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When the Ones We Love Misbehave: Exploring Moral Processes Within Intimate Bonds

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How do we react when our romantic partners, friends, or family members behave unethically? When close others misbehave, it generates a powerful conflict between observers' moral values and their cherished relationships. Previous research has almost exclusively studied moral perception in a social vacuum by investigating responses to the transgressions of strangers; therefore, little is known about how these responses unfold in the context of intimate bonds. Here we systematically examine the impact of having a close relationship with a transgressor on perceptions of that transgressor, the relationship, and the self. We predicted *less negative* emotional and evaluative responses to transgressors and smaller consequences for the relationship, yet *more negative* emotional and evaluative responses to the self when close others, compared with strangers or acquaintances, transgress. Participants read hypothetical wrongdoings (Study 1), recalled unethical events (Study 2), reported daily transgressions (Study 3; preregistered), and learned of novel immoral behavior (Study 4) committed by close others or comparison groups. Participants reported less other-critical emotions, more lenient moral evaluations, a reduced desire to punish/criticize, and a smaller impact on the relationship (compared with acquaintances) when close others versus strangers or acquaintances transgressed. Simultaneously, participants reported more self-conscious emotions and showed some evidence of harsher moral self-evaluations when close others transgressed. Underlying mechanisms of this process were examined. Our findings demonstrate the deep ambivalence in reacting to close others' unethical behaviors, revealing a surprising irony—in protecting close others, the self may bear some of the burden of their misbehavior.

Keywords: morality, relationships, social perception

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How do we react when friends, romantic partners, or family members misbehave? Prior research on moral judgment has almost exclusively focused on how individuals respond to transgressions committed by strangers (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2009; Greene et al., 2009; Haidt et al., 1993; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003; Reeder & Spores, 1983; Stellar & Willer, 2018; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). Only a few studies have examined the kind of closeness that characterizes intimate bonds. However, these studies have not always presented close others, instead measuring or manipulating perceived similarity or closeness to strangers (Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Shaver, 1970), or assigning participants to be third-party observers of other targets who share a close relationship (Simpson et al., 2016; Uhlmann et al., 2012). More recent research, which has directly assessed perceptions of close others, did so for anticipated responses to hypothetical infractions (Weidman et al., 2019) or focused specifically on emotional outcomes to friends or family members (Chen et al., 2018; Scarnier et al., 2009). Further, none of these studies have examined potential processes that underlie moral judgments of close others who transgress. Therefore, we still know very little about how individuals respond to the actual transgressions of close others across a range of perceptions and relationship types or the underlying mechanisms of these responses.

Contextualizing morality is critical to generating a more ecologically valid understanding of moral perception (Schein, 2020). The failure to comprehensively investigate responses to the transgressions of close others is particularly problematic because it omits what may be a large portion of observed transgressions. Individuals spend a considerable amount of time with their romantic partners, friends, and family members and are more likely to encounter the everyday transgressions of close others that characterize the majority of bad behavior (e.g., lying to someone; Ariely, 2012). As a result, current models of moral perception may fail to accurately predict observers' emotional, social, or behavioral responses in the numerous contexts in which one has a close tie to

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the transgressor. These models may be too simplistic to account for the powerful forces (e.g., rationalization) that arise when close others transgress and omit important outcomes (e.g., relationship quality) that are less relevant in the context of strangers. In summary, this work adds an important perspective to the study of morality, namely that moral perception does not occur in a social vacuum, but is affected by social relationships.

When romantic partners, friends, or family members act unethically, it generates a conflict within observers between upholding their moral values and maintaining their cherished relationships. As a result, individuals likely experience a complex and potentially ambivalent response. Here we investigate these responses, examining how the transgressions of close others influence observers' perceptions of the transgressor, the relationship, and the self, as well as the underlying forces that may influence these perceptions. We predicted *less negative* emotional and evaluative responses toward close others, characterized by less other-critical emotions, less harsh moral evaluations, and reduced desires to punish, compared with strangers or acquaintances. We also expected a smaller impact on observers' relationships with close others compared with acquaintances. However, we simultaneously predicted *more negative* emotional and evaluative responses directed toward the self, characterized by more self-conscious emotions and harsher moral evaluations. To further understand how these perceptions arise, we examined the role of rationalization within this context.

Perceptions of Close Others and the Relationship: The Case for Leniency

Strangers who transgress are typically met with harsh, global, and enduring negative evaluations by observers. The moment an unethical act is committed, observers have strong affective responses to the wrongdoer's behavior in the form of anger, contempt, and disgust, which amplify negative moral judgments (Avramova & Inbar, 2013; Goldberg et al., 1999; Schnall et al., 2008). These negative evaluations ripple out to profoundly influence other impressions (Anderson, 1965; Goodwin et al., 2014; Jones et al., 1972; Leach et al., 2007; Stellar & Willer, 2018) and persist even after the individual is credited with several moral deeds (Birnbaum, 1972; Riskey & Birnbaum, 1974).

When the transgressor is a close other, how might this social bond modify an observer's response? One might predict that individuals would be even more sensitive to and condemnatory of close others who transgress compared with strangers or acquaintances. Close relationships are predicated on communal sharing of resources and heavy investment; therefore, weak moral fortitude among close others may be especially dangerous (Rusbult, 1980). As a result, vigilance for and reactivity to selfish qualities in others could be particularly pronounced within close relationships because a close other's disregard for moral norms more heavily impacts a relationship partner than a stranger. Further, if the punishment of moral norm violators serves to bind individuals together in cooperative and cohesive groups (Durkheim, 1965; Haidt, 2007), then transgressions committed by those within our innermost circle may be particularly threatening, eliciting the strongest condemnatory responses. Some support for this claim comes from past work in the context of group membership, documenting the *black sheep effect*, in which in-group members are judged more severely for their unethical behavior than out-group members (e.g., Marques et al., 1988; Mendoza et al., 2014; Piff et al., 2012).

However, a more compelling prediction is that individuals will respond more leniently to close others than strangers or acquaintances. People place great value on their close relationships, which fulfil fundamental relational needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and contribute to one's sense of self and identity (Tesser, 1988). In addition, people want to see their close others positively (Murray et al., 2004) and routinely refrain from actions that would result in negative evaluations of them, such as engaging in downward social comparisons (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). People also care deeply about being moral. Most individuals internalize the desire to be a good person and avoid contact, let alone connection, to another unethical person (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Jordan & Monin, 2009; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Therefore, being in a close relationship with a person who behaves unethically should generate an uncomfortable inconsistency in one's beliefs about that person and their behavior (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946) and a conflict between one's relational and personal goals (Visserman et al., 2017).

One way to resolve this dissonance is to exit the relationship, but this is costly as it revokes the opportunity to satisfy fundamental needs and alters one's identity. Rather, it is far less costly, and preferable, to avoid seeing a close other negatively even in the face of their bad behavior. Two strategies would facilitate this outcome: one focuses on the act, the other on the transgressor. First, individuals could try to minimize the act by viewing it as less unethical, harmful, or consequential. Second, individuals could try to decouple the unethical behavior from their overall impressions of the transgressor's moral character. In a similar fashion to how judgments of a transgressor's performance can be separated from judgments of their morality (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013), individuals can consider mitigating circumstances or alternative explanations for the behavior. Explanations that remove the agency of the transgressor, such as using situational or external justifications (e.g., social pressures) or blaming others (e.g., the victim) would be especially effective. In support of this claim, past work finds that people discount bad behavior and resist updating their overall impressions of close others (Park & Young, 2020). These two strategies, which may occur before a judgment is made and/or after in a post hoc fashion, reduce the discomfort arising from the inconsistency of holding negative evaluations of a person's actions, yet positive evaluations their character (Haidt, 2001; Heider, 1946). As a result, one could continue to see their close other positively and remain in their cherished relationship, while still upholding their moral values.

Minimizing the act to see it as less unethical and decoupling the transgressor's character from their behavior both allow an individual to rationalize their close other's unethical actions (Kohlberg, 1969; Turiel, 1983). Past work has found that individuals rationalize the bad behavior of those who share the same ethnicity, political party affiliation, or national identity (Uhlmann et al., 2009), and even those who move synchronously in a minimal group paradigm (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Further, manipulating psychological closeness with a stranger led participants to view the transgressor's unethical behavior as less wrong (Gino & Galinsky, 2012). In fact, people report that they would hypothetically engage in protective (e.g., lying to a police officer to protect a perpetrator),

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rather than a punishing, actions when close others transgress (Weidman et al., 2019). These findings sit in contradiction to the *black sheep effect*, which finds harsher evaluations of in-group members who transgress, and suggest that these harsh judgments may not necessarily carry-over to our highly valued close relationships. Therefore, we predicted observers would perceive close others who transgressed *less negatively* than strangers or acquaintances and report a smaller impact on the relationship relative to acquaintances.

Aside from the intimacy of a close bond, one potential alternative explanation for these effects is that observers simply have background information about close others, but not strangers. When a close other misbehaves, this information is incorporated into a host of other positive information about that person which conflicts with their unethical behavior. Recent work does not support this claim, finding that the association between reduced impression updating of close others and relationship maintenance was not impacted by the amount of time participants knew their close other (Park & Young, 2020); however, we further tested the viability of this alternative explanation. We compared perceptions of close others to acquaintances with whom observers have background information and tested whether relationship length, as a proxy for background information, predicted more lenient responses to transgressors.

