

Culture Shapes Moral Reasoning About Close Others

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Moral norms balance the needs of the group versus individuals, and societies across the globe vary in terms of the norms they prioritize. Extant research indicates that people from Western cultures consistently choose to protect (vs. punish) close others who commit crimes. Might this differ in cultural contexts that prioritize the self less? Prior research presents two compelling alternatives. On the one hand, collectivists may feel more intertwined with and tied to those close to them, thus protecting close others more. On the other hand, they may prioritize society over individuals and thus protect close others less. Four studies ($N = 2,688$) performed in the United States and Japan provide self-report, narrative, and experimental evidence supporting the latter hypothesis. These findings highlight how personal relationships and culture dynamically interact to shape how we think about important moral decisions.

Public Significance Statement

Modern civilization is built on rules about how to behave. Yet, in Western cultures, when these rules are violated by people we know and love, people consistently dismiss them. Here, we demonstrate that this propensity to protect close others is powerfully influenced by culture. In four studies, we provide evidence ($N = 2,688$) that people from Japan—a culture in which individual interests are prioritized less than in the United States—are less likely to protect close others who transgress out of concern for the impact on society. We also demonstrate that this cultural difference disappears when people from Japan are themselves the victims, a scenario in which societal interests are muted and personal interests are focal. This work highlights how personal relationships and culture dynamically interact to shape how we think about important moral decisions.

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All study data and analysis files are available at <https://osf.io/vz3m8/>. The data in these studies were used in Martha K. Berg's dissertation.

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Elizabeth Holmes dupes Theranos investors out of millions of dollars.

Larry Nassar sexually assaults hundreds of gymnasts.

Richard Nixon covers up the Watergate Scandal.

On the surface, each of these notable crimes was unique. Yet, they share a common, underlying feature: In each case, a person close to the perpetrator knew about their crimes but failed to report them.

Experiences that pit people's motivations to be loyal versus lawful are not rare. They constitute approximately one third of the moral dilemmas people encounter (Sowden, 2015; see also Bloom, 2011). A growing body of research consisting of upwards of 25 experiments involving nearly 9,000 participants indicates that when people are confronted with these kinds of moral dilemmas, they consistently choose to protect loved ones at the expense of society (Berg et al., 2021; Earp et al., 2021; Forbes & Stellar, 2022; Soter et al., 2021; Weidman et al., 2020). This result is largest ($d = 0.9$) when people evaluate severe moral transgressions and emerges regardless of gender, political orientation, moral foundations, or disgust sensitivity. Yet, despite the strength and consistency of these results, they share an important caveat: All extant research has been performed in U.S. contexts with social norms that prioritize *personal*

over collective welfare. Thus, this leaves open the question of whether people living in cultural contexts guided by alternative moral frameworks that prioritize *collective* over personal welfare might reason about and resolve these dilemmas in fundamentally different ways. Here, we address these issues to deepen our understanding of how culture and relationships dynamically interact to impact moral reasoning.

At the heart of our inquiry is the question of whether the impact of close relationships on moral reasoning is universal, or whether cultural priorities shape the way motivations to protect close others are processed. Crucially for this question, contemporary moral theory demonstrates that non-Western cultures incorporate social dimensions into their core moral frameworks more centrally than Western cultures do (Atari et al., 2023; Jensen, 2018; Shweder et al., 1987). These social moral values not only play into how individuals reason about *harm* or *help*, but they hold moral imperatives in and of themselves. They integrate moral codes such as loyalty, respect to hierarchy, and deference to one's group into a central sense of social responsibility that shapes the decision-making calculus guiding individuals' reasoning (Chernyak et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2022; J. G. Miller et al., 1990). In the same vein, emphasis on social concerns has long been seen as a primary distinction between cultures. Decades of research indicate that people from Western cultures, such as the United States, are driven by a sense of personal identity that is distinctive from others (i.e., individualistic; Triandis, 1995), and many non-Western cultural contexts, such as Japan, are driven more by a sense of collective identity that is shared with others around them (i.e., collectivistic).

These divergent frameworks shape how people prioritize concerns about the self versus the collective—precisely the factors that people are forced to balance when presented with the dilemma of having to choose between protecting someone they know who has committed a crime versus reporting their behavior to defend society. Yet, it is unclear how moral frameworks that shift priority toward social concerns will impact how people resolve these close relationship dilemmas. On the one hand, people from collectivistic contexts may more strongly endorse ingroup-biased morality (e.g., kin-based morality; Enke, 2019; Haidt & Graham, 2007), value interpersonal responsibilities over justice (J. G. Miller & Bersoff, 1992), and construe the self as intertwined with close others (Gerpott et al., 2018; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). If so, they should be more protective of close others who transgress. On the other hand, people from collectivist contexts are especially vigilant to transgressions from ingroup members (Liu et al., 2019), such that they are not *always* prosocial to close others, and value collective group harmony (Triandis, 1995), upheld in social norms that drive individuals to prioritize societal interests at the expense of personal interest (Lu et al., 2021). Thus, people from collectivist contexts may be motivated to be less protective of close others who transgress.

We tested these competing predictions across four studies. In Studies 1 and 2, we examine differences in how Americans and Japanese respond to close and distant others' crimes, as well as the factors underlying their choices. In Study 3, we use an experimental causal chain approach to draw inferences about causal mechanisms underlying the findings from Studies 1 to 2. Finally, in Study 4, we

examine a context in which people's moral decisions influence individuals, but *not* society—and thus motivation to protect society should be muted—to experimentally test whether shifting concern away from society impacts moral judgments.

Transparency and Openness Statement

All analyses were computed using R 4.3.0 (R Core Team, 2023). We determined sample sizes across studies to adequately power and optimize our ability to reliably estimate our relationships of interest. Each primary analysis has power of at least .80 to detect a small effect based on post hoc power analyses for the final sample sizes of each study. All studies received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of Michigan. All samples are convenience samples from the respective culture. Additional materials, methods, and results are reported in the [Supplemental Materials](#). Study designs and analyses were not preregistered. All study data and analysis files are available via the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/vz3m8/> (Baldwin et al., 2024).

Study 1

American and Japanese participants were presented with a scenario in which they imagined witnessing either a close or distant other commit a high- or low-severity crime. Participants then imagined being approached by a police officer and were asked to report the likelihood with which they would report the crime. We then asked them to rate how much they were thinking about issues concerning harm to the individual and to society, loyalty, and self-interest when making their responses. We focused on these factors because they have been shown to influence how people resolve moral dilemmas involving close others in prior research with people in U.S. contexts (Weidman et al., 2020). Finally, participants also rated their anger and disgust in reaction to the scenario, because prior work indicates that these emotions intensify judgment of moral transgressions, even at the expense of relationships (Ben-Shakhar et al., 2007; Rozin et al., 1999).

Method

Participants

American Sample. We recruited 404 American participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid \$1 for completing the 10-min study. Forty-three participants were excluded on a priori grounds: 14 for failing an attention check, 28 for identifying as Asian, and one for free responses that indicated inattention or misunderstanding of study instructions. The final sample of 361 comprised 42.7% identifying as female, 56.2% identifying as male, and 1.1% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 36.6 ($SD = 11.5$).

