

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL
DISENGAGEMENT, ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, AND SEXUAL
MISCONDUCT VICTIMIZATION AND PERPETRATION AMONG MEN AND
WOMEN ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS IN THE UNITED STATES.

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Health and Human Performance.

Middle Tennessee State University

August 2019

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Acknowledgments

I chose the road less traveled because I desire to go where others have not. I am grateful for this experience and I would not have been able to do this project without support. Thank you to my family, friends and professors who helped me through this process. Most importantly, thank you all for believing in me.

Abstract

Sexual misconduct has been related individually to both ACEs and Moral Disengagement. Though existing studies examined the relationship between ACEs and sexual misconduct, there is a paucity of research exploring the relationship between ACEs and Moral Disengagement while considering sexual misconduct (perpetrator or victim). This study aimed to examine the relationship between Moral Disengagement, ACEs and sexual misconduct. This study found that participants ($N = 109$) ACE score was positively related to sexual misconduct as a perpetrator and a victim among college participants. Future research should further examine the relationship between these variables.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys have experienced some sort of child sexual abuse whether it was forced intercourse or another physical sexual act (D'Urso, Petruccelli, Costantino, Zappulla, & Pace, 2018). Sexual misconduct is defined as "any unwelcome sexual behavior that is committed without consent or by force, intimidation, coercion, or manipulation (University of Iowa, 2018). Sexual behaviors also include sexual attention and romantic gestures that are not reciprocated or offensive to the recipient (University of Iowa, 2018). In American, every 92 seconds someone is sexually assaulted and every 9 minutes that victim is a child (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2019). Despite the hundreds of assaults each day, only 5 out of every 1,000 perpetrators end up in prison (RAINN, 2019).

The "#MeToo" movement has empowered people by supporting both women and men who are victims of sexual violence by helping them speak their truth and heal. The #MeToo movement which was started in 2006 didn't begin to go viral until 10 years later when celebrities were coming forward as victims and accusations against celebrities came out via social media with the movement's hashtag. Since then it has expanded to reach a global community of survivors from all walks of life and helped to de-stigmatize the act of surviving by

highlighting the breadth and impact of sexual violence worldwide (MeToo, 2018). The movement has also opened the door for social media debates and shedding light on what is considered sexual harassment and assault.

To understand why people defend and commit rape and sexual harassment, this study relied on the theory of moral disengagement for an explanation as to why people feel it is accepted to participate in immoral behavior. Moral disengagement is defined as a “process where individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for their conduct” (Bandura, 2017). With the ease of communication through social media, college participants can befriend and interact with other participants online socially and professionally. People post skin-baring images and others make sexist and dehumanizing comments on various social media pages. The college campus is a mirror of this social media culture. Participants make indirect and direct inappropriate sexual comments towards other participants but see a moral justification for their actions. These actions often go unreported and unaddressed. Page and Pina (2015) suggest that individuals who have moral disengagement towards sexual harassment have the likelihood to escalate in their sexual misconduct. Ideally, the college campus is looked at to be a safe place where attendees can learn and develop in life. All of the participants entering college

come with a story despite the clean slate fairytale and with many an exposure to traumatic adversity in childhood.

The Tennessee Department of Health (2015) defines Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, as stressful or traumatic experiences that disrupt the safe, nurturing environments that children need to succeed. Individual ACEs include: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, mental illness in the home, household relatives incarcerated, mother treated violently, substance abuse in the household and parental divorce. A study done in Italy found that 14%-56% of sexually abused girls and up to 25% of boys were victims of sexual abuse from a family member and that adults rarely speak of the risk of sexual abuse in the home compared to other places (D'Urso et al., 2018). Prior research studies have found that children who experience adversity are at great risk of several negative outcomes in adulthood including sexual risky behaviors (Chandler and Monnat, 2015; Felitti et al. 1998). Chandler and Monnat (2015) found that adults who experienced ACEs were less likely to engage in primary healthcare for themselves. A study in the Northeastern part of the United States found that around 10% of women experience some form of sexual assault during their first year in college (McCauley & Casler, 2015).

Purpose of this study

Sexual misconduct has been related individually to both ACEs and Moral Disengagement. Though there are existing studies that examine the relationship between ACEs and sexual misconduct, there is a paucity of research exploring the relationship between ACEs and Moral Disengagement while considering sexual misconduct (perpetrator or victim). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to answer the following research question.

Research Question

What is the relationship between Moral Disengagement, adverse childhood experiences, and sexual misconduct (perpetrator or victim) among men and women within the college campus setting?

Hypotheses

1. When controlling for sex, age, and race, the more morally disengaged a participant is, the more ACEs they will have had.
2. When controlling for sex, age, and race, the more morally disengaged a participant is, the more likely it is that they have been a victim or perpetrator of sexual misconduct.

