

Research Paper

A Comparative Study of Empathy and Moral Disengagement between Psychology and Non-Psychology Students

Ruchika Singh^{1*}, Dr. Namita Srivastava²

ABSTRACT

This research aims to provide a study of moral disengagement and empathy on psychology and non-psychology professionals. As professional training is considered important contextual factor influencing these psychological capacities, psychology professionals explicitly focus on understanding emotions, cognition, behaviour, ethical responsibility and managing bias, in contrast to non-psychology professionals who may not receive systematic training in emotional processing or moral regulations. So, we collected data from 100 professionals, 50 from psychology and 50 from non-psychology, sample age range is 19-29 years old, we used one-way ANOVA. The finding highlights that both groups were largely similar across most dimensions of empathy and moral disengagement with the exception of perspective taking, dimension of empathy, suggesting psychology professionals may demonstrate a greater ability to cognitively understand and adopt different viewpoints for future research with large and more diverse sample, it may further explore how professional experience, years of practice and specific psychological training modalities influence empathy and moral reasoning.

Keywords: *Empathy, Moral Disengagement, Psychology Professionals, Comparative Study, Perspective Taking*

Professional conduct is shaped not only by technical competence but also by psychological capacities that guide interpersonal behaviour and ethical decision-making. Research in psychology and organizational behaviour has consistently shown that professionals frequently encounter situations involving interpersonal sensitivity, power dynamics, and ethical judgment, where purely technical skills are insufficient for effective and ethical action (Rest, 1986; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Empathy and moral disengagement have been widely studied as key determinants of prosocial and unethical behaviour, respectively. Empathy has been linked to increased helping behaviour, reduced aggression, and greater ethical sensitivity (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Decety & Cowell, 2014). In contrast, moral disengagement has been associated with ethical transgressions, reduced concern for others, and increased tolerance of harmful

¹Student, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India.

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India.

*Corresponding Author

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conduct in social and organizational settings (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2015). Scholars have further suggested that low empathy and high moral disengagement may jointly contribute to moral failures, particularly in environments where individuals experience performance pressure or role-based justifications for their behaviour (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Professional training has been identified as an important contextual factor influencing these psychological capacities. Education and training that emphasize ethical reasoning, emotional awareness, and reflective practice are believed to strengthen moral self-regulation and empathic engagement (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thomas, 1999). Through coursework, supervised practice, and adherence to professional ethical codes, psychology professionals are routinely trained to attend to others' emotional states, reflect on their own biases, and manage ethical dilemmas (American Psychological Association, 2017). In contrast, professionals from non-psychology backgrounds may not receive systematic training in emotional processing or moral self-regulation, even though they regularly face ethically relevant interpersonal situations in their work. Prior research suggests that differences in professional socialization and educational exposure can shape moral reasoning styles, empathic tendencies, and susceptibility to moral disengagement (Treviño et al., 2006; Moore, 2015). Accordingly, the present study situates itself within existing psychological literature to examine empathy and moral disengagement among psychology and non-psychology professionals. By integrating insights from moral psychology, social cognition, and professional ethics, the study seeks to extend prior research by empirically comparing these constructs across professional groups.

Empathy and moral disengagement represent two interrelated yet distinct psychological processes that are central to ethical behaviour and professional conduct. Empathy facilitates understanding, concern, and responsiveness toward others, whereas moral disengagement enables the justification or normalization of harmful actions. Examining these constructs together provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals regulate their emotions and moral standards in professional contexts. The present study aims to assess empathy and moral disengagement among psychology and non-psychology professionals. Psychology professionals typically receive formal training in emotional awareness, ethical reasoning, and human behaviour, which may enhance empathic capacities and strengthen moral self-regulation. In contrast, non-psychology professionals may not receive systematic instruction in these domains, potentially leading to differences in empathic engagement and susceptibility to moral disengagement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empathy

Zaki and Ochsner (2012) conducted a review study titled "The neuroscience of empathy: Progress, pitfalls and promise", which examined empathy from a neuroscientific perspective. Their research highlighted that empathy is a flexible and context-dependent capacity influenced by situational and individual factors. The authors emphasized that empathic responses could vary depending on professional roles, emotional regulation, and exposure to human suffering. The study concluded that empathy is shaped by both biological mechanisms and social experiences, making it relevant for examining differences across professional groups. A study by Cuff et al. (2016) titled "Empathy: A review of the concept" systematically reviewed existing definitions and theoretical models of empathy. The authors concluded that empathy involves both understanding others' emotions and emotionally responding to them. The study emphasized the importance of distinguishing between cognitive and affective empathy, particularly in applied fields such as psychology,

