



Moral Disengagements When Will Good Soldiers do Bad Things?

Christopher M. Barnes, Ph.D., and Keith Leavitt, Ph.D.

There is no moral precept that does not have something inconvenient about it.

—Denis Diderot

Christopher M. Barnes is an assistant professor of character development and research with the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. He holds a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Michigan State University. He also served four years active duty as an officer in the U.S. Air Force as a behavioral scientist in the Air Force Research Laboratory.

Keith Leavitt is an assistant professor with the CAPE at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. He holds a Ph.D. in organizational behavior (management) from the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington, masters degrees in management and social psychology, and is a research member of Project Implicit.

PHOTO: U.S. Soldiers search an Iraqi house, 21 September 2006, in Tal Afar. (Photo courtesy of Scott Andrew Ewing)

THROUGH INTUITION, VARIOUS EXPERIENCES, reactions to the experiences of others, and exposure to standards held by others, people develop a set of moral standards that they apply to their own actions. For Soldiers, the Army plays an important role in the development of these standards. Leaders, trainers, and educators aid Soldiers in inculcating institutional values. Moreover, the Army provides Soldiers explicit codes, such as the Geneva Convention, the Law of Land Warfare (Field Manual 27-10), and the U.S. Soldiers Creed.

Through these and non-Army sources, most Soldiers develop a cogent ethical framework that they use to inform and guide their behavior. Personal values serve a powerful self-regulatory function. Following this framework gives us a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, and violating our standards makes us feel guilty. Even in situations where doing the wrong thing brings benefit and doing the right thing places one at risk, many Soldiers use their ethical frameworks to select ethical behaviors. However, sometimes individuals with even the most codified and stringent moral standards can selectively disengage their ethical frameworks.

Moral disengagement involves avoiding applying an ethical framework to a situation by using four distinct rationalizing techniques. By removing the standards of ethical behavior that they normally hold themselves to, Soldiers can engage in unethical and inhumane acts they would otherwise describe as inexcusable. How does this process work? And, more practically, how do we recognize and attenuate it in Soldiers under our command and ourselves?

...officials may euphemize the behaviors by calling them “advanced interrogation techniques” or “threat neutralization.”

As noted by Bandura and colleagues in 1996, ethical frameworks can be disengaged by—

- Reconstructing the conduct.
- Obscuring personal responsibility.
- Misrepresenting or disregarding the harmful consequences of one’s actions.
- Vilifying the recipients of maltreatment by blaming and devaluing them.¹

We draw from recent research to describe this process, analyze a recently sensationalized (and controversial) example, and provide suggestions for preventing moral disengagement.

How Does Moral Disengagement Work?

Disengagement occurs through different psychological processes of restructuring the situation.

Reconstructing conduct through framing. One road to moral disengagement is to flip the framing of the issue. Rather than focusing on how a behavior is unethical, Soldiers reframe the behavior as in service of a higher ethical purpose. Former Lieutenant Colonel Allen West retired from the Army after a scandal in which he allegedly violated ethical codes of conduct by discharging a firearm next to the head of an Iraqi detainee. West had received information that someone in the area planned to make an attempt on his life and believed that the detainee had relevant information. Rather than focusing on how discharging the firearm threatened the reputation of U.S. forces in a situation where cooperation was essential, West focused on how obtaining information would help prevent an attack against his life. West emphasized that an attack on him could also place those around him in danger, so obtaining information from the detainee would protect his men as well. A respected Army officer and a recipient of the Bronze Star for previous meritorious actions, West was able to violate ethical standards that he would otherwise value (such as the Geneva Convention). West was so successful in his moral disengagement

that, as of this writing, he still adamantly defends his action even though it clearly violated explicit ethical codes of conduct and no evidence has ever emerged that his actions protected Soldiers’ lives.

Reconstructing conduct through the use of euphemistic language. Certain words—such as *torture* or *execution*—automatically raise red flags that prompt the use of ethical frameworks and standards. However, other words may not have the same effect even if they mean the same thing. Some behaviors clearly violate the rules



Steven D. Green, shown shooting off a lock at an abandoned house in December 2005.

DOD

of engagement, but officials may euphemize the behaviors by calling them “advanced interrogation techniques” or “threat neutralization.” Many people refer to a captured person as a prisoner, but others often use the word “detainee.” Soldiers can avoid ethical processing that would otherwise occur by using sanitized language.

Reconstruing conduct through advantageous comparison. We often determine how *moral* a behavior is by comparing it to another behavior. Soldiers make advantageous comparisons by comparing their behavior to even worse behaviors. The worse the comparison behavior is, the less harmful the behavior in question appears to be. In the television show *The Sopranos*, protagonist Tony Soprano claimed that his actions as a leader of organized crime were “not as bad as [those of] rapists and serial killers.” Soldiers may do the same thing. Compared to Saddam Hussein’s prolonged chemical attacks on the Kurds, any harm American Soldiers visit on Iraqis some see as trifling.

