

An Empirical Study on the Relationship between Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty

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Abstract: In recent years, some universities have revoked graduate degrees due to academic fraud, which has caused a seriously negative impact on the academic environment. Moral disengagement refers to the process by which individuals cognitively restructure their unethical behavior in order to alleviate the internal discomfort and guilt arising from moral conflict. Therefore, moral disengagement is considered an important predictor in the study of academic dishonesty. However, the causal relationship between the two still requires further investigation. Based on this, this study takes college students from a university in Shanxi as research subjects and adopts an empirical research method to investigate the relationship between explicit moral disengagement, implicit moral disengagement, and academic dishonesty. The study finds that both explicit and implicit moral disengagement are significant predictors of academic dishonesty among college students. The higher the level of either, the more likely academic dishonesty is to occur. From the perspective of gender, the incidence among males is higher than that among females.

Keywords: Moral Disengagement; Academic Dishonesty; Relationship; Empirical Study; Gender Moderation; Relational Responding Task

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between explicit moral disengagement and academic dishonesty, as well as the relationship between implicit moral disengagement and academic dishonesty, and to examine the moderating effect of gender. One of the research hypotheses is that moral disengagement can positively predict academic dishonesty (H1). Another research hypothesis is that gender moderates the relationship between moral disengagement and academic dishonesty (H2).

2. The Relationship between Explicit Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty

2.1 Research Method and Subjects

This study adopted a questionnaire survey and empirical research method, selecting college students from a university in Shanxi as research subjects. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 491 were recovered, meeting the requirements for statistical analysis. Among the respondents, 230 were male and 261 were female.

2.2 Research Instruments

First, the study used the Citizen Moral Disengagement Questionnaire revised by Yang Jiping and Wang Xingchao in 2013 to measure the level of moral disengagement among college students. The questionnaire consists of 32 items across 8 dimensions, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, representing "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Uncertain", "Agree", and "Strongly Agree", respectively. A higher score indicates a higher level of moral disengagement. The internal consistency coefficient of the overall scale is 0.91, and for the subscales, it ranges from 0.71 to 0.83.

Second, the Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire developed by McCabe and Treviño was used to measure academic dishonesty among college students. This questionnaire contains 12 items and uses a 4-point scale ranging from 1 to 4, representing "Never", "Rarely", "Sometimes", and "Often." A higher score indicates more serious academic dishonesty. The internal consistency coefficient is 0.80.

Third, SPSS 21 was used for data processing and analysis.

2.3 Research Results

2.3.1 Correlation Analysis between Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty

Through systematic analysis, moral disengagement was found to be significantly positively correlated with academic dishonesty ($p < 0.01$). For details, see Table 1.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Coefficients of Variables ($N = 491$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
Moral Disengagement	57.60	16.97	1		
Academic Dishonesty	16.78	5.26	0.52**	1	
Gender			-.27**	-.25**	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. (Same below)

2.3.2 Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty among College Students

An independent samples t-test showed that there were significant gender differences in both variables. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2 Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty among College Students

	Male ($N = 230$)	Female ($N = 261$)	<i>t</i>
Moral Disengagement	62.49±17.56	53.28±15.21	6.226***
Academic Dishonesty	18.17±5.91	15.54±4.25	5.708***

*Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

2.3.3 The Moderating Effect of Gender

Model 1 of the PROCESS macro was used to test the moderating effect of gender. The results showed that the interaction term of moral disengagement and gender significantly predicted academic dishonesty, indicating that gender moderates the effect of moral disengagement on academic dishonesty. See Table 3 for details.

Table 3 The Moderating Effect of Gender

Predictor	Academic Dishonesty	
	β	<i>t</i>
Moral Disengagement	0.22	5.82***
Gender	1.56	1.05
Moral Disengagement*Gender	-0.05	-1.97*
R^2	0.29	
<i>F</i>	65.34	

2.4 Summary

The research results indicate that explicit moral disengagement among college students is significantly positively correlated with academic dishonesty. The higher the level of an individual's moral disengagement, the more likely academic dishonesty is to occur. In terms of gender, gender plays a moderating role in this relationship, with the positive predictive effect being more significant for males than for females. The main reason is that females tend to be more emotional and pay more attention to their inner feelings, making them more likely to experience guilt and remorse when engaging in academic dishonesty, which in turn limits the recurrence of such behavior. [1]

3. The Relationship between Implicit Moral Disengagement and Academic Dishonesty

3.1 Research Purpose and Objectives

The previous research confirmed that explicit moral disengagement can predict academic dishonesty. However, in questionnaire-based measurements, there may be a tendency for respondents to

answer according to socially desirable norms, leading to measurement bias. This study aims to examine the relationship between implicit moral disengagement and academic dishonesty, in an attempt to correct such biases. The main research hypotheses include:

- (1) Implicit moral disengagement and explicit moral disengagement are two distinct variables;
- (2) There are significant gender differences in implicit moral disengagement;
- (3) Implicit moral disengagement can positively predict academic dishonesty;
- (4) The interaction effect of gender and implicit moral disengagement on academic dishonesty is significant. [2]

3.2 Research Method, Subjects, and Procedure

College students from a university in Shanxi were selected as the research subjects. A total of 135 questionnaires were distributed, and 117 were recovered, meeting the requirements for statistical analysis. Among them, 39 were male and 78 were female. The Moral Disengagement Scale and Academic Dishonesty Scale used were the same as in Study 1, with the addition of an Implicit Moral Disengagement Relational Responding Task. Participants first completed the Implicit Moral Disengagement Relational Responding Task, then took a five-minute break before filling out the Moral Disengagement Questionnaire and the Academic Dishonesty Questionnaire. The Implicit Moral Disengagement Relational Responding Task consisted of 7 phases, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4 Procedure of the Implicit Moral Disengagement Relational Responding Task

Phase	Task	Key Label
1	Discrimination of Priming Words	Correct: F Incorrect: J
2	Discrimination of Target Statements	Non-Moral Disengagement: F Moral Disengagement: J
3-4	Combined Discrimination Practice	Non-Moral Disengagement / Correct: F Moral Disengagement / Incorrect: J
	Combined Discrimination Test	
5	Discrimination of Target Statements	Moral Disengagement: F Non-Moral Disengagement: J
6-7	Reversed Combined Discrimination Practice	Non-Moral Disengagement / Correct: J Moral Disengagement / Incorrect: F
	Reversed Combined Discrimination Test	

The stimulus statements for the relational responding task are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Stimulus Statements for the Implicit Moral Disengagement Relational Responding Task

Moral Disengagement	Non-Moral Disengagement
Improper behavior within a corrupt system	Acting properly within a corrupt system
It's okay to cheat if no one gets hurt	Do not plagiarize when no one is watching
Plagiarize when no one is watching	Follow the rules even when everyone breaks them
Break the rules when everyone follows them	Never cheat even if there are benefits
Give helpful hints to friends during exams	Do not give friends hints during exams

To ensure the logicity and accuracy of the research results, a correction procedure was designed as follows:

(1) The experiment included a criterion for the accuracy rate in practice trials. If a participant's accuracy rate in the third or sixth practice phase was below 90%, a prompt stating "Accuracy too low, please practice again" was given. The participant had to reach an accuracy rate above 90% before proceeding to the formal experiment phase. This rule was not applied during the formal experiment phase. The data validity rate of this experiment was 86%.

(2) Considering the possible effects of task order on results, half of the participants were assigned to a design with the compatible task first and the incompatible task second, and the other half to the reverse order, to balance the experimental outcomes.[3]

(3) Measurements were conducted using E-Prime 2.0. Based on experimental requirements, the selected priming words and target statements were programmed. All tests were conducted on computers with the same configuration and system.

3.3 Data Processing

(1) Trials with accuracy rates below 20% were deleted; error responses were retained. Reaction times (RTs) exceeding 10,000 ms were excluded;

(2) Trials with RTs less than 500 ms were recorded as 500 ms; trials with RTs greater than 5,000 ms were recorded as 5,000 ms; [4]

(3) The average RTs for compatible classification tasks ("Correct" with "Moral Disengagement", or "Incorrect" with "Non-Moral Disengagement") and incompatible classification tasks ("Incorrect" with "Moral Disengagement", or "Correct" with "Non-Moral Disengagement") were calculated separately, then log-transformed;

(4) The resulting difference value was used as the indicator of implicit moral disengagement;

(5) Data with D values less than or equal to 0 were excluded.

After obtaining experimental results with E-Prime 2.0, data were imported into Excel for processing and finally analyzed using SPSS 21. The D1 algorithm was used to score implicit moral disengagement data, selecting only data from the formal experimental phase for analysis. Higher scores indicate lower levels of implicit moral disengagement.

3.4 Results and Analysis

3.4.1 Basic Characteristics of Implicit Moral Disengagement

An implicit D value equal to 0 indicates a neutral implicit attitude toward moral disengagement among college students; a value greater than 0 indicates a positive implicit moral disengagement, and a value less than 0 indicates a negative implicit moral disengagement. The study found that 99.5% of participants had an implicit D value greater than 0, indicating that the vast majority of respondents associated moral disengagement with negative terms. To further explore participants' implicit moral disengagement, a one-sample t-test was conducted using 0 as the standard for the participants' D values. The results are shown in Table 6. The overall implicit attitude toward moral disengagement was significant, indicating that participants' implicit attitude toward moral disengagement is negative.

Table 6 One-Sample t-Test for Implicit Moral Disengagement D Values Among College Students

Implicit Type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Implicit Moral Disengagement	0.33	0.19	18.647***

In the compatible and incompatible tasks, (Non-Moral Disengagement–Correct, Moral Disengagement–Incorrect) are compatible tasks, while the opposite combinations are incompatible tasks. Based on the reaction time data obtained from the experiment, the mean reaction times for compatible and incompatible classification tasks were calculated. A paired-samples t-test on the reaction times of the two task types showed a significant difference: $t(106) = 16.06$, $p < 0.001$. That is, college students tend to associate moral disengagement with incorrect words. See Table 7.

