



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL IDENTITY AND INTERPERSONAL GUILT AMONG MIDDLE AGE WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt in middle-aged women. Moral identity is defined as “the degree to which moral traits and values figure in a person’s self-concept.” On the other hand, interpersonal guilt is defined as “the emotional discomfort that people feel when they believe they have wronged others or failed to meet moral standards in interpersonal relations.” The main goal of this study is to evaluate whether a significant relationship exists between two psychological concepts. A sample of 250 middle-aged women between the ages of 35 and 55 participated in this study. Participants were randomly sampled using a simple random sampling technique. The study used a Moral Identity Scale (MIS-10) and an Interpersonal Guilt Rating Scale (IGRS-20) to collect data from each subject. Descriptive analysis and Pearson’s correlation were used to evaluate the collected data. The study revealed that the mean for moral identity is 51.76 and that for interpersonal guilt is 59.08. Correlation analysis revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt ($r = .207$, $p = .001$). The results show that individuals with high moral identity experience high levels of interpersonal guilt, suggesting that individuals with high moral identity have high sensitivity towards others.

Keywords: Moral identity, Interpersonal guilt, Middle age women

INTRODUCTION

Moral development is an important aspect in the formation of an individual’s perception of themselves in relation to others in a given society. One of the most important concepts in moral psychology is moral identity. Moral development plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals see themselves in relation to others within a society. A key idea in moral psychology is moral identity, which refers to the extent to which moral values and traits like honesty, kindness, fairness, and compassion are part of how a person sees themselves (Aquino & Reed, 2002). When someone develops moral values as a core part of their identity, it is likely that these values will influence their decisions, actions, and how they view the world. This is supported by the idea that individuals who possess a well-developed moral identity tend to behave in ways that are consistent with their internal value system (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity affects not only how people act but also how

they feel, especially in relation to others. For example, people with a strong sense of moral identity are likely to experience heightened emotional responses when their actions conflict with their personal moral standards (Aquino & Reed, 2002). This emotional response can act as a psychological tool that helps people align their behavior with their moral standards. Blasi (1984) suggests that individuals integrate moral values into their identity in a way that helps them behave in a morally consistent manner. As a result, moral identity plays a significant role in fostering empathy, a sense of responsibility, and concern for the well-being of others (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

Interpersonal guilt is another concept connected to moral functioning. It is the feeling of discomfort that arises when someone believes their actions have upset others. This type of guilt is deeply tied to relationships and often occurs when an individual feels responsible for the emotional well-being of others. While guilt is generally seen as a negative emotion, it can also play an important role in psychological health by prompting self-reflection and critical thinking about one's actions and those of others. Research in moral psychology shows that there is a strong link between moral identity and emotions like guilt. Persons whose morality is an important component of their personal identity tend to be more reactive to situations in which their behavior is at odds with their moral values (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Social Cognitive Theory postulates that moral behavior is affected by both environmental factors and internal processes such as self-evaluation and personal values (Bandura, 1991). The connection between moral identity and interpersonal guilt can be explored through various psychological theories. Blasi's Self Model of Moral Functioning (1984) states that people tend to maintain consistency between their moral values and their actions. When this consistency is disrupted, it can lead to emotions like guilt, which act as internal regulators that guide behavior. Bandura (1991) also emphasizes the role of self-regulation in moral behavior, suggesting that people evaluate their actions based on their own standards of right and wrong. Erikson's theory of development (1963) highlights middle adulthood as a time when people take on greater responsibilities towards others, which might explain why this stage is marked by a heightened sensitivity to emotions like guilt.

