A Relational Perspective of Social Influence on Moral Issues

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Abstract

Making social judgments and deciding how to act on our deepest moral convictions and virtues rarely occurs in a vacuum; these events typical transpire within close relationships, especially those with romantic partners. In this chapter, we discuss why it is important—indeed essential—to adopt a *relational* perspective to fully comprehend when, how, and why individuals are (or are not) influenced by their romantic partners when moral issues tied to core moral virtues arise. Working with Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model of moral judgment, we discuss a few of the relationship-relevant variables that may moderate the strength of influence between partners when such issues are discussed. We then focus on what should happen when romantic partners hold different amounts of power within their relationship. Our primary focus is on what Haidt calls "interpersonal effects"—instances in which an individual's intuition, judgment, and reasoning regarding a specific moral issue should be more versus less strongly influenced by his or her partner's intuition, judgment, and reasoning on that issue.

A Relational Perspective of Social Influence on Moral Issues

Imagine the following event: You and your romantic partner are watching the nightly news on television. You see a story about people who may have indirect ties to Al Qaida being detained by the U.S. government for very long periods of time in what appear to be harsh conditions without normal due process. You feel strongly that it is not fair for any government to detain anyone without good evidence and proper due process, and you also worry about the harm being done to the detainees. Your partner, however, thinks this is fine, particularly given the need to protect the U.S. in light of current terroristic threats around the world. After the story ends, you and your partner discuss whether these people should continue to be detained under these conditions. You mention the importance of fairness, due process, and avoiding unnecessary harm, but your partner stands firm in her belief that legitimate governments must take a hard stance with respect to potential terrorists. At the end of the discussion, you begin to agree with your partner without really knowing why, and you slide your opinion on the matter closer to your partner's position.

Early psychological theorists on moral thinking and development, such as Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969), conceptualized morality as an effortful cognitive process that, although shaped by cultural norms, tends to occur in the absence of immediate interpersonal influences. However, situations such as the one described above suggest that these processes do not occur in a vacuum, and that other people can influence our moral thinking without us engaging in elaborate thinking. The "new synthesis" in moral psychology, which has risen in prominence during the past two decades, adopts a different perspective: Much moral thinking is an automatic, emotionally-driven process that often is biased by the social context in which judgments are

taking place (Haidt, 2008). As Rai and Fiske (2011) assert, "…moral intuitions are defined by the particular types of social relationships in which they occur" (pp. 57).

Despite the theoretical importance of social relationships on moral intuitions, judgments, and thinking, little research has examined how interpersonal relationships actually impact these variables. Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model proposes some interpersonal links through which interaction partners may directly or indirectly influence each other's moral judgments and reasoning, but little research has tested these links and what strengthens or weakens them. In this chapter, we use relationship science to suggest when, and to what extent, romantic partners are likely to influence one another when discussing moral issues.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, we describe Haidt's (2001) Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) of moral judgment and the five "moral foundations" that constitute the major content areas underlying moral judgments. In addition, we briefly review the rather limited research that has tested the interpersonal links (social and reasoned persuasion) contained in Haidt's model. In section two, we discuss what a relational perspective on this model—especially the interpersonal links—can contribute to the morality field. More specifically, we discuss how certain relationship-relevant variables might moderate the strength of influence that "actors" (one partner in a relationship) have on their "partners" (the other partner in a relationship) within the social intuitionist model framework. We also showcase how one major relationship variable—the amount of power each partner has in a relationship—can be applied to extend our understanding of when, how, and why certain individuals are more versus less influenced by their partners. In the final section, we offer concluding comments and further ideas for future research.

