Study of Violence in Relation to Moral Disengagement and Guilt Reactions

Jayoti*, Amrita Yadava** and Deepti Hooda***

Violence is a major international issue. At the World Health Assembly in Geneva in 1996, violence was declared a leading public health problem worldwide. The World Health Organization (1996) defines violence as, “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”. The different types of violence include child abuse and neglect, school violence, youth violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, elder abuse, self-directed violence, and collective violence. The type of aggression or violence seen in adolescents and youth can range from bullying and physical fighting to assault and homicide. The fact is violence of one sort or another is part of many schools today. School violence is an act of violence committed within an educational facility. School violence can occur in several forms, including bullying, physical assaults, sexual assaults, gun violence, and gang violence.

In recent years, incidents of school violence have grown in number and appear in higher frequencies. According to the National Centre for Education Statistics (Dinkers et al., 2008), approximately 1.5 million violent incidents take place in US public schools a year, with 38% of public schools reporting at least one or more serious violent incidents. Fatal shootings and stabbing instances and suicide or homicide as consequences of ragging in Indian teaching institutes have rattled parents and teachers, forcing India to confront an issue it had previously known mainly through TV news footage from the United States. The neo-globalised Indian society seems to have picked up all the dangerous vices of the West, ranging from dating and pre-marital sex to gun culture in school system.

* Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, M. D. University, Rohtak.
** Professor, Department of Psychology, M. D. University, Rohtak. Email: amrita_yadava@rediffmail.com
*** Lecturer, Department of Psychology, M. D. University, Rohtak. Email: deepti.hooda@yahoo.com
School violence is a many-faceted problem, making it difficult to pinpoint its causes. Most educators and researchers would agree that school violence arises from a layering of causes and risk factors that include (but are not limited to) access to weapons, media violence, cyber abuse, the impact of school, community, and family environments, neighborhood environment, personal alienation, moral disengagement, guilt reactions and more.

As outlined in his social cognitive theory of moral agency, Bandura (1999, 2002; Bandura et al., 2001) describes moral disengagement as the sociocognitive processes through which detrimental conduct is fostered by reduction of prosocialness and anticipatory self censure and by promoting cognitive and affective reactions conductive to aggression.

Other researchers have also suggested that moral attitudes may be a key element in delinquent and aggressive behaviour (Cimbora & McIntosh, 2003; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Bandura (1995) posits that individuals selectively disengage the self sanctions that deter negative conduct through a cognitive process termed “moral disengagement.” Decreasing the sanctions prohibiting aggressive or antisocial behaviour may facilitate cognitive processes that increase the likelihood of aggression. Moral disengagement has been linked to aggressive and anti-social behaviour in children and adults (Bandura et al., 1996; Pelton et al., 2004; Gini, 2006) and provides a useful framework for understanding bullying and peer harassment behaviour among youth (Menesini et al., 2003). The influence on moral disengagement of guilt i.e., Fear of Punishment and Need for Reparation on harmful behaviour may be direct or via mediating factors. Bandura et al. (1996) have posited that feeling of guilt or need to make amend for inhumane conduct is reduced by disowning personal agency or reconstructing the behaviour as serving worthy purpose. Thus increase in moral disengagement is accompanied by lowering of guilt thereby weakening anticipating self- restraints against engagement in detrimental behaviour.

As per the socio-cognitive developmental approach (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1989) there are two main phenomenological aspects of guilt i.e., feeling of responsibility for others and feeling of self- blame and concern over the harmful consequences of ones action. Further, guilt has been proposed to be multidimensional with affective, cognitive and motivational having two probable outcomes i.e., functional (empathy driven or dysfunction (fear driven). Caprara et al. (1990) have proposed two different dimensions for encompassing the phenomena.

