Why "Good" Followers Go "Bad": The Power of Moral Disengagement

Craig E. Johnson
College of Business
George Fox University

Abstract

Moral disengagement answers the question of why "good" followers (those with high personal standards) go "bad" (engage in unethical and illegal activities). In moral disengagement, actors set aside the self-condemnation they would normally experience in order to engage in immoral activities with a clear conscience. Moral disengagement mechanisms encourage individuals to justify harmful behavior, to minimize personal responsibility for harm, and to devalue victims. The follower role makes individuals more vulnerable to moral disengagement. While all followers are susceptible to moral disengagement, some are more vulnerable than others due to such personal antecedents as lack of empathy, rigid and authoritarian beliefs, low self-esteem, and fear and anxiety. Retaining a sense of moral agency is the key to resisting moral disengagement. Exercise of moral agency can be encouraged by recognizing personal vulnerability; by never losing sight of the fact that "I" am at the center of any action, and by the on-going practice of self-questioning, such as modeled by the Quakers (Society of Friends).

People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions.
                                        Albert Bandura

Introduction

Followers are key to any large-scale criminal enterprise, major scandal or significant atrocity. Theft, financial fraud, the manufacturing and sale of harmful products, corruption, torture and genocide all require the active participation of followers. Former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, for example, looted a nonprofit fund for children and netted $9.6 million in an extortion scheme involving city contracts. To run his criminal operation he enlisted the help of family, staff members, private contractors and vendors. Thirty-four government officials and private citizens were convicted along with the mayor (Yaccino, 2013). For over a decade General Motors failed to recall a defective ignition switch implicated in at least 13 deaths. The company could not have covered up the deadly switch problem without the complicity of engineers, lawyers, customer service representatives and other employees (Stout, Vlasic, Ivory, & Ruiz, 2014). In a recent case of inhumanity, Islamic State (ISIS) rebels photographed themselves carrying out the execution of captured Iraqi soldiers.

Given that most individuals claim to have high personal standards (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2007), why do so many "good" followers engage in "bad" (illegal, unethical, cruel, inhuman) behavior? Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999, 2002) is one answer to this question. Section one of this paper introduces the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement as well as research linking moral disengagement with antisocial behavior. Section two examines the factors that make followers vulnerable to moral disengagement. Section three highlights the importance of moral agency and offers strategies for encouraging personal responsibility, with particular focus on the practice of asking reflective questions.

The Process of Moral Disengagement

According to Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura (1999, 2002), individuals set aside or disengage self-sanctions--guilt, shame, self-condemnation--that come from violating their personal moral standards. Once these sanctions are deactivated, people are free to participate in immoral activities with a clear conscience. Moral disengagement unfolds through eight mechanisms. The first set of mechanisms involves cognitive construal.   Perpetrators convince themselves that their harmful behavior is actually beneficial through *moral justification* or self-persuasion*.* Killing in war is justified, for instance, because it serves a higher purpose like protecting democracy or repelling aggression. *Euphemistic language* sanitizes conduct to make it more acceptable and reduces personal responsibility. In battle, civilians who are accidentally killed are sometimes referred to as "collateral damage." Actors sometimes speak as if what they did was the product of nebulous outside forces. (Cyclist Lance Armstrong blamed his doping on the "culture" of professional cycling.) At other times, they borrow jargon from legitimate enterprises to make illegitimate ones more acceptable, as in the case of organized crime figures that refer to themselves as "businessmen" instead of criminals. *Advantageous (palliative) comparison* makes unethical or criminal acts appear more acceptable through comparison. Athletes use this device when they excuse their dirty play (swearing, cheating) by claiming that it pales in comparison to more serious violations like fighting with opponents (Boardley *&* Kavussanu, 2007).

The second set of disengagement practices minimizes personal responsibility, thus reducing the self-condemnation that comes from acknowledging the harm one has done. *Displacement of responsibility* shifts the focus or blame to others. Company leaders displace responsibility when they deliberately remain ignorant so they can claim "plausible deniability"

about illegal actions like shredding documents or offering bribes. Obeying authority is another

common mechanism for displacing responsibility. This defense was used by almost all the Nazi

leaders tried at Nuremberg after World War II, as well as by concentration guards, members of

SS death squads and other Germans who claimed they were merely following orders. *Diffusing*

responsibility spreads the blame among group members. At General Motors, division of labor

diffused responsibility for repairing the faulty ignition switch. Employees in many different

divisions of the company knew of the problem but failed to communicate with one another, to

notify superiors, to reach out to victims or to offer a fix for the problem. *Disregarding*

consequences means ignoring minimizing or distorting the impact of harmful actions. This is

easier to do when technology separates agents from their victims. In drone warfare, for example,

operators launch Hellfire missiles at suspected terrorists thousands of miles away with the push

of a button. At times they employ "double taps." In a double tap, drone operators unleash a

second attack when neighbors and family are rushing to aid the victims of the first attack.

