Initial Impressions Determine Behaviours: Morality Predicts the Willingness to Help Newcomers

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Abstract Prior research has demonstrated the impact of morality (vs. competence) information for impression formation. This study examines behavioral implications of people's initial impressions based on information about their morality vs. competence in a workplace. School teachers and employees ($N = 79$) were asked to form an impression of a new school manager (i.e. a prospective boss), who was presented as High vs. Low in Morality and High vs. Low in Competence. Results showed that morality information rather than competence information determined initial emotional responses to the new manager, which mediated willingness to help the newcomer adjust in task and social contexts. Results are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications and future research directions are outlined.

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During the past decades social psychology has addressed the social implications of morality in interpersonal relations and group processes (Pagliaro 2012; see also Haidt and Kesebir 2010). This research has examined the relationship between moral reasoning and judgment (e.g., Forte 2004; Ruffy 1981; Weber and McGivern 2010), as well as the emotions elicited by moral characteristics (Gausel and Leach 2011; Rozin et al. 1999). As a result, researchers have discovered the central role of morality in social judgment (see Brambilla et al. 2011; Leach et al. 2007). This is evident, for instance from the importance of moral judgments in in-group evaluations (Ellemers et al. 2011; Leach et al. 2007), self-evaluations (Mosquera et al. 2002; see also the *holier than thou* effect; Epley and Dunning 2000), group norms (Ellemers et al. 2008; Pagliaro et al. 2011), in forming impressions of other individuals or groups (Brambilla et al. 2011; Brambilla et al., 2012), in the endorsement of stereotypes (Leach et al. 2008), and in the management education and development (Maclagan 1990; Maclagan and Snell 1992). These different studies converge to demonstrate the prominence of morality over other evaluative dimensions in determining the social judgments of individuals and groups (for recent reviews, see Ellemers and van den Bos in press; Leach et al. in press; Pagliaro 2012). The present research aims to extend prior studies illustrating the importance of morality for impression formation (Brambilla et al., 2011, 2012). Specifically, we aim to investigate whether information about morality and the initial emotional response this elicits also impacts on subsequent behavioral intentions towards the target, in this case the willingness to help and support a newcomer at work.

Morality and Impression Formation

The way people form impressions of other individuals and groups are a central issue in social psychology (see for instance Neuberg and Fiske 1987; Reeder and Brewer 1979). There is a substantial body of research showing that person and group impressions can be organized along two central evaluative dimensions, namely competence and warmth (for a recent review, see for instance Abele et al. 2008). Although different labels have been used to refer to these two dimensions, depending on the specific theoretical approach that was used—e.g. agency vs. communion, task vs. socio-emotional, instrumental vs. expressive, or competence vs. warmth—there is a common understanding of the general distinction between the two. That is, the dimension that researchers referred to as agency, task-orientedness, instrumentality or competence usually incorporates characteristics indicative of human *power*, referring to the ability to achieve desired goals. By contrast, the characteristics indicative of human *benevolence*, indicating the way in which people tend to interact with others, are usually encompassed in what has been referred to as communion, socio-emotional orientedness, expressiveness, or warmth (Leach et al. 2007). The distinction between these two fundamental dimensions of social judgment (Abele et al. 2008) has been fruitfully applied to the study of the way people form global impressions of social targets (e.g. Brambilla et al. 2011, 2012; De Bruin and Van Lange 1999, 2000; Martijn et al. 1992; Vonk 1996; Phalet and Poppe 1997; Wojciszke 2005). As a result of these efforts, there is an impressive amount of research to show that warmth (rather than competence) is primary when people form a global evaluation of others (e.g. De Bruin and Van Lange 1999, 2000; Martijn et al. 1992; Vonk 1996; Wojciszke et al. 1998).

Recently it was argued (Leach et al. 2007) that the dimension of warmth often encompasses traits associated with sociability (such as being helpful and kind) as well as traits indicating morality (such as honesty and trustworthiness; Anderson and Sedikides 1991; Trafimow and Trafimow 1999). Accordingly, Leach et al. (2007) empirically demonstrated that the dimension of warmth actually encompasses two distinct evaluative clusters, and that morality judgments can be reliably differentiated from sociability judgments. Furthermore, it was demonstrated across different groups, cultural contexts, and research methodologies that morality (rather than competence or sociability) is a primary basis of group pride and identification. As a result, for instance, perceived organizational morality was found to enhance employees' feelings of pride in the organization, and predicted their work satisfaction and commitment (Ellemers et al. 2011).

