



## **CIVIC MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND PERSONALITY. A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAW AND PSYCHOLOGY ITALIAN STUDENTS**

**M.E. De Caroli(1), E. Sagone(2), R. Falanga(3)**

(1) University of Catania (Italy) m.decaroli@unict.it

(2) University of Catania (Italy) esagone@unict.it

(3) University of Catania (Italy) rossellafalanga@libero.it

*Fecha de recepción: 15 de febrero de 2011*

*Fecha de admisión: 10 de marzo de 2011*

### **ABSTRACT**

The civic moral disengagement (CMD) is the set of mechanisms that allow subject to self-justification for the realization of socially reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions (Caprara et al., 2009) and it is divided in: the attribution of blame (AB), moral justification (MJ), euphemistic labelling (EL), diffusion and displacement of responsibility (DIFr-DISr), distortion of consequences (DC), dehumanization of victims (DV), and advantageous comparison (AC). In this investigation we sought to clarify a) the different use of CMD (assessed with the Civic Moral Disengagement) between psychology and law college students; b) the impact of personality factors (measured by the BFQ) on the use of these mechanisms depending on the course of study.

Statistical analyses showed that boys attending the psychology course used the mechanisms of CMD, and specifically, AB, MG, EL, DISr, DC, and DIFr, more than girls attending the law course; for students of psychology course, the “emotional control” had an impact on MG, the “perseverance” on AB, the “friendliness” influenced DV; for students of law course, “dominance/scrupulousness” had an impact on AB, “openness to culture/perseverance” on DISr, the “dynamism” on DIFr, and the “emotional control” on DV. Future research will investigate the use of the CMD in relation to individual values.

**Keywords:** civic moral disengagement, factors of personality, college students.

### **1. MECHANISMS OF CIVIC MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND PERSONALITY FACTORS**

The civic moral disengagement is the set of social-cognitive mechanisms that allow the individual to self-justification for the performance of reprehensible and damaging for the social safety actions (Caprara *et al.*, 2006) in order to preserve self-esteem. As stated by Caprara and Malagoli



Togliatti (1996), “a reprehensible conduct becomes acceptable if it separates the violation of a rule by the concern of punishment and perception of injury caused by guilt or shame” (1996, p.14).

Bandura (1986) studied the strategies through which individuals tend to express moral disengagement, highlighting eight different socio-cognitive mechanisms (Fig.1, p.376), which can lead to a significant redefinition of individual conduct with the minimization of the consequences (moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and advantageous or palliative comparison), or a deformation of the relationship between cause and effect of personal actions (diffusion of responsibility, displacement of responsibility, and distortion of the consequences), or a distorted vision of the recipient of the reprehensible actions (the attribution of blame and dehumanization of victim). From the analysis of each mechanisms (Bandura *et al.*, 2001) it was possible to find that:

- the moral justification (MG) is used to justify reprehensible actions in order to protect the representation of self and not contradict the guiding principles of the individual redefining the meaning of the harmful action;
- the euphemistic labelling (EL) tends to reduce the severity of the actions using terms or expressions that minimize the cruelty of committed action;
- the advantageous comparison (AC) is to refer to behaviours considered more severe in order to divert attention from the negative effects of own actions;
- the displacement of responsibility (DISr) allows the individual to shift responsibility to a superior level represented by a recognized authority or even by society in general;
- the diffusion of responsibility (DIFr) allows the person to share the responsibility for detrimental actions with the group in order to reduce the severity of the action produced by the single individual;
- the distortion of the consequences (DC) is used for altering the effects of an harmful behaviour in order to reduce personal misconduct and to consider as lawful an unlawful action;
- the attribution of blame (AB) motivates the individual to interpret own behaviour as caused by the victim and to exempt the individual from the severity of the consequences of the action;
- the dehumanization (DV) allows the individual to deprive the victim of human characteristics, reducing the victim to an object or animal.

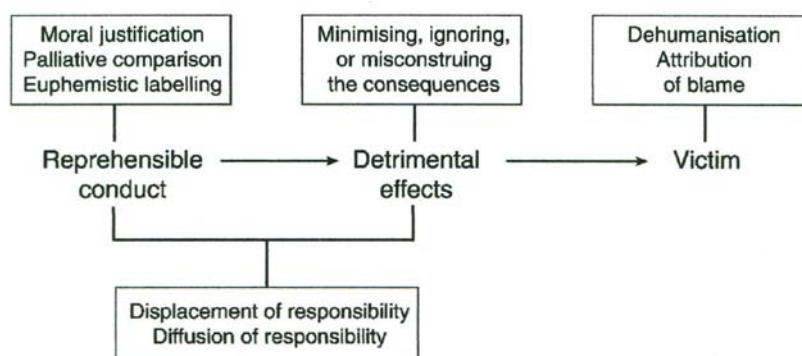


FIG. 1. Mechanism through which moral self-sanctions are selectively activated and disengaged from detrimental behaviour at different points in the self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1986).

