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David Eriksson

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The role of moral disengagement in supply chain management research

David Eriksson

University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to explain the role of moral disengagement in supply chain management (SCM) research and the challenges that arise if the theory is used beyond its inherent limitations.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual paper based on how Bandura developed and used moral disengagement.

Findings – Moral disengagement can be used validly in SCM research. The theory should not be applied to the supply chain itself, but SCM can be seen as an environment that is part of a reciprocal exchange, which shapes human behavior.

Research limitations/implications – The paper suggests a new theory for a better understanding of business ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability in SCM. Furthermore, the paper outlines how the theory should be used and some challenges that remain.

Originality/value – SCM researchers have shown how to apply a theory from psychology to SCM, which could progress to several areas of the research field. The paper also highlights an inconsistency in the use of the theory and explains how it should be used in SCM research.

Keywords Ethics, Business, Disengagement, Organization, Moral, Bandura, Supply change management

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to corporate social responsibility and sustainability in supply chain management (SCM) (Fassin and Van Rossem, 2009; Høgevold, 2011; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). Despite insightful research on the importance, for example, of a collaboration between stakeholders (Walker and Laplume, 2014) and transparency (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2012), the field still suffers from a lack of theoretical foundation (Winter and Knemeyer, 2013). Aguinis and Glavas (2012) stress the need for understanding the mechanisms that govern personal conduct, which could more effectively explain misconduct. One established theory that targets such mechanisms, but has not yet gained recognition in SCM, is that of moral disengagement from Albert Bandura.

Bandura is considered to be the most eminent living psychologist of the twentieth century (Haggbloom *et al.*, 2002). Bandura is most famous for the social learning theory (Bandura, 1963), but gained attention from researchers in areas related to SCM regarding the theory of “moral disengagement” (Bandura *et al.*, 1996). Although the use of moral disengagement in organizational research is relatively new (Samnani *et al.*, 2014), several examples can be found. These include consumer attitudes (Egan *et al.*, 2015), unethical employee behavior (Martin *et al.*, 2014) and counterproductive



workplace behavior (Fida *et al.*, 2015). However, the theory has still not achieved a breakthrough in SCM, despite offering a great potential through the intersection between the field itself and business ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Eriksson and Svensson, 2014). Recently, a few authors have used moral disengagement in SCM research (Eriksson *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Eriksson and Svensson, 2014; Egels-Zandén, 2015). However, guidelines on how to actually use the theory in this research field have not yet been established. By offering guidelines for an early stage of the adoption this theory, this paper seeks to reduce future problems which may arise by misusing the theory.

Although both Bandura and his moral disengagement work are highly regarded, there are problems with regard to how the theory is used in business-related research. One important issue is that moral disengagement is sometimes applied to organizations. A better understanding of these application problems is necessary to avoid confusion and misguidance if we wish to use the theory in SCM research. The purpose of this paper is to clarify how moral disengagement can be used in SCM and the challenges that emerge if it is used outside its intended area. The main research question is:

RQ1. What must be taken into account if the theory of moral disengagement is applied to SCM?

To answer this question, it is also necessary to understand how the theory is created, what it is intended for, whether there are any uncertainties relating to it and whether there are any other concerns worthy of attention.

2. Method

The investigation is limited to articles published by Bandura in SCM research and is centered on moral disengagement. This means that parts of works published as books or chapters are omitted. However, the body of literature readily available to researchers is captured. Each reviewed paper is explained briefly, and quotes explaining its perspective on the theory of moral disengagement are presented. Three uses are to be expected: first in which a consistent line is argued; second with a main line, but inconsistencies; and third in which multiple conflicting lines are argued. Statements from articles that relate the theory to individuals or organizations have been collated and considered in the review. References to the articles are discussed such that it enables the reader to verify that a true picture of the material used is provided in this paper.

