



Standing on principle: How moral principles can excuse disloyalty[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Loyalty
Morality
Friendship
Side-taking
Alliances
Moral judgment

ABSTRACT

How do we judge someone who must decide between loyalty to their friends and adherence to moral principles? Across seven experiments (four in the main text, three in the supplemental materials), participants read scenarios in which a person's friend becomes embroiled in a conflict with an acquaintance, and the person must decide whose side to take. We systematically varied whether the friend was morally right or wrong and whether side-takers opposed friends based on moral principles or had alternative motivations for their opposition, both altruistic and self-interested. Across experiments, we find that people consistently excuse disloyalty when opposing a friend is grounded in moral principles (e.g., the friend violated the side-taker's moral principle) but not when it reflects other motives. Further, we find this effect is specific to the side-taker's own moral principles: Neither alternative motives nor the moral judgments of others excuse disloyalty. These results align with the side-taking theory of morality, which holds that moral judgment functions to coordinate side-takers in a conflict. More broadly, they shed light on an underexplored feature of morality: its power to excuse disloyalty.

Let this, then, be laid down as the first law of friendship, that we should ask from friends, and do for friends, only what is good.

—Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Treatises on friendship and old age*.

Friendships provide many benefits, but they also entail obligations, loyalty chief among them (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Waytz et al., 2013). Sometimes these obligations clash with moral values—for instance, when a close friend commits a moral transgression. In such situations, do we support our wrongdoing friend, or stick by our morals and risk losing the friendship?

To answer such questions, we investigate how people judge those who choose sides in moral conflicts involving their friends. We propose that these dilemmas may not be as daunting as they seem. Although people generally expect friends to show favoritism, they also understand that morality demands impartiality—coming to a judgment that a neutral observer would agree is the right thing to do. As a result, siding against a friend based on moral principles may not provoke significant resentment despite expectations of loyalty. In what follows, we unpack this reasoning and report experiments designed to test it.

1. Friends demand loyalty, but loyalty can come at a cost

Loyalty is central to friendship (e.g., Aktipis et al., 2018; Barclay, 2016; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b; DeScioli et al., 2011; Hruschka, 2010; Reis, 2001; Silk, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Good friends not only are kind and spend time with one another but also reliably help each other in times of need (Beck & Clark, 1988; Brown, 1999; Brown & Brown, 2006; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark et al., 1986; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996) and are expected to take each other's side in conflicts (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a, 2011; Liberman & Shaw, 2017, 2019; Shaw et al., 2017). Consequently, people monitor friends for signs of loyalty and harshly condemn disloyalty in others (Berry et al., 2021; Everett et al., 2018). Perceptions of disloyalty can thus severely damage friendships, particularly when they result from siding against one's friends or remaining neutral in conflicts (Shaw et al., 2017). When a person remains neutral in a conflict between their friend and non-friend acquaintance, both adults and even children (by age 8- to 9-years old) expect their friend to be more upset than their acquaintance (Mackiel et al., 2026; Shaw et al., 2017).

While highly valuable as a friendship trait, loyalty also comes at a cost. Friends may draw us into costly conflicts that we otherwise could

[☆] This article is part of a Special issue entitled: 'Friendship' published in Evolution and Human Behavior.

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have avoided, and our loyalty to wrongdoing friends may give us a reputation as an immoral person (Kurzban et al., 2012). A growing body of research has examined the tradeoffs between loyalty and morality (e.g., Berry et al., 2024; Earp et al., 2026; Lee & Holyoak, 2020; McManus et al., 2020; Selterman & Koleva, 2015; Shaw et al., 2018; Simpson et al., 2016; Vasquez & Shaw, 2026; Waytz et al., 2013). In some cases, people's sense of loyalty can lead them to support immoral actions (e.g. Hughes, 2017), to dislike friends who support others too strongly (Barakzai & Shaw, 2018), and to prefer friends who behave harshly rather than kindly toward their enemies (Krems et al., 2017). In short, the loyalty obligations of friendship can often demand immoral behavior.

1.1. Morality demands impartiality

In contrast to loyalty's demands for partiality, morality often requires impartiality (Kohlberg, 1981; Shaw, 2013). That is, moral judgment typically treats certain actions as inherently right or wrong independent of the identities of the perpetrators or victims involved (Choshen-Hillel et al., 2015; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b; Kant, 1785; Rawls, 1971; Shaw & Knobe, 2013). Lady Justice, for instance, is typically portrayed as blind, a metaphor for morality's roots in impartial fairness. Accordingly, while people do support friends in the wrong, moral standards can sometimes lead them to oppose their friends who violate moral rules (Berry et al., 2024; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b; Dungan et al., 2014; Shaw et al., 2018; Waytz et al., 2013). Moral judgment can thus override loyalty obligations, motivating people to side against or even harm their friends (Berry & Hildreth, 2025; Dungan et al., 2015).

How can these tendencies toward partiality (loyalty) and impartiality (morality) coexist in the same mind? One evolutionary account proposes that moral judgment helps people choose a side in conflicts for reasons that transcend their loyalties. On this view, in dangerous conflicts, those who choose sides based on moral rules can avoid the costs of loyalty to allies and obedience to hierarchies (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). Choosing sides based on morality rather than alliances (e.g., rather than siding with one's kin or friends) avoids the threat of escalating small-scale squabbles into large scale battles (Liska, 1962). Likewise, choosing sides based on morality rather than status (e.g., rather than siding with the stronger or larger group) avoids the threat of empowering exploitative tyrants, a danger expressed by the phrase *semper tyrannis*. According to this account, moral rules that categorically prohibit certain actions, regardless of one's identity or social standing, allow people to coordinate their condemnation and side-taking decisions despite having opposing loyalties to the disputants (Kurzban, 2011; Kurzban & DeScioli, 2015). In such cases, one may side against a friend who has taken an action considered morally wrong without being seen as disloyal. This functional rationale is reflected in our moral psychology: People often deem siding against immoral friends as not only intuitive but also morally right (Cicero, 2009).

