Drug Use as a Risk Factor of Moral Disengagement: A Study on Drug Traffickers and Offenders against Other Persons

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This study investigates the moral-disengagement strategies and influence of drug use in adolescence on 49 offenders in Italian jails, 30 of which are drug traffickers and 19 of which are offenders against other persons. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data on family, social and medical histories and the manner in which the deviant act was carried out, and the Moral Disengagement Scale was used to identify specific moral disengagement mechanisms. The results show that the traffickers reported higher levels of general moral disengagement, dehumanization of victims, and advantageous comparison with respect to offenders against other persons. However, the offenders who used drugs in adolescence reported higher levels of advantageous comparison with respect to offenders who did not use drugs. Studying self-regulatory mechanisms is important for enriching the literature about risk factors connected with moral disengagement and deviant behaviour committed by offenders in order to implement the promotion of effective and targeted treatment and educational strategies.

Keywords: drug traffickers; drug use; moral disengagement; offenders; offenders against other persons; risk factor.

Introduction

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecological development and risk factors, the literature suggests that various psychosocial factors (e.g. drug use in adolescents) can influence deviant behaviour and, in particular, distortion of thought, as well as moral-disengagement mechanisms (e.g. Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). The psychological literature underlines how offenders make use of strategies to break free from the ethical codes imposed by society, and how moral disengagement is an important variable which influences juvenile deviant behaviour over and above the social characteristics of juvenile delinquents (e.g.

Kiriakidis, 2008; Petruccelli et al., 2017a, 2017b). Through moral disengagement, harmful behaviour is thus cognitively reconstructed so as to make it appear less harmful or not harmful at all to oneself and others (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2015, p. 193).

Bandura (1986, 1999) defines moral disengagement as a process of cognitive restructuring or reframing of destructive conduct as being morally acceptable without changing behaviour or moral standards. He suggests that moral self-regulation may be neutralized through eight mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, making advantageous comparisons (which serves to reduce the perceived offensiveness of individual

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deviant actions by depicting them as justified in the service of valued social and/or moral missions; see Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Martin, 2014), displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting consequences (which serves to minimize one's own role in deviant conduct or their consequences), dehumanization of victims (which serves to deprive the victim of his or her dignity), and attribution of blame (using this mechanism, the deviant action is considered a self-protective act that relieves the offender of his or her own responsibility). However,

the disengagement may centre on (a) the reconstrual of the conduct itself so it is not viewed as immoral, (b) the operation of the agency of action so that the perpetrators can minimize their role in causing harm, (c) the consequences that flow from actions, or (d) how the victims of maltreatment are regarded by devaluing them as human beings and blaming them for what is being done to them. (Bandura, 1999, p. 194)

In other words, the moral-disengagement mechanisms bring the individual engaging in deviant behaviour to empathize with his or her moral sense (moral self), thus helping that individual to view his or her deviant conduct as acceptable. Moral disengagement can be defined 'as a multicomponent construct where cognitive reasoning and emotional reactions reciprocally interact in predicting moral behavior' (Menesini, Palladino, & Nocentini, 2015, p. 126). The concept of moral disengagement, however, is particularly useful in explaining how individuals can engage in behaviours that are not concordant with their moral standards while simultaneously claiming to adhere to those standards and thus avoid feelings of conflict, guilt, and remorse (Hymel & Perren, 2015, p. 3). Indeed, several studies generally correlate moral disengagement with aggressive and unethical behaviour such as bullying (Bussey, Quinn, & Dobson, 2015; Gini, Pozzoli, &

Bussey, 2015; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Visconti, Ladd, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2015). In particular, the study conducted by DeLisi et al. (2014) suggests that moral disengagement can be a significant key factor in the realization of antisocial behaviour. Carroll (2009) found that higher levels of moral disengagement are connected with attitudes supporting offences, and lower levels of moral judgement are found in participants belonging to a brotherhood.

Nevertheless, when moral disengagement is studied in offenders, the breakdown between types of offence is rarely contemplated. The study conducted by Petrucci et al. (2017b), however, shows how sex offenders seem to make more use of moral disengagement than non-sex offenders. A statistical difference was found in moral justification, attribution of blame, advantageous comparison, and dehumanization of victims between the controls and the jailed participants, whereas the two jailed groups (sex offenders and non-sex offenders) show no significant differences.

Some previous and recent studies have shown how there are many risk factors associated with the deviant behaviour of offenders (inadequate socialization experiences, inappropriate forms of punishment, abuse and neglect; see Casey et al., 2017; Cuadra, Jaffe, Thomas, & DiLillo, 2014; Fang & Corso, 2007; Marshall & Barbaree, 1984; McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2011) and forms of abuse (e.g. drugs and alcohol; see Abracen & Looman, 2016; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Passini, 2012; Warr, 2002). In particular, the study conducted by Muratori et al. (2017) shows how higher moral-disengagement scores are associated with later higher levels of callous-unemotional traits in adolescents, even after, respectively, controlling for previous levels of callous traits and moral disengagement. Hyde, Shaw, and Moilanen (2010)

demonstrate how social and affective aspects of adolescents (e.g. early rejecting parenting, neighbourhood impoverishment, and child empathy) are connected with later moral disengagement. The relationship between some of these early constructs and later antisocial behaviour is mediated by moral-disengagement strategies, although the research by Newton, Havard, and Teesson (2012) shows that higher levels of moral disengagement can predict alcohol abuse.

