

Moral Disengagement in Group Violence

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This review looks into how offenders in violent group crimes use moral disengagement to justify their actions, with a focus on gender differences. Although interest in moral disengagement has grown, most research centers on male offenders and technology-related aggression, leaving a gap in our understanding of how these processes operate in the real-world. The material used for this study was found through systematic searches of Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and PsycINFO, using keywords related to moral disengagement, co-offending, and gender differences related to psychological, developmental, and sociocultural perspectives. The findings indicate that mechanisms such as victim blaming, harmful behavior justification, and shared responsibility are more likely in group settings where peer support and collective accountability encourage disengagement. Furthermore, both personal traits, such as impulsivity, anxiety, and callousness, and situational factors, such as age, race, and peer influence, were seen to be major contributors to shaping these patterns. This review's main contribution is its examination of gender differences. It has found that male offenders show higher levels of moral disengagement than female offenders, mainly due to gendered socialization and expectations rather than inherent traits. This gender perspective highlights key gaps, particularly the lack of research on female co-offenders in face-to-face violent situations, and points to the need for gender-sensitive interventions, along with more research into how different factors influence moral disengagement across offender groups.

Introduction

Moral disengagement is a psychological mechanism in which individuals use cognitive strategies to justify harmful actions against others in order to guard themselves against feelings of guilt, distress, or social stigma.¹ It is of great importance in enabling violent group behaviour, since it allows the members of these groups to maintain their self-esteem and avoid self-condemnation.² The process works by distorting a person's moral self-regulation; usually behaviour is regulated or assessed by internal standards that result in self-punishment. However, in the case of moral disengagement, bad actions are mentally reinterpreted so that people can carry out behaviours that would otherwise lead to guilt or shame.³

Moral disengagement is especially frequent in the case of group criminal behaviour, since the individuals involved usually set aside their personal moral principles, which allows them to carry out illegal activities without feeling ashamed.⁴ Co-offending refers to a crime that is committed as a result of the collaboration of two or more people.⁵ This kind of group situation is particularly typical in the case of violent crime, which includes any acts involving the use of physical force or threats meant to cause harm, for example, assault, robbery and homicide. Research into victim resistance and the outcomes of crime indicates that when people commit crimes together, the violence and danger involved are greater than in cases where the crime is committed alone.^{6,7} By means of these mecha-

nisms, co-offenders are able to carry out violent acts without experiencing the guilt that such behaviour generally would cause.¹ However, this review has its limitations. While studies show that moral disengagement has facilitated offending in group contexts, the outcomes vary on whether gang membership amplifies the disengagement.^{2,8} Also, the evidence relies on self-reported measures and proxy indicators, provoking questions about their relevance to real-life group violence.⁹ Critically, research on gender differences, particularly female co-offenders in offline violent contexts, remains underdeveloped, a gap this review addresses. The research has also predominantly examined moral disengagement in male offenders only, with a rather limited focus on female co-offenders or gender relations.⁵ The findings from male-only data may result in ineffective interventions that neglect to address gender-specific needs.¹⁰ This review intends to look into how groups consisting of offenders use moral disengagement as a way of justifying their violent actions, and to examine the differences between male and female groups. It will consider the mechanisms of moral disengagement in cases of violent co-offending, identify any gender disparities, and study the implications for interventions that are aimed at different genders. If these differences are understood, this could help to improve rehabilitation techniques and therapeutic methods.

Methods

The review integrates empirical research on moral disengagement in cases of violent offending, with a particular empha-

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sis on gender differences. In order to do this, the following keywords were used in Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and PsycINFO: “moral disengagement” AND (“group violence” OR “collective violence” OR “gang offending”) AND (“gender differences in co-offending” OR “gender differences in moral disengagement”). The reference lists of the key publications were also checked by hand. The first searches of the databases yielded more than 200 articles; after removing the duplicates and carrying out a careful review, 41 articles were selected for synthesis.

A study was included only if its peer-reviewed empirical research (regardless of whether it was quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), was published between 1991 and 2025, used validated scales or qualitative methods to measure moral disengagement, focused on offenders, and examined either situations involving group offending or gender differences. It was excluded if the study was entirely theoretical, had not measured moral disengagement, or had included populations who were not offenders and had no bearing on aggression.

