Not Our Fault: Judgments of Apathy Versus Harm Toward Socially Proximal Versus Distant Others

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Abstract

The current research aimed to delineate the moral intuitions that underlie apathy toward the suffering of socially distant others. Past research has shown that people endorse in-group-focused morality, according to which the fate of socially distant others is discounted, and harm-focused morality, according to which the omission of care is viewed less negatively as compared to the commission of harm. In the current study, we investigated how these two moral principles interact, by examining whether increased social distance differentially attenuates the severity of moral judgments concerning acts of apathy and harm. The results of five studies show that judgments concerning the omission of care are dependent on social distance, whereas judgments concerning the commission of harm are not. The findings challenge normative theories of morality that deny the legitimacy of "positive rights" and positive theories of morality that see harm and care as two end points of the same psychological continuum.

Keywords

The seminal studies of Milgram (1963), Darley and Latane, (1968), and Zimbardo (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) have conclusively demonstrated the potential "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1976), namely, the horrible moral consequences that stem from the actions (or lack thereof) of ordinary people. These studies have been popularized in literature and film and have likely influenced societies' understanding of moral responsibility. Yet, people in rich countries continue to turn a blind eye, as millions of individuals die from easily preventable illness and malnutrition. This apathy toward the fortunes of distant others does not seem to hinder people's ability to maintain a sense of moral integrity and to consider themselves to be of good moral character (Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Reese, Berthold, & Steffens, 2012).

How can this inconsistency be resolved? At face value, it may seem as if people in the industrialized societies adopt an *in-group-focused morality*, according to which the importance of the lives of socially distant others is discounted. Indeed, much research shows that people are less concerned with the fate of individuals who are perceived as being socially distant (e.g., Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris, & Fiske, 2010; Duclos & Barasch, 2014; Tronto, 1993).

However, despite decreasing concern toward increasingly distant others, people generally maintain that a central aspect of their moral integrity is reflected in concern even for socially distant individuals (Aquino, Reed II, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Reese et al., 2012). Indeed, there is ample real-world evidence to attest that people are not indifferent to the fates of distant others. For

example, the February 15, 2003, protest against the Iraq war remains, by a large margin, the single greatest assembly of individuals in support of a moral cause, drawing between 6 and 10 million people around the world. Whereas a major portion of the debate within the United States concerned putting American lives as risk, the discussion also revolved heavily around the potential harm incurred to innocent out-group members, namely, Iraqi civilians (Meyer & Corrigall-Brown, 2005).

The reaction of Western liberalism toward the Iraqi war stands in sharp contrast to its continued apathy toward the preventable loss of human lives due to disease and famine. According to the 2014 United Nations Children's Fund child mortality report, approximately 17,000 children under the age of 5 (most of which African and South Asian) die every day due to food deprivation and easily preventable diseases. It is likely that the main reason behind humanitarian organizations' difficulty of rallying the industrialized world against preventable deaths is that people assign diminished moral responsibility to events that

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result from omission of care (rather than the commission of harmful acts). In other words, providing aid to dying children is considered a benevolent altruistic act, rather than a moral necessity.

This differential outcry in response to lives lost from harm versus apathy can be seen as an example of the perceived asymmetry between positive and negative rights (e.g., Kamm, 1986). Negative rights determine the moral/legal status of people's expectation that the actions of other people *do not actively harm* one's health, property, and so forth. Positive rights determine the moral/legal status of people's expectation to receive active assistance and *care* from others, be it in the form of minimal standards of living, health care, and so forth. This asymmetry is emphasized by right-wing ideologies (Bradley, 2010) and by politically conservative and libertarian individuals (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012); however, it does not seem to be limited to right-wing individuals—as evident by much past research showing that people generally view harmful behavior toward others as being more immoral than failing to help, a finding referred to as the "omission bias" (Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991). In order to refrain from normative assertions, we will not refer to this moral intuition as a "bias," but rather as *harm-focused morality.*

Whereas much research has substantiated *in-group-focused morality* and *harm-focused morality* as two fundamental building blocks of human moral psychology, no research, to date, has investigated how these two principles interact in moral decision-making. Understanding the confluence of these two moral principles is especially important, given that many extreme cases of avoidable human suffering are characterized by a "double jeopardy," so to speak, in that they are not intentionally inflicted (i.e., do not evoke our harm-focused morality) and happen to distant others (i.e., do not evoke our in-group-focused morality).

