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Our Dictator Called Love—How the Heart Influences Moral Judgment

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Abstract

Previous research in moral psychology has shown that the willingness to protect a criminal offender from punishment is influenced by emotional closeness to that offender (Weidman et al., 2020). Research has yet to examine cognitive mechanisms and the information considered when deciding between protecting or reporting the offender. We replicated Experiment 2a of Berg Kitayama, & Kross (2021), which investigated how closeness to the offender and crime severity influence the willingness to protect the offender, as well as the attentional mechanisms informing that decision. Using Berg & colleagues' (2021) data, we also explored whether familial vs. non-familial and romantic vs. non-romantic close relationships with the transgressor influenced the willingness to protect them. The findings from our replication of Experiment 2a revealed that people were (1) more likely to protect emotionally *close* transgressors than distant transgressors; (2) more likely to protect the transgressor for *low* severity than high severity crimes, although the difference between willingness to protect close vs. distant transgressors for high severity crimes was larger than the difference of the willingness to protect a close (vs. distant) transgressor for a *low* severity crime; (3) paid more attention to details about the *person* when the transgressor was close to them but paid more attention to details about the *crime* when the offender was distant from them. Additional analysis revealed that familial vs. non-familial and romantic vs. non-romantic relationships with the transgressor predicted no significant differences in the willingness to protect them. Further investigation into situational or social factors that influence the link between relationship types and the willingness to protect the transgressor could help us gain greater insight into our behaviors when the expectations about the moral character of close loved ones are violated.

Keywords: moral transgressions, decision-making, relationship closeness

Our Dictator Called Love—How the Heart Influences Moral Judgment

We gain a sense of right from wrong from a young age, and this moral conscience follows us through the rest of our lives (Hofmann et al., 2018). However, what happens when our moral conscience conflicts with the intrinsic desire to protect a close friend, a family member, or perhaps a sweet neighbor from receiving criminal punishment for an immoral act? Research has shown that we are far less likely to report our loved ones when they have committed a crime (Weidman et al., 2020). In this paper, we studied the cognitive mechanisms behind this phenomenon by replicating Experiment 2a of Berg, Kitayama, & Kross (2021), which investigated how different levels of emotional closeness to the transgressor of a crime can predict different degrees of willingness to protect the transgressor.

Expectancy Violations and Attention Deployment

The difference in our willingness to protect transgressors depending on our closeness to them is best explained by what we pay attention to when our perceptions about the transgressor's moral character are violated (Berg et al., 2021). Children develop cognitive representations (Derryberry & Reed, 1996) to navigate the rules and norms that dictate our world (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). Because we tend to believe that people are generally moral (Dunning et al., 2014), our expectation of a person's moral character is violated when they commit a crime. Further, because we believe we are more ethical compared to the average person (Klein & Epley, 2016) and relationship closeness is associated with a larger overlap of the self and the close other (Aron et al., 1991), our expectations may be violated to an even larger degree when the transgressor is someone we are close to. Expectation violations cause us

to pay attention to different things depending on our motivations (Burgoon, 1993). Berg et al. (2021) hypothesized that people pay more attention to the offender when the offender is *close* to them, but pay more attention to the details of the crime when the offender is *distant* from them.

Given that the “replication crisis” in psychology called for better scientific practices and transparency (Maxwell, Lau, & Howard, 2015), we saw the importance of re-analyzing a portion of the data analysis conducted by Berg et al. (2021). It is important to note that we did not collect new data, instead, we re-analyzed the data publicly provided by Berg et al. (2021).

Family and Romance in Relationships

Previous research has illustrated that the nature of the relationship (i.e. closeness) has important implications for moral decision-making (Weidman et al., 2020). In the paper by Berg et al. (2021), of participants assigned to list a close other, some listed family members and romantic partners, while others listed non-relatives and friends instead. As we further explored the data provided by Berg et al. (2021), we became interested in whether close familial or romantic relationships had any influence on people’s willingness to protect a moral transgressor, especially when being compared with close non-family or non-romantic relationships. We hypothesized that people are more willing to protect their close family members or romantic partners over close non-family and non-romantic relationships, respectively.

One explanation for our hypothesized pattern of effects is that people are generally closer to family and romantic partners. When outlining the properties of interdependence, Berscheid et al. (1989) stated that close relationships depend on “frequent” and “strong” impacts on each other and interactions that have persisted for a “long duration of time.” These characteristics are more common in close family members and romantic partners than in

non-family or non-romantic relationships. It could be the case that people are more likely to protect their close family members or romantic partners because people are likely to spend more time with family members and romantic partners and have their lives impacted by these relationships.

