

# A review of Albert Bandura's 'Moral dis-engagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities'

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**Abstract:** This review purposed to consolidate the ideas of Albert Bandura on the question of moral disengagement as a premise upon inhumanities are perpetrated. These ideas are contained his article; 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities published in 1999. The review presents key concepts that build up his argument such as moral agency and moral sanctioning. Key questions adduced from Bandura's work include a demonstration of how moral justification is used to perpetuate inhumane acts, an elucidation of how euphemistic labeling is used to promote of inhumane acts, an exposition of the advantageous comparison and violence, displacement and diffusion of responsibility. In order to clarify Bandura's key questions his points of views, information sources and key inferences are also discussed in this review. It was concluded that moral disengagement leads to perpetration of inhumanities through a supportive network of legitimate enterprises through subdivision of functions and that moral agency is dual in nature. It was further observed that rapid radical shifts in destructive behavior through moral justification are most strikingly revealed in military conduct and that people do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves.

**Keywords:** Moral disengagement, inhumanities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Albert Bandura (Born December 4th 1925) is a Canadian American Professor Emeritus of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University. Professor Bandura has made significant contributions in both Psychology and Education. His input in Psychology is majorly in Personality psychology and Social cognitive theory and therapy which led to the transition between behaviorism and cognitive psychologies. Besides, he is considered as the father of social learning theory and the theoretical construct of self-efficacy. Some of his major works include *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control* (1997), *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*(1986), *Principles of behavior modification*(1969), *Psychological modeling: conflicting theories*(1971), *Aggression: A social learning analysis*(1973), *Analysis of Delinquency and Aggression*(1976), *Social Learning Theory* (1977), *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves*(2015). This paper reviews Bandura's *Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities* published in 1999.

## 2. GENERAL OUTLINE

Bandura's article 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities (1999) is clearly structured into an Abstract containing the purpose of and key elements of his investigation, a section on moral justification of inhumane acts, Euphemistic labeling of inhumane acts, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, and Diffusion of responsibility, Disregard or distortion of responsibility and finally, Dehumanization.

### 3. SUMMARY

Bandura posits his general view on why inhumane acts come about. His first premise rotates around the concept of moral agency which is a socio-cognitive self theory involving self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in personal standards linked to self-sanctions. According to Bandura inhumanities as such occur when there is a disconnect between moral thoughts and moral conduct (Moral agency) due to failed Self Sanctions which in turn are caused by a myriad of moral disengagement functions which he subsequently lists as: moral justification of inhumane acts, Euphemistic labeling of inhumane acts, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, and Diffusion of responsibility, Disregard or distortion of responsibility and final Dehumanization.

### 4. KEY CONCEPTS

To understand Bandura's point, it is crucial to conceptualize terms used in his article, and these are: Self Regulation Mechanism, Moral Agency, Self-condemnation, Self Organization Mechanism, Self sanctioning Mechanism, Socio cognitive Self Theory, Inhibitive aspects of Moral Agency, Proactive aspect of moral Agency and Self Censure. In regards to *Self Regulation Mechanism*, Bandura posits that it is a process in which people monitor their conduct and judge them according to their moral standards and perceive circumstances and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to. It also refers to how people do things that give them satisfaction and build their sense of self-worth while refraining from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards. *Moral Agency* is the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely. It is the link between moral thought and moral act. *Self-condemnation* refers to the process in which a person self regulates through judging oneself negatively as a retribution of whatever wrong they might have done. *Self Organization Mechanism* is regulating oneself based on proper order. *Self sanctioning Mechanism* is the role of cognition in inhibiting undesirable actions especially violence.

### 5. KEY QUESTIONS

#### 1. A Demonstration of how moral justification is used to perpetuate inhumane acts

Bandura observes that "People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions" and that during this process "...detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes" (p.3). He alludes to military training in which violence meted by military officers is pegged on morality or moral principles like serving one's country, protecting citizens or waging just war. With these moral conundrums, soldiers kill without self censoring. When harmful behavior is engineered to look cute then all forms of atrocities are permissible. Perhaps the most crucial part is, how come one group of military personnel considers their violence morally justified while those of their opponents are considered immoral? To this Bandura appeals to Cohen and Nisbett (1994) who posit that moral justification is mostly *sub cultural*.

