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## Analysis of college students' misbehaviors of academic morality in China based on the analyzing frame of moral disengagement

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### ABSTRACT

To investigate the academic morality misbehaviors of college students in China and its psychological causes, a survey of academic morality behaviors was conducted among 860 students through a questionnaire. The effects of moral disengagement on empathy, responsibility, moral identity and misbehaviors of academic morality were explored. Moral disengagement shows the significant positive prediction effect on academic morality misbehavior. Responsibility and moral identity have the prominent negative prediction effect on the moral disengagement. Moral disengagement plays no intermediary role in the relationship between empathy and academic morality misbehaviors. However, moral disengagement plays the full intermediary role in the relationship between responsibility and academic morality misbehaviors as well as the relationship between moral identity and academic morality misbehaviors.

### KEYWORDS

Moral disengagement; College student; Academic morality misbehavior; Moral identity.



## INTRODUCTION

College students' misbehavior of academic morality is common in China. Some researchers consider it as "an epidemic disease" and "a long-term problem"<sup>[1]</sup>. The misbehavior of academic morality is regarded as a serious immoral behavior<sup>[2]</sup>. It is inferred that there is a positive correlation between moral disengagement and misbehavior of academic morality. That is to say, an individual with the high sense of moral disengagement prefers to the misbehavior of academic morality. Moral disengagement is a special cognitive bias generated by an individual. In the bias, individuals redefine their behaviors to show less hurts as possible, reduce their responsibility in the consequences of their behaviors to a great extent, and decrease the identity to the suffering of victims<sup>[3]</sup>. The misbehavior of academic morality can be enhanced by moral disengagement because moral disengagement is able to reasonably prevent the guilt and self-condemnation produced by the misbehavior of academic morality from being separated from internal moral norms. Such separation reduces self-repression<sup>[4]</sup>. According to moral disengagement theory, individuals usually undergo a moral disengagement process prior to conducting their misbehaviors. The process enables the individuals to identify their own moral misbehaviors, thus showing no obvious guilt or self-condemnation for their misbehaviors. It is inferred that empathy, responsibility, and moral identity may influence the moral misbehavior of individuals through moral disengagement. Moreover, empathy, responsibility, and moral identity can decrease the moral misbehavior through preventing moral disengagement. Moral disengagement plays a significant intermediary role in the relationships between the decision-making process of individual misbehavior and several variables including empathy, moral identity, and reference points<sup>[5]</sup>. At present, college students' misbehaviors of academic morality were seldom studied in China. In the paper, we analyzed the misbehavior of academic morality for college students in China, studied the psychological causes and influencing factors, and investigated the intermediary role of moral disengagement in the relationships between academic morality misbehavior and three factors including empathy, responsibility, and moral identity.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Subjects and samples

This study conducted the survey among 860 undergraduate participants with random sampling method. A total of 860 questionnaires were issued and 825 valid questionnaires were received with the valid rate of 95.93%. The participants include 297 boys and 528 girls. The participants are composed of 463 urban participants and 362 rural participants. The 825 participants include 491 art students and 334 science students. According to the grades, the participants include 146 freshmen, 207 sophomores, 291 juniors, and 181 seniors.

### Study tools

#### Moral disengagement

The moral disengagement questionnaire compiled by Bandura was employed in the survey<sup>[6]</sup>. Since the 32 terms in this questionnaire were orientated for children and adolescents, Detert et al.<sup>[5]</sup> made certain appropriate modifications on the questionnaire to adapt it to college students. Like Bandura's tests, the terms for measuring moral disengagement consisted of eight sub-dimensions and were scored by 5 points. The higher score indicated the higher moral disengagement level. In addition, the back translation strategy was employed to ensure the consistent content. In preliminary survey, 200 questionnaires were obtained for factor analysis. Six items with the factor load of less than 0.30 or the cross load of higher than 0.30 were deleted. In the subsequent formal test, the remaining 26 terms were

used for the confirmatory factor analysis. Eight-factor model got the following indexes: a fit index of  $\chi^2/df = 2$ , goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.92, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.94, IFI = 0.98, tall latte index (TLI) = 0.96, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.89.

