Loneliness and Moral Judgment (Does Loneliness Make Moral Judgment More Permissible?)

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This paper examines how loneliness influences people’s moral judgment. This paper shows that lonely people make moral judgment more permissible. Four studies demonstrate that lonely people are more likely to make a moral utilitarian choice than non-lonely people (study 1 and study 2); and lonely people rate five dimensions of moral foundations (harm, fairness, in-group, authority and purity) (Haidt 2001) less relevant to their judgment than non-lonely people (studies 3 and 4). We also document that the effects are driven by empathetic concern.

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Loneliness and Moral Judgment Does Loneliness Make Moral Judgment More Permissible?
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that social connections are central facets of daily social life, and loneliness influences most people’s quality of life, relatively little empirical attention has been devoted to the understanding of how feeling lonely impacts people’s moral judgment. Some people judge it morally acceptable to sacrifice one person’s life in order to save several other lives. Some people think whether or not someone suffers emotionally has nothing to do with their judgments of right and wrong. What explains the differences in moral judgment? Will lonely people make moral judgment more permissible? In consumer research, it has been shown that socially excluded people are more likely to sacrifice their financial well-being for the sake of social inclusion, and more willing to try an illegal drug (Baumeister et al. 2008). From an evolutionary perspective, lonely people feel unsafe and tend to be more defensive and sensitive to threats and rejection (Cacioppo et al. 2006; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Ernst and Cacioppo 2000; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010).

However, it is still unclear how loneliness influences moral judgment. The purpose of this study is to advance our understanding on loneliness and moral judgment, where we refer loneliness as the subjective feeling of social isolation (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010). Louise C. and John T. Cacioppo, Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 218-227, 40 (2), 2010, 0883-6612. Because lonely people are more sensitive to threats and attacks, see the world as a more threatening place, expect more negative consequences from social interaction, have less trust in social interaction, and remember more negative events and feeling than non-lonely people. It becomes more interesting to test whether or not lonely people have the similar moral judgments as non-lonely people.

Do lonely people see moral judgment differently than normal people? Do they have different dimensions of moral judgment? We addressed those questions in four studies, and the result showed that feeling lonely makes moral judgment more permissible.

We define loneliness as a complex set of feelings that occurs when intimate and social needs are not adequately met and that “drives” individuals to seek the fulfillment of these needs (Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona 1980). Lonely people have a lower evaluation of self, a lower self-esteem, a lower lack of trust in others and self, and they usually feel less control over success and failure; lonely people generally feel less happy than non-lonely people (Cacioppo et al. 2006; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Ernst and Cacioppo 2000; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010; Wang, Zhu, and Shiv; Wang, Zhu, and Shiv 2012). Haidt’s social intuitionist approach suggests that moral judgment is generally the result of quick, automatic evaluations (intuitions)(Haidt 2001). We propose, in line with research on Cacioppo (2006)’s evolutionary model and Haidt (2001)’s social intuitionist approach, that because of increased negative emotions and defensive behaviors, feeling lonely decreases the severity of moral judgment. Specifically, feeling lonely increases the likelihood to choose a utilitarian choice in moral scenarios.

**Hypothesis 1:** Feeling lonely decreases the severity of moral judgment.

Empathy is critically important for subjective well-being because it promotes the maintenance of quality relationships and pro-social behaviors (Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Batson 1991; Eisenberg and Miller 1990). Previous studies have suggested that empathy in general, and most often emotional empathy, is associated with pro-social behavior (Batson 1991; Batson et al. 2002; Warden and Mackinnon 2003). Poor empathy could also lead to decreases in personal well-being as a consequence of isolation and feelings of loneliness. We expect to see that the positive side of emotional empathy, empathetic concern, mediates the relationship between loneliness and moral judgment. Therefore, it is hypothesized that feelings of loneliness will increase the utilitarian choices than non-lonely people. Furthermore, feeling lonely will also decrease moral standards by reducing empathic concern for others.

**Hypothesis 2:** Empathetic concern mediates the effects of loneliness on moral judgment. Specifically, feeling lonely will increase the utilitarian choices than feeling non-lonely. Furthermore, feeling lonely will also decrease moral standards by reducing empathic concern for others.

This paper examines how consumer moral judgment making is influenced by the feeling of loneliness. Four studies demonstrate that lonely people are more likely than non-lonely people to make a moral utilitarian choice (study 1 and study 2)(Greene 2007; Greene 2009; Greene et al. 2008); and lonely people rate five dimensions of moral foundations (harm, fairness, in-group, authority and purity) (Haidt 2001) less relevant to their judgment than do non-lonely people (studies 3 and 4). Finally, we examined whether lack of empathic concern causes lonely people to make a different moral judgments than non-lonely people. Our mediation analysis shows that feeling lonely leads to reduced empathic concern. People with reduced empathic concern are more likely to choose utilitarian choices in moral judgment, and they are more likely to rate the moral foundation judgment as less relevant to their moral judgment than non-lonely people (studies 2 and 4).

The findings are consistent with the previous consumer research on loneliness, suggesting that lonely people are less empathetic than non-lonely people are. We extend this work by demonstrating that lonely people make different moral judgment decisions compared to non-lonely people. Lonely people have a desire for connection, and at the same time, they are very sensitive to threats and rejections. Lonely people have a desire to feel connected, because a social group provides both psychological and physical safety (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Previous research demonstrated that socially excluded people are more likely to sacrifice their personal and financial well-being for the sake of social inclusion. For example, socially excluded people reported more willing to try an illegal drug than non-excluded people (Mead et al. 2011). Maybe it is the desire for connection that leads lonely people to choose more utilitarian choices than non-lonely people.

This paper also highlights the importance of the positive emotion, empathy, in influencing moral judgment. Social psychology and neuropsychological studies have shown the importance of emotions in moral behaviors. Social psychology studies have shown that psy-
chopaths usually violate moral behaviors even when they know it is not right. Because of lack of emotions, psychopaths can steal from their friends, dismember live animals, cheat on their partners, and even murder their significant others to collect insurance benefits, without showing any trace of remorse or shame (Cleckley 1982; Haidt 2001).

Figure 1: (Submarine Scenario): Percentage of people chose utilitarian vs. non-utilitarian choice by loneliness

![Percentage of choice graph]

Figure 2: Loneliness and Moral Foundations (N=206)

![Graph showing the relationship between loneliness and moral foundations]

Table 1: Means of Five Dimensions of Moral Foundations on Loneliness score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Harm</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Ingroup</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Purity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Lonely</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-value</td>
<td>&lt;.0057</td>
<td>&lt;.057</td>
<td>&lt;.003</td>
<td>&lt;.026</td>
<td>=0.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lonely people versus non-lonely people on five dimensions of moral foundations. It is measured by using 30 items Moral Foundation Questions. Each dimension has four questions, with lower number means not at all relevant to my moral judgment; and higher number means extremely relevant to my moral judgment. Loneliness is measured by using 20 items UCLA loneliness score, with lower number means non-lonely, higher number means lonely. Media Split of loneliness score. The lonelier the participant, the less relevant they rated those moral foundations, especially for the first four dimensions.

REFERENCES


