Article

Basking in detected vice: Outgroup immorality enhances self-view

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Abstract

In the last decade, a growing body of research has revealed that morality is the most important driver of impression formation. As such, social targets lacking morality are disliked and kept at distance, while moral targets are liked and respected. Here, we investigated whether social targets lacking morality elicit positive reactions in the observer. Study 1 revealed that participants reported an enhanced self-view when confronted with an immoral (vs. moral) behavior performed by a political opponent. Study 2 revealed the key role of morality in this process, as differential perceptions of the target's incompetence had no comparable effect on the observer self-view. Importantly, such results emerged when participants were highly identified with their ingroup. Taken together, these findings suggest that outgroup immorality can elicit positive self-related responses in the observer. Results are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications for social judgment and intergroup relations.

We tend to root for the good guy. Generally, we like to think of ourselves as being on the morally bright side of things. However, this doesn't mean we are not interested in finding out about the darker side of human nature via news stories, crime novels, or horror movies. In fact, we may even find ourselves enjoying the sight of other people doing bad things. In 2016, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was implicated in the scandal of the so-called "Panama Papers," a giant leak of financial records that exposed a system of corruption and tax evasion hidden by secretive offshore companies. The following year, in the US, the so-called "Russiagate" erupted

regarding the suspected connections of Donald Trump to Russia during his 2016 presidential campaign. Reading about news on politicians' wrongdoing, honest citizens would feel discomfort and indignation. However, beyond these negative emotions, liberals and conservatives

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alike might also experience a subtle sense of satisfaction for having caught a political antagonist with their "hand in the cookie-jar."

Morality has shown to be the main driver of impression formation. Social targets lacking morality are disliked and kept at distance, while moral targets are liked and respected (for a review, see Brambilla & Leach, 2014). While prior research has considered the implications of morality for the perception of others, the present research investigated how people feel about *themselves* when others engage in immoral (vs. moral) behaviors. Specifically, we considered intergroup contexts and tested the possibility that outgroup members not fulfilling moral standards might provide social comparison benefits, enhancing the observer's self-view.

The Primacy of Morality Information

The morality of the people we interact with is key for how things will turn out for us. Being able to rely on honest, sincere, and trustworthy others is fundamental for harmonious living. In this vein, research on impression formation and social judgment suggests that morality plays a dominant role in social perception both at interpersonal and group levels (Brambilla & Leach, 2014).

When asked to form a global impression on social targets, people are more interested in obtaining information about their morality than about other dimensions of their character (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011). Furthermore, moral information is more relevant than information related to sociability or competence in determining overall social evaluation: if compared to nonmoral characteristics, immoral traits and behaviors are likely to elicit stronger negative responses toward social targets, whereas moral qualities and acts foster more extreme positive impressions (Brambilla, Carraro, Castelli, & Sacchi, 2019; Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto,

2007). In addition, information about morality is a key determinant of the intention and actual behavior of approaching or avoiding others (Brambilla, Sacchi, Menegatti, & Moscatelli, 2016; Iachini, Pagliaro, & Ruggiero, 2015).

Importantly, previous studies investigated and clarified why morality is dominant in social perception. According to a functionalist approach, social evaluation and impression formation are essential tools when one must quickly establish other people's intentions and define whether they represent an opportunity or a threat to the self and the ingroup (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; De Bruin & van Lange, 2000; Fiske, 1992). Morality, comprising traits like honesty and trustworthiness, provides important information to infer whether social targets are beneficial or menacing (Brambilla et al., 2013; Brambilla et al., 2012). Given this link between morality and threat (see also Todorov, Mende-Siedlecki, & Dotsch, 2013; Todorov, Said, Oosterhof, & Engell, 2011; Willis & Todorov, 2006), it is not surprising that moral traits dominate social judgement and form the primary basis for the global evaluation of other individuals and groups.

While these prior works have considered the implications of morality for the impression formation process, the consequences of others' (im)moral conduct for the self have received less attention. However, developing a negative impression of social targets who engage in moral misconduct, does not preclude the observer from experiencing positive emotions concerning the self in contrast. Here, we investigated this possibility.

Morality, Self-Perception, and Group Image

The primacy of morality is not confined to the perception of other people and groups, it also pertains to how we perceive ourselves and our group. Consistent with this idea, people refer to morality as a central factor to define their own personality (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Ashton & Lee, 2008); moreover, in cross-cultural studies, a

person's positive self-concept has been shown to be related to self-ascribed morality and sense of honor in several countries and cultures (e.g., Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002a). Morality is such an important part of positive self-evaluation that an attack to the moral self leads to strong negative emotions and low self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001).