For this article, a decision was made to not provide a detailed explanation of the theory itself, although a short introduction is provided in Section 3, and parts of the theory are explained in Table I. For more information, the reader can refer to the works of Bandura. Also, the works of authors actually using the moral disengagement theory are not included, except for some examples of the use of the theory and/or related concepts. Instead, this article lays a basis for considering how moral disengagement can be used, based on the works of Bandura. A separate literature review on authors referencing Bandura (1999) has also been conducted (Eriksson, 2014, pp. 29-30), showing that such authors have generally accepted the theory, but did not continue refining it. Consequently, focusing on Bandura's papers alone should provide an objective explanation of the theory. One small remark on the theory was found in Treviño *et al.* (2006, p. 958), who state that "research will be needed to better understand whether these same processes [moral disengagement] are anticipatory, post hoc, or both". This issue

Table I.
Examples of how
moral disengagement
is connected to
individuals

Moral disengagement	Example quote
Moral justification	“People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions”
Euphemistic labeling	“People behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are verbally sanitized than when they are called aggression”
Advantageous comparison	“Terrorists see their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify”
Displacement of responsibility	“People will behave in ways they typically repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their conduct”
Diffusion of responsibility	“The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusing responsibility for detrimental behavior”
Disregard or distortion of consequences	“When people pursue activities that are harmful to others for reasons of personal gain or social pressure, they avoid facing the harm they cause, or they minimize it”
Dehumanization	“The strength of moral self-censure depends partly on how the perpetrators view the people they mistreat”
Attribution of blame	“In this process, people view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation”

Source: Adapted from Bandura (1999, pp. 192-203)

will be elaborated further in the present paper. Finally, this paper reveals inconsistencies and areas that need clarification, based on Bandura’s publications alone.

Several other theories and concepts can be used to understand morality in business and supply chain research. These include the attachment theory (Chugh *et al.*, 2014), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), demoralizing processes (Jensen, 2010) and moral approbation (Jones and Ryan, 1997). There are also several researchers who have investigated moral behavior in various familiar experiments, notably Milgram (1974) and Zimbardo (2007). Although there certainly are other options, there are two reasons why Bandura’s works and moral disengagement are reviewed in this paper. First, moral disengagement offers eight mechanisms that can be linked to the context of SCM, making it relatively easy to integrate with SCM. Second, the theory has been used in organizational research and is may be on the brink of gaining momentum in SCM.

3. Global supply chains and morality

In this paper, a supply chain is considered as a chain or network of organizations (cf. Cooper *et al.*, 1997; Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012). Depending on the sources, it is sometimes necessary to refer to a single organization. However, the organizations mentioned do not act alone, but are included in supply chains. The difference in scope is a result of varying

units of analysis used by researchers. Supply chain research usually focuses on a dyad, a chain or a network (Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012). However, a narrow focus does not exclude the organization from the rest of the chain. The management direction responsible for supply chains is called SCM. Sometimes, it is considered a management of flows (Forrester, 1958) and sometimes as process management (Cooper *et al.*, 1997). These chains are not confined to isolated geographical or cultural islands, but span several such regions (Lowson, 2001; Warburton and Stratton, 2002). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that a chain also spans several different perspectives of what is moral, which might appear to be a problem when discussing morality in a supply chain.

The definition of morality has been debated for long and is evidenced by the fact that the debate was already considered old in the eighteenth century (cf. Hume, 1777, Ch. 1). Discussing moral disengagement, Bandura addresses an individual's sense of right and wrong. Moral disengagement occurs when the individual is able to act in contravention of his or her morals, without feeling bad. The mechanisms by which one's morals are disengaged are the same across different geographical and cultural contexts, although the individual's sense of morality may differ depending on these contexts. As such, moral disengagement can be applied to each individual associated with a supply chain, as it only addresses how the specific individual is able to disengage morally, regardless of their real morals.

4. Moral disengagement

In this article, five papers written by Bandura (1999; Bandura *et al.*, 1996, 2000, 2001) are investigated to evaluate the role of moral disengagement in supply chain research. Moral disengagement is related to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1963). To understand human behavior, Bandura (1978, p. 346) uses what he calls reciprocal determinism, where:

[...] behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interlocking determinants of each other [...] the process involves a triadic reciprocal interaction rather than a dyadic conjoint or dyadic bidirectional one.