3. When controlling for sex, age, and race, the more ACEs a participant has had, the more likely it is that they have been a victim or perpetrator of sexual misconduct.
4. When controlling for sex, age, and race, the more ACEs a participant has had and the more morally disengaged they are, the more likely it is that they have been a victim or perpetrator of sexual misconduct.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

This review of literature will provide general knowledge on both the dependent variable sexual misconduct and the independent variables, ACEs and Moral Disengagement in this study. It will discuss recent research that compares sexual misconduct with moral disengagement and sexual misconduct with ACEs. These studies show that there is a relationship between the dependent variable, sexual misconduct, to the independent variables, moral disengagement, and ACEs. The information presented will identify the need to explore the relationship between all three variables mentioned.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the social cognitive theory developed by Bandura in 1986. This theory is used to understand how to alter behavior by learning how the interaction of personal factors, behavior, and environment can influence behavior (iSALT Team Minnesota State University-Mankato, 2014). One characteristic that sets this theory apart from others is that it factors in a person's previous experiences and how they influence that person's behavior or reasons why they engage in that behavior.

Observational learning is one concept of the social cognitive theory that suggests that a person can witness a certain behavior or action successfully and then replicate that exact action (Boston University School of Public Health, 2018). Bandura emphasizes that observational learning is a simple process and individuals play an important role in their behavior management (iSALT Team MSU, 2014). As it relates to moral disengagement, self-regulation is the component of observational learning that embodies thoughts, feelings, and actions (iSALT Team MSU, 2014). To better understand self-regulation, Bandura (1991) identified three sub-functions which include self-monitoring of conduct, the judgment of conduct in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances, and affective self-reaction. In the health education field, this theory is used in research to help develop intervention programs and can provide information on how to prevent sexual misconduct incidents among college participants.

Moral Disengagement

The theory of moral disengagement is the idea that individuals go through a cognitive process that justifies their actions due to the self-perception that normal moral principles do not apply and their immoral behavior is accepted (Page & Pina, 2015). Moral disengagement is a concept developed from Social

Cognitive Theory and broken down into mechanisms including moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding consequences, dehumanization, and attribute of blame in several studies by Bandura (1990;1991). These behaviors can cause both physical and mental harm towards the recipients and occur in everyday situations (Bandura, 1990). Page and Pina (2015) wrote a summary of each of the eight mechanisms shown below in Figure 1.

A study by Risser and Erkert (2016) investigated the relationship between callous-emotional traits and moral disengagement and found that individuals were more likely to have moral disengaged attitudes if they lacked empathy, emotion, and remorse. Regarding children and adolescents, prior research has found a significant positive relationship between those participants who display moral disengagement and also engage in aggressive behavior (Risser & Erkert, 2016). One study discussed that LGBTQ participants were more likely to be bullied by their male counterparts and that moral disengagement made it easier for the bullies to tease their LGBTQ peers (Camodeca, Baiocco, & Posa, 2018). In another study female participants who showed signs of moral disengagement were more likely to be cheating on their spouse (Risser & Erkert, 2016).

Figure 1

A summary of mechanisms of moral disengagement and their function in sexual harassment perpetration.

| Moral disengagement mechanism | Theoretical description | Application to sexual harassment perpetration |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Moral Justification | Cognitive reconstruction of detrimental behavior as socially or morally acceptable | Moral foundations such as loyalty guide evaluation of behavior (Leidner & Castano, 2012) Loyalty: Behavior is perceived as moral when it is considered advantageous to a social group. Gender harassment such as "girl watching" benefits men as it strengthens male bonding and creates a collective masculine identity (Quinn, 2002) |
| Euphemistic Labeling | Sanitizing language used to disguise the appearance and potential meaning of behavior | Language to describe sexual harassment as "flirting," "banter," "joking," "prank," "being friendly" or "harmless fun" (Kelly, 1988) |
| Advantageous Comparison | Harmful conduct is compared favorably against behaviors perceived as worse and more flagrant | Comparison of behaviors within and across different categories of sexual harassment (e.g., personal remarks compared to sexual touching) Sexually harassing behaviors compared to other forms of organizational misconduct |
| Displacement of Responsibility | Perception of detrimental behavior as caused by social pressures or the dictates of legitimate authority | Responsibility displaced onto workplace management High prevalence of sexual harassment in military when local commander is viewed as tolerant and condoning (Pryor et al., 1995) Importance of organizational leadership in facilitating sexual harassment (Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003) |
| Diffusion of Responsibility | The minimization of a person's perception of their individual responsibility for decision making and wrongful behavior committed within a group context | Hostile work environment harassment Disinhibition through observing others engaging in sexually harassing behaviors. Group decision-making for harassing behavior within smaller peer groups (Quinn, 2002) |
| Distortion of Consequences | The cognitive avoidance, distortion or minimization of the harmful effects of behavior through the disregard and distortion of its consequences | Reinterpretation of behavior as pleasurable and flattering for the victim Lack of victim protest and bystander intervention enables cognitive avoidance of harmful effects |
| Dehumanization | The perception of the victim of detrimental behavior as being a sub-human object | Sexual objectification as a form of dehumanization predicts greater male proclivities for rape and sexual harassment (Galdi et al., 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2012) |
| Attribution of Blame | The perception of the victim of detrimental behavior as being blameworthy by bringing suffering upon themselves. | Victims are more likely to be blamed by those holding traditional sex role beliefs (e.g., Jensen & Gutek, 1982) and sexist attitudes (Dejudicibus & McCabe, 2001). Greater attribution of victim blame among males higher in self-reported proclivity to sexually harass (Key & Ridge, 2011) |

