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Double Standards in Moral Judgments Within Intimate Relationships: A Multifaceted Perspective

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, we delve into the role of intimate relationships in shaping moral judgment, highlighting the notable disparity between appraisals of intimate others and strangers in instances of ethical transgressions. It contends that the double standard observed in these scenarios reflect the intricate interplay between human emotions and the adaptable nature of moral evaluation within different contexts. Drawing on the field of moral psychology, the analysis introduces pivotal theoretical frameworks, including moral reasoning, moral intuition, the hypotheses of moral universalism and moral favoritism, the dual-process theory of moral judgment, and a person-centered perspective on moral assessment. We center on pluralistic factors that influence moral judgment within intimate relationships, including emotion, cognition, value, perception of harm, perspective, and power dynamics. A notable incongruity is identified between the professed moral duties of people and their protective actions toward loved ones, with individuals frequently acting to defend intimate others despite holding conflicting moral principles. Besides, we conclude by exploring the repercussions of these double standards for modern legal systems.

Key Words: intimate relationships, moral judgment, moral universalism, moral partiality, dual-process theory

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Introduction

Moral judgment constitutes an indispensable aspect of human life. In the past decade and a half, the status of moral psychology has

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significantly risen, with a rapid increase in the study of morality. Within moral psychology, there is a dual focus: moral behavior on one hand, and on the other hand, moral cognition—the psychological process by which individuals identify, interpret, and evaluate moral (and immoral) actions. At the core of moral cognition lies moral judgment, as it is generally considered to involve the higher-level cognitive processing undertaken by human individuals in making decisions about actual actions. Research on moral judgment ranges from evaluating the rightness or wrongness of actions to inferring an individual's moral character (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene et al., 2001; Malle, 2021). To study moral judgment, it is impossible to avoid a phenomenon that is ubiquitous in everyday life—the dual standards people apply to moral judgments of their close others. Despite extensive scholarly inquiry into the moral assessment of strangers' actions, there is a notable lack of research concerning moral judgments within intimate relationships, including family ties, friendship, and romantic bonds. This gap reveals an intriguing paradox: universalist moral principles demand impartiality and fairness in our treatment of others, aiming to ensure equality in moral consideration (Soter et al., 2021). Yet, intimacy generates special moral obligations, often compelling individuals to prioritize the welfare of those closest to them, even at the expense of universal fairness (Archard, 1995; Weiss & Burgmer, 2021). This tension beckons for additional philosophical inquiry into how intimacy informs moral reasoning.

The dual-process theory of moral judgment posits that moral reasoning is a product of the interaction between emotion and cognition, striving to influence our decision-making (Crockett, 2016). In contrast, virtue ethics emphasizes a holistic, person-centered perspective, evaluating moral acts as indicative of enduring character traits rather than focusing exclusively on their actions (Uhlmann, 2015). These theoretical constructions provide divergent perspectives on traversing moral dilemmas, especially within the emotionally laden sphere of close relationships.

We argue that the prevalence of double standards in moral judgment within intimate relationships reveals the complexities of moral reasoning. From a multifaceted perspective, emotional bonds, cognitive appraisals, subjective value systems, perceptions of harm, divergent perspectives, and power dynamics all shape the moral evaluation of an intimate partner's actions. These assessments, while often aiming to preserve relational harmony and stability, can simultaneously produce moral inconsistencies and tensions. This dual character highlights not only the malleability of moral judgment but also its susceptibility to the demands of intimacy. Though such double standards are not necessarily harmful, they warrant careful examination of their implications on personal relationships and the broader moral frameworks that structure society.

Human moral judgment and dual-process theory

How do people make moral judgments?