Obscuring responsibility via displacement. To the degree that Soldiers believe that others determine their actions, they do not feel responsible for the ethical outcomes. An especially famous example of this is the Nuremberg defense. When prosecuted for war crimes, many former Nazi Soldiers argued that they were “just following orders.” Soldiers sometimes believe that social pressure or command pressure is too difficult to contend with and believe that they are not responsible for the outcomes.

Obscuring responsibility via diffusion. Diffusion of responsibility is a similar phenomenon. If multiple people share the responsibility for an act, no one individual feels responsible for it. One way for this to occur is for an unethical task to be broken up into steps that are relatively harmless and each of those steps assigned to a different person. A good example of this is a firing squad. Many people feel bad about executing someone (even when it is legal to do so), so having a group of people all fire simultaneously diffuses the responsibility. No single person knows the lethality of his own shot (or whether their weapon contained a live round), and therefore no one feels he is responsible for the death by firing squad.

Distortion. Disregarding or distorting the consequences of an action can result in moral disen-

agement. People remember the benefits of their actions, but often forget the harmful outcomes. They find ways to avoid seeing the harm of their actions. They may try to discredit any source of information that suggests their action was or might be harmful. By not acknowledging the harmful outcomes of an action, they avoid the normal process of ethical evaluation.

Derogation. How a Soldier views the recipients of his actions is important in the process of moral disengagement. Dehumanization involves ignoring any human qualities of a person or group of persons and treating him or them as an object. Because the potential recipient of a Soldier’s actions is no longer a human but merely an object, ethical considerations are not relevant. Blaming the recipient is a similar process. By blaming the receiver, people can view themselves as victims driven to their behavior by his provocations. The people running Abu Grahib prison at the time of the prisoner abuses may have believed that all of the prisoners were terrorists who had done terrible things and deserved retribution from the guards.

What Happens When People Morally Disengage?

Moral disengagement is a process that can occur in almost anyone and has important consequences. In studies of elementary and middle school students, Albert Bandura and colleagues found that moral disengagement led to verbal and physical aggression, stealing, cheating, lying, destructiveness, less help to others, and less personal guilt. In a study of college students, moral disengagement led to unethical business decisions.² In two studies examining adults, the morally disengaged tended to seek harsher sentences for criminals and had fewer negative reactions to reports of American Soldiers beating Iraqi detainees.³

Moral Disengagement at the Canal

In March 2007, three sergeants attached to Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, captured four Iraqi nationals after a firefight and discovered a small cache of weapons. Citing frustration with policies and procedures that frequently led to detainees being turned loose, the sergeants and nine other Soldiers from their unit drove to an isolated spot along a canal, shot the four detainees

...moral disengagement that allowed them to summarily execute four prisoners in their charge.

in the back of the head, promptly disposed of the bodies in the canal, and swore their subordinates to secrecy.

Interrogation tapes of the three sergeants hint at the processes of moral disengagement that allowed them to summarily execute four prisoners in their charge. A statement from Sergeant Michael Leahy shows the use of a *diffusion tactic*: “Like, my arm went up to the right, and I fired again. I’m pretty sure I didn’t hit anybody, but I’m not gonna say that because I don’t know for sure. I wasn’t even looking when I shot the second time. My arm just went to the right.” Although Leahy later admitted to shooting the man, he was careful to point out that his shot might not have been the fatal one. In a letter from prison, his co-conspirator, First Sergeant John Hatley (who was in charge that day) defended his actions through *displacement*, blaming those in charge of setting policy regarding the evidence required to hold detainees: “The guidelines established for detaining and prosecuting the enemy has [*sic*] extensive flaws. Furthermore, the enemy is well aware of these flaws and consistently exploits these to facilitate their release.” Of course, individuals who are on trial or in prison are motivated to restructure guidelines for their own benefit, but more telling (and a more dangerous practice) has been the general public’s seeming desire to disengage their own standards on behalf of those acting as their agents.

The media has recently provided us with an analogous incident in the form of a videotape of Sri Lankan soldiers capturing and executing members of the Tamil Tigers. Although Sri Lankan officials currently deny the authenticity of the videotape and the veracity of the claims, one can imagine that the justifications of the individual soldiers is quite similar to that of the sergeants at the canal. More meaningful, however, is the difference in the American and Sri Lankan public’s

response to the two incidents. An Internet search of reactions to the Sri Lankan incident reveals language such as “atrocities,” “war crimes,” and “murder,” but commentary on the American Soldiers’ canal killings produces examples of—

- *Victim derogation* (e.g., “they’re all second from the bottom on the evolutionary totem pole”; “you’re all feeling sorry for the same uncivilized creatures that would make you a victim in a heartbeat”).

- *Distortion by ignoring harm* (e.g., “they did the job they were sent to do. A little late, but . . . better late than never”).

