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The Relation Between People’s Connection With a Target and the Perceived Importance of Justice

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We propose that actors will perceive justice as more important with respect to a target when they experience moderate versus extremely high or extremely low connection with the target. In two studies, we manipulated actors’ connection with (e.g., similarity to) a target and the target’s standing on the appropriate justice criterion. Both studies yielded the predicted curvilinear relation between connectedness and the perceived relevance of justice. In Study 2, actors’ decisions were more affected by the justice criterion in the moderate versus extreme connectedness conditions. Our findings have important implications for the interplay between connection with others and moral motivations.

Every day, decisions are made about how to behave toward another individual in ways that are meant to help or hurt the target. Doctors and nurses decide whether a patient will receive emergency medical attention ahead of others also seeking emergency care; citizens choose whether to respond to appeals from victims of misfortune and how much money and time to donate to these individuals; jury members sometimes help decide the punishment of an offender, and so on. Our understanding of people’s choices in such situations will be increased by a greater knowledge of the motivations that drive people’s behavior toward the target. In the present research, we explored the role of a justice motive in behavior toward others. Specifically, we investigated when people perceive justice as a relevant consideration in their decision-making behavior with respect to specific targets.

In social psychology, justice is conceptualized as a judgment people make about events, as well as an important motivator of human behavior (see Ross & Miller, 2002; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). Researchers distinguish between at least three realms of behavior with respect to justice: behavior related to the distribution of resources or outcomes (e.g., Deutsch, 1985), the procedures one employs for making decisions about distributions or outcomes (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988), and the interpersonal treatment of those who are affected by decisions (e.g., Bies & Moag, 1986). Whether viewed as a judgment or a motive, and regardless of the realm of behavior, the concept of justice is often morally laden and, therefore, associated with conceptions of right and wrong (e.g., Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005; Kohlberg, 1976). Note, most social psychologists use the terms “justice” and “fairness” interchangeably (e.g., Coquil, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). We follow this convention in the present article.
However, that justice is not the only example of a moral motive; other examples are duty and obligation, self-restraint, caring and compassion, and spiritual purity (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). In the current studies, consistent with recent research in the social psychology of justice, we focus on justice as one moral motive that influences people’s behavior toward others—in particular, people’s allocation of positive outcomes (medical aid) or negative outcomes (punishment) to another being.

In the present studies, we investigate the influence of one broad factor that has been theorized to affect the degree to which people consider justice to be relevant to their behavior toward others: people’s connection with others or “connectedness.” Researches in social justice (e.g., Opotow, 1990), environmental psychology (e.g., Dutcher, Finley, Luloff, & Johnson, 2007; Schultz, 2002), interpersonal relationships (e.g., Gurung, Sarason, & Sarason, 2001), cultural psychology (e.g., Li, 2002), and other areas, have discussed the concept of connectedness. Although these researchers define connectedness in a number of ways, they agree that people experience connectedness with a target when they perceive that the target is part of their sense of self (see Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Overlap between one’s sense of self and a target has been shown to be related to interpersonal and intergroup similarity (e.g., Aron et al., 1992; Faseur & Geuens, 2010), empathy (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; Schultz, 2001), and the quality or strength of emotional attachment (e.g., Aron et al., 1992). Indeed, these related variables—especially similarity—are sometimes included in conceptual and/or operational definitions of connectedness (e.g., Cwir, Carr, Walton, & Spencer, 2011; Faseur & Geuens, 2010; Floyd, 1999; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Opotow, 1990). In the present research, we view variables such as similarity and emotional attachment to be alternative forms of connectedness (similar to Opotow, 1990). Furthermore, we experimentally manipulate these variables to investigate the influence of connectedness on human behavior (for examples of similar manipulations, see Cwir et al., 2011; Faseur & Geuens, 2010; Maner & Gailliot, 2007; Opotow, 1990).

Several researchers have suggested that people perceive moral rules such as justice or fairness to be less relevant for targets with whom they experience lesser rather than greater connectedness. For example, “scope of justice” researchers have theorized that justice is a less important concern to actors when they are less personally similar to, do not share the group membership of, or have an emotionally antagonistic (versus emotionally attached) relationship with the target of their behavior (e.g., Deutsch, 2000; Opotow, 1990, 2001a, 2005). The group value model of procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988) suggests a similar relation between connectedness and the perceived relevance of fairness. The theory posits that people care about procedural justice primarily because it tells them the extent to which they are a valued member of their social group. This argument implies that procedural justice will be of less concern to people when they are interacting with a member of an outgroup versus a member of their ingroup (e.g., Boeckmann & Tyler, 1997; Tyler & Lind, 1990; for a similar idea with respect to distributive justice, see Wenzel, 2002).

Although the empirical literature is not without problems (Hafer & Olson, 2003), some empirical studies directly support a relation between increasing connection with a target and the degree to which actors perceive justice or fairness as relevant in their behavior toward the target. Using a modified Stroop task (see Hafer, 2000), Correia, Vala, and Aguiar (2007) had participants identify the color of justice-related and neutral words after exposure to a child who suffered severe physical harm as the result of electric shock. Participants were slower to identify the color of justice versus control words—that is, they showed greater justice-word “interference”—when the child was from their ingroup (Portuguese) than when the child was from an outgroup (Gypsies). Thus, the concept of justice seemed to be of greater concern, and was primed to a greater extent, for the ingroup versus the outgroup victim (see also Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008). Olson, Cheung, Conway, Hutchison, and Hafer (2011, Experiment 2) manipulated whether a proposal to offer international aid was aimed at improving the health of a group of people, animals, or plants. Participants reported that justice was a less relevant consideration in deciding whether the proposal should be funded when the target was plants than when the target was either animals or humans. In addition, the pattern of means indicated a linear trend as the target ranged from more to less human (i.e., from humans to animals to plants). Participants also responded more slowly when rating the perceived importance of justice when the target was plants than when the target was either animals or humans, presumably indicating that the concept of justice was less primed when the target was plants. These differential reactions did not occur when the considerations were the cost of the project or the public interest. Thus, greater connection with a target has been shown to be related to greater concern about justice, whether connectedness is defined in terms of a target’s ingroup versus outgroup status (vis-à-vis the actor) or as the “humanness” of the target group.

