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Self-protection predicts lower willingness to apologize

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ABSTRACT

Although apologies are effective at promoting reconciliation, perpetrators often choose not to apologize because doing so can be threatening to the self. We hypothesized that dispositional self-protection would be negatively associated with willingness to apologize, but only when the transgression pertained to the self rather than another person. Only in that case would self-positivity be threatened, thereby activating the self-protection motive. In addition, we hypothesized that the negative association between self-protection and willingness to apologize for self-referent offenses would be serially mediated by responsibility-taking and guilt. This would be so because perpetrators can self-protect by lowering their felt responsibility and, in turn, reduce guilt for the transgression. The results were consistent with the hypotheses. We discuss implications of this motivational account for unwillingness to apologize.

Interpersonal offenses occur across many relationships. After offending someone, perpetrators must decide whether to offer an apology – a social account in which the perpetrator takes responsibility for negative behavior and acknowledges the harm inflicted on the victim (Kim et al., 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). Although apologies are one of the strongest predictors of a victim's forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010), perpetrators often do not give them. Research has sought to understand barriers to apologies, such as characteristics of the victim, the offense, or the perpetrator (Schumann, 2018). For example, perpetrators are less willing to apologize to angry and unforgiving (vs. more understanding and forgiving) victims (Lemay et al., 2012; Leunissen et al., 2012), and after committing intentional (vs. unintentional) transgressions (Leunissen et al., 2013). Perpetrators are also less willing to apologize when they possess certain traits (e.g., narcissism; Leunissen et al., 2017) or feel low guilt or empathy (Leunissen et al., 2013, 2017). Here, we extend the work on predictors of constructive perpetrator responses by focusing on perpetrators' self-relevant implications of apologizing. Using a vignette study, we investigate the association between self-protection and willingness to apologize under conditions of self-relevance or no self-relevance, and examine the psychological processes (i.e., responsibility, guilt) that may mediate this association. Specifically, we compare situations where the participant is either asked to imagine committing a transgression (i.e., probing their willingness to apologize; self-referent) or asked to imagine someone else committing the same transgression (i.e., probing the willingness of this other individual to apologize; other-referent).

Self-protection may be linked to decreased willingness to apologize

People are motivated to maintain positive self-views (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). When confronted with negative feedback they ignore or distort it to dampen its effect on the positivity of the self (Sedikides, 2020). This motive – and corresponding behaviors – are known as self-protection

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(Sedikides, 2012). For example, people attribute bogus negative feedback on a novel test to its difficulty, but attribute bogus positive feedback to their skill (Wortman et al., 1973). They also selectively forget negative feedback (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2020), and downgrade the self-relevance of tasks on which they failed (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983).

Committing an interpersonal transgression can threaten a perpetrator's positive self-view by reflecting negatively on their morality, competence, or kindness (Aronson, 1999; Gausel & Leach, 2011; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Perpetrators can therefore be motivated to self-protect after a transgression (Schumann, 2014). Indeed, in their recollections of their transgressions, perpetrators (vs. victims) are more likely to deny the adverse consequences of their offense, describe the transgression as an isolated incident, and reference external and mitigating circumstances for their behavior (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). These portrayals serve to minimize the negativity of the behavior and disrupt the connection between the self and the behavior, thus protecting perpetrators' positive self-views. However, apologizing thwarts these efforts to self-protect. Given that apologizing inherently requires accepting responsibility for a negative behavior and acknowledging the harm suffered by the victim (Tavuchis, 1991), perpetrators might often feel that apologizing further endangers their sense of goodness and morality (Schumann, 2018). In all, apologizing is incompatible with perpetrators' self-protection goals.

