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## The Ethical Disengagement Development in Children and Adolescents

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### Summary

*The current research aims to know the development of moral disengagement in children and adolescents. Several studies have indicated that there is a development of moral disengagement at various stages of life. The role that moral disengagement plays in how it perceives its relationship with other variables such as aggression and committing cyberbullying has been linked to a study. Moral disengagement from contexts and phenomena such as face-to-face bullying. From a cognitive theory perspective, there are factors that may be equally important regarding children and adolescents' perception of violence. Specifically, the morals they use can influence the viewpoint of both aggressors and victims. Moral disengagement can be defined as the concept of moral disengagement by referring to the mechanisms that people use as a barrier between their individual moral principles and their actual behavior. Moral disengagement uses several mechanisms that operate on different sites of self-regulation, including moral justification, useful comparison, shifting responsibility, and dehumanizing the victims to reduce the humanity of the victims and attribute responsibility. By looking at the victim as primarily responsible for this behavior, the levels of moral disengagement among children and adolescents who are victims of violence have become clear: their acceptance of violence and their inability to recognize abuse. Finally, the psychological study aims to know the extent of the development of moral disengagement and reduce the use of moral disengagement. Which occurs in children and adolescents*

**Keyword:** Ethical, Evolution - moral disengagement

### Introduction

Ethical disengagement occurs collectively in children and adolescents. Gini, Pozzol, and Bnssey (2013) indicated that peers influence each other in the classroom, leading to the occurrence of collective ethical disengagement in children and adolescents. The influence of peers in the same classroom on each other results in their ethical disengagement as a larger group rather than occurring individually, with individual occurrences being very rare. Pandora (Bandura, 2001) refers to ethical disengagement as a self-regulatory process that separates moral control from behavior that is subject to criticism and blame (2001, p.2771, Bandura).

The early years of a child's life are a critical formative stage that greatly influences their development throughout subsequent stages of life. This development is characterized by quantitative and qualitative changes accompanied by the elevation of psychological functions, reflected in an increased ability to learn, remember, problem-solve, be creative, achieve social harmony, and maintain self-stability. Cognitive development is evident in processing complex tasks and organizing them, enhancing the ability to use mental representation to solve problems and reflecting this development in appropriate times and situations (Alauneh, 2004).

The stage of adolescence follows the stage of childhood, and it is considered one of the most

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important stages that individuals go through in their various stages of growth. This stage witnesses many changes in mental, emotional, and social aspects of development. It also witnesses noticeable physical changes, and during this stage, the individual's self-perception crystallizes (Al-Rukaybat, 2015:1).

These contradictions support the problem of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of moral disengagement, which leads to individuals practicing morally disengaged behavior in the environment they live in. While the individual may exhibit different or contradictory behavior in another environment, this can be explained in the light of the individual's cognitive process, which means that the individual has different beliefs in different contexts regarding different situations and people. Here, moral disengagement can be described as a defense mechanism used by the individual to oppose or differ from others, and it can be described as a low level of self-awareness (Bandura, 1999: p12).

Based on this, some questions can be proposed that the current research attempts to answer:

- Does moral disengagement evolve through the stages of childhood and adolescence?

### **The first Topic: Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework represents the foundation or basis on which the researcher relies in defining and conducting their research procedures, as well as the philosophical basis on which the research is based and the interpretation of its results (Dawood and Abdul Rahman, 1990: 128).

### **The Researcher Will Present This Topic on Two Axes**

#### **First Axis: Breaking Ethical Bondage**

The complete concept of ethics should not be limited to explaining how people behave with human ethics, but how they behave in an inhumane way, and it is still possible for them to regain self-respect and feel satisfied with themselves. Clarifying adherence to ethical principles is much easier than the contradiction of violating ethical principles without losing self-respect. This violation of ethical principles can be achieved by breaking the ethical bondage of self-punishment from harmful behavior. Therefore, ethical bondage is always referred to in complex ethical problems and wide-scale human atrocities, and we see that ethical problems are solved by ordinary people from various professions and specialties (Bandura, 2014: p55).

