



Moral Disengagement as Determinant of Relational Aggression Among Adolescents

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Abstract:

The present study aimed at finding the predictive relationship between moral disengagement and relational aggression among adolescents. Sample of 612 adolescent students aged from 12-19 years was collected from different schools and colleges of district Gujrat, Pakistan. Two scales; Moral disengagement scale for Adolescents by Riaz & Bano(2018) and Urdu version of diverse adolescent relational aggression Riaz (2014) were used for measuring variables. The findings of the present study revealed significant predictive relation of moral disengagement with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.327$; $F(1, 607) = 295.362$, $p < 0.01$]; diffusion and displacement of responsibility, sub dimension with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.182$; $F(1, 608) = 135.060$, $p < 0.01$]; advantageous comparison with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.135$; $F(1, 608) = 94.823$, $p < 0.01$]; dehumanization with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.199$; $F(1, 608) = 151.106$, $p < 0.01$]; attribution of blame with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.134$; $F(1, 608) = 94.374$, $p < 0.01$], moral justification with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.110$; $F(1, 608) = 75.088$, $p < 0.01$] and euphemistic labeling with relational aggression [$R^2 = 0.054$; $F(1, 609) = 34.742$, $p < 0.01$]. The present study supported the predictive relationship of moral disengagement with relational aggression among adolescents.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, sub dimensions of moral disengagement, relational aggression, adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Moral disengagement is a process of persuading oneself that moral standards do not apply to oneself in a specific context. In this way morally disengaged individuals disable the mechanism of self-condemnation. Furthermore, moral disengagement is done by using a set of mechanisms of cognitive re-structuring. He further described the mechanisms of moral disengagement as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame (Bandura 2002). But the indigenous model which has been used in the current research talked about six dimensions: displacement or diffusion of responsibility, advantageous comparison, dehumanization, attribution of blame, moral justification and euphemistic labeling (Riaz & Bano, 2018). Putting oneself aside from massive brutalities is realized by using the mechanism of

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displacement or diffusion of responsibility which is practiced most frighteningly in socially authorized gross killings. They get spared from self-accusing responses as they are not considered as the real mediator of their behaviors (Badura 1999; Milgram 1974; Diener, 1977). The implementation of moral sanctions is also enfeebled when the self-sanction is slept by diffusing responsibility for harmful conduct. This could be achieved by dividing the tasks. Advantageous comparison is defined as how conduct is seen, is tinted by what it is equated against. For instance, Vietnam gigantic damage was lessened through depicting the American armed interference as securing the highly populated areas from communist dependence (Bandura 1999).

The mechanism of moral disengagement also works on the receivers of damaging acts. Self-criticism for brutal demeanor may be undone or reduced by undressing persons of human attributes. The power of moral self-disapproval contingent partially on how the wrongdoers view the individuals they maltreat (Milgram 1974; Bandura 1990). Attributing the victim is another mechanism that helps self-defending tenacities. People considered that there is nothing wrong with them, rather victim is responsible for provocation for injurious conduct. A victim is thought to be responsible for brutal acts (Bandura 1999). Furthermore, moral justification is a domain of moral disengagement which works on the reconstruction of the conduct itself. This category of disengagement functions on the intellectual rebuilding of the conduct itself. Euphemistic labeling is also a mechanism based on cognitive restructuring of moral disengagement. Actions are based on thought patterns which are shaped by the languages. Sugar coated languages are such a powerful tool that even killing someone lost much of its bitterness.

Relationships are extremely significant aspect of ones lives and harm to the social relations causes great distress in an individual's life. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) proposed the concept of relational aggression, and believed that relational aggression is more damaging than physical aggression among adolescence. Relational aggression pertains to deliberately damaging another individual's social relations, inclusion within a group, or feelings of acceptance (Crick & Grotpeter 1995).