To scrutinize the underpinnings of moral judgments, it is imperative to first grasp how individuals form such judgments. Two principal perspectives emerge in this discourse: in 2001, Haidt (2001) introduced a highly influential framework for understanding moral psychology known as the Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) (see **Figure 1**[2]). This model consists of a set of causal "links" connecting three psychological processes: intuition, judgment, and reasoning. In Figure 1, eliciting a Situation can elicit intuition, which is the source of moral judgment, representing the path of Connection 1. Reasoning comes after moral judgment to justify the decision, which is represented by Connection 2. The reasoning and judgments of friends can provide us with perspectives and stimulate our perceptions, as shown by Connections 3 and 4. Theoretically, reasoning can lead to judgment, but it is difficult to achieve in real life; hence, Connection 5 is depicted as a dashed line. When we think about issues, we often view them from a completely new angle, forming a new perspective, which constitutes the personal reflection of Connection 6.

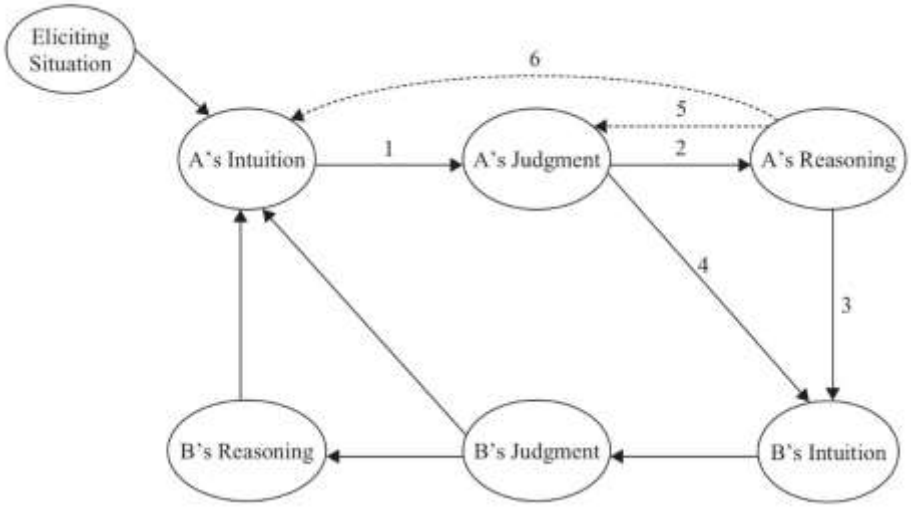

Figure 1. Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model (SIM). The SIM consists of six links describing causal connections among moral intuitions, moral judgments, and episodes of moral reasoning: (1) intuitive judgment, (2) post-hoc reasoning, (3) reasoned persuasion, (4) social persuasion, (5) reasoned judgment, and (6) private reflection. Dashed lines indicate links that are rarely used.

(1) Moral reasoning: from the views of developmental psychologists, including Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1969), who posit that moral judgments emanate from moral reasoning. They assert that conscious, deliberate cognitive processes underpin subsequent moral

[2] Figure 1 is excerpted from Haidt (2001, p. 815). For a more detailed and accessible discussion of the SIM, see Haidt (2013).

judgments and behavior. The philosophical underpinnings of this perspective are rooted in Kant's rationalism, which accents the pivotal role of conscious reasoning in moral judgment. When faced with the task of evaluating the morality of an action or decision, individuals apply universal principles of reasoning to the particular context (Murphy et al., 2009). Haidt (2001) defines moral reasoning as a "conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people to reach a moral judgment". However, Paxton and Greene (2010) argue that this interpretation is too broad and go on to interpret moral reasoning as: conscious mental activity through which one evaluates a moral judgment for its (in)consistency with other moral commitments, where these commitments are to one or more moral principles and (in some cases) particular moral judgments.

(2) Moral intuition: consider the immediate moral judgment that arises when observing someone randomly trampling a lawn or jumping a queue—this is an example of moral intuitive judgment. Haidt (2001) introduced the SIM, suggesting that moral judgments are shaped by swift, automatic, and unconscious moral intuitions, with conscious moral reasoning occurring post-intuitively and serving a secondary, complementary function. Moral intuition constitutes an automatic processing system that melds moral emotions and knowledge, enabling rapid judgments in response to moral transgressions. This intuitive response is a frequent occurrence in daily life, upon which people often rely to discern the goodness or badness of situations.

