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# Personality factors and civic moral disengagement in law and psychology university students

Elisabetta Sagone<sup>a\*</sup>, Maria Elvira De Caroli<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Educational Sciences, via Casa Nutrizione, 95124 Catania, Italy*

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## Abstract

The aim of this investigation was to clarify the different use of the civic moral disengagement between psychology and law university students, and the impact of personality factors on the use of these mechanisms depending on the course of study. Participants were randomly recruited from their academic places at the University of Catania, Sicily (Italy) and balanced on type of degree course, 82 students attending to the psychology degree course and 76 students attending to the law degree course. We used the Moral Disengagement Scale and Big Five Questionnaire for adults. Results showed that university students attending to the psychology course used the mechanisms of moral disengagement more than those attending to the law course, and law students were more emotionally stable and careful to details than psychology students. Boys used the mechanisms of moral disengagement and were more emotionally stable, open to experiences, and less agreeable than girls. Future researches will investigate the influence of personality factors on the mechanisms of moral disengagement in relation to other constructs, such as locus of control, prosocial moral reasoning, and emotional intelligence.

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*Keywords:* moral disengagement; big five personality; university students.

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## 1. Introduction

The civic moral disengagement is the set of social-cognitive mechanisms that allows the individual to justify his actions that are reprehensible and damaging for the social safety (Caprara et al., 2006; Caprara et al., 2009) in order to preserve self-esteem. This perspective derives from Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1986), according to which people think over the consequences of their actions, pursue goals in accordance with subjective norms, and tend to avoid behaviours that are in relation to self-censure. The strategies through which individuals tend to express moral disengagement are constituted by eight different socio-cognitive mechanisms (Bandura, 2002): 1) the *moral justification* is used to justify reprehensible actions in order to protect the self-representation and not contradict the guiding principles of the individual redefining the meaning of the harmful actions; 2) the *euphemistic labelling* tends to reduce the severity of the actions using terms or expressions that minimize the cruelty of committed actions; 3) the *advantageous comparison* is referring to behaviours considered more severe in order to divert attention from the negative effects of the individual's own actions; 4) the *displacement of responsibility* allows the individual to shift responsibility to a superior level represented by a recognized authority or even by society in general; 5) the *diffusion of responsibility* allows the person to share the responsibility for detrimental actions with the group in order to

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\* Elisabetta Sagone. Tel.: +39-095-2508021; fax: +39-095-2508070  
E-mail address: [esagone@unict.it](mailto:esagone@unict.it)

reduce the severity of the action produced by the single individual; 6) the *distortion of the consequences* is used to alter the effects of harmful behaviour in order to reduce personal misconduct; 7) the *attribution of blame* motivates the individual to interpret his or her own behaviour as caused by the victim and to exempt the individual from the severity of the consequences of the actions; and, finally, 8) the *dehumanization of victim* operates by nullifying self-restraints caused by feelings of empathy and compassion, and allows the individual to deprive the victims of human characteristics.

The construct of moral disengagement was analyzed in relation to prosocial behaviour (Caprara & Bonino, 2006), the propensity to aggression in at-risk context (Pastorelli et al., 1996) and violent acts (Paciello et al., 2008), violence toward animals (Vollum et al., 2004), bullying and antisocial conducts (Pelton et al., 2004; Pepler et al., 2008; Gini et al., 2011), and personality traits (Caprara & Malagoli Togliatti, 1996), according to the Big Five Factors Model developed by Costa and McCrae (1985). This model defined the personality in terms of *energy*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *emotional instability*, and *openness*. Accordingly, individuals who obtain high scores on the factor of *energy* have a self-image characterized by dynamism, activism, ability to establish themselves, and loquacity. Individuals who attain high scores on *agreeableness* have a self-image defined by cooperation, altruism, nurturance, friendliness, generosity and they are very confident and empathetic toward others. Individuals with high scores on *conscientiousness* tend to express themselves in terms of perseverance, accuracy, kindness, orderliness, and resourcefulness, showing high capacity to inhibit aggressive behaviours and prefer situations under their control. Individuals with high scores on *emotional instability* are characterized by vulnerability to stress, reduced control of negative emotions, and poor ability to manage impulses even in difficult situations that involve social problems. Finally, individuals with high scores on *openness* show a marked interest toward new things and experiences, curiosity, contact with others and favourable disposition to culture, lifestyle and customs of other individuals. As Caprara and Malagoli Togliatti (1996) reported in their study with Italian college students, moral disengagement negatively correlated with agreeableness, conscientiousness (in particular, perseverance), and openness (especially, openness to culture), in the sense that the more the students (specifically, boys) used moral disengagement the less they were cooperative, altruistic, trusting to others, respectful of norms and social rules, and open to the cultural differences.

