

## Emerging Adults' Moral Evaluations of Relational Aggression

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### Abstract

The present study explored the relationship between moral reasoning in terms of social domain theory, moral disengagement and relational aggression among emerging adults. Women (N = 246) and men (N = 51) were recruited from undergraduate students. Men (Mage = 21.98, SD = 1.81) were aged 19–25 years, and women (Mage = 21.39, SD = 1.49) were aged 19–26 years. Participants completed the survey online. Participants completed demographic information form, author-generated measures of moral reasoning scenarios and related questions, the Moral Disengagement and Relational Aggression in Friendships scales respectively. Higher levels of conventional reasoning were related to moral disengagement and relational aggression. However, two of the moral reasoning scenarios, the scenarios involving social exclusion and gossip were not significantly correlated with moral disengagement and relational aggression. The conventional reasoning scores derived from the other scenarios about sharing secrets, vandalism, and theft were significantly correlated with moral disengagement and relational aggression. Moreover, moral disengagement mediated the relationship between conventional reasoning and relational aggression. The findings of the present study suggest that emerging adults' moral reasoning was related to relational aggression, but moral disengagement had a more significant effect on relational aggression in comparison to reasoning. Results of the present study were discussed in light of relevant literature.

**Keywords:** Moral disengagement; Relational aggression; Moral reasoning; Social domain theory.

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## Beliren Yetişkinlerin İlişkisel Saldırganlığa İlişkin Ahlâkî Değerlendirmeleri

### Öz

Bu çalışmada, ahlâkî alan kuramı temelinde ahlâkî muhakeme, ahlâkî çözüme ve beliren yetişkinlerin ilişkisel saldırganlığı arasındaki ilişki araştırılmıştır. Çalışmaya, kadınlar (N = 246) ve erkekler (N = 51) olmak üzere toplamda 297 lisans öğrencisi katılmıştır. Erkeklerin yaş aralığı 19-25 (M= 21,98, SS = 1,81); kadınların yaş aralığı 19-26'dır (M = 21,39, SS = 1,49). Katılımcılar anketi çevrimiçi olarak doldurmuşlardır. Katılımcılar sırasıyla demografik bilgi formunu, yazar tarafından oluşturulan ahlâkî muhakeme senaryolarını ve sorularını, Ahlâkî Çözüm Öçeği'ni ve Arkadaşlıklarda İlişkisel Saldırganlık Ölçekleri'ni yanıtlamışlardır. Geleneksel muhakeme kurmanın yüksek düzeyleri, ahlâkî çözüme ve ilişkisel saldırganlıkla ilişkili bulunmuştur. Ancak sosyal dışlanma ve dedikoduyu içeren ahlâkî muhakeme senaryoları, ahlâkî çözüme ve ilişkisel saldırganlık ile anlamlı bir şekilde ilişkili bulunmamıştır. Sırların paylaşılması, vandalizm ve hırsızlıkla ilgili diğer senaryolardan elde edilen geleneksel muhakeme puanları önemli ölçüde ilişkisel saldırganlık ve ahlâkî çözüme ile ilişkili bulunmuştur. Üstelik ahlâkî çözüme, geleneksel muhakeme kurma ve ilişkisel saldırganlık arasındaki ilişkiye aracılık etmiştir. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, beliren yetişkinlerin ahlâkî akıl yürütmelerinin ilişkisel saldırganlıkla ilişkili olduğunu ancak ahlâkî çözümlenin, muhakemeye kıyasla ilişkisel saldırganlık üzerinde daha anlamlı bir etkiye sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın sonuçları ilgili literatür ışığında tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahlâkî çözüme; İlişkisel saldırganlık; Ahlâkî muhakeme; Sosyal alan kuramı.

### Introduction

*“Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people we personally dislike”<sup>1</sup>*

Aggression is defined as behavior intended to harm another organism, including acts that involve violence (Dodge et al., 2006). In addition, Dodge et al. (1997) examined the function of aggression in two different categories as proactive and reactive. Reactive aggression, is the display of aggressive behavior in response to any provocation and this provocation may be real or perceived (Dodge and Coie, 1987). Reactive aggression can be verbal,

