

## Standing up for close others: The relationship effect on moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts

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### Abstract

Moral courage, standing up for others and intervening when a norm is violated, is viewed as a virtue in modern societies. However, it remains unclear how moral courage varies in interpersonal relationships and across moral contexts. Two studies were designed to test the effect of relationship type (close or distant) between the bystander and the victim on moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts. The results showed that participants reported greater levels of moral courage when the victim was their family member or friend (vs. a stranger), and this relationship effect was stronger in the harm/care (vs. fairness) context. In addition, anger, a moral emotion, served a mediation role in the relationship effect on moral courage in both moral contexts. Taken together, the current findings demonstrate a relationship effect on the intentions of moral courage, especially in the harm/care context, suggesting that the relationship (between bystander and victim) and the context (harm/care vs. fairness) should be considered in understanding interventions against a norm violation.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### RELATIONSHIP AND MORAL COURAGE

Standing up for close others: The relationship effect on moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts

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## Abstract

Moral courage—standing up for others and intervening when a norm is violated—is viewed as a virtue in modern societies. However, it remains unclear how moral courage varies across interpersonal relationships and moral contexts. Two studies were designed to test the effect of relationship type (close or distant) between the bystander and the victim on moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts. The results showed that participants reported greater levels of moral courage when the victim was their family member or friend (vs. a stranger), and this relationship effect was stronger in the harm/care (vs. fairness) context. In addition, anger, a moral emotion, served a mediating role in the relationship effect on moral courage in both moral contexts. Taken together, the current findings demonstrate a relationship effect on the intentions of moral courage, especially in the harm/care context, suggesting that the relationship (between bystander and victim) and the context (harm/care vs. fairness) should be considered in understanding interventions against norm violations.

**Keywords:** moral courage; close relationships; anger; care; fairness

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A woman exits a hotel elevator. Pauses. Searches for her key. A man approaches from her left. He grabs at her arms, throat and hair. As he attacks, a member of the hotel staff enters the scene. He stands over her as she is pushed to the ground, as the elevator opens, as people emerge. He stands there as they walk away. It is more than three minutes before someone—anyone—offers help.

—Reported in *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Modern societies suffer from violence and conflicts, which often challenge human rights and may lead to social crises. Standing up courageously against these violations is strongly desired and regarded as basic competence in democracy (Edelstein & Fauser, 2001; Spini & Doise, 1998). Moral courage involves intervention against a norm violation or standing up for moral values (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013; Greitemeyer et al., 2006). While some people stand up and intervene despite the high personal risk of negative consequences, others do not. Previous research has identified dispositional factors that drive moral courage, such as justice sensitivity, conscientiousness, and moral emotions (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013; Halmburger et al., 2015), whereas the purpose of the current research was to examine relational factors and underlying processes of moral courage (Brandstätter et al., 2016).

Past findings related to helping behavior and intervention in cases of attack

indicate the importance of the perceived relationships between the bystander, the perpetrator, and the victim (Bennett et al., 2017; Bennett & Banyard, 2016; Shotland & Straw, 1976), as well as contextual cues that indicate the severity of the harm or the cost of helping (Banyard, 2011; Chabot et al., 2009; Burn, 2009; Fisher et al., 2006). Accordingly, the present research aimed to contribute to the literature by testing three hypotheses that address fundamental components of moral courage and combine them.

First, we hypothesized that moral courage would be more likely when the bystander has a close relationship with the victim compared to a distal relationship. Second, we hypothesized that anger, a typical moral emotion, would serve as an underlying mechanism in this effect and tested its role as a mediator between relationship type and moral courage. Third, considering the distinction between harm/care related violations, which involve suffering of close kin, and fairness related violations, which involve reciprocal altruism among unrelated individuals (Haidt & Graham, 2007), we hypothesized that the effect of relationship type (close vs. distant relationship with the victim) on anger and subsequent moral courage would be stronger in the harm/care—compared with the fairness—context.

## Relationship Features of Moral Courage and Emotion

Recent research has prized actions to redress norms, rather than helping a particular person or group (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013). In this vein, researchers have begun to explore the motives of moral courage, such as moral responsibilities, moral dispositions, and moral concerns (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013; Dungan, Young, & Waytz, 2019; Pouwels, van Noorden, & Caravita, 2019). It should be noted, however, that redressing norms requires confronting a wrongdoer, which may involve interpersonal risk, making it important to consider relationship features in a morally courageous situation.