If morality indeed evolved to serve this side-taking function, then the tension between morality and loyalty need not be so severe. While siding against a friend may generally be disloyal, doing so for the right reasons—when friends violate moral rules—should diminish perceptions of disloyalty. This is because perceptions of loyalty reflect, in part, the perceived probability that a friend will provide support in future conflicts (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b; Shaw et al., 2017; Silver and Shaw, 2022). Siding against an ally for no apparent reason signals general unreliability (or worse, provides information that one is disloyal or not truly a friend). But siding against an ally specifically because they violated a moral rule still signals reliability in any future conflict where the ally has not committed a moral offense. That is, morally motivated opposition to an ally is contingent on their behavior, not on a general unwillingness to offer support to allies generally (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2018) or to that ally specifically (Krems et al., 2017).

1.2. The current experiments

If one of the functions of moral judgment is to allow people to oppose their friends without being penalized for disloyalty, then moral justification should reduce perceived disloyalty when people side against friends in the wrong. To test this hypothesis, we report seven experiments (four in the main text; three in the supplemental materials) that present participants with hypothetical situations in which the “side-taker” sees a conflict between their close friend and an acquaintance. The side-taker must then choose sides in the conflict. In all but one experiment (Experiment 4) the side-taker exclusively sides against their friend. We vary whether the friend is the perpetrator or victim of a moral offense and then measure participants' judgments of the side-taker's loyalty to their friend. When the side-taker opposes their friend, we hypothesize that judgments of the side-takers' loyalty will be guided by the friend's moral standing. Specifically, we hypothesize that participants will judge side-takers as less disloyal when they oppose a friend who perpetrated a moral offense compared to a friend who was a victim of the moral offense.

1.3. General methods

For studies 2–4, we recruited online participants from CloudResearch's approved participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk, who completed the survey for 30–45 cents. Experiment 1 was run on Prolific, however, and participants were paid 80 cents. We restricted participation to residents of the United States for all studies. Based on a power analysis ($d = 0.3$, Cohen, 1988) to acquire 95% power, we tried to recruit approximately 50 participants per cell. We did not look at the data until all data were collected. All studies were pre-registered through [AsPredicted.org](https://osf.io/cu2f3/?view_only=4bb89ce260e049d6821da54740ac617c). All data, code, analyses, preregistrations, and supplemental materials can be found on the Open Science Framework page: https://osf.io/cu2f3/?view_only=4bb89ce260e049d6821da54740ac617c. Participants received an attention check and two comprehension checks. Participants who failed either 1) the attention check or 2) both comprehension checks were excluded from analysis. We also verified that results were unchanged when including all participants regardless of check performance; any differences are noted in the relevant experiment. Across all experiments, we used Welch's *t*-tests for planned comparisons, as this approach does not assume equal variances between groups and is robust to unequal sample sizes. We collapsed across gender in the analyses because we had no hypothesis about gender and found no significant correlations between gender and our dependent variables. In these experiments, we focused primarily on evaluations of the side-taker's loyalty, as our key question was whether a friend's moral standing impacts people's (dis)loyalty judgments for siding against one's friend. In all experiments except the first, we measured loyalty using a single item asking how loyal of a friend the side-taker is (1 = ‘very disloyal’ to 7 = ‘very loyal’). In Experiment 1, we additionally included two related measures of friendship quality (described in the methods of Experiment 1). All three measures showed consistent effects, validating our use of our primary loyalty measure throughout the following experiments. Participants received all measures in random order.

Rather than asking for their own reaction to a friend siding against them, all experiments in the main text asked participants to make judgments as outsiders to conflicts. We adopted the outsider perspective for two reasons. First, it reduces the influence of social desirability: Participants who imagine themselves as the friend might want to appear tolerant of morally motivated opposition, but this self-serving bias should not apply when judging someone else's loyalty from the outside (Kopcha & Sullivan, 2007; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Second, the outsider perspective avoids plausibility concerns. If participants imagined themselves in the scenario—for instance, confronting a coworker in a bar—they might find it implausible that they would act that way, distracting them from the central judgment of the side-taker's loyalty. Still, in a supplemental study (Experiment S3), we also examined first-party

judgments, asking participants to imagine being the friend who was sided against. The results of Experiment S3 were comparable to the results reported in the main text.

2. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we investigate whether a person who sides against their friend is seen as less disloyal when their decision to oppose a friend is based on moral principles. One possibility is that siding against a friend, regardless of their moral standing, will be taken as a sign of disloyalty. This view is plausible given that loyalty may be a unique moral foundation that our minds track separately from other moral foundations like fairness (Graham et al., 2013). For example, people might judge a person who sides against a friend on principle to be simultaneously moral and disloyal. Alternatively, the side-taking theory of morality holds that one function of moral judgment is to give side-takers a justification for taking sides. If people recognize moral principles as acceptable justifications for taking sides, then opposing a friend in the wrong will be seen as substantially less disloyal compared to opposing a friend in the right. Thus, the side-taking theory predicts that siding against a friend will be seen as much less disloyal when the friend is morally wrong compared to right.

To test this hypothesis, we vary the moral standing of the side-taker's friend: whether the side-taker's friend committed a moral transgression (friend is wrong condition) or the side-taker's friend was the victim of another person's moral transgression (friend is right condition). We also sought to explore whether people make this inference across three different scenarios depicting immoral behavior: stealing an idea, doing cocaine, and breaking a promise. In each condition, the side-taker chooses to side against their friend. Participants then answer three questions about the side-taker's loyalty. We predict that in each scenario, participants will judge the side-taker's friend as less disloyal when siding against their friend that is morally wrong than when siding against their friend that is morally right.

