Groups as moral anchors

Naomi Ellemers[1] and Jojanneke Van der Toorn[2]

Morality indicates what is the 'right' and the 'wrong' way to behave. However, what people see as moral can shift, depending on defining norms and distinctive features of the *groups* to which they belong. Acting in ways that are considered 'moral' by the group secures inclusion and elicits respect from others who are important to the self. Morality is a central feature of group membership. This helps explain how moral considerations regulate the behavior of individuals in groups, and when this is likely to elicit conflicts with members of other groups. We show how people's internal moral compass is anchored by socially shared conceptions of morality, which determine behavioral choices of individuals living and working together in communities and organizations.

Addresses
[1] Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 8, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands
[2] Leiden University, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: Ellemers, Naomi (N.Ellemers@uu.nl)

Introduction

Moral judgments distinguish 'right' from 'wrong' as guidelines for human behavior [1]. Moral behavior is viewed with respect; moral transgressions are sanctioned, with social exclusion as the ultimate consequence. Morality is seen as a key factor in social relations [2], enabling people to live together in groups. Morality has become an immensely popular topic of research in psychology [3–5]. The majority of this work has examined how individual decision making in moral dilemmas is affected by people's self-perceived character traits, internal moral convictions, the emotions they experience, or situational features that determine the implications of the choices they make [6].

We take a complementary approach, to broaden our understanding of how social behavior is affected by moral concerns. We do this by considering individuals in terms of the social *groups* to which they belong. Recent research illustrates important implications of the way people's membership in work teams, organizations, cultural communities and national societies relates to their moral self-views and judgments of others, and affects their behavior. Below we review the main conclusions from this work.

Morality and the group self

Our self-views are connected to the social groups (families, work teams, religious groups) to which we belong. Processes of self-categorization (where we think we belong) and social identity (our group's distinctive characteristics) define the 'group self' [7,8]. Shared moral standards are an important part of people's social identities. These help them define who they are, and express where they belong. Group memberships thus impact on individual thoughts, emotions, and actions relevant to people's self-views, and the way they judge others (Table 1).

Morality is a primary factor in how we view others [9], but also in how we view ourselves: We want to be moral and want to be seen by others as moral [10]. We pay more attention to tasks that can reveal our morality [11]. We are more inclined to remember and report our own moral acts [12], while we report other people's immoral acts [13]. Our moral self-views are affected by actions of others relevant to our social identity. We experience threat when other members of our group behave immorally [14]. Aggression and torture perpetrated by our fellow countrymen cause us guilt and shame [15]; when a member of our group treats people fairly, this boosts our moral self-views [16]. Social identification also affects our moral behavior. We treat colleagues fairly if we identify with our work team, but undermine their reputation if we don't [17].

People with different abilities or interests can instigate creative problem solving, but we experience stress from interacting with people who have diverging moral values [18]. We seek inclusion in groups that can validate the appropriateness of our moral values [19] and find it easier to trust the judgments of others who share these values [20]. When it is unclear what should be done, we seek moral guidance from other members of our group. We care primarily about what other ingroup members think of our moral behavior. This is visible in very basic brain processes, indicating increased attention in the presence of ingroup members for information that is consequential for our moral image [21].

Group morals thus have a self-defining function as well as an expressive function. Moral judgments about 'what we do' also imply criticism to 'who we are.' This is one reason why people find it difficult to cope with others' disapproval of their group's morality, and are quick to deny or

Table 1

How groups impact morality.

Research theme	Example	Reference
Moral reasoning	American participants think torture of a terrorist suspect is more justified when carried out by US security services rather than British security services. When own needs conflict with those of others, adolescents from Turkey vs. Spain make different moral decisions.	Tarrant, Branscombe, Warner, Weston. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:513–518 Kumru. *Soc Behav Personal* 2012, **40**:205–214.
Moral emotions	Norwegians report feeling shame when they consider discrimination against the Tater minority as a moral ingroup failure. Dutch citizens experience guilt due to the failure of the Dutch peace keeping force to protect the Muslims of Srebrenica against Serb aggression.	Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, Brown. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2012, **102**:941–960. Zimmermann, Abrams, Doosje, Manstead. *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2011, **41**:825–839.
Moral self-views	Dutch citizens who are told that the Netherlands is less moral than Germany in achieving equal treatment of migrants think this reflects badly on their personal image. After being told that other members of their group have treated Hispanic job applicants fairly, White Americans report having more positive moral self-views.	Täuber, Van Zomeren. *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2013, **43**:149–159. Kouchaki. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:702–715.
Moral judgments	When moral beliefs are seen to be shared in the group, people who disagree with these beliefs are viewed more negatively. Italians who think of other nationals (Albanians, French, Moroccans, Romanians, US citizens) as included in their moral community, are less likely to hold prejudicial judgments of them.	Goodwin, Darley. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:250–256. Passini. *J Commun Appl Soc Psychol* 2013, **23**:261–269.
Moral behavior	Adolescent football players are more inclined to engage in bullying behavior when they see their friends as engaging in such behavior. Workers make fewer unethical choices in a strong ethical business culture; a climate emphasizing self-interest fosters the incidence of unethical behavior in the workplace.	Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFolette, Steinfeldt. *Psychol Men Mascul* 2012, **13**:340–353. Kish-Gephart, Harrison, Treviño. *J Appl Psychol* 2010, **95**:1–31.

