

PSYRGGU 2020

Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

PERSONAL FACTORS OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS IN ADOLESCENCE

Sergey V. Molchanov (a)*, Olga V. Almazova (b), Nikolaj S. Priazhnikov (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) Faculty of psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, 125009, Mohovaya str. 11-9, Moscow, Russia
s-molch2001@mail.ru

(b) Faculty of psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

(c) Faculty of psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Abstract

Diversity of moral standards in modern Russia creates a various opportunities for self-identification in adolescence and can lead to deviant behavior in certain conditions. The increasing quantity and variety of deviant behaviour among Russian adolescents needs psychological interpretation for future prophylactic and intervention programs. Modern social situation of development is characterized by significant social multiplicity of social norms and values with potential high attractiveness of deviant behavior for adolescents. Moral disengagement mechanisms can be used for deviant behaviour justification and self-esteem support. Our goal was focused on the personal factors role in moral disengagement mechanisms application and moral judgments preferences in adolescence. We hypothesized that clusters of adolescents personality characteristics and peer relations define moral disengagement mechanisms use and moral development level. Our method included several questionnaires: moral disengagement mechanisms inquirer, moral judgments questionnaire, autonomy and basic assumption questionnaires, peer relations technique. The sample included 123 subjects-adolescents from 14 to 16. The results showed that moral disengagement mechanisms application is connected with personal characteristics that define understanding of social relations. The moral disengagement mechanisms preferences and widespread use correlates with personal characteristics. Active moral disengagement mechanisms application combines with perception of yourself or the world as unfriendly and non-controlled.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Adolescence, autonomy, basic assumptions, moral development, moral disengagement mechanisms.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of self-determination, as a gradual transition to adulthood with its rights and obligations. Moral development is one of the central lines of development in adolescence and youth and is associated with the transition from the assimilation of moral norms and principles to their appropriation as conscious acceptance as the basis for building a life path, as well as a regulator of behavior (Karabanova, 2007; Martsinkovskaya, 2012). The social situation of the development of modern Russian adolescents is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty concerns two aspects. First, the vagueness of general social moral norms and principles of behavior. Modern Russian society is characterized by a high variability of social models of behavior and norms under conditions of multi-culture, multi-religiosity, the presence of a pronounced socio-economic division of society into strata in the absence of unifying moral norms. Secondly, the uncertainty concerns the ambiguity in the perception of future prospects, that leads to difficulties in planning the future and the vagueness of accepting the idea of need to support the social structure in the context of mutual aid standards and care (Molchanov, 2016). As a result, the moral development of the modern Russian adolescent occurs under conditions of diverse, often vague or contradictory moral norms (Molchanov, 2007, 2011). The successful mastery of moral norms and principles does not act as a guarantor of their implementation in behavior. Adolescence as a period of experimentation often has an expression in the forms of deviant behavior, including delinquent and aggression that are associated with a violation of moral norms. Emerging situations of violation of social and moral norms require an explanation of the behavior for the offender himself. In the works of Bandura (1999a), a model of mechanisms of moral disengagement was proposed, which ensure the adoption of one's own behavior without actualizing experiences and reflections that can change self-esteem and self-image.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement are associated with three self-regulation processes: perception of the situation of moral choice, assessment of the consequences of the act for the participants in the situation, assessment of the figure of the victim and attitudes towards it. Bandura (1999b, 2002) identifies the following mechanisms of moral disengagement: 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 and delicacy behavior (Bandura et al., 1996a, 1996b).