In case of fear of punishment the person worries about the consequences of his/her wrongdoing as if he/she has no control over them. Wherein case of need for reparation, on the other hand, the person takes responsibility for his/her wrongdoing, and is actively engaged in mastering the consequences (Caprara, Manzi, & Perugini, 1992).
Although both fear of punishment and need for reparation have a common characteristic as regards emotional responsibility they differ with regard to level of hostility (i.e., hostility and prosociality respectively). Need for reparation play an inhibitory role on tolerance towards violence while Fear of Punishment is connected to Rumination via a circular relationship where Fear of Punishment may be a moderating mechanism for rumination an amplificatory mechanism for Fear of Punishment. Thereby Fear of Punishment may become a facilitator of violent behaviour by further enhancing the feeling guilt and the subsequently enhanced Fear of Punishment.

Thus Moral agency and guilt reactions could go a long way in providing a probable causal link to violence. The major objective of the study is to examine the relation of violence with guilt reactions and moral disengagement along with predictors of attitude towards violence.

**METHOD**

**Sample**
A purposive sample of 167 students (89 boys & 78 girls) of 8th to 12th standard was taken from government schools of Bhiwani city of Haryana. The age range of the sample was 12 to 19 years.

**Tools**
In order to collect the data the following tools were used in the present study:

**Measure of Attitude towards Violence**

- **Attitude Towards Violence Scale**: To measure the construct, Revised Attitude Towards Violence Scale (RATVS) developed by Anderson, Benjamin, Wood & Bonacci (2006) was used. The RATVS, containing 39 items, taps attitude towards four types of violence i.e., violence in war, penal code violence, corporal punishment of children and intimate violence. Using a 5-point likert-type scale, the respondents are required to indicate the extent of their agreement with which item using the following response format: strongly agree to strongly disagree. The coefficient alpha for the RATVS as a whole is 0.92. As the sample of the present study was proficient in Hindi language, the investigator translated the scale in Hindi. In the present study only three subscales (violence in war, penal code violence and corporal punishment of children) were taken and the intimate violence subscale was left out, as the subjects were children and the items of this subscale were not found to be appropriate for them. The test retest reliability correlation between Hindi and English versions was 0.73.

**Measure of Guilt Reactions**

- **Fear of Punishment Scale**: Fear of Punishment Scale by Caprara, Manzi & Perugini (1992) was used to measure the proneness to experience feelings of
persecution, oppression and tension that we tie to the anticipation and fear of impending punishment. The scale contains 30 items, 23 effective + 7 control items, the scoring is to be done on 6 point scale ranging from 0 (completely false for me) to 5 (completely true for me). A Hindi version of the scale by Sunita (2003) was used in the present study. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability for English version is 0.91 (Caprara, Manzi & Perugini, 1992). The test-retest reliability between Hindi and English version was 0.74.

*Need for Reparation Scale:* Need for Reparation Scale by Caprara, Manzi & Perugini (1992) was used to measure the proneness to experience feelings of remorse, embarrassment, disturbance, tension and desires for justice that were linked to the need for reparation of the negative results of guilt-eliciting actions. The scale contains 20 items, 15 effective + 5 control items, and scoring is to be done on a 6 point scale ranging from 0 (completely false for me) to 5 (completely true for me). A Hindi version of the scale by Sunita (2003) was used in the present study. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability for English version is 0.80 (Caprara, Manzi & Perugini, 1992). The test-retest reliability between Hindi and English version was 0.80.

*Measure of Moral Disengagement*

*Moral Disengagement Scale:* The multifaceted scale, Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996) used in the present study assessed proneness to moral disengagement of different forms of detrimental conduct in diverse contexts and interpersonal relationships. The scale consists of 32 items. Each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement was represented by a subset of 4 items. The items tapped children’s readiness to resort to moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame for different forms of transgressive conduct. The transgressive activities involved physically injurious and destructive conduct, verbal abuse, deceptions, and thefts. For each of the items, respondents rate their degree of acceptance of moral exonerations for such conduct on a 3-point Likert-type agree-disagree continuum. A Hindi version of the scale by Sunita (2003) was used in the present study. The test-retest reliability between Hindi and English version was 0.83.

