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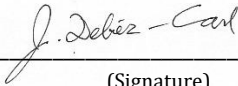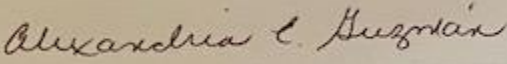https://digitalcommons.newhaven.edu/honorstheses/2

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAVEN
HONORS PROGRAM

## 2019-2020 Honors Thesis

# The Effect of Closeness on Belief in Innocence

# Kerri Kingsley

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Undergraduate Honors Program at the University of New Haven.

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**The Effect of Closeness on Belief of Innocence.**

Kerri Kingsley

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**Abstract**

Many people question how family and friends can stay loyal to convicted criminals or lie to throw off a police investigation; this study proposes that this belief in an accused criminal's innocence has to do with how close a person is to the offender. Using the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS) and a series of scenarios, this study compares how participants' closeness to someone interacts with the participant's belief in that person's innocence when faced with a hypothetical criminal accusation. The study was administered as an online survey using the URCS and a series of questions about participants relationships to two individuals. The data collected shows that closeness to a person has a significant positive correlation to participants belief in that person's innocence. Knowing how people react when someone close to them is accused of a crime could increase the knowledge of how ingroup bias affects people's judgement of those they are intimate with. These results are also potentially helpful to law enforcement during interviews of suspect's loved ones, to people who wish to understand why someone they know continues contact with a convict, and/or therapists who interact with patients suffering due to a loved one being accused and/or convicted of a crime.

**The Effect of Closeness on Belief of Innocence**

Crime and the criminal mind are a huge source of entertainment for people. They love listening to true crime podcasts, watching one of the million different crime shows on television, or reading detective novels. Something about trying to understand the criminal mind seems to fascinate, and confuse, people; they always want to know how someone could commit crime. Yet have you ever heard about an investigation and wondered how the perpetrator's friends and family seem to be often on their side? Do you wonder why those friends and family seem vehement in their denial of the offender's guilt and insist that they are innocent? Literature surrounding human relationships seem to suggest that how close two people are to one another affect their perception of the other person.

An integral part of the human experience is forming relationships with other people. Relationships are complicated things that can look different depending on the people in them and the context of the relationship. One major factor that separates different relationships is the level of relationship closeness. Relationship closeness is a complex idea with a few different interpretations; but generally, throughout the literature on relationship closeness it is defined as the level of intimacy or codependence shared between two people and/or how important the relationship is to those in it (Sternberg, 1986). There are some common relationships in society that can be assumed to have more relationship closeness than others. For example, a mother child relationship is often assumed to be a closer relationship than that of two classmates. Despite this no relationship is guaranteed to have a certain level of closeness as relationship closeness is a continuum that is influenced by many factors, such as influence of decision making and time spent with the other person (Dibble et. al., 2012). This has influenced researchers to develop tests people can take to scale the level of their relationship closeness.

This study takes those scales and the current literature on relationships to see how relationships closeness affect a person's belief in someone's innocence after they have been accused of a crime. The study specifically uses the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS) which is a twelve-point survey that scores a person's interdependence with another individual to produce a closeness score. Participants took a survey where they will complete the URCS twice producing two closeness scores, one for someone they are closer to and one for someone they are not as close to. All of the scores will be averaged out for each group and compared to the corresponding scores from questions asking about belief in innocence. Through this correlational study we looked to see if people are more likely to believe in the innocence of someone, they are close to, like the current relationship literature suggests. The results of this study showed that the closer someone is to a person, the more likely it is that they will believe that person to be innocent of a crime. This can help inform law enforcement, therapists, and the general public why people side with their loved ones even after arrest.

## Literature Review

Relationship closeness is a multifaceted element of the human experience. It is commonly thought to be the emotional ties people share. Sternberg (1986) categorized closeness as an aspect of intimacy, which he defined as the emotional stake two people have in each other. Closeness is also thought to be related to how well two people know each other. Closeness is further explained as the dependence two people feel for one another. This dependence includes the strength of and how often they affect each other. Interdependence does not relate to specific relationship type, rather it is something that is cultivated between any two people. Closeness

varies between people on a continuum and two people's behaviors and thoughts toward each other affect were on the closeness scale they land (Dibble et. al., 2012).

