Short Communication

Different mechanisms of moral disengagement as multiple mediators in the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the different mediating roles of eight mechanisms of moral disengagement in the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression. 389 junior high school students participated. Data were collected by parents reporting on spouses' harsh parenting, adolescents themselves reporting on moral disengagement and nominating out aggressive classmates. The results indicated that harsh parenting was positively associated with each mechanism of moral disengagement and only the mechanisms of moral justification and euphemistic language completely mediated the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression. These results add to extant literature on how harsh parenting could risk adolescents for aggressive behaviors.

1. Introduction

Although research has indicated that harsh parenting could risk children for aggressive behaviors (Chen & Raine, 2018; Wang, 2017), the mediating mechanisms involved in this relationship remain to be further explored. Taking into account the impact of moral disengagement on child aggression (Gini, 2006; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011), one might expect that moral disengagement might mediate the relation of harsh parenting to child aggression if harsh parenting functions as a risk factor for child moral disengagement. This study intends to explore the different mediating roles of the eight types of moral disengagement mechanisms in the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression.

Following Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory of moral agency, individuals would desist from injurious conduct under the guidance of internalized moral standards. Committing detrimental conduct would risk both external sanctions such as being disapproved and internal self-condemnation such as shame and guilt. To refrain from internal self-sanctions, individuals seek to rationalize their detrimental behaviors that violate moral standards through various psychosocial processes that have been conceptualized as moral disengagement (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Bandura et al. (1996) have proposed eight mechanisms of moral disengagement which could be classified as the following four groups. First, cognitive reconstruing enables individuals to reinterpret the reprehensible behaviors in a positive tone, including the following three mechanisms: *moral justification*

by portraying the immoral conduct as warranted, *advantageous comparison* by contrasting a detrimental conduct with a worse one to make it seem less serious, *euphemistic labeling* by using convoluted or periphrastic language to mask condemnable conduct. The second group promotes people to distort the agentive relation between their harmful conduct and the behavioral consequences, mainly comprising *displacement and diffusion of responsibility* (i.e., regarding one's own immoral conduct as being caused by external sources such as social pressures rather than as being personally responsible). The third group consists of the following mechanisms: *distorting* by minimizing or even disregarding the consequences of one's reprehensible conduct. The fourth group capacitates self-censure to be avoided by *dehumanization* (i.e., stripping people of human qualities) or by *attribution of blame* (i.e., viewing themselves as being compelled into destructive conduct by victims who deserve being punished).

Moral disengagement has been closely associated with aggressive and bullying behaviors (Bandura et al., 1996; Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, & Markos, 2016; Wang, Lei, Liu, & Hu, 2016). Morally disengaged individuals tend to display higher tolerance of moral violations or even showing rejecting attitudes toward moral values (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010). They often justify their morally violating behaviors, holding beliefs like "it is alright to fight when your group's honor is threatened" or "kids who get mistreated usually do things that deserve it" (two items from Bandura's Moral Disengagement scale). Adolescents with these morally disengaged beliefs have been found to commit more aggressive behaviors (Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004). In

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contrast, reduction in moral disengagement has been found to be longitudinally associated with reduction in antisocial behavior for adolescents (Shulman et al., 2011).

Therefore, the development of moral disengagement is greatly influenced by environments that expose children to attitudes or beliefs that tolerate the use of aggressive behaviors. According to the developmentally-guided model of moral disengagement (Hyde et al., 2010), children's morally disengaged views were first acquired through parent-child interactions, especially through harsh caretaking where children observe how parents could behave in morally disengaged ways. In Chinese families, parents tend to endorse harsh disciplinary practices to punish children's wrongdoings (Wang, 2017). Moreover, after children are harshly punished such as being spanked or slapped, Chinese parents tend to justify their aggressive behaviors toward children by saying something like "no parents would intentionally beat their children, it is all the children's fault" or "parents just want to help children correct their mistakes, etc." Therefore, harsh parenting might be a familial risk factor for adolescent moral disengagement. Based on the above literature on the associations among harsh parenting, moral disengagement and adolescent aggression, it could be hypothesized that moral disengagement may mediate the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression. In this study, a multiple mediator model was used to analyze and compare the different mediating roles of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement (see Fig. 1).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred junior high school students were recruited as participants. Complete data were gathered for 389 students (186 boys and 203 girls, $M_{age} = 12.88$, $SD = 1.10$, age spanning from 11 to 16). Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Harsh parenting

Following prior researchers (Wang, 2017), both parents filled in an online four-item questionnaire to measure their spouse's harsh parenting. One item is that "when your child did something wrong or made your spouse angry, your spouse would "lose temper or even yell at children." Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *never like that*, 5 = *always like that*). First, scores for harsh fathering and harsh mothering was computed separately (αs = 0.81 and 0.79, respectively) and then were averaged to index the total level of harsh parenting.

2.2.2. Moral disengagement

Adolescents completed the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996), which includes thirty two items, with four items on each of the following eight dimensions. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). The reliabilities were satisfactory: moral justification ($\alpha = 0.72$), euphemistic language ($\alpha = 0.81$), advantageous comparison ($\alpha = 0.76$), displacement of responsibility ($\alpha = 0.76$), diffusion of responsibility ($\alpha = 0.82$), distorting consequences ($\alpha = 0.77$), attribution of blame ($\alpha = 0.80$), and dehumanization ($\alpha = 0.74$). The index for moral disengagement was obtained by averaging scores across the 32 items.

2.2.3. Child aggression

Four peer-nominated items were used to measure aggression (Wang, 2017). On a class roster, students nominated out the classmates who fit each of the following items: "children who hits, kicks, or shoves other children," "children who start fights," "children who yell at other children," and "children who argue a lot with other children." For each student, all the nominations across the four items were summed and then divided by class size, with higher scores representing higher aggression.

2.2.4. Controll variables

As in prior research (Wang, 2017), age, gender, and socioeconomic
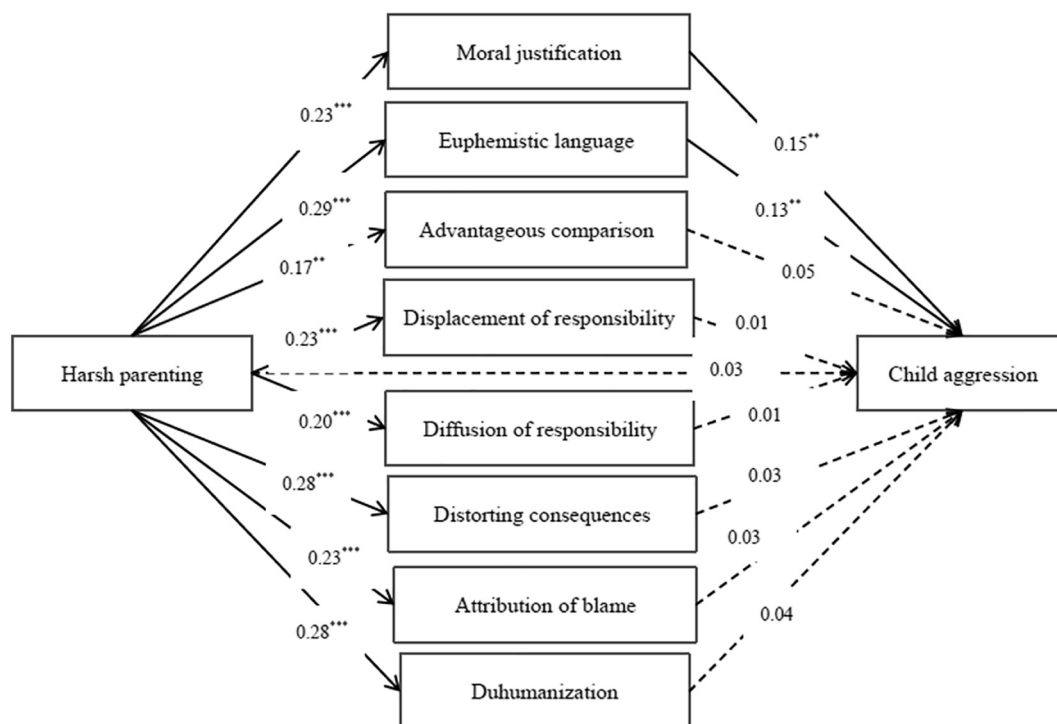

Fig. 1. The hypothesized multiple mediator model on the relation of harsh parenting to child aggression. Note: the controlled variables were not shown in the figure. $^*p < 0.05$. $^{**}p < 0.01$. $^{***}p < 0.001$.

status (SES) were controlled. An SES score was calculated by averaging the standardized scores of educational level and monthly income of both parents. Parental educational level was coded from 1(*equal to or below junior high school*) to 4 (*graduate education or above*). The mean values for paternal and maternal educational attainment were 2.20 (*SD* = 0.76) and 2.13 (*SD* = 0.65), respectively. The monthly parental income was coded from 1 (*< 2000 yuan*) to 5 (*> 5000 yuan*). The mean monthly incomes for fathers and mothers were 2.79(1.14) and 2.51 (1.14), respectively.

2.3. Procedures

We obtained permission to conduct this survey from the Ethical Committee for Scientific Research in our institution. Informed consent has been acquired from participants. Standardized instructions were used to direct participants on how to complete the questionnaires as well as ethical concerns.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

As shown in Table 1, harsh parenting was significantly and positively associated with child aggression. Harsh parenting was also significantly and positively associated with each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. Both displacement and diffusion of responsibility were not significantly associated with child aggression (*ps* > 0.05). All the remaining six mechanisms of moral disengagement were significantly and positively associated with child aggression.

3.2. Analyses of the multiple mediator model

Following prior research (Wang, 2017), regression models with each mechanism and child aggression as dependent variables were tested successively to analyze the mediating effects of different mechanisms after controlling for gender, age, and SES. All the variables were standardized first to reduce multicollinearity. The results indicated that (as shown in Fig. 1), after children's gender, age and family SES were controlled for, harsh parenting was significantly and positively associated with moral justification (β = 0.28, *p* < 0.001), euphemistic language (β = 0.29, *p* < 0.001), advantageous comparison (β = 0.17, *p* < 0.01), displacement of responsibility (β = 0.23, *p* < 0.001), diffusion of responsibility (β = 0.20, *p* < 0.001), distorting consequences (β = 0.28, *p* < 0.001), attribution of blame (β = 0.23, *p* < 0.001), and dehumanization (β = 0.28, *p* < 0.001), respectively. Harsh parenting has no significant and direct association

with child aggression. Among the eight mechanisms, only moral justification and euphemistic language were positively associated with child aggression (β = 0.15, *p* < 0.01; β = 0.13, *p* < 0.01). Sobel tests indicated that only moral justification and euphemistic language could significantly mediate the association between harsh parenting and child aggression (*z* = 3.16, 2.98, *ps* < 0.01).

4. Discussion

Based on research on the relation of harsh parenting to child aggression and the theoretical framework of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996), this study examined the mediating roles of eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. We found that harsh parenting was a familial risk factor for each of the eight mechanisms. Moreover, only moral justification and euphemistic language were found to mediate the association between harsh parenting and adolescent aggression.

The finding that harsh parenting might induce child moral disengagement provides support for the developmentally-guided model of moral disengagement (Hyde et al., 2010). Harsh parenting behaviors set examples for children to learn how to avoid self-censure through various mechanisms of moral disengagement. This finding also demonstrates the important role of harmonious parent-child interactions in the healthy moral development for children (Hoffman, 2000). The current study again demonstrated that moral disengagement was a risk factor for child aggression, a finding consistent with research linking negative moral reasoning and moral emotion with aggressive behaviors (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2010).

The more intriguing finding was that only moral justification and euphemistic language could mediate the relation of harsh parenting to child aggression. Despite no empirical research on Chinese parents' moral disengaged attitudes in the context of harsh parenting, Chinese parents sought to justify their harsh disciplinary strategies toward children, especially when such behaviors would inflict pain and harm upon children. For example, parents tend to attribute their harmful behaviors to children or lead children to believe that parents harshly treat them just to help them correct mistakes or improve themselves. No matter how parents try to justify their harsh parenting behaviors or use euphemistic language to embellish their injurious behaviors, such moral disengagement attitudes and behaviors could only enhance the risk for child aggression. Therefore, parents should best give up harsh parenting and when they unintentionally enacted these parenting tactics, they should take positive steps such as apology to repair the parent-child relation, so as to lower the risk for children's moral disengagement and aggression.

Table 1
Univariate and bivariate statistics for the study variables.

variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.Harsh parenting	–									
2.Moral justification	0.26***	–								
3.Euphemistic language	0.24***	0.65***	–							
4.Advantageious comparison	0.18**	0.53***	0.67***	–						
5.Displacement of responsibility	0.23***	0.48***	0.53***	0.50***	–					
6.Diffusion of responsibility	0.16**	0.44***	0.54***	0.51***	0.53***	–				
7.Distorting consequences	0.14**	0.47***	0.62***	0.63***	0.48***	0.45***	–			
8. Attribution of blame	0.24***	0.48***	0.59***	0.55***	0.47***	0.51***	0.46***	–		
9.Dehumanization	0.26***	0.62***	0.70***	0.64***	0.55***	0.60***	0.56***	0.62***	–	
10. Child aggression	0.14**	0.17**	0.17**	0.13*	0.1	0.07	0.11*	0.11*	0.15**	–
M	1.78	2.21	1.86	1.73	2.29	2.30	1.94	2.24	1.93	0.05
SD	0.87	0.99	0.83	0.87	0.92	0.85	1.15	0.94	0.88	0.09

Note. *N* = 389.
 * *p* < 0.05.
 ** *p* < 0.01.
 *** *p* < 0.001.

Acknowledgement

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