We approach self-protection from an individual differences perspective and provide a motivational account for it. Some people have a higher dispositional tendency to self-protect than others (Hepper et al., 2010; Thomaes et al., 2018; Tice, 1991). In line with interactionist models of trait activation (Cheung et al., 2016; Lenton et al., 2013; Tett & Guterman, 2000), we expect the dispositional tendency to self-protect to be activated – and thus to predict behavior – under certain circumstances. Specifically, we expect trait self-protection to predict (un)willingness to apologize only when the negative information is self-referent (i.e. when the transgression is committed by oneself and one has to decide the extent to which one is willing to apologize), because only then does the negative information threaten the self (Green et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2016). When the negative information pertains to someone else (when the transgression is committed by someone else and one judges the extent to which this other person is willing to apologize), the positivity of the self is not under threat, and self-protection will not be associated with willingness to apologize. Using the terminology from Batson et al. (1997; see also Green et al., 2008), we compare an imagine-self to an imagine-other condition. This reasoning implies a statistical interaction between dispositional self-protection and the referent of the transgression (self vs. other) on willingness to apologize, such that self-protection will only be negatively associated with willingness to apologize when the transgression is self-referent (H1).

Responsibility-taking and guilt

We tested whether responsibility-taking and guilt serially mediate the putative interaction between trait self-protection and referent of the transgression on willingness to apologize. One way that perpetrators can self-protect following transgression is by minimizing their responsibility for it. Given that a perpetrator's responsibility for a transgression is often ambiguous (Weiner, 1985), reducing a sense of responsibility for the transgression is a viable strategy to minimize threat to the self. Indeed, perpetrators frequently seek to lower their responsibility for failure (Wortman et al., 1973), deny responsibility for their offenses (Bandura, 1999), and refer to external and mitigating factors in their descriptions of interpersonal transgressions (Baumeister et al., 1990; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). We therefore hypothesized that perpetrators higher on disposition to self-protect would report lower responsibility for a transgression, but only when the transgression was self-referent (H2). We did not expect an association when the transgression was other-referent.

Taking responsibility means seeing oneself as the causal agent of harm inflicted upon a victim. Such a perception increases the possibility of experiencing guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994), with two implications. First, given that we expected a differential association between self-protection and responsibility-taking depending on the referent of the transgression, we hypothesized that
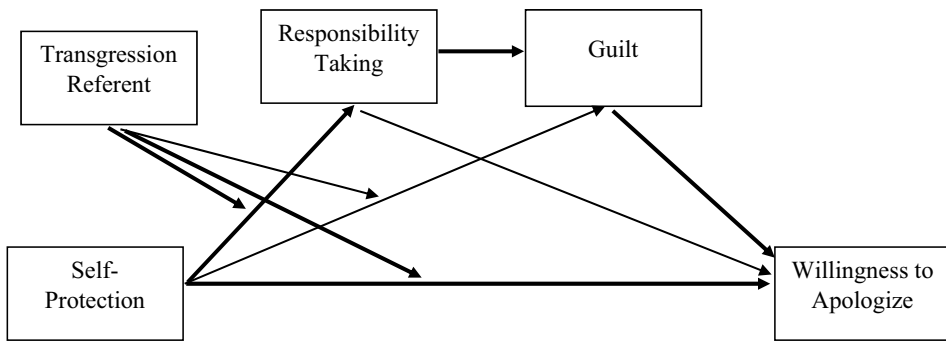
Figure 1. Hypothesized moderated serial mediation model.

dispositional self-protection would be negatively associated with guilt when the transgression pertained to the self, but unassociated with guilt when the transgression pertained to someone else (H3). Second, we hypothesized that responsibility-taking would predict increased guilt. Guilt in turn would motivate perpetrators to initiate relationship-restoring behaviors, such as an apology. Indeed, in previous work, guilt has been positively associated with willingness to apologize to a victim (Leunissen et al., 2013, 2017). We therefore hypothesized that responsibility-taking and guilt would serially mediate the negative association between self-protection and willingness to apologize (H4; Figure 1).

