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The Moral Compass and Life Skills in Navigating Radicalization Processes: Examining the Interplay among Life Skills, Moral Disengagement, and Extremism

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Abstract

The present study investigated the interplay among deficient life skills, moral disengagement, and extremist attitude across two national contexts. Using a sample of young students in high school or college ($N = 686$), the present study found significant indirect effects between deficient life skills (agency and structure) and various aspects of an extremist mindset through moral disengagement. These findings suggest that these two psychological concepts of life skills and moral disengagement are relevant for understanding and countering violent radicalization processes; that is to say that morality can direct the life skills toward either violent extremism or nonviolent, legal civil participation. Furthermore, the development and empowerment of life skills could enhance individual resilience to morally disengaging narratives and radicalized ideologies.

Keywords: moral disengagement, life skills, life psychology, radicalization, violent extremism
The Moral Compass and Life Skills in Navigating Radicalization Processes: Examining the Interplay among Life Skills, Moral Disengagement, and Extremism

“Force always attracts men of low morality”

- *Albert Einstein*

In recent years, devastating terror attacks around the world have emphasized the importance of understanding and countering processes of radicalization. Consequently, research within the social sciences on this calamitous phenomenon has increased. Psychology among cognate disciplines has been developing theories to explicate extremist trajectories and associated risk factors (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018). Within the PsycINFO database, the search keyword “radicaliz*” generated 10 hits related to works published in 2007 and 92 works published in 2017. Likewise, the keyword “extremis*” yielded 52 publications published in the year 2007, showing an increase to 154 by 2017. A central limitation within this field of research has been the difficulty related to collecting data and the attendant lack of inferential statistics (Schuurman, 2018).

Based on the recent increase in research, a psychology of radicalization is emerging around generic models of how normal individuals may become radicalized. Such an approach is examining general human root causes, risk factors, and underlying psychological mechanisms found in normal populations (Doosje et al., 2016, Kruglanski et al., 2014, Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019). The assumptions of generic radicalization trajectories generally depart from previous understandings of psychopathology and personality traits as primary explanatory factors to instead emphasize general psychological processes of human agency in the dynamic interplay with social, cultural, and societal structures characteristic of general human life conditions (Gill & Corner, 2017; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). However, this interplay between agency and structure, concerning the
individual’s ability and intent to participate in common social, cultural, and societal surroundings that provide the individual with possibilities and support for participation, has yet to be illuminated (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019). Indeed, such dynamics relate to the development of basic human life skills as a central part of human agency, enabling the individual to comprehend and manage in a meaningful way everyday tasks as well as more extensive psychosocial, sociocultural, and societal life challenges (Bertelsen, 2018, Antonovsky 1987). In accordance with the approach of developing generic psychological models for general processes of radicalization, we propose that individual deficiency in life skill development may be a risk factor in regard to violent radicalization. This is hypothesized because deficient life skills might imply deviance from nonviolent and legal management of life challenges. Furthermore, deficient life skills may expose the individual to social control and influence toward engagement with violent and illegal ideologies and life trajectories.

Due to the complexity of the interplay between general human life skills and the violent extremist’s comprehension and management of life challenges, we must assume other psychological mechanisms are at work with general human life skills when normal individuals engage in radicalized projects, thereby accepting the use of illegal acts and violence to harm others. In this article, we focus on the hypothesized underlying mechanisms of moral disengagement and how these mechanisms add to the above-mentioned association between life skills and radicalization (Bertelsen, 2016). The concept of moral disengagement has been examined within social psychology as cognitive strategies for distorting reality and making violence possible by converting transgressive behavior, like illegal acts and violence, into acceptable behavior (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Indeed, moral disengagement has been theorized as a central mechanism for reducing the cognitive dissonance arising in radicalized individuals during acts of terrorism (Maikovich, 2005). Accordingly, such mechanisms could be important in
associating individual life skills and central aspects of radicalization, such as extremist attitudes and acceptance of illegal and violent means to execute such extreme perspectives.

The aim of the present study was to examine the significance of morally disengaged life skills as a central socio-cognitive mechanism underlying generic radicalization processes. This aim included the twofold goal of first modifying the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement scale (MMD; Bandura et al., 1996) in regard to usability for radicalization studies of youth. The second goal was to examine the interplay among moral disengagement, life skills, and aspects of radicalization by investigating how the development level of life skills is indirectly predicting extremist endorsement through moral disengagement.