In the context of self-development, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that guide and deter behavior. Individuals engage in behavior that gives them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth, and they distance themselves from behaving in ways that contradict their ethical standards, as such behavior would lead to self-condemnation (Bandura, 2014:p80).

The practice of moral will can be two-fold: inhibitory and proactive. The inhibitory aspect refers to an individual's ability to refrain from acting in a bad or inhumane manner, while the proactive aspect is rooted in human ethics and manifests in compassion, empathy, and efforts to help others, even at the expense of oneself (Rotni, 1993).

In cases of proactive moral courage, individuals act ethically in opposition to entrenched social practices that are unjust and inhumane. This includes performing good deeds, refraining from bad deeds, therefore, ethical theories have focused more intensively on the inhibitory aspect than on the anticipatory aspect (Pellegrin & Bartini, 2002: p88).

Ethical disengagement can allow individuals to readjust their ethical standards and regain a

sense of moral rectitude. Ethical disengagement does not change the ethical standards that individuals possess, but rather provides them with a defensive mechanism to circumvent ethical standards in a way that removes ethics from harmful behavior and their responsibilities towards it. Additionally, these individuals adhere to their ethical standards in various aspects of their lives (Bandura, 2014, p:66).

## **Second Axis: Theories of Ethical Disengagement**

### **First: (The Social Cognitive Theory of Ethics)**

There are many ethical theories rooted in various ethical principles that have been proposed to pass judgment on the correctness or incorrectness of behavior. There is no consensus among researchers on the main ethical theories regarding a general principle that governs ethical behavior for all individuals, which is based on diverse ethical principles, most ethical theories only tell us half the story about the organization of ethical behavior. They primarily focus on the cognitive aspect of ethics and the use of ethical reasoning by those in power. For example, proponents of the rational principle have little to say about the mechanisms that translate ethical standards into ethical behavior (Guyer, 1998). This is because rationalists assume that people act in accordance with what they believe they are obligated to do. According to ethical theory, ethical behavior is governed by moral duty towards adopted moral principles, regardless of circumstances and behavioral consequences. Immanuel Kant was one of the early proponents of rationalism as a means of discovering truth (Guyer, 1998), and being a contemporary of cognitive determinism, Kant added that the rational analysis of moral concepts is the method for discovering the fundamental ethical principles when the main moral principle is revealed through reason. Therefore, individuals must accept independent rational will as a duty that must be universally accepted and applied without condition or qualification. In this ethical framework (ethical dictatorship), it determines what one must do as part of their duty towards ethical rules and transcends all other influences. For example, "one must not lie" is a universal principle that must be followed according to reason and in all circumstances, as there is no such thing as an independent will immune to environmental influences. Independent will is an illusion, so when dealing with ethical dilemmas (problems), people do not cling to their ethical standards regardless of the circumstances, people use rationalization to justify harmful activities and exclude personal responsibility from them. Kohlberg (1984) adopted the model of moral rationality in the developmental stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and this theory dominated developmental research on ethics when Piaget's theory was popular at the time. However, in the end, Kohlberg's theory became increasingly criticized as it relied solely on reason to determine moral behavior, limiting moral thinking to social justice and failing to establish a link between moral thinking and moral action. Moral behavior is influenced by various factors, including spatial and complex transitional factors that go beyond self-punishment, which can be clarified through hierarchical forms of thinking. High levels of moral maturity do not necessarily predict strong commitment to humane behavior, this is because justifications, regardless of their levels, can be applied to both harmful and beneficial activities. We can see that justice is indeed used to properly justify harmful means, and some ethical concepts rely on virtuous morals. (Hursthouse, 2012: p11)

The character of an individual characterized by virtuous morals is distinguished by a general inclination and reliance on virtuous morals as a method in their behaviors. Therefore, individuals with virtuous character are capable of ethical behavior in various difficult situations and follow good behaviors that manifest ethical virtue. Therefore, individuals with virtuous character adhere to ethical behavior in various circumstances and follow good behavior that is

characterized by ethical virtue.

