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‘She Had No Say’: Moral Disengagement and Empathy Explored Through Shared Reading

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Various experimental studies have shown that moral disengagement is connected to the empathic enjoyment of immoral or morally questionable characters in narratives. However, experimental research does not offer insight into how moral evaluations are formed by readers. Therefore, the current study will explore the layers of moral disengagement and its interplay with empathic responses in depth with the use of qualitative methods in a Shared Reading-setting. Three Shared Reading-groups in Belgium read the short story ‘A Fine Business’ by the Danish author Tove Ditlevsen and participated in a focus-group interview afterward (N = 22). Deductive content analysis of the focus-group transcripts shows that moral disengagement from immoral actions and empathy for morally questionable characters are strongly derived from personal perspective and experience, including not only one’s own perspective on the story but also one’s life experiences. Results also show that moral disengagement and empathy are strongly connected.

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Examining the link between the moral fiber of a fictional character and how readers or viewers appreciate that character, be it in text or audiovisual media, has been the subject of scholarly debate in literary criticism and media psychology for decades, if not centuries (cf. Hakemulder, 2000; Keen, 2007; Zillmann, 2000). Already in his *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasized that the moral character (*ethos*) of protagonists is fundamental to shaping the audience's emotional and aesthetic engagement with a narrative. Another leading notion is provided by Affective Disposition Theory (Zillmann, 1994), which suggests that audiences will have a positive disposition towards morally good characters and a negative disposition towards morally bad characters. During the flow of the fictional narrative, morally good deeds will add to appreciation, feeding hopes for positive outcomes and empathic feelings towards the liked character. In the same fashion, punishment for morally abject characters also adds to appreciation for the narrative.

While it may be easy to appreciate or empathize with morally good characters, many scholars have toyed with the notion that readers or viewers can also appreciate and empathize with fictional characters that are not solely good. Not only in literature, but in contemporary media in general, we do often find characters that challenge the audience's moral assumptions by acting on the threshold between good and evil, challenging audiences on moral and narrative levels (Salgado & Van Tourhout, 2018). Some widely recognized examples are Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and The Joker in the *Batman* franchise. In their systematic analysis of viewers' appreciation of movie characters, Konijn and Hoorn (2005, p. 110) concluded that fictional 'characters deemed fascinating combine good and bad features, which for the observer may evoke desirable inner conflicts, such as agreeable sensations of suspense'. A key feature of fictionality might be why readers and viewers are able to appreciate and empathize with these morally questionable characters. Through fiction, the audience can experience strong emotions without these emotions having real-life consequences (Bal & Veldkamp, 2013). This experience may allow feelings of empathy for potentially morally flawed characters, as one can 'feel with' and 'understand' the potentially bad character without moral obligation. It has also been shown that the moral dimension is empirically the most important link to feeling involved with and appreciation for a character (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Salgado and Van Tourhout (2018) theorize that audiences can accept the *suspension of moral values* or *morally disengage* to empathize with a morally bad character, which would support their narrative engagement and appreciation. The audience is lured into accepting characters' immoral behavior and actions that they would not accept outside the fictional narrative.

Moral disengagement is extensively elaborated upon by social psychologist Albert Bandura. Bandura states that human behavior is largely guided by self-regulation, a process in which individuals evaluate their own actions – and the actions of others – based on personal moral standards (Bandura et al, 1996; Bandura, 2002). This process encourages them to behave in ways that match their values, which often leads to feelings of satisfaction and increased self-esteem. At the same time, self-regulation discourages immoral behavior, as acting against one's values can result in moral self-sanctioning and its associated negative emotions such as guilt or shame. However, individuals do not always respond to moral failures by changing their behavior. In some instances, they choose to morally disengage in order to reduce or avoid the discomfort that comes with moral self-sanctioning. Moral disengagement involves the cognitive reframing of behavior that one would normally deem immoral in ways that diminish its perceived severity or reinterpret it as acceptable, justified, or even virtuous. Through this process of moral disengagement, individuals effectively reduce the dissonance between their conduct and their moral standards, thereby avoiding self-condemnation and feelings such as guilt or shame without changing their behavior (Bandura et al, 1996; Bandura, 2002).

Moral disengagement manifests through eight different mechanisms that often occur together, according to Bandura (2002):

1. **Moral justification:** immoral conduct is made *personally and socially acceptable*.
2. **Euphemistic labeling:** a *language play* is used to make harmful conduct appear respectable and thereby reduce personal responsibility.

