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Inbal Peleg-Koriat, Dana Weimann-Saks & Eran Halperin

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The moderating role of psychological distance on the impact of malleability beliefs on public attitudes toward punishment

Inbal Peleg-Koriat\textsuperscript{a}, Dana Weimann-Saks\textsuperscript{a}, and Eran Halperin\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Criminology and Department of Communication, Yezreel Valley Academic College, Yezreel Valley, Israel; \textsuperscript{b}Psychology Department, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

**ABSTRACT**

The way people perceive and think about crime and punishment is a central aspect of normative culture and formal social control. This study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the role played by malleability beliefs and psychological distance in the public’s punitive attitudes. To address these goals, we employed a 2X2 factorial experimental design, on a random stratified sample, in which we manipulated malleability beliefs about individuals (i.e., belief that personal character is fixed, unmalleable, or belief that character is malleable and can be changed and developed) and psychological distance (i.e., people’s subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self). In order to examine the interactive effect of malleability beliefs and psychological distance on participants’ punitive attitudes, a two-way ANOVA was performed on a sample of 190 participants. Our findings revealed that participants who were exposed to the malleability beliefs condition had a significantly more positive attitude toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration than participants who were exposed to the fixed beliefs condition. Moreover, results revealed significant interaction between the effects of malleability beliefs and psychological distance levels on participants’ attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives.

**KEYWORDS**
malleability; psychological distance; rehabilitation; punitive attitudes; punishment

**Introduction**

In recent years, international crime trends have been relatively stable or declining (United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, 2015). However, this trend has not reduced prison populations (Gazal-Ayal & Roberts, 2019). Additionally, numerous studies show that in some cases punitive policies that encourage widespread use of incarceration do not adequately address all the needs of offenders, victims, and their communities, and do not provide significant deterrence or rehabilitation (Gromet & Darley, 2009; O’Hear, 2006). The benefits of these policies are unclear and the toll in many cases is high (Roberts & Gazal-Ayal, 2013).
Consequently, in recent years, law enforcement authorities and social supervision in many countries have become more aware of alternative methods for dealing with criminal offenses, such as restorative justice and community courts that provide a therapeutic alternative to incarceration (Gal & Dancig-Rosenberg, 2017; Moss et al., 2019). Despite the research insights into the limitations of punitive policies and the benefits of rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration in certain cases, it seems that the public’s positions on this issue are less conclusive (Roberts & Stalans, 2004; Taylor et al., 2012), as described in further detail in the following sections.

**Penal policies and public opinion**

Studies conducted around the world show that retributive punishment is an important act in the public’s sense of justice after a criminal offense has been committed (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Gromet & Darley, 2009), and the public views community-based sanctions as too lenient for serious offenses (Roberts & Hough, 2005). On the other hand, some recent studies reveal that a segment of the public is willing to consider efforts to downsize prisons and support a penal-welfare approach to crime control. Relatedly, research shows that the public is willing to “tolerate” an alternative community-based sanction that provides supportive services for offenders, or at least for nonviolent and drug-abuse offenders (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). People do not always seem to favor incarceration of offenders, but they do want to live in a safe environment (Simon, 2014).

Public opinion indirectly shapes punishment policies, and affects high prison rates by influencing policymakers (Tonry, 2004). Gavrielides (2014) argues that alternatives to prosecution and incarceration, e.g., restorative justice, are unlikely to flourish unless citizens endorse these approaches. Roberts and Stalans (2004) explain why it is important to examine public attitudes toward punitive policies. According to their research, the first reason is that in some alternative criminal procedures, such as restorative justice, the victim and the public play a significant role. The second is that legislators and policymakers often indicate the importance of a policy that is consistent with public views, thereby strengthening public confidence in the law enforcement system.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the complexities of public opinion, it is important to identify the factors that have a significant impact on people’s punitive attitudes. Studies show that there are a variety of factors affecting people’s attitudes toward punishment policies and alternatives to incarceration (Chen & Einat, 2015; Van Camp & Wemmers, 2016). Sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., education, race, age, gender), personal values, causal attribution, victimization experiences, and discrete
emotions (e.g., fear, anger) have all been found to be significant in determining the public’s punitive attitudes (Chen & Einat, 2015; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Roberts & Indermaur, 2007; Sims, 2003). It seems there are numerous factors that can, both consciously and unconsciously, influence the public’s punitive attitudes. In the present research, we wish to introduce another potentially important antecedent, and propose that a person’s implicit theories concerning other people, namely their subjective beliefs about whether people’s attitudes and behaviors are malleable (incremental theory) or fixed (entity theory) (Dweck et al., 1995), play an important role in decision making in the legal context.

