

THE ROLE OF SELF-CONTROL AND RESILIENCE IN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CHILDHOOD EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence (CEDV) has been demonstrated to hold an important role in violent and unethical behaviors. Little is known about the relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement, the role of self-control and resilience. This study investigated whether CEDV has an impact on moral disengagement through the indirect effect of self-control and conditional effect of resilience. This study utilized purposive convenient sampling. The sample consisted of N = 562 (men; n = 273; women; n = 289) with age range between 16 to 25 years (M = 19.27; SD = 2.50). The sample was collected from madaaris, college, and university students from different provinces of Pakistan. The measures used in this study included the Urdu version of CEDV, Moral Disengagement Scale, Corner and Davidson Resilience, and Brief Self-Control Scale. The results indicated that CEDV significantly positively predicted moral disengagement through the indirect effect of self-control. Resilience significantly moderated the association among self-

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control and moral disengagement whereas the resilience did not significantly moderate the relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, self-control, childhood exposure to domestic violence, resilience

Introduction

Exposure of children to domestic violence is recognized as an adverse childhood experience that has a significant impact on the overall development and behavioral outcomes of individuals (Edleson et al., 2008; Holmes et al., 2022). Childhood exposure to home violence has been linked to unethical and criminal tendencies as an adult (Aguilar Ruiz & Pereda, 2022). Among 133 out of 275 million children around the world are exposed to this type of violence every year, according to research (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2015). Studies based on populations have shown that between 8 to 25 percent of children living in high-income nations and between 10 to 39 percent of children living in middle-income countries are exposed to domestic violence (Fagan, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2009). Exposure to domestic violence can lead to harmful outcomes (Buka et al., 2001; Duke et al., 2010; Fagan, 2022), like terrorism and moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 2017).

Research has suggested that understanding psychosocial processes is the best way to explain unethical behavior among youth (Haleem & Masood, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Various forms of youth interpersonal violence, such as victimization and delinquency, have been linked in studies with lower levels of self-control, resilience and different forms of domestic violence (Akpunne et al., 2020; Jones & Pierce, 2021). Adults who are exposed to domestic violence during their childhood are susceptible to engaging in high-risk activities and can be morally

disengaged (Bellis, 2014). Though there is a considerable amount of research on CEDV and its outcomes. However, there is a scarcity of research on coping strategies (e.g., self-control, resilience) and morality-related mechanisms (e.g., moral disengagement). As such, this study aims to add to the literature by identifying a potential mediating mechanism of self-control in the connection between CEDV and moral disengagement along with the moderating role of resilience.

The social cognitive theory of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996) provides an explanation for how individuals self-regulate a wide variety of behaviors that are considered immoral through eight different psychosocial mechanisms. The term "moral disengagement" refers to a cognitive mechanism (such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, dehumanization, and attribution of blame), which allows individuals to engage in immoral behavior without exhibiting obvious signs of guilt or self-censure (Bandura et al., 1996). According to this mechanism of social cognitive theory, behavior, cognition, and other personal factors, in addition to environmental influences, all work together as interactive determinants of each other (Bandura, 1986). Research suggests that there are many factors that can lead to the propensity to engage in immoral behaviors (Bandura, 2017; Haleem & Masood, 2022). One of the most important factors is that the history of CEDV is related to heightened risk of moral disengagement (Hyde et al., 2010; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2020). The influence that CEDV has on moral disengagement can be understood through the lens of the cognitive social learning theory. By observing how their parents react to conflict, children pick up the idea that it's acceptable to ridicule or scold other people as a means of resolving conflicts in their own relationships (Fang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In addition, it is noteworthy that the connection between CEDV and moral disengagement may be more obvious for young adults in Pakistan since, in

the Pakistani context, that children themselves accept the psychological maltreatment behaviors of their parents. In other words, the children in Pakistan accept the behavior of their parents because they believe it is for their own good (Ali et al., 2012; Haleem et al., 2022; Masood, 2014). Another important factor in predicting moral disengagement is self-control.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1996), the ability to exercise control over one's cognition by suppressing thoughts and behaviors to bring oneself in line with preferred standards is a fundamental trait of the self-regulation system (Tangney et al., 2004). Self-control may act as a mediator of moral disengagement since moral disengagement includes detrimental strategies that enable people to deviate from preferred social and moral standards. According to research, people who score high on the trait of self-control tend to be more thoughtful and more likely to discourage impulsive and self-destructive behavior (Alexandra, 2019; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Research has examined self-control as a mediating effect, attempting to explain when or how self-control influences the relationships between morality, exposure to violent settings, and criminal behavior (Hirtenlehner et al., 2015; Svensson et al., 2010). As suggested by these findings related mechanisms may be involved in individual susceptibility to moral disengagement. Another important psychological resource that can buffer the association between CEDV, self-control, and moral disengagement is resilience.

