

## The Role of Moral Disengagement in the Execution Process

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*The present study tested the proposition that disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables prison personnel to carry out the death penalty. Three subgroups of personnel in penitentiaries located in three Southern states were assessed in terms of eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. The personnel included the execution teams that carry out the executions; the support teams that provide solace and emotional support to the families of the victims and the condemned inmate; and prison guards who have no involvement in the execution process. The executioners exhibited the highest level of moral, social, and economic justifications, disavowal of personal responsibility, and dehumanization. The support teams that provide the more humane services disavowed moral disengagement, as did the noninvolved guards but to a lesser degree than the support teams.*

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**KEY WORDS:** executioners; jurors; moral agency; moral disengagement; social cognitive theory.

The EKG monitors are in front of me. As I push in the tubes, the heart beats slower and slower. I watch the lines on the EKG as they flatten. If I push a little harder, they flatten more. Once I finish the last syringe, the pulse ends and it's over. (Executioner)

In the exercise of moral agency people refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. This restraint of negative self-sanction keeps one's conduct in line with moral standards (Bandura, 1999, 2002). However, the self-regulation of conduct that has detrimental consequences to others or to society, is not entirely a personal matter. Rather than operating as autonomous moral agents, people are often enmeshed in social roles and functions. Acting as functionaries in these roles may require inflicting harm on others, as in the police, military and corrections. A particularly grave moral predicament faces those in corrections whose job may require taking a human life in the process of applying the legally sanctioned death penalty.

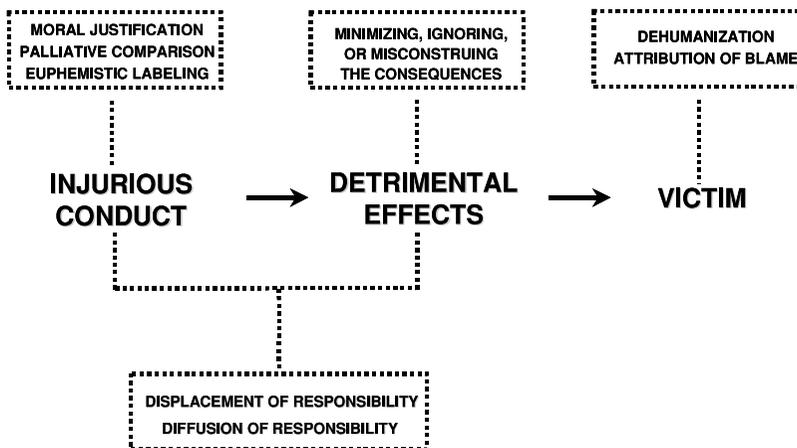
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The present study examined the proposition that selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions enables people to perform this lethal function while simultaneously maintaining their emotional well-being. This research is conducted within the social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1986, 1991). In the exercise of a moral self, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for their conduct. In this self-regulatory process, individuals engage a number of cognitive functions by monitoring their conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judging their actions in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulating their actions anticipatorily by the consequences they would apply to themselves. They do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth, and refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-censure. Moral agency is thus exercised through the constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards, combined with the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards.

Different lines of research have clarified the processes of moral self-regulation, such as the self-monitoring of conduct, construction of moral standards, formation of moral judgments from constellations of events, and the exercise of self-influence through self-reactive means (Bandura, 1986, 1991). The focus of the present study is on the enlistment of mechanisms of moral disengagement in the special situation of taking another person's life in state-sanctioned executions.

Moral standards do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct, however. Self-regulatory mechanisms do not operate unless they are activated. A variety of psychosocial mechanisms operate to selectively disengage moral self-sanctions from injurious conduct (Bandura, 2002, in press). In social cognitive theory of moral agency there are four sites in the process of moral control at which moral self-censure can be selectively disengaged: at the locus of the behavior; the agent of the action; the outcomes that flow from the behavior, and the recipient of the actions. These loci of moral disengagement are presented schematically in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Mechanism through which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from injurious conduct at different points in the self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1986).

Operating at the behavior locus are three separate disengagement mechanisms that convert the construal of injurious conduct into righteous conduct. In *moral justification*, worthy ends are used to vindicate injurious means (Bandura, 2003; Reich, 1990). Second, by the use of sanitizing *euphemistic language*, injurious conduct is rendered benign (Bolinger, 1980; Gambino, 1973). *Exonerative comparison* with even more flagrant inhumanities is a third mechanism for cloaking injurious behavior in an aura of benevolence. This advantageous contrast relies heavily on moral justification by utilitarian standards. It affirms that injurious conduct will prevent more human suffering than it causes (Bandura, 2003). This trio of mechanisms is especially effective in disengaging moral self-sanctions. Investing injurious conduct with high social and moral purpose not only eliminates self-censure but also engages self-approval in the proficient service of the activity.

The second set of disengagement mechanisms operates at the agency locus by obscuring or minimizing the perpetrator's agentic role in an injurious activity. Under *displacement of responsibility*, people view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible for them (Diener, 1977; Milgram, 1974). Because they do not perceive themselves to be the main causal agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions. The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by *diffusing responsibility* for injurious conduct (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). Responsibility can be diffused in three ways, by division of labor in which each of the subdivided tasks seem harmless in themselves, by group decision-making which absolves any individual from feeling personally responsible, and also by engaging in collective action which provides some degree of personal anonymity while minimizing individual accountability (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Zimbardo, 1995). The weakening moral control at the outcome locus is achieved by *minimizing or disregarding the harmful consequences* of one's action. As long as the injurious outcomes are ignored, minimized, or disbelieved there is little reason for moral self-regulation to be activated.

The final set of disengagement mechanisms operates at the locus of the recipients or objects of detrimental acts through *dehumanization* and *attribution of blame*. Self-censure for injurious conduct can be disengaged or blunted by divesting people of human qualities, or by attributing demonic and bestial qualities to them (Bandura et al., 1975; Haritos-Fatouras, 2002; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouras, & Zimbardo, 2002; Keen, 1986). Blaming the recipients of injurious treatment for bringing suffering on themselves also serves self-exonerating purposes. In this process of "blaming the victim," perpetrators see themselves as driven to injurious conduct by compelling circumstances or the foe's appalling inhumanities rather than by their personal decisions.

The sociological neutralization theory of delinquency proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957) includes some of the mechanisms of moral disengagement. They construe the process of neutralization in terms of guilt mitigation by denying responsibility and injury, claiming rightful retaliation, blaming one's condemners, and appealing to loyalty to transgressive peers. As previously noted, selective moral disengagement is rooted in the social cognitive theory of moral agency. It construes the disengagement mechanisms more broadly, specifies the points in

the self-regulatory process where the different modes of moral disengagement operate, distinguishes between different forms of nonresponsibility, and embeds the disengagement process in sociostructural arrangements.