We chose to analyze the relationships between personality traits and moral disengagement with reference to the differences related to training university in students attending to degree courses in Psychology and Law at the University of Catania, Sicily (Italy).

## 2. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to verify the use of mechanisms of civic moral disengagement in Psychology and Law university students and the influence of personality factors on the use of these mechanisms depending on the type of degree course. The choice of these groups of students was related to the different pathway of legal and psychological studies. As in the Manifesto of Studies at the University of Catania (Italy), in psychology degree course, specific attention is given to management of human resources and application of assessment techniques, intervention and research on psychological problems, activities that tend to increase psychological characteristics associated both with assertiveness and caring of others. Instead, in law degree course, great attention is given to legal advice and management of legal litigations. So, it is possible to hypothesize that this different training affected the use of mechanisms of civic moral disengagement.

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 158 Italian university students aged 20-26 years ( $M=23.5$ ,  $sd=2.4$ ), 60 males (38%) and 98 females (62%), were randomly recruited from their academic places at the University of Catania, Sicily (Italy) and balanced for type of degree course: 82 students attending to the psychology course and 76 students attending to the law course. Composition for sex represents the different trend in each course of degree because females predominantly chose to study psychology while males chose to study law.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Big Five Questionnaire for Adults (BFQ).

BFQ is a self-report personality inventory, consisting of 132 statements for each of which the subject has to evaluate him/herself on a 5-points scale from 1 (completely false for me) to 5 intervals (absolutely true for me). It is used to measure the five factors of personality:

- energy consists of the sub-dimension of dynamism (e.g., “I seem to be an active and vigorous person”) and dominance (e.g., “I’m willing to work hard just to do extremely well”);
- agreeableness is formed by cooperativeness (e.g., “I almost always meet the needs of others”) and friendliness (e.g., “I gladly trust with others”);
- conscientiousness is made by scrupulousness (e.g., “Usually I take care of everything in detail”) and perseverance (e.g., “If I fail in a task, I continue to try again until I succeed”);
- emotional instability is formed by control of emotions (e.g., “I don’t usually react in an exaggerated way”) and control of impulses (e.g., “Even in extremely difficult situations I don’t lose control”);
- openness consists of openness to culture (e.g., “I am always informed about what’s happening in the world”) and openness to experience (e.g., “I am fascinated by everything new”).

Cronbach’s alpha ranged between .66 and .78.

### 2.2.2. Civic Moral Disengagement Scale (CMDs).

This scale was composed of 32 items to which the subject must respond on a 5-points Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). It measured the inclination to use the following mechanisms of civic moral disengagement:

- advantageous comparison (e.g., “Young people cannot be blamed if they smoke some marijuana cigarette because most adults use much heavier drugs”);
- dehumanization of victim (e.g., “People who do not behave as human beings cannot be treated as such”);
- attribution of blame (e.g., “If people leave their things lying about it’s their fault if someone steals them”);
- diffusion of responsibility (e.g., “Employees are never responsible for illegal decision taken by their bosses”);
- distortion of consequences (e.g., “Evading taxes cannot be considered reprehensible considering the squandering of public money”);
- displacement of responsibility (e.g., “People cannot be held responsible for crimes committed at the instigation of others”);
- moral justification (e.g., “It is good to defend your family members, even when they are guilty of serious crimes in order to preserve the cohesion of the family”);
- euphemistic labelling (e.g., “Drawing graffiti on walls is the expression of the creative spirit”).

Cronbach’s alpha ranged between .62 and .84.