**Life Skills and the Life Psychological Model of Radicalization**

Life psychology has been applied as the theoretical foundation for the “Aarhus Model” for countering and preventing radicalization (Bertelsen, 2015). Furthermore, the theory has been integrated in the Danish national prevention strategy for radicalization (McNeil-Wilson, 2017). Fundamental to this psychological approach to comprehending radicalization, is the concept of life skills. The life skills are psychological capabilities to comprehend and manage general daily life tasks and challenges in a personal, sensible way as well as in a way that proves significant for the community and for society. Thus, life skills are defined as generic sets of psychological capabilities used to transform general human life tasks and life challenges into comprehensible, personally sensible, and commonly meaningful and manageable goals of change. With the generic notion of life skills, the skills are conceptualized as being essentially the same across sociocultural diversity, although they are usually expressed through great cultural diversity. (Bertelsen, 2013, 2018). This conceptualization of life skills matches several key definitions within the psychological literature. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined life skills as the ability to effectively interact with the environment.
According to UNICEF (2003), life skills enable people to make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-regulation that help them live healthy and productive lives. Accordingly, WHO’s (1999) conception of life skills stresses how they enable people to handle everyday challenges. Life skills have, furthermore, been associated with well-being (Diener 2000, Seligman 2002, Kahneman & Krueger 2006), self-efficacy (Banduara 2013), and goal setting (Sun & Frese 2013).

The theory of life skills proposed here is based on the relation between agent and world as double-sided (Heidegger 1967). That is, people’s lives (seen from the inside and out) are directed at something(s) or someone(s). On the other hand, (seen from the outside and in) people are also directed by external conditions and opportunities. One must to attune to reality in order to direct the outcome of one’s actions. Indeed, people are directed by the challenges and life tasks of the surrounding world. The human activity employed to handle these life challenges and life tasks is formed by specific life skills directed at specific life tasks. In short, peoples’ lives are directed at/by the surrounding world based on sets of intentional skill-task units.

Peoples’ lives unfold in context. Human beings are dependent on mutual participation in establishing common life contexts based on cooperation and division of labor. Therefore, the fundamental skills must basically be directed at/by social participation. Furthermore, they must be directed at/by the surrounding world in a realistic way, and they must be directed at/by the diversity of perspectives on, and expectations of, the good life. These are general human life tasks, which we must find ways to address by developing corresponding general human life skills. Such generic life skills pertaining both to how individuals are directed at and by their context can be operationalized into ten human skill-task units (please see Table 1 for an overview).

According to the life psychological approach to life skills and in accordance with the classic notion of agency-structure, life skills on one hand (inside-out) have an agency aspect, i.e., they are
directed at something/someone(s), basically represented by one’s wants and abilities. On the other hand, life skills (outside-in) have a structure aspect, i.e., they are directed by something/someone(s), basically represented by the material conditions and possibilities of surroundings, as well as being met by other people, i.e., supported, helped, and acknowledged. These two aspects merge into actual actions and activities, directed both at and by the world. This qualification of how life skills are basically directed at/by the world (want, ability, external conditions, being met, doing) is termed the Basic Five of Life Psychology (BFL, Bertelsen 2018). A balanced and dynamic relationship between the agency and the structure aspects of life skills can lead to a satisfactory life and an experience of meaning. Such an experience can relate to the individual’s quest for significance reflecting how a person matters to someone and is respected for who he or she is. Such experiences of significance satisfy universal needs for esteem, achievement, and control. On the contrary, a lack of significance has been identified as a central initiating factor in radicalization trajectories proceeding the adoption of a specific extremist ideology (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

In regard to radicalization, both the agency aspect and the structure aspect of life skills have emerged in research as central risk factors of radicalization processes (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019). That is, deficient life skills might create frustration from not being able to sufficiently handle tasks and challenges in life, resulting in a life that is not perceived as being good enough. Furthermore, inability to reflect and address problems in relationships, moral questions, and the greater questions regarding the constitution of society could make individuals vulnerable to organizations and rhetoric that appear to provide social support and a clear stance toward society and life. Research has revealed an association between childhood risk factors and trauma and conduct problems during adolescence to be precursors for involvement in violent extremist groups, highlighting the developmental dynamics between the individual and the social context (Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016). With deficient life skills, an experience of threat and uncertainty stemming from the
experience of not being in control and not being helped – together with other risk factors such as exclusion, delinquency, and the need to belong – could mobilize individuals to engage with violent extremism (Bertelsen, 2018).

Extremism in this study is defined as “an intense desire for and/or pursuit of universal and comprehensive changes in own and common life socially, culturally and/or societally where the concern for human coexistence is set aside” (Bertelsen, 2018, p. 321). Accordingly, societal extremism emerges as a human universal that occurs across history in societies, nations, cultures, and ideologies (Hogg et al., 2013). Radicalization refers to the process of adopting and developing such extremist attitudes. While an extremist attitude in itself is often completely legal, the acceptance of illegal or even violent means to express one’s extremist views can extend the concept of extremism and result in possible acts of terrorism. Importantly, extremism as such does not include violent or illegal expressions, and consequently, these different aspects of extremism should be examined independently (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009).

**Radicalized Moral Disengagement**

The question of morality and moral disengagement has been understood as a crucial step within the general understanding of radicalized trajectories whereby the individual justifies acts of violent extremism (Moghaddam, 2005). Empirical research has associated problematic social relations and adverse contexts with both aggression and extremism through mechanisms of moral disengagement (Fontaine, Fida, Paciello, Tisak, & Caprara, 2012; Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010; Simi et al., 2016).

