Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities

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Moral agency is manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely. Moral agency is embedded in a broader sociocognitive self theory encompassing self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in personal standards linked to self-sanctions. The self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral conduct do not come into play unless they are activated, and there are many psychosocial maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from inhumane conduct. The moral disengagement may center on the cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign or worthy one by moral justification, sanitizing language, and advantageous comparison; disavowal of a sense of personal agency by diffusion or displacement of responsibility; disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of one's actions; and attribution of blame to, and dehumanization of, those who are victimized. Many inhumanities operate through a supportive network of legitimate enterprises run by otherwise considerate people who contribute to destructive activities by disconnected subdivision of functions and diffusion of responsibility. Given the many mechanisms for disengaging moral control, civilized life requires, in addition to humane personal standards, safeguards built into social systems that uphold compassionate behavior and renounce cruelty.

The disengagement of moral self-sanctions from inhumane conduct is a growing human problem at both individual and collective levels. In a recent book entitled *Everybody Does It,* Gabor (1994) documented the pervasiveness of moral disengagement in all walks of life. Psychological theories of morality focus heavily on moral thought to the neglect of moral conduct. People suffer from the wrongs done to them regardless of how perpetrators might justify their inhumane actions. The regulation of humane conduct involves much more than moral reasoning. A complete theory of moral agency must link moral knowledge and reasoning to moral action. This requires an agentic theory of morality rather than one confined mainly to cognitions about morality. An agentic theory specifies the mechanisms by which people come to live in accordance with moral standards. In social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991), moral reasoning is translated into actions through self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in moral standards and self-sanctions by which moral agency is exercised. The moral self is thus embedded in a broader, sociocognitive self theory encompassing self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulative mechanisms. These self-referent processes provide the motivational as well as the cognitive regulators of moral conduct.

In early phases of development, conduct is largely regulated by external dictates and social sanctions. In the course of socialization, people adopt moral standards that serve as guides and as major bases for self-sanctions regarding moral conduct. In this self-regulatory process, people monitor their conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves. They do things that give them satisfaction and build their sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards, because such conduct

will bring self-condemnation. The constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards operate anticipatorily. In the face of situational inducements to behave in inhumane ways, people can choose to behave otherwise by exerting self-influence. Self-sanctions keep conduct in line with personal standards. It is through the ongoing exercise of self-influence that moral conduct is motivated and regulated. This capacity for self-influence gives meaning to moral agency. Self-sanctions mark the presence of moral oughts.

The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects—inhibitive and proactive. The *inhibitive* form is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The *proactive* form of morality is expressed in the power to behave humanely. In the latter case, individuals invest their sense of self-worth so strongly in humane convictions and social obligations that they act against what they regard as unjust or immoral even though their actions may incur heavy personal costs. Failure to do what is right would incur self-devaluation costs. In this higher order morality, people do good things as well as refrain from doing bad things. Rorty's (1993) analysis of the moral self in terms of a social-practice morality is another example of a theory that highlights proactive morality rooted in social obligation rather than just the morality of inhibition.

Moral standards do not operate invariantly as internal regulators of conduct, however. Self-regulatory mechanisms do not come into play unless they are activated, and there are many social and psychological

maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct. Selective activation and disengagement of personal control permit different types of conduct by persons with the same moral standards under different circumstances. Figure 1 shows the points in the process of internal control at which moral self-censure can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct. The disengagement may center on (a) the reconstrual of the conduct itself so it is not viewed as immoral, (b) the operation of the agency of action so that the perpetrators can minimize their role in causing harm, (c) the consequences that flow from actions, or (d) how the victims of maltreatment are regarded by devaluing them as human beings and blaming them for what is being done to them. The sections that follow document how each of these types of moral disengagement functions in the perpetration of inhumanities.

Moral Justification

One set of disengagement practices operates on the cognitive reconstruction of the behavior itself. People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. People then can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as moral agents while inflicting harm on others. Regional variations in the social sanctioning and use of violent means are pre-
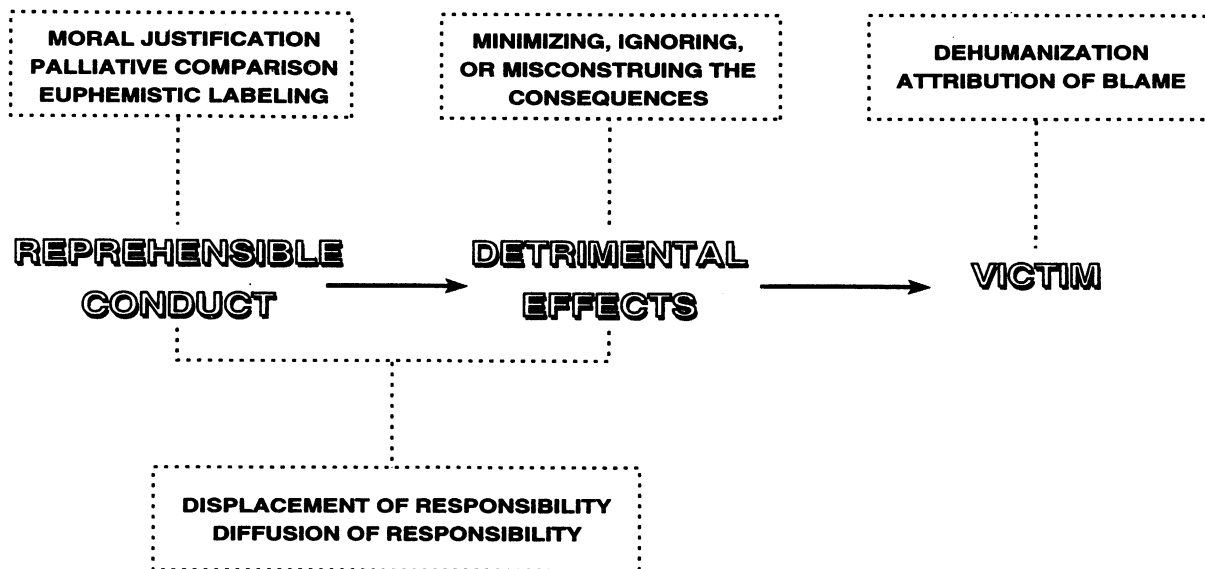

Figure 1. Mechanism through which moral self-sanctions are selectively activated and disengaged from detrimental behavior at different points in the self-regulatory process. From *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (p. 376), by A. Bandura, 1986, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Copyright 1986 by Prentice Hall. Reprinted with permission.

dictable from moral justifications rooted in a subcultural code of honor (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994).

Rapid radical shifts in destructive behavior through moral justification are most strikingly revealed in military conduct (Kelman, 1973; Skeyhill, 1928). The conversion of socialized people into dedicated fighters is achieved not by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives, or moral standards. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censure. Through moral justification of violent means, people see themselves as fighting ruthless oppressors, protecting their cherished values, preserving world peace, saving humanity from subjugation, or honoring their country's commitments. Just war tenets were devised to specify when the use of violent force is morally justified. However, given people's dexterous facility for justifying violent means, all kinds of inhumanities get clothed in moral wrappings.

Voltaire put it well when he said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." Over the centuries, much destructive conduct has been perpetrated by ordinary, decent people in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles, and nationalistic imperatives (Kramer, 1990; Rapoport & Alexander, 1982; Reich, 1990). Widespread ethnic wars are producing atrocities of appalling proportions. When viewed from divergent perspectives, the same violent acts are different things to different people. It is often proclaimed in conflicts of power that one group's terroristic activity is another group's liberation movement fought by heroic fighters. This is why moral appeals against violence usually fall on deaf ears. Adversaries sanctify their own militant actions but condemn those of their antagonists as barbarity masquerading as outrageous moral reasoning. Each side feels morally superior to the other.