3. Method

Out of 319 recruited participants, 25 were removed following our preregistered exclusion criteria (<https://aspredicted.org/gj7fc3.pdf>), leaving 294 participants (145 female; $M(\text{age}) = 44.27$, $SD = 13.07$). Participants read one of six versions of a vignette in a 3 (Scenario: stealing idea, doing cocaine, breaking a promise) $\times$ 2 (Moral principle: friend is wrong, friend is right) design. The vignettes described close friends John and David talking with one another. John tells David about something that happened recently with someone named Casey. It's always made clear to participants that David and Casey are acquaintances and not close friends. John tells David about a time that he did something wrong to Casey or Casey did something wrong to him, which determines whether David (the side-taker) has a moral reason or no moral reason to side against their friend John. In all cases, David sides-against his friend. For the sake of conciseness, only the stealing idea scenario is described below (see supplemental materials for the description of the other scenarios). In the condition where the friend is right for the stealing idea scenario, Casey steals one of John's new ideas for a project at work and takes credit for it. He tells the boss who is very proud of him. The comparison condition where the friend is wrong reads as follows:

John and David are really close friends. One evening, after work, John tells David about something that recently happened at work with an acquaintance from work named Casey. David does not know Casey that well, they are not close friends. John tells David, "Last week at work Casey had mentioned coming up with a new really great idea for a project to him. Casey hadn't told our boss the new idea because he was not sure it was good enough. Later that day when meeting with the boss he asked if I had anything new and I accidentally told the boss Casey's idea and took credit for it." John

continues, "Our boss absolutely loved the idea and for the first time in a while told me I'm doing a good job and that if I kept it up, I might get a raise soon! I could have told the boss it was Casey's idea, but I didn't. When Casey found out, he was really upset and confronted me. Casey was super angry at me. I mean, it was just one idea, I didn't think it was a big deal, but Casey clearly thought it was." John continues, "Can you believe that happened? Who do you think was in the wrong?" David looks at his friend John and says, "I think you were in the wrong. I'm with Casey on this one."

After reading the vignette, participants answered three dependent measures of loyalty. The first measure asked, "How loyal of a friend do you think David is?" on a scale from 1 ("Very disloyal") to 7 ("Very loyal") with "Neither loyal nor disloyal" as the midpoint. Participants also answered two more loyalty measures (related measures have been used in previous side-taking work; Shaw et al., 2017). One asked, "How good of a friend do you think David is?" on a scale from 1 ("Not at all a good friend") to 7 ("A very good friend"). The other asked, "Do you think David's behavior strengthened or weakened the friendship with John?" on a scale from 1 ("Definitely weakened") to 7 ("Definitely strengthened") with "Neither weakened nor strengthened" as the midpoint. The order of the latter two measures was counterbalanced. Participants answered demographic questions at the end.

4. Results

We conducted a 2×3 ANOVA for each measure. Table 1 shows the results.

In judgments of loyalty, participants judged the side-taker's opposition toward their friend as less disloyal when their friend was in the wrong ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.48$) than when their friend was in the right ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(288) = 15.21$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). We also found a significant interaction between moral principle and scenario, $F(2, 288) = 4.84$, $p = .009$, such that the pattern was obtained in each scenario but was attenuated in the breaking promise scenario (see Fig. 1) There was no significant effect of scenario on loyalty. For the remainder of our Experiments, we use loyalty as our dependent variable, but we do note that we saw the same pattern of effects for both the "how good a friend" and the "effect of friendship" dependent variables (reported in supplemental materials).

4.1. Discussion

In Experiment 1, when a person's friend was in the moral wrong, side-takers who sided against them were seen as much less disloyal than when siding against their friend who was in the moral right, in line with the side-taking theory of morality. Crucially, participants made this judgment across three different kinds of behaviors: stealing an idea, doing cocaine, and breaking a promise, suggesting that having a moral principle for opposing one's friend can excuse even clearly disloyal behavior. Additionally, we found this effect for each of the three different loyalty measures, showing that people excuse disloyalty not just on a question about "loyalty" but also on measures of friendship quality and relationship strength.

Table 1
2 $\times$ 3 ANOVA for judgments of side-taker

	Loyalty		Goodness of Friendship		Strength of Friendship	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Moral principle	232.91	<0.001	251.53	<0.001	114.12	<0.001
Scenario	0.31	0.737	3.20	0.042	4.15	0.017
Moral principle $\times$ Scenario	4.84	0.009	12.52	<0.001	6.33	0.002

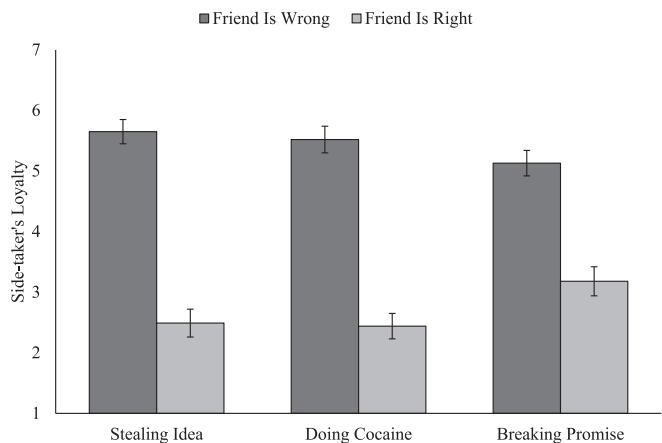


Fig. 1. Side-taker's level of loyalty by whether they opposed an immoral or moral friend across each scenario.

Fig. 1 The mean levels of the main loyalty measure reported for the side-taker for when they opposed their immoral friend or opposed their moral friend across the three types of scenarios. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Note, the “Doing Cocaine” scenario involved ingesting it at a friend's house and having that friend's child find it in the bathroom, not merely doing cocaine.

5. Experiment 2

From Experiment 1 it remains unclear how specific this effect is to morality. For instance, it could be that any excuse for failing to take a friend's side might similarly reduce perceptions of disloyalty. As a part of our folk psychology (Hutto & Ratcliffe, 2007), people could reason broadly about others' motivations: If a side-taker opposes a friend but offers a compelling justification, observers may judge their opposition as less disloyal, regardless of whether that justification is a moral one. On this account, even self-interest could function as an effective excuse for siding against a friend, reducing perceptions of disloyalty compared to those who side against their friends with no such motive. In contrast, the side-taking hypothesis predicts that moral justifications for opposing a friend will especially reduce judgments of disloyalty, more so than other kinds of excuses. Experiment 2 thus tests the specificity of this effect by adding a self-interest manipulation: In addition to varying the friend's moral standing, we varied whether the side-taker had a self-interested motivation to oppose their friend. The side-taking hypothesis predicts that moral principles, but not self-interest, will reduce judgments of disloyalty.