Organizational chains of command keep many from seeing the consequences of their actions.

Executives may order layoffs but do not have to face distraught employees. Instead, they leave it

up to lower level managers and the human resource department to carry out their decisions.

The third set of disengagement mechanisms devalues victims. *Dehumanization* is stripping

people of their humanity. It is much easier to treat others cruelly when they are reduced to

subhuman objects. During the Rwandan genocide, the Hutus referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches"

and then went out and slaughtered them using machetes and farm implements. In Darfur, Arab

militias and soldiers raided black villages, calling their victims "dogs" and "monkeys" that "are

not human" (Haslan & Lughman, 2012). *Attribution of blame* exonerates the perpetrator who

claims that the victim or some outside force provoked his/her response. Recipients are seen as

deserving their punishment. This is common in conflict situations where participants argue that the other party started the dispute and therefore deserved the harsh treatment she or he received. For instance, athletes claim that is okay to retaliate if an opponent has fouled them first.

Researchers use both qualitative and quantitative methods to test moral disengagement theory. Bandura and his colleagues (Osofsky, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2005), for example, interviewed prison executioners and found that they use a variety of disengagement mechanisms to enable them to take the lives of death row inmates. They point to the Bhopal chemical spill, the Ford Pinto exploding gas tank crisis, Nestle's marketing of infant formula in developing countries, and the Three Mile Island nuclear accident as examples of moral disengagement in action (Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000). Most studies, however, use measures of the propensity to disengage to examine the relationship between disengagement and unethical behaviors and attitudes. Examples of propensity to disengage questions taken from a variety of instruments include: "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about"; "Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit"; "Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt" (Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker & Mayer, 2012). "It is alright to exaggerate the truth to keep your company out of trouble"; "Employees cannot be blamed for wrongdoing if they feel that their boss pressured them to do it" (Barksy, 2011). "It is okay for players to lie to officials if it helps their team" (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008).

Moral disengagement is positively correlated with unethical behavior across a wide variety of age groups and settings. Disengaged children and adolescents are more aggressive and delinquent (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). They are more likely to bully and to cyberbully and, at the same time, as observers they are less concerned about the victims of

bullying (Obermann, 2011a, 2011b; Renati, Berrone, & Zanetti, 2012). Disengaged high school and college team sport athletes are more prone to such antisocial behaviors as breaking the rules of the game and trying to injure opponents. At the same time, they are less inclined to engage in pro-social behaviors like helping injured opponents or congratulating them for good play (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007). Morally disengaged video game players engage more frequently in such violent acts as torture and killing innocent civilians (Hartman, 2012). In the workplace, the propensity to morally disengage is tied to an extensive list of negative behaviors, including stealing, deception, damaging company property, sharing confidential information, deliberately trying to hurt others, making racist remarks, and using illegal drugs or alcohol on the job (Moore, et al.; 2012; Barksy, 2011; Detert, Trevino & Sweitzer, 2008). Morally disengaged citizens demonstrate higher support for military aggression, the killing of terrorists, and harsher punishment for criminals (McAlister, 2001; Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Vasiljevic, & Viki, 2013).

Follower Vulnerability to Moral Disengagement

Because moral disengagement is a widespread phenomenon, no individual or group can claim to be totally immune to its effects. However, followers are particularly vulnerable to the influence of moral disengagement. They have less power, information and status, which make them susceptible to the manipulation of unethical leaders. Politically astute leaders take advantage of this fact to persuade followers to disengage by using the following tactics (Beu & Buckley, 2004):