A CURVILINEAR RELATION BETWEEN CONNECTEDNESS AND THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF JUSTICE

The research in the previous section is consistent with a linear and positive relation between connectedness and
the perceived relevance or importance of justice. We suspect, however, that the association between these two variables is more complex. Specifically, we suggest a curvilinear relation, such that justice is perceived as relatively important when there is a moderate degree of connectedness between the actor and the target but as less relevant at extremely low or extremely high ends of a continuum of connectedness.

For the empirical studies just noted, the low connection conditions for which justice was deemed less important can be considered extremely low levels of connectedness. With respect to Correia et al. (2007), the Portuguese majority view Gypsies as extremely unlike themselves. This low level of connectedness is accompanied by a great deal of antagonism (Council of Europe: European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2007). Extreme antagonism and the related emotion of hate have been associated with a motivation to hurt others or to see them suffer (e.g., Royzman, McCauley, & Rozin, 2005), which, according to some authors, overrides concerns with justice (see Opotow, 2005). With respect to the Olson et al. (2011) study, plants are likely seen as extremely unlike humans. The low level of connectedness in this case was presumably accompanied by disregard rather than antagonism and hate—the participants simply did not think about the target’s outcomes (Opotow, 2001b). In cases of disregard, the motive that guides actors’ behavior will depend on the context. For example, when a target is disregarded and actors have a vested interest in the decision (as in our Study 1), self-interest might motivate actors’ behavior, overriding a concern with justice. In Olson et al. (2011), actors likely had a lesser tendency to help the plants by giving them scarce monetary resources because actors’ own self-interest could best be served by saving these funds to help with diseases that might affect humans, including the participant, in the future.

In summary, some studies are consistent with the idea that people are less concerned with justice when their connection with the target of their actions is extremely low: The actors’ behavior in these instances is presumably driven by alternative motives, such as the desire to see others hurt or self-interest. In the present Study 1, we created an extremely low connectedness condition in which the target was one that is easily disregarded and the participant had a vested interest in the decision. Given these constraints, we expected self-interest (and not justice) to guide participants’ behavior toward the target. In the present Study 2, we created an extremely low connectedness condition characterized by extreme antagonism and hate. In this case, we expected a desire to hurt the target (and not justice) to guide behavior toward the target.

Although some research addresses the claim that the perceived importance of justice decreases with decreasing connectedness, we are aware of relatively little research that addresses the notion that justice is perceived as less important or relevant at the positive pole of a continuum of connectedness. Gilligan’s (1982) work on gender and moral reasoning is one example. In theories of moral reasoning, justice is often considered to be an abstract moral principle that transcends interpersonal relationships or connections with others (Kohlberg, 1976). Women’s sense of self typically reflects their relationships; thus, according to Gilligan (1982), women are more motivated by a relationship-based obligation to care for and avoid harming others than they are by a desire to act justly, the latter of which disregards one’s connection to other people. Men, who typically possess a relatively independent sense of self, which is less defined by their connection to others, are more motivated by justice in their interactions with others, according to Gilligan. Gilligan’s reasoning suggests that a strong sense of connectedness with a target renders justice less important in one’s behavior toward the target (although both justice and the obligation to care for others can be seen as equally important moral motives).

A study by Batson, Klein, Hightberger, and Shaw (1995, Experiment 2) offers experimental evidence of a link between high connectedness and lesser concern with justice. Batson et al. manipulated male and female participants’ empathy with a target in need—a terminally ill child on a waiting list for aid that would improve her quality of life. After hearing the target’s story, participants were given the opportunity to move the child up the waiting list, placing her ahead of other, more needy children—an act that violated the principle of fairness. Results showed that high levels of empathy led participants to move the child up the waiting list and therefore to forgo justice considerations in their decision about the target. Furthermore, these participants appeared to know that they violated fairness principles in their decision. According to Batson et al. (1995), participants’ empathy prompted them to be motivated by altruism (a drive to increase the target’s well-being; see Batson, 1991) at the expense of acting justly (see also Oceja, 2008).

In summary, there is some evidence that people are less concerned with justice when their connection with the target of their actions is extremely high: The actors’ behavior in these instances is presumably driven by alternative motives, such as obligation, caring, or empathy-induced altruism. In the present Studies 1 and 2, we created extremely high connectedness conditions in which the target was extremely similar to the participant and someone for whom participants would feel a great deal of empathy—a twin (see Tancredy & Fraley, 2006). Thus, we expected altruism, a desire to increase the target’s well-being (not justice), to guide participants’ behavior toward the target.
Our review of the literature reveals some work consistent with a decrease in the perceived relevance of justice with lower levels of connectedness and some work consistent with a decrease in the perceived relevance of justice with higher levels of connectedness. To our knowledge, however, no one has proposed and tested our full hypothesized curvilinear relation between connection with a target and the degree to which actors perceive fairness as relevant in their behavior toward the target. Note the nuance of our argument. We are not suggesting that different justice rules apply in different kinds of social situations. Several authors have already made this point. For example, when social situations are aimed at economic productivity, an equitable distribution of resources will be perceived as fair, whereas for situations characterized by social welfare, a distribution based on need will be perceived as fair (e.g., Deutsch, 1985; Fiske, 1992). In contrast, we are arguing that justice will be perceived as less important or relevant at extreme ends of a connectedness continuum, whatever the justice rule may be that usually characterizes the social situation.

**THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

In the present research, participants read scenarios in which a decision was to be made about allocating outcomes to a particular target. Participants indicated the allocation decision they would make with respect to the target and the extent to which they thought justice was relevant or important to the situation.

We tested our curvilinear hypothesis in two ways. First, the scenarios varied in the extent to which participants felt connected with the target. We predicted that justice would be seen as less relevant in the extremely low and extremely high connectedness conditions compared to the moderate connectedness conditions (H1). That is, we predicted that the influence of connectedness on the perceived relevance of justice would be represented by a quadratic trend. Second, for each study, we also manipulated the justice criterion that, according to past research, people generally perceive as applicable to the given type of situation. We predicted that the manipulated justice criterion would be less influential in people’s decisions about the target in the extreme connectedness conditions compared to the moderate connectedness conditions (H2). That is, we expected an interaction between our connectedness and justice criterion manipulations.

We investigated our hypotheses with respect to two forms of connectedness and two justice rules. In Study 1, we manipulated connectedness by varying similarity, whereas in Study 2, our connectedness manipulation emphasized emotional attachment. We chose similarity and emotional attachment because these variables are most commonly associated with connectedness. With regard to the specific justice rule that would apply when justice was perceived to be relevant, in Study 1, we presented participants with a decision regarding the distribution of medical aid—a situation in which a “need” rule of justice would be seen as applicable (see Deutsch, 1985; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992). In Study 2, we presented participants with a decision regarding punishment in the case of reckless behavior causing harm to another—a situation in which a “deservingness” rule of justice would be seen as applicable (see Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). We hoped that testing our hypotheses across two different forms of connectedness and across situations that are associated with two different rules of justice would provide evidence that our findings were generalizable to more than one context.

**STUDY 1**

**Overview**

Participants read a story in which they and a target both needed scarce medicine. We created four connectedness conditions, with the extreme conditions characterized by extreme similarity to the target and extreme dissimilarity to the target. Participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to choose themselves over the target, as well as to rate the degree to which justice was a relevant consideration in the given situation. Presumably, when connectedness is extremely high (extremely similar condition), the dominant motive in this case would be a strong concern for the other’s well-being even at the expense of one’s own interests, rendering justice less relevant (see Batson et al., 1995). As connectedness becomes more moderate (similar condition, dissimilar condition), we reasoned that concern for the other’s well-being would decrease and concern for one’s own well-being would increase, balancing these two concerns and rendering justice more relevant. Finally, when connectedness is extremely low (extremely dissimilar
condition), we expected that, in this case, the dominant motive would be a strong concern for one’s own well-being at the expense of the other’s welfare, again rendering justice less relevant. Consistent with H1, therefore, we predicted a quadratic trend for the perceived relevance of justice when the independent variable was connectedness, such that participants would report that justice was less relevant in the extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate conditions.

We also manipulated who needed the medicine more—the participant or the target. Research suggests that an important distributive justice principle when the focus is on targets’ welfare, as in the case of medical aid, is to distribute the resources according to need (see Deutsch, 1985), especially when those resources are scarce (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992). Thus, if justice is perceived as important, participants’ decisions about the medical aid should be influenced by the need manipulation, such that participants should have a stronger tendency to give the aid to the target when the target has great need for the medicine. Consistent with H2, therefore, we predicted an interaction between the need and connectedness manipulations, such that need would have a weaker influence on participants’ medical aid decisions in the extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate conditions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 174 undergraduate students (93 women) at Brock University ($M_{age} = 19.73$, $SD_{age} = 2.01$). The students participated for either course credit or 10 Canadian dollars.

Procedure

Students participated in small groups. They were first asked to read a news article composed of excerpts from a real news story about avian flu. The article began as follows: “It could kill a billion people worldwide, make ghost towns out of parts of major cities, and there is not enough medicine to fight it. It is called the avian flu.” The story gave statistics on how many individuals in Canada might die from the virus and stated that there would not be enough antiviral medication available when it was needed.

Participants were then asked to imagine a scenario in which they and a target were sick with avian flu and there was only enough medicine for one of them. The description of the scenario included the manipulations of connectedness/similarity and need. After reading the article and the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire containing the dependent variables. They were given the following instructions: Really try to put yourself in this situation and answer as accurately and honestly as you can according to what you think you would do and how you would feel. There are no right or wrong answers.

Independent Variables

Connectedness. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four connectedness/similarity groups. In the “extremely similar” condition, participants were told that the target was their identical twin sibling, with whom they strongly identified and to whom they were extremely similar in terms of personality, values, and so on. In the “extremely dissimilar” condition, participants imagined that the target was a nonhuman animal—specifically, a chicken on a farm. There were also two more moderate conditions. In the “similar” condition, participants imagined that the target was someone with whom they identified and to whom they were very similar. In the “dissimilar” condition, participants imagined someone with whom they did not identify and to whom they were very dissimilar. To increase involvement, we asked participants to think of an actual individual if possible and to have a mental picture of the target in mind.

Need. Participants were also randomly assigned to one of two need groups. In the “target-more” condition, participants were told that the target needed the medicine more than they did, due to a weaker immune system, whereas in the “self-more” condition, participants were told that they needed the medicine more, due to a weaker immune system.

Dependent Variables

Four items served as checks for the connectedness manipulation. Participants rated how much they identified with the target (from 1 [not at all] to 7 [a great deal]), how similar they were to the target (from 1 [extremely dissimilar] to 7 [extremely similar]), and how much they could imagine being the target and feeling what the target might be feeling in the situation (both from 1 [not at all] to 7 [a great deal]). These items were averaged to create a composite measure of connectedness ($r = .81$). As a check on the manipulation of need, participants checked off whether the target needed the medicine more, both they and the target needed the medicine equally, or they needed the medicine more. To help test our assumptions about the concerns that would override justice in the extreme connectedness conditions, participants also rated the extent to which they cared about the target’s well-being in this situation.
as well as the extent to which they cared about their own well-being (from 1 [not at all] to 7 [a great deal]).

