

Moral Disengagement and the Support for Military Force: A Review

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Introduction

Rapid technological advances in robotics and artificial intelligence are introducing new military applications that will revolutionize warfare. The growing automatization of weapons allows warfare to be conducted at unprecedented distances — both physically and morally. We possess the capability to systematically destroy targets from thousands of miles away and make it home in time for dinner. The more morally distant we become from the atrocities of war, the more likely we are to support the use of lethal force. To what extent does moral disengagement impact the support of force? If moral disengagement influences public support for the use of force, then it is plausible that policies focused on resisting disengagement may reduce the degree to which violence is supported, and therefore promote peace.

This paper reviews literature that explores the relationship between the mechanisms of moral disengagement and support for lethal force. It summarizes the theory of moral disengagement, synthesizes current evidence-based research regarding the relationship between the mechanisms of moral disengagement and individuals' support for force, and summarizes the current state of knowledge while offering criticism and suggestions for future research.

Moral Disengagement Theory

Moral disengagement is a socio-cognitive theory whereby individuals exercise control of moral agency through a self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). Bandura (1999) suggested that self-regulation functions can be activated or

disengaged through eight interrelated mechanisms. According to the theory, most people have developed personal moral standards and act in a self-regulatory role by adjusting behavior in accordance with those moral standards. Moral disengagement is the process by which individuals deactivate the self-regulatory functions and violate their internal standards by engaging in unethical decision-making or morally inappropriate behavior.

Moral Justification. Individuals justify detrimental behavior by portraying it as serving a social or moral purpose (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). For example, violent acts associated with war are justified as a means of fighting oppression, honoring commitments to country, or protecting cherished valuables.

Euphemistic Labeling. Language can shape the perception of behavior. Activities can appear differently depending on the label attached. Euphemisms sanitize and camouflage meaning so that the actions described become less repugnant. Civilians killed in battle are labeled “collateral damage”; soldiers “take-out” targets rather than murder them, and aircraft conduct “precision strikes” rather than “bombing” (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002).

Advantageous Comparison. Contrasting reprehensible acts with righteous ones can change the perception of behavior. Harmful activities suddenly become less cruel when juxtaposed to worse inhumanities (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). The recent destruction of Mosul, Iraq is minimized by portraying coalition action as saving the populace from ISIS oppression. These labels enact a cognitive misrepresentation of the ac-

tual behavior.

Displacement of Responsibility. Displacement of responsibility occurs when harmful behavior is conducted on behalf of an authority (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). This mechanism is common among hierarchical organizations. A soldier, for example, will carry out orders given by a commanding officer — the moral burden associated with those orders are alleviated by displacing the moral responsibility onto the commanding officer.

Diffusion of Responsibility. The ability to self-regulate moral control is weakened when personal agency is diffused. An individual's role can be sub-divided to a level that their attention is devoted more to the individual task rather than the morality of the overall outcome (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). For example, a foreman in a missile facility is more concerned with the efficiency of production than the morality of the use of the weapon. The individuals' responsibility for the moral outcome of the weapon is diffused across the entire organization.

Disregard or Distortion of Consequences. It is easier to cause harm, when the atrocities caused, are remote or distorted. When the consequences of actions are minimized or discredited, there is little reason to enact self-sanctions of moral agency (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). Drone pilots remotely engage targets from hundreds of miles away and make it home in time for dinner. The consequences of their actions are distorted, therefore, making it difficult to engage self-censure.

Dehumanization. Dehumanization is a mechanism that strips people of human qualities and reduces them to subhuman objects. Nations at war portray their enemies as having degenerate or demonic qualities (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002).

Attribution of Blame. Injurious behavior is provoked when individuals view themselves as victims. Blame is placed on an adversary or circumstance and injurious conduct becomes

justifiable as a defensive mechanism (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002).

Review Methodology

This review focuses on research pertaining to moral disengagement and self-reported attitudes toward the use of military or lethal force. The included studies are peer-reviewed, introduce new empirical evidence, use rigorous quantitative or qualitative methodology, identify moral disengagement (or one of its mechanisms) as a key variable, and study how it affects an individuals' support of force.

Two included studies explore the relationship between moral disengagement and ethical decision-making generally. While the studies do not directly research "support of force" as an independent variable, they do broaden the scope of the review by offering organizational ethical decision-making perspectives. Additionally, one program evaluation was included to offer empirical evidence supporting policy options. Each article was screened for topical relevance, methodology, and general quality of research. Theoretical, literature reviews, and studies that did not present new empirical evidence were excluded. A total of twelve articles or fifteen studies were included in the review.

The Current State of Research

The theory of moral disengagement has produced an abundance of empirical research across a number of disciplines and domains, including child and adolescent development, criminology, aggression and bullying, workplace misconduct, and organizational behavior. Research specifically regarding moral disengagement and the endorsement of force is limited. Alfred McAlister is the most prominent contributor to research on this topic. He has independently authored or contributed to seven of the twelve articles reviewed and predominantly focuses on promoting public health through the reduction of conflict. Understanding attitudes and opinions regarding war and peace are critical in de-

termining whether nations will engage in conflict. The variables that impact the support for the use of force may also prevent it.