Moral disengagement entails eight mechanisms that separate moral reactions from inhumane conduct, allowing an individual to avoid self-condemnation for what is considered immoral (Bandura *et al.*, 1996; Bandura, 1999). The mechanisms are moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization and attribution of blame. As such, the theory includes behavior, cognitive processes and environmental influences. The following investigation considers how Bandura developed and used the theory.

4.1 Development of the theory: focus on individuals and context

Although related sources from previously published papers are available, Bandura *et al.* (1996) authored the first journal publication that focused on moral disengagement. Together with another publication from 1999 (Bandura, 1999), it develops and sets the stage for using the theory in the future. The articles focus on the morality of human beings:

A theory of morality must specify the mechanisms by which people come to live in accordance with moral standards (Bandura *et al.*, 1996, p. 364).

People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions (Bandura *et al.*, 1996, p. 365).

People have little reason to be troubled by guilt or to feel any need to make amends for inhumane conduct if they reconstrue it as serving worthy purposes or if they disown personal agency for it (Bandura *et al.*, 1996, p. 366).

Selective activation and disengagement of personal control permit different types of conduct by persons with the same moral standards under different circumstances (Bandura, 1999, p. 194).

Bandura (1999) also investigated the functioning of each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. These are described in relation to individuals in Table I. It is interesting to note that although the mechanisms focus on individuals, the impacts of such behavior can cause problems for entire groups of individuals. For example, the dehumanization of workers can lead to the justification of poor labor conditions:

The disengagement of moral self-sanctions from inhumane conduct is a growing human problem at both individual and collective levels (Bandura, 1999, p. 193).

While moral disengagement has focused on the morality of individuals, that does not exclude considering how groups of people who morally disengage affect their environment:

Collective moral disengagement can have widespread societal and political ramifications by supporting, justifying, and legitimizing inhumane social practices and policies. (Bandura *et al.*, 1996, p. 372)

During the development of the theory, data has been centered on individuals from different demographics. In brief, a study on proneness to moral disengagement, including 799 children aged 10-15 years (Bandura *et al.*, 1996); explanations built on earlier research that focus on individual engagement in and attitudes toward detrimental behavior, with the original research including a wide range of adult individuals, such as young adults, soldiers and professionals (Bandura, 1999); and a longitudinal study, including 564 children aged 11 years at the start of the study (Bandura *et al.*, 2000). There exists, however, a close connection between the collectives of individuals and the individuals themselves:

People do not operate as autonomous moral agents impervious to the social realities in which they are immersed. Moral agency is socially situated and exercised in particularized ways depending on the life conditions under which people transact their affairs. (Bandura, 1999, p. 207)

Bandura (1999) argues that the context can drive or halt moral disengagement. The aforementioned quote highlights the notion that human beings cannot be seen as isolated entities, a view that is consistent with reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978). One context to be considered is the organization in which the individual works, which is also dependent on suppliers, customers, and other business partners. The “conditions under which people transact their affairs” thus extends to the supply chain, and it is reasonable to consider the supply chain as part of the environmental influence. This is also the description of how the theory is used by Bandura *et al.* (2000), discussing transgression in the downstream supply chain, and by Bandura (1999, p. 198), explaining the diffusion of responsibility through subdivided routinized tasks; thus, a distinction between behavior and environmental influences is not only done by Bandura (1978) but is also advocated in social sciences (Sayer 1992, p. 213) discussing “object,” “causal powers,” “conditions” and “events”), and in SCM research (Eriksson, 2015).

4.2 *Application of the theory: focus on individuals, but with inconsistencies*

The investigation of moral disengagement and corporate transgression should, according to the aforementioned snapshot, focus on how individuals disengage from their morals. Moral disengagement might be a consequence of the context, which is how the theory is used:

People do not operate as autonomous moral agents, impervious to the social realities in which they are enmeshed. [...] Moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences. (Bandura, 2002, p. 102)

People behave more cruelly when it is easy to escape accountability, which is manifested in organizations with group decisions and hierarchical chains of command (Bandura, 2002, pp. 107-108). Despite mainly focusing on individuals, Bandura *et al.* (2000) also tried to apply moral disengagement to a corporation:

In many cases corporations actively defend their interests in ways that would normally be unthinkable for common law breakers. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, p. 58)

The authors continue by arguing why moral disengagement can be applied to the corporation itself:

