Reflections on Moral Disengagement: A Reply to Bandura

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Author note

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We are grateful for the invitation to engage in this exchange with a scholar as eminent as Bandura about a topic as interesting as moral disengagement. Due to space limitations, we will here focus on only a few issues raised by Bandura’s commentary on our book review (For further elaborations of our views, e.g. on emotion and motivation in morality, see Dahl, Waltzer, & Gross, in press; Turiel and Dahl, in press.)

In his thoughtful commentary, Bandura indicates that his book on moral disengagement (Bandura, 2015) did not seek to evaluate actions as moral or immoral. Instead, the book is said to explain why people engage in harmful behaviors. This is a useful clarification, especially since the book uses terms readers would easily interpret as evaluative, such as “detrimental behavior” (Bandura, 2015, p. xi), “inhumane conduct” (p. 48), “ethical lapses” (p. 48), and “wrongdoers” (p. 444).

At the same time, this clarification evokes new questions about how to determine when individuals are morally disengaging. Moral disengagement requires that individuals are not making genuine and principled moral judgments about harmful behaviors, but are instead reconstruing their actions in order to view themselves more positively. Determining when individuals do so is no easy task. For instance, how do researchers determine that people’s explanations of their judgments are not genuine expressions of how they formed those judgments, but an effort to morally disengage by conferring value on harmful behaviors? When do people experience insufficient guilt due to moral disengagement?

It follows from the above clarification that moral disengagement cannot be inferred from a lack of remorse for wrong or harmful actions. Since, as noted, the wrongness of actions cannot be decided by empirical psychology, researchers cannot infer moral disengagement from the fact that individuals do something wrong without remorse. Second, researchers cannot infer moral
disengagement from the fact that individuals cause harm without viewing themselves negatively: Most people view many harmful actions as perfectly acceptable or even obligatory (e.g. administering medication to children via hypodermic syringes, imprisoning dangerous criminals), and may have no reason to regret such actions.

A key empirical disagreement between moral disengagement theory and our view concerns how often individuals reconstrue harmful actions in order to view themselves positively, and how often such reconstruals lead people to engage in actions they would otherwise view as wrong. In our review, we argued that there are alternative explanations of the phenomena discussed by Bandura that would need to be ruled out in order to determine that the individuals disengaged from their moral principles. Still, whatever the fate of our contrasting perspectives, we believe that Bandura’s book has done great service to the field by drawing attention to important issues concerning connections between moral principles, judgments, and actions.
References

