What Is Moral Disengagement?

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The notion of moral disengagement was developed as an extension of the social cognitive theory. This theory helps to explain why certain people are able to engage in inhumane conduct without apparent distress (Bandura, 2002). The theory proposes eight interrelated moral disengagement mechanisms.

An individual would use: 1) a disengagement mechanism that results from a cognitive reconstruction of behaviour (moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and advantageous comparison); 2) a disengagement mechanism that obscures or minimizes an individual's active role in damaging behaviour (displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and disregarding or distorting the consequences; 3) a disengagement mechanism that focuses on the favourable acts of traits of those whom the harm is being perpetuated (dehumanization and attribution of blame).

The first group of disengagement mechanisms (moral justification, euphemistic labelling and advantageous comparison) help individuals to justify their detrimental conducts as not immoral. The basic assumption in this mechanism is that individuals do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct unless they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. These three disengagement mechanisms involve cognitive reconstruction of the behaviour itself. Under these mechanisms, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by displaying the conduct as morally justified. For example, through moral justification, hiring young children as labourers may be justified by portraying that the action is taken with the aim of providing those children with an alternative to other dangerous or degrading forms of employment. Bandura (1990) explained this strategy by referring to the action of killing others in wars. Soldiers are believed to have applied this strategy so that they are able to cognitively justify to themselves that killing others is a worthy action in order to pursue freedom, preserve peace or protect democracy.

Euphemistic labelling could take place by using technical language to label inhumane conduct. For instance, while doing business, lying to one's business competitors may be called strategic misrepresentation; and while engaging in wars, killing civilians may be referred to as collateral damage. In short, by using euphemistic language the detrimental action may appear benign.

Advantageous comparison involves comparing one's own behaviour to the more reprehensible behaviour of others to exonerate one's own conduct so that one's own behaviour then

appears as benevolent by comparison. In other words, the strategy helps one to cognitively restructure perceptions of reprehensible conduct to appear acceptable.

The second disengagement group (displacement of responsibility and diffusion of responsibility) helps to distribute blame across members of a group rather than placing blame on an individual. Individuals are more likely to disengage their moral controls if they can pass the responsibility of their actions to other parties or circumstances such as management orders or peer pressure. Under displacement of responsibility, a common remark that may be made by an employee in organization is 'I was made to do it by my boss'. As for the diffusion of responsibility, responsibility is diffused in a situation where many people are involved in the wrongdoing. Individual responsibility is reduced as many others are also involved in the reprehensible conduct. For instance, in organizations, diffusion of responsibility could be done through group decision making.

Finally, the last group (distortion of consequences, dehumanization and attribution of blame) results from minimising the outcomes of the deviant conduct or minimising the perception of distress that the conduct may cause to others. Disregarding or distorting the harmful consequences of one's actions can further weaken one's own moral control. Bandura (2002) further explained that harming others will be easier if the suffering is not visible and where the damaging actions are physically and temporarily distant from the injurious effects as these conditions may prevent self-censure to function as a self-restrainer.

The strength of moral self-censure also depends on how individuals treat the people they mistreat. Bandura (1990) claimed that dehumanization of the victim is a common strategy applied by soldiers to enable them to kill their enemy without feeling guilty. Self-censure for detrimental conduct could also be disengaged by attributing the blame to the victim. For instance, the tobacco industry has denied nicotine addiction as a factor, which caused the increased number of cigarettes consumed. One of the tobacco companies claimed that 'the choice of number of cigarettes smoked rests with the consumer and we do not directly influence the decision in either direction'(White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009,p.52).

According to Bandura (1991), it is possible to use multiple mechanisms of moral disengagement simultaneously. The use of multiple mechanisms will reduce the individual's self-censure drastically and therefore that individual will have a higher tendency to be involved in detrimental conduct. Executioners have been found to apply multiple moral disengagement mechanisms in performing their work (Osofsky, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2005). It is worth to note that moral disengagement is a gradual process (Bandura 1990). Repeated reliance on the mechanisms might lead to repeated performance of the detrimental actions and finally increase the degree of tolerance for such behaviour.

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