A grotesque and dark beauty: How moral identity and mechanisms of moral disengagement influence cognitive and emotional reactions to war ☆

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Abstract

Two studies examine the extent to which moral identity and moral disengagement jointly drive reactions to war. Study 1 finds support for a hypothesized positive relationship between moral disengagement and the perceived morality of a highly punitive response to the perpetuators of the September 11th attacks. It also finds that this effect was eliminated for participants who place high self-importance on their moral identities. Study 2 finds that moral disengagement effectively reduced the extent to which participants experienced negative emotions in reaction to abuses of Iraqi detainees by American soldiers; however, the effectiveness of moral disengagement was negated when participants' moral identities were primed.
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Introduction

> Let me have a war, say I:
> It exceeds peace as far as day
> Does night; it's sprightly, waking, audible, full of vent
>
> William Shakespeare
> Coriolanus, Act IV, Scene V

People are often ambivalent about war. To some, war epitomizes all that is wicked and disturbing about human nature. To others, a just war waged to defend a country or preserve freedom is an admirable and necessary expression of a nation's power and moral goodness. Yet even its most ardent defenders usually recognize war for what it is: an organized form of mass killing. The tragedy of modern war is that most of those killed are civilians not soldiers. In the wars of the 1990s, for example, it has been estimated that 75–90% of all casualties were civilian deaths (Hedges, 2003). It can be disturbing for those who support a war to contemplate the loss of innocent lives because most people strive to maintain the belief that they and the groups they identify with are morally good (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988). For obvious reasons, endorsing an activity that causes death and destruction on a massive scale can undermine these beliefs. Yet we know that

soldiers, politicians, and citizens manage to carry on with the business of war, sometimes with great enthusiasm and patriotic fervor, despite whatever doubts they may be experiencing.

Psychologists have offered many different answers to the question of how ordinary people reconcile their support for war (and the destructive activities it entails) with a self-view of being decent, caring, and kind. These answers include theories of aggression based on instinctive (e.g., Lorenz, 1967) and socio-biological models (e.g., Ghiglieri, 1999; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990); situational explanations such as difficult life conditions, submission to authority and role expectations (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1972); and more cognitively oriented theories emphasizing self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) and beliefs about the world (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003).

The present research adopts a socio-cognitive model (Bandura, 1991) to examine people's reactions to various actions taken by the US during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We take this approach because the socio-cognitive model explicitly recognizes the psychic need for people to resolve two seemingly inconsistent cognitions when they decide whether or not to support war: the desire to maintain a favorable view of the self and the need to justify actions that violate socialized self-sanctions against harming others.

Moral disengagement and shielding the self from moral consequences

One socio-cognitive explanation for why people participate in activities that cause harm to others is that they execute various mechanisms of *moral disengagement* that allow them to support or perpetrate harmful acts while maintaining a positive self-image (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). These mechanisms fall into several broad categories of dissonance reducing rationalizations that people use to shield the self from the consequences of inhumane conduct and the self-condemnations it may impose (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001). We focus on two distinct mechanisms involving the cognitive "reconstrual" of the conduct itself: *moral justification* and *advantageous comparison*. Moral justification occurs when harmful behavior is made personally and socially acceptable by depicting it as serving a valued or righteous social purpose (e.g., defending freedom) (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). Advantageous comparison is a "cognitive contrast effect" that allows a person to convince him or herself that harmful conduct is relatively minor when compared to something more injurious within a similar context (e.g., inadvertently killing a few civilians during war is not as bad as a dictator executing thousands of his people). Either of these mechanisms can weaken self-deterrents against harming others while providing self-approval for such behavior (Bandura, 1999).

But moral disengagement maneuvers do not *always* allow people to violate self-sanctions against harming others. For example, during the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam, two American helicopter crewmen refused to join their fellow soldiers in the killing of unarmed civilians. Instead, they attempted to airlift victims of the slaughter to safety. Such acts beg the question of what factors might neutralize the "effectiveness" of moral disengagement. We sought to answer this question by examining another postulate of socio-cognitive theory; namely, that moral cognitions are translated into action through various self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in standards and self-sanctions associated with the *moral self* (Bandura, 1999). Drawing from recent theoretical conceptions in moral psychology (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984, 1993), we refer to this construct as *moral identity*.

Moral identity neutralizes the effectiveness of moral disengagement

War is an obvious situation where disengagement practices are likely to be executed by those who support this activity, and even systematically encouraged by military leaders to ensure that soldiers are able to kill the enemy without hesitation or remorse (Grossman, 1995). In this paper, we explore the possibility that having a strong moral identity can neutralize or weaken these effects. Our main hypothesis is that while the execution of moral disengagement maneuvers will be positively (negatively) related to pro (anti) war cognitions and emotions, these relationships will be *weaker* when a person's moral identity is activated within the working self-concept. Below we present the theoretical rationale for this prediction.

Moral identity

We conceptualize moral identity as one of many possible identities that people use as a basis for self-definition. According to Blasi (1980), the moral personality results when a person constructs her identity on moral grounds and when moral commitments are central to her self-definition. The concept of moral identity is thus a key psychological mechanism that translates moral judgments, principles, or ideals into action. Similarly, Lapsley and Lasky (2001) suggest that a person who has a moral identity is one for whom moral schemas are chronically available, readily primed, and easily activated for processing social information. Building on this framework, Aquino and Reed (2002) proposed that most people possess a cognitive schema of the moral self that is organized around a set of moral trait associations. Both Aquino and Reed's (2002) and Lapsley and Lasky's (2001) conceptions are socio-cognitive models because they suggest that the activation of mental representations of the self is critical for processing social information and providing guidelines for action (Cervone & Shoda, 1999).