- *Reconstructing conduct by advantageous comparison* (e.g., “It’s War . . . They cut our heads off and drag us through the streets”).

- *Obscuring responsibility via displacement* (e.g., “you can thank Bush for this”).⁴

The stark contrast in the way we apply our moral standards to others compared to ourselves is obvious. In other words, we (as a Nation) often engage in moral disengagement in an attempt to excuse the behavior of those acting on our behalf.

Strategies for Keeping Morally Engaged

There are ways in which we can monitor the kinds of self-deception involved in restructuring for moral disengagement.

Monitoring cynicism. One antecedent of moral disengagement is highly evident in the canal killings—cynicism. Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer found that individuals high in the trait of cynicism (i.e., a low opinion of human nature, with the opinion remaining stable across time) are more likely to be morally disengaged; further, cynical individuals are subsequently more likely to make unethical decisions. However, cynicism may also increase over time. Leaders, especially those in-theater, should monitor the morale of their troops. (Morale is a weather vane for the inclination for moral disengagement.) Although frustrations, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion are consequences of long and repeated deployments, consistent and growing cynicism is a sign that a Soldier might need additional guidance or oversight in ethically challenging situations.

Increasing accountability. Another way to reduce moral disengagement is to increase

accountability, either formally (within systems) or informally (through reminders from leaders and other unit members). Just as diffusing responsibility can lead to moral disengagement, tying individuals directly to their own actions reduces the likelihood of unethical behavior. This is the reason why many retailers keep mirrors near expensive items; most people are unable to steal while literally looking themselves in the eye.

Creating an internal locus of control. Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer found that an external locus of control (a pervasive belief that the events in one's life are due to random processes, rather than their own actions) predicts increased moral disengagement. In other words, if individuals do not believe that they control meaningful outcomes in the world, they are less likely to hold their behavior to their own moral standards. Paradoxically, many of the features of our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, including long periods of silence punctuated by surprise attacks, changing objectives, and repeated deployments, might lead Soldiers to adopt a less internal (and more chance-based) locus of control.

Focus on benefits and harms of actions at hand. As noted above, one way to morally disengage is to reframe the action as serving a higher principle, such as when West reframed detainee mistreatment, ostensibly to protect his troops. In discussions and decision making processes, combatants stay morally engaged if they take a full view of the decisions being made. Forcing themselves to see the harm in their actions, however ugly and painful that may be, will leave them less likely to morally disengage. Moreover, we shouldn't compare the harms of a course of action to prototypical extreme harms, such as Nazi internment camps. We should evaluate the harms of an action in comparison to its benefits and the harms and benefits of alternative courses of action. This does not mean that Soldiers should never do harmful things, but they should screen

such behaviors through their moral frameworks rather than morally disengaging.

The power of language. The language that combatants use can influence their actions. Army leaders may do well to consider using language that is less euphemistic. By avoiding the use of euphemistic language that obscures the nature of certain actions, Soldiers will find it more difficult to morally disengage. Similarly, Soldiers should avoid using language that dehumanizes people on the other side of the conflict. By accepting that the populations involved in our current conflicts are people with complex motivations (and not simply evil monsters who deserve retribution), we will be less likely to morally disengage.

Conclusion

Clearly, there will be times when our Soldiers must engage in behavior intended to harm the enemy. That is the nature of war. However, Soldiers should not indiscriminately engage in such harm. They should first run contemplated behavior through moral frameworks in the hope of preventing more incidents like the killings at the canal in Baghdad. Indeed, important portions of Army training attempt to build moral frameworks for that very purpose.

The recent research summarized above highlights when our Soldiers will be most likely to morally disengage and cause incidents that are harmful not only to the victims but also to the very missions our Soldiers are working so hard to accomplish. The strategies we recommend are:

- Monitor cynicism.
- Increase accountability.
- Increase internal locus of control.
- Focus on both the harms and the benefits of a given course of action.
- Avoid dehumanizing those who oppose us in conflict.
- Use transparent and non-euphemistic language. **MR**

The language that combatants use can influence their actions. Army leaders may do well to consider using language that is less euphemistic.

NOTES

1. A. Bandura, C. Barbaranelli, G.V. Caprara, and C. Pastorelli, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71 (1996): 364-74.

2. J.R. Detert, L.K. Trevino, and V.L. Sweitzer, "Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93 (2008): (2), 374-91.

3. K. Aquino, A. Reed, II, S. Thau, and D. Freeman, "A grotesque and dark

beauty: How the self-importance of moral identity and the mechanisms of moral disengagement influence cognitive and emotional reactions to war," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43 (2007): 385-92.

4. All quotations are from the "25 most liked comments" as of 26 January 2010, regarding the "killings at the canal" story on CNN.com. Many of those quoted claim to be active duty Army or veterans of recent conflicts, although the anonymity of comments makes verification impossible.



DOD

Unidentified bodies near burning house, My Lai, Vietnam, 16 March 1968.