Perceptions of the Self: The Case for Harshness

Because strangers are typically deemed irrelevant to the goals and needs of the self, it is unlikely that their behavior will strongly influence important central features of one's identity, such as perceptions of one's own morality. In fact, studies of moral perception rarely measure the impact of a stranger's unethical behavior on self-perceptions. One study that did assess self-perceptions found that witnessing a stranger transgress slightly elevated one's view of one's own moral character, possibly through social comparison, generating a sense of moral superiority (Sacchi et al., 2021; Wills, 1981). As a result, when strangers act unethically, established models of moral perception either predict no consequences for observers' self-perceptions or a sense of moral superiority.

However, an individual's self-concept is partially defined by the valued social groups to which they belong (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Aron et al., 1992; Brewer, 1991; Leary et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Close others are deeply intertwined with our sense of self and their behavior may be perceived to reflect upon us (Tesser, 1988). Therefore, in comparison to strangers who transgress, close others are more likely to influence an observer's view of themselves, not by elevating it, but by damaging it. Closeness facilitates moral contagion, which occurs when individuals feel contaminated due to proximity to or contact with morally reprehensible people or objects (Eskine et al., 2013; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Stellar & Willer, 2014). In support of this claim, vicarious and collective self-conscious emotions (i.e., shame, guilt, and embarrassment), hallmarks of moral contagion, have been documented when those with whom we share a connection with such as friends, family, or in-group members, transgress (Brown et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2018; Doosje et al., 1998; Glasford et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2007; Lickel et al., 2005; Scarnier et al., 2009).

A shared moral identity with close others can create a shared sense of responsibility for unethical actions or at least a fear of being perceived as responsible. This perception is not entirely misguided. Lickel and colleagues (2003) found that the parents of the Columbine High School shooters were judged as responsible for their teenagers' immoral actions because of their failure to prevent the horrific events of that day. Therefore, despite hypothesizing that observers would perceive close others who transgress *less negatively* than strangers or acquaintances, we simultaneously hypothesized that observers would perceive themselves *more negatively*.

The Present Research

Across four studies, within diverse samples and methods, we investigated observers' perceptions of the transgressor, the relationship, and themselves after learning a close other, stranger, or acquaintance had transgressed. In Study 1, we examined responses to hypothetical immoral acts ostensibly committed by a romantic partner, friend, and stranger. In Study 2, participants recalled an actual unethical act committed by a close other (romantic partner, friend, or family member) or a stranger. In Study 3 (preregistered), participants completed a 15-day diary study where they reported on daily instances in which they witnessed their romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a coworker, or a stranger act unethically. Finally, in Study 4, participants came to the laboratory with a romantic partner, friend, or stranger and were presented novel immoral information about that person. In addition, we aimed to explore the underlying forces at play when responding to close others who transgress. Therefore, we measured a form of act minimization and transgressor decoupling (Study 1 and 3) and attempted to manipulate these constructs through a guided rationalization exercise (Study 2). To aid in the transparency of our work we have made all our data, syntax, materials, and replications for these studies available on our Open Science Framework (OSF; https://osf.io/9utgm/?view_only=91c641b22bd2453d91243219237839db).

To examine our outcomes of interest, we used emotional, cognitive, and behavioral intention measures. To measure responses to the transgressor, we gathered participants' other-critical emotions toward the transgressor, ratings of the their morality, and desire to punish and/or criticize them (Study 3). To measure the effect on the relationship, we assessed closeness, commitment, and dependence (Studies 3 and 4). To measure the impact on the self, we collected participants' self-conscious emotions (Studies 1–4) and ratings of their own morality (Studies 2–4).

In each study, our primary focus was on the differences between responses to the unethical behavior of close others and strangers (and acquaintances in Studies 3 and 4). However, to ensure that our effects were not limited to a particular type of close other, we included conditions with different types of close bonds (romantic partner, friend, or family member) and discuss whether the pattern of effects differ depending on the type of close relationship. Although close relationships share common psychological features, they also differ from one another in potentially important ways. For instance, only romantic relationships are characterized by romantic love (Gonzaga et al., 2001), only familial relationships introduce notions of genetic relatedness, and friendships are much easier to exit than both romantic and familial relations.

Study 1

We presented participants with standardized unethical behaviors using hypothetical scenarios in which close others (romantic partner and friend) and a stranger were depicted acting immorally, allowing us to vary only the participant's relationship to the transgressor. We used a within-subjects design to give us greater power for this initial test of our effects; however, this design precluded us from assessing moral evaluations of the self because multiple ratings of the morality of the self in quick succession would likely be heavily influenced by anchoring effects.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred and seven participants (101 male, 106 female) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). An a priori power analysis suggested a sample size of at least 164 participants per condition would detect a small to medium effect size with our repeated measures design (Cohen's $d = .2$, 80% power, error probability of .05, correlation among repeated measures estimated at .50 and nonsphericity correction $\varepsilon = 1$). Only participants who were currently in a relationship for a minimum of 1 year were eligible to participate in this study. The average relationship length was 7.68 years ($SD = 7.98$) for romantic partners and 11.64 years ($SD = 8.37$) for friends. The average age was 33.85 years ($SD = 10.71$). The sample was comprised of the following ethnicities: 72.46% White/European American, 11.11% Asian/Asian American, 7.73% Black/African American, 6.76% Hispanic/Latino American, and 1.93% Native American.

Procedure

This study used a three (immoral act: stealing money, lying about a bill, spreading a rumor) × three (transgressor: romantic partner, friend, stranger) fully crossed and randomized within-subjects design. After collecting participants' demographic information, we directed them to think of their romantic partner and a close friend and then provide the initials and gender of each person (see OSF site for all measures). Participants indicated whether they were married or cohabiting with their romantic partner and reported their relationship length and closeness via the Inclusion of Other in Self scale (a single-item pictorial measure of interpersonal closeness; IOS; Aron et al., 1992) with their romantic partner and friend. Participants then rated their partner's and friend's morality, as well as the morality of the average person to represent a stranger (see Materials for detailed descriptions).

We then presented participants three hypothetical scenarios in randomized order, randomly paired with one of the three targets as the imagined transgressor. To make the scenario more realistic, when the transgressor was a romantic partner or friend, we inserted the initials of that person and made the gender consistent with what the participant had specified. If the transgressor was a stranger, we randomized the gender of the transgressor and called them either Adam or Alice. Participants rated the morality of the transgressor and reported on their other-critical and self-conscious emotions. We also assessed variables that reflected our two theoretical rationalization strategies: act minimization and transgressor decoupling.

Materials

Piloted Scenarios. We selected three hypothetical scenarios based on a pilot study ($n = 50$). Pilot participants read 10 scenarios of unethical behaviors and were asked "How unethical is this behavior" from 1 (*not unethical at all*) to 5 *(very unethical*). We chose three behaviors to include in Study 1 that had roughly equivalent ethicality ratings and showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .60$), suggesting that we could randomly assign different targets to these behaviors without introducing the confound of different levels of act severity. The three scenarios were: (1) "Imagine a person walked by a store and decided that they really wanted a candy bar, so they went inside, picked one out, and got in line. However, when they looked in their wallet, they realized they didn't have any money on them and the bank was quite far away. While in line, they noticed a donation jar with money in it for the homeless. When the cashier looked away to bag the other customer's groceries they took a dollar from the jar to buy the candy bar, paid for it, and left eating it" ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .92$), (2) "Imagine a person went to a hotel bar and ordered three cocktails while they were with their friends. At the end of the night when they got the bill, they said they were staying at the hotel and listed a room number, charging the drinks to a stranger's hotel bill" ($M = 4.48$, $SD = .80$), and (3) "Imagine at a person's job they particularly disliked one of their coworkers. The two have not gotten along since that person arrived. One day the person decided to start a false rumor that the coworker had cheated on his wife and spread it to others in the workplace. Soon everyone thought the rumor was true" ($M = 4.61$, $SD = .66$).

Ratings of Morality. To capture baseline ratings, we asked "How moral or immoral do you think [insert romantic partner name, friend name, or the average person] is" on a scale of 1 (*very immoral*) to 7 (*very moral*). After imagining each act, we assessed the transgressor's morality with the item "How moral or immoral would you think [insert romantic partner name, friend name, or Adam or Alice] is after learning this happened?" using the same anchors as the baseline measure.

Emotions. We assessed emotional responses using the prompt, "How much would you feel the following emotions if you found out this happened?" We included anger, disgust, and contempt as three separate items ($\alpha = .87$), and shame, guilt, and embarrassment as three separate items ($\alpha = .80$), embedded among other distractor emotions: happy, upset, and compassionate from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Act Minimization. We assessed participants' perceptions of the ethicality of the act, as a form of act minimization, with the item "How ethical or unethical do you think this act is?" from 1 (*very unethical*) to 7 (*very ethical*).

Transgressor Decoupling. We assessed participants' attributions for the transgressor's behavior, as a form of transgressor decoupling, by asking participants to provide a two to three sentence open-ended response to the prompt "Why would you think [insert romantic partner name, friend name, or Adam or Alice] did this?" Five independent raters read participants' explanations for why the transgressors acted unethically and rated them as either internal or external. We instructed raters to code a response as internal if they perceived it as a dispositional attribution for the behavior, resulting from personal factors, such as traits, abilities, or feelings (e.g., "He is vindictive and petty"). We instructed raters

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to code a response as external if they perceived it as a situational attribution for the behavior, resulting from outside, situational factors (e.g., "He was so drunk that he was not thinking clearly"). Raters could code a response as both internal and external if it included both kinds of attributions. Raters showed moderate to substantial agreement for internal factors (Fleiss $\kappa = .57$) and external factors (Fleiss $\kappa = .61$).

