Loneliness and Moral Identity

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We examine how loneliness influences moral identity—the extent to which being a moral person is important to an individual’s identity. Across three studies, we show lonely people consider being a moral person as less important to their identity, and this effect of loneliness on moral identity is mediated by empathy.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We examine how loneliness influences moral identity—the extent to which being a moral person is important to an individual’s identity. The extant literature has focused on the consequences of moral identity, such as how the centrality of moral identity affects people’s reactions to uncommon moral. In this research, however, we explore an important antecedent of moral identity—loneliness. Our paper is the first to show that loneliness will make consumers less likely to consider being a moral person as important to their identity. We further show that lonely people are less empathetic, and it is this reduced empathy that makes lonely people less likely to consider being a moral person as important to their identity.

Moral identity refers to the degree to which being moral is important for one’s identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). In this research, we follow the previous literature (e.g., Cameron & Payne, 2012) and focus on Internalization moral identity, examining how it is affected by feelings of loneliness. Loneliness refers to a complex set of feelings that occurs when an individual feels socially isolated: such undesirable subjective feelings of social isolation drive individuals to seek fulfillment of their needs (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Whereas the majority of previous research has focused on the consequences of moral identity, we examine a particular antecedent of moral identity—feelings of loneliness. We propose that the mechanism responsible for lessening the importance of moral identity lies in empathy, which is a multidimensional construct with cognitive, emotional, and conditioning components (M. Davis, 2004). Our research follows the previous research (e.g., Eimolf, 2008; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Niezink, Siero, Dijkstra, Buunk, & Barelnds, 2012; Schroeder, Dovidio, Sibicky, Matthews, & Allen, 1988) and operationalized the construct of empathy with a measure of empathic concern. Specifically, we predict that:

Hypothesis 1: Loneliness decreases moral identity.

Hypothesis 2: The negative impact of loneliness on moral identity is moderated by empathy.

In study 1, we show that loneliness negatively affects moral identity, and that such an effect is mediated by empathy. In study 2, we manipulated loneliness and measured empathy and moral identity. We show that when participants were temporarily induced to feel lonely, they reported having reduced moral identity only when they experienced low empathy. For those who had high empathy, the temporarily induced loneliness did not reduce their moral identity. Finally, in study 3, we manipulated loneliness and empathy orthogonally and replicated the results of study 2. Specifically, when participants felt lonely, empathy boosted their reduced moral identity.

The objective of study 1 was to test our hypotheses that loneliness reduced moral identity (H1), and that the effect is mediated by empathy (H2). Undergraduate students (N = 290) first reported their felt loneliness to the 20-item (e.g., “how often do you feel completely alone”). Empathy was measured by using the empathic concern subscale of the Davis Empathy Scale (M. H. Davis, 1980). Participants also completed the 5-item Internalization subscale of the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). As predicted, the regression analysis revealed a significant influence of loneliness on moral identity ($b = -.05, t = -7.22, p < .001$), such that loneliness decreased moral identity. To test whether empathy mediates the effect of loneliness on moral identity, we conducted a mediation analysis, using loneliness as the independent variable, empathy as the mediator, and moral identity as the dependent variable. Results confirmed significant overall indirect effect of loneliness on moral identity (estimated mean indirect effect = -.01, BC 95% CI: [-.0201, -.0072]). The results support our hypothesis that the negative effect of loneliness on moral identity is mediated by empathy.

Study 2 employed a loneliness (lonely vs. non-lonely) by empathy (continuous) between-subjects design, where loneliness was manipulated and empathy was measured. Undergraduate students (N = 167) were first randomly assigned to one of the two loneliness conditions (lonely vs. non-lonely). In the lonely (non-lonely) condition, participants were asked to write a time they felt very lonely (connected). Then they completed the empathy scale and the Internalization moral identity scale. The results showed a significant two-way interaction between loneliness and empathy ($b = 0.11, t = 2.90, p < .01$), such that when empathy was low (-1SD), temporarily induced loneliness led to a lower moral identity ($b = -0.52, t = -2.26, p < .05$). However, when empathy was high (+1SD), the effect of loneliness on moral identity disappeared ($b = .44, t = -1.92, p > .05$).

The objective of study 3 is to show further support for our hypothesis that empathy mediates the negative effect of loneliness on moral identity. The study employed a 2 (loneliness: lonely vs. non-lonely) by 2 (empathy: empathetic vs. control) between-subjects design, where both variables were manipulated. Undergraduate students (N = 277) were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. The loneliness manipulation was identical to those used in study 2. Then participants were randomly assigned to one of two (empathetic vs. control) conditions. In the empathetic condition, participants viewed 15 compassion-inducing images (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010) and were instructed to feel empathy when viewing pictures. In the control condition, participants did not receive instructions to experience empathy, and they viewed 15 emotionally neutral scenic pictures. Consistent with the previous results, a 2 (loneliness) by 2 (empathy) ANOVA on the moral identity scores revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 274) = 4.60, p = 0.01$), such that participants who wrote about a lonely experience had a higher moral identity when they made efforts to experience empathy ($M_{empathy} = 6.29, SD = 1.12$) than when they did not ($M_{control} = 5.47, SD = 1.18, t = 3.21, p < .001$). However, empathy did not affect moral identity in the non-lonely condition. Participants in the non-lonely condition had similar mean ratings of moral identity, regardless of the empathy manipulation ($M_{empathy} = 5.71, SD = 3.15; M_{control} = 5.76, SD = 1.26, t = 3.21, all p > .10$). In study 3, we manipulated loneliness and empathy orthogonally and replicated the results of study 2.

Across the three studies, our results show converging evidence that empathy mediates the negative effect of loneliness on moral identity. As predicted, results showed that higher empathy could serve as a buffer and increase lonely people’s moral identity, which otherwise would be reduced by felt loneliness.

REFERENCES