Perhaps our sense of duty can also influence the willingness to protect transgressors who are family or romantic partners. We may feel obligated to protect family members because of our relation to them by blood or our inclination to uphold the family reputation. Another factor could be a sense of responsibility for their well-being because of how much we care for them. This may hold true for romantic partners as well. In this vein, Ebels-Duggan (2008) argued that we share a responsibility for our own and our romantic partner's happiness, which could explain a higher likelihood of protecting romantic partners. While we may feel responsible for our friends' happiness, the expectations associated with friendship tend to vary widely and be less strict compared to expectations for family and romantic relationships. The overlapping sense of duty and closeness could lead people to protect their family and romantic partners more than close non-family and non-romantic members.

In this extension, we examined whether close familial (vs. non-familial) and romantic (vs. non-romantic) relationships with the transgressor affected the likelihood to protect the moral transgressor from punishment.

Method

Our replication used portions of the data and code provided by Berg et al. (2021), which is publicly accessible at https://osf.io/6au4z/?view_only=c89f8750f86341669f73401846aca1b6.

Participants

The present data set ($N=399$, $M_{age}=33.12$, $SD_{age}=12$, 53% female, 67% Asian) was originally collected by Berg et al. (2021) from the online platform Prolific Academic.

Replication Procedure

The original study by Berg et al. (2021) randomly assorted participants into four groups with different combinations of either having a *distant* or *close* relationship and either making a decision about how to respond to a moral transgression of *high* or *low severity*. Participants in the *close* condition were told to think of a person they consider to be emotionally close to, while participants in the *distant* condition were told to think of a person they know but are emotionally distant from. Both groups briefly described the nature of the relationship to the person they imagined. Participants were then told to imagine the person they described either committing a low or high severity crime. Participants in the *low* severity crime condition imagined the person illegally downloading music off the internet, while participants in the *high* severity crime condition imagined the person committing blackmail. All were asked about the likelihood that they would report the person they imagined to the authorities (“How likely are you to tell the officer that you saw [close or distant person] commit [low or high severity crime]?” on a Likert scale of 1- “Very unlikely” to 6- “Very likely”), as well as the degree of attention they paid to the person and the immoral act (“To what extent was your response to the officer influenced by the following factors?” “WHO was doing the action”, “How WRONG the action was,” on a Likert scale of 1- “not at all,” 7- “extremely.”)

Before running any models, we first cleaned the raw data in R. Following instructions by Berg et al. (2021), we excluded one participant who did not provide valid data. We

reverse-scored the likelihood to *report* the offender to a police officer so the measure now represented the likelihood the participant would *protect* the transgressor.

We ran four multiple linear regression models in R. Some of these models used contrast coding instead of dummy coding, which repositioned the data in a way that simultaneously allowed us to test the main effect of each of our desired independent variables while simultaneously testing for interaction effects in one model. To prepare for contrast-coding, we first converted the wide data set into a long format. In doing so, we created a single column that contained participants' responses to the two attention-related measures: 1.) "How WRONG the action was", and 2.) "WHO was doing the action". Each participant then had 2 rows (long format), where the first row contained the numeric response for the attention paid to the "wrongness of the action," while the second contained the numeric response for the attention paid to "who was doing the action." We created a binary variable with 2 levels (attention towards crime, and attention towards person) that distinguished whether the row contained the participant's answer to the question about attention towards crime or towards the person.

Then, we took the predictors (closeness and severity) and adjusted the reference point so that it fell *between* the two levels of the predictor rather than it being *equal* to one of the two levels (For example, we set the reference point at 0 between close and distant levels of the predictor closeness, which were set at 0.5, and -0.5, respectively. This way, the intercept would not be equal to the mean response for *one* of the two levels but rather the mean response of *all* the data points.) This is so that we could find the main effect of our independent variables across groups while controlling for covariates in our multiple regressions.

Model 1 was a multiple regression model using contrast coding which examined closeness and crime severity as predictors for the willingness to protect the transgressor from

being reported to the police. We examined the main effect of closeness, the main effect of crime severity, and the effect of the interaction between closeness and crime severity.

Model 2 looked at the level of attention based on information type about the person and the crime as well as closeness using contrast coding. This model also examined interactions between attentional focus and closeness in predicting attention.

For ease of interpretation of these relationships in Model 2, we dummy coded the variable closeness and left the other independent variables contrast-coded in Models 3 and 4. In Model 3, we only looked at the instances when the transgressor was a *close* other to the participant by making the level “close” equal to the reference point. Thus, Model 3 examined the differences in the attention towards the person and the crime only for transgressors who were *close* to the participant, while controlling for crime severity. In Model 4, we looked at the instances when the transgressor was a *distant* other to the participant, by assigning the level “distant” equal to the reference point. Thus, Model 4 examined the differences in the attention towards the person and the crime only for transgressors who were *distant* to the participant, while controlling for crime severity.