The way in which the key concepts were defined is as follows: ‘violent group crime’ meant acts in which two or more people used physical force or made threats (for example, assault, robbery, homicide, gang violence, and multiple-perpetrator sexual offences); ‘co-offending’ referred to crimes committed by two or more individuals; ‘moral disengagement’ was the mental justification of harmful behaviour; and ‘gender differences’ meant the variations that had been reported between men and women regarding their moral disengagement scores, mechanisms, or justification patterns.

The study was organised thematically, with the results being divided into three main categories: the mechanisms of moral disengagement in group offending, the influencing factors (that is, individual characteristics and situational aspects) and gender differences. The patterns noted in the different studies were compared and the methodological weaknesses were carefully evaluated.

Conceptual Framework: Bandura’s Theory of Moral Disengagement (1999)

The eight mechanisms of moral disengagement described by Albert Bandura in his 1999 work are divided into three categories: reprehensible conduct, detrimental effects, and victimization.¹

Reprehensible Conduct consists of interpreting wrong actions in such a way as to make them appear morally acceptable. This can involve providing a *moral justification* by portraying the actions as righteous, employing *euphemistic labeling* by using cleaner language to reduce the apparent severity, and making *advantageous comparisons* by trivialising the harm when compared with even worse atrocities. In the case

of group offending, such mechanisms enable the co-offenders to reframe violence as being in keeping with the group’s objectives—such as protecting territory, enforcing loyalty, or retaliating against rivals—rather than as individual transgressions.²

The *detrimental effects* cover *diffusion of responsibility* (which means that the sense for accountability is spread out among the members), *displacement of responsibility* (when people explain their behaviour in terms of authority or peer pressure), and *disregard of consequences* (which involves either avoiding or downplaying the harm). In group crimes, diffusion has a great impact since each member can blame the harm on the group as a whole rather than take individual responsibility—this is different from individual offences, where the offender cannot share their culpability.¹¹

The *victimization* category includes *dehumanization* (stripping victims of human qualities) and *attribution of blame* (accusing victims of being responsible for their suffering). These mechanisms were often collectively reinforced as gang members validated the use of dehumanizing language and used blame attributions against outgroups, forming a shared moral framework that justified the harm that was inflicted^{2,8}.

Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory explains why group situations promote moral disengagement. This is because of a concept known as reciprocal determinism, which describes the continuous interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and the social environment; it is thus the social environment that forms mental processes. When people commit wrongdoing together, their peers alter the cognitive environment in which moral decisions are made, making disengagement strategies easier to access as well as reinforcing them within the social environment.

Results

Moral Disengagement in Group Offending

It has been shown that being in a group leads to greater moral disengagement. In a study carried out by Niebieszcanski et al. (2015), 269 male prisoners in UK prisons and young offender institutes were surveyed and it was discovered that street gang offenders had higher scores for moral disengagement than those who were not gang offenders. The most commonly used mechanisms were moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic language and diffusion of responsibility.²

In a similar study, da Silva and others interviewed 25 male offenders in 2018 who had committed multiple sexual offenses while in Portuguese prisons. The offenders described the act as an impulsive group experience and used language that downplayed their personal responsibility, presenting the event as an accident. The most common excuses were diffu-

sion of responsibility, peer pressure, and victim blaming, with 48% of participants blaming the victim and an additional 48% citing peer influence.¹¹ The evidence regarding gang membership is conflicting. While Niebieszczanski (2015) found that gang offenders had higher levels of detachment, Dyberg and Egan (2020) found no general difference between gang and non-gang youth in their community sample. On the contrary, they noted that gang members showed greater discriminant moral disengagement, a term which refers to the selective use of disengagement strategies directed at outgroups rather than at members of one's own group or at females.¹² This suggests that moral disengagement may be situational rather than dispositional—that is, it may result from group contexts and from hostility towards outgroups rather than denoting a permanent individual characteristic. In order to give a bit of background, Goupal (2021) used brand identification (for instance, Apple as compared with Microsoft) as a stand-in for a sense of group membership and found that people have an ingroup moral blind spot — that is, they are unable to recognise when their group is justifying bad behaviour — which therefore makes them more likely to accept and make use of collective justifications.¹³ Even though this study, which depends on a proxy measure, does not directly deal with violent co-offending, it does provide suggestive evidence that having a sense of group membership reduces individuals' sensitivity to unethical behaviour. The reason why group offenders use moral disengagement is so that they can get rid of feelings of guilt, shame, or cognitive dissonance while still preserving a positive self-image^{1,14} and because the sense of responsibility that is shared among group members reduces personal blame and thus makes it easier to disengage morally.²