2. Problem Statement

One of the common areas of application of moral disengagement mechanisms is the area of bullying and cyberbullying. There are data that indicate that participation as an aggressor in bullying is associated with the active use of mechanisms of moral disengagement in adolescence (Obermann, 2011). Moreover, the actualization of the mechanisms of moral disengagement takes place both in the conditions of traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Pornari & Wood, 2011). Note that for children and adolescents who are more involved in bulking, analyzing a hypothetical situation of violating the moral norm initially led to a search for mechanisms of moral disengagement in a situation, and not a search for moral grounds for the hero's action. There are a large number of studies aimed at studying the personal characteristics of adolescent

aggressors in the context of bullying. Thus, it is shown that the low level of development of moral emotions and the lack of awareness of moral values is associated with the active use of mechanisms of moral disengagement (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). In many investigations personality traits are regarded as a prerequisite for moral norms violation: aggressive behavior, immoral behavior, deviant behavior (Molchanov, 2014). The level of autonomy in adolescence correlates with orientation in moral dilemmas (Molchanov et al., 2015). Studied adult's personal characteristics associated with the active moral disengagement mechanisms application. Thus, orientation to the needs and requirements of another person, a high level of empathy are negatively related to the willingness to use mechanisms of moral disengagement, while the external locus of control, cynicism as a personality trait is associated with their more active use. At the same time, the tendency to prosocial behavior and a developed sense of guilt correlate with not using the mechanisms of moral freedom. The high significance of moral identity is also interconnected with inactive application of moral disengagement mechanisms (Detert et al., 2008).

3. Research Questions

3.1. What groups with different personal characteristics such as models of basic life perception, autonomy and relations with peers can be defined in adolescence?

3.2. What preferences in moral disengagement mechanisms are typical for adolescence with different personal features (basic assumption, autonomy and relations with peers)?

4. Purpose of the Study

Our goal was focused on the personal factors role in moral disengagement mechanisms application and moral judgments preferences in adolescence. We hypothesised that clusters of adolescents personality characteristics and peer relations define moral disengagement mechanisms use and level of moral development.

5. Research Methods

The sample included 123 adolescents aged from 14 to 16 years ($M=15.0$; $SD=0.8$), 48 subjects are (48,8%) boys and 54 (51,2%) are girls. Our method included the following questionnaires: Moral disengagement mechanisms technique in Russian adaptation by Ledovaya et al. (2016); original questionnaire of Moral judgments of justice and care principles by Molchanov and Markina (2014); Autonomy technique proposed by Poskrebysheva and Karabanova (2014); Basic assumption technique by Janoff-Bulman (1989), peer relations questionnaire Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) – part about peer relations questionnaire (Amsden & Greenberg, 1987). The investigation was realized in written form in group form with volunteers after the classes in schools.

6. Findings

We studied personal features as autonomy (emotional, cognitive, behavioral and valuable), relations with peers (attachment, trust, communication and rejection from peers) and world perception (on the base of basic assumptions: the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, The self is worthy, believe in luck, self-control of life). In table 1 there are mean values and standard deviations for all regarded characteristics for all sample, and comparison result for boys and girls (Mann-Whitney criteria for two independent samples).

Table 01. The main psychometric characteristics of assessments of personality traits in boys and girls, the significance of the differences between them

Parameter	All sample (SD)	Boys M(SD)	Girls M(SD)	Differences U	Differences
Attachment	3,58 (0,60)	3,51 (0,62)	3,64 (0,59)	1454,5	0,274
Trust	3,87 (0,76)	3,78 (0,77)	3,94 (0,75)	1443,0	0,246
Communication	3,43 (0,79)	3,28 (0,84)	3,57 (0,71)	1301,0	0,050
Rejection	2,67 (0,60)	2,63 (0,58)	2,70 (0,62)	1548,0	0,567
Emotional autonomy	10,61 (1,95)	11,05 (1,73)	10,21 (2,07)	1336,0	0,014
Cognitive autonomy	11,11 (2,10)	11,69 (2,02)	10,56 (2,08)	1250,0	0,004
Behavioral autonomy	10,53 (2,13)	10,67 (1,98)	10,35 (2,26)	1672,0	0,503
Valuable autonomy	10,85 (1,79)	11,09 (1,84)	10,68 (1,72)	1554,5	0,194
The world is benevolent	5,22 (2,39)	5,59 (2,18)	4,95 (2,51)	1443,5	0,240
The world is meaningful	4,73 (2,07)	4,57 (2,04)	4,93 (2,09)	1508,5	0,414
The self is worth	5,78 (2,99)	6,27 (2,91)	5,36 (3,04)	1367,5	0,108
Believe in luck	6,24 (2,89)	6,34 (2,85)	6,12 (2,96)	1590,0	0,727
Self-control of life	6,55 (2,12)	6,80 (2,20)	6,31 (2,05)	1398,5	0,150

The results show that girls estimate communication with their peers significantly higher and estimate lower emotional and cognitive autonomy, than boys.