We created an average of raters' codes, which represents what portion of raters believed each participant's attributional responses toward a transgressor's behavior was due to internal or external factors on a continuous scale of 0 (*no raters indicated internal or external factors*) to 1 *(all raters indicated internal or external factors*). Finally, we created a difference score, subtracting internal from external reasons for the transgressor's behavior to obtain a single attributions variable that identified the extent to which participants made more situational accounts of the transgressor's behavior, with greater values equating to more situational and less dispositional accounts.

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

To analyze our data, we used mixed-effects models (SPSS v23) with an unstructured covariance structure for residual errors. Covariates were grand-mean centered. We chose this type of analysis because of the presence of a time-varying covariate (baseline morality ratings of the transgressor), which was different for each transgressor. Effect size estimates are calculated as semipartial R^2 (Edwards et al., 2008).

For each of our outcomes, we began by testing the omnibus effect of condition. If the omnibus effect was significant, we then tested our primary comparison of interest—close others versus strangers. We also conducted secondary exploratory analyses comparing individual conditions (e.g., romantic partners vs. friends). We consider these analyses exploratory because we did not have any a priori hypotheses about how different types of close relationships would vary from each other, nor any expectations that romantic partners and friends would show different patterns when compared with strangers. These condition comparisons can be found in Table 1 and are reviewed in the discussion for interested readers.

Measures of the Transgressor

There was a significant effect of condition on moral judgments of transgressors, controlling for moral judgments before the transgression, $F(2, 236.74) = 3.49$, $p = .03$, $R^2 = .03$, and other-critical emotions, $F(2, 205.45) = 9.88$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .09$ (see Table 1 for means). Our planned comparisons revealed that close others were rated as more moral, $t(282.11) = 2.60$, $p = .01$, and elicited lower levels of other-critical emotions, $t(205.14) = 2.94$, $p = .004$, than strangers. Within the close other conditions, relationship length, controlling for baseline measures of closeness [IOS], did not predict moral judgments of transgressors, $F(1, 302.38) = .66$, $p = .42$, $R^2 = .002$, or other-critical emotions, $F(1, 321.39) = 1.22$, $p = .27$, $R^2 = .004$, offering some evidence that responses to close others were not entirely driven by greater background knowledge of them.

Measures of the Self

There was a significant effect of condition on self-conscious emotions, $F(2, 204.84) = 75.66$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .42$. Participants reported higher levels of self-conscious emotions in response to close others compared with strangers, $t(204.83) = 11.42$, $p < .001$.

Rationalization Strategies: Act Minimization and Transgressor Decoupling

There was a marginally significant effect of condition on our measure of act minimization, $F(2, 204.82) = 2.91$, $p = .06$, $R^2 = .03$, and a significant effect on our measure of transgressor decoupling, $F(2, 206.00) = 18.72$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .15$. Participants rated the same act as more ethical when it committed by close others than strangers, $t(204.92) = 2.41$, $p = .02$ and used relatively more situational than dispositional attributions for their behavior, $t(206) = 6.00$, $p < .001$.

We used a Monte-Carlo simulation to examine the simultaneous indirect effect of act minimization and transgressor decoupling on each of our outcomes individually, with 10,000 resamples in the MLmed Beta 2 (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020) macro for SPSS v23.0 (IBM Corp., 2016) at 95% confidence intervals (CIs). We found an indirect effect for act minimization (95% CI [−.11, −.01] and transgressor decoupling (95% CI [−.09, −.01]) on other-critical emotions and a marginal indirect effect for transgressor decoupling on ratings of the transgressor's morality (95% CI [.00, .07]).[1] However, we did not find an indirect effect for act minimization (95% CI [−.03, .16]) on ratings of the transgressor's morality, nor any indirect effects of act minimization (95% CI [−.05, .00]) and transgressor decoupling (95% CI [−.01, .07]) on self-conscious emotions.

Discussion

Participants reported less negative responses to close others who transgressed, feeling less anger, contempt, and disgust toward them and evaluating them as more moral than strangers, but also reported more negative responses toward the self, feeling more shame, guilt, and embarrassment despite having no role in the unethical act. Minimizing the act and decoupling the act from the transgressor mediated the emotional responses toward the transgressor, but only transgressor decoupling mediated evaluations of their morality. Unsurprisingly, these strategies did not explain why individuals felt comparatively higher levels of self-conscious emotions when close others transgressed.

Relationship length, controlling for baseline ratings of closeness, did not predict any measures of the transgressor, providing some evidence that background information about close others does not drive greater leniency toward them. There were no consistent patterns of effects that differentiated between specific types of close relationships. Although romantic partners elicited higher levels of self-conscious emotions than friends, both still reported significantly higher levels compared with strangers. The only exception to this pattern was that romantic partners and strangers

[1] Mediation figures and analyses investigating internal and external attributions separately can be found in the online supplemental materials for this study and Study 3.

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Table 1
Means (Standard Deviations) for Each Condition for Study 1

	Transgressor		Self	Rationalization	
Condition	Moral judgment	Other-critical emotions	Self-conscious emotions	Act minimization	Transgressor decoupling
Stranger	2.11 (1.30)[a]	2.96 (1.24)[a]	1.85 (1.06)[a]	1.90 (1.10)[a]	−0.57 (0.54)[a]
Close other	2.56 (1.48)	2.76 (1.22)	2.66 (1.14)	2.07 (1.14)	−0.29 (0.68)
Romantic partner	2.61 (1.60)[b]	2.89 (1.29)[a]	2.89 (1.17)[b]	2.06 (1.14)[b]	−0.34 (0.65)[b]
Friend	2.52 (1.35)[b]	2.64 (1.13)[b]	2.42 (1.07)[c]	2.08 (1.14)[b]	−0.25 (0.70)[b]

Note. Nonsignificant groups within a column are indicated with the same letter superscripts. However, comparisons with close others are not indicated with superscripts and are described in the main text.

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elicited roughly equivalent levels of other-critical emotions, whereas friends elicited significantly lower levels.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate our findings from Study 1 using actual responses to unethical acts by asking participants to recall a close other's or stranger's immoral behavior. In addition, we allowed participants to consider family members as well as friends or romantic partners. Family members are a particularly interesting case of close relationship because we do not choose our family, unlike our romantic partners and friends. Therefore, it is important to understand whether our effects hold when including this type of close relationship. Further, we added a measure of participants' ratings of their own morality, allowing us to examine the impact to the self beyond self-conscious emotions.

We also attempted to manipulate our two theoretical strategies for rationalization (act minimization and transgressor decoupling) to further explore their role in generating more lenient judgments. We guided half of our participants through a rationalization prompt after recalling the unethical event by a stranger or close other. We designed this manipulation to present a more comprehensive list of specific rationalizations participants could use, without explicitly labeling them as such, but also allowed for flexibility in selecting the reasons that participants felt best suited the particular act they recalled. We expected that participants instructed to rationalize would judge the transgressor more leniently than those who did not receive these instructions. However, we also predicted that this effect would be moderated by relationship type such that receiving instructions to rationalize would have a larger impact on the stranger condition than the close other condition. Because Study 1 suggested close others are already engaging in more rationalization than strangers to begin with, instructing close others to rationalize may only incrementally impact their judgments of the transgressor. We did not expect any main effects of rationalization or interactions with relationship type for our self-referential variables, which tend to be stronger for close others

Method

Participants

Four-hundred and ninety-nine participants were recruited from Prolific Academic. We removed participants who did not complete the recall task, who did not follow directions, or failed the attention check (n = 65). Our remaining sample size was 434 participants (250 men, 179 women, five prefer not to say). In Study 1, our omnibus effects were small to medium in size (Cohen, 1992; Edwards et al., 2008). Therefore, an a priori power analysis suggested a total sample size of at least 492 participants (effect size f = .15, 80% power, error probability of .05) would be sufficient for a between-subjects design with four conditions.

The average relationship length for romantic partners 6.44 years (SD = 6.72) and 8.69 (SD = 6.92) for friends. The average age was 28.77 years (SD = 10.72). The sample was comprised of the following ethnicities: 82.03% White/European American, 6.68% Hispanic/Latino American, 3.22% Black/African American, 6.67%, 2.76% Asian/Asian American, .69% Native American, .69% Middle Eastern, and 3.92% Other.

Procedure

This study used a 2 (relationship type: close other or stranger) × 2 (instructions: rationalization or control) between-subjects design. We first collected demographic information, then randomly assigned participants to recall a time when they witnessed or heard about a close other or a stranger committing an unethical act (see OSF for all measures). We asked participants to "Please think about a situation when you saw or heard about your current romantic partner, close friend, or a family member doing something that you did not believe was the right thing to do, something that you wouldn't do yourself. This is because you thought what he or she did was wrong, unethical, or immoral." We told participants that we were only interested in acts that did not directly involve themselves (e.g., the participant was not the target or an accomplice). We provided participants with a few examples of acts, such as lying, being mean to someone, stealing something, or committing a crime.

Following the recall task, we provided half our participants with additional instructions: "While recalling this situation, please do your best to provide reasoning for this person's behavior. Select 3 reasons from the list below that are the most relevant for the behavior you recalled. We will ask you to write a sentence about each of the 3 reasons you select." Participants were shown six possible reasons that fell under our two categories of act minimization: *the behavior wasn't that bad compared to other unethical acts*, *the act wasn't that harmful*, and transgressor decoupling: *social pressures caused the person to act this way, other people are to blame for their behavior, life circumstances caused this behavior, their behavior was justified*. Participants then expanded in one to two sentences on each reason they selected.