Note: Page, T. E., & Pina, A. (2015). Moral Disengagement as a self-regulatory process in sexual harassment perpetration at work: A preliminary conceptualization. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 73. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1016/j.avb.2015.01.004>

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Moral disengagement explains why people behave a certain way, but ACEs explores the likelihood that an event could occur. The extent to which a person before the age of 18, during childhood, experienced abuse or household dysfunction during childhood is classified as ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998). Children who experience child sexual abuse are at high risk for poor mental health outcomes including low self-esteem, depression, dissociation, and suicide (Ports, Ford, & Merrick, 2016). Researchers were unaware of how common ACEs were among adults (Felitti, 2002). Although the rates of ACEs varied a bit, most studies estimate that more than half of the population had at least one ACE (Felitti, 2002).

The original Adverse Childhood Experiences Study defined psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual contact as its three categories of childhood abuse (Felitti et al., 1998). Exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother or stepmother, and criminal behavior are defined categories of household dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study established a questionnaire that is used broadly by researchers today to measure a person's ACE score. ACEs such as abuse and neglect have an immediate impact on children and are associated with poorer health and behavioral outcomes.

Adults who experience neglect and abused during their childhood are more likely to engage in high risk behaviors and more likely to live an unhealthy lifestyle (Bellis, 2014). Adversity during childhood has been positively linked to risky health behaviors in adulthood that lead to early death (Center for Disease Control, 2016). Understanding ACEs' impact can help individuals' find effective ways to cope and avoid risky behaviors.

A study by Karatekin (2016) also found similar results among college participants compared to the original 1998 Adverse Childhood Experiences Study with a third of the undergraduate student participants reporting two or more ACEs. Windle et al. (2018) found the prevalence of ACEs among college participants consistent with previous literature of ACEs among the population. In another study, 75% of the college student participants reported one or more ACEs and of those participants, 3.3% reported some form of child sexual abuse (Petruccelli et al., 2017). Khrapatina and Berman (2017) noted that because many of the college participants are younger adults they may have a better recollection of their childhood compared to the older adults in the original study, thus resulting in higher adversity reporting. Participants that come to college after being a victim to child abuse are more likely to face obstacles both socially and academically (Windle et al., 2018).

Sexual Misconduct

The University of Iowa (2018) defines sexual misconduct as “any unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that is committed without consent or by force, intimidation, coercion, or manipulation.” Sexual misconduct also embodies the forms of sexual harassment which are any unwanted sexual attention and or romantic gestures that are not reciprocated or offensive to the recipient (Page, Pina, & Giner, 2016). Each year, 321,500 Americans are sexually assaulted or raped in the United States and 90% of those victims of rape are female (RAINN, 2019).

Researchers suggest that rape culture not only exists, but is prevalent and seen as permissible to a large portion of society (Giraldi & Turner, 2017). Before entering college, 28% of women reported having had experienced sexual violence or attempted sexual violence (Carey, Durney, Shepardson & Carey, 2015). The Association of American Universities (AAU) Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct found that 11.7% of participants reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force, threats of physical force, or incapacitation since they enrolled at their university (Association of American Universities, 2015). Researchers emphasize that substances such as alcohol may be associated with higher severity and increased vulnerability to sexual assault (McCauley, 2015). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and

Alcoholism there are an estimated 97,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape each year made by participants ages 18-24 who been drinking (NIAAA, 2015).

According to Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, RAINN, (2019), 8% of the reported sexual assaults occur at or near a college campus (RAINN, 2019). Colleges and universities across the United States have policies in place that require employees to report any type of sexual assault on the campus regardless of the victim's consent (Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018). In 2015, the Association of American Universities surveyed sexual assault and sexual misconduct and found that 63.3% of participants did not believe reporting incidents of sexual assault and sexual misconduct was going to be taken seriously by campus officials (Association of American Universities, 2015).

