NOBODY IS BETTER THAN YOU: OPPORTUNISTIC MORAL IDENTITY OF SEXUAL BATTERERS

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Abstract

Modern societies devise sexual violence as a social problem. Legal psychologists highlight the importance of identifying those variables that increase the likelihood of violent behaviour occurs – risk factors- and those variables that increase their opposition to have deviant behaviours -protective factors-. For these reasons, the objective of this work is to study moral identity and moral disengagement as variables strongly related to violent behaviour, in a sample of institutionalized men (sexual offenders and intimate partner batterers) and in a sample of community men to analyse the differences between them. The sample was composed of 91 convicted and 133 community participants who voluntarily completed The Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale and The Propensity to Moral Disengagement Scale. Variance analysis, bivariate correlations and hierarchical regressions were performed in order to analyse the differences in each of the variables between groups; to test the relationships between study variables, and to find out which mechanisms of moral disengagement are associated with both factors of moral identity in each group. Results show significant differences between groups in both factors of moral identity (internalization $F_{(1, 224)} = 20.72$, $p < .001$; and symbolization $F_{(1, 224)} = 14.52$, $p < .001$). Bivariate correlations showed relationship only between symbolization and moral disengagement in institutionalized participants and lastly, different mechanisms of moral disengagement were associated with both factors of moral identity in each group. Finally, the practical implications of these results were discussed to improve the psychological interventions with sexual offenders and intimate partner batterers.

Keywords: Sexual assault, Intimate partner violence, Moral identity, Moral disengagement, Risk factor

Introduction

Modern societies devise sexual violence as a social problem, which is in the cross hairs of the media, and concerns both citizens and public authorities. In Spain, the National Institute of Statistics (INE) registered 29.008 cases of women victims of interpersonal violence (with protective order or precautionary measures) during 2017. This number has increased by 2.6% compared to the previous year. In addition, the Crime Report, published by the Ministry of Interior of Spain in 2018, indicates that there has been an increase in sexual assaults with penetration of 22.7% compared to the same period of 2017.

Forensic professionals who work with these types of criminals, in the service of the courts or in prisons, face increasing pressure to effectively assess risk´s levels of recidivism (Craig, Browne, Beech & Strigner 2006). Criminal psychology research highlights the importance of identifying all contextual, temperamental and sociocognitive variables that increase the likelihood of violent behaviour will occur -risk factors- and those variables that increase their opposition to have deviant behaviours -protective factors- (Lösel & Farrington, 2012). In this sense, the study of moral development in this context is of special interest, as it is already equated in the old Roman law with dolo capacitas or discernment (Ríos, 1977). The offenders, like the rest of the population, choose their behaviour based on their perception of available options. However, they differ from other people in perceiving certain situations, as a legitimate option and not as a sexual offence. Accordingly, one of the predictive variables with more interest for the understanding of (im)moral behaviour is moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

Previous literature indicates that the development of moral judgment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the maturity of moral action. Therefore, the moral identity is a construct that arises in an effort to understand this gap between judgment and moral action. Moral identity refers to the importance of morality for the self (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). This construct has motivational nature and, as Aquino & Reed (2002) indicate, it is composed of two different dimensions: one public or social (symbolization) and other private or personal (internalization). The internalization dimension affects the association strength between moral traits and self-concept. The symbolization dimension acquires a more general sensitivity to the moral self as a social object, whose actions in the world, can report that one has these characteristics. Both dimensions allow that values such as being honest, compassionate, fair and generous to be central to the definition of personal identity. For that matter, it is coherent to think that people with high scores of moral identity are often more involved in moral actions.

This statement is supported by several empirical studies and reviews, as meta-analysis conducted recently by Hertz & Krettenauer (2016), where the relationship between identity and moral action provides a moderate effect size (r = .22).