The theories that use inclinations with the power of rejection expect a high level of consistency in ethical behavior in situations and areas of life more than what we observe. (Bandura, 1999: p39)

As scientific and knowledge-based wisdom includes possible consequences for certain activities, virtuous ethics adopt some aspects of the principle of judging by the outcome, as it determines the validity of the work by the benefit it produces. The moral dissociation is not a subjective characteristic that can be evaluated in one way that suits all cases. The mechanisms of moral dissociation work in various areas of life, but they are clearly manifested in the field of activity (Bandura, 2006).

Achieving ethical self-regulation cannot be accomplished through ethical thinking alone, or achieving independent willpower that enables individuals to overcome all other influences. Usually, ethical principles are surpassed through emotions, incitement to temptations, and coercive social pressures. David Hume, the contemporary of Kant, who focused on acquiring ethics through experience rather than intuition, undermined the power of reason, calling it a "slave to emotions" (Denis, 2014).

For the purpose of practicing self-influence on people, individuals must reflect on their actions and the circumstances in which they perform their behavior. Self-monitoring is not a mechanical control over individual performance and social effects. Beliefs, values, attitudes, current conditions, and emotional inclinations influence how individuals perceive their activities and their cognitive processing. A distinction is made between social norms and ethics, where social norms include the social laws regarding acceptable behavior within a specific group, as there is consensus on this behavior. Ethical standards vary according to time, place, and cultural environment (Turiel, 1983, p.11). Ethics include behavior that can be physically and psychologically harmful, behavior that harms others, diminishes their value, and violates their rights to a great extent. However, various social factors attribute harmful activities to the moral domain, which have been excluded (Bandura, 1991, p.99).

In moral disengagement, we find that self-regulation is the space in which harmful behavior is built, reducing its impact and contradicting its harm. The influence of behavior on self-regulation depends on comparable ethical standards, and ethical standards affect whether actions are judged as right or wrong. Individuals benefit from resources in building ethical standards (Bandura, 1986, p21).

The important people in an individual's life and their reactions to the rightness or wrongness of the individual's actions are crucial. The individual is particularly influenced by evaluative reactions from these emotionally significant individuals. The construction of personal standards can be directly or symbolically influenced by the values that are learned. It should be noted that people do not passively accept ready-made ethical standards, regardless of the social influences imposed on them, on the contrary, we find that they adopt their ethical standards by reflecting on multiple sources of direct or alternative influence (Bandura, 1986, p.16). People adopt different standards and usually do not practice or do what they preach. Practicing ethics involves a great deal of selectivity and hypocrisy to the extent that individuals themselves may adhere to different ethical standards in different situations. For example, individuals may act ethically in their social relationships and aggressively in their tax returns. Therefore, the standards individuals adopt are not an exact copy of what they have learned or imitated (Bandura, 1991 & Leon, 1980:56).

In some circumstances, factors of utmost importance may not be the same in other circumstances. When committing atrocities, ethical dilemmas often involve enough ambiguity to provide an interpretive deadline for denying responsibility and blaming the victims, as well as arranging mitigating circumstances. The moral disengagement removes constraints on harmful behavior and self-condemnation reactions to that behavior.

### **Secondly, "Social Cognitive Theory" by Albert Bandura.**

The social cognitive theory sees human behavior as a result of the interaction between personal influences, the behavior individuals engage in, and the environmental forces that affect them. It includes three factors: the first factor is personal determinants, which are biological gifts and internal psychological influences that take the form of abilities, beliefs, self-impressions, emotional states, goals, orientations, and values. These internal personal factors affect how individuals perceive the environment and how they behave.

As for the second factor, it is the one that contributes to changing the nature of the behavior that an individual performs, whether it is physical, social, or emotional. In daily life transactions, behavior changes environmental conditions, and in turn, it changes according to the conditions it has created.

The third factor that contributes to interaction is the abundance of environmental influences. The environment is not a homogeneous force that acts in one direction on creatures.

(Patterson, 1979).

Traditional psychological theories crystallized in a time that preceded the electronic age we live in. People live in the electronic era and in a different world. Ethical battles are fought across countries through individuals who possess extensive knowledge of the World Wide Web (Internet) and share relevant ethical information through blogs, online broadcasting, and sending text messages without restriction on wireless devices.