One possibility is that in-group-focused morality and harm-focused morality provide independent contributions to the severity of moral judgment. For example, people may believe that a person who stole money from his own brother is more despicable than a person who stole from a distant neighbor—to the same extent that they believe that a person who didn't help his brother in a time of need is more despicable than the person who didn't help a neighbor in need.

However, a second possibility is that harm-focused morality and in-group-focused morality are not independent of each other. Specifically, it is possible that social proximity plays an important role in determining the moral outrage concerning violations of care—to a greater extent than it affects judgments concerning violations of harm. In other words, the extent to which people are harm focused in their moral decision-making (Spranca et al., 1991) may decrease with increasing social proximity. Such an intuition echoes theories of moral psychology (e.g., Gilligan, 1977; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009) that argue that whereas moral decisions concerning harmful acts are universally applicable, judgments of care (or lack thereof) are more dependent on social context.

In light of these competing possibilities, we conducted five studies wherein participants judged violations of harm and care that occurred between relatively proximal and distal individuals. Consistent with an in-group-focused morality, we predicted that participants would judge moral violations between proximal others more harshly than between distant individuals. Consistent with harm-focused morality, we reasoned that participants would judge violations of negative rights (i.e., harmful behavior) more harshly than violations of positive rights (i.e., apathetic behavior). Most importantly, we predicted that judgments of harmful behavior would be affected by social distance to a lesser degree than judgments of apathetic behavior. Finally, given the greater endorsement of a harm-focused morality in the discourse of the political right wing, we sought to examine whether individuals across the political spectrum differ in the severity of their judgments concerning violations of negative versus positive rights and in the extent to which social distance moderates the relative severity of such violations.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Participants were 188 residents of the United States (120 men; age: $M = 34.10$, $SD = 10.86$) who performed the study via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Twelve additional participants did not finish the study. Sample size was predetermined prior to data collection. Power analysis using G*Power suggested that 170 participants provide >95% detection power for a medium-sized between-within interaction as well as for detecting the simple within-participant effects separately at each level of distance. In order to examine the interaction between distance and violation type separately at each of the five levels of political affiliation, a total sample size of 170 participants provides >80% power (see Supplemental Material for the breakdown of participants according to political affiliation).

Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to the proximal condition, in which they read two vignettes describing an interaction between two brothers or the distant condition in which the same vignettes described an interaction between two friends. The order of the presentation of the two vignettes was randomized.

Negative right violation vignette. The vignette participants read was as follows: "John and a friend [his brother] filled out a lottery form together. Time has passed, and both of them have forgotten to check the numbers against the lottery results. A few months later, John discovers that they have won an amount of 220,000 Dollars. He cashed in the ticket, but decides not to tell his friend [brother]."

Positive right violation vignette. The vignette participants read was as follows: "Dave won 3,000,000 Dollars in the lottery. A day

later after finding out about his prize, he calls his friend [brother] to tell him about the good news. Dave's friend [brother] is very happy for him. He also tells him that he is currently falling behind on his mortgage payments, and that he is in grave need of about 30,000 Dollars in financial assistance. Dave decides not to give his friend [brother] any money."

After reading each vignette, participants were asked to answer, based on the actions of the protagonist, how immoral they consider him to be. The answers were given on a scale of 0 (*not immoral at all*) to 100 (*very immoral*).

Finally, participants provided demographic details and indicated whether they were "very conservative," "conservative," "moderate," "liberal," "very liberal," "libertarian," or "not political." We recoded these answers to an ordinal measure of political conservatism ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 5 (*very conservative*). Participants who responded that they were "not political" were coded as moderates. Furthermore, because libertarians endorse highly conservative political attitudes concerning the issue of positive and negative rights (Iyer et al., 2012), they were coded as "very conservative."