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healthcare, and social services. This review supports the relevance of empathy in professional contexts where ethical sensitivity and interpersonal understanding are essential. Research conducted by Gleichgerrcht and Decety (2013) examined empathy among healthcare professionals and found that professional training and emotional demands significantly influence empathic engagement. Their findings suggested that individuals

Moral Disengagement

A seminal study by Bandura et al. (1996) titled “Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency” explored how individuals justify unethical behaviour through cognitive restructuring. Bandura (1999) further elaborated the concept of moral disengagement in his study “Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities”

The study concluded that workplace unethical behaviour, especially under authority pressure and goal-oriented environments. The author highlighted that professionals may morally disengage to justify actions that conflict with ethical standards, making this construct particularly relevant for adult working populations. established moral disengagement as a key construct in plays a significant role in examined moral disengagement in moral disengagement Bertelsen and Ozer (2018) developed the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale – Revised (MMDR) to assess moral disengagement more comprehensively in adult populations. Their work contributed to improving the measurement of moral disengagement by addressing conceptual clarity and applicability across professional contexts.

Bandura et al. (1996) suggested that reduced empathy facilitates moral disengagement by weakening concern for victims. Individuals with low empathic concern are more likely to dehumanize others and justify harmful actions. A study by Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008) examined moral disengagement and ethical decision-making in organizational settings. The findings indicated that individuals with higher moral disengagement exhibited lower empathic concern and were more likely to engage in unethical behaviour. Research conducted by Moore et al. (2012) found that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between personal traits and unethical behaviour. The authors noted that lower empathy increases susceptibility to moral disengagement mechanisms, thereby increasing unethical conduct. This study supports the idea that empathy and moral disengagement are interconnected psychological processes influencing moral behaviour.

Despite existing research on empathy and moral disengagement independently, comparative studies examining both variables together among psychology and non-psychology professionals remain limited.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To assess the empathy of psychology and non-psychology professionals.
- To assess moral disengagement of psychology and non-psychology professionals.

Methodology

The present study included 100 young adult professionals selected using a purposive sampling technique. The participants were within the age range of 19–29 years and were drawn from various professional backgrounds. The study aimed to examine the differences

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between psychology and non-psychology professionals in terms of empathy and moral disengagement.

Therefore, the study included the following variables—

Independent Variable

1. Type of Profession (Psychology and Non-Psychology Professionals)

Dependent Variables

1. Empathy
2. Moral Disengagement

Measures

The following standardized psychological instruments were used to assess the variables in the study:

- **Empathy Measure:** Empathy was assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980). The IRI consists of 28 items and measures empathy as a multidimensional construct across four subscales: Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, Fantasy, and Personal Distress. The scale assesses both cognitive and affective components of empathy. Previous studies have reported satisfactory reliability for the IRI, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging approximately from 0.70 to 0.78 across the subscales. The scale has demonstrated good construct validity and has been widely used in psychological research involving adult and professional populations.
- **Moral Disengagement Measure:** Moral disengagement was assessed using the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale Revised (MMDR) developed by Bertelsen and Ozer (2018). The MMDR measures six cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement, including moral justification, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. Previous research has reported good internal consistency for the MMDR, with Cronbach's alpha values generally exceeding 0.80 for the overall scale. The scale is grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory and demonstrates strong content and construct validity.

Research Design

The study adopted a comparative and explorative research design to examine the differences between psychology and non-psychology professionals. The independent variable was the type of profession, categorized into psychology professionals and non-psychology professionals. The dependent variables of the study were empathy and moral disengagement.

Procedure

Participants were approached individually and informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. The questionnaires were administered either in person or through online forms, depending on the availability and convenience of the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and no identifying information was collected from the respondents.

Statistical Analysis: For data analysis, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was proposed to examine the differences between psychology and non-psychology professionals on empathy and moral disengagement.

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RESULTS

In order to investigate the differences in empathy and moral disengagement between psychologists and non-psychologists, the current study used a quantitative research methodology. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the data in order to assess the two groups' differences in moral disengagement and empathy. The significance level was established at $p < .05$ and statistical analyses were performed using SPSS.

