

## Moral identity in psychopathy

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### Abstract

Several scholars have recognized the limitations of theories of moral reasoning in explaining moral behavior. They have argued that moral behavior may also be influenced by moral identity, or how central morality is to one's sense of self. This idea has been supported by findings that people who exemplify moral behavior tend to place more importance on moral traits when defining their self-concepts (Colby & Damon, 1995). This paper takes the next step of examining individual variation in a construct highly associated with *immoral* behavior — psychopathy. In Study 1, we test the hypothesis that individuals with a greater degree of psychopathic traits have a weaker moral identity. Within a large online sample, we found that individuals who scored higher on a measure of psychopathic traits were less likely to base their self-concepts on moral traits. In Study 2, we test whether this reduced sense of moral identity can be attributed to differences in moral judgment, which is another factor that could influence immoral behavior. Our results indicated that the reduced sense of moral identity among more psychopathic individuals was independent of variation in moral judgment. These results suggest that individuals with psychopathic traits may display immoral behavior partially because they do not construe their personal identities in moral terms.

Keywords: psychopathy, morality, moral identity, antisocial, immoral, moral behavior.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of psychopathy stands in sharp contrast to Socrates' famous dictum "to know the good is to do the good." Individuals with psychopathic traits know the difference between right and wrong — at least in straightforward cases such as knowing whether an act is illegal. Nevertheless, they often engage in frequent and flagrant bad behavior (Hare, 2003). This discrepancy between the judgments people make about what they *should* do and their actual behavior is not unique to psychopathic individuals. It is commonly observed in studies of judgment and decision-making and has been described as intrapersonal conflict (Lowenstein, 1996; O'Connor et al., 2005), or the "judgment-action gap" (Blasi, 1980). Research focusing on the discrepancies between judgment and choice has shed light on a key concept that may help to explain this discrepancy — that compared to judgment, choice elicits a greater degree of self-referent processing (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981; Sood & Forehand, 2005). This refers to an evaluation of an option in relation to the individual's self-concept. Individuals are aware that their choices are long-term reflections on their personality and are motivated to make choices that are consistent with

their sense of self (Sood & Forehand, 2005).

Within the moral domain, this referencing to one's self-concept is called moral identity (Blasi, 1995). Individuals vary in the degree to which they base their self concepts on moral traits (e.g., being generous, compassionate, and kind) compared to non-moral traits (e.g., being intelligent and funny). Although prior research on moral behavior has primarily emphasized the role of reasoning and deliberation (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969), it has been suggested that moral identity is an important source of moral motivation that may help to account for the common disconnect between moral judgment and action (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007).

Previous studies have shown that moral identity is greater in individuals who are considered moral exemplars (people whom others regard as highly moral, presumably partly due to their behavior), although these individuals do not necessarily have greater moral reasoning abilities (Colby & Damon, 1995; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995). However, studies have not explored whether moral identity is weaker in individuals with psychopathic traits. Such weakness may contribute to the immoral behavior observed in psychopathy. The aim of the present study was to test whether psychopathic traits may be associated with reduced moral identity, and if so, whether this relationship was related

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to, or independent of, differences in moral judgment abilities.

## 1.1 Psychopathy

Psychopathic traits include superficial charm, manipulativeness, callousness, dishonesty, lack of guilt, emotional shallowness, stimulation-seeking, and antisocial behavior, including taking advantage of others, lying, cheating, and abandoning relationships (Hare, 2003). Psychopathy has been traditionally conceptualized in forensic samples, describing a subset of individuals with Antisocial Personality Disorder who exhibit these distinct personality features. However, current research suggests that psychopathic traits exist on a continuum in the population (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) and individual differences can be reliably assessed via self-report (Levenson et al., 1995; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). Numerous studies have examined individual differences in psychopathic traits within the general population and have found similar results to studies conducted in incarcerated populations where the base rate of psychopathy is considerably higher. Within community samples, higher levels of psychopathic traits have been shown to be associated with increased immoral behavior, even if the individual has never been convicted of a crime (Belmore & Quinsey, 1994; Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrl, & Lacasse, 2001).

Some have hypothesized that the immoral nature of psychopathy may reflect a lower developmental stage of moral reasoning or cognition, yet empirical evidence is mixed and is not able to account for the disconnect between moral judgment and behavior (Fodor, 1973; Trevethan & Walker, 1989). It is generally thought that psychopathic individuals do not have cognitive impairments that would impede their ability to distinguish right actions from wrong ones (Hare, 2003; Raine & Yang, 2006), at least in cases that are generally agreed upon in the population (e.g., whether it is wrong to steal from someone). Thus, the aim of the present study was to explore whether moral identity may be a candidate for explaining why psychopathic individuals behave immorally.