With morality being a key aspect in how we evaluate ourselves and others, not surprisingly, people have an interest in seeing themselves and their groups as moral, as well as being perceived as moral by others. One effective way to maintain a positive moral self-concept is through social comparison. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that downward social comparison in a given domain—comparing ourselves with another person not doing quite as well—is one route to experience the self as adequate (Suls & Wheeler, 2013; Wills, 1981). Research on individual moral self-enhancement highlighted the "Muhammed Ali effect" (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989) or the "holier than thou" phenomenon (Epley & Dunning, 2000), that is, people's tendency to see themselves as more honest and trustworthy than others, rather than more competent (van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). For this reason, dealing with a person who behaves more morally than us might elicit a sense of threat to our moral identity (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, 2007). Trying to defuse the threat posed by the upward social comparison and the sense of moral inferiority, people are likely to derogate righteous targets by trivializing their moral behavior and discrediting their moral virtue (Cramwinckel, van Dijk, Scheepers, & van den Bos, 2013; Minson & Monin, 2012).

Social comparison operates on both the individual and the group level. Social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that social identity is the part of a person's self-concept that relates to group membership. People seek to maintain a positive social identity by giving positive value to their own group (ingroup) and distinguishing their group from other groups (outgroups).

Accordingly, morality plays a distinctive role also in defining social identity (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012). Moral positive traits (vs. sociability and competence traits) ascribed by people to their own ingroup have been shown to be the strongest predictor of ingroup identification (Leach et al., 2007). In the same vein, morality-related ingroup norms appear to be more relevant in guiding ingroup member behavior aimed to improve ingroup status than sociability- or competence-related norms (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008). Moreover, in order to defend their individual self-concept, people distance themselves from their ingroup when the ingroup is presented as immoral (Leach et al., 2007, Studies 4 and 5).

It is evident how central social comparison is in the definition of the social self-system: since groups are never isolated in the broader social context, the process of ingroup enhancement—the positive interpretation of ingroup attributes and social actions—only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparison with, other groups (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). This is particularly true for morality-based groups for which ingroup and outgroup evaluations are strictly interrelated. Indeed, when moral issues are implicated, identification becomes fundamentally based on the existence of an outgroup (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013). Ingroup and outgroup members simultaneously define each other because of the oppositional nature of morality: we do not only cherish our values and beliefs, but we need to differentiate ourselves from a less moral outgroup. In this sense, morality-based social identities would be based on a negational component, that is, "we are not like them" (Zhong, Phillips, Leonardelli, & Galinsky, 2008). This foundation of group membership on the opposing view (we vs. them) should be particularly strong for the moral domain due to the inherently threatening nature of immorality (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013).

In line with the centrality of the contrast between ingroup and outgroup in the context of

morality, people should be motivated to adopt strategies to perceive their own groups as morally good in comparison to outgroups. In fact, there is a tendency to assume one's ingroup as being more moral than any outgroup (Brewer & Campbell, 1976; LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In a similar vein, people distance themselves from (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005), and show intolerance towards (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014), people who do not share their moral convictions.

People take different routes to affirming ingroup morality. Evidence for the "black sheep effect" suggests that ingroup members are judged more harshly when they deviate from norms (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988): people are more threatened by ingroup than outgroup members committing moral transgressions when identification with the ingroup is high (van der Toorn, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2015). Similarly, people are reluctant to interact with immoral ingroup members because they perceive the target as threatening for the ingroup image (Brambilla et al., 2013). This is consistent with the model of subjective group dynamics (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Toboada, 1998; Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001) stating that, in some circumstances, group members may foster intragroup differentiation to promote positive intergroup distinction. However, in other contexts people will judge immoral behavior of outgroup members more severely, while justifying immoral acts of ingroup members (e.g., Iyer, Jetten, & Haslam, 2012; Rotella & Richeson, 2013; Tarrant, Branscombe, Warner, & Weston, 2012). Both routes are interpreted as strategies to sustain the moral superiority of the ingroup, granting positive intergroup differentiation and social and self-identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Evidently, morality is a primary dimension not only in the perception of others and outgroup members but also in the definition of the self at both the individual and group levels. Moreover, and crucially for the present research, the comparison between our own morality with others' morality plays a central role for self-perception.

The Present Research: Self-Related Needs, Self-View, and the Morality of Others

The fulfilment of self-related needs has long been used as a measure for how people feel about the self momentarily in social exclusion research (e.g., Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence are assessed to tap into a person's immediate sense of self to effectively navigate the individual in a complex social environment (Graupmann, 2018). Fulfillment of these needs can be seen as a measure of the extent to which an individual feels threatened versus safe in terms of self-integrity. The psychological concept of self-esteem, in particular, is seen as a representation of perceiving oneself to be socially accepted, included, and adequate (Bednar, Wells, & Peterson, 1989; Leary, 1999).