Although moral identity has not yet been studied in sexual offenders nor in intimate partner batterers, other studies point to the opinions of individuals and their behaviour do not necessarily concur (Batson, 2011). Individuals may be wrong about what really defines or matters to them. In addition, they may want to create a moral identity to leave a fair impression on others. Hence, moral identity and real behaviour would be widely disengaged (Vecina & Marzana, 2016). Thus, some studies have shown that individuals are mainly motivated to maintain a positive moral identity, while avoiding the costs of behaving morally (Batson, Thompson & Chen, 2002).

This moral opportunism could be facilitated by one of the social-cognitive variables strongly related to antisocial and violent behaviour, the moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986, Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker & Mayer, 2012). Bandura (1986) indicates that the moral agency, as an internal system of behaviour self-regulation, could be activated mainly in two ways: preventing the individual from engaging in violent behaviour - in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and negative self-sanctions - or disengaged morally to favour their engagement in them through justifications that make those behaviours reprehensible, socially acceptable and fair (Fuik, 2014). Consequently, moral disengagement is a mechanism that takes place when moral self-sanctions are disabled, resulting in the disinhibition of violent behaviours and terrible acts against others.

This moral disengagement occurs through eight cognitive mechanisms, which in turn are grouped into four major categories (Bandura, Barberanelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Firstly, individuals would change their perceptions of victims, blaming it either for causing reprehensible behaviour, or for dehumanizing it in some way (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt & Rock Henderson, 2010). Secondly, another category allows individuals to misrepresent or ignore the damaging consequences of the act. Thirdly, individuals can minimize their role of agent over behaviour, shifting responsibility to a third party or spreading responsibility for a larger group or context. Finally, in the latter category, individuals can cognitively restructure reprehensible behaviour (Risser & Eckert, 2016).

For the aforementioned reasons, the aim of this work is to study moral identity and moral disengagement in a sample of institutionalized men (sexual offenders and intimate partner

batterers) and in a community sample to analyse the differences between them. Thus, we firstly hypothesize, that men institutionalized for sexual crimes will have higher scores in identity and moral disengagement than non-institutionalized men; secondly, that the relations between both independent variables will be greater in the group of institutionalized participants; and, thirdly, that the moral disengagement´s mechanisms used to preserve the moral identity in both groups will vary between groups.

Method

Participants

The sample of this work was composed of two groups of participants, institutionalized and non-institutionalized.

The institutionalized sample was composed of 91 men, coming from all the Correctional Centres of the Autonomous Community of Galicia, aged between 18 and 75 years ($M = 43.24$, $SD = 11.23$). From all of them, 32 were convicted of sexual assault and 59 for intimate partner violence. The majority were Spanish (72%), and they indicated a medium-low academic level (64.3% primary). Likewise, intentional sampling was used to form this sample.

The non-institutionalized sample was composed of 133 men, from Pontevedra (54.1%), Lugo (21.8%), A Coruña (18.8%) and Ourense (5.3%) and aged between 18 and 75 years ($M = 42.24$, $SD = 10.75$). Regarding their academic level, 19.5% had done primary, 30.1% secondary, 27.1% professional training and 23.2% university studies. In addition, incidental sampling was used to form this sample.

Measurements

Moral Identity. The first measure was The Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale. This 10-item scale (Aquino & Reed,2002) was designed to measure moral identity or the degree to which individuals' self-concepts focus on moral traits. The scale consists of two subscales: Internalization, or the degree to which private views of oneself are focused on moral traits; and Symbolization, or the degree to which moral traits are reflected in the individual's actions in the world. Participants were given a list of nine moral traits (e.g., caring, fair, hardworking) and were asked to rate the extent to which they agree/disagree with statements regarding these traits using a 7 point scale. A sample item for the Internalization subscale is "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am" and for the Symbolization subscale

is "The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations." This instrument showed an acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha for Moral Identity of .66, and for Internalization and Symbolization of .55 and .65 respectively.

Moral Disengagement. The Propensity to Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore et al., 2012) has been used 24-item scale to assess the mechanisms of moral disengagement developed by Bandura et al. (1996). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. The items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ''Disagree strongly'' to ''Agree strongly.'' Sample items include ''it is alright to fight to protect your friends,'' and ''if people are living under bad conditions, they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively.'' This instrument showed an acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha for moral disengagement of .81.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical standards were ensured to shield rights of confidentiality, voluntariness and anonymity of the people surveyed.