Following these instructions or directly after the recall task in the control condition, participants briefly described the act in a phrase, which was later coded for severity, and reported how long ago the act happened from 1 (*less than 1 month ago*), (*1–6 months ago*), 3 (*7–11 months ago*), 4 (*1–5 years ago*), and 5 (*greater than 5 years ago*).[2] Participants rated the morality of the transgressor and themselves, as well as their emotional responses (see Materials). Lastly, at the end of the survey, we asked participants "Do you think you were able to successfully provide reasons, rationale, or justifications for this person's behavior?" (*Yes* or *No*).

Materials

Ratings of Morality. Because the event occurred in the past, we could not collect baseline ratings of the transgressor's morality. Therefore, after recalling the unethical event, we assessed ratings of the transgressor's morality using the following prompt, "After this event happened, how much (if at all) did it change how moral or immoral you thought [your partner, your friend, your family member, or this person] was from 1 (*much more immoral*) to 7 (*much more moral*). To assess participants' ratings of their own morality, we asked "Right after this event happened, how much (if at all) did it make you feel differently about your own morality?" on a scale from 1 (*I felt much more immoral*) to 7 (*I felt much more moral*).

Emotions. To assess emotional responses, we asked "How much did you feel the following emotions when you found out this happened?" from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We created composites of other-critical emotions (anger, disgust, and contempt; $\alpha = .76$) and self-conscious emotions (shame, guilt, and embarrassment; $\alpha = .71$) that were embedded among three distractor emotions: happy, upset, and compassionate.

Coded Act Severity. To create a more objective measure of act severity, we trained five independent raters to code the unethical acts reported by participants in their open-ended responses. After participating in a training session, raters coded each event's severity from 0 (*not bad at all*) to 3 (*very bad*). Raters demonstrated good reliability measured by a two-way random intraclass coefficient (intraclass correlation coefficient [ICC], average measures = .91).

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

We report the main effects and interaction between relationship type (close other versus stranger) and instructions (rationalization versus control) and include all simple effects in Table 2. Although we ran all analyses with our full sample, a notable number of participants (close others: $n = 38$; strangers $n = 58$) said they failed to successfully follow the instructions to rationalize. Therefore, we have included analyses with this smaller sample in the online supplemental materials. In addition, all analyses by condition controlled for coded severity of the act since there was a significant effect of participants' relationship with the transgressor on severity, $F(1, 426) = 21.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Analyses without this covariate can be found in the online supplemental materials. For both of these supplemental analyses, the overall patterns remained the same or were stronger in this smaller sample.

Measures of the Transgressor

For moral judgments of transgressors, there was a main effect of relationship type (close others vs. strangers), $F(1, 423) = 11.83$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03^2$, but no main effect of instructions, $F(1, 423) = 2.22$, $p = .14$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, nor an interaction, $F(1, 423) = .002$, $p = .96$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. For other-critical emotions, there was a main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 423) = 30.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, and instructions, $F(1, 423) = 7.65$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, but no significant interaction, $F(1, 423) = .001$, $p = .97$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. Finally, within the close other condition, relationship length did not predict moral judgments of transgressors, $F(2, 141) = 1.64$, $p = .20$, $R^2 = .02$, nor other-critical emotions, $F(2, 141) = .06$, $p = .94$, $R^2 = .001$.

Measures of the Self

For moral judgments of the self, there was a main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 423) = 4.23$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, but not instructions, $F(1, 423) = .08$, $p = .78$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, nor an interaction, $F(1, 423) = .29$, $p = .59$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. For self-conscious emotions, there was a significant main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 423) = 5.32$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, a marginal effect of instructions, $F(1, 423) = 3.41$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 423) = 2.02$, $p = .16$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$

Discussion

We found a main effect of relationship type, which showed a similar pattern of results to Study 1. Participants felt less anger, contempt, and disgust toward close others and evaluated them as more moral, but felt more shame, guilt, and embarrassment and reported somewhat more negative evaluations of their own morality when recalling unethical acts. These effects also emerged when examining contrasts between our control conditions, which did not include any instructions to rationalize. We replicated these effects when including family members as well as friends and romantic partners, though they were part of the larger group of close others, suggesting that family members may follow the same pattern. As in Study 1, relationship length did not predict any outcomes assessing perceptions of the transgressor, providing some evidence that these effects are likely not solely due to having additional background information about close others.

Our findings for rationalization were less clear. We found a main effect of our directed rationalization task on other-critical emotions, but not morality judgements of the transgressor. We did not find any interactions between relationship type and instructions, failing to support our hypothesis that it is a mediating factor explaining more lenient judgments of closer others than strangers. This null effect may result from directing participants to rationalize, which is quite different from them engaging in it spontaneously on their own. An exploratory comparison between strangers who were instructed to rationalize and close others who were not instructed to rationalize showed similarly lenient judgments of the transgressor. This finding would be in keeping with the notion that close others already engage in spontaneous rationalization, allowing strangers to evoke similar responses only when instructed to

[2] We controlled for how long ago the act occurred in exploratory post hoc analyses. All our effects held when adding this control variable.

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Table 2
Means (Standard Deviations) for Each Condition for Study 2

			Transgressor		Self	
Relationship type	Instructions	Act severity	Moral judgment	Other-critical emotions	Moral judgment	Self-conscious emotions
Stranger	Control	1.98 (0.73)[a]	2.53 (1.30)[a]	3.37 (0.96)[a]	4.70 (1.31)[a†]	2.04 (0.87)[a]
	Rationalize	1.86 (0.66)[a]	2.76 (1.43)[ab]	3.06 (0.98)[b]	4.58 (1.33)[ab]	2.00 (0.83)[a]
Close other	Control	1.64 (0.68)[b]	3.04 (1.55)[bc]	2.73 (1.10)[b]	4.35 (1.23)[b]	2.38 (0.95)[b]
	Rationalize	1.57 (0.74)[b]	3.29 (1.16)[c]	2.41 (1.08)[c]	4.38 (1.03)[a†b]	2.08 (0.96)[a]

Note. Nonsignificant groups within a column are indicated with the same letter superscripts. Marginal groups are both indicated with † next to the same letter superscripts.

rationalize. However, these findings do not show support for a causal test of our mechanism of rationalization.

Study 3 (Preregistered)

In Study 3, we utilized a more naturalistic method of experience sampling to capture daily observations of transgressions modeled after past work on unethical behavior in everyday life (Hofmann et al., 2014, 2018). This method reduced the retrospective bias present in Study 2, where participants could report events that occurred months or years earlier, captured more common everyday transgressions, and allowed us to assess the frequency people actually observe transgressions by close others and strangers in daily life. We included family members as a separate category of close other since Study 2 suggested our results also hold for this type of close other. We also included coworkers as an additional comparison group in this study to represent acquaintances, which allowed us to further examine whether having prior information about a person impacts responses to their transgressions. Given our failure to find support for a causal mediation of rationalization in Study 2, we included our two strategies for rationalization in this study to further examine its mediating effect when engaged in spontaneously.

We further explored our effects by measuring two new variables. First, we measured punitive motivations, which extends our current findings to the realm of behavioral intentions and make up an important facet of moral outrage (Tetlock et al., 2000). Second, we assessed the theoretically relevant constructs that characterize close relationships: closeness, commitment, and dependence. We measured baseline reports of closeness, commitment, and dependence before the unethical events to ensure that our different conditions of relationship type indeed reflect the underlying psychological features that characterize close bonds. We also collected these variables after the transgressions occurred to examine how they were impacted after an instance of unethical behavior. We focus on comparing coworkers to close others for these relationship variables since comparisons with strangers make little sense.

Method

Participants

We recruited 186 people from MTurk to complete our initial baseline survey for this study. From that sample, 141 people qualified (reported baseline data for at least five or more friends, family members, and coworkers, and passed all attention checks) and completed the diary portion of the study. Because this is the first study of its kind examining unethical instances by close others, we did not know how many instances to expect within our 15-day period. Therefore, we aimed to have about 100 participants reporting across 15 days for up to 1,500 responses. Our final sample included 113 participants who reported at least one unethical event over the course of the diary (44 men, 68 women, one preferred not to say). Participants had to be in a romantic relationship for a minimum of 1 year and currently be employed or a student to participate. Peers, who were not friends, could be considered coworkers for students.

The average relationship length was 13.23 years (SD = 8.59) for romantic partners, 14.13 years (SD = 9.65) for friends, and 7.09 (SD = 5.62) for coworkers. The average age was 38.65 years (SD = 10.51). The sample was comprised of the following ethnicities: 79.65% White/European American, 8.85% Black/African American, 6.19% Asian/Asian American, 1.77% Hispanic/Latino American, .88% Native American, and 2.65% other or mixed race.

Procedure

This study used an experience sampling design in which each day, for 15 days, participants were given the opportunity to report on whether they witnessed or learned of an unethical act committed by a partner, friend, family member, coworker, and stranger. For each target they reported acting unethically, participants completed follow-up questions. If a participant did not report witnessing or learning of an unethical act committed by a particular type of target (e.g., a family member) on a given day, they completed filler questions to equalize the length of the daily survey. Therefore, participants could report between zero and five acts per day, up to one unethical act for each target type.