Applying this distinction to the study of impression formation, Brambilla et al. (2011, 2012) examined the impact of information relevant to the morality of unknown others, compared to information concerning their sociability and competence. In a series of experiments (Brambilla et al. 2011) participants showed a significant tendency to select more morality than sociability and competence information when asked to choose traits that would help them form an impression of an unknown other. Similarly, Brambilla et al. (2012) showed that global impressions of a new group (i.e. a fictitious immigrant group) primarily depend on information about the morality of this group, while they are less influenced by information about the group's competence or sociability.

Interdependence or Emotional Approach–Avoidance?

In an effort to explain why people look primarily at morality (rather than competence and sociability) when forming a global impression of others, researchers usually refers to a functionalist hypothesis (e.g. Brambilla et al. 2011; Cuddy et al. 2008). According to this perspective, people attend to morality information in social interactions because they are primarily interested in understanding whether the behavioral intentions of the other party (which can be an individual or a group) are beneficial or harmful for them. Arguably, this judgment should guide subsequent behaviour towards the other party, in terms for instance of approach–avoidance tendencies. This is illustrated by research on behaviour in social dilemma situations. For instance, De Bruin and Van Lange (1999) showed that information about the other person's morality not only had a greater influence on their expected cooperativeness than information about the other party's intelligence, but also led participants to behave more cooperatively towards the moral than the intelligent partner. In a similar vein, it has been shown that the perceived trustworthiness of an in-group is a strong determinant of individuals' willingness to cooperate with other members of the group (for reviews, see Skitka 2003; Tyler and Blader 2003).

We take this reasoning one step further, and argue that—even when people are not directly dependent on another person—their behavioural intentions will be driven by the perceived morality of the other party rather than for instance their competence. That is, we predict that information regarding the morality of another person determines initial emotional responses, and these in turn predict the tendency to behave cooperatively towards them. Empirical evidence supports our rationale that information about morality—but not competence—is likely to elicit an initial emotional approach vs. avoidance response. Neuroimaging findings show that inferences of morality information—such as, for instance, trustworthiness—are uniquely related to the activity of the amygdala, the brain structure involved in the detection of potentially harmful, stimuli (Winston

et al. 2002). Moreover, functional neuroimaging studies show that people are highly attentive to facial information indicating trustworthiness (Willis and Todorov 2006). Individuals are able to infer trustworthiness very quickly (in less than 2 s), while they take more time to judge non-moral traits, such as likeability and competence (Willis and Todorov 2006), thus confirming the inferential importance of trustworthiness. The idea that information about the morality of another person is likely to elicit stronger emotional responses than competence-related information is also suggested by those works which have argued that moral judgments have more far-reaching social implications than competence judgements, causing people to be more vigilant to (prospective) members of their group that might be lacking in morality than to those lacking in competence (Ellemers and Van den Bos in press; Leach et al. in press; see also Giner-Sorolla 2012). Taken together, these works seem to sustain our main rationale that morality (rather than competence) is a primary determinant of emotional reactions towards a specific target and, subsequently, elicits behavioral responses.

The Present Research

The present research focuses on the impact of morality (vs. competence) information about a social target on impression formation and behavioural tendencies in a real applied workplace. Specifically, we assess initial emotional responses and the willingness to help the other person as relevant indicators of these processes. We examine this in the context of workers welcoming a newcomer at work, as this represents a situation in which participants are not directly dependent on the actions of the other person for their own outcomes. This allows us to move beyond prior research testing explanations based on interpersonal exchange and interdependence. That is, we aim to test whether initial emotional responses guide behavioural approach vs. avoidance tendencies (in this case, the willingness to engage in work-related and social activities that help the newcomer adjust to the new situation). This extends prior research on the impact of morality in interdependence situations (De Bruin and Van Lange 1999), as well as previous work showing the importance of morality information for impression formation (Brambilla et al. 2012). Specifically, we predict that—when information about the morality as well as the competence of an unknown target is available—information about morality determines initial emotional responses (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, morality information should also be the primary predictor of people's willingness to help the other person (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we hypothesise that the initial emotional responses mediate the effect of morality

information on people's behavioural approach vs. avoidance tendencies (Hypothesis 3).

We examine these predictions in an applied context, where a sample of school teachers and employees evaluates a newcomer in their organization, and expresses their willingness to engage in work-related and social activities that would help the newcomer adjust to the new situation. Morality emerged as an important dimension in the workplace with regards, for instance, the decision taken by the managers (Forte 2004; Weber and McGivern 2010), the relationship between business moral values of supervisors and subordinates (Jiang et al. 2011), and the identification with the organization itself (Ellemers et al. 2011). Showing the primacy of morality in a real organizational context, would extend the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from prior evidence that was obtained under more controlled and artificial circumstances with student participants (Brambilla et al. 2011, 2012). In addition, the present research aims to provide insights of practical interest to the way people establish supportive and cooperative relations with newcomers at work.

