On the Personality Mechanisms Leading to Violence

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Abstract

This chapter presents a theoretical framework that aims to reconnect basic individual differences in personality with cognitive mechanisms of disengagement of moral cognition within an integrative model of youth aggression. In particular, we extend previous research regarding the relations between basic traits from the Five Factor Model and individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement, trying to clarify the pathways through which each of the above constructs may contribute to violence. We theorized that basic traits, namely agreeableness and emotional instability, set the basis for specific tendencies like irritability and hostile rumination. Moral disengagement was posited as the gatekeeper, able to turn the influences of basic traits, irritability, and hostile rumination into aggression and violent behavior.

On the Personality Mechanisms Leading to Violence

Overview of the Issue

Among contemporary theorists, personality is viewed as a complex self-regulatory system including habitual behaviors, knowledge structures, and coping mechanisms (Caprara, 1996). Personality as a complex self-regulatory system includes the entire architecture of surface behavioral tendencies, and the underlying basic traits, as well as social cognitive mechanisms assigning meaningful behavior in the service of self-interest (Caprara & Cervone, 2000). A number of researchers have theorized about the importance of assessing individual differences in personality as an approach to understanding aggressive conduct (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Huesmann, 2003; Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). Across the past two decades, indeed, personality variables have been proved to be instrumental in clarifying various mechanisms conducive to aggression. For instance, offenders, in comparison to their non-offending peers, are likely to exhibit more impulsive behavior (Farrington, Ttofi, & Coid, 2009), have low self-control (Simons, Simons, Chen, Brody, & Lin, 2007), and suffer more from depressive symptoms (Wiesner & Kim, 2006), all of which are characteristics related to personality.
A triad of personality variables that are predictors of aggression in the laboratory as well as in natural settings—irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement—has emerged as particularly crucial. Whereas both irritability and hostile rumination are anchored to the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), moral disengagement developed out of Bandura’s social cognitive theory and his contributions to moral agency (1986, 1991). In this chapter, we focus on how these variables may act in concert in the development of youth antisocial behavior at school and with peers. Recent longitudinal studies demonstrated how these variables interact in the development of chronic conduct problems (Caprara, Alessandri, et al., 2010; Caprara, Fontaine, et al., 2010; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008). Drawing upon results from empirical studies, we developed a conceptual model in which irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement act as mediators in turning basic individual differences into aggressive and delinquent behaviors. The implications of this model for predicting violence in the school and for implementing preventive intervention programs are discussed.

**Conceptual Basis**

**Irritability, Hostile Rumination, and Moral Disengagement**

Irritability is defined as the “tendency to react impulsively, controversially or rudely at the slightest provocation or disagreement” (Caprara et al., 1985, p. 667); hostile rumination is defined as the tendency to “harbor and even to enhance, with the passing of time, feelings and desires of vengeance” (Caprara, 1986, p. 765); moral disengagement is defined as the process of convincing the self that ethical standards do not apply to oneself in a particular context, by separating moral reactions from inhumane conduct by disabling the mechanism of self-condemnation (Bandura, 1990; Fiske, 2010). Irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement have all been shown to account for a notable portion of variability in aggression and violence across a variety of conditions and over the course of development, from early adolescence to young adulthood (Caprara, 1987, 1996; Caprara, Paciello, Gerbino, & Cugini, 2007; Paciello et al., 2008). Moreover, both irritability and hostile rumination accounted for a significant portion of aggression in experiments designed to study aggression in response to frustration and provocation contingently (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Caprara et al., 1985).

Irritability is related to one’s capacity to dominate one’s emotional reactions in either real or apparent situations of danger, offense, or attack (Caprara et al., 1985). Irritability highlights the role that defective control over negative emotions play in amplifying the effects of situations that may promote reactive aggression (responding to an aggressive provocation). A characteristic of irritability is the influence of excitatory processes in fostering aggressive reactions to instigator situations. During crucial ages of development, empirical studies (Caprara et al., 2007) demonstrated that different trajectories may be distinguished for irritability. Whereas most of the participants demonstrated stable mean levels of irritability, half of the youth either increased or decreased in their level of hostile rumination over time. In addition, high irritability trajectories were associated with high physical and verbal aggression.

Hostile rumination pertains to one’s tendency to exhibit ill feelings, carrying desires and expectations of vengeance following self-threatening provocations (Caprara et al., 1985). It concerns the enduring influence of negative affect in distorting cognition in the pursuit of revenge. Self-concerns, attributions, and social attitudes play a role in transforming derogatory experiences into retaliatory reactions for purposes of revenge (see Caprara, 1987, for a review). Upon a thorough review of the literature on personality and aggressive behavior under both provocation and
neutral conditions, Bettencourt and colleagues (2006) described irritability as a major expression of aggression proneness across situations, and hostile rumination as a major expression of provocation sensitivity, or the tendency to react aggressively to provocation (see also Collins & Bell, 1997). As for irritability, four developmental trajectories were distinguished for hostile rumination, half decreasing or increasing over time. Interestingly, hostile rumination trajectories were associated with high levels of violent behavior.

**Moral disengagement** represents one of the major contributions of Bandura’s social cognitive theory. It pertains to the psychosocial processes that provide the cognitive framework within which aggression and violence appear appropriate reactions and acquire legitimacy in the pursuit of self-interest (Bandura, 1986, 1991; Caprara, 1996). Moral disengagement involves psychological schemes by which moral self-sanctions can be selectively disengaged from detrimental aggressive conduct by converting harmful acts to acceptable ones and by giving free reign to a variety of misbehaviors without carrying any moral sanctions. There are four points at which self-sanction can be disengaged from detrimental conduct: (a) the behavior itself, (b) the locus of responsibility (associated with the behavior causing detrimental effects), (c) the harmful consequences, and the (d) recipient (or victim). Additionally, there are eight mechanisms (e.g., moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame), which operate at these four points. These mechanisms allow individuals to engage in self-serving behavior that is in contrast with their moral principles, while continuing to advocate those principles without incurring self-evaluative emotional reactions, such as guilt.

Ultimately, moral disengagement points either to mechanisms that promote detrimental behaviors through selective deactivation of moral standards, or to the influence that social cognition exerts upon internalization of norms and values conducive to detrimental conducts through various forms of self-deception in the pursuit of self-interest. Several factors may contribute to interpretations of situations that are conducive to detrimental behaviors in the pursuit of self-interest (see Gibbs, 2003). For instance, one may be biased in his or her social judgment and decision making due to social cognitive underdevelopment (e.g., the inability to identify and evaluate a range of social values and behavioral options) or because he or she has become inclined to rationalize immoral or aggressive conduct by removing the moral content by which it may otherwise be deterred or inhibited. As cognitive distortions may reflect either the lack or circumvention of moral standards, one may question whether moral disengagement is fully appropriate to convey the nature of self-serving cognitive distortions that may be due to causes other than selective deactivation of established moral principles. This may be particularly true in earlier stages of development, when children have not yet achieved moral standards from which to disengage, or in social and cultural environments in which norms and values justify intentions and actions that elsewhere would serve as a source of blame, remorse, and guilt. Nevertheless, whatever may be the source of the tendency to activate processes that are captured by moral disengagement, such a tendency has repeatedly been associated with aggression and violence (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Dodge, 1991; Dodge & Coie, 1987).

A number of findings have shown that above mechanisms can be traced to the common latent variable of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004). Developmental studies (Paciello et al., 2008) identified four developmental trajectories: (a) non-disengaged group that started with initially low levels of moral disengagement followed by an important decline, (b) normative group that started with initially moderate levels followed by a decline, (c) later desister group that started with initially high-medium levels followed by an increase from 14 to 16 years and an even steeper decline from 16 to 20 years, and (d) chronic group that started with and maintained medium-high levels. Results from this
study (Paciello et al., 2008) demonstrated that adolescents who maintained higher levels of moral disengagement were more likely to show frequent aggressive and violent acts in late adolescence. In reality, a large body of research has demonstrated the disinhibitory power of moral disengagement in fostering aggressive behavior (Andrus, 1969; Bandura, 1990; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Rapoport & Alexander, 1989). Other research has also demonstrated its strong associations with various manifestations of aggression and violence, as well as other forms of antisocial conduct (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000; Gini, 2006; Menesini et al., 2003).

**Agreeableness and Emotional Stability**

Earlier studies (Caprara, Perugini, & Barbaranelli, 1994) have attempted to map individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement within the realm of a comprehensive model of personality, such as the Five Factor Model, the reference model to describe personality advocated by most researchers in the field. Using this model McCrae and Costa (1999) demonstrated that major dispositional tendencies can be described by five dimensions including: energy/extraversion (e.g., I like to meet with other people), agreeableness (e.g., I understand when others need my help), conscientiousness (e.g., I engage myself in the things I do), emotional stability (e.g., I easily get angry), and intellect/openness (e.g., I like to know and to learn new things).

Most relevant to aggression and violence are agreeableness and emotional stability. **Agreeableness** is the dimension that pertains to interpersonal relations (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001), in which the goal is to maintain positive relationships with other individuals (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). Agreeableness refers to concern and sensitivity toward other individuals, as well as kindness, civility, docility, and trust (Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 2000). Agreeableness has been negatively related to conflict and anger (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002), impulsivity, manipulative, and confrontational behaviors (Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996), as well as delinquent or aggressive behaviors (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). **Emotional stability** refers to personality characteristics pertaining to the capabilities to cope adequately with one’s own anxiety and emotionality, and to control irritation, discontent, and anger (Barbaranelli & Caprara, 2000). The opposite pole of emotional stability (neuroticism) is defined as the propensity to experience feelings of helplessness, discomfort, vulnerability, and inadequacy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Comrey, 1992). Caprara et al. (1992) demonstrated that emotional stability is linked to the emotional component of aggression. This finding is consistent with the research of Robins et al. (1996), showing that emotional stability is negatively related to antisocial patterns, including manipulative, impulsive, and confrontational behaviors.

**Description of the Specific Issues**

**Interrelatedness Among the Variables**

Recent studies have focused on the developmental trajectories of irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement, and on how they may influence each other over the course of development (Caprara, Fontaine, et al., 2010). Findings have shown that individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement are correlated over the entire course of adolescence. Moreover, their correlations increase with age, attesting to the gradual crystallization of a “mindset” in which proneness to irritation, revenge, and moral disengagement converge to foster and sustain aggressive and violent behaviors over the course of time. Whereas the higher stability of irritability attests to its temperamental roots, the increasing stability of hostile
Personality Mechanisms Leading to Violence

rumination and moral disengagement with the passing of time implies their social cognitive bases (Caprara et al., 2010).

As shown above, findings have revealed similar developmental trajectories from early adolescence to young adulthood, but slightly different outcomes (Caprara et al., 2007; Paciello et al., 2008). Whereas the contribution of irritability to aggression and violence declines with the passing of time, the contribution of hostile rumination and moral disengagement increases over the course of adolescence and becomes crucial at the onset of adulthood. Drawing upon these findings, one may theorize that defective capacities in dealing with anger and hostile feelings are conducive to aggression earlier in adolescence. Moral disengagement is mainly what allows one to indulge into aggression and violence later in adolescence.

Likewise, the influence that irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement exert on each other is different over the entire course of adolescence. Irritability contributes to earlier hostile rumination, which in turns bridges the relationship between irritability and moral disengagement (Caprara et al., 2010). Hostile rumination contributes, in part, to maintaining irritability, but there is no direct link between irritability and moral disengagement, nor does moral disengagement contribute to hostile rumination (Caprara et al., 2010). It is likely that individual differences in irritability are mostly temperamental, whereas these differences in hostile rumination and moral disengagement attest to the influence that social experience exerts over mechanisms of affect regulation (Dodge, 1991; Fontaine, 2007). Careful examination of the mediational role of hostile rumination provides support for the conceptualization of the development of dispositional aggression during which emotional processes (associated with irritability) contribute through hostile ruminative cognitions to social cognitive mechanisms (moral disengagement), that leads one to value aggression and violence as instrumental means by which to achieve a variety of goals.

Empirical findings have shown that irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement are located in the quadrant defined by the opposite pole of agreeableness and emotional stability. Whereas irritability is located close to the opposite pole of emotional stability, moral disengagement lies along the opposite pole of agreeableness, and hostile rumination at about 45 degrees between the opposite poles of emotional stability and agreeableness (Caprara, Perugini, & Barbaranelli, 1994). These findings are congruent with other results (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Collins & Bell, 1997; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Halverson et al., 2003; Kochanska, Friesenborg, Lange & Martel, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994; Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, & Johnsen, 2003). Together, these data point to individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement as expressions of different intrapersonal systems associated with emotion regulation and to management of self in relation with others. Irritability and moral disengagement are both intrapersonal systems, yet irritability predisposes one to aggression that is typically impulsive and reactive, whereas moral disengagement predisposes one to aggression that is typically instrumental to the pursuit of one’s own interest. Hostile rumination is a social cognitive process associated with attributions and expectations capable of turning negative affect due to self-threatening provocation into feelings and thoughts legitimizing the pursuit of vengeance.

A Theoretical Model

Relying upon earlier cross-sectional and longitudinal research designed to map individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement, a theoretical model was developed with the aim to clarify the different contributions of the agreeableness and emotional stability personality traits to violent conduct (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Caprara, Alessandri, et al., 2010; Caprara, Fontaine, et al., 2010; Paciello et al., 2008; Gleason, Jensen-
This theoretical model (Figure 7.1) assigns primacy to emotional stability and agreeableness in the posited set of pathways, in accordance with a vast literature demonstrating the significant biological component of basic traits as well as in accordance with alternative views of traits as habitual responses resulting from chronic person-situations interactions that, once crystallized, operate as automatic behavioral tendencies (Cervone, & Shoda, 1999; Higgings, 1999; Jang, Livesley, & Vemon, 1996; Jang, McCrae, Angleitner, Rienmann, & Livesley, 1998; Johnson, & Krueger, 2004; Lohelin, 1982; Lohelin, McCrae, Costa, & John, 1998; Rienman, Angleitner, & Strelau, 1997). As agreeableness and emotional stability are early-appearing features of personality that mostly reflect their temperamental roots (Caspi & Shiner, 2006; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Rothbart & Bates, 1998), this model proposes that these traits operate as primary spontaneous behavioral tendencies, setting the basis for experiences fostering the crystallization of specific affective and cognitive intrapersonal organizations conducive to aggression and violence. In particular, irritability is considered as mainly associated with the opposite pole of emotional stability, which among basic traits is chiefly concerned with the management of emotions. In contrast, moral disengagement is deemed as predominantly associated with the opposite pole of agreeableness, which is concerned with the management of interpersonal relations and whose opposite has been associated with callousness, cynicism, and other forms of insensitivity to others’ well being (DeYoung et al., 2010), similar to moral disengagement. Finally, hostile rumination is associated with both emotional stability and agreeableness, and as a tendency that reflects the regulation of both affect and interpersonal relations.

In line with previous findings demonstrating high intercorrelations among irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement, we point to irritability as a predecessor of hostile rumination. While not disregarding the contribution of the latter to the former over the course of development, previous findings highlight the mediating role of hostile rumination between irritability and moral disengagement as well as the crucial role of the latter in fostering aggression and violence (Bandura et al., 1996; Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; Caprara et al., 2007). In this model, irritability is considered as a temperament feature making people sensitive to angry feelings when under stressful situations, whereas hostile rumination is viewed as a tendency to nurture hostile feelings after provocations as a result of the inability to work effectively through dissipation of negative affect. Finally, moral disengagement is considered a mechanism that enables the turning of hostile feelings into thoughts and desires of revenge and, ultimately, into detrimental actions without feeling guilty or blameable.

**Application and Relevant Research**

A longitudinal study corroborated this mediational model, and confirmed the fruitfulness of bringing together the contributions of two major traditions of research on aggressive behavior...
through the systematic use of individual differences (Caprara, Alessandri, et al., 2010). Indeed, both the tradition of research that has focused on the role of negative emotions and affect regulation (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard et al., 1939) and the tradition of research which has emphasized social cognition (Bandura, 1986, 1991) have been influential in exploring how individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement can be traced to basic traits like agreeableness and emotional instability. This integrative theoretical framework extends previous research regarding the relations between basic traits from the Five Factor Model and individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement and clarifies the pathways through which the former and the latter may contribute to violence. For example, it posits that the opposite poles of emotional stability and agreeableness were most associated with irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement in accordance with earlier studies (Caprara et al., 1994). Yet the contribution of basic traits to violence was conceptualized as entirely mediated by individual differences in irritability and hostile rumination. It is likely that basic traits, namely lack of agreeableness and emotional instability, set the basis for specific tendencies like irritability and hostile rumination that in turn foster violent behavior, given proper conditions. However, it is most likely that irritability and hostile rumination do not turn into violence unless the mechanisms that allow one to hurt other people without incurring into blame or guilt get activated. Thus, it is not surprising that individual differences in moral disengagement are the gatekeepers to most of violence.

Emotional stability and agreeableness do not directly affect violent outcomes, despite their (moderate) associations (Caprara, Alessandri, et al., 2010). It is possible that opposite poles of emotional stability and agreeableness reflect intrapersonal systems associated with emotion regulation and management of self in relation with others. This sets a frame of mind that makes people prone to irritation and predisposes them to value revenge and act in self-exonerative ways that contribute to ongoing violent behavior. Clearly, the more people engage in violence, the more they need self-serving cognitive distortions that allow them to take distance from the detrimental effects of their actions (Gibbs, 2003; McCrady et al., 2008). The strong impact that moral disengagement exerts on engagement in violent episodes calls attention to social models and discourses that provide the cognitive framework within which violence appears appropriate and acquires legitimacy. Likewise, attention is needed to identify the major occasions and situations that, over the course of development, embed self-exonerative actions into a system of beliefs about the self and others, ultimately leading to the use of moral disengagement as a coping strategy, and the perception that aggression and violence are appropriate means to pursue one’s own goals (Arsenio & Gold, 2006; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Tisak, Lewis, & Jankowski, 1997; Turiel, 2006).

Ultimately, this chain leads to value violence as an instrumental means by which to achieve a variety of goals. Also it seems plausible that “hot” processes (mostly associated with both irritability) turn into “cold” processes (mostly associated with hostile rumination) that, to have access to action, need proper mechanism enabling individuals to distance themselves from the blameable consequences of their actions. In this developmental process, hostile rumination represents an important connection between emotional processes related to anger reactivity and cognitive mechanisms related to instrumental motivations (Dodge, 1991; Fontaine, 2007; Geen, 1998; Vitiello & Stoff, 1997). The distinctive influence that hostile rumination exerts on moral disengagement calls attention to how individual factors, such as attitudes, values, and attributional processes, can provide the cognitive framework in which retaliation and revenge appear appropriate. Social norms and experiences, in fact, can dictate why, when, and how it is appropriate to invest much of one’s own resources in the pursuit of retaliation (Crane-Ross, Tisak, & Tisak, 1998; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Tisak & Tisak, 1996).
**Implications**

The proposed framework points to the importance of a systematic use of individual differences in personality to understand affective and cognitive processes conducive to aggression and violence. Indeed, they are postulated to operate in concert through self-regulatory mechanisms and behavioral tendencies that crystallize over time. Empirical studies that examined the longitudinal and mediational relations among emotional stability, agreeableness, irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement (Caprara, 1987, 1996; Caprara et al., 2007; Paciello et al., 2008) have proved their usefulness in understanding commonalities, diversities, and reciprocities regarding the primacy and degree of influence that each dimension exerts over the others.

Moreover, the above model has practical value in view of prevention and interventions aimed to prevent school violence. In Table 7.1 we offer a systematic presentation of the ways in which this framework may be applied in the school. In reality, school represents an ideal setting for the promotion of interpersonal relationships and for the prevention of deviant development. Schools can be conceived of not only as developing learning and educational processes, but also as “positive institutions” for facilitating human and social development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The model presented above may be particularly important in order to understand more in depth episodes of violent behaviors and bullying in high schools. According to our proposal, aggression and violence are rooted not only in basic individual predisposition (i.e., agreeableness and emotional stability) and in lower order personality constituents (e.g., irritability and hostile rumination), but also in the individual’s cognitive evaluations of the consequences of his own conduct that open the way to violent behavioral outcomes. Although it is not still clear if basic traits may be changed or not, the youths’ ability to refrain from engaging in deviant conduct may be evaluated and modified through specific behavioral interventions (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the assessment of moral disengagement, along with personality disposition, may allow a deeper understanding of determinants of youth violent behavior and to its prevention. In this regard, our model offers a direction where effective strategies of prevention, control, and change should be implemented.

| 1. Assessing individual differences in personality represents a basic approach to understanding aggressive conduct. |
| 2. A triad of personality variables that are predictors of aggression in the laboratory, as well as in natural settings—irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement—has emerged as particularly crucial. |
| 3. Findings have shown that individual differences in irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement are correlated over the entire course of adolescence. |
| 4. In school settings, a mental health professional working with an aggressive child may also want to assess for individual differences in personality such as irritability, hostile rumination, and moral disengagement. |
| 5. Several easy-to-use measures are available for the assessment of irritability and rumination (Caprara et al., 1985), as well as moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). |
| 6. Youth profiles on these measures may be used to plan specific interventions aimed to enhance emotion regulation (with higher scores on irritability or hostile rumination) and to foster adherence to social norm and values. |
| 7. The youth habit to blame mates, to disregard school properties, or the inability to respect school properties should be regarded as warning signs of moral disengagement. |
References


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Personality Mechanisms Leading to Violence