Looking at self-related needs in particular, in the current research we examined how people feel about themselves when outgroup members behave immorally versus morally. Our primary hypothesis was that observing an outgroup member's immorality would have a positive impact on current self-views (Hypothesis 1). As indirectly suggested by prior research, the downward comparison with an immoral outgroup is likely to reduce threat to our moral identity (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, 2007) and to reaffirm the ingroup's moral superiority (Epley & Dunning, 2000). In fact, outgroup immorality may grant us a sense of doing comparatively well. Immoral behavior of an outgroup member can ensure the assumed moral superiority of one's ingroup and thereby legitimize the meaning derived from social identity. When outgroup members behave immorally, an increased sense of self-esteem related to group membership (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002) would thus lead to feeling more adequate individually. Such a positive effect on the individual level is likely to result in a sense of fulfilment of the fundamental self-related needs. Indeed, an increasing amount of evidence shows that, when self-evaluation is under threat, people are less satisfied

with respect to fundamental self-related needs (Williams, 2009). Accordingly, the feeling of self-worth derived from others' misfortune or failure is likely to boost need fulfillment (Brambilla & Riva, 2017).

Additionally, we hypothesized that level of identification with one's ingroup could moderate the positive effect provided by an outgroup member's immorality (Hypothesis 2). People's self-concept includes psychologically close others (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) and, at the group level, people who are highly identified with the ingroup consider the group as an extension of the self, base their self-perception on group membership, and show great need to perceive the ingroup in a positive way (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tropp & Wright, 2001). We therefore assumed that, when people think of themselves as members of a specific group and associate their self-concept with that social identity, they should feel more positive about themselves when facing moral transgressions performed by outgroup members.

We tested these hypotheses in two experiments. To provide first empirical support for our assumptions, in Study 1, we investigated the effects of an outgroup (vs. ingroup) member's immoral (vs. moral) behavior on self-related need fulfillment, and the moderating role of ingroup identification. To distinguish these effects as distinctively related to the moral domain from unspecific negative (vs. positive) outgroup behavior, in Study 2, we compared outgroup immorality to an equally negative behavior in a nonmoral domain (i.e., incompetence) regarding its effect on self-related need fulfillment. Both experiments have been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milano-Bicocca, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The studies were conducted in accordance with the guidelines defined by the Declaration of Helsinki (see https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/). All information about the procedure, including measures, manipulations,

and participant exclusion criteria are reported in what follows.

Study 1

In Study 1 we tested our hypotheses in the political context. We examined the effect of witnessing an outgroup (vs. ingroup) member's immoral (vs. moral) behavior on fulfillment of self-related needs (self-esteem, sense of belonging, control, and meaningful existence; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro et al., 2004). Level of ingroup identification was measured.

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation using G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The power analysis (for a between-subject ANOVA with four groups: $\alpha = .05$, power $= .80$, medium effect size $f = .25$) suggested a sample size of 180. We advertised the study and enrolled 200 participants who voluntarily completed an online questionnaire. Forty-four participants were excluded from the sample because they quit the questionnaire before reading the manipulation or before answering the key measures. Therefore, the final sample comprised 156 participants (31 male, one gender unspecified; $M_{age} = 27.35$, $SD_{age} = 10.83$, range: 18–66 years). All participants were Italian citizens and over 18 years old, thus being eligible to vote.

The study employed a 2 (behavior: moral vs. immoral) x 2 (group: ingroup vs. outgroup) between-participants design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions.

Materials and Procedure

The study was devised using the online platform to administer surveys SurveyMonkey; the link was divulged through social networks, posting the link on Facebook. The advertisement included the information that the study was conducted by a university. On the first screen,

participants learned that they were about to participate in a study on social perception, and informed consent was obtained. Next, participants were asked to provide demographic information (i.e., age, gender, nationality) and the name of the political party they voted for in the last Italian political election. The centrality of political identity was then assessed through five items (α = .87; e.g., "My political position is an important reflection of who I am," "I identify with the aforementioned political party"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

After that, participants indicated where they would sit in the Italian parliament independently of the existing political parties, on a 6-point scale (1 = *extreme left*, 6 = *extreme right*). According to this answer, they were randomly assigned to a condition featuring—depending on the participant's political leaning and the condition—a politician from the political right or left engaging in moral versus immoral behavior. Specifically, participants were presented with a fictitious newspaper. The article either described a serious case of corruption (immoral behavior) by a member of the major Italian left-wing/right-wing (ingroup vs. outgroup) party, or described the same politician carrying out a virtuous action (i.e., thwarting a corruption system; moral behavior). The two versions were similar in length, wording, and structure (see supplemental material for the details: https://mfr.osf.io/render?url=https://osf.io/atwsr/?action=download%26mode=render).