With the help of cluster analysis (using the K-average method), based on the results of assessing the personality characteristics of adolescents (autonomy, relationships with peers and basic assumptions), the subjects were divided into 3 groups (clusters). Cluster centers are presented in Table 2.

Table 02. Cluster centers - the distribution of subjects according to personal characteristics

Characteristics	1 cluster	2 cluster	cluster
Attachment	4,0	3,2	3,4
Trust	4,3	3,4	3,7
Communication	3,9	2,9	3,3
Rejection	2,4	2,7	3,0
Emotional autonomy	11	12	9
Cognitive autonomy	12	11	10
Behavioral autonomy	12	11	9

Value autonomy	11	11	11
The world is benevolent	7	4	4
The world is meaningful	6	3	5
The self is worth	7	8	3
Believe in luck	8	7	4
Self-control of life	7	7	5

Using the Kruskal-Wallis criterion, the significance of the differences in all the evaluations was established ($p < 0.05$), except for the assessment of value autonomy. As the result we can talk about the types of personal organization of adolescents.

Type 1 (38% of teenagers). These adolescents have a positive image of the surrounding world and themselves in this world, close, trusting relationships with peers with high level of behavioral and cognitive autonomy. That group has positive model of self and other people.

Type 2 (27% of subjects). Adolescents in this group perceive themselves in a positive way, but with a sense of injustice and hostility of the surrounding world, the lowest esteem of the positive aspects of relationships with peers and a high level of emotional autonomy. That group has positive model of self and a negative model of other people.

Type 3 (35% of subjects). Adolescents of this type have a negative image of the surrounding world and themselves in this world, the highest marks of alienation from their peers and the lowest level of emotional, behavioral and cognitive autonomy. That group has negative self model and high anxiety about relationships with others.

In table 3 there is the distribution of respondents of different sexes according to the resulting types of personal organization.

Table 03. Distribution of boys and girls according to the resulting types of personal organization

Sex	1 cluster	2 cluster	3 cluster
Boys	41%	31%	28%
Girls	36%	22%	42%

Using the χ^2 criterion, it was established that there is no connection between the sex and adolescents in concrete cluster group ($\chi^2 = 2.494$ with $p = 0.287$).

We analyzed differences in the severity of using different moral disengagement mechanisms for adolescents with different types of personal organization. In table 4 shows the average values of the severity of using different moral disengagement mechanisms in adolescents with different types of personal organization (Kruskal-Wallis criterion).

Table 04. The average assessment of the severity of the use of mechanisms of moral self-justification in adolescents with different types of personal organization, the differences between them

Moral disengagement mechanisms	1 cluster	2 cluster	3 cluster	Differences K-W	Differences p
Moral justification	3,35	3,40	3,53	0,650	0,722
Euphemistic labelling	2,60	3,29	3,02	5,302	0,071
Advantageous comparison	2,02	2,49	2,74	11,475	0,003
Responsibility distribution	2,52	2,87	3,10	4,909	0,086
Responsibility diffusion	2,44	2,87	3,16	7,379	0,025
Disregarding consequences	2,66	3,07	3,15	4,562	0,102
Victim dehumanization	3,83	4,17	4,44	3,220	0,200
Attribution of guilt	3,67	4,25	3,97	6,875	0,032

Moral self-justification mechanisms such as “moral justification” and “responsibility diffusion” are less commonly used by adolescents of first cluster personal organization, and more often by adolescents of third cluster. Adolescents of second cluster personal organization most often use the mechanism of “attribution of guilt”.