Extension Procedure

To investigate our exploratory hypothesis for our extension, we created a subset of data containing only the responses by the group that listed their close others in Experiment 2a. We then created a binary variable indicating whether participants described their relationship with their close other as familial or non-familial. Using regular expression functions in R, we categorized the groups by searching for keywords that revealed the nature of the relationship (e.g. keywords included “mom,” “dad,” “father,” “sister,” and “brother” for the *familial* group;

and “friend,” “spouse,” “partner,” “significant,” “wife,” and “husband” for the *non-familial* group).

We used the same method to create a new variable for the romantic and non-romantic categories (e.g. keywords included: “friend,” “mother,” “brother,” and “cousin” for the *non-romantic* group and “husband,” “wife,” “significant,” “spouse,” etc. for the *romantic* group).

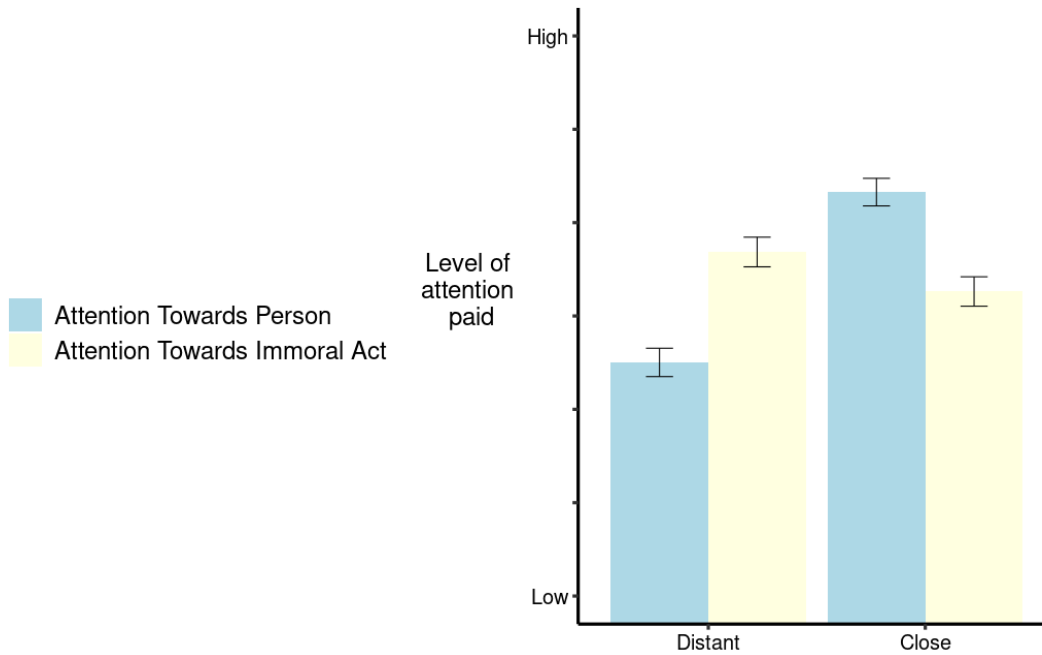
Results

Replication

Like Berg et al., (2021), we found that participants were significantly more likely to protect *close* transgressors compared to distant ones (Model 1: $b=0.96$, 95% CI=[0.69, 4.10], $p<.001$, $d=0.56$), and were more willing to protect transgressors in *low* severity crime scenarios compared to high severity crime scenarios (Model 1: $b=-1.80$, 95% CI=[-2.07, -1.54], $p<.001$, $d=-1.22$). There were significant interaction effects between closeness and the severity of the crime in their willingness to protect transgressors ($b=0.99$, 95% CI =[0.46, 1.53], $p < .001$; $d = 0.29$), such that when faced with a high severity crime participants were more likely to protect a close (vs. distant) transgressor than when faced with a low severity crime. Although the difference was less pronounced for a low severity crime, participants were also significantly more willing to protect a close (vs. distant) transgressor.

Model 2 revealed to us that when predicting how much attention was paid there was a significant interaction between the focus of attention and closeness to the transgressor. (See Figure 1; $b=2.25$, 95% CI=[1.65, 2.85], $p<.001$; $d=0.4$). When the transgressor was close to the participant they paid more attention to the person, whereas when the transgressor was distant their attention was more focused on the crime.

Fig 1. The figure illustrates the differences in attention towards the person and the immoral act in the distant-other group and close-other group.