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 201 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk in July 2017. We randomly assigned them to a self-referent (transgression and willingness to apologize pertains to the self) or other-referent (transgression and willingness to apologize pertains to someone else) condition. We included two attention checks (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), and excluded five participants who responded incorrectly to either of these, leaving 196 participants in the sample (109 women, 87 men; $M_{age} = 36.46$, $SD_{age} = 10.11$). Our hypotheses (H1-H3) take the shape of attenuated interactions (i.e., a significant association between self-protection and the dependent variable in the self-referent condition, no association in the other-referent condition). The effect size of such an attenuated interaction is half of that in the effect-present condition (Blake & Gangestad, 2020). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that our sample size ($N = 196$) powered our study (power: .80, alpha = .05) to be sensitive to an interaction effect of $r = .20$, meaning that our study was sensitive to find associations between self-protection and dependent variables in the self-referent condition of $r = .40$ and higher. This effect size converges with the correlation between narcissistic rivalry and post-transgression guilt and willingness to apologize as reported by Leunissen et al. (2017, Table 4).

Materials and procedure

We measured self-protection with the defensiveness subscale of the Self-Protection and Self-Enhancement Scale (Hepper et al., 2010). This subscale consists of 18 items (1 = *not at all characteristic of me*, 7 = *very characteristic of me*) assessing individual tendencies to self-protect, that is, diminish the negativity of unfavorable self-relevant feedback (α = .94, M = 2.91, SD = 1.17). Sample items are: "Telling other people that you expect to do even more badly than you really expect to do" and "Defining your moral standards to fit your actions (e.g., believing that it's ok to cheat in a game of cards, keep the extra change the cashier mistakenly gave you, or gossip about an acquaintance,

because . . .).” Next, participants read five scenarios (from Leunissen et al., 2017), each recounting an interpersonal transgression at work. Specifically, the scenarios described transgressions such as treating a colleague with little respect in front of others or blaming a mistake on a colleague. In the self-referent condition, participants imagined themselves as the perpetrator, and indicated how likely they would be to apologize for the transgression, take responsibility for the transgression, and feel guilty about the transgression. In the other-referent condition, participants imagined a third person, Joan or John (for female or male participants, respectively) committing the transgression and indicated how likely Joan or John would be to apologize, take responsibility for the transgression, and feel guilty about the transgression (for more on the first-person vs. third-person perspective manipulation, see: Batson et al., 1997; Libby et al., 2007).

After each scenario, we measured (1) responsibility-taking with “Would you/ Joan/John feel responsible for [behavior described]?,” (2) guilt with “How guilty would you/ Joan/John feel about [behavior described]?,” and (3) willingness to apologize with: “Would you apologize to your colleague for [behavior described]?” and “Do you think you/ Joan/John should apologize to your colleague [behavior described]?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*; adopted from Leunissen et al., 2017). We averaged the responsibility-taking items (α = .82, *M* = 5.33, *SD* = 1.36), the guilt items (α = .83, *M* = 4.75, *SD* = 1.53), and the willingness to apologize items (α = .79, *M* = 5.36, *SD* = 1.01) across the five scenarios. The scenarios, data file, and analysis script can be found at https://osf.io/zusc9/?view_only=6a09f2560c4f4a70851b627c724c5538.

Results

We fitted linear regression models with condition (−1 = self-referent, 1 = other-referent), self-protection (standardized), and the interaction between the two as predictors of responsibility-taking, guilt, and willingness to apologize (Table 1). We found main effects of condition for all three dependent variables. Specifically, participants reported that they would feel more responsible in the self-referent condition (*M* = 5.95, *SD* = 1.03) than Joan/John would feel in the other-referent condition (*M* = 4.70, *SD* = 1.36). Also, participants reported that they would feel guiltier in the self-referent condition (*M* = 5.42, *SD* = 1.29) than Joan/John would feel in the other-referent condition (*M*$_{other}$ = 4.08, *SD* = 1.46). Finally, they reported that they would be more willing to apologize in the self-referent condition (*M* = 5.72, *SD* = 1.02) than Joan/John would be in the other-referent condition (*M* = 5.00, *SD* = 0.87). Self-protection was only associated with willingness to apologize, and negatively so.