Malleability beliefs have been examined in preliminary correlative studies in recent years, and have been found to be associated with attitudes regarding punitiveness (e.g., Rade et al., 2018; Weimann-Saks et al., 2019). However, as far as we know, no experimental study has previously tested the causal relationship between malleability beliefs and punitive attitudes, which is one of the goals of the present study.

**Malleability beliefs and attitudes toward punishment**

Dweck et al. (1995) suggested that there are two assumptions that people make about the malleability of personal character: they believe that personal character is fixed, nonmalleable, or they believe that character is malleable and can be changed and developed. A variety of studies from different disciplines have found that malleability beliefs about individuals, namely the belief that people’s personalities can change, are associated with a lower likelihood of making stereotypical judgments (Rydell et al., 2007), a lower likelihood of showing aggression toward others (Yeager et al., 2013), reduced negative reactions to social adversity (Yeager et al., 2014), and a lower likelihood of recommending punishment and retaliation for others’ wrongdoings (Chiu, Dweck et al., 1997).

Additionally, malleability beliefs have been found to be correlated with people’s tendency to attribute negative or positive behavior to the dynamics of behavior, including the situational context, whereas fixedness beliefs have been found to be correlated with people’s tendency to attribute negative or positive behavior to permanent traits (Dweck et al., 1995). Accordingly, different beliefs about people’s ability to change can lead to different reactions to people’s negative social behavior. People with malleability beliefs are expected to see negative behavior as a challenge, and offer constructive solutions that involve steps to alter negative motivations or situations, such as education or negotiation (Chiu, Dweck et al., 1997). However, for people who understand wrongdoing as emanating from fixed
traits, punishment and retaliation are the favored responses, given the trait judgments they have made of the target (Halperin et al., 2011).

Recently, researchers have begun examining the role of malleability beliefs in the legal context. In our previous correlative study (Weimann-Saks et al., 2019), we found that malleability beliefs correlated with severity assessment of the defendant’s criminal behavior. Our analysis revealed that believing the malleable nature of individuals reduces the likelihood of viewing the defendant’s traits as fixed, which leads to more compassionate legal assessment. Additionally, several recent studies examined the correlation between malleability beliefs and punitive policies. For example, Tam et al. (2013) found that beliefs about the immutability of moral character are associated with the public’s attitudes toward punishment and rehabilitation. People with fixed beliefs made more internal attribution of criminal behavior, which in turn led to stronger punitive tendencies. Rade et al. (2018) found that growth mindsets (incremental beliefs) predicted more positive attitudes toward ex-offenders, which in turn predicted greater public support for reentry.

Although these findings provide preliminary evidence of the association between malleability beliefs and public attitudes toward punitiveness, as always, correlational results raise the possibility of reverse causation, and also the possibility that these effects are confounded with the effects of other, closely related factors. As far as we know, no experimental study has previously tested the causal relationship between malleability beliefs and punitive attitudes, which is examined by the present study for the first time.

Implicit theories are generally stable over time, although recent research on conflicts between groups and individuals has highlighted interventions that can induce an incremental mindset (general belief that people’s personalities change and develop) (Halperin et al., 2011). These studies have also shown that beliefs regarding the malleability of a specific group or people can be indirectly transformed by referring to beliefs about the malleability of groups or people in general (incremental mindset) (Halperin et al., 2011; Rydell et al., 2007). People with more incremental mindsets are more likely to urge others to change bad behaviors and to tackle new opportunities. These interpersonal nudges are instrumental in promoting behavior change and growth (Kammrath & Peetz, 2012). Therefore, there is reason to assume that altering beliefs about people’s malleability in general may be of crucial importance in the efforts to establish public support for a rehabilitative and restorative approach. Thus, the central aim of the present study is to examine whether changing participants’ incremental mindset will increase the potential support for a rehabilitative and restorative approach that aims to address the circumstances and needs that led to the deviant behavior, and encourages offenders to change their behavior.
The study also seeks to reveal possible boundary conditions for the effect of malleability beliefs on the public’s attitude toward punishment and rehabilitation. It proposes examining whether malleability beliefs is a relevant variable when it comes to concrete and realistic decision making, or if it is a significant variable only when people think abstractly about future policy, the implementation of which is doubtful. To examine this question, in the present study we utilized construal level theory (CLT), which originated in a series of articles by Trope, Liberman, and their colleagues (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010; Wakslak et al., 2006).