In fact, a key point of bystander theory suggests that the relationship between the bystander and the victim has an impact on the likelihood that the bystander will intervene (Latané & Darley, 1970). From a reciprocal point of view (Gouldner, 1960), individuals tend to feel more responsible for helping close others than strangers, as they are more likely to return such favors, since otherwise they would be considered ungrateful or “free-loaders.” In addition, a close relationship was also expected to lead to higher moral courage compared to a distant relationship, given that both moral courage and helping behavior are prosocial behaviors that share many attributes, although the focus of moral courage is on the perpetrator while the focus of helping behavior is on the victim. Such relationship effects are supported in the literature regarding helping in everyday life: having a closer relationship (e.g., friendship, more contact, in-group membership) with a victim was found to increase helping behavior in a variety of less risky situations for the bystander, such as contributing to medical research, intervening if someone stole a book (Bell, 2001), and offering financial and political help to victims of natural disaster (Levine & Thompson, 2004). Moreover,

another study found that, in the context of school bullying, adolescents were more likely to help a victim if she/he was a friend than a general classmate or an unknown person (Bellmore et al., 2012). In fact, Bennett et al. (2017) used vignettes to experimentally test the effect of the relationship between the bystander and the victim on the intent to help in situations of sexual violence, but the study produced mixed results, stressing the need to conduct further studies to explore the effect of the relational factor on the bystander's courageous act.

Another purpose of this study was to identify the emotional drive underlying moral courage. Lazarus's (2001) appraisal theory conceptualizes appraisal, emotion, and action as the means by which people cope with events in their social world. In coping with moral violations, previous studies suggested that moral anger is a driving factor of moral courage, in comparison with guilt and global mood (Baumert et al., 2014; Greitemeyer et al., 2006; Kayser et al., 2010). The rationale is that anger about norm violation helps bystanders to overcome the psychological barrier related to the potential negative consequences of the intervention. However, most previous research considered moral anger as triggered by perceptions and judgment of the perpetrator and overlooked the possibility that the level of anger might vary as a function of the relationship type between the bystander and the victim. Nevertheless, in one study, individuals felt a greater level of anger regarding perceived mistreatment of their in-group when their in-group identification was higher (Mackie et al., 2004), and such anger was expected to predict collective actions in confronting a wrongdoer (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2004; Yzerbyt et al., 2003). In the same vein, we argue that such an emotion-driven process also occurs in an interpersonal context. That is, witnessing injustice occurring to someone close (vs. distal) to the bystander instigates a higher level of anger, which further promotes the likelihood of a bystander intervening.

### **Moral Courage in Contexts: Harm/Care vs. Fairness**

Following the hypothesis regarding the effect of the type of interpersonal relationship between the bystander and the victim on moral behavior, we also examined whether such effect would vary across moral contexts, namely between norm violations that involve harm/care or fairness (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

In moral psychology, harm/care and fairness or reciprocity represent the two main aspects of interpersonal treatment (Haidt, 2007). From a developmental standpoint, both harm/care and fairness/reciprocity characterize universal forms of human experiences and relationships, corresponding to the two basic processes of the evolution of morality: kin selection (development of a sensitivity to the needs and suffering of close kin) and reciprocal altruism (development of a sensitivity to who deserves what), respectively (Haidt, 2007). In particular, the principle of harm/care derives primarily from moral concerns in close relationships (e.g., parent-child attachment), while the principle of fairness captures moral concerns of equality and cooperation, especially among people who are

not closely related (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

We based our theoretical reasoning on the situational model of helping and the bystander effect, wherein as the severity of the situation increases, bystanders are more likely to intervene due to clearer cues and a greater level of sensitivity to sufferings (e.g., Fischer et al., 2011; Dovidio et al., 1991; Fischer et al., 2006). From the perspective of moral foundations, both harm/care and fairness are universally endorsed over other values (Haidt, 2007; Graham et al., 2009). However, since care-related norms play a more critical role in the survival of human beings compared with fairness-related norms, perception of care and suffering might be a universal template and thus the most significant aspect for all moral judgments (Gray et al., 2014). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that a care-related violation (e.g., a physical or verbal attack) will be considered a more severe violation of morality compared with a fairness-related violation (e.g., unequal payment). Consequently, we expected people to show greater levels of moral courage when the victim is treated harmfully rather than unfairly, particularly when the violations occur to close others.

