

ABSTRACT

This thesis was constructed on the foundation of two broad theoretical criticisms levelled against Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. The first was the lack of clarity about what constituted the building blocks of the theory and the second was the lack of clarity about how these constituent components interacted in consistent and predictable ways as an integrated model of human behaviour. These 'theory-level' criticisms, which detracted from the empirical testability of social cognitive theory, seemed to have filtered down to the level of its individual building blocks. Therefore, moral disengagement, which constituted the focal variable of interest in this investigation, was not unaffected by them. Bandura's (1986) theoretical presentation of moral disengagement as either an eight or four-dimensional construct and the empirical treatments of moral disengagement by Bandura and his colleagues as a uni-dimensional (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996a; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli & Regalia, 2001b) and a four-dimensional variable (McAlister, Bandura & Owen, 2006), raised questions about its dimensionality. The first objective of this study was to examine moral disengagement's dimensionality and the stability of its internal factor structure (i.e. longitudinal measurement invariance) over time. The general lack of clarity about how the constituent components of social cognitive theory were expected to cohere as an integrated framework of human behaviour had specific implications for the moral disengagement construct and its temporal position relative to other social cognitive variables. The second objective of this study was to examine moral disengagement's temporal sequences relative to select social cognitive constructs (viz. proficiency-based self-efficacy, intention, and past and future behaviour) in order to comment on the likely temporal positions of these constructs relative to each other in the context of a model for predicting antisocial behaviour. Due to the exclusive activation of moral disengagement in antisocial contexts, the examination of its dimensionality and temporal sequences was contingent on an antisocial context. Software piracy, as a specific instance of antisocial behaviour, served as the context in which moral disengagement was researched in this study. A pilot investigation was conducted to test the psychometric properties of the scales that were developed to measure moral disengagement, proficiency-based self-efficacy, intention and behaviour in this study. Once their psychometric robustness was established, these scales were used in the context of a main longitudinal investigation separated by a three to four month time-lag in order to achieve the two main research objectives. Using the structural equation modelling family of data analysis techniques (specifically, confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis), the results of the main longitudinal study revealed that moral disengagement emerged as most meaningful as a uni-dimensional construct which consisted of four aggregated sets of items which represented the clusters of moral disengagement mechanisms that were likely to be activated at the four points in the self-regulation process envisaged by Bandura (1986). The findings suggested that this factor structure was longitudinally invariant when moral disengagement was measured across two assessment waves. Moral disengagement appeared to temporally precede intention and future behaviour and to temporally follow past behaviour. Self-efficacy, however, seemed to temporally precede future behaviour and to temporally follow past behaviour but unlike moral disengagement, self-efficacy appeared to temporally follow intention. Therefore, intention appeared to completely mediate the interaction between moral disengagement and proficiency-based self-efficacy in this study. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings were examined and directions for future research were proposed.

Keywords: social cognitive theory, moral disengagement, self-efficacy, dimensionality, temporal sequence, software piracy