

The Impact of Moral Disengagement on Antisocial Behavior Among Postgraduate Private University Students

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ABSTRACT

In the modern academic setting behavioral patterns among postgraduate students are influenced by complex social and cognitive processes. Moral disengagement, defined as the cognitive restructuring of unethical behaviour to reduce guilt, has been increasingly associated with antisocial tendencies. The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour among postgraduate private university students, with a focus on gender differences. A sample of 157 postgraduate students was selected using stratified and convenience sampling techniques to ensure equal representation of male and female participants. The Subtypes of Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire and the Moral Disengagement Scale were used to assess the participants. Findings revealed that most students reported moderate moral disengagement and low antisocial behaviour. A significant positive correlation was observed between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior ($\rho = .270$, $p = .001$). Additionally, significant gender differences emerged in both moral disengagement ($U = 1743.000$, $p < .001$) and antisocial behavior ($U = 1802.000$, $p < .001$). Further analysis indicated that gender significantly influenced these variables, suggesting its moderating role in the relationship.

Overall, the findings align with existing literature, emphasizing that higher moral disengagement is linked with increased antisocial tendencies, with gender shaping the nature and extent of this relationship.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, antisocial behavior, gender differences, postgraduate students

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades society has witnessed rapid social, cultural and technological transformations shaping an overall human behaviour. In modern life people are constantly confronted with circumstances that test their moral values and ethical decision making. People's perception of right and wrong have changed due to increased academic competition and changing interpersonal dynamics. Especially among young adults these changes have led to shifts in moral reasoning and behavioral patterns. People may come across situations that promote the justification of questionable behavior as they negotiate peer relationships, academic obligations, and career goals. In this regard it becomes crucial to understand the psychological mechanisms that underline immoral or antisocial behavior.

One such mechanism is Moral disengagement that enables individuals to justify harmful actions while maintaining a favourable self-image (Bandura, 1991). Students at universities face particular developmental problems as they deal with increased academic pressure and societal expectations. During this phase people are required to exhibit maturity, responsibility and ethical reasoning, however the pressure may lead to behaviors that deviate from social norms. Therefore, it has become increasingly important to comprehend the psychological processes that underline such behaviors.

Over time, repeated use of moral disengagement techniques might eventually lead to antisocial behavior. In general, antisocial behavior is defined as actions that go against social norms, hurt other people, or interfere with the smooth operation of a community (Moffitt, 1993). Antisocial behavior may have various forms including dishonesty, manipulation and rule-breaking. These actions not only impact individuals but their academic settings, and institutional operations.

The connection between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior has drawn more attention in psychological research. Various studies indicate that people who regularly engage in moral disengagement are more likely to display antisocial tendencies (Bandura et al., 1996). Moral Disengagement lowers feelings of guilt and enables people to justify harmful actions. As a result, individuals may engage in behaviours that violate social norms without experiencing psychological discomfort. This relationship is especially relevant among postgraduate students, who often face situations requiring ethical decision-making.

Albert Bandura's groundbreaking contributions to Social Cognitive theory (1986, 1999, 2002) established that human behavior is not driven by unchangeable moral imperatives but instead regulated and deregulated through a dynamic interaction of self-efficacy, self-monitoring and moral agency. Eight different psychosocial mechanisms were identified in his theoretical development of moral disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization, attribution of blame, and distortion of consequences. In order to protect the actor from self-criticism, each mechanism functions as a cognitive sleight of hand, reinterpreting the meaning of detrimental acts (Bandura, 2002).

These disengagement mechanisms have been repeatedly connected in empirical research to a broad range of antisocial consequences. In a variety of cultural contexts, Caprara et al. (2014) showed strong correlations between moral disengagement and aggressiveness. These results were expanded into organizational contexts by Detert et al. (2008), who showed how professional adults use moral disengagement to justify immoral behavior at work. Particularly among student populations, Bandura et al. (1996) established fundamental evidence that moral disengagement is associated with aggression, academic misconduct, and delinquent behavior among adolescents. These findings have been extended into higher education contexts by later researchers with significant empirical momentum (Fida et al., 2014; Gini et al., 2014). However, the specific intersection between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior within postgraduate cohorts attending private universities is still relatively understudied. This gap is significant. High tuition costs, competitive admissions, aspirational peer cultures, and resource-intensive settings are common characteristics of private universities, which may cultivate unique psychosocial pressures and social norms that influence the probability and type of moral disengagement (Ehrich et al., 2016). Furthermore, postgraduate students are especially vulnerable to role ambiguity, moral identity diffusion, and social comparison effects because they occupy a transitional identity space—they are neither undergraduates nor fully professional (Arnett, 2000).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior among Postgraduate Private University students.