(Bandura, 2002 p 21)

### **The interaction between social influences and self-influences**

The cognitive social theory adopts an interactive approach towards ethics. After adopting ethical standards, human behavior produces two sets of consequences: social outcomes and self-evaluative reactions. These outcomes can function as complementary or contradictory influences on behavior (Bandura, 1986).

The cognitive social theory, proposed by Bandura, discusses the reasons for the contradictory relationship between individual cognitive perceptions and actions. This theory describes the individual's self-regulating cognitive system and how it affects their ability to exercise judgment, self-control, and shape reactions (Bandura et al., 1996; Bauman, 2010).

The set of social systems and laws form the collective moral motives or determinants that influence social behavior. However, external laws are relatively weak determinants or inhibitors because most aggressive actions go unnoticed, and individuals continuously control their behavior in situations with no external limits, posing a minor external threat or minimal influence, therefore, self-regulation should play a crucial role in regulating ethical behavior, and self-regulatory mechanisms are an essential part of the concept of ethical institutions. (33: Willam, et al., 1991)

Mechanisms for ethical disengagement

To disengage ethically (eight psychological and social mechanisms), people detach themselves from ethical self-regulation and transition to harmful behavior. (Oberman, 2010; Parari & Wood, 2010)

These mechanisms operate in four areas in the process of ethical self-regulation. The first area (behavioral space) sanctifies harmful means by investing them in ethical and socially valuable purposes. Genuine intentions are used to justify harmful means. In other words, harmful behavior may appear virtuous or characterized by altruism through appropriate and beneficial comparisons. The belief that someone's harmful behavior will prevent more human suffering than it causes makes the behavior seem altruistic.

The language of softening in its various forms covers harmful behavior by using non-offensive language, excluding any inhumanity. The three mechanisms within the realm of behavior have a significant impact because they serve two purposes. They involve ethics in the harmful task but detach it during execution. In the realm of will, people avoid personal accountability for their harmful behavior by shifting responsibility onto others and distributing it widely so that no one bears the blame for the damage caused. This absolves them of guilt for the harm they have caused. The following is an explanation of each of these areas:

### **First Area: Behavioral Realm "Realm of Behavior"**

In the ethical will's behavioral realm, harmful behavior is transformed into virtuous behavior. This transformation requires more than a trick to convince oneself to sanctify the harmful means used to achieve valuable goals. It also gives additional legitimacy to these goals by absolving and concealing oneself in eloquent or twisted language. This realm includes the following mechanisms:

A- Ethical justification: It means reconstructing the sense of behavior cognitively in a general way with the aim of transforming it from behavior that is considered unethical from a general perspective to behavior that is commendable, through the authentication and rationalization of oneself. People do not engage in harmful behavior until they find justification for the morality of their actions. Social and ethical justifications legitimize those harmful practices by investing in noble goals. (17:wood, 2014).

B- Euphemistic language: It means using twisted or mildly softened phrases to lessen the impact of behavior or activity. Language represents our perception of events and thought patterns that people rely on in their actions. (Diener, Dineen, Andresen, Beamon and Fraser, 1975).

Using the passive voice without mentioning the doer is a linguistic form, giving the impression that harmful actions are the work of unnamed forces rather than specific individuals. (Bolinger, 1980).

C- The appropriate comparison "Useful comparison"

This mechanism involves making an individual's behavior appear good and upright by comparing it to another harmful and inhumane behavior. Self-justification is achieved by using a suitable comparison with inhumane actions, which is the third mechanism for the disappearance of that behavior in an aura of innocence. (Nisbett and Ross 1980).

### **The second area (sphere of will): (it obscures personal responsibility and includes)**

A- Displacement of responsibility. It means not recognizing or taking full responsibility for unethical behavior by blaming laws or higher authorities. This mechanism "displacement of responsibility" works by hindering or reducing the role of someone as an agent on behalf



of others in causing harm. People behave in ways that allow them to deny responsibility if legitimate authority accepts the responsibility for their behavior. (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989 Milgram-1974).

