

## EARLY EXPERIENCES AND SADISTIC TENDENCIES AS PREDICTORS OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN YOUNG ADULTS

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### Abstract

The current paper has investigated the predictive roles of early experiences and sadistic tendencies in the explanation of moral disengagement in young adults in Pakistan. A purposive sample of 352 university students (aged 18-25 years) participated in this correlational research design. The participants completed the measures of the Early Life Experiences Scale (ELES), Sadism Scale in University Students (SSUS) and the Moral Disengagement Scale in Adults (MDS-A). Correlation analyses demonstrated significant positive relationships between early adverse experiences, sadistic behaviors and moral disengagement. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that early submissiveness appeared a significant predictor of moral disengagement, whereas sadistic denigration emerged as a strong predictor, explaining the greatest percentage of variance. These results underscore the developmental significance of early relational events and the combined effect of sadistic tendencies in fostering the cognitive processes that justify harmful and immoral activities. The research bridges an empirical gap by incorporating developmental and personality factors as predictors of moral disengagement within a South Asian cultural context and emphasizes the necessity of developing the prevention and interventions strategies targeting young adults.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Moral disengagement is a mental process by which individuals justify or rationalise unethical behaviour in a way that they can break the moral norms without experiencing the personal guilt (Bandura, 1999; Yu & Zhang, 2025). Practically, people manipulate moral standards (as when they accuse the victims or minimize the harm) so that they can commit wrong without the self-accusation. The motive behind moral disengagement may also be the necessity to defend against the negative self-critical feelings of guilt,

shame, and cognitive dissonance (Moore, 2015). Also, social factors such as peer pressure and group acceptability contribute tremendously to the disengagement processes especially in young adults. Aggression, coldness, and sadistic inclinations are other personality characteristics that have been linked with the increased inclination to use the moral disengagement mechanism since such individuals might find pleasure in making other people suffer and justify it in their minds (Teng et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, exposures to violent behavior or unstable parenting in early years can also lead to

the formation of maladaptive cognitive processes that justify harmful behavior and dependence on moral disengagement in young adults (Hyde et al., 2010; Rubio-Garay et al., 2017). Combined, all this makes moral disengagement an important psychological process that intertwines early experiences and personality traits with antisocial and harmful behaviors in young adults. High moral disengagement has been linked to bullying among other behaviors such as cheating or cyber-aggression in young adults. Study found that bullied German adolescents were less well-adjusted to school, whereas their more highly morally disengaged counterparts were not as negatively impacted by victimisation. This indicates that moral disengagement reduces the relationship between the negative experiences and emotional distress i.e. being decoupled to moral norms cushions well-being during stress (Eilts & Wilke, 2025). On the whole, moral disengagement is a significant predictor of antisocial behavior in young adults and it is essential to know the reasons why. Cultural, religious and communal values dominate moral reasoning in Pakistan. The recent studies also emphasize how family, peers and the media influence moral behaviour. Going through complicated family authority and peer group requirements, as one in the studies of moral development observes, Pakistani youth deal with this, leading to conflicts in their moral decisions. Concisely, the Pakistani cultural background offers not only the powerful moral frames (e.g. religious ethics) but also the painful forces (e.g. communal pressure) which combine with the personal psychology. It is necessary to understand this context to determine why certain young people are likely to be drawn away from moral norms. Moral disengagement is associated with a number of risk factors; aggression, callousness, and sadism are personality traits that make a person more likely to justify harmful actions by falling backward, less empathetic and guilty (Teng et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). An unethical act can also be redefined as a just one with the help of cognitive factors, such as self-serving biases and decreased moral reasoning (Moore, 2015). Also, social factors like peer pressure, exposure to deviant groups, and socialization of aggression also

play a role in the diffusion of responsibility especially in young adults. The lack of emotions such as low empathy and low guilt proneness also contributes to noncompliance with moral norms (Hyde et al., 2010). One of the most important causes of moral disengagement is early life experiences; thus, poor childhood backgrounds can form maladaptive cognitions and accept malevolent conduct (Rubio-Garay et al., 2017). Adverse early experience is one of the key precursors of moral disengagement. Childhood adversity, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence may pollute the moral development of a person. According to research, traumatic upbringing makes people copy the antisocial behavior they have observed, and to find justifications that would seem to justify the use of harm. A research discovered that the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) was a positive predictor of moral disengagement is Wu et al. (2024) in their study of Chinese adults. Simply put, individuals with a higher degree of abuse or familial dysfunction tended to justify unethical behaviour in future life (Wu et al., 2024). widespread adversity (e.g. observing violence in the community or being abused). Overall, moral self-regulation can be compromised by an unfavorable childhood experience and heightened the need to resort to disengagement strategies (Wu et al., 2024; Mahmood and Fatmi, 2025).