To ascertain that the article was properly read, we asked participants to summarize it in one sentence and then to evaluate the described behavior (manipulation check; "How do you judge the episode described in the article?"; −3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*). Next, participants indicated self-related need fulfillment on a 20-item scale (Williams et al., 2000; α = .92) that assesses self-esteem (five items; e.g., "I feel good about myself," "My self-esteem is high"), control (five items; e.g., "I feel powerful," "I feel I have control of the events"), belongingness (five items; e.g., "I feel I belong to my community," "I feel disconnected"), and meaningful existence (five items; e.g., "I feel invisible," "I feel meaningless").

Participants responded all questions on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Finally, on the last page of the questionnaire, we debriefed participants regarding the fictitious nature of the newspaper article and asked for reaffirmation of their consent to include their responses in the study data.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

In a first step, the manipulation check regarding perception of the politician's behavior was submitted to a 2 (behavior: moral vs. immoral) x 2 (group: ingroup vs. outgroup) ANOVA with both factors varying between participants.

The expected main effect of behavior, $F(1, 151) = 168.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$, showed that participants judged the event described in the article as more negatively in the immoral condition ($M = -2.47$, $SD = 1.23$) than in the moral condition ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 2.18$). The ANOVA revealed neither a main effect of group, $F(1, 151) = 2.75$, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, nor an interaction effect between group and behavior, $F(1, 151) = 2.10$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, indicating that our manipulation of behavior was effective.

Need Fulfillment

Next, after reversing the negatively phrased items in the questionnaire and testing scale reliability, we computed composite scores of political identification and self-related need fulfillment, such that higher values indicate higher need fulfillment.

A 2 (behavior: moral vs. immoral) x 2 (group: ingroup vs. outgroup) ANOVA was computed on need fulfillment. As displayed in Figure 1, the analysis yielded neither a main effect of behavior, $F(1, 149) = 0.00$, $p = .98$, nor a main effect of group, $F(1, 149) = 1.25$, $p = .26$. However, the ANOVA showed a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 149) = 5.89$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Participants' need fulfillment was higher when they were presented with an immoral behavior performed by an

outgroup member ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.12$) than by an ingroup member ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(82) = 2.66$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.58$, 95% CI [0.14, 1.01]; when the behavior was moral, the level of need fulfillment was similar in the outgroup ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.09$) and the ingroup condition ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(82) = -0.87$, $p = .38$, $d = 0.21$, 95% CI [−0.26, 0.68]. Moreover, whereas the difference between moral and immoral outgroup behavior was not significant, $t(75) = 1.47$, $p = .15$, $d = 0.33$, 95% CI [−0.11, 0.79], participants' need fulfillment was higher when they were confronted with a moral behavior than with an immoral behavior performed by an ingroup member, $t(74) = 2.16$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.50$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.99].[1]

Finally, to investigate if outgroup or ingroup (im)moral behavior affected participants' need fulfillment depending on their level of identification

with their ingroup, a three-way interaction was explored using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; Model 3; 5,000 bootstrap resampling) with behavior as independent variable (where immoral behavior was coded as 0 and moral behavior as 1), group as first moderator (outgroup = 0, ingroup = 1), political identification as second continuous moderator, and need fulfillment as dependent variable.

Although the interaction between group, behavior, and political identification on need fulfillment did not reach significance ($B = 0.38$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = 1.69$, $p = .09$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.84]), we compared the pattern of results for low and high identifiers for exploratory purposes. First, we examined the effects of outgroup behavior manipulation (moral vs. immoral) on need fulfillment for low and high identifiers (at ±1 SD from the mean). As shown in Figure 2, when identification with the political ingroup was low (−1 $SD = 1.80$), moral outgroup behavior did not affect self-related need fulfillment ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.32$, $t = 0.56$, $p = .57$, 95% CI [−0.46, 0.82]); in contrast, when political identification was high (+1 $SD = 4.87$), outgroup behavior significantly affected need fulfillment ($B = -0.82$, $SE = 0.29$, $t = -2.79$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [−1.40, −0.24]). Therefore, for high identifiers, participants' need fulfillment was higher when the outgroup member behaved in an immoral way than in a moral way. Then, we compared the differences between high and low identifiers on the response to immoral outgroup

Figure 1. Interaction effect between behavior and group on sense of need fulfillment: Study 1.
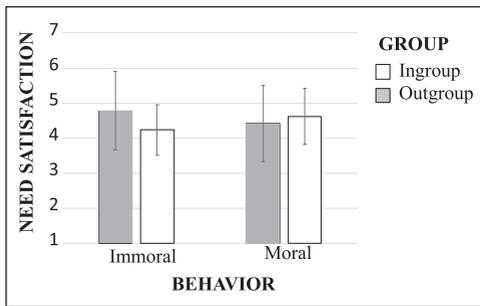

Figure 2. Moderation model: Study 1. Interaction effect between political identification, behavior, and group on sense of need fulfillment.

behavior. This analysis showed that need fulfillment increased along with ingroup identification ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 2.27$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.39])—the stronger the identification with the political group, the more positive the response to immoral outgroup behavior. In the case of moral outgroup behavior, need fulfillment was stable along the identification continuum ($B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = -1.05$, $p = .29$, 95% CI [−0.34, 0.10]).