## The Present Research

Consistent with the aforesaid, the present research examined the effect of relationship type on moral courage across moral contexts (harm/care and fairness). Study 1 tested the effect of relationship type and moral context on moral courage. Study 2 was used to replicate the finding of Study 1 and expand the relationship type to include close relationships in general, beyond the scope of kinship. We hypothesized that close relationships (family, close friends or partners) would lead to higher moral courage compared to a situation involving a stranger, and that the relationship effect would be stronger in a context of harm/care than of fairness. Additionally, we argued that a moral emotion—anger—would mediate this effect. That is, a close relationship (compared with a distant one) with a victim would lead to greater anger, and in turn give rise to an increased willingness to intervene when a moral violation occurs.

## Study 1

To test the effects of relationship type and moral context on moral courage, a 2 (family vs. stranger, between-subject factor)  $\times$  2 (harm/care vs. fairness, within-subject factor) mixed design was used. We expected close relationships (between victim and bystander) to enhance moral emotions towards those committing moral violations, thus encouraging people to intervene against such violations. Therefore, we expected anger to mediate the impact of relationship type on moral courage. Moreover, we hypothesized that the relationship effect would be stronger in the moral context of harm/care compared with fairness.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred and ninety-two college students were recruited in class at a university in Southern China. Twenty-eight participants failed to complete the study and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 164 valid cases. Based on the last-digit number of their cellphone, 80 participants were randomly assigned to the family condition (age:  $M = 19.73$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; 55.0% female) and 84 to the stranger condition (age:  $M = 19.65$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ; 67.9% female). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the College of Medicine, Xiamen University, and written consent forms were obtained from the participants.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants were exposed to two hypothetical scenarios that included violations of moral norms: harm/care violation and fairness violation. After each scenario, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that contained measures of moral emotion and moral courage. Participants then indicated their gender and age, and were debriefed and thanked in class.

**Manipulation.** Two potential norm violation contexts (harm/care and fairness) with two types of the victim (family and stranger) were developed: (1) harm/care vignette. A woman is in a park when she sees someone she thinks she recognizes—a person that used to be a childhood friend. She runs up to say hi, but at the last minute, she realizes it is not the person she thought it was. She tries to apologize, but the stranger yells an insult at her. (2) fairness vignette. A woman is purchasing food for her lunch. When it is her turn to pay, she notices that the vendor is charging her twice as much for the same food as the person in front of her.

In the family condition, the victim in the above vignettes was changed to “your mother.” This was chosen so that relationship type (family vs. stranger) could be most clearly manipulated, since a mother is universally accepted as the most important significant other in almost all human societies (Rothbaum et al., 2010). In the stranger condition, the victim was either a female tourist (harm/care context) or a female customer (fairness context).

**Manipulation check.** We conducted a pilot study to confirm the manipulation’s validity regarding moral context, i.e., that participants perceived the vignette representing the harm/care context as depicting more harm than unfairness, and perceived the fairness context as depicting more unfairness than harm. A total of 82 college students were recruited in class at a university in Southern China, and 5 participants were excluded since they failed to complete the study. The final sample consisted of 77 valid cases: 39 were assigned to the family condition and 38 were assigned to the stranger condition. Participants read the two vignettes (harm/care and fairness context) in random order, and after each vignette reported their agreement regarding how much the victim was treated harmfully and unfairly on a 9-point scale (1 = completely disagree, 9 = completely agree). As expected, the results showed that participants indicated that the victim was treated more harmfully in the harm/care context ( $M = 7.05$ ,

SD = 1.17) than in the fairness context ( $M = 6.64$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ),  $t(1, 76) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .031$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.31$ . No significant effects were found for relationship type (family vs. stranger) or for the relationship type  $\times$  moral context interaction. In addition, participants indicated that the victim was treated more unfairly in the fairness context ( $M = 7.92$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than in the harm/care context ( $M = 6.29$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $t(1, 76) = 7.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.13$ . No significant effects were found for relationship type or for the relationship type  $\times$  moral context interaction. Thus, the results indicated that the vignettes properly represented harm/care and fairness contexts.

**Moral courage.** Participants' willingness to intervene against a norm violation was measured after each vignette on a 6-point Likert-type scale (Halmburger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2014). Each number indicates a response: 0 = I would not get involved; 1 = I would ask the person if she has mistaken the woman for somebody else; 2 = I would remind the person that it is wrong to swear at the woman; 3 = I would ask the person to apologize to the woman; 4 = I would tell the person that I was about to call the police; 5 = I would reprimand the person in a serious manner and fight back if necessary. Higher scores indicated a greater level of moral courage in response to the moral violation.