5.1. Method

We planned to recruit ~200 participants as noted in our preregistration (https://aspredicted.org/R9Y_VF2). 211 participants completed the survey. Following preregistered exclusion criteria, 9 were excluded, leaving 202 participants (87 women; age $M = 37.82$ years, $SD = 11.41$) who were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2×2 between-subjects design.

Participants read one of four versions of a vignette. The vignettes describe a situation nearly identical to the Stealing Idea scenario of Experiment 1 (see supplemental materials for the exact wording) with John and David, who are close friends, chatting at a bar with an acquaintance named Billy. We again varied whether the side-taker's friend John was morally right or wrong—the friend's moral standing—which determines whether the side-taker has a moral reason or no moral reason to oppose their friend. Across all conditions, David (the side-taker) sides against his friend John, siding instead with their acquaintance. We also varied whether the side-taker (David) wants to kiss up to Billy to get a job (self-interest or no self-interest). The “No Self-Interest” versions were just a replication of the stealing idea vignettes from Experiment 1. For

the self-interest conditions, we added “...because Billy is the hiring manager at the company John works for, and David is currently applying for a job at John's company, John knows that David is looking to get into Billy's good graces.” The side-taking hypothesis predicts that moral principles would reduce perceptions of disloyalty more than self-interested reasons would—that self-interested reasons would not benefit the side-taker despite providing a rationale for their decision.

After reading the vignette, participants answered three questions. The first asked how loyal of a friend is David (the side-taker) on a scale from 1 “very disloyal” to 7 “very loyal”, with “neither loyal nor disloyal” as the midpoint. Participants also answered how moral of a person is the side-taker on a scale ranging from 1 “not moral at all” to 7 “very moral”, with the midpoint labeled “moderately moral.” We expected participants to judge that siding with the wrongdoer is less moral than siding with the victim.

Next, participants answered the manipulation check¹: whom they thought was in the right between Billy and John. The manipulation check confirmed that participants rated Billy as more right when John was in the wrong ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.59$) compared to when John was in the right ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.86$), $t(194.06) = 14.92$, $p < .001$. Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

5.2. Results

We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA for each measure. Table 2 shows the results.

In judgments of loyalty, participants judged that the side-taker's opposition toward their friend was less disloyal when the friend was in the wrong rather than the right (see Table 2 and Fig. 2). This was true both without and with self-interest: When the side-taker had no self-interest, participants judged opposing a friend as less disloyal when the friend was in the wrong ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.57$) than in the right ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.57$), $t(100.97) = 6.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.40$; and when the side-taker had a self-interested motive to impress the acquaintance, participants again judged opposing a friend in the wrong as less disloyal ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.37$) than opposing a friend in the right ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.93$), $t(84.20) = 3.21$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.65$. As predicted, there was no main effect of self-interest on participants' loyalty judgments, but there was an interaction between the side-taker's self-interest and moral principle, $F(1, 194) = 5.95$, $p = .016$ (see Table 2). However, this interaction moved loyalty judgments in the opposite direction to that of moral principle. When the friend was wrong, self-interested side-takers were judged more disloyal ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.37$) than side-takers without a self-interested motive ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.57$), $t(98.17) =$

Table 2
Experiment 2: 2 (Friend's Moral Standing: Right vs. Wrong) $\times$ 2 (Self-Interest: Present vs. Absent) ANOVA for Judgments of Side-Takers.

	Loyalty		Morality	
	F	p	F	p
Moral principles	52.58	<0.001	75.18	<0.001
Self-interest	0.60	0.439	0.15	0.904
Moral principles $\times$ Self-interest	5.95	0.016	0.002	0.963

¹ In Experiments 2, 3, and 4 (as well as supplemental Experiments S1, S2, and S3), we included a manipulation check asking participants who they thought was in the right, on a scale from 1 to 7, with the midpoint labeled ‘both of them or neither.’ This midpoint label combines two psychologically distinct judgments; however, because this measure served only as a manipulation check, this ambiguity does not affect our primary dependent variables. The manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived the moral standing of the friend as intended in all experiments (see supplemental materials for full results).

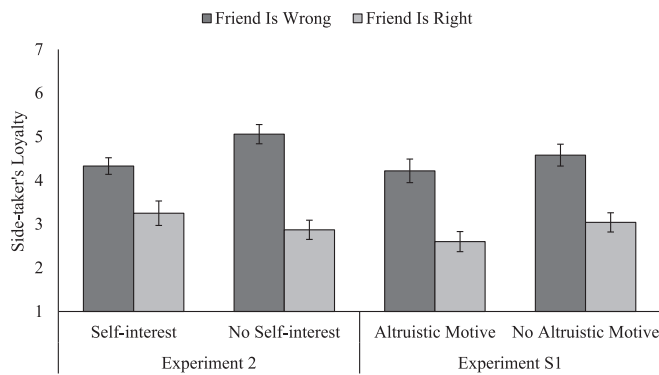


Fig. 2. Participants judgments of the side-taker's loyalty by the side-taker's moral principle, determined by the friend's moral standing, and the side-taker's self-interested motive (Experiment 2) or the side-taker's altruistic motive (Experiment S1) to oppose the friend. Participants rated loyalty from 1 "very disloyal" to 7 "very loyal." Error bars display the standard error.

2.49, $p = .014$, $d = 0.49$; when the friend was right, the effect of self-interest was small and nonsignificant (self-interest: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.93$; no self-interest: $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.57$), $t(90.82) = 1.09$, $p = .280$.