Moral disengagement was developed as a theory describing how ordinary people may engage in destructive conducts – not based on mere impulse but rather through cognitive mechanisms that deliberately justify their improper behavior (Bandura et al., 2006). In accordance with the aim here
to illuminate generic and general psychological factors and processes as risk factors of radicalization, the mechanisms of moral disengagement could provide part of the answer to why individuals in populations of ordinary people suddenly behave antisocially as seen in several cases of violent extremism. Indeed, research has shown a strong relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive and antisocial behavior, particularly among adolescents (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Hyde et al., 2010).

Selective disengagement from moral standards can occur at both individual and collective levels, permitting different types of conduct including detrimental acts of terrorism (Bandura, 1990). Bandura (1999) determined eight types of disengagement from morality through self-sanctions termed moral disengagement: (1) moral justification; (2) euphemistic language; (3) adventurous comparison; (4) displacement of responsibilities; (5) diffusion of responsibility; (6) distorting consequences; (7) attribution of blame; and, (8) dehumanization. Such selective activation and disengagement of moral self-sanctions can operate in everyday life and are central mechanisms when comprehending harmful acts such as violent extremism (Bandura, 2004). Indeed, Bandura (2004) has described the process of radicalization as involving “a gradual disengagement of moral self-sanctions from violent conduct” (p. 140).

Employing such mechanisms of moral disengagement could be especially prevalent among individuals with deficient life skills, suggesting that these mechanisms are central in regard to the association between deficient life skills and extremism. That is, the life skills do conceptually relate to, for example morality and reflections upon what is good behavior. However, the life skills are as such morally neutral and, consequently, do not reflect any moral directionality or normativity. Furthermore, if individuals do not possess the necessary skills in regard to 1) positioning oneself, 2) to realistic and morally attuning to the surrounding world, and 3) understanding and navigating the diversity of perspectives on life, the individual might more easily justify improper behavior
(Bélanger et al., 2019). Indeed, if the individual is incapable of relating to other humans and does not understand the intentions and feeling of others, or the structure in society, disengagement from moral self-sanctioning and, additionally, endorsement of violent extremism could emerge as a basic desire for changing and improving the world. Such radicalized developmental paths reflect empirical findings linking peer rejection and lack of empathy in adolescence to crime in early adulthood through the mediating role of moral disengagement (Fontaine et al., 2012, Hyde et al., 2010).

Current Study

Deficiently developed life skills can threaten the individual’s comprehension and management of life challenges in a way that leads to extremism (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019). In the current study, we examine how life skills are associated with various aspects of radicalization through moral disengagement. That is, moral disengagement was hypothesized as a central mechanism underlying the relationship between deficient life skills and an extremist mindset (Bertelsen, 2016). We first revised existing measures of moral disengagement to develop and statistically test a scale that appears relevant for youth in relation to extremism. The scale items were chosen and adapted based on how well they suited our research topic and target sample. We next employed this superordinate measure of moral disengagement to investigate the indirect effects of generic life skills on aspects of radicalization through moral disengagement to examine the importance of life skills on moral direction. That is, our study investigates how mechanisms of moral disengagement could provide a crucial component in the life psychological model of radicalization (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019).

Methods
To measure moral disengagement, we revised established measurements concerning our aim of studying radicalization cross-nationally among adolescents in high school or college. We drew on the items developed by Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) and the adaptation of this scale by Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008) to reach a scale that fit the age group of high school and college students. Our item pool was consistent with the original conception of eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, and it includes slightly modified items from the previously mentioned scales as well as two new items. The scale was revised with the aim of expanding the operationalization to suit studies of extremism across a population of normal youth and to fit other contexts besides the American context (see Table 2 for an overview of the items assessing moral disengagement). For example, we modified the original item, “It’s okay to steal to take care of your family’s needs” to, “It is all right to steal if it is necessary to help your family or group,” considering the latter more aligned with our study.

**Participants**

The present study utilized data from a larger research project (see Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019). Since we wanted to delve into the role of generic psychological processes as factors in radicalization among normal youth, our participants were 686 high school or college students from Denmark \(n=364\) and the United States of America \(n=322\). In the Danish sample, the participants’ ages ranged from 16 to 20 \(M=17.93.54, SD=0.87\) and in the American sample the age ranged from 17 to 20 \(M=18.54, SD=1.17\). Females made up 65.7% percent of the Danish sample, 33.2% were male, and 1.1% did not wish to indicate gender. Similarly, 65.9% of the U.S. sample were females, 33.0% were males, and 1.1% did not wish to report gender.

The Danish sample was recruited in agreement with various high schools located within the municipality of Aarhus, and the students answered the online questionnaire while in class under
teacher supervision. The U.S. sample was recruited through a research service company and participants were dispersed across the country.