Measuring Moral Disengagement — Peace Test Scale. The “Peace Test” is a scale developed to measure moral disengagement in support for the use of force (Grussendorf, McAlister, Sandstrom, Udd, & Morrison, 2002; McAlister, 2001). The scale consists of an introductory question followed by 15 conditions in which the respondent is asked to indicate their agreement with the use of force on a five-point Likert Scale. The scale discriminates between national and gender groups and is a valid measurement for predicting group response for support for specific military actions (McAlister, 2001). Several studies have tested and supported the reliability and validity of the “Peace Test” scale — making it the predominant methodology applied in research on this topic (Grussendorf et al., 2002; McAlister, 2000; McAlister, 2001).

Moral disengagement and Support for Force. Eight studies have directly measured the relationship between moral disengagement and individuals’ attitudes and opinions in the support of force (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Jackson & Gaertner, 2010; McAlister, 2000; McAlister, 2001; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006; McAlister, Campbell, & Murtagh, 2012; McAlister, Sandström, Puska, Veijo, Chereches, & Heidmets, 2001). Moral disengagement and support of force are positively correlated — the more morally disengaged an individual becomes, the greater the likelihood they will support the use of force (Aquino et al., 2007; Jackson et al., 2010; McAlister, 2000; McAlister, 2001; McAlister et al., 2006; McAlister et al., 2012; McAlister et al., 2001). This relationship does not just exist at the individual level but is also a social phenomenon (Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Therefore, policies enacted to address moral disengagement should influence both the individual perspective as well as the psychometric properties

of civic and organizational moral disengagement (Caprara et al., 2009; Detert et al., 2008; Johnson & Connelly, 2016).

McAlister et al. (2006) conducted the most generalizable study directly assessing the relationship between moral disengagement and support of military force. Data were collected from a nationally randomized sample to measure participant level of moral disengagement, support for military force, and sociodemographic factors. Partway through the study, the 9/11 attacks occurred allowing the research to include pre and post-attack analysis. The results conclude “that moral disengagement completely mediated the effect of the terrorist attack, and it completely mediated the relation of factors to support a military campaign against terrorists” (McAlister et al., 2006, p. 141-2).

Similar attitudes related to moral disengagement and specific opinions regarding military actions were found against Iraq in early 1998 (McAlister, 2000). Unlike the 9/11 impact study, this research is limited by the generalizability of its findings — the sample is representative of Texas in early 2008 — specific findings cannot extend further. Additionally, both studies do not control for confounding variables, limiting their internal validity and limiting the findings to correlation rather than causation.

Cross-cultural and Gender Comparisons. Several studies find that the positive correlation between moral disengagement and support of force occurs across cultural and gender groups (McAlister, 2000; McAlister, 2001; McAlister et al., 2006; McAlister et al., 2012; McAlister et al., 2001). McAlister et al. (2012) conducted a multi-method quantitative/qualitative survey in nine nations to study viewpoints on peace and government aggression. Responses varied greatly by region and culture (McAlister et al., 2012; McAlister, 2001). Stronger endorsements for an invasion were given by respondents living in nations that historically participate in multilateral military actions. “Self-defense” and “defense

of others” were the predominant reasons for justifying an invasion, while retaliation and revenge were less common (McAlister et al., 2012).

Sociodemographic, gender, and cultural factors moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and support of force (McAlister et al., 2001; McAlister et al., 2006; McAlister et al., 2012). The 9/11 impact study found that disengagement was stronger among males and individuals of lower education. The gender difference is likely associated with the cultural socialization of male aggression. The authors hypothesized that individuals of lower education are exposed to mass communication that articulates justification of military means to resolve conflict, and are therefore prone to accept those opinions as their own (McAlister et al., 2012). This hypothesis is partly supported by a randomized experiment that found persuasive communications produced a short-term change in attitudes toward support of force (McAlister, 2001).

Limitations

The majority of the research thus far has been conducted using similar methodology that limits the ability to determine causation. Existing research relies too heavily on survey methods and does not control — statistically or experimentally — for confounding variables. Future research should adopt experimental or regression methods that better control for confounding variables.

The current body of research has moderate levels of external validity. Earlier studies utilized convenient sampling techniques, reducing the studies generalizability. McAlister et al. (2006) addressed this issue by conducting an extensive national randomized sample that substantiated previous findings, thus increasing external validity. However, generalizability is limited to the United States. Rigorous qualitative research has explored cross-cultural comparisons, but larger research is needed to accurately represent and quantify international findings.

Future research should also explore moral disengagement and popular support of force at a societal level. Existing research regarding these two variables is limited to the individual. A scale measuring civic moral disengagement was presented and should be used to expand our understanding of the relationship at the collective scale (Caprara, 2009).

A Way Ahead

Can we implement policies that increase our individual and/or societal resistance to moral disengagement? Aquino et al. (2007) concluded from a two-group between-subjects experiment that a heightened awareness of moral identity tends to neutralize the effect of moral disengagement. The PeaceTest program was designed to determine if individuals can become resistant to moral disengagement, and thus less apt to support the use of military force. A program evaluation found that the PeaceTest project demonstrated the potential to produce a change in attitudes toward the use of military force and that the theory of moral disengagement may have useful applications in war prevention interventions (Howard, Shegog, Grussendorf, Benjamins, Stelzig, & McAlister, 2007). The PeaceTest is a small example of a policy program that can be implemented to counter the effects of moral disengagement and thus reduce the desire to use lethal force as a primary means of solving conflict.

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