

# Up Close and Friendly: A Study of Compassion and Favoritism by Human Resource Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

*We assess differences in human resource professionals' displays of compassion and favoritism by observing the rigor with which participants in an experiment enforce an organizational rule. In our experiment, participants must decide to report (be rigorous) or not report (be lenient) a rule violation committed by an employee. Participants are randomly assigned to three scenarios varying in affective and psychological closeness: the employee violating the rule is a co-worker, a co-worker experiencing serious difficulties at home, or a close friend experiencing the same difficulties. We observe that staff and senior human resource managers act with compassion towards co-workers facing severe difficulties at home. We also observe that human resource professionals (with the exception of senior managers) tend to be more lenient towards their friends. Our model suggests that moral reasoning is a fundamental driver of compassion when participants have information about extenuating circumstances. However, moral reasoning seems to be inhibited in the presence of friendship, so that favoritism, when it exists, is produced entirely by the direct effect of adding friendship to the decision context.*

## INTRODUCTION

Avoiding favoritism is a fundamental concern for HR professionals: “It is HR’s job to represent all employees, ensure equity within the workforce, and provide professional leadership, guidance, and advice on the human side of the business” (Elliott, 2004, p. 25). HR professionals are expected to apply rules consistently and avoid even an appearance of bias (Mollica, 2004). In exceptional cases, however, one may have legitimate reasons to circumvent a rule in someone’s favor. For example, allowing compassion to guide one’s choices is acceptable and even welcomed, as compassion leads to positive organizational outcomes such as increased organizational citizenship behavior (Moon, Hur, Ko, Kim & Yoo, 2015) and reduced employee stress (Eldor, 2017).

Compassion means recognizing a person’s suffering and wanting to alleviate it (Bein, 2013). In the context of our study compassion exists when a decision-maker, informed of serious problems experienced by an employee (i.e., extenuating circumstances), displays less rigor enforcing an organizational policy. We measure compassion by the difference in the probability of applying penalties between cases with and without awareness of suffering. Throughout this paper, we also refer to awareness of suffering as awareness of extenuating circumstances. In contrast, we say that favoritism exists when a decision-maker is less rigorous with a friend than with a non-friend. We measure favoritism by the difference in the probability of application of penalties between cases with and without ties of friendship. To simplify the exposition, when we need to refer to the existence of either awareness of personal suffering or ties of friendship, we label them broadly as conditions of closeness between the decision-maker and the individual affected by the decision.

We report the results of an experiment contrasting tendencies towards compassion and favoritism by human resource and other professionals (HRPs and non-HRPs). We assess the rigor with which participants enforce company rules in three distinct, and randomly assigned, conditions of closeness. In the first condition, neither extenuating circumstances or friendship exist. In the second, the decision-maker is aware of extenuating circumstances; the co-worker faces a family health crisis. In the third, both extenuating circumstances and friendship are at play. In the absence of compassion, levels of rigor should not be lower in condition 2 than in condition 1. In the absence of favoritism, levels of rigor should not be lower in condition 3 than in condition 2.

To examine the extent to which compassion arises when there is an awareness of personal suffering, and the extent to which favoritism arises in the presence of friendship, we employ a model in which (i) closeness to the co-worker involved, and (ii) having a role as an HRP and/or as a manager, affect agents’ decisions directly, and through moral reasoning. In other words, we allow for moral reasoning to mediate the effects of closeness, professional function, and managerial status on agents’ decisions. We also allow for closeness to moderate the effects of role on moral reasoning, of moral reasoning on the agents’ decisions, and the direct effect of role on decisions. Our model includes the moral reasoning perspectives of justice and care: the first representing the importance of fairness; the second the importance of compassion.

We detect compassionate behavior towards co-workers facing severe difficulties by staff (HRP or not) and by senior HRP managers. We observe further that junior managers and staff who are HRPs are more lenient towards their friends, but not senior HRP managers. Our model suggests that moral reasoning is a fundamental driver of compassion when participants have information about extenuating circumstances. However, moral reasoning seems to be inhibited in the presence of friendship, so that favoritism, when it exists, is produced entirely by the direct effect of adding friendship to the decision context.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Fairness and Compassion in the Workplace**

Various codes of ethics issued by human resource associations require members to demonstrate equity and fairness. In the United States, the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) directs HRPs to “develop, administer, and advocate policies and procedures that foster fair, consistent, and equitable treatment for all” (SHRM, 2014, Fairness and Justice section, para. 7). Similar requests appear in By-Law 1 of the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI, 2016), the Code of Ethics of Canada’s Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (CPHR, 2016), and the United Kingdom’s Code of Professional Conduct of the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2018).

At least two factors, however, may offset efforts to promote a fair workplace. First, fairness may conflict with other ethical responsibilities of HRPs. For example, a guideline in the SHRM Code of Ethics calls on HRPs to treat people with compassion. Compassion involves both awareness and action, a recognition that suffering is taking place and the will to act on behalf of the sufferer (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Second, workplace friendships often result from close contact (Berman, Rest & Richter Jr., 2002) and people are naturally partial towards their friends (Friedman, 1993). The desire to lessen pain and support friends could lead HRPs to make unfair decisions.

Managers, within or outside the field of HR, must also reconcile conflicting goals when confronted with workplace decisions involving personal suffering and ties of friendship. When managers react with compassion to personal suffering, they demonstrate that the organization cares about its employees (Yoon, 2017). Thus, compassion has been tied to employee engagement (Eldor, 2017). Workplace friendships also bring beneficial consequences such as enhanced work attitudes (Seok-Hwi Song & Olshfski, 2008) and trust (Methot, LePine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016). However, allowing either awareness of personal suffering or ties of friendship to influence workplace decisions may lead to unequal enforcement of work rules. Friendship between managers and subordinates may pose significant problems as the roles of friend and supervisor are substantially different (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). Friends are tempted to prioritize their friends’ needs, while managers are expected to be fair and to focus on the needs of their organizations.