Euphemistic Labeling

Language shapes thought patterns on which actions are based. Activities can take on very different appearances depending on what they are called. Not surprisingly, euphemistic language is widely used to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it. Euphemizing is an injurious weapon. People behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are verbally sanitized than when they are called aggression (Diener, Dineen, Endresen, Beaman, & Fraser, 1975).

In an insightful analysis of the language of nonresponsibility, Gambino (1973) identified the different varieties of euphemisms. One form relies on sanitizing language. By camouflaging pernicious activities in innocent or sanitizing parlance, the activi-

ties lose much of their repugnancy. Soldiers "waste" people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as "servicing the target," in the likeness of a public utility. The attacks become "clean, surgical strikes," arousing imagery of curative activities. The civilians whom the bombs kill are linguistically converted to "collateral damage." In an effort to sanitize state executions, a U.S. senator proclaimed, "capital punishment is our society's recognition of the sanctity of human life." This memorable verbal sanitization won him the uncoveted third-place award in the national Doublespeak competition.

Sanitizing euphemisms also are used extensively in unpleasant activities that people do from time to time. In the language of some government agencies, people are not fired, they are given a "career alternative enhancement," as though they were receiving a promotion. Being "disfellowshipped" is getting one's self fired by the Baptists. In the Watergate hearings, lies became "a different version of the facts." An "involuntary conversion of a 727" is a plain old airplane crash. The television industry produces and markets some of the most brutal forms of human cruelty under the sanitized labels of "action and adventure" programming. The acid rain that is killing our lakes and forests is merely "atmospheric deposition of anthropogenically derived substances." The nuclear power industry has created its own specialized set of euphemisms for the injurious effects of nuclear mishaps. An explosion becomes an "energetic disassembly." A reactor accident is a "normal aberration."

The agentless passive style in depicting events serves as another linguistic tool for creating the appearance that reprehensible acts are the work of nameless forces rather than of people (Bolinger, 1982). It is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts. Even inanimate objects are sometimes turned into agents. Here is a driver explaining to police how he managed to demolish a telephone pole: "The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way when it struck my front end."

The specialized jargon of a legitimate enterprise is also misused to lend respectability to an illegitimate one. In the vocabulary of the lawbreakers in Nixon's administration, criminal conspiracy became a "game plan," and the conspirators were "team players," like the best of sportsmen. They elevated the word *corruption* to new heights in the service of criminal conduct.

Advantageous Comparison

Advantageous comparison is another way of making harmful conduct look good. How behavior is

viewed is colored by what it is compared against. By exploiting the contrast principle, reprehensible acts can be made righteous. Terrorists see their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify. The more flagrant the contrasting inhumanities, the more likely it is that one's own destructive conduct will appear benevolent. For example, the massive destruction in Vietnam was minimized by portraying the American military intervention as saving the populace from Communist enslavement.

Expedient historical comparison also serves self-exonerating purposes. For example, apologists for the lawlessness of political figures they support cite transgressions by past rival administrations as vindications. Adapters of violent means are quick to point out that democracies, such as those of France and the United States, were achieved through violence against oppressive rule.

Exonerating comparison relies heavily on moral justification by utilitarian standards. The task of making violence morally acceptable from a utilitarian perspective is facilitated by two sets of judgments. First, nonviolent options are judged to be ineffective to achieve desired changes, thus removing them from consideration. Second, utilitarian analyses using advantageous comparisons with actual or anticipated threats by one's adversaries affirm that one's injurious actions will prevent more human suffering than they cause. The utilitarian cost–benefit calculus, however, can be quite slippery in specific applications. The future contains many uncertainties and ambiguities. Human predictive judgment is, therefore, subject to a lot of biases (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). As a result, calculations of long-term human costs and benefits are often suspect. There is much subjectivity in estimating the gravity of potential threats. Moreover, violence is often used as a weapon against small threats on the grounds that they will escalate and spread to where they will take a heavy toll on human suffering if left unchecked. The frequently invoked "domino effect" reflects this type of escalative projection concerning the likely course of events. Judgment of gravity justifies choice of options, but preference for violent options often biases judgment of gravity.

Assessments of conflicting realities and the best means to deal with them can be flawed by biasing social processes as well as by inferential errors from uncertain information. The information on which judgments are made may be tainted by the policy biases of those gathering and interpreting it (March, 1982). The use of superficial similarities in the framing of issues can distort judgment of the justification of violent means (Gilovich, 1981). For example, in judging how the United States should respond to a totalitarian threat toward a small nation by another country, people advocated a more interventionist course of action when the international crisis was likened to another Munich, representing political appeasement of Nazi Germany, than when it was likened to another Vietnam, representing a disastrous military entanglement. Gilovich added a new twist to Santayana's adage that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it: Those who see unwarranted likeness to the past are disposed to misapply its lessons.

Cognitive restructuring of harmful conduct through moral justifications, sanitizing language, and exonerating comparisons, taken together, is the most powerful set of psychological mechanisms for disengaging moral control. Investing harmful conduct with high moral purpose not only eliminates self-censure, but it engages self-approval in the service of destructive exploits. What was once morally condemnable becomes a source of self-valuation. Functionaries work hard to become proficient at them and take pride in their destructive accomplishments.

Displacement of Responsibility

Moral control operates most strongly when people acknowledge that they cause harm by their detrimental actions. The second set of disengagement practices operates by obscuring or minimizing the agentive role in the harm one causes. People will behave in ways they typically repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their conduct (Diener, 1977; Milgram, 1974). Under displaced responsibility, they view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities; they do not feel personally responsible for the actions. Because they are not the actual agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions.

Self-exemption from gross inhumanities by displacement of responsibility is most gruesomely revealed in socially sanctioned mass executions. Nazi prison commandants and their staffs divested themselves of personal responsibility for their unprecedented inhumanities (Andrus, 1969). They claimed they were simply carrying out orders. Self-exonerating obedience to horrific orders is similarly evident in military atrocities, such as the My Lai massacre (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