However, the literature is poor regarding the relationship between drug abuse in adolescence and moral-disengagement strategies in adult life. In order to understand deviant conduct better, it is necessary to refer to risk factors implicated in the genesis of distorted cognitive mechanisms. Therefore, it is crucial to refer to self-regulatory mechanisms of thoughts and actions, which stem from or are somehow implicated in the offender's conduct. This study builds on the work of Petruccelli et al. (2017b) by investigating the moral-disengagement levels of different types of offender. It aims to verify which group between the two examined has higher levels, and on which mechanisms. Following the study of Passini (2012), which shows how morbid dysfunction is a predictor of drug use, the present work, retrospectively, endeavours to verify whether or not drug use during adolescence increases the risk of using moral-disengagement strategies. Offenders are generally a poorly studied population; indeed, few studies have examined the moral disengagement of young and adult offenders, and in particular far less attention has been given to differences between different types of offender. The present explorative study, conducted on a convenience sample of offenders, intends to explore the role of drug use in adolescence about moral disengagement in adult life, and moral disengagement strategies in persons who commit offences toward other persons and traffickers of drugs. However, studying the self-regulation mechanisms of offenders may be of

considerable importance for the promotion of effective and targeted treatment strategies (Petruccelli et al., 2017a; Van Vugt et al., 2008). This research, furthermore, can be taken as an innovative contribution to extending the literature about risk factors implicated in the development of deviant thoughts in offenders, as well as potentially being a key to considering what thought patterns may constitute a starting point for developing and increasing specific strategies of re-education.

Method

Procedure and Participants

After having obtained permission from the Italian Department of Penitentiary Administration (DPA), the penitentiary heads were contacted, followed by the educational sector of the penitentiary, in order to identify detainees who could be asked to participate in the research. All participants were informed about the aims of the study and assured that it would be completely anonymous. After the participants had accepted, they signed a written informed consent form in order to guarantee their privacy and the anonymity of their personal information. After a semi-structured interview, conducted with every participant, the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) was individually administered to all participants. All procedures which involved human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The participants consist of 30 volunteer male Italian drug traffickers, recruited from penal institutes at Catania (Sicily), and 19 volunteer male Italian offenders against persons recruited from penal institutes at Frosinone (Lazio). In their past experience 61.2% of participants used drugs and 38.8% did not. With regard to education level, 63.3% of

participants had a lower secondary school diploma, 16.3% had the elementary licence, 8.2% had a high school diploma, and 12.2% did not graduate from high school.

Measures

A semi-structured interview designed for obtaining data connected to the committing of an offence was used (De Leo, Petrucci, & Pedata, 2004). It is not a diagnostic instrument but rather a form of data collection. The information collected relates to family, social and medical histories, as well as the manner in which the deviant act was perpetrated.

The Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara, Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Vicino, 1996) was used to measure levels of moral disengagement. It consists of 32 items assessing the mechanisms underlying moral disengagement as identified by Bandura (1999). Participants were asked to rate their agreement to items using a five-point Likert scale with answers ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha of the Moral Disengagement Scale is .89.

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Results

Moral Disengagement: Differences between Offenders against Other Persons and Drug Traffickers

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) used to verify possible different mechanisms of moral disengagement for the two groups of offenders showed a statistically significant difference for general moral disengagement, $F(1, 47) = 4.64, p = .036$. The drug traffickers ($M = 2.80, SD = 0.78$) reported higher levels of moral disengagement than the offenders against other persons ($M = 2.37, SD = 0.51$). Analysing, on the other hand, the specific mechanisms, a statistically significant difference emerges for dehumanization of victim, $F(1, 47) = 8.94, p = .004$. The drug traffickers ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.78$) reported higher levels of dehumanization of victims than offenders against other persons ($M = 1.92, SD = 0.92$). In the case of advantageous comparison, $F(1, 47) = 5.69, p = .021$, the drug traffickers ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.98$) also reported higher levels than the offenders against other persons ($M = 2.71, SD = 0.85$). In all other moral-disengagement mechanisms, the difference between two groups of offenders is not significant (Table 1).

Drugs Use in Adolescence as a Risk Factor for Increasing Moral Disengagement

The ANOVA used verified a difference between offenders who used drugs in adolescence and offenders who did not in the levels of moral-disengagement strategies employed.

Table 1. Significant differences between offenders against other persons and drug traffickers in moral-disengagement strategies.

	General moral disengagement, $M (SD)$	Dehumanization of victim, $M (SD)$	Advantageous comparison, $M (SD)$
Drug traffickers ($n = 30$)	2.80 (0.78)	2.74 (0.94)	3.36 (0.98)
Offenders against other persons ($n = 19$)	2.37 (0.51)	1.92 (0.92)	2.71 (0.85)

Table 2. Significant differences between drug users and non-drug users.