### **Role Theory**

Role Theory (Biddle, 1979) connects people’s personal and professional roles to their observed actions. Roles are pre-determined patterns of behavior which function as shortcuts, allowing people to act quickly. Roles are also contextual; one must understand the situation to predict role-related behaviors. Using a theatrical metaphor, role theorists refer to the scripts followed by role occupants and to an audience of observers, who watches and evaluates an individual’s performance. The audience consists of both outsiders and a cast of people occupying similar or complementary roles (Goffman, 1959).

A script provides an individual with a range of acceptable behaviors. Also, roles are not exclusive – a person may occupy multiple roles simultaneously. For example, someone can be at the same time manager, parent, colleague, and friend. Since each role carries expectations and constraints observers need to identify a person’s most salient role to better understand the behavior. The primary role someone will follow depends on the perceived costs of deviating from it, especially when those costs involve damages to the social network (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Fellow cast members may punish the actor who deviates from group standards (Goffman, 1959).

When critical roles contain incompatible expectations, a person experiences role conflict (Biddle,

1979). Role conflict helps explain the tension experienced by managers and employees as they reconcile personal values with job demands, negotiate contradictory policies, and resolve disagreements with colleagues.

In our experiment, the critical roles are those of manager vs. staff (or non-manager), HRP vs. non-HRP, and friend vs. non-friend. We anticipate that tension between the roles of friend and being either a manager or an HRP, will be an important determinant of the extent to which moral reasoning mediates the effect of closeness on participants' choices.

### **Moral Reasoning and Decision Making: Ethic of Justice and Ethic of Care**

Rest (1994) identified four steps in the process that leads to moral behavior: (i) acknowledging the impact on others of a moral situation, (ii) reasoning and choosing the right course of action, (iii) prioritizing moral values, and (iv) having the "moral toughness" (Rest, 1994, p. 24) to execute the intended action. To examine the moral reasoning process through which the agent either reaches a moral judgment or justifies a judgment previously made (Haidt, 2001), we assume that agents assign different weights to the justice and care perspectives of moral reasoning.

Justice has a strong tradition in the study of ethics. Rawls (1971) argued that justice is "the basic structure of society" and injustice "is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice" (para. 1). Kohlberg (1976) agreed, describing justice as "a basic and universal standard" (p. 56). Closely tied to the justice tradition is impartiality or the moral agent's (henceforth the agent's) obligation to treat all persons equally, without bias or discrimination (Kekes, 1981). A decision is ethical if and only if it can be universally applicable to all persons and all cases (Kant, 1797/2002).

Impartial decision-making has relevance in the public arena when the decision-maker occupies a position of power. For example, students have the right to expect professors to grade them fairly. In the private sphere, however, partiality may not only be "morally permissible" but even "morally obligatory" (Friedman, 1993, p.13). Thus, one is expected to feel and express partiality towards one's closest friends or family members.

Recognizing that impartiality is not the only criterion for moral decisions, Carol Gilligan (1983) defended the existence of an ethic of care, which recognizes the interdependence of human beings and the need to protect their loved ones. Gilligan's ethic of care includes two key components: preserving relationships and shielding others from hurt. A study by Wildermuth, de Mello e Souza, & Kozitza (2017) identified these as two separate factors, dubbed Care Relationships (Care-R) and Care Protection (Care-P). The first has to do with the preservation of relationships and the avoidance of conflict. The second refers to protecting the other person from being hurt and focusing on the human impact of the specific situation or context.

Care and justice orientations are not mutually exclusive; individuals use both as they seek solutions to ethical dilemmas (Lyons, 1983). Multiple factors affect moral orientation, such as managerial status (Derry, 1989), ethnic origin (Gump, Baker & Roll, 2000), national culture (French & Weis, 2000), personality (Agerström, Möller & Archer 2006), gender (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), and the type of dilemma encountered (Agerström, Möller & Archer 2006).

## Development of Hypotheses

### **Fairness and Compassion: Tension in the Role of an HRP**

Young professionals are discouraged from joining the HR field simply because they “like people” (Burke-Smalley, 2017). Nonetheless, interpersonal relationship competencies are essential for HRPs, as they seek to reconcile diverse stakeholder needs (Lo, Macky, & Pio, 2015). HRPs are urged to take a balanced approach (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012), acknowledging the human side of their roles, protecting their employers from legal jeopardy (Lussier & Hendon, 2016), and advancing their organization’s strategic agenda (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013). HRPs reconcile the goal of protecting the employee and being a strategic partner by arguing that well supported employees are beneficial for management (Brown, Metz, Cregan, & Kulik, 2009). Ethical dilemmas are intrinsic to an HRP’s job as he or she navigates tensions between compassion and fairness or between employee advocacy and striving to achieve organizational goals (Van Gramberg & Teicher, 2006; Greenwood, 2013).

The tension between the roles of co-worker and friend can be troublesome to HRPs. A recent posting on the SHRM website (Folz, 2018) included “being too friendly” (para. 9) as one of The Ten Biggest Mistakes New HR Professionals Make. As explained by an HR director: “Your friendships [and] personal needs are secondary to your obligation to your employer” (Seitz, as cited by Folz, 2018 para. 11). As HRPs attempt to solve the friend vs. professional inter-role tension they seek to separate themselves from their colleagues (De Gama, McKenna & Peticca-Harris 2012; Linehan & O’Brien, 2017).