Japanese Sample. We recruited 437 Japanese participants through Lancers (<https://www.lancers.jp>), a Japanese online crowdsourcing platform. Participants were paid ¥100 (roughly equivalent to \$1) for completing the 10-min study. One hundred one participants were excluded on the same a priori grounds as the American sample: 70 for failing an attention check and 31 for free responses that indicated inattention or misunderstanding of study

instructions. Participants were recruited in two phases.¹ The final sample of 336 comprised 49.7% identifying as female, 50.2% identifying as male, and 0.01% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 38.2 ($SD = 9.6$). All materials were translated into Japanese and back-translated into English to ensure fidelity of the translation.

Procedure

We employed a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan) \times 2 (closeness: close vs. distant) \times 2 (severity: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one combination of the closeness and severity conditions within each culture, resulting in approximately equal sample sizes across the conditions.

Participants were asked to generate the name of a close or distant other (depending on the condition to which they were randomly assigned) from their social networks. To help them generate a name, we showed participants a diagram of overlapping circles adapted from the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1991; see [Supplemental Materials](#) for the full prompt). When asked to generate the name of a close other, they were shown circles overlapping closely; when asked to generate the name of a distant other, they were shown circles further apart. This approach has been used in past research to effectively identify close and distant others (Berg et al., 2021; Weidman et al., 2020). Participants were then asked to describe their relationship with the person they nominated. More information on the types of close and distant others that participants nominated is reported in the [Supplemental Materials](#), as well as robustness analyses showing our main results hold accounting for the relationships nominated.

Each participant was then presented with a scenario, in which they were asked to imagine witnessing a close or distant other commit a high- or low-severity crime (for the full scenarios, see [Supplemental Materials](#)). Severity was manipulated because past research has shown that the tendency to protect close (vs. distant) differs with severity of crime, increasing with higher levels of severity (Berg et al., 2021; Weidman et al., 2020). Afterward, they were told that a police officer approached them and asked whether they had seen the person commit a crime.

Before responding to the dilemma, participants were asked a series of questions to assess potential mechanisms of their decision. Following Weidman et al. (2020), these questions covered four domains, described below. Each domain comprised a pair of questions, which were always presented together in the order indicated, but the four pairs of questions were presented in random order. Participants responded to the first three sets of questions using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*), and to the last pair of questions on anger and disgust using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*).

Loyalty. Two questions assessed the perceived loyalty of reporting the perpetrator (i.e., “To what extent is it loyal to tell the officer that you *did see* [perpetrator] commit the act in question?”²) and protecting the perpetrator (i.e., “To what extent is it loyal to tell the officer that you *did not see* [perpetrator] commit the act in question?”). Prior work has interpreted the former question as a measure of loyalty to society, and the latter as a measure of loyalty to the perpetrator (Weidman et al., 2020).

Harm. Two questions assessed the extent to which participants considered the harm that would come to the perpetrator (i.e., “How

much are you considering the harm (i.e., physical or emotional suffering) which would come to *[perpetrator]* when making your decision?”) or harm that would come to others in society (i.e., “How much are you considering the harm (i.e., physical or emotional suffering) which would come to *other people* (not including [perpetrator]) when making your decision?”).

Self-Interest. Two questions assessed the perceived self-interest of reporting the perpetrator (i.e., “To what extent is it in your own self-interest to tell the officer that you *did see* [perpetrator] commit the act in question?”) and protecting the perpetrator (i.e., “To what extent is it in your own self-interest to tell the officer that you *did not see* [perpetrator] commit the act in question?”).

Anger and Disgust. Participants reported their feelings of anger and disgust in response to witnessing the immoral act using two four-item scales (Harmon-Jones et al., 2016; United States: $\alpha = .97$ and .96 for anger and disgust, respectively; Japan: $\alpha = .95$ and .88, respectively).

Moral Decision Measure. Participants were then asked to rate how likely they were to report that they had witnessed the perpetrator committing the crime, on a 6-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*; 6 = *very likely*). This variable was reverse-coded, so that higher scores indicated a greater likelihood of lying to the police officer to protect the perpetrator.

Evaluation of Moral Decision. Directly after reporting their decisions (i.e., how likely they would be to report the perpetrator), participants answered three questions, in randomized order: whether they were satisfied with their decisions, whether they thought their decisions were good, and whether their decisions were difficult. Participants responded to each question on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

See [Supplemental Materials](#) for additional items assessing other individual differences, which were included after the dependent measure for exploratory purposes.

Attention Check and Severity Manipulation Check. We administered two data quality checks.

As an attention check, participants were presented with a long block of descriptive text that included instructions to select specific options from a list. Participants who failed to follow these instructions ($n = 84$) were excluded from all analyses.

As a manipulation check of crime severity, at the end of the study, participants were presented with all four scenarios that were used across subjects and asked to rank order them (1 = *most severe*; 4 = *least severe*). There were 187 participants (27% of our final sample) who incorrectly categorized at least one scenario (e.g., by ranking a low-severity scenario as one of the two most severe). We included these participants in all main analyses, but results were identical when they were excluded (see [Supplemental Materials](#)).

¹ We recruited subjects in two phases given that we had not previously used the Lancers platform. After confirming that data quality of the first sample was sufficiently high, we replicated the study with a second sample of equal size. After exclusions, the first sample included 191 participants (42.9% female; $M_{age} = 39.5$, $SD = 9.4$), and the second sample included 145 participants (58.6% female, 1.4% nonbinary; $M_{age} = 35.8$, $SD = 10.3$). Results did not differ between the two samples and were not moderated by sample, and so the two samples were collapsed.

² In all questions, “[perpetrator]” was replaced with the name of the perpetrator in question.

Analytic Strategy

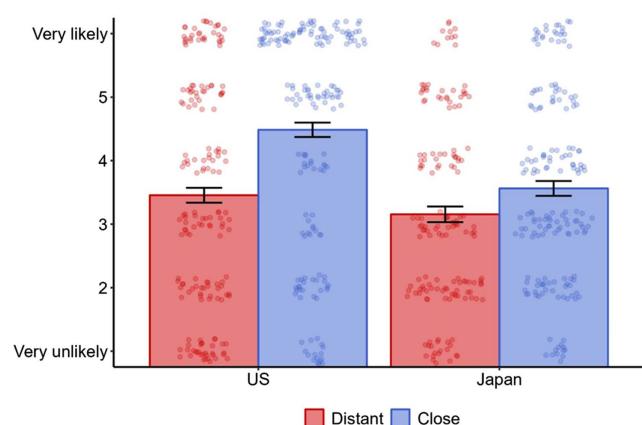
We assessed differences in reporting-related outcomes across culture and relationships by estimating regression models with closeness (distant vs. close), culture (United States vs. Japan), severity of the crime described in the vignette (low vs. high), each two-way interaction between them, and their three-way interaction predicting outcomes. Closeness, culture, and severity factors were each centered on zero. Full model statistics, condition means and sample sizes on each outcome, robustness checks, and secondary analyses are included in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