The “level of attention paid” refers to participants’ attentional focus when considering reporting the person to the police. Error bars represent +/- 1 standard error.

In Model 3, we replicated findings by Berg et al. (2021) that when deciding whether to report a crime committed by a close other, people were significantly more likely to focus on information about the person rather than details about the crime ($b = 1.06$, 95% CI = [0.64, 1.49], $p < .001$, $d = 0.49$). On the other hand, when thinking about a distant transgressor, people focused significantly more on the crime instead of the person (Model 4: $b = -1.19$, 95% CI = [-1.62, -0.76], $p < .001$, $d = -0.54$).

Extension

After replicating the findings by Berg et al. (2021), we explored whether the type of close relationship (familial vs. non-familial; romantic vs. non-romantic) affected the likelihood of protecting the transgressor. However, we failed to reject the null hypothesis. We found no

significant difference in the likelihood to protect familial vs. non-familial close others using a linear regression model (See Table 2: $b=0.027$, $p=0.904$). Our results further indicated that there was not a significant difference in the likelihood to protect romantic vs. non-romantic close others (See Table 2: $b=0.016$, $p=0.934$).

Table 1: Relationship types with the transgressor (familial vs. non-familial and romantic vs. non-romantic relationships) as predictors of the willingness to report the transgressor in unstandardized units.

Table 1			
Likelihood of protecting the transgressor			
Relationship type	β	95% CI	P-Value
Main effect of Familial v. Non-Familial	-0.027	[-0.43,0.45]	$p>.05$
Main effect of Romantic v. Non-romantic	0.016	[-0.36, 0.42]	$p>.05$

We used a dummy coding scheme and set non-familial and non-romantic levels as the reference levels in our analyses. P-value of $p>0.05$ indicates no significant relationship between listed variables.

Discussion

Our replication of the study conducted by Berg et al. (2021) illustrates how doing the ‘right’ thing may not always be simple. People are generally less likely to report transgressors for committing low compared to high severity crimes and people tend to protect their close loved ones over distant others. We also replicated Berg’s et al. (2021) novel finding that people focus on different information based on how close they are to the transgressor: we pay more

attention to the *transgressor* when we are close to the transgressor, while we pay more attention to the *crime* when we are distant from the transgressor. Berg's et al. (2021) findings broadly imply that if close to the transgressor, people tend to consider the potential negative consequences that the transgressor would experience if the crime were reported, including considerations like jail time, probation, and reputation. Conversely, if people are distant from the transgressor, greater attention is placed on the moral implications of the crime.

One conceptual limitation to Berg's et al. (2021) study is the way moral judgment was represented in the hypothetical scenario given to participants. According to comments left at the end of the survey, many participants were opposed to reporting crimes to the police for various reasons (Berg et al., 2021). Some explanations include "police can't often be trusted to not escalate to more violence than is necessary" and "the criminal justice system is very skewed towards protecting the rich and their assets" (Berg et al., 2021). Future studies could be designed without having an existing institution tied to the hypothetical moral decision, which would allow for a better representation of the underlying conflict of choosing between protecting those we love and abiding by moral and social laws.

We found no significant differences in the likelihood of protection when comparing relationship types (close familial vs. non-familial relationships and close romantic vs. non-romantic relationships) with the transgressor. Perhaps the effects of emotional closeness on moral decision-making dominate the effects of relationship types and moral decision-making. A within-subject study design comparing the willingness to protect romantic/non-romantic and familial/nonfamilial relationships within an individual's circle could potentially tease out the differences between relationship type and moral judgment. Factors including relationship duration, conflict frequency, emphasis on duty and obligation, and abuse may vary greatly in

romantic and familial relationships, and these different dynamics, in turn, can affect the degree of willingness to protect the transgressor. While there is a valid possibility that there are simply no distinguishing differences between romantic/non-romantic and familial/nonfamilial others, other variables besides closeness could potentially still predict the desire to protect the transgressor.

Conclusion

What happens when these two confounding interests—protecting those we love and abiding by societies' expectations for moral behavior—conflict with one another? We examined and replicated findings by Berg et al. (2021), who investigated whether willingness to protect the transgressor of a crime from punishment was affected by emotional closeness to the transgressor and the severity of the crime, as well as the role of attentional mechanisms in this moral decision-making process. We then extended our study to explore whether familial vs. non-familial and romantic vs. non-romantic close relationships with the transgressor affected said willingness to protect them, revealing that these types of relationships with the transgressor predicted no significant differences in the willingness to protect them. This investigation about the way people behave when making moral decisions regarding people they know and/or love can potentially pave the way for applicable solutions in judicial systems, as well as allow us to better understand the things we are willing to do for the people we are close to.

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