### **Academic morality misbehavior**

The academic morality misbehavior questionnaire compiled by McCabe and Treviño was used in the survey<sup>[2]</sup>. The questionnaire was composed of 12 terms and the 4-point scoring method was adopted. The higher score means the more serious academic morality behavior. In this study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was 0.82.

### **Empathy**

The questionnaire was an empathy scale revised from international personality item bank<sup>[7]</sup>.

It was composed of 10 terms and a 7-point scoring method was applied. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was 0.82. In this study, 5 terms from the emotional dimension were used to measure the empathy. The internal consistency of the scale was 0.73. In the confirmatory factor analysis of single factor model, the fitting indexes were obtained as follows:  $\chi^2/df = 2.95$ , GFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.06.

### **Responsibility**

The questionnaire was a responsibility scale revised from international personality item bank<sup>[7]</sup>.

It was composed of 10 terms and a 7-point scoring method was applied. The higher score means the higher responsibility. The internal consistency of the scale was 0.81. In the confirmatory factor analysis of single factor model, the fitting indexes were obtained as follows:  $\chi^2/df = 2.99$ , GFI = 0.97, NFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, and RMSEA = 0.06.

### **Moral identity**

The moral identity questionnaire compiled by Aquino and Reed was employed in the survey. In the survey, nine nouns that may "describe some characteristics of an individual", such as benevolence, compassion, fairness, and honesty, were presented to the participants. In the scale, the 5-point scoring method was used to evaluate the identity of an individual on these characteristics. For example, the important part in the behaviors of an individual was to become a person with these characteristics. Twelve items in internalization and symbolic dimensions were involved in this scale. The internal consistency coefficient was 0.74. In the confirmatory factor analysis of single factor model, the fitting indexes were obtained as follows:  $\chi^2/df = 3.29$ , GFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, and RMSEA = 0.06.

### **Data analysis**

All data were processed and analyzed with SPSS 16.0 and Lisrel 8.70.

## **STUDY RESULTS**

### **The correlations among the variables**

Since the social desirability in morality study was a hotspot, 3 lie detection items were added in the questionnaire. Before variable correlation analysis, the samples with lie detection score above 2 were deleted. TABLE 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables. The variables show the significant correlation at the level of 0.01. This outcome lays the basis of the following regression analysis.

**TABLE 1 : The basic statistics and correlation matrixes of the variables**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Moral Disengagement (1)	59.36	13.68				
Academic Moral Anomie Behavior (2)	9.71	0.37***				
Empathy (3)	25.13	5.16	-0.15**	-0.16***		
Responsibility (4)	53.94	6.83	-0.27**	-0.16***	0.45***	
Moral Identity (5)	38.12	5.92	-0.27**	-0.16***	0.31***	0.43***

Note : \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001, similarly hereinafter

**The effect of moral disengagement on the academic morality misbehavior**

The correlation matrixes suggested that moral disengagement was significantly correlated to the academic morality misbehavior. Therefore, in the subsequent analysis, the hierarchy regression analysis was used to profoundly explore the predictive effect of moral disengagement on the academic morality misbehavior in the case of controlling other correlation variables. The academic morality misbehavior was used as the dependent variable in hierarchy regression analysis. Firstly, the demographic variables (gender and grade), empathy, responsibility, and moral identity were introduced into the regression equation. Then, the moral disengagement was introduced into the regression equation. TABLE 2 shows the hierarchical regression analysis results.

**TABLE 2 : The effect of moral disengagement on academic morality misbehavior**

Variable	Academic Moral Anomie Behavior	
	First Step	Second Step
First Step	Sex	-0.29***
	Grade	0.10**
	Empathy	0.03
	Responsibility	-0.10***
	Moral Identity	-0.09***
Second Step	Moral Disengagement	0.25***
F	15.03***	37.05***
The Square of R	0.13	0.20
The Square of ΔR	0.13***	0.07***

Being consistent with the hypotheses in this study, moral disengagement can significantly and positively predicate academic morality misbehavior in the case of controlling other variables and show an increase of 7.3% in the variable interpretation. This outcome supports the hypothesis that the individuals with the higher moral disengagement are more liable to show academic morality misbehavior.

