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The Morality of Partiality: How Relationship Expectations Shape Moral Evaluations

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Abstract

While many ethical traditions praise impartiality as a moral ideal, it remains unclear whether people view impartial actors as possessing an especially strong moral character. In the present research ($N = 3,417$), we examined how people evaluate partial and impartial actors who prioritized either a socially connected other (i.e., a family member, friend, or community member) or a stranger in need. Across classic sacrificial dilemmas (Experiment 1) and more ecologically valid helping scenarios (Experiments 2-3), partial actors were judged to be more moral and trustworthy than impartial actors. This preference was strongest when impartial actors failed to prioritize a close (e.g., family member or friend), rather than a more distant social tie (e.g., community member). Across experiments, impartial actors were also perceived as less predictable and as fulfilling less of their relational obligations, and these perceptions predicted judgments of morality and trustworthiness. In a fourth experiment, participants exhibited a preference for partiality in their own helping decisions, with a majority choosing to help a socially connected other over a stranger in greater need. This preference was stronger when decisions were described as publicly observable rather than anonymous, consistent with anticipated reputational consequences influencing helping decisions. Together, these findings suggest that everyday moral judgments serve a socio-relational function. Rather than evaluating moral character primarily in terms of adherence to abstract ethical principles, such evaluations appear to reflect assessments of individuals' reliability as long-term social partners.

Keywords: Moral judgment, Partiality, Social relationships, Cooperation, Moral character, predictability

Introduction

For centuries, many influential and often opposing ethical traditions have converged on a core tenet of morality: impartial beneficence. This ideal is implicit in the Christian maxim “*love thy neighbor as thyself*,” the Golden Rule urging us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and utilitarian philosophies prescribing that actions should aim to maximize collective happiness (Cottingham, 1986; Kekes, 1981). Nevertheless, while many moral philosophies cast partiality as a moral failing, we can ask whether this aligns with individuals’ day-to-day moral judgments. Impartiality may be generally endorsed in the abstract as a moral good promoting fairness and collective welfare (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009, 2013; Shaw, 2013); however, it is unclear whether peoples’ moral evaluations elevate impartial—compared to partial—actors in more intimate relational contexts. The present research examines how people evaluate the moral character of impartial and partial actors across relational contexts. We propose that, while impartiality can signal fairness in certain contexts (Kurzban et al., 2012), people hold a moral preference for partiality such that they view individuals who prioritize the well-being of socially close others as morally superior to those who behave impartially.

Much research on morality has centered on how people judge interactions between fictional individuals whose relationship is unknown (Bloom, 2011; Schein, 2020). However, everyday moral actions commonly involve socially connected others, with relational context impacting both individuals’ first-party moral decisions (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001; Madsen et al., 2007; Sznycer et al., 2016) and third-party evaluations (Everett et al., 2018; Hughes, 2017; Law et al., 2022; McManus et al., 2020, 2021). For example, in the context of family, kin altruism (Hamilton, 1964) explains individuals heightened altruism toward close relatives, with partial actions promoting shared genetic fitness. Beyond kinship, relationship-based theories of

morality propose that moral evaluations are best understood as a psychological adaptation that evolved to facilitate cooperation and maintain social relationships (Curry et al., 2016, 2019; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Thus, in this view, people will exhibit a moral preference for partial actors, including those who prioritize socially close non-kin (e.g., friends), on account that partial actions signal that an individual is a valuable cooperation partner, one that can be trusted to fulfill relational obligations and maintain long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

Consistent with this view, recent research reveals individuals' moral preference for partiality. People perceive impartial actors electing to help strangers at the expense of helping a socially close other as less moral than partial actors prioritizing the well-being of socially close others (e.g., family members; Hughes, 2017; Law et al., 2022; McManus et al., 2020, 2021). Furthermore, impartial actors are trusted less and judged as worse cooperation partners (Everett et al., 2018; Law et al., 2022). One reason for this moral preference is that people perceive social relationships as carrying special obligations, obligations that are violated by individuals who fail to prioritize close social ties. The strength of these obligations, and the moral condemnation for violating them, may scale with the degree of social closeness between actor and beneficiary. For instance, McManus and colleagues (2021) demonstrated that people perceive a greater obligation to help a closer (e.g., sibling) compared to more distant (e.g., cousin) relative and that perceived obligations shaped moral evaluations. Relatedly, Law and colleagues (2022) showed that impartial actions that failed to prioritize the well-being of socially close others (e.g., family members and friends) were judged to be less moral than impartial actions that failed to prioritize the well-being of more distant social ties (e.g., community members). Thus, impartial actions, to the extent that they violate a perceived moral obligation to prioritize a familiar other, may be

viewed as morally unacceptable and consequently, the individuals performing them as possessing a poor moral character.

Accurately assessing the character of others is important for our social well-being, allowing us to anticipate the future behavior of others and avoid untrustworthy individuals likely to cause us harm. Person-centered theories of moral judgment place character assessment as fundamental to moral evaluation (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2012; Uhlmann et al., 2015), viewing moral judgments as less about actions and more about what these actions reveal about a person's underlying character. Consistent with this view, people at times distinguish between the morality of actions and the moral character of those performing them (Cushman, 2015; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2014; Uhlmann et al., 2014), judging some actions as morally permissible while simultaneously viewing those who perform them as immoral (Uhlmann et al., 2013). Thus, impartial actions, even when deemed morally acceptable in the abstract, may cast doubt on the moral character and trustworthiness of the individuals performing them. For example, Hughes (2017) finds that impartial actors described as sacrificing their mother's life for the greater good (i.e., to save a world-renowned peace negotiator) are viewed as lacking empathy relative to partial actors (who elected to save their mother and sacrifice the peacekeeper), with empathy judgments mediating the influence of partiality on judgments of actor's moral character.

In contexts where people expect individuals to prioritize socially close others, impartial actors may be perceived as unpredictable, with their failure to help friends and family making their moral motives and future behavior difficult to discern. Recent research reveals that people hold a moral preference for more predictable actors, with perceptions of predictability being positively associated with judgments of morality and more predictable individuals being endorsed as better cooperation partners (Turpin et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). For example,

people view individuals engaging in immoral acts (e.g., assault) for an intelligible reason (e.g., to escape punishment) as possessing a superior moral character than those engaging in the same immoral acts for no reason, despite more predictable immoral actors engaging in an additional immoral act that causes additional harm (Walker et al., 2021). Thus, to the extent that people expect individuals to prioritize their friends and family, impartiality may signal an unpredictable individual whose moral beliefs and actions are difficult to discern or rely on, with this unpredictability leading to distrust and negative moral evaluations. Notably, negative evaluations of impartial actors may be stronger in the case of close social ties on account that neglecting to prioritize especially close others may violate peoples' expectations to a greater extent and thus act as a stronger signal of a person's unreliable moral character.

Even if implicitly, the anticipated reputational consequences of different actions play a role in motivating peoples' behavior, as suggested by research showing that people more frequently behave in ways that signal their moral quality when others are watching (Kurzban et al., 2007; Lacetera & Macis, 2010). Thus, to the extent that people internalize negative evaluations of impartial actors, they may elect to behave in a more partial manner when their behavior is observable to others. In doing so, they may not only avoid damaging their social relationship with the person they are failing to prioritize but also be judged more favorably by third-party observers. Prior research demonstrates that people direct more help, resources, and altruistic effort toward socially close others than strangers (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001; Kruger, 2003; Madsen et al., 2007; Passarelli & Buchanan, 2020; Sznycer et al., 2016). For example, Sznycer and colleagues (2016) found that individuals' willingness to help—whether by donating a kidney, loaning money, or providing various favors—was associated with the perceived genetic relatedness of the beneficiary, with closer kin eliciting greater help. In other work, emotional

closeness was shown to partially mediate the relationship between genetic relatedness and prosocial help, with people, at times, being more willing to help emotionally close non-kin than genetically related but emotionally distant kin (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001). Thus, even in contexts where individuals view impartiality as morally correct, they may fail to act on this belief publicly in order to avoid damaging their social relationships or eliciting negative evaluations of their moral character.

The Present Research

The present research investigates how people view the moral character of impartial and partial actors across distinct moral and relational contexts. Consistent with individuals' observed prosocial preferences (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001; Kruger, 2003; Madsen et al., 2007; Passarelli & Buchanan, 2020; Sznycer et al., 2016) and more positive moral evaluations of partial compared to impartial actors (Everett et al., 2018; Hughes, 2017; Law et al., 2022; McManus et al., 2020, 2021), we hypothesize that partial actors—described as prioritizing the well-being of a socially close other instead of a stranger—will be judged as more moral and trustworthy. We test this hypothesis using both classic sacrificial dilemmas (Experiment 1) and more ecologically valid helping scenarios (Experiments 2 and 3). Furthermore, we assess this hypothesis across distinct relational contexts varying in both genetic relatedness (i.e., kin vs. non-kin) and social closeness (e.g., friend vs. community member).