### **Fairness and Compassion: Tension in the Role of a Manager**

Managers are uniquely poised to help alleviate the pain of those under their responsibility (Yoon, 2017). Compassion is a characteristic of servant leadership (Jit, Sharma & Kawatra, 2017), a leadership style that seeks to prioritize followers’ needs. The servant leadership style leads to positive organizational outcomes such as increased team trust and collaboration, stronger employee perceptions of wellbeing and, overall, a positive work environment (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Ties of friendship between managers and their subordinates are of interest in our study, as we explore differences in decisions made by HRPs and non-HRPs, managers or not. A particularly difficult management scenario involves the disciplining of a friend, as reported by Schujmann and Costa (2012): “People experience a great deal of anxiety when called upon to reprimand or notify a friend because their work is not up to par (p. 38).

Fairness, a major leadership evaluation criterion (Janson, Levy, Sitkin, & Lind, 2008), serves as a motivational tool to increase productivity and optimize relationships (Long, 2015). One may expect managers to fear interference or even the perception of interference of friendship with their roles.

### **Propensity to Compassion**

Closeness enhances compassion, as people have both “the emotional bonding” (Dutton, Workman & Hardin, 2014, p. 288) to care about the other’s suffering and have access to more information on the other’s situation. Access to information on another can be enough to enhance feelings of proximity (Watley & May, 2004), and knowledge of a person’s affective state is a prerequisite to empathy, or the “capacity to share, understand, and respond with care to the affective states of others” (Decety, 2011, p. vi). Studies on empathy-induced altruism (e.g., Batson, Klein,

Highberger, & Shaw 1995) suggest that people who experience empathy are likely to make decisions that favor those with whom they empathize.

Compassion facilitates workplace connections and increases a sense of pride in the organization (Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014). When individuals benefit from compassionate acts by co-workers, they experience positive feelings, which extend to the organization itself (Lilius et al., 2008). Lack of compassion may lead to negative feelings about co-workers and the organization and reduce the employee's sense of belonging (Lilius et al., 2008). Shahzad and Muller (2016) argue that without compassion, organizations "endanger the dignity and humanity" (p. 146) of their employees.

We hypothesize therefore that, when access to information on personal suffering is introduced, agents display compassion, i.e., they display less rigor in implementing company norms. We hypothesize further that both the direct and indirect effects of information on personal suffering are to decrease rigor. We test these hypotheses (stated below in alternate form) for each of the professional categories and ranks under study.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Awareness of personal suffering reduces rigor.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Moral reasoning mediates the effect of awareness of personal suffering by reducing rigor.

**Hypothesis 1c:** The effect of awareness of personal suffering not mediated by moral reasoning reduces rigor.

### **Propensity to Favoritism**

Workplace friendships have benefits and challenges. Benefits include boosting job involvement (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995) and, in general, enhancing employees' positive perceptions on the work environment (Dickie 2009; Schujmann & Costa, 2012). Berman, West and Richter Jr. (2002) surveyed 222 city managers and chief administrative officers in 544 U.S. cities. Most participants (87.5%) viewed peer-to-peer work friendships favorably. Problems may emerge, however, due to the potentially incompatible demands associated with the roles of friend and co-worker. Employees may feel challenged as they attempt to provide affection to their friends but, at the same time, want to remain focused on the needs of the business (Schujmann & Costa, 2012).

We hypothesize that agents display favoritism when friendship is added to access to information on personal suffering, i.e., rigor in implementing company norms decreases. We conjecture further that the direct effect of friendship decreases rigor, and that if favoritism occurs it is not because of moral arguments, but simply because of friendship between the decision maker and the co-worker. We test these hypotheses (stated below in alternate form) for each of the professional categories and ranks under study.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Ties of friendship reduce rigor.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Moral reasoning mediates the effect of friendship by increasing rigor.

**Hypothesis 2c:** The effect of friendship not mediated by moral reasoning decreases rigor.

## Methods

To contrast propensities towards favoritism and compassion by HRP and non-HRP, managers or not, we exposed a sample of professionals to a moral dilemma involving a co-worker. The co-worker violated a company norm, and participants must choose between reporting the violation or not. The decision to report the violation could lead to serious losses for the co-worker. Participants are randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions involving closeness.

### Data Collection

The data were collected via a survey addressed to 645,870 registered members of Linked:HR, a global online human resources group on LinkedIn. This resulted in 1,248 complete responses. Although 1,248 useful responses seem low compared to the size of the Linked:HR group, the observed response rate is higher than what is normal for similar studies. Social media websites have low rates of engagement, defined as the ratio of registered users who interact with a post to the full membership of the group. For groups with between 100,000 and 1,000,000 members, the engagement rates for Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram amount to only 0.02, 0.21, and 1.85 percent respectively (Leone, 2016). According to Olivier Taupin, owner of Linked:HR (personal communication, October 4, 2017), the engagement rate for his group at the time of the survey was around one percent, which implies that about 6,500 members noticed the invitation to participate in the survey. On this basis, the participation rate was 19.2 percent, which exceeds the average response rate of 11-17 percent for web surveys targeting professionals (Shih & Fan, 2008).

Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 81, with an average of 45 years, and 75.6 percent reported an Anglophone country of origin (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States). The two next largest groups were from Europe (10.8 percent excluding the UK) and Asia (8.2 percent). About 69 percent of participants were female, 57 percent were HRPs, and 46 percent held a managerial position. Approximately 25 percent of the sample were senior managers, and 21 percent were junior managers. Personal characteristics were similar across the three randomly assigned closeness conditions.

