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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

STRATEGIES OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS USE IN ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

Adolescence is a sensitive period with many moral dilemmas and development of moral orientation. Teenagers can be very susceptible to moral challenges in their everyday life. Choice of moral behaviour not always correlates to social norms and can be deviant in the nature. The necessity to defend own self-esteem in the case of immoral behaviour becomes an important task. The model of moral disengagement mechanisms proposed by A. Bandura allows to interpretated the "moral freedom" behaviour. The study was aimed to investigate the peculiarities of moral disengagement mechanisms use and to obtain the role of social factors in that process. Our method included use of moral disengagement mechanisms measurements. The data consists of 546 adolescents aged from 14 to 17 from two types of schools: boarding school for gifted adolescents (Kolmogorov boarding school) and normal school in Moscow. We define 3 groups of adolescence with different strategies of use of moral disengagement mechanisms: active users, passive users and group of "victim distortion". Social and biological factors that influence on preference of strategies of use of moral disengagement mechanisms were defined. Some gender differences were found, the age dynamic of use of moral disengagement mechanisms was depicted, dependence in school environment was observed.

1. Introduction

The formation of moral orientation is one of the central lines of development in adolescence. Growing cognitive abilities to reflect and analyses, increasing quantity of social communication and the self-determination as the normative developmental task of the adolescence leads to enlargement of situations of moral choice in adolescents life (Karabanova, 2007). That leads to increasing sensitivity to moral collisions, espessially to some types of moral dilemmas that meet in their life (Molchanov, 2007; Wark & Krebs, 2000). The role of peers becomes more important and technological progress changes the world of social and moral norms. Informational socialization becomes an important sphere of examples and judgments, including moral (Martsinkovskaya, 2012). The diversity of social and moral norm becomes very wide due to varity of forms of socialization and the incertanty of future perspectives (Molchanov & Markina, 2014). That can lead to high diversity of inderstanding social and moral norms with frequent collision of moral norms significant in different social, ciltural and religious groups. That experience can guide the adolescent to conflicting feeling of good and bad, right and wrong behavior. The feeling of self-dissapointed due to the violantion of moral norms can be strong feeling that can influence the structure of internal moral norms.

2. Problem Statement

Moral disengagement mechanisms as a part of moral development of personality activates with two conditions. The first condition is the acceptance of the person the necessity to follow moral standards and orientation on their implementation as the foundation of moral self-esteem. The second condition is the lack of self-regulation to realize moral choice on the basis of moral standards. "Moral freedom" of the personality is defined in the choice between following proper moral behavior or violation of moral norms and social expectations of others. The awareness of that contradiction can be the point to progressive development of moral consciousness or the start of moral regress with search for argument that allow to violate moral norms with save of moral self-esteem (Molchanov, 2014). Self-regulation processes need the moral justification in case of violence of moral norms. Bandura (1999, 2002) defined 8 mechanisms of moral disengagement that helps to interpretate your own behavior: moral justification, speech euphemism, justifiable comparison, distribution of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization of the victim, attribution of guilt. Further studies of the mechanisms of moral self-justification showed that they are actively used in conditions of deviant behavior (Bandura et al.,1996). The often use of moral disengagement mechanism can lead to stable strategy what mechanism to use to justify yourself. Adolescence as the period of time with high risk of deviant and delinquent behaviour can be regarded as the time of developing strategy of use of moral disengagement mechanisms.

3. Research Questions

3.1. What strategies of use of moral disengagement mechanisms can be defined in adolescence?

3.2. What role plays social and biological factors in preference of strategies of moral disengagement mechanisms?

4. Purpose of the Study

Our goal was to investigate the role of personal factors in applying of moral disengagement mechanisms and moral judgments to justify deviant behavior in adolescence. We proposed that basic assumptions, autonomy type and relation with peers define moral disengagement mechanisms use and level of moral development.

5. Research Methods

The data consists of 546 adolescents aged from 14 to 17 years old (M=15.5; SD=0,8), 342 subjects are (62,6%) boys and и 204 (37,4%) are girls. 411 (75,2%) subjects are from the boarding school for gifted adolescents (Kolmogorov boarding school) and 136 (24,8%) are pupils from normal school in Moscow. The age distribution is the following:14 years – 7,0%; 15 years – 41,6%; 16 years– 42,1%; 17 years– 9,3%.The distribution of sibling position is: single - 24%, older (senior) – 40,6%, middle – 8,3%, junior 27,1%. Our method included the questionnaire: moral disengagement mechanisms technique in Russian adaptation by Ledovaya et al. (2016) on the basis of C. Moore technique. Every moral disengagement mechanism is estimated by 3 questions. The investigation was realized in written form in group form with volunteers after the classes in schools.