**The effect of empathy, responsibility, and moral identify on moral disengagement**

Correlation matrixes show that empathy, responsibility, and moral identify are significantly negatively correlated to moral disengagement. Therefore, in the subsequent analysis, the hierarchy regression analysis was used to investigate whether empathy, responsibility, and moral identity could significantly improve the interpretation on moral disengagement in addition to demographic variables (gender and grade)<sup>[8]</sup>. The process was indicated as follows. Firstly, demographic variables were brought into the regression equation as the first-layer variables. Then empathy, responsibility, and moral identity were introduced into the regression equation as the second-layer variables. Finally, the variations of the square of R, as well as the F-test value of such variations, were calculated.

**TABLE 3 : The effects of empathy, responsibility, and moral identity on moral disengagement**

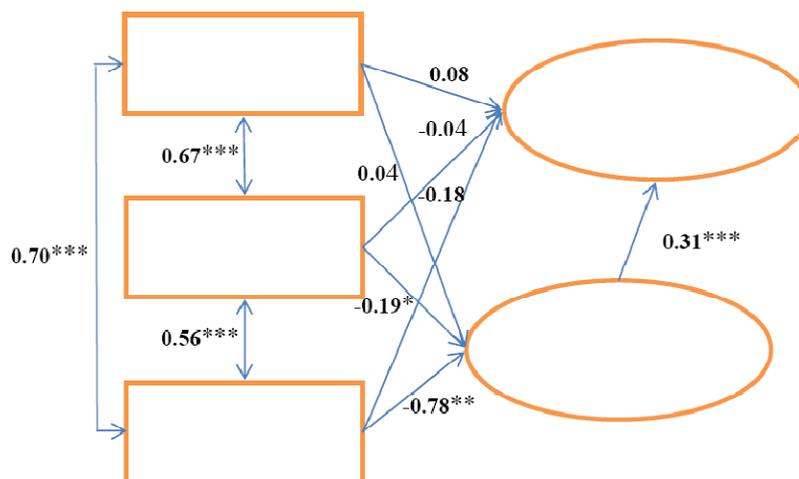
	Variable	Academic Moral Anomie Behavior	
		First Step	Second Step
First Step	Sex	-0.19***	-0.15***
	Grade	0.13**	0.13**
	Empathy		0.06
	Responsibility	-0.18***	
Second Step	Moral Identity	-0.19***	
	<i>F</i>	14.13***	16.87***
	The Square of <i>R</i>	0.05	0.13
	The Square of $\Delta R$	0.05***	0.09***

As shown in TABLE 3, in the case of controlling demographic variables, empathy shows no predominant prediction effect on moral disengagement, while responsibility and moral identity present the prominent negative predicting effect on the moral disengagement. Moreover, responsibility and moral identity contribute to the interpretation to the moral disengagement by a variable increase of 9%. Among collinearity diagnosis indexes, tolerance and variance inflation factors also achieve ideal scores (the scores of the former are all higher than 0.70, while those of the later are all lower than 1.50). This result reveals that the three predictive variables are unlikely to show the collinear relationship. Therefore, the study result validates the research hypothesis that responsibility and moral identity show the predominant negative predicting effect on moral disengagement. Unfortunately, it does not support the hypothesis that empathy shows significant predicting effect on moral disengagement.

### The intermediate effect of moral disengagement

The intermediate role of the moral disengagement was explored with structural equation model (as shown in Figure 1). In the study, two models, namely, the non-intermediary model and the intermediary model, were constructed. According to the fit indexes of the two models, the more reasonable one can be determined. Whether the influencing paths of empathy, responsibility, and moral identity on academic morality misbehavior pass through the moral disengagement is the difference between the non-intermediary model and intermediary model. Generally, data fit well with the model when absolute fit index  $\chi^2/df < 5$ , RMSEA  $< 0.08$ , and GFI and NFI  $> 0.90$ .

Model fitting result shows that a number of indexes of the non-intermediary model are below the critical value (TABLE 4). As for the intermediary model, except that NFI is less than the critical value of 0.90, other indexes exceed the critical value and are superior to the indexes of non-intermediary model. This result suggests that the intermediate model M shows a better fitting effect.