Based on contingency table analyses we can reject independence between rigor and closeness (chi-square = 59.24, df = 2, p = 0.000), between rigor and being an HRP (chi-square = 21.28, df = 1, p = 0.000), and between rigor and being a manager (chi-square = 9.96, df = 1, p = 0.002). Decisions to report the violation are more common under C1, and less common in C3; more frequent for HRPs than non-HRPs; and more frequent for managers than staff than would be the case if these variables were independent.

We adopted Wildermuth et al.'s (2017) moral reasoning instrument (MR-20) to identify participants moral reasoning orientation. Answers to the 20-item questionnaire—provided after participants made their report/not-report decisions—were factored into Justice, Care Protection, and Care Relationships. Further details on the measurement of moral reasoning orientation are available upon request.

### A Decision-Making Model

The agent's decision consists of reporting or not reporting the associate's absence from a required meeting. We assess rigor in rule enforcement by the probability that the agent signals an intention to report. To examine how closeness, managerial status, and being an HRP influence decisions, we specified a model in which the probability of reporting depends on closeness, whether the agent holds a managerial position, whether the agent is an HRP, and on the agent's moral

reasoning orientation, composed of Justice, Care-Protection, and Care-Relationships. These moral orientation variables also depend on closeness, managerial position and being an HRP, and are determined endogenously. A diagram of the proposed model is provided in the top panel of Figure 1.

The model has one equation for each of the four endogenous variables: probability of reporting, Justice, Care-Protection, and Care-Relationships. There are three exogenous variables of interest: closeness, being an HRP, and managerial status. Each exogenous variable has an effect on moral intent that is mediated by moral reasoning, and an effect not mediated by moral reasoning. The model also includes five control variables which have been shown previously to affect moral intent and reasoning: age (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), gender (Agerström, Björklund, & Allwood 2010), Anglophone origin (Stedham & Beekun, 2013), and two personality traits, conscientiousness and neuroticism (Wildermuth et al., 2017). The model's variables and equations are defined in the middle and bottom panels of Figure 1.

### **Tests of Hypotheses and Measurement of Effect Sizes**

We estimated the equations in our model to maximize the log likelihood of observed responses using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Table 1 provides summary statistics for the estimated coefficients.

To test the compassion (favoritism) hypotheses, we measured the total, direct, and indirect effects of providing information on personal suffering (of being a friend of the co-worker involved). We adopted the counterfactual approach (Pearl, 2001; Valeri, 2012) to decompose total effects, and Monte Carlo (Preacher & Selig, 2012) to estimate means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for total, direct and indirect effects.

## **Results**

### **Regarding Compassion (H1a-H1c)**

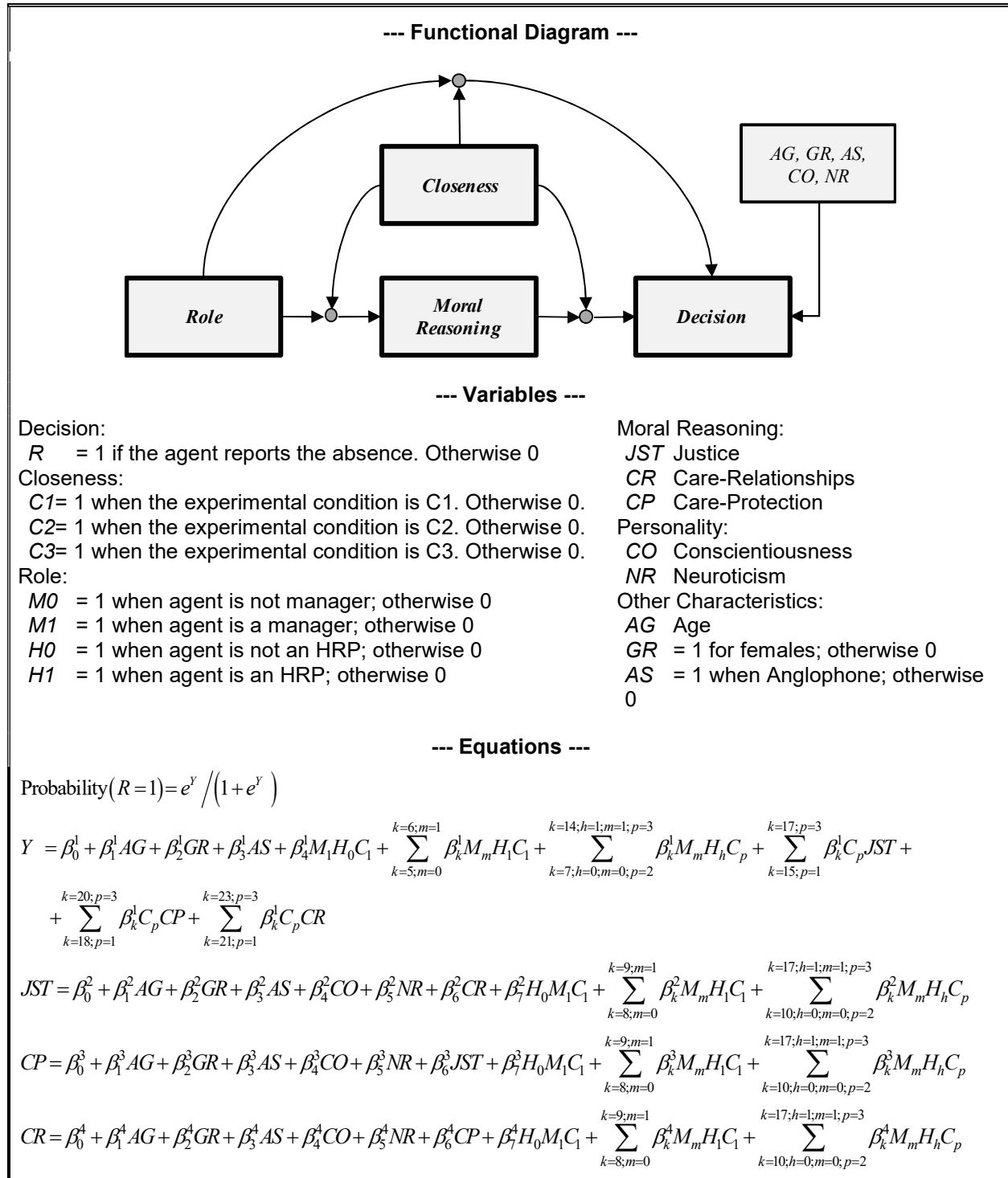
Table 2 (panel H1) presents statistics on the total, direct, and indirect effects of switching from closeness condition C1 to C2, all measured by odds ratios. Statistically significant decreases in rigor (odds ratios less than 1) indicate compassion. The total effect -- the ratio of the odds of reporting under C2 to the odds of reporting under C1 -- equals the product of the direct and indirect effects. The indirect effect equals the product of effects attributable to Care-P, Care-R, and Justice and in every case (in this panel) results from an increase in emphasis on Care-P and a decrease in emphasis on Justice. The effect of Care-R was never significant. The indirect effect was significant for non-HRP staff ( $p = 0.001$ ) and for HRP managers ( $p = 0.025$ ).