For example, displacement and diffusion of responsibility are not just cognitive denial machinations. They are built into the very structure of social systems to obscure personal accountability. Dehumanization is a key mechanism that operates by nullifying self-restraints operating through feelings of empathy and compassion. Moral disengagement through religious and social imperatives involves an affirmative proactive process not a defensive denial one. These various psychosocial maneuvers are not just “techniques.” They are grounded in self-regulatory processes that have been corroborated experimentally (Bandura, 1986, 1991).

The facilitative role of moral disengagement has been verified in diverse forms of injurious conduct. They range from antisocial pursuits (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001) to international terrorism and support of military force in international conflicts (Bandura, 2003; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2004a). It is important to recognize that selective moral disengagement operates not only at the individual level, but does so with even more profound and pervasive impact at the broader level of social systems. When corporate and societal practices enlist moral disengagement mechanisms they can cause widespread and devastating human harm (Bandura, 1973, 2003; Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2002). The present research is designed to articulate the ways in which moral disengagement operates in an especially grave moral predicament—the taking of human life in the application of the death penalty.

Moral disengagement comes into play at three levels in the application of the death penalty—at the societal, judicial, and execution levels. At the societal level, public support for the death penalty has remained at a high and stable level, but there has been a recent decline in sanction of state executions. In a discerning analysis, Gross and Ellsworth (2003) identify a number of factors that have weakened public support for the death penalty. The conflicted view of the American public regarding state executions is shown in voicing substantial support for the death penalty while doubting its deterrent value, and acknowledging that the judicial system is often administered unfairly and cannot fully protect innocent defendants from being put to death.

Enlistment of the mechanisms of moral disengagement eases the public’s moral dilemma over state executions. Indeed, findings of a national study (McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2004b) show that the higher the moral disengagement, the stronger the support for capital punishment even when respondents are given the alternative of life imprisonment without parole and for executing mentally retarded defendants. Level of moral disengagement varies as a function of a number of sociodemographic characteristics. Higher levels of moral disengagement are exhibited by males, those of lower education, and older individuals. Caucasians exhibit greater levels of moral disengagement regarding the execution of criminals than do either African-Americans or Hispanics. Variation in support of executions closely mirrors the level of moral disengagement by members in each of these categories.

Moral qualms are eased when execution is viewed in the abstract under the sanitized label of "capital punishment." People favor the death penalty in the abstract but are more hesitant to impose it when given information that personalizes the murderer (Ellsworth, 1978). In explaining the variation, Ellsworth suggests that when people have minimal information about a convicted felon, they conjure up a prototype of the most heinous murderer. They are also less supportive of the death penalty if they have to serve as jurors (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983). Obviously those who voice support for the death penalty are far removed from its implementation in the execution chamber. It is a graver moral predicament for jurors who make decisions that sentence a person to death, and still more so for executioners who society has assigned the task of taking a person's life.

In his in-depth analysis of jurors' moral disengagement, Haney (1997) identified the unique conditions built into the sentencing process that enable jurors to sentence a person to death. Individuals who unalterably oppose the death penalty are eliminated when the jury is impaneled. Attorneys battle over the personalization and dehumanization of defendants. Diffusion and displacement of responsibility also figure prominently in the sentencing process. Jurors view their decisions as a sentencing imperative rather than as a personal decision, aided by prosecutors who often present them with misleading and forced choices on capital sentencing (Bowers and Steiner, 1999). Jurors not only minimize their personal responsibility for their collective decision but play down its consequences as well. They contend that Appellate judges will ultimately decide the question and, even if the death sentence is upheld, the execution is unlikely to happen.

The weakening of moral engagement by distal role is captured in the remarks of a retiring warden: "If jurors had to draw straws to see who was going to pull the switch or start the lethal injection, there wouldn't be as many executions" (Rimer, 2000). While jurors can distance themselves from the consequences of their decision and minimize them by employing any number of the psychological mechanisms we have outlined, executioners cannot slight their deathly function. One executioner described his lethal role in the starkest terms, "My job is one violent act of watching a man die. I see him when he walks in alive. I watch him as he is rolled out dead. I know that I have killed him" (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2002). A number of books have been written about the execution process and the experiences of some of the participants in it (Cabana, 1996; Johnson, 1998; Lifton & Mitchell, 2000; Prejean, 1993; Trombley, 1993). However, the psychosocial factors that enable executioners to take a human life have not been tested systematically and evaluated comparatively as a function of the distinct roles the prison personnel play in the execution process.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991) posits that performance of the executioner role requires disengagement of moral self-sanctions that would otherwise curb its adoption and prompt self-censure were it to be enacted. Carrying out an execution is facilitated when high societal and moral purposes justify lethal means, and when executions are structured psychosocially in ways that are, in large part, self-exonerating.

The present study was designed to shed light on the pattern of moral disengagement of a social system in which its members perform markedly different

roles in the taking of a human life. We tested the hypothesis that the enlistment of the various mechanisms of moral disengagement varies as a function of the nature of the individual's degree of involvement in the execution process. For this purpose, three subgroups of prison personnel were studied in maximum-security penitentiaries located in three Southern states where the executions are carried out.

One subgroup comprised randomly selected prison guards whose job functions do not include any involvement in the execution process. Their noninvolvement would minimize the need to neutralize moral self-sanctions. The second subgroup included members of the support team who carry out the more humane services during the execution. They provide emotional support to the families of the victim and the inmate, offer the inmate counseling and spiritual guidance, and manage relations with the press and general public. These functions are best performed by humanizing relationships and providing solace during this tormenting event. One of the members aptly described their supportive role as, "You have to be compassionate or else you can't perform your work."

Members of the third subgroup, the execution team, perform key roles in the execution itself. The strap-down members are each assigned the task of strapping down a particular part of the inmate's body to the gurney. The medical technicians insert the catheters into the inmate's veins, and attach the electrocardiogram electrodes to monitor the inmate's heart rate. Finally, the executioner pushes the plungers of the syringes to deliver the lethal drugs.