Resilience, which is the enhanced ability to bounce back from adversity, shields individuals from the emotional harm related with harsh conditions and strengthens the probability that they will undertake difficult circumstances effectively (Block & Kremen, 1996). Research on resilience defines a specific risk or difficulty and measures positive or effective responses to that difficulty

(Alvord & Grados, 2005). According to research on youth resiliency, certain characteristics or traits make some youth immune to adverse or harmful environmental influences (Ungar & Hadfield, 2019). In addition, research identifies protective factors that enhance youths' ability to cope with adversity (Dishion & Connell, 2006). Most of the research on youth risk and resilience focuses on risk factors for issues such as abuse, delinquency, and gang violence (Cooke, 2021; Newsome et al., 2016). Regarding CEDV, moral disengagement, and self-control there is limited research on youths' vulnerability and resilience (Aly et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2012).

Research emphasizes that resilience includes self-regulatory functions that tend to shield the adverse consequences of an unfavorable environment and inhibit deviant and unethical behavior (Aly et al., 2014; Buckner et al., 2003; Gardner et al., 2008). The self-regulatory aspect of resilience is also hypothesized to investigate the moderating impact of resilience in relation to an unfavorable environment (e.g., CEDV), lack of self-control, and moral disengagement. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the moderating role of resilience in association between CEDV, self-control, and moral disengagement.

Rationale of the study

Numerous studies (Mihelic et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020) have examined the consequences of moral disengagement however there is a lack of research on its psychosocial predictors. By examining antecedents, we increase our understanding of what influences individuals to engage in unethical behavior among youth, as well as how these influences relate specifically to moral disengagement. The present study fills the gap in existing research by looking into individual (e.g., self-control) and social (e.g., CEDV) predictors along with the conditional effect of resilience among young adults. According to Sullivan et al.

(2004), 275 million children worldwide are exposed to domestic violence. Fewer studies have been done on whether exposure to domestic violence as a witness, as opposed to as a direct victim (e.g., seeing, hearing, or interfering in harm against a parent or sibling), affects the occurrence of negative outcomes later in life. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to encourage further study into the ways in which youth who have witnessed domestic violence may be more susceptible to low self-control and resilience which in turn lead to moral disengagement. Our research will help guide future studies and policy decisions aimed at decreasing moral disengagement through protective mechanisms among young people.

Hypotheses

1. There is a positive relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement among young adults.
2. There is a negative relationship between CEDV and self-control and moral disengagement among young adults.
3. Self-control mediates between CEDV and moral disengagement among young adults.
4. Resilience moderates the association between CEDV, self-control and moral disengagement among young adults.

Method

The present study used the cross-sectional survey research design.

Sample

This study consisted of a sample of 562 young adults with age range between 16 to 25 years ($M = 19.27$; $SD = 2.50$). The sample was representative of both men (48.8 %), and women (51.2 %). The data were collected using

purposive convenient sampling from madaaris (religious institutes, 28.8 %) colleges and universities (71.2 %) from both private (72.8 %) and government sector (27.2) educational institutes across Pakistan. Respondents belonged to the province of Punjab (45.1 %), Sindh (2 %), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (21.2 %), Baluchistan (3.2 %), and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (38.6 %) respectively.

Instruments

Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale (CEDV)

Childhood exposure to domestic violence (Edleson et al., 2008) was measured using the Urdu version of CEDV scale (Masood, 2014) which consists of 33 items with initial 10 questions focusing on exposure to intimate partner violence at home (sample item: Adults in your family disagree). The next seven questions (11-17) consist of child involvement in home violence (sample item: Physically tried to stop mom and partner's fight). The next four items (18-21) consist of the Risk Factors for children (sample item: Your mom seems sad, worried, or upset). The next eight items (22-29) focused on the child's exposure to community violence (sample item: Seen someone get hurt by another person). The final 30 to 33 items are about physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (sample item: An adult in your family hurts your feelings). It is a four-point Likert scale with options ranging from (0 = *Never* to 1 = *almost always*). There are no negative worded items in this scale. The score for this ranges from 0 to 99. According to the original authors, the alpha coefficient is .71. A high score indicates a high level of violence exposure.

Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS)

BSCS (Tangney et al., 2004) is devised to assess individual awareness, control of thoughts and actions (example item: "I am good at resisting temptations"). In present study the BSCS Urdu version (Zafar & Kausar, 2014) is used. The BSCS

is a 13-item measure of self-control. The response items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*), the BSCS has shown good reliability α .85 and validity among young adults (Tangney et al., 2004). The score ranged from 13-65. High scores on scale show a high level of self-control and vice versa.

Moral Disengagement Scale

Moral disengagement was assessed by moral disengagement scale Urdu version translated by researcher in this study. It consists of 32 items developed by Bandura et al. (1996). The multifaceted scale assesses proneness to moral disengagement under eight mechanisms. The alpha reliability coefficient for this measure was ($\alpha = .82$) (Bandura et al., 1996). Example items are “It is alright to fight to protect your friends” “It is alright to fight when your group's honor is threatened”. An overall score is created by summing the responses to the set of items to provide the composite measure of moral disengagement. The response categories for MD range from (*1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree*). There are no reversed score items in this scale, score range from 32 to 160. High scores on scale show a high level of moral disengagement and vice versa.

Connor and Davidson Resilience Scale

The current study employed a 10-item version of the Connor and Davidson Resilience scale Urdu version. Originally developed by Connor and Davidson (2003). The response options for this scale are rated on a 4-point Likert scale the response options ranged from (0 = *not true at all*) to (4 = *true nearly all the time*). Example item is “I can deal with whatever comes my way”. The score ranges from 0 to 40, and there are no reverse-scoring items in this scale. The original authors have reported high alpha reliability .98. Higher scores on the scale show the higher level of resilience and vice versa.

Demographic sheet

Demographics included demographics such as gender, age, education, province, socioeconomic status, family system, and parents' education, and marital status.

Procedure

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards, ethical approval was taken from Institutional Ethics Committee. Before the data collection, students were informed about the objectives and characteristics of the study, and their consent to participate in the research was taken. They were briefed regarding the voluntary nature of their participation, the right to withdraw at any time, the confidentiality of their responses, and their anonymity. It took approximately 25 to 30 minutes to complete all questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed in SPSS 26 version. The data were checked for missing data, and outliers for conformity with the normal distribution. Descriptive statistics comprising study variables were analyzed as an initial assessment for the overview of the characteristics of the sample. To see whether the variables' CEDV, self-control, resilience and moral disengagement significantly correlated. Correlation analyses were performed. The PROCESS macro-SPSS (Model 4) was used to conduct a mediation analysis to investigate the mediating role of self-control in relation to CEDV and moral disengagement (Hayes, 2013). To check the moderating role of resilience in relation between CEDV, self-control, and moral disengagement the process macro (Model 1) was used.

Results

Descriptive statistics means, standard deviations, and correlation between all study variables CEDV, Self-control, Resilience, and moral disengagement are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 562)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1 MD	76.93	15.80	-			
2 CEDV	18.31	9.67	.18**	-		
3 SC	42.26	6.87	-.17**	-.29**	-	
4 Resilience	22.09	5.37	.01	-.12**	.32**	-

Note. MD = Moral Disengagement; CEDV = Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence; SC = Self-Control

** $p < .01$

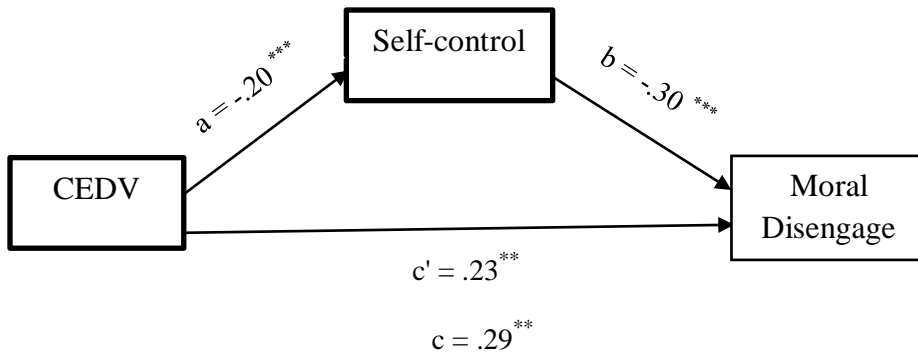
Table 1 shows the CEDV is significantly positively correlated with moral disengagement. This supports hypothesis 1 of study such that those who have exposed to domestic violence have more propensity to moral disengagement. Whereas CEDV is significantly negatively correlated with self-control, the finding supports the hypothesis two of the study this indicates that those who have been exposed to domestic violence have low level of self-control. On the other hand, self-control is significantly negatively correlated with moral disengagement. This indicates that the individuals who scored high on self-control exhibit a low level of moral disengagement. While resilience is not significantly correlated with moral engagement.

Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis was done through the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013), to estimate the indirect effect of self-control between CEDV (see table 2) and moral disengagement.

Figure 1

The Indirect Effect of Self-Control Between CEDV and Moral Disengagement



The findings show (Figure1) the direct path from CEDV to moral disengagement is positive and statistically significant ($c' = .23$, $SE = .07$, $[.09, .36]$). The direct effect of CEDV on moral disengagement is negative and significant ($a = -.20$, $SE = .02$, $[-.26, -.14]$). The direct effect of self-control on moral disengagement is negatively significant ($b = -.30$, $SE = .09$, $[-.50, -.11]$). The total effect from empathy via moral disengagement to violent extremist was also significant ($c = .29$, $SE = .06$, $[.16, .42]$).

Table 2

The Indirect Effect of Self-Control Between CEDV and Moral Disengagement (N = 562)

Predictors	Moral disengagement			
	Model I		Model II	
	β	β	95% CI	
			LL	UL
Constant	71.55***	85.70***	76.34	95.07
CEDV	.29***	.23***	.09	.36
Self-control		-.30**	-.50	-.11
R^2	.03	.05		
ΔR^2		.02		
F	18.68***	14.30***		
ΔF		4.30		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results (Table 2) show the mediating effect of self-control between CEDV and moral disengagement. The direct effect of CEDV on moral disengagement decrease in magnitude while controlling for the effect of self-control. Furthermore, self-control significantly mediated the relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement, accounting for 5% of the total effect variance. The relationship between CEDV and MD was significantly mediated by the indirect effect of self-control ($ab = .06$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI = [.02,.10]). This supported hypothesis 3 the results demonstrated that as a person's level of self-control improves, their ability to morally disengage reduces.

Moderation Analysis

To investigate the moderated role of resilience in relation to CEDV, self-control and moral disengagement moderation analysis (Model 1) was carried out with the help of SPSS (Process Macro Version 4) by Hayes (2013).

Table 3

Moderating Effect of Resilience in Relationship With Self-Control and Moral Disengagement (N = 562)

	Moral disengagement		
	B	95% CI	
		LL	UL
Constant	50.51**	20.87	80.14
Self-control	.52	-.18	1.23
Resilience	2.10**	.77	3.43
Self-control*resilience	-.04**	-.07	-.01
R^2	.04		
F	9.65**		

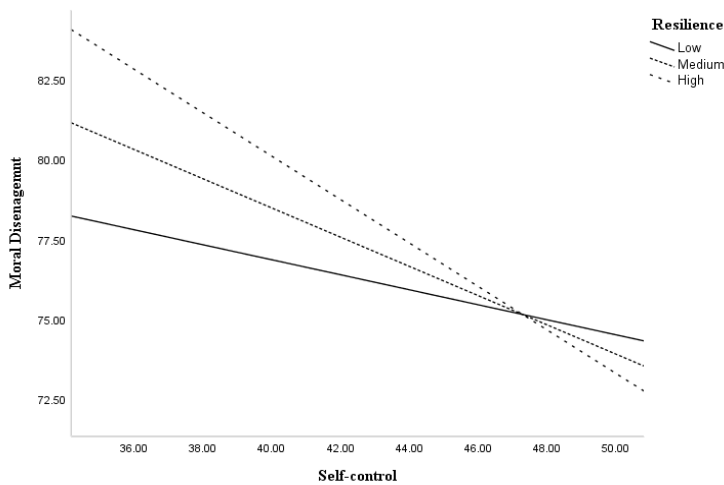
Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UI = Upper Limit

** $p < .01$.

Table 2 illustrates the moderating effect of resilience in relationship with self-control and moral disengagement. The interaction self-control x resilience is significantly $-.04$ ($p < .001$) moderating the relationship between self-control, and moral disengagement. The mod graph further explains the moderating effect.

Figure 2

Mod graph illustrating Interaction Effect of Resilience and Self-Control on Moral Disengagement



The mod graph in figure 2 depicts resilience's moderating effect on the relationship between self-control and moral disengagement. The figure shows that self-control decreases moral disengagement among all the three levels of resilience. In the above mod graph three levels of resilience have been depicted as low level of resilience is represented by a plain straight line, medium level of resilience is represented by a close dotted line and high level of resilience is represented by a spaced dotted line. A positive relationship exists for three levels of resilience between self-control and moral disengagement. Accordingly, low, medium, and high levels of resilience all show decreasing levels of moral disengagement as self-control increases. Although there is only a slight distinction between the three levels of resilience, there is strong evidence to suggest that self-

control and resilience significantly interact. However, the effect of moderation is stronger for those with high levels of resilience, than those with medium levels, and then those with low levels.

