

Boarding School and Moral Disengagement: How Educational Environments Shape Moral Identity

Prarthana Goenka

Welham Girls' School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether boarding school environments are associated with argues that the institutional hierarchies, traditions, collective disciplinary structures, and peer cultures common in boarding schools may normalize behaviours that allow individuals to distance themselves from personal responsibility. The study tests three hypotheses: that more years spent in boarding school will be associated with higher moral disengagement, that this relationship will be stronger among individuals who left school more recently, and that it will be stronger among those who attended single-sex schools.

To test these expectations, the study uses data from an online survey of more than 130 participants. The survey controlled for personality, demographic, and socioeconomic factors and measured moral disengagement using adapted items from Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale. The findings show that boarding school attendance is positively associated with moral disengagement, although the relationship is not statistically significant in the full sample. Among respondents under the age of forty, however, the relationship is stronger and statistically significant in several models. Each additional year spent in boarding school is associated with an approximately one percentage-point increase in moral disengagement, suggesting that individuals who spent all twelve years in boarding school may score around twelve percentage points higher than those who did not attend boarding school. The study finds no meaningful relationship between single-sex schooling and moral disengagement. These findings suggest that the effects of boarding school environments may be strongest closer to the period in which individuals leave school and may weaken over time.

I. Introduction

Moral disengagement describes the psychological mechanisms through which individuals rationalize unethical behaviour such as war crimes. In his social cognitive theory of moral agency, psychologist Albert Bandura theorized how the average human being can do harmful

things without feeling guilty (1999). Building on Stanley Milgram's shock experiments and Philip Zimbardo's prison study, he identified mental "shortcuts" — such as using gentler words — euphemisms — for harmful acts or blaming someone else-displacement, that allowed individuals to 'switch off' or 'disengage' from their sense of right and wrong (Milgram 1963; Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973). Bandura called this process moral disengagement and argued that it is not a rare character flaw, as commonly thought of inherently existing in anti-social individuals, but a set of mechanisms anyone can employ to precipitate such behaviour when society, groups, or situations make wrongdoing seem acceptable, usually by creating oblivious structures around it

Moral disengagement is a social-cognitive process that allows individuals to act unethically without feeling personal guilt. Research emphasizes the malleability of disengagement across domains, from child and adolescent aggression to sports psychology, suggesting that targeted interventions can reactivate moral self-regulation through implicit and explicit moral "engagement" (Bandura 1999; Moore 2015). This underscores the interplay between personal and conventional values and disengagement mechanisms.

Research on moral disengagement also establishes a causal and operant conditioning relationship, through negative reinforcement, between moral disengagement and bullying behaviour in schools. Thornberg et al. (2023) found that moral disengagement was indirectly associated with pro-bullying and passive bystanding behaviours, mediated by motivational factors. Students who morally disengage are less likely to defend victims and more likely to remain passive. Similarly, Ivaniushina and Alexandrov (2022) argue that school disciplinary structures influence students' aggression through moral disengagement and bullying by teachers, thereby mediating the relationship between institutional feedback structures and student behaviour.

Understanding and measuring Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is assessed by the extent to which individuals use mechanisms to validate unethical actions. This is done with the help of specific psychological scales. For the purpose of this study, the scales developed by Bandura, typically including statements reflecting the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement have been used. For example, participants have responded to statements such as "It is okay to insult someone if they are really annoying" on a Likert agreement scale (Bandura et al. 1996).

According to Alfred L. McAlister (2001), moral disengagement was measured through a 15-item Moral Disengagement Scale designed to assess attitudes favourably disposed to the use of military force. The scale consists of six of Bandura's eight mechanisms of moral disengagement.

These mechanisms are illustrated by moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame.