In the different studies mentioned, it seems that diffusion of responsibility, moral justification, and victim-blaming are the most frequently cited mechanisms in cases of group offending. However, the link between gang membership and moral disengagement is still unclear—Niebieszczanski found that gang offenders showed greater moral disengagement, while Dyberg and Egan found no general difference, suggesting that moral disengagement may vary depending on the context. Overall, these results show that group situations do lead to an increase in moral disengagement, even though the degree of this effect differs depending on the group and the method of measurement. It thus appears that strategies which take group dynamics into account—such as questioning the shared justifications and promoting individual liability—could be important for reducing violence in cases of co-offending.

Factors That Influence Moral Disengagement in Co-offending

The individual characteristics, external factors and demographic features of people who co-offend can influence their

tendency towards moral disengagement.⁴

Stiths Gómez Tabares in 2024 looked at anxiety, impulsivity, and self-esteem among 1,419 young people between the ages of 16 and 30 and discovered that both anxiety and impulsivity were significant positive predictors of moral disengagement, whereas self-esteem acted as a negative predictor.¹⁵ This indicates that people who are anxious or impulsive are more likely to justify risky behaviour using mechanisms such as displacing responsibility or denying any harm, while those with low self-esteem might participate in moral disengagement in order to protect their self-image. In situations that involved group offending, these characteristics may have been particularly important, because anxious or impulsive individuals might be more easily influenced by peer pressure and group norms that tend to justify violence, while people with low self-esteem may turn to collective justifications in order to maintain their self-image within the group.

In the case of bullying that takes place in schools, Georgiou and colleagues (2020) found that impulsivity is positively linked to moral disengagement, impulsive teenagers being more inclined to use techniques such as blaming others or denying any harm in order to avoid feeling guilty¹⁶. The fact that moral disengagement was found to predict subsequent bullying shows a clear sequence going from impulsivity toward disengagement to aggression, a pattern which is reinforced by peer pressure. Because impulsive people do not have the inhibitory control necessary to take moral consequences into account before acting, they are more susceptible to cognitive distortions¹⁵. In situations involving group offending, this sequence was likely to be especially hazardous, because the presence of peers within co-offending groups could cause impulsive aggression to be accepted as normal, thus increasing the justifications employed to excuse it and making moral disengagement a collective rather than an individual phenomenon.

Individuals with anxiety may use moral disengagement to avoid the emotional pain of guilt or social disapproval.¹⁵ Tillman et al. (2018) exposed participants to scenario-based tasks including unethical behavior and found that people who felt intense anxiety and guilt after learning about the consequences of their actions were more likely to engage in post-moral disengagement, particularly with downplaying or rationalizing harm to reduce emotional distress.¹⁷ This tactic was more common among the individuals who experienced significant emotional distress when facing ethical conflicts, suggesting that anxiety served as a psychological defense to maintain self-image and control feelings of disgrace after immoral actions. In group offending examples, the pattern was more pronounced, in that co-offenders who experienced post-offense guilt or anxiety downplayed the harm they caused, leading to a reinforcement of everyone's justifications, thus making it easier for all members to morally disengage.

Individuals who have low self-esteem could turn to moral disengagement in order to maintain a favourable opinion of themselves following the commission of inappropriate actions.¹⁸ Liang and colleagues (2025) used a contingent dual-process model to explain how unethical behaviour affects self-esteem through two psychological pathways. In their multi-method study, they found that unethical behaviour can damage moral identity while at the same time increasing people's feeling of personal efficacy. In cases where individuals are motivated by system justification—that is, when they strongly believe that the social system is fair and legitimate—they are more likely to experience a drop in self-esteem after engaging in unethical behaviour. Conversely, when people have a weak sense of system justification, they tend to engage in moral disengagement and reinterpreted their actions as being justified so as to either preserve or improve their self-esteem, allowing them to feel morally acceptable even though they have violated ethical rules. In cases involving group offences, this tendency may be strengthened: co-offenders with low self-esteem may rely on collective justifications to protect their self-image, which in turn makes moral disengagement more acceptable within the group.