6. Findings

Due to the fact that the russian version of moral disengagement mechanisms technique is rather new the first step was to study internal reliability of the questionnaire. The analyses showed that for all moral disengagement mechanisms except one the data is acceptable (the Alpha Cronbach coefficient for one mechanism os more than 0,5, for all the other – about 0,7).

Table 1 consists of medium and standard deviation of all moral disengagement mechanisms for all the data, separately for men and women and result of differences analysis between men and women (t-criteria for independent samples).

Table 01. Medium and standard deviation of all moral disengagement mechanisms for all the data, separately for men and women and result of differences analysis between men and women

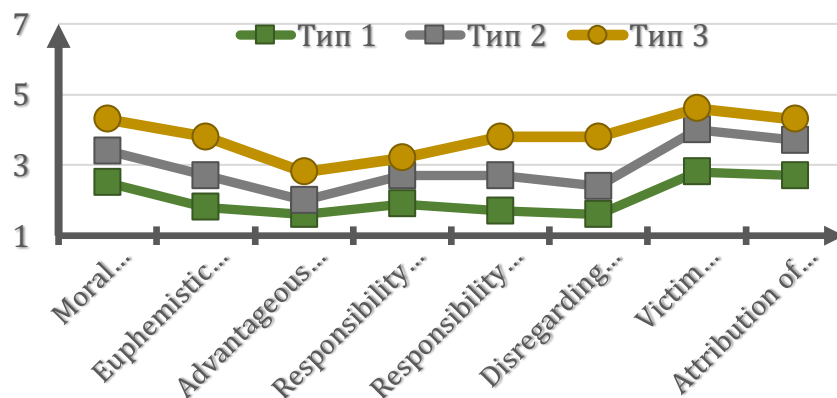| Moral disengagement mechanisms	All data		Men		Women		Differences	
	Me	SD	Me	SD	Me	SD	t	p
Moral justification	3,48	1,25	3,71	1,28	3,09	1,10	5,738	<0,001
Euphemistic labelling	2,83	1,14	2,91	1,15	2,68	1,11	2,275	0,023
Advantageous comparison	2,15	0,87	2,17	0,84	2,11	0,93	0,715	0,475
Responsibility distribution	2,62	1,15	2,62	1,22	2,62	1,04	0,009	0,993
Responsibility diffusion	2,77	1,12	2,88	1,16	2,58	1,01	3,056	0,002
Disregarding consequences	2,63	1,12	2,73	1,09	2,48	1,16	2,514	0,012
Victim dehumanization	3,87	1,33	3,96	1,33	3,72	1,30	2,086	0,037
Attribution of guilt	3,62	1,08	3,75	1,08	3,40	1,05	3,727	<0,001

For all sample and independently for men and women the highest severity is typical for such moral disengagement mechanisms as victim dehumanization, attribution of guilt, moral justification and the lowest for advantageous comparison. The severity of victim dehumanization, attribution of guilt, moral justification is significantly higher than for other mechanisms and advantageous comparison is significantly lower that the others (t-criteria for dependent samples and p<0,05).

Men have significantly higher severity of all moral disengagement mechanisms than women except responsibility distribution and advantageous comparison. Correlation analysis showed that esteem of severity of all moral disengagement mechanisms is related between themselves (r – от 0,2 до 0,6, p<0,05, Pearson correlations), that indirectly shows internal connectedness of the construct.

We used cluster analysis (K-means method) on the basis of results of moral disengagement mechanisms technique for 8 mechanisms and divided subjects to 3 groups. Cluster centres are presented in table 2 and figure 1. The use of one-factor dispersion analysis (ANOVA) help to define significant differences in esteem of all moral disengagement mechanisms by adolescents from different clusters (p<0,001). That allows us to define different «types» of «moral freedom».

Table 02. Cluster centres – subject's distribution in clusters with different strategies of moral disengagement mechanisms use

Cluster / Moral disengagement mechanisms	1 cluster	2 cluster	3 cluster	Differences K-W	Differences p
Moral justification	2,5	3,4	4,3	1,648	0,439
Euphemistic labelling	1,8	2,7	3,8	3,775	0,151
Advantageous comparison	1,6	2,0	2,8	***10,971***	***0,004***
Responsibility distribution	1,9	2,7	3,2	0,760	0,684
Responsibility diffusion	1,7	2,7	3,8	0,027	0,986
Disregarding consequences	1,6	2,4	3,8	1,844	0,398
Victim dehumanization	2,8	4,0	4,6	***11,604***	***0,003***
Attribution of guilt	2,7	3,7	4,3	0,836	0,658

Figure 01. Subject's distribution in clusters with different strategies of moral disengagement mechanisms use

Cluster 1 (26,7% subjects) shows lower activity in use of moral disengagement mechanisms. When that group use moral disengagement mechanisms they prefer advantageous comparison and strategies of victim distortion (victim dehumanization and attribution of guilt). We name that group as group of «passive users».

