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## SHORT PAPER

# Social norms are enforced by friends: The effect of relationship closeness on bystanders' tendency to confront perpetrators of uncivil, immoral, and discriminatory behaviors

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. The authors also confirm that the research reported in this paper adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as authors' national ethics guidelines.

## Data Archiving and Accessibility Statement

The data are available upon request.

## Abstract

When witnessing an uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior, bystanders have the opportunity to “speak up” and confront the perpetrator about his/her act. We examined whether the closeness of the relationship between the bystander and the perpetrator affects the bystander's reaction. We asked middle schoolers, high schoolers, and university students ( $N = 1,386$ ) to indicate how they would react if they were to witness each of 26 uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behaviors. We experimentally manipulated the relationship to the perpetrator, who was described as a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger. Results showed that the closer the relationship to the perpetrator the greater the bystander's self-reported likelihood of “speaking up.” The findings speak to the role of close relationships in the perpetuation of social norms. They also suggest ways to curb anti-social behaviors in a variety of school and organizational settings.

**Keywords:** social control, social norms, morality, bystander-perpetrator relationship, students

In September 2015, a 17-year-old California teenager was acclaimed as a hero after he rushed to help a blind classmate being beaten up by a bully during lunchtime. The teenager floored the bully with a single punch. Several other students looked on, but only the 17-year-old adolescent confronted the perpetrator. The victim was his friend, but what about the perpetrator? Was he a friend too? An acquaintance? A stranger? Would it have made a difference? The purpose of the present research was to examine the influence of the closeness of the relationship between a bystander and the perpetrator of an uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior on the bystander's tendency to “speak up” and confront the perpetrator. We tested two plausible hypotheses against each other: one stating that individuals are more likely to intervene when they feel close to the perpetrator, the other stating the exact opposite.

## Social Control

When witnessing a behavior that transgresses social norms or moral standards, bystanders sometimes

communicate to the perpetrator that his or her behavior is wrong. This particular form of communication is frequently referred to as “social control” (Brauer & Chekroun, 2005), but has also been called “speaking up” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), “confronting the person” (Rattan & Dweck, 2010), “social sanctions” (Eriksson, Andersson, & Strimling, 2015), “pressure to conform” (Schachter, 1951), “altruistic punishment” (Balafoutas, Nikiforakis, & Rockenbach, 2016), “moral criticism” (Voiklis & Malle, 2016), “norm enforcement” (Horne, 2009), and “civil courage” (Greitemeyer, Osswald, Fischer, & Frey, 2007). Social control perpetuates social norms (Gibbs, 1981) and promotes prosocial behaviors (Yamagishi, 1986). It does so by making prescriptive norms salient, such as when an individual confronts a racist coworker or prevents a fellow student from bullying a classmate. In many settings, social control is essential to avoiding disastrous outcomes, e.g., in communication between airline pilots (Bienenfeld & Grote, 2012) or among members of medical teams performing an operation (Okuyama, Wagner, & Bijnen, 2014).

In the present paper, we report a randomized experiment that examines whether bystanders' likelihood to

intervene depends on the type of relationship they have with the perpetrator. Are bystanders more likely to confront a perpetrator if this person is a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger? The study of the influence of the bystander–perpetrator relationship on social control provides insight into bystanders' motivation to promptly intervene or not. It will also help us develop strategies to effectively reduce antisocial behaviors. Two opposing hypotheses can be made, and we will discuss each of these hypotheses in the next sections. As we will see, both hypotheses are plausible and theoretically justifiable. We therefore abstained from favoring one hypothesis over the other and simply tested the two hypotheses against each other in the present research.

### **Social Control Decreases with Relationship Closeness (Hypothesis 1)**

There are several reasons to believe that individuals are *less* likely to exert social control as the closeness of the relationship between them and the perpetrator increases (Hypothesis 1). First of all, confronting a friend might ruin the friendship. This concern may be particularly prevalent among students (our participant population), who tend to worry a lot about social acceptance and the number of friends they have (Byrne, 2000; Lane & Gullone, 1999). The bystander literature discusses that individuals weigh costs and benefits of taking action before deciding to intervene (Ashburn-Nardo, Blanchar, Petersson, Morris, & Goodwin, 2014). And the closer the relationship between bystander and perpetrator the greater the cost of intervention.