3. **Advantageous comparison:** immoral behavior is viewed *in comparison* with other immoral behaviors and appears negligible or even benevolent.
4. **Displacement of responsibility:** immoral actions are viewed as stemming from the *dictates of authorities* rather than personal responsibility.
5. **Diffusion of responsibility:** with a *division of labor*, individual tasks seem harmless in themselves, and attention is shifted away from the meaning of what one is doing.
6. **Disregard or distortion of consequences:** *minimizing, disbelieving, or ignoring* the effects of immoral actions.
7. **Dehumanization:** no longer viewing the one suffering harm as a person but as a *sub-human subject*.
8. **Attribution of blame:** immoral conduct becomes a justifiable defense, and the *victim gets blamed* for bringing suffering upon themselves.

While Bandura's scholarship primarily focuses on moral disengagement from one's own immoral conduct, several experimental studies have shown that people also tend to morally disengage from the immoral actions of a fictional other in literature, movies, and the like. Studies have shown that perceived character similarity and identification are vital for the degree to which one morally disengages from immoral conduct in a fictional narrative (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Other studies showed that moral disengagement, in turn, plays a significant part in both affective and cognitive enjoyment, favorable affective dispositions, attributing positive attributes to the character, identification, and character liking (Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). De Jonge et al. (2022) showed that moral disengagement is a necessary precursor to empathy when engaging with a fictional perpetrator of morally abject deeds.

THE VALUE OF THE SHARED READING-SETTING

So far, various scholars have given insight into the generalized effects of readers' moral disengagement on positive feelings and vice versa through experimental research designs that allow for controlled manipulation of key variables (De Jonge et al., 2022; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Although Bandura's theory of moral disengagement explains *how* individuals cognitively justify harmful behavior, it does not resolve *which* moral standards actually dominate when moral values collide. In many situations, both in the real world and in fiction, immorality is not clear-cut but context dependent. Actions can simultaneously adhere to and violate different moral values. According to moral disengagement theory, the moral standards from which individuals may disengage are formed through social interactions and observational learning (Bandura, 2002). Experimental research, such as the studies mentioned above, does not provide insight into how readers form moral evaluations, especially disregarding the social context of moral evaluations and moral disengagement. Therefore, the current study will explore moral disengagement in depth with the use of a qualitative method and deductive content analysis,¹ which are well suited to provide such insights. This study aims to explore how the experience and layers of moral disengagement towards immoral conduct in fiction are verbalized by readers, who are encouraged to think aloud about their moral reasoning in a Shared Reading-session. Moreover, the study examines the co-occurrence of expressions of moral disengagement and empathy toward a character who displays immoral conduct.

Shared Reading is a specific literary practice developed by the UK-based charity organization 'The Reader' (The Reader, 2019). Shared Reading-groups practice 'reading-aloud-together.' Participants do not have to prepare for the reading group – a Reader Leader will read a story and a poem aloud, with pauses to discuss the story and poem together. Shared Reading would provide a suitable opportunity for discussing moral disengagement. The reading practice aims to change the perspectives of its participants through the slow reading of a story and facilitating open discussions on the subject matter of the story. During the discussions, participants share their

¹ Deductive content analysis is a "top-down" approach to qualitative data analysis involving the application of predetermined codes to the data (Bingham & Witkowski, 2022).

views and experiences related to the story, perhaps changing the minds of fellow readers, and together work towards more openness and acceptance (cf. Andersen, 2022). Shared Reading, and the open space that it offers to its participants, aims to resonate with participants' inner selves (Andersen, 2022; Canning, 2017) and elicit empathic feelings for others (Christiansen, 2023; Skjerdingsstad & Tangerås, 2019). The openness of the Shared Reading-setting allows participants to learn to approach a story from various perspectives and embrace others' perspectives (Andersen, 2022). This perspective-taking encourages readers to place themselves into the shoes of others – others in the group or the fictional 'other' in the story being read. Hence, Shared Reading lends itself to potential moral disengagement from immoral action in discussing the various sides of a character's immoral behavior. As fiction often employs narrative techniques that encourage readers to empathize with its characters (Keen, 2007), we may tend to seek reasons within the story to morally disengage from a character's immoral behavior. In a Shared Reading-setting, the co-construction of meaning plays a crucial role in shaping how participants interpret events in a story. When immoral actions or otherwise morally charged events are discussed collectively, the group's interpretive framing can substantially influence how individuals morally evaluate these actions (cf. Andeweg et al., 2025; Skjerdingsstad & Tangerås, 2019). Participants do not merely express their own interpretations of the events in the story; they respond to, negotiate with, and sometimes align themselves with the interpretations of others. When certain moral evaluations repeatedly surface – such as treating a morally questionable act as understandable, inevitable, or minor – these can influence the moral evaluations of the other participants and thus open the door to moral disengagement.

