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SCIENCE BRIEF

Are we good (enough)?

Defining and defending the morality of our groups.

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For a variety of reasons, including the development of national and international law and the availability of information through electronic media, there is greater accountability for group immorality today. The world now has a universal declaration of human rights, truth and reconciliation commissions, United Nations sanctions and the international criminal court to uphold the moral standards of the "international community" as it is now called. More informally, there are consumer campaigns against "unethical" companies, protests against "corrupt" banks and brokerages, and the public pillorying of "dishonest" political, business and other leaders.

In this climate, it is difficult to be indifferent to the morality of the groups to which we belong. Being part of a family, organization, town or country accused of immorality can raise serious questions about our own integrity as people wonder if the group's shortcomings are reflected in us. And questioning the morality of our own group can compromise our membership in it, as a sense of distrust makes it difficult to live and work with others. Thus, the morality of our groups (i.e., their fairness, honesty, trustworthiness) has important social and psychological implications for us that recent theory and research aims to understand (for reviews, see Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012; Leach, Bilali, & Pagliaro, 2014).

Morality Matters

For a long time in psychology, it was assumed that individuals were more concerned about their group's power, status and achievement, rather than their morality (for discussions, see Brambilla & Leach, in press; Leach et al., 2014; Wojciszke, 2005). This followed from the presumption that material wealth translated directly into the physical and psychological health that people seek. Recently, however, it has become clear that the psychological benefits of material wealth are less obvious than were presumed (Diener, 2000). For example, in wealthy countries, the rise in average income in the last few decades has led to little increase in individuals' happiness. As important as money is, people around the world report that their happiness is more important and valuable than money (Diener, 2000). Indeed, large-scale cross-cultural studies show that most people rate moral values (like honesty, helpfulness and justice) as much more important than achievement or power and status (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001).

Group Morality

In Leach, Ellemers & Barreto (2007), we aimed to provide comprehensive evidence that the morality of our groups matters to us. In addition to showing that people say that the honesty and trustworthiness of their groups matters more to them than their

competence or sociability, we examined how much morality matters with more subtle methods. For example, in several studies, we asked participants to indicate how much an important in-group (e.g., their family, their university, their home town) possessed a set of traits, some of which were clearly moral (i.e., sincere, honest, trustworthy) and some of which were about the group's competence (e.g., intelligent, skilled) and sociability (e.g., warm, friendly). We then used factor analysis to examine what percentage of the overall positivity in the traits ascribed to in-groups was based in moral and non-moral factors. Across studies, it was the moral traits ascribed to the in-group that were most strongly associated with the positivity in individuals' views of their in-group and their identification with the in-group. Thus, the more that people saw the group as an important and positive part of themselves, the more they described the group as moral. Positive identification was less strongly and less consistently linked to viewing the in-group as competent or as sociable. People appeared to be most psychologically invested in viewing their groups as moral, rather than intelligent, skilled, warm or friendly.

Importantly, Leach et al. (2007) also provided experimental evidence of the link between the morality of the group and positive feeling about it. In two experiments, we presented students with an ostensible research report showing that their peers were either more or less academically honest than students at a rival university. Belonging to a more moral group led individuals to feel greater pride and less shame. In addition, being more moral led individuals to emphasize their similarity to the group. Emphasizing one's similarity to the group is one way to share in the group's morality by making it more of one's own. Just as we can emphasize our membership in a successful local team by wearing its colors, we can "bask in the reflected glory" of a moral group by seeing ourselves as a central part of the group. On the other hand, evidence that the in-group was less moral led to opposite responses — less pride, more shame and less perceived similarity to the group as a whole. Because immoral groups reflect poorly on us as members, we feel ashamed of them and try to distance ourselves from them when we can (for a review, see Leach et al., 2014).

Although it is only recently that peoples' morality has been seen as mattering as much or more than their power, status and achievement, psychology has long acknowledged that people care about other peoples' morality (for reviews, see Leach et al., 2014; Wojciszke, 2005). We pay close attention to other peoples' honesty, trustworthiness and fairness because it enables us to decide whether to treat them as friend or foe. Indeed, several studies by Todorov and collaborators show that people judge politicians' and others' trustworthiness in a one-tenth of a second scan of their faces (e.g., Willis & Todorov, 2006).

Decades of research show that our inferences regarding peoples' morality are more far-reaching, long-lasting and difficult to change than inferences regarding other characteristics such as power and achievement (for reviews, see Brambilla & Leach, in press; Leach et al., 2014). One lie is worth a thousand frowns, or thereabouts. This is because we infer that it is liars who lie. In contrast, anyone can be cold or less than clever on occasion.