Bennett, Banyard, and Edwards (2017) showed that men are more likely to help a sexual violence victim if the perpetrator is a stranger, rather than a friend. Similarly, Bennett and Banyard (2016) found that participants with a close relationship with the perpetrator perceived the situation involving sexual violence as less problematic. And because bystanders interpreted the situation as less of a problem that required their intervention, they were less likely to help when the perpetrator was a friend. Simpson and Laham (2015) found that individuals are less likely to see a violation of a purity norm as immoral when it is their friend committing the act than when a stranger is.

Curphy et al. (1998) reported that cadets in a U.S. Air Force Academy were less willing to take action regarding unethical behaviors by a close friend than by a stranger. It should be noted, however, that these authors studied cadets' tendency to notify someone in a position of authority rather than confronting the person directly.

Caplan, Bennetto, and Weissberg (1991) suggest that one's relationship with another person influences the problem-solving strategies one chooses to employ. Middle-schoolers were presented with a hypothetical

peer-conflict situation with a friend relative to an acquaintance. Behaviors such as being physically aggressive, snatching, and help-seeking solutions were less frequently used with friends than with acquaintances. By extrapolation, then, one might predict that students will be less likely to confront a friend rather than an acquaintance about his/her uncivil behavior.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the closer bystanders feel to a perpetrator of an uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior the less likely they are to exert social control.

### **Social Control Increases with Relationship Closeness (Hypothesis 2)**

There are also a variety of reasons to believe that students are *more* likely to exert social control as the social distance between them and the perpetrator decreases (Hypothesis 2). Chekroun and Nugier (2011) showed that in an intergroup context students were more likely to exert social control toward an uncivil ingroup member rather than an uncivil outgroup member. This effect was mediated by moral emotions (e.g., shame, embarrassment) suggesting that bystanders were worried that the uncivil behavior by the ingroup member would negatively reflect on them. A similar reasoning might be applied to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The closer the relationship to the perpetrator, the more bystanders are worried that the uncivil behavior will reflect negatively on them and the more likely they are to "speak up."

The "Black Sheep effect" describes our tendency to judge deviant ingroup member more negatively than comparable outgroup members (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Likewise, Shinada, Yamagishi, and Ohmura (2004) observed greater moral outrage and larger punishments when a non-cooperative confederate was an ingroup rather than an outgroup member. Extrapolating from this work to interpersonal relationships, one might expect that social control increases as one's closeness to the perpetrator increases.

Bystanders may be more likely to confront friends rather than strangers because it is less costly to do so. Horne and Cutlip (2002) showed that the likelihood of social control depends on the cost of sanctioning. In a study by Balafoutas and Nikiforakis (2012), 61% of the respondents said they did not exert social control because of fear of retaliation. Assuming that friends will retaliate less than strangers, these findings suggest that social control increases with relationship closeness.

Eriksson, Strimling, and Ehn (2013) argued that rewarding and punishing another person's behavior in public goods games are considered more appropriate when the player has specifically been given the role to do so in the experimental situation. Being a friend might constitute such role in that individuals are expected to keep their friends in check. Support for this idea comes from Chekroun and Brauer (2004),

who showed that bystanders are less likely to “speak up” when the perpetrator is accompanied by a friend, presumably because it behooves the friend to address the uncivil behavior. Kiesler, Kiesler, and Pallak (1967) showed that people are more likely to intervene when they are “committed to future interaction” with the perpetrator, and the strength of this commitment decreases with social distance to the perpetrator.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the closer bystanders feel to a perpetrator of an uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior the more likely they are to exert social control.

### The Present Study

We conducted a randomized experiment in which we asked middle schoolers, high schoolers, and university students to report their reactions if they were to witness each of 26 unacceptable behaviors. Relationship closeness was manipulated between subjects: The perpetrator was described as either a friend, and acquaintance, or a stranger. We predicted that relationship closeness would lead to either decreased (Hypothesis 1) or increased (Hypothesis 2) social control. We also conducted exploratory analyses in which we examined if the effect of relationship closeness on social control depended on age and/or gender.