There were two primary dependent variables. First, participants rated the following question on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all relevant) to 7 (very relevant): “How relevant do you feel justice or fairness is to this situation?” Second, immediately after reading the scenario, participants rated on a 6-point scale how likely they were to choose themselves over the target to receive the medicine (where 1 meant they would definitely choose the target and 6 meant they would definitely choose themselves).

Finally, after participants rated their decision about who they would choose to receive the medicine, they were asked to explain “why you made the above decision or what you considered in making the decision.” The responses were coded by two independent raters, who were blind to the purpose of the study, into one or more of the following categories: “need” (the choice was made on the basis of who needed the medicine more), “connection” (the choice was made on the basis of some connection the participant had with the target, such as affection, similarity, or family ties), “lack of connection” (the choice was made on the basis of a lack of connection between the participant and the target), “self-interest” (the decision was based on what was best for the participant), “value/worth” (the decision was based on who had greater value or was more worthy), “guilt/right” (the decision was based on avoiding guilt or on doing what was “right”), and “other.” Some participants’ responses included more than one reason; thus, they received a 1 in more than one category. The two raters agreed on the coding for 87% to 97% of participants, depending on the category of response. Most disagreements were resolved by discussion between the raters; remaining disagreements were resolved by the first author.

Results

Manipulation Checks

We intended participants to feel less connected with the target as the conditions ranged from extremely similar to extremely dissimilar. To check whether the manipulation was perceived as intended, we conducted a linear trend analysis with the composite measure of connectedness as the dependent variable (see Keppel, 1991). A significant linear trend for connectedness was found, such that participants felt less connected with the target as the target was less similar to them (from the extremely similar to extremely dissimilar conditions, the Ms were 5.46, 5.31, 3.32, 2.62), $F(1, 166) = 242.30, p < .001$. Neither the main effect for need nor the interaction between the linear trend for connectedness and need were significant ($F$s < .49).

With respect to the need manipulation, 78% of participants selected the option that was correct for their condition. The pattern of responses was similar within each connectedness condition. In summary, the manipulations of connectedness and need were generally interpreted as intended.

Concern for the Target’s Well-Being Versus One’s Own Well-Being

We also tested our assumption that people would care more about the target’s well-being (relative to their own well-being) in the extremely similar condition and care more about their own well-being (relative to the target’s well-being) in the extremely dissimilar condition. We first calculated a difference score by subtracting ratings for target well-being from ratings for own well-being (so higher positive scores indicated that participants cared more about themselves than the target, whereas lower negative scores indicated that participants cared more about the target than themselves). We then subjected these scores to the same linear trend analysis as the connectedness manipulation check. This analysis led to a significant linear trend in the expected direction (from the extremely similar to extremely dissimilar conditions, the Ms were $-.91, -.35, +2.62, +3.57$), $F(1, 166) = 116.12, p < .001$. Neither the main effect for need nor the interaction between the linear trend for connectedness and need were significant ($F$s < 1.38).

Perceived Relevance of Justice

H1 predicted a quadratic trend for the effect of the connectedness manipulation on participants’ ratings of the perceived relevance of justice, such that participants in the extremely similar and extremely dissimilar conditions would view justice as less relevant than would participants in the moderate conditions. We tested this hypothesis with a trend analysis in which the perceived relevance of fairness was the dependent variable (see Keppel, 1991). A significant quadratic trend was found for connectedness, which conformed to our prediction, $F(1, 166) = 7.37, p = .007$ (see Figure 1). Neither the main effect for need nor the interaction between the quadratic trend for connectedness and need were significant ($F$s < .80).

1Participant sex did not moderate any of our expected effects in Study 1 or Study 2 (all $F$s < 2.09).

4When we removed participants who failed the need manipulation check, tests of hypotheses showed similar results.
Participants in the moderate connectedness conditions should be more likely to cite need (i.e., the presumed justice criterion) as a reason for their decision compared to participants in the extreme connectedness conditions (i.e., extremely similar and extremely dissimilar). Our reasoning also led us to expect that participants in the extremely similar condition would be more likely to claim that their decision was based on a sense of connection with the target, compared to participants in the other three connectedness conditions. Finally, we expected that participants in the extremely dissimilar condition would be more likely to cite self-interest, compared to participants in the other connectedness conditions.

To test our reasoning, we performed a 4 (connectedness) × 2 (category endorsed vs. not endorsed) contingency table analysis for each of the response categories. The categories need, connection, lack of connection, and value/worth were contingent upon the connectedness condition (see Table 1), and the chi-square statistic for self-interest just missed conventional levels of significance. The patterns for need, connection, and self-interest were consistent with the expectations just mentioned: Need was more important in the moderate conditions, connection was more important in the extremely similar condition, and self-interest was more important in the extremely dissimilar condition. Lack of connection was mentioned most often in the moderately dissimilar condition. Also of note, almost half of the participants in the extremely dissimilar group said that their decision was based on the (low) value/worth of the target.

Discussion

The results of our first study provided some support for the notion of a curvilinear relation between connection with a target and the degree to which people believe justice is a relevant consideration in decisions affecting...
that target. First, in support of H1, participants reported that justice was less relevant when deciding to distribute scarce medicine for avian flu to their twin (vs. them) or to a bird (vs. them) compared to when deciding to distribute aid to targets at more moderate levels of connectedness. That is, justice was seen as less relevant for decisions that involved targets lying at the extreme ends of a connectedness/similarity continuum.

Second, open-ended responses showed evidence that participants used the justice criterion of need as a basis for their decisions to a greater extent in the moderate connectedness conditions, a pattern that supports H2. In contrast, when the target was extremely similar to them, connection with the target was a popular basis for participants’ aid decisions, whereas when the target was extremely dissimilar, self-interest was a popular rationale. These data are echoed by the fact that participants’ ratings of concern for their own well-being minus their ratings of concern for the target’s well-being increased with decreasing connectedness.

