



Moral Disengagement: A Guide to Reducing Excuses for Discrimination against Latinos and People of Color, Those in Poverty

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We need a cohesive culture focused on health equity, where everyone works individually and as a group to ensure that each person has a fair and just opportunity for health and wealth.

To get there, we must help people understand and overcome the mechanisms by which they discriminate against people of color and/or justify people being in poverty.

Moral disengagement is one of those mechanisms.

This guide on moral disengagement is part of the *Salud America!* “Achieving a Cohesive Culture for Health Equity in Latino and All Communities: A Research Review.” Visit the Review web page (<https://salud.to/cohesion>) or read the full Review with citations (<https://salud.to/ccreview>).

What is Moral Disengagement?

Moral disengagement is the cognitive process of decoupling one’s internal moral standards from one’s actions, thus allowing one’s self to conduct unethical behavior without feelings of guilt or distress.

In simpler terms, it is the process of mentally rationalizing bad decisions, by convincing oneself that ethical standards do not apply within a particular context or situation.

What Are the Four Ways by Which a Morally Disengaged Person Justifies His/Her Actions?

1. **Moral justification:** Reconstruct the immoral action as serving the greater good. For example: “Government aid makes people less willing to help themselves.”
2. **Diffusing responsibility:** Attribute the immoral action to an order from an authority figure. For example: “My family doesn’t believe in supporting welfare programs, so I don’t either”; or “A police officer is just enforcing policy when using a chokehold.”
3. **Minimizing injurious consequences:** Person tells him/herself that the outcome of the action will not be a “big deal.” For example: “A poor person can get health care if they really need it.”
4. **Dehumanizing the victim:** Person reduces his/her identification with the victim, saying the victim did something to make themselves a target for the action. For examples: “Some cultures of people have values that lower their economic ambition.”



How Does Moral Disengagement Impact Views of Those in Poverty?

Social dominance, or group-based social hierarchy where superior groups dominate over inferior groups, influences how we view those living in poverty.

Beliefs about the causes of poverty are individualistic (where poor people themselves are believed responsible due to immorality, poor money management, or laziness); structuralist (where the socioeconomic system itself fails to provide jobs, sufficient wages, and good schools); and fatalistic (believed to be a result of illness, handicaps, or bad luck).

Myths legitimizing these beliefs, such as the bootstraps myth, work to enhance the social hierarchy.

How Does Moral Disengagement Impact Latinos and Other People of Color?

Latinos and other out-groups suffer the consequences of biases, racism, and discrimination that result in negative interactions with those acting with moral disengagement, often at the doctor's office, with law enforcement officials, during the hiring process, or at the work place.

70% of Latino immigrants in the United States believe that discrimination is a major hindrance to their success in this country.

How Morally Disengaged Are People in the U.S.?

In a web-based survey where white adults read either about projected U.S. racial demographics as a "majority-minority" demographic makeup by 2042, or about current U.S. racial demographics in 2010, participants who read about the future demographics revealed more racial bias than those who read about current demographics.

Survey respondents who agreed with statements of moral disengagement were less likely to support government subsidized health insurance than those who disagreed. 68% of respondents who believed "too much government reduces people's willingness to help themselves" said they support reducing healthcare disparities, compared to 82% of those who did not hold that belief.



Social and economic conservatives tend to be more biased against social and economic liberals, and social and economic liberals tend to be more biased against social and economic conservatives, respectively, according to five studies.

How Does Social Identity Drive Moral Disengagement, Especially among Immigrants?

Social identity theory refers to a person's feeling of belonging to a certain social group and his/her desire to maintain a positive social identity through membership to that group, as belonging creates positive feelings toward the group and its members.

This can result in one group member or members acting on behalf or in defense of another member or members, even if there is no personal relationship.

It also creates antipathy and negative attitudes toward out-group members. A perceived threat to the identity associated with the in-group, such as the belief that an influx of unskilled immigrants will result in lower wages and higher rates of unemployment for

non-immigrants or the goal to preserve the national language, can result in moral disengagement-based discrimination and prejudice toward immigrants.

In a questionnaire about opposition to a closed border, Latinos showed the most overt opposition (52%) and covert opposition (55%) to a closed border. White and black respondents showed overt opposition (43% and 30%), too; however, covertly, fewer opposed a closed border (28% and 13%). This shows significant social desirability bias among white and black respondents, who are likely to underreport anti-immigrant sentiment to appear more tolerant.