downplay the moral transgressions of ingroup members. This seems to plague businesses in the financial sector, which cling to current practices more strongly as questions concerning their morality become more pressing.

Groups define what is moral

We think of moral convictions as personal values to which people are strongly committed [22]. Yet what we consider to be moral does not only depend on internal convictions, but also on socialization, and cultural and religious norms [23]. Universal moral guidelines are seen through the lens of group defining values that over time become internalized as personal moral convictions (Figure 1).

Moral norms and judgments apply to a range of behaviors in everyday life [24,25]. While there is broad agreement about basic moral principles such as the importance of being reliable, caring and fair, shared ideas about what is the 'right' way to enact these principles may vary [24], depending on the cultural, religious, or political context in which this is defined [26,27]. Universal moral values (e.g., do no harm) are very broad and abstract, and can be translated into diverging behavioral guidelines that are group-specific and identity-defining (Table 2). These more specific moral standards are used to define which individuals are virtuous and 'proper' group members [28].

Behaving in line with group morals affords respect and secures inclusion. This is the case regardless of whether group morals prescribe cooperation or self-focused behavior [29]. What outgroup members think is moral seems less relevant in this respect [30]. Newcomers who subscribe to our moral standards are welcomed into the group [31]. Those who challenge group morals are ignored,

Figure 1
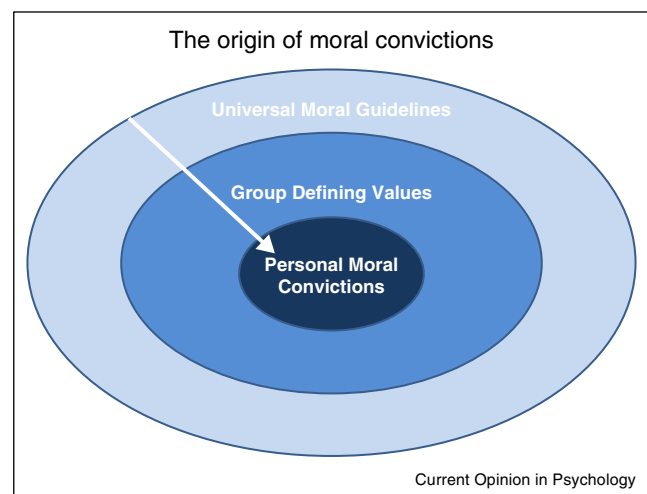
The origin of moral convictions.

Table 2

How agreement about universal moral guidelines can elicit disagreement about moral behavior.

Universal moral guideline	Group defining value	Personal moral conviction
Do no harm	Circumcision is a mark of religion	It is right to circumcise your baby
Do no harm	Surgery is a way to cure illness	It is wrong to circumcise your baby
Distribute resources fairly	High performance deserves greater reward	It is right to pay large bonuses
Distribute resources fairly	Equal effort deserves equal pay	It is wrong to pay large bonuses
Be reliable and sincere	People should make clear where they stand	It is right to act in line with your own preferences
Be reliable and sincere	People should be loyal to the group	It is wrong to act in line with your own preferences

ridiculed or ostracized — even if they have valid reasons to do so [32]. We dislike people who consider their personal values to be morally superior to those of others [33]. This is why it requires moral courage to challenge shared conceptions of morality.

Adhering to group morals serves a *social function* as it allows people to feel included and valued [34••]. It is not self-evident that this results in desirable outcomes. Due to distinctive moral norms and accountability to other group members, people can either display or refrain from behavior that is generally seen as 'moral'. Immersion in a student fraternity can tempt individual members into binge drinking, but can just as well help rally them to volunteer as freshman tutors. Whether group morals benefit or undermine individual moral behavior depends on what they prescribe (the nature and content of the moral code), and whether they set standards that are stricter or more lax than internal moral convictions.