The present work also examines *when* and *why* impartial actors are judged negatively. We propose that impartiality is evaluated unfavorably when it is perceived as violating relational obligations and social expectations. To test this account, Experiments 1-3 assess whether impartial—compared to partial—actors are viewed as less predictable and the extent to which these perceptions of predictability are associated with participants' moral evaluations. Similarly,

in Experiments 2 and 3, we examine the extent to which impartial actors are viewed as violating their social obligations and whether these perceived violations predict judgments of their moral character. In sum, we propose that actors failing to prioritize a socially close other will be viewed as less moral and less trustworthy, with the strength of this moral preference being tied to the degree to which impartiality is perceived as violating relational obligations and signalling unpredictability. Therefore, we hypothesize that participants will exhibit a stronger moral preference for partiality for close, as opposed to more distant, social ties on account that we expect that failing to prioritize a close social tie (e.g., a family member) will be perceived as more strongly violating one's relational obligations and signal greater unpredictability.

Finally, in Experiment 4, we examine whether a moral preference for partial compared to impartial actors leads people to behave in a more partial manner when their actions are observable to others. Participants reported whether they would prefer to help a socially connected other (i.e., friend, family member, or community member) in need or a stranger in greater need. We hypothesized that a majority of participants would state a preference for helping a socially connected other and that this preference would increase with social closeness. Critically, we predicted that participants would behave more partially when their decision was publicly observable, consistent with the possibility that people anticipate and seek to avoid negative moral evaluations associated with impartiality. Thus, Experiment 4 tests a potential consequence of a moral preference for partiality: that public observability increases partial behavior as an impression-management strategy, even when individuals may privately regard impartiality as morally ideal.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Eight hundred participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk and received \$0.50 USD upon completion of an approximately 4-minute online questionnaire. To be eligible to participate in Experiment 1, participants were required to be residents of the United States and possess a Mechanical Turk submission approval rating greater than or equal to 95%. We excluded participants who reported responding randomly at some point during the experiment ($n = 86$) or who failed to correctly respond to two comprehension check items ($n = 219$).¹ Following these exclusions, we retained a sample of 564 participants (47% female; $M_{age} = 39.27$, $SD_{age} = 12.73$). Sensitivity power analyses conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that the retained sample afforded 80% power to detect effects of approximately $\eta_p^2 = .014$ or larger in mixed-model analyses. All experiments were reviewed and received ethics clearance from a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE #42018). All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation.

Materials and Measures

Participants were presented with two vignettes, each of which described a scenario in which an actor had the choice of sacrificing a single individual to save the lives of five others. Both vignettes featured a friend of this actor, either as the single individual who could be sacrificed or among the five individuals who could be saved. Below each vignette was a statement describing whether the actor decided to sacrifice the single individual (Utilitarian Action) or let harm befall five individuals (Deontological Action). Consequently, this description

¹ Sixty-nine participants self-reported providing poor quality data and failed to correctly respond to comprehension check items, exhibiting multiple grounds for exclusion.

also revealed whether the actor elected to save their friend (Partial Action) or one or more strangers (Impartial Action). Following each vignette, participants evaluated the actor across various moral dimensions presented in a randomized order within a matrix table.²

Moral Perception. Participants evaluated each actor's morality and overall goodness using 7-point scales that ranged from *immoral* to *moral* and *bad* to *good*, respectively. The two judgments were strongly correlated (Partial Action: $r = .87$; Impartial Action: $r = .89$) and were averaged to create a moral perception composite, with higher values reflecting stronger perceptions of moral goodness.

Trustworthiness. Participants judged the trustworthiness of each actor using a 7-point scale that ranged from *untrustworthy* to *trustworthy*.

Predictability. Participants judged the predictability of each actor using a 7-point scale that ranged from *unpredictable* to *predictable*.

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either a Deontological or Utilitarian condition. In the Deontological condition, participants read two vignettes describing a hypothetical actor who chose not to sacrifice one individual to save five others. One vignette described the single individual as a close friend of the actor (Partial Action), whereas the other described the single individual as a stranger and included the actor's friend among the five individuals who could be saved (Impartial Action). In contrast, participants in the Utilitarian condition were described a hypothetical actor who chose to sacrifice a single individual to save five others. Again, one vignette described the single individual as a close friend of the actor (Impartial Action) while another described this individual as a stranger and placed the actor's friend among the five

² For the purpose of brevity, secondary measures (i.e., empathy, violence, intentionality, and harm) are described and analyzed in the supplementary materials (Part A and C, respectively).

people who could be saved (Partial Action). Accordingly, Experiment 1 featured a 2 (Act Type: Deontological vs. Utilitarian; between-subjects) by 2 (Partiality: Partial vs. Impartial Action; within-subjects) mixed design. The presentation order of partial and impartial vignettes was counterbalanced across participants. After each vignette, participants evaluated the described actor across various moral dimensions. Next, they responded to a comprehension check question assessing their understanding of the vignette. Finally, they concluded Experiment 1 by responding to two demographic questions and a single-item measure of attentiveness.

Statistics and Software

All analyses were conducted in RStudio v2024.12.0+467 (Posit Team, 2024) with R v4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2024). Linear mixed-effects models were fitted to participant data using the lme4 package v1.1.35.5 with degrees of freedom estimated using the Satterthwaite method (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Plots were generated using ggplot2 (v3.5.1; Wickham, 2016).

Transparency and Openness

For all experiments, we collected our full sample prior to data analyses and report all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures used. All measures and materials presented in the current study can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part A). Data and analyses scripts (i.e., annotated R scripts) pertaining to each experiment are available on Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/dhybf/>). The hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan for Experiments 2 and 3 were preregistered through Open Science Framework. These pre-registrations can be viewed via the following links (Exp 2: <https://osf.io/9m26b/>; Exp 3: <https://osf.io/fnums/>). We describe minor deviations from these pre-registrations in the supplementary materials (Part B).

Results and Discussion

First, we examined whether participants exhibited a moral preference for partiality by evaluating actors who chose to save a close friend in a sacrificial dilemma more favorably than those who behaved impartially. A 2 (Act Type: Deontological vs. Utilitarian) by 2 (Partiality: Partial vs. Impartial Action) mixed ANOVA on moral perceptions revealed a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 562) = 8.36, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .015$, such that partial actors were viewed as more moral ($M = 4.32, SD = 1.70$) than impartial actors ($M = 4.20, SD = 1.78$). This effect did not differ across act types, as indicated by the absence of a Partiality by Act Type interaction, $F(1, 562) = 0.05, p = .823, \eta_p^2 < .001$. Nevertheless, we did observe a main effect of Act Type, $F(1, 562) = 221.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .283$. Consistent with prior work (Everett et al., 2016; Turpin et al., 2021; Uhlmann et al., 2013), deontological actors were judged as more moral ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.28$) than utilitarian actors ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.51$). The same pattern emerged for judgments of trustworthiness. Participants evaluated partial actors as more trustworthy than impartial actors, $F(1, 562) = 77.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .121$, and deontological actors as more trustworthy than utilitarian actors, $F(1, 562) = 314.75, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .359$. Again, the Partiality by Act Type interaction was not significant, $F(1, 562) = 2.35, p = .126, \eta_p^2 = .004$. Therefore, actors who prioritized the well-being of a close friend were viewed more positively than those behaving impartially, regardless of whether they acted in a deontological or utilitarian manner.

Perceptions of Predictability Shape Moral Evaluations

Prior work reveals that more predictable individuals are viewed as more moral and as more desirable cooperation partners, even when their behavior involves causing additional harm (Turpin et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). Thus, we examined whether partial actors were perceived as more predictable than impartial actors, and whether predictability judgments were

associated with moral perceptions and trust. A 2 x 2 mixed ANOVA on predictability judgments revealed a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 562) = 143.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .203$, such that partial actors were perceived as more predictable ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.70$) than impartial actors ($M = 3.71, SD = 1.71$). We also observed a main effect of Act Type, $F(1, 562) = 177.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .240$, with deontological actors perceived as more predictable ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.23$) than utilitarian actors ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.47$). The interaction between Partiality and Act Type was not significant, $F(1, 562) = 2.11, p = .147, \eta_p^2 = .004$.