**Figure 1 : Mediation model of moral disengagement**

As shown in Figure 1, the influencing paths of empathy on moral disengagement and academic morality misbehavior fail to achieve the significance level, indicating that moral disengagement does not play the intermediate role in the relationship between empathy and academic morality misbehavior. Meanwhile, the path coefficient for the influences of responsibility on academic morality misbehavior also fails to reach the significance level, while that on moral disengagement achieves a very predominant level. This result proves the complete intermediate role of moral disengagement in the relationship between responsibility and academic morality misbehavior. In the similar way, moral disengagement also plays a complete intermediate role in the relationship between moral identity and academic morality misbehavior with an effect value of -0.24. The result does not support the hypothesis that the moral disengagement plays no intermediary role in the relationship between empathy and academic morality misbehavior, while validates the hypotheses that moral disengagement plays the intermediate role in the relationship between responsibility and academic morality misbehavior as well as in the relationship between moral identity and academic morality misbehavior.

**TABLE 4 : The fitting indexes for the model of the intermediate role of moral disengagement**

Model	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
MNo Mediation	8.49	0.85	0.88	0.89	0.82	0.89	0.07
MMediation	2.93	0.91	0.88	0.92	0.92	0.92	0.06

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### The effect of moral disengagement on academic morality misbehavior

The study shows that, in the case of controlling other variables, moral disengagement can significantly and positively predict academic morality misbehavior of college students. That is to say, the higher moral disengagement level indicates the obvious tendency of the morality misbehaviors.

This conclusion is consistent with most of previous studies. Bandura pointed out that moral disengagement might lead to the failure of the self-regulatory function of morality. Furthermore, individual is promoted to approve its morality misbehavior cognitively and implement morality misbehaviors reasonably without significant guilt or remorse<sup>[3]</sup>. The study results on Chinese college students in this study further support this theory, indicating the cross-cultural stability of the theory.

### The effect of empathy, responsibility, and moral identity on moral disengagement

By controlling the influences of demographic variables on moral disengagement, empathy does not show significant prediction effect on moral disengagement. This outcome disagrees with previous study results<sup>[5]</sup>. The reason lies in that the influences of empathy on moral disengagement are investigated from an emotional view in the paper, while moral disengagement follows a cognitive mechanism. Therefore, empathy does not show significant influences in the regression analysis. As a result, the empathy in the emotional level merely cannot reduce the moral disengagement level. Therefore, to reduce the moral disengagement level, it is required to reach the empathy in a cognitive level.

It was previously confirmed that responsibility significantly and negatively predicted the moral disengagement. That is to say, the higher individual responsibility means the low probability of the moral disengagement. This result is consistent with our hypothesis. That is to say, the individual with high responsibility sense are less liable to shift and disperse responsibility, thus showing the low moral disengagement level. Moral identity also shows a negative prediction effect on moral disengagement. The higher moral identity level means the low probability of the moral disengagement. This result is consistent with our hypothesis and previous studies<sup>[5]</sup>.

### The intermediate role of moral disengagement

The study fails to confirm the intermediate role of moral disengagement in the relationship between empathy and academic morality misbehavior. That is to say, empathy does not affect morality

misbehavior through moral disengagement. However, as mentioned above, moral disengagement, as a cognitive mechanism, cannot be reduced through the empathy in the emotional level. Therefore, future researches should pay attention to the influences of empathy in the cognitive level on moral disengagement.

This study reveals that moral disengagement plays a full intermediating role in the relationship between responsibility and academic morality misbehavior. That is to say, reasonability affects academic morality misbehavior through moral disengagement.

This study also proves the complete intermediately role of moral disengagement in the relationship between moral identity and academic morality misbehavior. According to the theory of individual moral disengagement, individuals should firstly approve their morality misbehaviors in a moral level through moral disengagement mechanism before conducting the morality misbehavior. However, moral identity will prevent morality misbehaviors through preventing this identification process. Namely, moral identity can prevent academic morality misbehaviors through reducing moral disengagement.

### **The disadvantages of this study**

This study interpreted the intermediate the role of moral disengagement in detail. However, it merely analyzed the correlations of three antecedent variables of moral disengagement and failed to profoundly investigated relationships of the three factors. Therefore, we will explore the internal relations of the three factors.

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