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TYPES OF ADOLESCENT MORAL DISENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The process of teen socialization in today's Russia is distinguished by a complex and ambiguous content of social and moral norms and behavioral patterns being acquired. In combination with subsequent adolescent individualization, the difficulties of going through the process of socialization lead to an increase in the intensity of deviant and delicate behaviors that breach moral and social norms of interaction and show aggression towards other people. The model of moral disengagement mechanisms proposed by A. Bandura is an effective tool for analyzing the causes of deviant and aggressive behaviors in adolescents. Our research aims to explore the features of the use of moral disengagement mechanisms by Russian adolescents with different basic assumptions, moral judgments and ideas about peer interaction. The study involved 103 teenagers aged 14-16, of whom 47.6% were boys and 52.4% were girls. A battery of methods was used including those designed to determine moral disengagement mechanisms, personal basic assumptions, moral judgments analysis and the methodology of ideas about peer relations. The results allowed us to identify three groups of adolescents who prefer different models of using moral disengagement mechanisms. The analysis of personality traits, moral development specifics and peer relationship assessment reflects differences between groups of adolescents who prefer different strategies for using moral disengagement mechanisms.

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Keywords: Mechanisms of moral disengagement, moral development, adolescence, basic assumptions.



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1. Introduction

The problem of deviant and delinquent behaviors in adolescence has always been of great relevance. In the times of social dislocation and transformation, eroding values and norms in the system of social relations, the previous forms of socialization prove to be untenable and the former social institutions are ‘a failure’ causing de-socialization and deviant behaviors. The process of teen socialization in modern Russian society is associated with highly variable social models of behavior and norms being acquired and a highly uncertain future, which affects the sustainability of the norms and models being acquired (Molchanov, 2007). This results in an increased occurrence of deviant adolescent behaviors in Russian society today and calls for a need to explain and interpret the ongoing deviations that are often associated with the violation of moral norms.

2. Problem Statement

Bandura’s (2002) social learning theory offers an explanatory model of human moral development. The main mechanism of moral development consists in learning through imitating models and standards that meet social moral norms in a given culture, allowing it to regulate and guide the child’s behavior. Accordingly, the acquired moral norms are considered to be a result of such learning. It is important to note that the learning process may produce behaviors that include elements of different behavioral models. Moral development transformations tend to be smooth and even which rules out abrupt and sudden changes. Moral development is a gradual daily process of defining moral standards and ways of response (Thomas, 1997). Two forms of moral behavior are distinguished: a proactive form of moral behavior when a person is being humane in helping others; and an obstructive (suppressive) form of moral behavior, which is aimed at blocking the manifestations of one’s inhumane and asocial behavior. Bandura (1999a) considers the option of the proactive form of moral behavior as more progressive, while admitting that blocking undesirable behavior is also an important component of moral behavior.

The functioning of proactive and suppressive forms of moral behavior is ensured by a self-regulation system that includes three components of moral behavior control: a process of self-observation, a process of making judgments and a process of self-response. The self-observation process allows us to observe our own behavior. The process of making judgments is designed to correlate our behavior with our moral standards. The self-response process allows one to evaluate the ‘correctness’ or ‘incorrectness’ of one’s behavior and, if necessary, to change it. (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996b). The perception of one’s behavior as inappropriate to the norm leads to the actualization of a system of self-sanctions, which act as a feedback on self-encouragement or self-punishment (Bandura, 1999a). A human being finds it important to conform to his inner self-image, which sustains his self-esteem of being a ‘good’ person. However, in some situations where the moral norms acquired are violated, it becomes necessary to justify one’s behavior, one’s so-called ‘moral’ freedom.