Next, we examined whether predictability judgments were associated with evaluations of morality and trustworthiness using linear mixed-effects models (see Table 1). Predictability was decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components to distinguish participants' general tendency to perceive actors as more or less predictable from actor-specific deviations in predictability judgments. For moral evaluations, both between-subject and within-subject predictability were positively associated with perceptions of morality (see Figure 1). Participants who generally viewed actors as more predictable also tended to view them as more moral, and, within participants, actors judged as more predictable were also judged as more moral. Act Type remained a significant predictor of moral perceptions when predictability was included in the model, whereas Partiality no longer uniquely predicted moral judgments. A similar pattern emerged for judgments of trustworthiness, although Partiality remained a significant predictor after accounting for perceptions of predictability. In both cases, models including predictability fit the data better than models excluding it (Moral Perceptions: $\chi^2(5) = 198.34, p < .001$; Trustworthiness: $\chi^2(5) = 252.02, p < .001$). Together, these findings suggest that perceptions of predictability play an important role in shaping positive evaluations of partial actors.

Table 1 | Perceptions of Predictability Predict Moral Evaluations (Experiment 1)

Variable	Estimate	95% CI	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Moral Perceptions (DV)					
Intercept	4.32	[4.20, 4.43]	73.34	559	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.50	[0.43, 0.58]	13.16	559	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.20	[0.14, 0.26]	6.42	560	< .001
Partiality	-0.01	[-0.10, 0.07]	-0.33	560	.743
Act Type	0.97	[0.70, 1.23]	7.20	559	< .001
Trustworthiness (DV)					
Intercept	4.35	[4.24, 4.46]	78.87	559	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.53	[0.46, 0.60]	14.81	559	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.32	[0.24, 0.39]	8.09	560	< .001
Partiality	0.27	[0.15, 0.38]	4.59	560	< .001
Act Type	1.17	[0.93, 1.42]	9.34	559	< .001

Note. Results from linear mixed-effects models predicting judgments of actor moral goodness (moral perceptions) and trustworthiness from Partiality (Partial Action = 0.5, Impartial Action = -0.5), Act Type (Deontological = 0.5, Utilitarian = -0.5), and judgments of actor predictability. Predictability was decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components. The between-subject component was grand-mean centered. Both models included random intercepts for participants. Interactions involving Partiality, Act Type, and predictability were nonsignificant (all $ps > .177$) and are omitted for conciseness. Moral Perceptions Model: $R_m^2 = .42$, $R_c^2 = .85$; Trustworthiness Model: $R_m^2 = .49$, $R_c^2 = .78$.

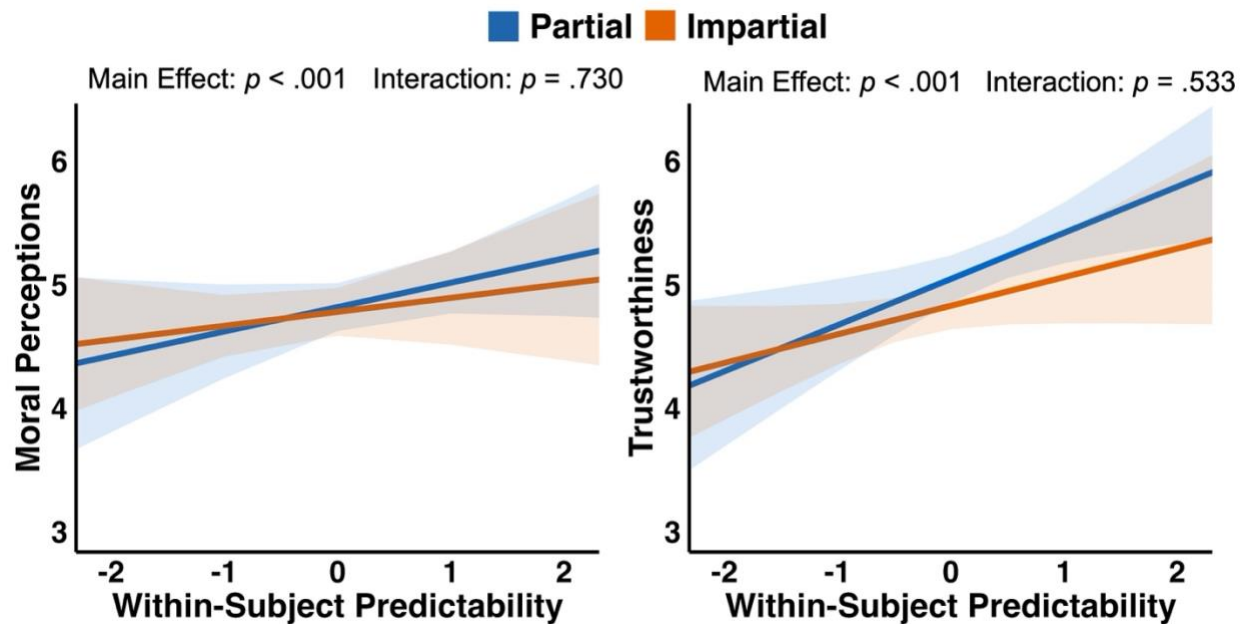


Figure 1 | Experiment 1: Perceived Predictability Positively Predicts Moral Evaluations.

Within-subject variation in perceptions of actor predictability were positively associated with both moral perceptions (Left Panel) and judgments of trustworthiness (Right Panel). Lines represent predicted values from the reported linear mixed-effects models for partial (blue) and impartial (orange) actors across levels of predictability. Shaded regions reflect the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates.

Experiment 2

Although sacrificial dilemmas are useful for examining moral preferences, they depict extreme situations with low ecological validity. Accordingly, in Experiment 2, we examined participants' moral evaluations of partial and impartial actors in more everyday helping contexts, in which actors chose whether to help a friend or a stranger. People are generally more willing to help close others than strangers (Burnstein et al., 1994; Passarelli & Buchanan, 2020), with relationship-based theories of moral judgment proposing that prioritizing close others reflects a social and moral obligation within close relationships (Curry, 2016; Curry et al., 2019; Rai & Fiske, 2011). We therefore predicted that participants would again exhibit a moral preference for partiality, evaluating actors who chose to help a friend as more moral and trustworthy than those who instead helped a stranger. Additionally, we examined whether partial actors would be perceived as more predictable and as better fulfilling their relational obligations, and whether these perceptions might help explain positive evaluations of partial actors.

Method***Participants***

A sample of 810 U.S. residents was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk using the same eligibility criteria as Experiment 1. Participants received \$0.50 USD for completing an approximately 4-minute online questionnaire. Consistent with preregistered exclusion criteria, we excluded participants who self-reported engaging in inattentive responding ($n = 204$) or failed

to correctly respond to two comprehension check questions ($n = 275$).³ Following these exclusions, we retained a sample of 497 participants (42% female; $M_{age} = 40.73$, $SD_{age} = 13.36$). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect effects of $d = 0.12$ or larger in the preregistered paired-samples t -tests.

Materials and Measures

Experiment 2 featured two vignettes adapted from McManus and colleagues (2020). These vignettes described a situation in which both a hypothetical actor's close friend and a stranger were in need of assistance. Each vignette was followed by a brief statement describing whether the actor decided to help their friend (Partial Action) or the stranger (Impartial Action). As in Experiment 1, participants evaluated each actor on several moral dimensions presented in a randomized order within a matrix table. Judgments of moral goodness (i.e., moral perceptions), trustworthiness, and predictability were assessed using the same measures as in Experiment 1. Inspired by relationship-based theories of moral judgment (Curry et al., 2019; Rai & Fiske, 2011), participants also evaluated the extent to which each actor fulfilled their social obligations.

Social Obligation. Participants judged the extent to which each actor fulfilled their social obligations using a 7-point scale that ranged from *completely violated obligations* to *completely fulfilled obligations*.

Design and Procedure

Experiment 2 employed a fully within-subjects design. Participants viewed two vignettes: one in which a hypothetical actor helped a friend rather than a stranger (Partial Action), and one in which an actor helped a stranger rather than a friend (Impartial Action). The presentation order of partial and impartial vignettes was counterbalanced across participants. After each vignette,

³ One hundred sixty six participants self-reported engaging in inattentive responding and failed to correctly respond to both comprehension check questions, exhibiting multiple grounds for exclusion.

participants evaluated the actor across several moral dimensions and completed a comprehension check item assessing their understanding of the scenario. Participants then responded to two demographic items and a single-item measure of attentiveness before concluding the experiment.

Results and Discussion

Participants again exhibited a moral preference for partiality. Consistent with Experiment 1, paired-samples t -tests revealed that partial actors were judged as more moral, $t(496) = 13.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.62$, 95% CI [0.52, 0.72], and more trustworthy, $t(496) = 20.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.93$, 95% CI [0.82, 1.03], than impartial actors. Partial actors were also perceived as more predictable, $t(496) = 32.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.45$, 95% CI [1.32, 1.57], and as better fulfilling their social obligations, $t(496) = 17.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.77$, 95% CI [0.67, 0.87], than impartial actors. Thus, these findings replicate the moral preference for partiality observed in Experiment 1 within a more ecologically valid helping context. Actors who prioritized the well-being of a close friend were viewed as more moral, trustworthy, and predictable, while also being perceived as better fulfilling their relational obligations.