To explore whether and how readers deploy one or more of the eight dimensions of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002) or what other strategies they deploy to come to terms with immoral actions and empathize with a morally questionable character, I conducted focus-group research among participants in a Shared Reading-setting. Focus-group research is a qualitative approach often used to gain in-depth insight into social phenomena (O.Nyumba et al., 2017), in this case, it was employed to see how moral disengagement and empathy with a fictional character are established through reading. The approach is ideal for generating new ideas or inquiring how a certain issue is perceived in order to understand its impact (Breen, 2006). Both focus-group interviews and Shared Reading rely on group-based interaction where participants respond to a stimulus – questions in a focus-group interview, a story in Shared Reading – and discuss their perceptions, interpretations, and reactions. In both settings, meaning and understanding are co-constructed: participants influence one another's perspectives through dialogue, question each other's assumptions, and negotiate shared interpretations and, in this instance, moral evaluations. Focus-group discussion would presumably come natural to participants in Shared Reading. Thus, I deployed focus-group interviews within the Shared Reading-setting to explore how Bandura's (2002) eight dimensions of moral disengagement are possibly applied in real-life conversations about immoral acts in fiction and how moral disengagement relates to empathy in readers.

RESEARCH METHOD

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

To examine the process of moral disengagement and the possible manifestation of the eight dimensions proposed by Bandura (2002), I designed a focus-group study among participants of three Shared Reading-groups in Belgium. Participants were all members of existing Shared Reading-groups and had been participating in their respective Shared Reading-groups for varying amounts of time; thus, participants were familiar with each other and seemed comfortable speaking freely. The members of the Shared Reading-groups were asked to participate in the study by their regular reader leader. The reader leader provided general background information on the overall research project.² The researcher selected an independent reader leader, who was not the regular reader leader of any of the Shared Reading-groups, to lead the three Shared Reading-sessions. The use of an independent reader leader, unfamiliar to any of the participants, leading all three sessions in the same manner aims to create similarity between the three sessions. First, the reader leader read the narrative short story out loud, with

² The ELIT project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 860516.

pauses to discuss the story, as a reader leader would do in any regular Shared Reading-session. To keep conditions as similar as possible between the three groups, pauses were taken at the same points in the story and the reader leader asked the same questions to prompt discussion among the participants. During the Shared Reading of the short story, the prompts were typical open questions one would ask in Shared Reading, not yet inviting judgment on the characters or their respective actions. The Shared Reading-sessions were approximately 70 to 80 minutes long. The story that was read was about a young couple looking to buy a house from a single mother. Over the course of the story, the protagonist, a young pregnant woman called Grete, becomes increasingly more uncomfortable with her husband's and the estate agent's conduct (see *Stimulus material*).

Directly after the Shared Reading-session, focus-group interviews were held with all participants of the Shared Reading-group. The focus-group interviews were conducted by the researcher, with the reader leader present, and opened with a word of welcome, gratitude, and an introduction to the topic of the focus-group interview. The terms 'moral disengagement' and 'empathy' were not used to avoid confusing the participants with theoretical concepts they might not be familiar with or biasing their responses. Instead, the focus-group was introduced as an effort 'aimed at gaining an understanding of your feelings towards the young pregnant woman, your attitude towards her uneasy feelings, and her lack of action.' After the introduction to the topic, I opened the focus-group interview with a general opening question, asking what participants thought of the story. With an introductory question, asking participants' opinions on the young pregnant woman (Grete), I introduced that the protagonist of the short story would be the topic of discussion. Next, two transitory questions about Grete's attitude towards the men (her husband and the estate agent) and the other woman (the one who is selling the house) in the story led to the key questions. The key questions captured Bandura's (2002) dimensions of moral disengagement. That is, I translated the theoretical concept of the moral disengagement strategy into a question about moral evaluations that could be asked as a regular question to general readers (see [Table 1](#)). The two dimensions involving responsibility,

Table 1 Focus-group interview questions.

