

Moral Disengagement Scale: Associations with Aggressive Behavior

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Introduction

Researchers suggest moral attitudes may be a key element in delinquent and aggressive behavior (Cimbora & McIntosh, 2003; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004).

Bandura (1995) posits that individuals selectively disengage the self sanctions that deter negative conduct through a cognitive process termed "moral disengagement."

Decreasing the sanctions prohibiting aggressive or antisocial behavior may facilitate cognitive processes that increase the likelihood of aggression. Moral disengagement has been linked to aggressive and anti-social behavior in children and adults (Bandura et al., 1996; Pelton et al., 2004; Gini, 2006).

Moral disengagement may prove a rich target for cognitive-behavioral intervention programs aimed at reducing aggressive and anti-social behavior in adolescents.

Bandura developed the *Moral Disengagement Scale* to assess the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: Moral Justification, Euphemistic Language, Advantageous Comparison, Displacement of Responsibility, Diffusion of Responsibility, Distorting Consequences, Attribution of Blame, and Dehumanization. Bandura et al. (1996), and Pelton et al. (2004), found a single factor for the MDS resulting in an overall Moral Disengagement score.

The **purpose of this study** was to examine the factor structure and reliability of the *Moral Disengagement Scale*, and to examine the relationships between moral disengagement and behavioral correlates including aggression, bullying, and prosocial behavior.

Hypothesis One: Moral disengagement will be positively correlated with verbal, physical and relational aggression.

Hypothesis Two: Moral disengagement will be negatively correlated with prosocial behavior.

Hypothesis Three: Students who report bullying others will have higher moral disengagement scores than other students.

Participants

Data were collected in the fall of 2005 from fifth through ninth grade students at nine different Midwestern schools as part of a larger, longitudinal study of childhood aggression.

1173 (623 girls, 547 boys) students; 53% female and 47% male
10% 5th; 32% 6th; 27% 7th; 21% 8th and 10% 9th grade

74% European American; 6% Biracial; 5% African American; 4% Latino; 4% Asian; 1% Middle Eastern; 1% Native American; .5% Eastern European; and 3% Other. (1.5% did not respond).

Measures

Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS; Bandura, 1995) is a 32-item self-report measure that assesses the individual's tendency to employ cognitive mechanisms that disengage self-sanctions and justify the use of aggressive and violent behaviors (Bandura, 1995). Five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Internal consistency reliability for the *Moral Disengagement Scale* has been reported as .82 (Bandura et al., 1996; Pelton et al., 2004). In the current sample, internal consistency reliability was .92.

Children's Social Behavior Scale (CSBS; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) is a 15-item self report measure that asks children to report how often they engage in different subtypes of aggressive and prosocial behaviors. Five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Never" to "All the time."

The subscales have shown acceptable internal consistency reliability, ranging from .66 to .82 (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). In the current sample, internal consistency reliability for the subscales ranged from .81 to .89.

The Bully Survey-Short (BS-S; Swearer et al., 2002) is a 6-item self report measure that asks children about their involvement in bullying. Internal consistency reliability was .59.

Results

One-way ANOVA indicated significant between groups differences, $F(4,1164) = 12.44, p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons (Tukey HSD) indicated bullies ($M = 75.81, SD = 22.52$) scored significantly higher than all other groups, $p < .05$.

Bully-victims ($M = 67.41, SD = 17.24$) scored significantly lower than bullies, $p < .05$, and significantly higher than victims ($M = 61.97, SD = 16.54$), bystanders ($M = 61.56, SD = 16.81$), or those not involved in bullying ($M = 62.96, SD = 16.35$), $p < .05$.

Principal-components analysis with varimax orthogonal rotation resulted in one factor, accounting for 30% of the variance, being retained (see Table 2).

No significant differences were found between victims, bystanders, and those not involved in bullying.

Figure 1. Mean Moral Disengagement Scores across the Bully/Victim Continuum.

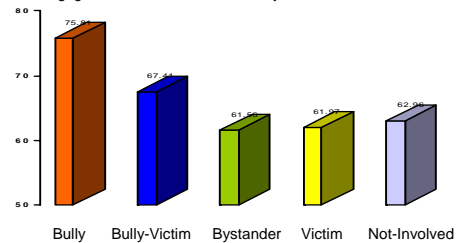


Table 1. Correlations among Moral Disengagement, Aggression, and Prosocial Behavior.

	Moral Disengagement
Relational Aggression	.331*
Physical Aggression	.377*
Verbal Aggression	.334*
Prosocial Behavior	-.200*

* $p < .001$

Table 2. Factor Loading for Each Item.

Items (Abbreviations)	Loading
Alright to fight to protect	.39
Slapping and shoving	.53
Property damage no big deal	.51
Kids in gangs shouldn't be blamed	.34
Bad conditions	.34
O.k. to tell small lies	.52
Deserve to be treated like animals	.48
Teachers' fault	.56
Bad mouths your family	.59
Teach obnoxious kids a lesson	.65
Stealing a little	.59
Instigator should not be blamed	.42
Kids who aren't disciplined	.43
Kids don't mind being teased	.54
If act like a jerk	.65
If people are careless	.26
Alright to fight for group's honor	.65
Taking bicycle is "borrowing"	.60
O.k. to insult/beat is worse	.67
If a whole group does something bad	.42
Bad words	.60
Teasing doesn't hurt	.56
Obnoxious not treated as human being	.50
Kids who get mistreated	.50
Alright to lie to protect friends	.60
Get high once in a while	.51
Taking from store	.55
Unfair to blame	.51
If friends pressure	.47
Insults don't hurt	.61
Some have to be treated roughly	.59
If parents force	.47

Discussion

This study extends the findings of Bandura (1996) and Pelton (2004) with a more diverse, American sample.

This study confirmed Bandura et al.'s (1996) finding of a single factor structure for the MDS.

As expected, Moral Disengagement was associated with bullying and aggression and was negatively correlated with prosocial behavior.

Moral Disengagement may prove a rich target for efforts to prevent or ameliorate youth aggression.

Limitations include: 1) measures used in this study were all self-report; 2) low internal consistency reliability for the BS-S. Therefore, common method variance might have influenced the results.

While research has supported the accuracy of self-report, future research utilizing multiple informants will elucidate the current findings.