**Construal level theory (CLT)**

Psychological distance is defined as “a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). CLT states that people’s preferences and evaluations of objects or events are influenced by realistic and perceived distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Psychological distance has four dimensions: time, space, social distance, and probability (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In other words, psychological distance refers to people’s perception of when the event will occur (in the near or distant future), where will it occur (here or elsewhere), whom it will happen to (to other people, to the person themselves, or their relatives), and how likely it is to happen (hypothetical or actual occurrence) (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

CLT suggests that mental representations of objects and events vary depending on their distance from the perceiver. When people psychologically experience objects or events as distant, they are more likely to construct them through an abstract, high-level lens, by focusing, for example, on their aims, causes, and desirability; whereas, when people psychologically experience objects or events as near, they are more likely to construct them through a concrete, low-level lens, by focusing, for example, on their means, consequences, and feasibility (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010; Williams et al., 2014; Yudkin et al., 2020). Abstract (high-level) thinking leads people to appreciate the big picture (global information processing), while concrete (low-level) thinking leads people to appreciate the individual details (local information processing) (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Williams et al., 2014). From a distance perspective, people literally see the whole forest better than the individual trees, while from a close perspective, people see the trees but may find it difficult to appreciate the whole forest (Liberman & Förster, 2009).

As mentioned above, one of the dimensions in CLT is probability. People can think, feel, and act differently about events whose occurrence is realistic (compared to unrealistic or less realistic). In a series of seven
In experiments, Wakslak et al. (2006) examined how probability affects people’s construals of events, and found that reducing an event’s probability leads people to represent the event by its abstract, central, and general features, rather than by its specific, concrete features. In the context of a decision-making process, distant decisions (compared to more proximal decisions) are more likely to be represented in terms of end-states (desirability features) than in terms of concrete means for reaching those end-states. Hence, when psychological distance is reduced, people focus on the “how” aspects of the outcome (“How do I get it?”), and costs become increasingly relevant. On the other hand, when probability is low, people focus more on the “what” aspects of the outcome (“What do I get in the end?”), and they attribute less importance to the costs associated with achieving the final goal (Todorov et al., 2007).

Moreover, research suggests that psychological distance causes the evaluative system to rely on fixed and general sources of information rather than context-dependent information (Ledgerwood, Trope, et al., 2010). For instance, when a person has to make a decision about a policy that will be implemented in the near future, as opposed to one that will be implemented in the distant future, their attitudes and decisions tend to be more susceptible to random social influences (which are context-specific), and less influenced by their ideological values and basic beliefs (which are broad and general) (Ledgerwood, Wakslak, et al., 2010). In other words, individualized information has considerable influence on psychologically close decisions (e.g., a concrete and realistic decision regarding policy change), whereas general or statistical information has considerable influence on psychologically distant decisions (e.g., a future policy whose implementation is doubtful).

Thus, considering all the above, it is evident that the literature has consistently found that when psychological distance is high (e.g., when people need to formulate an attitude regarding a distant change in punitive policies, with low probability of occurrence), people’s decisions will be more influenced by their values and basic beliefs (Ledgerwood & Trope, 2010; Todorov et al., 2007). The present study examines whether the same mechanism exists when the values and basic beliefs are malleability beliefs. In this situation, we assume that malleability beliefs about people, which are an abstract psychological variable relating to a person’s future potential for change, will constitute a significant predictor of the decision outcome. Conversely, when psychological distance is low (e.g., high probability of change in existing punitive policies in the near future), individualized information will be relatively influential. Although psychological distance and malleability beliefs both represent key variables of considerable interest to researchers across cognitive, social, and developmental psychology, to our
knowledge, until now no research has examined the interactive effects of these variables. Thus, this study attempts to examine the interactive effect of two important variables (malleability beliefs and psychological distance) on the public’s attitude in the legal context, and the boundaries of this effect.

**Overview of the present study**

The aim of the present study was to test whether the previously identified correlations between malleability beliefs and punitive attitudes (Maruna & King, 2009; Rade et al. 2018; Tam et al., 2013) are causal. Additionally, we explored the assumption that psychological distance moderates the correlation between malleability beliefs and the participant’s support for rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. To this end, we used a between-participants experimental design consisting of two independent variables (2 x 2)—malleability beliefs (malleable vs. fixed), and psychological distance (close vs. distant). The dependent variable was the participant’s attitude toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. We expected to find that changing participants’ beliefs about the malleability of individuals (people in general, not specifically offenders, relying on the assumption that people would apply the general principle to specific situations, challenges, and individuals) Dweck et al. (1995) would increase the likelihood that they would express more positive attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration.