Opening question	What do you think of the story we have just read?	
Introductory questions	What do you think about the young pregnant woman?	
Transition questions	How do you feel about the young pregnant woman's attitude towards her husband and the estate agent? How do you feel about the young pregnant woman's attitude towards the woman selling her house?	
Moral Disengagement questions	Do you think the young pregnant woman is justified in not speaking up? (and why/how?)	<i>Moral justification</i>
	Do you think the young pregnant woman can be held responsible for the uncomfortable business practices? (and why/how?)	<i>Displacement of responsibility; diffusion of responsibility</i>
	What do you think the consequences are of the young pregnant woman's silence? (Could this be different if she spoke up?)	<i>Disregard or distortion of consequences</i>
	Do you think the woman who sells her house deserves the treatment she is getting from the young couple and the estate agent? (and why/how?)	<i>Dehumanization</i>
	Do you think the woman who sells the house is to blame for the uncomfortable business practices? Perhaps partly? (and why/how?)	<i>Attribution of blame</i>
	Do you think the young pregnant woman has less responsibility than her husband and the estate agent? (and why/how?)	<i>Advantageous comparison</i>
Closing question	Finally, is there anything connected with your feelings towards the young pregnant woman that has not been discussed that you feel strongly about and would like to bring up now?	

displacement of responsibility and *diffusion of responsibility*, were combined in one category (because they were considered too close to formulate in separate questions). I did not include ‘euphemistic labeling’ because this could not be translated into a regular question. Finally, I asked participants if there was anything regarding their feelings towards Grete that had not come up yet and that they would still like to bring up (cf. Breen, 2006). During the focus-group interviews, there was significant interaction between the participants, as they responded to each other’s answers to the questions asked. Thus, the focus-group interviews could be characterized as a group discussion centered around questions posed by the interviewer. The focus-group interviews were approximately 25 to 35 minutes long. After the focus-group interview, participants were debriefed, and it was explained to them that I am interested in their tendency to ‘morally disengage.’ This was explained as a tendency to put aside one’s norms and values in favor of empathizing with someone else, especially a fictional other. The Shared Reading and the focus-group interviews were conducted in Dutch.

PARTICIPANTS

In total, 22 participants took part in the study. They voluntarily participated in one of three Shared Reading-groups. Group 1 consisted of two men and six women ($M_{\text{age}} = 75$, Age range = 65–86 years). Group 2 was a group of seven women ($M_{\text{age}} = 76$, Age range = 47–89 years). Group 3 was a group of people living with financial hardship and consisted of three men and four women ($M_{\text{age}} = 75$, Age range = 64–89 years). Since the first focus-group interview provided the richest data source, the transcripts of this interview were pseudonymized to facilitate a clear distinction between participants in the data analysis (see *Results*). The transcripts of the second and third focus-group interviews are anonymized, as the distinction between participants is less imperative to the data analysis.

STIMULUS MATERIAL

Stimulus material for this study was the short story ‘A Fine Business’ by the Danish author Tove Ditlevsen from her volume of short stories *The Trouble with Happiness: And Other Stories* (2022/1963). The short story is about a young couple wanting to buy a house. The wife, Grete, is highly pregnant, and as they still live in a small flat, there is some sense of urgency to find a new home. With an estate agent, the couple arrives at a beautiful cottage owned by a recently divorced woman, who is forced to sell the house, with her three young children – one still a baby. Grete feels immense sympathy towards the woman and her children, who remain nameless. It’s clear that they do not want to sell and move house, especially the children, but they need to do so due to financial needs. While her husband and the real estate agent have a look around the house and comment on its shortcomings, Grete observes the situation of the other woman, and grows increasingly anxious about her own future: who can guarantee that her husband won’t one day leave her with small children as well? At the same time, she cannot help but question whether the cottage, with all its shortcomings, is even the right home for her and her family. Meanwhile, she feels guilty as she watches her husband and the estate agent push aggressively for a lower price, clearly taking advantage of the woman’s financial need. Although Grete becomes increasingly uncomfortable with their negotiation tactics, she suppresses her feelings and does nothing to stop the dubious sale. Only after they leave the cottage, once the deal has already been made, does she ask her husband whether they couldn’t at least have spared the woman the money they denied her. In the face of unethical behavior, Grete stays silent until it is too late, which also places her on morally questionable grounds. The short story is narrated by an external narrator, who focalizes mainly through Grete. A Dutch translation of the story was read to the participants, ‘Goede Zaken’ (2023/1963). No alterations were made.

‘A Fine Business’ was selected because the short story is particularly well-suited for exploring the concept of moral disengagement, as it presents a morally charged yet relatable situation from everyday life in which the protagonist’s inaction becomes both understandable and morally troubling. While some might infer that Grete’s inaction means she is complicit, others might solely attribute the responsibility to the husband and the real estate agent who actually commit the immoral act and thus morally disengage from Grete’s conduct. Thus, the story lends itself perfectly to the discussion of Grete’s morality and the exploration of readers’ moral disengagement. This is especially true in a Shared Reading-setting, where participants are

invited to share their interpretations of the story and their moral evaluations, ideally without the other participants holding them accountable for their views.