State-sanctioned executions present a unique moral challenge. In most social systems that trade in death, the perpetrators' moral self-restraints are gradually weakened through participation in a progression of committing inhumanities against "enemies" (Bandura, 1999; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Sprinzak, 1990). Moreover, they usually deliver the lethal means remotely toward faceless victims. These conditions make it easier to remove humanity from one's lethal actions. There is no such gradual easing in State executions of taking a human life by performing paler versions of death before carrying out the ultimate one. They have to kill a human being they have come to know personally up close and by their own hand. Having to inflict pain and suffering personally curbs injurious conduct (Milgram, 1974). Disengagement of restraining self-sanctions would enable executioners to do it at the outset. Based on the theoretical formulation outlined here, it was predicted that the members of the execution team would exhibit the highest level of moral disengagement, the support team the lowest level, and the noninvolved guards would be at an intermediate level of moral disengagement.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants were 246 prison personnel from three maximum-security penitentiaries in each of three Southern states where the state executions are performed. With regard to sociodemographic characteristics, 76% of the personnel were male and 24% were female. They ranged in age from 21 to 66 years, with a mean age of

41 years. Half of the personnel were Caucasian and the other half were African-Americans. Their level of education was 45% high school, 27% some college, 20% finished college, and 8% finished postgraduate study. Twenty-three percent were single, 67% were married, and 10% were divorced. The number of years employed in the prison system varied from 1 to 31 years, with 46% serving 1–5 years, 30% for 11–20 years and 24% for more than 20 years. They also varied widely in the number of executions in which they had participated, ranging from 1 to 27 executions. Sixty-three percent had participated in 1–5 executions, 7% in 6–10 executions, 9% in 11–15 executions, and 21% in more than 16 executions.

### **Selection Criteria**

Individuals do not apply to serve on an execution team. Rather, they came from the ranks of the regular prison guards. The wardens use the following criteria in inviting prison guards to join the execution team. They must be level-headed, dependable, and have a record of managing inmates fairly that has earned them the respect of the inmates. Such an invitation from a warden is taken as a mark of respect. None of the guards in the three penitentiaries declined the invitation to join the execution team, although they were told that they are free to do so. In the long stretches of time between executions, they performed the regular guard duties throughout the penitentiary. Execution teams remain highly stable over time. No member in any of the three prisons dropped out of an execution team, with only two exceptions, who were removed for personal conflicts.

### **Penitentiary Systems**

The penitentiaries varied in their sociostructural orientation. Penitentiary A operates under a strong religious orientation. The warden has built an accredited inmate Bible College with inmate ministers providing the spiritual counseling on death row. Religious murals adorn the Death House and the security guards personalize their relationship with the inmates. The Warden holds prayer sessions for the execution team immediately prior to the execution. The prison maintains an open relationship with the surrounding community, even providing the public an annual Prison Rodeo with inmate participants.

Penitentiary B is more security-oriented and detached from the community. Within this prison, death row inmates have more privileges than they do at the other facilities, where they are confined to their cells. Death row inmates can spend time in the law library and interact with one another outside in an activity known as “Groupwalk.” However, the security guards are discouraged from personalizing their relationship with the inmates on death row and maintain a code of silence called “Code Blue” with outsiders concerning their role in the execution process. Religious volunteers visit the Death Row each week. Inmates are allowed to have visitors each day prior to the execution.

Penitentiary C is operated under a strong code of professional management. Prisoner life is run under a tight schedule that follows the letter of the law. The location and activities of each inmate should be known at all times. The warden

insists that inmates be treated with respect, and executions should be performed with dignity. No visitors are allowed prior to the execution.

The penitentiaries also varied somewhat in size, with the A and C facilities being larger, containing 5,100, and 5,200 inmates respectively, and B holding 1,000 inmates. The corresponding number of members on the execution and support teams in these three facilities were 54 in A and C, and 15 in penitentiary B. The number of members in each penitentiary serving in the execution and support teams respectively were 14 and 40 in A; 10 and 44 in C; and 8 and 7 in B. A corresponding number of guards, 54, 15, 54, in penitentiaries A, B, and C, respectively, who were not involved in the execution process, were randomly selected as our comparison condition. In all the three penitentiaries, 100% of the members of the execution and support teams completed the measures of moral disengagement and were interviewed in depth concerning their experiences. The participation rate for the noninvolved comparison guards was also 100%.

This extraordinarily high participation rate was the result of strong rapport, built over several years, with one of the wardens who enjoys considerable respect in the field of corrections. The participants found it personally beneficial to have this opportunity to talk anonymously in the semi-structured interview about their experiences. Their positive experiences vouched for the value of participating in the study. This warden's active endorsement of the project won ready acceptance by other wardens.

At the time of this study, all three states used lethal injection as the method of execution. Penitentiary A switched from electrocution to lethal injection in 1993, B used the electric chair as the method of execution until 2002, and C used execution by lethal gas until 2002. The various members of the execution team now perform essentially the same roles in each of the penitentiaries—escort, strap-down, insertion of the intravenous lines, attachment of electrocardiogram monitors, and delivery of the lethal drugs.

### **Level of Involvement in the Execution Process**

The support teams and the execution teams served markedly different functions. Some of the members of the support team provide emotional support for the families of the victim as they await the execution, relieve the trauma of the homicide, and seek relief through a sense of closure. As one officer described it, "They are emotional, but are not jumping for joy. As a family, they hug. The nightmare is finally over—it is a relief." Still others provide support for the families and relatives of the condemned inmate as they meet with the inmate for the last time. The families' final parting is especially difficult for the support team. Other members of the support team include counselors who provide psychological support to the condemned inmates. Some members manage relations with the media and other public figures who have interest in particular executions. Spiritual advisors offer prayers of support immediately before the inmate is escorted to the death chamber. As one spiritual advisor explained, "I prayed with him at the end. I read John 3:16 to him, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have

everlasting life.' He tried to hug me through the bars. Fifteen minutes later he was dead."

The members of the execution team have the task of carrying out the execution. The strap-down team escorts the inmate to the death chamber. The strap-down is accomplished by highly fractionated, diffused responsibility. Each member straps a particular part of the body: left leg, right leg, left arm and torso, right arm and torso, head, all under close supervision of their leader. They approach their task with a strong sense of technical responsibility. "We each have a small role on the team. We carry out a job for the state. The press and victims are watching. We have a certain duty and do it as efficiently as we can." The emergency medical technicians get the lethal drugs from the pharmacy, insert the intravenous lines for the syringes into the inmate's veins, and attach the electrocardiogram electrodes to monitor the inmate's heart rate. The executioner administers three different drugs: sodium pentothal to put the inmate to sleep to suppress death spasms, pancuronium bromide to stop respirations and potassium chloride to stop the heart beat. The individual who administers the lethal injection pushes the plungers one by one until each drug enters the blood stream. Death comes with striking speed. Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences among the three groups of participants on any of the sociodemographic characteristics we collected.

