Moral Disengagement and Aggression in Children and Youth:

An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory of moral agency was developed in order to explain how adults with seemingly well-established moral standards can engage in inhumane and egregious behavior against others without apparent self-recrimination. Over the past decade, a growing body of research has explored the applicability of his theory in understanding aggressive behavior among children and youth, with consistent demonstration of links between aggression and one's tendency to *morally disengage*, justifying or rationalizing such behavior through a number of different cognitive mechanisms. Expanding on these initial studies, this article introduces a special issue of Merrill Palmer Quarterly that includes nine empirical articles investigating the individual and situational characteristics, socialization factors and developmental pathways that underlie the links between moral disengagement and aggression in children and youth, with a final commentary that critically evaluates the contributions of these articles and raises further questions for future research.

Aggressive behavior has long been a focus of developmental research (see Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006), as scholars strive to understand the factors that promote or deter such behavior in children and youth. More recently, attention has focused on a particular subcategory of youth aggression – school bullying (e.g., Jimmerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2010), as scholars attempt to mobilize empirical knowledge in order to inform educational practice (e.g., Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010). Within these literatures, researchers have attempted to identify the developmental trajectories, personal characteristics, risk and protective factors, contextual contributions, and mechanisms that underlie aggressive behavior. Given the harmful impact of such behavior, and consistent evidence that aggressive children and youth and those who bully others endorse more positive attitudes toward aggression (e.g., Bentley & Li, 1995; Bosworth, Espelage & Simpn, 1999; Carney & Merrell, 2001; Crick & Dodge, 1996; Olweus, 1997; Perry, Perry & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988) and show lower levels of empathy (e.g., Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Espelage, Mebane & Adams, 2004; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988), researchers have long questioned the links between aggression/bullying and morality (e.g., Berkowitz & Mueller 1986; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Malti, Gasser, & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Menesini, Nocentini, & Camodeca, 2011; Tisak, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2006). Do deficits in morality underlie aggressive and bullying behavior in children and youth?

As summarized elsewhere (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Rocke Henderson, 2010), decades of research in the 1980s and 1990s focused on cognitive models of moral development, and documented clear links between moral

reasoning and aggression among youth offenders, with delinquent youth showing lower levels of moral reasoning than non-delinquent youth (see Stams et al., 2006 for a review). Although less is known about these links within normal populations (Arsenio & Lemarise, 2004), such deficits are not clearly demonstrated among aggressive youth in community (non-delinquent) samples (e.g., Schonert-Reichl, 1999). Moreover, these relationships appear, as well as children's perceptions of aggression as a moral issue, appear to vary as a function of both type of aggression and sex (e.g., Murray-Close, Crick, & Galotti, 2006).

One of the more recent and promising foci in this area has come from research on the applicability of Bandura's socio-cognitive theory of moral agency in adults (Bandura 1999, 2002; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996), which offers an inclusive conceptual framework within which the moral dimensions of aggression and bullying in children and adolescents can be understood (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti & Hymel, 2012). Within this framework, the concept of moral disengagement has been particularly useful in explaining how individuals can enact behaviors that are not concordant with their moral standards while at the same time claiming to adhere to those standards and avoiding feelings of conflict, guilt, or remorse. In addition to moral values (standards), moral emotions and moral justifications (cognitions) are important considerations in understanding aggression and bullying behavior (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Perren et al., 2012).

According to Bandura (1999, 2002), moral reasoning and moral standards provide guidelines for moral conduct, but they impact behavior through several self-regulatory mechanisms that influence whether or not one engages in (im)moral conduct. By

selectively activating or disengaging internal controls in any given situation, these mechanisms can promote either positive or negative behaviors in individuals with similar moral standards. With adults, Bandura identified several different cognitive mechanisms through which individuals can morally “disengage”, thereby reducing the likelihood of self-censure or self-recrimination for harmful conduct. The first mechanism, *cognitive restructuring*, allows the individual to construe negative behavior more positively through moral justification (viewing negative behavior as serving a moral or social function), euphemistic labeling (using sanitizing language to make negative behavior sound more acceptable), or advantageous comparisons (viewing a behavior as less negative relative to far worse acts). A second mechanism involves minimizing one’s role or responsibility for a given act, either through displacement (viewing a legitimate authority as responsible for negative behavior rather than one’s self) or diffusion of responsibility (emphasizing group decision-making and collective action). Third, individuals can distort or disregard the consequences of a negative act, effectively distancing one’s self from the harm caused by emphasizing positive outcomes that can occur. The fourth mechanism involves dehumanizing or blaming the victim, viewing them as somehow deserving of negative behavior or at least partially responsible for it (see Hymel et al., 2010; Hymel & Bonanno, in press for a more detailed description of the theory as applied to children and youth).