Moreover, we expected to find that under the condition of low psychological distance (i.e., high probability of change in existing punitive policies in the near future), malleability beliefs would not affect the public’s attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. In contrast, under the condition of high psychological distance (i.e., low probability of change in punitive policies in the near future), participants exposed to experimentally induced malleability beliefs would express more positive attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration than participants exposed to fixedness beliefs.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and ninety participants (89 men and 101 women) took part in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 70 years (M = 42.23, SD = 14.86). All the participants were Jewish, most of them were non-religious (73.2%) and married (59.5%). The sample of respondents was obtained from an online Midgam Project Web Panel, a company that specializes in providing
infrastructure services for internet research, and employs a panel of over 30,000 subjects, representing every geographic and demographic sector in Israel, for the validity of internet questionnaires. The company uses the stratified sampling method based on data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics Israel, 2019), and determines quotas by age and gender. Participants signed up and were paid for their participation ($1.2).

**Materials**

Each participant was asked to read two articles. The participants were made to believe that the articles had been published in well-known journals. In each article, one of the independent variables was manipulated. In addition, participants responded to questionnaires that measured the following variables:

**Malleability manipulation**

The first article aimed to manipulate *malleability beliefs*. To address this aim, we employed an experimental design, manipulating incremental beliefs about people. The manipulation was adapted from Chiu, Hong, et al. (1997). Each participant was given a short article to read that presented either the entity or the incremental theory. The first version emphasized belief in change (incremental theory), and the article’s main message was that, according to recent research, people’s behavior and attitudes can change, and their character is not constant (malleable condition). In the second version, the article emphasized belief in stability (entity theory), and the article’s main message was that, according to recent research, people’s behavior and attitudes are stable and will never change (fixed condition). After reading the article, the participants were asked to answer two reading comprehension questions about the text in order to ensure that they had read it. Only participants who answered the questions correctly continued in the study (two were removed from the study).

**Malleability manipulation check**

The participants were also asked to answer a *malleability beliefs* questionnaire in order to test the manipulation. To assess malleability beliefs about people, we used a 5-item scale ($\alpha = .88$) (rated from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 6, “strongly agree”) based on the scale used by Chiu, Hong, et al. (1997) with some very minor adjustments in style and language. The participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with the five statements regarding people in general, with no items mentioning the legal context or
a specific defendant (e.g., “As much as I hate to admit it, you can’t really change people’s basic characteristics”; “People can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can’t really be changed”).

**Psychological distance manipulation**

To manipulate psychological distance, the participants were asked to read an article reviewing the conclusions of the Israeli Public Committee to Examine Penal Policy and Rehabilitation of Offenders, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Dalia Dorner (2015). The report warned against adopting severe punishment policies, and recommended examining restorative and rehabilitative alternatives to imprisonment, and expanding use of community courts and other therapeutic alternatives to incarceration (Gal & Dancig-Rosenberg, 2017). In one version of the article (low psychological distance condition), after describing the report summary, it was noted that the Knesset (the Israeli legislative branch) is expected to discuss implementation of the recommendations next week, and they are expected to be implemented next month (concrete and close wording). In the second version of the article (high psychological distance condition), after describing the report summary, it was noted that the Knesset’s approval process of the recommendations is expected to take a long time, if at all (vague and distant wording).

**Dependent variable**

To assess attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration, the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire regarding the Dorner Committee Report on punishment policy (reducing use of retributive punishment, and increasing community-based rehabilitative alternatives to imprisonment). To measure agreement with the Dorner Committee’s punishment policy, we used a 4-item scale ($\alpha = .89$). The participants were asked to answer four questions on a 1–5 scale (rated from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 5, “strongly agree”) (“I think that the findings of the Dorner Committee supporting reduction of prison sentences and examining alternatives to imprisonment are correct”; “The findings of the Dorner Committees supporting reduction of prison sentences and examining alternatives to imprisonment should be taken with a grain of salt”; “I would be happy if the findings of the Dorner Committee supporting a reduction in prison sentences and examining alternatives to imprisonment were accepted and indeed changed reality”; “I believe that a significant part of the Dorner Committee findings supporting reduction of prison sentences and examining alternatives to imprisonment are incorrect”).
**Procedure**

The participants read two articles (each article contained 700–740 words, and in each article we manipulated one independent variable). By combining the conditions, we created four experimental groups (any possible combination of the two independent variables). After reading each article, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire.