## 2 Study 1: Moral identity

In Study 1, we sought to determine whether psychopathic traits are associated with moral identity. To that end, we administered measures of psychopathy and moral identity to a large, online sample. We hypothesized that those who score higher on psychopathic traits may be less likely to view moral traits as central to their sense of identity.

In addition, we wanted to see whether moral identity was differentially related to the two factors that are thought to underlie psychopathic traits. The first factor (Interpersonal-Affective) involves interpersonal and emotional features including callousness, manipulativeness, superficial charm, shallow emotions, and a lack of guilt and empathy. The second factor (Lifestyle-Antisocial) involves antisocial lifestyle and behavioral features, such as sensation-seeking, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and antisocial behavior. We predicted that both factors of psychopathy would be related to moral identity, but that the Interpersonal-Affective factor would demonstrate a stronger relationship because of the callousness and lack of empathy associated with it. We did not think that individuals with such traits would place importance on moral traits such as being honest and generous.

## 2.1 Method

### 2.1.1 Participants

Participants were adult volunteers who visited [www.yourmorals.org](http://www.yourmorals.org), an online research website where individuals can fill out a number of questionnaires and learn more about psychological constructs. As part of initial registration, website visitors report basic demographic information; then they self-select to take one or more surveys from a list of available questionnaires. Participants receive online feedback about the survey they took and can see how their scores compare to averages of all site visitors. Participants for the present study were individuals who completed Levenson's Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al., 1995) as well as either the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) or the Adjusted Good Self Assessment (Barriga, Morrison, Liao & Gibbs, 2001), another measure of moral identity. Final sample sizes were 204 participants who completed the psychopathy scale plus the Moral Identity Scale (47% female, 75% white, mean age  $35.2 \pm 14.2$  years, 54% with college degree, 70% from the United States) and 221 participants who completed the psychopathy scale plus the Adjusted Good Self Assessment (47% female, 77% white, mean age  $36 \pm 14.3$  years, 57% with college degree, 71% from the United States). One hundred seventy participants completed all three scales.

### 2.1.2 Materials

*Levenson's Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP)*. Psychopathy was assessed using the LSRP (Levenson et al., 1995). The LSRP is a 26-item rating scale that was constructed to provide indices of the two factors of the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (Hare, 2003), which is

a semi-structured interview that is considered the gold standard for assessing psychopathy. The Interpersonal-Affective subscale assesses the core personality traits of psychopathy, including manipulateness, callousness, and lack of guilt or remorse; the Lifestyle-Antisocial assesses features of the antisocial lifestyle, including impulsiveness, irresponsibility, and antisocial behavior. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type agree/disagree scale. The LSRP and its factor structure were initially validated in a sample of 487 undergraduates (Levenson et al., 1995) and was further validated in two studies of community participants (Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999). These two studies provided excellent evidence for the reliability and validity of the LSRP and strongly replicated the two-factor structure using confirmatory factor analyses and differential relations to personality dimensions. Predicted relations were observed between the LSRP and other self-report measures of delinquency — individuals scoring higher on the LSRP demonstrated task-related deficits similar to those observed in incarcerated psychopaths. A recent taxometric analysis of the LSRP supports the dimensional interpretation of psychopathy, consistent with findings on the PCL-R and other self-report measures (Walters, Brinkley, Magaletta, & Diamond, 2008).

*The Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale.* This 10-item scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) was designed to measure moral identity or the degree to which individuals' self-concepts center on moral traits. The scale consists of two subscales: Internalization, or the degree to which private views of oneself are centered on moral traits; and Symbolization, or the degree to which moral traits are reflected in the individual's actions in the world. Participants were given a list of nine moral traits (e.g., caring, fair, hard working) and were asked to rate the extent to which they agree/disagree with statements regarding these traits using a 7-point scale. A sample item for the Internalization subscale is "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am" and for the Symbolization subscale is "The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations." This scale has been validated with a variety of samples and criterion measures of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