### Method

#### Participants

One thousand three hundred and eighty-six students in a medium-sized French city voluntarily took part in the experiment. There were 709 middle school students (346 males, 361 females, 2 unidentified, mean age = 13.08, age range = 11–17 years old), 419 high school students (161 males, 247 females, 11 unidentified, mean age = 16.86, age range = 14–22 years old), and 258 university students (29 males, 222 females, 7 unidentified, mean age = 22.28, age range = 17–50 years old). Approximately two-thirds of the middle and high schools students attended regular schools, whereas one-third attended general aid schools. The university students attended a public university and had a large variety of majors. Sample size was determined by an a priori power analysis. Assuming a small effect ( $f^2 = .02$ ) and an alpha-level of .05, one needs 397 participants to achieve a power of .80. We contacted a large number of teachers and professors to be sure to have at least 400 observations and then collected data from as many students as we could in one semester.

#### Material and Manipulation

All participants read short descriptions of 26 uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behaviors. Sample items

are “The student cuts in line at the cafeteria”, “The student steals a book from the school library”, and “The student speaks of Arab/Muslim students in a racist manner, using very vulgar and insulting language” (see Appendix S1 for a complete list of items). Participants were instructed to imagine that they observed one of their fellow students engage in each of these behaviors and were asked how they would react. They were asked to choose one of seven possible reactions: “I would imitate him/her”, “I would hang out with him/her”, “I would show him/her my encouragement”, “I wouldn’t do anything”, “I would avoid him/her”, “I would alert an authority figure” and “I would tell him/her that his/her behavior is wrong”. We were primarily interested in the number of respondents who chose the last response option, which is our indicator of social control.

The questionnaire contained several additional items of secondary importance. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions either in the main text or in Appendix S1.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions: They were asked to imagine that the fellow student who engaged in each of the 26 behaviors was either a friend, or an acquaintance, or a stranger.

### Results

We combined the data from the three samples into a single data file. We computed for each participant seven scores, one for each response option. Each score was computed by dividing the number of times s/he chose a given response option by the number of valid responses given by that participant. We also computed a social sanctions score by dividing the number of times s/he chose one of the last three response options (I would avoid him/her, I would alert an authority figure, and I would tell him/her that his/her behavior is wrong) by the number of valid responses. As can be seen in Table 1, all total scores had satisfactory internal consistency. Also, the most frequent self-reported reactions were to do nothing or to tell the perpetrator that his/her behavior was wrong: Each were chosen about one-third of the time. Participants indicated that they were less likely to alert an authority figure or to avoid the perpetrator. Positive reactions to the uncivil behaviors were extremely rare.

For the main analyses, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with condition as the independent variable and the social control score (the proportion of times that participants reported that they would tell the perpetrator that his/her behavior is wrong) as the dependent variable. The effect of condition was statistically significant,  $F(2,1360) = 20.66$ ,  $p < .0001$ . The linear trend of condition (coded  $-1$ ,  $0$ ,  $1$  for stranger, acquaintance, and friend, respectively) was statistically significant,  $b = .034$  [.023; .045],  $F(1,1360) = 38.38$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = .17$ , whereas the quadratic trend was

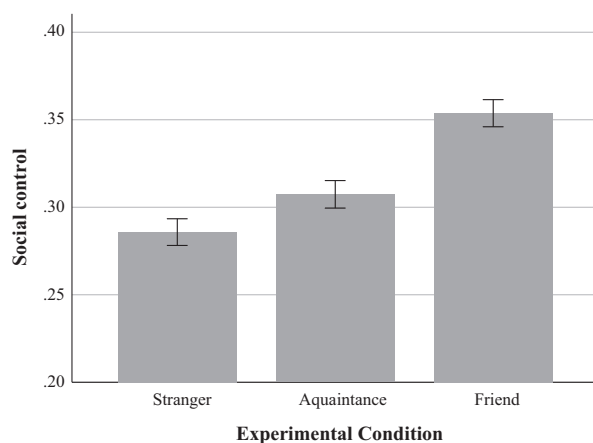
**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for each of the eight reactions to the uncivil behaviors. We report the mean, standard deviation, and the Kuder-Richardson 20 (the equivalent of Cronbach's Alpha for binary response scales)