Participants first took part in a baseline survey to gather demographic information about participants, baseline measures about the targets, and ensured participants qualified for the study (see OSF site for all measures). Participants then reported the first name and last initial of: (1) their romantic partner, as well as their ten: (2) closest friends, (3) family members, and (4) coworkers with whom they spend the most time. Participants were told that if they considered their coworker to be a close friend, they should name that person in their close friend category. For their partner, each friend, and each coworker, participants reported on how long they had been in a relationship, friendship, or had known each individual, respectively. To measure baseline perceptions, participants then rated the morality of each person they listed, the morality of the average person (stranger), and their own morality (see Materials). To assess baseline perceptions of their relationship with each person they listed, participants also reported their perceptions of closeness, commitment, and dependence to that person.

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They also filled out a variety of other measures for another unrelated research project.

The following evening, all qualified participants received the first daily survey. The survey was the same every day and participants were sent reminder emails and a link to complete the survey each night for fifteen nights. In the daily survey, participants first stated whether they witnessed or learned of any unethical acts committed by their romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a coworker, or a stranger that day. For each target type, participants were asked "Over the course of the day, have you witnessed or heard about [your romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a coworker, or a stranger] act in a way that you consider to be unethical or immoral?" As in Study 2, participants were told that we were only interested in acts that did not directly involve the participant and were provided a few examples. If participants witnessed a friend, family member, or coworker act unethically, they were asked the first name and the initial of the last name of the person they witnessed so we could link it with their baseline survey. Therefore, participants could report up to one incident for each of the five target types each day.

If participants reported witnessing or learning of an unethical act, they were asked to describe the act done by each target with the following prompt: "You indicated that today you witnessed or heard about [your romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a coworker, or a stranger] act unethically. In a short phrase or sentence, please recall what they did." This description was later coded by research assistants for act severity. Then, for each act, participants reported on the morality of the transgressor and themselves, their other-critical and self-conscious emotions, and their desire to punish and/or criticize the transgressor. They also reported their perceptions of closeness, commitment, and dependence with the transgressor. Further, we measured variables that reflected our two theoretical rationalization strategies: act minimization and transgressor decoupling.

Materials

Relationship Variables. For each target listed in the baseline survey and for a hypothetical person (stranger), participants reported on the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992) and four items that reflect the Investment Model Scale, which measures commitment and three bases of dependence (satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives; "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with this person"; "I feel satisfied with our relationship"; "I am highly invested in my relationship with this person"; "I am open to pursuing alternatives to my current relationship with this person"; Rusbult et al., 1998) on a scale of 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*agree completely*). We made a composite score of these items since they showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .74$). After each act, participants again completed the IOS and a one item measure that reflected the Investment model Scale ("Please indicate the degree to which you feel committed, satisfied, and invested in your current relationship with [insert name or this stranger] after you witnessed or heard about this act" from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*completely*; $r = .81$).

Ratings of Morality. To assess baseline ratings of morality, we asked "How moral or immoral do you think [insert name (romantic partner, friend, family member, coworker conditions) or the average person (stranger condition)] is?" as well as "How moral or immoral do you think you are?" on a scale of −5 (*very immoral*) to 5 (*very moral*). To assess morality after reporting the unethical event, we asked "After you witnessed or heard about this act, how moral or immoral do you think [insert name or this stranger] is?" and "After you witnessed or heard about this act, how moral or immoral do you think you are?" using the same anchors.

Emotions. To assess emotional responses toward the transgressor, we asked "How much did you feel the following emotions when you found out [insert name or this stranger] acted that way?" on a scale of 1 *(not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Angry, disgusted, and/or contemptuous and ashamed, guilty, and/or embarrassed were presented as triplets rather than separate emotions to reduce the burden on participants of a three-item measure.

Desire to Punish. We asked: "How much do you think [insert name or this stranger] should be punished, or reprimanded (criticized) for this behavior?" on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Act Minimization. We assessed participants' perceptions of the ethicality of the act, as a form of act minimization, with the item "How moral or immoral do you think the act was?" using the same anchors as the morality ratings.

Transgressor Decoupling. We assessed participants' attributions for the transgressor's behavior as a form of transgressor decoupling. Six independent raters read the attributional causes of the transgressors' behaviors and coded them as either internal or external. The coding scheme was the same as in Study 1. The raters showed fair agreement for internal factors (Fleiss $\kappa = .33$) and external factors (Fleiss $\kappa = .30$). Again, for analyses, we took the average of raters' codes and created a difference score, subtracting internal from external reasons for the transgressor's behavior to obtain a single attributions variable.

Act Severity. Observers coded open-ended descriptions of act severity. We trained three independent raters to code the unethical acts reported by participants using the same methods as Study 2. Again, raters demonstrated good reliability measured by a two-way random intraclass coefficient (average measures ICC = .85).

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

The data collected from the daily diaries consisted of up to five incidents of unethical behavior, nested within up to fifteen daily diaries, nested within each individual. The data did not violate assumptions of independence at the day level but did at the incident level, so we nested incidents within participants. As indicated in our preregistration, we analyzed our data using multilevel modeling (Mixed Models, SPSS v23) and began with an unstructured covariance matrix for random effects. However, all of our models in this study indicated lack of variation in the data for random effects. Therefore, despite the models technically converging, we did deviate from our original preregistration by using a diagonal covariance matrix for random effect models because we received warnings about our models and they failed to output denominator degrees of freedom and a significance test. We made this modification by following the recommendations for managing warning and errors in mixed model generation (West et al., 2014). Covariates were grand-mean centered.

We first report the omnibus effect of condition. Because we had both strangers and coworkers (acquaintances) as control conditions, we then focused on both comparisons with close others for our outcomes. However, when comparing relationship variables, we only compare close others to coworkers because relationship variables are hard to interpret in the context of strangers. Comparisons between individual conditions can be found in Table 3. Effect size estimates are calculated as semipartial R^2. Analyses without this covariate can be found in the online supplemental materials.

Descriptive Statistics

Participants reported witnessing or hearing a total of 735 incidents of unethical behavior over the span of the diary. The transgressor was a romantic partner in 111 incidents (15.10%), a friend in 116 incidents (15.80%), a family member in 126 incidents (17.10%), a coworker in 157 incidents (21.40%), and a stranger in 225 incidents (30.60%). These findings suggest that, on average, participants in our sample tended to witness or hear about five incidents over the course of the 15-day diary, averaging to about 2.5 acts per week.

We did not analyze 103 of the reported incidents because the actors of these transgressions did not have ratings in the baseline survey. Therefore, we used 632 instances of unethical behavior in our analyses. As in Study 2, all analyses by condition controlled for coded severity of the act since there was an effect of condition on severity, $F(4, 52.88) = 7.78$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .37$ (see Table 3 for individual comparisons). Acts committed by close others were coded as significantly less severe than strangers, $t(113.72) = 3.67$, $p < .001$, and marginally less severe than coworkers, $t(52.24) = 1.97$, $p = .05$.

Manipulation Check

As expected, there was a significant effect of condition for closeness, commitment, and dependence at baseline, $F(4, 81.80) = 86.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .81$, illustrating that relationship type reflected underlying differences in these measures. Participants reported significantly higher levels of closeness, commitment, and dependence with close others compared with coworkers, $t(91.00) = 4.65$, $p < .001$.[3] Comparisons between types of close others are shown in Table 3.

Measures of the Transgressor

In keeping with our previous findings, there was a significant effect of condition on moral judgments of transgressors, controlling for baseline morality ratings, $F(4, 85.37) = 10.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .34$, other-critical emotions, $F(4, 60.85) = 9.37$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .38$, and the desire to punish, reprimand or criticize the transgressor, $F(4, 83.72) = 7.82$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .27$. Close others were rated as more moral, $t(174.32) = 6.40$, $p < .001$, elicited lower levels of other-critical emotions, $t(139.22) = 6.06$, $p < .001$, and evoked a lower desire to punish, reprimand, or criticize, $t(145.73) = 5.55$, $p < .001$, than strangers. Compared with coworkers, close others were rated as more moral, $t(99.63) = 2.46$, $p = .02$, and evoked a lower desire to punish, reprimand, or criticize, $t(70.18) = 2.36$, $p = .02$, but elicited equivalent levels of other-critical emotions, $t(60.45) = .96$, $p = .34$. Within the close other and coworker conditions, relationship length, controlling for baseline ratings of closeness [IOS], did not predict moral judgments of transgressors, $F(1, 74.09) = 1.16$, $p = .28$, $R^2 = .02$, other-critical emotions, $F(1, 72.10) = .03$, $p = .87$, $R^2 < .001$, or the desire to punish and/or criticize, $F(1, 78.85) = .06$, $p = .81$, $R^2 < .001$.

Measures of the Relationship

There was a significant effect of condition on closeness, commitment, and dependence, $F(4, 73.62) = 25.39$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .58$. Participants reported higher levels of closeness, commitment, and dependence, $t(81.89) = 4.28$, $p < .001$, for close others than coworkers, controlling for baseline ratings of closeness, commitment, and dependence.[4] Within the close other and coworker conditions, relationship length, controlling for baseline ratings of closeness [IOS], did not predict differences in closeness, commitment, and dependence, $F(1, 42.24) = .29$, $p = .59$, $R^2 = .01$.