The Social Intuitionist Model and Moral Foundations

According to Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model (SIM) of social judgment, moral judgments and decisions frequently occur in interpersonal contexts. Thus, according to Haidt, moral judgment is an inherently interpersonal process. The SIM, which is shown in Figure 1, claims that *eliciting situations* (e.g., watching a TV news story about long detentions of suspected terrorists) evoke automatic *intuitions* akin to gut-level sentiments within an individual (Person A). These intuitions are experienced as diffuse feelings that fall somewhere on a good-to-bad dimension regarding the eliciting situation. Intuitions are perceived very quickly, automatically, and with little or no deliberate or rational thinking. Once activated, they affect the individual's *judgment* of the eliciting situation, which often is expressed in observable verbal or nonverbal behavior. Following the expression of the judgment, individuals often engage in post hoc reasoning to support their judgment. During this reasoning process, individuals attempt to explain, justify, or make sense of their intuition and judgment.

---Insert Figure 1 here---

What makes this model dyadic are the pathways that connect Person A's judgment and reasoning to Person B's intuition, judgment, and reasoning about the eliciting situation, and vice versa. There are two sets of interpersonal pathways through which social influence can occur. *Reasoned persuasion*, represented by paths A_1 and A_2 in Figure 1, runs from one individual's explicit reasoning to the other's intuition. Reasoned persuasion occurs when Persons A and B directly communicate the reason(s) for their judgments to one another, which may then influence each other's intuitions. *Social persuasion*, represented by paths B_1 and B_2 in Figure 1, runs from one individual's judgment of the eliciting situation to the other's intuition. Social persuasion occurs when one person conforms to the other's judgment, even if there are no attempts to change opinions (or virtues) about the eliciting situation. Both sets of pathways (reasoned and

social) suggest that individuals can and sometimes do influence each other's intuitions once an eliciting situation launches the process depicted in Figure 1.

Which variables are the wellspring of the intuitions, judgments, and reasoning that guide how partners perceive and evaluate specific moral issues? According to Haidt and Joseph (2004), there are six moral foundations, which are mental modules that reflect a person's core virtues: (1) *care/harm* (the extent to which an individual values cherishing and protecting other people); (2) *fairness/cheating* (the extent to which an individual values fair, equal, and just treatment of others); (3) *loyalty/betrayal* (the extent to which an individual values standing up for his or her group, family, or nation [the ingroup]); (4) *authority/subversion* (the extent to which an individual values respect for legitimate authority and obeying social traditions); (5) *sanctity/degradation* (the extent to which an individual values decency and purity, and abhors disgusting things or actions); and (6) *liberty/oppression* (the extent to which an individual values freedom and loathes tyranny). Eliciting situations automatically activate one or more of these basic virtues in the minds of perceivers, which then rapidly and automatically affect their intuitions (see Figure 1).

Research Testing the Reasoned and Social Persuasion Links in the Social Intuitionist Model

What has research revealed about the social intuitionist model, especially in the context of relationships? Although the SIM was published 14 years ago, there has been surprisingly little research examining the social components of the model (see the A and B paths in Figure 1). The literature still largely ignores the interpersonal contexts in which moral judgments and reasoning are made (Ellemer, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013; Haidt, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). There is some support for these interpersonal effects in studies examining employee–employer/organization and ingroup contexts (e.g., Ellemer, et al. 2013; Hornsey et al., 2003; Kundu & Cummins, 2013).

Kundu and Cummins (2013), for example, used the Asch conformity paradigm and found that moral judgments made by confederates influenced participants' own judgments. More specifically, when confederates judged an impermissible moral transgression as permissible, participants did as well, whereas those in the control group (who were not exposed to social influences) did not. Likewise, participants were more likely to judge a permissible moral judgment as impermissible if they were exposed to a confederate who did so. To the best of our knowledge, however, no research to date has tested for similar effects in intimate relationships.

Expanding the SIM: A Relational Perspective

The SIM has been highly influential in the field of morality, and it is especially appealing to social psychologists because of its inherently dyadic nature, given that the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of one interaction partner can influence the other partner (and vice versa) at different specific stages of the model. However, the model says very little about whom the interaction partners are or what can and should affect the strength of the interpersonal paths. We believe that adopting a relational perspective can: (1) provide deeper insights into when and how these interpersonal influences occur, and (2) expand the SIM in some important ways.

