Abstract

Moral disengagement has historically been related to unethical decision-making (Chugh, Kern, Zhu, & Lee, 2014). Bandura (1990) claims that it is moral disengagement that allows ordinary people to act unethically without feeling remorse for their actions. Understanding what factors contribute to moral disengagement may help limit this detrimental behavior. Certain attachment styles have been connected to moral disengagement in present literature (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Elliot & Reis, 2003; Chugh et al., 2014). A connection between mindsets and moral disengagement has also been established (Dweck & Legget, 1988). The purpose of this study is to better understand the relationship between attachment styles, mindsets, and moral disengagement. We hypothesize that mindsets mediate the relationship between attachment styles and moral disengagement because of a mindset’s role in threat construal. We hypothesize that when faced with a morally difficult situation, individuals who are securely attached will view it as a challenge and adopt a mastery-oriented mindset, keeping them morally engaged in the situation. On the other hand, we hypothesize that when faced with the same morally difficult situation, individuals who are anxiously attached will view it as a threat, take on a performance-oriented mindset, and morally disengage from the situation. We hypothesize that mindsets will mediate the relationship between attachment style and moral disengagement only when individuals are presented with a morally difficult task. We expect to see no difference in moral engagement levels when the situation does not threaten their moral self-concept.

Background

Past research has focused on two prominent attachment styles. Firstly, secure attachment, in which the caregiver is readily available and responsive when attachment is sought, and secondly, anxious attachment, in which the caregiver rejects or neglects when attachment is
sought (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Attachment styles affect not only how individuals view relationships, but also shape the individual’s broad outlook on situations outside the relationship (Chugh et al., 2014). Past literature has discussed how attachment styles can influence the choice between moral engagement and moral disengagement, due to the fundamentally different ways individuals with each attachment style view achievement situations. When the securely attached encounter an achievement situation, they see it as a challenge, while the anxiously attached view it as a threat and evaluative of their competence (Elliot & Reis, 2003; Chugh et al., 2014). This evaluation of situation as either a threat or a challenge greatly influences individual’s moral involvement. Participants primed with attachment security were less willing to steal and morally disengage than those primed with attachment anxiety (Chugh et al., 2014).

Past literature has also discussed the relationship between mindsets and moral engagement. Dweck and Leggett (1988) identified two mindsets with distinct goals in relation to morality. Firstly, individuals with a mastery-oriented mindset have learning goals. They pursue courses of action that help to develop their own moral understanding or to master a morally difficult situation. Since goal of individuals with a mastery-oriented mindset is to grow morally, these individuals believe that morality is a malleable trait. The second mindset identified by Dweck and Leggett refers to individuals who are performance-oriented. These individuals have performance goals and engage in moral actions to prove to themselves and other that they are in fact moral. Those with a performance-oriented mindset see morality as a fixed trait.

Dweck and Leggett (1988) first examined these mindsets in relation to academic performance within a classroom. Students who were mastery-oriented had the goal of learning the material and increasing their intelligence while performance oriented students simply desired to look smart. Though these students were of equal intelligence and performed the same on age
appropriate problems, Dweck and Leggett observed a difference in performance and engagement when problems were slightly too hard for their grade level. Mastery-oriented students engaged in self-instruction and self-monitoring, remained optimistic that their efforts would be fruitful, and saw failures as unsolved challenges. Performance-oriented students expressed negative self-cognitions, attributed their failure to personal inadequacy, developed an aversion to the task, and engaged in task-irrelevant verbalizations. As indicated by this example, the differences between these two mindsets are made obvious only by situations that challenge an individual’s self-concept. In order to see the differentiation in moral engagement levels between mastery-oriented and performance-oriented individuals, both groups must be presented with a task that is morally difficult, to either be construed as a challenge or as a threat.

Though past literature has established a connection between attachment styles and moral engagement and between mindsets and moral engagement, no research has connected these ideas into a meditational model. We hypothesize that the relationship between attachment styles and moral disengagement is mediated by mindsets. A relationship between attachment styles and mindset is rational. Having secure attachment allows for unimpeded exploration of environments because the individual knows they have their attachment figure’s support when needed (Elliot and Reis, 2003). The securely attached are likely to have a mastery-oriented mindset because they are not afraid of exploring their environment and any difficult situations they may encounter because of the attachment figure’s support. They are more likely to view a difficult situation as a challenge. Having anxious attachment creates anxious and distracted exploration because the individual is uncertain about the availability of their attachment figure. (Elliot and Reis, 2003). The anxiously attached are likely to see difficult situations as threatening to their self-concept because they the support of an attachment figure. When situations are seen
as threatening and evaluative of competence, the performance-mindset is invoked and moral disengagement is likely (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The aim of the present study is to build a meditational model that will offer a better understanding of the relationship between attachment styles, moral disengagement, and mindsets. We hypothesize that anxious attachment leads to a threat construal that is disorienting, and, without a strong support behind them, individuals will adopt a helpless mindset making them more prone to moral disengagement.

**Methodology**

This survey will be distributed through the use of SONA Systems and Qualtrics. Participants will be offered an extra credit point in a psychology course for completing this survey. 250 participants were recruited for this study. The Close Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was used to assess participants’ attachment styles. To determine participant’s mindsets the Dweck Mindset Questions (YEAR) was used. Next, participants were randomly assigned one of three tasks. One group received a task that threatens their moral self-concept, another group received a task that is morally affirming, and the final group a filler task. In the threat condition, participants wrote about a time when they “hurt someone by doing something selfish, uncaring, or mean’ and how their victim felt.”(Effron, 2014). In the morally affirming condition, participants were asked to write about a time in their life when they “helped someone by doing something caring, compassionate, generous, or kind” and how the beneficiary felt (Effron, 2014). In the filler condition, participants were asked to write about their dream vacation destination. After completing this writing task, participants were be given the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastoreli, 1996) to measure for moral disengagement. Finally, participants were given a test for cheating in which they received a list of five words to unscramble. They will be told that
each word they unscramble will grant them an entry into a random drawing for a $100 Amazon gift card. Three of the letter combinations provided will be unsolvable, indicating that any participant who self-reports over 2 unscrambled words has cheated. Regardless of how many words the participants report to have unscrambled, their name will be entered into the drawing once.
References:


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