We also found that lack of connection was a popular rationale for participants’ decisions in the moderately dissimilar condition. Our argument suggests that lack of connection should have been mentioned even more often in the extremely dissimilar condition, which was not the case. Perhaps participants felt so little connection with the extremely dissimilar target—an animal—that the concept of connectedness (low or high) did not occur to them at all.

In summary, results for ratings of the relevance of justice and for the open-ended responses were largely supportive of both our hypotheses. However, results involving our manipulation of need did not support predictions. Contrary to H2, there was no interaction between the connectedness and need independent variables on participants’ decisions about the medicine, suggesting no significant difference in the use of a need principle of justice to determine one’s choice as a function of connectedness, a finding at odds with the open-ended data. Because the results of Study 1 were mixed, we decided to conduct a second investigation.

STUDY 2

Overview

For Study 2, participants read a story in which a target had transgressed and faced potential punishment. We created six connectedness groups rather than four as in Study 1. The connectedness continuum also differed from Study 1, ranging from extreme emotional attachment to extreme emotional antagonism and hate, rather than extreme similarity to extreme dissimilarity. We measured the degree of punishment participants would assign to the target if they were able to do so, as well as the degree to which they believed that justice was an important consideration in their punishment decision. Presumably, in the extreme emotional attachment condition (extremely high connectedness), the dominant motive would be concern for the other’s well-being, lessening the relevance of justice (as in Study 1). In the extreme emotional antagonism condition, we presumed that a desire to harm the target would render justice less relevant (see Rozyman et al., 2005). Consistent with H1, therefore, we predicted a quadratic trend for the perceived relevance of justice when the independent variable was connectedness, such that participants would perceive justice to be less important in the two extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate connectedness conditions.

We also varied the responsibility of the target for the transgression. Research has shown that an important basis of perceived justice in the domain of punishing criminal behavior is the deservingness of the perpetrator (e.g., Carlsmith et al., 2002), such that people see punishment as just if the degree of punishment matches the degree to which perpetrators are thought to deserve negative outcomes. Furthermore, perceived deservingness for negative outcomes is substantially determined by how responsible a perpetrator is believed to be for a transgression; the greater the perpetrator’s responsibility, the more negative outcomes (e.g., the harsher punishment) people believe he or she deserves (e.g., Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1999). Thus, in the present study, when justice is perceived as important, participants’ punishment decisions should be influenced by the responsibility/deservingness manipulation, such that participants should recommend greater punishment when the perpetrator is more responsible for the crime (for detailed discussions of the links between responsibility, deservingness, and justice, see Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1999; Lerner, 1977; Mikula, 2003; Montada, 1994). Consistent with H2, therefore, we predicted an interaction between the responsibility and connectedness manipulations, such that responsibility would have a weaker influence on participants’ punishment decisions in the extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate connectedness conditions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 242 introductory psychology students (164 women) at the University of Western Ontario. The students received course credit for their participation.

Procedure

Participants took part in the study in small groups. They were asked to read a scenario in which a car driver’s brakes failed, and as a consequence, the driver hit and killed a child. The driver was always portrayed...
as the same sex as the participant. A description of the driver given at the beginning of the scenario constituted the connectedness manipulation. The scenario itself contained the manipulation of responsibility. After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire containing the dependent variables.

**Independent Variables**

**Connectedness.** There were six connectedness groups, ranging from extreme emotional attachment to extreme emotional antagonism. In the extreme attachment condition, participants imagined that the driver was their identical twin sibling, who was also their best friend and closest confidant. In the extreme antagonism condition, participants imagined that the driver was their worst enemy: someone they hated, and who was very dissimilar to them in almost every way.

The four remaining conditions represented more moderate levels of connectedness-emotional attachment. In the high-attachment condition, the driver was described as a good friend who was similar to them in important ways. In the moderate-attachment condition, the driver was a fellow student whom they did not know personally. In the low-attachment condition, the driver was an adult resident of a large midwestern U.S. city. Finally, in the very low-attachment condition, the participants imagined that the driver was a resident of a foreign country and was very dissimilar to them.

**Responsibility.** The first paragraph of the scenario contained the responsibility manipulation. In the high-responsibility condition, the paragraph read,

The driver owns a 1996 car and tries to spend as little money as possible on it. The car has not been taken to a garage for service or repairs in four or five years. Recently, the driver has noticed some strange noises but is hoping they will just go away. The driver knows that the car might be unsafe but figures that the chances of a serious problem are small.

In the low-responsibility condition, the paragraph read,

The driver owns a 1996 car and has been very conscientious about maintaining it. The car is taken to the garage for service regularly, and any suggested repairs are always completed. Just two weeks before, the car was in for a checkup.

The rest of the scenario was identical in all conditions and described the accident in more detail (following is the version given to female participants, in which the driver is also a woman):

The driver is approaching a traffic light at about 50 km per hour when the light turns yellow. The driver steps on the brakes, hears a loud cracking sound, and suddenly loses all braking power. The driver stomps on the brakes as hard as possible but nothing happens. There is no time to avoid the intersection, so the driver just honks her horn and tries to steer around a car that is coming to a stop for the red light in front of her. The car barrels into the intersection and strikes a van that is crossing on the green light. The car bounces off the van and runs onto a sidewalk, where a 9-year-old girl is struck and thrown more than 10 feet. Although an ambulance is called and arrives within minutes, the girl’s injuries are so serious that she dies at the scene. No-one else is injured.

The police come to the scene and interview everyone. The driver’s car is confiscated and taken to a police station. The driver is also taken to the police station and booked, though no charges are laid at this time.