Middle adulthood is a key period in life, marked by increased social roles and responsibilities. During this time, individuals often have multiple roles to fulfill at home, work, and in the community. These roles can enhance awareness of moral duties and social responsibilities (Erikson, 1963). For women, especially, these roles often involve care, nurturing, and maintaining family connections, which can increase sensitivity to the impact of their actions on others. Research shows that people who are highly concerned about others may feel intense guilt if they believe their actions have harmed someone else (O'Connor et al., 2002). There has been a clear absence of research literature regarding the direct relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt. The majority of the research has focused on adolescents and young adults, with middle adulthood remaining an understudied life stage. The present study attempts to bridge the research gap by investigating the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women. Despite the importance of moral identity and interpersonal guilt, there is limited research on the direct relationship between these two factors. Most studies have focused on adolescents and young adults, with middle adulthood receiving less attention.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the link between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women. This research has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the understanding of how moral thinking and emotions interact. Practically, the findings can help psychologists, counselors, and teachers develop interventions that support emotional regulation and moral behavior. By focusing on middle-aged women, the study adds to a broader understanding of human development by exploring an under-researched group. While there is a lack of extensive research on the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt, this study aims to fill that gap. The results can help professionals better understand how moral identity influences emotions like guilt and how this understanding can be used to improve emotional well-being and promote positive behavior in individuals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Iwai et al. (2023) carried out a study to explore how moral identity contributes to the experience of guilt and its influence on interpersonal behavior. The research adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both experimental and correlational designs, with a total sample of around 300 participants. Autobiographical recall tasks along with standardized moral identity measures were utilized, showing satisfactory reliability with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70. The results indicated that individuals possessing a stronger moral identity reported more intense feelings of guilt following moral transgressions. Furthermore, these heightened guilt responses were associated with more genuine and meaningful apologies, suggesting a clear connection between moral identity and guilt in social interactions.

Li et al. (2024) conducted an experimental study using a randomized controlled design to investigate the association between moral responsibility and group-based guilt. The study included adult participants and examined moral cognition through the administration of oxytocin. Standardized measures of moral responsibility and guilt were employed to assess participants' emotional reactions. The findings demonstrated that individuals with a higher sense of moral responsibility exhibited stronger feelings of guilt when moral standards were violated. These results indicate that moral cognitive processes play a significant role in shaping guilt responses, thereby supporting the relationship between moral identity-related constructs and interpersonal guilt.

Hardy and Carlo (2011) conducted a study to examine the relationship between moral identity and prosocial behavior in adolescents and young adults. The study used a quantitative correlational research design with a sample of approximately 350 participants. Standardized measures of moral identity and prosocial tendencies were used, with reliability coefficients above 0.75. The findings revealed that moral identity is positively associated with empathy, responsibility, and concern for others. These traits are closely related to interpersonal guilt, suggesting that individuals with a strong moral identity may be more likely to experience guilt in situations involving harm to others.

Aquino and Reed (2002) conducted a quantitative study to examine the role of moral identity in influencing moral behavior and emotional responses among adults. The study used a cross-sectional survey design with a sample of approximately 500 participants. The Moral Identity Scale was used as the primary tool, which showed good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.70 to 0.83. The findings indicated that individuals with a strong moral identity are more likely to experience discomfort and self-conscious emotions such as guilt when their behavior is inconsistent with their moral values. This suggests that moral identity plays a significant role in regulating emotions related to moral conduct.

Tangney and Dearing (2002) conducted a study to explore guilt as a moral emotion and its role in interpersonal behavior. The study employed a survey research design with a sample of approximately 400 participants. The Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA) was used to measure guilt proneness, demonstrating good reliability with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.76 to 0.88. The results showed that individuals who are more prone to guilt are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. The study highlights that guilt functions as a mechanism that promotes moral behavior and social harmony.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**Operational Definitions*****Moral Identity:***

Moral identity is the degree to which moral values, such as honesty, fairness, kindness, responsibility, and concern for others, are an important aspect of a woman's sense of herself. It is also the degree to which moral values influence a woman's thoughts, decisions, and behaviors. For a woman with a high moral identity, her behaviors are evaluated in terms of moral standards, and she takes personal responsibility for acting in ways that are congruent with her moral values, especially in interpersonal and family-related situations.

Interpersonal Guilt:

Interpersonal guilt is the negative emotions felt by a woman when she perceives that she has failed to meet the expectations or needs of others. It includes feelings of guilt about hurting someone emotionally, failing to meet responsibilities, focusing on one's own needs, or believing that one's behaviors have had a negative impact on others. High levels of interpersonal guilt are associated with a woman's tendency to hold herself responsible for others' well-being and with negative emotions in interpersonal relationships.

Conceptual Definitions***Moral Identity:***

Moral identity is the degree to which moral qualities are central to an individual's self-concept and influence behavior and moral decisions (Aquino & Reed, 2002). It is a reflection of the internalization of moral values within the individual, which functions as a motivational factor for an individual to conduct themselves in a manner that is morally upright. An individual with a moral identity is more inclined to conduct themselves in a manner that is prosocial, with a sense of concern for fairness, empathy, and social responsibility (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

Interpersonal Guilt:

Interpersonal guilt is a type of guilt characterized by a sense of responsibility for the adverse consequences experienced by others in an interpersonal context (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002). It is an emotional response that is connected with empathy, compassion, and a desire for maintaining harmonious relationships with others.