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, quote from “An Ideal Husband”

physical or relational. The key factor distinguishing the two forms is motivation. In proactive aggression individuals may exhibit aggressive behaviors without provocation. Therefore, proactive aggression may be used to achieve desirable outcomes, such as gaining status (Shaffer, 2009). Aggressive behaviors are also divided into physical, verbal, and relational forms. Besides the physical and verbal forms of aggression, another important form that has been discussed in recent years is relational aggression. Relational aggression is stated as a form of aggression that aims to disrupt friendship relations and harm others through manipulation, social exclusion, or gossip (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression plays an important role in establishing and maintaining relationships with others. Compared to the other forms of aggression, relational aggression is more difficult to detect. It includes manipulation, social exclusion and gossip. Some scholars argue that relational aggression occurs more frequently in later years of life since it is less visible than the other forms of aggression (Shaffer, 2009). In young adulthood, close relationships have an important role for individuals. While individuals are focusing on realizing themselves in terms of love and close relationships, they also enter the decision-making process about choosing a partner (Arnett, 2003). Similarly, Erikson (1968) emphasizes the stage of intimacy versus isolation, the formation and maintenance of close relationships in this age period (as cited in Austrian, 2008). Although some studies examined the relationship between relational aggression and psychopathology (Ostrov and Houston, 2008; Thompson et al., 2013; Werner and Crick, 1999), there are limited numbers of studies about emerging adults' relational aggression and its negative consequences. Therefore, a better understanding of the development of relational aggression in emerging adulthood is important.

Aggressive behavior results from the interaction of social, cognitive, emotional, and biological factors (Dubow et al., 2003). From a moral developmental perspective, Gibbs (2019) stated that individuals who perform aggressive behaviors may be in a self-focused state of morality. In this state, individuals put their self-interest in front of others, no matter what the consequences are. Also, this self-focused state has both grandiose and self-deficient forms. In the grandiose form, individual perceive others as weaker and treat them as such; consider them controllable. Therefore, these people may think that they can intimidate others through aggression. In the vulnerable form, individuals see themselves as worthless and inadequate, and may feel

that others do not respect them or even humiliate them. This makes them more sensitive to perceived threats, leading them to respond aggressively when they believe they are being attacked. Different forms and functions of aggression can be considered in terms of these different self-state and moral views. For example, the proactive function of aggression may be related to the grandiose self-state, while reactive one may be related to the vulnerable self-state. The moral reasoning behind these acts may differ accordingly. In a similar vein, the social information processing model suggests that socio-cognitive processes influence the emergence of aggressive behaviors (Crick and Dodge, 1994). This approach explains why some individuals react aggressively while others do not. Similar to the learning approach, individuals' experiences and interpretations of the situation and cues in the environment can play a role in revealing aggressive behavior. Perceiving a situation as threatening, or interpreting ambiguous cues as hostile, can trigger aggressive behavior.

As a social and a cognitive factor, morality has received relatively little research interest or attention in terms of relational aggression. However, Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) evaluated the moral domain theory and the social information processing model in terms of interpreting information and making judgments and stated that both could be effective in putting aggressive behavior into action. Accordingly, both domain theory and social information processing models make judgments about behavior; however, in moral reasoning, the intention to cause harm is especially important. On the other hand, the intention is not so clear in the social information processing model. Nevertheless, the interpretation of social cues may still reflect underlying moral reasoning skills. Guerra et al. (1994) also suggest a similarity between social information processing and moral behavior. While coordinating intrapersonal factors and situational cues, individuals consider the morality of the given situation. Repeated exposure to similar situations may lead individuals to rely on habitual patterns of moral evaluation. Experiences about victimization also shape moral evaluations, for example Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger et al. (2011) found that being victimized by their peers is related with more sophisticated moral reasoning. Moreover, moral skills may influence both the emergence of aggressive behaviors and the evaluation of such behaviors. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine relational aggression among emerging adults in terms of moral reasoning. Understanding how emerging adults consider relational aggression within the framework of social domain theory is important.