#### B- Dissemination or distribution of responsibility:

It means distributing responsibility for unethical behavior among individuals, placing a portion of the responsibility on the individual rather than the entirety. Individuals tend to act more brutally and aggressively when they are part of a collective responsibility rather than acting individually. Bandura (1973) argues that collective action is a form of moral disengagement through the distribution of responsibility, as collective action provides a legitimate cover for harmful means, especially when supported by justifications based on principles. Involvement in a group fueled by escalating emotions can override cognitive control, causing individuals to act recklessly without considering the consequences of their actions. Additionally, collective actions give a sense of anonymity, as individuals feel unrecognized (Zimbardo, 1969).

**The third domain, "result space",** involves minimizing or disregarding the consequences or outcomes of a behavior. This includes overlooking, distorting, and denying the harmful results or neglecting the consequences. This is done by justifying negative behavior by giving it a positive spin and neglecting its negative outcomes. These methods work to loosen ethical constraints by reducing, overlooking, and opposing the harmful effects of an individual's actions. When people engage in activities that harm others, they avoid facing or minimizing the harm they caused. They tend to particularly downplay the harm they caused when they act alone and easily evade responsibility. If the reduction or minimizing of harm does not yield any results, evidence of harm can be denied. As long as the harmful consequences of someone's behavior are ignored, minimized, and opposed, there is no reason to activate self-control, it is easy to harm others when their suffering is invisible, when destructive activities are materially and temporally distant from their effects. When people hear and see the suffering they have caused to others, it awakens pain in them and self-control becomes an obstacle for those people (Bandura, 1992). People are less committed to orders when carrying out harmful activities, and when the pain becomes clear and evident (Milgram, 1974), when people are socially influenced to act punitively, they remember that the harm they caused is less severe than the act itself. (Arsen, Coleman, Forbes & Johnson, 1972)

#### **The Fourth Domain, "Victim Space," Includes**

A- Dehumanization: by depriving the victim of their humanity by attributing characteristics or qualities that are below the acceptable level of humanity to the victim.

The final group of ethical disengagement practices works on the victims of harmful and damaging practices. Here, moral disengagement relies on how perpetrators dehumanize the people they mistreat and on the realization that the other person is a sensitive human being with basic needs that they themselves require. This awakens in us a sense of empathy and compassion for the suffering of others by sensing our shared humanity (Bandura, 1992). It is difficult to cause suffering to fellow human beings without going through self-condemnation and self-blame, but it is easy to do so without feeling guilt if they are dehumanized. In this case, ethical disengagement occurs by stripping the victim or victims of their human qualities, viewing them as non-human entities devoid of feelings, hopes, and fears, and no longer considering them as individuals with a mind (Gibson and Haritos-fatouros, 1986).

Experimental studies have shown that people who are interested in the feelings of others, when given disciplinary authority, treat dehumanized individuals more harshly than humane individuals or those with human qualities (Bandura et al, 1975). Those in positions of power rarely express personal responsibility for their actions with humane individuals, often justifying and regularly disavowing harmful behavior. Conversely, when individuals are dehumanized and punished collectively, those in power justify their harmful behavior and refuse to condemn its use, especially if the punishments are applied incorrectly and increasingly weaken and do not develop the victim's performance (Hersh, 2004).

It is important to distinguish between depersonalization and dehumanization. The term dehumanization refers to others being stripped of their humanity and replaced with something non-human, while depersonalization refers to others being treated with emotional detachment and little regard for themselves as individuals, for example, in work areas covered by the killer routine, it is very easy for employees to turn a state of indifference and depersonalization into a degree where they treat people as objects. (Bandura et al, 1975).

### **B-Blaming the Victim(S)**

Blaming those who have been mistreated is another method that operates within the victim's sphere and serves self-exoneration purposes. Through a series of events with the adversary, the individual can choose from the chain of events that occurred with the adversary as a defensive action, portraying the adversary's actions as the beginning of provocation. Then, the individual blames the adversary, as they brought suffering upon themselves due to their aggressive and instigating behavior, and therefore deserve punishment. Here, the individual exonerates themselves and can achieve it by looking at the harmful behavior as a result of oppressive circumstances rather than individual self-action, turning the external blame of the criminal into a victim. Their behavior is seen as faultless and transforms into inhumane acts through provocations.