Can Moral Disengagement Be Changed?

While exposure to the poor in an impersonal way, such as panhandling, usually negatively reinforces negative feelings and beliefs, interpersonal or intergroup contact may change a person's beliefs about out-group members in a positive way.

Can Moral Disengagement Be Changed Through Exposure to Those in Poverty?

In a unique study, participants either: waited without watching TV, waited while watch Niger famine news footage (including a crying, emaciated baby), or waited while watching the Niger famine footage and completing an activity on a laptop during or after watching. Participants who were distracted during the famine footage cared less about related political issues (hunger, poverty reduction, etc.) than those who watched with no distraction and those who watched no TV. Participants who watched TV with no distraction reported significantly more negative moods than the other conditions.

A second study applied the same concept to online media. Participants chose an online video to watch. They were either forced to watch a pre-video ad—either the same Niger famine footage or a promotion about Dell computers—or skip the ad after 8 seconds. Participants who skipped the famine ad showed less concern for related political issues than those forced to watch the famine ad or the computer ad. Participants forced to watch the famine ad reported more concern for related political issues, as well as significantly greater negative moods than the other conditions.



A third study had participants sit a table with gadgets and magazines at one end, and a TV that was either off or on (again playing the Niger famine footage) at the other end. Participants who read or played with the gadgets rated famine-related political issues as significantly less important than the other group.

What Are Solutions to Improve Tolerance and Compassion toward Latinos and Other People of Color, Those in Poverty, and Other Out-Groups?

Intergroup contact

What is the intergroup contact theory? Members of one group, having incomplete or inaccurate ideas about members of another group, can positively change their beliefs and attitudes toward that group via contact (either face-to-face or other interactive, even digital, methods). The greater the interaction between in-group and out-group members, the less prejudice exhibited by the in-group.

Does the intergroup contact theory really work to dispel implicit bias, system justification, and moral disengagement?

- In a study, a largely white group of college students watched one of three versions of a documentary about a border patrolman sent to live with a family of immigrants for 30 days (one 80% positive, one mixed, one 80% negative). Those who watched the positive portrayal of intergroup contact had more positive attitudes toward immigrants. Also, likeability of the out-group member was associated with positive attitudes toward the out-group, highlighting the importance of intergroup friendships.
- In a study of 77% white, 14% black, and 9% Latino adults, researchers found low levels of anti-immigrant sentiment among blacks, Latinos, those with higher levels of education, liberal political ideology, and/or having immigrant friends. Conversely, religious affiliation was associated with higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment.
- One study found that more interpersonal contact with Latino immigrants predicted fewer calls for lower immigration rates, fewer calls for increased border security, and fewer calls for increased workplace raids.
- In a study, participants who read an article about rising U.S. income inequality rated structural/system factors (i.e., coming from a poor or rich family) as more important for getting ahead than individual factors (i.e., hard work), compared to those who read a similar-length article about baseball. A follow-up study found inequality-article readers were also more likely to hold government and major businesses as responsible for reducing income inequality, and less likely to hold low-income individuals responsible.
- It is common for in-group members to blame out-group members for their problems on the basis of factors perceived to be within their individual control (i.e., spending habits, the popular “bootstraps” myth). In-group members less



commonly blame external factors beyond individual control (i.e., being the victim of racist government policies that intentionally depress wealth-building potential of minorities). A series of studies tested if in-group members would show more compassion for out-group members if the out-group was seen as not being in control of the outcome.

- White participants favored external explanations in situations where out-group members were perceived to have less control, and they also reported increased perceptions of black suffering, which increased feelings of compassion.
- Manipulation of external explanations for the actions of Chechen militants increased perceived suffering, which increased feelings of compassion.
- Deep thinkers (who are less needy for quick, certain answers) were more likely to perceive suffering as being a result of external explanations compared to shallow thinkers, and they showed more compassion than shallow thinkers in the face of external explanations.