To begin with, who are the interaction partners? Most individuals are unlikely to discuss moral issues with strangers or casual acquaintances on a regular basis. Instead, interaction partners are likely to be close relationship partners—family members, friends, and romantic partners. Closeness is defined as the frequency, diversity, duration, and strength of influence between two people (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). In addition, self-disclosure of one's core beliefs and values is critical to the development and maintenance of close relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988), so close relationship partners should be particularly likely to discuss moral issues when eliciting situations arise.

Additionally, research examining morally-relevant behavior (as opposed to moral intuition, judgment, or reasoning outlined in the SIM) suggests that close relationship partners often play an important role in shaping moral judgments. For example, Gino and Galinsky (2012) found that when participants felt psychologically close to a person who acted in a selfish manner, they saw the behavior as less unethical or morally inappropriate (which, in turn, led them to behave in a similar manner). In sum, intimate partners–arguably those who are closest to us psychologically–should have the capacity to exert strong influence on our moral intuitions, judgments, and reasoning.

Relational Influences in the Social Intuitionist Model

To the extent that close relationship partners tend to be the most frequent and impactful interaction partners, we can expand the SIM by turning to relationship science for variables that are likely to govern whether and the degree to which partners influence one another once an eliciting situation has occurred.

<div align="center">---Insert Figure 2 here---</div>

Figure 2 shows how theories, models, and recent findings in relationship science can be incorporated into the social intuitionist model to clarify when interpersonal influences should—and should not—occur, depending on the perceptions and attributes of relationship partners (see the bottom half of Figure 2). To keep the model and examples easier to follow, we focus on the perceptions/attributes of *partners* (the person initially reacting to the judgments and reasoning of an actor following an eliciting situation) rather than both actors and partners, even though actor perceptions/attributes should also affect the interpersonal influence processes we discuss. In addition, we highlight only some of the possible moderating effects of certain relationship-

relevant variables on only the actor-to-partner interpersonal pathways (Paths A_1 and B_1 in Figure 2) to keep the model and examples manageable.

As shown in Figure 2, certain perceptions and attributes of the partner should affect the strength of the *social persuasion path* (the actor's judgment to partner's intuition) and the *reasoned persuasion path* (the actor's reasoning to the partner's intuition), both of which appear on the right side of Figure 2. At the start of this process, the way in which partners perceive an eliciting situation (e.g., the terrorist detention news story) can affect how influential the actor is likely to be. If the eliciting situation is central to the identity or self-concept of the partner, if it is associated with important, self-defining virtues the partner cherishes (e.g., the paramount importance of fairness and harm-avoidance in all contexts), or if it stems from sources internal to the relationship (e.g., the actor aggravates the eliciting situation by denigrating the partner's concerns about fairness and harm-avoidance), the actor's judgment and reasoning should have a relatively weaker effect on the partner's intuition, judgment, and reasoning.

Certain personal attributes of the partner might also affect how persuasive the actor is. If, for instance, the partner has less power in the relationship, low self-esteem, or is insecurely attached, s/he may be more vulnerable to social or reasoned persuasion from the actor. As a rule, individuals who lack power (Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015), have lower self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), or are more insecurely attached (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) should be more susceptible to influence from their partners given their "one-down" position in relationships, and this may be especially true when they are satisfied with or strongly committed to their partners/relationships. To illustrate, we expand on insecure attachment, which has received recent theoretical (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012) and empirical (Koleva, Selterman, Iyer, Ditto, & Graham; 2014) coverage in the moral literature. Koleva et al. (2014) found that

greater attachment avoidance (i.e., the tendency to value independence, autonomy, and control in close relationships) was associated with *weaker* moral concerns about the moral foundations of harm and unfairness, whereas greater attachment anxiety (i.e., the tendency to worry about relationship loss and seek greater security) was associated with *stronger* moral concerns about harm, unfairness, and impurity. Given these findings, it is likely that an actor's judgment or reasoning on moral issues related to harm, unfairness, and impurity should have a stronger impact on a partner's intuitions if the partner is anxiously attached, but the actor should have a weaker impact on a partner's intuitions if the partner is avoidantly attached.