One more important predictor is the sadistic and dark personality. Sadism entails enjoying the pain of others and it is among the so-called dark tetrad traits (along with narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism). Sadistic individuals are particularly susceptible to moral disengagement as a way of supporting cruelty. To provide one example, Bruges and Caparros (2021) examined incarcerated offenders and discovered that aggressive-sadistic tendencies were the characteristics that were most closely associated with high moral disengagement. This practically implies that individuals who take pleasure in causing harm are highly likely to redefine their actions in a positive or justified manner. In the same line, moral disengagement has been demonstrated lately as a mediator between sadism

and aggressive behavior. In a study that was conducted on Chinese students, students who scored higher in everyday sadism were more likely to cyberbully others and this relationship was completely accounted for by the fact that they had a greater moral disengagement. The implication is that sadistic persons lose a sense of empathy and moral self-sanction by which they can be cruel without having a sense of guilt. In Pakistan, the empirical research on sadism is very limited, but there is some evidence in the literature on the dark personality that suggests the same.

Recent studies using Pakistani samples indicate that psychopathic and narcissistic tendencies are associated with more moral disengagement (Khan & Khan, 2023), suggesting that any type of callous and self-centered personality will support disengagement. Even the Dark Tetrad scales have been tailored to Pakistani youth (Akhtar et al., 2022), which proves that these attributes are relevant to this culture. Hence, young Pakistani with a high sadistic or dark-triad will probably become more vulnerable to moral disengagement as it is seen in international samples. Recent research has also highlighted sadism to be significantly correlated with higher levels of moral disengagement (Gajda et al., 2023). Sadism is also at times associated with a lack of empathy as explained in research that suggests individuals high in sadism show diminished startle response to aversive stimuli which suggests an underlying deficit in affective empathy (Buckels et al., 2023). Young adults in South Asia experience strong collectivistic orientation, family structures and cultural emphasis on honor which can influence manifestation of these variables. A study by Saddiqui, Schultze- Krumbholz & Kamran (2024) shows that higher moral disengagement leads to more bullying behaviors which underscores its role as a cognitive mechanism that allows individuals to justify their actions. Despite this research there is a broad gap in research in South Asia directly connecting these variables.

Hence, moral disengagement in young adults seems to be driven by the two dysfunctional early-life experiences, as well as sadistic tendencies. Childhood trauma may destroy inherent moral restraints, as a result of which people have to use

justifications to act harmfully. Similarly, sadistic or detached personality tendencies render the process of depersonalization easier in an individual, as they will minimize the effect of any action taken. These factors are particularly important to understand in Pakistan where a significant number of young people are adversely impacted at an early age and have to find their way through social challenges.

Although the moral disengagement studies have been strong in the western world, practically no cross-cultural studies have been conducted in South Asia and in Pakistan in particular, which can be used to understand how the predictors of developmental and personality factors interact. Pakistani research has also studied elements individually: parental acceptance-rejection has been linked to moral disengagement in Pakistani adolescents in Lahore (Hasnain et al., 2023), and family functioning and Dark Triad traits (with the exception of sadism in the vast majority of cases) have been identified as correlates of moral disengagement in Pakistani adolescents (Majeed et al., unpublished thesis) it has a native Moral Disengagement Scale of adults in Urdu, with good reliability but is not (yet) able to incorporate early relational or personality risk factors such as sadistic tendencies (Saif & Riaz, 2021). The cultural context of Pakistan, including collectivist ideals, male-female hierarchy, the focus on respect to elderly members and strong values of family honor and obedience, might affect early submissiveness and moral reasoning differently than in individualistic ones (Hasnain et al., 2023; Batool, Afshan, and Mirani, 2024). The current research tries to fill this gap by studying the relationship between early negative relational experiences and sadistic dispositions as predictors of moral disengagement in the young adults in Pakistan so that a model can be developed that is culturally oriented.

#### Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between early life experiences, sadistic tendencies and moral disengagement in young adults

- To find out the predicting role of early life experiences and sadistic tendencies in explaining moral disengagement in young adults.