Results

Primary Outcome: Protecting Close (vs. Distant) Perpetrators

Across cultures, people were more likely to protect close (vs. distant) perpetrators (closeness main effect: $b = 0.72$, 95% CI [0.49, 0.95], $p < .001$; see [Figure 1](#)). However, a key cultural difference emerged: Japanese participants responded to close and distant others more similarly than Americans did (Closeness \times Culture interaction: $b = -0.62$, 95% CI [-1.08, -0.16], $p < .01$). Specifically, while Japanese and Americans were similarly punitive of distant others (Japan: $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.48$, United States: $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.78$; $b = -0.30$, 95% CI [-0.63, 0.03], $p = .077$), Japanese were significantly less likely to protect close others ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.48$), compared to Americans ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.75$; $b = -0.92$, 95% CI [-1.24, -0.60], $p < .001$). This effect of culture did not depend on the severity of the crime (Closeness \times Culture \times Severity interaction: $b = 0.37$, 95% CI [-0.55, 1.29], $p = .43$), age of the participant (Closeness \times Culture \times Age interaction: $b = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.07], $p = .248$) or gender of the participant (Closeness \times Culture \times Gender interaction: $b = -0.19$, 95% CI [-1.12, 0.73], $p = .681$).

Figure 1
Likelihood of Protecting Close (vs. Distant) Others Across Cultures



Note. Likelihood of protecting the perpetrator (reverse-scored from original question) based on an interaction between culture and closeness. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. Points represent the distribution of raw individual data. Group estimated means, standard errors, and sample sizes are reported in the [Supplemental Materials](#). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Secondary Outcomes: Concerns and Emotions in Response to the Moral Dilemma

Next, we examined 11 categories of individuals' concerns and emotions in response to the moral dilemma to better understand their reporting intentions. To reduce the possibility of erroneous conclusions due to inflated Type I error, we adjusted p values for the false discovery rate (using *fuzzySim* in R; [Barbosa, 2015](#)).

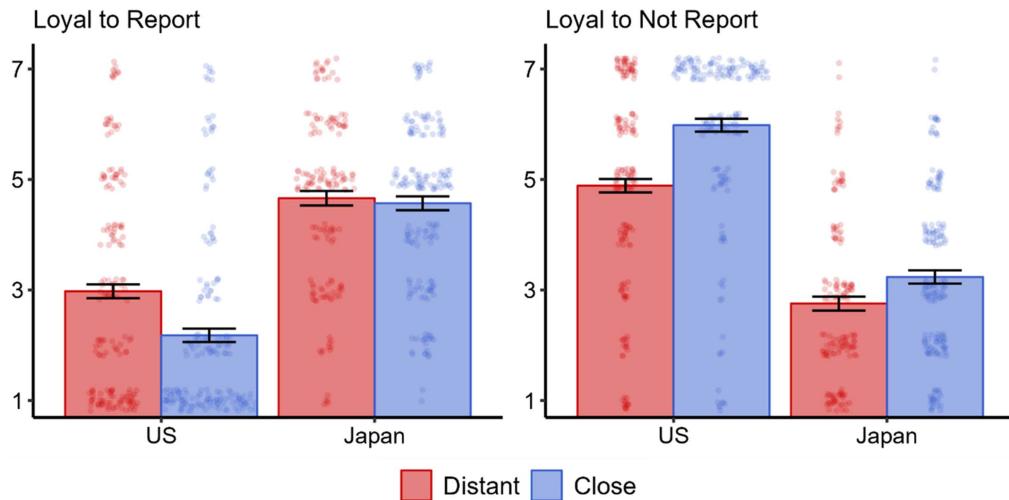
First, we examined perceptions of loyalty across cultures. Americans' and Japanese' definitions of loyalty diverged (see [Figure 2](#)). While Americans (vs. Japanese) overwhelmingly expressed it was loyal to *not* report the perpetrator (culture main effect: $b = -2.44$, 95% CI [-2.68, -2.20], $p < .001$), especially for close others (simple effect of closeness for United States: $b = 1.10$, 95% CI [0.76, 1.43], $p < .001$), Japanese (vs. Americans) were more likely to express that it was loyal to *report* the perpetrator (culture main effect: $b = 2.04$, 95% CI [1.79, 2.29], $p < .001$), *regardless* of their relationship (simple effect of closeness for Japan: $b = -0.09$, 95% CI [-0.45, 0.27], $p = .702$).

Second, we examined individuals' concerns during the decision-making process. Without exception, Americans' (vs. Japanese's) concerns were more protection-oriented: They reported it was more in their self-interest to protect and less in their self-interest to report and reported more concern for the offender and less concern for others (culture main effects: $bs = -0.97, 0.61, -0.53, 0.47$; 95% CIs [-1.25, -0.69], [0.34, 0.88], [-0.78, -0.28], [0.20, 0.74]; all $p < .001$, respectively; see [Figure 3A](#)). In addition, in almost every case, Americans' responses were stronger for close others than distant others (simple effects of closeness for United States: self-interest to protect: $b = 0.84$, 95% CI [0.45, 1.23], $p < .001$; self-interest to report: $b = -0.38$, 95% CI [-0.76, 0.00], $p = .067$; concern for perpetrator: $b = 1.20$, 95% CI [0.85, 1.54], $p < .001$; concern for others: $b = -0.98$, 95% CI [-1.35, -0.60], $p < .001$).

Japanese responses to close others were more mixed. On the one hand, Japanese felt more concern for close (vs. distant) perpetrators and felt that it was more in their self-interest to protect them (simple effects of closeness for Japan: $bs = 1.68, 0.83$; 95% CIs [1.32, 2.04], [0.43, 1.24]; $p < .001$, respectively). On the other hand, regardless of their relationship with the perpetrator, they felt concern for potential harm to others and that reporting was in their self-interest (simple effects of closeness for Japan: $bs = 0.10, -0.08$; 95% CIs [-0.29, 0.49], [-0.47, 0.32]; $ps = .702, .744$, respectively). After making their decision, Japanese, but not Americans, rated decisions regarding close others as particularly difficult (simple effect of culture for close others: $b = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.39, 1.20], $p < .001$; see [Figure 3B](#)). Japanese were also less satisfied with and confident in their decision for close others (simple effects of culture for close others: $bs = -1.11, -0.98$; 95% CIs [-1.41, -0.81], [-1.29, -0.68]; $p < .001$, respectively).

Last, Americans and Japanese diverged in their emotional response to contemplating the transgression (see [Figure 3C](#)). While Americans felt relatively little negative emotion in response to contemplating transgressions by either close or distant others (simple effects of closeness for United States: disgust: $b = -0.16$, 95% CI [-0.50, 0.17], $p = .440$ ³; anger: $b = 0.12$, 95% CI [-0.24, 0.48], $p = .624$), Japanese experienced a heightened level of disgust for both close and

³ For low severity crimes, Americans' levels of disgust were particularly low, especially for close others (Closeness \times Culture \times Severity interaction: $b = -1.28$, 95% CI [-2.25, -0.31], $p = .009$).