Perceptions of Predictability and Social Obligation Shape Moral Evaluations

Next, we examined whether judgments of predictability and social obligation were associated with moral evaluations using linear mixed-effects models. As in Experiment 1, predictability judgments were decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components, distinguishing participants' general tendency to perceive actors as more or less predictable from actor-specific deviations in perceived predictability. The same decomposition was applied to judgments of social obligation. Both within-subject and between-subject variation in perceived predictability and social obligation were positively associated with moral perceptions (see Table 2). Participants who generally perceived actors as more predictable and as better fulfilling their

social obligations also tended to view them as more moral. Likewise, within participants, actors perceived as more predictable and as better fulfilling their social obligations were also judged as more moral. Importantly, Partiality no longer predicted moral evaluations after accounting for predictability and social obligation judgments. We also observed a Partiality by Predictability interaction (see Figure 2), such that predictability was positively associated with moral evaluations for partial actors, $b = 0.23$, 95% $CI [0.14, 0.31]$, but was not reliably associated with evaluations of impartial actors, $b = -0.07$, 95% $CI [-0.16, 0.01]$. Model comparisons indicated that including predictability and social obligation judgments substantially improved model fit relative to models excluding one or both predictors (all $\chi^2 > 33.53$, all $p < .001$).

Table 2 | Judgments of Predictability and Social Obligation Predict Moral Evaluations (Experiment 2)

Variable	Estimate	95% CI	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Moral Perceptions (DV)					
Intercept	5.02	[4.91, 5.14]	84.43	492	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.18	[0.09, 0.27]	3.92	492	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.08	[0.02, 0.13]	2.72	494	.007
Obligation (Between)	0.59	[0.51, 0.66]	15.65	492	< .001
Obligation (Within)	0.51	[0.45, 0.57]	16.81	494	< .001
Partiality	-0.01	[-0.19, 0.17]	-0.10	494	.918
Partiality x Predictability	0.30	[0.16, 0.44]	4.22	492	< .001
Partiality x Obligation	-0.12	[-0.27, 0.03]	-1.56	492	.119
Trustworthiness (DV)					
Intercept	4.87	[4.76, 4.98]	86.82	492	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.27	[0.19, 0.36]	6.22	492	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.20	[0.14, 0.26]	6.34	494	< .001
Obligation (Between)	0.51	[0.44, 0.58]	14.40	492	< .001
Obligation (Within)	0.52	[0.45, 0.59]	14.95	494	< .001
Partiality	0.31	[0.10, 0.52]	2.94	494	.003
Partiality x Predictability	0.16	[0.03, 0.30]	2.45	492	.015
Partiality x Obligation	-0.22	[-0.36, -0.08]	-3.10	492	.002

Note. Results from linear mixed-effects models predicting judgments of actor moral goodness (moral perceptions) and trustworthiness from actor Partiality (Partial Action = 0.5, Impartial Action = -0.5), perceived predictability, and perceived social obligation. Predictability and social

obligation judgments were decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components, with between-subject components grand-mean centered. Models included interactions between Partiality and within-subject variation in predictability and social obligation judgments. Both models included random intercepts for participants. Moral Perceptions Model: $R_m^2 = .52$, $R_c^2 = .62$; Trustworthiness Model: $R_m^2 = .62$, $R_c^2 = .63$.

A similar pattern emerged for judgments of trustworthiness. Both within-subject and between-subject variation in predictability and social obligation judgments were positively associated with trust (Table 2). However, unlike moral evaluations, Partiality remained a significant predictor of trustworthiness after accounting for predictability and social obligation judgments. We also observed significant Partiality by Predictability and Partiality by Social Obligation interactions. Predictability was more strongly associated with judgments of trust for partial, $b = 0.28$, 95% *CI* [0.19, 0.37], than impartial actors, $b = 0.12$, 95% *CI* [0.03, 0.21], whereas perceived fulfillment of social obligations was more strongly associated with trust for impartial, $b = 0.63$, 95% *CI* [0.53, 0.73], than partial actors, $b = 0.41$, 95% *CI* [0.31, 0.51]. Model comparisons again indicated that models including predictability and social obligation judgments fit the data better than models excluding these predictors (all $\chi^2 > 77.33$, all $p < .001$). Together, these findings suggest that perceptions of predictability and relational obligation play an important role in shaping positive evaluations of partial actors in everyday helping contexts.

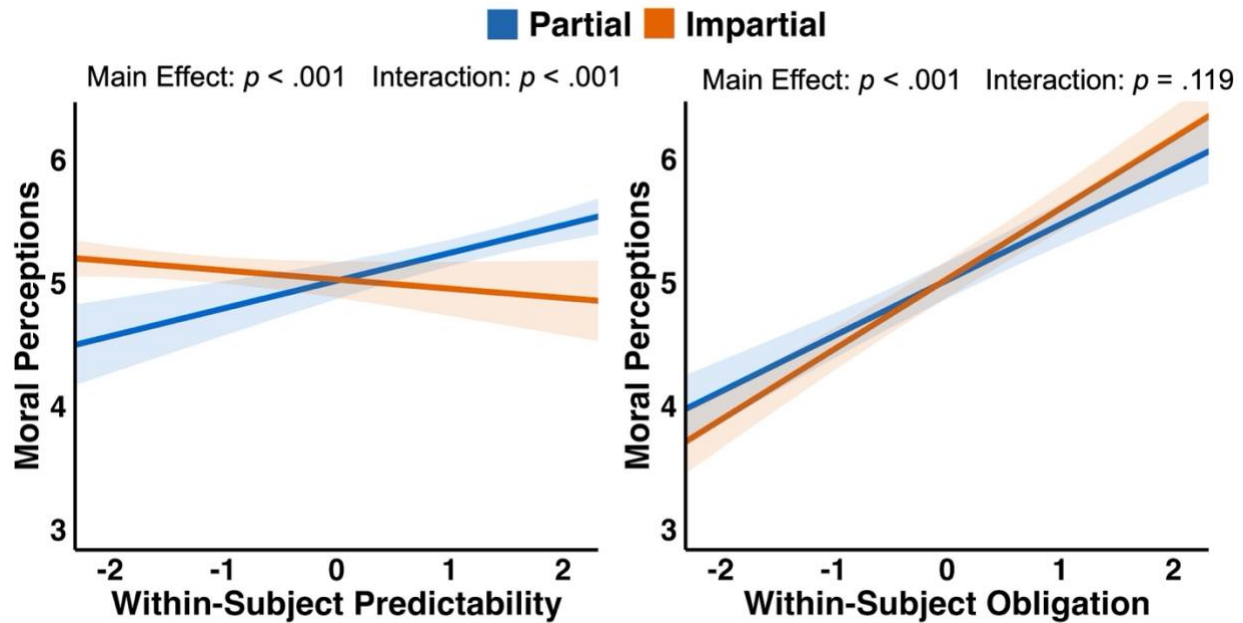


Figure 2 | Experiment 2: Perceived Predictability and Social Obligation Positively Predict Moral Evaluations. Within-subject variation in perceptions of actor predictability (Left Panel) and social obligation (Right Panel) were positively associated with moral perceptions. Lines represent predicted values from the reported linear mixed-effects model for partial (blue) and impartial (orange) actors across levels of predictability and social obligation. Shaded regions reflect the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates.

Experiment 3

Experiments 1 and 2 revealed a moral preference for actors who prioritized the well-being of close others over strangers. In Experiment 3, we examined whether this preference for partiality varies across different social relationships. Prior work demonstrates that social closeness influences helping behavior, such that people are generally more willing to help family members than friends, and friends than strangers (Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001; Passarelli & Buchanan, 2020; Stewart-Williams, 2007). Similarly, relationship-based theories of moral judgment propose that social obligations vary across relational contexts, with stronger obligations toward closer others (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Accordingly, Experiment 3 tested whether participants' preference for partiality would vary as a function of relational closeness by manipulating whether the known individual in need of assistance was a family member, friend,

or community member. Additionally, we examined whether perceptions of predictability and social obligation were associated with moral evaluations of partial and impartial actors across these relationship contexts.

Participants

A sample of 1204 U.S residents was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk using the same eligibility criteria as Experiments 1 and 2. Participants received \$0.50 USD after completing an approximately 4-minute online questionnaire. Consistent with preregistered exclusion criteria, we excluded participants who self-reported inattentive responding ($n = 114$) or failed to correctly respond to comprehension check items ($n = 220$).⁴ Following exclusions, we retained a sample of 901 participants (52% female; $M_{age} = 39.25$, $SD_{age} = 13.66$). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect effects of approximately $\eta_p^2 = .011$ or larger for the preregistered mixed-model analyses.