According to social domain theory, individuals coordinate domains of social knowledge when they decide what is wrong, right, or acceptable (Nucci, 2001; Nucci et al., 1996; Truiel, 2006). When making social decisions, individuals take three domains into account. These domains are the moral, conventional and personal domain. Smetana (2013) stated that the social world is structured by many different social expectations, rules, and customs. Therefore, individuals gain awareness of these different expectations, rules, and customs through their lifespan. They are not only aware of these regulations related to certain social contexts but also develop an understanding of the obligatory social rules and expectations. Thus, social domain theory is concerned with how individuals understand, interpret, accept, and sometimes reject different aspects of the social world. Social domain theory focuses on the cognitive element of morality suggests that moral development can be understood through moral reasoning and judgments, while also recognizing the importance of emotional and behavioral dimensions. The moral domain encompasses universal and normative rules involving moral harm, justice, and rights. The conventional domain includes social rules and expectations that may vary according to different social environments or cultures. Therefore, social traditions present expectations about how individuals should behave in the social environments they are in. Individuals begin learning social conventions in childhood and follow them because they understand that adults consider these rules important (Çam et al., 2012). From this point of view, the expectations put forward by society can also change over time. For example, during COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face communication decreased and meetings shifted online, something that might have seemed unacceptable or unimaginable to older generations before the pandemic. The last one, personal domain includes individuals' personal preferences, self-understanding, and interpretations of behavior. Nucci et al., (1996) stated that personal domain is related to the private matters of individuals. Personal preferences and choices are evaluated within this area. According to Smetana (2013) children and adolescents tend to consider personal issues as matters of choice rather than universal right-or-wrong judgments, because the outcome of this action concerns only the person who did the action. For example, how to dye your hair or what kind of music you listen to are included in this domain.

Studies based on social domain theory show that children and adolescents differ across several dimensions of social reasoning. For example, behaviors that cause physical harm are generally evaluated based on the moral

domain, even if there is no rule that restricts this behavior, while social customs (for example, not following a dress code when going somewhere) are evaluated as wrong when there are some rules that restrict this behavior (Turiel, 2006). Although physical aggression was examined based on social domain theory (Cima et al., 2010; Leenders and Brugman, 2005), relational aggression has received far less research attention. Studies conducted in early childhood show that children evaluate physical aggression as wrong based on moral domain, regardless of the context, while they generally evaluate relational aggression contextually (Helwig et al., 1995). Similarly, in the study conducted by Jambon and Smetana (2020), it was seen that children aged 4-7 evaluate physical aggression based on moral domain, but this is not valid for relational aggression. From a developmental point of view, children can separate the moral and the social domain from an early age (Killen and Smetana, 2013). However, studies show that children evaluate moral violations as more important than conventional ones. Studies on social domain theory are usually limited to early childhood, middle childhood, and pre-adolescence (Bradley, 2005; Leenders and Brugman, 2005; McDonald et al., 2014; Smetana, 1999). There is a limited number of studies examining relational aggression within the context of social domain theory. In their study Goldstein and Tisak (2010) examined adolescents' view about relational aggression, they found a relationship between their responses to dilemmas and relational aggression. They also found that adolescents' social reasoning about gossip differs from their reasoning about social exclusion. Specifically, adolescents viewed gossip as morally wrong and harmful, in contrast they viewed social exclusion in terms of personal domain, although gossip and social exclusion are both types of relational aggression. However, in another study social exclusion was evaluated based on the moral domain (Killen and Stangor, 2001). It seems to be important to answer how youth think about relational aggression and its link to aggressive behavior. As stated, earlier, relationships and friendships established during young adulthood are important. Therefore, present study aims to examine relational aggression in terms of moral variables in emerging adulthood.

Another important element in the study of relational aggression is moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers to how people justify morally inappropriate behavior rather than moral knowledge or moral reasoning (Bandura et al., 1996). According to the socio-cognitive theory, individuals with the same moral standards may engage in aggressive acts by stopping or

ignoring their internal control mechanisms through moral disengagement. Thus, moral disengagement is a cognitive process through which moral reasoning becomes disconnected from behavior. Bandura et al. (1996) stated that moral disengagement can be achieved by making a moral justification for unethical behavior, restructuring the wrong behavior, or ignoring the consequences of the behavior. Individuals may also justify their behavior through dehumanization. According to Bandura et al. (1996) asking questions through hypothetical dilemmas in the examination of moral development does not help us to see the whole aspects of morality as much as we think. Although psychological theories of morality are generally based on reasoning, the emotional and behavioral dimensions are also important in terms of examining moral action. According to Bandura and colleagues, measuring moral reasoning seems much more practical than behavioral measurements. In contrast, individuals suffer because of immoral acts against them; therefore, what the moral reasoning level of the perpetrators is, or how the perpetrators justify their actions, is much less important when we consider these acts from the victim's point of view. Thus, the concept of moral disengagement focuses on how individuals justify morally inappropriate behavior rather than their moral knowledge (Bandura et al., 1996).