*The Adapted Good Self Assessment.* This scale, developed by Barriga, Morrison, Liao, and Gibbs (2001) is another measure of identity that assesses the degree to which an individual identifies with moral traits (moral identity) as well the degree to which an individual identifies with pragmatic traits, such as being intelligent, ambitious, curious, attractive or funny. On this scale, participants are presented with a diagram of three concentric circles meant to represent importance to the self; the inner circle is labeled "very important to me," the middle

circle is labeled "somewhat important to me," the outer circle is labeled "a little important to me," and the label "not important to me" is outside the circles. Participants are instructed to think about the figure as they answer (on a 4-point scale with the labels mentioned above) how much given traits describe his/her *self* and the *kind of person* he/she is. To enhance respondents' understanding of the items, each trait was described with two synonyms such as "honest or truthful" and "athletic or agile." The moral traits (considerate, honest, helpful, sympathetic, generous, sincere, fair, and dependable) were evenly interspersed throughout the questionnaire with the nonmoral traits (imaginative, industrious, outgoing, athletic, funny, logical, independent, and energetic). The inclusion of this scale provides an alternative measure of moral identity as well as a test of the specificity of findings to the moral domain by assessing the self-relevance of pragmatic traits.

## 2.2 Results

Descriptive statistics for the scales are provided in Table 1. Age, sex, and education were entered as control variables in all analyses because these variables were correlated with psychopathy scores. The two factors of psychopathy were significantly correlated ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ). Multiple regression analyses were conducted using each Moral Identity subscale as the dependent variable and entering total psychopathy score, age, sex, and education as predictors. Additional regressions were conducted in which both factors of psychopathy were simultaneously entered as predictors in place of the total psychopathy score.

Results are shown in Table 1. As predicted, controlling for age, sex, and education, participants who scored higher on psychopathy were much less likely to base their self-concepts on moral traits, as measured by the Moral Identity Scale and by the moral traits aspect of the Good Self Assessment. These effects were quite large, with betas ranging from  $-.41$  to  $-.58$ . Total psychopathy scores were negatively associated with scores on both the Internalization and Symbolization subscales of the Moral Identity Scale. When the two psychopathy factors were entered as predictors simultaneously, both were significantly and negatively associated with moral identity; however, the Interpersonal-Affective factor explained more variance in overall moral identity, as well as its Internalization and Symbolization subscales, than the Lifestyle-Antisocial factor.

On the Good Self Assessment, total psychopathy scores were associated with the degree to which participants based their self-concepts on moral traits, but not with the degree to which they based their self-

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and regression analyses demonstrating associations between study variables and psychopathy.

Scale	N	Mean (SD)	$\alpha$	Beta values		
				Total	I-A Factor	L-A Factor
Psychopathy	2,157	46.17 (10.52)	.86	–	–	–
Interpersonal-Affective		26.60 (7.54)	.87	–	–	–
Lifestyle-Antisocial		19.57 (4.92)	.72	–	–	–
Moral Identity	204					
Average		4.71 (1.18)	.87	–.55***	–.45***	–.19**
Internalization		5.92 (1.15)	.87	–.58***	–.51***	–.16*
Symbolization		3.51 (1.52)	.84	–.41***	–.31***	–.16*
Good Self Assessment	221					
Moral traits		3.21 (0.51)	.76	–.43***	–.42***	–.07
Pragmatic traits		3.04 (0.43)	.42	–.003	.19*	–.23**

Note. The beta values are from multiple regression models predicting moral identity from psychopathy scores, age, sex, and education. Numbers indicate standardized beta ( $\beta$ ). Betas for the total score are from multiple regressions including total psychopathy scores only; beta values for the two factors are from multiple regressions that simultaneously enter both the Interpersonal-Affective and the Lifestyle-Antisocial factors of psychopathy to predict moral identity. Negative  $\beta$  indicates lower scale ratings for individuals scoring higher in psychopathy.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

concepts on pragmatic traits. When the two psychopathy factors were entered simultaneously as predictors, the Interpersonal-Affective factor but not the Lifestyle-Antisocial factor was associated with the importance of moral traits, whereas the Lifestyle-Antisocial factor but not the Interpersonal-Affective factor was associated with the importance of pragmatic traits to the participant’s self-concept.

Overall, data from two unique measures of moral identity confirmed our prediction that psychopathy is associated with a reduced sense of moral identity, and that this is primarily driven by the Interpersonal-Affective factor, or the dimension which reflects the core personality and emotional traits of psychopathy. Furthermore, data from the Good Self Assessment confirms that the association with psychopathy is specific to traits in the moral domain.