Objectives

- To identify the levels of moral identity among middle-aged women.
- To identify the levels of interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women.
- To examine the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women

Hypothesis

H0: There will be no significant relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women.

Research Design

A correlational research design was adopted to examine the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women. In this study, moral identity and interpersonal guilt were the two major variables examined in order to understand how moral self-concept influences emotional responses in interpersonal situations. The Moral identity was the independent variable and Interpersonal guilt was the dependent variable.

Sample technique

The participants of the study comprised 250 middle-aged women with an age range of 35 to 55 years. The participants of the study were selected through the application of the simple random sampling technique, which allowed each individual to have an equal chance of selection while meeting the set criteria concerning their age as well as the relevance of the study variables. This sampling strategy helped to ensure the selection of participants whose experiences closely relate to the constructs of moral identity as well as interpersonal guilt. The sampling strategy helped to ensure the selection of participants with experiences relevant to the study objectives.

TOOL DESCRIPTION

1. **Moral identity scale:** Moral Identity Scale by Aquino & Reed, 2002 is a self-report scale that comprises 10 items designed to measure how much moral qualities feature in one's self-concept. Two aspects of moral identity, namely, Internalisation and Symbolisation, are tapped by this scale, with each aspect having five items. Internalisation captures how much one's moral qualities matter to them, while Symbolisation taps how much one expresses their moral qualities through their actions and behavior. Each item's score is rated using a Likert scale, ranging from 1, which stands for 'strongly disagree,' to 7, which stands for 'strongly agree.' This scale has shown high reliability and validity in past studies. High scores on this scale show high levels of moral identity, which implies that one's moral values form a vital component of their self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002).
2. **Interpersonal guilt scale:** The Interpersonal Guilt Rating Scale-20 (IGRS-20), which was developed by O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, and Gilbert (2002), is a 20-item measure that is completed by an individual to measure their interpersonal guilt in a social relationship. This measure includes four dimensions of guilt: Survivor Guilt, Separation Guilt, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, and Self-Hate Guilt, each having five items. Individuals respond to each item on a Likert scale to measure how much each statement reflects their feelings. This measure has shown reliability and constructs validity in assessing interpersonal guilt in various groups of individuals. A high score on this measure indicates a high level of interpersonal guilt, which reflects a strong tendency to experience guilt in interpersonal situations (O'Connor et al., 2002).

PROCEDURE

The current study aims to explore the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women. A questionnaire booklet containing the Moral Identity Scale, Interpersonal Guilt Rating Scale-20, and demographic measures was administered to 250 middle-aged women between 35 to 55 years of age, including both working women and homemakers who fall within the criteria of this study. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants for this study. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, the purpose of this study was explained to the participants, and their informed consent was obtained prior to filling out the forms individually. The responses of the participants remained confidential. Once the data collection procedure was completed, the responses of the participants were encoded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for further statistical analysis.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The collected data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods with the help of SPSS Statistics 20. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the levels of moral identity and interpersonal guilt among the participants. In order to examine the relationship between the variables, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used as an inferential statistical method. This analysis

helped to present summarized information about the variables, identify the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt, and draw conclusions based on the obtained results.

INCLUSION CRITERIA:

- Women between the ages of 35–55, targeting midlife experiences relevant to moral identity development.
- Women proficient in reading and writing English to ensure accurate questionnaire completion.
- Women with regular engagement in interpersonal interactions, either personally (e.g., family, friends) or professionally (e.g., workplace), to capture real-world guilt dynamics

EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

- Women below or above the 35–55 age range to maintain focus on the specified developmental stage.
- Women unable to comprehend or respond in English, ensuring data quality and ethical communication.
- Women with minimal interpersonal contact (e.g., isolated lifestyles) to guarantee sufficient exposure for studying interpersonal guilt

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Levels of Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt

VARIABLE	N	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Moral Identity (MI)	250	51.76	9.284
Interpersonal Guilt (IPG)	250	59.08	10.515