ACEs and Sexual Misconduct

Children who are exposed to sexual abuse are also at high risk for engaging in sexually risky behaviors (Ports et al., 2016). One study found that half of the female sex offenders that had an association with ACEs experienced sexual abuse as a child (Pflugradt, Allen, & Zintsmaster, 2018). Another study by Levenson and Socia (2016) found those sex offenders who as children experienced sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and witnessed domestic violence were significantly more likely to be sex offenders as an adult. In the latter study, Levenson and Socia (2016) suggest that these acts may be linked to the sex

offenders, who were molested as a child, engaged in sexual misconduct as an attempt to cope with their need for attention, intimacy, affection, and control.

Not only are ACEs associated with sexual perpetrators, but also the victims. The higher an individual's ACE score the more likely they will experience sexual victimization in adulthood (Ports et al., 2016). This was found to be the same for participants enrolled in college. Since individuals with a high ACE score are associated with an increased risk for sexual victimization while in college, it is necessary to coordinate and develop a trauma-informed care prevention program and or intervention to help college participants (Windle et al., 2018).

Moral Disengagement and Sexual Misconduct

D'Urso et al. (2018) found that sex offenders who viewed children sexually were more likely to be morally disengaged and had experienced some form of past child sexual abuse. Moral disengagement for these sex offenders was that they perceived children as sexual objects and so to them, there was nothing wrong with having sexual contact with a child. Wegner, Abbey, Pierce, Pegram, and Woerner (2015) found that perpetrators endorsed their actions with moral justifications by blaming the victims, in that they thought that they had a sexual entitlement to the victim. Justifications included the victim making the perpetrator sexual aroused, led on, or they thought the victim would enjoy it.

Similarly, Page and Pina (2015) emphasize that moral disengagement provides an explanation as to why individuals become sexual harassment perpetrators. They also suggest that individuals who have moral disengagement towards sexual harassment have a higher likelihood of escalating in their sexual misconduct. This means that individuals that show signs of moral disengagement towards sexual harassment such as, moral justification could start out making inappropriate comments to eventually committing a crime such as rape (Page & Pina, 2015).

Demographics

Age, sex, and race are all associated with sexual victimization (Johnson, Matthews, & Napper 2016). Research shows that adolescents who experienced physical abuse or sexual abuse once during their childhood are likely to be victimized as an adult (McCauley & Casler, 2015). Teen boys were found to be more likely to engage in teen dating violence and sexual violence in their efforts to validate their masculinity to either themselves or others (Reidy, Smith-Darden, Cortina, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith 2015). The younger in age an individual commits their first offense and the higher the severity of the offense the more likely they will repeat offending (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015). One study found that African American or Black participants are more likely to report sexual touching and penetration victimization (Johnson et al., 2016). Biracial participants,

when compared to Caucasian or White participants, were found to be more likely to report all forms of sexual victimization except for sexually abusive relationships (Johnson et al., 2016). Another study found that LGBTQ college participants may also be viewed as a more vulnerable population since they are less likely to report sexual assault or misconduct (Snyder, Scherer, & Fisher, 2018).

Summary

Much research has been done to look at how moral disengagement and ACEs both relate to sexual conduct separately, but few studies have considered all three factors together. Researchers have used other terms such as lack of empathy and remorselessness, which fall under the moral disengagement framework when comparing behavior to ACEs. However, this literature lacks information on other mechanisms in the moral disengagement framework. This is the same for ACEs research, where past researchers have to discuss child abuse and other forms of neglect but do not include all of the ten identified ACEs when researching moral disengagement. This study was important to help develop a better understanding of the impact both moral disengagement and ACEs have toward sexual misconduct on the college campus.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to exam the relationship between ACEs, Moral Disengagement and sexual misconduct among men and women enrolled in college. This chapter provides information on the participants, the protection of human rights, instruments, selected measures, data entry, and data analysis.

Participants

The target population for this study was college participants, both men and women, at least 18 years of age or older. The determined minimum sample size was $n = 107$ which was calculated using the GPower3 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang 2007; 2009). The study was led by two southeastern universities who provided outreach support to gather participants. Participants were recruited by mass email to current participants enrolled in the college via professors. Some professors included proof of survey participation as an opportunity for extra credit to their students.

Protection of Human Rights

This research study presents a low psychological risk for participants. Participants received a cover letter informing them of the purpose of the study and could decide if they consent to the study. Participants under the age of 18 were omitted from the study. To protect the rights of people participating in the survey, participants remained anonymous. The data collected was very sensitive

so to protect participant's participants filled out the survey online at their leisure and did not report on any information that could identify them individually. The only individual information collected was the demographics which were race, age, and sex that were used as control variables. Anytime during the study participants had the option to opt-out or discontinue their participation in the study. Due to the nature of the questions, resources were included near the end of the survey for participants who needed it. The resources included contact information for reporting sexual harassment or rape, the local counseling center, and university police. The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval number 19-2010.