In psychological studies of disengagement of moral control by displacement of responsibility, authorities explicitly authorize injurious actions and hold themselves responsible for the harm caused by their followers. For example, Milgram (1974) got people to escalate their level of aggression by commanding them to do so and telling them that he took full responsibility for the consequences of their actions. As shown in Figure 2, the greater the legitimacy and closeness of the
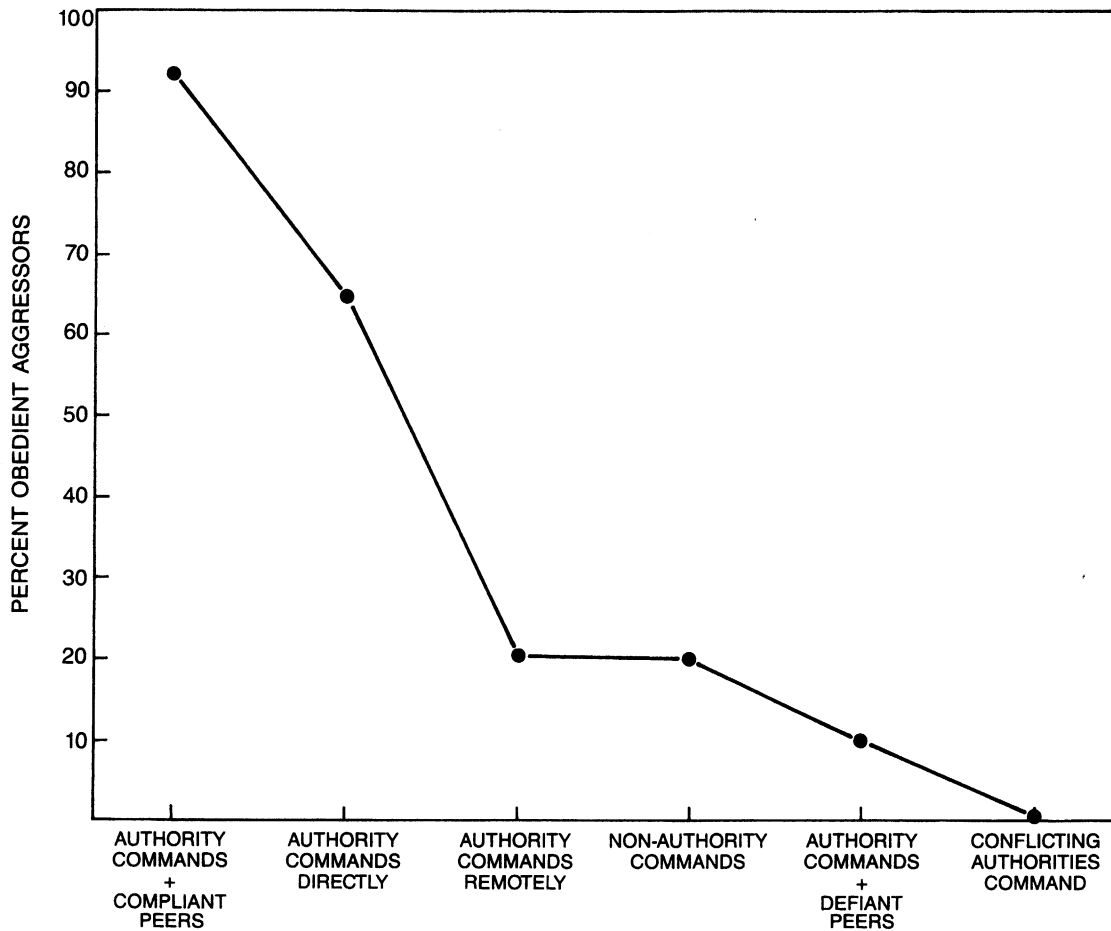
Figure 2. Percentage of people fully obedient to injurious commands as a function of the legitimization and closeness of the authority issuing the commands. This figure is plotted from data from Experiments 5, 7, 13, 15, 17, and 18 from *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, by S. Milgram, 1974, New York: Harper & Row. Copyright 1974 by HarperCollins, Publishers. Adapted with permission.

authority issuing injurious commands, the higher the level of obedient aggression.

The sanctioning of harmful conduct in everyday life differs in two important ways from the direct authorizing system examined by Milgram (1974). Responsibility is rarely assumed that openly. Only obtuse authorities would leave themselves accusable of authorizing harmful acts. They usually invite and support harmful conduct in insidious ways for personal and social reasons. Through surreptitious sanctioning practices, they can shield themselves from social condemnation should the courses of action go awry. They also have to live with themselves. Sanctioning by indirection enables them to protect against loss of self-respect for authorizing human cruelty.

In detrimental schemes, authorities act in ways that keep themselves intentionally uninformed. As our secretary of state instructed a presidential advisor in the Iran–Contra affair, "Just tell me what I need to know." Authorities do not go looking for evidence of wrongdoing. Obvious questions that would reveal incriminating information remain unasked, so officials do not find out what they do not want to know. Implicit agreements, insulating social arrangements, and authorization by indirection are used to leave the higher echelons unblamable.

When harmful practices are publicized, they are officially dismissed as only isolated incidents arising from misunderstandings of what had been authorized, or the blame is assigned to subordinates, who are portrayed as misguided or overzealous. Investigators who go looking for incriminating records of authorization display naiveté about the insidious ways that pernicious practices usually are sanctioned and carried out. One finds decisional arrangements of foggy nonresponsibility rather than incriminating traces of smoking guns.

There is another basic difference from the direct authorizing system. Obedient functionaries do not cast off all responsibility for their behavior as if they were mindless extensions of others. If they disowned all responsibility, they would perform their duties only when told to do so. It requires a strong sense of responsibility, rooted in ideology, to be a good functionary. It

is, therefore, important to distinguish between two levels of responsibility: duty to one's superiors and accountability for the effects of one's actions. The best functionaries are those who honor their obligations to authorities but feel no personal responsibility for the harm they cause. They work dutifully to be good at their evildoing. Followers who disowned responsibility, without being bound by a sense of duty, would be quite unreliable in performing their duties when the authorities are not around.

Goldhagen (1996) documented that many of the perpetrators in the German genocide infantry were more than willing executioners. Disengagement practices operate within sociopolitical structures that shape their expression and affect their prevalence. Cultural hatreds create low thresholds for the disengagement of moral self-sanctions. Inhumanities toward human beings cast in devalued categories and invested with vile attributes become not only permissible but righteously approvable.

Diffusion of Responsibility

The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusing responsibility for detrimental behavior. Kelman (1973) pro-vided a discerning analysis of the different ways in which a sense of personal agency gets obscured by diffusing personal accountability. There are several ways of doing it. A sense of responsibility can be diffused, and thereby diminished, by division of labor. Most enterprises require the services of many people, each performing subdivided jobs that seem harmless in themselves. After activities become routinized into detached subfunctions, people shift their attention from the morality of what they are doing to the operational details and efficiency of their specific job.

Group decision making is another common practice that gets otherwise considerate people to behave inhumanely. When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible. Social organizations go to great lengths to devise mechanisms for obscuring responsibility for decisions that will affect others adversely. Collective action is still another expedient for weakening moral control (Zimbardo, 1995). Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). Figure 3 shows the level of harm inflicted on others on repeated occasions depending on whether it was done as a group or individually. People act more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions.
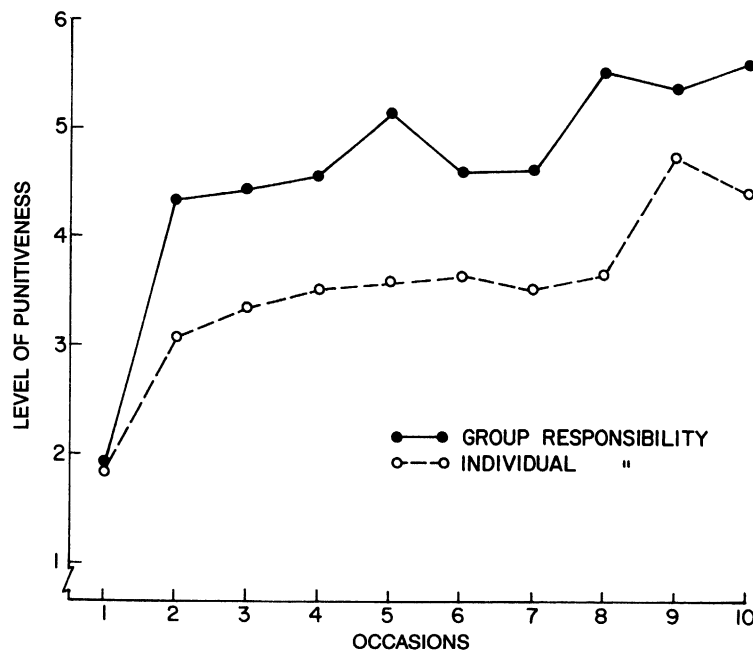

Figure 3. Level of punitiveness by individuals under conditions in which severity of their punitiveness was determined personally or jointly by a group. Occasions represent successive times at which punitive sanctions could be applied. From "Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims," by A. Bandura, B. Underwood, & M. E. Fromson, 1975, *Journal of Research in Personality, 9*, p. 260. Copyright 1975 by Academic Press. Reprinted with permission.

Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

Additional ways of weakening moral control operate by disregarding or distorting the effects of one's actions. When people pursue activities that are harmful to others for reasons of personal gain or social pressure, they avoid facing the harm they cause, or they minimize it. If minimization does not work, the evidence of harm can be discredited. As long as the harmful results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, distorted, or disbelieved, there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.

It is easier to harm others when their suffering is not visible and when injurious actions are physically and temporally remote from their effects. Our death technologies have become highly lethal and depersonalized. We are now in the era of faceless warfare, in which mass destruction is delivered remotely with deadly accuracy by computer and laser-controlled systems. When people can see and hear the suffering they cause, vicariously aroused distress and self-censure serve as self-restrainers (Bandura, 1992). As shown in Figure 4, people are less compliant to the injurious commands of authorities when the vic-

tims' pain becomes more evident and personalized (Milgram, 1974). Even a high sense of personal responsibility is a weak restrainer of injurious conduct when aggressors do not see the harm they inflict on their victims (Tilker, 1970).

A Pulitzer prize was awarded for a powerful photograph that captured the anguished cries of a girl whose clothes were burned off by the napalm bombing of her village in Vietnam. This single humanization of inflicted destruction probably did more to turn the American public against the war than the countless reports filed by journalists. The military now bans cameras and journalists from battlefield areas to block disturbing images of death and destruction.

Most organizations involve hierarchical chains of command in which superiors formulate plans and intermediaries transmit them to functionaries who then carry them out. The farther removed individuals are from the destructive end results, the weaker is the restraining power of injurious effects. Disengagement of moral control is easiest for the intermediaries in a hierarchical system—they neither bear responsibility for the decisions nor do they carry them out and face the harm being inflicted (Kilham & Mann, 1974).
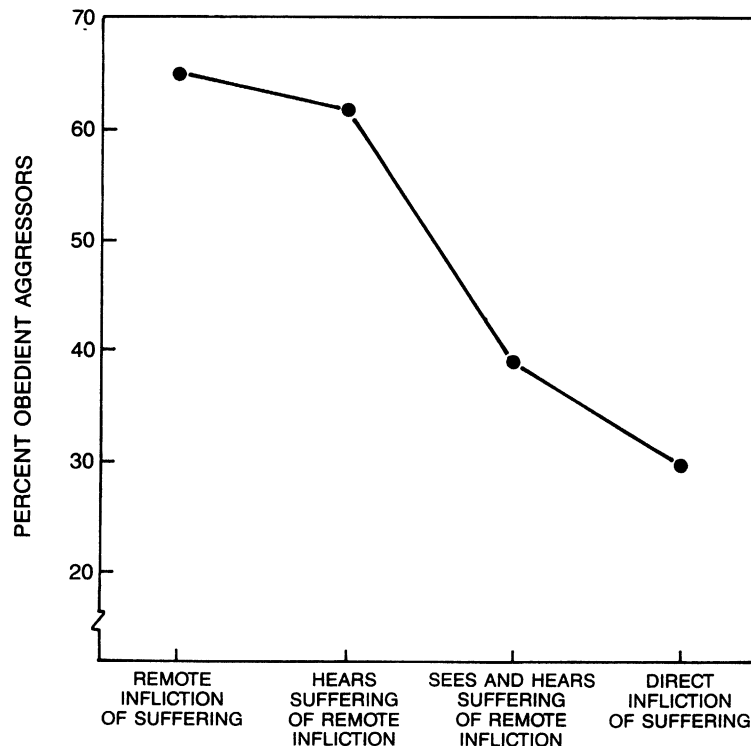

Figure 4. Percentage of people fully obedient to injurious commands issued by an authority as the victim's suffering becomes more evident and personalized. This figure is plotted from data from Experiments 1 through 4 from *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, by S. Milgram, 1974, New York: Harper & Row. Copyright 1974 by HarperCollins Publishers. Adapted with permission.

Dehumanization

The final set of disengagement practices operates on the recipients of detrimental acts. The strength of moral self-censure depends partly on how the perpetrators view the people they mistreat. Correlative interpersonal experiences during formative years, in which people experience joys and suffer pain together, create the foundation for empathic responsiveness to the plight of others (Bandura, 1986). To perceive another in terms of common humanity activates empathetic emotional reactions through perceived similarity and a sense of social obligation (Bandura, 1992; McHugo, Smith, & Lanzetta, 1982). The joys and suffering of those with whom one identifies are more vicariously arousing than are those of strangers or of individuals who have been divested of human qualities. It is, therefore, difficult to mistreat humanized persons without suffering personal distress and self-condemnation.

Self-censure for cruel conduct can be disengaged by stripping people of human qualities. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects (Keen, 1986; Kelman, 1973). They are portrayed as mindless "savages," "gooks," and other despicable wretches. If dispossessing one's foes of humanness does not weaken self-censure, it can be eliminated by attributing demonic or bestial qualities to them. They become "satanic fiends," "degenerates," and other bestial creatures. It is easier to brutalize people when they are viewed as low animal forms, as when Greek torturers referred to their victims as "worms" (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986).

During wartime, nations cast their enemies in the most dehumanized, demonic, and bestial images to make it easier to kill them (Ivie, 1980). The process of dehumanization is an essential ingredient in the perpetration of inhumanities. Levi (1987) reported an incident in which a Nazi camp commandant was asked why the Nazis went to such extreme lengths to degrade their victims, whom they were going to kill anyway. The commandant chillingly explained that it was not a matter of purposeless cruelty. Rather, the victims had to be degraded to the level of subhuman objects so that those who operated the gas chambers would be less burdened by distress.

In experimental studies of the perniciousness of the combined effect of dehumanization and a diminished sense of personal responsibility, a supervisory team was given the power to punish a group of problem solvers with varying intensities of electric shock for deficient performances (Bandura et al., 1975). The punishment was administered either personally or collectively to the performing recipients characterized in either humanistic, animalistic, or neutral terms. Unknown to the supervisors, the administered shocks were never delivered to the recipients. Dehumanized individuals were treated more punitively than those who had been invested with human qualities (Bandura et al., 1975). Figure 5 depicts the power of dehumanization to promote human punitiveness.

Combining diffused responsibility with dehumanization greatly escalates the level of punitiveness. In contrast, personalization of responsibility and humanization of others together have a powerful self-restraining effect (Figure 6). The supervisor's self-regulatory evaluative reactions to performing a punitive role differed markedly across the different disengagement conditions. Those who assumed personal responsibility for their actions with humanized individuals rarely expressed self-exonerative justifications and uniformly disavowed punitive sanctions. By contrast, when performers were divested of humanness and punished collectively, the supervisors often voiced exonerative justifications for punitive sanctions and were disinclined to condemn their use. This is especially true when punitive sanctions were dysfunctionally applied in increasing intensities that impaired rather then improved group performance. Self-exonerators behaved more harshly than do self-disapprovers of punitive actions.

