What do the Bobo Doll and Moral Disengagement Have in Common?

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SCOPE

- Introduction
- Moral Disengagement
- Moral Disengagement applied to the Military
- Conclusion
- Questions

Introduction

- Albert Bandura, a distinguished psychologist and psychology theorist, created the famous Bobo Doll experiment in 1961. It is a classic psychology experiment.

Psychology Classics
The Bobo Doll Experiment
Albert Bandura
www.all-about-psychology.com
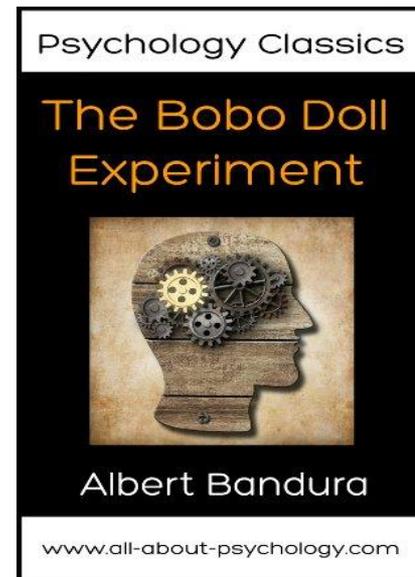
INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

- The Bobo is a doll-like toy with a rounded bottom and low center of mass that rocks back to an upright position after it has been knocked down:
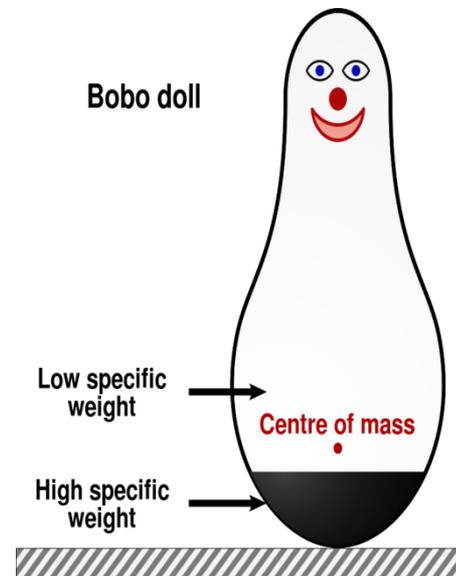
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bobo_doll_experiment

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bobo_doll_experiment#/media/File:Bobo_Doll_Deneyi.jpg

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

- From these results Bandura developed the Social Cognitive Theory, later adding the Social Cognitive Theory of Morality.

- Social Cognitive Theory provides an agentic conception of human development: the notion that human beings can influence the course of events by their own actions. SCT explains human behavior in terms of triadic codetermination.

- In triadic codetermination, human functioning is a product of the interplay of personal influences, the behavior individuals engage in, and the environmental forces that impinge on them. (Bandura, 2016).

- The basic premise: people learn not only through their own experiences, but also by observing the actions of others and the results of those actions.

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

- Among these three factors lie key constructs, such as self-efficacy, observational learning, behavioral capability, expectations, expectancies, locus of control, reinforcement, emotional arousal, and self-regulation.

- Rooted in SCT, Bandura makes a significant contribution with a focus on morality with the central question:

How do otherwise considerate human beings do cruel things and still live in peace with themselves?

- Bandura's intricate theory and model explain an array of unethical and inhumane behaviors not only on individual level but also within social systems that use numerous mechanisms for rationalizing their unethical actions, e.g., governments, legal systems, industry, military, etc.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

ALBERT BANDURA

Moral Disengagement

How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves
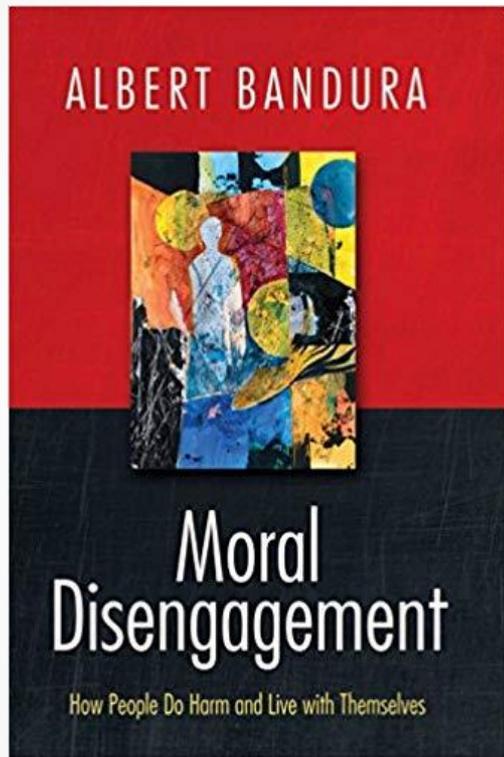
- Bandura suggests that the concept of moral disengagement explains "how people do harm and live with themselves".

- These concepts represent the theoretical background of an envisaged research project that will attempt to explore the nature of the connections that may exist between moral disengagement, moral injury, and PTSD in soldiers.

Moral Disengagement (continued)

- Bandura postulates that through moral development people adopt standards of right and wrong to guide behaviors resulting in personal satisfaction and contribute to a sense of self-worth while abstaining from behaviors that violate their moral standards.