Instruments

The survey for this study was generated using the Qualtrics software, Version June 2019 of Qualtrics. Copyright © 2019 Qualtrics. The questions for the survey included the ACE questionnaire (10 questions), the Moral Disengagement in Sexual Harassment Scale (32 questions), questions pertaining to involvement as a perpetrator or experience as a victim of sexual misconduct (6 questions), and demographic questions (4 questions) (Felitti et al., 1998; Page, Pina and Giner, 2016).

Selected Measures

This study used sexual misconduct measuring involvement as a perpetrator and experience as a victim for the dependent variable. The independent variables were both moral disengagement and ACEs. The control variables were sex, age, and race.

Control variables. Sex, race, and age were controlled to investigate any demographic significant differences in the findings. Sex was divided into two questions: biological sex and gender identity. Biological sexes were categorized as male, female, intersex, or prefer not to say. Gender identities were grouped as man, woman, other, nonbinary, or prefer not to say. Participants selected race by White/ Caucasian, Black or African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Multiply Ethnicity/Other with the text to specify. Age was determined by the numerical text input of age on those who identified as 18 years or older.

ACEs. A person's ACE score could range from 0-10 which is measured using a scale with 0 meaning no ACE and 10 being all ACEs. This sum will define a participant's ACE score. The Adverse Childhood Questionnaire was developed from the Felitti et al., 1998 study to identify the person's ACE Score, with each yes answer equaling one ACE. As mentioned previously, the ACE score will be determined by how many questions on the ACE Questionnaire are

answered with yes = 1, no = 0, and unanswered questions = 0. Individual ACE's include: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, mental illness in the home, household relatives incarcerated, mother treated violently, substance abuse in the household and parental divorce. The ACE score does not measure the amount of time or occurrences a specific ACE has occurred in the participant's life.

Moral disengagement. Moral disengagement was measured using the Moral Disengagement in Sexual Harassment Scale developed and validated by Page, Pina, and Giner (2016). The questionnaire was developed to be parallel to the original Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Albert Bandura which included the following mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding consequences, dehumanization, and attribute of blame (Bandura, 1990). Their survey was used in three different studies and the 32 items of the MDiSH yielded excellent internal consistency: Study 1 alpha .95, Study 2 alpha = .97, and Study 3 alpha = .98 Page, Pina, and Giner (2016). Measures include sexist jokes, sexual derogatory word or phrase, and display of sexual materials (Page et al., 2016). The Likert Scale was used to measure each question with 7 = strongly agree, 6 = agree, 5 = somewhat agree, 4 = neither

agree nor disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Lower scores indicate greater susceptibility to moral disengagement.

Dependent variable. Question about past sexual misconduct was also added to identify if participants have been a sexual victim or perpetrator.

Participants identified if they had been a perpetrator or victim of the rape, sexual harassment, or unwanted sexual contact since turning the age 18. Sexual misconduct victimization and perpetration were measured by if the answer selection of either yes or no.

Data Analysis

All information collected from the survey will be analyzed in SPSS Version 26. Hypothesis 1 was analyzed using correlation. Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were analyzed using logistic regression. The primary focus of this study was to determine if a relationship between all three of the variables exists. Both moral disengagement and ACEs were the continuous independent variables in this study. The first independent variable, total ACE score, includes ACEs before the age of 18, such as verbal physical, sexual abuse and neglect, and household dysfunction. The second independent variable, moral disengagement, measured the participant's moral perception towards sexual harassment. The dependent variables are whether a person has been involved in sexual misconduct as a victim or perpetrator. Other variables were race, sex, and age which were

controlled to identify if they had any significant effect like in previous research. Before the survey link was sent out, the study questionnaire was reviewed to catch any possible errors and ensure proper function. Data from surveys was exported from Qualtrics Version (June 2019) and analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 26.0.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

A frequency analysis of descriptive statistics was conducted to examine participants' ACE score, susceptibility to Moral Disengagement, and sexual misconduct as a victim and perpetrator for college participants ages 18 and older who completed the questionnaire survey. A total of 206 individuals participated in the online survey but those whose age was not 18 or older and who did not answer 2/3 of the validity check questions correctly were excluded from the study, leaving 109 participants. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for all study variables. The table represents the population percentage with the number of participants or the mean and standard deviation of each variable in the table. The mean age of the college participants was 23.78 ($SD = 5.83$) years of age and the sample is made up of 75% females. Understanding that a person's biological sex may be different from their gender identity, participants were asked to identify their gender but no one responded differently from biological sex. The majority of the sample population's race is made up of both Black or African American (40.4%) and White or Caucasian (43.1%). The other race categories show varying smaller percentages.