Table 7 Reaction Times for Compatible and Incompatible Classification Tasks of Implicit Moral Disengagement

Test Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Compatible Classification	1507.48	385.80	16.05***
Incompatible Classification	2047.34	467.84	

3.4.2 Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement

An independent samples t-test was conducted on implicit and explicit moral disengagement among college students of different genders. The results showed that explicit moral disengagement differed significantly by gender, $t = 2.07$, $p < 0.05$; however, implicit moral disengagement did not show a significant gender difference, $t = 0.10$, $p > 0.05$. See Table 8.

Table 8 Gender Differences in Implicit and Explicit Moral Disengagement

Measurement Type	Male(<i>N</i> = 39)	Female(<i>N</i> = 78)	<i>t</i>
Explicit Moral Disengagement	61.69±14.34	56.15±13.28	2.07*
Implicit Moral Disengagement	0.33±0.17	0.33±0.21	0.10

3.4.3 Correlation Analysis of Moral Disengagement, Gender, and Academic Dishonesty

Correlation analysis was conducted on explicit moral disengagement, academic dishonesty, and implicit moral disengagement. The results are shown in Table 9: explicit moral disengagement was significantly positively correlated with academic dishonesty ($p < 0.01$); implicit moral disengagement was significantly negatively correlated with academic dishonesty ($p < 0.05$); gender was significantly negatively correlated with moral disengagement ($p < 0.05$) and academic dishonesty ($p < 0.05$). At the same time, the table shows that explicit moral disengagement and implicit moral disengagement did not reach a significant correlation level ($p > 0.05$). This indicates no obvious association between explicit and implicit moral disengagement among college students, supporting the hypothesis of inconsistency/separation in the processing of explicit and implicit moral disengagement.[5]

Table 9 Correlation Analysis of Explicit and Implicit Moral Disengagement, Gender, and Academic Dishonesty

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Explicit Moral Disengagement	58.00	13.83	1			
2. Implicit Moral Disengagement	0.33	0.19	-0.03	1		
3. Academic Dishonesty	17.99	4.74	.337**	-.200*	1	
4. Gender	1.67	0.47	-.190*	-0.01	-.186*	1

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 Overall Characteristics of Implicit Moral Disengagement

Data processing of implicit moral disengagement showed that 99.5% of participants had an implicit D value greater than 0, while only 0.05% had a D value less than 0. A D value greater than 0 indicates the presence of implicit moral disengagement, and the larger the D value, the lower the level of implicit moral disengagement. Results with D values equal to 0 showed no difference and had a small sample size, so they were excluded. For results with D values less than 0, existing views vary: some scholars believe that a D value less than 0 indicates a very strong implicit moral disengagement, even stronger than the non-moral disengagement part; others think it may be caused by a practice effect in the implicit experiment, as participants gave formal responses during the fourth and seventh parts and may have lost patience due to repeated responses, leading to random answering. Considering that only 0.05% of participants had D values less than 0 in this study, this part of the data was excluded and treated as missing values. Overall, results indicate that participants tend to associate moral disengagement more with negative words, suggesting that regardless of the level of implicit moral disengagement, college students tend to regard moral disengagement as a negative moral quality and thus associate it more with negative words.

3.5.2 Analysis of Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement

An independent samples t-test was conducted on implicit and explicit moral disengagement among college students of different genders. The results showed that explicit moral disengagement differed significantly by gender, which is consistent with previous research findings and with the results of Study 1; however, no significant gender difference was found in implicit moral disengagement, thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported. A possible reason for this phenomenon is that the internal mechanisms of implicit moral disengagement measurement are the same for males and females, while the difference in explicit moral disengagement may be due to males having a lower social desirability effect than females, resulting in males showing more genuine attitudes in questionnaire surveys.

4. Conclusions and Implications

4.1 Research Conclusions

Based on moral disengagement theory, this study explored the effects of explicit and implicit moral disengagement on academic dishonesty and the role of gender through two studies. Study 1 found that the higher an individual's level of explicit moral disengagement, the more likely academic dishonesty occurs, with gender playing a moderating role — males are more prone to academic dishonesty than females. Study 2 verified the reliability of the relational responding paradigm in measuring implicit moral disengagement. Individuals with higher levels of implicit moral disengagement are more likely to engage in academic dishonesty, and males exhibit higher levels of implicit moral disengagement

than females.

4.2 Research Implications

In the pursuit of academic truth, research integrity is the most fundamental belief. In recent years, with the rise of generative AI, academic dishonesty involving AI has shown a clear upward trend, making the remediation of academic dishonesty more urgent. Universities should develop relevant disciplinary measures according to actual conditions to eliminate students' opportunistic mentality. While external supervision is important, raising awareness is equally critical. Efforts should be made through centralized lectures, typical case warning education, and campus culture construction to continuously strengthen education on academic integrity among college students, guiding them to establish correct values and life outlooks, strictly abide by academic norms, and reduce levels of moral disengagement.

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