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 79 Italian school teachers and school employees (mean age = 40.64; SD = 10.03), voluntarily participated in this study. Teachers and employees were recruited in different public schools—primary and middle schools—located in the centre of Italy (namely, in the Region Abruzzo). Each school welcomed an average of about 600 students. The number of teachers and employees of the schools that participated in the study ranged from a minimum of 50 to a maximum of 100. The organizational structure consisted of a general manager, an administrative secretary, the body of employees and teachers.

Materials and Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment the researcher told participants that they were participating in a study on impression formation. Participants were asked to imagine that a new school manager will come to their school in the near future. We devised a 2 (*morality*: high vs. low) × 2 (*competence*: high vs. low) between-participants design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Each participant was provided with information regarding both morality and competence dimensions. To manipulate morality and competence we used six traits that were pre-tested in prior research (Brambilla et al. 2012; Leach et al. 2007) as being balanced in terms of favourability

while clearly referring to either morality or competence. Thus, depending on the experimental condition, the school manager was described as either high or low in morality (i.e. honest, sincere, and trustworthy) or competence (i.e. intelligent, competent, and skilful). Following the procedure developed by Brambilla et al. (2012), participants were asked to anticipate that a new school manager would come to work at their school in the near future. They were told that information was available about the degree to which the school manager has a number of characteristics. Participants then were presented with a table containing the different trait labels referring to competence and morality. The extent to which the school manager allegedly possessed these traits was indicated by marking each trait "high" or "low" depending on experimental condition (see Appendix for the full scenario). After they had received this information, participants reported their initial emotional response to the target. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they felt: *affection*, *hostility*, *hatred*, and *suspicion* towards the target (alpha = .75). Negative items were reverse-scored to create an index reflecting the positivity of participants' emotional responses, as pre-tested and validated in previous research (see Brambilla et al. 2012; Stephan et al. 2005). Because different items are contained in this scale (with some items, e.g. hatred referring to quite extreme emotions), the scores should not be interpreted in terms of their absolute values (e.g. compared to the scale midpoint). Indeed, it is most important to focus on the *relative difference* in emotional responses observed in the different experimental conditions.

Next, participants were asked to indicate their intentions to help the target adjust to the new situation by engaging in specific work related as well as social activities (i.e., I would be willing to: "spend time with the new school manager to describe local education practices"; "spend time with the new school manager to show our city"; "sign a petition supporting the new school manager"; "help the new school manager"; "work together with the new school manager"; alpha = .86). Even though these items asked about work-related (explain educational practices) as well as more social activities (e.g. spend time to show the city), a principal components analysis (PCA) confirmed that they represented a single underlying construct which explains 65 % of the variance in the individual items. It is worth noting that this measure of behavioral intentions refers to discretionary behaviours, which refer to cooperative efforts above and beyond the call of duty. Moreover, this measure of behavioral intentions is modelled after items that are used to assess discretionary efforts in organizations (see for instance, Borman and Motowidlo 1997; Smith et al. 1983).

To be able to examine whether initial emotional responses relate to behavioural intentions, it is important to first establish whether emotional responses and behavioural intentions indeed can be seen as empirically distinct constructs. This is why we conducted another PCA (with oblimin rotation) to examine this. This confirmed that the items assessing initial emotional responses and behavioural intentions loaded onto two separate dimensions, which together account for 66 % of the variance. All items had factor loadings of .55 or higher on the intended factor, and no cross-loadings larger than .33 were observed. This further strengthens the validity of the adopted instruments.

Finally, to check the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, participants rated the target on perceived morality (i.e. "How likely it is that the school manager is moral?") and competence (i.e. "How likely it is that the school manager is competent?"), on seven-point scales, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Results

Manipulation check

To establish whether our manipulations had the intended effect, we performed 2 (*morality*: high vs. low) by 2 (*competence*: high vs. low) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the two manipulation checks. The measure of perceived morality only yielded a significant main effect of the manipulation of morality, $F_{(1,75)} = 248.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .77$. Participants rated the target as more moral in the high-morality condition ($M = 6.05$, SD = 1.13) than in the low-morality condition ($M = 1.97$, SD = 1.16). The measure of perceived competence revealed a significant effect of the manipulation of competence (high vs. low), $F_{(1,75)} = 127.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .563$. Participants rated the target as more competent in the high-competence condition ($M = 5.41$, SD = 1.56) than in the low-competence condition ($M = 2.15$, SD = 1.17).[1]