**Procedure**

The present study was conducted to find out the degree of correlation of violence with guilt reactions and moral disengagement. To fulfill the purpose, Attitude Towards Violence Scale, Fear of Punishment Scale, Need for Reparation Scale and Moral Disengagement Scale were administered on 167 students of 8th to 12th standard. The tests were administered either individually or in very small
groups of 2-3 individuals. All the tests were paper pencil tests and were administered in group situation (7-10 respondent/group). The sequence of the administration of the tools was changed or randomized for every group, so that effect of order and fatigue may be minimized. It was ensured that subjects had understood the method of responding and responded to all the items. Scoring was done as per the scoring patterns prescribed by their authors and/or manuals. The obtained data were subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS software. Pearson product moment correlations and multiple regression analysis were applied to the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the aim to explore the relationship of attitude towards violence with guilt reactions and moral disengagement, Attitude towards Violence Scale, Fear of Punishment Scale, Need for Reparation Scale and Moral Disengagement Scale were administered to the sample. In order to analyze the scores, coefficients of correlations were computed to analyse the associations between attitude towards violence, guilt reactions and moral disengagement and the same have been shown in Table 1. The result reveals that moral disengagement is significantly and positively correlated with attitude towards violence \( (r = .24, p < .01) \). A glance at the Coefficient of correlations point out that Violence in war, a type of Attitude Towards Violence, is significantly and positively correlated with Moral Justification \( (r = .18, p < .05) \) and Dehumanization \( (r = .23, p < .01) \) the two factors of Moral disengagement. Whereas, attitude towards violence in war was not significantly related with any of the Guilt reactions, i.e., Need for Reparation nor Fear of Punishment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Moral Disengagement</th>
<th>Guilt Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>EL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W = Violence in war</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C = Corporal punishment</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P = Penal code violence</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T VIO = Total violence</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01, * p<.05

W = Violence in war
C= Corporal punishment of children
P= Penal code violence
T VIO= Total violence
Corporal punishment of children, the second scale of attitude towards violence, was significantly and positively correlated with Moral Disengagement (r = .23, p < .01) and was significantly and positively correlated with only one factor of Moral Disengagement i.e., Dehumanization (r = .16, p < .05). Here again, Coefficients of correlations between Corporal punishment of children and Guilt reactions (Need for Reparation and Fear of Punishment) were found to be non significant.

The third subtest of Attitude towards Violence i.e., Penal code violence, was also significantly and positively correlated with Moral Disengagement (r = .21, p < .01) and only one factor of Moral Disengagement i.e., Dehumanization (r = .16, p < .05) was significantly and positively correlated with Attitude towards Penal code violence. Penal code violence was significantly and positively correlated with one of the guilt reaction i.e., Fear of Punishment (r = .21, p < .01) but not with Need for Reparation. Caprara et al., (1992) reported significant correlation between Fear of Punishment and tolerance towards violence. They also found that Fear of Punishment loaded positively on the factor “Proneness to aggression” and “Need for Reparation” loaded negatively on the same factor.

Considered together these results show that Moral Disengagement is significantly related with Attitude towards Violence and Dehumanization, a subfactor of Moral Disengagement, is significantly and positively correlated with all the subtest of Attitude towards Violence (Violence in war, Corporal punishment of children and Penal code violence). Moral Justification is significantly and positively correlated with only one subtest of Attitude towards Violence i.e., Violence in war. In case of Guilt reactions, Need for Reparation is not significantly related with any type of Attitude towards Violence, whereas Fear of Punishment is significantly related with Penal code violence.