Additionally, we obtained significant interactions between condition and self-protection on responsibility taking, guilt, and willingness to apologize (Table 1, Figure 2). In the self-referent condition, self-protection was negatively associated with responsibility-taking (β = −.37, 95% C.I. [−.54, −.20], *t*(192) = −4.34, *p* < .001), guilt (β = −.33, 95% C.I. [−.50, −.16], *t*(192) = −3.85, *p* < .001), and willingness to apologize (β = −.51, 95% C.I. [−.68, −.33], *t*(192) = −5.73, *p* < .001). In the other-referent condition, however, self-protection was positively associated with their judgments of Joan/John’s responsibility-taking (β = .20, 95% C.I. [.03, .037], *t*(192) = 2.38, *p* < .001) and guilt (β = .31, 95% C.I. [.14, .48], *t*(192) = 3.60, *p* < .001), but not willingness to apologize (β = .08, 95% C.I. [−.09, .25], *t*

Table 1. Linear regression analyses testing links in the serial multiple mediator model.

	Outcome					
	Responsibility-taking		Guilt		Willingness to Apologize	
Predictor	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*
Condition	−.47 [−.59, −.35]	< .001	−.44 [−.56, −.32]	< .001	−.37 [−.49, −.25]	< .001
Self-protection	−.09 [−.20, .03]	.161	−.01 [−.13, .11]	.843	−.21 [−.34, −.09]	< .001
Condition × Self-Protection	.29 [.17, .41]	< .001	.32 [.20, .44]	< .001	.29 [.17, .42]	< .001

Note: 95% Confidence interval in brackets. Condition coded as −1 self-referent, 1 other referent.
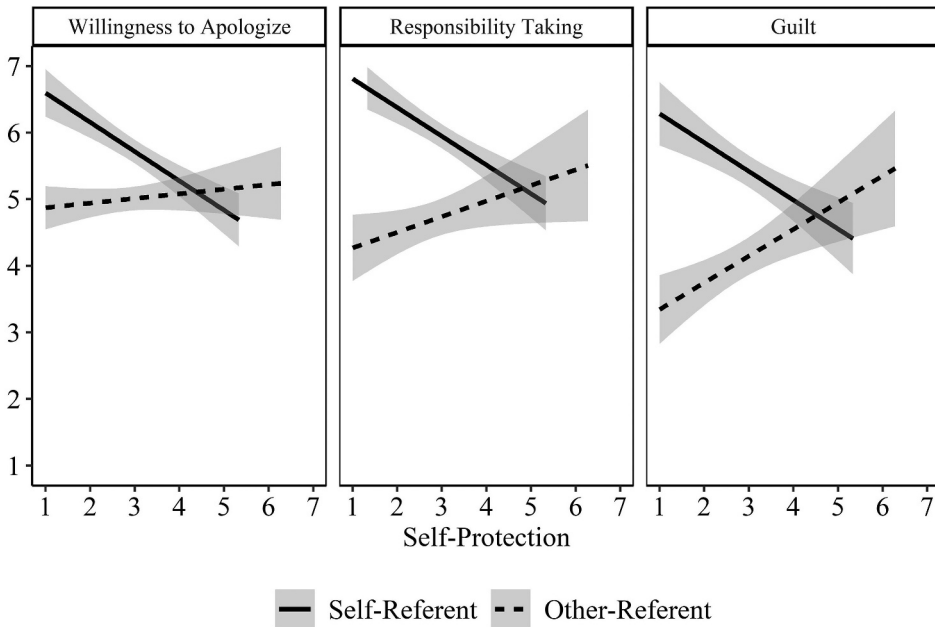
Figure 2. Interactions between self-protection scale and referent condition on willingness to apologize, responsibility-taking, and guilt. *Note*: Shaded area represents the 95% confidence interval

(192) = 0.91, p = .362). These findings are consistent with H1-3, although we did not expect the positive associations between self-protection and responsibility-taking or guilt in the other-referent condition.

Next, we tested whether responsibility-taking and guilt serially mediated the association between self-protection and willingness to apologize in the self-referent condition. We fitted two additional models (Table 2). The first model showed that responsibility-taking was positively associated with guilt (controlling for condition, self-protection, and their interaction).[1] We fitted a second model, showing that guilt was positively associated with willingness to apologize (controlling for responsibility-taking, condition, self-protection, and the interactions with condition). These models lend support to H4 (see Figure 3 for regression coefficients of the paths).