Figure 2*Differences in Perceptions of Loyalty Across Culture and Closeness*

Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. Points represent the distribution of raw individual data. Group estimated means, standard errors, and sample sizes are reported in the *Supplemental Materials*. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

distant others (culture main effect: $b = 1.83$, 95% CI [1.59, 2.07], $p < .001$; simple effect of closeness for Japan: $b = 0.00$, 95% CI [−0.35, 0.34], $p = .982$) and heightened anger in response to close others' transgressions (Closeness \times Culture interaction: $b = 1.08$, 95% CI [0.56, 1.60], $p < .001$).

Discussion

Findings from Study 1 demonstrated that although individuals protect close (vs. distant) others across both cultures, Japanese (vs. Americans) were less protective when they witnessed close others commit crimes. In secondary models to probe the concerns and emotions that played into this decision-making process, we found that when faced with moral transgressions by close others, Japanese felt concern for close others, but also focused on potential harm to society and felt unequivocally that reporting was loyal and in their self-interest. In addition, Japanese had a more difficult time making these decisions about close others and felt more negative emotion during the experience than did Americans.

Together, these findings suggest that when choosing how to react when societal and individual interest were pitted against one another, Japanese (vs. Americans) felt conflicting motivations, but ultimately prioritized the needs of the group over the needs of individuals within the group.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought converging evidence to support the idea that cultural priorities influence how people respond to moral dilemmas involving close others using a different methodology—namely, an unconstrained assessment of people's moral decisions. As in Study 1, we presented American and Japanese participants with a scenario of a close other committing a high- or low-severity crime, but then we asked them to write freely about how they would

respond and explain their rationale. Given that we found the strongest cultural difference for scenarios involving close others in Study 1, we focused on close others in this study.

Method

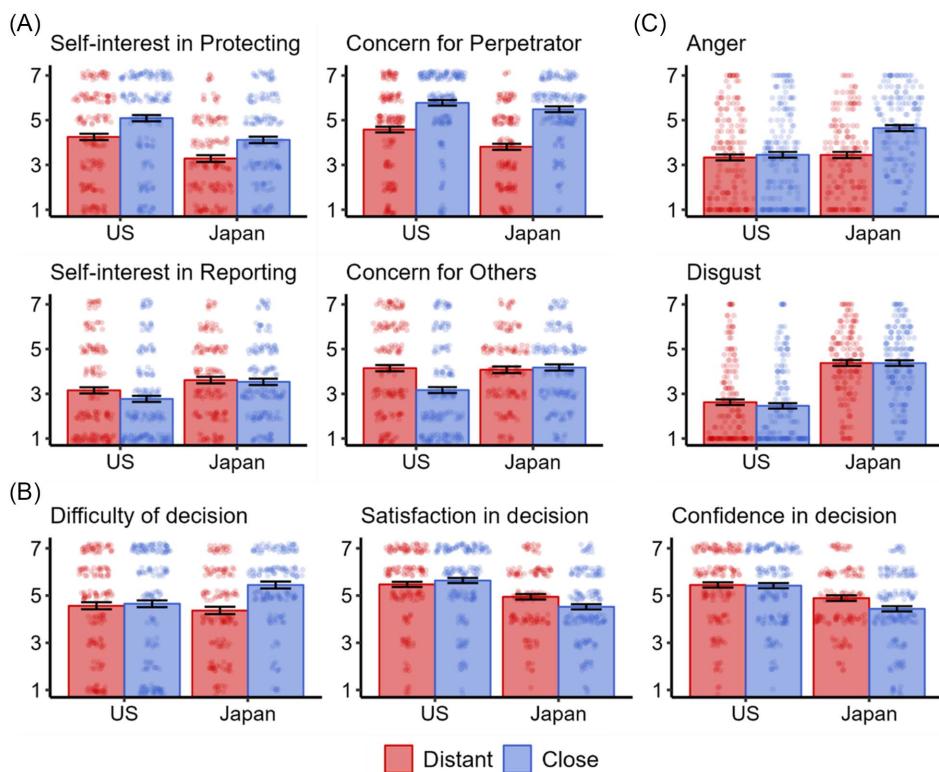
Participants

American Sample. We recruited 220 American participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid \$1.50 for completing the 10-min study. Fifty-three participants were excluded on a priori grounds: one for indicating that the data they had provided was not reliable or valid, 10 for identifying as Asian, and 42 for free responses that indicated inattention or misunderstanding of study instructions. The final sample of 167 comprised 35.9% identifying as female, 63.5% identifying as male, and 0.6% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 34.8 ($SD = 10.7$).

Japanese Sample. We recruited 178 Japanese participants through Lancers (<https://www.lancers.jp>), a Japanese online crowdsourcing platform. Participants were paid ¥120 for completing the 10-min study. Seven participants were excluded on the same a priori grounds as the American sample: two for indicating that the data they had provided was not reliable or valid, and five for free responses that indicated inattention or misunderstanding of study instructions. The final sample of 171 comprised 48.5% identifying as female, 50.3% identifying as male, and 1.2% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 42.2 ($SD = 10.2$). All materials presented to the Japanese sample were translated into Japanese and back-translated into English to ensure fidelity of the translation.

Procedure

We employed a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan; between-subjects) \times 2 (severity: high vs. low; between-subjects) design. Participants were randomly assigned to the two experimental

Figure 3*Differences in Concerns About and Reactions to Crime Scenarios by Culture and Closeness*

Note. Agreement with each of the remaining eight potential concerns and emotions regarding the crime. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. Points represent the distribution of raw individual data. Group estimated means, standard errors, and sample sizes are reported in the [Supplemental Materials](#). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

conditions within each country, with the final sample sizes across conditions for the American sample were as follows: high severity: 90; low severity: 77. Final sample sizes across conditions for the Japanese sample were as follows: high severity: 89; low severity: 82.⁴

Participants were asked to generate the name of a close other from their social network and specify their relationship (see [Supplemental Materials](#) for more information on the relationships nominated). Each participant was then asked to imagine witnessing the person they had nominated commit a high- or low-severity crime (for full scenarios, see [Supplemental Materials](#)). Next, they were asked to write a short paragraph describing how they would respond to the crime, both in the moment and down the line in their relationship with the perpetrator. To allow for a wide range of possible responses, including those identified in prior work (Weidman et al., 2020), the scenarios specified that a police officer was present at the scene but had not noticed the crime. Thus, participants had the option of reporting to the police officer, but they could respond to the crime in different ways without involving the officer. Next, participants were asked to write a second short paragraph describing why they would carry out the actions they had described.

At the end of the study session, participants were prompted to respond to the following question: “It is very important for us to have reliable and valid data. Would you recommend that we use your responses to this survey as part of our study?”

Thematic Coding

All Japanese responses were first translated to English. Responses to the first prompt (“What would you do?”) were coded by three independent coders who were blind to study conditions for seven themes. Prior work (Weidman et al., 2020) has categorized people’s free responses to this prompt into five themes: confronting the perpetrator, supporting the perpetrator, avoiding the perpetrator in the future, reporting the perpetrator, and doing nothing. Based on a careful reading of a subset of this study’s data, while blind to study conditions, we replaced the “confrontation” category with three more precise categories of confrontation: telling the perpetrator that the act was wrong, asking the perpetrator why they did the act, and convincing the perpetrator to right the wrong.⁵ Essays were coded as 0 (*theme not present*) or 1 (*theme present*), and final coding was based on consensus by at least two of the three

⁴ Each group was balanced in sample size upon data collection. Slight imbalances in the sample sizes of each group are due to a priori exclusions detailed in the “Participants” section above.