The construct of moral disengagement was analyzed in relation to other psychological dimensions such as prosocial behavior (Caprara and Bonino, 2006), the propensity to aggression in at-risk contexts (Pastorelli *et al.*, 1996), styles of family functioning in relation to the quality of emotional bonds and the flexibility of rules (Ardone, 1996), and personality traits (Caprara and Malagoli Togliatti, 1996), according to the Big Five Factors Model, developed by Costa and McCrae (1985). Questo modello definisce la personalità nei termini della This model defined the personality in terms of:



- *energy*: individuals who get high scores on this factor have a self-image characterized by dynamism, activism, the ability to establish themselves, and loquacity;
- *agreeableness*: individuals who attain high scores on this factor have a self-image characterized by a feeling of cooperation, altruism, nurturance, friendliness, generosity and they are very confident and empathetic toward others;
- *conscientiousness*: individuals who obtain high scores on this factor tend to express themselves in terms of perseverance, accuracy, kindness, orderliness, and resourcefulness; they show high capacity to inhibit aggressive behaviors, prefer situations under their control, and express tenacity about finishing uncompleted projects;
- *emotional stability*: individuals who get high scores on this factor appear to be characterized by low vulnerability, high patience, control of negative emotions, and a good ability to manage impulses even in difficult situations that involve social problems;
- *mental openness*: individuals who obtain high scores on this factor show a marked interest towards things and new experiences, curiosity, contact with others and favourable disposition to the culture, lifestyle and customs of other individuals.

Caprara and Malagoli Togliatti (1996) explored, in a sample of 534 college students, the relationship between personality (as measured with the *Big Five Questionnaire for Adults*) and use of mechanisms of moral disengagement (as assessed with the *Moral Disengagement Scale*): the authors found that moral disengagement negatively correlated with agreeableness (especially with friendliness and cooperativeness), conscientiousness (in particular, perseverance) and mental openness (especially with openness to culture). This meant that the more students appeared prone to the use of moral disengagement the less they were cooperative, altruistic, trusting to others, respectful of norms and social rules, and open to the cultural differences.

It seemed interesting to replicate the analysis of the relationships between these constructs with reference to the differences related to training university in students attending degrees in Psychology and Law.

## 2. AIMS OF RESEARCH

In this investigation we sought to verify: a) the use of mechanisms of civic moral disengagement in psychology and law students and b) the impact of personality factors on the use of these mechanisms depending on the type of study. The choice of these two groups of students was related to the different pathway of legal and psychological studies: as indicated in the Manifesto of Studies at the University of Catania, in the degrees of psychological area, specific attention is given to management of human resources and application of assessment techniques, intervention and research on psychosocial problems, all activities that tend to increase psychological characteristics associated to assertiveness; instead, in the degrees of legal area great attention is given to the exercise of legal and administrative functions, e.g., legal advice, management of legal litigations.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of 165 university students, chosen randomly from their academic places and divided in 89 students attending the degree of Psychology and 76 students attending the degree of Law at the University of Catania.



### 3.2. MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

Materials were constituted by the *Civic Moral Disengagement Scale* of Caprara and colleagues (2009) and the *Big Five Questionnaire for Adults* of Barbaranelli *et al.* (1998) e sono stati somministrati in *setting* di piccolo gruppo presso le rispettive sedi universitarie degli studenti. (1998) and they were administered in small group *setting*.

The *Civic Moral Disengagement Scale*, composed by 40 statements to which the subject must respond on a 5-points scale of agree / disagree (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), measures the inclination to use the following mechanisms of civic moral disengagement:

- *confronto vantaggioso* : ad es., “i ragazzi non possono essere incolpati se fumano qualche spinello perché la maggior parte degli adulti usa droghe ben più pesanti”; *advantageous comparison*: e.g., “kids can not be blamed if they smoke some marijuana cigarettes because most adults use drugs much heavier”;
- *deumanizzazione della vittima* : ad es., “le persone che non si comportano come essere umani non possono essere trattate come tali”; *dehumanization of victims*: e.g., “people who do not behave as human beings can not be treated as such”;
- *attribuzione di colpa* : ad es., “se le persone lasciano in giro le proprie cose è colpa loro se qualcuno le ruba”; *attribution of blame*: e.g., “if people leave their things lying about it’s their fault if someone steals these things”;
- *diffusione della responsabilità* : ad es., “i dipendenti non sono mai responsabili dell’esecuzione delle decisioni illegali prese dai loro dirigenti”; *diffusion of responsibility*: e.g., “employees are never responsible for the illegal decisions taken by their leaders”;
- *distorsione delle conseguenze* : ad es., “evadere le tasse non può essere ritenuto riprovevole in considerazione degli sperperi che vengono fatti del denaro pubblico”; *distortion of consequences*: e.g., “evade taxes can not be considered reprehensible in light of the fact that there is squandering of public money”;
- *dislocamento della responsabilità* : ad es., “le persone non possono essere ritenute responsabili per i reati commessi su istigazione di altri”; *displacement of responsibility*: e.g., “people can not be held responsible for crimes committed at the instigation of others”;
- *giustificazione morale* : ad es., “per preservare l’unità della famiglia è bene schierarsi sempre a difesa dei propri congiunti, anche quando colpevoli di gravi reati”; *moral justification*: e.g., “it is good to defend own relatives, even when they are guilty of serious crimes, in order to preserve the unity of the family”;
- *etichettamento eufemistico* : ad es., “disegnare graffiti sui muri è espressione di spirito creativo”. *euphemistic labelling*: e.g., “draw graffiti on the walls is an expression of the creative spirit”.

The *Big Five Questionnaire for Adults* (BFQ) is a personality inventory, consisting of 132 statements for each of which the subject has to evaluate itself on a 5-points scale from 1 (completely false for me) to 5 intervals (absolutely true for me), from which it is possible to measure the five factors of personality (including their sub-dimensions):

- *Energy* consists of the sub-dimensions of *dynamism* (e.g., “I seem to be active and vigorous person”) and *dominance* (e.g., “I’m willing to work hard just to do extremely well”);
- *Agreeableness* is formed by the *cooperativeness* (e.g., “I almost always meet the needs of others”) and *friendliness* (e.g., “I gladly trust with others”);
- *Conscientiousness* is made by *scrupulousness* (e.g., “usually I take care of everything in detail”) and *perseverance* (e.g., “if I fail in a task, I continue to try again until I succeed”);





- *Emotional stability* is formed by *control of emotions* (e.g., “I don’t usually react in an exaggerated way”) and *control of impulse* (e.g., “even in extremely difficult situations I don’t lose control”);
- *Mental openness* consists of *openness to culture* (e.g., “I am always informed about what’s happening in the world”) and the *openness to experience* (e.g., “I am fascinated by everything new).

### 3.3. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis of data was conducted by applying the following statistical tests using SPSS 15 software (Statistical Package for Social Science): *t* Student, Manova, and linear regression with stepwise method.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. MECHANISMS OF CIVIC MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

From the statistical analysis of data (Table I), it was possible to notice a interaction of sex with the type of degree ( $F_{(8,154)}=7,318, p<.001$ ), in the sense that:

- boys were more likely to use the attribution of blame ( $F=5,03, p=.026$ ), the moral justification ( $F=12,08, p=.001$ ), euphemistic labelling ( $F=22,08, p<.001$ ), the displacement of responsibility ( $F=7,66, p=.006$ ), and the distortion of consequences ( $F=5,46, p=.021$ ) than girls;
- psychology students were more likely to use the attribution of blame ( $F=5,05, p=.026$ ), the moral justification ( $F=21,66, p<.001$ ), the euphemistic labelling ( $F=26,66, p<.001$ ), the advantageous comparison ( $F=23,63, p<.001$ ), the distortion of consequences ( $F=32,56, p<.001$ ), the diffusion of responsibility ( $F=21,75, p<.001$ ), and the dehumanization of the victim ( $F=11,12, p=.001$ ) than law students.

In summary, boys attending to the degree of psychology were more likely to use all mechanisms of civic moral disengagement, with the exception of advantageous comparison and dehumanization of the victim than girls attending to the degree of law (Table I).

### 3.2. FACTORS OF PERSONALITY

From the statistical analysis of data it was possible to highlight that, in relation to sex ( $F_{(10,152)}=2,36, p=.012$ ) and type of degree ( $F_{(10,152)}=2,51, p=.008$ ):

- boys were more dominant (boys=39,73 vs. girls=37,85;  $t=2,06, p=.04$ ), prone to emotional control (boys=36,65 vs. girls=32,37;  $t=2,96, p=.003$ ) and open to experience (boys=42,85 vs. girls=41,06;  $t=1,93, p=.05$ ) than girls; the opposite occurred for the cooperativeness in the sense that girls seemed more prone to cooperation than boys (boys=40,03 vs. girls=41,98;  $t=-2,20, p=.029$ );
- psychology students were more prone to cooperation than law students (psy=42,06 vs. law=40,36;  $t=1,98, p=.05$ ); the opposite occurred for conscientiousness (psy=38,36 vs. law=41,11;  $t=-2,74, p=.007$ ) and control of emotions (psy=32,10 vs. law=36,07;  $t=-2,84, p=.005$ ) in the sense that law students seemed more careful to details and prone to control of emotions and of difficult situations than psychology students.