Many conditions of contemporary life are conducive to impersonalization and dehumanization (Bernard, Ottenberg, & Redl, 1965). Bureaucratization, automation, urbanization, and high geographical mobility lead people to relate to each other in anonymous, impersonal ways. In addition, social practices that divide people into ingroup and outgroup members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanization. Strangers can be more easily depersonalized than can acquaintances.

Under certain conditions, wielding institutional power changes the power holders in ways that are conducive to dehumanization. This happens when persons in positions of authority have coercive power over others with few safeguards to constrain their behavior. Power holders come to devalue those over whom they wield control (Kipnis, 1974). Even college students, who had been randomly assigned to serve as either inmates or guards, when given unilateral power in a simulated prison, quickly come to treat their charges in degrading, tyrannical ways (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

The findings from research on the different mechanisms of moral disengagement are in accord with the historical chronicle of human atrocities: It requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce atrocious deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can be led to do extraordinarily cruel things.
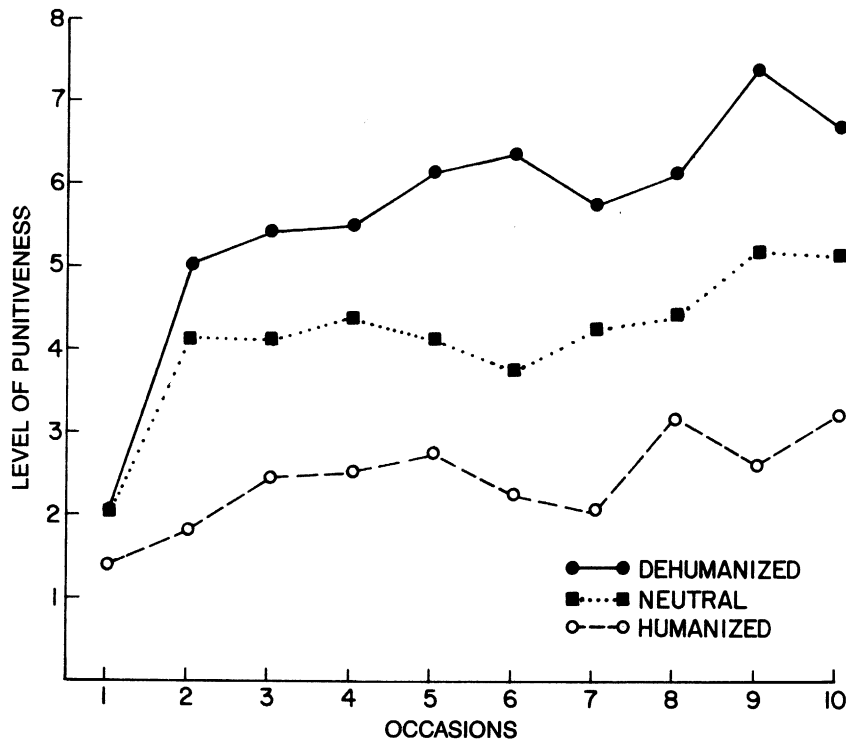
Figure 5. Level of punitiveness on repeated occasions toward people characterized in humanized terms, not personalized with any characterization (neutral), or portrayed in dehumanized terms. From "Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims," by A. Bandura, B. Underwood, & M. E. Fromson, 1975, *Journal of Research in Personality, 9,* p. 260. Copyright 1975 by Academic Press. Reprinted with permission.
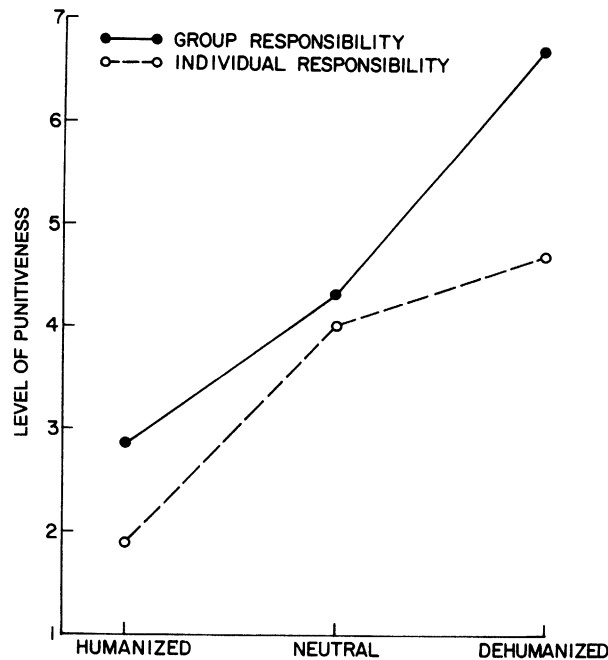

Figure 6. Level of punitiveness as a function of diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of the recipients. From "Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims," by A. Bandura, B. Underwood, & M. E. Fromson, 1975, *Journal of Research in Personality, 9,* p. 264. Copyright 1975 by Academic Press. Reprinted with permission.

Power of Humanization

Psychological theorizing and research tends to emphasize how easy it is to bring out the worst in people through dehumanization and other self-exonerative means. The sensational negative findings receive the greatest attention. For example, Milgram's (1974) research on obedient aggression is widely cited as evidence that good people can be talked into performing cruel deeds. What is rarely noted is the equally striking evidence that most people refuse to behave cruelly, even under unrelenting authoritarian commands, if the situation is personalized by having them inflict pain by direct personal action rather than remotely and if they see the suffering they cause (Bandura et al., 1975; Milgram, 1974). Even when punitive sanctions are the only means available and they are highly functional in producing desired results, those exercising that power cannot get themselves to behave punitively toward humanized individuals (see Figure 7). In contrast, when punitive sanctions are dysfunctional because they usually fail to produce results, punitiveness is precipitously escalated toward dehumanized individuals. The failure of degraded individuals to change in response to punitive treatment is taken as further evidence of their culpability that justifies intensified punitiveness toward them.

The emphasis on obedient aggression is understandable considering the prevalence of people's inhumanities to one another. However, the power of humanization to counteract cruel conduct also has considerable social import. People's recognition of the social linkage of their lives and their vested interest in each other's welfare help to support actions that instill them with a sense of community. The affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others.