**Measurement**

All participants were requested to participate in the research project by replying to the following measurement scales through an online questionnaire:

*Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement –Revised (MMD-R)* consist of our revised version of items from the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement scale (MMD; Bandura et al., 1996) and the items used for assessing moral disengagement by Detert et al. (2008). MMD-R includes 24 items, with three items tapping into each of the following mechanisms of moral disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. These dimensions were included in an overall aggregate measure of moral disengagement. All items were answered through a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The scale yielded good internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha $\alpha=.92$. See Table 2 for item wording.

*Life Skills Scale* (LSS; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019) comprises 40 items pertaining to insufficiently developed life skills divided across the two dimensions of agency (want and ability) and structure (external conditions and being met). Each of the ten life skills are then represented with two items within each dimension. Responses are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” A sample item for the agency subscale reads: “I don’t know how to ... create close and good relationships with family and friends.” Additionally, a sample item for the structure subscale reads: “People in this country are not ordinarily disposed to help me in being able to… relate to rules, requirements, and procedures plus learning to understand different explanations,
knowledge, and beliefs.” Internal consistency was good with $\alpha=.91$ for the agency subscale and $\alpha=.95$ for the structure subscale.

*Extremism Scale* (ES; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018) consists of a unidimensional 14-item scale that taps into both a strong desire for comprehensive personal and societal change (6 items) and aspects of intolerance (8 items). The scale measures general extremism, which can comprise various forms of, for example political and religious concerns. Responses are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Sample items include: “Most people in this country have a lifestyle and culture that is necessary to change totally.” The scale yielded good internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha $\alpha=.92$.

*Pro-violence and Illegal Acts in Relation to Extremism Scale* (PIARES; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018) includes 6 items pertaining to accepting the use of violence and 6 matching items relating to the acceptance of using illegal means in relation to extremism. All items were answered through a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” A sample item from the pro-violence subscale reads: “Using physical violence is the only thing that really works when it is a matter of … creating a new and better society.” A sample item from the illegal acts subscale reads: “Breaking the law is the only thing that really works when it is a matter of … creating proper conditions for those with whom one feels a solidarity.” Internal consistency was good with $\alpha=.92$ for the pro-violence subscale and $\alpha=.92$ for the pro-illegal acts subscale.

**Results**

The statistical analyses were conducted in either SPSS or Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011) employing maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. To evaluate model fit we used Kline’s (2012) guidelines: Comparative Fit Index (CFI)$\geq.90$, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) $\leq.08$, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)$\leq.08$. 
Furthermore, Little’s (2013) criteria for evaluating invariance was employed, $\Delta$CFI ($\leq .010$) and $\Delta$RMSEA ($\leq .010$). The main analysis of the hypothesized indirect effects model was examined through a structural equation model (SEM) utilizing partial (MMD-R, ES, & PAIRES) or fully aggregated (LSS) self-report measurement.

Testing the factor structure of the Measure of Moral Disengagement – Revised (MMD-R)

Our adaptation of the Bandura et al., (1996) and Detert et al. (2008) scales for assessing moral disengagement was examined through a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in order to confirm that the internal structure of these scales remained intact in our revised version. The MMD-R was tested as a second order CFA with each of the eight subscales loading onto one superordinate factor of moral disengagement. This model yielded acceptable fit, $\chi^2(241)=664.92$, $p<.001$; CFI=.904, SRMR=.050; RMSEA=.051, 90%CI=.046 to.055. In this model, diffusion of responsibility was allowed to covary with displacement of responsibility and advantageous comparison. Likewise, advantageous comparison was allowed to covary with distorting consequences.

General Results

As expected, our results revealed that all variables in this study were positively and significantly correlated (see Table 3). However, deficiency in both the agency and structure dimension of life skills were significantly yet not strongly correlated with moral disengagement, indicating that these predictors of radicalization tap into dissimilar concepts. That is, even though attunement to one’s norms and values relative to the morality of the surrounding society is encompassed as part of the life skills, the overall measure of deficient life skills is generally discerned from the concept of moral disengagement. Moreover, the moderate and positive correlation between moral disengagement and the three aspects of extremism reflect that although
these concepts are related, they do not tap into the same phenomena. Indeed, these concepts differ in that moral disengagement relates to generic mechanisms that are employed in everyday behavior, while the aspects of extremism include a component ideological orientation toward radical societal change.

The hypothesized indirect effects model was then estimated through SEM analysis utilizing the whole sample of participants and controlling for the effects of gender, vis-à-vis the effect on the mediating and outcome variables. This indirect effects model yielded a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(152)=357.98, p<.001; \text{CFI}=.964; \text{SRMR}=.031; \text{RMSEA}=.047, 90\% \text{CI}=.040 \text{ to } .053$. Multigroup SEM was then conducted to examine equivalence across the two contexts of Denmark and the U.S. by comparing constrained (factor loadings, intercepts, and structural regression paths constrained to be equal across both groups) versus unconstrained models (all parameters freely estimated for both groups). The results did not yield invariance across the two groups, $\Delta \text{CFI}=.025; \Delta \text{RMSEA}=.010$. Consequently, parameters for the two groups were estimated freely in the results. This revealed an indirect effects model with the same significant paths across the two contexts, even though the strength of these paths did differ vis-à-vis the two samples. This unconstrained model also yielded good fit to the data, $\chi^2(304)=531.70, p<.001; \text{CFI}=.961; \text{SRMR}=.039; \text{RMSEA}=.049, 90\% \text{CI}=.042 \text{ to } .056$.