⁵ Based on the close read of the data, a fourth confrontation-related theme was identified and coded: preventing the crime from happening in the first place ($GAC = .91, .83$). However, since participants were told that the crime had already taken place, this theme does not indicate a valid response to the prompt and will not be discussed.

coders. The resulting themes were as follows (Gwet's agreement coefficient [GAC], a robust measure of interrater reliability, referring to American and Japanese responses, respectively): telling the perpetrator that the act was wrong ($GAC = .88, .91$), asking the perpetrator why they did the act ($GAC = .92, .97$), convincing the perpetrator to right the wrong ($GAC = .94, .91$), reporting the perpetrator to an authority figure ($GAC = .97, .97$), avoiding the perpetrator in the future ($GAC = .96, >.99$), supporting the perpetrator ($GAC = .77, .93$), and doing nothing ($GAC = .86, .91$).

Responses to the second prompt ("Why would you choose that action?") were coded by three independent coders who were blind to study conditions for two themes, based on the emerging themes from Study 1. Essays were coded as 0 (*theme not present*), 1 (*minor theme*), or 2 (*major theme*), and the final coding was based on the average of the three coders' ratings, rounded to the nearest whole number.⁶ The themes were as follows (intraclass correlation [ICC] referring to American and Japanese responses, respectively): concerns for the self or the perpetrator, for example, "I love her and I wouldn't want her to get in trouble"; $ICC(3, 3) = .64, .72$, and concerns for society or the social order, for example, "Because due to the act, people will be hurt"; $ICC(3, 3) = .75, .70$.

Analytic Strategy

In all models, we assessed thematic differences in responses across cultures by estimating regression models with culture (United States vs. Japan), severity of the vignette (low vs. high), and the interaction between them predicting outcomes. Both culture and severity factors were centered on zero. Logistic regression was used for assessing which themes individuals were engaging in their responses; linear regression was used for assessing the degree to which individuals prioritized individuals versus society in their responses. Coefficients from logistic regression models were converted into odds ratios for interpretability. Full model statistics, condition means, and sample sizes on each outcome, and robustness checks are included in the *Supplemental Materials*.

Results

People's decisions were strikingly different across cultures (see **Figure 4A**). American participants were significantly more likely to give the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt by asking them why they committed the crime ($OR = 0.34, 95\% CI [0.12, 0.82], p = .024$) and to support the perpetrator (for example, by warning them about the police or helping them escape; $OR = 0.29, 95\% CI [0.16, 0.51], p < .001$). In contrast, Japanese were significantly more likely to try to convince the perpetrator to right their wrong (e.g., by turning *themselves* in to the police $OR = 7.74, 95\% CI [2.94, 35.23], p < .001$). Cultural differences for two themes were moderated by severity of the crime. Americans were more likely to say they would do nothing for low severity crimes (Culture \times Severity interaction: $OR = 6.84, 95\% CI [2.00, 25.05], p < .001$). In addition, while Americans were more likely to tell the perpetrator they were wrong for high (vs. low) severity crimes, Japanese were less likely to do so (Culture \times Severity interaction: $OR = 0.16, 95\% CI [0.05, 0.53], p = .003$). Together, these findings converge with Study 1 findings indicating that Japanese take less protective actions in response to a close other's misbehavior. There were no differences in the extent to which Japanese and Americans

mentioned that they intended to report the perpetrator ($OR = 1.38, 95\% CI [0.43, 4.43], p = .569$) or to avoid the perpetrator ($OR = 0.62, 95\% CI [0.11, 3.51], p = .551$).

People's reasons for choosing these actions also differed across cultures (see **Figure 4B**). Americans ($M = 1.42, SD = 0.67$) were significantly more likely than Japanese ($M = 0.90, SD = 0.73$) to cite concerns about themselves or their close others (e.g., wanting to avoid punishment for their friends; $b = -0.52, 95\% CI [-0.67, -0.37], p < .001$). In contrast, Japanese ($M = 0.58, SD = 0.68$) were significantly more likely than Americans ($M = 0.38, SD = 0.64$) to cite concerns about others in society or the social order (e.g., wanting to prevent others from being harmed by similar crimes in the future; $b = 0.21, 95\% CI [0.07, 0.35], p = .004$). Neither of these effects were moderated by the severity of the crime.

Discussion

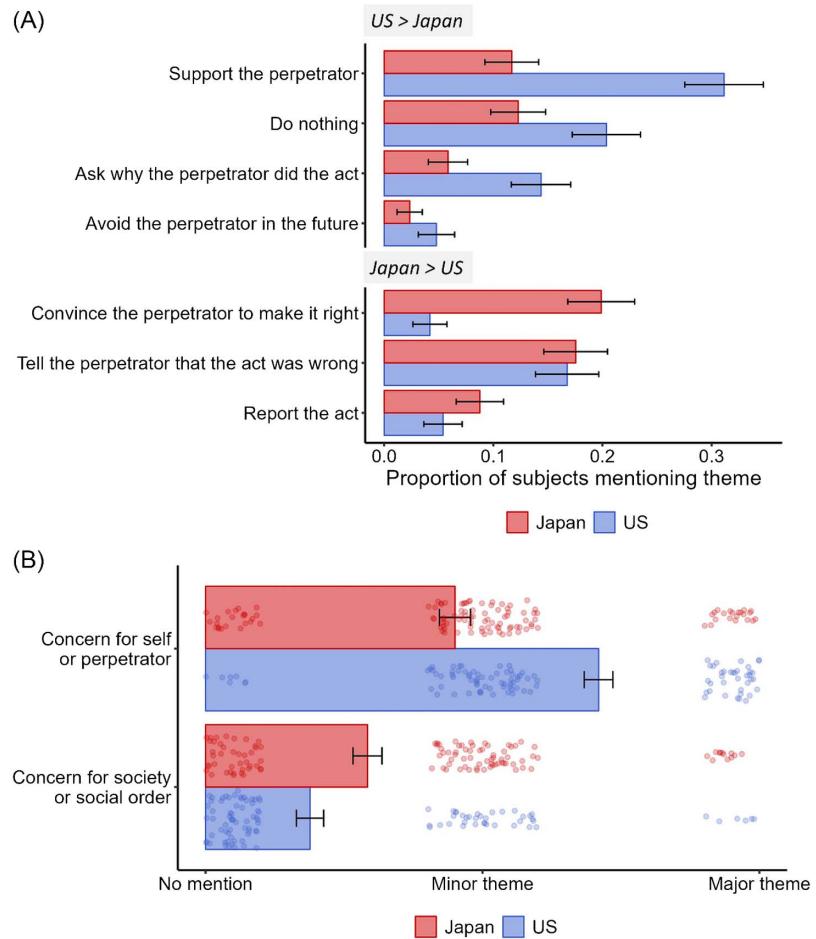
Consistent with Study 1 findings, Study 2 revealed that Americans (vs. Japanese) chose protective responses toward close others' crimes and they reasoned based on individual-focused concerns. In contrast, Japanese (vs. Americans) responses conveyed conflicting themes: While they did not show less concern for the perpetrator, they chose less supportive responses toward close others' crimes (e.g., convincing the perpetrator to atone for their act) and they reasoned based on concerns for the society.