Peer modeling

What is peer modeling? Peer modeling, based on the intergroup contact theory, promotes positive intergroup attitudes via the knowledge that an in-group member has a close relationship with an out-group member. The in-group friendship partner becomes a positive peer model that demonstrates tolerance in interacting with the out-group, while the out-group friendship partner becomes a positive example that repudiates the negative beliefs or stereotypes about the out-group.

Does peer modeling really work to dispel implicit bias, system justification, and moral disengagement?

- A study of 1,400 Finnish school students introduced two types of peer models: same-age peer models and older university students. The peer models shared written stories of changing attitudes toward out-groups through a close friendship with an out-group member; the university students shared stories expressing support for increasing tolerance of foreigners. Learning from the peer models significantly positively influenced intergroup attitudes among students who had fewer opportunities to form intergroup friendships due to attending schools with less diverse student populations.
- A similar intervention among U.S. ninth-graders used peer modeling via authentic stories of changed behavior to overcome prejudice, promote positive intergroup interactions, and reject moral disengagement processes, which came from the audience itself. A significant reduction in verbal aggression was noted in the program school, with those reporting five or more experiences



of verbal aggression decreasing from 16% at baseline to 7% at follow-up in the program school.

- A meta-analysis examined 81 studies—using either intergroup contact, socialization and knowledge acquisition, and/or empathy training programs to improve intergroup attitudes to reduce prejudice—found that in general, the interventions yielded a 15% improvement in intergroup attitudes, although most only reported short-term outcomes. This shows promotion of positive intergroup attitudes and the prevention or correction of prejudice through training programs in children and adolescents is possible. Direct intergroup contact and empathy training were found to be the most promising intervention components, and direct contact, unsurprisingly, was more beneficial than indirect or vicarious contact.

Effective communication

What is effective communication? Effective communication allows individuals to voice their points of view without attacking another's views, and without feeling attacked.

Does effective communication really work to dispel implicit bias, system justification, and moral disengagement?

- Use of a scientific method can help establish productive conversation patterns between people who have difficulty communicating due to negative perceptions or stereotypes, polarizing views, and distrust.
- The method facilitates conversations that allow participants to truly understand each other's values, concerns, and motivations, rather than those that devolve into reinforcement of negative stereotypes or assumptions.
- Elements include: setting ground rules and structures for speaking; listening to others; allowing equal participation; sharing core beliefs; exploring doubts and uncertainties; asking genuine questions of others; and avoiding inflammatory language.
- The goal of the project is not for parties to reach an agreement, but rather to listen to and understand one another.

Social media for social change

What is social media for social change? While much has been said about the detrimental effects of social media on relationships, it is also clear that social media can be used to bring people together, and to bring about social change.

Does social media for social change really work to dispel implicit bias, system justification, and moral disengagement?

- The #BlackLivesMatter movement began on Twitter in 2016 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. It has reached and engaged millions of people across America, becoming an organization with chapters in more than 30 cities across the United States. The death of Martin, and the subsequent deaths of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland,

Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others at the hands of police, illustrated that traumatic events often lead to social sharing and seeking of support, in this case leading to the growth of a movement that strives to end systematic racial inequality against blacks and people of color.

- The Occupy movement, a sociopolitical movement against social and economic inequality that incited hundreds of occupy protests around the world, spread information using various forms of social media, including a blog called “We are the 99 Percent,” where people shared stories of economic struggles. Similar democratic movements began on social media during the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns, as well as smaller movements such as Rebuild the Dream, an anti-Tea Party movement with goals of fairer tax rates and fair pay, better public education, and Medicare for all.
- In 2009 and 2010, in response to the continued deportation of youth eligible for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, Latino youth took to social media to mobilize and organize sit-ins in Congressional offices, marches, and symbolic graduations. An online undocumented youth advocacy group called DREAM Activist was formed, and in 2009, the founders of the group organized 500 youth to participate in the National DREAM Act Graduation in Washington, D.C., a symbolic graduation ceremony for undocumented Latino youth. On New Year’s Day 2010, four undocumented students from Miami-Dade College set out on a 1500-mile march from Florida to Washington, D.C. to advocate for the DREAM Act; they called their trek the Trail of DREAMs, and documented their journey via blog, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter posts. Along the way, they collected 30,000 signatures in support of the DREAM Act to deliver to President Obama when they arrived.
- Social media platforms are also important tools for advocacy groups. In a survey of 53 advocacy groups, most reported that social media is useful in strengthening outreach efforts, such as increasing message exposure and reaching and educating voters, as well as heightened ability to turn interests into action and mobilize groups quickly.
- Alternative media approaches may have some effect in effective in disassembling violent extremism. For example, video and audio dramas that address issues of identity, reconciliation, and tolerance have proven to positively impact behavior and attitudes, and seeing an in-group member share a platform with an out-group member has proven to positively impact understanding and tolerance of the out-group. The most effective interventions are those that encourage empathy and awareness, allay misinformation, and encourage conversation rather than trying to change minds.