Different verbal means are used such as disseminating rumors, rolling eyes, overlooking, making faces, exclusion, gossip, and friendship removal (Cheng 2009). Generally, relational aggression is the basis of psychological and emotive harm that is considered far more damaging than physical harm (Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young 2011). During the adolescence period, social elements become very important. In adolescence era, peer groups have an impact on ones' evaluation about his or her self. Relational aggression with teenagers is especially significant as they are passing through a transitory period (Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison 2009). Usually, children and adolescents have inherently built natural tendencies to be involved in relational aggression. Emotions of anger, jealousy, and envy may be underlying children's wish or need to use social aggression. Relational aggression has many determining factors as presenting aggression in the media, home environments, and gender mindsets. So relational aggression is not caused by a single factor rather it is an accumulation of several reasons (Patton 2013). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura 1991) violence is related to unfair ethics like moral disengagement, denoting to reasoning tactics which let the moralization of activities thought as immoral, otherwise (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè 2008). Some teenagers cannot guess the influence of their corrupt activities on others and display deep silence on the sufferings of others. Such problems may encourage violence (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen 2010). Researches showed significant associations between the

ability to extricate from moral self- evaluations and aggressive conduct (Hymel & Bonanno 2014). Furthermore, the dehumanization, a mechanism of moral disengagement, plays a discrete part in bullying and victimization (van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski 2014). It was found that relational aggression was positively linked with moral disengagement in pre adolescents (Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, & Markos 2016). Relational aggression was positively linked with moral disengagement. Besides, moral disengagement mediated the effects of callous-unemotional qualities and behavioral activation system on relational aggression (Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, & Markos 2016).

Moral disengagement is today's burning issue worldwide and in Pakistan as well. The present study aimed to explore relationship of moral disengagement with relational aggression among adolescents. This predictive relationship had not been studied in Pakistan before. Besides, there is a dire need to study these variables as they are vital with reference to adolescents being future of every society.

RESEARCH METHODOGY

The present research was conducted in the District of Gujrat, Pakistan. Target population was adolescents between 12-19 years of age studying in educational institutes. Adolescents not attending any educational institute or having physical disability and diagnosed psychological problems which hinder them in responding, were not included in the sample. Educational institutes were decided for sample selection because they encompass a huge variety of different segments of the population. Youngster from different areas, socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds gather together under a single roof. These educational institutes consist of a diverse population of students. The multistage random sampling technique was employed in the present study for selection of a good representative sample. Correlational research design was used in the present study.

Procedure

Sample selection was carried out by three stages sampling design. At first stage, 26 institutes were selected randomly with equal allocation: Middle schools 8 (Girl's schools =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector; Boy's schools =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector), High schools 8 (Girl's schools =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector; Boy's schools =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector), Colleges 8 (Girl's colleges =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector; Boy's colleges =4, 2 from public and 2 private sector), Universities 2 (1 from public and 1 from private sector, both university were coeducation).

Now these were considered sub-populations, while at second stage a sample of 28 girls and 20 boys were selected randomly from respective institutes whereas university education system was co-education so a sample of 32 with 16 girls and 16 boys were selected from each university. From middle schools a sample of 192 adolescent students was collected (Girls 56 from public and 56 from private, boys 40 from public and 40 from private), from high schools a sample of 192 adolescent students was collected (Girls 56 from public and 56 from private, boys 40 from public and 40 from private), and from colleges a sample of 192 adolescent students was collected (Girls 56 from public and 56 from private, Boys 20 from public and 20 from private). The total sample became 640, 28 questionnaires were discarded, and remaining sample became 612. From 640, proposed proportion

of boys and girls was 40% and 60% respectively but after getting data clean, the proportion became 59.8% and 40.19%.

In the next stage sections were selected randomly from all classes. From each selected section attendance list was obtained from the teacher. According to that list students were selected systematically by even odd method. Scales of study were given to students to be filled in a separate room. With the permission of the authorities, adolescent students were informed about the purpose of research, its significance and voluntary basis of the research. Informed consent was assured before data collection. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured.

Measures: Moral Disengagement Scales for Adolescents

Moral disengagement scale for Adolescents, MDSA (Riaz & Bano 2018) was used to measure moral disengagement among adolescents. It is a self-report measure consisted on 24 item likert type scale with the response category of “Not at all agree”, “very less agree”, “Agree to some extent”, “Agree” and “Always agree”. All the items are worded positively with high scores showing high level of moral disengagement.

MDSA is a six dimensional scale: 1. Displacement and diffusion of responsibility, 2. Advantageous comparison, 3. Dehumanization 4. Attribution of Blame, 5. Moral justification and 6. Euphemistic labeling having alpha reliability coefficient of .756, .745, .634, .677, .744, and .738 respectively. Cronbach alpha coefficient of the whole scale was .80.

The Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale

The Urdu version of diverse adolescent relational aggression scale (Riaz 2014) originally developed by Horton (2010) was used to measure relational aggression. The scale consisted of 27 items to illustrate relational aggression, acts and effects. There is no reversely scored item. All items are worded positively to rate the relational aggression. Responses have been rated on four-point Likert type format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Scale has a composite score; all the items are totaled for getting a score for relational aggression with high scores showing more relational aggression. Score range of the scale is 27-108. Cronbach’s Alpha reliability for the scale is .78, and the split half reliability is .7.

RESULTS

Table 1

Summary of Regression Analysis of Moral disengagement and Sub Dimensions of Moral disengagement as Predictor of Relational aggression among Adolescent Students (N=612)

Variables	R	R ²	B	SE	β	F	P
Moral disengagement	0.571	0.327	0.4249	0.024	0.572	295.4	0.000
Diffusion and displacement of responsibility	0.426	0.182	0.880	0.075	0.426	135.1	0.000
Advantageous comparison	0.366	0.134	0.858	0.088	0.367	94.82	0.000
Dehumanization	0.446	0.199	1.307	0.106	0.446	151.1	0.000
Attribution of blame	0.366	0.134	1.178	0.121	0.367	94.37	0.000
Moral justification	0.330	0.109	1.341	0.154	0.332	75.09	0.000
Euphemistic labeling	0.230	0.053	0.913	0.155	0.232	34.74	0.000

To further determine the predictive relationship of moral disengagement and relational aggression, Path analysis (SEM) was carried out to check the model fit. All indicators of a good fitted model suggested that our model is appropriately good fitted model.

Table 2

Model Fit Summary of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (N=612)

P Value	GFI	A GFI	CFI	RMSEA	RMR
.000	.959	.918	.90	.097	.05

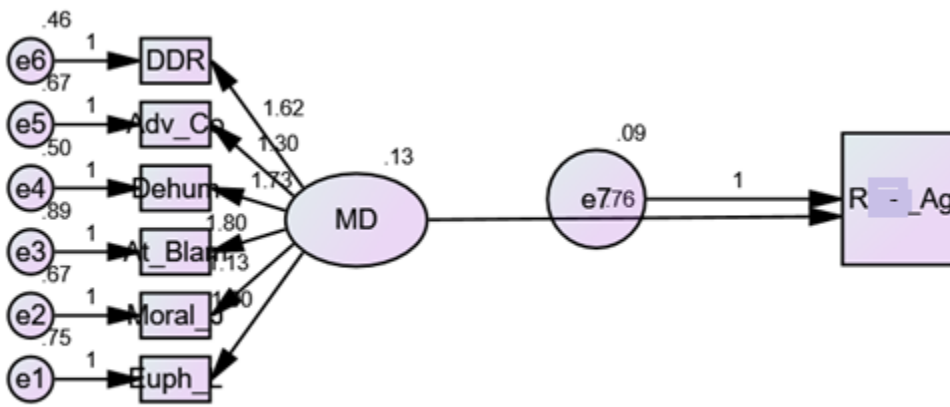


Figure 1

Note: MD=Moral disengagement, DDR=Diffusion and Displacement of Responsibility, Adv_Co=Advantageous comparison, Dehum=Dehumanization, At_Blam=Attribution of Blame, Moral_J=Moral Justification, Euph_L=Euphemistic Labeling, R-Ag=Relational Aggression

DISCUSSION

Quality of life is the most important, but quality of moral life has a significant value for the strong foundation of every society. Adolescence is a vulnerable time when individuals can develop unhealthy habits that grow into problems in their adult life. According to Bandura (1991), unethical behaviors create shame and guilt. These immoral conducts are the result of committed action and habits which are against one's values or ethical code. To get rid of these uncomfortable emotions, people apply diverse tactics to refrain from painful sentiments. There are people, whom use the views of shame and guiltiness consequential from immoral conduct for the advancement of affirmative character growth, mature affection, generousness, and honesty. Whereas, there are persons who use tactics of "moral disengagement" to support them escape unacceptable emotions though keep on acting badly. These damaged relations showing lack of feeling of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion is labeled as "relational aggression" (Crick & Grotpeter 1995). When someone is high in moral disengagement they apply different mechanisms to refrain themselves from self-sanctions and condemnation which otherwise would not let them indulge in behaviors

like relational aggression. Ethically, it is not accepted to spread rumors against someone, gossiping or calling bad names or spoiling the reputation of someone, but by dehumanizing someone getting him or her off the human qualities and human rights, justifying ones' immoral act by rationalizing and rapping ones' brutalities in sugar coated sansitized words, one tended to slept the mechanisms of self-sanctions.