MEASURES

The focus-group interviews were transcribed and coded³ according to the eight dimensions of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002) and expressions of empathy (Shen, 2010).⁴ Coding is often used to make sense of textually rich data such as in-depth interviews and other kinds of discourse. It is a way of indexing or mapping data to provide an overview of disparate data that allows researchers to make sense of them in relation to the topic at hand (Elliott, 2018). In the current study, I used coding as a way of tagging data points (things participants said) that reference Bandura's eight dimensions of moral disengagement and expressions of empathic responses towards the protagonist, Grete (see Table 2; Bandura, 2002; Shen, 2010).

Table 2 Coding scheme.

Moral justification	Redefining immoral conduct into something neglectable or worthy
Euphemistic labeling	Language is used to minimize the immorality of the act
Advantageous comparison	Minimizing the severity of the immoral act by comparing it to something that is presumably more immoral or comparing the perpetrator of the immoral act to someone presumably more immoral
Displacement of responsibility	Someone or something else is held responsible for the immoral act
Diffusion of responsibility	Responsibility for the immoral act is diminished through division of labor
Disregard or distortion of consequences	Consequences of the immoral act are minimized, disbelieved, or ignored
Attribution of blame	Victim is blamed for what is inflicted upon them
Dehumanization	Language is used to portray the victim of the immoral act as sub-human
Empathy	Expressions of recognition, affect, and identification

RESULTS

When analyzing the transcribed data³, expressions from participants showed efforts to morally disengage from the protagonist's actions, in large part to take responsibility away from the protagonist. Often, Grete, the protagonist, was denied moral agency over her conduct. Her conduct is morally exonerated because of 'the type of woman' that Grete is, someone 'stuck in that time' when women had no say, and possibly because she was raised to 'be the sensible one and shut up'. Participants also determined that Grete had no choice. She was heavily pregnant and in need of a home. Likewise, various empathic expressions towards the character were expressed, and the story was deemed 'recognizable' and 'engaging'.

However, not all participants were willing to morally disengage from the protagonist's conduct. These participants did struggle with the ethics of Grete's passiveness and why she chose not to speak up. Especially, speaking up after the deal was already done was considered futile and shows a lack of character. According to JR, 'you don't get responsibility. You have to take it.' Additionally, JR also expressed that staying silent but criticizing afterwards is 'the worst thing you can do.' Compellingly, even though the story is primarily focalized by Grete and the questions asked during the focus-group interviews all pertained to Grete, she was not the focal point of discussion in two out of the three focus-group interviews. Both the second and third groups acknowledged that Grete was not in a position to speak up against her husband, absolving her from moral obligations through *moral justification* (she has to protect herself in

³ For an English translation of the coded transcriptions, see <https://osf.io/aq4rm/>.

⁴ Even though this paper does not take a deep dive into the discussions around the conceptualization of empathy, it is imperative for empirical studies to conceptualize empathy clearly and unequivocally. In this paper, I adhere to the definitions and dimensions for state empathy by Lijiang Shen (2010). Shen splits state empathy into three separate dimensions that reflect the extensive theoretical and conceptual discourse around the definition of empathy, including affect, cognition, and identification:

Affective empathy: *sharing* of others' feelings;
Cognitive empathy: *understanding* their perceptions and motivations;
Associative empathy: *identifying* with the protagonist.

pregnancy) or *displacement of responsibility* (she is not in a position to be held accountable for her husband's actions). However, in these groups, the story was mostly discussed through the lens of the victims in the situation: the young mother who sold the house and her three small children. They mainly empathized with the young mom and her children. They felt like the young mother was in an impossible position: 'forced to sell her house' and caught 'in a weak moment in their lives.' A participant in the second group took particular offense to Grete's inattentiveness towards the children: 'It costs nothing to be nice about a little baby, or ask "how is the little baby?"'

However, participants did not consider the young single mother entirely blameless in the situation. They did attribute some blame to her. One participant in the third group remarked that the woman should rein in the real estate agent as 'she is not obliged to stay with [him].' The participants in the second and third groups hardly discussed Grete but rather focused on the characters in the story that received their most empathy - the children: 'They are the only victims.' These participants remarked that while the young mother was thinking about the money the sale would generate, her children were the real victims of the sale. When they have to leave the house 'their childhood is over.' The participants in those groups also empathized with the children as 'they are the only ones trying to do something and make a stand.' Given the lack of discussion about Grete, there was little data to analyze regarding her immoral conduct.