### 2.2.3. Data analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted with the help of SPSS 15. The following statistical tests were used: independent samples t test, ANOVA, and regression analysis with stepwise method. Type of degree course and sex of participants were considered as independent variables, while mean scores obtained in civic moral disengagement and personality factors were counted as dependent variables.

## 3. Results

From 2 (Sex) x 2 (Type of course) x 8 (Mechanisms of disengagement) analysis of variance, it was possible to notice sex effects,  $F(8,147)=3.729$ ,  $p=.001$ , and type of course effects,  $F(8,147)=7.094$ ,  $p<.001$ , on mean scores in each mechanisms of civic moral disengagement. In addition, a significant interaction of sex with the type of course was found,  $F(8,147)=6.364$ ,  $p<.001$  (Table 1). University students attending to the psychology course (and specifically, boys) obtained higher levels in almost all mechanisms of civic moral disengagement than those

attending to the law course (specifically, girls). The comparison of the mean scores revealed that boys were more likely to use moral justification ( $F(8,147)=15.61, p<.001$ ), euphemistic labelling ( $F(8,147)=14.60, p<.001$ ), displacement of responsibility ( $F(8,147)=6.72, p=.010$ ), attribution of blame ( $F(8,147)=4.67, p=.032$ ), and distortion of consequences ( $F(8,147)=7.40, p=.007$ ) than girls. In addition, psychology students were more likely to use moral justification ( $F(8,147)=11.88, p<.001$ ), euphemistic labelling ( $F(8,147)=20.98, p<.001$ ), advantageous comparison ( $F(8,147)=29.10, p<.001$ ), displacement of responsibility ( $F(8,147)=5.27, p=.023$ ), distortion of consequences ( $F(8,147)=32.50, p<.001$ ), diffusion of responsibility ( $F(8,147)=20.46, p<.001$ ), attribution of blame ( $F(8,147)=5.27, p=.023$ ), and dehumanization of victim ( $F(8,147)=7.15, p=.008$ ) than law students.

Regressions analyses with stepwise method, in which the dependent variable consisted of eight mechanisms of moral disengagement and the predictor variables were factors of personality, were performed in order to understand the influence of personality factors on the use of moral disengagement mechanisms. The findings showed significant differences between university students attending to the two courses. In psychology students (Table 2), control of emotion/perseverance had an impact on the moral justification, perseverance affected on the advantageous comparison, friendliness/dynamism on the displacement of responsibility, friendliness/control of emotions on the attribution of blame, and friendliness/dominance affected on the dehumanization of victim.

Table 1.  
Mechanisms of civic moral disengagement: Differences for sex and type of course

Mechanisms of civic moral disengagement	Sex	Type of course	M	sd	ANOVA
Moral justification	Boys	Psychology	2.54	0.55	8.52*
		Law	1.96	0.42	
	Girls	Psychology	1.91	0.56	
		Law	1.87	0.48	
Euphemistic labelling	Boys	Psychology	2.88	0.54	11.48*
		Law	2.08	0.56	
	Girls	Psychology	2.16	0.59	
		Law	2.04	0.52	
Displacement of responsibility	Boys	Psychology	2.44	0.63	4.11**
		Law	2.02	0.48	
	Girls	Psychology	1.99	0.54	
		Law	1.96	0.60	
Distortion of consequences	Boys	Psychology	2.48	0.70	8.07*
		Law	1.64	0.43	
	Girls	Psychology	1.93	0.57	
		Law	1.65	0.59	
Diffusion of responsibility	Boys	Psychology	2.41	0.68	7.40*
		Law	1.73	0.35	
	Girls	Psychology	2.15	0.56	
		Law	1.98	0.54	

Note: Mean scores significant differences for \*  $p<.01$  and \*\*  $p<.05$

Table 2.  
Regression analyses: group of psychology students

Mechanisms	Predictors	Psychology students		
		Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Moral justification	Control of emotions	.28**	.10	.08
	Perseverance	-.23*		
Advantageous comparison	Perseverance	-.27**	.07	.06
	Friendliness	-.31**	.12	.10
Displacement of responsibility	Dynamism	.24*		
	Friendliness	-.28**	.13	.10
Attribution of blame	Control of emotions	.25*		
	Friendliness	-.37***	.19	.17
Dehumanization of victim	Dominance	.23*		