#### 2. An elucidation of how euphemistic labeling is used to promote of inhumane acts

The article points out the correlation between the immorality of inhumanness and Euphemism. He builds up this premise by stating "Language shapes thought patterns on which actions are based" (p.3) and that "Activities can take on very different appearances depending on what they are called. Further, he notes "Not surprisingly, euphemistic language is widely used to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it" (P3). Euphemism is essentially an analogical language rightfully used as an indirect means of decorum. However it can be abused to sanitize immorality. Appealing to Gambino (1973), Bandura explains three forms of *sanitizing* language used to perpetrate aggression: Sanitizing Parlance, the Agentless -passive- parlance style, Illegitimizing specialized jargon. In regards to Sanitization of Parlance, Bandura gives the example of the military language in which military attacks are for instance euphemized as "*clean, surgical strikes*," making it sound like a medical life saving procedure yet in real sense it connotes indiscriminate massive.

#### 3. Advantageous Comparison and violence

Bandura observes that violent acts can be justified when those engaging in it are doing so on the premise of exonerating comparison. This sounds like the comparison of the lesser evil versus the greater evil argument. He gives an example who

commits terrorism in the name of protecting those he identifies with and whom he feels are being mistreated. His terrorism is therefore a means to an end, achieving some sort of justice. Such acts as observed by Bandura are normally based on misinformation inaccurate facts and in some cases they are results of already existing problem of self censure and d moral disentanglement.

#### 4. Displacement of Responsibility

Displacement of responsibility refers to the moral disentanglement in which responsibility is either deflected or simply obscured such that the agentive role is not located. He gives the example of "a leader of a militia gives command to juniors to execute an atrocity and proclaims that he will take responsibility". As an authority it simply means that the individual militia can justify themselves for their heinous act without fear because after all there is someone else responsible for the perpetrators acts. Whenever a senior promises to be personally responsible of another person's crime, but does not claim so in public he /she can deny to the public that such and such of violent act happened to absolve himself but at the same time sanitizing the junior officer.

#### 5. Diffusion of Responsibility

According to Bandura, Moral control seems to be weakened by ignoring, minimizing, and distorting or discrediting perpetrated violence. This happens especially when violence is perpetrated remotely and public censure is kept at bay as in the case of military keeping off camera men from war scenes.

### 6. BANDURA'S POINT OF VIEW

Albert Bandura mainly uses Social Cognitive theory. It would `be expected of him since he is the founder of the theory, which somehow deviates from Freudian, Piagetian a, Skinnerian theories. In early phases of development, conduct is largely regulated by external dictates and social sanctions. In the course of socialization, people adopt moral standards that serve as guides and as major bases for self-sanctions regarding moral conduct.

### 7. INFORMATION

To build up his point, Bandura appeals to several authorities including but not limited to Gabor(1994), Bandura (1986), Rorty's (1993), Voltaire , Kramer(1990), Rapoport & Alexander(1982), Reich (1990), Kramer, (1990), Gabor (1994), Bandura (1991). Bandura appeals to his own Social cognitive theory significantly. Socio cognitive Self Theory includes *self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in personal standards linked to self-sanction.*

### 8. KEY INFERENCES

From the key questions addressed by Bandura the following inferences can be made: First that Several inhumanities operate through a supportive network of legitimate enterprises through subdivision of functions and diffusion of responsibility. Secondly, that moral agency is dual in nature having both inhibitive and proactive tangents with inhibition being manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely while pro-activeness is expressed in the power to behave humanely. Thirdly, Rapid radical shifts in destructive behavior through moral justification are most strikingly revealed in military conduct. Fourthly, People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves.

### 9. CONCLUSION

This review set out to express the ideas of moral disengagement as expounded by Professor Albert Bandura. The introductory part presents an outline of Bandura's literary history while the general outline presents the blue print of the article. A synopsis of the summary and key concepts gives the premises for the key questions in Bandura's idea of moral disengagement which entail a demonstration of how moral justification is used to perpetuate inhumane acts, an elucidation of how euphemistic labeling is used to promote of inhumane acts, advantageous Comparison and violence, Displacement of Responsibility and Diffusion of Responsibility. The article surmises by presenting four inferences of Bandura's thought.

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