As Ribeaud and Eisner (2010) point out, the concept of MD is quite consistent with “neutralization theory” within criminology, as proposed by Sykes and Matza 50 years ago (see Maruna & Copes, 2005, for a review), and as reflected in applied research with young offenders by Gibbs and colleagues (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Gibbs, Potter & Goldstein, 1995; Gibbs, Potter, DiBiase & Devlin, 2008) considering the “self-serving cognitive

distortions” that serve to justify negative behaviors. Still, Bandura’s contemporary, socio-cognitive theory of moral agency has inspired a growing number of studies documenting the greater capacity for moral disengagement evident among aggressive children and youth and those who bully others. The robust nature of these findings is documented in a recent meta-analytic review of 27 independent studies conducted by Gini, Pozzoli, and Hymel (2014). Children and youth who engage in more aggressive behavior and/or bullying are significantly more likely to morally disengage. Moreover, the relationship between aggression/bullying and moral disengagement is consistent across boys and girls, and appears to be stronger in adolescence than childhood (see also Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinet, & Caprara, 2008).

Moral dis/engagement is also reflected in the emotional reactions individuals experience in response to negative behavior. Emotions of guilt or shame reflect moral engagement or moral responsibility, whereas emotions of pride or indifference in the context of immoral behavior are considered reflections of moral disengagement (Menesini et al., 2003, Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Perren et al., 2012). Links between specific moral emotions and aggressive behavior have been documented in both children (Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2006) and adolescents (Arsenio, Adams, & Gold, 2009). Menesini and colleagues (2003) also showed that bullies, more than victims or outsiders, ascribe feelings of indifference and pride in response to hypothetical bullying.

Inspired by two recent international exploratory workshops or “think tanks” addressing aggression and/or bullying and moral disengagement, one hosted by Drs. Susan Swearer and Shelley Hymel for the Bullying Research Network at the University

of Nebraska at Lincoln in 2011 and another hosted by Drs. Sonja Perren and Eveline Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger at the University of Zurich, Switzerland in 2012, this special issue was undertaken to usher in the next wave of research on aggression and moral disengagement. In the workshops, it was clear that we need to move beyond concurrent correlational studies, which investigate bivariate associations between moral disengagement and aggression. This special issue features nine empirical articles by recognized scholars from around the globe that explore the developmental trajectories, situational processes, contextual effects and risk/protective factors that underlie the link between aggression and moral disengagement, applying different methodological and conceptual approaches to study moral disengagement.

The first three papers explore how individual characteristics moderate (buffer/aggravated) the impact of moral disengagement on aggression/bullying. Specifically, Bussey, Quinn and Dobson (this issue) investigate the moderating role of empathy and perspective taking in the association between moral disengagement and overt aggression among Australian adolescents. Roos, Salmivalli and Hodges (this issue) explore the effects of guilt, shame and one's tendency to externalize blame on aggressive behavior in fifth and sixth grade students in Finland, considering whether these relationships are moderated by children's capacity for emotion regulation and their level of negative emotionality. In a sample of early adolescents in Italy, Gini, Pozzoli and Bussey (this issue) examine the moderating role of moral disengagement in understanding the links between both reactive and instrumental aggression and psychopathic tendencies (callousness/unemotionality, impulsivity/irresponsibility, grandiosity/manipulation).

The next three papers focus on developmental pathways, exploring trajectories and age-related changes in the links between moral disengagement and aggression/bullying. In a longitudinal study of Swiss students between the ages of 11 and 13 years, Ribeaud and Eisner (this issue) examine the causal links between aggressive behavior and moral neutralization, reflecting neutralization techniques, moral disengagement and self-serving cognitive distortions. Sticca and Perren (this issue) investigate the longitudinal associations between bullying behavior and the development of three aspects of moral thinking, including moral disengagement, perceptions of moral responsibility and feelings of remorse, in a sample of Swiss adolescents, followed between grades 7 and 9. In a sample of American children, followed from grades 4 through 7, Visconti, Ladd and Kochenderger-Ladd (this issue) evaluate moral disengagement as a mediator between children's prosocial and antisocial goals and aggressive behavior, both concurrently and longitudinally.

The final three papers consider moral disengagement in its situational context, addressing issues of socialization. In a large sample of Italian adolescents (13-18 years of age) from 56 classrooms, Menesini, Palladino and Nocentini (this issue) explore the role of both individual and group moral indices in predicting student reports of bullying, considering individual reports of moral emotions when bullying others and classroom level (aggregated) pro-bullying attitudes as well as the level of bullying reported among sociometrically accepted students. Dormajian and Bukowski (this issue) investigate the role of moral disengagement in bystander behavior, distinguishing between efforts to defend victimized peers and passive witnessing behavior in a short-term longitudinal study of Canadian pre-adolescents. In a sample of Italian preschool children (age 3-6

years), Camodeca and Taraschi examine the role of parent moral disengagement, as reflected in their tendencies to externalize blame and to respond with indifference in daily situations, in predicting teacher ratings of children's externalizing behavior (anger, aggression, egotism and opposition). The special issue culminates with an integrative discussion by Dr. Eveline Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger.

The studies included in this special issue, describing research conducted with students of different ages and from different countries, reflect the international focus of research in this area and the applicability of the construct of moral disengagement in explaining aggressive behavior across ages and around the globe. Our hope is that this collection of studies will serve to extend our current understanding of the role of moral disengagement in childhood and youth aggression and to inspire further research in this area

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