### 2.3 Discussion

Individuals with a greater degree of self-reported psychopathic traits were less likely to base their self-concept on moral traits such as being honest, generous, and kind, but do not show differences in how much they base their self-concept on pragmatic traits such as being intelligent or creative. The reduced identification with moral traits

was true for how participants privately view themselves, as well as how moral traits are reflected in their actions in the social world. As predicted, the Interpersonal-Affective factor accounted for more variance in moral identity, possibly due to the willingness to take advantage of others, callousness, and lack of empathy associated with this factor. Whereas previous studies have demonstrated that an increased sense of moral identity promotes exemplary moral behavior (Colby & Damon, 1995), our results provide initial evidence that a reduced sense of moral identity may be a factor that contributes to the immoral behavior observed in psychopathic individuals.

However, an alternative explanation for this result is that the association between moral identity and psychopathic traits is driven by differences in moral judgment, which in turn affect identity. Differences in how people judge moral and immoral acts may drive individuals to value morality differently as a part of their self concepts. This possibility would undermine our argument that a weaker sense of moral identity may be able to account for some of the immoral behavior observed in psychopathic individuals, above and beyond differences in moral judgment. Study 2 was conducted to address this possibility.

### 3 Study 2: Relation to moral judgment

In Study 2 we had two goals. First, we wanted to replicate the basic relationship between psychopathy and moral identity observed in Study 1. Second, we wanted to determine whether the relationship between psychopathy and moral identity could be attributed to differences in moral judgment. We predicted that the observed relationship between psychopathy and moral identity is independent of differences in moral judgment, since prior research suggests that self-referent processing (i.e., acting in concordance with one's identity) is related more to actual choice than to judgment (Sood & Forehand, 2005).

To test this hypothesis, we used a series of moral dilemmas that are commonly used in morality research (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001), where individuals are asked to make hypothetical moral judgments. These hypothetical scenarios pit an imminent danger (e.g. a runaway trolley about to run over five people) against an immediate moral violation (e.g. killing another person in order to stop the trolley), and require individuals to judge the morality of potential actions. Such moral dilemmas have long been used as thought experiments by philosophers, as well as in several studies of moral judgment in recent years (Ciarra, Muccioli, Ladavas, & di Pellegrino, 2007; Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010; Greene et al., 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007; Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008). These dilemmas vary in the emotional aversiveness of the required action (e.g., flipping a switch that will result in a death versus pushing a man, which will result in his death). We chose these dilemmas as they have been shown to result in individual differences in moral judgments, and to also elicit emotional responding, which is considered a key deficit in psychopathy (Greene et al., 2001).

## 3.1 Method

### 3.1.1 Participants

Participants were 214 adult volunteers (37% female, 75% white, mean age  $33.8 \pm 16.3$  years, 61% with college degree) on the yourmorals.org website who had not participated in Study 1. Participants had previously registered on the site and filled out demographic information. 164 were from the US, 29 from the EU, 12 from Canada, and 9 from other countries. We used the same measures to assess moral identity and psychopathic traits as those described in Study 1.

### 3.1.2 Materials

*Moral judgment task.* A modified version of the moral judgment task used by Greene et al. (2004; 2001) was used to examine differences in moral judgment. This task involves hypothetical classic moral dilemmas, some of which involve causing "up close and personal" harm to another person (personal dilemmas) and some of which are less direct (impersonal dilemmas). Since issues have been raised regarding the heterogeneous nature of the dilemmas (e.g., Moore et al., 2008), in the present study, we modified several of the dilemmas used in Greene et al. (2001) so that the two versions of each dilemma were as identical as possible except for the action required. An example of a scenario with personal and impersonal actions can be found in Table 2; all materials are available as an online supplement at <http://journal.sjdm.org/10/10316/dilemmas.html>. After reading each scenario, participants were asked to answer the following Yes/No question: "Is it morally appropriate for you to [do action] in order to [prevent some other danger]?" Because the action in the scenario always involved hurting someone to produce a greater good (saving many) a Yes response indicates a more utilitarian moral judgment. A second question asked participants to rate their certainty about their answer on a 7-point response scale from "extremely uncertain" to "extremely certain".

Our first wave of 87 participants completed six dilemmas in random order; each participant was given one version (personal or impersonal) of each of the six dilemmas: Trolley, Mining, Father, Safari, Lifeboat, and Doctor. Each participant received three personal and three impersonal dilemmas. Later, the number of dilemmas was increased to 10, adding Vaccine, Crying Baby, Submarine, and Preventing the Spread. These 10 dilemmas were completed by 127 participants.