**Moral emotion.** A 10-item state anger scale (Spielberger et al., 1988) was used to measure the anger aroused by the moral violation. Participants indicated the degree to which they felt anger after reading the hypothetical scenarios on a 6-point Likert-type scale (0 = Not at all, 5 = Very Strong). The items were averaged so that higher scores reflected a greater level of state anger regarding the moral violation. The reliabilities for two moral contexts were satisfactory: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$  (harm/care vignette) and  $\alpha = .92$  (fairness vignette).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Given that compassion was another possible target emotion underlying moral courage (Gilbert, 2015), in the above pilot study we also measured compassion using a single item asking participants to indicate how much compassion they felt towards the victim on a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = to a great extent). The results showed that participants reported a higher level of anger when the victim was their family ( $M = 7.36$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) rather than stranger ( $M = 6.51$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ),  $t(1,152) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.56$ , while neither the main effect of moral context nor the interaction effect of relationship type (family vs. stranger)  $\times$  moral context on anger was significant. As for compassion towards the victim, there was no significant difference between family ( $M = 6.82$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) and stranger condition ( $M = 6.70$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $t(1,152) = 0.54$ ,  $p = .592$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.09$ . Moreover, neither the main effect of moral context nor the interaction effect of relationship type  $\times$  moral context on compassion was significant. The results indicated that anger, rather than compassion, was more likely to be the target emotion underlying moral courage.



## Results and Discussion

Mean scores, SDs, and Pearson correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, relationship type was significantly correlated with moral courage and moral emotion in both vignettes: higher anger and higher moral courage were displayed when the victim was a family member compared to a stranger. Moreover, moral emotion was also significantly correlated with moral courage.

A 2 (relationship type: family vs. stranger)  $\times$  2 (moral context: harm/care vs. fairness) general linear model analysis was conducted, with moral courage as the dependent variable, and age and gender as covariates. As expected, there was a main effect of relationship type,  $F(1, 160) = 43.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $p^2 = .22$ , such that participants reported a greater level of moral courage when the victim was their family rather than a stranger. There was no significant main effect of moral context,  $F(1, 160) = 0.54$ ,  $p = .463$ ,  $p^2 = .003$ .

Furthermore, as expected, there was a significant two-way interaction between relationship type and moral context,  $F(1, 160) = 8.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p^2 = .05$ , indicating that the effect of relationship type on moral courage was stronger in the harm/care context than in the fairness context (Figure 1). Simple effects analysis showed that participants reported a higher level of moral courage in the harm/care context when their family member was involved rather than a stranger,  $F(1, 160) = 50.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $p^2 = .24$ , which was also found in the fairness context, although to a lesser extent,  $F(1, 160) = 8.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p^2 = .05$ . In addition, the results showed that none of the other interaction effects in the model were significant, such as moral context  $\times$  age,  $F(1, 160) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .471$ ,  $p^2 = .003$ , or moral context  $\times$  gender,  $F(1, 160) = 3.76$ ,  $p = .054$ ,  $p^2 = .023$ .

Moreover, similar results were found when the dependent variable was moral emotion: the effect of relationship type on anger was stronger in the harm/care context than in the fairness context (see Appendix 1).

Next, via Hayes' (2013) simple mediation model, we tested if moral emotion (anger) mediated the effect of relationship type on moral courage. In the model, moral courage was included as the dependent variable, relationship type as the independent variable (family = 1, stranger = 0), moral emotion as the mediator, and gender and age as covariates. This analysis was conducted twice: once for the harm/care context and once for the fairness context.

In the harm/care context, the results revealed that the manipulation of relationship type evoked higher levels of anger in the family (vs. stranger) condition, which in turn led to higher scores of moral courage. As shown in Figure 2A, relationship type revealed a significant total effect ( $B = 1.33$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and a significant direct effect ( $B = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on moral courage. Furthermore, we found an indirect effect of relationship type on moral courage ( $B = 0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.29, 0.74]). Since the confidence interval did not



include zero, this result supported our hypothesis that the effect of relationship type on moral courage against a harm/care norm violation is significantly (but partially) mediated by anger.

In the fairness context, the results also revealed that the manipulation of relationship type evoked a higher level of anger in the family (vs. stranger) condition, which in turn led to higher scores of moral courage. As shown in Figure 2B, relationship type displayed a significant total effect ( $B = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but no significant direct effect ( $B = 0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p = .066$ ) on moral courage. Furthermore, we found a significant indirect effect of relationship type on moral courage,  $B = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.47]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, this result supported our hypothesis that the effect of relational status on moral courage against a fairness norm violation is significantly (and fully) mediated by moral emotion.