We manipulated the two independent variables using two separate texts in order to examine the manipulation effect of each variable. By means of the first article, we manipulated malleability beliefs, and after reading the text, the participants responded to a questionnaire that examined the effect of the manipulation. After testing the effects of the manipulation of the first variable, the participants were asked to read the second article, which included manipulation of the second variable, psychological distance. The study was conducted anonymously, and the response time of the entire study was about 20 min. Approval for the present study was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee.

**Results**

**Manipulation check**

In order to test whether the malleability manipulation indeed changed malleability beliefs in the desired direction, an independent \( t \)-test was conducted. A significant difference was found in perceived malleability between the conditions, \( t(188) = -6.61, p < .001 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.97 \). Participants who were exposed to the malleable condition expressed a higher level of perceived malleability (\( M = 4.31, SD = 1.03 \)) than participants who were exposed to the fixed condition (\( M = 3.29, SD = 1.08 \)) (see Table 1).

**Preliminary analysis**

The study was designed as a randomly parallel four-group randomized controlled trial. No differences were found between the groups in demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological distance</th>
<th>Malleability</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Perceived malleability M(Sd)</th>
<th>Attitudes M(Sd)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.14 (1.04)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malleable</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.39 (1.10)</td>
<td>2.96 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3.79 (1.24)</td>
<td>2.89 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3.44 (1.10)</td>
<td>2.48 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malleable</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4.23 (0.97)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3.85 (1.11)</td>
<td>2.83 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>190</td>
<td>3.82 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.86 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
variables, such as age ($F(3,186) = 0.115, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0.002$) and number of children ($F(3,186) = 0.302, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0.004$). Additionally, no significant correlations were found between the condition and the qualitative variables: level of religiosity ($x^2(9) = 7.73, rc = .11, p > .05$), level of education ($x^2(6) = 5.64, rc = .24, p > .05$), and marital status ($x^2(9) = 4.71, rc = .09, p > .05$).

**Main analysis: hypotheses testing**

In order to examine the interactive effect of malleability beliefs and psychological distance on the participants’ attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives, a two-way ANOVA was run on a sample of 190 participants. Simple main effects showed that participants who were exposed to the malleable condition had a significantly more positive attitude toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration ($M = 3.06, SD = 0.98$) than participants who were exposed to the fixed beliefs condition ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 185) = 7.48, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.043$. No significant simple main effect was found between psychological distance conditions, $F(1, 185) = 0.20, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0.001$. Moreover, as we hypothesized, a significant interaction was found between the effects of malleability beliefs and psychological distance levels on participants’ attitudes toward the punishment policy in the Dorner Committee Report, $F(1, 185) = 3.84, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.018$. Thus, for participants in the high psychological distance condition, a significant difference was found between the malleability beliefs condition ($M = 3.16, SD = 0.88$) and the fixed condition ($M = 2.48, SD = 0.97$), $t(96) = -3.60, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.74$. For participants in the low distance condition, no significant difference was found between the malleability beliefs condition ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.01$) and the fixed condition ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.08$), $t(90) = -0.69, p > .05$, Cohen’s $d = -0.14$ (see Figure 1).

**Discussion**

The main goals of the present study were: (a) to provide empirical support for a causal, not only correlational, association between malleability beliefs and punitive attitudes; and (b) to identify some boundary conditions for the above association. Our findings revealed a significant main effect of malleability beliefs on participants’ attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. Participants who were exposed to the malleability beliefs condition had a significantly more positive attitude toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration than participants who were exposed to the fixed beliefs condition. Another
A possible explanation for this interesting finding is that people in a low-distance condition, as Todorov et al. (2007) showed, focus more on the specific implications of the expected change (local information processing), namely on the costs, risks, and the effort they need to invest here and now (e.g., invest more money in rehabilitation in the short term, or fear that, in the near future, criminals will be released from prison), and therefore general beliefs about people’s ability to change in the future serve as a less relevant consideration in the decision-making process. In contrast, people in a high-distance condition think more abstractly (global information processing) and are less sensitive to concrete details when making decisions; costs
and risks become less relevant, and ends-related features become more salient than means-related features. In this situation, malleability beliefs about people, which are an abstract psychological construct that relates to a person’s future potential for change, constitute a significant predictor of the decision outcome. Thus, growth mindsets (incremental beliefs) predicted more positive attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives only in the latter distance condition.