Measures of the Self

There was no effect of condition on participants' ratings of their own morality controlling for baseline morality ratings, $F(4, 83.80) = 1.39$, $p = .25$, $R^2 = .06$, but a marginally significant effect of condition on self-conscious emotions, $F(4, 69.65) = 2.14$, $p = .09$, $R^2 = .11$. Participants reported higher levels of self-conscious emotions in response to close others compared with strangers, $t(130.80) = 2.46$, $p = .02$, but not coworkers, $t(66.93) = 1.63$, $p = .11$. One concern about our within-subjects design was that on days that participants saw more than one transgression, they rated their own morality multiple times in a nightly session that may have led to anchoring effects (similar to our concern for Study 1). Therefore, we conducted an additional post hoc exploratory analysis selecting the days in which participants witnessed only one transgression. When participants witnessed only one transgression per day, there was a significant effect of condition on participants' ratings of their own morality $F(4, 57.86) = 4.17$, $p = .005$, $R^2 = .22$, controlling for baseline morality ratings and coded act severity. Participants felt significantly less moral in response to close others ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.76$) compared with strangers ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(114.89) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, but not compared with coworkers ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 2.21$), $t(37.32) = .93$, $p = .36$.

Rationalization Strategies: Act Minimization and Transgressor Decoupling

There was a significant effect of condition on act minimization, $F(4, 100.58) = 6.55$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .21$, and transgressor decoupling, $F(4, 99.33) = 2.84$, $p = .03$, $R^2 = .71$. Participants rated the acts as more ethical when committed by close others compared with strangers, $t(150.12) = 4.42$, $p < .001$, and coworkers, $t(86.50) = 2.05$, $p = .04$. However, unlike past studies, the use of

[3] We did gather measures of relationship for a hypothetical stranger in the baseline survey. Close others did receive higher ratings on this measure than strangers, $t(113.90) = 15.12$, $p < 0.001$. However, the relationship measure is hard to interpret since individuals do not have a relationship with strangers and the stranger rating represents only one hypothetical stranger, whereas the close other ratings encompass many individuals.

[4] We also found that close others experienced higher levels of closeness, commitment, and dependence than strangers, $t(228.38) = 9.85$, $p < 0.001$, controlling for baseline ratings. However, again, these findings are hard to interpret because we do not have a baseline measure of these specific strangers and individuals do not typically have a relationship with strangers.

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Table 3
Means (Standard Deviations) for Each Condition for Study 3

Condition	Act severity	Manipulation check	Transgressor			Relationship	Self		Rationalization	
		Relationship baseline	Moral judgment	Other-critical emotions	Punish, reprimand, or criticize	Relationship follow-up	Moral judgment	Self-conscious emotions	Act minimization	Transgressor decoupling
Stranger	1.70 (0.66)^{a}	2.56 (0.94)^{a}	−2.74 (2.06)^{a}	3.60 (1.23)^{a}	3.24 (1.26)^{a}	1.34 (1.23)^{a}	2.82 (2.19)^{ab}	1.84 (1.29)^{a}	−2.94 (1.84)^{ad}	−0.19 (0.64)^{a}
Coworker	1.39 (0.39)^{b}	4.26 (1.49)^{d}	−1.61 (2.19)^{d}	2.85 (1.27)^{b}	2.80 (1.00)^{ac}	3.62 (2.00)^{b}	2.71 (2.12)^{ab}	2.21 (1.22)^{ab}	−2.55 (1.53)^{ac}	0.04 (0.61)^{b}
Close others	1.51 (0.50)	5.26 (1.51)	−0.54 (2.59)	2.71 (1.21)	2.43 (1.01)	5.56 (2.10)	2.60 (1.85)	2.49 (1.21)	−1.95 (1.65)	−0.08 (0.61)
Romantic partner	1.40 (0.52)^{b}	5.59 (1.08)^{b}	0.05 (2.63)^{b}	2.65 (1.26)^{b}	2.38 (1.15)^{b}	6.25 (1.94)^{c}	2.17 (1.98)^{ab}	2.57 (1.22)^{b}	−1.36 (1.73)^{b}	0.01 (0.63)^{b}
Friend	1.62 (0.51)^{ac}	5.32 (1.14)^{c}	−0.65 (2.56)^{bc}	2.65 (1.23)^{b}	2.48 (0.98)^{bc}	5.09 (1.87)^{d}	2.67 (1.84)^{ab}	2.51 (1.24)^{b}	−2.41 (1.59)^{acd}	−0.09 (0.59)^{ab}
Family	1.52 (0.45)^{bc}	4.81 (2.09)^{cd}	−1.13 (2.44)^{bcd}	2.83 (1.14)^{b}	2.44 (0.86)^{bc}	5.21 (2.30)^{cd}	3.03 (1.58)^{a}	2.37 (1.17)^{b}	−2.18 (1.42)^{bc}	−0.18 (0.59)^{a}

Note. Nonsignificant groups within a column are indicated with the same letter superscripts. Superscripts are omitted for the close others, which represent a composite of romantic partner, friend, and family conditions. However, comparisons of close others to strangers and coworkers can be found in the main text.

relatively more external compared with internal attributions did not reach significance when comparing close others to strangers, $t(124.50) = 1.57$, $p = .12$, or coworkers, $t(74.96) = 1.50$, $p = .14$.

We conducted mediation analyses using the same protocol as Study 1 in the MLmed Beta 2 (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020) macro for SPSS v23.0 (IBM Corp., 2016). For all of our mediation models we compared close others to strangers, except for our relationship variables where we compare close others to acquaintances (coworkers). There was an indirect effect of act minimization for ratings of the transgressor's morality, (95% CI [.20, .70]), other-critical emotions (95% CI [−.45, −.16]), and the desire to punish, reprimand, and/or criticize (95% CI [−.44, −.15]), and self-conscious emotions (95% CI [−.24, −.04]), but not for our relationship measures (95% CI [−.03, .17]) or participants' own morality (95% CI [−.10, .05]).[5] There were no significant indirect effects of transgressor decoupling for any measures (ratings of the transgressor's morality (95% CI [−.03, .04]), other-critical emotions (95% CI [−.05, .03], the desire to punish, reprimand, and/or criticize (95% CI [−.03, .02]), the relationship (95% CI [−.15, .01]), the ratings of self (95% CI [−.02, .03]), or self-conscious emotions (95% CI [−.01, .01])).

Discussion

There was a high prevalence of unethical acts committed by close others during the daily diary, supporting claims for the importance of studying how social bonds impact moral perception. As in earlier studies, participants again showed less negative responses to close others who transgressed compared with strangers, but simultaneously showed signs of more negative responses to the self. Specifically, participants felt less anger, contempt, and disgust toward close others, rated them as more moral, and wanted to punish or criticize them less than strangers. They also experienced smaller consequences for their relationship outcomes (compared with coworkers). However, they reported more shame, guilt, and embarrassment when close others transgressed, though ratings of their own morality were only more greatly reduced when we restricted our analyses to days in which participants only reported their own morality once during a survey session.

Though participants again showed signs of minimizing the act and decoupling the act from the transgressor, as they did in Study 1, only minimizing the act consistently explained more lenient responses to the transgressor. This would suggest that act minimization may play a role in more lenient judgments; however, these findings need to be considered in the context of Study 2, which did not find an effect of manipulating either of these rationalization strategies. Our effects were not likely due to having additional background information about close others. Differences between close others and coworkers mostly followed the same pattern as comparisons between close others and strangers across our measures. In addition, in keeping with Studies 1 and 2, relationship length, controlling for baseline closeness ratings, did not predict any outcomes examining perceptions of the transgressor or relationship. Finally, as in our previous studies, romantic partners and friends showed similar effects across our outcomes. For seven of

[5] Although we tested this mediation model comparing close others to coworkers to be more conservative, the mediation between close others and strangers showed similar effects (see online supplemental materials).

our eight analyses, the groups did not differ significantly from one another.

Study 4

In our final study, dyads learned novel and standardized unethical information in the laboratory, allowing us to gather responses moments after the participant learned this new information about their partner. We also used an undergraduate sample for this study to ensure our effects generalize and to avoid concerns about relying on online samples (Chandler et al., 2013; Paolacci et al., 2010; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). This study helps address one potential confound in Studies 2 and 3, which inherently includes a selection bias for participants who remained in their relationships despite witnessing their close other's bad actions and may be more likely to be lenient to their close other.

We created an acquaintance relationship between strangers by having them participate in a task to get to know one another, to speak to concerns that the unethical act is the only piece of information an observer knows about a stranger, which may explain harsher perceptions of a stranger compared with a close other. We also introduced a more rigorous measure of moral character by having participants rate themselves and their partner on moral traits, rather than having participants simply respond to how moral or immoral the transgressor was. Because these were supposed to be spontaneous disclosures of immoral behavior, we could not collect our measures of act minimization and transgressor decoupling.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred and ninety-two people (146 dyads) from a Canadian university participated in this study for course credit in a psychology course or for payment. We removed 21 (7.19%) participants who did not believe the manipulation or guessed the hypothesis of the study. Of those removed, eleven participants were from the romantic partner condition, six participants from the friend condition, and four participants from the stranger condition. Our remaining sample size was 271 participants (72 men, 198 women, one preferred not to say). Based on the results from Studies 1 and 2, which revealed small to medium effect sizes, an a priori power analysis suggested a total sample size of at least 246 participants (Effect size $f = .20$, 80% power, error probability of .05, three groups) using a between-subjects design for this study.

The average relationship length was 1.81 years ($SD = 1.01$) for romantic partners and 3.39 years ($SD = 3.08$) for close friends. The average age was 18.84 years ($SD = 1.74$). The sample was comprised of the following ethnicities: 35.27% Asian/Asian American, 18.15% White/European American, 13.36% Middle Eastern, 7.19% Black/African American, 5.82% Hispanic/Latino American, .34% First Nations and 19.68% other or mixed race.