Study 3

The previous studies demonstrate a consistent pattern: Japanese (vs. Americans) are less protective toward close others who transgress, based on stronger concerns for the welfare of society (vs. individuals). However, the previous studies are correlational. Therefore, in Studies 3a–c, we experimentally tested the mechanism hypothesized to underlie the cultural difference in moral decisions that emerged across Studies 1–2—namely, a perspective that prioritizes society versus individuals. To do so, we manipulated social norms, following a broad base of research demonstrating the efficacy of manipulating norms to influence decision making (see [D. T. Miller & Prentice, 2016](#)). We manipulated norms within a single cultural context (i.e., the United States), by having participants make moral judgments in the context of a new culture, with norms which either prioritized the individual or society. Although the studies differed in terms of whether conditions varied between- (Study 3a) or within-subjects (Studies 3b–c), they were conceptually identical, and therefore we present the combined findings in a mega-analysis (i.e., an analysis which combines all available data, while controlling for sample; see *Supplemental Materials* for results of each study).

⁶ This coding scheme was intentionally different from the one we used for the first question we coded. When coding for *what* people did, we aimed to understand *which* of the response categories people were engaging in. Thus, we chose a binary measure. When coding for *why* people chose these responses, we aimed to understand the *degree* to which people were prioritizing individuals versus society; therefore, we chose a continuous measure. We report the appropriate interrater reliability statistics for each coding scheme (GAC and ICC, respectively).

Figure 4
Responses and Reasons for Responses to Crime From Japanese Versus U.S. Respondents in Study 2



Note. Thematic results from two open-ended prompts: (A) How participants would respond to a close other's transgression, and (B) Why they would choose the indicated actions. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error. Points represent distributions of raw individual data points. Raw data points are not included in Panel A because the data are binary (0,1) and thus are not distributed across the scale of the figure. Theme estimated means (or proportions), standard errors, and sample sizes are reported in the *Supplemental Materials*. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method

Participants

All participants in Studies 3a–c were Americans recruited through Prolific Academic. One hundred thirty-four participants across the three studies were excluded on a priori grounds: Three for indicating that the data they had provided was not reliable or valid, 10 for identifying as Asian, 81 for failing a manipulation check, 34 for failing an attention check, and six for providing the same name multiple times. The final combined sample of 941 participants across the three studies comprised 53.6% identifying as female, 46.3% identifying as male, and 0.01% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 34.6 ($SD = 12.8$). See *Supplemental Materials* for the demographics and exclusions of each subsample.

Procedure

To manipulate social norms, we adapted an established and well-validated experimental approach for testing the causal influence of cultural and social constructs (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2021). In each of the three studies, we asked an independent sample of American participants to imagine that they had traveled to a foreign planet named Zorp, where there was a human colony that had a set of social norms that prioritized either society or the individual (adapted from Orvell et al., 2019). Two of the three norms were filler items, which were unrelated to the question of prioritizing society or individuals ("On Zorp, you *nod your head* to greet others from the colony when you see them" and "On Zorp, you make bread by collecting *duja plants* and grinding them into flour"). The third norm pertained to societal versus

individual interests and varied depending on experimental condition. In the “individual” condition, this norm read: “On Zorp, you make decisions by considering the best interests of *you and your friends*.” In the “society” condition, however, this norm instead read: “On Zorp, you make decisions by considering the best interests of *the entire colony*.”

After subjects learned the norms of the colony, they were presented with similar scenarios to those used in Study 1, in which they imagined witnessing a close or distant other committing a high-severity crime and were subsequently asked whether they would report the crime to a Zorp law enforcement officer (for full scenarios, see *Supplemental Materials*). We focused on high-severity dilemmas to simplify our design, given that Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that the moderating role of culture for reporting is identical across high- and low-severity scenarios.

In Study 3a, we employed a 2 (social norms: individual vs. society; between-subjects) \times 2 (closeness: close vs. distant; between-subjects) design, in which each subject completed one trial. Because Study 3a yielded an unexpected interaction effect (namely, a greater effect of our manipulation for distant [vs. close] others), in addition to our predicted main effects, we sought to test these effects more robustly in a second study (Study 3b), in which we increased statistical power by using a mixed, repeated-measures design. Specifically, we employed a 2 (social norms: individual vs. society; between-subjects) \times 2 (closeness: close vs. distant; *within*-subjects) design, in which each participant completed four trials. Finally, we sought to replicate Study 3b by conducting a third study (Study 3c) that was identical to Study 3b. See *Supplemental Materials* for additional detail about Studies 3a–c.

Analytic Strategy

To test the social norms manipulation, we estimated a multilevel model of all data from Studies 3a–c, controlling for sample and the

crime vignette seen by each participant, and accounting for random effects of participant (using *lme4* in R; Bates et al., 2015). Social norms (individual vs. society), closeness (distant vs. close), and the interaction between these variables were included as predictors of the likelihood of protecting the perpetrator. Both closeness and social norms factors were centered on zero. Results for each study individually and full mega-analytic model statistics are reported in the *Supplemental Materials*.

Mega-Analytic Results

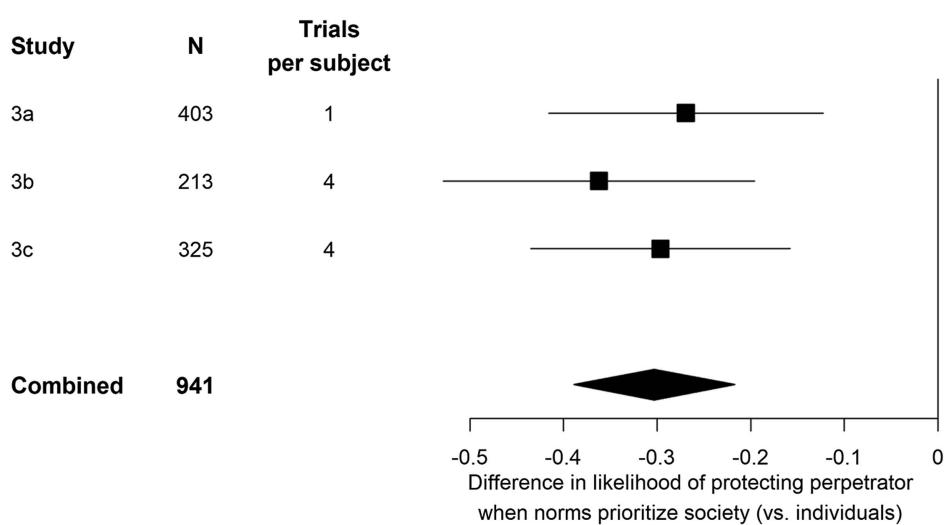
Overall, people were significantly less likely to protect the perpetrator when operating within norms that prioritized society (vs. individuals; $b = -0.36$, 95% CI $[-0.55, -0.17]$, $p < .001$; see *Figure 5*). This effect was equivalent for crimes involving close versus distant others (Culture \times Closeness interaction: $b = 0.11$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 0.28]$, $p = .162$).

