

## Moral Disengagement in Ethical Decision Making: A Study of Antecedents and Outcomes

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### Main points

- *Moral disengagement* is a process by which the processes that normally inhibit unethical behaviour are deactivated by moral self-regulatory mechanisms. Such mechanisms comprise: (1) situational factors, and (2) individual attributes.
- **Situational factors** involved in moral disengagement are said to include:
  - **moral justification**: the process by which individuals rationalise harm done to others in ways that make it appear morally justifiable (e.g., *if I didn't do this, someone else would, and it's better if I'd do it because my motives are not reprehensible*);
  - **euphemistic language**: use of morally neutral language to make reprehensible conduct seem less harmful or even benign (e.g., *collateral damage is inevitable in such situations*);
  - **advantageous comparison**: unethical behaviour is compared with even more harmful conduct, thus making the original behaviour appear acceptable (e.g., *what I did was nothing compared to the other things that had been done recently*);
  - **displacement of responsibility**: viewing one's behaviour as being a direct result of authoritative dictates (e.g., *I was only following orders*);
  - **diffusion of responsibility**: no one group member feels personally responsible for the collective group destructive behaviour (e.g., *I don't feel particularly badly about this, because we all had a part in doing it*);
  - **distorting the consequences**: downplaying the probable results of unethical behaviour (e.g., *taking this little bit of money doesn't affect anything in a huge company like this*);
  - **dehumanisation**: us-versus-them thinking based on convenient stereotypes (e.g., *they live like animals, therefore they deserve to be treated like animals*); and
  - **attribution of blame**: exonerates the self by placing fault with the target of the harmful behaviour (e.g., *terrorists deserve to be tortured because they have brought such outcomes upon themselves*).
- **Individual attributes** involved in moral disengagement are said to include:
  - **empathy** (or lack of empathy): ability/inability to recognize and understand another's thoughts and feelings;
  - **cynicism**: general distrust of other persons, groups, ideologies, social conventions, and institutions;
  - **external locus of control**: belief that, as an individual, you can do little to affect the outcomes of situations; and
  - **moral identity**: the salience of ethics/morals in the self identity.
- The researchers tested their model using a sample of university students, and found general support for the hypotheses that moral disengagement depends on both situational and individual factors. (Interestingly, all other factors being equal, men were more liable to moral disengagement than were women.)
- The paper included a set of items used to measure moral disengagement: e.g., *it is all right to fight to protect your friends; damaging property is no big deal when you consider that others are beating up people; if someone is pressured into doing something, they shouldn't be blamed for it; a member of a group or team should not be blamed for the trouble the team cause; insults don't really hurt anyone; if someone leaves something lying around, it's their own fault if it gets stolen; some people deserve to be treated like animals*; etc.