- In order to obtain certain benefits people are coerced to engage in activities that provide those benefits yet in the process violate their moral standards:

"To engage in those activities and live with themselves, they have to strip morality from their actions or invest them with worthy purposes. Disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables people to compromise their moral standards and still retain their sense of moral integrity." (Bandura, 2016)

- According to Bandura, by selective use of a number of psychosocial maneuvers people can disengage from moral self-sanctions and engage in conduct they would otherwise perceive as unethical, cruel, or even atrocious.

Moral Disengagement (continued)

- Bandura explains that in order to engage in behavior that clashes with one's moral values and then live with the consequences of the behavior, people use *mechanisms of moral disengagement*.

- When engaging in behaviors that contradict their moral standards people may experience self-imposed sanctions, e.g., self-criticism, feelings of guilt and remorse, and even penalizing of self through personal punishment system.

- These strong negative consequences represent "strong motivating and self-regulatory influences on moral behavior". (Bandura, 2016).

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

- When social pressures are extreme and potentially involve a risk to different forms of physical existence, personal integrity, and emotional stability, people may be coerced to give up on adhering to their moral standards: "Under severe social threats, individuals often hold in check personally valued but socially chastised behavior in risky situations." (Bandura 2016).

- In order to live with themselves following transgression of own moral standards, to maintain self-respect in the face of violating own moral principles, people manage by employing "*selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions from harmful conduct.*" (Bandura, 2016).

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

- Bandura, 2016: *"People often face pressures to engage in harmful activities that provide desired benefits but violate their moral standards. To engage in those activities and live with themselves they have to strip morality from their actions or invest them with worthy purposes. Disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables people to compromise their moral standards and still retain their sense of moral integrity."*

- They do not do that by changing their moral standards but rather through selectively and flexibly applying one or more mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Moral Disengagement applied to the Military

- Morally based anguish, which is distinguished from stress disorders arising from traumatic battle experiences, is called "*moral injury*".

- Although the construct of Moral Injury has raised significant interest and generated significant body of research of the topic, an agreement on definition of the moral injury has yet to be achieved.

- Construct validation efforts are ongoing but moral injury is generally assumed to result from exposure to events that involve either perpetrating or witnessing actions that violate one's core beliefs (Litz et al., 2009), or betrayal by a leader or trusted authority (Shay, 2014).

- Self-forgiveness and peace of mind are especially difficult to achieve when one has killed for a cause that turned out to lack moral legitimacy. (Bandura, 2016).

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT APPLIED TO THE MILITARY (CONTINUED)

- Moore, 2015: Moral disengagement theory is fertile ground for empirical research across a number of disciplines and domains, including military psychology.

- Negative behaviors associated with predisposition to morally disengage: criminal behavior, aggression and bullying, workplace misconduct, unethical behavior generally, and numerous negative psychological states such as increased ability to dehumanize others and a greater likelihood of endorsing of violence toward them.

- Studies also provide evidence of moral disengagement as a motivated cognitive process: when it was in the participants' interest to disengage from an internalized standard, they were more likely to do so.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT APPLIED TO THE MILITARY (CONTINUED)

- Other studies found that individuals were more susceptible to the negative behavioral consequences of moral disengagement when primed to feel anxious and insecure; also, feelings of personal distress elicit moral disengagement.

- In addition, priming social connectedness resulted in a tendency towards dehumanization: theorizing that priming social connectedness satisfies the human motivation to connect, leaving room to think of others as less human and endorsing their mistreatment.

- This is consistent with finding that psychological closeness with someone who behaves unethically also amplifies moral disengagement.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT APPLIED TO THE MILITARY (CONTINUED)

- Moral justification – Conversion of socialized individuals into dedicated fighters is achieved by cognitively reconstructing the morality of killing so that soldiers can do it free from self-censure. With commitment to the justness of the cause, killing becomes an act of heroism.

- On discharge, moral standards are reengaged so that violent conduct is again deterred by self-sanctions.

- However, when soldiers are sent into battle with questionable justification, they pay a heavy social and psychological price.

- This research project aims to determine if the "difficult to treat" cases of PTSD and Moral Injury in soldiers are related to disruption of the Moral Disengagement and Moral Reengagement process.

CONCLUSION

- Moral Disengagement explains how individuals justify negative and harmful behaviors towards others.

- In war operations moral disengagement serve to reduce individual and collective feelings of condemnation or self-censure even though some soldiers still experience negative emotions as a result of the inconsistency between their behavior and their self-guide.

- Some studies suggest that individuals will experience a greater magnitude of negative emotions after having learned that their behavior was responsible for causing a negative outcome (Kubany and Watson, 2003).

CONCLUSION (CONTINUED)

- Tillman et al. 2018 showed that individuals did experience greater negative emotions after having learned the consequences of their unethical behavior compared to the emotions experienced immediately following the act.

- In addition, guilt and shame relate differently to moral disengagement. Their findings suggest shame was positively related and guilt was negatively related to moral disengagement, implying that those who felt higher levels of guilt to some extent accepted fault for the outcome and did not rationalize it by morally disengaging.

CONCLUSION (CONTINUED)

- Against this background, the current research project seeks to:
  - Explore the long-term outcomes resulting from having behaved unethically in military operations and
  - the degree to which Moral Disengagement and Moral Reengagement can serve a remedial purpose when providing mental health care services to soldiers and veterans who experience a greater magnitude of negative emotions after having learned that their behavior was responsible for causing negative outcomes for reasons other than the proffered justification for the military operations they had participated in.
- Military Psychologists are cordially invited to offer inputs that may serve to enhance research in this particular area.

QUESTIONS?

- Thank You
- Contact Information: