

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in Police Unethical Behaviour

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Abstract

Nowadays there were a lot of police unethical behavior reported in Indonesia which became concern of law enforcement agency and abused of public trust. One of the reason of this phenomena is varied depend on the reason of the perpetrators. Moral disengagement is the ability to use cognitive mechanism to excuse unethical decision making. Moral disengagement can contribute to unethical behaviour depends on the mechanism used. Moral disengagement is divided by eight mechanisms. The eight mechanisms are moral justification, euphemestic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. This research purpose to examine the descriptive data of moral disengagement in Police Officer. The instrument of this research was moral disengagement scale developed based on socio-cognitive theory by Albert Bandura. Data collected from 150 police officers from traffic division, criminal investigation division, vital object division, operation division, and ethical profession division. Result of this study indicate that the level of moral disengagement on the subject is low and the mechanism used is varied.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, Unethical behaviour, Police misconduct,

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Introduction

Ethical violations committed by the police would be dilemma that occurs not only in the police force but also in Indonesian society. The police ethical violations committed by the police to decreased the public's expectations and trust to the police (Dwilaksana, 2011). According to Dwilaksana (2011), the police tend to give defensive answers when confronting reports of problems in the institution. When there is a case of ethical violation, the police often use the excuse to the public, to trying using different point of view and do not judge the police without facts. This practices are actually intended to protect the police. In reality this has negative impacts to the police as they protect their violating members without punishment.

Ethical violations committed by police is contradictory to the main task of police officers. The phenomenon of ethical violations committed by law enforcement officials is interesting and need further researched. Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes a concept called the moral disengagement which is explain the mechanisms of moral control can be disengaged from unethical behaviour.

Moral disengagement is the process of convincing ourselves that the ethical standards not applicable in a particular context when doing unethical behaviour. It may inhibits and hinder negative consequences for the individual (Jackson & Sparr, 2005). Moral disengagement usually occurs when an individual commits something that violates the moral or ethics. Bandura (In Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Mayer, 2012) suggests moral disengagement theory to explain how the process of moral disengagement inhibit the cognitive processes between unethical behavior conducted and sanctions of such behavior.

According to Bandura (In Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer, 2008) moral disengagement is one of the cognitive mechanisms that inhibit the process of self-regulation in regulating person's moral standards. Moral disengagement can explain why individuals can do unethical things without feeling guilty. When someone would commit unethical behavior, then there is a process of moral regulation that would impede the person to commit ethical violations. Moral disengagement inhibits the process of moral regulation, so that the individual can easily perform unethical behaviour without guilt.

Bandura (In Jackson & Sparr, 2005) suggests that individuals are always observing and comparing their behaviors with moral standards that exist. In addition they can also choose to behave in unethical and change the rationalization they have to make their behavior becomes more acceptable, although the behavior is at odds with existing ethics. In this case the moral disengagement plays an important role in the process of rationalizing the behavior committed by individual.

Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli (1996), suggested that moral disengagement can influence behavioral consequences of ethical violations committed by individuals. Bandura (In Moore et al., 2012) suggested that moral disengagement correlated with unethical behaviours. Moore et al. also found that moral disengagement has impact on individual's involvement in corruption. However, research conducted by Zschoche (2011) argued that moral disengagement did not have significant effect on the behavior of police corruption. Based on the above

description, this research aimed to finding out *moral disengagement* among provincial police members.

Mechanisms

Bandura (1999) suggested eight dimensions of moral disengagement that can alter individual cognitive structure of the moral standards. Eight dimensions of moral disengagement which are: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame.

The first dimension is the moral justification. In this dimension the individual feels that he violates ethical behavior for the sake of a better intention. Individuals tend to feel that the immoral behavior that they do for the sake of defending a conviction or to protect something. Moral justification is often done in the case of the military, especially during the war. Real war is an act that is not in accordance with the humanitarian done because it is considered to achieve a better goal.

The second, euphemistic labeling is a mechanism using sanitized words in order not to cause a real sense of guilt on the individual self. The use of euphemistic labeling tends to be committed by individuals so that ethical violations become more acceptable (Bandura 1999). According to Diener et al. (In Bandura, 1999) euphemistic labeling is one of dangerous mechanisms that can increase individual aggression.

Advantageous comparison is another mechanism that makes ethical violations behavior seems better. In this case, the violation of ethical behavior is being compared to violence or criminal actions that bring bigger consequences, so that the ethical violations do not look too severe (Bandura, 1999). According to Jackson and Sparr (2005) advantageous comparison is done so that the negative behavior by individuals is becoming more acceptable when compared to the behavior of others. These three dimensions: advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling, and moral justification are the most powerful dimensions in ignoring moral values when committing unethical behaviors (Bandura, 1999).

The next is displacement of responsibility. Displacement of responsibility is an assumption that ethical violations are performed as following orders from the authorities. This can make individuals personally not directly responsible for the action (Jackson & Sparr, 2005). In this case the action is seen as following orders from the authorities, so it will avoid direct responsibility to the person (Bandura, 1999). The person is not responsible for his behavior because he considered that he was not the perpetrator who actually (Bandura et al., 1996).

The next dimension is the diffusion of responsibility that is the dimension which considers that the responsibility for violation of ethical behavior to be reduced because the others do the same. In this case the responsibility and guilt in individuals spread because he felt that others were doing the same thing (Bandura, 1999). Decision making in groups is another form of diffusion of responsibility for behavior that violates ethics. In this case all members of the group have responsibility for the decision, but in fact nobody really feel responsible and this can make individuals much easier to do things that violate ethics (Bandura et al., 1996).