Another possible set of relationship-relevant moderators is the partner's perceptions and evaluations of the relationship. To the extent that a partner feels very close to the actor, is highly satisfied with the relationship, or is strongly committed to it, actors should be able to exert greater influence on their partners. Gino and Galinksy (2012), for instance, found that individuals were more likely to adopt immoral behaviors and make lenient moral judgments about those behaviors when they were displayed by someone to whom they felt close. The relationship effectively "overrode" individuals' own moral compasses. Returning to our running example, if you feel very close to your mate, you should find his/her intuition, judgment, and reasoning about the long-term detention of possible terrorists relatively more compelling and influential, even if they go against your own virtues and values.

Furthermore, the way in which interpersonal influence is communicated and carried out may also affect relationship outcomes (see the bottom of Figure 2). If, for example, an actor and partner agree about how to view and evaluate an eliciting situation, they should have a more positive interaction, which may increase feelings of intimacy in both dyad members. According to Reis and Shaver (1988), feelings of intimacy are generated when one dyad member discloses a

personally important or revealing piece of information, the "responding" partner then conveys understanding, validation, and caring toward the disclosing partner, and the disclosing partner then perceives these well-intentioned behaviors accurately. Discussions that center on important moral issues ought to be good contexts in which these types of discussions often occur. If, however, the actor and partner sharply disagree about how to view or evaluate the eliciting situation, this may result in a highly negative interaction, which could decrease feelings of intimacy in both dyad members. Consistent with these ideas, Krebs and colleagues (2002) found that partners who had different moral perspectives were less likely to reach mutual resolutions during their interpersonal moral conflicts.

Social Power Influences in the Social Intuitionist Model

We now explain in greater detail how one major relationship variable—differences in power within a relationship—may generate specific patterns of interpersonal influence effects within the social intuitionist model. One of the most fundamental concepts in relationship science is power (Huston, 1983; Simpson, Farrell, Oriña, & Rothman, 2015), which can be measured with the Relationship Power Inventory (Farrell, Simpson, & Rothman, in press). Stable differences in power can develop within a relationship for several reasons, such as one partner being perceived as having greater authority and the right to have more control, or when chronic asymmetries in dependence exist between partners (e.g., when one individual relies much more on the other than vice versa to obtain rewards or avoid punishments in the relationship; Rollins & Bahr, 1976; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Indeed, when one dyad member has greater control over the ultimate fate (i.e., good or bad outcomes) of the other across many situations, the more powerful person tends to adopt an agentic orientation and exert greater influence on the less powerful partner, especially when important decisions are being made in the relationship

(Kirchler, 1995; Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2011). If, for instance, your partner has more power than you do, the strength of the interpersonal pathways leading from your mate to you should be greater than the corresponding pathways leading from you back to your mate. These predicted effects are shown in Figure 3 by the thicker lines running from the more powerful person's judgment and reasoning to the less powerful person's intuition (paths A_1 and B_1 on the right side) compared to the reverse paths (paths A_2 and B_2 on the left side).

---Insert Figure 3 here---

The more powerful person should also have greater capacity to change the intuitions, judgments, and perhaps even the moral virtues of the less powerful person over time, especially if a couple has recurring discussions about the eliciting situation. Returning again to our example, to the extent that you have less power in the relationship and want to avoid conflicts with your higher-power partner, you may routinely comply with—and eventually come to agree with—the judgment and reasoning that your partner expresses about the government having legitimate authority to detain suspected terrorists without due process. Indeed, with the passage of time, you may gradually reduce the importance you place on the virtues of fairness and harm-avoidance, or you may increase the importance of the virtues your partner deems most important—respect for authority and supporting the ingroup.

Differences in power may have some of the strongest effects on moral judgment and decision-making when an outcome is important to the higher-power partner. Under these circumstances, the lower-power partner may habitually comply with—and eventually internalize—the intuitions, judgments, and reasoning of the higher-power partner with respect to the eliciting situation. There may be circumstances, however, when the higher-power partner

considers and supports the intuitions, judgments, and virtues of the lower-power partner, even if the two partners disagree.