According to the socio-cognitive theory, individuals with the same moral standards may engage in antisocial actions by stopping internal control mechanisms through moral disengagement. For this reason, factors beyond reasoning contribute to unethical or unwanted behaviors. Therefore, the theoretical approach to morality should focus on how people adopt moral standards. How individuals adopt these standards and which mechanisms influence this process are key considerations. Socio-cognitive theory assumes that individuals transform moral reasoning into action through self-regulation (control over their behavior, controlling impulses, etc.). In other words, in the process of socialization, individuals acquire direct knowledge of moral standards and internalize them as part of their behavioral regulation. Evaluation of action involves evaluating reactions for the action and handling the situation by incorporating one's self-evaluations (Bandura et al., 2001). In this way, moral standards are formed. Once formed, these standards guide the individuals for the rest of their life and shape their actions. Moral standards help individuals to evaluate possible consequences and reflect on situation from their own perspective (e.g., "How would I feel if this were done to me?") before acting. For this reason, individuals tend to take actions that affirm their

self-perception, which includes avoiding harmful acts and self-criticism. Although self-regulation process may help individuals, some factors emerge inhuman behavior. In this case, individuals can restrain themselves to protect their moral standards; therefore, the self-regulation element ensures the internalization of these standards and the emergence of a tendency to act accordingly in all circumstances. In contrast, some cognitive distortions can prevent them from activating this self-regulation process (Bandura et al., 1996). According to Gibbs (2019) ego-oriented distortions are especially high in individuals involved in criminal behavior. Accordingly, individuals with violent tendencies take less account of others' vulnerabilities, particularly those of victims. They prioritize their own feelings and desires and tend to focus primarily on the personal consequences of the event. Another contributing factor is that antisocial individuals see their dignity and rights above others. This belief may lead to self-centered attitudes. They may view an act as unfair when they think of themselves as a victim, yet they do not tend to show the same sensitivity to the person they victimize. For example, a person who is angry at someone may prevent them from socializing—such as by interrupting their speech or excluding them from social activities—and justify this exclusion as fair or deserved. However, when they are in the same position, they may view it as unacceptable, failing to put themselves in the other party's shoes because they do not see the other person as deserving of equal treatment. Another study also showed that individuals who were bullied by their peers but did not perform aggressive acts towards them have a higher score in comparison to bullies and victimized bullies (Perren et al., 2012). These individuals also showed reactions against aggressive acts, viewing them as morally wrong, whereas older participants were found to be more morally desensitized and did not react like younger ones. As mentioned, earlier, moral disengagement can be achieved by fitting a moral justification for behavior, restructuring behavior, ignoring the consequences of behavior, and dehumanizing it. Studies show the link between relational aggression and moral disengagement (Gini et al., 2015; Kokkinos et al., 2016). By making justifications about their aggressive behavior, individuals may continue to perform those kinds of acts without guilt. Erzi (2020) also found that moral disengagement has a mediator role between dark triad personality and relational aggression; individuals who get higher scores on Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism were likely to perform aggressive behaviors by justifying their acts through moral disengagement.

### **Purpose of the Current Study**

In light of these studies, the major purpose of the present study is to examine how moral reasoning, in terms of domain evaluations, is related to self-reported relational aggression and moral disengagement. Secondly, the study examines the mediating role of moral disengagement between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Moral reasoning was measured using violation scenarios. Scenarios covered transgressions which include social exclusion, gossip, telling friends' secrets, vandalism, and theft. These scenarios included different forms of aggression based on the hypothesis that conventional reasoning would be positively related to relational aggression. However, transgressions which include relational aggression may elicit different domain answers compared to vandalism and theft. For example, exclusion scenarios may emerge from more conventional reactions as Goldstein and Tisak (2010) showed in their study while theft can be evaluated within the moral domain. Therefore, we hypothesized that moral disengagement would have a mediating role between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Studies showed that moral disengagement may be advantageous for individuals who engage in relational aggression because it gives a chance for avoidance of guilt feelings or remorse (Gini et al., 2015; Kokkinos et al., 2016). For example, although individuals may evaluate transgressions, within the moral domain, they can behave in a more aggressive manner through moral disengagement. Scenarios are followed by questions measuring the judgments of the emerging adults in terms of social domain theory. Also, we asked emerging adults' justifications behind their decisions. Although these answers were not included in the analysis, answers were coded into three domains. The hypotheses of this study were as follows: (1) There is a significant positive relationship between moral reasoning and moral disengagement. (2) Relational aggression is significantly predicted by moral reasoning and moral disengagement. (3) Relationship between moral reasoning and relational aggression is mediated by moral disengagement.