## Method

### *Research Design*

A correlational research design was best suited for this type of study because it helps to examine the strength and direction of relationships between naturally occurring psychological variables specifically, early experiences, sadistic tendencies, and moral disengagement in young adults.

### *Sampling Strategy*

Purposive sampling strategy was used for this research, as it involves the deliberate selection of participants based on certain traits that are relevant to the study including, young adults within a specific age range who are able to fill the self-report measures related to the variables such as sadistic tendencies and moral disengagement.

### *Participants*

A total of 352 participants were selected for this study comprising 51.1% of male participants and 48.9% of female participants. The age range of both the genders falls within the age range of 18-25 years. Participants who did not fall under this age range or had any severe mental health problem were not included in the study.

### *Setting*

The data for the study was collected from university students currently studying in undergraduate programs across various higher education institutions in Pakistan. The primary data collection sites included University of the Punjab, and University of Management and Technology. These institutions were selected because there is high accessibility, student diversity, and relevance to the target population of young adults aged 18 to 25 years.

### *Procedure*

Both the relevant institutional bodies and the ethical committee of the university were asked for their approval. It is crucial in ensuring that the study will compile with all the ethical standards on

rules and regulations. To standardize the techniques, specific procedures for data collecting were established. This included sourcing for permission to collect data at the universities in Lahore and development of the survey tools. To obtain participants, notifications were made to the participants in university courses. The goals and methods of the study, and the confidentiality of the different aspects of the research were explained to the participants. Before collecting the data, participants were asked to give their consent for the participation in the study. The questionnaire was completed by the students within the university environment to ensure their anonymity.

### *Measures*

*Demographics Sheet.* A survey was made that collects basic demographic information from its respondents by enquiring about their age, gender, marital status, level of education, birth order, parents' occupation and educational attainment, and more.

*Early Life Experiences Scale (ELES; Gilbert et al., 2003).* This scale was developed to measure emotional memories in one's family, linked to recall of feeling devalued, frightened and having to behave in a subordinate way. This 15-item scale asks participants to rate on a five-point measure (ranging from 1 = Completely untrue, to 5 = Very true). The scale has three separate subscales: recall of feelings of threat, feeling (un)valued ( these items were reversed in order to minimize any response bias) and submissiveness. The Cronbach's alphas of .89 for threat, .85 for submissiveness,.71 for (un)valued and .92 for the total score were found.

*Sadism Scale for University Students (SSUS; Mudassar & Khadim, 2020).* This scale is used to measure the derivative of pleasure by different forms of suffering on individuals. This is a 31-item scale that asks participants to rate on a five-point measure ranging from 1 to 5. The scale consists of 3 factors F1 consisting of 16 items related to denigration, F2 consisting of 8 items about inability to regulate and F3 having 7 items about dominance. The authors of the scale found

Cronbach’s alpha of .91 for F1 denigration, .80 for F2 inability to regulate, and .81 for F3 dominance and .91 for the total items.

1= completely disagree to 5= completely agree. The Split half reliability for the first half of items is .85 and for the second half is .86 respectively.

**Moral Disengagement Scale for Adults (MDS-A; Saif & Riaz, 2021).** The moral disengagement scale for adults was presented to the participants. It is a 20-item scale that measures the mechanism of moral disengagement in adults. It is divided into 6 factors including Moral Justification with a Cronbach alpha value of .73, Euphemistic Labeling with .68, Advantageous Comparison with .75, Displacement of Responsibility .82, Diffusion of Responsibility, Distortion, Disregard and Minimization of Consequences with .78 and Dehumanization and Attribution of blame with .86 and the total items with a value of .90. The scale is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from

**Analysis**

The entire data that was collected was evaluated in SPSS using statistical tools to understand the relationship that exists between early experiences, sadistic tendencies and moral disengagement in young adults. Demographic information of the study population was summarized using descriptive statistics. Correlation analysis was also conducted to analyze the direction and magnitude of relationships between study variables. Regression analysis was conducted to ascertain predictive correlations between these variables, offering insights into how alterations in one variable may forecast alterations in another.

**Results**

**Table 1**

Normality Analysis of Study Variables (N=352)

Variable	M	Skewness	Kurtosis
ELES	44.86	.336	1.79
SSUS	67.91	.445	-.36
MDSA	46.13	.08	-.57

Note: ELES= Early life experiences scale, SSUS= Sadism scale for university students, MDS-A= Moral disengagement scale for adults, M= Mean

The descriptive and normality indices for the study variables are presented in the above table, indicating that data for all three variables is normally distributed.