Let us check for differences in the estimates obtained in the “justice-care” methodology of adolescents with different types of personal organization. In table 5 shows the average values of assessments of the moral development of adolescents with different types of personal organization (Kruskal-Wallis criterion).

Table 05. The average values of assessments of the moral development of adolescents with different types of personal organization (Kruskal-Wallis criterion)

Moral development stage for justice and care principles	1 cluster	2 cluster	3 cluster	Differences K-W	Differences p
Justice 1 stage	2,70	2,99	2,88	1,648	0,439
Justice 2 stage	2,70	3,02	2,88	3,775	0,151
Justice 3 stage	2,74	2,69	3,27	10,971	0,004
Justice 4 stage	3,03	2,87	3,03	0,760	0,684
Justice 5 stage	3,55	3,56	3,54	0,027	0,986
Justice 6 stage	3,29	3,06	3,29	1,844	0,398
Care 1 stage	2,65	3,27	2,85	11,604	0,003
Care 2 stage	3,39	3,32	3,56	0,836	0,658
Care 3 stage	3,54	3,16	3,56	6,055	0,048
Care 4 stage	3,62	3,29	3,71	6,391	0,041
Care 5 stage	3,22	3,04	3,17	1,596	0,450

Estimates for Justice principle 3 stage are highest in adolescents with the third type of personal organization. Estimates for Care principle 1 stage are highest in adolescents of second type of personal organization. They also have the lowest ratings for stages 3 and 4 of care principle.

7. Conclusion

Analysis of autonomy, relationships with peers and basic personal assumptions as personal characteristics of adolescents allowed to identify 3 groups of teenagers: first group with a positive model of self and other people, second group with positive model of self and a negative model of other people, and third group with negative self model and high anxiety about relationships with others. Differences were obtained for adolescents various groups in field of moral development and self-justification. For a group with a positive model of self and other people is typical less active use of moral disengagement mechanisms. A group of adolescents with a positive model of selves and a negative model of other people are more actively use moral disengagement mechanism of attribution of guilt with a preference for moral judgments of egoistic orientation, without the desire to care in self-sacrifice forms. The third group with a negative model of self and anxiety over relations with other is more active in using moral disengagement mechanisms of “moral justification” and “diffusion of responsibility” with the tendency for social conformity in behavior.

Active moral disengagement mechanisms application combines with perception of yourself or the world as unfriendly and non-controlled. The expressiveness of all moral disengagement mechanisms, except “Advantageous comparison”, “distribution of responsibility” and “attribution of guilt” is associated with the possibility to use cyberbullying when other means of influence on a person were ineffective” ($p < 0.05$). The more a teenager agreed with the statement, the more pronounced these moral disengagement mechanisms. Also internet time spent is directly related to the severity of such a moral disengagement mechanism as “Disregarding consequences” ($r = 0.196$; $p = 0.039$). At the same time adolescent’s academic performance is negatively associated with the use of such moral disengagement mechanisms as “Euphemistic labelling” ($r = -0.240$; $p = 0.011$) and “Advantageous comparison” ($r = -0.304$; $p = 0.001$).

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by Russia Foundatin for Basic Research under the project 19-013-00823.

References

- Amsden, G. C. & Greenberg, M. T. (1987). The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Relationships to well-being in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 16(5), 427 —454.
- Bandura, A. (1999a) Moral disengagement. In I.W. Charny (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of genocide* (pp. 415-418). ABC-Clio.
- Bandura, A. (1999b) A social cognitive theory of personality. In L. Pervin & O. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality* (2nd ed., pp. 154-196). Guilford Publications.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 31, 101-119.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G., & Pastorelli, C. (1996a). Multifaceted impact of self-efficacy beliefs on academic functioning. *Child Development*, 67, 1206-1222.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G., & Pastorelli, C. (1996b) Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercis of moral agency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 364-374.
- Detert, J. R., Trevin, L. , & Sweitzer, V. L. (2008). Moral Disengagement in Ethical Decision Making: A Study of Antecedents and Outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(2), 374 –391.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1989). Assumptive Worlds and the Stress of Traumatic Events: Applications of the Schema Construct. *Social Cognition*, 7(2), 117.