Results

All raw data for the experiments are available at the Open Science Framework (http://osf.io/trme2). We conducted an analysis of variance with violation type (negative vs. positive) as a within-participants variable, social distance (distant vs. proximal) as a between-participants independent variable, and judgment severity as the dependent variable. The results showed a main effect for violation type, whereby participants judged the negative right violation more severely than the positive right violation, $F(1, 186) = 251.57, p < .001$. There was an effect of social distance, whereby participants judged violations of the rights of proximal others more severely than violations of the rights of distant others, $F(1, 186) = 21.973, p < .001$. Most importantly, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 186) = 13.06, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .065$. For the negative right violation, there was no significant difference between the proximal and distant conditions, $F(1, 186) = 1.26, p = .261$; for the positive right violation, participants judged the failure to provide care more severely for proximal others as compared with distant others, $F(1, 186) = 28.93, p < .001$ (Figure 1).

We conducted a regression analysis to investigate the effects of political orientation. Consistent with the claim that conservatives put a greater emphasis on negative rights, there was an interaction between political orientation and violation type, $F(1, 184) = 6.09, p = .014$. There was a nonsignificant trend toward a positive correlation between levels of conservatism and judgment severity for the negative rights violation, $\beta = .110, SE = 0.072, CI [−0.033, 0.253], F(1, 186) = 2.28, p = .132$; in contrast, there was a nonsignificant trend toward a negative correlation between conservatism and judgment severity for the positive rights violation, $\beta = −.107, SE = 0.072, CI [−0.250, 0.036], F(1, 186) = 2.15, p = .143$. There was no interaction between political orientation, violation type, and social distance, $F(1, 184) < 1$ (Figure 2).
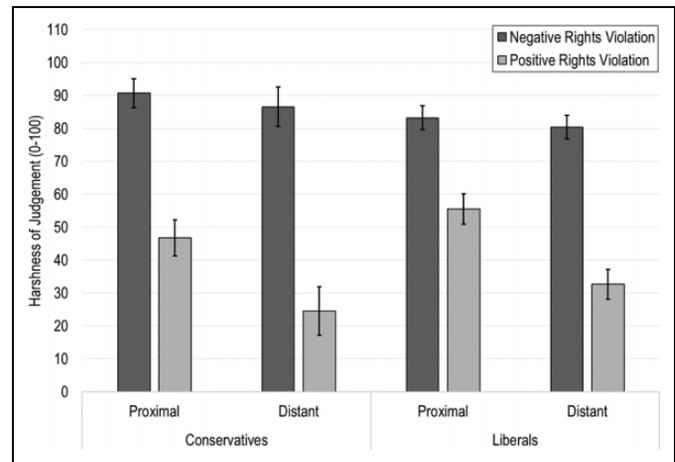

Figure 1. Harshness of moral judgment according to political orientation, violation type, and social distance in Experiment 1. Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Figure 2. Harshness of moral judgment according to political orientation, violation type, and social distance in Experiment 2. Error bars represent standard error of the mean.
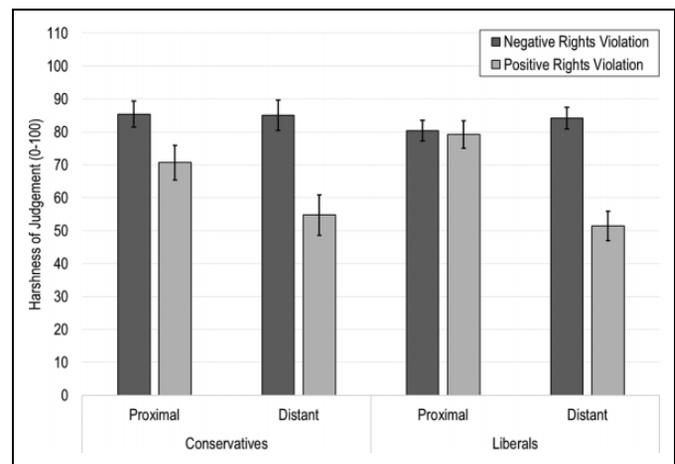
Experiment 2

In Experiment 1, we compared moral judgments concerning an interaction between close kin (brothers) and close nonkin and saw that people exhibit greater harm focus for close kin. In the second experiment, we wanted to see whether this pattern of results also remains when comparing two nonkin members of different social proximity, namely, a close friend versus a fellow student. Furthermore, in order to provide evidence to the generality of the phenomenon observed in Experiment 1, we employed different moral scenarios.

Method

Participants

Participants were 195 residents of the United States (108 women; age: $M = 36.87, SD = 13.76$) who performed the study via MTurk. Five additional participants did not finish the

study. The sample size was predetermined prior to data collection and was identical to that of Experiment 1.