Finally, we tested the indirect effects of self-protection, via first responsibility-taking and then guilt, on willingness to apologize, contingent on condition (self- vs. other-referent). We used 5000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. This indirect effect was negative and significantly different from zero in the self-referent condition (b = −.12, SE = .03, 95% CI [−.20; −.08]), but was not significantly different from 0 in the other-referent condition (b = .07, SE = .04, 95% CI [−.00; .14]).[2] These results support H4.

Table 2. Linear regression analyses testing links in the serial multiple mediator model.

	Outcome			
	Guilt		Willingness to apologize	
Predictor	β	p	β	p
Condition	−.15 [−.26, −.04]	.008	.02 [−.07, .12]	.608
Self-Protection	.04 [−.06, .14]	.384	−.18 [−.26, −.10]	<.001
Condition × Self-Protection	.14 [.04, .24]	.006	.03 [−.06, .11]	.536
Responsibility-taking	.63 [.51, .75]	< .001	.36 [.24, .48]	<.001
Guilt			.51 [.39, .63]	<.001

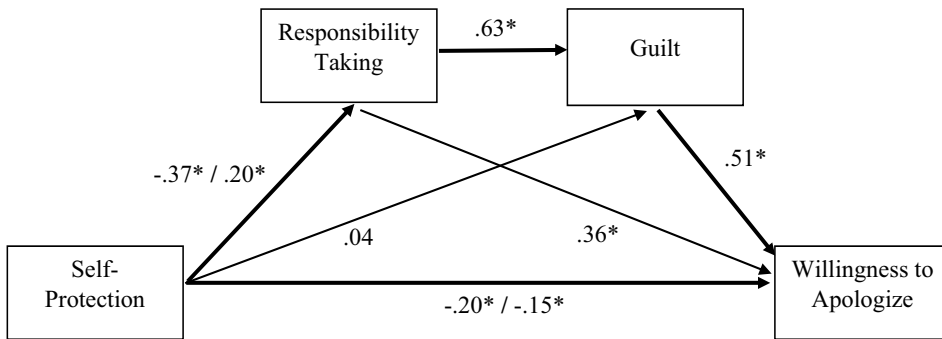*Note*: 95% Confidence interval in brackets.

Figure 3. Fitted moderated mediation model. *Note*: Numbers (i.e., standardized regression weights) before the slash refer to associations in self-referent condition, numbers after the slash to associations in other-referent condition. * $p < .05$.

Discussion

What predicts whether a perpetrator is willing to apologize after a transgression? We highlighted the self-relevant implications of committing a transgression. Such an act constitutes a threat to the positivity of the perpetrator's self, as it potentially indicates that one is not as kind or moral as one would like to believe (Sedikides et al., 2015). To preserve the positivity of the self, perpetrators may self-protect after a transgression (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). They could do so by distorting information relevant to the transgression, such as a felt sense of responsibility and consequent guilt for the transgression. We expected self-protection to thwart willingness to apologize, because, by apologizing, one accepts responsibility for the transgression and acknowledges its wrongfulness.

We approached self-protection as an individual difference variable: Some people are more inclined to self-protect than others (Hepper et al., 2010, 2013; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Traits, such as self-protection, are activated when a situation is relevant to the trait (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Lenton et al., 2013; Tett & Guterman, 2000). A transgression only threatens the positivity of the self when the transgression pertains to the self, but not when the transgression pertains to someone else (Gebauer et al., 2013; Sedikides & Alicke, 2019; Sedikides et al., 2016). Hence, in the former, trait self-protection is relevant to the situation, and should predict willingness to apologize, whereas, in the latter, trait self-protection is irrelevant to the situation, and should not predict willingness to apologize.