Unlike power differences between strangers or people who have clearly delineated role relationships (such as supervisor/supervisee and teacher/student), most romantic relationship partners are committed to each other for more than merely structural, role-governed reasons. Many partners are also committed for personal and/or moral reasons (Johnson, 1991). In addition, unlike relationships between total strangers or people involved in purely role or task-based relationships, romantic partners typically want to maintain their relationship over time. To do so, they establish some communal sharing rules (Fiske, 1991) and work to achieve long-term equity so their relationship will be happier and more stable in the long-run (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

These unique aspects of romantic relationships give lower-power romantic partners somewhat greater potential to influence their higher-power partners than is true of lower-power partners in other types of relationships (Simpson et al., 2015). One circumstance in which higher-power relationship partners may be influenced by their less powerful partners is when the lower-power partner makes pleas to get their way on certain issues, perhaps by invoking the importance of fairness in the relationship or clarifying how important the relationship is to the higher-power partner (Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). Other circumstances may include situations in which the higher-power partner feels especially close to the lower-power partner, has low self-esteem, or truly relies on the lower-power partner for resources or outcomes that only s/he can provide.

Lower-power partners may also pay closer attention to the intuitions, judgments, reasoning, and virtues of their higher-power partners, given their greater outcome dependence in

the relationship (Dépret & Fiske, 1993). If so, the lower-power partner may hold more accurate perceptions of the higher-power partner's intuitions, judgments, and reasoning, allowing the lower-power partner to behave more consistently with the intuitions, judgments, reasoning, or virtues held by the higher-power partner. One positive consequence of this is that interactions may go more smoothly. The higher-power partner, however, is likely to have less accurate perceptions of the lower-power partner's intuitions, judgments, reasoning, and virtues, which could lead higher-power partners to believe they are being "responsive" to their lower-power partner when, in fact, they are not. This could destabilize interactions and eventually harm the relationship.

In sum, patterns of social judgment and decision-making on moral issues should depend on which partner in a relationship holds greater power, with the lower-power person often complying with—and perhaps eventually internalizing—the higher-power partner's intuitions, judgments, reasoning, and virtues with respect to certain moral issues, especially when a decision or outcome is important to the higher-power partner. That being said, many of the relational variables listed in Figure 2 are likely to moderate the strength of these interpersonal influence pathways.

Conclusions

This chapter makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it reveals how moral judgments can be informed by recent relationship theories, models, constructs, and findings, especially those pertaining to differences in power between partners in established romantic relationships. As we have shown, the application of these guiding principles permits one to generate novel predictions that cannot be derived without adopting a relational view of dyadic influence as it pertains to moral issues. For example, individuals who wield more power

in a relationship should be less swayed by their partner's intuitions, judgments, and reasoning when discussing issues grounded in their core moral virtues. Conversely, those who have less power should be more susceptible to influence, which may be witnessed in changing their virtues to be more in line with those of their higher-power partner or avoiding eliciting situations where they may feel pressure to comply with their partner's desires, especially when they privately hold a different position on the issue.

Second, we suggest that the processes through which partners form and discuss moral judgments may have important consequences for the relationship. Growing more similar in moral judgments and beliefs about the importance of specific virtues may bring relationship partners closer and smooth their interactions. Conversely, continued disagreements about moral judgments and reasoning could elicit criticism, defensiveness, and heated interactions, all of which could destabilize the relationship. Moreover, if partners are unaware of each other's moral beliefs or virtues, they may inadvertently insult one another or be seen as being unresponsive. Focusing greater theoretical and empirical attention on how couples discuss important moral issues/dilemmas may also provide relationships researchers with new insights into when, how, and why relationships grow or fail.

