The unintended consequence of becoming empathetic

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When people say that they want to change things about their personalities, they might not know about the inadvertent consequences

these changes could bring. In fact, changes in personality may also lead to changes in political ideologies, say researchers from Michigan State University and the University of Granada, who led the study.

"We found this interesting effect where people wanted to improve on things like being more emotionally connected to others—or, becoming more empathetic," said William Chopik, assistant professor of psychology at MSU. "But we found that this leads to changes in their political souls as well, which maybe they weren't intending. We saw that in these personality changes toward greater empathy, people placed a lot more importance upon more liberal ideologies—like how you should treat other people and take others' perspectives."

The study, published in the most recent edition of *Journal of Research in Personality*, is the first to look at shifts in personalities and morals due to volitional change—or, changes one brings upon oneself.

Chopik and co-authors from Southern Methodist University and the University of Illinois asked 414 volunteer participants to take a weekly questionnaire. Such questions included how they would react in certain situations, if they wanted to improve or change themselves, how they felt about helping others and other personality-related queries. Additionally, the researchers measured participants' "empathic concern"—or, feelings that would arise when they saw someone in need or doing poorly. The researchers continued the weekly questionnaire for four months.

"Among the questions, we asked participants how they felt about five broad moral foundations: care, fairness, loyalty, authority and purity. We tracked sentiments week-to-week," Chopik said. "While these are common for personality-related assessments, individual moral foundations can also help explain attitudes toward various ideologies, ethical issues and policy debates."

Generally, liberal and progressive people tend to prioritize two of the five moral foundations: care and fairness; whereas, conservatives draw from all five—including the more binding foundations: loyalty to the ingroup, respect for authority, and observance of purity and sanctity standards, Chopik said.

"Our study shows that when people are motivated to change, they can successfully do so," he said. "What we were surprised to find was that an upward trajectory for something like perspective-taking aligned with the person's shift towards the more liberal foundations."

The researchers did not intend for their study to generalize personality traits of one political party or another, but rather to see if—and how—a person could change themselves and what might be a result of their "moral transformation."

"Being a better perspective-taker exposes you to all sorts of new ideas, so it makes sense that it would change someone because they would be exposed to more diverse arguments," Chopik said. "When you become more empathic, it opens up a lot of doors to change humans in other ways, including how they think about morality and ideology—which may or may not have been intended."

More information: Ivar R. Hannikainen et al. Moral migration: Desires to become more empathic predict changes in moral foundations, *Journal of Research in Personality* (2020). DOI: 10.1016/j.jrp.2020.104011

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