Table 1

Participant Demographics for Age, Sex and Race including Variable information

| Descriptive Statistics | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Variable | % or Mean | <i>N</i> or <i>SD</i> |
| Age | 23.78 | 5.83 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 22% | 24 |
| Female | 75.2% | 82 |
| Missing | 2.8% | 3 |
| Race | | |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 0.9% | 1 |
| Asian / Pacific Islander | 5.5% | 6 |
| Black or African American | 40.4% | 44 |
| Hispanic | 3.7% | 4 |
| White / Caucasian | 43.1% | 47 |
| Other | 3.7% | 4 |
| Sexual Misconduct Involvement | | |
| Yes | 36.8% | 39 |
| No | 63.2% | 67 |
| Victim | 36.8% | 39 |
| ACE Score | 1.94 | 2.08 |
| Moral Disengagement | 71.13 | 29.13 |

The mean ACE score was 1.94 ($SD = 2.08$) and the mean for Moral

Disengagement Scale was 71.14 ($SD = 29.13$). Among the participants 36.8% identified as having some form of sexual misconduct since turning the age 18 including sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact, and rape as a victim and sexual misconduct involvement. The mean ACE score for victims of sexual

misconduct was 3.03 ($SD = 2.33$) and the moral disengagement mean was 60.7 ($SD = 23.47$). 69.7% of the participants reported having at least one ACE that ranged from 0-8. The mean age for victims of sexual misconduct was 25 ($SD = 6.96$). Of the victims who reported some form of sexual misconduct 10% were male and 90% were female. 71.8% of the victims identified race as White/Caucasian and 23.1% identified as Black or African American.

Not shown in the table is that 2.8% report having been a perpetrator of unwanted sexual contact and sexual harassment. The mean ACE score for a perpetrator was 3.67 ($SD = 2.33$) and the mean moral disengagement score was 70.3 ($SD = 8.50$).

Moral Disengagement and ACEs Correlations

For Hypothesis 1 correlational analysis was used to examine the relationship between the study participant's ACE score and their level of Moral Disengagement Scale. ACEs score which could range anywhere from 0-10 ranged from 0-8 with no one reporting more than 8 ACEs. ACE score 0 = 30.3%, ACE score 1 = 25.7%, ACE score 2 = 11%, ACE score 3 15.6%, ACE score 4 = 2.8%, ACE score 5 = 4.6%, ACE score 6 = 6.4%, ACE score 7 = 1.8%, an ACE score 8 = 1.8%. The Moral Disengagement Scale which could range as low as 32 (morally engaged) to 224 (morally disengaged) only ranged from 32-156 in this study with the average score of 71. The correlation between ACE score and

moral disengagement was found to not be statistically significant, $r = -0.84$, $p > .05$, one-tailed.

Table 2
Odds Ratios of ACEs and Moral Disengagement for Sexual Misconduct

| | Sexual Misconduct | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| | OR | 95% CI |
| Moral Disengagement | 0.988 | (.968-1.009) |
| ACE Score | 1.544 | (1.189-2.005) |
| Sex | 3.799 | (.729-19.799) |
| Age | 1.059 | (.979-1.147) |

Note: OR = Odds Ratio, 95% CI = 95% confidence interval

Relationship Analysis

For hypothesis 2, 3, & 4 a bivariate logistic regression was used to test each one. Table 2 represents results from the logistic regression analysis that was performed to test the research hypothesis regarding the relationship between the likelihood that a participant is involved and who experienced sexual misconduct, ACE score, and susceptibility to moral disengagement when controlling for age, sex and race. For hypothesis 2, the null hypothesis was confirmed, meaning that this study found no significant statistical between participants who experienced sexual misconduct and their Moral Disengagement scale. Hypothesis 3 resulted in a statistical significance between ACEs and the

likelihood of participation in sexual misconduct as either a victim or perpetrator. Participants who identified having experienced sexual misconduct (36.8%) for every individual ACE score a participant has their likelihood to experience sexual misconduct increased 1.54 (95% *CI* = 1.19-2.01) compared to those who did not experience sexual misconduct (63.2%). For hypothesis 4 this study found no significant statistical relationship between all three variables: ACEs, moral disengagement and sexual misconduct. When compared to those who had no sexual misconduct (63.2%) to those who had experienced sexual misconduct (36.8%), there was no statistically significant difference with moral disengagement 0.99 [95% *CI* = .97, 1.01], sex 3.8 [95% *CI* = .73, 19.8], and age 1.06 [95% *CI* = .98, 1.15]. Data for race was blank in the logistic regression table. A chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated comparing sexual misconduct as a victim or a perpetrator with ACEs, moral disengagement, sex, age, and race. No significance from the values was found $\chi^2(8, n = 106) = 5.48, p > .05$.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What is the relationship between moral disengagement, adverse childhood experiences, and sexual victimization (perpetrator or victim) among men and women within the college campus setting? This chapter discusses the relationship between the variables, study limitation, future recommendations for research, and a conclusion.

