

Moral Disengagement: Flipping the Switch between Good and Evil

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Why Study Moral Disengagement?

- ▶ A large part of stigma reduction is the recognition that people who experience mental illnesses are people first and that mental illness is but one element of a multi-faceted person that exists within a particular context.
- ▶ Self-care is more than just leading a healthy lifestyle and getting some good sleep. It is also being more skillful in guiding your behavior in such a way that you can do what you intend and own what you do.
- ▶ Both of these ends can be effectively explored by developing a greater appreciation of the multiple influences on behavior and the psychological process of moral disengagement.

Learning Objectives

- ▶ Define Moral Disengagement
- ▶ Identify multiple influences on human behavior
- ▶ Describe the eight mechanisms by which Moral Disengagement can occur
- ▶ Apply the framework of Moral Disengagement as a tool to evaluate potential risk in others and as a method of monitoring your own vulnerability to “going bad.”

What Moral Disengagement is Not

- ▶ **Moral Disengagement** is NOT a pathological process such as anti-social personality disorder or psychopathy.
- ▶ **Moral Disengagement** is NOT people doing the wrong thing when under the influence of intoxicants.
- ▶ **Moral Disengagement** is NOT people doing the wrong thing because they have internalized criminal or otherwise deviant beliefs and attitudes.
- ▶ **Moral Disengagement** is NOT a conscious choice people make to do what they know to be morally or ethically wrong in that moment.

What is Moral Disengagement?

- ▶ **Moral Disengagement** is a psychological process that distorts our moral compass in a way that allows us to perform harmful or unethical acts and still think of ourselves as decent people.
 - ▶ It allows us to behave in ways that are self-serving, insensitive, unjust, hurtful and hateful.
 - ▶ In its most extreme forms it allows us to behave in ways that are inhumane and evil.
 - ▶ It is quite literally the thought process behind the “slippery slope.”

Characteristics of Moral Disengagement

- ▶ Always originates at an individual level but is often expressed at the small group, organizational or even national level.
- ▶ Is triggered in response to external cues that have been socialized.
- ▶ Its expression is heavily dependent on multiple influences on behavior.
- ▶ Is a deviation from a person's usual standards of conduct.
- ▶ Allows individuals to temporarily neutralize their moral standards through rationalization.
- ▶ Causes detrimental behavior to appear justified, even morally righteous, no matter how immoral or unethical the behavior.
- ▶ Moves us away from a contextualist view of people and towards an essentialist view.