The current findings confirm our hypotheses and show that participants reported higher levels of moral courage when the victim is their family member compared to a stranger, and that this effect is stronger when the victim is treated harmfully rather than unfairly. In addition, the results reveal that this association is mediated by moral emotion (anger), which was higher in the family member (vs. stranger) condition. Although the findings from Study 1 are encouraging, the current reproducibility crisis in Psychological Science (Open Science Collaboration, 2015) underscores the importance of replication. In addition, we wanted to expand the findings related to relationship type to other close relationships, namely those who are not kinship family members.

## Study 2

The second study was designed to replicate the effects of relationship type on moral courage as a response to norm violations in harm/care and fairness contexts. In addition, the present study aimed at examining whether the effect of relationship type could be extended to close relationships in general; that is, we expected a similar display of moral courage in a situation involving family or close friends. To test these effects, a 3 (relationship type: family vs. close friend vs. stranger, between-subject factor)  $\times$  2 (moral context: harm/care vs. fairness, within-subject factor) mixed design was used, with moral courage as the dependent variable.

## Method

**Participants.** Two hundred and fifteen college students were recruited online from a university in southern China. Fifteen of them failed to complete the research, resulting in 200 valid cases. Based on the last-digit number of their ID, 73 participants were randomly assigned to the family member condition (age:  $M = 20.29$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; 82.2% female), 57 to the close friend condition (age:  $M = 20.33$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ; 84.2% male), and 70 to the stranger condition (age:  $M = 20.21$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; 77.1% female).

**Materials and Procedure.** The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Institute of Psychology), as in Study 1, and an online consent form was obtained from the participants. Participants were first exposed to two hypothetical scenarios that included violations of moral norms as in Study 1. After each scenario, participants were instructed to fill out a questionnaire measuring moral courage and moral emotion. Finally, participants indicated their gender and age and were thanked and debriefed.

The same vignettes as in Study 1 were used. In the new “close friend” condition, the victim in the vignettes was changed to “your close friend/partner.” Moral courage and moral emotion were measured with the same measures as in Study 1, with the latter demonstrating high reliabilities across moral contexts (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$  in the harm/care vignette and  $\alpha = .92$  in the fairness one).

## Results and Discussion

Mean scores and SDs of key variables are presented in Table 2. As will be described in what follows, there was no significant difference in the effect of the family or the close friend condition on moral courage. Consequently, we merged the two groups for the correlation calculations (see Table 3). The results showed that significantly higher anger and higher moral courage were displayed when the victim was a family member or a close friend compared to a stranger. Moreover, moral emotion was also significantly correlated with moral courage.

A 3 (relationship type: family vs. friend vs. stranger, between-subjects factor)  $\times$  2 (moral context: harm/care vs. fairness, within-subjects factor) general linear model analysis was conducted, with moral courage as the dependent variable, and age and gender as covariates. As expected, there was a main effect of relationship type,  $F(1, 195) = 23.77, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = .20$ . The pairwise comparisons showed that there was no significant difference in moral courage between the family and the friend condition ( $p = .911$ ), whereas participants reported a higher level of moral courage for their family member than for a stranger ( $p < .001$ ) and for their friend than for a stranger ( $p < .001$ ). There was no significant main effect of moral context (harm/care vs. fairness),  $F(1, 195) = 0.11, p = .738, \eta^2 = .001$ .

Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between relationship type and moral context,  $F(1, 195) = 11.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ , indicating that the effect of relationship type on moral courage was stronger in the norm violation of harm/care than of fairness. This was also apparent in the simple effects analysis, in which participants reported a higher level of moral courage in the harm/care context when their family and friends were involved compared to a stranger,  $F(1, 195) = 37.44, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = .28$ . This effect was also found in the fairness context, although to a lesser extent,  $F(1, 195) = 3.09, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ . In addition, the results showed that none of the other interaction effects in the model were significant, such as moral context  $\times$  age,  $F(1, 195) = 0.15, p = .696, \eta^2 = .001$ , and moral context  $\times$  gender,  $F(1, 195) = 0.10, p = .758, \eta^2 = .001$ .

= .000.