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits—defined by diminished empathy, guilt, and emotional sensitivity—are consistently linked to moral disengagement.¹⁹ Hyde et al. (2010) found that youth with high CU traits lack the ability to experience moral emotions such as guilt, shame, or remorse, making them more likely to rationalize harmful behavior without internal contradiction.²⁰ These individuals frequently employ victim blaming, lessening harm, and diffusing responsibility—strategies that impede conscience formation and the internalization of moral standards.²¹ Because they do not experience the emotional remorse that typically inhibits harmful behavior, they are more prone to accepting rationalizations and morally disengaging⁴. In group offending contexts, individuals with CU traits may be particularly dangerous: their lack of emotional responsiveness may make them less susceptible to the guilt that normally stops people from committing violence, and their readiness to rationalize harm may be encouraged by other offenders who approve of the behaviour and offer similar justifications.

Other environmental and contextual factors too play a role in moral disengagement. As Cardwell and others (2015) found, using data from the Pathways to Desistance study, serious adolescent offenders followed three different patterns of moral disengagement—low, moderate, and high—over a seven-year period. These patterns were based on demographic and situational factors such as race, gender, and exposure to criminogenic environments. Young people who were part of stigmatized groups or who had come from socially unstable environments were more likely to end up in the moderate or high moral disengagement categories and had higher re-arrest

rates. This shows that external circumstances are able to reinforce the mental processes that result in unethical behaviour. The results of Cardwell's study stress that moral disengagement is not simply a matter of individual disposition but is instead determined by the social and structural environments in which young adolescents find themselves. In situations where young people commit offences together, this influence was especially strong. A sense of collective membership was formed, and the social pressure exerted by the group members made disengagement strategies seem normal, and thus rendered them more accessible and collectively reinforced within the group.

Age likewise shapes moral disengagement, particularly in co-offending contexts. Using data from the Pathways to Desistance study, Chen and Sutton (2025) analyzed 1,345 youth offenders aged 16 to 23 and found that moral disengagement and antisocial behavior are mutually reinforcing between the ages 16 and 18.²² This suggests that younger adolescents are more cognitively flexible and may benefit most from early intervention. From 19 to 21, antisocial behavior seems to predict moral disengagement later in life, whereas from 21 to 23, no apparent link was detected. This disparity potentially indicates that moral disengagement becomes more established with age and less amenable to change as cognitive styles and identity-congruent beliefs consolidate. In co-offending contexts, younger adolescents would likely be more susceptible to group-based justifications and peer influence, whereas older individuals may rely on well-rehearsed disengagement mechanisms that are resistant to external correction. Albert et al. (2013) similarly highlight that the teenage brain is particularly sensitive to peer pressure, which may amplify moral disengagement in adolescent co-offending groups.²³

Race and ethnicity could also shape moral disengagement in co-offending contexts. Using Pathways to Desistance data, Cardwell et al. (2015) found that Black and Hispanic youth were disproportionately represented in moderate and high moral disengagement trajectories, which were linked to higher re-arrest rates.⁴ Importantly, Cardwell et al. argued that these descriptive findings reflect structural and environmental disadvantages—institutional inequality, over-policing, and lack of prosocial resources—rather instead of inherent group characteristics. Piquero (2015) similarly argues that developmental criminology theories have neglected race and ethnicity, reducing their validity by neglecting to consider how systemic injustice and racialized policing shape moral development and offending patterns.²⁴ In co-offending contexts, these structural disadvantages may be amplified: marginalized youth in group settings may face greater scrutiny as well as fewer prosocial alternatives, making moral disengagement a more accessible coping mechanism within their social environments.

Although the study was conducted with a general adoles-

cent population rather than among offenders, Caravita et al. (2014) found that peer influence strongly shapes the development of moral disengagement in early adolescence.²⁵ By following 369 students aged 9 to 14 over one year, they found that adolescents adopted moral thinking patterns from their peers and that disengagement techniques, such as blaming others, reducing the harm, and justifying unethical behavior, were acquired and legitimized through social interaction. The influence of peers was a stronger predictor of moral disengagement versus selection. It was seen that adolescents would conform to their friends' moral attitudes rather than seek out friends who shared their values. In cases of co-offending, this suggests that group norms and peer reinforcement were powerful, as adolescents in offending groups might adopt and legitimize disengagement strategies through social interaction, making moral disengagement a shared rather than an individual process.