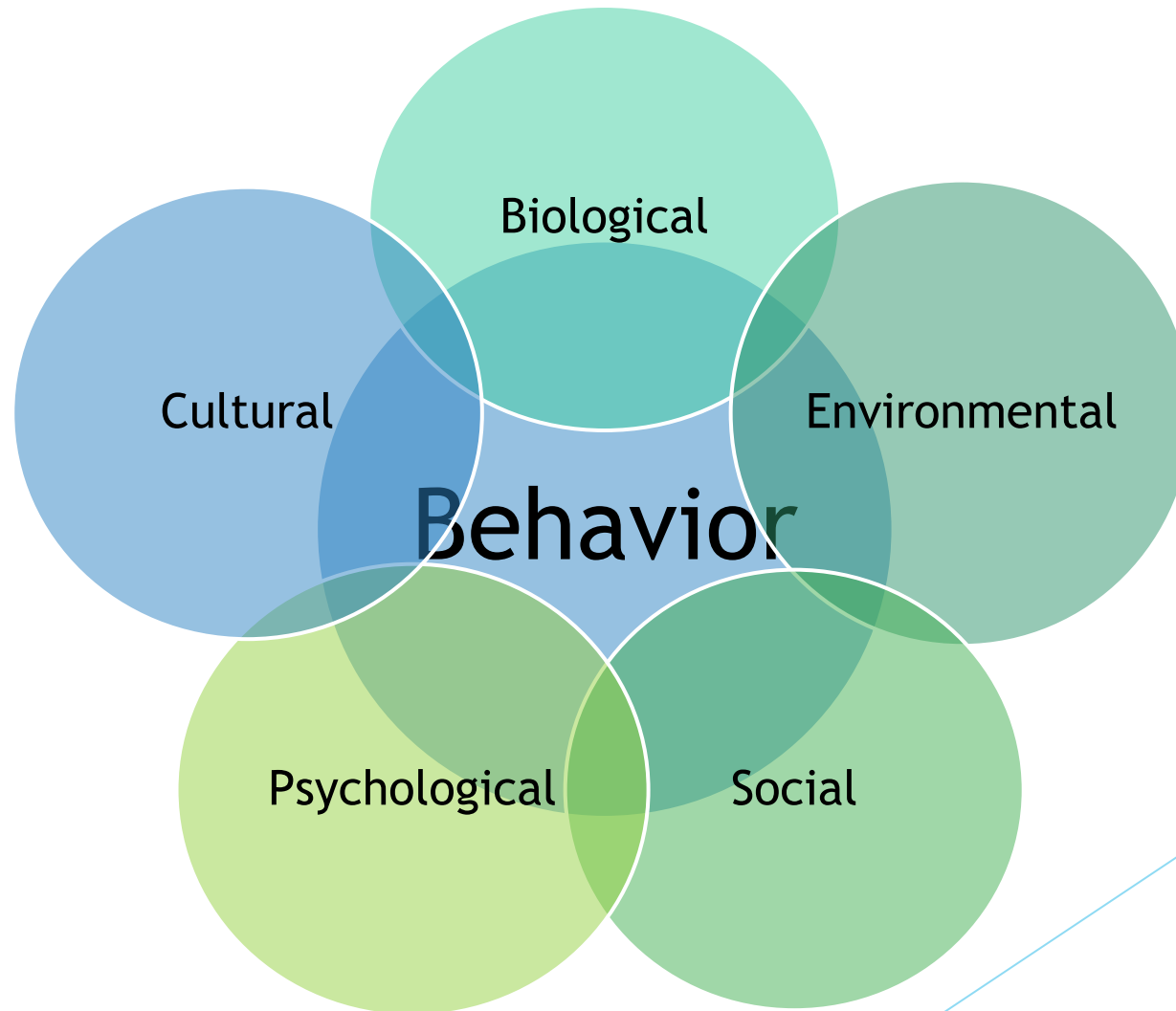
There is no Theory of Everything

- ▶ Before one can really understand moral disengagement, it's important to understand there is no grand unifying theory of human behavior.
- ▶ No single way of explaining behavior.
- ▶ No one thing that causes people to do what they do.

- ▶ Instead, there are multiple **influences on behavior**, which may seem obvious but that view is not our “default setting” so we have to push back.



Influences on Behavior



Influences on Behavior: Some Quick Examples

- ▶ **Biologically**, high levels of testosterone are known to *facilitate* aggressive behavior. (Daly & Wilson 1988).
- ▶ **Socially**, winning a competition is known to increase levels of testosterone whereas losing a competition is known to decrease them. (Mazur & Lamb, 1980).
- ▶ **Psychologically**, a social-cognitive intervention aimed at teaching children how to think about and respond differently to social provocation moderates testosterone reactivity in the face of provocation and reduces aggression even 20 years after the intervention has been completed. (Carré, Iselin, Welker, Hariri & Dodge, 2014).

Influences on Behavior: Some Quick Examples

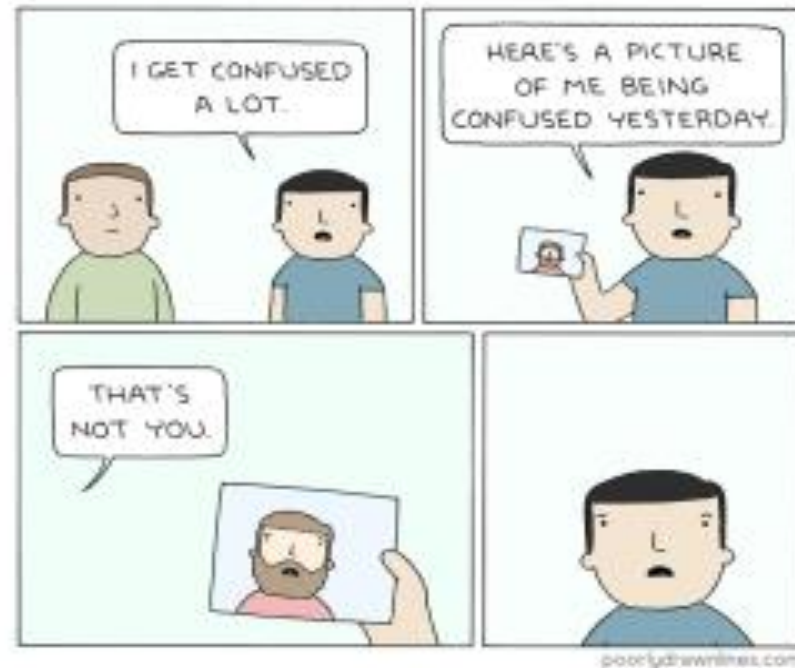
- ▶ It is also the case that:
 - ▶ **Cultural** expectations about the acceptance of pain as either a normal or abnormal part of life will determine whether pain is seen as a problem that requires a solution or just as something to be endured. (Peacock & Patel 2008).
 - ▶ **Environmental** conditions such as hotter temperatures are associated with higher rates of violent crime. (Anderson, Anderson, Dorr, DeNeve & Flannafan 2000.)
 - ▶ Finally, even our own past **behavior** will influence our current behavior. In situations where it's unclear how we should behave we often look to what we have done under similar past circumstances and act accordingly. (Bem 1972)