## **Method**

### **Model of the Current Study**

A correlation model was used in this study. According to the purpose of the study, the relationships between moral reasoning in terms of domain evaluations, relational aggression, and moral disengagement were examined. In addition to this, a regression model was used to determine significant predictors of self-reported relational aggression.

## Participants and Procedure

This study was approved by the University Ethics Committee (decision number: 2022/06–01-2021-YONP 0987). Decision number was 25, decision date was January 6<sup>th</sup> of 2022. Women (N = 246) and men (N = 51) were recruited through convenience sampling from undergraduate students (N = 297). Participants were given informed consent at the beginning of the study. In the informed consent it was explained that they have the right to leave the study at any time without completing it. Since convenient sampling was used, the majority of the participants were female students from social sciences faculties. In the preliminary analysis, the effect size was calculated and there were no gender differences. Men (Mage = 21.98, SD = 1.81) were aged 19–25 years, and women (Mage = 21.39, SD = 1.49) were aged 19–26 years. 86% (n=255) of mothers and 75% (n=223) of fathers had less than a university degree. 90% (n=267) of the participants led their lifetime in the metropolis. The majority of the participants (81%, n=241) stated that they have middle income and below. Participants completed the questionnaires voluntarily via online. At the beginning of the survey, informed consent was obtained. Participants received course credit for their participation. All participants answered all questions, there was no missing data. The minimum required sample size was determined by an a priori power analysis (Faul et al., 1992), with an alpha=0.05, power=0.80 and small effect size ( $f^2 = 0.03$ ), the projected sample size needed for “Linear Multiple Regression Fixed Model: R2 increase” is approximately 264 for this analysis. 297 participants were included in the data analysis. Post hoc power analysis was performed with alpha=0.05, with small effect size ( $f^2 = 0.03$ ) and sample size of 297. Power was revealed as 0.85, which is considered as adequate.

## Measures

**Moral Reasoning:** To measure participants’ moral reasoning about moral transgressions, five scenarios were created by the researcher. These scenarios contained five different categories of transgression: social exclusion, gossip, vandalism, sharing friends’ secrets, and theft respectively. In a similar vein, Leenders and Brugman (2005) also used different scenarios in terms of context for measuring social reasoning. For each scenario, participants answered four questions using a 4-point scale. The first question assessed the acceptability of the act. For example, in a theft scenario, participants were asked, “Is it right or wrong performing this act?” Participants rated their answers from “right” to “completely wrong”. The second question

assessed the seriousness of the act (“How bad is doing that?”) and rated their answers from “very bad” to “not bad.” The third assessed the generalizability of the act (“If everybody did this, would it be right or wrong?”) and rated their answer from “right” to “completely wrong.” The last question assessed authority contingency (“If nobody saw it, would it be right or wrong?”), and participants rated their answers from “right” to “completely wrong.” For each scenario a sum score was computed. Higher scores indicated more non-moral (conventional domain) reasoning and low scores indicated more moral domain ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). In addition to these questions for each scenario participants were asked the justification of the reasoning. For example, in the social exclusion scenario participants were asked, “Why do you think it is right or wrong” Participants answered these open-ended questions for each transgression. Approximately more than 50 % of the participants’ justifications fell into the moral domain. None of the participants evaluated scenarios 2, 4 and 5 in terms of personal domain. However, these justification categories were not included in the analysis.

**Table 1. Domain Categories for Justifications and Examples**

	1. Social exclusion	2. Gossip	3. Vandalism	4. Sharing Secrets	5.Theft
Moral Domain: Reference to rights and fairness	N= 144 %48.5	N= 280 % 95	N= 259 % 87.2	N= 259 % 87.2	N=255 % 85.9
	One should value the people with whom they are friends. Therefore, her behavior is wrong.	It is a wrong behavior because what he did is unethical because he deliberately slandered his friend.	We cannot write and draw things according to our wishes on things that are not ours	We cannot tell others the secrets that people trust and tell us, we damage both the sense of trust and our friendship.	It is not nice to take something secretly from someone. This is theft and is a crime and unethical.
Conventional Domain: Reference to social coordination	N= 2 %0.07	N= 5 % 1.7	N= 17 % 5.7	N= 17 % 5.7	N= 25 % 8.3
	It is wrong not to invite your friend according to the values of the society.	Slander can look bad in the eyes of others	It is a bad behavior to damage things that do not belong to us, it is not welcome in society, if one person does so, others will continue.	If everyone does this, only interests will emerge. We lose a concept called true friendship	The world would become unbearable if everyone stole like her

	N= 148 % 50	None	N= 7 %2.4	None	None
Personal Domain: Reference to personal preference	It may be wrong not to invite your close friend, but everyone's decision needs to be respected.		I hate buses. I have a desire for drawing too, it is not a bad idea.		