**Table 2**

Frequencies and Percentage of Demographic Variables (N=352)

Demographic variable	f	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	180	51.1
Female	172	48.9
<b>Current semester</b>		
1st year and 2nd year	190	53.8

3rd year and 4th year	162	45.9
<b>Institute</b>		
Private	166	47.0
Public	186	52.7
<b>Family system</b>		
Joint	109	30.9
Nuclear	243	68.8

Note: f = Frequency, % = Percentage

The demographic information of 352 participants is provided in the table. On gender basis, the sample was almost equal whereby 51.1% were males (f = 180) and 48.9% were females (f = 172). 53.8% of the participants were studying in their 1st or 2nd year with 45.9% in their 3rd or 4th year.

Students in public institutions slightly dominated (52.7%) than those in the private institutions (47%). In the family structure type, most (68.8%) were of a nuclear type of a family, whereas 30.9% belonged to a joint family.

**Correlation Analysis**

**Table 3**

Pearson Correlation, Mean, Standard Deviation on Early Life Events Scale, Sadism Scale for University Students and Moral Disengagement Scale-Adult

Sr.	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	ELES_F1	3.45	0.56	-	-.01	.13*	-.21***	.14**	.09	.07	.12*	.16*
2	ELES_F2	3.60	0.60		-	.50***	.73***	.20***	.24***	.19***	.23***	.12*
3	ELES_F3	3.50	0.58			-	.76***	.12*	.15**	.14**	.15**	.12*
4	ELES_Total	3.52	0.57				-	.12*	.20***	.14**	.16**	.07
5	SSUS_F1	3.70	0.62					-	.66**	.67**	.94**	.59***
6	SSUS_F2	3.65	0.59						-	.65**	.83**	.37***
7	SSUS_F3	3.68	0.61							-	.83**	.44***
8	SSUS_Total	3.75	0.63								-	.56***
9	MDSA_Total	3.72	0.65									-

Note: ELES=Early Life Experiences Scale, SSUS= Sadism Scale for University Students, MDSA= Moral Disengagement Scale-Adults, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

The table above shows the means scores, the standard deviations, and Pearson correlation factors between the subscales and total scores of 352 participants in Early Life Events Scale (ELES) and Sadism Scale for University Students (SSUS) and the total of Moral Disengagement Scale to Adults (MDSA).

The correlation revealed that Early Life experiences subscales showed strong positive intercorrelation with each other and the overall score in ELES, confirming internal consistency of the construct. Early life experiences (ELES) factors showed a small but significant relationship with sadism and moral disengagement while F1 of ELES has a negative relationship with the ELES total and weak positive correlation with sadism and moral disengagement. The sadism subscales

(SSUS) have strong positive intercorrelation and demonstrate moderate to strong correlation with the SSUS total. And sadism as a total has a moderate positive correlation with moral disengagement, revealing high sadism tendencies will have higher moral disengagement.

Overall, the correlation results showed a meaningful positive relationship between sadism and moral disengagement while the relationships with early life experiences are comparatively weaker.

**Hierarchical Regression**

Hierarchical regression analysis was done to find out the predictors of moral disengagement in young adults.

**Table 4**

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Predictors of Moral Disengagement in Young Adults

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	95% CI for B		R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
				LL	UL		
Step 1						0.03*	0.02*
Gender	-2.74	1.46	-.10	-5.63	.14		
Family System	-.81	1.57	-.02	-3.92	2.28		
Institute Type	4.06	1.46	.14**	1.17	6.95		
Step 2						0.06**	0.05**
ELES_F1	.76	.28	.14**	.19	1.32		
ELES_F2	.26	.18	.08	-.09	.62		
ELES_F3	.14	.15	.05	-.16	.44		
Step 3						0.37***	0.36***
SSUS_F1	.67	.07	.55***	.52	.83		
SSUS_F2	-.18	.15	-.07	-.49	.12		
SSUS_F3	.26	.17	.10	-.07	.60		

Note. B = Unstandardized Coefficient, SE = Standard Error, CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit,  $\beta$  = Standardized Coefficient, R<sup>2</sup> = Coefficient of Determination,  $\Delta R^2$  = R square change, ELES=Early Life Experiences Scale, SSUS= Sadism Scale for University Students, MDSA= Moral Disengagement Scale-Adults \*p< .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Hierarchical regression was carried out to study the predictive role of early life experiences and

sadistic tendencies on moral disengagement in young adults. The findings of Step 1 resulted in

that demographic variable revealed a nonsignificant 3% of the variance in moral disengagement ( $R^2 = .03$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ , ns). Among these, only institute type appeared as a significant predictor ( $B = 4.20$ ,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas gender, family system, and semester were found to be nonsignificant.