Procedure and Materials

Negative right violation vignette. "John is a college student. In order to support himself, he works as a guide at the local campus. He accompanies potential students and their parents as they visit the college, and shows them around. His best friend [a fellow student named] Greg also works as a guide. One day, John and Greg were assigned to jointly accompany a family. When they came to the end of the tour, Greg greeted the family goodbye and headed quickly to class. When John came to say goodbye to the family, the father shook his hand and said that both him and Greg were very helpful. He gave John two 100 Dollar bills, and told him to give Greg half of the money. John decided to keep the money and not share it with Greg."

Positive right violation vignette. "Dave is a college student. His best friend Chris studies with him [One of the fellow Students in Dave's college, is a guy named Chris]. Chris was diagnosed with severe illness and is in a state of a medically induced coma. The only chance to save his life is with a very costly medical procedure which his family cannot afford. The college student's union decided to put donation boxes across campus, and posted signs saying that if every student donated only 2 Dollars, there will be enough money to save Chris's life. Despite having many opportunities to contribute, and despite being relatively wealthy, Dave did not donate any money to help save Chris."

Results

Participants judged the negative right violation more severely than the positive right violation, $F(1, 193) = 66.65, p < .001$, and violations of the rights of proximal others more severely than violations of the rights of distant others, $F(1, 193) = 10.63, p = .001$. Most importantly, similarly to Experiment 1, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 193) = 33.98, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .149$. Unlike in Experiment 1, there was no interaction between political orientation and violation type, $F(1, 191) = 1.02, p = .314$. There was also no interaction between political orientation, violation type, and social distance, $F(1, 191) < 1$.

Experiments 3a–3b

Experiments 1 and 2 provided evidence that the adoption of harm-focused morality is not independent from the degree of social proximity between moral agents and patients. However, the samples in these experiments were both taken from the U.S. population—that highly values personal independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and self-reliance. In contrast, interdependent cultures assign greater value to mutual assistance and comradery. In light of this, in Experiment 3, we investigated the generality of the observed effect by attempting

to replicate the findings on a sample of participants from Israel, a relatively interdependent culture (Hofstede, 1983).

Participants

Participants were 80 Israelis (40 women; age: $M = 29.81$, $SD = 6.05$), members of an online surveys panel, who received a monetary compensation for their participation. The sample size (40 participants per between-participants group) was predetermined prior to data collection, based on the effect sizes observed in Experiments 1 and 2 (minimal partial $\eta^2 = 0.065$). Power analysis suggests that this sample size provided more than 95% detection power. Political affiliation was not introduced into the current study because in Israel, it is not representative of attitudes toward economic distribution.

Procedure and Materials

The procedure was identical to that of Experiments 1 and 2, except for the translation of vignettes to Hebrew. Participants read both the vignettes used in Experiment 1 and the ones used in Experiment 2.

Results

Replication of Experiment 1

Participants judged the negative right violation more severely than the positive right violation, $F(1, 78) = 120.26, p < .001$. There was a marginally significant effect of social distance, whereby participants judged violations of the rights of proximal others more severely than violations of the rights of distant others, $F(1, 78) = 3.07, p = .083$. Most importantly, as in Experiment 1, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 78) = 9.90, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .112$.

Replication of Experiment 2

Participants judged the negative right violation more severely than the positive right violation, $F(1, 78) = 34.47, p < .001$. Participants did not judge violations of the rights of proximal others ($M = 78.686, SD = 20.433$) as significantly more severe than violations of the rights of distant others ($M = 73.202, SD = 17.849$), $F(1, 78) = 1.620, p = .209$. Most importantly, similarly to Experiment 2, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 78) = 8.593, p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .099$.

Is the Interaction Between Violation Type and Social Distance Moderated by Cultural Context?

