Moral Disengagement As a Predictor of Bullying and Aggression: Are there Gender Differences?

Rhonda Turner, M.A.

Introduction

Researchers suggest moral attitudes may be a key element in delinquent and aggressive behavior (Cimbora & McIntosh, 2003; Arsenio & Lemerie, 2004). Bandura (1995) posits that individuals selectively disengage the self sanctions that deter negative conduct through a cognitive process termed "moral disengagement."

Bandura (1995) notes 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.

Hypothesis Four: Males will score higher than females for overt aggression, bullying, and MDS. Girls will score higher for relational aggression.

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; 27% 6th; 21% 7th 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 .69.

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 on the MDS.

No significant differences were found between victims, bystanders, and those not involved in bullying. Males scored significantly higher than girls on measures of overt aggression, bullying, and moral disengagement.

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. As expected males scored higher than girls on moral disengagement, overt aggression and bullying. Contrary to expectations, males and females did not significantly differ on relational aggression.

Moral Disengagement may prove a more salient factor than gender in aggression and bullying than gender, and may provide 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 is warranted.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Disengagement</td>
<td>.331*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Aggression</td>
<td>.377*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
<td>.334*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Behavior</td>
<td>-.200*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p < .001

** = statistical significance (p < .000)

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Continuous Variables across Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying (1-90)**</td>
<td>5.76 (2.15)</td>
<td>7.77 (2.39)</td>
<td>7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt Agg.</td>
<td>5.60 (2.77)</td>
<td>4.52 (2.04)**</td>
<td>5.03 (2.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Agg.</td>
<td>7.95 (3.78)</td>
<td>7.70 (3.20)</td>
<td>7.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Dis.</td>
<td>66.77 (18.98)</td>
<td>61.83 (16.18)**</td>
<td>64.16 (17.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>