The first focus-group interview, however, did revolve almost entirely around the story's protagonist, Grete. Their discussion seemed to be mainly driven by one participant, MB. MB clearly expressed moral disengagement strategies, and in addition she shared a lot of her personal experiences in response to the story. MB's perspective on the short story and the personal memories that she shared became a central part of the group discussion. Other participants were engaged with her reflections and responded empathically to MB rather than to the story character. MB's responses to the story and other readers' reflections encouraged them to also apply moral disengagement toward Grete. The focus-group interview with the first Shared Reading-group provides a rich data source regarding the cognitive processes of moral disengagement and their connectedness to empathy. Therefore, I analyzed the data of the first focus-group more in depth, with a special focus on MB's reading of the story: her expressions of moral disengagement, her empathic responses, and the ways in which the group interacted with her expressions and responses.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DISPLACEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPATHY

MB opened her response to the story by expressing that the story was very 'empathic,' and that she feels 'a bit sad' for the protagonist, Grete. Already at the beginning of the session, MB expressed that the story hit a personal note for her: 'Yes, I feel it is recognizable. So, I recognize the obvious situations. Yeah.' When asked by a fellow participant if that meant that the story touched on things she also experienced, MB answered: 'Yes, it is also my behavior and attitude, actually.' In these responses, MB established that she empathized with Grete, as she recognized the situation and identified with it. As expected, this empathy is intertwined with expressions of moral disengagement. MB *displaced the responsibility* for Grete's conduct to the time period she assumed the story to take place in and the upbringing common in that time: 'That was our time like that, right? You were raised that way, too, right? Just shut up and listen, hey. [...] I come from such a nest.' These responses suggest that MB empathized with Grete, as she was placing herself in Grete's shoes, illustrated by using 'you' to indicate a shared experience. This empathic recognition that MB established between herself and Grete is interwoven with moral disengagement when the group is asked if Grete was justified in staying silent. 'Yes, she cannot do otherwise,' MB said. 'With the type of woman described here, that is how it should be. [...] She will grow over that. But right now, as a 20-year-old, she cannot do it yet. Because she comes from that kind of nest, too, probably.' MB expressed similar empathic responses when asked about the consequences of Grete's silence on the shady business practices, even though MB acknowledged that the outcome of the story could have been different if Grete had spoken up, potentially better for the woman who was selling the house. This response initially opposed Bandura's *disregard or distortion of consequences*. However, MB immediately justified Grete's response, in accordance with *displacement of responsibility*, again in line with her empathic understanding of Grete's position: 'I think that type of woman discussed here, it was not in her

capabilities. You describe a different type of woman then, but the way she is described here, she cannot do anything else.'

Over the course of the interview, MB revealed why she understands Grete's position so well; she had experienced something similar in the sixties: 'I did not have my own bank account. No. I did not have my own... My money was deposited in my husband's account. I did not have my own account. And I got household money. [...] However, after three weeks, it often ran out. And then I think, I am much too proud to say my pennies are gone. [...] You do not get appreciation; you do not get anything. And that is where the divorce comes from. That is the consequence. [...] In this case, I can see that woman breaking, even after so many years. Then she breaks and says, "And what about me." But at that moment, she was not like that. Then, I can recognize myself in it.' This quote, again, illustrates nicely how empathic understanding of a character's actions and position is interwoven with strategies of moral disengagement, again especially *displacement of responsibility* in this case.

Another interesting pattern in MB's *displacement of responsibility* for Grete emerged when analyzing how she compared Grete's responsibility with the responsibility of Grete's husband and the estate agent: 'She had no say, hey. [...] It is those two men making a bargain between themselves.' Neither is MB *attributing blame* to the woman selling her house. When asked if the other woman might not have been articulate enough, MB responded: 'No, not for me, in that situation. Imagine you are sitting there with three little kiddies, and your husband goes running off with another. You do not go running off, do you? So, the gentleman went walking, didn't he?' Instead, MB puts the responsibility for the other woman's suffering on the estranged husband. MB empathized with both women and displaced the responsibility for their conduct to their husbands and the estate agent.