These results are consistent with compassion by all HRPs regardless of rank, and by non-HRP staff. For HRP managers and non-HRP staff moral reasoning makes a contribution to compassion which is significant at better than the 0.05 level, while for HRP staff and non-HRP managers the contribution to compassion is significant at better than the 0.10 level. The direct effect, however, contributes significantly to compassion only for staff HRPs ( $p = 0.023$ ).

The evidence of compassion by non-HRP managers is weaker. The lack of statistical significance of compassion in this case is associated with a less consistent increase in an emphasis on care-protection and to a weaker direct effect of closeness.



**Figure 1. Decision-making model: Functional diagram, variables, and equations.**



**Table 1. Coefficients and p-values for the decision-making model (N=1248).**

		Right-hand side variables												
LHS		AG	GR	AS	CO	NR	JST	CP	CR	hx2	hx3	hX1	hX2	hX3
Y	$\beta$	<b>.015</b>	.277	<b>.409</b>						-.403	<b>-.654</b>	.319	.029	<b>-.771</b>
	<i>p</i>	<b>.034</b>	.089	<b>.020</b>						.205	<b>.036</b>	.479	.953	<b>.047</b>
JST	$\beta$	.004	-.003	-.136	<b>.231</b>	-.040			<b>-.210</b>	-.210	<b>-.472</b>	.018	-.136	-.358
	<i>p</i>	.257	.969	.106	<b>.001</b>	.090			<b>.000</b>	.154	<b>.001</b>	.929	.550	.057
CP	$\beta$	.002	.035	-.041	.055	<b>.045</b>	<b>-.291</b>			<b>.354</b>	<b>.351</b>	.161	.306	<b>.395</b>
	<i>p</i>	.370	.557	.526	.326	<b>.011</b>	<b>.000</b>			<b>.002</b>	<b>.002</b>	.286	.078	<b>.006</b>
CR	$\beta$	<b>-.014</b>	.163	.168	-.107	<b>.182</b>		<b>-.107</b>		<b>-.538</b>	-.026	-.063	<b>1.218</b>	†.104
	<i>p</i>	<b>.008</b>	.186	.212	.354	<b>.000</b>		<b>.000</b>		<b>.023</b>	.910	.843	<b>.001</b>	.729

		Right-hand side variables												
LHS (cont.)		Hx1	Hx2	Hx3	HX1	HX2	HX3	JST1	JST2	JST3	CP1	CP2	CP3	CR1
Y	$\beta$	.694	-.162	<b>1.038</b>	†.578	.145	-.550	<b>1.135</b>	<b>1.083</b>	<b>.799</b>	<b>-.980</b>	<b>1.064</b>	<b>-.826</b>	.071
	<i>p</i>	.076	.646	<b>.002</b>	.091	.656	.064	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.384
JST	$\beta$	.251	.211	-.213	<b>.301</b>	.084	.043							
	<i>p</i>	.121	.197	.191	<b>.036</b>	.556	.762							
CP	$\beta$	.040	.210	<b>.322</b>	-.151	-.067	<b>.222</b>							
	<i>p</i>	.748	.095	<b>.010</b>	.168	.540	<b>.041</b>							
CR	$\beta$	.145	<b>-.632</b>	.447	-.295	<b>-.545</b>	.071							
	<i>p</i>	.576	<b>.016</b>	.086	.197	<b>.017</b>	.756							

		Right-hand side variables	
LHS (cont.)		CR2	CR3
Y	$\beta$	-.078	.073
	<i>p</i>	.286	.208

† Numerals 1, 2, and 3 appended to a variable name indicate an interaction with experimental conditions 1, 2, and 3.

‡ Variables of the form *HX#* represent interactions between being an HRP, being a manager, and closeness, as follows: *H* indicates being an HRP; *h* indicates not being an HRP; *X* indicates being a manager; *x* indicates not being a manager; and “#” indicates the closeness condition.

§ Coefficients with *p*-values less than 0.05 are in bold.