**Relational aggression:** Relational aggression was measured using the 22-item Relational Aggression in Friendships Scale (Kurtyılmaz et al., 2017). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). The items of the scale showed excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). Higher scores indicated higher relational aggression.

**Moral disengagement:** Moral disengagement was measured using the 8-item Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore et al., 2012). This scale had been validated in a Turkish sample (Ekmekçioğlu and Aydoğan, 2019). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). The items of the scale showed adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.69$ ). Higher scores indicated higher moral disengagement.

### Data Collection and Analysis Plan

In terms of data collection, convenience sampling was used. Sample consisted of students, and they received course credit for their participation in the study. Participants completed the survey online. Statistical analyses were conducted by using SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Gender differences were explored through independent sample t tests, and no gender differences were found. Effect sizes were expressed as Cohen's d. Preliminary analyses revealed no problems associated with normality. Correlation analysis are presented in Table 3. Process Macro for SPSS Release 2.15 was used for mediation analysis.

## Results

### Main analysis

Multiple regression analyses were performed to determine significant predictors of relational aggression (Table 3). When both moral reasoning and moral disengagement scores were entered, only moral disengagement predicted relational aggression. Scenario 1 and moral disengagement predicted relational aggression ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $F(2, 295) = 21.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Scenario 2 and moral disengagement predicted relational aggression ( $R^2 =$

0.12,  $F(2, 295) = 20.90, p < .001$ ). Scenario 3 and moral disengagement predicted relational aggression ( $R^2 = 0.13, F(2, 295) = 21.89, p < .001$ ). Scenario 4 and moral disengagement predicted relational aggression ( $R^2 = 0.13, F(2, 295) = 22.02, p < .001$ ). Scenario 5 and moral disengagement predicted relational aggression ( $R^2 = 0.13, F(2, 303) = 21.74, p < .001$ ).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics**

	Total			Female			Male			t test gender	d
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
Scenario1	297	9.08	1.92	246	9.11	1.95	51	8.91	1.72	.65	0.10
Scenario2	297	8.12	1.91	246	8.10	1.94	51	8.23	1.74	.43	-0.07
Scenario3	297	8.27	1.97	246	8.28	1.99	51	8.32	1.82	-.12	-0.02
Scenario4	297	7.94	2.09	246	7.90	2.10	51	8.32	1.94	1.26	-.20
Scenario5	297	8.07	2.11	246	8.06	2.14	51	8.26	1.94	-.59	-0.09
MD	297	15.45	4.75	246	15.22	4.41	51	16.27	6.12	-1.40	-0.19
RA	297	51.24	15.33	246	50.88	14.51	51	52.04	17.24	-.49	-0.07

MD=Moral Disengagement; RA=Relational Aggression

**Table 3. Regression Analysis**

	r (β)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Scenario 1		.64**	.44**	.53**	.43**	.04	-
Scenario 2			.53**	.79**	.68**	.10	.02(.35**)
Scenario 3				.64**	.67**	.17**	.04(.35**)
Scenario 4					.78**	.12*	13 (.36**)
Scenario 5						.21**	.12*
MD							(.36**)
RA							.35**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

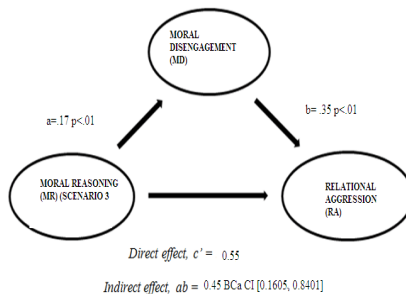
**Mediation Analysis:** Since the correlation analyses showed that there is a significant relationship among moral reasoning scores, moral disengagement, and relational aggression, mediation analyses were conducted for three of the scenarios numbered 3, 4 and 5. Mediation analysis models are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Scenario 3: Model tested whether moral disengagement mediated the

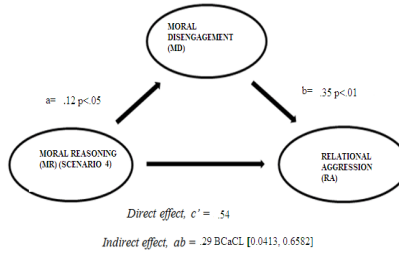
relationship between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Direct effect of moral reasoning on relational aggression was not significant when moral disengagement was included in the analysis ( $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.4294$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $-0.2947$ ,  $1.3956$ ). Indirect effect of moral disengagement was significant ( $b = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.1720$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $0.1605$ ,  $0.8401$ ). Participants who used more conventional reasoning were likely to morally disengage and thus were more likely to engage in relational aggression (MR→MD → RA).