But that's not usually how we experience other people, why?

When we try to explain the behaviors of others, we take an *essentialist* view because we don't usually have all the relevant information.

When we explain our behavior we can think about several different influences because we know a lot about our thoughts, feelings and experiences. We take a more *contextualist* view.

Why? It mostly comes down to efficiency. The world is such a complex place that it would be impossibly confusing for us to take it all in so we develop mental short-cuts that help us cope with the information overload.



Essentialist vs Contextualist

Essentialist View

- ▶ Concludes that people do what they do because of stable inner qualities.
- ▶ If someone does something “good” they must have the inner quality of “goodness.”
- ▶ This is our default setting when it comes to understanding others and is hard to overcome.

Contextualist View

- ▶ Concludes that we can't know why someone has behaved a certain way until we know something about all, or at least the major, relevant influences.
- ▶ If someone does something “bad” we need to know about their personal history, their social relationships, their socioeconomic status, their environment, their beliefs etc... before we can determine why.

Essentialist View Pros & Cons

Pros

- ▶ Doesn't require much effort allowing for *rapid judgments and reactions* to dynamic situations.
- ▶ Usually provides a good “**80% solution**”.
- ▶ The conclusions you reach seem obvious so they are easy to explain and usually *get agreement* from others.

Cons

- ▶ *Distorts and over-simplifies* our understanding of people and situations.
- ▶ It places “*cognitive blinders*” on us. We see what we expect to see and don't see what we don't expect to see.
- ▶ Because *we start with a conclusion*, even if we investigate further, we see evidence supporting our conclusion and ignore evidence contradicting it.

Contextualist View Pros & Cons

Pros

- ▶ Provides your best shot at an **accurate** understanding of a person or situation.
- ▶ Good for developing an **effective** course of action when dealing with complex or novel situations and people.
- ▶ Effortful problem solving **slows things down** and has a better chance of preventing missteps.

Cons

- ▶ Because it's **slower and more effortful**, it can become a problem in rapidly unfolding situations that require immediate action.
- ▶ It can lead to **paralysis by analysis**. Even when appropriate, it's easy to get lost in the weeds.
- ▶ It can be hard to know **which influences are relevant** and how strongly they impact behavior.

A History Considering the Importance of Context

People have always grappled with the question of how to tell if someone is good or evil but the idea that people's actions might be influenced by something other than internal characteristics hasn't received as much attention until the past 150 years.

Here we will look at the history of Social Psychology as it builds towards identification of the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