Procedure

We used a between-subjects design, in which participants were randomly assigned to learn unethical information about either their romantic partner, a close friend, or a stranger (see OSF site for all measures). Participants arrived at the lab with a romantic partner, a close friend, or another student whom they did not know. Only participants who had been in a romantic relationship or friendship for longer than a year could bring their romantic partner or friend. Participants were told that this study was about impression formation and that it would take place across three rounds. They were told that each round would involve: (1) providing information about themselves, (2) reading and responding to information provided by their study-partner, (3) engaging in a face-to-face discussion about the information each person had shared, and (4) completing follow-up surveys based on the discussion and the information they learned. Participants were told that they would be responding to different questions than their study-partner across the three rounds.

Participants were first separated into different rooms where they provided demographic information. Next, participants reported on baseline perceptions of their own morality. Participants also provided some filler information about their current emotional state. We then began round one. Round one was intended to convince participants that round two was real, to obtain additional baseline measures, and to provide background information that was important in our stranger condition. A research assistant separately asked each participant a series of three questions, ostensibly aimed at revealing a particular personality characteristic or trait. Each participant answered a different set of questions (see Materials). As the participants were speaking, the research assistant summarized participants' answers on a piece of paper. After both participants answered their questions, the research assistant visited each participant's room, swapping their answers so that the participants could read their study-partner's responses. Both participants were told to read through the responses, copy them into a survey for our records, and answer a follow-up question (unrelated to our analyses) about each response. This was done to ensure they thoroughly read the responses. Participants then reported on some of their study-partner's traits, their emotions, and their own traits. These were also not used for any analyses, but instead were intended to make their inclusion in round two appear more natural. Once both participants completed the survey, they were brought to the same room and given 3 minutes to discuss their responses to the questions of round one together. After 3 minutes, the research assistant took the participants back to their separate rooms. Following the discussion, we collected baseline measures of participants' perceptions of their study-partner, including ratings of their morality and ratings of perceived closeness, commitment, and dependence with their study-partner.

In round two, we presented novel false immoral information to both participants about their study-partner. As in round one, participants were each asked to respond to three questions by the experimenter. However, unbeknownst to participants, in this round they both responded to the same questions. Instead of swapping their actual answers, the research assistant brought both participants the same set of a prefilled answers, ostensibly completed by their study-partner. On this document, participants had responded to three morality-related questions with answers that suggested they had behaved unethically (i.e., had engaged in lying, plagiarism, and acted selfishly; see Materials for questions and prefilled responses). As in round one, participants were told to read through their study-partner's responses, copy them into the survey, and respond to a follow-up question. Participants reported on their study-partner and their own moral traits, their other-critical and self-conscious emotions, and their perceived closeness, commitment, and dependence

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with their study-partner. Although participants then expected to interact with one another and discuss these responses, as they had in round one, at this point the study ended and participants were probed for deception and fully debriefed.

Materials

Questions and Responses for Rounds One and Two. For round one, one participant was randomly chosen to respond to three questions related to conscientiousness: (1) "What is your favorite and least favorite chore," (2) "Have you ever done something spontaneous? If so, what?," and (3) "Is your room often messy or clean." Meanwhile, the other participant responded to three questions related to openness: (1) "If you could choose to go anywhere in the world, where would you go on vacation?," (2) "Who is your favorite musician or artist," and (3) "If you had the choice to go to a restaurant, would you rather go to one that is familiar, where you know you like the food, or one you haven't been to before?."

For round two, both participants were asked three questions about social anxiety: (1) "Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say," (2) "Would you like to be famous," and (3) "Imagine that you have received $50. You are also told that you will have to give a public talk in front of a group of people you work with. How much, if any, money of the $50 would you give back, in order to avoid giving the public talk?"). Both participants were given the following responses, ostensibly written by their study partner: (1) "How often would you say that you lie in the course of a week?" to which they had selected *everyday*; (2) "Have you done anything recently that would be considered immoral or unethical? If so, what?" to which they briefly answered *I plagiarized an essay*; and (3) "Imagine that you have been paired with another person to play a game. In this game, called the dictator game, one of you is randomly chosen to receive $10. The person who receives the $10 can choose to keep the entire $10 or share some of it with the other person. Imagine you are selected to receive the $10. How would you split the money?" to which they selected *Keep $10, give $0*.

Ratings of Morality. To assess ratings of their study-partner's morality, we asked "After learning this information, please rate the other person on the following traits" from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) before and after the manipulation. We embedded four traits related to morality including honest, trustworthy, fair, and ethical (baseline ratings: $\alpha = .70$; postmanipulation ratings: $\alpha = .85$) among distractor traits (baseline distractor traits: dominant, organized, funny, competent, assertive, warm; postmanipulation distractor traits: friendly, emotional, anxious, competent, assertive, and warm).

To assess participants' ratings of their own morality, we asked "Please rate yourself on the following traits" from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 *(extremely*) before and after the manipulation. We measured the same four traits as the transgressor (baseline ratings: $\alpha = .60$; postmanipulation ratings: $\alpha = .74$) embedded among distractor traits (baseline distractor traits: extraverted, friendly, funny, intelligent, confident, sociable, emotional, curious, anxious, self-conscious, impulsive, competent, assertive, warm, humble, compassionate; postmanipulation distractor traits: friendly, emotional, anxious, competent, assertive, and warm).

Emotions. To assess participants' emotional responses toward their study-partner, we asked "After learning this information, how much do you feel the following emotions toward the other person?" We embedded anger, disgust, contempt ($\alpha = .61$) within distractor emotions (inspired, surprised, or compassion) from 1 (*none at all*) to 10 (*as much as I've ever felt*). Further, we asked "After learning this information, how much do you feel the following emotions yourself?" We embedded embarrassment, shame, guilt ($\alpha = .85$) embedded within distractor emotions (joy, excitement, or bored) using the same anchors.

Relationship Variables. To assess ratings of closeness, commitment, and dependence, at baseline and after learning of their partner's immoral behavior, participants responded to the same items as the baseline measures in Study 3 (baseline: $\alpha = .75$; postmanipulation: $\alpha = .72$).

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

We conducted dyadic analyses (Mixed Models, SPSS v23), nesting individuals within pairs since we expected the responses of individuals who participated in the study together to be related to one another, which violates the assumption of independence. We treated dyads as indistinguishable. We treated condition as a fixed effect and grand-mean centered our covariates. As in Studies 1–3, we tested the omnibus effect of condition before examining close others to strangers, our primary comparison of interest. However, all pairwise comparisons and means for our main dependent variables are shown in Table 4. Effect size estimates are calculated as semipartial R^2.

Manipulation Check

There was a significant effect of condition on closeness, commitment, and investment, $F(2, 136.14) = 219.02$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .76$ (see Table 4 for individual comparisons), illustrating that the underlying psychological features that characterize close relationships differed for close versus more distant others. Participants reported significantly lower levels of closeness, commitment, and dependence, $t(133.96) = 20.90$, $p < .001$, with acquaintances compared with close others.

Measures of the Transgressor

There was a significant effect of condition on moral judgments of transgressors, controlling for moral ratings before learning the unethical information, $F(2, 109.44) = 12.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .18$, and a marginal effect on other-critical emotions, $F(2, 199.10) = 2.88$, $p = .06$, $R^2 = .03$. Close others were rated as more moral than acquaintances, $t(108.54) = 4.86$, $p < .001$. However, contrary to earlier studies, participants felt higher levels of other-critical emotions toward close others than acquaintances, $t(123.39) = 2.36$, $p = .02$. Within the close other conditions, relationship length did not predict moral judgments of transgressors, $F(1, 65.81) = .28$, $p = .60$, $R^2 = .004$, or other-critical emotions, $F(1, 62.46) = .53$, $p = .47$, $R^2 = .01$.

Measures of the Relationship

There was a significant effect of condition on ratings of closeness, commitment, and dependence, $F(2, 170.53) = 6.05$, $p = .003$,

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Table 4
Means (Standard Deviations) for Each Condition for Study 4

	Manipulation check	Transgressor		Relationship	Self	
Condition	Relationship baseline	Morality of transgressor	Other-critical emotions	Relationship follow-up	Morality of self	Self-conscious emotions
Acquaintance	3.53 (0.82)[a]	2.47 (0.78)[a]	1.79 (1.14)[a]	3.22 (0.75)[a]	3.99 (0.60)[a]	1.48 (1.04)[a]
Close other	5.92 (0.76)	3.32 (0.91)	2.17 (1.41)	5.66 (1.02)	3.99 (0.52)	1.81 (1.40)
Romantic partner	6.17 (0.70)[b]	3.31 (1.03)[b]	2.24 (1.63)[b]	6.02 (0.94)[b]	4.06 (0.54)[a]	2.08 (1.76)[b]
Friend	5.73 (0.76)[c]	3.32 (0.81)[b]	2.12 (1.21)[ab]	5.39 (1.00)[c]	3.93 (0.51)[a]	1.60 (1.00)[a]

Note. Nonsignificant groups within a column are indicated with the same letter superscripts. Superscripts are omitted for the close others, which represent a composite of romantic partner, friend, and family conditions. However, comparisons of close others to strangers and coworkers can be found in the main text.