### Measurement of Moral Disengagement

The various forms of moral disengagement regarding executions were measured with a 19-item scale completed anonymously by every participant. The items assessed the eight mechanisms we have outlined through which moral self-sanctions are disengaged from lethal activity.

*Moral justification* included biblical imperatives that murder must be avenged, and the necessity to execute murderers to maintain societal order, deter others from homicidal crimes, and to spare societal costs of life imprisonment. "The bible teaches that murders must be avenged: life for a life and eye for eye" and "If a society is to be law-abiding, murders must be avenged with capital punishment" are items tapping religious and social justifications. *Euphemistic language* sanitizes the taking of human life as simply a legal penalty. "Capital punishment is just a legal penalty for murder," clothes executions in pallid legalese. *Advantageous comparison* characterizes executions as merciful compared to the heinous homicides of the condemned. "An execution is merciful compared to a murder" is a sample item in which an execution is rendered benign by contrasting it with homicidal inhumanity. *Displacement of responsibility* absolves executioners from being judged personally for carrying out the orders of society, and shifts responsibility to the heinous nature of the crimes and to sentencing requirements that are presumed to dictate jurors' decisions. The item, "Those who carry out state executions should not be criticized for following society's wishes" typifies the displacement of responsibility. *Diffusion of responsibility* exonerates any single juror from being held accountable for a group decision, and any single member of the large execution team from feeling personal responsibility. The following item assessed the reduction of personal accountability through the exercise of group agency, "When the twelve jurors approve the death penalty no one

*juror should be held responsible for the decision to execute a murderer.*” The items assessing *minimization of consequences* contend that current modes of execution minimize suffering, elaborate safeguards assure that no innocent persons will be executed, and jurors’ decisions are of little consequence because later court rulings will decide the matter. “*Nowadays the death penalty is done in ways that minimize the suffering of the person being executed*” is a sample item of minimization of suffering. In *attribution of blame*, murderers have only themselves to blame for being put to death, and the mechanism involving *dehumanization* characterizes murderers as devoid of any human qualities. In the item “*Murderers who receive the death penalty have forfeited the right to be considered full human beings,*” they are stripped of human qualities.

Participants rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (+2) to uncertainty (0) to strongly disagree (−2). The positive values represent espousal of the various modes of moral disengagement; the negative values represent disavowal of them. To evaluate the structure underlying the set of items of moral disengagement, a principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was performed. Only items loading .40 or higher were considered for inclusion in a factor. The actual scale item loadings in the factors ranged from .47 to .75. One item was discarded because it did not load on any factor. As shown in Table 1, the results reveal a four-factor structure with eigen values greater than 1. The factors essentially correspond to the four loci in the central process where the disengagement of moral self-sanctions can occur.

The first factor, *moral justification*, included high loadings on 7 items supporting executions based on biblical imperatives, deterrence, maintenance of societal order, exonerating comparison, and minimization of the taking of human life. The second

**Table 1.** Factor Structure for the Different Modes of Modes of Moral Disengagement

Items	Factors			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Item 1	0.74	0.12	0.11	0.10
Item 2	0.72	0.18	0.33	0.03
Item 3	0.67	0.11	−0.06	0.38
Item 4	0.60	0.16	0.02	0.33
Item 5	0.59	0.01	0.24	−0.07
Item 6	0.57	0.36	0.16	0.04
Item 7	0.48	0.08	0.29	0.04
Item 8	0.06	0.71	0.04	0.27
Item 9	−0.13	0.68	0.02	0.33
Item 10	0.34	0.66	0.17	−0.37
Item 11	0.40	0.65	0.23	−0.26
Item 12	0.42	0.52	0.24	0.07
Item 13	0.15	0.47	0.07	0.08
Item 14	0.20	0.21	0.75	−0.13
Item 15	0.19	0.20	0.75	0.04
Item 16	0.19	−0.05	0.54	0.34
Item 17	0.20	0.03	−0.03	0.65
Item 18	−0.08	0.21	0.28	0.60
Item 19	0.41	0.09	−0.08	0.51

factor comprised 6 items that centered on *economic and security justifications* for executing condemned inmates. The third factor, represented by 3 items, focused on *dehumanization*. The fourth factor, *nonresponsibility*, also comprised of 3 items, expressed the view that neither jurors nor executioners should bear responsibility for societally sanctioned executions. The first two factors contained more items because they combined more modes of disengagement. These four factors, with eigen values of 5.52, 1.83, 1.54, and 1.17, accounted for 29, 20, 5, and 4% of the variance, respectively. The alpha reliability coefficients were .81 for factor 1, .75 for factor 2, .61 for factor 3, and .50 for factor 4.

All of the participants in the support and execution subgroups, but not the subgroup of guards who had no involvement in the execution, were interviewed by the lead author in an open-ended format for their experiences regarding the execution process. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a separate session following administration of the scales assessing moral disengagement. These qualitative data served to further inform the findings from the standardized assessment with personalized accounts of how the guards experienced the execution process. The interviews included the participants' personal background, educational history, sociodemographic status, the correctional jobs they held, the role they performed in the execution process, and the number of executions in which they participated. Also discussed was their emotional reactions in preparation, during, and after an execution, the extent to which they discuss their experiences with others, their perception of the stressfulness of the process, and the ways they tried to manage their stress in this situation. The interviews ranged from 30 min to 2 h with an average interview time of 1 h.