In the longstanding debate over the nature of disengagement, Bandura rejected the idea that moral disengagement is inherent, instead proposing the social cognitive theory in which disengagement is an active process shaped by cognitive mechanisms and societal, social, and cultural conditioning. He emphasized observed and learned behaviour over fixed traits. However, studies suggest that these mechanisms may also function as universally accessible cognitive tools, emerging across cultures, ages, and contexts (Bandura 1999).

Detert et al. (2008) further found that moral disengagement correlates with stable personality traits such as cynicism and low empathy, suggesting that it is not merely situational but also trait-like and inherent. Moore extended this argument by suggesting that while some individuals show consistent patterns of moral disengagement, these patterns remain malleable and shaped by situational contexts. Hyde similarly viewed moral disengagement as developmentally and environmentally shaped, focusing particularly on adolescence as a critical period for moral identity formation.

Although extensive research has established a relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive tendencies, and parallel research has examined how boarding schools influence academic achievement, there appears to be limited directed comparative research on the effect of different educational spaces — specifically boarding versus non-boarding schools — on moral disengagement . (Gini, Pozzoli, and Hymel 2014; Zhong, Feng, and Xu 2024). This makes the present line of inquiry both imperative and novel

II. Theoretical Framework

One possible explanation for why boarding schools may influence levels of moral disengagement lies in the institutionalization of norms and hierarchical structures. Euphemistic language, for instance, refers to the use of mild or misleading language to make unethical actions appear acceptable. In boarding school environments, hierarchical structures and the normalization of bullying or hierarchical practices are often institutionalized and justified as “traditions.” Senior students may enforce norms without accountability because such practices are viewed as embedded institutional culture (Bandura 1999; Garandeanu, Lee, and Salmivalli 2014).

Robinson (2025), in *Hierarchical Governance in Boarding Schools: Shifting Power Dynamics, Culture, and Policy*, explores the experience of a newly appointed Director of Residential Life transitioning from a liberal boarding school in New York to a traditional Southern institution. The work examines how traditions, elitism, authority structures, and institutional rigidity create

systems in which moral disengagement mechanisms become normalized. Practices such as allowing seniors to stand ahead in lines or exercise authority over juniors become normalized through repeated institutional reinforcement.

Similarly, Connolly's (2024) *School Culture: Identifying the Barriers to Belonging at Boarding Schools and Shifting the Culture* highlights how boarding school culture is often shaped by socio-economic status and elitist institutional structures. These norms and traditions can become enforcing agents of discipline, reducing the likelihood that harmful practices are questioned or reported.

Compared to boarding schools, we would expect that non-boarding school environments generally provide greater accessibility to grievance redressal mechanisms through parental involvement and reduced institutional immersion. Students spend less time within school environments, resulting in comparatively weaker conditioning into institutional disciplinary structures.

Diffusion of responsibility may also operate differently across educational spaces. In boarding school environments, collective punishment and branched-out leadership structures may dilute personal accountability. Authority is distributed through systems involving principals, deans, teachers, captains, vice captains, and senior students, increasing the possibility of unchecked power and power abuse. Non-boarding schools, by contrast, generally rely on more centralized and direct disciplinary systems, with fewer intermediaries between students and authority figures.

At the same time, boarding schools may also possess the capacity to indoctrinate stronger moral orders through immersive environments, structured peer mentoring, institutional routines, volunteering practices, and shared habits. Students live full-time within the institution, allowing continuous exposure to moral and cultural norms. Repeated practices and routines may initially function through fear-based conditioning but eventually lead to internalization of moral behaviour. Studies by **Zhong, Feng, and Xu (2024)**, **Sobon et al. (2025)**, and **Latif, Nahar, and Hanum (2025)** all emphasize how boarding school environments can foster moral sensitivity, emotional regulation, self-discipline, and peer accountability.

Boarding schools can therefore function both as corrective institutions and as environments that intensify disengagement. Structured isolation from family and external support systems may either strengthen existing beliefs associated with disengagement or encourage self-reflection and engagement. Acts of rebellion may emerge as responses to rigid norms, while institutional responses determine whether disengagement becomes normalized or challenged. For example,

juniors who experience bullying may later justify repeating the same behaviour toward younger students.