Since how close two people are can affect their opinions of one another, level of closeness could also affect how people perceive criminal actions. The concept of 'belief in innocence' is operationalized as the idea that someone is not culpable for a criminal action. One experiment that looked at husbands' reactions to their wives' criminal conviction found that many of the husbands made excuses for their wives' behavior. The husbands would claim that outside forces forced their otherwise law-abiding wives to commit crimes (Einat et. al., 2015). This denial of responsibility is in line with Matza and Sykes's (1957) techniques of neutralization. They developed popular techniques used by criminals to lessen the guilt felt when committing crimes. One technique is the denial of responsibility that states that criminals can convince themselves that the people and society around them are the real reason for their criminal behavior (Sykes & Matza, 1957). It is possible that it was the closeness between the spouses that pushed the husbands to deny their wives' culpability of any crime even after conviction. Along those same lines people tend to defend their friend's innocence when their friends are accused of a crime, and at times are even so sure of their friends' innocence that they lie for them. In one study where participants were presented with either a stranger or their friend having confessed to a minor crime believed more often that their friend's the confession was coerced and that their friend was actually innocent (Kienzle & Levett, 2018). Another study found that participants were more likely to corroborate the (false) alibi of a friend than that of a stranger (Marion & Burke, 2016).

One recent study developed this idea of preferential bias and how that affects the criminal justice system by looking at theft in family-owned business. It was found that if a thief was

related to the owner of the company than they could expect their punishment to be less severe

than non-kin thieves and that they would not expect to be reported to the police, due to kin

employers being hesitant to believe their relative was stealing and/or not want their relative to

have a criminal record. (O'Brien et. al., 2017). Preferential treatment is one benefit of being

close to people as found by studies on 'in-groups' (defined as groups of people who feel mutual

loyalty, trust, and dependence on one another) (Brewer, 1999). Allport (1957) felt that people

within ingroups are rewarded for their loyalty, rewards which in turn produce continued loyalty.

He gave the examples of food and shelter when you're a child, your family (i.e., an ingroup),

provides for you because you are a part of their group and you stay a part of their group because

they provide for you. These rewards may also be less straightforward than food and shelter, and

more based in perceptions such as a belief in innocence. People are more likely to see those in

their groups as more deserving of help and the benefit of the doubt (Brewer, 1999).

     Crime severity is the perceived seriousness of a criminal offence. Different criminal

actions are perceived with varying degrees of severity. Since perceived crime severity can both

affect and be affected by how close you are to the offender; it will be controlled for in the

analysis of the study's data. Using the National Crime Severity Survey this study will control for

crime severity, so it does not impact the results (Wolfgang, 1985). This study will focus on the

affect that closeness between two people has on one person believing in the other's innocence

after being accused of a crime.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants for this study were undergraduate students in a University Introduction to Psychology course. The participants were required as part of the course requirements in their class to go onto a research study database and choose from a selection of studies which they wanted to participant in. They were given brief descriptions of the surveys to help them make their choice. Those who participated in this study received class credit and were entered into a raffle to win on of two Amazon gift cards.

A total of seventy-five participants took the survey but after screening the data sixty-nine entries were used. Participant entries were not used if the participant was under the age of eighteen or were flagged for giving non sensical answers (i.e., reported that person A was an important part of their life but never thought of them). Participants had to be eighteen years old or older, and of those who participated the ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-eight. The participants included people from different genders, majors, and years of schooling.

### Design

This study is a correlational, within groups design. Participants were given surveys that tested their closeness to two individuals in their lives and then had them answer questions pertaining to potential actions of those individuals. The independent variable is relationship closeness, which is measured by how important one person is too another person. The two levels of the independent variable are the two people (person A and person B) with whom the participant's relationships were tested. When choosing person A participants were prompted to

pick someone they felt close to such as a spouse. For person B the participants were asked to choose someone they were not as close to such as a neighbor. By prompting the participants to choose people in these two categories we were able to easily create a group with a higher closeness score than the other, which was officially determined by averaging each group's closeness score. The dependent variable is belief innocence, which is how likely the participant is to think either person A (close relationship) or B (not close relationship) is to commit a crime. The study controlled for crime severity by using the same crime for both the questions asking about guilt.