After answering questions for all dilemmas, participants were shown a screen that debriefed them about the goals of the moral dilemmas task, gave feedback about their answers (comparing their proportion of "yes" answers on personal and impersonal dilemmas to averages for all site visitors), and thanked them for their participation.

For each participant, we calculated the total proportion of "yes" responses, as well as the proportion of "yes" responses to the personal and impersonal dilemmas separately. We also combined the response data and the certainty data into a composite variable by coding "yes" responses as 1 and "no" responses as -1, and multiplying by the certainty ratings (0-6) (referred to hereafter as "composite approval score"). We calculated the average of these scores across all dilemmas, as well as for personal and impersonal dilemmas separately.

Table 2: Personal and impersonal versions of a sample moral dilemma

Scenario	Condition	Resolution
Enemy soldiers have taken over your village. They have orders to kill all remaining civilians over the age of two. You and some of your townspeople have sought refuge in two rooms of the cellar of a large house. Outside you hear the voices of soldiers who have come to search the house for valuables.	Personal	Your baby, who is with you in the room, begins to cry loudly. You put your hand over his mouth to block the sound. If you remove your hand from his mouth his crying will summon the attention of the soldiers who will spare your baby's life, but will kill you and the others hiding in both rooms. To save yourself and the others you must keep your hand on his mouth and smother your baby to death.  Is it appropriate for you to smother your baby in order to save yourself and the other townspeople? [Yes/No]
	Impersonal	Your baby begins to cry loudly in the other room. His crying will summon the attention of the soldiers who will spare your baby's life, but will kill you and the others hiding in both rooms. If you turn on the noisy furnace to block the sound, the other room will become uncomfortably hot for adults and children, but deadly for infants. To save yourself and the others you must activate the furnace, which will kill your baby.  Is it appropriate for you to overheat your baby in order to save yourself and the other townspeople? [Yes/No]

### 3.2 Results

As in Study 1, all regressions controlled for age, gender, and education levels. The association between total psychopathy scores and moral identity was nearly identical to that reported in Study 1 ( $\beta = -.57$  in Study 2, compared to  $\beta = -.55$  in Study 1) indicating that the relationship between these two constructs is robust.

The pattern of overall results for the moral dilemmas was similar to that obtained in prior studies using this type of dilemmas — although they involved the same tradeoffs and consequences, participants endorsed the action depicted in 58% of the impersonal dilemmas, but did so in only 36% of the personal dilemmas, and this difference was statistically significant ( $t(213) = 10.72, p < .001$ ).

Importantly, we found that psychopathic traits predicted a greater proportion of “yes” responses across all dilemmas ( $\beta = .27, p < .01$ ), and to personal ( $\beta = .24, p < .01$ ) and impersonal dilemmas ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) separately. Similarly, psychopathic traits were associated with a higher average composite approval score (i.e., more “yes” responses and with greater certainty) for all dilemmas ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ), as well as for personal ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ) and impersonal dilemmas ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) separately. Because these effects were similar, we used the average composite approval score as our measure of “moral judgment” in the rest of our analyses as it captures both the judgment itself and the participant’s certainty about it.

To determine whether moral judgment underlies the relationship between psychopathy and moral identity, we conducted a regression simultaneously predicting moral identity from psychopathy and moral judgment scores. The relationship between psychopathy and moral identity was virtually unchanged by the addition of moral judgment to the model ( $\beta = -.54, p < .01$  compared to  $\beta = -.57, p < .01$  when psychopathy scores were entered alone). Moral judgment was not significantly related to moral identity in this regression ( $\beta = -.03, p = .64$ ).

However, because we thought it quite likely that the causal associations among identity and moral judgment are complex and bidirectional, we conducted an additional regression analysis that used moral judgment as the dependent variable. To that end we conducted a regression analysis predicting moral judgment from psychopathy scores and moral identity scores. We found that the relationship between moral judgment and psychopathy was virtually unchanged by the addition of moral identity to the model ( $\beta = .28, p < .01$  compared to  $\beta = .30, p < .01$  with psychopathy scores alone). Moral identity was not significantly related to moral judgment ( $\beta = -.04, p = .64$ ). Therefore moral identity did not mediate the relationship between psychopathy and moral judgment. Taken together these results suggest that psychopathy is independently related to both a weaker moral identity as well as to more utilitarian moral judgment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Although the raw correlation between moral judgment and moral identity was  $-.20$  ( $p < .01$ ), this correlation is explained by the correlations of each of these measures with psychopathy.