Next, we explored the same interaction between type of behavior (moral vs. immoral) and identification level for the ingroup condition. No significant effect arose when the behavior was performed by an ingroup member ($ts < 1.47$, $ps > .14$).

Finally, we compared the ingroup and outgroup conditions. When high identifiers witnessed moral behavior, their level of self-related need fulfillment was greater when such a behavior was performed by an ingroup member than by an outgroup member ($B = 0.67$, $SE = 0.34$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$, 95% CI [−0.01, 1.35]); this pattern was reversed when they were presented with immoral behavior ($B = -0.58$, $SE = 0.31$, $t = -1.87$, $p = .06$, 95% CI [−1.18, 0.03]). For low identifiers, these effects were not significant ($ts < 1.26$, $ps > .21$).

Study 2

Study 1 provided first empirical support to our hypotheses. Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings in the context of political parties in a different intergroup context (i.e., national groups). Moreover, to investigate whether the differences were specific to information about morality or more generally related to valence, we introduced an experimental condition in which participants faced outgroup failure in a nonmoral domain (i.e., competence).

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). The power analysis (for a between-subject ANOVA with four groups: $\alpha = .05$, power $= .80$, medium effect size $f = .25$) suggested a sample size of 180. We advertised the study and enrolled all participants who voluntarily started the online questionnaire. Twenty-one participants were excluded from the sample because they quit the questionnaire before reading the manipulation or before answering the crucial measures. The final sample comprised a total of 176 Italian participants (102 female; $M_{age} = 33.38$, $SD_{age} = 13.85$; range: 18–70 years).

The study employed a 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) between-participants experimental design. Moreover, we administered two different versions of the questionnaire where the scenario was varied (about engineers vs. about politicians). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions.

Materials and Procedure

As in Study 1, the study was devised using SurveyMonkey, and participants were recruited to participate in a university research study via Facebook. On the first screen, participants were informed that the study was on social perception, and informed consent was obtained. Next, participants were asked to provide demographic information (age, gender, nationality). Then, participants indicated to what degree they identified with the Italian nationality on a six-item scale (e.g., "Being Italian is an important reflection of who I am"; $\alpha = .73$; $1 = $ *not at all*, $7 = $ *very much*; Cameron, 2004).

Analogously to Study 1, participants were then presented with a fictitious newspaper article. In order to explore effects due to the specific scenario content and to increase data reliability, we created two different scenarios. On the morality dimension, the article either described the immoral (or moral) behavior of German engineers being accused (or commended) by the Environmental Protection Agency for having altered devices and data on polluting emissions (or for having promoted ethical programs for polluting emissions reduction; Scenario 1), or it described a case of corruption in the healthcare system organized (or thwarted) by a German politician (Scenario 2). On the competence dimension, participants were presented with

analogous newspaper articles describing the actions of the German engineers/politician in terms of incompetence versus competence (i.e., German engineers were accused of/commended by the Economics and Technic Agency for having produced a new type of engine that is extraordinarily wasteful and unsteady/efficient and economically profitable (Scenario 1); a German politician promoted a law that obstructed/fostered economic growth (Scenario 2; see supplemental material for details: https://mfr.osf.io/render?url=https://osf.io/atwsr/?action=download%26mode=render). The different versions of each scenario were similar in length, wording, and structure. Note that, differently from Study 1 where political orientation was made salient, in the political scenario of Study 2 we only referred to a German politician without any reference to a specific party; thus, in both scenarios of the second experiment, the national category was activated.

To ascertain that the article was properly read, we asked participants to summarize it in one sentence and then to evaluate the described behavior (manipulation check; 1 = *extremely negative*, 7 = *extremely positive*). Moreover, participants were asked to what extent the described behavior was associated with the morality and the competence dimension ("To what extent is the episode you read about in the newspaper article related to morality/competence?"; relatedness manipulation check). Next, as in Study 1, participants indicated self-related need fulfillment (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; α = .89).

On the last page of the questionnaire, we debriefed participants regarding the fictitious nature of the newspaper article and asked for reaffirmation of their consent to include their responses in the study data.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

After reversing the negatively phrased items in the questionnaire and testing the scale reliability, we computed composite scores of national identification and self-related need fulfillment,

such that higher values indicate higher need fulfillment. Then, as a preliminary analysis, we computed a series of 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) x 2 (scenario: engineers vs. politician) between-participants ANOVAs on the manipulation checks and on need fulfillment in order to exclude specific effects of the scenario content. The analysis yielded neither a significant three-way interaction effect on the manipulation check items, $Fs(1, 168) < .70$, $ps > .41$, nor on the dependent variable (i.e., need fulfillment), $F(1, 168) = 1.81$, $p = .18$. Thus, for the following analyses we collapsed our data over the two scenarios.