Distortion of consequences is the dimension that minimizes the consequences of the action. When people do things that harm others, then people tend to eliminate or minimize the effects or consequences of behavior that they did (Bandura, 1999). According to Jackson and Sparr (2005), individuals can easily harm to others when the effects of the consequences of behavior not seen in visible or just looks small.

Dehumanization is a mechanism on the victim of behavior. When a person conducts behavior that creates negative impacts on others, they who receive the negative impact are considered less human than the person who conducts the act (Bandura, 1999). A person conducts negative acts to others because he or she may previously looked down or dehumanize by others (Jackson & Sparr, 2005).

The last mechanisms is attribution of blame. Attribution of blame is the mechanism that considers the responsibility of being the victim's behavior as the victim is entitled to be treated as such (Moore et al., 2012). In this case, the individual commits some actions based on the reflection of being underestimated and by others and his action is a reaction of provocation committed by others (Jackson & Sparr, 2005).

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 150 police officers in Jakarta. 32.7% were from traffic division, 20% were from criminal investigation divisions, 20 % from operations division, 20.7 % were vital objects division, and 6.7% from internal profession and security division. Traffic division is charged with the spesific duties of traffic enforcement, traffic accident, traffic control and traffic administration. Criminal investigation division is charged with the duty of investigating criminal case. Operation division is charged with the duty as a back up for general operations. Vital objects division is responsible for securing vital objects in the city. Internal profession and security division is responsible for the ethics in the internal institutions. Internal profession and security division also in charged to guard every officers to keep the ethics and their professional standard. 78% of participants in this study were male and 22% were women. The age of the participants is range between 17-55 years old ($M=32.51$, $SD =7.81$). The data collection were done by using a convenience sampling method based on the suitability of the subject and the need for research to perform data retrieval.

Measures

The data was taken using self-report questionnaire consisting of demographic attributes and measuring devices to analyze the moral disengagement. Moral disengagement was measured using Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Moore et al (2012). This scale consists of twenty-four items and each dimension consists of three items. Each items will be measured using a Likert scale with a range of 1-5, 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Examples of items on the moral scale of disengagement is "Lying to protect a friend is a natural thing". The validity of measuring instruments is done using face validity and content validity. The Alpha Cronbach internal consistency is 0.892.

Data Analysis And Results

The data were analyzed using descriptive method. From the answers given by the participants obtained the value of the whole item. On this measure obtained median of 3.0, the minimum value of 1.00, the maximum value of 4.00. The mean of data 2.46 with the standard deviation of 0.5811. Based on the description of these data, it is known that the mean value obtained is smaller than the median, it can be said that moral disengagement in the participants tend to be low.

Moral disengagement are categorized based on the total score of the points contained in moral disengagement scale. Subjects were categorized into two types: high moral disengagement and low moral disengagement. In this study, subjects with low moral disengagement were 80 subjects (53.3%), while subjects with high moral disengagement, there were 70 subjects (46.7%). Data can be seen in Table 1.

Moral Disengagement	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Low	80	53.3
High	70	46.7
Total	150	100

Tabel 1: Descriptive of moral disengagement

Based on the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, this variabel also had a differences mean score in every mechanisms. From the the answers given by the participants, we get the descriptive data to explain how the differences in every mechanisms. Tabel 2 explain about the descriptive data of each mechanisms. From the data we get that the mechanisms that get the highest mean is dehumanization, moral justifications, and displacement of responsibility. These three mechanisms get the highest score compare than the other mechanisms.

Mechanisms	Mean	Standard Deviation
Moral justifications	2.68	0.86
Euphemestic labelling	2.44	0.75
Advantageous comparison	2.55	0,84
Displacement of responsibility	2.6	0,87
Diffusion of responsibility	2.18	0,82
Distortion of consequences	2.40	0,74
Dehumanization	2.69	0,85
Attribution of blame	2.38	0,77

Tabel 2: Descriptive of each mechanisms

This research also aim to describe how the moral disengagement in each divisions. Every divisions had different responsibility and also different values. It can influence the officers perceptions about how they should responsible for their work. Tabel 3 describe the moral disengagement in every divisions. From the data below, it explained about the frequencies of high moral disengagement and low moral disengagement in each divisions. As we can see, operations and vital object division had more percentage of high moral disengagement than the low moral disengagement.

Traffic, criminal, and internal professions security divisions had more percentage of low moral disengagement than the high moral disengagement.

Division	Low Moral disengagement	High moral disengagement	Mean	SD
Traffic division	59,2%	40,8%	2,314	0,629
Criminal investigation	66,7%	33,3%	2,326	0,525
Vital object	45,2%	54,8%	2,636	0,446
Internal professions and security	60,0%	40,0%	2,412	0,417
Operations	36,7%	63,3%	2,667	0,640

Tabel 3: Moral disengagement in each divisions

Discussions

The research depicts that the majority of the subjects have moral disengagement which tend to be low. This means that the participants have low levels of cognitive restructurization in ethical violation. On the other side, it means the subjects in this study have a low barriers in the process of self-regulation in the moral standard for behavior. Low levels of moral disengagement in this study can not be interpreted as a low level of behavioral tendencies to ethical violations. This research also found the differences of moral disengagement in every divisions. This finding can explain that differences divisions had a differences moral disengagement.

The limitations of this research is the number of participants that been used. We hope that further research can get more participants to explain more about moral disengagement in police officers. The further research also can explain how the other divisions that hasnt been explain in this research. This research also can be the based for the further research to try to explain how moral disengagement in another province state police institution. Further research is expected to find out the correlation of moral disengagement in violation of ethics. Moral disengagement can be the influence of another variabel that can be contribute to violation behaviour. It may also be conducted in another profession or background.

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