We conducted a joint analysis of all four studies. This was an analysis of variance with violation type as a within-participants variable and social distance, vignette (brother and friend vs. friend and fellow student), and sample (Israeli vs. American). The results showed that our main finding—the
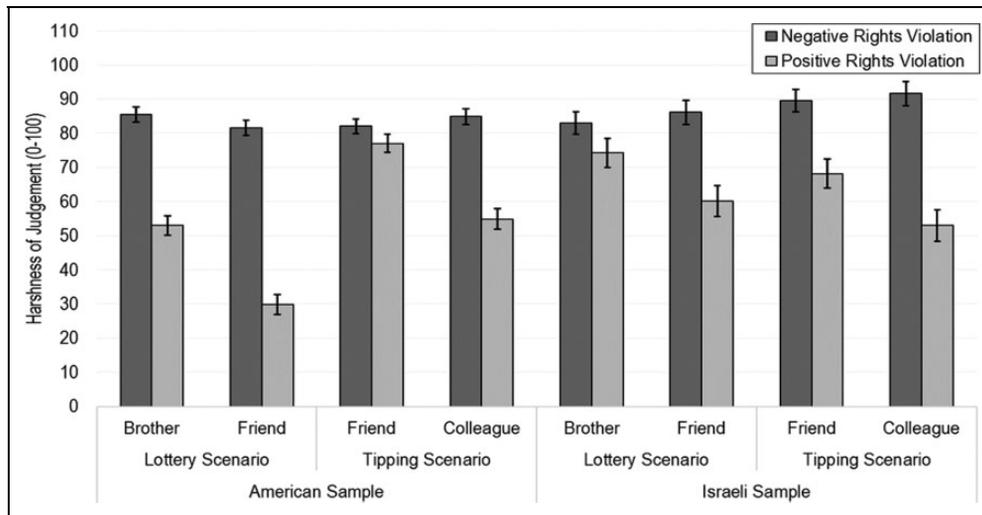
Figure 3. Results of joint analysis of all four experiments. Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

interaction between violation type and social distance—did not differ between the relatively interdependent (Israeli) and independent (American) samples, $F(1, 535) < 1$ (Figure 3).

Ceiling Effects Analysis

In Experiments 1–3, the average judgments of negative rights violations were relatively high. Thus, a possible concern is that judgments of negative rights violations were not affected by social distance because participants regarded these violations as atrocious. In order to address this concern, we conducted further analyses that showed the effects were not driven by ceiling. In light of space limitations, we refer the reader to the Supplemental Materials for details of this analysis.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 was meant to address several possible criticisms of Experiments 1–3. First, we sought to rule out the possibility that the current findings are limited to situations pertaining to taking versus giving of money. Second, we wanted to use more mundane scenarios that evoke lower levels of moral condemnation (and are less prone to ceiling effects). Third, we wanted to use scenarios wherein the positive and negative rights violations occur in contexts that are more similar to each other. Finally, we wanted to see whether the pattern of results holds at greater social distances than those investigated in Experiments 1–3.

Participants

Participants were 80 MTurkers (46 women; age: $M = 38.80$, $SD = 14.27$).

Procedure and Materials

Negative right violation vignette. "Greg lives in the suburbs of Louisville, KY. [His neighbor Chris lives in the house right next to him]. One late night, Greg was driving home and accidently hit [Chris's] someone's new car, destroying his [neighbor's] side mirror. Greg noticed that no one saw him, so he decided to keep on driving quickly without leaving a note on [his neighbor's] this person's window shield."

Positive right violation vignette. "Dave lives in the suburbs of Indianapolis, IN. [His neighbor Daniel lives in the house right next to him.] One morning, Dave was driving to work when he noticed [Daniel] someone stranded by the side of the road, holding a car battery charger. He realized that [Daniel] this person needs help charging his car battery, but because he very was tired, he decided to keep on driving without offering help to [his neighbor] this person."

Results

Participants judged the negative right violation more severely than the positive right violation, $F(1, 78) = 89.29$, $p < .001$. Participants judged violations of the rights of proximal others more severely than violations of the rights of distant others, $F(1, 78) = 19.34$, $p < .001$. Most importantly, as in Experiments 1–3, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 78) = 18.19$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .189$. For the negative right violation, there was no significant difference between the proximal ($M = 78.341$, $SD = 26.755$) and distant ($M = 73.307$, $SD = 22.772$) conditions, $F(1, 78) < 1$; for the positive right violation, there was an effect of distance whereby participants judged the failure to provide care more severely for proximal others ($M = 60.756$, $SD = 27.566$) as compared to distant others ($M = 26.794$, $SD = 22.002$), $F(1, 78) = 36.85$, $p < .001$. There was no interaction between political orientation and violation type, $F(1, 76) = 1.52$, $p = .222$. There was an interaction between political orientation, violation type, and social distance, $F(1, 76) = 5.87$, $p = .018$—which stemmed from the fact that the Violation Type × Distance interaction was observed for conservative and very conservative participants, $F(1, 19) = 27.54$, p

< .001, but not for liberal and very liberal participants, $F(1, 38) = 2.98$, $p = .092$.