Next, Hayes' (2013) simple mediation model was used to test if moral anger mediated the effect of relationship type on moral courage. Since there was no significant difference in moral courage between the family and friend condition, we merged the two groups so that relationship type again included only two values: 1 for family or friend and 0 for stranger. In this mediation model, relationship type was the independent variable, moral courage the dependent variable, moral emotion the mediator, and gender and age were entered as covariates.

In the harm/care context, relationship type evoked higher levels of anger in the family-friend (vs. stranger) condition, which in turn led to higher scores of moral courage. As shown in Figure 4A, relationship type displayed a significant total effect ( $B = 1.47$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and a significant direct effect ( $B = 1.23$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on moral courage. Furthermore, we found an indirect effect of relationship type on moral courage ( $B = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI [0.12, 0.43]). Since the confidence interval did not include zero, this result supported our hypothesis that the effect of relationship type on moral courage is significantly (but partially) mediated by moral emotion.

In the fairness context, relationship type also evoked higher levels of anger in the family-friend (vs. stranger) condition, which in turn led to higher scores of moral courage. As shown in Figure 4B, relationship type displayed a significant total effect ( $B = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but no significant direct effect ( $B = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $p = .061$ ) on moral courage. Furthermore, there was an indirect effect of relational status on moral courage,  $B = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.29]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, this result supported our hypothesis that the effect of relationship type on moral courage is significantly (and fully) mediated by moral emotion.

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 and showed that relationship type plays a key role in driving moral courage across different moral contexts, and that this effect is more potent in response to norm violations involving harm/care compared to fairness. In addition, moral emotion (anger) was found to mediate the effect of relationship type on moral courage. Moreover, consistent with findings related to other prosocial behaviors that indicate similar effects for romantic partners and close friends (e.g., Nudelman & Nadler, 2017), Study 2 provides evidence that close relationships in general, i.e., not limited to kinship, have a strong effect on moral courage.

## General Discussion

The goal of the current research was to examine the effect of relationship type on moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts. Three major findings were demonstrated across two studies. First, there was a relationship-type effect on moral courage, indicating that close relationships (compared to distant relationships) between a bystander and a victim lead to higher levels of moral courage. This effect was found when the victim was a family member

(mother, Study 1) and a close friend (Study 2), suggesting a relationship effect beyond that of kinship. Second, and more importantly, we distinguished between two contexts of norm violations that involve harm/care and fairness, and found that the relationship-type effect was more potent in the moral context of harm/care. Third, we found that the effect of relationship type on moral courage was mediated by moral emotion (anger). As a whole, this research consistently demonstrated that a close (vs. distant) relationship with a victim arouses greater anger, which in turn increases the bystander's intention to intervene against norm violations. The research presented in this paper has both theoretical and practical implications that will be discussed in the following sections.

### **The Relationship Approach to Moral Courage**

Although some previous research on moral courage de-emphasized the role of the victim, our findings revealed that the relationship between bystander and victim plays a significant role in bringing about moral courage. This is consistent with similar effects observed in other social behaviors, including helping (Bennett & Banyard, 2016) and third-party punishment (Lotz et al., 2011). Thus, the current results suggest that an integrated process model, rather than dispersed frameworks, should be further explored in order to understand moral courage in particular, and prosocial behaviors in general.

In addition, close relationships in the current research included both kinship and friendship. Moral courage did not differ significantly between the family and friend conditions, and both close relationships lead to a greater level of moral courage than a stranger. These findings are generally consistent with those in the literature on helping, wherein having a closer relationship to victims (e.g., friendship, more contact, in-group membership) increases helping behavior in a variety of situations (e.g., Bell et al., 2001; Levine et al., 2005). Despite the fact that we extended the relationship effect on moral courage beyond the scope of kinship, some claim that kinship is the most valued of all interpersonal relationships (Schneider, 1980). For example, previous research has shown that the ethical system in traditional China is based on close-knit community ties, kinship ties, such that people are easily disregarded in moral context even if they are cordial with their non-kin associates (Yan, 2011). However, the current findings challenge this notion. To further clarify the influence of culture on moral courage and its antecedents, future studies should re-examine the effect of specific close relationships on moral courage from a cross-cultural perspective.

Moreover, the current research sheds light on possible training practices to increase moral courage (Brandstätter & Jonas, 2012). Particularly, emphasizing the close relationship between the bystander and the victim may encourage higher levels of moral courage. Consequently, we would expect more courageous behavior against norm violation when the perception of the interpersonal relationships between the victim and the bystander is manipulated by using phrases such as “we are family” and “we are friends” in uncertain or chaotic

situations.