	Mean	SD	KR20
(1) Imitate him/her	.023	.065	.830
(2) Hang out with him/her	.010	.046	.864
(3) Show encouragement	.015	.042	.696
(4) Not do anything	.313	.194	.840
(5) Avoid him/her	.136	.134	.782
(6) Alert an authority figure	.184	.161	.849
(7) Say that behavior is wrong	.319	.168	.754
(8) Social sanction (sum of 5, 6, and 7)	.639	.226	.883

not,  $p = .202$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, the closer respondents were to the perpetrator, the more likely they were to confront him/her and communicate their disapproval. These results confirm Hypothesis 2, but are contradictory to Hypothesis 1.

Although we had no predictions for the other seven outcome variables, we nevertheless analyzed them as a function of experimental condition. There was a statistically significant linear trend of experimental condition on "doing nothing": The closer the relationship to the perpetrator was, the less likely the participants were to say that they would not react in any way,  $b = -.027$  [-.039; -.014],  $F(1,1362) = 17.47$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = .11$ . A linear trend in the opposite direction emerged for the social sanctions score (the sum of the last three response options): The closer bystanders felt to the perpetrator, the more likely they were to say that they would react with some sort of social sanction,  $b = .024$  [.010; .039],  $F(1,1362) = 10.52$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r = .09$ . None of the other effects for any of the outcome measures yielded statistically significant results.

To establish generalizability of the effect, we conducted an additional analysis in which we included type of behavior as an additional predictor. We computed, for each participant, three separate social



**Fig. 1:** Social control as a function of the closeness of the relationship between the bystander and the perpetrator of the uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior. Error bars represent one standard error of the mean

control scores, one for uncivil behaviors, one for immoral behaviors, and one for discriminatory behaviors (see Appendix S1 for details). We estimated a general linear model with one between-subjects predictor (the linear trend of condition, coded  $-1, 0, 1$ ) and one within-subjects predictor (type of behavior, with three levels). The analyses yielded a non-significant interaction effect,  $F(2, 2628) = .32$ ,  $p = .726$ , suggesting that participants' self-reported tendency to speak up more when they feel closer to the perpetrator generalized across all three types of behaviors.

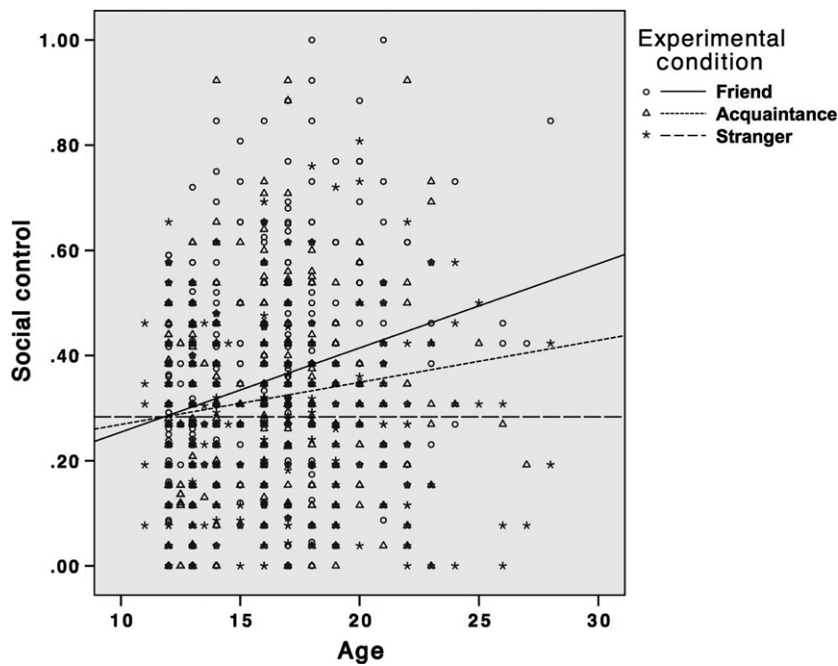
We also conducted exploratory analyses in which we included age as a predictor. We estimated another general linear model in which we regressed participants' social control score on the linear trend of condition (coded  $-1, 0, 1$ ), age (mean-centered), and the product of the two.<sup>1</sup> As above, the linear trend of condition was statistically significant,  $b = .034$  [.024; .045],  $F(1,1311) = 39.20$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = .17$ . So was the effect of age,  $b = .008$  [.005; .011],  $F(1,1311) = 32.79$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = .16$ . Older participants were more likely to exert social control than younger participants. Both effects were qualified by a significant (linear trend of) condition by age interaction,  $b = .008$  [.005; .012],  $F(1,1311) = 23.02$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = .13$ . As can be seen in Figure 2, the relationship closeness effect (the closer bystanders felt to the perpetrator the more likely they were to speak up) became stronger with age. In other words, the older the bystanders were the more their self-reported reactions to an uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behavior were influenced by the closeness of the relationship between them and the perpetrator of the behavior.