Cluster 2 (42,0% of data) shows middle level in use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Most popular mechanisms are victim dehumanization, attribution of guilt and advantageous comparison. That group is named as group orientated on strategies of victim distortion (group of "victim distortion").

Cluster 3 (31,3% adolescents) present the the most active group at use of all moral disengagement mechanisms. We called that group as group of «active users».

First factor that influence on moral disengagement mechanisms is sex. Table 03 presents the distribution of men and women in different clusters of use of moral disengagement mechanisms. There is the significant link between sex and adolescent cluster belonging (χ^2=24,986 при p=0,002, effect power V Cramer's - 0,141). Men more often are active users and women are passive users of moral disengagement mechanisms.

Table 03. Sex distribution for clusters of use of moral disengagemnet mechanisms

Cluster/ Sex	Passive users	Victim distortion	Active users	All
Men	78 (22,8%)	142 (41,5%)	122 (35,7%)	342 (100,0%)
Women	68 (33,3%)	87 (42,6%)	49 (24,0%)	204 (100,0%)
All	146 (26,7%)	229 (42,0%)	171 (31,3%)	546 (100,0%)

Next factor that influence the use of moral disengagement mechanisms is sibling position. Table 4 present the results of distribution of adolescents in clusters of use of moral disengagement mechanisms with different sibling position.

Table 04. Distribution of adolescents in clusters of use of moral disengagement mechanisms with different sibling position

Cluster / Sibling	Active users	Victim distortion	Passive users	All
Single	28 (22,0%)	55 (43,4%)	44 (34,6%)	127 (100,0%)
Older	58 (27,0%)	89 (41,4%)	68 (31,6%)	215 (100,0%)
Middle	15 (34,1%)	16 (36,4%)	13 (29,5%)	44 (100,0%)
Junior	39 (27,3%)	65 (45,5%)	39 (27,3%)	143 (100,0%)
All	140 (26,5%)	225 (42,5%)	164 (31,0%)	529 (100,0%)

No significant differences for correlation of sibling position and cluster with different level of moral disengagement mechanisms severity were found (χ^2=6,967 with p=0,225). If we exclude the group of middle children from the sample (as the most different power group) with the one-factor dispersion analysis (ANOVA), we can find the significant differences in use of moral disengagement mechanisms. The results are presented in table 5. There are significant differences for «victim dehumanization» mechanism.

Table 05. The results of dispersion analysis (ANOVA) to define differences in esteems of moral disengagement mechanisms for adolescents with different sibling position

Moral disengagement mechanism	Differences	
Justice 1 stage	F	F
Moral justification	0,066	0,066
Euphemistic labelling	1,912	1,912
Advantageous comparison	0,425	0,425
Responsibility distribution	0,387	0,387
Responsibility diffusion	0,033	0,033
Disregarding consequences	0,920	0,920
Victim dehumanization	3,076	3,076
Attribution of guilt	0,954	0,954

The use of victim dehumanization mechanism is more active for adolescents with single sibling position than for junior sibling position in family (Tukey test, MD=0,3866; p=0,040).

We analysed the correlation of sex and sibling position (without adolescents with middle sibling position) with esteem of moral disengagement mechanisms with one-dimentional two-factors analysis. Table 6 present the results.

Table 06. The results of analysis of sex and sibling position (without adolescents with middle sibling position) interaction with esteem of moral disengagement mechanisms

Factor/ Moral disengagement mechanism	sex		Sibling position		sex x sibling position	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Moral justification	29,338	<0,001	0,184	0,832	0,784	0,457
Euphemistic labelling	3,406	0,046	1,814	0,164	0,024	0,976
Advantageous comparison	0,831	0,362	0,374	0,688	2,865	0,047
Responsibility distribution	0,060	0,807	0,214	0,808	0,546	0,580
Responsibility diffusion	10,762	0,001	0,147	0,864	0,740	0,478
Disregarding consequences	4,938	0,027	0,320	0,727	2,155	0,117
Victim dehumanization	2,850	0,050	2,974	0,045	0,067	0,935
Attribution of guilt	11,602	0,001	0,161	0,852	3,517	0,030

The results shows that two mechanisms: advantageous comparison and attribution of guilt are influenced by interaction of sex and sibling position. Advantageous comparison mechanism for women is typical more for junior siblings, and least of all for older siblings; for men – highest points for single and lowest – for junior siblings. Attribution of guilt mechanism for women is lower for older siblings and highest for junior; for men highest points are for older siblings and lowest – for junior siblings in the family.