The literature converges on several individual and contextual predictors of moral disengagement. Impulsivity, anxiety, and callous-unemotional traits consistently emerge as significant predictors,^{15,16,26} while contextual factors such as age, peer influence, and criminogenic environments shape its expression.^{4,22,25} The strength of these associations varies by developmental stage: moral disengagement remains malleable in adolescence but becomes more entrenched in adulthood²². The influence of race and ethnicity, observed in descriptive sample-level findings, reflects structural and environmental disadvantages rather than inherent group characteristics.^{4,24}

The data show that moral disengagement is not simply a fixed personality trait yet is influenced by developmental stage, peer pressure, and the wider structural context. Although it can still be altered during adolescence, it tends to become firmly established in adulthood, implying that early intervention could be the most effective approach. Because peer pressure leads to the acceptance of disengagement strategies as normal, and because structural disadvantages—such as institutional inequality and excessive policing—create conditions in which moral disengagement is more likely, interventions focused on group offending should take into account both individual tendencies and the social environments that promote disengagement.

Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement

Although moral disengagement strategies are commonly used by both male and female offenders, research indicates that there are notable gender differences in their rate and application.^{4,27}

In 1996 Bandura and some of his colleagues carried out a study involving 1,140 participants aged between 11 and 16, employing the Moral Disengagement Scale, and found that boys used moral disengagement much more often than girls,

the most significant differences being observed in the areas of euphemistic labeling, blame attribution, and dehumanization.²⁷ This simple study shows that socialization may account for men's tendency to make cognitive justifications for improper behaviour.

These gender differences appear in qualitatively distinct patterns. For euphemistic labeling, male offenders use goal-directed language that reframes violence as routine—describing assaults as “handling business” or “teaching a lesson”—while female offenders use minimizing language, such as describing an assault as “a fight that got out of hand.”^{2,28} For blame attribution, male offenders directly blame victims, framing violence as justified retaliation, whereas female offenders attribute blame to situational factors, claiming they acted under pressure, were coerced, or had no choice.^{27,29} Dehumanization also shows gendered patterns: male offenders, particularly in gang contexts, describe rivals as “animals” or “vermin,” while female offenders are less likely to employ extreme dehumanization, instead viewing victims as unworthy of concern.^{8,30} Taken together, gender differences are not simply quantitative (men using mechanisms more often) but also qualitative; male offenders tend toward action-oriented justifications that reframe violence as legitimate, while female offenders tend toward minimizing, context-dependent justifications that diffuse personal responsibility.

This pattern has occurred in a variety of situations. Rubio-Garay et al. (2019), using the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (MMDS), discovered that men were more likely than women to engage in moral disengagement, especially in the areas of victim blaming and trivialising the harm.²⁸ In a study based on vignettes that looked at technology-facilitated rather than offline violence, Martínez-Bacaicoa et al. (2024) found that men morally disengaged more frequently than women and that sexist attitudes were strongly linked to moral disengagement.³¹ Even though this online context is different from offline co-offending, the data remain consistent in showing that male groups show higher levels of moral disengagement.

The fact that men show greater moral disengagement than women raises the question of why this difference is the case. Current research has identified two possible explanations: (1) differences in emotional processing and (2) the impact of socially reinforced gender roles and expectations. However, as the evidence presented below shows, these explanations are complicated by an important dissociation between self-report and objective measures.

Because women are more emotionally involved in moral situations, it becomes harder for them to justify harmful actions. In order to find out how emotional processing differs between the sexes when making moral decisions, Cordellieri et al. (2020) carried out a study in which the participants

were given scenarios that required them to make ethically difficult decisions and emotional outputs were monitored using behavioural tools. The results they obtained indicated that women consistently showed a greater degree and intensity of emotional involvement in terms of concern and shame; on the other hand, the men displayed considerably weaker emotional reactions. The study therefore concluded that women's greater moral sensitivity can make it more difficult for them to employ moral disengagement.³⁰

In a similar study, Ward and King (2017) looked at the way in which the emotional outcomes that are anticipated can have a different effect on moral intentions depending on gender. The participants were asked to imagine themselves carrying out some unethical act, for example lying, cheating, or harming other people, and then to predict how they would feel afterwards. Women were found to be significantly more likely than men to expect to feel self-consciousness, guilt, and shame. This expectation of experiencing emotional distress may prevent women from engaging in or justifying wrongdoings.²⁹ Cabrera et al. (2020) reached a similar conclusion, finding that emotions and moral disengagement interact with gender in the context of supporting victims of bullying, there being greater affective involvement on the part of women which in turn hinders disengagement.³²

Yet one must be careful in reaching these conclusions since a discrepancy is found when self-report measures are compared with objective behavioural and neural assessments. In a two-part study with over 1,400 participants, Löffler and Greitemeyer (2023) looked into whether expectations regarding gender roles act as a mediator of the gender differences regarding empathy.³³ The participants completed the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, which is used to assess the ability to recognise emotions. The task was presented as being about either "empathic capacity" or "social-analytic capacity". Löffler and Greitemeyer found that even though women rated themselves as having higher levels of self-reported empathy, there were no differences between the sexes in the objective emotion-recognition tasks. The way in which the task was framed had a strong effect on women's self-perceptions—when empathy was not explicitly mentioned, the gender differences vanished. This shows that women feel pressure to conform to traditional social stereotypes instead than suggesting that they have a natural empathic ability.