The My Lai massacre graphically illustrates the dual aspects of moral agency. An American platoon, led by Lieutenant William Calley, massacred 500 Vietnamese women, children, and elderly men. Insightful analyses have documented how moral self-sanctions were disengaged from the brutal collective conduct (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). A ceremony, 30 years in coming, was held at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial honoring extraordinary heroism of prosocial morality (Zganjar, 1998). The moral courage that was honored testifies to the remarkable power of humanization. Hugh Thompson, a young helicopter pilot, swooped down over the village of My Lai on a search- and-destroy mission as the massacre was occurring. He spotted an injured girl, marked the spot with a smoke signal, and radioed for help. Much to his horror, he saw a soldier flip her
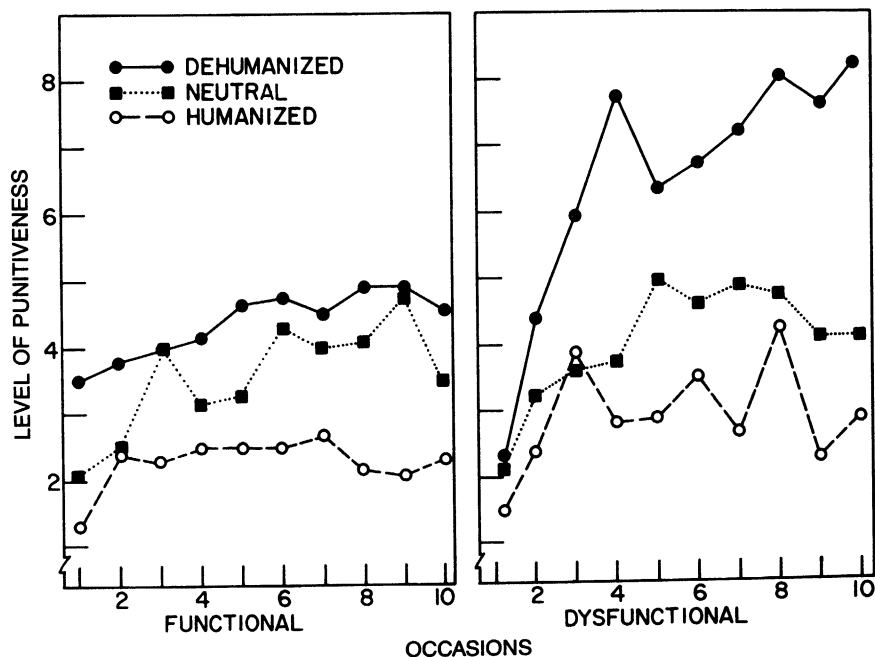
Figure 7. Level of punitive sanctions imposed on repeated occasions as a result of dehumanization of the recipients and the effectiveness of the punitive actions. Under the functional condition, punishment consistently produced improved performances; under the dysfunctional condition, punishment usually gave rise to performance failures. From "Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims," by A. Bandura, B. Underwood, & M. E. Fromson, 1975, *Journal of Research in Personality, 9*, p. 264. Copyright 1975 by Academic Press. Reprinted with permission.

over and spray her with a round of fire. On seeing the human carnage in an irrigation ditch and soldiers firing into the bodies, he realized that he was in the midst of a massacre.

He was moved to proactive moral action by the sight of a terrified woman with a baby in her arms and a child clinging to her leg. As he explained his sense of common humanity, "These people were looking at me for help and there is no way I could turn my back on them." He told the commanding officer to help him remove the remaining villagers. The officer replied that "The only help they'll get is a hand grenade." Thompson moved his helicopter in the line of fire and commanded his gunner to fire on his approaching countrymen if they tried to harm the villagers. He radioed the accompanying gunships for help and together they airlifted the remaining dozen villagers to safety. He flew back to the irrigation ditch where they found and rescued a 2-year-old boy still clinging to his dead mother. Thompson described his empathetic human linkage: "I had a son at home about the same age."

Proactive moral action is regulated in large part by resolute engagement of the mechanisms of moral agency. In the exercise of proactive morality, people act in the name of humane principles when social circumstances dictate expedient, transgressive, and detrimental conduct. They disavow use of valued social ends to justify destructive means. They sacrifice their well-being for their convictions. They take personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. They remain sensitive to the suffering of others. Finally, they see human commonalities rather than distance themselves from others or divest them of human qualities.

Social psychology often emphasizes the power of the situation over the individual. In the case of remarkable moral courage, the individual triumphs as a moral agent over compelling situational pressures to behave otherwise. Such moral heroism is most strikingly documented in rescuers who risked their lives, often over prolonged periods fraught with extreme danger, to save from the Holocaust persecuted Jews with whom they had no prior acquaintance and had nothing material or social to gain by doing so (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Stein, 1988). Humanization can rouse empathic sentiments and a strong sense of social obligation linked to evaluative self-sanctions that motivate humane actions on others' behalf at a sacrifice of one's self-interest or even at one's own peril (Bandura, 1986). In the case of the rescuers, a resolute personal obligation for the welfare of persecuted individuals overrode self-concern despite the grave risks and heavy burdens the extended protective care entailed. Rescuers viewed their behavior as a human duty rather than as extraordinary acts of moral hero-

ism. Once the protective relationship was initiated, the development of social bonds heightened the force of empathic concern and moral obligation.

Attribution of Blame

Blaming one's adversaries or circumstances is still another expedient that can serve self-exonerative purposes. In this process, people view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation. Punitive conduct is, thus, seen as a justifiable defensive reaction to belligerent provocations. Conflictful transactions typically involve reciprocally escalative acts. One can select from the chain of events a defensive act by the adversary and portray it as initiating provocation. Victims then get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves. Self-exoneration is also achievable by viewing one's harmful conduct as forced by compelling circumstances rather than as a personal decision. By fixing the blame on others or on circumstances, not only are one's own injurious actions excusable, but one even can feel self-righteous in the process.

Justified abuse can have more devastating human consequences than acknowledged cruelty. Mistreatment that is not clothed in righteousness makes the perpetrator rather than the victim blameworthy. However, when victims are convincingly blamed for their plight, they eventually may come to believe the degrading characterizations of themselves (Hallie, 1971). Exonerated inhumanity is, thus, more likely to instill self-contempt in victims than inhumanity that does not attempt to justify itself. Seeing victims suffer maltreatment for which they are held partially responsible leads observers to denigrate them (Lerner & Miller, 1978). The devaluation and indignation aroused by ascribed culpability provides further moral justification for even greater maltreatment.

Gradualistic Moral Disengagement

Disengagement practices will not instantly transform considerate persons into cruel ones. Rather, the change is achieved by gradual disengagement of self-censure. People may not even recognize the changes they are undergoing. Initially, they perform milder aggressive acts they can tolerate with some discomfort. After their self-reproof has been diminished through repeated enactments, the level of ruthlessness increases, until eventually acts originally regarded as abhorrent can be performed with little personal anguish or self-censure. Inhumane practices become thoughtlessly routinized.

The gradual disengagement of morality is illustrated by a prison guard who assisted in the execution

of convicts by gassing. Putting people to death requires subdivision of the task to get someone to do it. The guard's role was limited to strapping the legs to the death chair. This spared him the image of executioner: "I never pulled the trigger. I wasn't the executioner" (Marine, 1990), he explained. Executioners require heavy use of euphemisms as well. The guard received $35 extra for each execution. In a linguistic rechristening of deathly gassing as benevolent caring, he remarked "That was a lot of money for baby-sitting." He described the changes he had undergone over the course of 126 executions as follows: "It never bothered me, when I was down at their legs strapping them in. But after I'd get home, I'd think about it. But then it would go away. And then, at last, it was just another job." Haney (1997) presented a systematic analysis of the way in which capital trials are structured to enlist the various mechanisms of moral disengagement. This enables jurors to sentence a human being to death. Executions have become routinized to the point in which there are no longer any vigils or media coverage at the midnight executions. Societal executions are now not only out of sight but out of mind.

Sprinzak (1986, 1990) showed that terrorists, whether on the political left or right, evolve gradually rather than set out to become radicals. The process of radicalization involves a gradual disengagement of moral sanctions from violent conduct. It begins with prosocial efforts to change particular social policies and opposition to officials, who are intent on keeping things as they are. Embittering failures to accomplish social change and hostile confrontations with authorities and police lead to growing disillusionment and alienation from the whole system. Escalating battles culminate in terrorists' efforts to destroy the system and its dehumanized rulers.

Moral Disengagement in the Merchandising of Deathly Wares

So far, I have described the different mechanisms of moral disengagement individually. In the transactions of everyday life, they operate in concert within a sociostructural context to promote inhumanities. This is well illustrated in the analyses by Thomas (1982) of the activities of an American weapons dealer named Terpil. He supplied despots with weapons, assassination equipment, and the latest in terrorist technology. This case is especially informative because it shows vividly that those who trade in human destruction do not do it alone. They depend heavily on the moral disengagement of a network of reputable agents managing respectable enterprises.