As expected, in judgments of morality, participants judged that the side-taker's opposition toward their friend was more moral when the friend was in the wrong ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.71$) rather than the right ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.64$) (see Table 2). For additional analyses, see the supplemental materials.

5.3. Discussion

In line with the side-taking theory of morality, participants again judged that siding against a friend was much less disloyal when the friend was wrong than when the friend was right. Crucially, we found that this reduced penalty for disloyalty was specific to moral principles: Self-interest, a comparable non-moral motive, did not reduce judgments of disloyalty for siding against a friend. These results demonstrate that not just any excuse will work to mitigate disloyalty inferences about those who side against their friends. Indeed, supplemental experiment S1 shows that even a moral justification unrelated to the specific conflict fails to excuse disloyalty. As the side-taking theory predicts and our results confirm, moral principles appear to be particularly effective at excusing disloyalty. Additionally, supplemental experiment S2 demonstrates that people titrate their inferences about the loyalty of side-takers based on the moral standing of the parties involved in a conflict: Siding against a friend was judged least disloyal when that friend was in the wrong, moderately disloyal when moral standing was ambiguous (i.e., both sides are in the wrong), and most disloyal when the friend was in the right. This suggests that people evaluate siding against a friend as increasingly less disloyal by the degree to which the side-taker has a principled reason to side against their friend.

6. Experiment 3

In our previous experiments, the vignettes described actions considered immoral by most people (e.g., stealing a coworker's idea, breaking a promise, etc.). Thus, participants would expect the side-taker and other observers to believe this action is wrong. Because of this, there are at least two factors that could cause the friend's moral violation to excuse the side-taker's disloyalty: 1) most observers' beliefs about the friend's moral standing, and 2) the side-taker's beliefs about the friend's moral standing. If what matters are the judgments of most observers, then knowing that an audience morally condemns a friend should reduce perceptions of disloyalty for siding against that friend. Alternatively (or additionally), people may excuse disloyalty when the side-taker believes their friend has done something wrong. To investigate

these possibilities, in Experiment 3 we manipulate the observers' and the side-taker's moral judgments of the conflict independently.

We presented participants with a scenario in which three people—a side-taker, a friend, and an acquaintance—are chatting on their lunch break at work when an argument breaks out between the friend and the acquaintance over the ethics of eating meat. Rather than varying who violated a moral rule, this time we varied what the characters believe about the friend's moral standing: 1) whether the side-taker believes his friend is right or wrong, and 2) whether a crowd of people watching the argument believes the friend is right or wrong. Across all conditions, the side-taker decides to side against his friend.

The side-taking hypothesis predicts that the side-taker's moral beliefs will excuse disloyalty more strongly than the crowd's moral beliefs. This is because choosing sides according to moral rules requires someone to stand by their own moral judgment rather than merely going along with the crowd's opinion. Always following the largest crowd would merely be a form of "bandwagoning"—joining the stronger coalition (Snyder, 1991; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013)—a quite different strategy from choosing sides based on moral principles (for extended discussion, see DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; DeScioli, 2016).

6.1. Method

222 participants completed the survey. Following preregistered exclusion criteria, 37 were excluded, leaving 185 participants (71 women; age $M = 35.59$ years, $SD = 10.71$) who were assigned to one of four conditions: side-taker principle and crowd principle, side-taker principle and crowd no principle, side-taker no principle and crowd no principle, and friend no principle and crowd principle.

In a 2×2 between-subject design, participants were assigned to read one of four versions of our vignettes. The vignette describes how the side-taker's acquaintance morally condemns their friend for eating meat at lunch. Here, the moral violation is eating meat, and, as in the previous experiments, the side-taker always opposes his friend in the argument. We vary between conditions whether the side-taker believes eating meat is wrong (side-taker = act is wrong, side-taker = act is not wrong) and whether the crowd witnessing the argument thinks eating meat is wrong (crowd = act is wrong, crowd = act is not wrong). For example, the condition where both the side-taker and crowd believe eating meat is wrong (side-taker = act is wrong and crowd = act is wrong) states:

Imagine John and David are really close friends who work at the same company. One afternoon, John and David are eating lunch together when John sees an acquaintance named Billy, who joins them at their table for lunch. Billy is a vegan who finds eating meat unethical. He tells John that he shouldn't be eating meat for lunch. John disagrees, and their conversation turns into an argument.

The argument gets loud enough that it draws a crowd of people from work. Most of the people at their work are also vegans, and it's clear from their reactions that they support Billy. The argument starts to get heated. John turns to his friend David. David never eats meat and is also an ethical vegan who believes it is unethical to eat meat. John knows how his friend personally feels about this issue and asks David, "who do you think is right?"

David says, "I'm with Billy on this one, it's unethical to eat meat."

In the crowd = act is wrong conditions, we replaced the underlined text with the following line:

Most of the people at their work eat meat, and it's clear from their reactions that they support John.

In the side-taker = act is not wrong conditions, we replaced the italicized text with the following line:

David eats meat, but does not tend to eat meat at work. He does not personally have any ethical qualms about eating meat.

After reading the vignette, participants answered the loyalty and morality measures from our previous studies. We also included two exploratory questions. The first asked participants, “How strong of a reason did David have to take Billy's side?” from 1 “very weak” to 7 “very strong with 4 “neither weak nor strong” labeled as the midpoint. We included this measure to assess how participants perceived the strength of David's justification for side-taking, and whether those perceptions were influenced by our manipulations of David's personal moral principle and the crowd's moral principle. Second, we asked participants how much they personally oppose eating meat: “Do you think eating meat is unethical?” from 1 “definitely ethical” to 7 “definitely unethical” with 4 “neither ethical nor unethical” labeled as the midpoint. We asked this question to see whether participants' own views influence their judgment of the side-taker. The analysis of this exploratory measure is in supplemental materials (along with the measures of morality which were not central to our design).

6.2. Results

We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA for each measure. Table 3 shows the results.