**Dependent Variables**

Four items served as checks for the connectedness manipulation. Participants rated how similar they imagined themselves to be to the driver overall, and with respect to attitudes and values, intelligence, and personality traits, from 1 (very dissimilar) to 5 (very similar). These items were averaged to create a composite measure of connectedness (α = .89). Two items served as checks for the responsibility manipulation. Participants rated how responsible they imagined the driver to be for the death of the child, from 1 (not at all responsible) to 5 (completely responsible), and how much they imagined the driver should be blamed, from 1 (not at all blamed) to 5 (totally blamed). These items were averaged to create a composite measure of perceived responsibility (α = .86).

We measured the perceived relevance of justice by asking participants how much their punishment decisions were influenced by what would be fair and just and by what was morally right, from 1 (not at all influenced) to 5 (completely influenced). The mean of these two items formed a composite measure of the perceived relevance of justice (α = .68). In addition, to test our assumptions about the motives that might override justice in driving punishment decisions (at least in the extreme emotional attachment condition), we asked participants how much their decisions were influenced by their concern about the driver’s well-being, from 1 (not at all influenced) to 5 (completely influenced).5

Participants were asked three questions assessing the punishment they wanted the driver to receive. First, participants were asked what charges they would lay if they could determine punishment. They chose one of the

5An additional item asked the extent to which participants’ punishment decisions were influenced by their “feelings for the driver.” Originally, we expected this item to tap into both positive and negative feelings about the driver. However, in retrospect, we believe the meaning of this item was ambiguous in that some participants interpreted it to mean only positive feelings, whereas others interpreted it as we intended. This item, therefore, was not analyzed.
following six options in answer to this question: 1 = no charges, 2 = traffic violation, 3 = small fine, 4 = large fine, 5 = criminal negligence, and 6 = manslaughter. Second, participants chose one of the following six options to indicate the specific punishment they would want applied to the driver: 1 = no punishment; 2 = demerit points; 3 = small fine; 4 = large fine; 5 = criminal conviction, put on probation; and 6 = criminal conviction, jail sentence. Third, participants chose one of five options to indicate what damages they would want awarded to the family of the child if the driver was sued: 1 = none, 2 = up to $10,000, 3 = up to $100,000, 4 = up to $500,000, and 5 = more than $500,000. We standardized these items, then calculated the mean to create a composite measure of punishment ($\bar{x} = .86$).

**Posttest**

After the main study, we conducted a posttest to increase our confidence that participants defined fairness in the same manner across connectedness conditions. Responsibility was intended to be the justice criterion that was relevant to the kind of situation presented to participants in Study 2. Thus, we expected participants to believe that it would be fair and just to assign punishment to the driver based on his or her responsibility for the accident, regardless of their connection with the target. Such results, given that we find support for our hypotheses in the main study, would provide further evidence that participants are not simply applying different justice rules for different kinds of social situations; rather, as reflected in their ratings of the perceived relevance of justice and in their punishment decisions, they actually consider justice to be less relevant at the extreme ends of the connectedness continuum.

Eighty-two students (26 women) participated in the posttest. After completing several measures for unrelated investigations, participants were randomly assigned to read one of the 12 scenarios described earlier for Study 2. There were 20 participants in each of the extreme connectedness conditions (10 per responsibility group), and 10 to 12 participants in each of the four moderate connectedness conditions (five or six per responsibility group). Prior to analysis, the moderate attachment conditions were collapsed into two groups, one for the relatively high-attachment groups (good friend, fellow student) and one for the relatively low-attachment groups (resident of U.S. city, dissimilar resident of foreign country).

After reading the scenario, participants answered three questions regarding the punishment they thought was the most fair. These three items had the same response options as the three punishment items in the main study (i.e., six levels of charges, six levels of punishment, five levels of damages), but, for each item, participants were asked to choose the punishment they thought was the most fair and just, regardless of what punishment they might actually choose. We standardized the three items, then calculated the mean to yield a composite measure of the level/degree of punishment deemed most fair ($\bar{x} = .85$).

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks**

To check the manipulation of connectedness/attachment for the main study, we conducted a linear trend analysis, with the composite measure of connectedness as the dependent variable. This analysis showed a significant linear trend for connectedness, such that participants felt less connected with the target as they were less positively and more negatively attached to the target (from the extreme attachment to extreme antagonism conditions, the $M$s were 3.70, 3.65, 2.69, 2.76, 2.14, 1.96), $F(1, 230) = 173.69, p < .001$. There was also a main effect for the responsibility manipulation, such that participants in the low-responsibility condition felt more connected with the target ($M = 3.28$) than did participants in the high-responsibility condition ($M = 2.36$), $F(1, 230) = 86.68, p < .001$. More important, the linear trend for connectedness was significant in each responsibility condition ($ps \leq .001$) and was not moderated by responsibility ($F = .32$).

To check the responsibility manipulation, we conducted a 6 (connectedness) $\times$ 2 (responsibility) ANOVA on the composite measure of perceived responsibility. This analysis showed that participants in the low-responsibility condition saw the driver as less responsible for the death of the child ($M = 2.08$) than did participants in the high-responsibility condition ($M = 3.44$), $F(1, 230) = 145.67, p < .001$. There was also a main effect for connectedness, $F(5, 230) = 3.41, p = .005$. Post hoc tests using Tukey’s LSD revealed that participants in the extreme antagonism condition tended to see the driver as more responsible ($M = 3.26$) than did participants in the other connectedness conditions (average $M = 2.66$; all $ps < .01$). The interaction of the two manipulations was not significant, $F(5, 230) = 1.33, p = .25$, and pairwise comparisons showed that the effect of responsibility was significant and in the predicted direction for every level of connectedness (all $ps < .003$). In summary, our manipulations were relatively successful.