- Karabanova, O.A. (2007). Ponyatie «sotsial'naya situatsiya razvitiya» v sovremennoi psikhologii [Term “social situation of development” in modern psychology]. *Metodologiya i istoriya psikhologii [Methodology and History of Psychology]*, 4, 40—56.
- Ledovaya, Y. A., Tikhonov, R. V., Bogolyubova, O. N., Kazennaya, E. V., & Sorokina, Y. L. (2016). Moral Disengagement: the Psychological Construct and its Measurement. *Vestnik SPbSU. Series 16. Psychology. Education*, 4, 23–39.
- Martsinkovskaya, T. D. (2012). Informatsionnaya sotsializatsiya v izmenyayushchemsya informatsionnom prostranstve [Information socialization in changing informational space]. *Psikhologicheskie issledovaniya [Psychological investigations]*, 5(26), 7. <http://psystudy.ru/num/2012v5n26/766-martsinkovskaya26.html>
- Molchanov, S. V. (2016). *Psihologia podrozkovogo i unosheskogo vosrazsta* [Psychology of Adolescence and Youth]. U-rait Publisher.
- Molchanov, S. V. (2007). Moral'no-tsennostnye orientatsii kak funktsiya sotsial'noi situatsii razvitiya [Moral-value orientation as the function of social situation of development]. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya [Cultural-Historical Psychology]*, 1, 73-79.
- Molchanov, S.V. (2011). Moral' spravedlivosti i moral' zaboty: zarubezhnye i otechestvennye podkhody k moral'nomu raz- vitiyu [Moral of justice and moral of care: foreign and domestic approaches to moral development]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 14. Psikhologiya [Moscow University Bulletin (Vestnik). Seria 14. Psychology]*, 14(2), 59-72.
- Molchanov, S.V. (2014). Usloviya i faktory resheniya moral'nykh dilemm v podrozkovom vozraste [Conditions and factors of solving moral dilemmas in adolescence]. *Natsional'nyi psikhologicheskii zhurnal [National Psychological Journal]*, 4(16), 42—51.
- Molchanov, S. V., & Markina, O. S. (2014). Dinamica moralnoy orientatsii v maldshem podrozkovom, starshem podrozkovom i unosheskom vozraste [Moral orientation dynamic in adolescence and youth]. *Psihologo-pedagogicheskie issledovania [Psycho-pedagogical investigations]*, 6(4), 134-146.
- Molchanov, S. V., Poskrebysheva, N. N., Zapunidi, A. A., & Markina, O. S. (2015). Development of Autonomy as a Precondition of Adolescents' Orientation in Moral Sphere. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya [Cultural-historical psychology]*, 11(4), 22—29.
- Obermann, M. L. (2011). Moral disengagement in self-reported and peer nominated school bullying. *Aggressive behavior*, 37(2), 133-144.
- Perren, S., & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, E. (2012). Cyberbullying and traditional bullying in adolescence: differential roles of moral disengagement, moral emotions and moral values. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9, 195-209.
- Pornari, C. D., & Wood, J. L. (2011). Peer and Cyber Aggression in Secondary School Students: The Role of Moral Disengagement, Hostile Attribution Bias, and Outcome Expectancies. *Aggressive Behavior*, 36(2), 81–94.
- Poskrebysheva, N. N., & Karabanova, O. A. (2014). Issledovanie lichnostnoi avtonomii podrozkva v kontekste sotsial'noi situatsii razvitiya [The research of individual adolescent autonomy in the context of social situation of development]. *Natsional'nyi psikhologicheskii zhurnal [National Psychological Journal]*, 4(16), 34-41.