To test closeness the study used the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS). This self-report exam looks at a given 12 items to scale the interdependence of two people. Participants were asked questions like "My ____ and I have a strong connection" and "I think about my ____ a lot". Averaging the Likert scale responses from the 12 items, gave a closeness score: the higher the score, the higher degree of interdependence (Dibble et. al., 2012). Because the scale is made up of a small number of questions, the items are purposely directed to capture assessments of cognitive and behavioral dependence within the relationship being tested. Research using the URCS has found the results to be consistent between varying relationship types (parent and child, spouses, stranger, etc.). The research has also found the scale to have a high level of reliability which in turn showed smaller errors and larger effects (Dibble et. al., 2012).

To see how closeness affects belief in innocence participants were asked to read multiple questions about person A and person B (See Appendix A). Two of those questions pertained to someone being accused of stealing a thousand dollars, these were the questions we looked at for our results. Participants were asked to rate their options on a Likert scale of one to seven, one

being guilty and seven being completely innocent. To not lead participants to specific answers, they also read eight other questions, pertaining to the same two people, but about four different mundane activities such as dying one's hair or cooking dinner. Those questions were also used seven-point Likert scales to record the participants opinion. These filler scenarios helped to control for the possibility of participants discovering the study's specific hypothesis. Each person had a total of five questions about them with the other person having five different, but similar questions about the same scenarios.

The crime of stealing a thousand dollars, and its rated severity were drawn from the National Survey of Crime Severity. The severity survey was conducted in order to scale of serious different crimes were perceived by the public. It was a supplement to the National Crime Survey conducted in the 1970s. The survey used 60,000 participants who were asked to rate different crime scenarios. They were given the scenario of someone stealing a bike which had a fixed rating of 10 to use as a reference for their scaling, all the ratings were collected and combined to produce a list of severity scores for various crimes (Wolfgang, 1985). Controlling for crime severity was important as to not run into the possibility of participants believing one crime to be more severe and there for less likely for their close relationship to commit.

**Procedure**

The participants took part in the study online, through survey software. Participants first consented to be a part of the study and then answered some basic demographic questions. They were then prompted to fill out the two URCS, one for someone they felt they were close with, such as a parent or spouse (person A), and one for someone the participant was not as close too, a classmate or neighbor (person B). After filling out both URCS participants then went on to

answer the ten Likert scale questions. The participants were then prompted to submit their

answers. The survey took about fifteen to twenty minutes to complete.
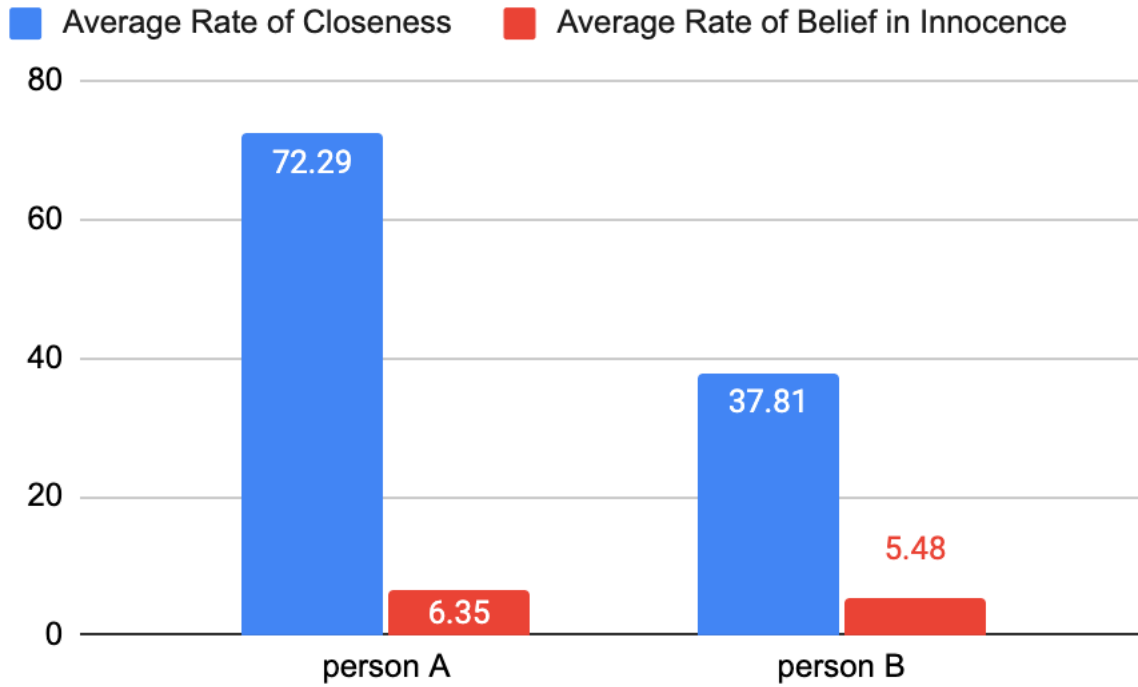
## Results