Table I - Mechanisms of civic moral disengagement – Differences for sex and type of course

Table I - Mechanisms of civic moral disengagement – Differences for sex and type of course					
Mechanism of civic moral disengagement	Sex	Type of course	M	SD	MANOVA Sex for Type of course $F_{(8,154)}=7,318, p<.001$
attribution of blame	boys	psychology	<b>2,44</b>	,64	$F=4,96, p=.027$
		law	<b>2,43</b>	,81	
	girls	psychology	<b>2,43</b>	,65	
		law	<b>1,9</b>	,77	
moral justification	boys	psychology	<b>2,52</b>	,52	$F=9,82, p=.002$
		law	<b>1,87</b>	,36	
	girls	psychology	<b>1,96</b>	,54	
		law	<b>1,84</b>	,42	
euphemistic labelling	boys	psychology	<b>2,71</b>	,40	$F=11,87, p=.001$
		law	<b>1,96</b>	,56	
	girls	psychology	<b>1,99</b>	,49	
		law	<b>1,84</b>	,42	
advantageous comparison	boys	psychology	2,38	,46	ns
		law	1,76	,61	
	girls	psychology	2,07	,64	
		law	1,68	,47	
displacement of responsibility	boys	psychology	<b>2,42</b>	,62	$F=5,85, p=.017$
		law	<b>2,03</b>	,46	
	girls	psychology	<b>2,00</b>	,50	
		law	<b>1,94</b>	,60	
distortion of consequences	boys	psychology	<b>2,33</b>	,64	$F=4,57, p=.034$
		law	<b>1,58</b>	,40	
	girls	psychology	<b>1,90</b>	,59	
		law	<b>1,56</b>	,52	
diffusion of responsibility	boys	psychology	<b>2,26</b>	,67	$F=5,71, p=.018$
		law	<b>1,64</b>	,33	
	girls	psychology	<b>2,08</b>	,53	
		law	<b>1,88</b>	,48	
dehumanization of victims	boys	psychology	2,75	,48	ns
		law	2,25	,75	
	girls	psychology	2,53	,64	
		law	2,23	,75	
civic moral disengagement	boys	psychology	<b>2,47</b>	,33	$F=4,45, p=.036$
		law	<b>1,94</b>	,34	
	girls	psychology	<b>2,11</b>	,38	
		law	<b>1,86</b>	,44	
Differences for sex ( $F_{(8,154)}=4,714, p<.001$ ); Differences for type of course ( $F_{(8,154)}=9,670, p<.001$ )					

### 3.3. CIVIC MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND FACTORS OF PERSONALITY

From linear regressions with stepwise method, in which the dependent variable consisted of the mechanisms of civic moral disengagement and the predictor variables were factors of personality, it was clear that:

- in psychology students, “dynamism”/“friendliness” had a significant impact on civic moral disengagement ( $\bullet=,215, t=2,05, p=.043$ ;  $\bullet=-,258, t=-2,46, p=.016$ ); in addition, with respect to each mechanism, “control of emotions” had a noteworthy impact on the moral justification ( $\bullet=,214, t=2,03, p=.04$ ), “perseverance” affected on the advantageous comparison ( $\bullet=-,228, t=-2,17, p=.03$ ), “friendliness” affected on the dehumanization of the victim ( $\bullet=-,318, t=-3,10, p=.003$ );



- in law students, “dominance”/“scrupulousness” had an appreciable impact on the attribution of blame ( $r=.400$ ,  $t=3,85$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $r=-,373$ ,  $t=-3,59$ ,  $p=.001$ ); “openness to culture”/“perseverance” affected on the displacement of responsibility ( $r=.500$ ,  $t=4,46$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $r=-,469$ ,  $t=-4,18$ ,  $p=.001$ ); the “dynamism” influenced the diffusion of responsibility ( $r=-,307$ ,  $t=-2,77$ ,  $p=.007$ ); the “control of emotions” affected on the dehumanization of the victim ( $r=-,237$ ,  $t=-2,09$ ,  $p=.039$ ); the “scrupulousness” had an effect on the distortion of consequences ( $r=-,274$ ,  $t=-2,44$ ,  $p=.017$ ); “friendliness”/“dominance”/“scrupulousness”/“control of emotions” affected on the euphemistic labelling ( $r=-,361$ ,  $t=-3,52$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $r=.369$ ,  $t=3,70$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $r=-,230$ ,  $t=-2,25$ ,  $p=.027$ ,  $r=.225$ ,  $t=2,17$ ,  $p=.033$ ).