Disengagement Mechanism	Leader Tactic
Cognitive construal	Emphasize that criminal activities serve moral ends (e.g. a larger vision)
	Make loyalty to the leader and organization the ultimate moral obligation
	Frame morally questionable activities as socially acceptable
	Re-label harmful actions as harmless or beneficial
Diffusion/Displacement of Responsibility	Rely on legitimate power to demand obedience
	Force subordinates to comply through threats, persuasion, rewards and punishments
	Create bureaucratic structures which obscure criminal and unethical outcomes
	Focus on positive benefits of compliance (e.g. earning money to support family) and not the negative consequences (e.g. consumers hurt by the product)
Dehumanization of Victims	Encourage followers to ignore victims by focusing on profits and other goals

While all followers are susceptible to moral disengagement, some are more vulnerable than others. Cynics appear to be more vulnerable, as do individuals who believe that life is shaped by events outside their control, Machiavellians who manipulate others for personal gain, people who believe that truth is relative, and those who lack empathy (Detert, et al., 2008). Attitudes towards leadership also serve as antecedents to disengagement. Followers who (a) do not feel that they would be capable leaders, (b) are not interested in leading or in confronting

leaders, and (c) believe that leadership rests entirely in one person are more willing to displace responsibility for their actions to their leaders (Hinrichs, Wang, Hinrichs, & Romero, 2012). Other personal characteristics may act as antecedents to moral disengagement, though they have yet to be tested. *Ethical blind spots,* unconscious biases that undermine moral reasoning, appear to promote disengagement (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). Individuals overestimate their ethicality, believing they are more ethical than they actually are, which blinds them to the fact that they could excuse unethical behavior. Individuals forgive their own unethical behaviors, tempting them to underestimate the consequences of their actions. People unwittingly favor members of their group, prompting favorable comparisons that excuse the behavior of insiders while devaluing outsiders.

Other antecedents to moral disengagement may be found in the study of toxic leadership and followership. The cognitive and motivational factors that encourage subordinates to willingly submit to bad leaders appear to foster disengagement as well. Toxic followers suffer from low self-esteem and unclear self-concept, which makes them more susceptible to the manipulative leader strategies, identified earlier (Thoroughgood, Padill, Hunter, & Tate, 2012). These followers hold authoritarian attitudes that encourage them to obey the unethical or illegal orders of leaders. They have rigid thought patterns that drive them to seek closure and to submit to authority. As just-world thinkers, they believe that people get what they deserve, so they rationalize suffering, failure or hardship as the product of the victim's personal character or actions. Fear as a powerful motivator "seduces" individuals into toxic followership. Toxic followers fear their own mortality as well as challenging the leader and being ostracized from the group. They are anxious about change and have a high need for security (Lipman-Bluman, 2005,

2008). As a consequence, toxic followers look to destructive leaders to be their saviors and comply with their unethical and immoral directives.

Resisting Moral Disengagement Through The Recognition of Moral Agency

Bandura (2004) asserts that personal moral agency determines if actors will engage anti-social or pro-social behaviors. Moral agents are responsible for their actions, which cause harm or good. Their behaviors then draw blame or praise from observers (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Recognizing one's moral agency, then, is essential for staying morally engaged. Whatever the situational pressures to disengage, the follower is ultimately responsible for her or his actions and can resist. Phoenix Veterans Affairs doctor Sam Foote resisted situational influences when he kept alerting authorities of falsified patient waiting lists even though his initial letters were ignored (Foote, 2014). Others in the Veterans Affairs health system also blew the whistle even though they suffered suspensions, demotions, poor performance evaluations and other reprisals (Tritten, 2014). The Nuremberg Principles capture the importance of follower agency in the face of powerful external forces. Judges at the WWII trial of Nazi officials rejected defendant claims that they were following orders. Any individual who commits a crime is liable for punishment, even if directed to do so by government authorities. Using the same argument, the US military code says that soldiers have a duty to resist unlawful orders.

Three follower-centric strategies can highlight the individual's moral agency and thus strengthen resistance to disengagement. First, be alert to the danger. Acknowledging vulnerability lays the groundwork for resistance.   As noted earlier, all followers are susceptible to moral disengagement but certain factors act as antecedents. We are at high risk if we are cynical, hold authoritarian and rigid beliefs, have unclear self-concepts, and suffer from fear and anxiety.