Only 36.8% of the study participants identified with some form of sexual misconduct, with 2.8% of those who identified as a perpetrator they also identified as a victim. No study participants only identified with being a perpetrator of sexual misconduct. The results of the study found that the percentage of males (10%) and females (90%) victims were consistent with demographic data from the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (2019). Regarding age, 66.7% of the victims were between the ages of 18 and 24 which is consistent with the average age of college students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Two-thirds of the participants had at least one ACE which was consistent with the original 1998 ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998). ACE scores range from 0 to 8, with no one reporting more than 8 ACEs. The Moral Disengagement Scale ranged from a score of 32 (low moral disengagement) to 224 (high moral disengagement). Study participants

scores ranged from 32 to 156, with an average score of 71, which indicates a low susceptibility to moral disengagement.

The first hypothesis of this study was to examine the relationship between moral disengagement with the number of ACEs a participant has when controlling for sex, age, and race. The correlation was found to not be significant but had a strong negative relationship. Two-thirds of the participant reported having at least one ACE. No one in the study reported having more than an 8 ACE score. According to the Moral Disengagement Scale, no one had high moral disengagement. The scores ranged from 32 (not morally disengaged) to 71 (neither morally engaged or disengaged).

Those who were found to have a higher ACE score were more likely to have a low moral disengagement susceptibility compared to those with a lower ACE score suggesting an inverse relationship ($r = -.84$). This could be due to participants who had experienced adversity in their childhood being more aware of what is sexual misconduct rather than those not exposed to ACEs before college. Due to the small sample size, there was a lack of people who had a high susceptibility to moral disengagement and a high number of ACEs, therefore, could be a reason this test was not significant. A larger sample size would be beneficial when repeating this analysis.

The second hypothesis of this study was to investigate the relationship between Moral Disengagement and sexual misconduct as a perpetrator or a victim. Though this study found no statistical significance between participants who experienced sexual misconduct and their level of moral disengagement, prior research suggests a possible relationship. Research indicated that sex perpetrators or sex offenders had a high susceptibility of moral disengagement towards their crimes (D'Urso et al., 2018; Wegner et al., 2015). Girdali and Turner, (2017) found a majority of their study participants who posted on social media did not recognize the banners as rape culture, seeing as they were initially meant as a joke and accepted. Further investigations of sexual awareness knowledge are needed to see if there is a possibility that participants do know what all embodies acts of sexual harassment. Sexual misconduct policies are mandated in many of the educational institutions in the United States but whether or not participants are familiar with these policies is unclear. The study findings may be different due to the small sample size of individuals who reported sexual misconduct involvement. The findings could also be different due to the reporting of the Moral Disengagement Scale which did not account for the 8 mechanisms including moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding consequences, dehumanization, and attribute of blame in several studies by

Bandura (1990;1991). Exploring the mechanisms could allow future researchers to determine whether or not an individual is morally disengaged, and if so, which mechanism is being employed. Understanding how moral disengagement influences sexual perpetrators and victims can aid in the development of educational programs including awareness and prevention for sexual misconduct.

The third hypothesis of this study was to investigate the relationship between an individual's ACE score and sexual misconduct as a perpetrator or a victim. The results of this study found that for every ACE score a person has the likelihood they will experience sexual misconduct as either a perpetrator or victim increased by .434 in the log-odds. These findings are consistent with prior research that children who experience physical neglect and abuse, emotional neglect and abuse, sexual abuse and household dysfunction are likely to experience sexual misconduct as a victim or perpetrator (Ports et al., 2016; Pflugrad, Allen, & Zintsmaster, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016). Understanding how ACEs increase the likelihood of sexual misconduct as a victim or perpetrator can aid in preventing reoccurrence during adulthood. Students entering college do not come with a clean slate, therefore there is a need to make sure students have access to resources and understand how to use them.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was to examine if a relationship exists between all three variables: moral disengagement, ACEs and sexual misconduct

as a perpetrator or victim. Though this study found no significance between the variables, there are a few things to consider. Page and Pina (2015) emphasize that the moral disengagement explains as to why individuals become sexual harassment perpetrators and those who go unpunished escalate overtime in their severity of assaults. Additionally, college participants with a high ACE score are associated with an increased risk for sexual victimization while in college (Windle et al., 2018). Therefore, sexual misconduct intervention programs at colleges and universities may benefit from recognizing the prevalence of ACEs and moral disengagement to aid in the safety of the entire campus (Windle et al, 2018).