(Bandura, 2001; Obermann, 2010; Panar, Wood, 2010)

### **The Evolutionary Aspects of Moral Disengagement**

The development of moral disengagement begins in childhood, as individuals go through processes that shape their life paths. In the developmental study of moral disengagement, various mechanisms are measured using a material language that they acquire in their childhood.

(Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996)

As for the mechanism of displacement of responsibility, children believe that they should not be blamed for aggressive behavior if they were pressured to engage in it by others, bad circumstances, or overwhelming forces. In the mechanism of diffusion or sharing of responsibility, they believe that blame should be attributed to one child for the problem caused by the group. Regarding the mechanism of minimizing and distorting the consequences, children claim that physical attacks, insults, and teasing are not harmful or are a way to vent emotions.

(Bandura & Walters, 1959; Darley, Klosson, & Zanna, 1978; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957)

### **Second Topic: Previous Studies**

Accessing previous studies is an important and fundamental step that the researcher should take before starting the necessary steps to complete their research. This gives the researcher an understanding of what these studies have achieved in their field of research and the variables



they have addressed. It also allows them to benefit from some of the procedures and results when preparing and analyzing their own research. Therefore, the researcher reviewed some studies related to the current research, by accessing available studies in Iraq as well as accessing the internet. The researcher was able to obtain a number of studies that addressed the concept of ethical disengagement.

Studies that addressed ethical disengagement

Despite the scarcity of studies that have addressed this concept to the researcher's knowledge, she was able to obtain a considerable number of these studies, which addressed ethical disengagement and its relationship with some psychological and educational variables, including:

### **1-(Zeldman, 2013) Empathy as a Mediator Between Adolescent Bullying Behavior and Moral Disengagement After Control Imposition for Social Acceptance.**

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of empathy on the link between adolescent bullying behavior and moral disengagement after control imposition for social acceptance (such as response bias). 676 students in 7th and 8th grades from suburban middle schools in Southeast Michigan participated in the fall of 2013. The results showed that (a) male respondents were more involved in various forms of traditional bullying behaviors such as physical, verbal, and social bullying, and (b) high rates of physical harm and moral disengagement were indicated. Female respondents (a) were susceptible to social harm and (b) had high levels of empathic responses, students in the eighth grade were more likely to be exposed to this behavior than those in the seventh grade, as the study indicated that (a) they engaged in all types of traditional bullying, such as physical, verbal, and social bullying, and (b) they showed high rates of moral disengagement, while students in the seventh grade showed higher levels of social acceptance than those in the eighth grade. The main effect of race appeared in reports of physical and cyber bullying, as well as reports of empathy. However, the moral significance of race decreased for both types of bullying once they were added to the regression model, and therefore no longer made a significant contribution to the model for participants who responded in a socially acceptable manner. They were less likely to (A) Their involvement in all forms of bullying and harm, (B) the belief in moral disengagement compared to those who appear to have a moderate level of moral disengagement were more likely to engage in all forms of verbal, social, physical, and cyber bullying compared to those who achieved a low level of moral disengagement. (Zeldman, 2013)

### **2- (Marlin, 2019 Study) Individual Ethics in Moral Disengagement and Bullying Among Swedish Fifth Graders: the Role of Collective Ethics in Moral Disengagement and Supportive Bullying Behavior Within Classrooms.**

The aim of this study was to examine the class climate and class-level moral disengagement that contribute to explaining different levels of harm among different layers of society. A total of 899 children from 43 Swedish elementary school classrooms participated in the current study.

The ethical class disengagement, class climate disengagement, and harm to peers were evaluated through a self-report questionnaire in order to consider the cluster nature of the data from the overlapping students within the classrooms. The multilevel regression model was analyzed in line with the hypotheses of this study, controlling for age, gender, racial background at the student level, class size, and percentage of boys at the class level. Both ethical class disengagement and class climate contributed to explaining the variation between classes in bullying, and the results indicate that:

- 1- Bullying is less likely to occur in classrooms with a warm and fair atmosphere characterized by positivity and support between children and between teachers and children.
- 2- The level of ethical class disengagement is less likely to occur because the classroom atmosphere is warm and fair. (Marlin: 2019, 1)

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