Discussion

Across three studies, we found a robust effect of our social norms manipulation. In a context prioritizing the needs of the group (vs. individuals), Americans were less protective of transgressors. These findings parallel our cross-cultural findings from Studies 1 to 2, providing causal evidence that social norms that prioritize the group lead to less protective responses toward transgressors.

We observed one notable difference between the cross-cultural findings of Studies 1 and 2 and the experimental findings of Study 3. Whereas Study 1 revealed that the effect of culture was largest for decisions involving close (vs. distant) others, we observed no such difference in Study 3. This may have been because of the strength of our norms-based manipulation in Study 3. In the real world, cultural norms may be most salient when they conflict with personal interests, but in Study 3, we manipulated norms to prioritize society

Figure 5
Mega-Analytic Effect of Social Norms Manipulation Across Studies 3a–3c



Note. Mega-analytic effect of social norms manipulation across three studies. X-axis represents unstandardized difference in likelihood of protecting, which is on a 6-point scale. Whiskers, and the width of the combined estimate, indicate ± 1 standard error.

or individuals equally strongly across both conditions, such that the norms were salient regardless of one's relationship to the transgressor.

Study 4

Studies 1 and 2 showed that Japanese (vs. Americans) are less protective of close others who transgress. In combination with Study 3, these studies isolated one plausible mechanism for this cultural difference: Japanese (vs. Americans) base moral decisions on a greater concern for society (vs. individuals). This concern, in turn, leads them to be less protective toward close others. In Study 4, we sought to test whether shifting moral priorities *away* from society might impact Japanese reporting decisions.

We reasoned that societal concerns might not be as salient for Japanese if the self is the victim of the penetrator's wrongful action. Under such conditions, the entire encounter happens within the context of the perpetrator–victim relationship, rendering the episode private and thus societal concerns less relevant. Therefore, by manipulating whether the self is the *victim* (vs. observer), we can experimentally test how societal concerns shape the cultural difference in reporting close others that we demonstrate in Studies 1–2. To test this idea, we manipulated American and Japanese participants' perspectives as observer or victim of a crime. Our primary objectives with this study were to replicate the findings from Study 1, and then to test how moral judgment of close others differs for those in the victim condition.

Method

Participants

American Sample. We recruited 402 American participants through Prolific Academic. Three participants were excluded on a priori grounds: One for indicating that their data were not reliable and/or valid, and two for using the same name for both relationship nominations. The final sample of 399 comprised 45.1% identifying as female, 53.4% identifying as male, and 1.5% identifying as nonbinary, with an average age of 35.5 ($SD = 12.2$).

Japanese Sample. We recruited 414 Japanese participants through Lancers. Seven participants were excluded on the same a priori grounds as the American sample: Six for indicating that their data were not reliable and/or valid, and one for using the same name for both relationship nominations. The final sample of 407 comprised 49.4% identifying as female and 50.6% identifying as male, with an average age of 41.9 ($SD = 10.3$). All materials were translated into Japanese and back-translated into English to ensure fidelity of the translation.

Procedure

We employed a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan; between-subjects) \times 2 (perspective: victim vs. observer; between-subjects) \times 2 (closeness: close vs. distant; within-subjects) design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the perspective conditions within each culture, resulting in approximately equal sample sizes across the conditions.

Participants were asked to generate the name of one close other and one distant other from their social network and specify their relationship with each person (see *Supplemental Materials* for more information on the relationships nominated). The subsequent procedure was identical to that of Study 1, except that here, we focused on high-severity crimes to simplify the design and given that our primary interest was whether perspective (as victim or observer) influenced interpersonal moral decisions across cultures (for a list of scenarios, see *Supplemental Materials*). After reading about the crime, participants were asked to rate how likely they were to call the police to report that they had witnessed the perpetrator committing the crime, on a 6-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*; 6 = *very likely*). As in previous studies, this variable was reverse-coded, so that higher scores indicated a greater likelihood of *not* reporting the crime in protection of the perpetrator.

Analytic Strategy

To test the influence of victimization from close others on moral judgment across cultures, we estimated a multilevel model (using *lme4* in R; [Bates et al., 2015](#)) with culture (United States vs. Japan), perspective (observer vs. victim), closeness (distant vs. close), each two-way interaction between them, and their three-way interaction predicting likelihood of protecting the perpetrator. A random effect for participant was included to account for repeated measures within participants. As in Studies 1–3, each factor was centered on zero. Full model statistics, condition means and sample sizes on each outcome, and robustness checks are included in the *Supplemental Materials*.

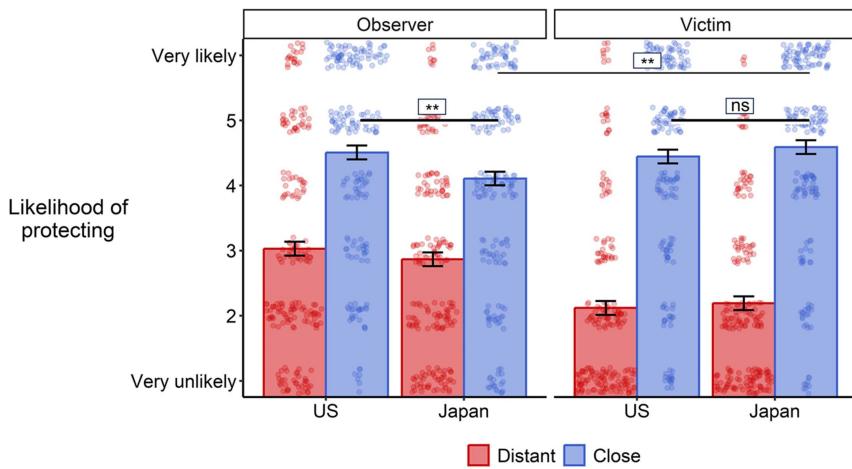
Results

Consistent with findings in Studies 1 and 2, when imagining a transgression against *someone else*, Japanese participants were less likely to protect close others than American participants (simple effect of culture for close others in nonvictim condition: $b = -0.40$, 95% CI $[-0.69, -0.11]$, $p = .008$; see *Figure 6*). Critically, when imagining a transgression against *themselves*, Japanese and American participants were *equally likely* to protect close others (simple effect of culture for close others in victim condition: $b = 0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.15, 0.44]$, $p = .328$; Culture \times Victim interaction for close others: $b = 0.55$, 95% CI $[0.13, 0.96]$, $p = .010$). Strikingly, this means that Japanese protected close others *more* when they were the victim (simple effect for victimization for close others in Japan: $b = 0.48$, 95% CI $[0.19, 0.78]$, $p = .001$; Close \times Victim interaction for Japanese: $b = 1.16$, 95% CI $[0.82, 1.50]$, $p < .001$). Thus, when priority is shifted away from society toward the self, Japanese are *less* punitive toward close others, providing further evidence that societal priorities shape individuals' moral judgments of close others.