ENCOURAGING MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

There was considerable interaction among the participants in the focus-group interviews. Participants are empathic towards MB, and were convinced to morally disengage through her reading experience. For instance, when a participant (BMT) noted that Grete is equally to blame for the way things are going, MB responded that Grete is not to blame. A third participant (FH) carefully interjected that BMT should 'rename that,' in an attempt to convince BMT to apply moral disengagement. Finally, BMT said: 'She is responsible for what happened, given her age. Because she made a choice. And even though it is a wrong choice, which she will never do again in later times. But it is... No, that was not correct. It is not a wrongdoing, it is a wrong choice.' Here, BMT engaged in *euphemistic labeling* of the responsibility for the immoral conduct, encouraged by her fellow participants, by nullifying what she had said before: that Grete was to blame as well.

It was mostly the women in the group that morally disengaged. While the women engaged in displacement of responsibility, by putting the responsibility of Grete's conduct on a lack of equality with her husband by saying that 'she doesn't have that kind of relationship' and it is 'a different time,' the men interpreted this differently. The submissiveness to her husband and her infatuation for him was 'guilty by omission,' according to JM. This could be seen as *euphemistic labeling*, as it makes the immorality of her inaction sound less severe than outright committing an immoral act. However, the women did not seem to interpret JM's remark that way. In response to JM's claim, MB and another woman (CM) engaged in *advantageous comparison*. They 'find her less responsible than them, than the men,' as the men 'have taken it upon themselves.' When the reader leader reiterated that Grete is heavily pregnant and suggests that this might not be the time to start doubting her husband, MB *morally justified* why Grete cannot afford to do that: 'You're in survival mode. You need to take care of that baby. So... You need to have a nest, you need to have a house. Where the baby has a roof over its head. [...] That has priority, right?'

When asked by the interviewer if the group had any final remarks, JM asked a question, seemingly to prompt the others to rethink their moral disengagement: 'Who would you think is the most sympathetic character in the whole story?' He answered his own question: 'That little boy, huh? Or that little girl, huh? The rest, pfff. Those are honest, those are honest. Kids are always honest.' JM felt the most empathic towards the children in the story, not towards Grete, which might be why he did not apply any moral disengagement strategy to her.

The current paper explored moral disengagement in depth with the use of a qualitative method and deductive content analysis. It aimed to explore how the experience of moral disengagement towards immoral conduct in fiction is verbalized by readers, who were encouraged to think aloud about their moral reasoning, and how moral disengagement and empathy might go hand-in-hand. The Shared Reading-setting demonstrated to be the right setting for this type of research. Within the framework of Shared Reading, participants are encouraged to share personal opinions, reflections, and their memories. Shared Reading strives to create a judgment-free space (cf. Andersen, 2022). This has translated very well into our focus-group interviews. Participants were active, spoke their minds, and shared many personal reflections on the story and its characters.

Data from focus-group interviews after the Shared Reading of the short story 'A Fine Business' (2023/2022/1963) showed that several, but not all, readers deploy Bandura's dimensions of moral disengagement (2002) to exonerate a story character of moral responsibility. However, they do not deploy all strategies similarly. In the focus-group interviews, limited to this one story, the most prominent moral disengagement strategy was the *displacement of responsibility*, strengthened with *euphemistic labeling*, *advantageous comparison*, and sometimes also *attribution of blame* to the victim. The short story that was used lends itself perfectly for moral disengagement through the displacement of responsibility. First of all, the protagonist, Grete, is passive in the story. She herself is not necessarily behaving immorally. Instead, she is silent in the face of injustice. While some might infer that this means she is complicit, others might solely put the responsibility on the ones actually committing the immoral act and thus morally disengage from Grete's conduct.

Analysis of the focus-group interviews showed these two types of readers: Some readers did indeed morally disengage, and mainly deployed *displacement of responsibility* in their reasoning. Our analysis showed that moral disengagement strategies go hand-in-hand with empathy. Participants who empathized with Grete were more willing to morally disengage, and vice versa. The connection between moral disengagement and empathy is especially well illustrated in the first focus-group interview. One participant in this group, MB, empathized strongly with Grete, as she herself had similar experiences in her life. In MB's reflections on the short story, it is clear she recognized herself and her own lived experiences in the fictional character (cf. Shen, 2010). This empathic experience goes hand-in-hand with moral disengagement towards the character's actions. In turn, the group expressed empathy with MB's reflections on the story, and many were convinced to morally disengage as well. Mostly deploying *displacement of responsibility*, MB and her fellow participants imply that if one is given a certain role due to *time period*, *upbringing*, or *gendered role patterns in a relationship*, one will not act as their own moral agent (cf. Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 2002). When one does not see themselves or, in this case, the story's protagonist as their own moral agent, it opens the road to moral disengagement. MB's experience with the short story also concurs with previous quantitative research showing that identification significantly predicts moral disengagement, especially when it comes to morally ambiguous characters (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016), and that readers' perceived similarity to the character predicts moral disengagement (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). While these studies report a direction from identification and recognizing similarity to predict moral disengagement, from the current qualitative study, no direction of effect can be derived.