Specifically, in order to work with institutionalized sample, the standards collected by the Ministry of the Interior of Spain were followed in order to access the centres.

All the participants signed the informed consent before their collaboration, where they were explained that to leave the study did not have any type of drawback. In this way, all procedures in accordance with institutional standards were respected.

Data analysis

Data analyses were conducted on IBM SPSS Statistics 23, and Mplus v.7 was used for the analyses of structural equation modelling. Firstly, one-way ANOVAs were performed to analyse the differences in all the study variables explained by (non) institutionalization. Secondly, correlation analyses were used to assess the associations among the study variables. Thirdly, hierarchical regressions were performed to find out which mechanisms of moral disengagement are associated with both factors of moral identity in each group.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations, internal consistency of each of the scales, as well as the results of ANOVAs for each of the variables. The results show no significant differences between both groups, institutionalized and non-institutionalized participants, in moral disengagement scores. However, the differences between groups in the internalization and symbolization of moral identity variables have been significant. This is, institutionalized participants have higher scores than non-institutionalized participants in internalization $F(1, 224) = 20.72$, $p < .001$ and symbolization $F(1, 224) = 14.52$, $p < .001$. These scores can be observed in figure 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive results of all study variables explained by groups

	Institutionalized Males	Community Males			
	M (SD)	M (SD)	α	F	η_{p2}
Moral Disengagement	50.47 (15.18)	49.93 (11.96)	.81	.09	.00
Moral Justification	6.83 (3.28)	6.25 (2.49)	.60	2.24	.01
Euphemistic language	6.69 (2.86)	7.71 (2.64)	.63	1.67	.00
Advantageous comparison	5.18 (2.31)	5.48 (2.37)	.59	.82	.00
Displacement of responsibility	6.84 (5.18)	5.87 (2.48)	.38	3.52	.01
Diffusion of responsibility	5.90 (2.80)	6.15 (2.15)	.55	.59	.00
Distorting consequences:	7.37 (2.21)	7.53 (2.24)	.05	.27	.00
Attribution of blame	6.03 (2.75)	5.38 (1.42)	.40	5.33*	.02
Dehumanization:	5.51 (2.88)	6.05 (2.51)	.66	2.36	.01
Moral identity symbolization	16.91 (4.53)	14.96 (2.93)	.65	15.13***	.06
Moral identity internalization	21.50 (3.32)	19.77 (2.84)	.55	17.38***	.07

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. η_{p2}= partial eta squared effect size.

The differences in the scores of moral disengagement and moral identity in the group of institutionalized participants were also analysed, according to the criminal typology, but not finding significant differences between the scores provided by the participants convicted of sexual offences and intimate partner violence $p > .05$.

Table 2 shows correlations between moral disengagement and both factors of moral identity, internalization and symbolization for each group. In the group of non-institutionalized