The results of the indirect effects model controlling for the effects of gender (see Figure 1) indicated that there was a direct and positive association between deficient life skills in regard to structure on one hand and extremist attitude [DK: $\beta=.26, p=.002, 95\% \text{CI}=.10 \text{ to } .42$; US: $\beta=.19, p=.017, 95\% \text{CI}=.03 \text{ to } .35$] and acceptance of illegal means [DK: $\beta=.19, p=.004, 95\% \text{CI}=.06 \text{ to } .32$; US: $\beta=.22, p=.007, 95\% \text{CI}=.05 \text{ to } .31$] on the other. Furthermore, deficient life skillsagency [DK: $\beta=.29, p<.001, 95\% \text{CI}=.16 \text{ to } .42$; US: $\beta=.37, p<.001, 95\% \text{CI}=.20 \text{ to } .55$] and deficient life skillsstructure [DK: $\beta=.21, p=.004, 95\% \text{CI}=.07 \text{ to } .35$; US: $\beta=.31, p<=.001, 95\% \text{CI}=.16 \text{ to } .46$] were
positively associated with moral disengagement. Additionally, moral disengagement was positively linked with extremist attitude [DK: $\beta = .42, p < .001, 95\% CI = .28 \text{ to } .56$; US: $\beta = .48, p < .001, 95\% CI = .28 \text{ to } .69$], acceptance of violent means [DK: $\beta = .56, p < .001, 95\% CI = .41 \text{ to } .71$; US: $\beta = .70, p < .001, 95\% CI = .53 \text{ to } .88$], and acceptance of illegal means [DK: $\beta = .47, p < .001, 95\% CI = .33 \text{ to } .61$; US: $\beta = .55, p < .001, 95\% CI = .36 \text{ to } .73$].

The hypothesized indirect effects model was then compared to an alternative model examining moral disengagement as the independent variable and the deficient life skills as the mediating variables. The models were compared using the Bayesian (BIC) and Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) as recommended for comparison of non-nested models (Kline, 2015). A lower BIC and AIC value supported the hypothesized model, $\text{BIC}_{\text{hypothesized model}} = 28619.09$ and $\text{BIC}_{\text{alternative model}} = 32138.11$; $\text{AIC}_{\text{hypothesized model}} = 28006.46$ and $\text{AIC}_{\text{alternative model}} = 31479.91$.

Evaluating the indirect effects within the hypothesized model yielded six significant indirect paths. Deficient life skills$_{agency}$ was through moral disengagement indirectly and positively associated with extremist attitude [DK: $\beta = .12, p = .001, 95\% CI = .05 \text{ to } .19$; US: $\beta = .18, p = .009, 95\% CI = .05 \text{ to } .32$], acceptance of violent means [DK: $\beta = .16, p > .001, 95\% CI = .07 \text{ to } .25$; US: $\beta = .26, p = .002, 95\% CI = .10 \text{ to } .43$], and acceptance of illegal means [DK: $\beta = .14, p > .001, 95\% CI = .06 \text{ to } .21$; US: $\beta = .21, p = .004, 95\% CI = .06 \text{ to } .35$]. Furthermore, deficient life skills$_{structure}$ was through moral disengagement indirectly and positively associated with extremist attitude [DK: $\beta = .09, p = .010, 95\% CI = .02 \text{ to } .16$; US: $\beta = .15, p = .001, 95\% CI = .06 \text{ to } .23$], acceptance of violent means [DK: $\beta = .12, p = .005, 95\% CI = .04 \text{ to } .20$; US: $\beta = .22, p < .001, 95\% CI = .12 \text{ to } .31$], and acceptance of illegal means [DK: $\beta = .10, p = .008, 95\% CI = .03 \text{ to } .17$; US: $\beta = .17, p > .001, 95\% CI = .08 \text{ to } .25$].

**Discussion**
Our results indicate that moral disengagement could be one of the central mechanisms underlying the relationship between deficient life skills and various aspects of radicalization. Specifically, moral disengagement appeared as a central mechanism of circumventing moral self-sanctioning and the exertion of moral agency among individuals with deficient life skills in regard to extremism. Together, deficient life skills and moral disengagement emerge as central personal risk factors for engaging in violent extremism.