Moral leadership and moral atmosphere

People pay close attention to the moral character of their groups, teams, and organizations [35]. Religious, political, or organizational leaders can help define shared morals and thus guide the moral behavior of individual group members. They do this most effectively when they model the desired behavior, by acting in accordance with moral guidelines. If they do this right, this also strengthens their leadership position, as leaders are seen as more prototypical of their group if they embody the moral values the group holds, and help distinguish the group from other groups [36].

The moral climate enacted by organizational leaders is more predictive of individual behavioral choices than formal regulations or moral codes [37••]. In general, people tend to be too optimistic about their ability to behave in accordance with their moral intentions [38]. Moral behavior requires deliberation to monitor compatibility with relevant guidelines and self-control to avoid moral transgressions. The ability to do so is limited and subject to depletion [39]. Additionally, the moral significance of one's behavior is not always clear up front, for instance due to a focus on legal or business concerns instead of ethical considerations [40••]. For example, offshoring production to third world countries may seem

an economically sound strategy but can turn out to have questionable moral implications in terms of its local humanitarian effects.

Because moral lapses are to some extent inevitable, the motivation to be moral elicits defensive responses and post hoc justifications of the group's moral transgressions [41]. The reverse is also true: people become more lax in their moral behavior once they have demonstrated a willingness to adhere to moral standards [42]. This is also visible at the group level: when formal regulations communicate the importance the group attaches to moral behavior, individual group members are less vigilant in preventing moral lapses. As a result of this paradoxical effect, in organizations where equal opportunity programs are in place, female workers are more likely to encounter gender bias [43•].

Interpreting these inconsistencies is complicated, as moral justifications for past behavior are not always sincere. Sometimes, moral behavior is driven by initial emotional responses, and is rationalized after the fact [27]. But sometimes political, religious, or business leaders simply invoke such justifications to mask moral lapses for political purposes, to protect their position of power or to deflect criticism on their tendency to prioritize financial gain over ethical considerations. This makes it difficult to separate moral rhetoric from true morality, for instance when people defend their material interests by invoking moral values, or when leaders moralize their group's goals to engage followers for their own purposes — not out of responsibility for their well-being [44].

The morality of inequality between groups

Group morals also impact on the position of groups in the social order [45]. Different moral values can be a source of intergroup conflict, or can be mobilized or exaggerated to legitimize and perpetuate such conflict [46].

If equality is seen as a moral obligation that needs to be met this elicits stress; people are better able to think of ways to improve minority outcomes when aiming to achieve equality as a moral ideal [47]. The threat of acknowledging intergroup inequality and seeming immoral can deflect support for reparation measures. Instead, the moral standards of an outgroup may be devalued to justify aggression

Figure 2
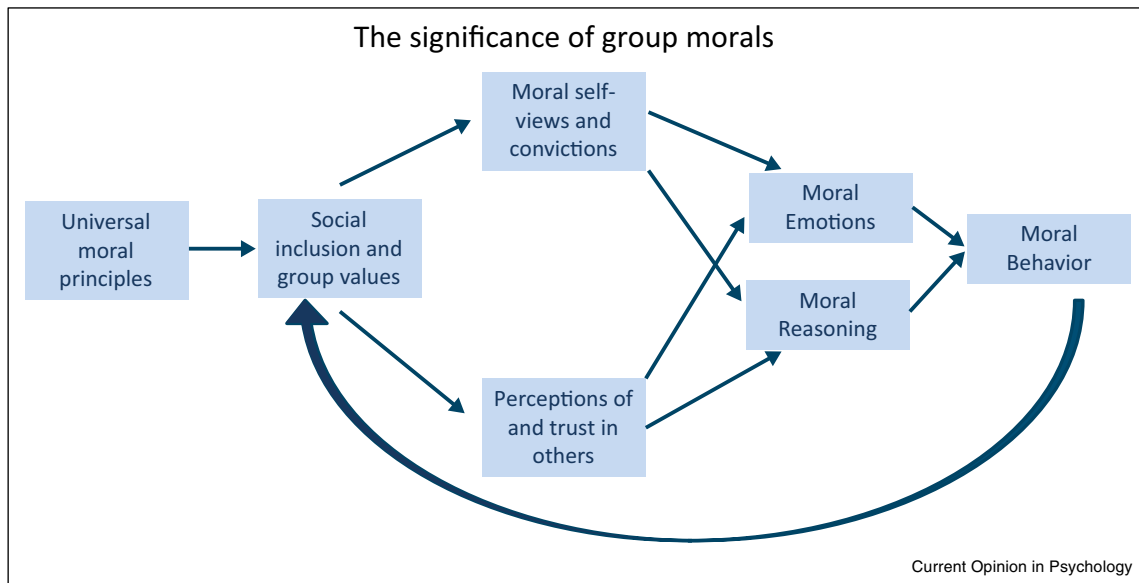
The significance of group morals.