The present results imply that high moral disengagers show more favorable attitude towards violence. Those who are highly prone to moral disengagement tend to have positive attitude towards violence in war (e.g., “War can be just”), Corporal Punishment of Children (e.g., “Children should be spanked for temper tantrums”) and Penal Code Violence (e.g., “Capital punishment is often necessary”). These results receive support from earlier studies where high moral disengagers were more readily angered and behave more injuriously than those who apply moral self sanctions (Bandura et al., 1996). Attitude towards
Violence significantly predict physical aggression, violence and verbal aggression (Anderson et al., 2006). Paciello et al., (2008) also attest the fact that adolescents who maintained higher levels of moral disengagement are more likely to show frequent aggressive and violent acts in late adolescence. In an earlier study, Kwak & Bandura (1998) had also reported that higher the moral disengagement and weaker the perceived self- efficacy to resist peer pressure for transgressive activities, the heavier the involvement in anti-social conduct.

Fear of Punishment, the proneness to experience feelings of persecution, oppression and tension that we tie to the anticipation and fear of impending punishment, is related to attitude towards Penal code violence. The two forms of guilt reactions have been poised to play a role via locus of control. In case of Fear of Punishment the person worries about the consequences of his/her wrongdoing as if he/she has no control over them. In case of Need for Reparation, on the other hand, the person takes responsibility for his/her wrongdoing, and is actively engaged in mastering the consequences. Fear of Punishment is “fear driven” and Need for Reparation is “empathy driven” (Caprara et al., 1992). In Indian culture, the traditional customs, values and regulations tend to propagate external locus of control, in which the person is at the mercy of “forces” he does not control. Thus, it may be because of this external locus of control that a relationship between Fear of Punishment and favorable attitude towards Penal code violence is obtained (e.g., Capital punishment is often necessary, Prisoners should have more severe labour sentences than they do, Violent crimes should be punished violently, The death penalty should be a part of every penal code).

Although, correlations are very useful statistical tool to investigate the associations between variables yet they provide no idea about the predictive power of the variable. Therefore, multiple regression was worked out by using stepwise method to find a sub-set of moral disengagement and guilt reactions factors that could account for the maximum proportion of variance in attitude Towards Violence and to eliminate those that do not make additional contribution to the variables already in the equation. In the present study, there were a total of 10 predictor variables and 3 criterion variables (Violence in war, Corporal punishment of children and Penal code violence). Multiple regression was applied on each criterion variable and results are depicted in Table 2.

The results of regression analysis on Violence in war, a factor of Attitude towards Violence, scores point out one predictor that met the criteria to entry in the equation (Table-2). Moral disengagement factor, Dehumanization, contributed maximum to the prediction of Violence in war. The Multiple R for this predictor is .23 and $R^2 = .05$ (F = 9.42, p<.05), which means that Dehumanization accounted for 5% of variance in the criterion variable i.e., Attitude towards Violence in war. The regression coefficients ‘B’ of Dehumanization point towards the positive direction of influence.
TABLE 2

Predictors of Attitude towards Violence computed by step-wise multiple regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion variables</th>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>R Multiple</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>R Sq Change</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence in war</td>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporal punishment of children</td>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penal code violence</td>
<td>Fear of Punishment</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>7.243</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>5.863</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diffusion of Responsibility</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>5.398</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second regression equation was computed to estimate the extent of variance in Corporal punishment of children scores. The most significant predictor of Corporal punishment of children, a factor of Attitude towards Violence, was found to be Dehumanization (Moral disengagement factor) having Multiple R equal to .16 and R² = .02 (F = 4.40, <.05). This implies that 2% of variance in the outcome variable i.e., Corporal punishment of children is explained via Dehumanization. The regression coefficients ‘B’ of Dehumanization indicate that the direction of influence is positive.