Participants judged that the side-taker's opposition to their friend was less disloyal when the side-taker believed that eating meat is wrong compared to when they did not (see Table 3 and Fig. 3). This was true regardless of the crowd's beliefs. When the crowd did not believe that eating meat is wrong, participants judged that the side-taker was less disloyal when they believed that eating meat was immoral ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.20$) compared to when they did not ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(90.42) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$. Similarly, when the crowd believed that eating meat is immoral, participants again judged that the side-taker was less disloyal when they believed that eating meat was immoral ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.61$) compared to when they did not ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(85.02) = 2.89$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.62$. Thus, the friend's moral offense *in the eyes of the side-taker* and not the crowd excused the side-taker's disloyalty, as predicted by the side-taking hypothesis. Furthermore, participants tended to judge side-takers as more disloyal when they joined the crowd in opposing the friend ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.75$), compared to when the crowd supported the friend ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.65$).

6.3. Discussion

Experiment 3 again found that participants excused the side-taker's disloyalty when side-takers opposed their friend based on moral principles. But here we refined this effect by finding that it is driven primarily by the side-taker's beliefs about their friend's moral standing rather than observers' belief about their moral standing. When the friend violated the side-taker's moral principle (that eating meat is wrong), participants judged the side-taker as less disloyal for opposing his friend, compared to when the side-taker did not believe that eating meat is wrong. In contrast, the crowd's moral principle about the moral rightness or wrongness of eating meat did not significantly impact judgments

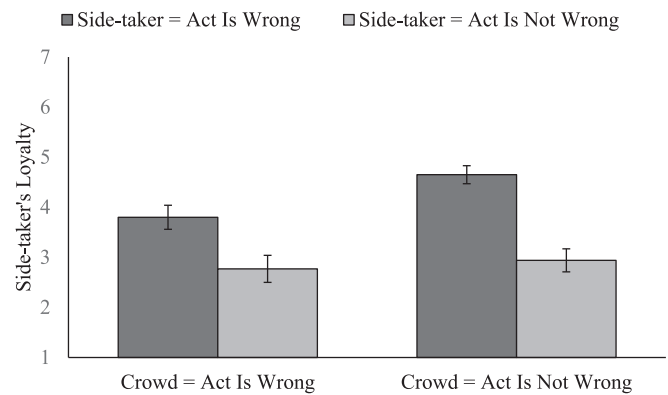


Fig. 3. Participants' judgments of the side-taker's loyalty by whether the side-taker believed that eating meat is wrong (or not) and whether the crowd believed that eating meat is wrong (or not). Participants rated loyalty from 1 “very disloyal” to 7 “very loyal.” Error bars display the standard error.

of the side-taker's loyalty. Thus, Experiment 3 demonstrates that people are more willing to excuse side-takers who oppose their friends based on their own moral principles, not the crowd's.

7. Experiment 4

In the previous experiments, the side-taker always opposed their friend. We chose this design to investigate how the side-taker's moral principles influence people's perceptions of their disloyalty. But in many conflicts, people choose to support their friend or to stay out of it and take no sides at all (Shaw et al., 2017). How do people perceive the side-taker's loyalty when, for example, they support a friend who is in the wrong? In Experiment 4, we examine people's judgments of side-takers across these different decisions. As in our previous studies, participants read a scenario about a disagreement between the side-taker's friend and acquaintance. In a between-subjects design, we manipulated the side-taker's moral reason for taking sides through the friend's moral standing (friend right or friend wrong), as in prior studies, while we also varied the side-taker's decision: They side with their friend, side against their friend, or remain neutral. Participants again judged the side-taker's loyalty and morality, as well as two additional questions assessing how close the friend would feel to the side-taker after this event.

Based on the side-taking hypothesis, we derived the following four predictions: First, we expect to replicate the previous results in the conditions where the side-taker opposes their friend. Second, participants will judge a side-taker who remains neutral as more loyal when their friend was morally wrong compared to morally right. This prediction mirrors findings from previous research demonstrating that people judge a friend's neutrality in conflicts as a betrayal akin to active opposition (Shaw et al., 2017). Third, participants will judge a side-taker who supports a friend who was morally wrong as especially loyal, because it shows that their loyalty is stronger than their moral principles. Finally, across all conditions, participants will judge a side-taker who supports their friend as the most loyal, surpassing those who oppose their friend and remain neutral (as found in previous research, Shaw et al., 2017).

7.1. Method

319 participants completed the survey. Following preregistered exclusion criteria, 18 were excluded, leaving 301 participants (159 women, age $M = 38.43$ years, $SD = 13.71$) who were assigned to one of six conditions: supports wrong friend, opposes wrong friend, remains neutral with wrong friend, supports right friend, opposes right friend, and remains neutral with right friend.

Participants read one of six versions of our vignette. As before, the

Table 3

Experiment 3: 2 (Side-taker's Belief: Act Is Wrong vs. Act Is Not Wrong) $\times$ 2 (Crowd's Belief: Act Is Wrong vs. Act Is Not Wrong) ANOVA for Judgments of Side-Takers.

	Loyalty		Reason Strength		Morality	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Side-taker = act is wrong	36.88	<0.001	97.36	<0.001	60.24	<0.001
Crowd = act is wrong	4.96	0.027	0.361	0.549	2.64	0.106
Side-taker = act is wrong $\times$ Crowd = act is wrong	2.18	0.141	1.35	0.247	0.466	0.496

vignette described three people chatting at a bar: a side-taker, their friend, and an acquaintance. The friend becomes embroiled in an argument with the acquaintance. Across conditions, we varied whether the vignette described the friend as being in the wrong or right. In the wrong conditions, participants read:

Imagine Jamie and Taylor are two close friends out at a bar. The two of them start talking to Casey, a new person Jamie and Taylor recently met. After sitting in the bar for an hour, Jamie picks a fight with Casey. Unprovoked, Jamie pesters Casey about a subject that Casey is sensitive about. Casey tries to tell Jamie to drop it, but Jamie won't let it go and continues to pester Casey about it and tell Casey that Casey is being a sensitive little baby. Finally, Casey says, "What's your problem? Why are you being such a jerk?" Jamie says, "Me? You're the one being a jerk." Then Casey looks at Jamie's friend Taylor, "Who's the jerk?"