**Table 2. Effects of closeness on rigor explained for the full sample (N=1248).**

	H1. Compassion				H2. Favoritism			
	C1 → C2				C2 → C3			
	non-HRP		HRP		non-HRP		HRP	
	Staff	Mgr.	Staff	Mgr.	Staff	Mgr.	Staff	Mgr.
Starting odds of reporting	3.13	4.03	9.07	8.06	1.09	1.58	2.59	3.81
Ending odds of reporting	1.09	1.58	2.59	3.81	.85	.85	.87	1.68
<b>Total Effect (Odds Ratio)</b>	<b>.35</b>	<b>.39</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>.47</b>	<b>.78</b>	<b>.54</b>	<b>.33</b>	<b>.44</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.002	.095	.007	.035	.243	.168	.010	.009
Upper limit 95% CI	.66	1.29	.66	.92	1.40	1.54	.71	.78
	**		**	*			**	**
<b>Indirect Effect (OR)</b>	<b>.51</b>	<b>.56</b>	<b>.69</b>	<b>.67</b>	<b>.91</b>	<b>1.15</b>	<b>.89</b>	<b>1.01</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.001	.068	.086	.025	.291	.676	.281	.526
Upper limit 95% CI	.75	1.08	1.07	.94	1.20	1.89	1.27	1.34
	***			*				
<b>Care-Protection (OR)</b>	<b>.64</b>	<b>.77</b>	<b>.80</b>	<b>.86</b>	<b>.97</b>	<b>.95</b>	<b>.89</b>	<b>.82</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.000	.116	.047	.089	.382	.373	.144	.016
Upper limit 95% CI	.79	1.10	.99	1.03	1.14	1.24	1.06	.96
	***		*					**
<b>Care-Relationships (OR)</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>1.07</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>1.11</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>1.07</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.579	.837	.825	.602	.886	.895	.895	.895
Upper limit 95% CI	1.05	1.24	1.15	1.06	1.12	1.30	1.25	1.18
<b>Justice (OR)</b>	<b>.79</b>	<b>.68</b>	<b>.83</b>	<b>.78</b>	<b>.90</b>	<b>1.09</b>	<b>.91</b>	<b>1.15</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.068	.091	.166	.045	.184	.663	.265	.896
Upper limit 95% CI	1.03	1.10	1.13	.99	1.09	1.54	1.17	1.40
				*				
<b>Direct Effect (OR)</b>	<b>.68</b>	<b>.70</b>	<b>.41</b>	<b>.71</b>	<b>.86</b>	<b>.47</b>	<b>.38</b>	<b>.44</b>
<i>p-value</i>	.121	.283	.023	.183	.323	.074	.008	.003
Upper limit 95% CI	1.14	1.97	.88	1.35	1.47	1.16	.71	.73
			*				**	**

\* Monte Carlo simulations were performed with 2000 trials. All hypotheses tests are one-sided, of the form “odds ratio < 1 (alternate) vs. odds ratio ≥ 1 (null). The lower bound of all confidence intervals for odds ratios is zero, and the upper bound is the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of the simulated ratios. The *p*-value in each case is measured by the relative frequency of observed odds ratios greater than 1.

† Standard *p*-value cutoff points are denoted as follows: 0.05 (\*); 0.01 (\*\*); 0.001 (\*\*\*).

‡ The total effect equals the ratio of ending to starting odds of reporting and can be decomposed into the product of the direct and indirect effects. The indirect effect is the product of the effects of the three moral reasoning variables: Care-Protection, Care-Relationships, and Justice.

§ In panel H1, *p*-values for total effects represent the estimated probability based on Monte Carlo trials that the null hypothesis of no compassion is true.

¶ In panel H2, *p*-values for total effects represent the estimated probability based on Monte Carlo trials that the null hypothesis of no favoritism is true.

The expected odds ratios for total effects fall in the range (0.29 – 0.47), which can be considered of moderate size (Chen, Cohen & Chen, 2010). As an example, for HRP staff the odds of reporting the violation drop from 9.07 to 2.59 (the probability from 0.90 to 0.72).

To examine whether the effect of rank on rigor depends on seniority, we performed tests restricting the sample to having only junior and then only senior managers. This reduces sample size by 20-25 percent. These tests suggest that senior managers, both HRP and non-HRP, display greater compassion than junior managers, based on their lower mean total effects. See Table 3, panel H1. Based on these restricted samples we cannot reject the null hypothesis that junior managers are not compassionate, HRP or not. There is, however, strong evidence of compassion by senior HRP managers ( $p = 0.043$ ).

**Table 3. Effect of closeness on rigor explained separately for junior (N=931) and senior (N=991) managers.**

	H1. Compassion (§)				H2. Favoritism (§§)			
	C1 → C2				C2 → C3			
	Managers				Managers			
	non-HRP		HRP		non-HRP		HRP	
	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior
Starting odds of reporting	2.08	5.17	9.39	6.97	1.52	1.74	5.96	2.59
Ending odds of reporting	1.52	1.74	5.96	2.59	.70	.92	1.48	1.88
Total Effect (Odds Ratio)	.73	.34	.63	<b>.37</b>	.46	.53	<b>.25</b>	.73
<i>p-value</i>	.396	.107	.218	.043	.276	.201	.003	.268
Upper limit 95% CI	6.99	1.47	1.63	.96	3.95	1.85	.57	1.66
				*			**	

\* Monte Carlo simulations were performed with 2000 trials. All hypotheses tests are one-sided, of the form “odds ratio < 1 (alternate) vs. odds ratio ≥ 1 (null). The lower bound of all confidence intervals for odds ratios is zero, and the upper bound is the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of the simulated ratios. The  $p$ -value in each case is measured by the relative frequency of observed odds ratios greater than 1.

† Standard  $p$ -value cutoff points are denoted as follows: 0.05 (\*); 0.01 (\*\*); 0.001 (\*\*\*)

§ In panel H1,  $p$ -values for total effects represent the estimated probability based on Monte Carlo trials that the null hypothesis of no compassion is true.