Scenario 4: Model tested whether moral disengagement mediated the relationship between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Direct effect of moral reasoning on relational aggression was not significant when moral disengagement was included in the analysis ( $b = 0.54$ ,  $SE = 0.4017$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $-0.2407$ ,  $1.3405$ ). Indirect effect of moral disengagement was significant ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.1540$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $0.0413$ ,  $0.6582$ ). Participants who used more conventional reasoning were likely to morally disengage and thus were more likely to engage in relational aggression (MR→MD → RA).

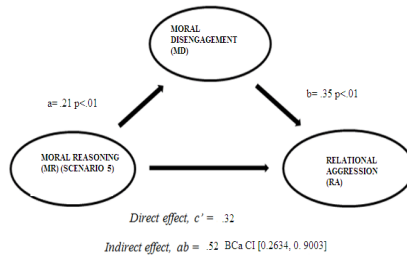
Scenario 5: Model tested whether moral disengagement mediated the relationship between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Direct effect of moral reasoning on relational aggression was not significant when moral disengagement was included in the analysis ( $b = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.4048$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $-0.4803$ ,  $1.1133$ ). Indirect effect of moral disengagement was significant ( $b = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.1621$ , 95% bootstrap confidence interval:  $0.2634$ ,  $0.9003$ ). Participants who used more conventional reasoning were likely to morally disengage and thus were more likely to engage in relational aggression (MR→MD → RA).



**Figure 1. Mediation Analysis 1**



**Figure 2. Mediation Analysis 2**



**Figure 3. Mediation Analysis 3**

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationships among emerging adults' moral reasoning, relational aggression, and moral disengagement. Individuals' social reasoning and beliefs about different forms of aggression were calculated as moral reasoning scores according to social domain theory. While higher moral reasoning scores indicated more conventional domain, lower scores indicated more moral domain reasoning. The first hypothesis of the study was partially supported. Moral reasoning scores for the three scenarios (vandalism (Scenario 3), sharing secrets (Scenario 4) and theft (Scenario 5) were significantly and positively related to moral disengagement. In contrast, the other scenarios (1 and 2) which were about social exclusion and gossip were not found significantly related to moral disengagement. A recent meta-analytic review showed that moral disengagement is related to both personal and environmental factors, and moral values (Luo and Bussey, 2023). In a similar vein, Pozzoli et al., (2016) found that moral disengagement was significantly related to moral values when reactions to implicit moral stimuli were high. A similar pattern was seen in terms of relational aggression. Goldstein and Tisak (2010) found that social exclusion was evaluated in the personal domain by adolescents. Adolescents thought that peer exclusion was different from other violations like physical aggression,

vandalism and it was not considered in the moral domain.

In the present study, we also found that social exclusion was justified in terms of personal domain in comparison to other violations. However, the other scenario including “gossip” was justified as morally wrong or considered generally in the moral domain by many participants, although it was not significantly related to relational aggression. The gossip scenario was about two close friends; one of them gets a higher score from an exam, the other one gets a lower grade and tells other classmates that his friend cheats on the exam to get this higher grade. *Because* all participants in the present study were undergraduate students, gossip scenario might have been considered as very wrong, unfair and sinful, even some of the participants stated that calumny cannot be accepted from a religious point of view. We can speculate that seeing gossip as a “back bite” may be a protective factor for moral disengagement. As Bandura et al (1996) suggested, moral disengagement occurs when the moral standards and self-regulatory behavior are deactivated. Therefore, evaluating gossip as a sinful act (both from a religious and a legal point of view) may prevent participants from justifying gossip for whatever reason behind. Another reason for this result may be the demographic characteristics of the sample. Previous work found that in comparison to adolescents, university students used less moral disengagement mechanisms, namely moral justifications and displacement of responsibility (De Caroli and Sagone, 2014).