Moral disengagement and relational aggression are studied among adolescents as it is an age of vital development as both progressive and destructive developmental procedures get started during that period. Adolescents confront with very important bodily, psychologically and communally fluctuations during this phase of growth (Escobedo, Reddy, & DuRant 1997).

The present study is consistent with previous findings that relational aggression was significantly linked with moral disengagement (Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, Mandrali & Parousidou 2016). Additionally, one recent study supported the notion that aggressors experienced higher levels of moral disengagement (Shin, Davis & DiBlasi 2017). Further, this is well established by past studies and current research as well that ability to disengage from moral self-sanctions is significantly related to aggressive behavior (Hymel & Bonanno 2014).

In the present study, all six sub domains of moral disengagement are significantly related to relational aggression in adolescents. The findings of this study made a unique contribution to the literature by showing that all six moral disengagement mechanisms appear to be activated in relational aggression. Besides findings, the overall predictive relationship of moral disengagement and relational aggression in the present research has also supported the relationship of six sub dimensions of moral disengagement and relational aggression.

The present research adds an evidence that diffusion and displacement of responsibility are found to be a good predictor of relational aggression among adolescents. Such as displacing the responsibility to justify unethical behavior is one of cognitive mechanism which people use for their actions onto someone else (Bandura 1999). In many well-known occurrences of immoral behaviors (e.g. "Abu Ghraib jail abuse scandal (Hersh 2004)", doers justified their doings by saying that they were only following instructions (Reid 2005). These followers seemingly thought that they were not at all accountable for their own conducts. One study results also show contradictory findings from the present study which stated that diffusion of responsibility and blaming the victim were not linked to aggression, including the relational aggression (Thornberg, & Jungert 2014). When someone refrains from taking the responsibility or responsibility is diffused among many people, then acts which a single individual could not courage to commit, become easy. With a multitude of actors it is difficult to draw causal attributions on any single individual. Single individual's influence is merely one of a number of situations that collectively result into an injurious consequence (Thompson 2012). Diffusion of responsibility, perhaps infers that the real part of accountability on an individual allied reduced and becomes harder to gauge (Linklater 2011).

All humans occasionally justify themselves through advantageous comparisons. Advantageous means providing an advantage or giving a convenience. This is a strategy to mark one's behavior good by relating it with a more terrible substitute. Huge demolition of the Vietnamese rural areas during the Vietnam combat was depicted as a lot preferred for the Vietnamese than being imprisoned by the Communists (Southwerk 2014). On the other hand, extremists view their

conduct as deeds of noble killing by associating them with prevalent brutalities imposed on the persons with whom they relate (Bandura 2004). Advantageous comparison is to rationalize one's behavior, where persons match their conduct contrary to the egregious example and determine that their act was comparatively harmless and suitable (Brown 2014). Thus, how conduct is regarded as, is highlighted by what it is matched against. By misusing the contrast rule, wrong deeds can be made virtuous. For example, family violence could be rationalized with advantageous comparison as telling a kid after giving a slap that the present act of violence was nothing in contrast to what they faced as a child being beaten furiously. So what was once ethically not acceptable converts into a way of self-assessment. Accordingly, adolescents might justify their relationally aggressive behavior by comparing it with the worst form of violence. Expression of relational aggression like gossiping, backbiting, spreading rumors and group exclusion is not considered as much serious as another form of violence (like physically injuring someone). The third dimension i.e. dehumanization of moral disengagement showed that it is a significant predictor of relational aggression in adolescents. Humans have strong moral proscriptions and psychological barriers against hurting others. So, they could not harm others as these acts generate negative emotions which are disturbing for an individual. But sometimes human adapt dehumanized behavior which is one of the moral disengagement mechanism that makes it easier to happen. Smith (2011) claimed that dehumanization breaks down the ethical barriers by decreasing the perceptions of sufferers as a human being, commendable of concern. Being unsuccessful to identify other persons as human beings is reflected to be a central enabler of ferocity among humanities and all over in history. This procedure is supposed to let colonials kill native folks as if they were bugs while whites were owners and blacks were their property (Haslam & Loughnan 2014). When someone dehumanizes an individual and view him or her without human qualities and below the level of humanity, then one may expect any type of inhumanity. Backgrounds of extermination, colonization and oppression give us the examples of dehumanization applied down the power slope, by the people in authority against the occupied (Kteily & Bruneau 2017). Relationally, aggressive behavior of youngsters could be explained by the mechanism of dehumanization. When someone is not ready to allot human qualities to an individual, they are perceived as objects who can be manipulated, treated and played as coldly. One can ruin their relationships, social status or prestige just to satisfy one's own so called social status, to obtain power and control over the environment. The results of the present study are in line with previous research findings that dehumanization has a discrete part in the mistreatment (van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski 2014).