Deficient life skills do by definition imply difficulties in, or distortion of, the ability to comprehend and manage the psychosocial and sociocultural as well as economic challenges in modern life. This may lead to the development of oversimplified ideas about the ideal social, cultural, and societal life understood as possible solutions to one’s challenges in life, vis-à-vis the definition of extremism. Indeed, research has revealed that obsession with one goal rather than integration of multiple goal pursuits increased moral disengagement as well as intentions to engage in violent extremism (Bélanger et al., 2019). Deficient life skills may at the same time lead to deficits in the resilience to social influence from extremist groups through radicalized discourses, ideologies, and narratives. Furthermore, the mechanisms of moral disengagement may further reinforce these processes, reflecting the complex relationship between these two psychological concepts in relation to the endorsement of violent extremism. There is an increasing focus on extremist social influence from group effects as well as from extremist discourses, propaganda, and narratives in social media (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010). Such a focus emphasizes the importance of a moral compass in regard to the interaction between agency and structure in everyday life.

In our results, the structure aspect of life skills was both directly and indirectly associated with extremist attitude and acceptance of illegal means. Contextual adversity and instability, as well as lack of support and abuse, have been associated with later development of extremist attitudes, highlighting the structural facilitation of life skill development as central and that these dynamics
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precede adoption of extremist ideology (Simi et al., 2016). Indeed, early-on rejection by one’s parents, neighborhood impoverishment, and lack of empathy have been associated with later development of moral disengagement (Hyde et al., 2010). These findings highlight the importance of societal and social facilitation of life skills development in order to be able to participate in civic involvement rather than approaching radicalized trajectories.

In regard to group violence, moral disengagement is proven to be used across group ideology in order to legitimize morally questionable behavior (Villages de Posada, Flórez, & Espinel, 2018) and to be a significant correlate of aggression among youth (Gini et al., 2014). That is, mechanisms of self-sanctioning from morality, e.g., through dehumanizing other groups in society and displacing responsibility for violent conflict, could pave the way for employing antisocial behavior in relation to an extremist attitude. Thus, moral disengagement appears to provide a central underlying mechanism in a generic psychological model of radicalization. The moral compass of employing one’s life skills in life projects aimed at profoundly changing one’s own and societal life and consequently regaining significance may appear central in regard to how this life project is carried out through interplay with radicalized social network ideology and narratives (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski, Jasko, Webber, Chernikova, & Molinario, 2018).

With radicalization happening among the normal population, moral disengagement could be a cornerstone in understanding the willingness to use and support extreme means. Such means are often necessitated within radicalized narratives and ideologies of fighting for the higher good by changing life and society into something better, which could even be preserving a peaceful and just world (Bandura, 1999; Kruglanski et al., 2018). The rhetoric within extremist narratives can influence individuals’ moral compass enough to justify the necessity of violent means and to allow the targeting of civilians who are framed as responsible for the perceived unjust world (Kruglanski et al., 2014). This reflects how what one party perceives is fair might seem excessive to another,
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which can initiate a cycle of revenge to restore equity through retaliatory action and violence (Stillwell, Baumeister, & Del Priore, 2008). However, not everyone (in fact very few) with deficient life skills will engage in violent extremism. On the other hand, comprehensive desires for and ideologies of fundamental cultural and societal changes, as well as the will and ability to conduct violent and illegal extremist actions, might presuppose a high level of comprehension and management of life in general and, furthermore, organizing and initiating such acts in particular. We must therefore assume that some individuals with highly developed life skills, especially concerning the pragmatics of planning and community involvement, may also turn to violent and illegal extremist solutions for cultural and societal life challenges. But again, few people enter the life trajectories of violent radicalization.

In our results, the mechanisms of moral disengagement were particularly salient among individuals with deficient agency life skills, suggesting them to be easy targets for such radicalized ideology. Consequently, developing and educating individuals about general life skills would make them more resilient to self-sanctioning from morality and more resilient to adopting radicalized narratives, which currently are easily accessed through social media and extended networks.

Implications

A central aim of investigating generic models of radicalization processes is the development of empirically informed anti-radicalization interventions. Our results highlight those mechanisms of life skills development and morality as central in regard to extremist endorsement. Interventions, via education and mentoring, could prove a crucial approach to not only facilitating the general development and empowerment of life skills but also to further strengthening social cognitive resilience to violent extremism of engaging in self-sanctions from moral standards (Aly, Taylor, & Karnovsky, 2013; Bertelsen, 2016, 2018). That is, addressing moral repugnance could be central for
the individual to choose non-radicalization over radicalization and thus express one’s involvement in societal change through legal activism contrary to violent extremism (Cragin, 2014).

Such educative interventions can be employed as a way of preventing anti-social behavior in general and to developing moral standards in particular. In regard to radicalization, such intervention aims to build cognitive resilience to reject radicalized narratives through a grounding in citizenship and in civic values. That is, developing self-regulatory systems and basic life skills for participating in everyday life could prevent the individual from being influenced by the narratives and rhetoric of violent extremism (Aly et al., 2013). Our results suggest that, overall, interventions empowering life skills and the moral agency of young people could provide a path to addressing perceived injustice through legal community participation and citizenship.

