

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Gilgamesh Effect: The Ethical Consequences of Disconnection

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Abstract:

A number of recent experiments have revealed that the mere thought of human connection can increase ethical decision-making whereas the thought of human disconnection can decrease ethical decision-making. This paper provides an appropriate name for the phenomenon, reviews the evidence, and highlights its relevance.

Keywords: Ethics, Psychology, Economics, Connection, Loneliness, Love, Human connection, Ethical decision-making, Social isolation, Individualism, Money

Introduction

The Gilgamesh Effect is the psychological phenomenon where thoughts of human connection increase ethical decision-making whereas thoughts of human disconnection decrease ethical decision-making. The phenomenon gets its name from the ancient Mesopotamian story, The Epic of Gilgamesh, in which the evil King Gilgamesh leaves his decadent tower, sheds his royal clothing, and through various forms of reconnection, becomes a better person (Sandars, 1972). The story, surprisingly well preserved on clay tablets (Dalley, 2009), is regarded as the earliest example of great literature (Schmidt, 2019) and as a result, it is one of the first documented accounts expressing the psychological impact of connection and disconnection.

Experiments

Many old legends and tales set the villain in a location clearly disconnected from others, be it a mighty tower, a dark cave, haunted woodland, the depths of the ocean, or the pits of hell. At least subconsciously, perhaps, it was observed that human disconnection can lead to compromised ethics.

In modern times, we can see many vivid examples that when there is some form of human disconnect, we are far from the best versions of ourselves, from road rage to youtube comments. But in addition to various physical forms of disconnect, we now have growing evidence that the mere thought of human disconnection can significantly decrease ethical decision-making (Macdonald, 2019; Macdonald, 2020a; Macdonald, 2020b).

One set of experiments showed that participants who read through sentences that contained themes of human disconnection would score lower on a subsequent ethics test than those who read through sentences that contained themes of human connection (Macdonald, 2019). The inclusion of a control group showed that while the thought of human disconnection can significantly decrease ethical decisions, thoughts of human connection increase ethical decisions, and to a greater degree (Macdonald, 2019).

Another set of experiments showed that the Gilgamesh Effect can also be triggered via simple graphical primes (Macdonald, 2020b). Participants who saw images of stickmen connected by lines scored higher on a subsequent ethics test than those who saw images of stickmen disconnected by lines.

The Gilgamesh Effect has also been triggered via a combination of words and images (Macdonald, 2019). In addition to this, a broad range of priming strategies has been explored which was shown to impact the potency of the effect. For example, the potency was shown to increase with indirect priming strategies (such as via the use of metaphors), and increase further still when the primes appear to come from the participants themselves, which was revealed when participants were asked to list ways that humans are connected or disconnected from one another (Macdonald, 2020a). The varied priming techniques explored also assisted in providing convergent evidence, thus there is greater confidence that the triggered responses are the result of a successfully primed theme rather than the result of any idiosyncratic effects of the primes themselves.

Rather appropriately, given the etymology of the Gilgamesh Effect, there appears to be a link with the psychological impact of money. A known phenomenon in psychology is that participants primed with the idea of money will score lower on an ethics test (Gino et al, 2009; Kouchaki et al, 2013; Macdonald, 2019; Vohs, 2015). And interestingly, one experiment showed that when participants were primed with money, they felt a decreased sense of human connection (Macdonald, 2019). Therefore, one of the reasons why money can trigger a decrease in ethical decision-making might be the Gilgamesh Effect.

Relevance

Authentic connection is vital for our physical and mental health (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010; Flegal et al, 2013). Accordingly, when given the choice of physical pain or isolation, social mammals will opt for the former (McMillan, 2016). It has also been noted that children who experience neglect suffer worse mental health consequences than those who also receive physical abuse (Egeland et al, 1981). And a recent study revealed that both actual and perceived social isolation are strongly associated with an increased risk of early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015). In fact, the latest evidence suggests that the increased risk of mortality from a lack of authentic social relationships is greater than that from obesity (Flegal et al, 2013; Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010).

The Gilgamesh Effect shows us that in addition to decreased personal health, disconnection can also decrease our ethical judgment. Therefore, disconnection is a cruel, double-edged sword. It harms the individual as well as those around them. Thus authentic human connection not only helps to make us healthier people, it also helps to make us good people, ones who make more morally conscious decisions that benefit others.

The Gilgamesh Effect reminds us that we are particularly susceptible to various means of human disconnection, not only physical barriers but even the mere idea of it, which can be triggered in several discrete ways, from precise words to abstract imagery. Therefore the effect also reminds us of our responsibility as nodes within a complicated web of interconnections. The words we use and the images we share help to create the environments and perspectives of those around us (Bargh et al, 1996; Dijksterhuis et al, 1998).

The Gilgamesh Effect is increasingly relevant in modern times with the rise of technologies that evidently have the ability to decrease our sense of authentic human connection: online shopping, internet pornography, video gaming, online gambling, smartphones, and 'social' media. We also appear to be in a time of widespread political polarization and divisive rhetoric (Aquino et al, 2001; Bail et al, 2018; Brugnoli et al, 2019; Carothers, 2019; Cheng et al, 2017; Cook et al, 2018; Pelletier, 2010; Price-Thomas et al, 2018; Törnberg, 2018).

Conclusion

While it can appear as though humankind is progressing in a positive linear fashion, we are rapidly losing important connections. We are becoming disconnected from how our products are created, and how our food is grown. We are becoming disconnected from many of the consequences of our systems. We are losing our direct connections with our community, our friends, the natural world, and perhaps, ourselves.

As we increasingly become disconnected, atomized individuals, I see it as no coincidence that we are also experiencing high levels of social phobia, loneliness, depression, anxiety, addiction, inequality, division, corruption, pollution, and resource depletion (Alhassan et al, 2018; Bandelow et al, 2015; Beutel et al, 2017; Bystritsky et al, 2013; Cash et al, 2012; Choi et al, 2020; Cook et al, 2013; Cook et al, 2016; Diffenbaugh et al, 2019; Dimant et al, 2017; Hawkley et al, 2010; Howe, 2015; Jefferson, 2001; Kanter et al, 2008; Koneswaran et al, 2008; Kiss, 2009; Mittal et al, 2015; Scarborough et al, 2014; Vieira, 2012; Wang et al, 2017; Zyglidopoulos et al, 2017).

Let the Gilgamesh Effect remind us of a pertinent set of truths, that we are most vulnerable when we are disconnected, that we are incredibly susceptible to various forms of disconnection, and that we are the best versions of ourselves when we work towards that which can authentically connect us.

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