The moral universalism hypothesis

Based on the processes of moral reasoning and moral intuition, numerous scholars have proposed a variety of theories regarding how an individual makes moral judgments in response to moral events and which factors play a crucial role in this process. Among them, moral universalism asserts the existence of an invariant, universally applicable moral code, which demands that individuals, irrespective of their relationship to the offender, adhere to the same moral decisions (Soter et al., 2021). Empirical research indicates that both adults and children, approximately eight years of age, exhibit a preference for equitable treatment in economic resource allocation games, rejecting unequal offers that favor themselves or their in-group.

Nevertheless, this research does not unequivocally endorse universalism. When children are responsible for resource allocation, they display a bias toward their in-group and close relationships, often opting to preserve existing group inequalities. This behavior suggests that while children may comprehend and aspire to fairness in abstract or hypothetical contexts, their real-life decisions are influenced by social norms, group allegiances, and personal prejudices, indicating

the limitations of moral universalism in practical situations. Moreover, the real-world inapplicability of moral universalism is further underscored by the complex tapestry of social and cultural contexts. Various societies and cultures have evolved distinct moral codes and ethical norms, frequently shaped by historical, religious, and societal factors. These divergences can result in conflicting interpretations of moral conduct, thereby complicating the notion of a singular universal moral standard.

The moral favoritism hypothesis

An alternative perspective posits that individuals should afford greater protection to morally culpable close others than to strangers (Archard, 1995). The hypothesis of moral favoritism suggests that we harbor unique relational duties, which, while distinct from our universal moral obligations, pertain solely to intimate others. This concept can be traced to Confucius' expositions on filial piety, which underscore the special moral obligations to family, and to the Ten Commandments, which instruct individuals to "honor their parents." The moral favoritism hypothesis enjoys more empirical validation than its universalist counterpart. Loyalty, for instance, is a foundational element within grounded theories of morality and is broadly supported. Specifically, individuals tend to view those who neglect to assist their family less favorably than those who fail to aid strangers, deeming the former less suitable as spouses and friends (Soter et al., 2021). Research indicates that in moral dilemmas, impartial actors may be perceived as more immoral than those exhibiting eccentric behavior. Nonetheless, there remains debate regarding the obligatoriness of morally favoring close others, with varying responses depending on the context. Yet, it is incontrovertible that moral favoritism is a prevalent phenomenon in everyday life, exemplified by the lover's preferential treatment of oneself, which appears to be a universal desire within the context of romantic love.

Dual-process theory of moral judgment

Traditional rationalism conceptualizes moral judgment as an outcome of successive rational deliberations, whereas the social intuition model portrays it as a more intuitive process. Greene et al. (2004) leveraged the social intuition model and integrated research from cognitive neuroscience to introduce a dual-process theory of moral judgment, which elaborates on the role of emotions and feelings within this domain. The dual-process theory sharpens and expands the understanding of emotions in moral judgment, positing that it arises from a balanced competition between emotions and cognition (Crockett, 2016). This theory suggests that individuals do not depend exclusively on preconceived models of logical reasoning nor solely on their current emotional state when making moral judgments. It also

argues that an exaggerated emphasis on either factor is insufficient to account for the complexities of moral judgments in specific situations. The dual-process theory posits that the two described judgment inclinations represent two distinct processing pathways that may operate concurrently within the social context of moral judgment. The activation of these pathways, or their simultaneous engagement, is determined by the nature of the situation and the problem at hand, which influences the manifestation of the moral judgment. We contend that the dual-process theory of moral judgment can be seen as a fusion of the moral universalism and moral favoritism hypotheses, with the interplay between emotion and cognition dictating whether individuals align with the moral favoritism or moral universalism hypothesis. The interplay of these factors renders individual moral judgment a dynamic and contextually grounded process.