Bandura (1999b) identified several psychological mechanisms that make it possible to bypass the activation of the self-regulation system and in doing so to provide ‘moral freedom’ to the person. They came to be called moral disengagement mechanisms and are associated with three self-regulation processes: perceiving a moral choice situation, assessing consequences of one’s action regarding those involved in the

situation and assessing the victim and one's own attitudes towards it. Bandura identifies the following mechanisms of moral freedom: moral exoneration, speech euphemism, exonerating comparison, responsibility distribution, diffused responsibility, distortion of consequences, victim dehumanization and guilt attribution. It should be noted that the mechanisms of moral freedom could be triggered off simultaneously by launching a whole system of self-disengagement from immoral behavior. Thus, the cognitive transformation of 'bad' behaviors into 'good ones' using the above mechanisms of moral freedom makes it possible for a man to justify his immoral behavior. At the stage of perceiving a moral choice situation, this involves moral exoneration, speech euphemization and selection of an object to be compared to. At the stage when the moral choice situation and consequences of one's action are being assessed, responsibility becomes redistributed or diffused and the consequences of one's action are either ignored or minimized. At the stage when the figure of the victim of immoral behavior is being assessed, it becomes possible to dehumanize it and attribute to it the guilt for the harm done. Consequently, the process of self-sanctioning does not actualize itself and the resulting immoral behaviors, 'justified' by social and moral motives, may become a source of increased self-esteem and self-approval.

The model of 'moral freedom' mechanisms proposed by A. Bandura has gained popularity and is widely used for various research purposes in order to study the age-psychological features of the use of moral disengagement mechanisms and to understand the specifics of moral disengagement in various spheres of life, primarily in those related to deviant and delicate behaviors. Of particular interest are studies into the specifics of adolescent use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Thus, the meta-analysis of 27 studies shows there is a link between aggressive behaviors and the use of moral disengagement mechanisms in the primary school and adolescent age. Different types of offensive behavior, such as aggression, bullying and cyberbullying, tend to be steadily correlated with the use of moral disengagement mechanisms (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014).

In one of his works, A. Bandura and colleagues conducted an empirical study of the characteristic manifestations of moral freedom mechanisms in children aged 10-15 years. It was shown that the use of moral disengagement mechanisms is typical for children who are inclined to display aggression and delinquent behaviors. At the same time, the tendency for prosocial behavior and a developed sense of guilt correlate with the non-use of moral freedom mechanisms. It can also be noted that prosocial behavior is positively associated with guilt feeling and is negatively linked with aggressive and delinquent behaviors. The most popular moral freedom mechanisms proved to include those of moral disengagement, blame-shifting and victim dehumanization. Gender differences were found to exist in the preferred moral freedom mechanisms - boys tend to make a greater use of moral disengagement, speech euphemization, minimization of harmful consequences, dehumanization and blame attribution. No link was found between the mechanisms of moral freedom and socio-economic status (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996b). The use of moral freedom mechanisms was found to be totally unrelated to a teenager's status and sociometric popularity among other children (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996a). In terms of moral disengagement mechanism use, the analysis of the age dynamics (14-20 years) showed greater use of these mechanisms to be typical only for a group of adolescents who begin to actively disengage themselves as early as at the age of 14-15 years, which correlates with a high level of aggressive behaviors typical of them (Gini et al., 2014). A highly promising

area for research is the study of specific use of moral disengagement mechanisms in a situation of cyberbullying. It has been established that cyberbullies are mostly teens actively involved in cyberbullying in real life. However, a high level of cyberbullying proves to be related to the specifics of the hierarchy of moral values and moral emotions experienced (sympathy, empathy, distress) rather than to the use of moral disengagement mechanisms (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). The Russian sample shows the study of moral disengagement mechanisms to be episodic. Let us note here several papers by Ledovaya, Tikhonov, Bogolyubova, Kazennaya, and Sorokina (2016) on adapting the Moore questionnaire, designed to diagnose the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Analysis of various studies allowed us to build our own research model into the specifics of moral disengagement mechanisms used in adolescence.

3. Research Questions

3.1 Based on the analysis of the data obtained, it is necessary to identify groups of adolescents who prefer to use different models of moral disengagement mechanisms.