Limitations and Future Research

The complex interplay among deficient life skills, moral disengagement, and violent extremism sheds light on important psychological mechanisms that work together in increasing the risk of engaging in radicalized trajectories. This interplay, however, only captures a limited fraction of the complexity of the phenomenon of radicalization. Consequently, there are several other decisive factors concerning extremist involvement which need to be scrutinized, such as sociocultural embeddedness, personality (e.g., the so-called dark triad of the personality traits psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism; Paulhus & Williams 2002), group processes, cultural affiliation (Gil & Cornor, 2017; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019), and personality disorders and psychiatric illness (which may be more prominent among solo terrorists; Corner, Gill, & Mason, 2016; Gill & Corner, 2017).

Additionally, the present study poses several limitations and thus presents possibilities for future research. First, the question of generality must be addressed. Our sampling did not include
people actually involved with radicalization and it would be helpful to examine how these generic psychological mechanisms apply among individuals admitting a higher endorsement of extremism; however, the aim of this study was to address the fact that homegrown radicalization in Western countries is found among ordinary, relatively well-educated youth, making relevant the investigation of normal and general psychological mechanisms, as represented in the sample within this study (Victoroff, 2005).

Second, our study focused on deficient life skills and how this could be a risk factor of radicalization. Future research may approach the phenomenon of seemingly socially well-integrated and well-functioning youth who enter violent extremist life trajectories through a radicalized mentality (Victoroff, 2005). In other words, further research could scrutinize the relationship between well-developed life skills and violent extremism. Such a study could investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms, differentiating between entering pathways of violent extremism based on deficient and well-developed life skills, respectively.

Third, our cross-sectional data does not inform us about the temporal causality of life skills predicting extremism through morality. Future research could employ an experimental and longitudinal approach to elucidate how these two mechanisms might influence each other in regard to becoming radicalized.

Fourth, our attitudinal study is based on a generic approach to extremist mindsets. Consequently, we have no evidence that endorsement of violent or illegal means in relation to extremism could transform into actual radicalized behavior. Future research could investigate the relationship between extremist attitudes and behavior through factors such as societal involvement and attitude stability (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006).

Fifth, our measure of radicalization comprises endorsement of profound changes in life and disregard for others within one dimension. Future research could further investigate the central role
of the quality of life skills (developmental level and morality) as factors, which differentiates the mindset, and the skillset, of legal activism from violent extremism (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009).

Conclusion

Pursuing a generic model for a psychology of radicalization, the present study scrutinizes central general psychological mechanisms that appear relevant as risk factors for radicalization. We did this by examining how the interplay among deficient life skills and moral disengagement could relate to various aspects of radicalization. We found that both deficiently developed life skills as well as moral disengagement are relevant risk factors that interplay in regard to endorsement of violent extremism. Specifically, our results indicate that deficiency in the agency and structure aspect of life skills are indirect predictors of endorsement of violent and/or illegal extremism through moral disengagement. Additionally, the structure aspect of life skills was directly associated with extremist attitudes and acceptance of illegal means in relation to extremism. This suggests that these mechanisms work in tandem in regard to radicalization processes and that both should be addressed in the development of preventive interventions. Consequently, individuals with deficient life skills are especially influenced by moral disengagement, suggesting that the development of life skills could be a way of building resilience to morally disengaged narratives and radicalized ideology. Accordingly, our study emphasizes the importance of addressing the morality by which the individual life skills are employed in civic participation.

References


MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND LIFE SKILLS


### Table 1. An overview of the general life skills/tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operationalization of the general human skill-task units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. **Relations.** This skill-task unit is about close social relationships. It enables one to participate actively in creating, maintaining, and developing significant social and personal relationships.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of belongingness, attachment, and the capacity to form close relationships (for example, belonging as a basic human need, Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

2. **Frames.** This skill-task unit is about the basic material framework and activities constituting one’s life. It enables the individual to participate actively in creating, maintaining, and developing the framework and activities that are necessary to balance his or her everyday life in private, at work, and through projects, according to one’s own interests.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of position, self-management, and self-interests (for example Davies & Harré, 1990).

3. **Community.** This skill-task unit is about making a difference when it comes to the greater good. It enables the individual to participate in creating, maintaining, and developing one or more communities in his or her own personal way.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general field of community psychology (for example, critical and active participation in shaping and transforming one’s community, Kagan et al., 2011).

4. **Attentiveness.** This skill-task unit is about being present and being focused, as well as being absorbed and engaged in something. Furthermore, it is about assimilation/accommodation regarding the concrete situation or activity in which one participates.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of sensitization and immediate assimilation and accommodation of acts according to possibilities and conditions (for example, Maturana & Varela, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
5. **Pragmatics (planning).** This skill-task unit is about creating an overview of what needs to be done to find the most efficient way to reach that goal. It is about what milestones are to be achieved on the way to the goal. It may be necessary to identify and overcome some obstacles (either in one’s surroundings or created by oneself).