	Advantageous comparison, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Drug users (<i>n</i> = 30)	3.41 (0.88)
Non-drug users (<i>n</i> = 19)	2.63 (0.95)

The results however only show a statistically significant difference related to advantageous comparison $F(1, 47) = 8.6, p = .005$. Specifically, those who used drugs in adolescence reported higher levels of advantageous comparison ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.88$) than those who did not ($M = 2.63, SD = 0.95$; see Table 2).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present research aims to investigate whether or not the history of drug use in adolescence is a risk factor in increasing the use of moral-disengagement strategies in adult and criminal life, and the difference in moral disengagement between two groups of offenders (drug traffickers and offenders against other persons).

The results show that the drug traffickers reported higher levels of advantageous comparison than the offenders against other persons. The data, although not always consistent with the literature and baseline studies (e.g. Petruccelli et al., 2017b), suggest that drug traffickers, having been charged with a crime that is less violent than those committed by offenders against other persons, make it a point to settle upon this difference to justify their actions. In other words, drug traffickers may minimize their offence because they think that there are many others that are worse than theirs.

The drug traffickers also reported higher levels than the offenders against other persons for dehumanization of the victim and general moral disengagement. These two results could lead to the belief that drug dealers are more uninhibited in declaring the moral-disengagement mechanisms that justify their deviant actions than offenders

against other persons. In some cases, it is possible that drug traffickers might find it easier to dehumanize because – based on the type of offence – they have not victimized a specific individual in the same way as the offenders against other persons, who contrarily might, out of defence, remorse, or social desirability bias choose not to dehumanize – or at least to do so to a lesser extent than drug traffickers. However, it is likely that offenders against other persons are subject to the dynamics of social desirability and the fear of disappointing the social expectations that those who have committed such serious offences must have to use some cognitive strategy that leads them to the deviant act. Indeed, the literature (e.g., Petruccelli et al., 2017a), in general, underline how offenders against other persons report higher levels of moral disengagement’s mechanisms, specifically about dehumanization of the victim. It’s also possible that drug’s traffickers show higher levels of moral disengagement’s mechanisms regarding the victims, because offenders against other persons, in jail, developed more social desirability to improve their status.

Previous research (e.g. Haynie & Osgood 2005; Passini, 2012) has underlined how moral disengagement is a predictor of drug use. The data analysed herein show that the offenders who used drugs in early or late adolescence reported higher levels of advantageous comparison than those who did not. One possible explanation for this is that the early use of drugs can be a risk factor in the genesis of mechanisms that justify deviant conduct. In particular, drug use and criminality that begin in adolescence further justify any consequent serious actions, and therefore justify the use of advantageous comparison. Individuals who were involved in drug abuse

in adolescence will probably appraise the actions that they are carrying out as not so serious for either themselves or the law, and will learn to make them socially acceptable by comparing them with deviant actions that are more reprehensible.

Therefore, it is possible to consider drug use in adolescence as a risk factor in the genesis of moral-disengagement mechanisms. In other words, the deviant conduct (drug use), which may have given rise to the deviant behaviour of repeat offenders, can be a factor that increases the use of the advantageous comparison. Drug use is an action that, compared to other crimes (e.g. rape), is less reprehensible and therefore can be useful in justifying their conduct. Furthermore, in accordance with the literature, since moral disengagement is sometimes associated with deviant actions, drug use may also have a general effect on delinquent action itself.

Although the present investigation provides valuable new insights into risk factors for moral disengagement in offenders, a few important considerations should also be noted. First, the use of self-report questionnaires allows for a partial evaluation of the complexity of the variables considered in the study. This limit becomes particularly relevant in relation to the social desirability of participants, especially in those who committed crimes or delinquent acts. During data collection the involved offenders could implement strategies to make them seem more desirable and thus show themselves as complying with social norms. Future research could therefore benefit from the use of other types of measurement (e.g. different informants, interviews, implicit tools and systematic interviews). Future studies could also investigate the effects of affective and psychological abuse regarding moral disengagement and emotional dysregulation of offenders (e.g. Sevecke, Franke, Kosson, & Krischer, 2016), as well as the impact of religion, culture and country of origin, and levels of education on moral disengagement. Second, it is not possible to generalize these results to all offenders,

foremost because of the scarce number of offenders. Nevertheless, despite its limitations and as the literature suggests (Petrucelli et al., 2017a; Van Vugt et al., 2008), studying mechanisms of moral disengagement in offenders is important to identify and promote effective and targeted educational strategies. Indeed, this research represents a considerable contribution to enriching the literature because finding and assessing offender participants is not easy in Italian jails.

In addition, in relation to what has emerged, it might be useful to pay more attention to different cognitive strategies that offenders use to regulate behaviour, and thus explore the weight that the emotional component plays in this bond. Future studies may evaluate mediation or moderation models in considering the relationship between moral disengagement, emotional aspects and risk factors (e.g. drug use) of offenders. In conclusion, this research can be seen as an innovative contribution and a potential key to understanding which cognitive patterns may constitute a starting point for developing and increasing specific intervention strategies, as well as relapse prevention.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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