The Role of Moral Disengagement in Cyberbullying Participant Roles

Ruth Jeong, M.A., Megan Gilbertson, M.S., S.S.P., Logan Riffle, M.A., Michelle Demaray, Ph.D.
Northern Illinois University, Department of Psychology

Introduction

- Individuals can engage in cyberbullying situations in various ways. In addition to bullying perpetration and victimization, other behaviors include: passive outsider behavior, defending of the victimized individual, and assisting the individual engaged in cyberbullying perpetrator (Sarmiento et al., 2019).
- Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory process that facilitates reduced feelings of guilt when individuals behave contrary to their moral standards (Bandura et al., 1996).
- Some studies have shown significant associations between moral disengagement and traditional bullying, but research on moral disengagement and cyberbullying is limited (Killer et al., 2019).
- Research has demonstrated a link between moral disengagement and cyberbullying perpetration behavior (Kowalski et al., 2014).
- Similar to perpetrating behaviors, reinforcing behavior has been linked to moral disengagement (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012), but this association has not been examined in the cyber context.

Research Questions
1. What is the nature of potential associations between moral disengagement and the following online bullying role behaviors: bullying, victimization, defending, passive outsider, and reinforcing? How do these associations differ by gender?
2. Will the associations between moral disengagement and the bullying behaviors above differ by gender?

Participants
- N = 197 College students attending a public midwestern university
- 65 (33%) Male; 132 (67%) Female
- 49.7% White, 17.8% African American, 9.6% Asian, 19.3% Hispanic/Latino(a), 1.5% American Indian, 1% Other

Procedure/Measures
Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey. IRB approval was obtained and participants provided consent.
- Bandura’s Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS; Bandura, 1996).
- The Cyberbullying and Victimization Survey (CBVS; Brown, Demaray, & Secord, 2014).
- The Cyberbullying Bystander Questionnaire (CBQ; Sarmiento, Herrera-Lopez, & Zych, 2019).

Method

Cyberbullying behaviors, with the exception of defending behaviors, are significantly associated with moral disengagement.

Research Questions 1 and 2

Five hierarchical regressions were conducted:

In Step 1, the Total Moral Disengagement Score and Gender (0 = male; 1 = female) were entered; In Step 2, the Moral Disengagement by Gender interaction was added; DVs were Cyberbully, Cyber Victim, Reinforcer, Passive Outsider, and Defender; NOTE: Lower moral disengagement scores = more disengagement.

Cyberbully: Step 2 accounted for significantly more variance (p < .001) than Step 1. Moral Disengagement (r = .015, p < .001), Gender (r = .119, p = .05), and Moral Disengagement X Gender (r = .015, p < .001) were all significant predictors of the Bully Score. See Figure 1 for a plot of the gender interaction.

More moral disengagement was associated with more bullying for boys, but not girls.

Cyber victim
- Only Step 1 was significant (p < .05). Moral Disengagement (r = .005, p < .016) emerged as the only significant predictor of the Victim score.
- More moral disengagement was associated with more victimization.

Reinforcer
- Only Step 1 was significant (p < .001). Moral Disengagement (r = .012, p < .01) was the only significant predictor of the Reinforcer score.
- Low moral disengagement was associated with more reinforcing behavior.

Passive Outsider
- Only Step 1 was significant (p < .001). Moral Disengagement (r = .012, p < .01) and Gender (r = .394, p < .05) were significant predictors of the Passive Outsider score.
- Being a girl and having lower moral disengagement was associated with passive outsider behavior.

Defender
- The regression on the Defender score did not emerged as significant.

Discussion

- In examining how moral disengagement is related to each of the bully role behaviors, the results showed how individuals in the bullying context may be more likely to behave differently according to their level of moral disengagement.
- Findings gleaned from this study may be particularly important for practitioners in designing prevention and intervention programs aimed at helping students recognize, reflect, and discuss personal responsibilities and perceptions related to bullying.

Limitations & Future Research
- The Cyberbullying Bystander Questionnaire (CBQ) is relatively new and limited in usage, making it difficult to confirm our results with other studies.
- The current sample had disproportionately more females than males, which may have impacted the findings.
- Future research should explore the associations between moral disengagement and bullying role behaviors and how these associations differ between young adults compared to youth.