participants, the relationships of moral disengagement have been significant with both factors, while in the group of institutionalized participants it has only been related to the symbolization.
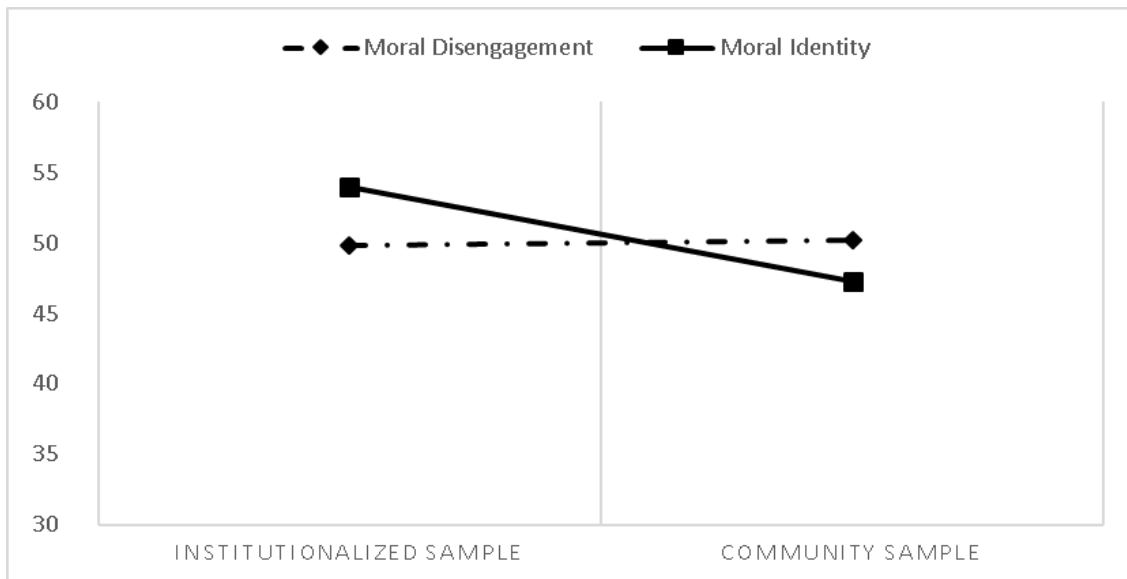
Figure 1. Normalized scores in moral disengagement and moral identity obtained in both groups.

Table 2. Results of the correlation analysis between all variables in both groups

	1	2	3
1. Moral Disengagement			
2. MI. Symbolization			
Institutionalized	(.21**)		
Community	.18*		
3. MI. Internalization			
Institutionalized	(-.26)	(.30**)	
Community	-.20*	.25**	

Note. The coefficients in brackets correspond to institutionalized males and the coefficients without brackets correspond to non-institutionalized males. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3 shows a multiple regression model for each group, through which it can be known which mechanism of moral disengagement is most strongly associated with each factor of moral identity. This table reveals the standardized correlation coefficients *(β)* as well as the scores obtained in the model comparison *test t*.

Table 3. Predictive moral disconnection mechanisms in the hierarchical regression analysis on internalization and symbolization of moral identity

Institutionalized sample			
	β	t	R^2
Symbolization			
Moral Justification	.25	2.45*	.05
Community sample			
	β	t	R^2
Internalization			
Diffusion of responsibility	-.42	-4.57 ***	.08
Displacement of responsibility	.34	3.74***	.16
Dehumanization	-.19	-2.37*	.19
Symbolization			
Moral Justification	.20	2.38*	.05
Dehumanization	.20	2.37*	.08

Note. $* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001$

Through each hierarchical regression, low but significant portions of variance can be found in the prediction of moral identity since all R^2 oscillate between the values .05 and .19 (for non-institutionalized participants). Moral justification is the common mechanism of moral disengagement in both samples for the symbolization of moral identity. The internalization of the moral identity in the community population can be explained to a greater extent by the mechanism of dehumanization.

Discussion

The purpose of this work was to study the gap between judgment and moral action through the study of moral identity, in a context in which previously it had not been evaluated: the prison context. In particular, the differences between institutionalized and non-institutionalized men have been studied, with a view to finding out the functional value of preservation of positive moral identity in each sample. Likewise, moral disengagement has been considered to explain the possible discrepancies between identity and moral behaviour. This approach allows us to connect results from two separate fields, moral and criminal psychology, to improve the psychological interventions that deal with this type of aggressors. However, it is necessary to highlight some limitations that must be considered when interpreting and generalizing the results. Firstly, the data have been obtained exclusively through self-reports that, in the case of this sample, may present certain distortions in the results such as the Rosenthal effect or a certain social desirability (the extreme cases were controlled). Secondly,

the generalization of these results to other contexts must be taken with certain precautions given the peculiarities of the evaluation context: prison inmates. Thirdly, this study assumes a linear relationship between the study variables and criminal behaviour, but it is not necessarily the only one.