In conclusion, few of our most important social judgments and decisions happen in social isolation; as Haidt (2001) and Rai and Fiske (2011) indicate, they almost always occur in interpersonal contexts. This makes the relative absence of empirical research on how relationship partners can and do affect one another on moral issues all-the-more surprising. A great deal can be learned by considering what we currently know about relationships, by measuring and modeling the intuitions, judgments, reasoning, and core virtues of *both* relationship partners as they actively make important judgments and decisions, and by measuring the *perceptions* that

one partner has of the other on these key dimensions. Our hope is that this chapter will facilitate

the integration of the morality and relationships literatures so we can better understand and

generate new hypotheses with respect to these important topics.

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Footnotes

1. Paxton and Greene (2010) claim that moral reasoning affects moral judgments by counteracting automatic processing tendencies that may bias judgments. Specifically, they suggest that judgments involving rights and duties occur primarily through intuition processes, whereas utilitarian judgments associated with the promoting "the greater good" tend to be influenced by controlled reasoning. Similar patterns of relational thinking and modeling can also be applied to this alternative model.

Figure 1. Adapted Version of Haidt's (2001) Social Intuitionist Model of Social Judgment
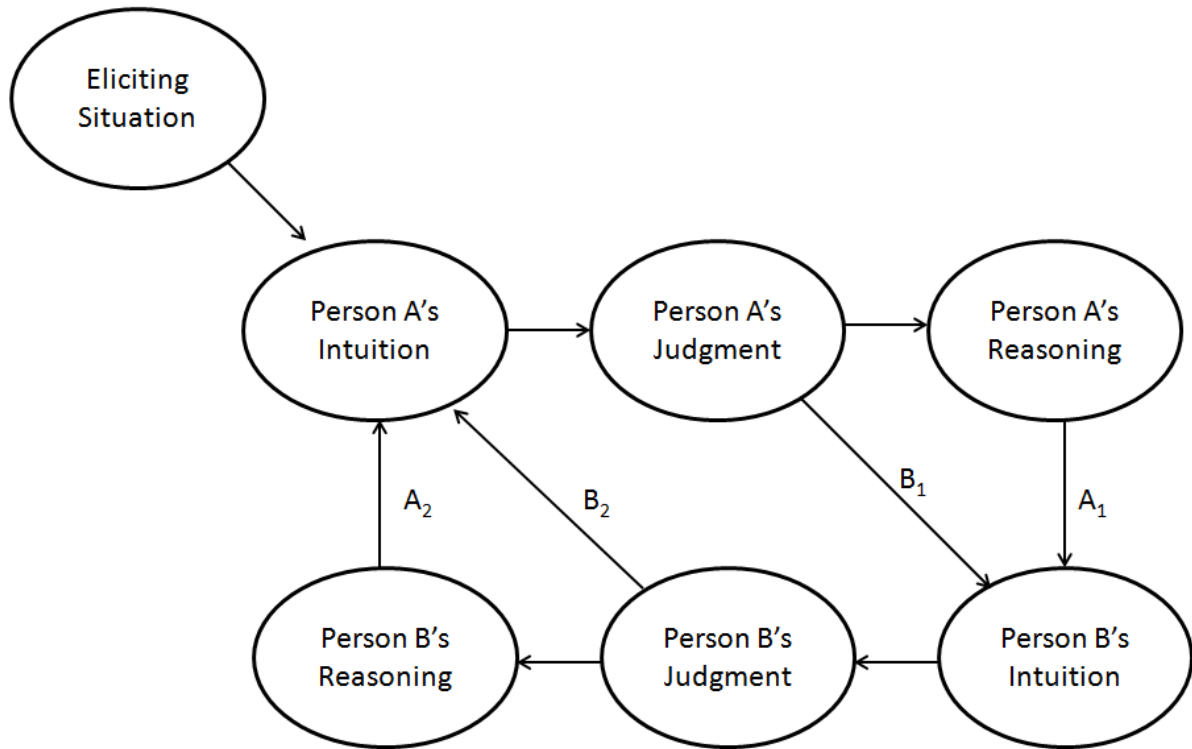
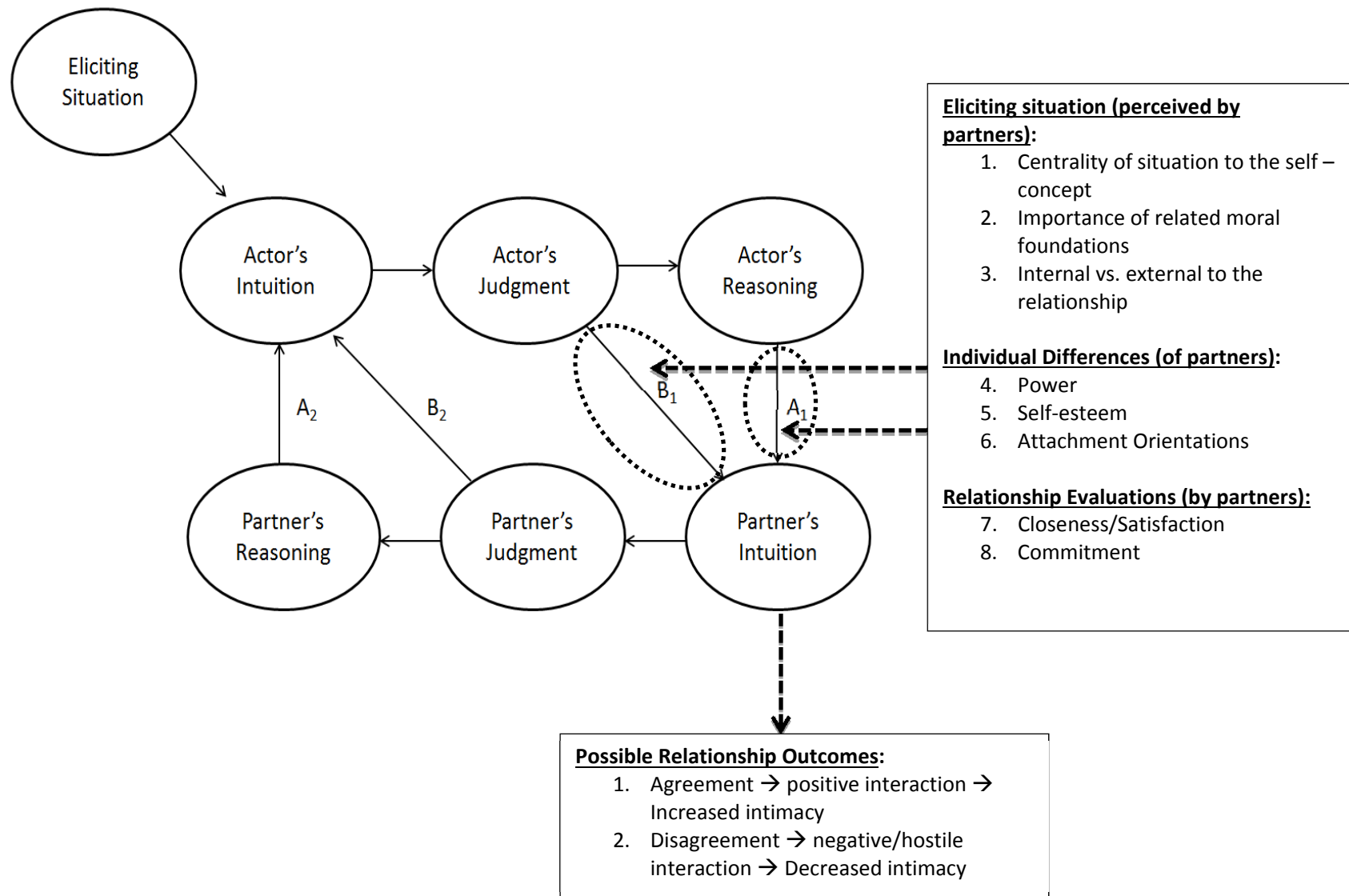Figure 2. Possible Moderating Factors of Haidt's (2001) Interpersonal Pathways in a Relational Context

Figure 3. Possible Effects of Within-Relationship Power Differences on Haidt's (2001) Social Intuitionist Model of Social Judgment