Conversely, non-boarding environments provide greater access to proximate love, parental guidance, and grievance mechanisms, potentially strengthening compassion and reducing immediate disengagement responses. Human beings often learn through perception, response, and observed behaviour. As demonstrated through Milgram's experiments, individuals also display a tendency to conform to authority figures, often justifying their behaviour through mechanisms of moral disengagement (Milgram 1963; Bandura 1999).

Hypotheses

Based on the above proposed theory, we derived the following hypotheses:

1. ***More years spent in boarding school will correlate with higher levels of moral disengagement.*** This is based on the idea that prolonged exposure to institutional hierarchies, normalized traditions, and collective disciplinary systems may increase the likelihood of disengagement mechanisms becoming internalized.
2. ***The effect of boarding school exposure on moral disengagement will be stronger in individuals closer to having left school.*** This is based on the idea that, if external environments shape moral disengagement, then the more years an individual has spent outside school, the more exposure they will have had to other environments that may weaken the effects of boarding school.
3. ***The effect of boarding school exposure on moral disengagement will be stronger in individuals from single-sex schools.*** Single-sex school environments often place greater emphasis on conformity, peer culture, and rigid social hierarchies, which may intensify group-based behavioural norms.

III. Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we designed a survey to examine the relationship between educational spaces, specifically boarding versus day schools, and moral disengagement among adults. The study aimed to understand how different schooling environments, combined with demographic and personality factors, influence moral identity and disengagement tendencies. Participants were required to complete a structured online questionnaire after providing informed consent and were assured anonymity throughout the process. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study

at any point. Responses were collected anonymously, and the researcher did not have access to identifying information.

The questionnaire included sections on educational background, moral disengagement, demographics (for socio-economic controls) and personality controls due to their theoretical relationship with moral disengagement. Participants reported the number of years spent in boarding school versus day school from Grade 1 onwards, along with experiences in co-educational versus single-sex schools and government versus private schools. Moral disengagement was measured using adapted items from Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale, including statements such as "It is alright to fight to protect your friends," "Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking," and "Kids cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it" (Bandura et al. 1996). Participants indicated agreement/ disagreement levels in a Likert scale format. Additionally, items indicative of personality traits and parental authority styles were included to capture psychological predictors that play a mediating role in the relationship between schooling type and disengagement.

The survey was distributed online with the help of associates on digital platforms. Participants were encouraged to respond honestly, and a pilot run with three subjects was conducted to refine clarity and address discrepancies within the survey. The working sample consisted of 133 adults from the Indian subcontinent, along with approximately 20 overseas participants. Two responses were excluded because the respondents were underage, leaving 131 valid responses for analysis. This study specifically tested the hypotheses, as mentioned earlier, that greater exposure and time spent in boarding school environments would correlate with higher moral disengagement. It also hypothesized that this association would be stronger among individuals closer to having left school, and in individuals that were placed within single-sex school environments.

IV. Results

The first subsection presents descriptive statistics to contextualize the variables. The second presents the regression analysis and evaluates it in the context of the hypotheses. Additional relationships that emerged from the survey are also evaluated and discussed.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Boarding (years)	1.55	2.79	0	12	128
Single-sex (years)	5.46	5.14	0	12	130
Average MD	0.40	0.11	0.20	0.82	128

Age	42.98	13.21	18	73	131
Cars	1.33	1.06	0	3	128
Washing Machine	0.50	0.50	0	1	131
Male	0.37	0.48	0	1	131

Age and Moral Disengagement

A total of 131 respondents reported their age. Their ages ranged from 18 to 73 years, with a mean age of 42.98 years ($SD = 13.21$). The sample therefore consisted primarily of middle-aged adults, although younger and older respondents were also represented. Analysis of the relationship between age and moral disengagement suggested a weak negative association, with older respondents reporting marginally lower levels of moral disengagement.