Terpil became a weapons merchant after he fell from grace at the Central Intelligence Agency. He masked his death operations in the euphemisms of a legitimate business fulfilling "consumer needs," under the sanitized name *Intercontinental Technology*. To spare himself any self-censure for contributing to human atrocities, he actively avoided knowledge of the purposes to which his weapons would be put. "I don't ever want to know that," he said. When asked whether he was ever haunted by any thoughts about the human suffering his deathly wares might cause, he explained that a weapons dealer cannot afford to think about human consequences: "If I really thought about the consequences all the time, I certainly wouldn't have been in this business. You have to blank it off."

Probes for any signs of self-reproach only brought self-exonerative comparisons. When asked if he felt any qualms about supplying torture equipment to Ugandan president Idi Amin, Terpil replied with justification by advantageous comparison. As he put it

> I'm sure that the people from Dow Chemical didn't think of the consequences of selling napalm. If they did, they wouldn't be working at the factory. I doubt very much if they'd feel any more responsible for the ultimate use than I did for my equipment.

When pressed about the atrocities committed at Amin's torture chambers, Terpil repeated his depersonalized view: "I do not get wrapped up emotionally with the country. I regard myself basically as neutral, and commercial." To give legitimacy to his "private practice," he claimed that he aided British and American covert operations abroad as well.

What began as a psychological analysis of the operator of a death industry ended unexpectedly in an international network of supporting legitimate enterprises run by upstanding, conscientious people. The merchandising of terrorism is not accomplished by a few unsavory individuals. It requires a worldwide network of reputable, high-level members of society who contribute to the deathly enterprise by insulating fractionation of the operations and displacement and diffusion of responsibility. One group manufactures the tools of destruction. Others amass the arsenals for legitimate sale. Others operate storage centers for them. Others procure export and import licenses to move the deathly wares among different countries. Others obtain spurious end-user certificates that get the weaponry to embargoed nations through circuitous routes, and still others ship the lethal wares. The cogs in this worldwide network include weapons manufacturers; former government officials with political ties; former diplomatic, military, and intelligence officers who provide valuable diplomatic skills

and contacts; and weapons merchants and shippers operating legitimate businesses. By fragmenting and dispersing subfunctions of the enterprise, the various contributors see themselves as decent, legitimate practitioners of their trade rather than as parties to deathly operations.

Even producers of the television program *60 Minutes* contributed to Terpil's coffers ("CBS Paid 2 Fugitives," 1983). Terpil skipped bail to a foreign sanctuary after he was caught selling assassination equipment to an undercover FBI agent. He was tried in absentia. The government attorney confronted the lead reporter of the program about a payment of $12,000 to an intermediary for an interview with the fugitive Terpil. The reporter pleaded innocence through various disengagement maneuvers.

Disengagement of moral control mechanisms has been examined most extensively in military and political violence. However, it is by no means confined to extraordinary circumstances. Quite to the contrary, such mechanisms operate in everyday situations in which decent people routinely perform activities that bring them profits and other benefits at injurious costs to others. Self-exonerations are needed to neutralize self-censure and to preserve self-esteem. For example, certain industries cause harmful effects on a large scale, either by the nature of their products or the environmental toxification and degradation their operations produce. Disregarding or minimizing injurious consequences, or discrediting the evidence for them, is a widely used disengagement practice. For years, the tobacco industry, whose products kill more than 400,000 Americans annually (McGinnis & Foege, 1993), disputed the view that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major contributor to lung cancer.

The vast supporting cast contributing to the promotion of this deadly product includes talented chemists discovering ammonia as a means to increase the nicotine kick by speeding the body's absorption of nicotine (Meier, 1998a); inventive biotech researchers genetically engineering a tobacco seed that doubles the addictive nicotine content of tobacco plants (Meier, 1998c); creative advertisers targeting young age groups with merchandising and advertising schemes depicting smoking as a sign of youthful hipness, modernity, freedom, and women's liberation (Dedman, 1998; Lynch & Bonnie, 1994; Meier, 1998b); ingenious officials in a subsidiary of a major tobacco company engaging in an elaborate international cigarette smuggling operation to evade excise taxes (Drew, 1998); popular movie actors agreeing to smoke in their movies for a hefty fee; legislators with bountiful tobacco campaign contributions exempting nicotine from drug legislation even though it is the most addictive substance, and passing preemption laws that block states from regulating tobacco products and their advertising (Lynch & Bonnie, 1994; Public Citizen Health Research Group, 1993); U.S. trade representatives threatening sanctions against countries that erect barriers against the importation of U.S. cigarettes; and even president Carter firing his head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for refusing to back off on the regulation of tobacco products.

The gun industry provides another example of moral disengagement in the business arena. As sales for low caliber guns stagnated, the gun industry shifted their production to weapons of increasing lethality (Butterfield, 1999; Diaz, 1999). The new generation of pistols is faster firing semiautomatics with larger magazines to hold more bullets of higher caliber that magnify their killing power. Victims now suffer more gunshot wounds of greater severity and higher likelihood of death. To protect themselves against being outgunned, the police, in turn, are switching from revolvers to semiautomatic pistols using more lethal ammunition in the deadly escalation. An executive of a trade group representing gun manufacturers justifies the production change through advantageous comparison with normal business practices that trivialize the lethality of the product (Butterfield, 1999). "Just like the fashion industry, the firearms industry likes to encourage new products to get people to buy its products." Through social justification, he invests the more deadly weapons with worthy self-protective purposes: "If the gun has more stopping power, it is a more effective weapon." Another exonerative device absolves the gun industry of responsibilty for the criminal use of the lethal semiautomatic pistils they design and market:

> We design weapons, not for the bad guys, but for the good guys. If criminals happen to get their hands on a gun, it is not the manufacturer's fault. The problem is, you can't design a product and insure who is going to get it.

A law suit for negligent marketing and distribution practices won by New York City against gun manufacturers charged that they oversupply stores in Southern states with lax gun laws, with knowledge that the weapons are bought and resold to juveniles and criminals in cities with tough gun laws.

Much work remains to be done in analyzing the particular forms that moral disengagement practices take at industry-wide levels and the justificatory exonerations and social arrangements that facilitate their use. As indicated in the previous examples and other analyses of industry-wide moral disengagement (Bandura, 1973), injurious corporate practices require a large network of otherwise considerate people doing jobs draw-

ing on their expertise and social influence in the service of a detrimental enterprise through selective moral disengagement. Edmund Burke's aphorism that "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" needs a companion adage that "The triumph of evil requires a lot of good people doing a bit of it in a morally disengaged way with indifference to the human suffering they collectively cause."

Institutionalized discrimination of devalued subgroups in societies takes a heavy toll on its victims. It requires social justification, attributions of blame, dehumanization, impersonalized agencies to carry out the discriminatory practices, and inattention to the injurious effects they cause. Ideologies of male domination, dehumanization, ascription of blame, and distortion of injurious consequences also play a heavy role in sexual abuse of women (Bandura, 1986; Burt, 1980; Sanday, 1997).