Second, never lose sight of the fact that "I" am responsible. In his book *The Lucifer Effect* (2007), for instance, Philip Zimbardo offers followers a ten-step program for resisting unwanted social influences that pressure them into committing evil acts. Each of his steps begins with "I" to remind readers that, no matter what, they are morally accountable. Five steps directly address moral disengagement: "I am mindful" (think before acting); "I am responsible (do not displace responsibility on others); "I respect just authority but rebel against unjust authority"; "I want group acceptance but value my independence"; "I will be more frame-vigilant" (aware of how leaders are shaping the definition of the situation). Ira Chaleff (2003) ends his examination of courageous followership with a meditation made up of a series of "I" statements. These are designed to help readers visualize themselves as ideal (courageous) followers. The ideal follower is able to say: "I am a steward of this group and share responsibility for its success"; "I am responsible for adhering to the highest values I can envision"; "I am responsible for my successes and failures and for continuing to learn from them"; "I am responsible for the attractive and unattractive parts of who I am" (p. 221).

Third, engage in the ongoing practice of self-questioning. Questions are not only an effective way to encourage self-reflection and examination, but they also address several of the personal antecedents of disengagement by promoting learning, personal development, greater self-awareness and self-confidence, and cognitive flexibility (Marqurdt, 2005).

The Quaker (Society of Friends) practice of queries illustrates how questions can encourage the exercise of personal moral agency in a nonthreatening fashion. Quakers believe in the God-given potential of each individual and measure their spiritual progress through self-examination, not through church creeds or structures. The Queries make up an important part of

the worship experience in many Quaker meetings and are used in private devotionals. They are typically updated every 30-40 years (Durham, 2010).

Quaker queries serve as reminders of important values and, at the same time, reveal the vulnerabilities or shortcomings of those who ask them. According to the introduction of the British *Advices and Queries*, the questions are "for the comfort and discomfort of Friends" (Durham, 2010, p. 41). The introduction to a U.S. version of the Queries notes that the practice of queries reflects "Friends' awareness of their human weaknesses" (Brown, 1969, p. 1). Among the questions Friends periodically ask themselves are: "Do you respect the dignity & worth of every human being as a child of God?" "Do you approach new ideas with discernment?" Do you love one another as becomes the followers of Christ? "Is your life marked by simplicity?" "Are you honest and just in your dealings?" (Durham, 2010; Brown, 1969; "The Queries," 2014).

In the spirit of Quaker Queries, the following questions address each of the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Like Quaker questions, these inquiries should provoke discomfort when appropriate, revealing if the seeker has fallen victim to one or more of the disengagement practices. These questions should be asked periodically, as are the Quaker queries, because moral disengagement is an ongoing threat.

Query 1. *Moral justification*: Would I normally think this action is wrong?

Query 2. *Euphemistic labeling*: Does my language hide what is really going on?

Query 3. *Advantageous comparison*: Who am I comparing myself to and am I making this comparison to excuse my behavior?

Query 4. *Displacement of responsibility*: Am I responsible for doing harm or damage even though I want to put the blame on others?

Query 5. *Diffusion of responsibility*: Am I excusing the harm I am causing by

blaming others or other factors?

Query 6. *Disregard or distortion of consequences*: Am I aware of all the possible harmful consequences of my actions?

Query 7. *Dehumanization*: Am I treating others as less than fully human individuals?

Query 8. *Attribution of blame*: Am I blaming the victim to excuse my harmful actions?

Conclusion

Moral disengagement encourages follower participation in unethical, illegal and inhumane activities. Good people set aside their personal moral standards by justifying harmful behavior, minimizing personal responsibility, and devaluing victims. They then willingly engage in behaviors they would normally condemn. While followers are particularly vulnerable to moral disengagement mechanisms, they can resist by recognizing their personal moral agency. Individuals are responsible for their actions no matter how strong the outside pressures to disengage. Prompting self-examination through questions or queries is one way to highlight the follower's role as moral agent and to blunt the power of moral disengagement.

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Author Biography

Craig E. Johnson (PhD, University of Denver) is Professor of Leadership Studies and director of the Doctor of Business Administration program at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership, ethics and management. Previously he served as chair of the university's Department of Communication Arts. Johnson is the author of *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership* and *Organizational Ethics: A Practical Approach* (Sage Publications) and co-author, with Michael Z. Hackman, of *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* (Waveland Press). His research findings, instructional ideas, and book reviews have been published in the *Journal of Leadership Studies, Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, Journal of Leadership Education, Academy of Management Learning and Education, International Leadership Journal, Communication Quarterly, Communication Reports* and other journals. Johnson has led and participated in service and educational trips to Kenya, Rwanda, New Zealand, China, Brazil, and Honduras. He has also served in volunteer leadership roles in a variety of nonprofit organizations.