Why Is All of This Important for Social Cohesion?

Social cohesion is a difficult-to-define concept.

Some researchers call social cohesion a “descriptor of the quality of collective togetherness” with three essential dimensions: social relations, identification with the geographical unit, and orientation toward the common good.

Within social cohesion, researchers especially note the importance of social capital (the relationship networks among people who live, work, and function together).

How does social cohesion impact health?

- In general, high levels of social capital in a community are associated with lower crime rates, better health, and overall well-being.
- In one study, four measures of social capital — perceived fairness, perceived helpfulness, group membership, and trust — were associated with mortality.
- Social interaction with others does affect health outcomes, as relationships can facilitate the sharing of resources, help increase opportunities, and improve livelihood.



What is the state of social cohesion in the U.S.?

- Social cohesion has declined in the U.S. in recent decades.
- The main reason for the decline, also called social erosion, is deprivation and inequality experienced by those in poverty amid a widening rich-poor gap.
- Participation in social events and acting in favor of the common good become particularly difficult when income and resources are low. An unequal distribution of resources isolates the less fortunate, excluding them from sociocultural life.
- Conversely, when individuals or groups have equal access to resources, this allows for equal participation and networking, promoting a sense of trust and belonging, security and self-worth. This in turn strengthens the desire for social participation and fosters social cohesion.

How does this impact how we think about social cohesion?

- While increased neighborhood or community diversity has a negative effect on trust and social cohesion, this negative effect is mediated by direct contact between in-group and out-group members.
- This suggests that it is the development of out-group hostility, isolation, and segregation (both socioeconomic as well as racial/ethnic) as a response to increased diversity, rather than the increase in diversity itself, that erodes social cohesion.

- Social cohesion should therefore represent the capacity of a society to ensure the long-term physical and psychological well-being of its members.
- A cohesive society is an inclusive one; a society without significant disparities in health, wealth and income, one that values individuals' backgrounds, integrating those from different backgrounds in a way that everyone relates to one another.

Does improving social cohesion (and access to affordable housing and healthcare) improve well-being and buffer negative effects of poor living conditions?

- An increase in social cohesion can create feelings of solidarity. This manifests as eagerness to help others, on an individual level, and enhanced social welfare systems, on an institutional level.
- Friendships and other social affiliations can counteract the negative effects of poverty by providing positive feedback, increasing confidence and feelings of adequacy and self-worth. In a study of over 2,500 Latinos, physical health was significantly associated with social cohesion and friend support. Mental health was significantly associated with social cohesion, and friend/family support.
- One example of a cohesive community effort is the redevelopment of Sunnydale, the largest public housing community in San Francisco. Sunnydale has been defined by poor housing and extreme poverty and violence. Baseline data, including social and physical needs, was collected on all Sunnydale residents prior to starting redevelopment, which will include replacement of all existing housing with the addition of new units as well as a fitness center, educational facilities, arts program, health clinic, farmers market, and acres of green space. Additional data on the residents will be collected over time to determine the social and physical impacts of the project, which also aims to find jobs for Sunnydale residents in growing job sectors.

Further Reading: Implicit Bias and System Justification

In addition to implicit bias, there are two other key mechanisms that we must help people understand and overcome, to achieve a cohesive culture focused on health equity, where everyone works individually and as a group to ensure that each person has a fair and just opportunity for health and wealth.

Read more about these mechanisms:

Implicit Bias: A Guide to Reducing Excuses for Discrimination against Latinos and People of Color, Those in Poverty: <https://salud.to/implicitbias>

System Justification: A Guide to Reducing Excuses for Discrimination against Latinos and People of Color, Those in Poverty: <https://salud.to/systemjust>

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