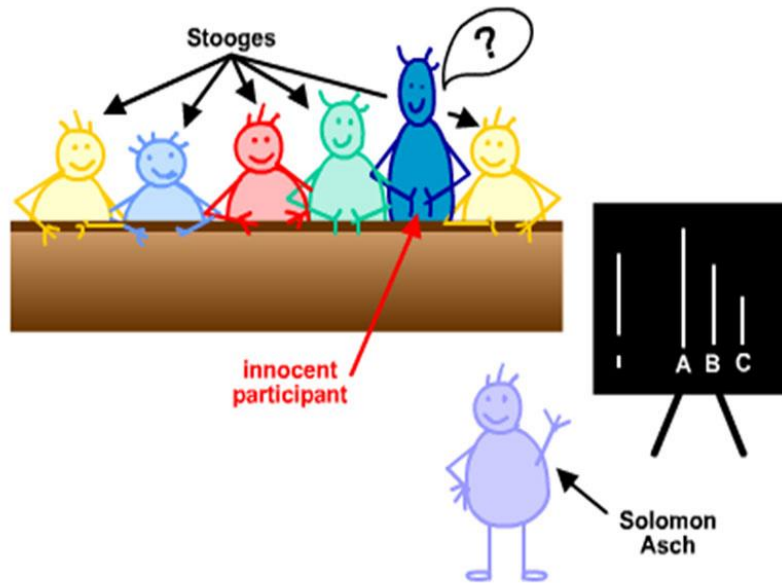


Allport and the "J-curve hypothesis of conforming behavior" 1934

- ▶ Floyd Allport studied *naturally occurring social conformity* and found that small deviations from social rules are common, while larger deviations are increasingly rare.
- ▶ For example, the law says everybody should come to a full stop at a stop sign but many people "slide through" though and increasingly fewer drive through at ever higher rates of speed.



Asch's Social Conformity Experiments 1951



- ▶ Solomon Asch conducted an experiment to investigate the extent to which *social pressure* from a majority group could affect a person to conform.
- ▶ Over several trials, most participants went along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought "peculiar"

The Milgram Obedience Experiment 1963

- ▶ Milgram wanted to investigate whether Germans were particularly *obedient to authority* figures as this was a common explanation for the Nazi killings in World War II.
- ▶ He found that ordinary people are likely to follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being.
- ▶ People tend to obey orders from others if they recognize their authority as morally right and/or legally based.



Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Study 1973

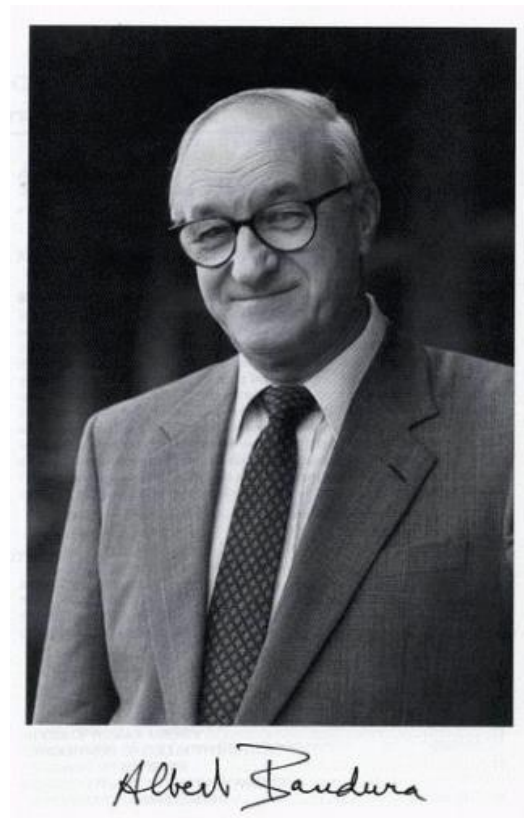


- ▶ Zimbardo was interested in finding out whether the brutality reported among many American prison guards was due to sadistic personalities (*dispositional*) or if it was related more to the prison environment (*situational*)
- ▶ He found that people will readily conform to the *social roles* they are expected to play, even if that role is undesirable.
- ▶ The effect is especially potent if the roles are strongly stereotyped as the roles of prison guards and prisoners.

Albert Bandura, Social Cognitive Theory and the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

1990

- ▶ Bandura explains that individuals **adopt standards** of right and wrong that **serve as guides and deterrents** for conduct.
- ▶ People **do things** that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth and **do not do things** that violate their moral standards, because such conduct will bring self-condemnation.
- ▶ However, people from all walks of life will sometimes behave in ways that **conflict with their values**, and still maintain **positive self-regard** and peace of mind.



Why Does A Contextualist View Matter?

- ▶ Behavior is influenced by multiple factors, *not single causes*.
- ▶ These influences *operate on everyone* regardless of the presence or absence of psychopathology and regardless of a person's degree of commitment to upholding the law.
- ▶ Many of these *influences are subtle* and not often considered but may be important.
- ▶ Subtle and infrequently considered influences will only be detected through *focused deliberation*.
- ▶ If you are attributing behavior to a single cause you are not getting the whole picture. This should be a **red flag**.
- ▶ Failure to consider the multiple influences on others can lead to inappropriate courses of action.
- ▶ Inability to recognize the influences on your behavior may ultimately lead to outcomes you will come to regret.

Questions