In another general linear model we regressed participants' social control score on the linear trend of condition (coded  $-1, 0, 1$ ), gender (coded  $-.5$  and  $.5$ ), and the product of the two. Female participants ( $M = .33$ ,  $SD = .16$ ) were more likely to "speak up" than male participants ( $M = .30$ ,  $SD = .18$ ),  $b = .033$  [.015; .052],  $F(1,1343) = 12.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .10$ , but this effect was not moderated by the linear trend of condition ( $p = .42$ ). Additional analyses are reported in Appendix S1.

## Discussion

The present experiment examined a key factor in students' likelihood to confront a fellow student whom they witnessed engaging in an uncivil, immoral, or

<sup>1</sup>Because our student sample contained several older undergraduates, we excluded all participants who were 29 years or older, leading to the exclusion of 23 participants (=1.7%). Subsequent analyses showed that our conclusions were not conditional on the exclusion of the outliers. When we analyzed the dataset with all participants (including the older undergraduates) we obtained nearly the same results. We also ran the same analyses applying a log-transformation to the age variable. Again, the results of the inferential tests were nearly identical.



**Fig. 2:** Social control as a function of bystander age, the relationship closeness between the bystander and the perpetrator, and their interaction. The lines represent model predictions

discriminatory behavior: the closeness of the relationship between the bystander and the perpetrator. In a randomized experiment involving middle schoolers, high schoolers, and university students, we tested two theoretically plausible hypotheses against each other: one stating that individuals are less likely to intervene as the closeness between them and the perpetrator increases, the other stating the opposite. The results provided support for the latter hypothesis, but were inconsistent with the former hypothesis. We found a relationship closeness effect: Individuals report that they exert more social control when the perpetrator is a close friend than when s/he is an acquaintance, and social control toward an acquaintance is in turn more likely than toward a stranger.

One explanation for this effect is that bystanders experience more moral emotions (e.g., shame, embarrassment) and are more afraid that the uncivil behavior will reflect negatively on them as the closeness between them and the perpetrator increases. After all, other people know whom the perpetrator is friends with. Deviant friends therefore have a greater capacity to tarnish the bystander's reputation than deviant strangers. The bystanders' tendency to speak up would thus be influenced by their desire to protect their own image. Another explanation is that social control is driven primarily by the desire to prevent the perpetrator from getting into trouble and from damaging his/her relationship with instructors and other students. As such, "speaking up" would be quite similar to helping behavior in that its goal is to lead the perpetrator back on the "right track". It follows then, that the closer we feel to another person the more likely we are to help them. A third explanation is that friends are less likely to retaliate, maybe even physically, and are thus

perceived as less threatening than strangers. The present experiment does not allow us to assess which of these three mechanisms produces the observed effect, but future research should address this important point.