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R^2 = .07, controlling for baseline ratings. Participants reported higher levels of closeness, commitment, and dependence with close others than acquaintances, $t(204.74) = 3.04$, $p = .003$, controlling for baseline ratings. Within the close other conditions, relationship length did not predict differences in closeness, commitment, and dependence, $F(1, 70.88) = .05$, $p = .83$, $R^2 < .001$.

Measures of the Self

There was a significant effect of condition on self-conscious emotions, $F(2, 104.28) = 4.54$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .08$, but not on participants' ratings of their own morality, $F(2,111.34) = .84$, $p = .44$, $R^2 = .01$. Participants reported higher levels of self-conscious emotions when learning unethical information about close others compared with acquaintances, $t(100.58) = 2.11$, $p = .04$.

Discussion

In Study 4 we found some evidence for more lenient perceptions of close others, yet harsher perceptions of the self, though this evidence was not as strong as in previous studies. Participants rated close others as more moral than acquaintances and there was a smaller impact on relationship outcomes, but these effects did not extend to other-critical emotions, which were actually greater for close others. Participants may have felt higher levels of other-critical emotions toward their close other because their romantic partner or friend did not disclose their behavior before the experiment, and instead shared it with a stranger (the researcher) first. Further, the unethical information was presented in a very brazen way, with no explanation or reasoning behind their actions, which could have contributed to the differences in this effect.

We found evidence for more negative outcomes for the self in the form of greater self-conscious emotions after being confronted with their close other's unethicality compared with an acquaintance's. However, we failed to find differences by condition in participants' ratings of their own moral traits. This is somewhat less surprising, given our earlier findings that this effect is weaker, our smaller sample size in Study 4, and our new measure of participants' own morality—rating themselves on morally relevant traits. Again, we did not find any support for the alternative explanation that more lenient judgments of close others result from simply having differences in background information. Finally, like past studies, romantic partner and friend conditions showed similar effects across the majority of our main variables though romantic partners elicited higher levels of self-conscious emotions than strangers, whereas friends did not.

General Discussion

Across a diverse range of methods with both student and online samples, our findings suggest that having a close relationship with the transgressor heavily impacts responses to their bad behavior, supporting the call for social-relational factors to be more strongly incorporated into models of moral judgment. The results reveal the ambivalence people experience when a close other behaves unethically. Participants reported less other-critical emotional reactions (except in Study 4), more lenient moral judgments, and lower behavioral intentions to punish close others who transgressed compared with strangers and acquaintances. In addition, moral transgressions had smaller consequences for perceived closeness, commitment, and dependence for close others than acquaintances (Studies 3 and 4). At the same time, participants reported more intense feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment despite having no direct role in the bad behavior and we found some evidence that ratings of participants' own morality were damaged by a close other's bad behavior. These responses persisted across a range of temporal intervals since the acts occurred, from minutes (Study 4), hours (Study 3), and days to years (Study 2).

We found no evidence that more lenient perceptions of close others were simply the result of having background information about close others. Our results held, for the most part, when comparing close others to acquaintances and relationship length did not predict more lenient responses within our close other conditions. Admittedly, acquaintances differ from strangers in numerous other ways (e.g., closeness, outcome dependence) and relationship length is an imperfect proxy for background information. Therefore, future research should try to further unconfound closeness to and knowledge of transgressors to further disentangle these effects.

The presence of rationalization is typically identified by its consequences—more lenient responses than would be expected or rational (e.g., Tsang, 2002; Uhlmann et al., 2009). In this respect, the fact that close others were evaluated less negatively than strangers or acquaintances suggests rationalization was a force in these responses. However, we attempted to investigate this process more deeply by identifying, measuring, and manipulating two overarching strategies for rationalizing—minimizing the act and decoupling the transgressor from the act. Our findings from

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Studies 1 and 3 suggest that spontaneously engaging in rationalization, particularly act minimization, may be one factor in more lenient perceptions of close others compared with strangers and acquaintances. However, directing participants to engage in rationalization did not interact with the type of relationship (close others vs. strangers) in Study 2 to influence judgments of the transgressor. One possible reason for these discrepant findings may be the difference between spontaneously rationalizing versus being externally directed to do so. Similar differences have been documented when measuring versus manipulating emotional reappraisal tactics (Ehring et al., 2010; Quigley & Dobson, 2014), which have similar features to rationalizing strategies. The lack of a causal manipulation of our mediator makes us cautious about interpreting support for rationalization as a mediator and more work is needed to build confidence in its role in responses to close others. In addition, rationalizations may continue post hoc after a judgment has been made (Haidt, 2001) and may not be restricted to occurring as a mechanism that temporally precedes a judgment. This work offers a step toward offering a conceptual framework for rationalization, but future work should more comprehensively define the contours of this complex construct.

Our effects were similar across types of close relationships, demonstrating that psychological closeness seems to matter more than specific relationship type. However, when these groups diverged, romantic partners (with the exception of increased other-critical emotions in Study 1) typically elicited the most lenient responses, and also the strongest impact on the self. This finding may reflect that our romantic relationships tend to be our most cherished relationships and, because people typically only have one partner at a time, they have higher interdependence with that partner and higher investment in the relationship compared with other close bonds.

Implications

The vast majority of past research within moral perception has examined people's responses to unethical behavior within a social vacuum, but to understand moral responding in an ecologically valid manner, it is essential to account for social context. In everyday life, unethical behaviors are embedded within important social ties. We focused on close relationships, but power dynamics or group membership represent other important social factors that affect moral perception and should be incorporated in future research. Further, our work helps shed light on conflicting predictions as to when individuals are more (*black sheep effect*; e.g., Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988) or less (*perceived similarity* e.g., Shaver, 1970) harsh toward those they are closest to. The *black sheep effect* has been theorized to serve as a way of protecting the integrity of the ingroup by ostracizing an in-group transgressor (Coull et al., 2001). This allows people to remove unethical group members and continue to meet their need to belong through being bonded with a group. However, in a dyadic relationship context, ostracizing a close other who has transgressed destroys that bond, removing the relationship that was meeting one's need to belong. Therefore, this work points to the critical nature of protecting one's social group in the *black sheep effect*. Future research should investigate whether creating groups that would soon dissolve; therefore, removing the mechanism of protecting the integrity of the group, leads to more lenient judgments of ingroup members.

Identifying that observers are more lenient toward close others who transgress raises deeper concerns about how moral norms are policed by individuals in these contexts and the capacity for close others to normalize unethical behavior. When close others act unethically, their behavior was viewed as more ethical than that of a stranger. In addition, our findings that individuals are less likely to punish or criticize a close other fall in line with past work suggesting that individuals try to deliver disproportionately positive feedback to maintain their positive relationships with close others (Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). This may allow perceivers to either overlook and/or fail to call out transgressions committed by close others, which poses as danger for maintaining the moral norms in society. Further, when close others act unethically, it may serve to normalize bad behavior since participants perceived close others' unethical behavior as less wrong than strangers'. This work highlights the potential dangers of more permissive responses to the misbehavior of close others.

In addition, more adverse impacts on the self when close others transgress raises important questions. For instance, people might feel motivated to make up for the bad behavior of close others in a similar fashion to moral licensing, but at an interpersonal level. Moral licensing has primarily been documented in regard to one's own moral actions, though some work has examined this phenomenon vicariously within in-groups (Blanken et al., 2015; Kouchaki, 2011). These effects may be especially pronounced in the context of close others and warrant further investigation.

Limitations

There were a number of methodological and measurement limitations of these studies. Although Study 2 allowed for more severe unethical acts, we primarily focused on low to moderately severe acts in this work. We chose to focus on these types of behaviors as they likely represent what people witness in their daily lives. However, it is not clear to what extent these effects extend to unambiguously bad behaviors, like the many sexual assault allegations that have come to light in the recent #MeToo movement. Weidman and colleagues (2019) found that perceptions of transgressions that involved sexual misconduct were not influenced by the participant's relationship to the transgressor, though participants still anticipated protecting their close other for these acts. Further, although we included the severity of the act as a covariate, severity differences by condition were large and may not have been fully controlled for. We also used subjective codes of severity made by raters; therefore, they necessarily contain error. In addition, Studies 2 and 3, relied on recall paradigms, which are subject to retrospective biases. These hindsight judgments may have impaired accurate recollection of events and should be interpreted with caution (Erdfelder et al., 2007).

There are also limitations to how we collected our samples. Our studies relied heavily on samples recruited from MTurk and Prolific. Although this allowed us to collect data from individuals who have been in longer relationships compared with undergraduates samples (average online sample relationship length: $M = 9.12$ years, $SD = 7.76$, undergraduate sample relationship length: $M = 1.81$ years, $SD = 1.01$), there are well-founded concerns about the quality of data gathered from crowdsourcing platforms like MTurk (Chandler et al., 2013; Paolacci et al., 2010; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). In attempt to diminish some of these concerns, we used

attention checks and selection criteria to recruit high quality workers and did not allow participants who took part in earlier studies to participate in our subsequent studies (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). In addition, our 15-day daily diary study allowed us to have extended contact with participants, which helps reduce participants tendency to provide minimally sufficient responses when recruiting from crowdsourcing marketplaces (Krosnick, 1991). It is encouraging that our effects in these studies were similar across multiple platforms and to those in our laboratory study with an undergraduate, in-person sample; however, future work should replicate these findings across a broader range of samples of adults.

Conclusion

Incorporating social psychological factors, such as close relationships, into the field of moral psychology is critical. In everyday life, unethical acts do not occur without context. Our findings demonstrate the ambivalence inherent in responding to close others who transgress—in protecting our close others, the self takes on some of the burden of their misbehavior.

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