### 3.3 Discussion

We replicated the finding from Study 1 that higher psychopathic traits are associated with a reduced sense of moral identity. In Study 2, we found that this relationship appears to be independent of differences in moral judgment. Although it is unlikely that psychopathic individuals have deficits in the basic ability to distinguish right from wrong (i.e. moral judgments that have general consensus in the population), here we show that in situations where the difference between right and wrong is less clear-cut, such as the ones depicted in the hypothetical moral dilemmas we used, psychopathic personality scores are in fact related to differences in moral judgment. Individuals higher in psychopathic traits were more likely to make utilitarian moral judgments. This finding is consistent with theoretical predictions based on previous work (Greene et al., 2001) that emotion is a key factor that leads to non-utilitarian moral judgments; individuals with deficits in emotional responsiveness, such as those high in psychopathy, would be expected to make more utilitarian judgments, as they do not experience the same degree of negative emotion when contemplating causing harm to another individual. Indeed, individuals with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPC), a region important in incorporating emotion into decision-making, have also been found to show increased utilitarian moral judgments (Ciaramelli et al., 2007; Koenigs et al., 2007). However, it should be noted that our finding is inconsistent with a recent study using a similar set of dilemmas that found no differences in moral judgment in a sample of 14 male psychopathic delinquents compared to healthy controls and delinquents without psychopathic traits (Cima et al., 2010); however, the sample size in that study may have been insufficient to detect an effect, as the authors noted that the variance in the three groups was sufficiently high to make apparent differences in some of the judgments non-significant (Cima et al., 2010).

With respect to moral identity, the differences in moral judgment observed in the present study were neither a predictor of, nor a result of differences in moral identity. This is in line with prior research that suggests that referencing one's own self-concept or identity is more relevant to actual decision-making processes than to judgment (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981; Sood & Forehand, 2005).

The relationship between moral identity and psychopathy was found to be stronger than the relationship between moral judgment and psychopathy. This suggests that moral identity may be an important factor to examine in future research on why psychopathic individuals behave immorally.

## 4 General discussion

The findings from the current study demonstrate that more psychopathic individuals are much less likely to self-identify with traits that are in the moral domain. This suggests that the internal characteristics of such individuals seem to correspond to their external (i.e., behavioral) tendencies that have been described in previous research; it implies a level of coherence and continuity between how individuals higher in psychopathy view themselves and how they behave, thus, lending support for the hypothesis that moral identity may be an important factor in moral behavior. Moral identity may be a motivating factor in moral behavior because of the consistency principle, which states that an individual has a strong need to act consistently with his or her identity (Erikson, 1964). To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first to study moral identity in relation to psychopathic traits, and shows that it indeed appears to be in line with previous reports of behavior. However, future research directly examining behavior, as well as psychopathic traits, will be necessary to confirm this possibility.

Interestingly, our results also showed evidence that more psychopathic individuals are more likely to give utilitarian ("yes") responses to difficult moral dilemmas, when compared to less psychopathic individuals, in line with previous hypotheses that reduced emotional responsiveness (e.g. to the idea of causing harm to another individual) leads to more utilitarian patterns of moral judgment. However, these differences in moral judgment do not account for the observed differences in the way psychopathic individuals view themselves. Furthermore, we suggest that it is likely that much of the immoral behavior that psychopathic individuals engage in involves relatively straightforward violations of moral norms — violations that psychopathic individuals know is wrong but choose to proceed despite this knowledge. Based on our current findings, we hypothesize that the self-identification with moral traits may be an important motivating factor that is missing in psychopathic individuals. If their self-concept does not involve moral traits, they may lack the motivation necessary to behave morally.

### 4.1 Limitations

The present study aimed to establish an initial link between moral identity and psychopathic traits; additional research assessing actual moral behavior will be necessary to further explore the relationship between moral identity and immoral behavior. In addition, our sample consisted of visitors to an online research website; while research has shown that internet samples tend to be more

diverse than traditional student samples (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004), our sample may tend to exclude some groups that might behave differently. Lastly, our analyses rely on a self-report measure of psychopathy. Although the measure used here possesses solid construct validity, further research using interview-based measures will help to clarify the relationship between moral identity and psychopathy.

## 4.2 Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals with a greater degree of psychopathic traits have a reduced sense of moral identity; individuals scoring higher in psychopathy were less likely to find moral traits central to their self-concept. This was not related to differences in moral judgment. It is possible that one of the reasons that psychopathic individuals fail to behave morally is that they lack the motivation to be seen by others or themselves as a moral individual.

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