**Perceived Relevance of the Target’s Well-Being**

Our reasoning assumes that the greater a participant’s connection with the target driver, the more the participant will be concerned for the target’s
well-being (similar to Study 1). Furthermore, decisions about the target with whom one is extremely attached should also be more influenced by this concern (rather than a concern with justice). To test this reasoning, we conducted a linear trend analysis, with participants’ ratings of the extent to which their punishment decisions were based on concern for the driver’s well-being as the dependent variable. This analysis showed a significant linear trend for connectedness conforming to our expectations (from the extreme attachment to extreme antagonism conditions, the means were 3.05, 2.68, 2.39, 2.50, 2.33, 1.75), $F(1, 230) = 30.69, p < .001$. Neither the main effect for responsibility nor the interaction between the linear trend for connectedness and responsibility were significant ($F_{s} < 1.10$).

**Perceived Relevance of Justice**

H1 was that justice would be seen as less relevant in the extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate conditions. More specifically, we expected a quadratic trend for the perceived relevance of justice as a function of connectedness. A trend analysis showed the predicted quadratic trend, $F(1, 230) = 5.47, p = .02$, as shown in Figure 2. Neither the main effect for responsibility nor the interaction between the quadratic trend for connectedness and responsibility were significant ($F_{s} < 1.20$).

**Punishment Decisions**

H2 was that responsibility (the justice criterion in the current situation) would influence people’s punishment decisions to a lesser degree in the extreme connectedness conditions than in the moderate conditions. A 6 (connectedness) × 2 (responsibility) between-subjects ANOVA with punishment decision as the dependent variable yielded a main effect for connectedness, $F(5, 230) = 9.26, p < .001$, and a main effect for responsibility, $F(1, 230) = 194.44, p < .001$. These effects were superseded by a significant Connectedness × Responsibility interaction, $F(5, 230) = 4.46, p = .001$ (see Table 2 for cell means, as well as the difference in mean punishment between the high- and low-responsibility conditions for each level of connectedness). To interpret the interaction, we calculated the effect sizes for responsibility within each similarity condition (in terms of Hedges’s $g$; see Grissom & Kim, 2005). The pattern of the interaction (see Figure 3) conformed to predictions, with the effect of responsibility being smaller in the extreme conditions than in the moderate conditions.

To more precisely explore H2, we conducted two interaction contrast analyses. In the first analysis, we examined the interaction between the responsibility manipulation and the contrast between the extreme attachment condition versus the four middle conditions.

![FIGURE 2](image-url) **FIGURE 2** Perceived relevance of justice as a function of connectedness/attachment manipulation, Study 2. *Note.* att. = attachment; ant. = antagonism.

![FIGURE 3](image-url) **FIGURE 3** Effect size for perceived responsibility of the driver as a function of connectedness/attachment, Study 2. *Note.* att. = attachment; ant. = antagonism.

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<tr>
<td>Extreme attachment</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High attachment</td>
<td>-0.80</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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<td>Moderate attachment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low attachment</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low attachment</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme antagonism</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
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*Note.* $N = 242$ (20 or 21 per condition). Resp. = responsibility.
The interaction was significant, $F(1, 230) = 4.86, p = .03$. Thus, as predicted, the effect of responsibility was significantly smaller in the extreme attachment than in the more moderate connectedness groups. We conducted a second analysis in which we examined the interaction between the responsibility manipulation and the contrast between the extreme antagonism condition versus the four middle conditions. This interaction was also significant, $F(1, 230) = 13.41, p < .001$. As predicted, the effect of responsibility was significantly smaller in the extreme antagonism than in the four moderate connectedness groups.

**Posttest**

We performed a 4 (connectedness) × 2 (responsibility) ANOVA on the degree of punishment perceived as most fair or just. The only significant effect was a main effect for responsibility, $F(1, 74) = 23.28, p < .001$, such that, when considering what punishment was most fair or just, participants in the low-responsibility condition tended to choose less harsh punishment ($M = -.40$) compared to participants in the high-responsibility condition ($M = .42$). The main effect was not moderated by connectedness, $F(3, 74) = .28, p = .84$; thus, we were comfortable assuming that people believed a responsibility/deservingness justice criterion applied (if justice was relevant) across connectedness conditions in Study 2.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 2 strongly supported our proposal of a curvilinear relation between the degree to which people feel connected with a target and the degree to which they believe justice is relevant in their behavior toward the target. Consistent with H1, and paralleling the results of Study 1, participants reported that justice was less important when they were deciding on punishment for either their closest friend or their most hated enemy, compared to targets with whom they experienced more moderate levels of connectedness.

H2 also received support. Our posttest showed that people believed that administering punishment on the basis of the perpetrator’s responsibility would be fair in all connectedness conditions, yet participants in the two extreme connectedness conditions in our main study used responsibility information to a lesser extent when assigning punishment. This pattern was evident in the overall interaction between connectedness and responsibility, as well as in the pattern of within-cell effect sizes for the responsibility manipulation and the more specific interaction-contrasts. Finally, also consistent with our reasoning, participants reported that their decisions were based on concern for the target’s well-being to a greater extent in the extreme emotional attachment condition than in the other connectedness conditions, suggesting that altruism might have overtaken justice concerns in this condition (see Batson et al., 1995). We assume that the dominant motivation in the extreme antagonism condition was a desire to hurt the target, regardless of justice considerations; however, future research is needed to test this assumption.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Researchers have suggested a linear relation between the degree to which actors feel connected with a target and the degree to which actors perceive justice or fairness as relevant in their behavior toward the target. Our purpose in the present research was to test whether the relation between connectedness and the perceived relevance of justice is curvilinear, such that justice or fairness is deemed less relevant at both extreme ends of a connectedness continuum. We found some support for our contention. In two studies, participants in both extreme connectedness conditions reported that justice was less important compared to participants in more moderate connectedness conditions. This quadratic trend occurred in both studies despite different forms of connectedness (extreme similarity to extreme dissimilarity; extreme emotional attachment to extreme emotional antagonism), different justice criteria (need; responsibility/deservingness), and differences in the nature of the decision being made (distributing medical aid; assigning punishment). Also consistent with a curvilinear relation, participants’ decisions were less influenced by the relevant justice criterion in extreme versus moderate connectedness conditions, although evidence for this phenomenon in Study 1 was mixed.