Initial Emotional Response

Next, we submitted the emotional response score to a 2 (*morality*: high vs. low) × 2 (*competence*: high vs. low) between-participants ANOVA. The analysis yielded a main

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[1] In addition to the intended effect of the competence manipulation ($\eta_p^2 = .63$), there was also a much smaller ($\eta_p^2 = .15$) effect of the morality manipulation on perceived competence $F_{(1,75)} = 13.71$, $p = .001$. Importantly, the interaction was not interaction $F_{(1,75)} = 0.66$, $p = .42$, and the perceived difference in low vs. high competence was retained in both the low and the high morality conditions (high morality condition: low competence $M = 2.58$; SD = 1.35; high competence $M = 6.00$; SD = 1.09; low morality condition: low competence $M = 1.76$; SD = 0.83; high competence $M = 4.72$; SD = 1.67). This confirms that our experimental manipulations had the intended effects.

effect of morality $F_{(1,69)} = 36.81$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .35$. Participants indicated a more positive emotional response to the new-coming school manager in the high morality condition ($M = 5.84$, SD = .87) than in the low morality condition ($M = 4.30$, SD = 1.33). We also observed a main effect of competence, $F_{(1,69)} = 9.71$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, indicating that participants rated the target more favourably in the high-competence condition ($M = 5.47$, SD = 1.35) than in the low-competence condition ($M = 4.67$, SD = 1.27). There was no reliable interaction effect, $p > .94$.

We had anticipated that morality information would dominate initial emotional responses. To test whether this was the case, we compared the effect sizes of the morality and competence main effects. We first converted the effect size indicators to Fisher's z ($z = .67$ and $z = .37$, respectively) and then tested whether there was a significant difference between them (for similar procedures see, Rosenthal and Rosnow 1984, p. 372; Rule and Ambady 2008). This revealed that the effect of morality was reliably stronger than the competence effect (one tailed $Z = 1.77$, $p = .037$). These findings are in line with our Hypothesis 1.

Behavioural Intentions

Next, we submitted the behavioural intentions scores to a similar 2 (*morality*: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (*competence*: high vs. low) between-participants ANOVA. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the analysis only yielded a main effect of morality $F_{(1,75)} = 35.97$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. Participants showed more positive behavioural intentions in the high morality condition ($M = 5.29$, SD = 1.17) than in the low morality condition ($M = 3.60$, SD = 1.34). No other significant effects were observed (all *ps* ns.)

Mediation Analysis

Finally, we conducted a mediational analysis to assess whether the effect of moral traits on the behavioural intentions was mediated by global impressions, as hypothesized (Hypothesis 3). In a regression analysis, the manipulation of morality (coded as: *low* $= -1$, *high* $= 1$) predicted the dependent variable behavioural intentions, $\beta = .57$, $p = .001$, as well as the proposed mediator, initial emotional responses, $\beta = .59$, $p = .001$. In addition, initial emotional responses emerged as a positive predictor of behavioural intentions, $\beta = .68$, $p = .001$. Finally, when initial emotional responses and morality were simultaneously included as predictors, the effect of initial emotional response on the behavioural intentions was retained ($\beta = .52$, $p = .001$), while the effect of the manipulation of morality on behavioural intentions was reduced ($\beta = .25$, $p = .02$). Following the procedure proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004) we then used bootstrapping

(with 5,000 resamples) to compute 99 % confidence intervals. Confidence intervals that do not contain 0 denote statistically significant indirect effects. The bootstrapping procedure indicated that there was a significant indirect effect of the morality manipulation on behavioral intentions, through initial emotional responses, as predicted in Hypothesis 3 (99 % CI = LL: 0.1704; UL: 0.8087).

Discussion

In everyday life, people continuously form impressions about unknown others, based on information that is available to them. Research on impression formation has consistently demonstrated the importance of morality in the way people evaluate other individuals and groups. The present research builds on and extends recent evidence showing that people rely more strongly on morality (vs. competence) information when asked to form a global impression about another target (Brambilla et al. 2012). We anticipated and found that the importance of morality information affects initial emotional responses to an unknown target, as well as behavioural tendencies to help the other person. This suggests that ascertaining the other's morality not only is fundamental for initial impression formation, but also determines the behavioural inclination to be cooperative and help the other person.