A person-centered approach to moral judgment

The aforementioned theories primarily debate whether moral judgment should be grounded in the material consequences of behavior (consequentialist ethics) or in adherence to rules, duties, and obligations (deontological ethics). However, a person-centered approach to moral judgment, rooted in virtue ethics (Uhlmann et al., 2015), presents a third perspective on morality. This approach considers the individual, rather than the behavior, as the fundamental unit of moral evaluation, treating behaviors as indicative of intrinsic moral traits such as integrity and empathy. In essence, this framework suggests that moral judgment often hinges on the question, “Is this person moral?” rather than “Is this act moral?”. It posits that perceived biases and errors in moral judgment may arise from a moral system intended to discern the character of others. The theory underscores the importance of valuing the enduring aspects of moral character over transient behaviors. When applied to explain the double standard in moral judgment within intimate relationships, this theory suggests that our default assumption of a higher moral character in intimate others may lead to the perception that identical actions carry different moral weight.

Factors affecting moral judgment in intimate relationships

Moral judgments of others’ behavior are influenced by the relationships among the specific situation being evaluated, the characteristics of the person judging the situation, and the other person involved in the situation (Klinger et al., 1964). When there is an intimate relationship between the judge and the party involved, the factors that lead to different decisions still need to be explored. The emotional and cognitive factors in moral judgment are significant topics in social cognitive neuroscience research. Xie and Luo (2009) have proposed that emotion is an essential factor in moral judgment

and that moral judgment is the result of the synergistic interaction between emotional processing and cognitive processing.

Under these two major factors, there are many other closely related factors. Therefore, in addition to these two, we have also listed other factors that are currently worth exploring in research. Fundamentally, moral judgment is based on the assessment of harm (Piazza et al., 2018), so the level of harm we perceive also plays a decisive role in moral judgment. However, the human mind is complex, and we cannot enumerate all the factors that influence moral judgment within intimate relationships.

Emotional factor

There exists a profound ambivalence in responding to the immoral conduct of those close to us. Intimate others, being emotionally entwined with us, often elicit feelings of pain, disappointment, and anger when they act improperly. Nonetheless, this emotional reaction may also impel us to seek forgiveness, tolerance, and protection rather than pursue punishment and condemnation (Huebner et al., 2009). In shielding our loved ones, the self may inadvertently assume a measure of responsibility for their transgressions (Forbes & Stellar, 2021).

Conversely, empathy, as an alternative or indirect form of emotional reactivity, plays a crucial role in altering an individual's emotional state, particularly in moral contexts. The extent to which one experiences the emotional state of the individual in need or the victim, especially negative emotions, can significantly impact subsequent moral judgments. When faced with a moral dilemma, our proximity to others is likely to influence whether we empathize with the wrongdoer or the victim of the misconduct. The empathy-altruism hypothesis suggests that empathy for the victim initially elicits the individual's altruistic motivation, prompting a desire to assist the sufferer irrespective of personal gain or loss. The intensity of empathy is directly proportional to the strength of this altruistic impulse (Batson et al., 1991). The stronger the empathy, the more robust the altruistic motive; simultaneously, since the empathy for the victim involves the individual's personal experience of negative emotions, the desire to alleviate these feelings as swiftly as possible may also lead to altruistic behaviors driven by self-interested motives. In the context of an intimate other, this hypothesis is more pertinent when the intimate other is the victim of immoral behavior. However, the phenomenon is likely to be inverted when the intimate other is the perpetrator, as in such cases, we are more inclined to empathize with the individual engaging in immoral behavior.

Cognitive factor

Moral judgments within intimate relationships frequently entail a nuanced cognitive process that involves deciphering the motives, intentions, and repercussions of the actor's behavior. Neurological research has further shown that interpersonal closeness moderates both emotional and cognitive processes during ethical decision-making (Zhan et al., 2018). We tend to be more disposed to interpret the motives behind the actions of those close to us as mitigating or driven by necessity, rather than strictly evaluating the morality of the actions based on their consequences alone. This tendency can be juxtaposed with the previously mentioned person-centered approach to moral judgment. Studies have revealed that moral attributions are more pronounced when engaging with less intimate others (Hughes et al., 2016).