The relationship closeness effect generalized across all three types of behaviors, i.e., minor norm transgressions ("uncivil behaviors"), major norm transgressions and criminal acts ("immoral behaviors"), and hostile behaviors toward ethnic minorities ("discriminatory behaviors"). This generalizability replicates recent work by Moïsuc, Brauer, Fonseca, Chaurand, and Greitemeyer (2018) who also found that individuals tend to react in similar ways to different types of deviant behaviors. Finally, our exploratory analyses showed that the relationship closeness effect increases with age. This result may be due to the fact that the stability of friendships increases with age: The friendships of older children are more stable than those of younger children, even though the overall number of friends decreases with age (Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986; Berndt & Hoyle, 1985).

One of the shortcomings of our experiment is that we used a methodology consisting of vignettes and self-reports. One may wonder whether participants can accurately predict their reactions or tend to self-present in a socially desirable way. Fully aware of its shortcomings, we chose this methodology for two reasons. First, prior research has shown that self-reports are quite accurate estimates of actual levels of social control. Brauer and Chekroun (2005) examined bystanders' reactions to a variety of uncivil behaviors. Half of the participants were in the questionnaire condition and reported how they would react if they were to witness the behavior under consideration. The

other half of the participants were in the behavior condition in which they observed a confederate engage in the uncivil behavior and their reaction was being measured. Across uncivil behaviors, the correlation between the self-reports and the actual social control reactions was .86.<sup>2</sup> Second, our goal was to examine a variety of behaviors some of which could not be staged by a “deviant” confederate in a school or university (for ethical or practical reasons). In order to be able to include these behaviors as well, we decided to use vignettes in our research.

The present experiment has a number of theoretical and practical implications. First they show that activities promoting close relationships are likely to reduce uncivil, immoral, and discriminatory behaviors. Our findings show that people intervene more often when they feel close to the perpetrator. The implication is that making them feel closer to others in their social environment will increase their tendency to exert social control. And social control reduces anti-social behaviors and increases prosocial behaviors (Gibbs, 1981; Yamagishi, 1986). As such, it is likely that activities that allow students to get to know each other and to form friendships with each other will reduce incivilities both inside and outside the classroom. Team building activities in companies probably reduce the occurrence of counterproductive workplace behaviors and facilitate the occurrence of organizational citizenship behaviors. Finally, initiatives that promote the development of friendly relationships among neighbors will likely reduce the number of incivilities committed in public spaces of the neighborhood.

Second, the present experiment suggests that people will fail to realize the extent to which their uncivil, immoral, or discriminatory behaviors violate societal standards if their friends tend to consider these behaviors to be acceptable. We tend to become friends with people who are similar to us (Parker & Seal, 1996; Rubin, Lynch, Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth, 1994). Similar others may approve of or even engage in the same undesirable behaviors as we do. For example, among certain groups of students it may be considered “uncool” to be academically achieving, and a variety of deviant behaviors may be seen as desirable (e.g., racial slurs). Our findings suggest that none of their peers are likely to confront the students about their behaviors: Their friends won’t do it because they see nothing wrong in these behaviors, but other fellow students won’t speak up either because they tend to abstain from exerting social control toward strangers. The concerned individuals may thus never be reminded of the descriptive and prescriptive norms related to these behaviors and will instead maintain the illusion that their behaviors are seen as acceptable by most students in the school. This situation can be

avoided by helping students from different social and ethnic backgrounds develop close relationships (e.g., group tasks with a common goal, sports teams).

When children are young, their caregivers tell them what is right and wrong, and the parents will intervene when they observe their children engage in undesirable behavior. The present experiments show that with age, friends play an increasingly important role in regulating students’ behaviors. When students engage in a behavior that violates societal standards, their friends will confront them and let them know that they disapprove of the behavior. By the time individuals reach adulthood, the perpetuation of social norms and moral standards is primarily a role that will be played by friends rather than strangers.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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<sup>2</sup>An in-depth examination of the relationship between self-reported and actual social control, and the extent to which it generalizes to major immoral behaviors, would itself be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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