Pang and others (2023) did the same thing and looked into whether the greater level of sympathy shown by females could be attributed to biological factors.³⁴ They discovered that although women stated they had higher levels regarding empathy in questionnaires and reacted more strongly emotionally to facial expressions of pain, the EEG data showed no obvious differences between the sexes in terms of neural responses. When participants were subtly exposed to gender-related expectations, women's self-reported empathy increased if empa-

thy was portrayed as a feminine trait. This indicates that it is social norms and the gender roles that have been internalised, instead of biological tendencies, which shape the perception regarding empathy. These results go against the idea that women are more sensitive by nature and instead show how important social conditioning is in relation to the self-perception of emotions. Even though some studies have looked at the biological correlates of offending, for example by examining testosterone levels in male prisoners, the evidence in support of biological explanations for gender differences in moral disengagement is still inconclusive.³⁵

The findings go against the notion that women are more understanding or emotionally sensitive by nature. Instead, they show that self-report measures indicate how much people have internalised gendered social expectations. This proves that the pattern of gender differences varies according to the method of measurement; although gender differences are clearly apparent in self-report measures they are less obvious in objective behavioural or neural assessments, indicating that social expectations and the circumstances of the measurement affect the way individuals report moral disengagement.

The key issue is that the gender differences in moral disengagement are primarily the result of socialization, not biology. From an early age boys are taught to keep their emotional expression in check and to value agentic qualities, whereas girls are encouraged to recognize and display the emotions that are suitable for care-oriented roles.^{26,36} It is this different socialization process, and not any basic biological differences, which explains why male offenders always show higher levels of moral disengagement.

The information we have regarding group offending suggests that gender dynamics shall influence the way co-offenders employ moral disengagement. Men who commit offences together might be more inclined to reinforce moral disengagement techniques jointly by offering mutual justifications and receiving support from one another, employing methods to justify violence against members of other groups, spreading out the responsibility, and keeping a positive image of themselves.^{2,13} In contrast, women who commit offences together might experience greater emotional conflict and are therefore less likely to resort to victim-blaming or dehumanisation. However, since there is little research on female co-offending groups, these patterns continue to be speculative.

Discussion

Literature consistently shows that group-oriented violent offenders employ moral disengagement, with mechanisms like diffusion of responsibility, moral justification, dehumanization, and victim blaming amplified by peer support and mutual culpability. This pattern goes beyond violent offending to other group contexts; Gini et al. (2015) found that collec-

tive moral disengagement has a important role in peer aggression and bystander behavior, supporting the importance of group-level processes in facilitating harmful actions³⁷. Walters (2020) found that moral disengagement acts as a mediator in the relationship between co-offending and delinquency, indicating that group processes cause cognitive justifications which sustain the offending behaviour.⁹ In a similar way, Cardwell et al. (2015) demonstrated that environmental and demographic factors influence the patterns of moral disengagement within serious youth offenders.⁴ This implies that measures aimed at group dynamics should be more effective than those which concentrate only on individual cognition.

Personal characteristics also make people susceptible to moral disengagement. According to Stiths Gómez Tabares (2024), both anxiety and impulsivity are predictors of moral disengagement since inadequate affective regulation results in cognitive distortions.¹⁵ Hyde et al. (2010) and Shulman et al. (2011) discovered that callous-unemotional traits—those characterised by reduced sympathy and guilt—undermine the emotional mechanisms which prevent disengagement.^{20,21} Chen and Sutton (2025) found that moral disengagement stays flexible during adolescence but becomes more entrenched as people get older.²² It is therefore essential to provide early intervention, in particular for individuals who have poor affective regulation or who possess callous-unemotional traits.