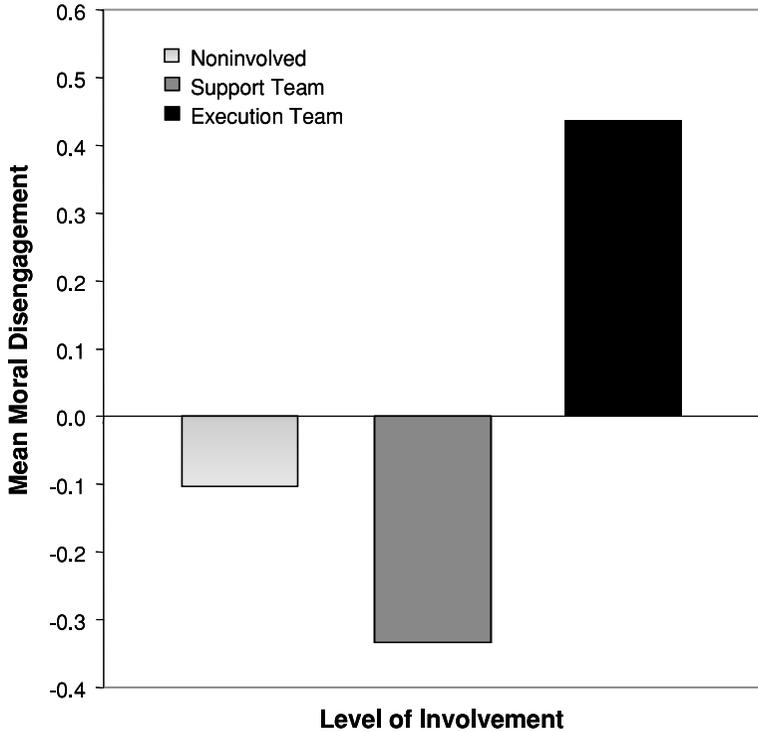
## RESULTS

Analysis of variance of the set of sociodemographic factors revealed no significant differences in moral disengagement for level of education, gender, race, marital status, penitentiaries, and support of the death penalty. However, there was a low but significant correlation,  $r(246) = .17, p < .01$  between age, and moral disengagement. Older personnel were higher moral disengagers than were the younger ones. Age was, therefore, included as a covariate in our subsequent analyses.

### Level of Involvement in the Execution Process

Disengagement of moral self-sanctions at each of the self-regulatory loci weakens restraint over lethal behavior (Bandura, 1999). The various disengagement mechanisms work in concert. The data were, therefore, analyzed both in the aggregate, and for the four factors separately. For the aggregate analysis, the scores for all the items were summed and averaged to provide a composite measure of moral disengagement. Figure 2 presents the extent of overall moral disengagement as a function of level of involvement in the execution process.

Analysis of covariance of moral disengagement as a function of level of involvement in the execution process revealed a highly significant involvement effect,



**Fig. 2.** Extent of moral disengagement as a function of the type and degree of involvement in the execution process.

$F(2, 243) = 26.74, p < .0001$ . In the Tukey post hoc test, executioners exhibited higher moral disengagement than members of the support team ( $p < .0001$ ), and also higher than the noninvolved guards ( $p < .0001$ ). The support team disavowed moral disengagement and differed in this regard not only from the executioners but also from the noninvolved guards ( $p < .004$ ). The latter were low on moral disengagement but to a lesser degree than the support team average. These are striking differences in kind in comparison with the executioners rather than just differences in magnitude of the same kind.

Figure 3 presents the variations in level of moral disengagement as a function of execution involvement for each of the four factors of disengagement. The findings reveal interesting variations for the different modes of moral disengagement. Executioners made heaviest use of dehumanization, security and economic justifications and disavowal of personal responsibility, but somewhat lesser use of moral justification. Capital punishment is, of course, created, justified, and sanctioned societally. Hence, all three groups of guards strongly disavow any responsibility on the part of jurors or executioners for the application of the death penalty. Noninvolved guards and those on the support team disavowed moral justifications for the death penalty, but were slightly prone to dehumanization of condemned prisoners and to use economic and security justifications.

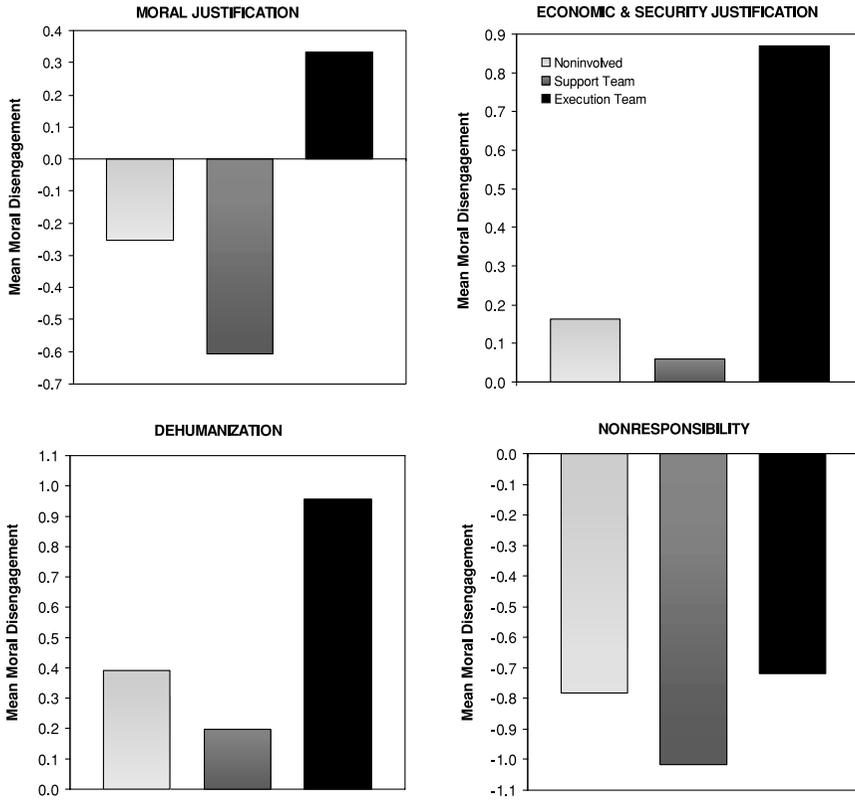


Fig. 3. Variations in the different forms of moral disengagement as a function of the type and degree of involvement in the execution process.

The pattern of differences as a function of level of execution involvement is essentially the same even though the level of moral disengagement varies across the different modes of disjoining moral self-sanctions. The groups differ significantly on all four modes of moral disengagement. The significance levels were as follows: for moral justification,  $F(2, 243) = 21.08, p < .0001$ ; economic and security justifications,  $F(2, 243) = 16.75, p < .0001$ ; dehumanization  $F(2, 243) = 13.65, p < .0001$ ; and nonresponsibility  $F(2, 243) = 4.08, p < .02$ .