First, the reciprocal causation operates among corporate modes of thinking, corporate behavior and the environment. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, pp. 59-60)

Second, a corporation can be viewed both as a social construction and as an agentic system with the power to realize intentions. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, p. 60)

Third, corporate identity is crucial for the development and functioning of a corporation. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, p. 60)

Moreover, the practices of a corporation operate through self-regulatory mechanisms. These mechanisms regulate the allocation of resources in the pursuit of the goals and objectives of the corporate in accordance with its values and standards. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, p. 60)

When corporations engage in reprehensible conduct they are likely to do so through selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions. (Bandura *et al.*, 2000, p. 60)

The first quote does not clarify whether organizational thinking and behavior are of humans acting in an organization or whether the organization itself is attributed with these, otherwise human, abilities. The second and third quotes do not explain whether or why moral disengagement can be applied to organizations. The fourth quote attributes organizations with human traits of having a self, goals, objectives, values and standards. The fifth quote is based on the assumption that organizations have the ability to choose and engage in conduct and that the organization has both morality and a self.

Although it is often useful to consider an organization as an entity of its own, which is also often legally so, the justification and reasons for applying moral disengagement to the organization are clearly rather vague. The justifications rest on an assumption that human traits can be attributed to organizations through colloquial similarities, in terms of how organizations and individuals are described, and not actual similarities, how they really are. The given reasons thus overlook the fact that moral disengagement rests on reciprocal determinisms, which already distinguishes between individuals and their environment. Focusing on individuals in their professional situation would be more consistent with the

theory and could add value to the analysis without losing justification for using the theory. [Bandura et al. \(2000\)](#) actually focused on moral disengagement and individuals throughout the article, apart from some exceptions, for example:

Ford used different moral disengagement strategies to defend its highly controversial decision. ([Bandura et al., 2000](#), p. 61)

This is a description by the authors of the reviewed article, addressing how Ford dealt with the controversy of faulty gas tanks in the Pinto. By replacing “Ford” with “Managers at Ford,” the theory can be applied consistently with respect to how it has been developed, and the need to apply it to organizations seems superfluous.

5. Analysis

After reviewing these papers, it is now possible to reconsider the research question and shed some light on the important topic addressed here.

RQ2. What must be taken into account if the theory of moral disengagement is applied to SCM?

Based on the works of Bandura, it is evident that the theory only applies to human beings. It is developed through studies on humans and rests on several traits that we use to describe and understand only humans. The paper by [Bandura et al. \(2000\)](#) is the only identified inconsistent use of moral disengagement by Bandura himself. As aforementioned, the motivation for using moral disengagement in organizations is not convincing, and the choice to do so did not even seem necessary for the paper itself.

Using the theory in SCM requires us to consider two possible applications of moral disengagement to supply chains. The first is whether the supply chain itself uses moral disengagement, and the second is whether it can be applied to individuals in a supply chain.

The first alternative, applying moral disengagement directly to a supply chain, or to the companies therein, is not supported by the way in which the theory was developed, and must therefore be considered incorrect. If it is to be done, it is necessary to justify very clearly how this is possible, including both the generalizability of the theory to a supply chain and the attribution of human traits.

The second alternative, however, is supported by the theory and should be encouraged. [Bandura \(1978\)](#) includes reciprocal determinism in the environment in which organizations and supply chains may be placed. To understand how the environment can influence morality, the work of [Sayer \(1992\)](#) can be of assistance. He outlines how the possible events that objects can generate are dependent on the context in which they occur. The context could both cause and/or prevent moral disengagement. Multiple mechanisms of moral disengagement are described through the context in which they are likely to prevail ([Bandura et al., 1996](#)). There are plenty of examples of the theory being applied successfully to organizational contexts. For example, the theoretical overview by [Johnson and Buckley \(2014\)](#) focuses on organizational structure and moral disengagement. See [Eriksson and Svensson \(2014\)](#) for research connecting moral disengagement with SCM.