Boarding School Experience and Moral Disengagement

A total of 128 respondents reported the number of years they had spent in boarding school, with the average respondent having spent only 1.55 years in boarding school ($SD = 2.79$), and values ranging from 0 to 12 years. This relatively low mean reflects the fact that most participants had never attended boarding school, while a smaller number had substantial boarding school experience.

Participants with boarding school experience tended to report slightly higher levels of moral disengagement than those without such experience. While the direction of the relationship was positive, boarding school exposure explained very little variation in moral disengagement scores.

Single-Sex School Experience and Moral Disengagement

A total of 130 respondents reported the number of years they had spent in single-sex schools. On average, respondents spent 5.46 years in single-sex educational environments ($SD = 5.14$), although experiences varied considerably, ranging from no exposure to the entirety of schooling being spent in single-sex institutions.

Despite this variation, no meaningful relationship was observed between single-sex schooling and moral disengagement.

Gender and Moral Disengagement

A total of 131 respondents reported their gender. Of these, 37% were male and 63% were female. Although female respondents formed the majority of the sample, moral disengagement scores were very similar across genders.

Socioeconomic indicators

Given that individuals often do not respond to questions about household income, and to avoid errors in remembering their household income while growing up, we used car and washing machine ownership as a proxy for socioeconomic status.

A total of 128 respondents reported the number of cars owned by their household while growing up. The mean number of cars was 1.33 (SD = 1.06), with responses ranging from 0 to 3 or more vehicles. This indicates moderate variation in socioeconomic background within the sample.

A total of 131 respondents reported whether their household owned a washing machine while they were growing up. Approximately half of respondents reported having access to a washing machine (M = 0.50, SD = 0.50), indicating an almost even split within the sample.

Overall Moral Disengagement Scores

Moral disengagement scores were generally low to moderate across the sample. The average score was 0.40 (SD = 0.11), with values ranging from 0.20 to 0.82. Most respondents therefore exhibited relatively low levels of moral disengagement, although there was sufficient variation to examine individual differences.

Analytical Results

H1: More years spent in boarding school will correlate with higher levels of moral disengagement.

We find that, holding gender, age, socio-economic indicators and school ownership constant, an increase of one year in boarding school is associated with an increase of 0.01 (1 percentage point) on the 0–1 moral disengagement scale. Over 12 years of school, this would suggest an increase in 12 percentage points, relative to those with no years in boarding school. However, this result is not statistically significant.

The models below (Figure 1) regress the dependent variable, the moral disengagement scale, on the independent variables: years spent in boarding school and years spent in single-sex schools, as well as the covariates.

Figure 1

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(Intercept)	0.39*** (0.01)	0.39*** (0.01)	0.39*** (0.02)	0.35*** (0.05)	0.33*** (0.07)	0.36*** (0.07)
boarding	0.01 (0.00)		0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
singlesex		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
boarding × singlesex			0.00 (0.00)			
school_typePrivate				0.07+ (0.04)	0.07+ (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)
age				-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
parental					0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
male						-0.02 (0.02)
cars						-0.02 (0.01)
washing						-0.01 (0.02)
Num.Obs.	125	127	124	124	124	121
R2	0.019	0.001	0.024	0.058	0.059	0.086
R2 Adj.	0.011	-0.007	-0.001	0.026	0.019	0.021
AIC	-192.0	-192.7	-186.4	-188.8	-187.0	-178.1
BIC	-183.5	-184.2	-172.3	-171.9	-167.2	-150.2
Log.Lik.	98.990	99.363	98.206	100.412	100.481	99.074
F	2.391	0.153	0.973	1.828	1.478	1.320
RMSE	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

H2: The effect of boarding school exposure on moral disengagement will be stronger in individuals closer to having left school.

