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Moral Disengagement: Exploring Support Mechanisms for Violent Extremism among Young Egyptian Males

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Abstract

This study applied Bandura's (1986) eight mechanisms of moral disengagement to a sample of young, Egyptian Muslim males (N=660). Findings uncovered two distinct scoring groups, likewise a statistically significant ($p<.01$) relationship between higher reported levels of moral disengagement and age. For this sample, younger individuals were likewise more apt to possess higher levels of moral disengagement. Findings argue for additional analyses exploring these relationships, likewise employing counter-violence, communication interventions derived specifically from Bandura's identified mechanisms.

Keywords

Moral Disengagement, Extremism, Terrorism, Egypt

INTRODUCTION

By definition, 'violent extremism' are acts of violence decisively perpetrated on civilian non-combatants for the purposes of obtaining ideological, religious or political objectives (Borum, 2004). Under this definition, there are many 'root cause' explanations for violent extremism, psychological theories that examine broad environmental factors (i.e. poverty and government restrictions, etc.) as individual motivations and factors for such acts (Atran, 2004; Krueger & Latin, 2003).

Investigating individualized attitudes and beliefs toward violent extremism can arguably help explain several key behaviours underlying this ideology, most notably strong support for the use of violent tactics to achieve various, violent aims. While no one theory nor perspective can singlehandedly explain the variability and complexity of violent extremism, existing research, however, reasons that understanding human social cognitive processing can help decipher key pieces in this salient puzzle (Bandura, 1990). Toward this end, there is a glaring need to better understand individual and mass support for violent methods, data which can be used toward developing alternative and effective, non-lethal means for persuading people to think and act otherwise.

To develop effective persuasion campaigns against violence involves understanding how people come to believe that violence against 'some people' is acceptable and justified in the first place. Echoing this philosophy, Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory of moral disengagement posits that the use of violence and aggression may be directly related to an individual's tendency to disengage from their own moral standards and guidelines (Paciello et al., 2008). Meaning that, in general, people knowingly monitor their own conduct, refraining from actions that result in self-criticism and/or a violation of personal standards (Bandura, 1986).

To explain, engaging in behaviour inconsistent with one's personal values and/or principles is generally highly uncomfortable, often resulting in intense feelings of guilt and remorse. Still, individuals with fluid ethics and/or values do commit atrocities, and experience no self-censure or sense of wrongdoing while doing so (Bandura et al., 2001). This dismissal is derived via an active and gradual process of learning to disengage internal self-sanctions, of selectively distorting social cognitive information for the purposes of justifying violence (Bandura, 1990).

Bandura (2001) suggests eight social-cognitive mechanisms at work by which an individual may disengage from his/her own personal moral agency. These mechanisms centre around three primary areas: 1) elements connected to actual violent behaviour; 2) the consequences of violence; and 3) personal responsibility for violence and the targets of violent actions. All eight mechanisms allow a person to effectively eliminate any guilt or reproach from engaging in violent acts (see Table 1). Under this rubric and taken together, individuals who endorse high levels of moral disengagement are also and logically more likely to support the use of violence plus engage in aggressive and violent behaviour themselves (McAlister et al., 2006; Paciello et al., 2008).

Table 1. Eight Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Mechanism of Moral Disengagement	Definition
1. Moral Justification	Detrimental conduct justified as serving socially worthy and moral purposes
2. Euphemistic Language	Language that sanitizes harmful conduct
3. Advantageous Comparison	Contrasting harmful conduct with highly flagrant acts or atrocities
4. Displacement of Responsibility	Ascribing blame for damage to other agents
5. Diffusion of Responsibility	Obscuring and minimizing one's agentive role in harm
6. Misrepresenting the Harm	Distorting, minimizing or disbelieving the harmful effects
7. Ascription of Blame	Blaming the victim for their own plight
8. Dehumanization	Stripping people of human qualities or investing them with demonic attributes

Bandura's explanation is not new to this problem set; moral disengagement has – for over two decades - been theoretically applied to understand terrorism and political violence (Bandura, 1990). However, only a handful of these studies directly measured rates of moral disengagement in the populations exposed to terrorism and violence (McAlister et al., 2006).

JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS STUDY

In particular, few studies examine the processes of moral disengagement among male Muslim populations. This population is particularly critical to current investigation, given their status as a prime recruitment base by many violent extremist groups (Borum, 2004). Not surprisingly, existing research finds groups such as Al Qaeda, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Irish Republican Army knowingly infusing mechanisms of moral disengagement into their mass communication efforts to promote and justify violent methods (Sarma, 2007; Weimann, 2008). In his analysis of over 5,000 terrorist websites, Weimann (2008) discovered that much of the rhetoric espoused by these groups directly taps into Bandura's eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. Aly (2010) echoed these sentiments, uncovering a correlation between social identity and violent or extremist behaviour as the premise for anti-terrorism campaigns in some Arab countries.

Thus, a closer assessment of levels of moral disengagement among male Muslim populations can provide useful, tangible information about how susceptible this audience might be to terrorist appeals for the use of violence. Bandura's theory suggests ways of countering mechanisms, of helping 'reengage' peoples' lost sense of moral agency and/or personal self sanctions.

Various demographic and attitudinal variables collected in tandem might further assist in reasoning how a larger population is likely to advocate for violent method use. Ethical discrepancies, Lieber (2005) uncovered, are likely to emerge from traditional drivers such as age, education, gender and political ideology.

This knowledge can subsequently be applied in designing valid campaigns and messages aimed at countering terrorist propaganda. In sum: better understanding of which segments of a population are most vulnerable to moral disengagement can engender more effective counter-messaging toward at-risk populations.