The data from the surveys were inputted into SPSS and analyzed with a paired samples t-

test and a Wilcoxon singed-rank test. A paired samples t-test is used when the data being

analyzed is given by the sample group of participants but under two different conditions. For this

study the two conditions were innocence level of person A (close relationship) and person B

(less close relationship). The t-test is designed to see if there is significant difference between the

two groups of data being analyzed. There was a significant difference between the innocence

ratings of person A (M= 6.35, SD= 1.235) and person B (M= 5.48, SD= 1.461) showing that

participants rated those they were closer to as more likely to be innocent than those they were not

as close to, t= 4.235, (p<.001).

Despite the significant results, because the data was not normally distributed or

continuous, we decided to run a Wilcoxon signed-rank test. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test is used

to test for the presence of significant difference between two paired data sets. Unlike the t-test

this test is nonparametric and does not assume normality or continuous data. After running the

Wilcoxon signed-rank test on SPSS we found that there was a significant difference between the

levels of belief in innocence of person A and person B (Z= -3.878, p<.001). On average

participants rated their person A to have a higher level of innocence when accused of theft than

their person B when accused of the same crime. Of the total participants 35 ranked person A as

having higher levels of innocence, 25 people had the same innocence scores for person A and

person B, and 9 people actually ranked person B's innocence levels as higher than person A.

To confirm that URCS differences were contributing to differences in the belief in innocence found in the preceding results, we wanted to ensure that the participants were really on average closer to person A than person B. First, averages of the closeness scales for person A and person B for each URCS question were computed for all participants. Then we ran another Wilcoxon signed rank test comparing the individual results of the URCS's for person A and person B. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups (Z= -6.751, p<.001). The means of person A (M= 72.29) and person B (M= 37.81), where higher averages reflect the higher the overall rate of closeness to participants. Of the participants 60 people ranked person A closer to them than person B. 9 people ranked person B closer to them than person A. These results confirmed that person A was ranked closer more often, and this likely accounted for the difference in belief in innocence across both groups. The data shows that a higher rate of closeness is correlated to a higher rate of belief in innocence, and vice versa, as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1

*Average Rates of Closeness and Belief in Innocence in Participants Relationships*



*Note: This figure demonstrates the average scores from the results of the URCS and the average rates of innocence for person A and person B.*

**Discussion**

As previously stated, a person's relationships with someone can alter their perception of them. It has been shown that even after conviction people make excuses for their loved one's actions (Einat et. al., 2015). This study looked at if being close to a person would lower the likelihood of you believing a criminal accusation in the first place. The data from this study shows that there is a correlation between how close two people are and whether it is likely that one of those people would believe the other committed a crime. From the data we can see that the closer a person is to someone, the higher the belief in their innocence is.

These results are in line with the current literature on closeness. Those within a group are often more loyal and trusting of the other members of that group than they are of people outside of that group. They relate to their group members and feel they deserve loyalty Brewer, 1999). This could be a possible reason for why the innocence levels for person A (those the participants were closer to) are higher than the rates for person B (those the participants were not as close to). If you are close to someone, they are a part of your in-group and you will most likely trust them and give them the benefit of the doubt. Another possible explanation for these results is to try to protect one's self. There is a theory that people within a group feel loyalty is rewarded, usually returned loyalty (Allport, 1957). The higher rates of belief in innocence levels seen in this study could be the results of participants feel required to believe in those they are close to because of the idea that the other people would give them the benefit of the doubt in return.