For much the same reason that others' morality matters to us, our own morality matters a great deal. Indeed, we can infer a great deal about who we are as people from our own morality. To a greater degree than evidence of our incompetence or coldness, evidence of our immorality suggests that we may have an immoral character. Thus, moral acts are meaningful.

Also, our morality is important to us because we are well aware that morality is the glue that holds social relations together. The kind of interdependence enabled by groups and other close relations requires some basic trust in the morality of the actors involved if individuals are to cooperate for mutual benefit (de Waal, 1996). From troops of chimpanzees to human families, companies and countries, groups can only operate as collective enterprises if their members have some shared basis for cooperation (for a discussion, see Leach et al., 2014). This is morality at its simplest. To trust others, and to be trusted by others, we must maintain a reputation for being moral and we must have a sense that group members have a shared sense of the "rules of the game" (see Leach et al., 2014). For instance, Pagliaro, Ellemers, and Barreto (2011) showed that individuals follow norms of being moral in a group partly because they believe that being moral earns them the respect of their fellow members. Without earning this respect for being a moral member of the group, individuals could not expect the care and cooperation that the group provides its members in good standing (see also de Waal, 1996).

Because morality is a social glue, moral norms within groups are powerful bases for individual action in support of the group. We examined this in Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto & Leach (2008). In two experiments, we led participants to believe that they were part of an experimentally-created group of "inductive thinkers" who had to work together on organizational tasks in competition with another group. In addition, we encouraged participants to work hard to improve their performance because they had performed worse than the other group in the initial tasks. When we also led participants to believe that their fellow group members expected them to work hard for the benefit of the group because it was the "moral" thing to do, participants more quickly and more often chose to work for the benefit for the group than for their individual benefit. Thus, establishing a moral norm for the group encouraged greater self-sacrifice for the benefit of the group. Something similar appears to happen in many groups as individuals are asked to sacrifice their time, energy, labor and sometimes even their lives, because it is the right thing to do to achieve the greater good. Injunctives for self-sacrifice based in power, status and achievement are less compelling bases for individual action on behalf of the group. In fact, in Ellemers et al. establishing a norm that working on the group's

behalf was smart produced less willingness to self-sacrifice for the group. In a third experiment, this same pattern was obtained in a study of lower-status Southern Italians who were more willing to work collectively to improve the group's status when they were led to believe that other group members believed collective improvement to be the more moral, rather than smart, course of action. There are other examples of materially disadvantaged groups working together to improve their lot in life because it is the right thing to do, rather than the smart or lucrative thing to do. Here too our morality matters.

Challenges to Our Morality

Establishing that morality is central to how people think and feel about their groups, as well as how they act within their groups, in no way suggests that groups are especially moral in practice. In fact, one can expect just the opposite. Because we are so invested — psychologically and socially — in the morality of our groups, we are likely to resist evidence to the contrary. Like many other flattering views of ourselves, believing that we are moral serves as a theory that biases our interpretation of relevant evidence and thus protects that part of our identity and self-esteem based in our perceived morality (for a review, see Leach et al., 2014). This is likely why there is so little explicit acknowledgement of past and present in-group immorality around the world. In fact, in a recent review, Leach, Bou Zeineddine & Cehajic-Clancy (2013) found little outright acknowledgement of in-group wrongdoing even in egregious cases of genocide and other mass violence. And little shame and guilt was openly expressed about such wrongdoing. Instead, in many instances, members define their group's acts as justified, accidental, unforeseen or as otherwise amoral, rather than immoral. Or the perpetrators are seen as a lunatic fringe of the in-group, unrepresentative of the group as whole or irrelevant to the individual member whose morality is untainted by the acts of distant others.

On those rare occasions when group members feel bad about acknowledged in-group immorality, it can have important implications. Gausel, Leach, Vignoles & Brown (2012) examined this in two studies of Norwegians' responses to being confronted with facts regarding the country's large-scale discrimination against so-called Gypsies. Those Norwegians who were most concerned about the condemnation that the in-group might receive from the international community most wanted to avoid the issue by covering it up and not thinking about it. This was especially true among those who saw themselves as most similar to Norwegians as a whole and thus were most personally implicated in the country's obvious immorality. In contrast, those who were most concerned with the in-group's moral failing were most ashamed and most wanted to express contrition to the victims. This contrition was associated with wanting to make amends by compensating the victims financially and otherwise. In other words, being made to face undeniable in-group immorality led to two opposing reactions — a self-defensive avoidance and a pro-social approach.

Future work will have to explain what leads to these two different orientations toward challenges to our morality. Believing that our immorality can be redressed by improving ourselves and by improving the damage we have done may be important to taking on the serious challenge that immorality presents to our self-image and to our reputation (Leach et al., 2014). As we all fail morally, at some time or other, it is important that we understand what allows us to face such failure head on and what drives us into the shadows in an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of not being good (enough).

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