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Workplace Bullying and its Relationship to Moral Disengagement

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The study of workplace bullying has been an active area of research in the last two decades and many scientific articles have been published in the literature. Models for workplace bullying generally describe a process that contains four components, one of which is a psychological harassment behaviour or more commonly termed, a bullying behaviour. Many studies have focused on the target of workplace bullying, because the target is the most accessible point of study. Consequently, there are fewer studies on those who are bullies, because of the difficulty of obtaining a self-identification with being a bully.

Studies that have been done concurrently with workplace bullying examine the construct of moral disengagement and its relationship to unethical decision making. Although these studies focus on unethical decision making, one can easily see how unethical behaviours are similar to bullying behaviours, i.e., both are self-serving behaviours.

The philosophy of moral disengagement suggests that people develop personal standards of moral behaviour and furthermore, those standards serve a self-regulatory role, i.e., one will use those standards

as a guide for future behaviour. Another concept in the construct is self-sanctions, which can be considered to be a self-imposed penalty if one were to behave in a way that is inconsistent with one's moral standards. Thus, self-sanctions are linked to injurious behaviour. Furthermore, the construct suggests that the self-regulatory process operates only if it is activated. Activation of self-sanctions (or engagement of self-sanctions) enables a person to conduct themselves in line with their adopted standards, because if one were to violate a moral standard, this would result in a threat of a penalty for the behaviour. Alternatively, disengagement of self-sanctions from injurious conduct allow a person to behave in a manner that is not consistent with their moral standards, *yet still feel moralistic* (i.e., they feel as if they have not violated their moral standards).

Since one can selectively activate or disengage self-sanctions from injurious conduct, two individuals with the *same moral standards* can conduct themselves in two different ways (Bandura, 1990, Selective Activation and Disengagement of Moral Control, *Journal of Social Issues*, 46(1), p.27), i.e., one which is humane and the other which is inhumane.

There are eight mechanisms whereby individuals can disengage self-sanctions from injurious conduct and are as follows:

1. Moral justification (conduct is made acceptable by justifying the behaviour as serving either a worthy or moral purpose), e.g., *I have to holler and scream at my employees, because that is the only way I can get the work done.*

2. Euphemistic labelling (language that exchanges an offensive expression for a more palatable expression, making injurious behaviour appear less harmful), e.g., *when a supervisor provides harsh criticism of one's work, upon being challenged, they might claim it to be constructive criticism.*
3. Advantageous comparison (bad behaviour may be made to appear good when compared to some other behavior that is deemed to be more harmful), e.g., *it is OK for me to use rude language, because everyone else does it here and some are even worse than me.*
4. Disregard of consequences (one can ignore the harm, minimize the harm or reject the evidence of harm one has caused), e.g., ignoring - *when one is verbally abusive, they are not thinking of how the target feels when treated in that way*; minimizing - *I know I took credit for their work, but, ... , it really was a team effort anyway*; rejecting - *if a perpetrator spreads false rumors and is subsequently challenged they could respond by saying "I never meant in that way, they must have misunderstood me"*.
5. Displacement of responsibility (the absence of acknowledging that harm was done when acts are perpetrated through the direction of a higher authority), e.g., *my boss told me to get the work done, so I have to assign this type of work load.*
6. Diffusion of responsibility (personal responsibility may diminish if there are others that could take action for stopping bad behaviour), e.g., *a bystander, in a meeting with several people, and who witnesses a target being mistreated, might use the following rationalization - why should I step in when there are others who could intervene.*

7. Dehumanization (the target is deemed as not having any feelings), e.g., *when a perpetrator is abusive, they are not thinking of how it may make the target feel.*
8. Attribution of blame (blame the victim), e.g., *I have to treat a subordinate employee that way because they don't know how to do anything.*

Furthermore, these mechanisms have their basis in rationalizations, which "conceal the true motivations for actions through elaborate reassuring or self-serving but incorrect explanations" (Abnormal Psychology, Barlow, Durand & Stewart, p. 20).

Thus, if one can gain a better understanding of how moral disengagement operates in the workplace, one will have a better understanding of a workplace bully. Furthermore, as cited in Moore *et. al.*, training interventions could possibly reduce the harm caused by morally disengaged thinking, and could have practical implications for organizations (Paciello *et. al.*, 2008, as cited in Moore).

The following four publications provide more reading on the topic of moral disengagement:

1. Detert, Trevino & Sweitzer, (2008), Moral Disengagement in Ethical Decision Making, *J. Applied Psychology*, 93(2), p.374.
2. Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker & Mayer, (2012), Why Employees do Bad Things: Moral Disengagement and Unethical Organizational Behaviour, *Personnel Psychology*, 65, p. 1.
3. Johnson & Buckley, (2014), Multi-Level Organizational Moral Disengagement, *J. Bus Ethics*, 130(2), p.291.

4. Jenkins, Zapf, Winefield, & Sarris, (2012), Bullying Allegations from the Accused Bully's Perspective, *British J of Management*, 23, p.489.

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