The ranks from the Wilcoxon signed-rank test also show some interesting results. The majority number of people who scored their person A higher in innocence than their person B was in line with the study's hypothesis and findings. The 25 'ties', the instances where participants rated their person A and person B the same in belief of innocence levels could be due to honest belief of that recorded innocence level, cases of fence sitting where the participants felt bad about rating one higher or lower than the other, or possibly cases of participants not taking the questions seriously and were missed during the first screening of the data. The 9 cases where innocence levels are reported higher in a participant's person B than person A are the most interesting. They could have been caused by participants not taking the questions seriously, or it could be a case of someone knowing their loved one well enough to know that they would commit theft. Those nine cases could also possibly match up to the nine people who rated their

person B closer than their person A, even furthering support for the idea that belief in innocence is related to higher closeness.

One possible limitation to this study is that it only asks about one crime, theft of a thousand dollars, so it does not test how people would react if they crime was violent and/or against another person. By asking about only one crime this study cannot say how participants would react to people being accused of a lessor or worse crime. Maybe people would be more willing to believe their loved ones committed a 'lessor' crime such as speeding or not paying a fine. On the opposite side of that people who were willing to believe someone they did not know very well, like a neighbor, can commit theft but may not be willing to believe they could commit double homicide. Since this study only asked about a single crime, we cannot say how universal our results are when applied to other crimes. A way to combat that in the future would be to include more than just one question about crime and differ the severity levels between the questions.

Another limitation to this study is that there is no way of knowing if participants gave truthful responses to the belief in innocence questions or not. The participants could have been truthful in saying that how likely they think person A and person B would be to commit theft or it could be a case of in and out group interactions. The participant could have been acting out of loyalty and giving their loved one's higher innocence score out of expected loyalty just as Allport (1957) theorized. If this occurred, it could have skewed the data and may have a few implications on the study's theory that people are less likely to believe their loved ones committed a crime at all but could offer more evidence to support literature that says people cover for their loved ones regardless of how innocent they believe them to be (Einat et. al., 2015) (Marion & Burke, 2016)

Futures studies could build upon this theory by seeing how closeness correlates to various levels of crime severity. By asking participants about multiple crimes with a range of different levels of severity. This could be done in two different ways. One way would be using a similar format of this study, two people of various closeness levels to the participant, and just ask questions about how likely each person is to be guilty of the crime. This could show if the results of this study are applicable to multiple levels of crime severity, both lesser crimes and more serious violent crimes. Another possible future study could use the same format as the current study, having a person A and person B of different closeness levels, and ask participants to rank the believed innocence levels for multiple crimes; and then regression models could be run to see how closeness affects belief in innocence for a wide range of crimes. Future studies could also only look at a single person who the participant is close to. This study could then ask the participant to rate how likely the person was to commit various crimes but also include an open-ended option where the participant has to explain (i.e., yes, I think my father would be guilty of speeding because he does it regularly, but he would never assault someone). This study design would hopefully give some insight to why the participants believe in their loved ones, if it is a true belief on innocence or compulsory loyalty.

The results of this study could be applied to the criminal justice system, therapy, and general public knowledge. For police investigators it would be helpful to understand that people close to the suspect often might not believe their accusation which could hinder investigations. Though it is important to talk to people close to the suspect to gain information on them, the suspects loved ones may be too clouded by their relationship to properly aid the investigation. This knowledge can not only help police but also the general public in understanding why people sometimes refuse to admit when their loved ones have done something wrong. These results

would also be useful for therapists to remember as they may have clients who have had loved

ones accused and/or convicted of crimes who may be reluctant or outright refusing to accept the

charges. Understanding of closeness plays a role in accepting accusations against loved ones may

be helpful to therapist trying to aid a patient in distress of a conviction.

## Conclusion

People's relationships with others are complex and are made up of many factors that

influence closeness between two people. A person's relationship worth someone, no matter how

close of distant, affects how they perceive them, and has implications related to crime. This study

shows that the closer a person is to another individual seems to be positively correlated to their

belief in that person's innocence. A suspect's loved ones may not be the best person for police to

try to use against them as data shows a person is very likely to believe their loved ones are

innocent over guilty.

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**Appendix A**

Questions About Person A

Answer the following questions about person A.