Measures and Materials

Experiment 3 featured three vignettes, two of which were identical to those used in Experiment 2. Each vignette described a situation in which both a stranger and a known individual required help. Depending on condition, the known individual was described as a close friend, relative, or member of the same community as a hypothetical actor able to provide help. Following each vignette, participants read a brief statement indicating whether the actor chose to help the known individual (Partial Action), the stranger (Impartial Action), or neither individual (No Help Action). Participants then evaluated each actor on the same moral dimensions assessed in Experiment 2.

⁴ Eighty-nine participants exhibited multiple grounds for exclusion, self-reporting engaging in inattentive responding and failing to correctly respond to all comprehension check items.

Design and Procedure

Experiment 3 featured a 3 (Relationship: Friend, Relative, Community Member; between-subjects) by 3 (Partiality: Partial Action, Impartial Action, No Help Action; within-subjects) mixed design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three Relationship conditions, which determined the relationship between the known individual and the hypothetical actor in each vignette. Regardless of condition, participants viewed three vignettes: one in which the actor helped the known individual, one in which they helped the stranger, and one in which they chose not to help either individual. Following each vignette, participants judged the actor on various moral dimensions. The pairing of actions with vignettes, as well as the presentation order of the resulting items, was counterbalanced such that each combination and order was equally likely to occur. As the present research focuses on moral evaluations of partial versus impartial actions, judgments of actors who chose not to help either individual were not analyzed here, as these actors differed not in *whom* they helped, but in *whether* they helped at all.⁵ As in Experiments 1 and 2, participants also completed comprehension check questions assessing their understanding of each vignette. Next, they stated their agreement with three statements designed to assess their beliefs about the morality of helping family, friends, and community members before strangers (e.g., “A moral person helps their family before helping strangers”). Finally, participants concluded the experiment by responding to two demographic items and a single-item measure of attentiveness.

Results and Discussion

We conducted a 3 (Relationship: Friend, Relative, Community Member) by 2 (Partiality: Partial Action, Impartial Action) mixed ANOVA to test whether partial actors were perceived as

⁵ Not surprisingly, actors who chose not to help either individual were judged as substantially less moral and trustworthy than both partial and impartial actors (all $p < .001$).

more moral than impartial actors and whether the magnitude of this effect varied across relationship contexts. This analysis revealed a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 898) = 330.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .269$. As hypothesized, partial actors were judged as more moral ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.09$) than impartial actors ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.38$). We also observed a Partiality by Relationship interaction, $F(2, 898) = 10.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$ (see Figure 3). Follow-up contrasts indicated that the moral preference for partiality was stronger for family members compared to friends, $b = 0.26, t(898) = 2.06, p = .040$, and stronger for friends compared to community members, $b = 0.33, t(898) = 2.59, p = .010$.⁶ A similar pattern emerged for judgments of trustworthiness. There was a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 898) = 629.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .412$, as well as a Partiality by Relationship interaction, $F(2, 898) = 6.96, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .015$. Follow-up contrasts revealed that this interaction was driven by a weaker partiality effect in the Community Member condition relative to both the Friend, $b = 0.47, t(898) = 3.40, p < .001$, and Relative, $b = 0.43, t(898) = 3.07, p = .002$, conditions. Conversely, the effect of partiality on judgments of trust did not differ between the Friend and Relative conditions, $b = -0.05, t(898) = -0.34, p = .734$. Thus, in sum, these findings suggest that relational closeness amplifies individuals' moral preference for partiality.

⁶ Participants evaluations of partial and impartial actors were consistent with their explicit beliefs regarding the morality of prioritizing socially close others over strangers. One-sample t -test indicated that agreement with the statements "A moral person helps [their family/their friends/members of their community] before helping strangers" was reliably above the scale midpoint for family, $t(900) = 17.43, p < .001, d = 0.58$, friends, $t(900) = 17.40, p < .001, d = 0.58$, and community members, $t(900) = 10.64, p < .001, d = 0.35$. Participants also expressed stronger agreement when the target was a family member or friend compared to a community member (both $ps < .001$).

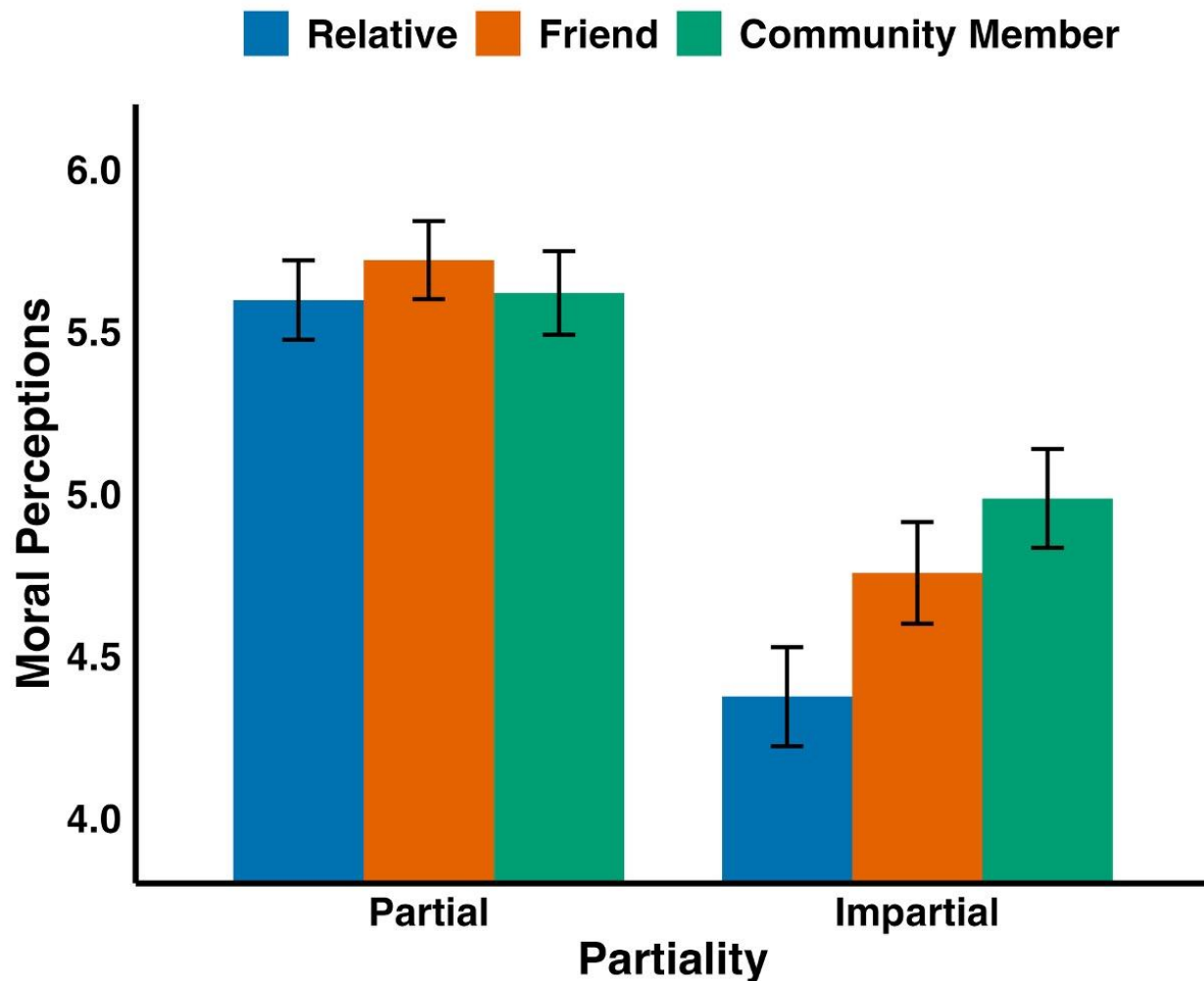


Figure 3 | Experiment 3: Moral Perceptions as a Function of Relationship and Partiality. Bars represent mean moral perceptions of hypothetical actors electing to help either a socially connected other or a stranger. Moral perceptions are displayed separately for Partial and Impartial actions (x-axis), with Relationship condition (Relative, Friend, Community Member) indicated by color. Error bars reflect the 95% confidence intervals around each mean.