Value factor

Moral judgments within intimate relationships are significantly shaped by personal values (Hughes, 2017). For certain individuals, the preservation of relational harmony and stability may take precedence over the adherence to moral principles. Consequently, they may opt for tolerance and forgiveness in the face of intimate others' misdeeds. This response does not indicate a moral compromise but rather reflects a prioritization of values, where the integrity of the relationship is deemed more critical than the pursuit of immediate justice or the unwavering application of moral standards. Additionally, such choices are often influenced by factors such as one's past experiences, cultural background, and psychological disposition (Graham et al., 2013). For example, individuals reared in cultures that value collectivism and communal harmony may be more inclined to forgive and seek reconciliation, whereas those from more individualistic cultures may place greater emphasis on personal accountability and the maintenance of moral norms.

Harm perception factor and perspective factor

The indelible connection between harm and morality is widely acknowledged; however, within the framework of moral dualism, "harm" is defined with an emphasis on the "perceived" aspect, which need not be objective but merely needs to be perceived to impact moral judgments (Zhan & Wu, 2019). This discrepancy between perception and reality may result in our perceiving less harm to the victim when a close other is the aggressor, or conversely, more harm when a close other is the victim, due to the proximity of the aggressor to us. This perceptual error is intricately linked to our perspective. The interplay between and damage perception is encapsulated here. Do we view events from a subjective perspective or through the lens of an objective,

"God's eye" view? Niese et al. (2022) introduced a comprehensive model suggesting that third-person and first-person perspectives elicit qualitatively distinct processing styles. Visual perspective significantly influences an individual's moral judgment, with a third-person perspective prompting harsher moral judgments regarding moral transgressions compared to a first-person perspective. In scenarios where an intimate other is involved in an immoral event, we are inclined to adopt the first-person perspective, placing ourselves in the shoes of that intimate other. When the intimate other is the victim, we may perceive greater harm due to factors such as imperfect information access; conversely, when the intimate other is the aggressor, we may perceive less harm (Gino & Galinsky, 2012). From a perspective standpoint, it appears that we are not merely favoring the intimate other but rather catering to our own self-interest, as human self-interest plays a role in shaping our perspectives.

Power factor

Individuals of lower subjective social class, characterized by a lower sense of power, tend to hold others to stricter moral standards than they do themselves, a phenomenon linked to perceptions of injustice (Wang et al., 2020). Those in the lower social strata, or those with less power, may elevate their moral expectations of others as a reaction to their perceived unfair disadvantages. Conversely, individuals with a higher sense of power are more prone to rendering moralistic judgments. Consequently, when a high-powered individual engages in immoral behavior concurrently with a close other who belongs to the same subjective social class as the observer, the observer is more likely to view the high-powered individual as more immoral and anticipate that they will face punishment. This psychological dynamic is reminiscent of the psychology underlying "hatred of the rich."

"Would" and "should"

The previous text mentioned numerous factors and theories that influence moral judgment within intimate relationships, but it is not difficult to see that many of these factors merely affect the final moral decision rather than directly reversing people's moral cognition. Despite numerous studies indicating that individuals are more inclined to shield an intimate other who has acted immorally over a stranger, this does not imply unconditional acceptance of the intimate other's transgression. Rather, they maintain a moral judgment that acknowledges the wrongdoing, with participants reporting a stronger propensity to protect the intimate other than is morally warranted (Soter et al., 2021).

This phenomenon reflects a cognitive-behavioral dissonance, wherein discrepancies between cognitive processes and behavioral outcomes

result in actions that are at odds with one's moral evaluations. For instance, within the person-centered approach to moral judgment, an individual might deem the person as moral due to various factors, without necessarily approving of their specific actions. Similarly, while moral favoritism suggests a duty to protect close others, it does not propose that any action taken by intimate others should be deemed moral.