1.From your knowledge of them how likely is person A to dye their hair an unnatural color?
| 1 Very likely | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Not very likely |

2.Person A is asked to complete a minor task at work. From your knowledge of them rank how likely they are to either complete the task right away or put it off until the last minute.
| 1 Complete it right away | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Put it off until the last minute |

3.Person A is hungry after work. From your knowledge of them how likely is it that they would cook for themselves?
| 1 Not very likely | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Very Likely |

4.Person A has the chance to move for work. From your knowledge of them how likely are they to move?
| 1 Not very likely | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Very likely |

5.Personal A is accused of stealing a thousand dollars from their workplace. From your knowledge of them do you believe they would be innocent or guilty?
| 1 Probably guilty | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Completely innocent |

Questions About Person B

Answer the following questions about Person B.

1.From your knowledge of them, how likely are you to believe in their innocence after Person B is accused of stealing a thousand dollars?
| 1 Probably guilty | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Completely innocent |

2.Person B is offered a promotion, but they would have to move to a new city. From your knowledge of them how likely do you think it is that they take the job?

1 Not very          2               3               4               5               6          7 Very likely
   likely

3.From your knowledge of them would Person B be more likely to eat out for dinner or cook at home?

1 Eat out           2               3               4               5               6          7 Cook at
                                                                                                                           home

4.Person B is going to dye their hair. From your knowledge of them are they more likely to dye it a natural color or an unnatural color? Unnatural 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Natural

1 Unnatural         2               3               4               5               6          7 Natural

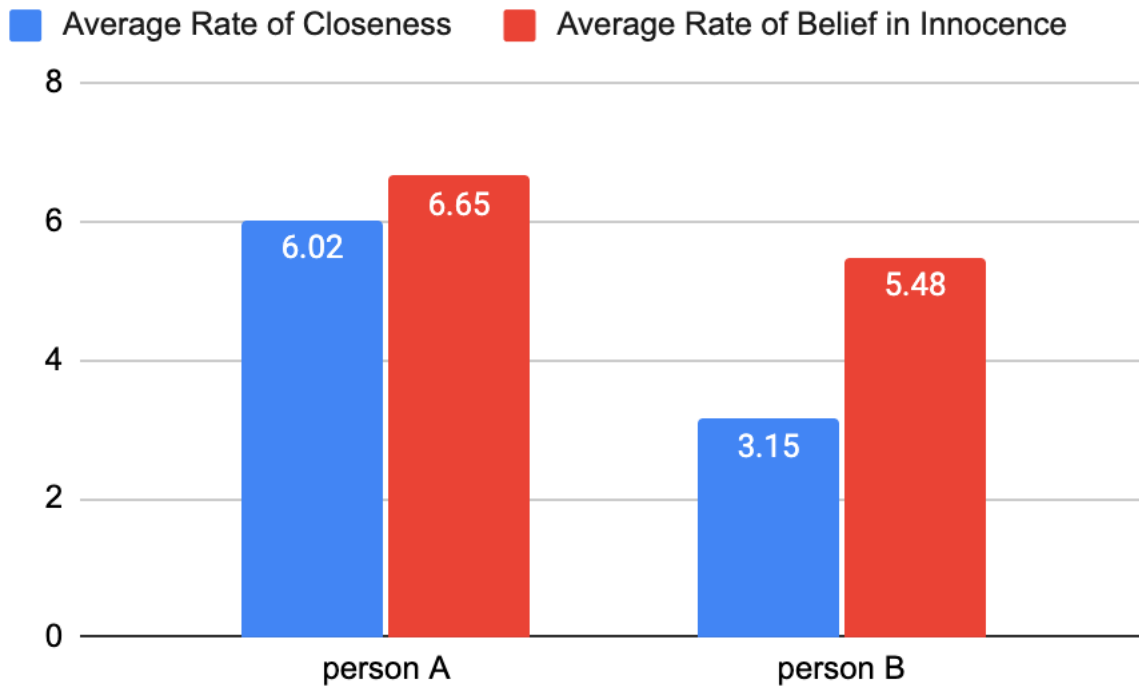5.From your knowledge of them how likely is person B to procrastinate a small task?

1 Put it off        2               3               4               5               6          7 Finish it
                                                                                                                           right away

**Appendix B**

Figure 1

*Average Rates of Closeness and Belief in Innocence in Participants Relationships*



*Note: This figure demonstrates the average scores from the results of the URCS and the average rates of innocence for person A and person B.*