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of prediction, planning, choice, and decision (for example, Ajzen, 1991; Montana & Charnov, 2000).

6. **Ethics (norms, values).** This skill-task unit is about assessing whether what one is doing or what one is part of is in accordance with his or her personal norms and values.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of moral reasoning and assimilation/accommodation to norms and values (for example, Campbell et al., 2002).

7. **Awareness.** This skill-task unit is about using one’s senses in relation to the perceptions coming from the surrounding world (sounds, visual impressions, people’s body language, or nonverbal communications) and sensations or affects in one’s own body (not intentions and thoughts, but affects, body posture, etc.).

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of awareness of internal and external cues and incentives and awareness of how perceptions form from sensations and affordances (for example, Gendlin, 1962, Gibson, 1979).

8. **Reflection (understanding oneself).** This skill-task unit is about taking into perspective one’s own thoughts, feelings, and motivation in a given situation or perspective on one’s own and our common lives in general.

9. **Empathy (understanding others).** This skill-task unit is about taking into perspective other people’s thoughts, feelings, and motivation in a given situation or their perspective on their own and our common lives.

These two skill-task units are considered together in the general psychological field of mentalization, social cognition, and empathy (for example, Fonagy et al., 2002).
10. Navigation (understanding systems). This skill-task unit is about seeing the world (nature, culture, society) and life from a System perspective (laws, regulations, institutions, procedures, as well as scientific and cultural discourses). It enables one to comply with, and deliberate critically and innovatively on, the transaction between the System and the lived lifeworld.

The notion of this skill-task unit is rooted mainly in the general psychological field of societal psychology, political psychology, cultural psychology, and discourse psychology (for example, Habermas, 1987).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item wording</th>
<th>MJ</th>
<th>EL</th>
<th>AC</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>DR</th>
<th>DC</th>
<th>DH</th>
<th>AB</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is all right to use physical violence to protect your friends.(^c)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is all right to react with physical violence if someone offends your family.(^c)</td>
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<td>.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is all right to steal if it is necessary to help your family or group.(^b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beating a really obnoxious and evil person is just teaching them a lesson.(^b)</td>
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<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using condescending expressions about others is just a way of speaking.(^b)</td>
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<td>.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving a friend your answers to homework or exams is just helping.(^b)</td>
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<td>.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is nothing especially wrong with destroying things if you compare it to beating people up.(^c)</td>
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<td>.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stealing a little money is not especially serious compared with those who steal a lot of money.(^c)</td>
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<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>A person, who is a member of a group, can't be blamed for the problems that the group creates.(^c)</td>
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<td>.68</td>
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<tr>
<td>The individual person in a group can’t be blamed for something that the group has jointly decided to do.(^c)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A person who played a minor role can't be blamed for the damage done by a group.(^c)</td>
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<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>A person living under poor conditions can't be blamed if they behave aggressively.(^c)</td>
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<td>.68</td>
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<tr>
<td>A person who is brought up badly can't be blamed for bad behavior.(^b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>If a person is pressured to do something, they can't be blamed for doing it.(^b)</td>
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<td>.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teasing a person doesn't hurt them.(^c)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It doesn't mean much to take something from a big supermarket without paying – it won’t do any difference.(^d)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No one is harmed by getting beaten once in a while.(^d)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some people deserve to be treated like animals.(^c)</td>
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<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is all right to treat a person badly if they behave like a pig.(^c)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A really obnoxious and evil person doesn't deserve to be treated like a human being.(^c)</td>
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<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>If people behave badly in school, then it is the fault of the teacher or the school.(^c)</td>
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<td>.63</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If people are careless about where they lay their things, then it is their own fault if the things get stolen.(^c)</td>
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<td>.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>If people are treated badly, then they are usually themselves to blame for it.(^c)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. MJ: Moral Justification, EL: Euphemistic language, AC: Advantageous comparison, DF: Diffusion of responsibility, DR: Displacement of responsibility, DC: Distorting consequences, DH: Dehumanization, and AB: Attribution of blame. \(^a\) represents items adapted from Bandura et al., (1996), \(^b\) are items adapted from by Detert et al. (2008), and \(^c\) are items adapted from both Bandura et al., (1996) and Detert et al. (2008). \(^d\) are new items.
Table 3. Correlations, means, and Internal consistency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LSS-external</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>Pro violence</th>
<th>Pro illegal acts</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Internal consistency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Skills Scale - agency</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.32***</td>
<td>2.69 (1.00)</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Skills Scale - structure</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>2.52 (1.15)</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral disengagement</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>2.52 (1.00)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremism</td>
<td></td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>2.49 (1.13)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>1.97 (1.24)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro illegal acts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.30 (1.39)</td>
<td>.92</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01
Figure 1. Results of the indirect effects model.
MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND LIFE SKILLS

Note. Results for the two national samples presented in the following order: DK/U.S. \(*p < .05; **p < .01.\)