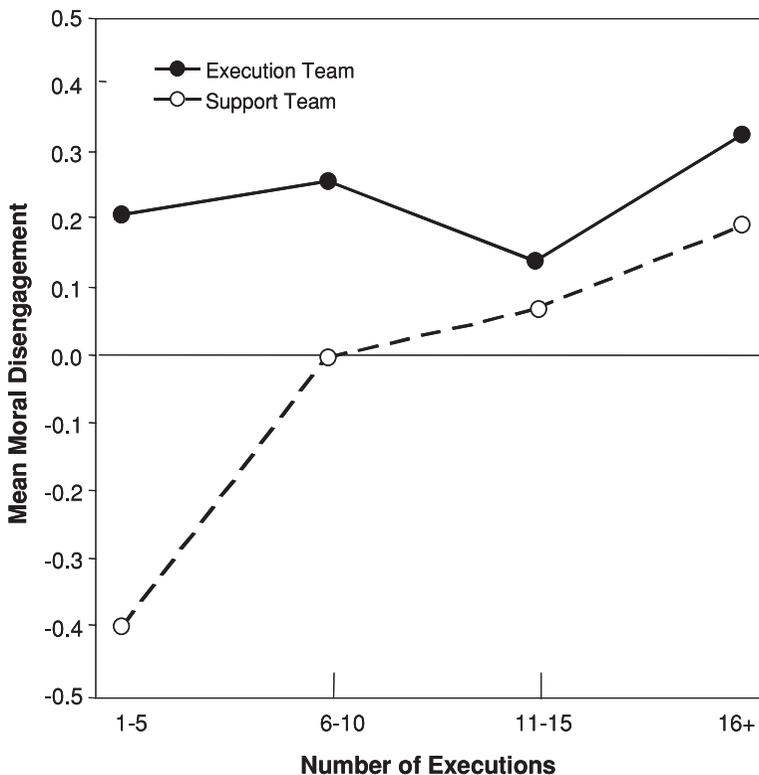
The sources of the difference within each of the four factors of moral disengagement were evaluated with the Tukey post hoc test. Each of the groups differed significantly from each other beyond the  $p < .001$  level in moral justification. As shown in Fig. 2, executioners favored moral justifications, the support team disavowed such vindications, as did the noninvolved guards, but again to a lesser degree. Executioners also differed beyond the  $p < .001$  level in their adoption of economic and security justifications from members of the support and noninvolved groups, who did not differ from each other. For dehumanization the same pattern of intergroup differences held: executioners were more dehumanizing than the support and noninvolved groups ( $p < .001$ ), which did not differ from each other. As previously noted,

regardless of the role they play, all of the guards absolved the implementers of the death penalty of any sense of responsibility. However, the members of the support team did so even more strongly ( $p < .03$ ) than did the noninvolved guards.

### Moral Disengagement as a Function of Number of Executions

Figure 4 presents the changes in moral disengagement by the members of the support and execution teams as a function of the number of executions in which they had participated. The more years the personnel served in the prison system the greater the likelihood of participating in executions. Years in the prison system was, therefore, added as a covariate in the analysis. Significant main effects were obtained for both level of involvement,  $F(1, 112) = 4.32, p < .05$ , and number of executions,  $F(3, 113) = 4.65, p < .004$ . These main effects are qualified by the significant interaction of level of involvement and number of executions,  $F(3, 113) = 2.71, p < .05$ .

The executioners were moral disengagers at the outset and remained so with no significant differences across the multiples of executions. The members of the support team began as moral engagers but gradually rose to be moral disengagers with



**Fig. 4.** Changes in moral disengagement by members in the support and execution teams as a function of the number of executions in which they participated.

their more extensive participation in executions. The planned linear contrast for this progression toward moral disengagement was highly significant,  $t(87) = 4.53$ ,  $p < .0001$ . In intergroup comparisons with the Bonferonni correction the members of the execution team differed in higher overall moral disengagement from the support team through 5 executions,  $t(75) = 5.92$ ,  $p < .0001$ . But by the 15th execution they become moral disengagers and no longer differed in this regard from their counterparts on the execution team. However, by the time the members of the support team had engaged in 16 or more executions, the executioners were slightly higher in moral disengagement,  $t(23) = 3.68$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study adds a unique set of information to our knowledge about the various psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement that are enlisted in the performance of the most anguished aspect of the death penalty—the intentional taking of a human life. This outcome is achieved through the collective effort of many people, each efficiently performing a small part. This path to death of a condemned inmate involves fragmentation of the execution process via institutional procedures, as well as personal disengagement of moral self-sanctions by the various actors in the implementation of executions.

The institutional arrangement diffuses the agentic subfunctions across a variety of individuals, each performing only a small bit in the division of labor. The disinhibitory power of diffusion of responsibility through task fractionalization is reflected in the remarks of a guard in San Quentin who strapped down the offenders' legs to the death chair in 126 executions (Marine, 1990). "I never pulled the trigger," he said, "I wasn't the executioner." Displacement of responsibility also figures prominently. The prison personnel regard neither the jurors nor any of the implementers as the actual agents of this activity. Rather, the accountability is displaced to the societal imperative to use the death penalty as the ultimate punishment for homicidal crimes. As one of the guards put it, "We have a job to do and that job isn't to be a coldhearted individual. It is simply to carry out the order of the state." Some of the displacement of responsibility is to the jurors: "It's not up to me to say yea or nay. That's for the judges and juries. I'm not a part of the deal-making process. I'm here to do the job. I'm assigned to do it and have the job to do." Displacement of agency relieves distress, "It don't bother me at all. The law says this, and I follow it, and that's it." The dictate of law gains added disinhibitory force when it is grounded in religious imperative. The religious amplification of legal obligation is shown in a prison chaplain who found justifications for the death penalty in religious decree: "I believe that when the laws of men correspond with the laws of God, the laws of men become the laws of God. That enables me to support the death penalty."

### Routinization of Lethal Functions

The members of the execution team see themselves as doing society's work as in any other job in an institutional service facility. Their focus is not so much on the

meaning of their activity, but on performing the sub-functions proficiently: "I had a job to do, that's what we did. Our job was to execute this man and we were going to do it in a professional manner." In his analysis of diffusion of responsibility, Kelman (1973) documents a similar change in focus in military activities. After lethal activities become routinized into separate sub-functions, participants shift their attention from the morality of their activity to the operational details and efficiency of their specific job. Some of the medical technicians even swab the inmate's arm with alcohol to prevent possible infection—ironically in a person they are about to execute.

The displacement and diffusion of agentic responsibility was prevalent among the prison personnel regardless of whether they had no involvement in the execution process, provided emotional supportive services, or carried out the executions. Interestingly, members of the support team more strongly upheld the nonresponsibility of the implementers of the death penalty than did the noninvolved guards. A possible explanation for this difference is that the purpose of their spiritual and ameliorative role is so antithetical to an execution that they sense a greater institutional command that obligates staff to do it. One member of the support team expressed well the sense of ameliorative inefficacy and institutional dictate, "I'm in a helping profession, but there isn't a damn thing I can do for these guys. I hate it, but I do it. I am required to do it."