Extending this logic, in relation to our first hypothesis, the results have confirmed higher scores in moral identity in the institutionalized population than in the community population. The literature indicates that usually institutionalized participants have a low self-concept, strongly associated with low social competence. Several studies, which have manipulated experiences of institutionalization, have shown that people have negative emotional reactions when they think they have performed poorly (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). Although our results seem a priori contradictory to the previous literature, these findings are consistent with the theory of moral compensation (Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009). This theory proposes that moral (or immoral) behaviour can result from an internal balance between the moral identity of the individual and the cost inherent to prosocial behaviour. In this way, people with a low moral identity increase the motivation to act prosocially (Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Iliev & Medin, 2009), while feeling relatively moral reduces the motivation to act prosocially (allowing in certain circumstances, produce moral licenses that lead to reprehensible acts). These results are particular interest in this study context, since previous high scores in this construct had been identified as a protective factor or promoter of prosocial behaviours, especially in community populations (Aquino & Reed, 2002). However, these results may also indicate that, in certain people and in certain contexts, high scores can function as a risk factor in a double sense: facilitating that certain behaviours are perceived legitimate as "moral licenses" and as a predictor of poor initiative for change (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000).

Besides that, although higher scores on moral disengagement were found in the group of institutionalized participants, these differences have not been significant with respect to the scores obtained in the group of non-institutionalized participants. This suggests that both groups use these cognitive strategies to disassociate from moral standards, once they have performed behaviours that, based on them, would be reprehensible.

Regarding our second hypothesis, the results have shown different associations between moral disengagement and moral identity. The moral disengagement has been significantly and positively related to the symbolization of moral identity in both samples. According to these results, it could be said regardless of the institutionalization, that people

strive to preserve and improve positive concepts of themselves before others. Moreover, they can do this by behaving in a moral way, or by cognitive skewing their world concepts through these cognitive mechanisms (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011).

The internalization of the moral identity has been negatively and significantly related to the moral disengagement only in the sample of non-institutionalized participants. These results indicate that in the community sample, repeated use of the mechanisms of moral disengagement to convert the reprehensible behaviours into justifiable ones, is associated with a lesser importance for oneself and behaving as a moral person (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000). However, moral disengagement in the institutionalized population has not had significant relationships with the internalization of moral identity. These findings are consistent with the theory of moral hypocrisy, which does not assume the optimistic assumption that individuals are motivated to achieve moral integrity, but that they are motivated to appear moral in the eyes of others, avoiding the cost of be moral. In this way, the benefits to oneself of moral hypocrisy are obvious: to obtain the material rewards of acting selfishly and to obtain the social rewards of being seen and seeing oneself as honest and moral. These results have some relevance for the treatment of this sample, because the problem is not only that the moral motivation is weak - counteracted by situational pressures or by the use of mechanisms of moral disengagement - but the goal is not really to be moral, only see oneself and be seen by others as moral (Batson 2011; Jones & Pittman, 1982).

In addition, it is important to highlight the cognitive strategies used by both groups to reduce the cognitive dissonance between identity and (in) moral behaviour. In the group of non-institutionalized participants, moral identity has been associated with the mechanisms of perceptions´ change about victims (dehumanization), minimization of the agent´s role (diffusion and displacement of responsibility) and with the cognitive restructuring of one's own harmful behaviour (moral justification). In the group of institutionalized participants, only the cognitive restructuring of the harmful behaviour has been used. Based on these results, the non-institutionalized population needs to use more diversity of cognitive strategies to reduce the cognitive, affective and anticipatory guilt reactions that arise before the offence.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the need to evaluate moral development in general and moral identity, particularly, in the prison inmates. Specifically, an excessive moral identity can act a risk factor in the motivation for change when making interventions with these offenders. For this reason, one cognitive-behavioural training program is recommended due to their effectiveness, Moral Recognition Therapy (Ferguson & Wormith, 2013; Little & Robinson,

1988). This program works around integrated and structured packages of skills or abilities train based on the protection or risk factors that have been considered (not evidence-based) or observed (evidence-based) that characterize antisocial or criminal groups versus normalized ones.

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