Next, we examined whether partial actors were again perceived as more predictable and as better fulfilling their social obligations, and whether the magnitude of these effects varied across relationship contexts. Analyses of predictability judgments revealed a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 898) = 2233.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .713$, as well as a significant Partiality by Relationship interaction, $F(2, 898) = 10.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$. Consistent with Experiments 1 and 2, partial actors were perceived as more predictable ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.19$) than impartial

actors ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.33$). Follow-up contrasts indicated that this effect was weaker in the Community Member condition compared to both the Friend, $b = 0.65$, $t(898) = 4.07$, $p < .001$, and Relative, $b = 0.63$, $t(898) = 3.96$, $p < .001$, conditions, which themselves did not differ, $b = -0.02$, $t(898) = -0.13$, $p = .899$. The same pattern emerged for judgments of social obligation. There was a main effect of Partiality, $F(1, 898) = 508.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .362$, such that partial actors were judged as better fulfilling their social obligations ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.31$) relative to impartial actors ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.43$). We also observed a significant Partiality by Relationship interaction, $F(2, 898) = 16.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .036$, again driven by a weaker partiality effect in the Community Member condition relative to both the Friend, $b = 0.62$, $t(898) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, and Relative, $b = 0.84$, $t(898) = 5.61$, $p < .001$, conditions. Thus, partial actors were again viewed as more predictable and as fulfilling more of their social obligations compared to impartial actors, particularly when prioritizing socially close—relative to more distant—social ties.

Perceptions of Predictability and Social Obligation Shape Moral Evaluations

Finally, we examined whether judgments of predictability and social obligation were associated with moral evaluations using linear mixed-effects models. As in Experiment 2, predictability and social obligation judgments were decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components. Replicating the results of Experiment 2, both within-subject and between-subject variation in these judgments were positively associated with perceptions of moral goodness (see Table 3). That is, perceiving actors, in general, as more predictable and as fulfilling more of their social obligations was associated with judging them as more moral. Similarly, within participants, actors viewed as more predictable and as better fulfilling their social obligations were also viewed as more moral. Notably, Partiality was no longer a reliable

predictor of moral evaluations after accounting for predictability and social obligation judgments.

Table 3 | Judgments of Predictability and Social Obligation Predict Moral Evaluations (Experiment 3)

Variable	Estimate	95% CI	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Moral Perceptions (DV)					
Intercept	5.06	[4.97, 5.15]	109.39	894	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.18	[0.12, 0.25]	5.51	894	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.10	[0.05, 0.14]	4.49	896	< .001
Obligation (Between)	0.53	[0.48, 0.58]	20.73	894	< .001
Obligation (Within)	0.50	[0.46, 0.55]	21.72	896	< .001
Partiality	-0.05	[-0.19, 0.10]	-0.61	896	.540
Partiality x Predictability	0.24	[0.14, 0.35]	4.51	894	< .001
Partiality x Obligation	-0.21	[-0.33, -0.10]	-3.74	894	< .001
Trustworthiness (DV)					
Intercept	4.82	[4.73, 4.91]	102.53	894	< .001
Predictability (Between)	0.25	[0.18, 0.31]	7.34	894	< .001
Predictability (Within)	0.22	[0.17, 0.26]	9.41	896	< .001
Obligation (Between)	0.48	[0.43, 0.53]	18.27	894	< .001
Obligation (Within)	0.50	[0.45, 0.55]	19.94	896	< .001
Partiality	0.07	[-0.09, 0.23]	0.88	896	.378
Partiality x Predictability	0.21	[0.10, 0.31]	3.78	894	< .001
Partiality x Obligation	-0.27	[-0.39, -0.16]	-4.74	894	< .001

Note. Results from linear mixed-effects models predicting judgments of actor moral goodness (moral perceptions) and trustworthiness from actor Partiality (Partial Action = 0.5, Impartial Action = -0.5), perceived predictability, and perceived social obligation. Predictability and social obligation judgments were decomposed into within-subject and between-subject components, with between-subject components grand-mean centered. Models included interactions between Partiality and within-subject variation in predictability and social obligation judgments. Both models included random intercepts for participants. Moral Perceptions Model: $R_m^2 = .50$, $R_c^2 = .60$; Trustworthiness Model: $R_m^2 = .56$, $R_c^2 = .62$.

These analyses also revealed Partiality by Predictability and Partiality by Social Obligation interactions (see Table 3, Figure 4). Predictability judgments were positively associated with moral evaluations of partial, $b = 0.22$, 95% *CI* [0.15, 0.29], but not impartial actors, $b = -0.02$, 95% *CI* [-0.09, 0.04]. Furthermore, social obligation judgments were more

strongly associated with evaluations of impartial, $b = 0.61$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.68], relative to partial actors, $b = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.47]. Neither predictability nor social obligation judgments interacted with Relationship to predict moral evaluations (all $p > .106$), suggesting that these associations emerged consistently across relationships varying in social closeness.⁷ Model comparisons indicated that including predictability and social obligation judgments significantly improved model fit relative to models excluding one or both of these judgments (all $\chi^2 > 64.05$, all $p < .001$). The same pattern of results emerged for judgments of trustworthiness (Table 3). Taken together, these findings suggest that, across relationship contexts, individuals' moral preference for partiality is closely tied to their perceptions of actors' predictability and fulfillment of social obligations.

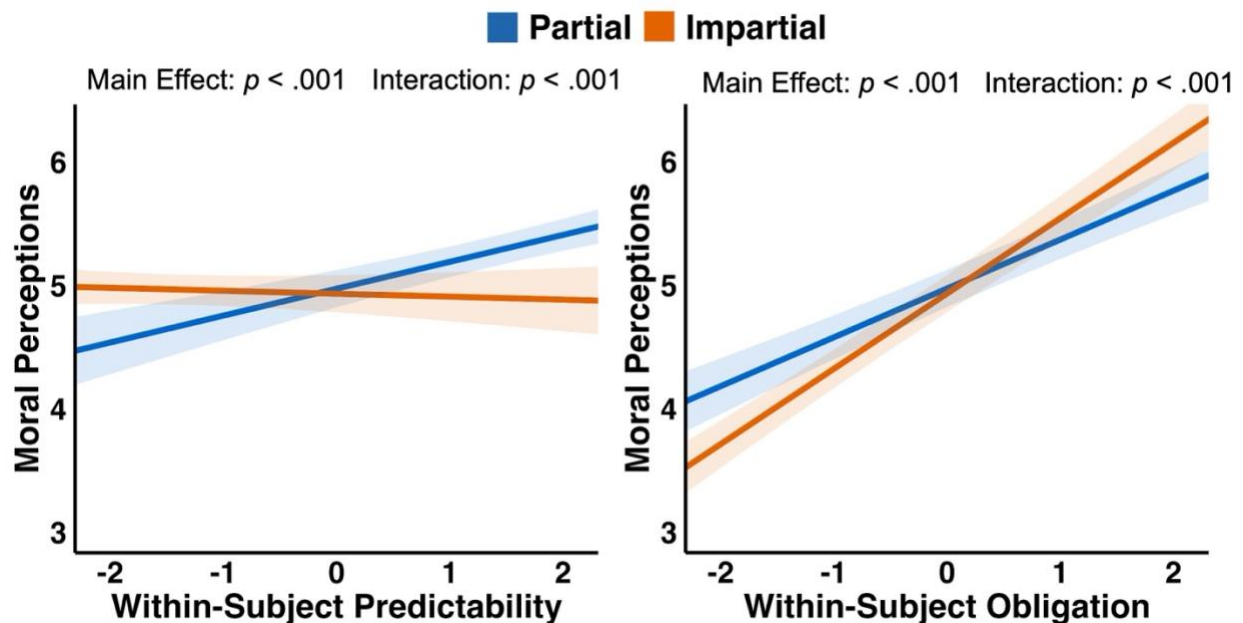


Figure 4 | Experiment 3: Perceived Predictability and Social Obligation Positively Predict Moral Evaluations. Within-subject variation in perceptions of actor predictability (Left Panel) and social obligation (Right Panel) were positively associated with moral perceptions. Lines represent predicted values from the reported linear mixed-effects model for partial (blue) and

⁷ Accordingly, relationship-related terms were omitted from the models reported in Table X.

impartial (orange) actors across levels of predictability and social obligation. Shaded regions reflect the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates.

Experiment 4

Experiments 1-3 demonstrated that people view individuals who prioritize socially close others over strangers as more moral and trustworthy. In Experiment 4, we examined whether this moral preference is reflected in individuals' own helping decisions. Participants chose whether to help a socially close other or a stranger in greater need, allowing us to assess whether people themselves exhibit a preference for partiality in everyday helping contexts. We also examined whether anonymity moderates these decisions. If individuals have internalized social norms favoring partiality, they should elect to prioritize close others when their behavior is observable to others as failing to do so may not only risk harming an important social relationship but lead to negative moral evaluations from observers. In contrast, when decisions are anonymous, individuals may feel free to act in accordance with their private moral preferences rather than anticipated social judgments. Accordingly, we predicted that participants would be more likely to behave impartially when their choices were private compared to public. Additionally, we again examined whether individuals' preference for partiality varied as a function of relational closeness. Specifically, we assessed whether individuals would show a stronger preference for partiality when the potential beneficiary was a relatively close (e.g., friend or relative) as opposed to more distant social tie (e.g., community member).