Other readers, however, were not willing to morally disengage from Grete's conduct. The men in the first focus-group, who refused to accept MB's moral disengagement strategies, did not empathize with Grete. The participants who did not express moral disengagement toward Grete (mainly in the second and third focus-groups), empathized more strongly with the other characters, the victims in the story: three small children and their young mother who was forced to sell the house. Again, showing that moral disengagement and empathy are inextricably connected. When there is no empathy for Grete, there is no moral disengagement, and when there is no moral disengagement, there is no empathy.

While focus-group research can gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena (O.Nyumba et al., 2017), it also occurs in a social context (Breen, 2006), and the results obtained reflect social dynamics within the group (O.Nyumba et al., 2017). Such dynamics and the process of sharing and comparing understandings of the story and its character(s) mean that focus-group interviews can yield more insights than individual interviews (O.Nyumba et al., 2017). However, the structure of the focus-group interviews also prevented further in-depth exploration of an individual participant's experiences with the dimensions of moral disengagement. After all, albeit influenced by social learning, moral disengagement is an individual's suspension of the self-regulatory mechanisms that govern moral conduct (Bandura, 2002) and, thus, a personal experience. During the focus-group interviews, as expected, participants influenced each other's responses and stances on Grete's moral conduct. That also means there wasn't an unfiltered and unbiased response from all participants. Instead, some participants might have responded in a way they deemed more socially acceptable within the social context of that specific Shared Reading-group. Since the short story places the protagonist, Grete, on morally questionable grounds, the socially acceptable moral evaluation is co-constructed among participants. As was noticed in the first focus-group, the one with MB, some participants might have been encouraged by other participants to morally disengage, where they perhaps wouldn't if interviewed individually, especially with such dominant moral disengagement voiced by MB.

A key feature of Shared Reading is its emphasis on creating a judgment-free space, where participants can explore a story and discuss characters without feeling pressured to take a firm stance. In this study, focus-group interviews were conducted within the Shared Reading-setting, where participants were asked to morally evaluate the protagonist of the story, Grete. This might have created a paradox: participants were placed in a setting that encourages open, non-judgmental reflection, yet were simultaneously prompted to make explicit moral judgments. This tension may help explain why two of the groups did not directly address the focus-group questions or did not consistently engage with moral evaluations of Grete. Accustomed to the freedom and fluidity of Shared Reading discussions, participants in the study at times reverted to their usual exploratory mode of talking, prioritizing their own associative reflections on the story and the other story characters over interview questions specifically about Grete. As a result, the data does not always contain the explicit use of moral disengagement strategies that I was hoping for.

Additionally, the groups consisted of mostly relatively older people (all were aged > 47), and mostly female. Even though these groups are a good representation of Shared-Reading-groups in Belgium, where this study was conducted, the results of this study are not generalizable. It is well conceivable that younger participants, who would not recognize the historical time frame of the sixties and not recognize such gender role patterns as MB expressed, would not follow moral disengagement strategies and not empathize with Grete. Future research could include a more diverse set of participants.

In all, the results of this study are in line with the quantitative results reported in various experimental studies (De Jonge et al., 2022; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). This qualitative exploration not only provides a confirmation of the connection between moral disengagement and empathy, but it also sheds light on how moral disengagement and empathy are articulated, what language and justifications are used, how moral evaluations are co-constructed in a social setting, and how peers reinforce or challenge each other's moral disengagement and empathic responses. Moral disengagement from immoral actions and empathy for morally questionable characters are strongly derived from personal perspective and experience, as well as social norms. Not only does one's own perspective on the story or one's own life experiences influence empathy and moral disengagement, as MB's reading of the story 'A Fine Business' shows, learning about the perspectives and life experiences of peers also influences empathy and moral disengagement. Moral disengagement and empathy exist alongside each other and seem inextricably connected.

The data supporting the findings of this study, coded focus-group interview transcripts, are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF) at osf.io/aq4rm. All data have been pseudonymized or anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the VU Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) of the Faculty of Social Sciences. Copies of the ethical approval and participant consent form are available in the OSF repository.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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