The next factor that can determine the use of moral disengagement mechanism is the type of school. We analysed the differences of esteem of moral disengagement mechanisms for pupils from different schools excluding the high graduation school class from Kolmogorov boarding school (t-criteria for independent samples). The results are presented in table 7.

Table 07. Medium and standard deviation esteem of moral disengagement mechanisms for pupils from different schools, the verification of differences of these esteems

Moral disengagement mechanism	Kolmogorov boarding School		School		Differences	
	Me	SD	Me	SD	t	p
Moral justification	3,37	1,23	3,51	1,30	-1,066	0,287
Euphemistic labelling	2,68	1,10	2,99	1,23	-2,662	0,008
Advantageous comparison	1,99	0,74	2,48	1,05	-5,710	<0,001
Responsibility distribution	2,57	1,14	2,78	1,15	-1,826	0,068
Responsibility diffusion	2,64	1,09	2,85	1,18	-1,831	0,068
Disregarding consequences	2,44	1,08	2,94	1,16	-4,508	<0,001
Victim dehumanization	3,66	1,27	4,11	1,36	-3,407	0,001
Attribution of guilt	3,46	1,00	3,90	1,07	-4,233	<0,001

Adolescents from normal schools shows higher severity of mechanisms: euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, disregarding consequences, victim dehumanization, attribution of guilt than their peers from Kolmogorov boarding school.

Table 8 presents the distribution of pupils for different clusters of moral disengagement mechanisms from different schools.

Table 08. Distribution of adolescents from different schools in clusters of moral disengagement mechanisms

Schools	Passive users	Victim distortion	Active users	All
Kolmogorov boarding School	106 (32,8%)	138 (42,7%)	79 (24,5%)	323 (100,0%)
Ordinary school	25 (18,4%)	56 (41,2%)	55 (40,4%)	136 (100,0%)
All	131 (28,5%)	194 (42,3%)	134 (29,3%)	459 (100,0%)

Pupils from normal school more often consist in "active users" group and adolescents from Kolmogorov boarding school – in "passive users" group of moral disengagement mechanisms (χ^2=15,416 with p<0,001, effect of power V Cramer's - 0,183).

Age also influence on preferences of use of moral disengagement mechanisms in adolescence. Responsibility diffusion and victim dehumanization mechanisms are more typical for some age groups of adolescents (one-factor dispersion analysis (ANOVA) was used). Analysis results are presented in table 9.

Table 09. The results of differences in esteem of moral disengagement mechanisms for adolescents of different age (dispersion analysis ANOVA)

Moral disengagement mechanisms	Differences	
	F	p
Moral justification	2,537	0,056
Euphemistic labelling	1,129	0,337
Advantageous comparison	0,469	0,704
Responsibility distribution	1,373	0,250

Responsibility diffusion	4,220	0,006
Disregarding consequences	1,744	0,157
Victim dehumanization	2,946	0,032
Attribution of guilt	2,616	0,051

The responsibility diffusion mechanism is more typical for 16-years old adolescents than for their junior peers (15-years old). (Tukey test, MD=0,2809; p=0,035). The victim dehumanization mechanism is more typical for junior adolescents (14-years old) than for older adolescents (15-years old (Tukey test, MD=0,6023; p=0,048).

7. Conclusion

The analysis helped us to define 3 groups of adolescence with different strategies of use of moral disengagement mechanisms: active users, passive users and group of "victim distortion"). Group of «passive users» shows lower activity in use of moral disengagement mechanisms and consists of quarter of the sample (26,7% subjects). Group of "active users" is the most active group at use of all moral disengagement mechanisms and describe about third part of the sample (31,3% adolescents). The biggest group of victim distortion prefer strategies of victim distortion: victim dehumanization, attribution of guilt and advantageous comparison and include the biggest part of the sample (42,0%).

Some social and biological factors in preference of strategies of use of moral disengagement mechanisms were analysed. Gender differences showed that women more often use the strategy of passive users and men – active users. The sibling position of men and women has different influence on preference of moral disengagement mechanisms. The belonging to school has some correlation with use of moral disengagement mechanisms.

Acknowledgments

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