justification	2,17 (.74)	1,96 (.57)	1,95 (.59)

Relevant differences for age-groups were noted (Table 2): thus, early and middle-late adolescents were more likely than university students to use the eight moral disengagement mechanisms (moral disengagement - early

adolescents:  $M=2,44$ ; middle-late adolescents:  $M=2,40$ ; university students:  $M=2,07$ ;  $F_{(2,1080)}=42,084, p<.001$ .

Table 2: Moral disengagement mechanisms: differences for age groups

Mechanisms of moral disengagement	Age-groups	Mean	Std. Dev.	$F_{(2,1080)}$	Sig.
1. Attribution of blame	Early adolescents	2,22	,82	4,010	.018
	Middle-late adolescents	2,08	,67		
	Young adults	2,16	,73		
2. Advantageous comparison	Early adolescents	2,46	,71	46,234	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	2,48	,63		
	Young adults	1,96	,61		
3. Dehumanization of victim	Early adolescents	2,34	,74	3,635	.027
	Middle-late adolescents	2,21	,57		
	Young adults	2,31	,65		
4. Diffusion of responsibility	Early adolescents	2,71	,79	61,446	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	2,72	,63		
	Young adults	2,10	,59		
5. Displacement of responsibility	Early adolescents	2,71	,75	84,543	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	2,78	,65		
	Young adults	2,04	,57		
6. Distortion of consequences	Early adolescents	2,39	,77	34,430	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	2,42	,68		
	Young adults	1,93	,63		
7. Euphemistic labeling	Early adolescents	2,55	,78	32,164	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	2,59	,66		
	Young adults	2,11	,61		
8. Moral justification	Early adolescents	2,17	,74	14,432	<.001
	Middle-late adolescents	1,96	,57		
	Young adults	1,95	,59		

Effects of sex were found (Table 3): thus, boys ( $M=2,52$ ) were more likely than girls ( $M=2,25$ ) to make use of the moral disengagement mechanisms to justify their own actions ( $t_{(1081)}=8,978, p<.001$ ).

Table 3: Moral disengagement mechanisms: differences for sex

Mechanisms of moral disengagement	Sex	Mean	Std. Dev.	T-tests	Sig.
1. Attribution of blame	Boys	2,32	,78	5,680	all values for $p<.001$
	Girls	2,06	,72		
2. Advantageous comparison	Boys	2,50	,69	5,323	
	Girls	2,28	,68		
3. Dehumanization of victim	Boys	2,42	,68	5,362	
	Girls	2,20	,65		
4. Diffusion of responsibility	Boys	2,74	,72	5,053	
	Girls	2,51	,76		
5. Displacement of responsibility	Boys	2,81	,73	7,918	
	Girls	2,46	,71		
6. Distortion of consequences	Boys	2,56	,74	9,328	
	Girls	2,15	,69		
7. Euphemistic labeling	Boys	2,64	,72	6,352	
	Girls	2,36	,72		
8. Moral justification	Boys	2,20	,69	5,839	
	Girls	1,96	,65		

Pearson’s linear correlations among all mechanisms of moral disengagement were applied for total sample (Table 4): thus, positive relations were mainly obtained between attribution of blame and both distortion of consequences and moral justification, between advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling, between diffusion of responsibility and euphemistic labeling, with values equal or superior to  $r_{(1082)}=.50$  for  $p<.001$ .

Table 4: Correlations among mechanisms of moral disengagement: total sample

	AB	AC	DV	DifR	DisR	DC	EL	MJ
AB	.							
AC	,45(**)	.						
DV	,49(**)	,41(**)	.					
DifR	,43(**)	,47(**)	,33(**)	.				
DisR	,36(**)	,48(**)	,34(**)	,48(**)	.			
DC	,52(**)	,47(**)	,40(**)	,48(**)	,48(**)	.		
EL	,44(**)	,50(**)	,35(**)	,53(**)	,48(**)	,48(**)	.	
MJ	,51(**)	,49(**)	,47(**)	,46(**)	,40(**)	,44(**)	,45(**)	.