Discussion

The present study yielded some significant results involving the association among the personality factors (e.g., self-control), social factors (e.g., CEDV) in support for moral disengagement. The development of conceptual frameworks for understanding and explaining the significance of resilience is a substantial aspect of research related to morality. Although the research on the outcomes of moral disengagement among young adults has received considerable empirical support (Paciello et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of evidence for the role of psychosocial factors, the mediating mechanisms and conditional effect underlying the specific relationship between these variables remain largely unknown in support of moral disengagement. Thus, we devised a mediation model to examine whether self-control mediated the relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement. Our results support hypothesis 1, which suggests that there is a positive relationship between CEDV and moral disengagement. As expected, our results showed that CEDV positively predicted young adults' moral disengagement. This contribution is significant because it demonstrates that exposure to CEDV can result in unethical behavior, particularly among young people with a high level of moral disengagement. Consistent with earlier studies (Hyde et al., 2010; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2020) which indicated that exposure to domestic violence increases the likelihood of moral disengagement. This study also addresses an important question that who is more likely to be at risk as a result of exposure to CEDV and its unethical outcomes.

According to the second hypothesis, there is a negative relationship between CEDV and self-control and moral disengagement. Findings showed a significant negative relationship between CEDV and self-control, such that the greater the exposure to domestic violence, the lower the self-control will be. Our results are consistent with those of prior studies that demonstrated the same relationship between these variables (Payne et al., 2011). Consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Alexandra, 2019; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004) the findings showed a significant negative relationship between self-control and moral disengagement. This suggests that individuals who have a low level of self-control have a greater propensity to engage in immoral behavior. This study adds to the literature that how the emotion regulation process of self-control is associated with CEDV and moral disengagement. In the third hypothesis that we put forward, we proposed that CEDV indirectly affects moral disengagement through one's level of self-control. That is to say, the ability to exercise self-control may decrease moral disengagement. These findings are in line with those of earlier studies that emphasize the role of self-control in lowering the risk of moral disengagement and the outcomes that are associated with it (Hirtenlehner et al., 2015; Svensson et al., 2010).

In light of the moderating influence of resilience at the individual level, it seems fairer to evaluate the effects of self-control and CEDV on immoral behavior in terms of a gradient of intensity rather than the simple presence/absence of such effects. Considering this, we propose that the moderating effect of resilience may shed light on why some persons exposed to CEDV and low self-control do not engage in unethical behavior while others do. According to the fourth hypothesis of the study, resilience moderates the relationship between CEDV, self-control, and moral disengagement. The results demonstrated that resilience significantly moderates the relationship between self-

control and moral engagement. These findings are encouraging in light of research indicating that individuals can increase their resilience and decrease their moral disengagement (Aly et al., 2014) through the interaction affect with self-control one the important emotion regulation mechanism. Interestingly, no interaction effect was found between CEDV and moral disengagement and resilience.

Implications

This study has some theoretical and practical implications. This study adds to the theoretical literature by highlighting the positive self-regulatory mechanisms in reducing moral disengagement. The study's findings could be used to inform policy and practice. Because of the staggering numbers of children who are exposed to domestic violence, effective intervention strategies are urgently needed to protect this vulnerable population and buffer the effect of moral disengagement through building resilience. The findings of the present study can help researchers and practitioners deal with the alarming issue of CEDV and its outcomes.

Limitations and Suggestions

It is necessary to consider the study's limitations when interpreting the results. The study's first limitation is its cross-sectional design, which does not allow us to determine the causal relationship between CEDV, self-control, resilience, and the socio-cognitive mechanism of moral disengagement. Another limitation of the present study is that it did not include the victims of domestic violence within its sample. Further studies can take the sample of victims of domestic violence. The primary advantage of our study is that it included nearly equal numbers of male and female respondents from all provinces in Pakistan.

Future research may employ experimental and longitudinal methods to investigate this possibility and better comprehend these variables.

Conclusion

These findings contribute to our comprehension of the psychological processes that can predict moral disengagement. The findings concluded that exposure to domestic violence during childhood is a significant risk factor for lack of self-control and moral disengagement. In addition, CEDV demonstrated a significant indirect effect on moral disengagement via self-control. Furthermore, resilience demonstrated a substantial moderating effect between self-control and moral disengagement. The findings highlight the importance of unraveling the distinct and combined effects of domestic violence exposure, as well as examining these effects in the context of other known risk and protective factors.

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