To assess whether the manipulation was effective and whether the scenarios on morality and competence were properly balanced by valence, a 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) between-participants ANOVA was computed on the valence manipulation check. The analysis showed the expected main effect of valence, $F(1, 171) = 192.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$. Participants evaluated the event described in the articles more negatively in the negative conditions ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.20$) than in the positive conditions ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.80$). The analysis yielded neither a main effect of dimension, $F(1, 171) = 0.39$, $p = .53$, nor an interaction effect, $F(1, 171) = 2.32$, $p = .13$, suggesting that the manipulation of behavior valence was perceived as intended; moreover, incompetent and immoral scenarios and competent and moral ones proved to be properly balanced by valence. To test the perceived relatedness of the scenarios with the two different dimensions, a 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) x 2 (manipulation check: morality vs. competence) ANOVA with repeated measures on the third factor was computed. The analysis revealed a significant interaction between the manipulated dimension and the relatedness manipulation check, $F(1, 172) = 14.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Participants perceived the behaviors described in the competence scenarios as more related to

Figure 3. Moderation model: Study 2. Interaction effect between national identification, behavior, and dimension on sense of need fulfillment.
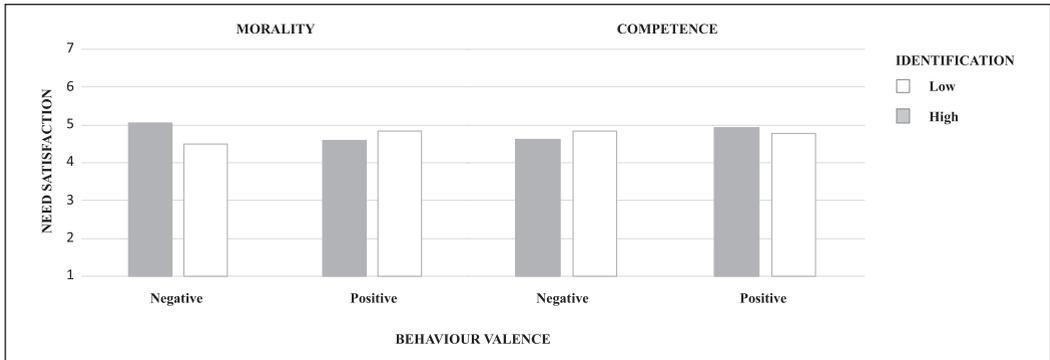
competence ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.76$) than to morality ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.86$), $t(82) = -2.40$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.48]; conversely, they perceived the behaviors described in the morality scenarios as more related to morality ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.74$) than to competence ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.83$), $t(92) = 2.87$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.30$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.50].

Effect on Need Fulfillment

We next computed a 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) ANOVA on the crucial dependent variable, self-related need fulfillment. The analysis did not reveal any significant effects, Fs(1, 172) < 0.68, ps $> .41$.[2]

To investigate whether, in line with Study 1, outgroup behavior affected participants' self-related need fulfillment depending on their level of identification with the national ingroup, a moderation model was carried out using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; Model 3; 5,000 bootstrap resampling) with outgroup behavior valence as independent variable (where negative behavior was coded as 0 and positive behavior as 1), dimension (competence = 0, morality = 1) as first moderator, national identification as continuous second moderator, and need fulfillment as dependent variable. As shown in Figure 3, the analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between dimension, behavior valence, and

identification ($B = -0.58$, $SE = 0.22$, $t = -2.59$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [−1.02, −0.14]).

To explore this interaction, we first compared the effects of outgroup behavior (moral vs. immoral) on need fulfillment of low and high identifiers. In line with findings of Study 1, for highly identified participants (+1 $SD = 5.17$), when the outgroup behavior pertained to the morality dimension, immoral outgroup behavior led to greater need fulfillment than moral outgroup behavior ($B = -0.46$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = -1.96$, $p = .05$, 95% CI [−0.92, 0.01]), whereas for low identifiers (−1 $SD = 3.17$), the effect became nonsignificant ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = 1.47$, $p = .14$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.81]).

Then, in the other direction, we compared the differences between high and low identifiers on the response to outgroup immorality. The findings showed that immoral outgroup behavior fostered a greater sense of need fulfillment for participants highly identified with their national group compared to the lowly identified ($B = 0.27$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 2.46$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.50]). When we matched the differences between high and low identifiers on the response to moral behavior, we found no impact of identification level on need fulfillment ($B = -0.13$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -1.05$, $p = .30$, 95% CI [−0.36, 0.11]).