Development of Moral Disengagement

Advances in the measurement of moral disengagement hold promise of furthering our understanding of how this aspect of morality develops and influences the courses lives take. Developmental research shows that moral disengagement already is operating even in the early years of life (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). It contributes to social discordance in ways that are likely to lead down dissocial paths. Figure 8 presents the direct and mediated paths of influence of proclivity for moral disengagement on delinquent conduct (Bandura et al., 1996). High moral disengagers are less troubled by anticipatory feelings of guilt over injurious conduct, are less prosocial, and prone to ruminate about per-

ceived grievances and vengeful retaliation, all of which are conducive to aggression and antisocial conduct. The higher the moral disengagement and the weaker the perceived self-efficacy to resist peer pressure for transgressive activities, the heavier the involvement in antisocial conduct (Kwak & Bandura, 1998). Gender differences in moral disengagement do not exist in the earlier years, but before long, boys become more facile moral disengagers than do girls.

Moral development typically is studied in terms of abstract principles of morality. Adolescents who differ in delinquent conduct do not necessarily differ in abstract moral values. Most everyone is virtuous at the abstract level. Amorphous abstractions obscure the dynamic processes governing the selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions. It is in the ease of moral disengagement under the conditionals of life that the differences lie. Among adolescents, facile moral disengagers display higher levels of violence, theft, and other forms of antisocial conduct than do those who bring moral self-sanctions to bear on their conduct (Elliott & Rhinehart, 1995). Proneness to moral disengagement predicts both felony and misdemeanor assaults and thefts, regardless of age, sex, race, religious affiliation, and social class. This predictive generality attests to the pervading role of self-regulatory mechanisms in detrimental conduct. Moral engagement against destructive means can be enhanced in children by peer modeling and the espousal of peaceable solutions to human conflicts (McAlister, Ama, Barroro, Peters, & Kelder, 1999).

Interplay of Personal and Social Sanctions

The self-regulation of morality is not entirely an intrapsychic matter, as rationalists might lead one to
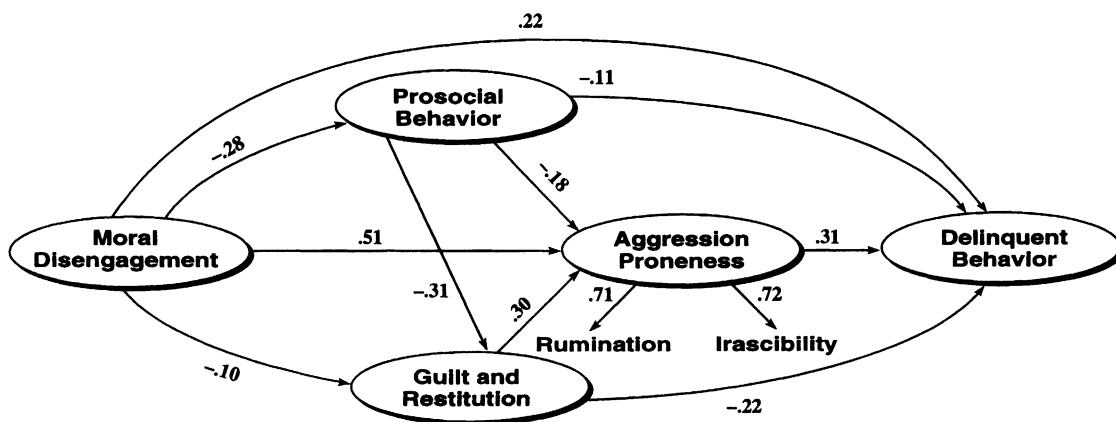

Figure 8. Contribution of moral disengagement to the multivariate determination of delinquent behavior. All paths of influence are significant at $p < .05$ or less. From "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency," by A. Bandura, C. Barbaranelli, G. V. Caprara, and C. Pastorelli, 1996, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, p. 370. Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

believe. People do not operate as autonomous moral agents impervious to the social realities in which they are immersed. Moral agency is socially situated and exercised in particularized ways depending on the life conditions under which people transact their affairs. Social cognitive theory, therefore, adopts an interactionist perspective to morality. Moral actions are the products of the reciprocal interplay of personal and social influences. Conflicts arise between self sanctions and social sanctions when individuals are socially punished for courses of action they regard as right and just. Principled dissenters and nonconformists often find themselves in this predicament. Some sacrifice their welfare for their convictions. People also commonly experience conflicts in which they are socially pressured to engage in conduct that violates their moral standards. Responses to such moral dilemmas are determined by the relative strength of self sanctions and social sanctions and the conditional application of moral standards.

Sociostructural theories and psychological theories often are regarded as rival conceptions of human behavior or as representing different levels of causation. Human behavior cannot be fully understood solely in terms of social structural factors or psychological factors. A full understanding requires an integrated perspective in which social influences operate through psychological mechanisms to produce behavior effects (Bandura, 1997). Some of the moral disengagement practices, such as diffusion and displacement of responsibility, are rooted in the organizational and authority structures of societal systems. The ideological orientations of societies shape the form of moral justifications, sanction detrimental practices, and influence which members of society tend to be cast into devalued groups. These sociostructural practices create conditions conducive to moral disengagement. However, people are producers as well as products of social systems. Social structures—which are devised to organize, guide, and regulate human affairs—are created by human activity. Moreover, within the rule structures, there is personal variation in their interpretation, adoption, enforcement, circumvention, or active opposition (Burus & Dietz, in press).

As noted previously, social cognitive theory avoids a dualism between social structure and personal agency (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Sociostructural influences affect action via self-regulatory mechanisms operating through a set of subfunctions. Neither situational imperatives (Milgram, 1974) nor vile dispositions (Gillespie, 1971) provide a wholly adequate explanation of human malevolence. In social cognitive theory, both sociostructural and personal determinants operate interdependently within a unified causal structure in the perpetration of inhumanities. Unusual forms of malevolence are typically the product of a unique interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences.

Concluding Remarks

The massive threats to human welfare stem mainly from deliberate acts of principle rather than from unrestrained acts of impulse. In the insightful words of C. P. Snow, "More hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than in the name of rebellion." Ideological resort to destructiveness is of greatest social concern but, ironically, it is the most ignored in psychological analyses of people's inhumanities toward each other. Given the many psychological devices for disengaging moral control, societies cannot rely entirely on individuals to deter human cruelty. Civilized life requires, in addition to humane personal codes, effective social safeguards against the misuse of power for exploitative and destructive purposes.

Monolithic sociopolitical systems that exercise tight control over institutional and communications systems can wield greater power of moral disengagement than can pluralistic systems that represent diverse perspectives, interests, and concerns. Political diversity and institutional protection of dissent allow challenges to suspect moral appeals. Healthy skepticism toward moral pretensions puts a further check on the misuse of morality for inhumane purposes. Limited public access to the media has been a major obstacle to reciprocal influence on detrimental social policies and practices. The evolving telecommunications technologies are transforming the mode of sociopolitical influence (Bandura, 1997). Interactive communication through the Internet provides vast opportunities for participatory debates that transcend time, place, and national boundaries about issues of social concern. Mobilization of collective influence against injurious social policies via the Internet can be swift, wide-reaching, and free of monopolistic social control. But the Internet is a double-edged tool. Internet freelancers, of course, can use this unfiltered and unfettered political forum to mobilize support for detrimental social practices as well as for humane ones.

Some of the efforts at change must be directed at institutional practices that insulate the higher echelons from accountability for the detrimental policies over which they preside. Discourses that cloak inhumane activities in sanitizing language should be stripped of their euphemistic cover. Some of the moral disengagement is in the service of profit rather than political purposes. Corporate practices that have injurious human effects must be monitored, subjected to negative sanctions, and widely publicized to enlist the public support needed to change them. Regardless

of whether inhumane practices are institutional, organizational, or individual, it should be made difficult for people to remove humanity from their conduct.

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