Discussion

When someone is the victim of a close other's crime, one's response to the crime has little bearing on the fate of others in society. Therefore, if Japanese participants' punishment of close others' transgressions is driven by societal concerns, they would be less likely to punish when they themselves were the victims. Findings

Figure 6
Likelihood of Protection, Predicted by Victim (vs. Observer) Perspective, Culture, Closeness, and Their Interactions in Study 4



Note. Plot headers refer to whether the *self* is the observer or victim of the crime. Error bars indicate ± 1 standard error. Points represent the distribution of raw data. Group estimated means, standard errors, and sample sizes are reported in the *Supplemental Materials*. ns = nonsignificant pairwise comparison. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

** indicates a statistically significant pairwise comparison at $p < .01$.

from Study 4 supported this hypothesis providing additional causal evidence highlighting the role that norms that prioritize individuals versus society play in moral cognition.

General Discussion

Four studies provided converging evidence using multiple methods indicating that Japanese are less protective toward close others who transgress than Americans, and that their decisions are rooted in concerns for society. Critically, the influence of close relationships on moral reasoning emerged in all samples: across the United States and Japan, both conditions of our social norm manipulation, and scenarios involving the self as observer and victim. However, the strength of this effect was attenuated among Japanese, as well as among Americans primed with social norms that prioritized society over individuals. Moreover, when the implications of the crime for society were muted in Study 4, this cultural difference disappeared, highlighting a mechanism that drives the effect we document across studies: when the crime occurred entirely within a dyadic relationship and thus had no implications for others, Japanese and Americans were equally protective.

These findings illustrate both the pervasive influence that close relationships have on moral reasoning across cultures and the capacity for social norms to modulate this effect. They demonstrate how superordinate goals influenced by culture (e.g., goals emphasizing the importance of protecting the self vs. society) transform the moral calculus people engage in when deciding how to react to perpetrators of crimes. Indeed, we found that *reducing* the goal to protect society caused Japanese to exhibit the same level of bias toward protecting close (vs. distant) others as Americans (Study 4).

Previous research has hypothesized that collectivistic societies prioritize close social relationships. In such societies, the concept

of the self is not solely individualistic but also relational, with individuals considering themselves as part of a broader social context. For instance, Enke (2019) suggested that moral values are more communal in these societies, and Miller and their associates (e.g., J. G. Miller & Bersoff, 1992) have proposed that interpersonal obligations are viewed as moral rather than merely conventional. Given this widely shared assumption, the discovery that Japanese participants prioritize close relationships in moral dilemmas less than Americans do might appear puzzling, even paradoxical.

One key insight that may help resolve this paradox lies in the idea that the self can be defined at three distinct levels: personal, relational, and collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Importantly, both the relational and collective selves are rooted in social contexts, but they differ in *which* social contexts are used to define the self. The relational self is intertwined with specific social relationships, whereas the collective self is shaped by higher order groups, such as ethnicity and race, or even society at large. Both of these aspects of the self can be characterized as interdependent, as they are seen as inseparable from the surrounding social conditions. Crucially, however, the implications of this interdependence can diverge significantly based on whether it is in context of specific relations or abstract social entities. Our findings suggest that although Japanese society is characterized by a social orientation and collectivistic tendencies rather than individualism, their self-identity is not primarily relational, as is commonly assumed. Instead, their identity may lean more toward being societal, tied closely to abstract social entities that transcend specific relationships. Accordingly, our findings align well with the claim made by Kashima et al. (1995), namely, that interdependence for Japanese is defined not in reference to social relations, but rather to social roles and societal obligations. Moreover, this suggests that the moral values in Japan of loyalty,

deference to authority, and group harmony are defined primarily with respect to society at large, rather than close others.

Our analysis indicates that Japanese individuals do not exhibit a strong inclination to protect close others. This should not, however, be construed as a sign of them being individualistic or unconcerned with social relations. On the contrary, when probed about their decision making around the moral dilemmas presented in this research, Japanese showed strong relational concerns, conflicting motivations between their close others and the greater good, and difficulty making definite decisions. However, instead of protecting close others, their actions are often ultimately guided by a strong commitment to the collective welfare. It is important to note that Americans, in contrast, demonstrated a pronounced tendency to protect their close others. Likewise, this inclination toward protection should not be taken as evidence of them being less individualistic. In a typical American perspective, the self is often viewed as an independent agent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This perspective makes individuals view it as not only permissible but also morally justifiable and even normative to calculate outcomes primarily for the individual self (D. T. Miller, 1999). From this standpoint of a common folk psychology of the self, protecting close others is perceived as advantageous because there can be potential costs associated with not doing so. This perspective is reflected in the responses of Americans in Studies 1 and 2, where apparent acts of prosociality (i.e., protecting close others) are linked to self-interests.

Other cultural dimensions that vary between Japan and the United States may also influence moral reasoning in relationships. Most notably, research on the strength of social norms—termed tightness–looseness—has shown that norms are “tighter” in Japan compared to the United States, such that norm violation is punished more severely (Gelfand et al., 2006, 2011). Thus, we would expect tightness–looseness would predict the strength to which violations of the social norms investigated in this research are punished. However, it should not change the norm to be more oriented toward individual versus societal concerns, which we observe as central to cultural differences in protecting close others. Additionally, while tightness–looseness might predict mean level differences of punishment across cultures, tightness–looseness theory does not predict individuals within a given culture should punish close others differently than distant others. Future research should continue to explore other ways in which culture interacts with relationships to influence moral reasoning.

From a translational perspective, this work has important implications for whistleblowing interventions. While our work does not speak to how people *should* respond to the moral dilemmas we presented to participants, one could imagine situations in which communities or organizations would want to change how people respond to close others’ transgressions. For example, companies benefit from fostering close relationships among their employees (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995), but they might simultaneously want to encourage employees to speak up if they observe an immoral act that could hurt the organization. Our work, which suggests that norms-based interventions are effective at increasing people’s intentions to report close others’ crimes, can inform such future interventions.

This work responds to the call for psychological research to expand beyond Western samples, which are not representative of the majority of the population across the globe (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010; Kitayama et al., 2022; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The present work is an important step toward increasing the diversity and representation of the samples from which we draw inference, and future research should continue to test this phenomenon in additional cultural contexts.

Constraints on Generality

Finally, it is important to articulate the generalizability of this work. This research uses a mixture of self-report, narrative, and experimental designs, as well as various crime scenarios, demonstrating that these patterns of results are robust to different research approaches and moral situations. In addition, we show the cultural differences observed here generalize across ages and gender. We have found support of these patterns across monocultures in the United States and Japan. We encourage future research to expand upon this research by testing these hypotheses in additional countries and across multicultural contexts.

Concluding Comment

This work illustrates the power of culture to regulate interpersonal moral judgment. Whereas Americans are more likely to protect close others than Japanese, our multimethod evidence indicates the psychology behind this pattern is intricate and dynamic. Americans are protective of close others, but their prosociality may often be in service of self-interests. In contrast, Japanese are not as protective of close others, but this apparent indifference may reflect the greater good of protecting social order and the collective undergirding it. Our findings underscore the importance of studying moral decision making in non-Western cultural contexts, and they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how culture and personal relationships dynamically interact to shape important moral decisions.

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