Next, we explored the same interaction between behavior valence (positive vs. negative) and identification level but for the competence

condition: when participants were presented with a(n) (in)competent outgroup member's conduct, the behavior's valence did not affect the level of self-related need fulfillment at any level of ingroup identification (ts < 1.35, ps > .18).

Finally, we compared the morality and competence conditions. The comparison between the two dimensions among highly identified participants showed that, whereas moral and competent behavior had the same effect on the person's self-related need fulfillment ($B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.24$, $t = -1.33$, $p = .19$, 95% CI [−0.79, 0.16]), need fulfillment was higher in the immorality than in the incompetence condition ($B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.22$, $t = 2.02$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.88]). No difference arose for lowly identified participants (ts < 1.37, ps > .17).

Overall, in line with Study 1, these findings suggest that an immoral conduct when performed by outgroup members is likely to increase participants' self-related need fulfillment but only when they are highly identified with their national ingroup. Importantly, this effect did not arise when the outgroup behavior concerned another dimension of social perception (i.e., competence).

General Discussion

The current research examined how people feel about themselves in reaction to moral transgressions of outgroup members and examined the effect of group membership and level of ingroup identification on such a process. As hypothesized, results from Study 1 showed that participants experienced higher self-related need fulfillment when presented with an outgroup member's wrongdoing than with an ingroup member's analogous behavior. Moreover, for those who were highly identified with their ingroup, the resulting self-view was more positive while facing an outgroup's immoral act than a moral one. For low-identified people and for ingroup target, this effect was absent. In Study 2, using a different social category (national group instead of political party) and different scenarios, we obtained converging findings: for highly identified participants, immoral outgroup behavior elicited a more positive influence on self-view than moral behavior, whereas for low identifiers, this pattern was not observed. It is

worth noting that, different from prior studies that exclusively focused on morality (e.g., van der Toorn et al., 2015), in the second experiment we compared the effect of im/moral outgroup conduct to that of a behavior pertaining to a different dimension of social perception (i.e., competence). Unlike the pattern in the morality domain, there were no effects when the outgroup action occurred in the competence domain. This suggests that the found self-view enhancement is not due to a generic presentation of an outgroup failure but to a specific misconduct in the moral domain.

Taken together, these two studies support our hypothesis of immoral conduct leading to more positive self-views when performed by outgroup members. This yields interesting insights into the role of group membership in responding to immorality. As such, the present research expands on prior work in several ways. First, whereas past studies mainly focused on the negative effects of immoral behavior on the perception of others (Brambilla et al., 2013), we analyzed an unexplored effect of immorality on positive fulfillment of self-related needs. Second, in line with van der Toorn and colleagues (2015; see also Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010), we extended the limited body of research on the role of group membership in responding to immoral behavior and, moreover, we underlined possible direct effects of an advantageous intergroup comparison on individual variables. Third, importantly, we shifted the perspective from focusing on how morality information affects the perception of and the behavior toward the outgroup, to how it affects perception of the self. For instance, the more adverse effect when facing an ingroup rather than an outgroup transgressor is somewhat consistent with the "black sheep effect" (Marques et al., 1988). However, whereas this strand of literature investigated the attitudes and the intentions toward the agent, the current studies focused on the intrapsychic responses in terms of self-satisfaction. Our findings of positive outcomes for self-view indicate a motivational process steering the types of information sought out about outgroups. Fourth, although we based our hypotheses on well-established literature on intergroup relations and social comparison, we investigated

specific effects of morality in the context of intergroup comparison with regard to other dimensions (i.e., competence).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are some limitations to the present research. Although the data were mainly consistent, a significant difference between the first and the second experiment concerned the strength of the effect. In Study 1, the effect arose independently from the participants' level of ingroup identification and the interaction with the identification level did not reach the conventional levels of significance; differently, in Study 2, we found the key difference between moral and immoral outgroup behavior only in the subsample of participants who were highly identified with their ingroup. This discrepancy might be justified by the groups we considered in the different scenarios. In fact, in Study 2, we presented wrongdoing performed by German targets: since both Italy and Germany belong to the EU, German people are not unambiguously identifiable as outgroup members. When participants affirmed to be highly identified with the Italian group, thus categorizing themselves at a national level and not at a superordinate level, the critical effect occurred. Moreover, although Study 2 introduced two different scenarios, both of them were related to national identity: thus we do not have a direct comparison between the effects produced by a political outgroup (Study 1) and those generated by a national outgroup (Study 2). This comparison might be important to highlight effect peculiarities, given the tendency to moralize political parties (e.g., Ryan, 2014) and the tendency shared by liberals and conservatives to distance themselves from people who do not share their moral convictions (Brandt et al., 2014).

In addition, we underline that the sample size of our studies (especially of Study 2 [which also explored the moderating role of group identification]) might not be ideal. Thus, the reported findings should be replicated with a larger sample.