Among respondents under 40 years of age, the regression results provide support for the hypothesis that greater exposure to boarding school is associated with higher levels of moral disengagement. Figure 2 reports the regression results for the section of the sample that is under

40. The coefficient for boarding school attendance was positive and statistically significant. With controls, we find that for those under 40, every additional year spent in boarding schools is, on average, associated with 4 percentage point increase in model disengagement. Over 12 years of school, this would suggest an increase in nearly 50 percentage points relative to those with no years in boarding school.

Compared with the full sample, the relationship between boarding school attendance and moral disengagement appears stronger among individuals who are closer to having left school, supporting the hypothesis.

Figure 2

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(Intercept)	0.39*** (0.02)	0.42*** (0.02)	0.38*** (0.02)	0.45** (0.14)	0.49** (0.16)	0.48** (0.17)	0.47** (0.16)
boarding	0.01* (0.01)		0.03** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
singlesex		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
boarding × singlesex			-0.00+ (0.00)				-0.00+ (0.00)
school_typePrivate				0.02 (0.11)	0.03 (0.12)	0.07 (0.14)	-0.06 (0.15)
age				-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
parental					-0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
male						-0.00 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)
cars						-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
washing						-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)
Num.Obs.	44	43	43	43	43	41	41
R2	0.091	0.002	0.220	0.167	0.175	0.213	0.290
R2 Adj.	0.069	-0.022	0.160	0.080	0.063	0.017	0.084
AIC	-67.4	-61.5	-68.1	-63.3	-61.7	-52.5	-54.7
BIC	-62.1	-56.2	-59.3	-52.7	-49.3	-35.3	-35.8
Log.Lik.	36.720	33.755	39.040	37.644	37.834	36.236	38.348
F	4.197	0.088	3.658	1.908	1.565	1.084	1.409
RMSE	0.11	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.09

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Regression results for those under 40 only

H3: The effect of boarding school exposure on moral disengagement will be stronger in individuals from single-sex schools.

Attendance at a single-sex school appears to have no meaningful relationship with moral disengagement. The coefficients for single-sex schooling are effectively zero across all models.

The interaction term between boarding school attendance and single-sex schooling is also effectively zero across the models, providing no evidence that the relationship between boarding school attendance and moral disengagement differs for students from single-sex schools.

In contrast, private school attendance shows a stronger and significant relationship with moral disengagement with a coefficient of 0.08.

V. Discussion

The results show that each additional year of boarding school is associated with a 0.01-point increase in moral disengagement. While the relationship is not statistically significant in the full-sample regressions, it is significant in the regressions restricted to respondents under 40. This indicates that time spent in boarding school may have a noticeable effect on moral disengagement that dissipates over time. For individuals who spent all 12 years in boarding school, the expected increase is 0.12 points, or 12 percentage points.

On the other hand, an interesting relationship between private schools and moral disengagement emerges. Being primarily in a private schools is associated with an increase in moral disengagement up to 0.08 (in Model 6 in Figure 1). This could be due to the social notion of a private school as being more elitist and secluded, which may influence social attitudes and behaviour. Alternatively, because most participants had attended private schools, the study might not actually allow for much socio-economic variation, making it difficult to fully separate the effect of private schooling from other socio-economic factors. Therefore, while the relationship appears significant, it should be interpreted with caution.

However, the study presents several limitations, such as a limited survey sample size. Most of the participants were also not from a boarding school, or had spent relatively little time there, which could have affected the results and made it more difficult to identify any meaningful relationship. Since most of the participants were middle-aged, we can also draw that other factors may have played a role in shaping moral engagement after their time spent in boarding school, potentially reducing any long-term effects of the schooling environment.

VI. Conclusion

This paper set out to answer fundamental questions regarding the role of institutional structures, specifically boarding and non-boarding environments, in shaping an individual's identity. The findings provide support for the theoretical framework among respondents under 40: for an individual who spends all 12 schooling years in a boarding school, the model predicts a 0.12-point increase in moral disengagement, given that each additional year is associated with a 0.01-point increase.

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