Gender differences also emerged, as male offenders had the tendency to use disengagement strategies that reflected lower emotional responsibility, while female offenders were more emotionally conscious and less dependent upon these mechanisms.¹⁸ It would seem that these differences stem from gender norms portraying women as more understanding, reinforcing the feelings of guilt that may prevent disengagement. However, caution is needed in this understanding because while self-report studies consistently show men indicate greater moral disengagement,^{27,28} objective assessments uncover no clear gender differences.^{33,34} This suggests observed differences may reflect social expectations as opposed to genuine cognitive differences, so gender-based claims must remain tentative.

Consequences for Gender-tailored interventions

Research based on empirical evidence concerning moral disengagement and youth offending shows that there are gender differences in emotional processing, behaviour, and cognitive strategies. However, these conclusions must be regarded with caution since they are primarily based on self-report data and drawn from general populations rather than from violent co-offenders. Taking that limitation into account, several possible paths for gender-responsive interventions emerge.

The meta-analysis carried out by Huey and Galbraith in 2023 found that psychosocial programmes for young people

taking part in the justice system do not show a significant difference in effectiveness for boys and girls. The authors noted that this might be because there is a lack of gender-specific targeting rather than because the outcomes are actually the same, and they proposed that the current programmes may be too general to consider the different developmental paths and affective needs of male and female offenders.

For boys who generally show greater moral disengagement and less emotional sensitivity when using self-report measures, interventions must include elements aimed at supporting empathy, training in emotional intelligence, and work on moral reasoning. Cognitive-behavioural techniques which challenge the distorted disengagement strategies might help to break up the existing patterns.³⁸ Yet the body of evidence for these methods within groups that commit violence together is still very limited, and any assertions regarding their effectiveness must therefore be treated with caution.

With regard to young women, interventions would have to consider the specific vulnerabilities and trauma experiences that are generally linked to delinquent behaviour. Among this group, disengagement may manifest itself through emotional suppression, internalised shame, and social exclusion. Consequently, trauma-informed care, supportive relationships, and forms of treatment based on empowerment which aim at enhancing self-worth and affective regulation appear to be promising. That said, these approaches still need to undergo further empirical testing among women who commit offences together.

Above all, it is necessary to qualify these recommendations by accepting that the body of evidence regarding gender-specific interventions in cases of violent co-offending is not well developed. Most of the studies make use of self-report measures, samples drawn from the general population, or indirect proxies for co-offending. Since there is a discrepancy between self-report data and objective measures, it is questionable whether the gender differences that are observed actually represent real cognitive patterns or are instead the result of measurement artifacts.^{33,34}

The fact that these conclusions point to the value of gender-responsive models which go beyond the one-size-fits-all approach means that programmes ought to be attentive to the emotional, cognitive and social needs of boys and girls, and the content, method of delivery and therapeutic aims should consider these differences.

Analysis of conflicts and contradictions of literature

There is a significant contradiction in the existing literature regarding the connection between gang membership and moral disengagement. Niebieszczanski and colleagues (2015) dis-

covered that street-gang offenders in a sample of U.S. prisoners showed significantly greater levels of moral disengagement than did non-gang offenders, indicating that gang norms lead to stronger cognitive justifications for causing harm.² On the other hand, Dyberg (2018) found no overall difference between gang and non-gang young people in an English community sample, instead noting a higher level of discriminant moral disengagement—that is, the selective application of moral disengagement towards outgroups.¹²

The opposite results may be explained by differences in methodology, context, and the way the concepts are understood. The fact that one study used a sample of prisoners in the United States whereas the other used a community sample in England shows that there are different cultural values and social structures involved, making it hard to draw direct comparisons. Furthermore, the way Dyberg separated general moral disengagement from discriminant moral disengagement (DMD) shows that gang members do not engage morally in a general way but only selectively when dealing with perceived outgroups or rivals. The fact that this theory—that is, the interpretation of moral disengagement as something that takes place in specific situations rather than as a fixed disposition—provides an explanation for the discrepancy between the two studies.

Methodological restrictions

The extent to which current research can be regarded as valid and can be applied more generally is restricted by a number of methodological problems. A significant problem in this regard is the heavy reliance on self-report scales, for example Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale, since such scales are prone to low levels of introspective accuracy, retroactive distortion, and social desirability bias—especially in institutional situations where offenders might underreport their disengagement in order to appear remorseful. Secondly, most of the studies make use of proxies for co-offending, such as peer delinquency or gang membership, rather than directly measuring the processes involved in group offending. These proxies do not capture the interpersonal relationships, group decision-making, and moral judgments that are part of actual group crimes and therefore could oversimplify the psychological dimensions of co-offending.