The findings were consistent with the hypotheses. We experimentally varied whether a transgression was self-referent (i.e., participants imagined being the perpetrator) or other-referent (i.e., participant imagined someone else being the perpetrator). Only in the self-referent condition was self-protection was negatively associated with willingness to apologize, responsibility-taking for the transgression, and guilt over the transgression. Self-protection was not associated with willingness to apologize, but was positively associated with judgments of responsibility-taking and guilt in the other-referent condition. This positive association was unexpected. Although it warrants further research to determine its replicability, we speculate that it may be due to persons high on self-protection being relatively prone to antagonizing and devaluing others (Back et al., 2013; Sedikides, 2021, 2012). Here, individuals high on self-protection would want to see others look bad in order to make themselves look good. They would think, then, that others are *actually* more responsible and guilty, and thus would take more responsibility and feel guiltier.

Limitations and future research directions

Our research has several limitations. First, we collected data via the online platform Amazon MTurk. Data from MTurk has the potential of being of lower quality due to inattentive responding (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). To mitigate this influence, we included two attention checks, and only five participants (2%) failed either check. Second, we used a measurement-of-mediation design.

The limitations of this design are well documented (Bullock et al., 2010). Particularly relevant for the current study is that we cannot make strong conclusions about the causal ordering of responsibility taking, guilt, and willingness to apologize due to the fundamentally correlational nature of the mediation analyses. Future investigations should therefore incorporate experimental-causal-chain designs (Spencer et al., 2005). Finally, our study included five scenarios, all set within a work context, with transgressions occurring between colleagues. Future research should investigate whether our results generalize to other types of social situations. For example, because the self-protection motive is diminished in close relationships (Sedikides et al., 1998), relationship closeness may prove to be an important boundary condition of our reported effects.

The current findings generate other intriguing research questions. Future research might examine whether ameliorating threats to the self may assuage the self-protection motive and enable people to engage in beneficial reparative actions (Green et al., 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For example, our motivational account for unwillingness to apologize predicts that perpetrators will be more or less willing to apologize depending on whether the transgression constitutes a threat to the positivity of the self. One such situation reflects the framing of a transgression. When information threatens positive conceptions of central compared to peripheral traits, people engage in more self-protection, as negative information on central traits is more threating to the positivity of the self (Sedikides, 2012; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Our framework thus predicts that perpetrators will be less willing to apologize when the transgression pertains to central rather than peripheral traits. For example, most people consider being trustworthy more central to their identity than being predictable (Sedikides, 1993). When someone arrives late for an important appointment, being accused of being untrustworthy is likely to evoke a stronger unwillingness to apologize than being accused of being unpredictable. Likewise, previous research has shown that perpetrators make more extensive apologies when they first had an opportunity to self-affirm, as the self-affirmation protects the integrity of the self (Schumann, 2014). We predict that such a self-affirmation could prove particularly effective in eliciting apologies from those experience a transgression as a strong threat to the self, such as people who score high on dispositional self-protection.

Coda

Understanding predictors of apologizing can help to clarify the reconciliation process. We provide a motivational account for why perpetrators can be unwilling to apologize, thus adding to individual differences and motivational accounts of this phenomenon (Schumann, 2018). Given that apologizing threatens a perpetrator's positive self-views, perpetrators who have a chronic tendency to protect the self from negative information (i.e., people scoring high on dispositional self-protection) are less willing to apologize in the wake of a transgression.

Notes

1. We exploratorily tested whether the paths from responsibility taking to guilt and from guilt to willingness to apologize were moderated by condition. This was not the case. The interaction between responsibility taking and condition (controlling for self-protection and its interaction with condition) was not significant, $\beta = .01$, 95% C.I. [−.11, .13], $t(190) = 0.21$, $p = .838$, indicating that the association between responsibility taking and guilt did not differ per condition. Likewise, the interaction between guilt and condition (controlling for self-protection, responsibility taking, and its interactions with condition) was not significant, $\beta = −.08$, 95% C.I. [−.11, .13], $t(188) = −1.30$, $p = .196$. The association between guilt and willingness to apologize did not differ between conditions.
2. The self-protection and self-enhancement scale has three additional subscales, measuring self-enhancement and self-affirmation. Exploratorily adding these subscales in our regression models did not alter our conclusions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at http://osf.io/zusc9/.

Open scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at http://osf.io/zusc9/.

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