Participants

Six hundred and three U.S. residents were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk using the same eligibility criteria as Experiments 1-3. Participants received \$0.50 USD upon completing a 4-minute questionnaire. We excluded data from 212 participants who self-reported inattentive responding ($n = 58$) or failed to correctly respond to comprehension check questions

($n = 180$).⁸ The final sample consisted of 391 participants (53% female; $M_{age} = 39.55$, $SD_{age} = 13.45$). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that this sample afforded 80% power to detect effects of $\eta_p^2 = .024$ or larger for the assessed between-subjects interaction.

Measures and Materials

Participants were presented with a vignette describing a situation in which two individuals were seeking financial assistance online to help repair flood damage to their homes following a severe storm. Within the vignette, participants read about a hypothetical actor (“Michael”) who had decided to donate \$100 to one of these individuals. One individual was described as socially connected to Michael—either his friend, relative, or a member of his community, depending on Relationship condition—whereas the other individual was described as a stranger. Participants were first asked to indicate which individual they would donate to if they were in Michael’s position: the known individual or the stranger. They then responded to the question, “How difficult would this decision be for you?” using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at all difficult*) to 7 (*Extremely difficult*). Next, participants were informed that the stranger’s home had been damaged more severely by the storm and would require significantly more money to repair (i.e., compared to the home of Michael’s friend, relative, or community member). Participants again indicated which individual they would choose to donate to and rated how difficult this decision would be using the same 7-point scale. Thus, the second donation decision assessed whether participants would prioritize a socially close other even when a stranger was in greater need.

Design and Procedure

⁸ Forty-six participants engaged in inattentive responding and failed to correctly respond to comprehension check items, exhibiting multiple grounds for exclusion.

Experiment 4 featured a 3 (Relationship: Friend, Relative, Community Member) by 2 (Donation Anonymity: Public, Private) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three Relationship conditions, which determined the relationship between Michael and the known individual described in the vignette. Participants were also randomly assigned to one of two Donation Anonymity conditions. In the Public condition, participants were instructed to imagine that their donation decision would be publicly visible online. Conversely, in the Private condition, participants were instructed to imagine that their decision would remain completely anonymous and thus, would not be known by others. After completing the donation task, participants responded to a comprehension check question assessing their understanding of the vignette. Participants then completed exploratory measures assessing whether they prioritize being helpful or appearing helpful (see Supplementary Materials Part A). As in Experiment 3, they reported their agreement with a statement designed to assess beliefs about the morality of helping close others before strangers. Finally, participants concluded Experiment 4 by responding to two demographic questions and a single-item measure of attentiveness.

Results and Discussion

Participants exhibited a strong preference for partiality in their donation decisions. When a known individual and a stranger were described as being in equal need, a large majority of participants (97%) elected to donate to the known individual, $\chi^2(1) = 340.73, p < .001$. Even after learning that the stranger was in greater need, a smaller—but still clear—majority of participants (66%) continued to prioritize the known individual, $\chi^2(1) = 42.56, p < .001$ (see Figure 5). We used binary logistic regressions to examine whether Relationship (Friend, Relative, Community Member), Donation Anonymity (Public, Private), and their interaction predicted participants'

donation decisions. We focused on participants' second donation choice—made after learning that the stranger was in greater need—because participants overwhelmingly chose to donate to the known individual prior to this information, regardless of condition (all $ps > .054$). These analyses revealed a main effect of Relationship, $\chi^2(2) = 13.79, p = .001$. Participants were more likely to donate to the known individual rather than the stranger in greater need when the known individual was a friend, $OR = 2.62, p = .001$, or relative, $OR = 1.95, p = .033$, compared to a community member. Thus, preferences for partiality were stronger in the case of close, rather than more distant, social ties.⁹ We also observed a main effect of Donation Anonymity, $\chi^2(1) = 11.00, p < .001$. Participants were more likely to donate to the stranger in greater need when their donation decision was private rather than publicly observable. Thus, observability increased participants' tendency to prioritize socially close others, suggesting that participants may have been aware of and considered the reputational consequences of impartiality.

⁹ Participants' donation decisions were again largely consistent with their explicit beliefs about the morality of prioritizing close others over strangers. One-sample t -test revealed that agreement with the statement "A moral person helps [their family/their friends/members of their community] before helping strangers" was reliably above the scale midpoint in the case of family, $t(125) = 6.55, p < .001, d = 0.58$, and friends, $t(133) = 4.72, p < .001, d = 0.41$, but not community members ($p = .339$). Relatedly, participants reported stronger agreement when the target was a family member or friend compared to a community member (both $p < .002$).

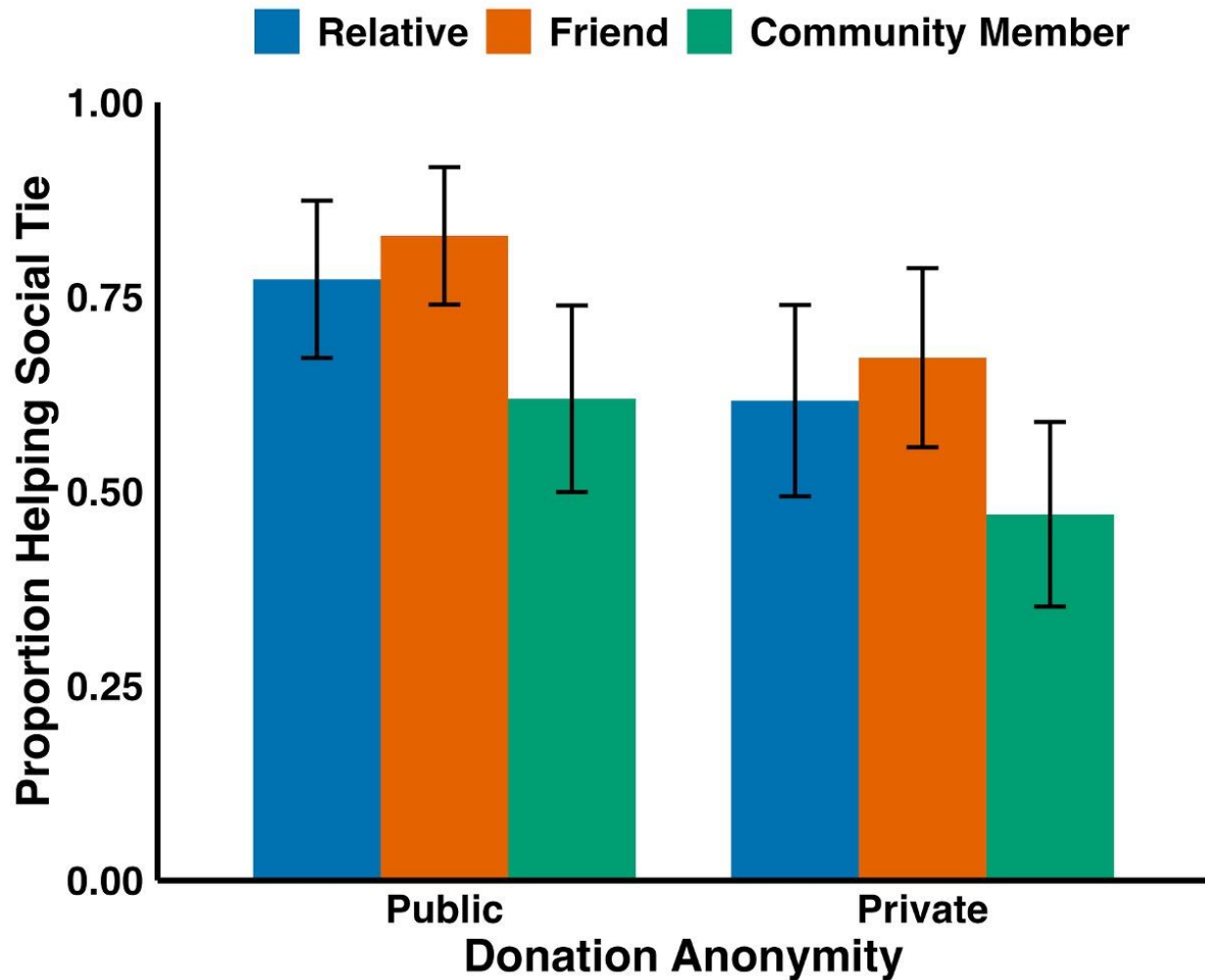


Figure 5 | Experiment 4: Donation Decisions as a Function of Relationship and Anonymity. Bars depict the proportion of participants who chose to help a socially close individual over a stranger in greater need. Donation decisions are shown separately for Public and Private conditions (x-axis), with Relationship condition (Relative, Friend, Community Member) indicated by color. Error bars reflect the 95% confidence interval around each mean proportion.