Second hypothesis of the study was also supported. Moral reasoning score for the scenarios about vandalism (Scenario 3), sharing secrets (Scenario 4) and theft (Scenario 5) found to be associated with moral disengagement and relational aggression; relational aggression was significantly predicted by moral reasoning and moral disengagement.

The third hypothesis of the study was also supported. Results showed that the relationship between moral reasoning and relational aggression was mediated by moral disengagement. According to Bandura et al. (1996) an individual's moral behavior is a function of moral reasoning and self-regulatory mechanisms but moral disengagement occurs when people do not activate moral standards which prevent them acting immorally. Therefore, strong moral standards can be a protective factor for the emergence of moral disengagement. Previous work also showed that moral standards can be activated through focusing on the well-being of others. Individuals act in

harmony with moral standards to avoid guilt and remorse (Bussey et al., 2015). Although previous work showed the relations between moral disengagement and relational aggression (Erzi, 2020; Gini et al., 2015; Kokkinos et al., 2016) according to our knowledge this is the first study which explored the relationship between moral reasoning, moral disengagement and relational aggression.

The present study also showed that conventional reasoning (higher moral reasoning scores indicated more conventional reasoning) is related to moral disengagement. In other words, when individuals did not consider these violations in terms of moral domain, they were more likely to deactivate the moral standards and showed a tendency for relational aggression. In a similar vein, Wang et al., (2016) also showed the negative relationship between moral reasoning about aggression and moral disengagement. In their study they found that adolescents with high disengagement and low moral reasoning reported more cyber-bullying.

As mentioned above, moral reasoning scores of vandalism, sharing secrets and theft scenarios were related to moral disengagement and relational aggression. Among the three of them, only sharing secrets scenario directly involved relational aggression. Individuals who considered this scenario in a conventional manner showed a tendency for relational aggression. In contrast those who evaluated it within the moral domain had lower scores on relational aggression. Studies showed that not only relational but also different forms of aggression are related with moral reasoning (Harvey et al., 2001; Murray-Close et al., 2006) and with moral disengagement (Bussey et al., 2015; Gini et al., 2014). In the present study we showed that moral reasoning about different forms of aggression is associated with relational aggression through moral disengagement. In other words, emerging adults who showed more conventional reasoning were more likely to distance themselves from moral standards and engage in relational aggression.

As mentioned before, individuals who perform aggressive behaviors have a self-centered moral view which affects their opinion about their aggressive acts (Gibbs, 2019). They may ignore the negative consequences of their act for the victim and focus on their gain and also, they have difficulty in seeing the event from the victims' point of view. Results of the present study showed that moral disengagement had a more significant effect on relational aggression. As Bandura et al. (1996) suggested, hypothetical dilemmas may

not be helpful as expected in terms of moral issues. In order to see the whole picture of morality, individual must understand the reason behind immoral acts. In other words, using conventional reasoning may cause immoral acts with less effort. This kind of reasoning and moral view may help individuals to justify their wrong acts easily. However, the relationship between relational aggression tendency and moral disengagement seemed more *robust* than moral reasoning in this study.

### Conclusion

The current study was limited by the small number of male participants and the use of self-report measures. Additionally,, the use of author created scenarios can require further replication. Although previous work used similar tools like scenarios (Goldstein and Tisak, 2010; Leenders and Brugman, 2005); moral reasoning about aggression can also be measured with a scale (Murray-Close et al., 2006). Another limitation is social desirability bias; measuring morality with more implicit measures will prevent this type of response especially within the adult samples. Since this study only measures relational aggression in terms of friendships, emerging adulthood is also considered as an important phase of life finding romantic partners. Studies also showed that romantic relational aggression (RRA) is relatively common among emerging adults (Bagner et al., 2007; Linder et al., 2002). Also, different functions of aggression (reactive vs proactive) seem to be important in terms of motivation behind the act and morality. Therefore, future studies may also explore these different types and functions of RA in terms of moral variables.

To our knowledge, this study was the first to explore the mediating role of moral disengagement between moral reasoning and relational aggression. Although significant associations were found, coefficient effects were relatively small. Therefore, results are needed for further replication. Cross sectional design also hindered inferences about causality. Longitudinal designs may be helpful to understand the development of moral reasoning and relational aggression. In particular, with respect to the development of moral disengagement, previous work suggests that young adults use fewer justifications in comparison to adolescents (De Caroli and Sagone, 2014). Therefore, future research may explore these issues.

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