Although multiple executions did not produce further increases in moral disengagement, they did reduce the level of distress over performing them. The executioners described the desensitization through routinization: "No matter what it is, it gets easier over time. The job just gets easier." The routinization is fostered by a sense of duty and professionalism in carrying out the executions: "The process has become very routine and the next day is easy. It should be that way. The job is something that must be taken care of. It is a duty of my job that has to be done."

The executioners varied in their reaction to their own desensitization. Some took pride in their emotional toughness: "I take pride that I can do it without falling apart mentally." Others were distressed by the fact that they no longer were perturbed by their deadly deeds: "The hardest thing for me is that the first one really affected me and the next two to three didn't. It affected me that it didn't affect me."

Active institutional efforts are generally made to create a sense of dignity in the execution of an individual (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2002). A warden of one of the penitentiaries described this dignifying effort, however ironic it may appear to outsiders and to those who revere the dignity of life: "There's an awful lot of dignity in carrying out executions in our prison. The act may seem barbaric, but it isn't carried out by barbaric people. We try to carry out the act with as much dignity and respect for all people involved." The custom is reinforced by members of the support team, "My responsibility is to follow the law. I can't change the law, but I can be compassionate and caring. I can provide dignity to the man and all those involved in the process." Efforts to humanize executions can exacerbate the moral anguish of those who have to perform them. Indeed, to view offenders with dignity and then take their life would exact a heavy emotional toll. To negate moral self-sanctions, executioners do not focus on the taking of life, but rather seek solace in the dignity of the process and in the view that condemned killers have a bestial aspect to

their nature and executing them will protect the public. Dehumanization is one of the better group differentiators among the different modes of moral disengagement. Thus, the execution process is institutionally professionalized and dignified, but the offenders tend to be dehumanized by those who have to take a human life. Blatant institutional dehumanization proliferates in dictatorial police and military systems that prescribe, model, and openly reward such practices (Haritos-Fatouros, 2002; Huggins et al., 2002; Keen, 1986).

Some of the support for the death penalty was grounded in moral justification: "We are taking a perfectly healthy human being and executing him. I had to make sure it was all right between me and God." Other members emphasize its deterrent power: "I believe in the death penalty. There needs to be a death penalty to deter people from committing murder." However, members of the execution team made stronger justifications on economic and security grounds: "I am for the death penalty. It is all in a day's work. I'm not callous or hardened. Death Row inmates are here too long, it is wrong for the taxpayers, families, and us."

### **Disengagement Mechanisms Operating in Concert**

The preceding analyses centered on the different disengagement mechanisms taken individually. We turn now to a discussion of the findings on how these different mechanisms function in concert in the execution process. As hypothesized, they operate in strikingly different ways as a function of the roles performed. The executioners, who face the most daunting moral dilemma, made the heaviest use of all of the mechanisms for disengaging moral self-sanctions. They adopted moral, economic, and societal security justifications for the death penalty, ascribed subhuman qualities to condemned inmates, and disavowed a sense of personal agency in the taking of life.

Members of the support team also held society rather than the implementors of the death penalty as the accountable agents. But in marked contrast to the execution team, they disavowed moral justifications, eschewed economic and security justifications, and exhibited low proneness to dehumanization. Non-involved guards displayed a similar pattern of moral involvement but to a lesser degree.

In other studies, public support of lethal means, as in the use of military force and the death penalty, moral disengagement varies as a function of sociodemographic characteristics (McAlister et al., 2004a, 2004b). Proneness to moral disengagement is higher in males, the lesser educated, older persons, and those of Caucasian ethnicity. However, with the exception of age, sociodemographic factors were unrelated to moral disengagement for the prison personnel in our study. One possible explanation is in terms of the homogeneity of the correctional employees. However, they differed widely in sociodemographic characteristics so curtailed range cannot be the reason for the non-relatedness. Marked differences in situational demands and degree of personal agency most likely account for the disparity in correlates (Bandura, 1999). In public support of lethal means, the supporters are neither the implementing agents nor the objects of situational role demands as in the case for the implementers of the death penalty. Situational and

role demands can override the influence of personal attributes (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Larsen, Coleman, Forges, & Johnson, 1971; Zimbardo, 2004).

### **Transformation of the Emotional Support Group into Moral Disengagers**

Of particular interest is the gradual transformation of members of the support team from being moral engagers to moral disengagers with increasing participation in executions. That individuals performing a compassionate function in the executive process should gradually change into moral disengagers merits serious study for theoretical and social reasons. How does immersion in an execution system create a moral disengagement spillover effect? Does it reflect a selective attrition over time or a personal transformative process? Temporal attrition merits consideration, but given that chaplains and mental health personnel are hired for the sole purpose of providing ameliorative services it seems unlikely that they exempt themselves from these duties. In the course of providing ameliorative aid, the support personnel hear the families of the victim recount the brutal ways in which their loved ones were murdered. Repeated exposure to horrid accounts of heinous criminals can gradually instill a more vile view of them. One of the support members described the deliberate effort to counteract such a process: "I close my mind to what the inmates have done. It is easier to work with it in that way. I prefer to be in denial than to let everything come to the surface."

### **Uniform Moral Disengagement by Executioners**

It could be argued that the results presented here are due to the selection process by which some corrections personnel get into each of the functions outlined above. That potential artifact is negated by the following considerations. As expected, executioners exhibited moral disengagement at the outset rather than achieved it gradually, which is the common pattern in the performance of other deadly activities (Bandura, 1973, 1999; Sprinzak, 1986, 1990). Thus, in the first and second executions the members of the execution team scored in the moral disengagement range ( $M = +.45$ ), whereas members of the support team disavowed morally neutralizing practices ( $M = -.49$ ). A number of factors minimized self-selection influences. As previously noted, individuals neither applied for, nor were hired to serve as executioners. They were invited from the ranks of the regular guards based on dependability and a record of fair treatment of inmates. None refused the invitation. Nor was there any attrition once they joined an execution team. Moreover, they did not differ from the other guards or support team members on any of the major sociodemographic characteristics. The lack of change over time in moral disengagement by the execution team is counter to the notion that executioners evolve into moral disengagers through repeated performance of executions.

Although multiple executions did not produce further increases in moral disengagement, they reduced the level of distress over performing them. The executioners described the desensitization through routinization: "No matter what it is, it gets easier over time. The job just gets easier." The routinization is fostered by a sense of duty and professionalism in carrying out the executions: "The process has become

very routine and the next day is easy. It should be that way. The job is something that must be taken care of. It is a duty of my job that has to be done.”