We next examined judgments of decision difficulty using a 3 x 2 between-subjects ANOVA. This analysis revealed a main effect of Relationship, $F(2, 385) = 3.03, p = .049, \eta_p^2 = .016$, such that participants reported greater difficulty deciding whom to help when the known individual was more socially distant (e.g., a community member rather than a relative). In contrast, Donation Anonymity did not influence decision difficulty, $F(1, 385) = 0.46, p = .500, \eta_p^2 = .001$. Thus, although anonymity altered participants' donation choices, it did not appear to

change the subjective difficulty of the moral conflict itself. We did not observe a Relationship by Donation Anonymity interaction for either donation decisions or judgments of decision difficulty (both $p > .760$). Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals exhibit a robust behavioral preference for partiality, even when a stranger is objectively in greater need of help. Moreover, this preference was sensitive to social observability: participants were more willing to behave impartially when their decisions were anonymous, consistent with the possibility that publicly observable helping decisions are shaped, in part, by the anticipated social costs of impartiality.

General Discussion

Across four experiments, participants demonstrated a consistent moral preference for partiality. Actors who prioritized socially close others over strangers were judged as more moral and trustworthy across both classic sacrificial dilemmas (Experiment 1) and more ecologically valid helping contexts (Experiments 2 and 3). This preference also emerged in participants' own helping preferences (Experiment 4): most participants preferred helping a socially connected other rather than a stranger, even when the stranger was in greater need. Together, these findings suggest that despite impartial beneficence being a central tenet of many moral philosophies, everyday moral judgments often favor actors who prioritize socially close others.

The present findings also provide insight into *why* impartial actors are viewed less favorably than those who prioritize socially connected others. Across experiments, impartial actors were perceived as less predictable and as fulfilling less of their social obligations than partial actors. Moreover, these perceptions were consistently associated with judgments of morality and trustworthiness. These findings align with person-centered theories of moral judgment, which propose that moral evaluations are fundamentally tied to inferences about

individuals' underlying character (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2012; Uhlmann et al., 2015). From this perspective, moral judgments of impartial actors do not simply reflect the perceived morality of impartial actions, but assessments of what these actions reveal about a person as a potential long-term cooperation partner.

Moral judgments have been theorized to serve as a psychological adaptation to facilitate cooperation and maintain social relationships (Curry et al., 2019; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Accordingly, individuals who defy social expectations or violate relational obligations, even when helping strangers, may be viewed as immoral or untrustworthy on the grounds that their actions signal poor relational reliability. That is, failing to prioritize socially close others may signal that an individual is unlikely to honor the obligations associated with close relationships. Similarly, impartial actions, when defying social expectations, may make a person's motives and future behavior seem more difficult to discern, generating social uncertainty and undermining trust (FeldmanHall & Shenhav, 2019; Turpin et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). Consistent with this interpretation, impartial actors were reliably viewed as less predictable and as fulfilling less of their social obligations than partial actors. Although the present research cannot establish the precise causal role of these perceptions, the robust associations observed across paradigms suggest that perceived unpredictability and relational violations help explain why impartial actors are viewed as less moral and trustworthy than those who prioritize socially connected others.

The present findings also highlight the importance of relational context in moral judgment. While research in moral psychology has largely ignored the role of social relationships (Bloom, 2011), recent work has begun to demonstrate the role of social relationships in shaping moral evaluation (Everett et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2016; Law et al., 2022; McManus et al.,

2020, 2021). Consistent with this work, the present findings show that people's moral preference for partiality varies across relational contexts. In Experiment 3, actors failing to prioritize a family member or friend were judged more negatively than those who failed to prioritize a member of their community. Notably, judgments of predictability and social obligation were similarly influenced by relational context: impartial actors were viewed as less predictable and as violating their social obligations to a greater extent when they failed to help socially close, compared to more distant, others.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the reputational costs of impartiality depend, in part, on the relational context in which impartiality occurs. Failing to prioritize socially connected others may signal social unreliability, particularly when strong relational obligations are perceived. Consequently, impartial actors may be viewed as relatively poor cooperation partners, particularly when their actions fail to prioritize close social ties. More broadly, these findings suggest that moral evaluations of partial and impartial actors are shaped less by cognitive assessments of whether a person's actions conform to abstract moral principles and more by pragmatic inferences about who is likely to be a reliable social partner.

Experiment 4 demonstrated that individuals not only exhibit a moral preference for partiality in their third-party moral evaluations, but in their own donation preferences. Participants overwhelmingly preferred to help a socially connected other rather than a stranger in equal need. Furthermore, a majority maintained this preference when learning that the stranger was in greater need, particularly when the familiar other was described as a close social tie (e.g., a friend). Notably, participants were more likely to choose the impartial option when their decision was said to be anonymous rather than publicly observable. This pattern is consistent with helping decisions being shaped by reputational concerns, with publicly failing to help a

close social tie risking not only relational strain with the neglected individual but moral condemnation from observers.

These findings complement prior work demonstrating that prosocial behavior is sensitive to audience effects (Bateson et al., 2006; Bradley et al., 2018; Haley & Fessler, 2005), with people behaving more generously when others are watching. They also suggest that moral decisions may reflect a tension between impartial moral ideals and socially embedded relational expectations. Individuals may endorse impartiality as morally admirable in the abstract while nevertheless anticipating reputational costs for behaving impartially in their day to day lives. This tension may be especially relevant for movements such as effective altruism, which ask adherents not only to adopt impartiality as a private value but to act on it publicly. The present findings show that, at least in some interpersonal contexts, impartial help carries reputational costs, particularly when such help appears to neglect close social ties. Consequently, promoting impartial giving may require not only arguments about aggregate welfare or fairness, but also engagement with the relational and social expectations that shape everyday moral evaluation.

More broadly, the present findings echo philosophical critiques of impartiality (Scheffler, 2010). While many philosophical traditions have upheld impartial beneficence as a defining feature of morality, emphasizing fairness, equal consideration, and the maximization of collective welfare, critics argue that obligations to friends, family members, and close others are not departures from morality, but among its most fundamental expressions (Annis, 1987; Cottingham, 1986; Stocker, 1976; Stroud, 2006). From this perspective, failing to prioritize close others is not a principled commitment to moral values (i.e., impartiality), but rather a violation of the relational norms that structure social relationships. People's moral evaluations appear to align with this view, suggesting that moral evaluations are embedded within relational expectations,

with impartial actors helping strangers being viewed as less moral and trustworthy than partial actors prioritizing the well-being of their social ties.

Limitations and Future Directions

Across four experiments, spanning distinct moral and relational contexts, participants consistently exhibited a moral preference for partially. Nevertheless, this work is not without limitations. First, the present findings were observed in a sample of U.S. residents recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, raising potential questions about the generalizability of these effects across populations and sampling methods. Although prior work suggests that perceptions of relational obligations and preferences for predictable social partners are widespread (Curry et al., 2019; Turpin et al., 2021) cultural variation likely exists in the extent to which partiality is morally valued. Future research should seek to examine these effects in non-Western and non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, including within cultures that place differing emphasis on collectivism and kinship obligations.

Second, the present research relied on hypothetical vignettes and self-reported donation preferences. Although such methods are common in moral psychology, they necessarily simplify the complexity of moral decisions in real interpersonal contexts. Future research could examine whether similar patterns emerge in behavioral paradigms involving real financial stakes, ongoing relationships, or repeated cooperation. For example, it would be informative to assess whether people preferentially trust, cooperate with, or avoid impartial actors in interactive economic games, and whether such behavior is mediated by perceptions of predictability or relational obligations. Similarly, future work may examine whether real-world donation decisions exhibit a preference for partiality and whether this preference is mitigated by anonymity.

Conclusion

Across four experiments, people consistently preferred actors who prioritized socially close others over strangers. Partial actors were viewed as more predictable and as better fulfilling their social obligations than impartial actors, and these perceptions were associated with more favorable judgments of their moral character. Participants' own prosocial preferences also exhibited partiality, with most electing to help a socially connected other even when a stranger was in greater need. Although impartial beneficence is often treated as a moral ideal, the present findings suggest that everyday moral judgments are deeply shaped by relational obligations and concerns about social reliability. Thus, moral evaluations may be shaped less by detached assessments of whether actions conform to abstract moral principles and more by pragmatic inferences about what those actions reveal about a person's value as a long-term cooperation partner.

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