Table 4.1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Empathy Dimensions

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perspective Taking	18.61	5.86
Fantasy	17.49	4.21
Personal Distress	15.03	4.74
Empathic Concern	21.10	5.70
Overall Empathy	72.23	12.85

The sample consisted of 100 participants ($N = 100$) drawn from both psychology and non-psychology professional backgrounds. The descriptive analysis of empathy dimensions revealed varying levels across components. The mean score for Perspective Taking was 18.61 ($SD = 5.86$), indicating a moderate ability among participants to adopt others' viewpoints. Fantasy scores showed a mean of 17.49 ($SD = 4.21$), suggesting a moderate tendency to imaginatively engage with fictional situations. Personal Distress had a mean score of 15.03 ($SD = 4.74$), reflecting moderate emotional discomfort in response to others' distress. The mean score for Empathic Concern was 21.10 ($SD = 5.70$), indicating a relatively higher tendency toward feelings of compassion and concern for others. The overall empathy score had a mean of 72.23 ($SD = 12.85$), suggesting a moderate level of empathy across the sample, with noticeable variability among participants.

In terms of moral disengagement, the mean score was 373.39 ($SD = 21.04$), indicating the overall tendency of participants to engage in cognitive justifications that may facilitate disengagement from moral standards. The variability in scores suggests differences in the extent to which individuals employ such mechanisms across the sample.

Overall, the descriptive findings indicate moderate levels of empathy across its dimensions, along with observable variation in moral disengagement among participants.

Table 4.2 ANOVA Outcomes for Empathy Dimensions

Variables	df (Between, Within)	F-ratio	p-value	η^2 (Eta Squared)
Perspective Taking	1, 98	2.394	.017	.07
Fantasy	1, 98	0.462	.953	.01
Personal Distress	1, 98	1.210	.311	.02
Empathic Concern	1, 98	1.041	.441	.023
Overall Empathy	1, 98	0.646	.861	.013

Note. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$.

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the differences between psychology and non-psychology professionals across various dimensions of empathy, including Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Personal Distress, Empathic Concern, and Overall Empathy.

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The results indicated a statistically significant difference in Perspective Taking, $F(1, 98) = 2.394$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .07$, suggesting that participants differed in their ability to adopt others' viewpoints based on their professional background.

However, no statistically significant differences were observed in Fantasy, $F(1, 98) = 0.462$, $p = .953$, $\eta^2 = .01$; Personal Distress, $F(1, 98) = 1.210$, $p = .311$, $\eta^2 = .02$; Empathic Concern, $F(1, 98) = 1.041$, $p = .441$, $\eta^2 = .023$; or Overall Empathy, $F(1, 98) = 0.646$, $p = .861$, $\eta^2 = .013$. These findings indicate that participants across both groups exhibited comparable levels in imaginative engagement, emotional discomfort in response to others' distress, feelings of compassion, and overall empathic tendencies.

Overall, the results suggest that while professional background may influence certain cognitive aspects of empathy such as perspective taking, it does not significantly affect other emotional or overall components of empathy in the present sample.

Table 4.3 Mean and Standard Deviation of Moral Disengagement

Variables	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Moral Disengagement	373.39	21.04

The descriptive analysis of moral disengagement was conducted for the total sample. The results indicated that the mean score for Moral Disengagement was 373.39 (SD = 21.04), reflecting the overall tendency of participants to engage in cognitive mechanisms that justify or rationalize behavior inconsistent with moral standards. The obtained mean suggests a moderate to relatively elevated level of moral disengagement within the sample. The standard deviation indicates a reasonable degree of variability, implying that participants differed in the extent to which they employed moral disengagement strategies. Overall, the findings highlight the presence of noticeable individual differences in moral disengagement among the participants.

Table 4.4 ANOVA Outcomes for Moral Disengagement

Variables	df (Between, Within)	F-ratio	p-value	η^2 (Eta Squared)
Between Groups	1,98	0.805	.709	.023

Note. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$.

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the differences between psychology and non-psychology professionals in terms of moral disengagement. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in moral disengagement between the groups, $F(1, 98) = 0.805$, $p = .709$, $\eta^2 = .023$. This suggests that participants from both professional backgrounds exhibited similar levels of moral disengagement.

Overall, the findings indicate that professional background does not have a significant influence on moral disengagement in the present sample, and both groups demonstrate comparable tendencies in employing cognitive mechanisms that justify or rationalize behavior inconsistent with moral standards.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study revealed a statistically significant difference in the Perspective Taking dimension of empathy between psychology and non-psychology

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professionals. This suggests that individuals with a background in psychology may possess a greater ability to cognitively understand and adopt the viewpoints of others. This aligns with the nature of psychological training, which emphasizes understanding human behavior, emotional processes, and interpersonal dynamics through continuous engagement with theoretical frameworks, case studies, and reflective practices. In contrast, no significant differences were observed in Personal Distress, indicating that both groups experience similar levels of emotional discomfort in response to others' distress. Likewise, Empathic Concern did not differ significantly between the groups, suggesting that feelings of compassion and concern for others may be more universally shared and less influenced by professional background. The Fantasy dimension also showed no significant group differences, indicating that the tendency to imaginatively engage with fictional or hypothetical situations is not strongly shaped by training in psychology and may instead be influenced by individual personality traits or creative exposure.