The table shows the descriptive statistics for Moral Identity (MI) and Interpersonal Guilt (IPG) among the 250 middle-aged women who participated in the study. The mean score for Moral Identity was 51.76, and for Interpersonal Guilt, it was 59.08. This indicates that the participants had moderate levels of both moral identity and guilt. The standard deviation values for Moral identity 9.284 suggest a reasonable degree of variability in responses, indicating that most participants exhibit an average level of moral self-concept and 10.515 for Interpersonal guilt indicates slightly higher compared to moral identity suggesting greater variability in the experience of interpersonal guilt and how they perceive and respond to relational responsibilities and moral expectations

Table No. 2 Pearson's correlation between Moral identity and Interpersonal guilt

VARIABLES		MI	IPG
MORAL IDENTITY (MI)	Pearson Correlation	1	.207**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	250	250
INTERPERSONAL GUILT (IPG)	Pearson Correlation	.207**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	250	250

The present study examined the relationship between Moral identity and Interpersonal guilt among middle age women using Pearson's product moment correlation analysis. The statistical analysis revealed a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r(248) = .207, p = .001$ between moral identity and interpersonal guilt. This finding indicates a small but statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables, suggesting that higher levels of moral identity are associated with higher levels of interpersonal guilt among the participants. Given that the obtained p value was below the established level of statistical significance ($p < .05$), the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt is rejected. The result suggests that women who internalize moral values as central to their self-concept may be more likely to experience guilt in interpersonal contexts; a strong moral identity may heighten sensitivity toward relational responsibilities, social expectations, and perceived moral transgressions, thereby increasing the likelihood of interpersonal guilt. In middle adulthood, a developmental stage frequently characterized by greater relational investment and social accountability, such emotional responses may reflect an increased commitment to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships.

DISCUSSION

The current research explored the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt within a sample of 250 participants. The findings show that these two constructs have a slight but statistically significant positive relationship. People are more likely to feel guilty about their behavior toward others if they place a high priority on their moral principles. According to the relationship between these constructs, a person may become more emotionally sensitive to circumstances involving responsibility toward others if morality is a major part of who they are. From a psychological perspective, moral identity represents more than the mere endorsement of positive traits; it reflects the degree to which these traits are central to one's self-definition. When moral characteristics are deeply embedded within identity, individuals may evaluate their actions and decisions against these internalized standards. In interpersonal situations involving perceived shortcomings, unmet expectations, or relational strain, this evaluative process may intensify emotional responses. Thus, the observed correlation may indicate that moral self-structure contributes to heightened self-awareness in relational contexts. People might be more conscious of the emotional effects they have on other people as well as the repercussions of their behavior. They may feel guilty as a means of self-correction when they believe they have fallen short of moral obligations or relationship expectations. According to this perspective, interpersonal guilt can serve as a self-controlling emotional mechanism that promotes accountability and helpful conduct.

In the context of middle-aged women, this association may hold particular developmental relevance. Middle adulthood is frequently characterized by sustained relational engagement and multiple social responsibilities. Women in this life stage often occupy interconnected roles such as spouse, parent, caregiver, and active family member. These roles are typically accompanied by expectations of nurturance, responsibility, and relational maintenance. As moral values become integrated into daily relational functioning, sensitivity to interpersonal harmony and perceived moral lapses may increase. Consequently, the positive association observed in this study may reflect the interaction between identity-based moral standards and the relational demands of middle adulthood. Despite the statistical significance of the association established in this research, the size of the association is small in magnitude. This means that moral identity alone does not explain all the differences in interpersonal guilt. Guilt is a complex feeling shaped by several psychological and social factors, such as empathy, personality traits, past relationships, and cultural expectations about duties and responsibilities. So, interpersonal guilt may be better understood as a multi-faceted concept that arises from how individual values interact with the context.

The modest effect size observed in the present study further reinforces the understanding that emotional experiences are rarely determined by a single variable. Rather, moral identity may operate as one influential component within a broader network of cognitive, affective, and social processes. The statistical findings therefore highlight association rather than causation, suggesting that while moral identity is meaningfully linked to interpersonal guilt, additional moderating and mediating factors likely contribute to the overall emotional outcome. The demographic characteristics of the samples further demonstrate the contextual nature of the current results. Most subjects were urban, middle-class, and married. These social settings might highlight relational roles, family duties, and moral responsibility, which could strengthen both their moral self-view and their awareness of social obligations. Urban and middle-class environments often emphasize structured family systems, social reputation, and adherence to normative standards of conduct. Within such contexts, relational behavior may carry heightened social meaning, potentially reinforcing both moral self-evaluation and emotional accountability. Marriage, in particular, involves ongoing negotiation of expectations, mutual obligations, and emotional interdependence, which may amplify awareness of relational responsibilities and, in turn, intensify guilt responses when those responsibilities are perceived as unmet.