Our data suggest that the relation between connectedness and the perceived relevance of moral rules such as justice or fairness is not as straightforward as researchers have suggested. One reason why the literature has focused on a linear rather than a curvilinear relation is that researchers studying the conditions under which people forgo justice considerations do not usually examine relationships characterized by extremely high connectedness, such as very close family relationships (for an exception, see Batson et al., 1995). Thus, social justice researchers have overlooked the possibility that the justice motive can be relatively weak not only for relationships with very negative connotations (i.e., extremely low connection relationships) but also for relationships with very positive connotations (i.e., extremely high connection relationships). A related point is that researchers have emphasized negative behavior toward targets that appears to result when justice is perceived as less important (e.g., Hafer, Olson, &
Peterson, 2008; Opotow, 1990) to the exclusion of positive behaviors that result under similar circumstances, such as helping motivated by altruism. We believe this emphasis has sometimes led researchers to confound negative behavior toward a target with the perception that justice is of little importance (see Hafer & Olson, 2003; Olson, Cheung, Conway, & Hafer, 2010; Olson et al., 2011). Results for the current set of studies are a reminder to researchers to remain aware that positive behaviors toward others as well as negative can be driven by motives other than justice.

The curvilinear pattern found in our research might help explain mixed results of past research. For example, perhaps studies yielding no evidence for a relation between connectedness and the importance of the justice motive (e.g., Olson et al., 2010, Study 2) involved relatively moderate levels of connectedness rather than the broader range used in the present studies (extending to very low and very high levels).

Our data also have some interesting implications for the broader research literature on moral exclusion and moral regard (as opposed to research on exclusion and regard with respect to justice concerns specifically). For example, Aquino and Reed (2002) argued that a strong moral identity reduces the psychological distance between “self” and “other” (i.e., increases feelings of connectedness), leading one to extend moral principles (including justice) to targets for whom moral principles would otherwise seem irrelevant. Our data suggest that, although a strong moral identity might indeed lead one to have more compassion for dissimilar others, this increased compassion could potentially be at the expense of justice as a guiding moral principle (see Batson et al., 1995). In support of this reasoning, Reed and Aquino (2003, Study 4) found that individuals with a strong moral identity were less likely to endorse punishment (killing) and more likely to endorse forgiving those responsible for the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Individuals with a strong moral identity (in Study 1) also conformed less to Foa and Foa’s (1980) principles of distributive justice; specifically, they were more likely than individuals with a weak moral identity to extend particularistic resources (which are usually seen as more fair or appropriate when given only to specific individuals) to strangers. Our interpretation of these data is that the moral boundary for compassion—one moral motivation—among those with a strong moral identity was expanded, but the moral boundary for justice—another moral motivation—was reduced.

Our discussion underscores the complex role that connectedness plays with respect to justice and other moral concerns. First, the relation between connectedness and the relevance of a moral principle is not always linear. Second, connectedness can affect the perceived relevance of different moral principles in opposite directions. For example, increasing connection with a target might heighten the degree to which a moral principle of compassion is perceived as relevant, yet at the same time reduce the relevance of justice. Decreasing connection with a target, in contrast, might lessen the perceived relevance of compassion, yet heighten the relevance of justice (at least to some moderately low level of connectedness).

Limitations and Future Research

Although we tried to maximize experimental realism, one limitation to the present studies is that participants responded to hypothetical scenarios and not to real situations. Participants might have been driven (either consciously or unconsciously) by a desire to respond according to social norms, regardless of how they would actually behave in the given situation. Although we cannot rule out this motivation, data from Study 1 reduce our concern that socially desirable responding was a major influence in our research. In particular, many participants in Study 1 admitted to socially undesirable responses in their open-ended comments. For example, a number of participants began their comments with a statement such as “I admit that I would...” and “I feel bad saying this, but ...,” suggesting that counternormative responses were not avoided. In future, our hypotheses should be tested within the context of people’s real experiences with various targets.

Researchers should also examine whether the relation between variables other than connectedness and the perceived relevance of fairness is curvilinear. For example, some authors have noted that the greater the conflict over resources between an actor and a target, the less the actor perceives justice to be important (e.g., Beaton & Tougas, 2001; Opotow, 1993). We wonder if justice will also become less relevant as resources become extremely abundant and conflict dissipates, because all parties can have what they need and want. A similar position, in fact, has been taken by some philosophers of justice, such as Hume (1777/1975), who claimed that distributive justice need not be considered when resources are bountiful. Thus, the association between conflict and the perceived relevance of fairness might also be curvilinear, with justice perceived as more important when conflict is moderate (see Tyler et al., 1997, p. 223).

Researchers could also examine whether the relation between connectedness and the perceived relevance of fairness (or other moral principles) differs for other forms or different components of connectedness (for a similar idea in the group-level emotion literature, see Iyer & Leach, 2008). In the present studies, we found evidence of a quadratic relation for two forms of
connectedness: similarity–dissimilarity and emotional attachment–antagonism (forms of connectedness that overlap). A quadratic relation, however, might not always occur. Rather, the relation between the perceived relevance of fairness and connectedness (even when extreme conditions are considered) might differ depending in part on the form or component of connectedness that is most salient in a given situation.

In summary, we began our article with examples of decisions that people make about helping or harming others—decisions related to important social issues like health care, charitable behavior, and punishment of crimes. Our results suggest that not only will such decisions be affected by the decision makers’ connection with the target but also that this relation is more complex than current literature suggests. Researchers still have much work to do to fully understand how people’s connection with others affects moral thought and behavior. We hope that the present research encourages such further work.

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