In Step 2, early life experiences were added, resulting in a substantial increase in explained variance ( $R^2 = .06$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Only submissiveness was found to be a significant predictor ( $B = .76$ ,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while other factors of ELES, feeling unvalued and recall of threat were nonsignificant.

In Step 3, sadistic tendencies were entered, producing a significant increase in explained variance ( $R^2 = .37$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Of the sadistic factors, only denigration was a significant predictor ( $B = .67$ ,  $\beta = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). While inability to regulate and dominance were nonsignificant. Importantly, the inclusion of sadistic tendencies reduced the predictive effect of submissiveness to non-significance.

Overall, these findings suggest that while early submissiveness contributes to moral disengagement, sadistic denigration is the strongest predictor, accounting for a large proportion of variance in moral disengagement in young adults.

### Discussion

Moral decision-making and the ability to regulate harmful behavior play an important role in maintaining healthy social relationships. Yet, individuals may sometimes give justification or rationalize their harmful actions through cognitive mechanisms known as moral disengagement. In collectivistic societies like Pakistan, social norms, family structures, and interpersonal dynamics greatly influence how individuals interpret moral standards and regulate their behavior. Early experiences of individuals within their family environment greatly shape their behaviour and moral judgement. Considering the influence of personality and developmental factors on moral functioning, the current study aimed to investigate the predictive role of early experiences and sadistic tendencies to explain the moral disengagement in

young adults. The findings provide insight into how unhealthy personality traits and negative early experiences play a role in cognitive processes that make individuals justify unethical behaviors.

### Inter-correlation

The correlation analysis of this study brings out significant associations between negative early experiences, sadistic tendencies, and moral disengagement in young adults. Namely, Early Life Experiences turned out to be positively and significantly connected with Sadistic Tendencies and Moral Disengagement. It means that the people who have faced emotional neglect, threat, or other negative experiences during their childhood become more predisposed to exhibit the characteristics related to finding pleasure in hurting others and employing cognitive systems that would enable them to excuse the use of harmful behavior. This observation is consistent with a study which found that childhood trauma and insecure attachment are powerful predictors of maladaptive personality characteristics and aggression in adulthood (Zubair & Kamal, 2021). The weak to moderate relationships between early life experience's subscales of emotional loss/threat and sadistic tendencies indicate that not every distressing early experience affects the psyche in the same way, emotional insecurity seems quite a prominent determinant of sadistic traits. These are consistent with the study and indicate that children raised in emotionally neglectful, or abusive, settings can be low in empathy and high in hostility as a coping strategy (Zubair & Kamal, 2021). Furthermore, the fact that the positive relationship between sadistic behavior and moral disengagement is strong indicates that people with sadistic behaviors are more prone to use displacement of responsibility, dehumanization or victim-blame mechanisms to justify their conduct. Recent study by Bano et al., 2021 has discovered that interpersonal aggression also correlates with moral disengagement, suggesting that there is a significant predictive relationship between relational aggression and moral disengagement in adolescents which shows that cognitive mechanisms to justify harmful behavior in

individuals facilitate aggressive behavioral conduct towards others.

Lastly, the weak to moderate relationship that was found between early life experiences and moral disengagement indicates that emotional insecurity and childhood adversity could serve as the antecedents of moral disengagement in old age. Taken together, these findings suggest that early life experiences, sadistic tendencies and moral disengagement are connected, and initial adversity may help to develop sadistic dispositions, which also reinforce cognitive processes that engage harmful behavior as morally justifiable (Neumann et al., 2020).

#### **Predictors of Moral Disengagement**

The current study examined the predictors of moral disengagement with relevance to the roles of early life experiences and sadistic tendencies for explaining in young adults using hierarchical regression analysis. Findings provide important insights into how developmental vulnerabilities and maladaptive personality traits contribute to the cognitive processes that facilitate moral disengagement.