In the right conditions, Jamie's name was switched with Casey's, such that the vignette described Casey (the acquaintance) picking an unprovoked fight with Jamie (the friend). Across conditions we varied the side-taker's response. In the conditions for opposing the friend, the vignette read, "Taylor looks at Jamie and says, 'You were being the jerk and so you should apologize.'" The conditions for supporting the friend read, "Taylor looks at Casey and says, 'Casey, you were being the jerk and so you should apologize.'" Finally, the neutral conditions stated, "Taylor says, 'I'm not getting involved guys.'"

Participants answered the loyalty and morality questions from the previous studies. We also added two questions about how the side-taker's decision would affect their friendship (these questions were adapted from Shaw et al., 2017). Participants were asked, "Given what happened, has Jamie's relationship with Taylor been strengthened or weakened?" on a scale ranging from "definitely weakened" (1) to "definitely strengthened" (7), with a midpoint of "neither strengthened nor weakened." Participants were also asked, "Given what happened, how close does Jamie feel to Taylor?" on a scale from "much less close" (1) to "much closer" (7), with a midpoint of "neither more nor less close." As in Experiments 2 and 3, we included a manipulation check that asked participants "Who was in the right?" The manipulation check confirmed that participants rated Casey as more in the right when Jamie was in the wrong ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 1.61$) than in the right ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.52$), $t(297.59) = 20.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.40$. For analyses of the closeness composite, as well as the morality measure, see the supplemental materials.

7.2. Results

We conducted a 3×2 ANOVA for each measure. Table 4 shows the results. There was a significant interaction, so we conducted follow-up t -tests. Participants judged that the side-taker's loyalty depended both on whether they supported the friend and whether the friend was in the wrong (see Table 4 and Fig. 4). As expected, participants judged the side-taker who supported their friend as more loyal ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.39$) than the side-taker who opposed their friend ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(193.87) = 7.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$, and remained neutral ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(197.65) = 9.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.31$. There was no significant difference in judgments of loyalty between the side-taker who opposed their friends and the side-taker who remained neutral, $t(200.20) = -0.94$, $p = .346$, $d = -0.13$. However, participants judged

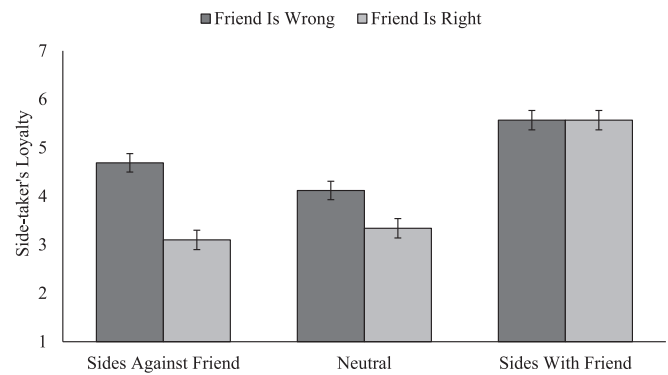


Fig. 4. Participants' judgments of the side-taker's loyalty by the friend's moral standing and the side-taker's decision. Participants rated loyalty from 1 "very disloyal" to 7 "very loyal." Error bars display the standard error.

the side-taker who opposed their friend as more loyal when their friend was in the wrong ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.34$) rather than the right ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(97.85) = 5.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$. Likewise, participants judged the side-taker who remained neutral as more loyal when their friend was in the wrong ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.32$) rather than the right ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(101.56) = 2.84$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.56$. Finally, participants judged the side-taker who supported their friend as no more loyal when their friend was in the right ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.43$) rather than the wrong ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(94.00) = 0.01$, $p = .992$, $d < 0.01$.

In judgments of morality, we again found that people evaluate the side-taker as more moral when siding with the person in the moral right rather than moral wrong (see Table 4). Opposing a friend was judged far more moral when the friend was in the wrong than in the right, $t(98.01) = 13.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.72$. Side-takers who remained neutral were judged to be similarly moral whether the friend was in the right or wrong, $t(100.89) = 0.13$, $p = .896$, $d = 0.03$. And side-takers who supported the friend were judged to be more moral when the friend was in the right rather than the wrong, $t(92.71) = 3.34$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.68$.

7.3. Discussion

Experiment 4 replicated our previous findings: Participants judged the side-taker as less disloyal when they opposed a friend in the wrong compared to a friend in the right. Importantly, we observed the same pattern when the side-taker remained neutral: Participants judged neutrality toward wrongful friends as less disloyal. As expected, participants perceived the side-taker who supported their friend as more loyal and closer to their friend than those who opposed their friend and remained neutral. Finally, these results replicate previous research demonstrating that people generally treat neutrality from friends as a form of muted opposition (Shaw et al., 2017). Overall, these results demonstrate how judgments of loyalty depend jointly on which side someone takes and the moral standing of their friend in the conflict.

Experiment 4 also sheds light on how people judge the morality of side-taking in conflicts, a topic rarely examined in the friendship literature. Our findings indicate that judgments of loyalty hinged on the friend's moral standing, not simply on whether the side-taker supported their friend or the acquaintance; indeed, participants judged side-takers

Table 4

Experiment 4: 3 (Side-Taker's Decision: Oppose vs. Neutral vs. Support) $\times$ 2 (Friend's Moral Standing: Right vs. Wrong) ANOVA for Judgments of Side-Takers.