### **Patterns of Stress Management**

In managing stressors, individuals can focus on changing the perturbing realities or on alleviating the emotional distress they cause (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion regulation was not assessed with a questionnaire but the guards' experiential reports shed informative light on how they managed the emotional aspects of a worklife that requires the taking of a human life. Their personalized accounts provide conceptual guides for structuring formal assessments of the emotional aspects of the execution process. Moreover, their accounts add to our understanding of how stress management is eased by linkage to theological and societal vindication of capital punishment at the broad social level.

Executions do not provide leeway for task-oriented coping strategies because the job cannot be restructured, nor does it allow alternative solutions. Therefore, the personnel had to rely heavily on strategies of emotion regulation to enable them to put a person to death without paying a heavy emotional toll. Positive reconstrual of a perturbing activity is an effective strategy for neutralizing its aversiveness (Bandura, 1997; Gross, 1998). Construing executions as serving high moral and societal purposes not only negates vexing self-devaluation but can engage self-approval in the service of the death penalty. The following guard describes the disinhibiting and ameliorative effects of presumed religious sanctions: “I wouldn't do it at all if it didn't feel right. I'd stop if I felt it were against my morals and the bible.” Societal legal sanctions had similar effects: “According to the law this was justified. I never felt pain or sorrow.” However, public disputes about the morality of state executions exacerbates the emotion regulation problem: “Having the whole country concerned about the death penalty creates more stress for us than the actual execution.”

The guards also increased their immunity to distress by cognitive reconstrual of executions as dutiful performance of a deterrence function in conformance to high professional standards. “He did a deed and it is our job to kill him. We did a professional job.” Depersonalization of the relationship with condemned inmates was another ameliorative strategy: “It makes it really stressful getting to know the inmates. By not knowing them, you can do your job. Getting to know them makes it tough.” Inmates' expressed attitudes of cruelty also made it easier to execute them: “Some of the inmates talk about killing people like eating a bag of potato chips. That makes it easier.”

Selective control of one's own consciousness is still another emotion regulation strategy for lessening perturbing ruminations (Bandura, 1997). Members of the execution team adopted a firm compartmentalization of their worklife and homelife: “My life is like a switch. I turn it on when I get here and turn it off when I leave. I won't let myself take my job home.” The compartmentalization of their worklife extended to their other social relationships as well: “We don't speak about it and we don't talk about what we do back there. We do our job proudly, but we don't want to talk about it with anyone.” Psychosocial severance of one's worklife reduced social evaluative stressors, but the management of one's psychic life presented coping

challenges. Executioners tried to control unwanted thoughts about the executions mainly by thought suppression: "I don't try to think about it. I look at it as a job. I don't take it home and I don't discuss it with my kinds. I treat it as a job." Efforts to ban unwanted thoughts may only exacerbate the cognitive control problem because the very negation of the thought contains the thought (Wegner, 1989). Some of the participants described unwanted intrusions as a lingering problem. "After it was over, I was satisfied with the way it had turned out and that we had done such a good job with no glitches. I was really pleased, but at the same time, the execution kept bringing up a lot of emotions."

### **Converging Supportive Evidence**

Verification of the selective exercise of moral agency in the use of lethal means requires converging evidence from diverse methodologies (Bandura, 1999). Experimental studies that create conditions conducive to moral disengagement, such as displacement and diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization, sanitizing language, and minimization of outcomes, enable people to carry out injurious behavior (Bandura et al., 1975; Diener, Dineen, Endresen, Beaman, & Fraser, 1975; Milgram, 1974; Miller, 1986; Tilker, 1970; Zimbardo, 1969). In developmental analyses, level of moral disengagement predicts subsequent injurious conduct after controlling for prior level of injuriousness and other possible psychosocial contributors to such conduct (Bandura et al., 2001). Verification of relations between moral disengagement practices and inhumanities perpetrated under conditions of social strife and tyranny lend further support to the contributory role of moral disengagement (Andrus, 1969; Bandura, 2003; Ivie, 1980; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Rapoport & Alexander, 1982; Reich, 1990). The present study is but one piece in an effort to further our understanding of the execution process.

The predictions concerning the exercise of moral agency were tested for the pattern of moral disengagement by members performing differential roles within the social system not just for executioners. The differential pattern of moral disengagement across the three constituent groups was present at the time of the first execution in which they participated. The executioners exhibited moral disengagement, the support team members disavowed disengagement of moral self-sanctions, and the non-involved guards were weaker disavowers. This pattern of significant differences at the outset indicates that moral disengagement is an enabler rather than merely the result of performing repeated executions or reflects attribution of the more compassionate members. The executioners' graphic reports document how effective moral disengagement creates release from the restraint of self-sanctions for putting a person to death.

The present program of research was conducted from the agentic perspective of social cognitive theory. A growing body of research on the development, exercise, and selective disengagement of moral self-sanctions attests to the influential role played by moral agency in transgressive conduct and societal efforts to deter it through legal sanctions. The facility for moral disengagement is developed at an early age and operates as part of transgressive and antisocial patterns of conduct (Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Elliott & Rhinehard, 1995). At the organizational level,

moral disengagement practices are widely used in the service of corporate transgressions. The tests of the theory in the domain of capital punishment add to the generality of the operative mechanisms of moral disengagement across levels within the legal system. At the social policy level, moral disengagement fosters public support for the death penalty (McAlister et al., 2004b). At the legal system level, it enables jurors to impose the death penalty (Haney, 1997). At the penal level, it enables prison personnel to take a human life as part of their job. The quantitative and qualitative data presented here of their beliefs and experiences of a relatively large sample of individuals engaged in the execution process help to deepen our psychological understanding of how they manage to deal with this grave moral predicament.

Extension of this line of research to other aspects of enforcement and judicial systems would further our understanding of how legal systems operate in practice. Prosecutors vary in their proneness to try cases as capital offenses. Do prosecutors who are heavy users of the death penalty differ in moral disengagement from those who are reluctant to seek the death penalty and vary in this regard depending on the sociodemographic characteristics of defendants and victims (Baldus & Woodworth, 2001)? Police forces also have extensive discretionary power in how they implement the law on the streets (Reiss, 1971). Does level of moral disengagement predict the enforcement practices of violence-prone police (Toch, 1980)? Individuals are enmeshed in institutional systems that are, in turn, created and maintained by systemic forces that operate at higher social levels. Therefore, analysis of how systemic influences shape the form and level of moral disengagement in prison systems is another fruitful avenue of research. The consistency of findings across the diverse phenomena examined thus far indicate that selective disengagement of moral agency plays an influential role in both transgressive pursuits and the societal systems designed to control them.

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