In addition, the large percentage of unemployed subjects suggests that there might be differences in terms of the vocational, social, and relational expectations placed upon them, which might influence how they experience moral evaluation and interpersonal responsibility. Overall, these findings suggest that the moral self-concept is meaningfully associated with the interpersonal emotional functioning; however, the small effect size indicates that future research should examine additional psychological and social variables that may further develop or strengthen this relationship. Taken together, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how internalized moral standards are linked with emotional experiences in adult relational functioning. By examining moral identity within the lived experiences of middle-aged women, the study highlights the interaction between personal value systems, developmental stage, social context, and processes of emotional regulation.

SUMMARY

The study aimed to explore the association between Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt among middle-aged women. The central objective was to investigate whether the extent to which moral values are integrated into an individual's self-concept is related to the experience of guilt within interpersonal contexts. The sample comprised 250 middle aged women selected through simple random sampling. Data were obtained using standardized measures: the Moral Identity Scale, which evaluates the centrality of moral traits to one's identity, and the Interpersonal Guilt Scale, designed to assess guilt-related emotional responses in relational situations. Descriptive analysis indicated moderate levels of both Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt within the sample. Pearson's product moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between the variables. This statistical technique was used because the primary objective of the study was to assess the direction and strength of their linear relationship within a single population sample. The findings of the statistical analysis indicated a small yet statistically significant positive correlation between Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt, $r(248) = .207$, $p = .001$. Although the magnitude of the correlation was modest, the direction and statistical significance of the relationship demonstrate a consistent pattern of association within the sample. The obtained p value was substantially below the conventional alpha level of .05, indicating that the probability of observing such a relationship due to chance alone is minimal. Consequently, the null hypothesis proposing the absence of a significant relationship between Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt was rejected. These results provide empirical support for the existence of a statistically reliable positive association between the two constructs within the studied population.

CONCLUSION

1. Relationship between Moral Identity and Interpersonal Guilt

The findings of the present study reveal a significant positive relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt among middle-aged women. Women who strongly internalize moral values such as honesty, compassion, and fairness tend to experience greater interpersonal guilt when they believe their actions may have negatively affected others. This suggests that when moral values become an important part of an individual's self-concept, they influence emotional responses within interpersonal situations.

2. Role of Moral Values in Interpersonal Emotions

The results highlight the important role of moral values in shaping emotional experiences such as guilt. Women who strongly identify with moral traits may demonstrate greater concern for the well-being of others and show heightened sensitivity in interpersonal interactions. Such emotional responses can promote empathy, responsibility, and reflection on one's actions, thereby supporting the maintenance of positive and harmonious relationships.

3. Psychological and Social Implications

Understanding the relationship between moral identity and interpersonal guilt provides valuable insight into how moral values influence emotional regulation and interpersonal behavior. These findings may assist psychologists, counselors, and researchers in understanding the role of moral self-concept in shaping emotional responses. Encouraging the development of moral identity may help foster empathy, responsibility, and prosocial behavior within society.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. **Limited Generalizability:** The study was conducted among middle-aged women, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Cultural, social, and demographic differences may influence moral identity and interpersonal guilt.
2. **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study used a cross-sectional research design, examining the variables at a single point in time. A longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into how moral identity and interpersonal guilt develop over time.
3. **Self-Report Measures:** The use of self-report questionnaires may introduce social desirability bias, as participants may respond in ways they perceive as socially acceptable.
4. **Limited Variables:** The study focused only on moral identity and interpersonal guilt, without considering other psychological factors such as empathy, personality traits, or emotional intelligence that may influence interpersonal emotions.
5. **Sample Diversity:** Although the study included an adequate number of participants, the sample diversity was limited, which may affect the broader applicability of the findings.

FUTURE SCOPE

1. **Longitudinal Research:** Future studies could use longitudinal designs to explore how moral identity and interpersonal guilt change across different stages of adulthood.
2. **Inclusion of Additional Variables:** Further research may include related constructs such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and prosocial behavior to better understand interpersonal guilt.
3. **Cross-Cultural Studies:** Future research could examine these variables across different cultural and social contexts to understand the influence of cultural values on moral identity and guilt.
4. **Broader Participant Groups:** Subsequent studies may include men and individuals from different age groups to determine whether similar relationships exist across diverse populations.

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