Limitations

A case-control study design was used to determine if a relationship between ACEs and moral disengagement exists among victims and perpetrators of sexual misconduct. Strengths of using a case-control study were the cost and ease of data collection through the survey electronically. Threats to this study design do exist and one was the recall bias, participants may not be able to recall their history concerning ACE or sexual misconduct. The second weakness of this design was how the participant were selected, self-selection bias, were participants could decide for themselves if they wanted to participate in the study. It is important to report that the sample size was not met after the exclusion of the participants who were under the age 18, those who did not answer 2/3 if the

validity questions correctly, participants with missing values. Due to the small sample size, the averages might be unstable and are likely to change.

Recommendations for Future Studies

A goal of future research in this study to continue to examine the relationship between the three variables: moral disengagement, ACEs and sexual misconduct as a perpetrator or victim. Moral disengagement should be considered to be analyzed by each mechanism rather than the scale itself. By utilizing the mechanism future researches can determine if someone is morally disengaged in either moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding consequences, dehumanization, and attribute of blame. Colleges should also consider social media since interaction between students is likely to occur online. Making sure students understand that comments on social media and online are still in the real world and can be just as harmful such as sexual harassment. Additionally, researchers should investigate sexual harassment and sexual misconduct knowledge to decide on future sexual misconduct intervention, prevention, and educational programs on the college campus. Lastly, the sample size should be considered in the examination of all three variables to insure more accurate analyses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to examine the relationship between moral disengagement, ACEs, and sexual misconduct. The correlation between ACE score and moral disengagement was found to not be statistically significant. No statistically significance was found between moral disengagement and sexual misconduct as a perpetrator or victim but understanding how the variables relate can aid in the development of educational programs including awareness and prevention for sexual misconduct.

This study found that participants ACE score was positively related to sexual misconduct as a perpetrator and a victim among college participants. This confirmed what is in the previous literature and understanding childhood adversity can help provide students with adequate resources to help students. Though this study did not find a statistical significance between ACEs, moral disengagement, and sexual misconduct, prior research has indirectly related these variables. It is important that future research continues to investigate the relationship between these variables to understand how to prevent sexual misconduct and aid in prevention and education programs on the college campus.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

**IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE**

Tuesday, February 26, 2019

Principal Investigator **Bethany Wrye (Faculty)**
Faculty Advisor **NONE**
Co-Investigators **Katherine Witcher**
Investigator Email(s) **Bethany.wrye@mtsu.edu**
Department **Health and Human Performance**

Protocol Title ***Moral disengagement and sexual misconduct within the college campus setting***
Protocol ID **19-2010**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

| | | |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------|
| IRB Action | APPROVED for ONE YEAR | |
| Date of Expiration | 9/30/2019 | Date of Approval 9/6/18 |
| Sample Size | 500 (FIVE HUNDRED) | |
| Participant Pool | Primary Classification: Healthy Adults (18 or older) Specific Classification: MTSU Students | |
| Exceptions | Online survey and online informed consent are permitted | |
| Restrictions | 1. Mandatory active informed consent; the participants must have access to an official copy of the informed consent document signed by the PI. 2. Identifiable personal information must not be collected or recorded. | |
| Comments | NONE | |

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**9/30/2021**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **9/30/2019**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this

protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

Post-approval Actions

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

Continuing Review (Follow the Schedule Below):

Submit an annual report to request continuing review by the deadline indicated below and please be aware that **REMINDERS WILL NOT BE SENT.**

| Reporting Period | Requisition Deadline | IRB Comments |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| First year report | 8/31/2019 | NOT COMPLETED |
| Second year report | 8/31/2020 | NOT COMPLETED |
| Final report | 8/31/2021 | NOT COMPLETED |

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Only two procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. In addition, the researchers can request amendments during continuing review. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel.

| Date | Amendment(s) | IRB Comments |
|------------|---|----------------|
| 11.05.2018 | 1. Pollala Dickson (Assitant Professor at TSU - pdickerson@tnstate.edu - CITI2161997) is approved to join the investigating team. 2. Approved to enroll participants from other institutions. | NONE |
| 11.16.2018 | Aubrenie Jones (acj2z - CITI 6295587) has been approved to join the investigating team. Angela | NONE |
| 02.21.2019 | 1. Bowman has been approved to serve as a co-investigator. 2. Depression anxiety and stress scale (DASS21) is added to the online survey (Revised Qualtrics Link on file) | Minor Revision |
| 02.22.2019 | The recruitment email containing the Qualtrics link can be sent by the Academic Affairs or by faculty/staff or advisors. The sender of the recruitment email will not have access to who took the survey and the responses. | Minor Revision |

Other Post-approval Actions:

| Date | IRB Action(s) | IRB Comments |
|------|---------------|--------------|
| NONE | NONE. | NONE |

Mandatory Data Storage Requirement: All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after IRBN001 – Expedited Protocol Approval Notice

Institutional Review Board

Office of Compliance

Middle Tennessee State University

study has been closed. Subsequent to closing the protocol, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.

IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.
More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).