Experiment 5

In Experiments 1–4, we investigated participants' levels of moral condemnation toward individuals who violated others' negative and positive rights. In Experiment 5, we wanted to see whether the effects also hold when participants are asked to answer how they themselves would behave in imagined interactions with proximal or more distant others.

Participants

Participants were 80 MTurkers (45 women; age: $M = 34.83$, $SD = 10.13$).

Procedure and Materials

The vignettes participants read in this experiment were similar to those used in Experiment 2. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in the situation described and report how they would behave. In the positive rights scenario, they were asked: "What are the chances that you will indeed share the money with Greg?," and in the negative rights scenarios: "What are the chances that you will donate the money to help save Chris?" An additional difference from Experiment 2 was that both in the positive and in the negative rights scenario, the amount of money at stake was identical (US$100).

Results

Participants reported that they are more likely to refrain from violating a negative right than refraining from violating a positive right, $F(1, 78) = 21.02$, $p < .001$. Participants reported that they are more likely to refrain from violating the rights of proximal others than those of distant others, $F(1, 78) = 28.42$, $p < .001$. Most importantly, as in Experiments 1–4, there was an interaction between violation type and social distance, $F(1, 78) = 31.85$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .289$. For the negative right violation, there was no significant difference between the proximal ($M = 91.432$, $SD = 22.226$) and distant ($M = 89.697$, $SD = 21.898$) conditions, $F(1, 78) < 1$; for the positive right violation, there was an effect of distance whereby participants were more likely to refrain from violating the right of proximal ($M = 95.567$, $SD = 11.973$) as compared to distant others ($M = 49.744$, $SD = 39.627$), $F(1, 78) = 45.80$, $p < .001$. There was no interaction between political orientation and violation type, $F(1, 76) < 1$. There was also no significant interaction between political orientation, violation type, and social distance, $F(1, 76) = 2.09$, $p = .152$.

Effects of Political Orientation

In order to increase the statistical power to detect potential effects of political orientation, we conducted a joint analysis of Experiments 1, 2, 4, and 5. Consistent with the idea that conservatives adopt harm-focused morality to a greater extent, there was an interaction between violation type and political orientation, $F(1, 527) = 6.12$, $p = .013$, which was qualified by a nonsignificant trend toward a *positive* correlation between conservatism and judgment severity for the negative rights violation, $\beta = .083$, $SE = 0.047$, CI [−0.010, 0.177], $F(1, 527) = 3.06$, $p = .081$, and a nonsignificant trend toward a *negative* correlation between conservatism and judgment severity for the positive rights violation, $\beta = −.057$, $SE = 0.040$, CI [−0.136, 0.021], $F(1, 527) = 2.06$, $p = .152$. There was a marginally significant interaction between political orientation, violation type, and distance, $F(1, 527) = 2.79$, $p = .095$. This trend stemmed from the fact that highly conservative individuals exhibited a larger Violation Type × Distance interaction (partial $\eta^2 = 0.366$) as compared to that of conservatives (0.106), moderates (0.160), liberals (0.129), and very liberals (0.130). Thus, the results showed that the interaction between violation type and distance was *not* more pronounced for relatively more liberal participants.

Discussion

We conducted five experiments wherein participants judged immoral acts that involved harm or apathy (lack of care) between relatively proximal and distant individuals. Unsurprisingly, we found an effect of in-group-focused morality reflecting harsher judgments of immoral acts between socially proximal agent and patient. Also unsurprisingly, we found that people adopted harm-focused morality, such that the commission of harm was judged more harshly than the omission of care. Critically, we observed an interaction between social distance (proximal vs. distal) and violation type (positive vs. negative right violation) reflecting a greater adoption of harm-focused morality for interactions between more distant individuals. We found this when differences in social distance were manifested in kin versus nonkin friendships (Experiment 1 and 3a), in a close versus collegial relationship (Experiment 2 and 3b), and in interactions between neighbors versus strangers (Experiment 4). We also found this for both North American (Experiment 1 and 2) and Israeli participants (Experiment 3) and in judgments concerning others (Experiment 1–4) and the self (Experiment 5).