H2: There will be a significant difference in levels of moral disengagement between male and female students.

H3: There will be a significant difference in levels of antisocial behavior between male and female students.

H4: Gender will significantly moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior.

Participants:

157 participants (78 male & 79 females)

Inclusion Criteria:

Participants meeting the following criteria were included in the study :

1. Participants must age between 18-25 years at the time of data collection.
2. Participants must be full-time postgraduate students of any private university.

3. Participants must identify as male and female.
4. Participants must provide informed consent for voluntary participation.

Exclusion criteria:

Participants were not included in the study if :

1. They aged below 18 or above 25 years of age.
2. They have a history of severe psychiatric or neurological disorders.
3. They failed to provide informed consent or withdraw during the study.

Instruments:

Subtypes of Antisocial Behaviour Questionnaire (STAB)

To assess antisocial behaviour among participants the Subtypes of Antisocial Behaviour Questionnaire (STAB) developed by S. Alexandra Burt and M. Brent Donnellan (2009) was used. It is a self report tool used to measure an individual's antisocial conduct across common situations.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale

Moral disengagement was assessed using the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Albert Bandura and colleagues (1996). It measures an individual's tendency to justify and defend unethical or harmful behaviour.

Procedure and Analysis

To ensure clarity, transparency and consistency a structured and sequential research approach was followed. A stratified sampling was used to ensure balanced participation of both genders along with convenience sampling to reach postgraduate students from private universities based on their desire and availability to take part in the study. In order to uphold ethical standards informed consent and confidentiality was guaranteed.

After the selection of participants a structured Google Form was used to collect the data. The beginning of the form included uniform instructions like an informed consent statement clearly outlining the purpose of the study following a digital consent checkbox of voluntary participation. Failure to provide consent leads to elimination of the form.

There were three sections to the questionnaire :

- Demographic details - name(optional), age,gender,current education
- Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale
- Subtypes of Antisocial Behaviour Questionnaire (STAB)

Participants were not time bound and were given enough time to complete the questionnaire. Following the completion of data collection the responses were carefully examined and arranged. For additional analysis the collected data was coded and imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Before moving on to the statistical analysis the dataset was screened for the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a data of 157 participants was retained for the study.

Appropriate statistical methods were then used based on the objectives and hypothesis of the study. Sample characteristics were described using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage. Tests of normality were conducted to determine the distribution of the data. Since the data was not normally distributed, non-parametric tests were applied. To examine the correlation between moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour Spearman Correlation was applied, while gender differences were explored using Mann-Whitney U test. These statistical methods were chosen because they matched the study's goals and were suitable for non-normally distributed data.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to assess if gender moderates the association between moral disengagement and anti-social behavior, investigate gender differences in these variables, and investigate the relationship between moral disengagement and antisocial behavior among university students. The findings of the study provide meaningful insights into how cognitive moral processes and behavioural tendencies interact within a student population. The results are discussed in relation to each hypothesis.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Study Variables (N=157)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	79	50.3
	Female	78	49.7
	Total	157	100.0
Moral Disengagement	Low	43	27.4
	Moderate	105	66.9
	High	9	5.7
	Total	157	100.0
Antisocial Behavior	Low	105	66.9
	Moderate	50	31.8
	High	2	1.3
	Total	157	100.0

Interpretation

The frequency distribution revealed that most students demonstrated moderate levels of moral disengagement and low levels of antisocial behaviour. This suggests that while moral disengagement is present among students, it may not always turn into overt antisocial behaviour. Instead, students may occasionally use cognitive justifications without consistently engaging in harmful actions. This variation highlights the complexity of moral cognition and behavioural expression.

Table 2 : Tests of Normality for Moral Disengagement and Antisocial Behavior Across Gender (Kolmogorov-Smirnov)

Variable	Category	Statistic (D)	df	Sig. (p)
Moral Disengagement	Low	.515	43	.000
	Moderate	.397	105	.000
	High	.519	9	.000
Antisocial Behavior	Low	.421	105	.000
	Moderate	.490	50	.000

Interpretation

All p-values < .001 indicate deviation from normality. The “High” category for antisocial behaviour was omitted as gender was constant in that group.