3.2. To identify the features of moral judgments, basic assumptions, the nature of ideas about peer interaction in adolescents who prefer to use different models of moral disengagement mechanisms.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our study was to study the peculiarities of the use of moral disengagement mechanisms by Russian adolescents with different basic assumptions, moral judgments and ideas about peer interaction.

5. Research Methods

The pilot part of the study involved 103 adolescents aged 14-16 years, of which boys made up 47.6% and girls were 52.4%.

The battery of research methods included:

1. C. Moore's method of moral disengagement highlighting the preferred mechanisms of moral disengagement (as cited in Ledovaya et al., 2016),
2. The method of assessing moral judgments 'Justice-Caring' (Molchanov, 2007)
3. Janoff-Bulman's World Assumptions Scale (in the adaptation of Kalmykova & Padun, 2002).
4. Inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA) (peer relations section)

6. Findings

Initially, the research outcomes were analyzed by using the moral disengagement method. The most popular mechanisms of moral disengagement are those of victim image distortion, victim dehumanization and guilt attribution, as well as moral exoneration. The gender differences consist in the fact that girls enjoy to a much lesser degree employing such a moral disengagement mechanism as 'moral exoneration' (Mann-Whitney test, $p = 0.044$).

Using the cluster analysis (via the K-means method) and based on the outcomes of the C. Moore questionnaire (the intensity of 8 moral disengagement mechanisms), the respondents were divided into 3 groups (clusters). The cluster centers are given in Table 1.

Table 01. Cluster centers: distribution of respondents by manifestation of moral disengagement mechanisms

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Moral Exoneration	3.6	3.7	2.6
Speech Euphemism	4.0	2.6	2.0
Exonerating comparison	3.5	2.0	1.6
Distribution of responsibility	3.7	2.6	1.8
Diffused responsibility	3.8	2.9	1.5
Distortion of consequences	4.1	2.8	2.0
Victim dehumanization	4.2	4.7	2.7
Guilt attribution	4.3	4.2	2.7
Number of respondents (%)	32%	44%	24%

Using the Kruskal-Wallis criterion, we established the significance of differences in the manifestation of all the mechanisms in different clusters. In this connection, we can further talk about the moral disengagement types.

Type 1 adolescents (32%) are more active than the other groups of respondents in using all of the moral disengagement mechanisms. Let us call it as a group of active users of moral disengagement strategies ('Active users').

Type 2 study participants (44%) demonstrate an average level of use of moral disengagement mechanisms. The most popular mechanisms are victim image distortion strategies: dehumanization and guilt attribution, as well as moral comparison. Let us designate this group as one focused on distorting the victim's image (group of 'victim image distortion').

Type 3 respondents (24%) show the least activity in the use of moral disengagement mechanisms. In case they do, they most commonly resort to moral comparison and strategies of victim image distortion (victim dehumanization, guilt attribution). Let us call it a group that does not actively use moral disengagement strategies ('passive users').

Using the χ^2 criterion, it was established that there is no connection between the sex and adolescents falling into a certain type ($\chi^2 = 0.994$ with $p = 0.608$).

Next, we analyzed the peculiar features of moral judgments, the level of autonomous development, and the nature of basic assumptions and the assessment of specific peer relations that are characteristic of adolescent groups with different preferences for moral disengagement mechanisms.

Let us check if there are differences in the moral judgments of adolescents with different types of use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Table 2 shows mean values of the moral development score for groups of adolescents with different types of use of moral disengagement mechanisms (the Kruskal-Wallis criterion).