The regression analysis on Penal code violence scores reveal that out of 10 predictor variables only three met the criteria. Table 2 reveals that the most significant predictor of Attitude Towards Penal code violence was found to be Fear of Punishment, a type of guilt reactions, Multiple R equal to .20 and the R² equal to .04 (F = 7.243, p <.01) tells that this predictor variable accounts for 4% of variance in the criterion variable i.e., Attitude towards Penal code violence. At the next step in regression equation, Dehumanization, a factor of Moral disengagement, entered the equation increasing the multiple R value to .26. The R² was found to be equal to .07 (F = 5.863, p <.01) It implies that 7% of variance in Attitude towards Penal code violence is explained by Dehumanization in combination with Fear of Punishment. Whereas the individual share of variance for this variable is 3%. At third step, Diffusion of Responsibility, another factor of Moral disengagement, entered the regression equation increasing multiple R to .30 and R² equal to .09 (F=5.398, p <.01), which implies that Diffusion of Responsibility with combination of above two predictors account
for 9% of variance in Penal code violence. It further implies that only 2% (R²-change=.02) of variance is explained by Diffusion of Responsibility alone. The regression coefficients ‘B’ of Fear of Punishment and Dehumanization indicated that direction of influence was positive for the two predictors except Diffusion of Responsibility where the direction of contribution is negative. The negative direction of contribution of Diffusion of Responsibility implies that greater the diffusion of responsibility more unfavorable attitude towards penal code violence e.g., capital punishment is often necessary, prisoners should have more severe labour sentences than they do, violent crimes should be punished violently, the death penalty should be a part of every penal code.

The findings that Fear of Punishment is a predictor of attitude towards penal code violence can be explained using the concept of Rumination. Studies have reported rumination to be a strong predictor of aggression (Caprara and Pastorelli, 1989; LABOS, 1989). In another study, Caprara et al. (1992) observed positive association between Fear of Punishment and Rumination i.e., more one is afraid of punishment, the less rumination there is, and the less rumination there is, the less one is afraid of punishment. Thus, the more guilt becomes associated with fear of potential sanction, the less likely one is to maintain hostile feelings overtime, but the more one maintains hostile feelings overtime, the more one feels fear of a potential punishment.

Results based on step-wise multiple regression suggest that Dehumanization is the most common predictor of Attitude towards Violence. Self-censure for cruel conduct can be disengaged by stripping people of human qualities. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects (Keen, 1986; Kelman, 1973). It is easier to brutalize people when they are viewed as low animal forms, as when Greek torturers referred to their victims as “worms” (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986). During wartime, nations cast their enemies in the most dehumanized, demonic and bestial images to make it easier to kill them (Ivie, 1980). The process of dehumanization is an essential ingredient in the perpetration of inhumanities. Levi (1987) reports an incident in which a Nazi camp commandant was asked why they went to such extreme lengths to degrade their victims, whom they were going to kill anyway. The commandant chillingly explained that it was not a matter of purposeless cruelty. Rather, the victims had to be degraded to the level of subhuman objects so that those who operated the gas chambers would be less burdened by distress. In experimental studies of the perniciousness of the combined effect of dehumanization and a diminished sense of personal responsibility, a supervisory team was given the power to punish a group of problem solvers with varying intensities of electric shock for deficient performances. The punishment was administered either personally or collectively to the performing recipients characterized in humanistic, animalistic...
or neutral terms. Unknown to the supervisors, the administered shocks were never delivered to the recipients. Dehumanized individuals were treated more punitively than those who have been invested with human qualities (Bandura, Underwood & Fromson, 1975). Combining diffused responsibility with dehumanization greatly escalates the level of punitiveness and in contrast, personalization of responsibility and humanization of others together have a powerful self-restraining effect (Bandura, 1999).

From the above discussion it can be inferred that two factors of Moral disengagement i.e., Dehumanization and Diffusion of Responsibility, significantly predict different components of Attitude towards Violence. Thus, individuals with high level of Moral disengagement and Fear of Punishment show favorable Attitude towards Violence. Therefore, further researches may be undertaken for designing possible intervention to enhance moral engagement and in turn curb violence and aggression to some extend.

REFERENCES


Caprara, G.V., Perugini, M., Barbaranelli, C., & Pastorelli, C. (1990). Esplorazione delle dimensioni comuni della colpa e dell’aggressivita’: Contributo empirico (Exploration