§§ In panel H2,  $p$ -values for total effects represent the estimated probability based on Monte Carlo trials that the null hypothesis of no favoritism is true.

## Regarding Favoritism (H2a-H2c)

Table 2 (panel H2) presents statistics on the total, direct, and indirect effects of switching from C2 to C3. Our results are consistent with favoritism by HR staff ( $p = 0.010$ ) and managers ( $p = 0.009$ ). In both cases friendship had a highly significant negative direct effect on rigor. The indirect effect of moral reasoning, however, is insignificant across the board (both confidence intervals include 1). In the case of HRP managers, for example, we have the following odds ratios: Justice 1.15, Care-Relationships 1.07, and Care-Protection 0.82. Of these three, only Care-Protection had a statistically significant effect ( $p = 0.016$ ). The resulting mean odds ratio for moral reasoning (product of the three components) is 1.01. In the case of non-HRP staff ( $p = 0.243$ ) and non-HRP managers ( $p = 0.168$ ), the evidence of favoritism is too weak for us to reject the null hypotheses of no favoritism.

The average total effects measured by odds ratios for HRP staff and managers are 0.33 and 0.44, which can be considered of moderate size (Chen, Cohen & Chen, 2010). In the case of HRP staff, the average odds of reporting the violation drop from 2.59 to 0.87 (the probability from 0.72 to 0.46).

If we restrict the sample to junior managers and then to senior managers, we still cannot reject the null hypothesis of no favoritism by non-HRP managers, regardless of seniority. The result for HRP managers, however, suggests that favoritism is a problem mostly for junior managers ( $p = 0.003$ ), as we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no favoritism for senior managers. See Table 3, panel H2.

## Discussion

We could not detect favoritism among non-HR professionals, regardless of rank, but we found evidence supporting HRPs' vulnerability to favoritism (except senior managers). We also found that information on personal suffering produces compassionate behavior by all types of professionals, except for non-HRP managers. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Moral reasoning plays an important role in compassionate decisions. Access to information on extenuating circumstances increases agents' concerns with the protection of someone who is hurt and reduces their focus on justice. However, moral reasoning seems to play no role in situations predisposed to favoritism. The irrelevance of moral reasoning when the decision maker needs it so much, due to the involvement of a friend, is disturbing. A possible explanation lies in the tension between the roles of friend and HRP, the former activating care and the latter triggering justice and fairness, leading the two to offset each other.

Finding favoritism among HRPs but not among non-HRPs is surprising. Given previous research on HR depersonalization and attempts to seek neutrality (de Gama, McKenna & Peticca-Harris, 2012), the call for HRPs to be "credible activists" (Ulrich et al., 2013), and the importance given by professional codes of ethics to fairness in decision making, we expected HRPs to resist favoritism. We propose three explanations.

First, research findings in the existing literature that reveal lack of bias in decision-making and were based on live interviews may have recorded how HRPs wish they behaved, not how they truly behave. A case in point is the study by de Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris (2012).

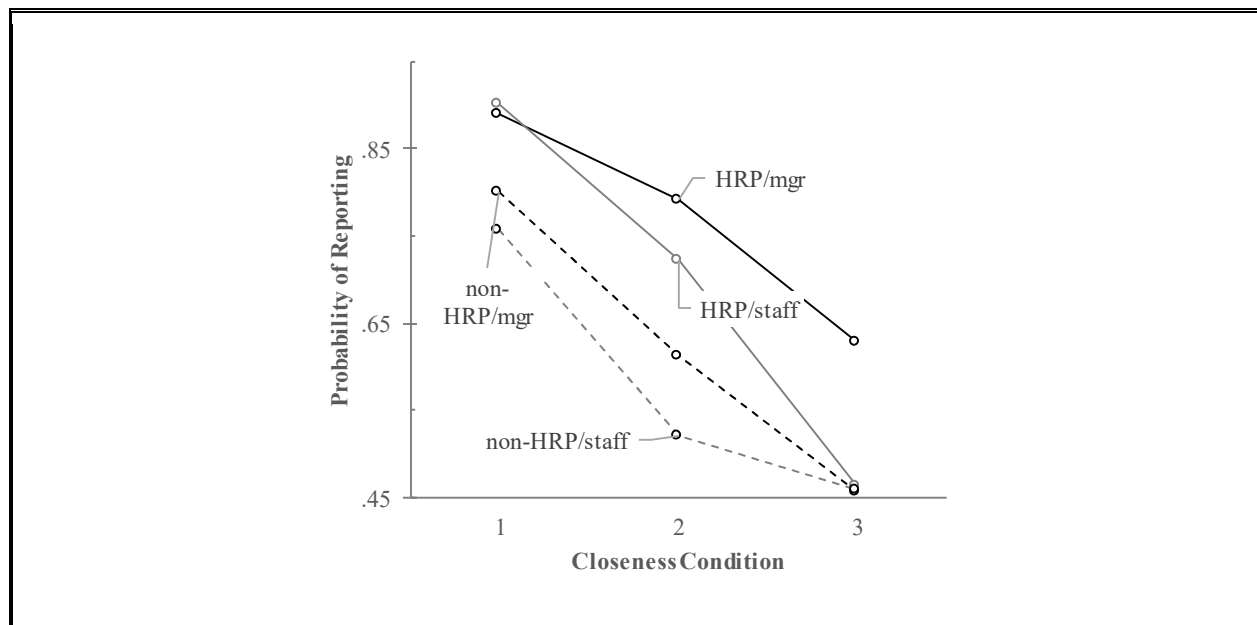
Second, there is evidence in the literature that HRPs display systematic personality differences when compared with non-HRPs. Two traits are relevant to the issue of favoritism: extraversion and image management. The first is related to sociability and friendliness; the second, to a

concern with controlling the image one projects to others. A study comparing 1,846 HR managers with 51,297 other professionals found that HR managers tend to score higher in both traits (Lounsbury et al. 2008). Sociable people who pay attention to the perceptions of others, and worry about being liked, may be more reluctant to hurt a friend.