As mentioned previously, attribution of blame is also revealed as significant predictor of relational aggression. Blaming is considered as a deed of marking an individual as accountable, creating adverse declarations about a person or group that their movements are communally or ethically bad. Blaming the oppressor is an undervaluing behavior that happens when the sufferer of a wrongdoing or a coincidence is apprehended as accountable entirely or in part for the misconducts that have been done against them. When victim is being blamed and held responsible for the atrocities being committed to him/her than showing aggressive attitude to that person seems rationalized. People believe that if something bad is not happened to them or others, therefore, victim has something deficient, which is causing him/her to bear the unwanted. Such attitudes

make it easier for aggressor to make the victim target of aggressive behavior without any negative feeling which refrain someone from behaving badly.

Continuing the debate, Moral justification pertains to justifying one's behavior as moral and depicting brutal conducts as having a noble aim for making it acceptable on social grounds. According to Bandura (1991), moral justification is the foremost mechanisms of moral disengagement which is able to encourage persons to overlook prohibitions and break up personal values. Moral justification is needed for behaviors that are, or seem to be ethically obnoxious. It targets to protect a conduct against condemnation, strive for sanction, and be viewed as ethically capable (Hermann 2015).

According to previous research findings, adolescents who are oppressors exhibited more ethically detached cognition than non-engaged (Perren, Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel 2012). Furthermore, another study supported these findings that moral reasoning was more consistently related to children's aggressive behavior (Gasser & Malti 2012). Thus, moral justification is present in every type of exploitation and ill-treatment. "War is sometimes necessary to achieve peace." Such as individuals tend to be cruel to their kids because they are actually teaching child a lesson. A research conducted by Thornberg and Jungert (2014) explained the view that justification is significantly related to bullying. Further, moral justification and blaming the victim were the solitary dimensions of moral disengagement that meaningfully linked to abuse (Thornberg & Jungert 2013). These findings are in line with the present research that by increasing the moral justification and attribution of blame, the maltreatment like relational aggression will increase as well.

The last dimension of moral disengagement, euphemistic labeling is rewording related to the use of well-mannered, nice, or unbiased words and terminologies to mention the things which publicly may view unkind, offensive, or awkward to converse about. This mechanism is used to reduce the emotive strength of the truth being discussed. Moral self-sanctions can be reduced by covering activities in innocent language. For example, "Collateral damage," applied to the killing of innocent civilians, department of War is labelled as the Department of Defense, accidentally killing one's own soldiers is called friendly fire.

Summing up, moral disengagement has a strong part in compelling to any type of ferocity including the relational aggression. A person who uses relational aggression tactics for one's own benefits may use any or all of moral disengagement tactics to detach from immoral acts. The aggressors might view the victim inferior than being a human, and consequently worthy of the penalty. They may use euphemistic language, such as naming their exploitation "discipline". They can blame the victim that it is the victim who force them to behave aggressively. They might condemn victim, asserting that he/she has some intrinsic flaws that needs corporal control of it. All tactics of moral disengagement are prevalent in all societies, and in all practices of violence, from oppression on an individual level to torment and combat. Although, euphemistic labeling has gained little attention from researcher and limited literature was available, but this study plays a vigorous role in spreading the knowledge about euphemistic labeling in adolescents and its consequences in the form of relational aggression.

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