Going forward, some concerns still exist. It could be beneficial to investigate the mechanisms of moral disengagement in individuals prior to and after the discovery of misconduct associated with the supply chain. Is it possible that different mechanisms, or the same mechanisms of moral disengagement, but to a different degree, are activated

before and/or after the harmful effects are realized? This is important to understand how to encourage individuals to act morally and how they may try to avoid moral responsibility. The short reference of the work by Ford (Bandura *et al.*, 2000) reveals that it is possible for certain mechanisms of moral disengagement to allow managers moral leeway in taking decisions that would cause suffering and that other mechanisms helped them escape moral responsibility *ex post facto*.

The definition of moral itself can be debated. However, Bandura uses it in relation to what an individual considers to be right and wrong, which we must accept when using his theory. Bandura does not provide a clear definition of ethics, and thus we need to turn to other sources. Lewis (1985, p. 383) defines business ethics as “rules, standards, codes, or principles which provide guidelines for morally right behavior and truthfulness in specific situations,” and Bishop (2013, p. 636) states that “ethics concerns the moral behavior of individuals based on an established and expressed standard of the group”. In these terms, morality is an inner feeling of right and wrong, and ethics are social constructs.

Bandura focuses on morality; however, research on organizations that use moral disengagement often refers to ethics (Bandura *et al.*, 2000; Baron *et al.*, 2015; Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014). Johnson and Buckley (2014, p. 6) blur the line between morality and ethics and state that “[...] moral disengagement, [is] a method by which individuals cognitively ‘disconnect’ the causal links between one’s actions and unethical outcomes [...]”. Moore *et al.* (2012, p. 2) make similar statements: “[...] an important driver of unethical behavior is an individual’s propensity to morally disengage [...],” and “[...] allows those inclined to morally disengage to behave unethically without feeling distress [...]”. These comments imply that there is a direct connection between morality and ethics, which might be fallacious. This is true if ethics are the social constructs of right and wrong, and such constructs are based on reasoning from morality. They are then likely to be aligned, but that is not necessarily the case.

Reducing moral disengagement as a means to increase ethics assumes that there is little or no difference between the morality of the individual, and the values that are agreed upon as ethical. If these do not align, it is not possible to improve ethics by reducing moral disengagement. For example, if individuals in a supply chain do not share the same views of right and wrong as stipulated in ethical guidelines, they do not need to morally disengage to behave unethically. They could, as a matter of fact, behave morally according to their own perceptions while being unethical according to an ethical guideline. It is therefore important to maintain a distinction between morality and ethics and be aware that one does not, by default, produce the other.

Several authors have argued that morality can only be attributed to human beings (Bevan and Corvellec, 2007; McMahon, 2008; Jensen, 2010). For authors in related fields, this is not an issue. However, if we refer only to Bandura to see how the theory is used, we may be misguided, as he himself applies it to both individuals and non-individuals (e.g. organizations).

6. Concluding discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to clarify the appropriate uses of moral disengagement and the challenges faced if it is used outside of this framework. The conclusions are summarized in the analysis section, outlining how moral disengagement should and should not be used. It has been firmly established that moral disengagement should only be applied to human beings. The supply chain setting is

interesting, as it can provide an environment in which moral disengagement is activated or deactivated. If moral disengagement should be used in the context of an organization (or the supply chain) itself, for example, as is the Pinto case, this needs to be justified properly and comprehensively.

Moral disengagement offers a considerable potential for use in SCM research. It could help to explain demoralizing processes in organizations (Jensen, 2010) and increase knowledge on how organizations can align their corporate social responsibility interests with individuals in the supply chain (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012).

This paper can guide researchers in using the theory of moral disengagement in SCM research. Through a better understanding of the supply chain context and its management, it might be possible to influence the moral disengagement of individuals active within the supply chain. This is, in turn, food for managerial thought. Perhaps, corporate social responsibility and sustainability in the supply chain could be enhanced by reducing the potential for employers and employees to disengage morally.

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About the author

David Eriksson holds a PhD in Textile Management from the University of Borås, where he is currently employed as a lecturer. He is an engaged scholar in the international research community, authoring both journal articles and international conference contributions. His research agenda consists of various research subjects, and he has published in areas such as ethics, new product development, supply chain management, sustainability and value creation. David Eriksson can be contacted at: dr.d.eriksson@gmail.com

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