Table 02. Average scores for the Justice-Caring method scales in adolescents with different types of use of disengagement mechanisms, the differences between them

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Differences	
				K-W	P
Justice 1.1	3.0	3.0	2.5	10.144	0.006
Justice 1.2	3.0	2.9	2.5	6.771	0.034
Justice 2.1	3.2	3.0	2.5	8.980	0.011
Justice 2.2	3.1	3.1	2.8	2.933	0.231
Justice 3.1	3.6	3.6	3.5	0.008	0.996
Justice 3.2	3.1	3.4	3.2	2.405	0.300
Caring 1.1	3.2	2.8	2.5	8.489	0.014
Caring 1.2	3.4	3.7	3.2	5.312	0.070
Caring 2.1	3.5	3.5	3.3	2.077	0.354
Caring 2.2	3.5	3.7	3.6	1.311	0.519
Caring 3.1	3.3	3.3	3.0	4.012	0.135

The results show that the score for low levels of moral development (for moral judgments and the ‘justice’ principle and the ‘caring’ principle) is lower for ‘passive users’ of moral disengagement mechanisms (Type 3) than for the rest of the adolescents (Types 1 and 2).

The research verified the existence of differences in the personal basic assumptions score for groups of adolescents with different types of use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Table 3 presents the results obtained.

Table 03. Mean score on the personal basic assumptions scales for groups of adolescents with different types of use of the moral disengagement mechanisms. The differences between them

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Differences	
				K-W	P
Benevolence of the outside world	4.4	5.3	6.0	6.409	0.041
Justice of the outside world	4.4	5.4	4.8	5.799	0.055
Self image positivity	5.8	5.2	6.7	3.634	0.162
Belief in good luck	5.5	5.7	7.4	5.046	0.080
A feeling of control over one’s life	6.0	6.6	6.6	1.917	0.383

The ‘passive users’ of moral disengagement mechanisms see the outside world as being the most benevolent and the group of ‘victim image distortion’ consider it to be the most just. At the same time, ‘active users’ of moral disengagement mechanisms see the outside world as the most unfriendly and unfair.

There are no significant differences in assessment of various aspects of autonomy between groups of adolescents with different uses of moral disengagement mechanisms.

The study verified the existence of differences in assessing the specifics of peer relations for groups of adolescents with different types of use of moral disengagement mechanisms. The results are given in the Table 4.

Table 04. Mean scores of peer relations for groups of adolescents with different types of use of moral disengagement mechanisms, differences between them (Kruskal-Wallis criterion).

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Differences	
				K-W	P
Attachment	3.3	3.6	3.8	9.624	0.008
Trust	3.5	3.9	4.1	8.143	0.017
Communication	3.2	3.5	3.6	5.180	0.075
Rejection	3.0	2.7	2.4	12.638	0.002

Such positive aspects of peer relations as attachment and trust, are rated above all by the ‘passive users’ of moral disengagement mechanisms. At the same time, these same adolescents rate ‘peer rejection’ as being the lowest.

The ‘active users’ of moral disengagement mechanisms rate the positive aspects of peer relations as the lowest of all and the negative aspect as being the highest of all.

7. Conclusion

The cluster analysis singled out three groups of adolescents who prefer different models of using moral disengagement mechanisms. They include a group of active users of moral disengagement mechanisms; a group that prefers strategies of victim image distortion (dehumanization and guilt attribution) and moral comparisons, as well as a group which is least inclined to use any of the moral disengagement mechanisms. The most common group among adolescents is the one that prefers strategies of victim image distortion and moral disengagement. No gender differences were found to exist in preferences for moral disengagement strategies.

The analysis of personality traits, moral development specifics and peer relations scores reflects differences between groups of adolescents who prefer different strategies for using mechanisms of moral disengagement. Unlike the ‘inactive’ users, groups of more active users of moral disengagement mechanisms (the ‘active users’ group and the ‘victim image distortion’ group), are more focused on the moral judgments of the initial stages. This can be seen in the preconventional morality level (fear of punishment and submission to authority; the idea of instrumental exchange) and the level of interpersonal conformity, as well as display of one’s care for oneself and one’s own interests. They are characterized by their peer rejection experiences. The group of active users sees the outside world as the most unfriendly and unjust. At the same time, representatives of the ‘victim image distortion’ group believe in the justice of the outside world. Representatives of the inactive user group do not prefer the stages of the initial development of moral judgments. They perceive their world as being more ‘positive’: in peer relations, they experience attachment and trust in relationships with the benevolence of the outside world standing out most in the area of their basic assumptions.

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