Last but not least, we found a significant interaction effect between relationship type and moral context on moral courage. This indicates that moral courage was more displayed when the victim was a close other compared with a stranger, and that this effect was even stronger in the harm/care context than in the fairness context. Such results contribute to the research on moral courage (Baumert, 2013; Voigtländer, 2008) and to the situational model (Latané & Darley, 1970), and imply a need to return to the foundations of moral norms when exploring situational factors that contribute to the likelihood of a bystander to intervene.

### **Moral Anger as a Driving Force of Moral Courage**

Across moral contexts, a moral emotion (anger) mediated the effects of relationship type on moral courage. This supports the rationale that moral courage is emotion-driven, since anger was found to be the motivational force underlying engagement in defending moral standards in a wide range of studies (Batson et al., 2007; Halmburger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2014; Rothmund, Baumert, & Zinkernagel, 2014; Tangney et al., 2007; Valentino et al., 2011). The bystanders reported more anger when they had a close relationship with the victim, replicating effects in previous studies in which individuals felt a greater level of anger about the perceived mistreatment of their in-group (Mackie et al., 2004), and such anger predicted confrontation with the perpetrator (e.g., Yzerbyt et al., 2003).

However, the current findings go beyond replicating previous findings and challenge the exclusive mediating role of moral anger, which has been previously proposed (Halmburger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2014). Specifically, both studies indicated that anger played a different role in the moral context of harm/care and fairness. Moral anger fully mediated the effect of relationship type on moral courage in the fairness context, but only partially mediated the effect in the harm/care context. Thus, the present study suggests that other factors might explain the effect of relationship type on moral courage in the harm/care context. While anger toward the perpetrator may be the exclusive moral emotion generated when a victim is economically deprived or treated unfairly, a victim that is physically or verbally harmed may also trigger other emotions, such as empathy or fear. Although previous studies found little evidence for an effect of empathy on moral courage (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013; Kayser et al., 2010), this may depend on the specific moral context of the research (e.g., harm or fairness).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The findings presented in this paper shed light on important aspects of moral courage. However, it should be noted that this initial study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting its findings and should be further assessed in future research. First, the current research focused on the re-

relationship between the bystander and victim, but this effect might also depend on the relationships between the other parties (i.e., victim and perpetrator, perpetrator and bystander). Therefore, future studies should examine whether there are additional effects related to the relationship types of the other parties and whether these effects modify the effect of the relationship between the bystander and victim on moral courage. Second, since anger did not fully mediate the effect of relationship type on moral courage in the care/harm context, it would be useful to investigate the role of additional moral emotions (e.g., empathy) and psychological processes that can lead to moral courage (Halmburger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2014). Third, the current research utilized a methodology that involved hypothetical scenarios and measured intentions to intervene, due to the ethical issues that may arise from facilitating interpersonal transgressions and observing the degree to which perceived harm and anger lead a bystander to confront or not confront a perpetrator. While intentions have been shown to be strong determinants of intervention behavior, future studies should nevertheless attempt replicating the current findings by using realistic situations and behavioral measures (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013). For example, a natural experiment might use an observation of a person yelling at one participant's family or friend in realistic situations, and examine the degree of intervention, if any, of the participant.

## Conclusions

There is a growing interest in social behavior that involves potential sacrifice on behalf of an individual to restore moral values or for the benefit of others, such as heroism (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). An important behavior that can manifest itself in interpersonal relationships is moral courage, which includes an intervention against a norm violation or standing up for moral values (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013; Greitemeyer et al., 2006). The current research found that people are more willing to stand up against a perpetrator when the victim is a close friend or a family member, compared to a stranger. This draws attention to parallel processes between moral courage and other prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping behavior, Bell et al., 2001; Levine et al., 2005). Moreover, this effect was found to be stronger when the moral norm was in the context of harm/care (vs. fairness), with corresponding anger levels over the moral violation. While anger fully explained the effect on moral courage in the fairness context, additional moral emotions should be considered when the moral context involves care. This unique context-dependent effect highlights the importance of the current findings and offers concrete objectives for future research. Taken together, this research demonstrates the importance of close relationships for interventions against norm violations across moral contexts, suggesting that a relational approach should be considered when restoring moral values and mobilizing moral behavior.

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## Figures

**Figure 1.** Relationship type (family vs. stranger) as a function of moral courage across harm/care and fairness contexts (Study 1). Error bars indicated the standard error of mean scores.