#### **Impact of Demographic Factors on Moral Disengagement**

The findings revealed that demographic factors alone contributed minimally to moral disengagement, whereas the addition of early experiences and sadistic tendencies provided substantial explanatory power. In demographics, institutional influences may shape moral reasoning to some extent; however, individual psychological factors appear to play a much stronger role. These findings can also be justified by the research that was carried out to understand the role of sadistic tendencies, empathy and dominance in Pakistan. The research highlights that everyday sadism in a sample of educated young males 18-25 years old greatly correlates with other psychological traits like empathy and dominance. It shows that these traits are very meaningful in Pakistani context reinforcing that psychological and personality variables contribute to behavior and presumably to constructs like moral disengagement (Khan et al., 2025).

The study also found out that the type of institute is also a significant predictor of moral disengagement in young adults which aligns with the comparative analysis conducted by Rafique et al., 2020, who found that public sector college students reported lower moral development as compared to private sectors. This suggests that the type of climate in public colleges does not favor character building and there is a lack of consistent moral oversight. Moreover, even though the results display public sector institutions as a driver of disengagement, Rafique et al., 2020 also noted that there is a significant perceptual gap as public institute teachers hold overly optimistic views regarding the morality of their students as compared to the student's self reports. This discrepancy suggests the mechanism of moral disengagement such as, displacement of responsibility or distortion of consequences flourish due to going unnoticed by authorities causing these mechanisms to ultimately be embedded within the institute's culture.

#### **Role of Early Life Experiences in Moral Disengagement**

Submissiveness emerged as a significant predictor of moral disengagement, suggesting that individuals who internalized submissive roles in early relational contexts are more likely to rationalize or disengage from moral standards. This finding underscores the developmental influence of early relational dynamics, in line with prior work emphasizing how adverse or constraining environments shape later cognitive and moral processing. In Pakistani context, Hasnain et al., 2023 demonstrated that adolescents who experience higher levels of parental rejection are significantly more prone towards moral disengagement. It highlights the importance of early relational adversity in the development of mindset where submissiveness is developmental antecedent of moral disengagement. Interestingly, other facets of early experiences such as feeling unvalued and recall of threat, did not significantly contribute, highlighting the unique influence of submissiveness on moral disengagement.

### Role of Sadism in Moral Disengagement

Sadistic tendencies significantly increased the explained variance in moral disengagement, with denigration emerging as the strongest and most robust predictor. The powerful role of denigration highlights that young adults who derive satisfaction from belittling or humiliating others are particularly vulnerable to disengaging from moral standards. Recent research shows that students who take up belittling and bullying roles in university have greater moral disengagement, particularly deriving pleasure from humiliating others. Siddiqui et al., 2025 found that Pakistani university students did not just justify their actions of bullying and humiliating others but also found their actions as a source of social reward, which highlights the vulnerability of such individuals to morally disengage.

Two of the important findings of the study were that sadistic tendencies and early life experiences both play significant roles in predicting moral disengagement in young adults. Higher levels of sadistic tendencies were strongly associated with a greater tendency to morally justify or overlook harmful behaviors, while negative early life experiences also played a meaningful role in shaping these patterns. These results indicate that both developmental factors and personality traits can contribute towards how individuals rationalize their unethical behaviors. Interventions that are focused on building empathy, increasing self-awareness and promoting healthy emotional regulation in early life can help to reduce moral disengagement and promote more prosocial behaviors in young adults.

### Limitations

Despite the valuable insights, the study has few limitations that can be considered for future researches. The correlation research design restricts any inference of causality. The current study relied on self report measures which may be affected by the social desirability effect and response biases. As the data for this study was only collected from one city of Pakistan and from only university students, the findings may not be generalizable to individuals belonging to other regions of Pakistan or to different educational

backgrounds. For future studies, including participants from diverse educational backgrounds, different areas and regions may provide a better understanding of moral disengagement in the Pakistani young adults.

### Implication

The findings of this study highlight the significance of psychological and emotional development in early stages and how it helps to shape moral reasoning in later stages. Interventions that help to promote healthy parenting practices, attachment and emotional support can help to reduce the likelihood of moral disengagement and negative personality traits in later life. Furthermore, the strong predictive role of sadistic tendencies suggests that universities should employ anti-bullying programs, empathy building workshops, and training on prosocial behavior development. Providing counseling and psychological support can also help to identify and resolve the harmful tendencies before they escalate into more serious antisocial behavior in university students.

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