When overall empathy was considered, no significant difference was found between psychology and non-psychology professionals. This indicates that although psychology professionals may demonstrate higher abilities in specific cognitive aspects such as perspective taking, their overall empathic capacity remains comparable to that of individuals from other professional backgrounds. This finding highlights the multidimensional nature of empathy, suggesting that strengths in one component do not necessarily translate into higher overall empathy. It also implies that empathy as a broader construct is influenced by multiple factors beyond professional training alone.

With respect to moral disengagement, the results indicated no significant difference between psychology and non-psychology professionals. This suggests that professional background does not substantially influence the cognitive mechanisms individuals use to justify or rationalize unethical behavior. Moral disengagement appears to be shaped more by personal values, situational contexts, and broader social influences rather than by formal education or training in psychology. The findings indicate that both groups exhibit comparable tendencies in employing such cognitive mechanisms.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that while psychology professionals may exhibit enhanced cognitive empathy in terms of perspective taking, both psychology and non-psychology professionals are largely similar in emotional empathy, overall empathic capacity, and moral disengagement. These results underscore the importance of understanding empathy as a multidimensional construct and highlight that professional training may selectively influence certain components rather than the construct. The study contributes to existing literature by emphasizing that cognitive aspects of empathy may be more sensitive to professional training, whereas emotional and moral processes remain relatively consistent across individuals. Future research with larger and more diverse samples may further explore the role of professional experience, duration of training, and specific domains of practice in shaping empathy and moral reasoning.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate variations in empathy and moral disengagement between psychology professionals and those from other fields. The research results somewhat validated the intended goals. A notable distinction was noted between the two groups regarding the Perspective Taking aspect of empathy, suggesting that psychology professionals possess a higher ability to comprehend others' perspectives compared to

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individuals from other areas. This emphasizes the impact of psychological instruction and training on particular aspects of empathy.

The effect size for perspective taking was small to moderate, indicating a modest influence of professional background.

However, no notable differences emerged between psychology and non-psychology professionals in other facets of empathy, such as Empathic Concern, Personal Distress, Fantasy, and overall empathy. Additionally, no notable difference in moral disengagement was found between the two groups. These results indicate that the emotional components of empathy and moral reasoning may be stable characteristics that aren't significantly affected by a person's professional experience by itself.

In summary, the findings highlight that although psychology training can improve specific cognitive elements of empathy, especially in perspective-taking, it does not automatically result in alterations in emotional empathy or moral disengagement. The research highlights the significance of acknowledging empathy as a complex idea and proposes that professional education could particularly affect specific empathic abilities instead of general empathic potential.

The results of this study enhance understanding of empathy and moral disengagement in different professional fields and could impact training initiatives. Integrating organized modules for empathy development and moral reflection in diverse professional fields could enhance relational comprehension and ethical consciousness in various work environments.

Limitations

Although the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the research employed a comparative research design, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the relationship between professional background, empathy, and moral disengagement. The findings indicate differences and similarities between groups but do not establish cause-and-effect relationships.

Secondly, the study was conducted on a relatively small sample size, which may limit the statistical power and reliability of the findings. Additionally, there is a possibility of overgeneralization, as the results derived from this specific sample may not be fully representative of the broader population.

Further, the research focused on professionals within a narrow age range and specific occupational fields, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings to wider professional groups or the overall workforce. Lastly, the study did not account for other potentially influential variables such as personality traits, emotional intelligence, work-related stress, organizational culture, or prior ethical training, all of which may significantly impact empathy and moral disengagement.

Future Implications

The findings of the study highlight the importance of empathy training, particularly in enhancing cognitive components such as perspective taking. This suggests that structured training modules could be incorporated into professional education programs beyond the field of psychology.

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From an applied perspective, the results may inform organizational policies and professional development initiatives by encouraging the inclusion of empathy enhancement and ethical decision-making workshops across diverse professions. Early identification and development of empathic skills may contribute to improved interpersonal relationships, ethical conduct, and overall professional well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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