On the theoretical level, our results enable new insights into the psychological processes involved in shaping attitudes toward punishment and its alternatives. From the perspective of psychological research, to our knowledge, the present study is the first to test the interactive effects of entity and incremental theories (Dweck et al., 1995) on the one hand, and psychological distance on the other. As found in a previous study (Halperin et al., 2011), inducing an incremental mindset is an effective indirect strategy for promoting conciliatory solutions. The present study expands this insight by examining the effects of an incremental mindset on realistic and critical attitude-shaping processes that can affect people and society not only in theory, but in practice as well.

From the perspective of criminological research, the attempt to learn about the specific psychological processes that influence the public’s punitive attitudes should help us to better understand the nature of public attitudes and their influence on punitive policies. Insights into psychological research can help legal and criminological scholars better calibrate penal policies to human realities, and foster a desired set of beliefs in the public. Belief in a person’s ability to change and develop might dramatically shape the public’s point of view when forming an attitude toward the desired policy for contending with crime. However, the present study also found that the perception of psychological distance, measured here in terms of probability and time (Todorov et al., 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wakslak et al., 2006), moderates the effect of malleability beliefs on public attitudes. Thus, under the condition of low psychological distance, malleability beliefs will not affect public attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. Within this domain, these relatively simple elements add a novel dimension to the existing framework.

From a more practical standpoint, as argued above, despite very strong intuitions that exist in the public, policy analysts and researchers have long agreed that there is no credible evidence that severe punishment policies have significant deterrent effects; the severity of the outcome offers little in terms of crime prevention through deterrence (Roberts & Gazal-Ayal, 2013; Tonry, 2009). Significant support for these arguments was recently provided by the Israeli Public Committee to Examine Penal Policy and Rehabilitation of Offenders (Dorner 2015).
The results of this study can contribute to the important challenge facing policymakers to increase public support for penal policies that are consistent with the current approach in the literature, and which will be more compromising and restorative (Roberts & Gazal-Ayal, 2013; Tonry, 2009). At the same time, it is important to emphasize that although rehabilitative and restorative approaches are often proposed as an alternative to the traditional criminal justice system, for some offenders there is still no appropriate alternative to imprisonment. Consequently, an appropriate solution in many instances is to bring rehabilitative and restorative approaches into the prisons (Miers, 2001; Peleg-Koriat & Weimann-Saks, 2019). The findings of this study show that we can influence public attitudes through psychoeducation. Our successful use of a relatively simple manipulation may serve as a basis for a variety of long-term interventions and educational programs aimed at promoting more positive attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration. Furthermore, the findings provide a new persuasion technique that can help policymakers attempting to soften public attitudes, and convince the public that since defendants can be rehabilitated, severe punishment is undesirable.

Alongside the present study’s significant contributions, it also has some clear limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample was limited. The participants were all from Israel. Israeli public discourse is characterized by very low awareness of alternatives to imprisonment (Peleg-Koriat & Weimann-Saks, 2019). It would be valuable to conduct a similar survey with participants from different countries with different legal systems and penal norms. Second, the present study is based on the assumption that people have ingrained and basic beliefs about the malleability of personal character, and that psychological distance, which is a more dynamic variable, will determine the boundaries by which these basic beliefs influence people’s particular decisions. Therefore, in the present study we considered it appropriate to manipulate the variables in the order which is consistent with the theoretical model—that is, first the fundamental dispositional beliefs (i.e., malleability beliefs), and then the dynamic and constant variable (i.e., psychological distance). However, in further studies it would be interesting to manipulate the variables in a different order. Finally, the present study examined general attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives to incarceration without referring to the existing stigmas toward certain groups of offenders. For example, previous studies have found that the public is far less welcoming of probably dangerous offenders (e.g., sex offenders and murderers) into their communities than nonviolent offenders (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Immerwahr & Johnson, 2002). In future research, it would be interesting to examine the model with reference to different groups of offenders.
In summary, the present study attempts to map the effects of malleability beliefs and psychological distance on attitudes toward rehabilitative and restorative alternatives. It adds to existing literature by examining the limits of the influence of malleability beliefs on public attitudes, and gaining a better understanding of the relationship between the variables and conditions in which this relationship exists (or not).

Note

1. A power analysis, run through GPower software 3.1.9.2 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), accounted for the appropriateness of our sample size (N = 190), with α = .05, power = .80, and a medium effect size (Cohen’s f ≥ .25).

References