METHODS

Structured phone interviews were given to a convenience sample of 660 Muslim Egyptian males between the ages of 15-30 years old ($M=24$ years old). The interviews were administered between the dates of 10, June 2009 to 28, June 2009. All measures were translated into Arabic, and subsequently back translated by professional translators (native Arabic speakers). Interviews were likewise administered by fully- trained interviewers and native Arabic speakers. All participants were recruited on a volunteer basis, with interviews lasting n average of 26 minutes each. The self-report measures analysed for this study were part of a broader research project investigating Arab male opinions and attitudes on a variety of topics.

Participants

45% of the sample had attended some university and/or completed a graduate degree. 53% reported working in a full time job, with 41% of this group self-identifying as students and/or apprentice status. Approximately 87% of the sample identified themselves as ‘middle class.’ All participants lived in one of five major Egyptian cities including Cairo (30%), Al-Gharbia (15%), Al-Menyah (16%), Al-Sharqiyah (20%), and Al-Behera (18%).

Measures

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement: A modified version of the Mechanism of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996) was administered to the participants. The original scale was modified for use with an adult Muslim population and included 21 items from the original scale. Original items and verbiage on education were removed to remain developmentally appropriate for the target sample. All items were scored on a 1 to 3 scale, with 1 indicating ‘disagree,’ 2 corresponding to ‘neutral’ and 3 ‘agree.’ For the sampled population, the Moral Disengagement Scale was found to possess adequate internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha=.74), suggesting that scale items were appropriately highly inter-correlated with each other. A total score for Moral Disengagement was calculated by summing across the items and calculating its average. Higher scores indicate higher levels of Bandura’s notion of moral disengagement.

Attitudes against violence: Participant attitudes on violence were measured via nine items gauging level of support for violence against civilian non-combatants. This Attitudes Against Violence Scale explored individual beliefs in the effectiveness of violence such as, “Violence against civilians is the only way for Muslims to fight against powerful countries,” “Violence against civilians is justified as a punishment for non-believers,” and “Violence against civilians is effective in protecting the interests of Muslims.” Said questions were rated on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating ‘completely agree’ and 5 ‘completely disagree.’ For the following sample, the Attitudes Against Violence Scale was found to possess adequate internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha=.68), suggesting scale items were appropriately highly inter-correlated with each other. A total score for Attitudes Against Violence was calculated by summing across the items and calculating its average. Higher scores indicate lower levels of Bandura’s notion of support for violence.

RESULTS

Zero-Order Correlations

For this sample, mechanisms of moral disengagement were strongly and negatively correlated to attitudes against violence (see Table 2). Additionally, moral disengagement was negatively correlated with age, such that younger participants endorsed higher levels of moral disengagement. However, neither moral disengagement nor attitudes against violence were correlated with level of education, job status or social class. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating younger individuals tend to have higher rates of moral disengagement (Paciello et al., 2008).

Table 2. Zero Order Correlations of Moral Disengagement, Attitudes Towards Violence, and Demographic Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Moral Disengagement	1.53	0.31	--	-.23**	-.10*	-.02
2. Attitudes Towards Violence	4.19	0.69	-.23**	--	.15**	.05
3. Age	23.6	5.17	-.10*	.15**	--	.45**
4. Level of Education	5.5	1.41	-.02	.05	.45**	--

**p<.01. *p<.05.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Two groups ('high' and 'low') were formed stemming from total scores on the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale. The 'low' levels of moral disengagement group included 344 respondents, the 'high' one 316. Additionally, three age groups were formed: a) participants 15-20 years old (N=216); b) 21-25 years old (N=184); and c) 26-30 years old (N=260). A 3x2 ANOVA was run for the attitudes against violence measures, with age and moral disengagement entered as grouping variables.

Results of the 3x2 ANOVA found the overall model ($F [5, 654]=14.46$; $p < .01$), main effects of moral disengagement, and age group all significant. This joint finding suggests that – for this sample of Egyptian Muslim males - both age and moral disengagement significantly impact attitudes against the use of violence. More importantly, there is a significant interaction between age and moral disengagement on attitudes against violence ($F [5, 654]=15.84$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2=.05$).

In particular and in the 'high' moral disengagement group, younger participants (15-20 year old and 21-25 year old) were significantly more likely to support the use of violence as compared to their older peers (26-30 year old group). In contrast, there were no significant differences uncovered in the 'low' group among these same variables. Meaning, in the 'low' moral disengagement group, all age groups reported a consistent attitude strongly opposing the use of violence. This finding suggests that younger individuals that endorse higher levels of moral disengagement are also more likely to support the use of violent methods and strategies, such as attacks on civilians. Therefore and for this sample, it is a combination of youth and social cognitive processes of moral disengagement that may partially explain the tendency to support the use of violence toward achieving certain goals.

DISCUSSION

While a snapshot analysis, this study uncovered tangible signs of the potency of moral disengagement among a vulnerable population. A startling although perhaps unsurprising link between moral disengagement and age points to a glaring reality of the ability of media and/or peers to engender strong held beliefs capable of nurture even at younger ages. In specific, how a calculated marriage between ideology and/or message construct can exponentially increase the effectiveness and adoption rates of both. When this marriage produces violent extremism, the results can literally be both fatal and tragic.

Moreover, this study reasons for a better infusion of proven social science theory and practice when analysing, creating communication interventions toward countering violent extremism. Analysed studies uncover a systematic, successful use of moral disengagement to advocate for, sustain violent extremist action and recruiting. In turn, messaging to counter these tactics must adopt the same rigor and commitment.

Future research potential on this topic is near endless. Experimental research design derived from these findings can produce valuable insights on the ability of strategic communication to increase or decrease moral disengagement mechanisms within vulnerable populations. More importantly, provide clear links between theory and practice on a topic of enormous global importance.

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