The reflection and application of double standards in law

Given the inevitability of moral double standards in intimate relationships, the question arises whether such relationships should be addressed within legal frameworks. When someone protects an intimate partner who has acted immorally, should the law prioritize impartiality or personal sentiment? Balancing legal justice with private emotions is complex. Today, cases involving domestic violence and abandonment attract more focus than crimes of public vengeance or indiscriminate harm, with judgments closely monitored by the public. Legal mechanisms, such as criminal reconciliation, allow for mediation in some jurisdictions, even for serious cases, fostering family ties, reducing social conflicts, and improving judicial efficiency. However, critics argue this approach can weaken the punishment's preventive role, undermine equality, and enable wealthier individuals to evade trial (Schünemann et al., 2001).

Legal fairness demands impartiality, reflecting moral universalism, as seen in the ancient Chinese adage, "If the emperor breaks the law, he is as guilty as any commoner." Moral responses, like indignation and dehumanization, influence punishment severity (Bastian et al., 2013) and intersect with intimacy and perceived harm. In practice, judges may consider relationships, leading to leniency in cases involving family, close friends, or vulnerable individuals, while high-power offenders face stricter penalties. Relationship-based leniency affects sentencing, liability, and treatment. The moral favoritism hypothesis suggests people protect close others who act immorally and favor reduced punishment. This highlights the need for strict enforcement of the legal recusal system, as close ties between legal officers and clients can compromise impartiality. Moreover, blame is often viewed as a zero-sum game (Dyer et al., 2022), where favoring one party increases blame on the other, further complicating fair judgment.

Concluding remarks: a multifaceted process?

We claim that the dual-process theory is a more powerful explanatory framework. A dual-process theory provides a more realistic framework for understanding moral judgment compared to the hypotheses of moral universalism and moral favoritism (Barrouillet, 2011). While moral universalism emphasizes absolute fairness, it overlooks the

nuanced emotional and relational complexities inherent in human life. For instance, parental favoritism toward children, though inconsistent with universalist principles, aligns with the natural dynamics of familial relationships. Conversely, moral favoritism explains protective behaviors but fails to address the tension between moral principles and emotional needs. Dual-process theory reconciles these competing mechanisms by integrating emotion (e.g., empathy, anger) and cognition (e.g., rule-based reasoning), offering a more comprehensive explanation of double standards in intimate relationships. This ecological approach acknowledges the fluidity of moral decision-making, recognizing that individuals may shift between universalist and partial judgments depending on contextual demands. For example, a person might exhibit emotional tolerance in cases of infidelity while adopting stricter judgments toward domestic abuse due to perceived harm.

The factors influencing moral judgments in intimate relationships—emotion, cognition, values, harm perception, perspective-taking, and power—are deeply interconnected and cannot be neatly disentangled. These elements are often causally related, rendering rigid categorizations overly simplistic. While the factors outlined above are significant, they represent only a subset of the broader, interrelated influences that shape moral judgment.

In legal practice, balancing fairness and flexibility in intimate relationships is crucial. While excessive favoritism harms justice, limited flexibility may support fairness, especially in protecting vulnerable groups like minors. Mediation in minor family disputes can stabilize social relationships, but leniency in serious crimes, like sexual assault or embezzlement by those in power, risks eroding public trust. In domestic violence cases, many argue that punishments should not be reduced due to the abuser's relationship to the victim (Hinkle, 2019). Overuse of mechanisms like "letters of understanding" can weaken legal deterrence and enable impunity for severe crimes, including intra-familial homicide.

Double standards in intimate relationships reflect both the inherent tendencies of human interactions and their role in promoting social cohesion. Dual-process theory effectively captures this dynamic by integrating emotional and rational dimensions into moral judgment. Within the justice system, institutional safeguards should aim to mitigate favoritism without disregarding humane considerations in exceptional circumstances. The ultimate objective is to achieve a dynamic equilibrium between moral ideals and the complexities of human life.

Data availability

None declared.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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