Levels of significance \*  $p<.05$ ; \*\*  $p<.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p<.001$

In law students (Table 3), dynamism/scrupulousness had an appreciable impact on the moral justification; friendliness/openness to culture/openness to experience influenced the diffusion of responsibility; control of emotions affected the dehumanization of victim; scrupulousness/dominance had an effect on the attribution of blame; dynamism/openness to culture/scrupulousness had an effect on the distortion of consequences; lastly, cooperativeness/dynamism affected the euphemistic labelling.

Table 3.  
Regression analyses: group of law students

Mechanisms	Predictors	Law students		
		Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Moral justification	Dynamism	.28**	.12	.09
	Scrupulousness	-.23*		
	Friendliness	-.29**		
Diffusion of responsibility	Openness to culture	.37***	.25	.22
	Openness to experience	.28**		
Dehumanization of victim	Control of emotions	-.26*	.13	.10
	Scrupulousness	-.35**		
Attribution of blame	Dominance	.34**	.19	.17
	Dynamism	.35**		
Distortion of consequences	Openness to culture	.40***	.24	.21
	Scrupulousness	-.26*		
Euphemistic labelling	Cooperativeness	-.32**	.12	.10
	Dynamism	.25*		

Note: Levels of significance \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### 4. Conclusion

Findings indicated that law students were less likely to use the mechanisms of civic moral disengagement than psychology students. Particularly, boys attending to the psychology course were more likely to use the mechanisms of moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences than girls attending to the law course. No appreciable differences concerning advantageous comparison, attribution of blame, and dehumanization of victim were noted. As for the sex differences, results represented a confirmation of what has already been highlighted in the literature on this area in Italian context (Falanga et al., 2009), according to which boys used the moral disengagement more than girls.

The influence of personality factors on the use of these mechanisms with regard to the degree course was confirmed. In fact, among psychology students, the greater was the control of emotions and the lower was the perseverance, the greater was the tendency to justify the harmful actions reformulating the meaning by virtue of a superior principle (moral justification). In addition, the higher was the perseverance, the lower was the tendency to draw the most damaging behaviours compared to those made by the subject (advantageous comparison). The lower was the friendliness and the higher was the dynamism, the higher was the tendency to dislocate one's own responsibilities to the others. The lower was the friendliness and the higher was the control of emotions, the higher was the attribution of blame to the others. Lastly, the lower was the friendliness and the higher was the dominance, the higher was the tendency to deprive the victim of its human qualities (dehumanization of victim).

Among law students, the higher was the dynamism and the lower was the scrupulousness, the higher was the tendency to justify the harmful actions reformulating the meaning by virtue of a superior principle (moral justification). The higher was the openness and the lower was the friendliness, the higher was the tendency to share responsibility for disruptive actions with other people in order to reduce the severity (diffusion of responsibility). The lower was the control of emotions, the higher was the tendency to deprive the victim of human qualities (dehumanization of victim). The greater was the dominance and the lesser was the scrupulousness, the greater was the allocation of negative actions to provocation by the victim (attribution of blame). The higher were the dynamism and the openness to culture, but the lower was the scrupulousness, the higher was the tendency to alter the effects of harmful behavior in order to reduce misconduct (distortion of consequences). Lastly, the lower was the

cooperativeness, but the higher was the dynamism, the higher was the tendency to reduce the severity of the acts using terms or expressions that minimize the cruelty of these actions (euphemistic labelling).

The reduced control of emotions (in general terms of emotional instability) and the low friendliness (that is, agreeableness) could be considered the key factors that negatively influenced the use of moral disengagement mechanisms more than other personality traits in psychology university students. The reduced scrupulousness and high dynamism and openness could be judged as negative elements in relation to moral disengagement in law students.

Future investigations will focused on the impact of other constructs, such as locus of control, well-being (in terms of life satisfaction: see Rigby & Huebner, 2005), prosocial moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, and on the tendency to use the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

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