These findings suggest that harm-focused morality and in-group-focused morality do not provide independent contributions to moral judgment, but that harm-focused morality is attenuated for socially proximal others. The interaction between these two fundamentals of moral psychology may help explain the tragic paradox wherein people can be morally outraged by wars that occur in distant parts of the globe but remain apathetic to avoidable deaths that are not the result of man-made harmful acts.

As noted, harm-focused morality is not merely an empirical description of people's moral behavior but is at the foundations of right-wing political thought. An extreme example of this is

the "objectivist" moral ideology developed by Ayn Rand (1964). This moral philosophy (which plays an important role in American right-wing politics) denies the validity of positive rights (i.e., the moral obligation to provide care for people in need) mostly on the grounds that they entail a violation of people's negative rights (i.e., the moral obligation not to harm the well-being of other people). For example, in order to provide health care for the entire country, the government must use its power and collect taxes from individuals, regardless of whether they want to contribute this money or not—thus supposedly infringing upon their negative rights. Because of the inherent conflict between positive and negative rights, objectivist philosophy argues that the only legitimate criterion according to which individuals' moral character should be judged is whether or not they harmed others; whether or not an individual chooses to care for others has no bearing on his or her moral character.

A common criticism of the right wing's rhetoric concerning the supremacy of negative rights is that it may not reflect a coherent moral system, but rather that the negation of positive rights may simply be a means to legitimize inequalities that benefit well-off societal groups (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1846/1978; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001). Put differently, by advocating for the moral legitimacy of apathy toward the poor and by emphasizing the importance of enforcement of property rights, privileged individuals may advance their own well-being at the expense of less-privileged individuals. In order for the right wing's negation of positive rights to be vindicated as a manifestation of a true deontological moral principle, one should expect it (to the very least) to be applied to individuals in a nonbiased, nondiscretionary manner. However, if one applies harm-focused morality to moral judgments that pertain to socially distant others, but not to moral judgments that pertain to close others, then one cannot advocate for the universal superiority of harm-focused morality over care-focused morality.

Our findings show that people do see a moral imperative in providing assistance to others—to the extent that the recipient is socially proximal. This was true regardless of participants' political orientation. In accordance with the common conception of the political map in the United States, the results did suggest that liberals attributed greater importance to positive rights compared to conservatives. However, critically, liberals and conservatives did not differ in the in-group-biased manner with which they endorsed harm-focused morality (if anything, conservatives exhibited this bias to a slightly larger extent).

Clearly, the participants in our experiments did not benefit themselves or their in-group by making their moral judgments. However, we believe that it is worthwhile to consider the possibility that members of wealthy nations (as are most participants in psychology studies) do in fact benefit from endorsing a social–moral system wherein harm-focused morality is cherished and applied in a discretionary manner (i.e., applied to a greater extent to socially distant others). At the societal level, challenging our beliefs concerning the supremacy of harm would undermine our ability to continue turning a blind eye in the face of preventable human misery, and as

such, is likely to be psychologically (or economically) taxing. In light of this, it is possible that the (relatively bipartisan) adoption of harm-based morality by individuals in Western societies can be seen as instantiation of motivated cognition (see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003, for a related discussion in the context of conservative ideology).

Finally, the current findings may also have important implications for positive/descriptive theories of morality. According to the moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004), there are several innate systems that govern our moral judgments: a system for the maintenance of care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, loyalty versus betrayal, authority versus subversion, and sanctity versus degradation. Previous work on moral foundations has treated the moral intuitions concerning harm and care as two end points on a single continuum. However, as the current research shows, judgments of harm commission and judgments of care omission are separately modifiable; namely, the importance of harm violations is generally stable across different levels of social distance, whereas care is differentially applied to socially proximal and distant individuals. This finding suggests that future research should continue to investigate whether the two factors (harm and care) should be separated and treated as two independent foundations (as is argued, e.g., in Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). Hopefully, such continued research into the psychology of apathy and care may help find ways to mitigate the former and increase the latter.

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

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