In this context, it is important to note that our measure of behavioural intentions asked about specific discretionary behaviours aiming to help the newcomer adjust through work related (explaining educational practices) as well as social activities (spend time to show city). This extends prior research showing that morality information is important in situations of interdependence, where knowing whether the other party is trustworthy is essential to one's own (cooperative to competitive) behaviour towards them. The present data suggest that morality information also determines emotional as well as behavioural responses to others when we are not interdependent (i.e. the willingness to engage in social activities with a prospective new colleague). Notably, the discretionary behaviours we assessed indicate a willingness to cooperate with the other person above and beyond the call of duty. In organizational contexts this is referred to as 'Organizational citizenship behaviour' (Motowidlo 2000; Organ et al. 2006), indicating an increase in the individual efforts of employees that enhances organizational performance.

An important aim of the current research was to examine the psychological process underlying the effect of information about another person's morality on behavioral tendencies towards that individual. We found support for our prediction that initial emotional responses to the other person play an important role in this process. Future research might further examine whether specific behaviours depend on

particular emotions (such as fear or anger) or relate to more global positive or negative impressions people form based on the information they have available.

We consider the nature of the sample examined (i.e. real employees) and the realistic nature of the focal situation (i.e. forming an impression about a new-coming manager), as well as the specific behavioral intentions examined as a strong point of this research. Compared to many laboratory simulations, the format and the real, applied context in which participants completed these measures make the results highly relevant.

In fact, in organizational contexts, competence rather than morality is often expected to play a dominant role in the impression formation. Hence, in an organizational context, where the primary goals often relate to competence in task performance, perceivers should be more interested in gaining information about the target's competence than morality. From this standpoint, the pre-eminence of morality even under these conditions is not trivial and, therefore, provides strong evidence in support of the general primacy of morality information across different contexts.

This is of course not to say that competence is irrelevant, and indeed also in the present research competence did affect initial emotional responses. Nevertheless, we have noted that the effect of competence on these initial responses is significantly weaker than the effect of morality. Furthermore, and most important for our present purpose, competence does not influence people's behavioral tendencies to help the unknown other, whereas morality does. These results have important practical implications. As past research has highlighted, competence is a self-profitable trait (Peeters 1992) and tends to dominates self-perceptions (Wojciszke 2005). This implies that, especially in organizational settings, people might try to emphasize and give more visibility to their competence than to their morality. However, our results suggest that co-workers may be more inclined to use morality-related information in establishing supportive and cooperative relations with others at work. Hence, these findings pertaining to the role of different evaluative dimensions in social perceptions and their behavioral consequences could inform efforts to strategically enhance the synergy between employees at work, which can be crucial in promoting team building, trust, and cooperation within the organization.

These results also raise a number of intriguing questions, which might be addressed in future studies, examining the implications of social impression formation at work. It might be of interest to extend the present findings to other classes of situations or behaviours within work organizations, and to examine how information about competence and morality of different parties concerned affects negotiation and conflict management, or can inform recruitment of personnel. That is, the present data suggest that organizations may be insufficiently aware that assessing the morality of prospective workers is just as important if not more so than assessing their competence. Moreover, the present results can be used to improve formal communications in organizations about characteristics that are considered important or the way people informally discuss colleagues at work. Thus, even though further work might help empirically establish the representativeness of the current findings for the general population, in principle we think that the results we observed should apply to people in work situations more generally. In fact, the situation we examined (i.e. in which employees are asked to form an impression about a new-coming manager) and the measures that we used (indicating the extent to which they would be willing to help the new manager) are quite general in nature, and by no means specific to the type of organization or the sample of employees we examined. Thus, we would expect that other types of employees in other organizations should respond in a similar vein to these manipulations.

With the present research we have gained more insight into when and why moral traits impact not only on initial emotional responses, but also on behavioral intentions towards other individuals. In this sense, these findings contribute to theoretical insights into the way morality information impacts upon social interactions, which has clear practical implications for applied issues in organizations.

Appendix

Example of experimental material, relative to the high morality by high competence condition. Note that, the instructions and materials were presented to participants in Italian.

Imagine that for a normal job rotation a new boss is to arrive. F.B., 55 years old, has already conducted several complexes.

On the basis of previous knowledge, below we denote some features of F.B., the new boss, on a scale ranging from "little" to "very".

Based on this previous knowledge, we know that F.B. is...

Not much	**Honest**	Very much X
Not much	**Sincere**	Very much
Not much	**trustworthy**	Very much X
Not much	**Intelligent**	Very much X
Not much	**Competent**	Very much X
Not much	**Skillfull**	Very much X

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