Correlations were significant all for  $p < .001$

AB=attribution of blame; AC=advantageous comparison; DV=dehumanization of victim; DifR=diffusion of responsibility; DisR=displacement of responsibility; DC=distortion of consequences; EL=euphemistic labeling; MJ=moral justification;

### 3. Conclusion

The analysis of the cross-age development of moral disengagement in a widespread sample of Italian participants from early adolescence to youth and the deepening of the differences for age and sex constituted the main purposes of this investigation. Results fully confirmed the two hypotheses: in relation to  $H_1$ , we predicted that early and middle-late adolescents would be likely to adopt these mechanisms more than young adults (university students) and, in relation to  $H_2$ , that boys would be likely to use mechanisms of moral disengagement more than girls. As previously found in other researches (Sagone & De Caroli, 2013; De Caroli & Sagone, 2013), the increase of age was related to the reduced use of moral disengagement. Furthermore, in relation to sex differences, results of this study were consistent with findings linked to the development of moral orientation and prosocial moral tendencies: thus, girls were more likely to use care orientation and boys were more likely to adopt justice orientation (Gump, Baker, & Roll, 2000; Jaffee & Hyde, 2000) and, additionally, girls scored higher in altruistic, anonymous, emotional, and compliant prosocial behaviours than boys, whereas boys scored higher than girls in public prosocial behavior (Carlo et al., 2003; Eklund et al., 2012). These evidences could justify the reduced use of mechanisms of moral disengagement by girls and, on the contrary, the widespread use of these mechanisms by boys. Furthermore, it was noteworthy to underline the differences between adolescents and young adults in resorting to mechanisms of moral disengagement: thus, adolescents made use of mechanisms which allow themselves to share the responsibility for harmful behaviours with their group to minimize the severity of behaviours realized by the single person; on the contrary, university students were more prone to employ mechanisms which damage individually the target of misconduct, depriving it of human characteristics.

Considering the recent findings reported by Detert et al. (2008) about the antecedents and outcomes of moral disengagement, according to which people with low levels of empathy, lack of moral identity, cynicism, and chance locus of control orientation were more inclined to moral disengagement than the others, future research could be addressed toward the analysis of the relationships between moral reasoning and disengagement from adolescence to adulthood.

### References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A., Caprara, G.V., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., & Regalia, A. (2001). Socio-cognitive self-regulatory mechanisms governing transgressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 125-135.
- Bauman, S. (2010). Cyberbullying in a rural intermediate school: An exploratory study. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 30, 803-833.

- Boardley, I.D., & Kavussanu, M. (2009). The influence of social variables and moral disengagement on prosocial and antisocial behaviours in field hockey and netball. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 27, 843-854.
- Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., Iafrate, C., Beretta, M., Steca, P., & Bandura, A. (2006). La misura del disimpegno morale nel contesto delle trasgressioni dell'agire quotidiano. *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, 1, 83-106.
- Caprara, G.V., Fida, R., Vecchione, M., Tramontano, C., & Barbaranelli, C. (2009). Assessing civic moral disengagement: Dimensionality and construct validity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 47, 504-509.
- Carlo, G., & Randall, B. A. (2002). The development of a measure of prosocial behaviors for late adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 31, 31-44.
- Carlo, G., Hausmann, A., Christiansen, S., & Randall, B. A. (2003). Socio-cognitive and behavioral correlates of a measure of prosocial tendencies for adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 23, 107-134.
- De Caroli, M.E., & Sagone, E. (2013). Belief in a just world, prosocial behavior, and moral disengagement in adolescence. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*.
- Detert, J. R., Treviño, L. K., & Sweitzer, V. L. (2008). Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 374-391.
- Eklund, J., Loeb, C., Hansen, E.M., & Andersson-Wallin, A.C. (2012). Who cares about others?: Empathic self-efficacy as an antecedent to prosocial behavior. *Current Research in Social Psychology*, 2, 31-41.
- Gump, L.S., Baker, R.C., & Roll, S. (2000). Cultural and gender differences in moral judgement: A study of Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 22, 78-93.
- Hymel, S., Roche-Henderson, N., & Bonanno, R. (2005). Moral disengagement: A framework for understanding bullying among adolescents. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 1-11.
- Jaffee, S., & Hyde, J.S. (2000). Gender differences in moral orientation: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 703-726.
- Paciello, M., Fida, R., Tramontano, C., Lupinetti, C., & Caprara, G.V. (2008). Stability and change of moral disengagement and its impact on aggression and violence in late adolescence. *Child Development*, 79, 1288-1309.
- Perren, S., & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, E. (2012). Cyberbullying and traditional bullying in adolescence: Differential roles of moral disengagement, moral emotions, and moral values. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9, 195-209.
- Pornari, C.D., & Wood, J. (2010). Peer and cyber aggression in secondary school students: the role of moral disengagement, hostile attribution bias, and outcome expectancies. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 36, 81-94.
- Sagone, E., & De Caroli, M.E. (2013). Personality factors and civic moral disengagement in law and psychology university students. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 93, 158-163.
- Vollum, S., Buffington-Vollum, J., & Longmire, D.R. (2004). Moral disengagement and attitudes about violence toward animals. *Society & Animals*, 12, 209-235.