A third possible explanation is that despite persistent efforts to obtain a seat at the table (i.e., to increase HRPs' participation in critical organizational decisions), the power and influence of HRPs in organizations are still limited (Linehan & O'Brien, 2017). A real or perceived lack of power could encourage HRPs to rely on networks of friends and resist breaking bonds of loyalty.

The graph in Figure 2 compares the probability of reporting the violation over the three conditions of closeness in our experiment, and across the different roles of manager and staff, combined with being an HRP or not. Besides the decreases in rigor that we discussed above as being associated with increasing the closeness between the decision-maker and the employee, we also observe that at each condition of closeness managers appear to be more rigorous than staff members (in the same career path), and that HRP professionals appear to be stricter than non-HRP professionals (in the same managerial status).

**Figure 2. Probability of reporting as a function of role (HRP or non-HRP/manager or staff) and closeness<sup>†</sup>.**



† Closeness conditions: (1) neither extenuating circumstances or friendship; (2) extenuating circumstances; (3) extenuating circumstances and friendship.

### Implications

To the extent that our results can be confirmed by additional research, organizations must strive to preserve, reinforce, and continue to develop mechanisms to counteract favoritism and its negative effects. Such mechanisms include team decision-making systems (e.g., performance appraisals conducted by multiple evaluators), advocacy for employees (e.g., the office of the ombudsperson), and training in ethical decision-making. Concerning the latter, organizations

must go beyond the simple dissemination of rules of conduct. For example, employees could practice employing multiple moral reasoning lenses when confronted with ethical decisions (Baird, 2011). Furthermore, since moral reasoning may be inhibited by ties of friendship, employees should be trained to apply such lenses deliberately when making decisions involving their friends.

Although the data are consistent with favoritism only by HRPs, we note that the average total effects for non-HRP professionals were also less than 1. We just did not have enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no favoritism for non-HRPs at conventional significance levels.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The generalizability of our results is impacted by the fact that participants were members of the same online discussion group, most were from Anglophone countries (75.6 percent total, with 60.2 percent from the United States), and the sub-sample of non-HR professionals were mostly from the field of organizational development. Future research should re-examine favoritism and compassion by agents with other cultural and national origins, as well as other professional backgrounds.

Future experiments should include a fourth scenario in which there is friendship, but no access to personal information. Although the only difference between our experimental conditions C2 and C3 is friendship, there remains the possibility that awareness of personal suffering interacts with friendship, so that the effect of friendship alone could be different from the effect of friendship combined with extenuating circumstances.

Regarding the experimental vignette, future research should alter the origin of the associate's personal problem to an event not protected by law, as family health issues often are. For example, in the United States the Family Medical Leave Act requires employers to give employees unpaid time off to attend to personal or family health issues. Participants who remembered such statutes may have altered the decisions they might otherwise have made. This does not cast doubt on the finding of favoritism, because the same family health issue was present in conditions C2 and C3. Regarding the tests in the transition from C1 to C2, however, some participants may have decided against reporting the violation not because of compassion, but because of legal protections for family health issues. Others may have chosen instead to report the violation and follow company protocol, knowing that regardless of their decisions the associate had higher level protection in the law.

To assess the extent to which personal and compassionate leave statutes may have affected our results, we read 612 textual answers provided to a survey question on whether participants considered any additional factors in reaching their decisions. We found that in condition C1, which did not involve family health issues, only 3 of 212 textual responses mentioned personal leave statutes (all 3 would report the absence). Under C2 the fraction increased to 11 of 177 responses (6 would report), and under C3 the proportion increased to 21 of 223 responses (13 would report). Among the legal frameworks mentioned were Australia's National Employment Standards, the United States' Family Medical Leave Act, and California's Family Rights Act. We find it unlikely that our results on compassion can be attributed to legal considerations, given the small number of participants who expressed such a concern under C2. The fact that references to legal statutes under condition C3 were so much more frequent than under condition C2 is puzzling, however (in both conditions the associate faced the same family health problem) and reinforces the case for favoritism. Participants seemed to remember family protections more often when their friends were involved.

Finally, future studies should incorporate a robust personality instrument to better examine connections between personality traits, professional backgrounds, compassion, and favoritism.

## Conclusion

Information on personal suffering is associated with compassion by HR and non-HR professionals, except for non-HR managers. Compassion can be partially attributed to information on personal suffering strengthening decision makers' emphasis on care and weakening their emphasis on justice.

Friendship is associated with favoritism by HR professionals who are not yet of senior managerial rank. Friendship is directly linked to favoritism, without any interference from moral arguments by the decision-maker.

A material tendency by HR professionals to favor those with whom they share ties of friendship, if it indeed exists, could produce localized problems such as diminished motivation and job satisfaction. Favoritism in promotion and recruitment decisions, however, can have much broader social consequences. For example, favoritism can exacerbate the glass ceiling effect and dampen organizational efforts to promote inclusion and diversity.

We call on researchers and practitioners to investigate further whether and to what extent HR professionals are vulnerable to favoritism. Systemic reasons could explain favoritism by HRPs. For example, HRPs who protect their friends may be more successful in the long-run, and the field of HR may attract professionals who value seeking and developing friendships.

Ultimately, both justice and compassion are important in the workplace. But we must be compassionate in the application of justice, and just in the application of compassion. The crux of the problem is that closeness affects our propensities to be fair and compassionate, and the distribution of closeness is not equitable.

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