Overall, since all obtained p-values were less than .05, the assumption of normality was violated for the variables under study. Consequently, non-parametric statistical tests were considered appropriate and were employed for further data analysis.

Table 3 : Spearman’s Rho Correlation Matrix for Gender, Moral Disengagement and Antisocial Behavior

Variable		Gender	Moral Disengagement	Antisocial Behavior
Gender	Correlation Coefficient	1.000		
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.		
Moral Disengagement	Correlation Coefficient	.456*	1.000	
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.	.001

Antisocial Behavior	Correlation Coefficient	.440*		1.000
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		

Interpretation

Hypothesis 1: The results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour (Spearman’s rho = .270, p = .001). Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This finding suggests that higher levels of moral disengagement are associated with increased antisocial behaviour among students.

The findings are consistent with previous research indicating that individuals with higher moral disengagement tend to exhibit increased antisocial tendencies. These individuals often justify unethical actions, attribute blame to victims, and normalize harmful behaviour, which gradually lowers internal moral standards. In the context of university students, academic pressure, social competition, and peer dynamics may further facilitate disengagement from moral responsibility.

The frequency distribution revealed that most students demonstrated moderate levels of moral disengagement and low levels of antisocial behaviour. This suggests that while moral disengagement is present among students, it may not always turn into overt antisocial behaviour. Instead, students may occasionally use cognitive justifications without consistently engaging in harmful actions. This variation highlights the complexity of moral cognition and behavioural expression.

Table 4: Mann–Whitney U Test Comparing Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement and Antisocial Behaviour

Variable	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Moral Disengagement	1743.00	4903.000	-5.696	.000
Antisocial Behavior	1802.000	4962.000	-5.492	.000

Interpretation

Hypothesis 2: The results from the Mann-Whitney U test indicated a significant gender difference in moral disengagement (U = 1743.000, Z = -5.696, p = .000). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This finding suggests that male and female students differ significantly in their levels of moral disengagement.

Research has consistently shown that females tend to demonstrate higher empathy and moral sensitivity, whereas males may be more likely to justify aggressive or rule-breaking behaviour. Social norms often encourage males to exhibit assertiveness, competitiveness, and risk-taking behaviours, which may contribute to greater use of moral disengagement strategies.

Furthermore, gender role expectations may influence how individuals interpret and respond to moral dilemmas. Females may rely more heavily on relational and care-oriented reasoning, while males may adopt more utilitarian perspectives. These differences could explain why male students may exhibit higher moral disengagement tendencies.

Hypothesis 3: The results revealed a significant gender difference in antisocial behaviour ($U = 1802.000, Z = -5.492, p = .000$). Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This finding indicates that male and female students differ significantly in their levels of antisocial behaviour.

The frequency distribution showed that most students reported low levels of antisocial behaviour, suggesting that overt antisocial actions were relatively limited within the sample. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that males tend to exhibit higher levels of antisocial behaviour compared to females. Biological factors, such as hormonal influences, combined with social expectations encouraging dominance and independence among males, may contribute to this pattern. Additionally, male peer groups often reinforce behaviours associated with risk-taking and rebellion.

The observed differences also reflect broader developmental trends, where males demonstrate higher externalizing behaviours while females exhibit more internalizing tendencies. This pattern is commonly reported across adolescent and young adult populations.

Table 5 : ANOVA Results Indicating the Moderating Influence of Gender on Moral Disengagement and Antisocial Behaviour

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Moral Disengagement	Between Groups	9.093	1	9.093	39.654	.000
	Within Groups	35.544	155	.229		
	Total	44.637	156			
Antisocial Behavior	Between Groups	7.513	1	7.513	36.490	.000
	Within Groups	31.914	155	.206		
	Total	39.427	156			

Interpretation

Hypothesis 4: The results from the ANOVA analysis revealed significant effects for both moral disengagement ($F = 39.654, p = .000$) and antisocial behaviour ($F = 36.490, p = .000$) across gender groups. These findings suggest that gender significantly influences the relationship between moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis was accepted.

This moderation effect highlights the importance of considering demographic variables when examining psychological constructs. Gender differences in emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and social expectations may alter how cognitive

processes translate into behaviour. For example, males with high moral disengagement may be more likely to express antisocial behaviour outwardly, whereas females may regulate such tendencies more effectively.

Additionally, cultural factors may influence how gender roles shape behavioural responses. Students may internalize societal expectations that guide their moral decisions and behavioural expressions. These findings emphasize that moral disengagement does not operate in isolation but interacts with individual characteristics such as gender.

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