**Figure 2.** Moral emotion as a mediator between relationship type and moral courage in the harm/care (A) and fairness (B) contexts in Study 1. The numbers related to the path from relationship type to moral courage represent a direct effect.

**Figure 3.** Moral courage as a function of relationship type (family vs. friend vs. stranger) across harm/care and fairness contexts (Study 2). Error bars indicated the standard error of mean scores.

**Figure 4.** Moral emotion as a mediator between relationship type and moral courage in the harm/care (A) and fairness (B) contexts in Study 2. The numbers related to the path from relationship type to moral courage represent a direct effect.

## Tables

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations related to variables (Study 1)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender a	—						
2. Age	.04	—					
3. Relationship Type b	.12	.02	—				
4. Moral Emotion (harm/care)	.23**	.45***	.21**	—			
5. Moral Emotion (fairness)	.22**	.50***	.22**	.52***	—		
6. Moral Courage (harm/care)	.23**	.45***	.21**	.54***	.48***	—	
7. Moral Courage (fairness)	.23**	.45***	.21**	.54***	.48***	.52***	—

Note.  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$

a Gender: 1 = female, 0 = male

b Relationship type: 1 = family, 0 = stranger

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of moral courage and moral emotions (Study 2)

Variable	Family	Friend	Stranger
Moral Courage (harm/care)	3.51 (1.12)	3.49 (1.15)	2.33 (1.21)
Moral Courage (fairness)	2.73 (1.31)	2.71 (1.29)	2.24 (1.18)
Moral Emotion (harm/care)	3.21 (0.89)	3.18 (0.91)	2.41 (0.95)
Moral Emotion (fairness)	2.89 (0.98)	2.85 (1.01)	2.51 (0.99)

**Table 3.** Correlations related to variables (Study 2)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender a	—						
2. Age	.03	—					
3. Relationship Type b	.08	.01	—				
4. Moral Emotion (harm/care)	.30**	.53**	.59**	—			
5. Moral Emotion (fairness)	.42**	.21**	.22**	.33**	—		
6. Moral Courage (harm/care)	.31**	.53**	.59**	.42**	.21**	—	
7. Moral Courage (fairness)	.30**	.53**	.59**	.42**	.21**	.52***	—

Note.  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$

a Gender: 1 = female, 0 = male

b Relationship type: 1 = family-friend, 0 = stranger

## Appendix 1

In Study 1, when moral emotion (anger) was the dependent variable, there was a main effect of relationship type ( $F(1, 160) = 27.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p^2 = .15$ ), such that participants showed a greater level of anger when the victim was their family, rather than a stranger. There was no significant main effect of moral context on anger ( $F(1, 160) = 0.60$ ,  $p = .44$ ,  $p^2 = .004$ ), but there was a significant two-way interaction between relationship type and moral context ( $F(1, 160) = 14.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p^2 = .08$ ), indicating that the effect of relationship type on anger was stronger in the harm/care context than in the fairness context. The simple effects analysis also indicated a higher level of anger in the harm/care context when a family member rather than a stranger was involved ( $F(1, 160) = 38.68$ ,

$p < .001$ ,  $p^2 = .20$ ), which was also found in the fairness context, although to a lesser extent ( $F(1, 160) = 7.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p^2 = .04$ ).

In Study 2, when moral emotion (anger) was the dependent variable, there was a main effect of relationship type ( $F(2, 197) = 10.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $p^2 = .09$ ), such that participants showed a greater level of anger when the victim was their family or friend, rather than a stranger. There was also a significant main effect of moral context on anger ( $F(2, 197) = 5.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $p^2 = .03$ ), and a significant two-way interaction between relationship type and moral context ( $F(2, 197) = 13.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p^2 = .13$ ), indicating that the effect of relationship type on anger was stronger in the harm/care context than in the fairness context. The simple effects analysis also indicated a higher level of anger in the harm/care context when a family or friend member rather than a stranger was involved ( $F(2, 195) = 24.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p^2 = .20$ ), which was not found in the fairness context ( $F(2, 195) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $p^2 = .02$ ).

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<sup>1</sup>For the detailed information, see the article reported in the Washington Post: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/06/viral-footage-shows-bystanders-doing-nothing-as-chinese-woman-is-attacked-in-hotel/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.dad1d80c39cd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/06/viral-footage-shows-bystanders-doing-nothing-as-chinese-woman-is-attacked-in-hotel/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.dad1d80c39cd)

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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