	Loyalty		Rel. Strength		Rel. Closeness		Morality	
	F	p	F	p	F	p	F	p
Friend's moral standing	25.19	<0.001	5.73	0.017	11.12	<0.001	94.14	<0.001
Side-taking decision	53.22	<0.001	115.01	<0.001	28.09	<0.001	44.81	<0.001
Friend's moral standing $\times$ Side-taking decision	8.05	<0.001	9.64	<0.001	12.91	<0.001	44.84	<0.001

who supported the offender similarly, regardless of whether that offender was a friend or an acquaintance. Moreover, merely opposing a friend was not seen as immoral: When the friend was in the wrong, participants evaluated the side-taker's morality on that basis alone, independent of loyalty obligations. While loyalty itself can sometimes be moralized (e.g., Everett et al., 2018), our results suggest an intriguing asymmetry: Moral principles can excuse disloyalty, but loyalty does not excuse immorality. This accords with recent work on snitching, in which people who opt not to snitch on their friends for moral violations are seen as highly loyal but as lacking in all other moral foundations (for related results, see Berry et al., 2024).

8. General discussion

Across four experiments (and three supplemental experiments), our results consistently align with the side-taking theory: Judgments of a side-taker's loyalty closely tracked their moral principles for opposing their friend, such that moral principles excused disloyalty to their friend. Notably, this effect was found across various contexts and several different measures of friendship loyalty but applied only to moral principles, whereas neither self-interested nor altruistic motives excused disloyalty. Furthermore, the effectiveness of moral principles depended specifically on the side-taker's moral beliefs rather than the moral beliefs of a crowd.

Our findings show that, as outsiders, people often excuse apparent disloyalty when it stems from moral principles. This pattern suggests that the clash between morality and loyalty is not always irreconcilable: Moral principles can license opposition to a friend without branding the side-taker a traitor. Importantly, this does not mean that morality and loyalty never conflict; indeed, research shows they frequently do (e.g., see Berry et al., 2024; Everett et al., 2018; Krems et al., 2017; Waytz et al., 2013). Rather, it means that moral principles can sometimes excuse disloyalty, allowing close friends to oppose each other without severely damaging their friendship.

Our results align with the side-taking theory of morality proposed by DeScioli and Kurzban (2013) which argues that moral judgments function as a coordination device designed to align side-takers with each other to diminish the cost of conflicts. According to this theory, alliances and hierarchies create adaptive problems for side-takers in conflicts, and moral judgment aims to solve these problems by motivating people to choose sides according to impartial moral rules, independent of their loyalties to allies and deference to hierarchies (Berry & Hildreth, 2025; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Shaw et al., 2018). On this account, having moral principles at all *means* committing to side against *anyone* who violates the moral rules, regardless of their identity. Such commitments uniquely provide justification for side-taking and ensure that side-takers' decisions coordinate with each other. This coordination minimizes the risk of escalated conflict between alliances while excusing the disloyalty of opposing friends who are in the wrong. Furthermore, our results suggest an additional benefit to morally motivated opposition: Because siding against a friend in the wrong reduces the signal of disloyalty, side-takers face reduced reputational costs for abandoning immoral friends, both from friends themselves and outsiders (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2018; Shaw et al., 2017), thereby minimizing the social devaluation that would activate shame (Landers & Sznycer, 2022, 2025; Landers, Sznycer and Al-Shawaf, 2024; Landers, Sznycer, & Durkee, 2024). In other words, taking sides based on moral principles allows people to coordinate against wrongdoers and avoid any drop in status, all while preserving the future value of alliances.

Moreover, the side-taking theory explains why one's own moral code, rather than the crowd's, excuses disloyalty as we found in Experiment 3. Simply following the moral consensus of the crowd is a form of bandwagoning with the stronger coalition and risks empowering exploitative leaders. In contrast, choosing sides based on moral principles can avoid the costs of conflicts between alliances and exploitation by dominant leaders and coalitions. Unlike loyalty, moral judgment can coordinate

side-taking decisions dynamically based on the moral standing of the disputants in the conflict. From this perspective, moral judgment's capacity to excuse disloyalty is not a bug but a feature.

Our findings also raise important questions about whose moral principles excuse a side-taker's disloyalty to a friend. While we found in Experiment 3 that participants focused on the side-taker's moral beliefs, rather than the crowd's, this pattern may depend on the offense—in this case eating meat. Although personal moral beliefs are naturally shaped by societal values (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009b), our results reveal that a crowd's moral condemnation is insufficient to get one off the hook: To be excused for disloyalty, side-takers must act in accordance with their own moral principles. Future research can examine whether those principles must align with broadly shared moral norms or whether personal moral conviction can suffice.

One limitation of our studies is the reliance on hypothetical scenarios rather than observation of participant behavior. It is possible that participants would behave in ways that run counter to their professed judgments. Reputation concerns might lead people to report acceptance of morally justified opposition from their friends despite reacting differently in real life (Kowalski & Leary, 1990; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). However, the consistency of our findings across both first-person (supplemental Experiment S3) and outsider (Experiments 1–4) perspectives suggests our results are not easily accounted for by self-serving reputational concerns (i.e., people claiming they would not judge a friend disloyal for opposing them when they were in the wrong). Still, we acknowledge it is possible that participants would demonstrate different results on a behavioral measure. For instance, people may respond quite negatively to side-takers who oppose them based on both moral and non-moral principles and thus refuse to cooperate with either (e.g., perhaps both principled and unprincipled disloyalty would elicit a relationship-ending emotion like hatred; see Landers et al., 2025; Sell et al., 2021). Nevertheless, because we chose to investigate people's judgments of the side-taker's loyalty (rather than the side-taker's behavior), we think asking people to make such judgments was appropriate. Future research would also benefit from testing these in broader contexts. Although we tested five distinct scenarios involving varied moral violations, the full range of contexts over which these conclusions generalize remains an open question.

9. Conclusion

The question of how we choose sides in our friends' conflicts is both theoretically and practically important. The current work suggests we possess a complex psychology that integrates relational and moral considerations to decide where our loyalties lie. Our results provide a key insight: Siding against our friends need not imply disloyalty, but only if we do so for the right reasons. As Cicero observed long ago, true friendship cannot be separated from virtue. Our findings show that moral principles preserve loyalty, even when they require us to oppose our friends.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mitchell Landers: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Peter DeScioli:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Alex Mackiel:** Writing – review & editing. **Alex Shaw:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary dat

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2026.106883>.

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