There are three closely linked themes that deserve to be highlighted. First, the evidence shows that socialization—rather than biology—is the main factor behind the gender differences in moral disengagement. If empathy is presented in a gender-neutral way, the gender differences in objective performance disappear,^{33,34} which indicates that social expectations are what lead to the self-reported differences. Second, measurement bias is important since the self-report scales pick up on social desirability, adherence to gender roles, and the

limitations of self-reflection and could therefore exaggerate the gender differences, as women might internalise the norms regarding appropriate emotional expressions.²⁹ Third, moral disengagement depends on the context. The discrepancy between Niebieszczanski (2015) and Dyberg and Egan (2020) shows that disengagement can be situational rather than a stable disposition. Likewise, the results from the online vignette studies³¹ may not apply to actual offline violent co-offending, pointing to the role of context in moral cognition.

Review Limitations

The review has a number of limitations. First of all, as it is a narrative review, it does not make use of the systematic search methods, the tools for evaluating quality, or the statistical synthesis which are used in a meta-analysis. Even though narrative reviews allow the combination of different types of studies, they are more susceptible to selection bias since the choice of studies and their interpretation can be influenced by the author's judgment. Meta-ethnography and the meta-synthesis of qualitative research: A review of the literature. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(5), 731–741.

Secondly, the review identified peer-reviewed articles by means of searches in various databases (Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PsycINFO) and through the use of keywords. This method might have omitted relevant studies that were published in other databases, in languages other than English, or in grey literature such as dissertations, government reports, and conference proceedings. There could also be publication bias since studies with significant or positive findings are more likely to be published than those with negative results.

Thirdly, the evidence is primarily drawn from samples in Western countries, especially from the United States, the United Kingdom, and various European nations. It cannot readily be extended to non-Western situations because cultural norms, legal systems, and social structures might affect moral disengagement in different ways. As a result, future reviews must concentrate on studies that originate in a wide range of cultural and geographical contexts.

Fourth, the fact that the review places great emphasis on gender differences possibly have inadvertently reinforced a binary understanding of gender, even though it itself acknowledged that gender is not a fixed or binary thing. The fact that the existing literature mostly entails comparing male and female offenders does not imply that the review's findings should be interpreted as supporting a simple gender binary. Research in the future should examine moral disengagement across a wider variety of gender identities.

Even though it has these limitations, the review supplies a comprehensive summary of the existing literature concerning moral disengagement in group violence and incorporates

a critical gender perspective which points out important gaps for future research.

Gaps in Literature

Even though there is increasing interest in moral disengagement, the existing literature has not yet adequately taken account of gender differences, particularly in instances of co-offending. The limited research that does look at gender is mainly focused on technology-assisted behaviour, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, where disengagement is typically the result of anonymity and depersonalization. While these conclusions deal with moral reasoning in virtual situations, they do not cover the interpersonal processes and emotional conversations that occur in offline group crimes. Moreover, there is a shortage of studies on female co-offending groups, which leads to a gap in our knowledge of women's role in moral disengagement within collective crimes. Because of this lack of research, the current theories cannot be broadly applied to all types of co-offending groups and do not consider how gendered socialization might influence disengagement strategies in face-to-face and high-stakes situations.

Future Directions in Research

Future studies ought to focus on examining moral disengagement in real co-offending situations—that is, offline group violence which includes gang violence, premeditated assault, and group property crime—rather than concentrating on technology-assisted aggression. Although online contexts involve de-personalized harm, real-world group crime entails physical consequences, interpersonal relationships, and actual harm.^{39–41}

From a methodological point of view, future studies ought to combine self-report measures with observational assessments, neurocognitive techniques, and qualitative surveys in order to take into account the complexity of moral disengagement. Special emphasis should be placed on using long-term studies if we are to understand how disengagement changes over time in relation to an individual's peer status, emotional development, or their exposure to an intervention. There is also a strong need for research that is culturally representative and includes a balanced gender distribution, as the existing evidence chiefly stems from male offenders in Western societies. Subsequent studies should look at how disengagement strategies interact with intersecting identities such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race in order to obtain more detailed and representative data. Finally, gender-sensitive interventions which focus on emotional literacy, empathy skills, and moral responsibility must be tested empirically to find out whether they are effective in reducing both disengagement and

recidivism among young offenders.

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