We should also note that in Study 1, we employed a general measure of political orientation but not an explicit measure of identification with the specific political party cited in the fictitious paper: although we referred to the same political coalition, this could have made the data on identification less valid.

Moreover, as specified for Studies 1 and 2, we advertised our research via Facebook. Such a recruiting method is a cost-effective way to contact a large number of individuals in a short period of time. However, as noted by Thornton et al. (2016), characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education) of samples recruited via Facebook are frequently unbalanced and there is a lack of environmental control during administration. To avoid this limitation, future studies could adopt more traditional recruitment methods and administer the experiment in a controlled setting (i.e., lab).

Future research might also use different measures (implicit and explicit) aimed at assessing not only the influence on self-related need fulfillment but also the emotional and the behavioral reactions to others' misconduct. Finally, we should note that the present findings are compatible with alternative interpretations. We argued that witnessing an outgroup's wrongdoing could cause positive affect, granting the individual a sense of doing comparatively well in the moral domain. On the other side, the outgroup's misconduct is also likely to elicit positive responses in people because it confirms their expectations about the perceived social reality and their a priori worldview based on the idea that they are "holier" than the others (Epley & Dunning, 2000). Further studies could investigate these unexplored mechanisms and address the aforementioned limitations.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

The present findings shed new light on prior studies on the role of morality in the information search process (Brambilla et al., 2011). In line with the negativity effect (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989; Vonk, 1996), past experiments showed a more influential impact of negative moral information than of positive cues on impression formation (Brambilla et al., 2016) and the tendency to look for behaviors that strongly

falsify the target's positive moral traits (Brambilla et al., 2011). On the anecdotal level, people avidly—and often uncritically—post and consume stories on wrongdoers and moralized contents on social networks (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & van Bavel, 2017; Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2016). The attraction exerted by the negative pole of the moral continuum has been interpreted in terms of people's motivation to detect immorality in the social context, to unmask partners of interaction pretending to be moral, and to avoid the dangerous consequences of approaching potentially harmful persons. From this perspective, both the attempt to falsify the target's morality and the interest devoted to immoral acts may be functional to the ingroup defense and the reduction of intergroup threat through the anticipation of undesirable intentions and future behavior. However—and not necessarily in contradiction with the previous interpretation—the present studies suggest that our attraction to immorality might be due to affective benefits for the self, especially when we do not share group membership with the wrongdoers.

In this vein, the current research may have important implications for social life. Our data indicate that witnessing outgroup immorality enhances a person's self-view. A growing literature on moral licensing claims that performing a moral action or feeling good can decrease the willingness to act virtuously in a subsequent situation because of a mechanism of self-indulgency (e.g., Monin & Miller, 2001). Additionally, recent studies have shown that a vicarious moral licensing phenomenon is likely to occur when people observe the moral behaviors of actors with whom they share identity and membership, that is, ingroup members (Kouchaki, 2011). In a complementary perspective, complacency—rather than indignation and anger—derived from outgroup immorality might work as a shortcut, thus reducing the spur and the impulse to improve actual group morality. As a result, outgroups or outgroup members behaving immorally not only fail to provide a model for inspiration and moral elevation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011) but they are also likely to weaken the person's own motivation to uphold and improve moral standards of the ingroup and society in general.

Observing the current political divides in Europe and the US, where politics have become increasingly moralized and personal over the last decade (Kahn, 2015), our findings might seem almost intuitive. The notion that learning about the "other side" failing morally results in positive self-validation becomes plausible in such a climate, even though, it should actually be alarming. The prevailing sentiment about political issues has recently been described as divided and lacking trust in people with different political beliefs, as well as in institutions of representative democracy themselves (Pew Research Center, 2012). There is reasonable concern that the political divide is going to obstruct societal progress through the political process (Hall, 2014). Understanding the role that sense of self can play in this context promises avenues for creating a more constructive civic discourse on the levels of the individual person and the group.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. To explore if our manipulation had a different impact on the four different types of need (belonging, $\alpha = .72$; control, $\alpha = .63$; self-esteem, $\alpha = .79$; meaningful existence, $\alpha = .83$), we computed a 2 (behavior: moral vs. immoral) x 2 (group: ingroup vs. outgroup) x 4 (need: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence) ANOVA with the first two factors between participants and the last one within participants. The analysis did not yield a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 447) = 1.02$, $p = .31$, thus revealing the independent variables to have a similar effect on the four different needs.

2. Analogously to Study 1, we decomposed the need fulfillment scale (belonging, α = .69; control, α = .59; self-esteem, α = .81; meaningful existence, α = .74). We then computed a 2 (dimension: morality vs. competence) x 2 (behavior valence: positive vs. negative) x 4 (need: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence) ANOVA with the first two factors between participants and the last one within participants. The analysis did not show a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 516) = 0.92$, $p = .34$.

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