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With regard to the research objectives initially proposed, it appeared that boys attending the degrees of Psychology were more likely to use the mechanisms of attribution of blame, moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences than girls attending the degrees of Law. Nessuna differenza apprezzabile si rileva in merito al confronto vantaggioso e alla deumanizzazione della vittima. No appreciable differences were noted concerning the advantageous comparison and the dehumanization of the victim. In this paper the differences of gender emerged in the present work represent a confirmation of what already evidenced by the literature in this area (Falanga *et al.*, 2009), also in the Italian context (Falanga *et al.*, 2009), according to which boys used the moral disengagement more so than for girls.

The impact of personality factors on the use of these mechanisms depending on the course of study was confirmed. In fact, in the students who attended the degree of Psychology, the greater was the control of emotions, the greater was the tendency to justify the harmful actions reformulating the meaning by virtue of a superior principle (moral justification); the higher was the perseverance, the lower was the tendency to draw the most damaging behaviours compared to those made by the subject (advantageous comparison); the higher was the friendliness, the lower was the tendency to deprive the victim of the human qualities (dehumanization of the victim).

In law students, the greater was the dominance the greater was the allocation of their negative actions to provocation by the victim (attribution of blame) and, at the same time, the higher was the conscientiousness, the lower was the attribution of blame; the greater was the openness to culture, the greater was the shift of responsibility to a superior level (displacement of responsibility) and, at the same time, the higher was the perseverance, the lower was the displacement of responsibility; the higher was the dynamism the lower was the tendency to share responsibility for disruptive actions with other people in order to reduce the severity (diffusion of responsibility); the larger was the control of emotion the smaller was the tendency to deprive the victim of human qualities (dehumanization the victim); the larger was the scrupulousness the smaller was the tendency to alter the effects of harmful behaviour in order to reduce misconduct (distortion of consequences); the higher were the friendliness and conscientiousness the lower was the tendency to reduce the severity of the acts using terms or expressions that minimize the cruelty of these actions (euphemistic labelling) and, at the same time, the greater were the dominance and control of emotion the greater was the use of euphemistic labelling.



Future investigations will deepen the impact of other constructs, such as the locus of control, prosocial moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, on the tendency to use the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

## REFERENCES

- Ardone, R. (1996). Disimpegno morale e stili di funzionamento familiare: un contributo su famiglie con figli adolescenti. *Rassegna di Psicologia*, 1.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: a social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A., Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli C., Pastorelli C., & Regalia, C. (2001). Socio-cognitive self-regulatory mechanisms governing transgressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 125-135.
- Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G.V., & Rabasca, A. (1998). *BFQ-C. Big Five Questionnaire for Children*. Firenze: Organizzazioni Speciali.
- Caprara, G.V., & Malagoli Togliatti, M. (1996). Personalità e disimpegno morale: contributi preliminari e prospettive di ricerca. *Rassegna di Psicologia*, 1, 11-23.
- Caprara, G.V., & Bonino, S. (2006). *Il comportamento prosociale. Aspetti individuali, familiari e sociali*. Trento: Erickson.
- Caprara, G.V., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., Iafrate, C., Beretta, M., Steca, P., & Bandura, A. (2006). La misura del disimpegno morale nel contesto delle trasgressioni dell'agire quotidiano. *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, XXXIII, 1, 83-106.
- Caprara, G.V., Fida, R., Vecchione, M., Tramontano, C., & Barbaranelli, C. (2009). Assessing civic moral disengagement: dimensionality and construct validity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 47, 504-509.
- Costa, P.T., & McCrae, R.R. (1985). *The NEO-Personality Inventory*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Falanga, R., De Caroli, M.E., & Sagone, E. (2009). Comportamenti ritenuti gravi dagli adolescenti e meccanismi di disimpegno morale. Una ricerca empirica nel contesto catanese. *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology*, 1, 303-312.
- Pastorelli, C., Incatasciato, M., Rabasca, A., & Romano, A.M. (1996). Meccanismi di disimpegno morale e propensione all'aggressione in contesti sociali a rischio. *Rassegna di Psicologia*, 1, 107-118.