against them [48]. Seeing members of other groups as less worthy of consideration - or even as less human - legitimizes neglect of their needs and immoral behavior against them [49•]. This happened to Jews in the Holocaust and Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide, who were referred to as sub-human beings (vermin).

In the absence of threat, the desire to appear moral can benefit fair treatment of other groups. People are more attentive to avoid making negative associations with Muslims when they think this is diagnostic of their morality [11]. After the moral stature of the ingroup is affirmed — by recalling national contributions to history — people are more willing to acknowledge its past moral wrongdoings, for instance involvement of White Americans in the slave trade [50], or the role of German citizens in the Holocaust [51].

The desire to be (seen as) moral can prevent people from acknowledging social inequality; affirming the moral virtue of their group and emphasizing social equality as a moral ideal enables them to engage in reparation attempts.

Conclusion

Social groups provide people with moral anchors for their personal convictions. Shared moral values impact upon the way we see ourselves and others, and on the reasoning and emotions that make us behave in ways that characterize the moral values of the group and secure group inclusion (Figure 2). This elucidates why people tend to be relatively unconcerned about moral guidelines that are

provided by members of groups they consider less relevant to their sense of self and social identity (i.e., outgroups). Understanding these mechanisms helps explain for instance why businesses, politicians, or other nations seem to discard moral outrage about their practices voiced by the general public.

Caution is needed when trying to influence others' moral behavior. The motivation to be moral can elicit a range of defensive mechanisms that make people resilient to external critique. Paradoxically, attempts to protect one's (shared) moral identity can elicit deceit (for optimal self-presentation), licensing (disconnecting one's actions from one's identity), and disengagement (rationalization of moral transgressions). These mechanisms also illustrate that what is considered moral by the group is not necessarily good for society. Group moral guidelines can invite moral lapses, justify social inequality, or elicit hostility and aggression against other groups.

These insights advance our understanding of the moral dilemmas faced by individuals working and living in groups, and can inform attempts to achieve social equality, resolve conflicts in communities, prevent power abuse at work, and facilitate organizational ethics and employee compliance.

Acknowledgements

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- • of special interest
- •• of outstanding interest

1. Cohen TR, Morse L: **Moral character: what it is and what it does**. *Res Organ Behav* 2014, **34**:43-61.

2. Rai TS, Fiske AP: **Moral psychology is relationship regulation: moral motives for unity, hierarchy, equality, and proportionality**. *Psychol Rev* 2011, **118**:57-75.

3. Giner-Sorolla R: *Judging passions: moral emotion in persons and groups*. Hove: Psychology Press; 2012.

4. Greene J: *Moral tribes: emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them*. New York: Penguin Group; 2013.

5. Haidt JD: *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York: Random House; 2012.

6. Bauman CW, McGraw PA, Bartels DM, Warren C: **Revisiting external validity: concerns about trolley problems and other sacrificial dilemmas in moral psychology**. *Soc Pers Psychol Compass* 2014, **8/9**:536-554.

7. Ellemers N: **The group self**. *Science* 2012, **336**:848-852.

8. Ellemers N, Haslam SA: **Social identity theory**. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology.* Edited by van Lange P, Kruglanski A, Higgins T. London: Sage; 2011:379-398.

9. Goodwin GP: **Moral character in person perception**. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 2015, **24**:38-44.

10. Conway P, Peetz J: **When does feeling moral actually make you a better person? Conceptual abstraction moderates whether past moral deeds motivate consistency or compensatory behavior**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2012, **38**:907-919.

11. Van Nunspeet F, Ellemers N, Derks B, Nieuwenhuis S: **Moral concerns increase attention and response monitoring during IAT performance: ERP evidence**. *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci* 2014, **9**:141-149.

12. Mulder L, Aquino K: **The role of moral identity in the aftermath of dishonesty**. *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2013, **121**:219-230.

13. Hofmann W, Wisneski DC, Brandt MJ, Skitka LJ: **Morality in everyday life**. *Science* 2014, **345**:1340-1343.

14. Brambilla M, Sacchi S, Pagliaro S, Ellemers N: **Morality and intergroup relations: threats to safety and group image predict the desire to interact with outgroup and ingroup members**. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2013, **49**:811-821.

15. Čehajić-Clancy S, Effron D, Halperin E, Liberman V, Ross L: **Affirmation, acknowledgment of ingroup responsibility, group-based guilt, and support for reparative measures**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:256-270.

16. Kouchaki M: **Vicarious moral licensing: the influence of others' past moral actions on moral behavior**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:702-715.

17. Duffy MK, Scott KL, Shaw JD, Tepper BJ, Aquino K: **A social context model of envy and social undermining**. *Acad Manag J* 2012, **55**:643-666.

18. Kouzakova M, Harinck F, Ellemers N, Scheepers D: **At the heart of a conflict: cardiovascular and self-regulation responses to value vs. resource conflicts**. *Soc Psychol Pers Sci* 2014, **5**:35-42.

19. Ellemers N, Jetten J: **The many ways to be marginal in a group**. *Pers Soc Psychol Rev* 2013, **17**:3-21.

20. Jetten J, Hornsey MJ: **Deviance and dissent in groups**. *Annu Rev Psychol* 2014, **65**:461-485.

21. Van Nunspeet F, Derks B, Ellemers N, Nieuwenhuis S: **Moral impression management: evaluation by an in-group member during a moral IAT affects perceptual attention and conflict and response monitoring**. *Soc Psychol Pers Sci* 2015, **6**:183-192.

22. Kreps TA, Monin B: **Core values versus common sense: consequentialist views appear less rooted in morality**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2014, **40**:1529-1542.

23. Greenwood K: **On the social dimensions of moral psychology**. *J Theory Soc Behav* 2011, **41**:333-364.

24. Graham J, Nosek BA, Haidt J, Iyer R, Koleva S, Ditto PH: **Mapping the moral domain**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:366-385.

25. Lovett BJ, Jordan AH, Wiltermuth SS: **Individual differences in the moralization of everyday life**. *Eth Behav* 2015, **22**:248-257.

26. Graham J, Haidt J: **Beyond beliefs: religions bind individuals into moral communities**. *Pers Soc Psychol Rev* 2010, **14**:140-150.

27. Haidt J, Kesebir S: **Morality**. In *Handbook of social psychology,* 5th edn. Edited by Gilbert FD, Lindzey G.Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2010:797-832.

28. Tooby J, Cosmides L: **Groups in mind: the coalitional roots of war and morality**. In *Human morality and sociality.* Edited by Hogh-Olesen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2010:191-234.

29. Ellemers N, Pagliaro S, Barreto M: **Morality and behavioural regulation in groups: a social identity approach**. *Eur Rev Soc Psychol* 2013, **24**:160-193.

30. Pagliaro S, Ellemers N, Barreto M: **Sharing moral values: anticipated ingroup respect as a determinant of adherence to morality-based (but not competence-based) group norms**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2011, **37**:1117-1129.

31. Pagliaro S, Brambilla M, Sacchi S, D'Angelo M, Ellemers N: **Initial impressions determine behaviours: morality predicts the willingness to help newcomers**. *J Bus Eth* 2013, **117**:37-44.

32. Sumanth JJ, Mayer DM, Kay VS: **Why good guys finish last: the role of justification motives, cognition, and emotion in predicting retaliation against whistleblowers**. *Organ Psychol Rev* 2011, **1**:165-184.

33. Minson JA, Monin B: **Do-gooder derogation: disparaging morally motivated minorities to defuse anticipated reproach**. *Soc Psychol Pers Sci* 2012, **3**:200-207.

34. Ellemers N, Van den Bos K: **Morality in groups: on the social-**
•• **regulatory functions of right and wrong**. *Soc Pers Psychol Compass* 2012, **6**:878-889.
This paper provides a more elaborate explanation of the social functions of moral judgments and moral guidelines as a group phenomenon.

35. Van Prooijen AM, Ellemers N: **Does it pay to be moral? How indicators or morality and competence enhance organizational and work team attractiveness**. *Br J Manag* 2015, **26**:225-236.

36. Haslam SA, Reicher SD, Platow MJ: *The new psychology of leadership: identity, influence, and power*. New York: Psychology Press; 2013.

37. Treviño LK, Den Nieuwenboer NA, Kish-Gephart JJ: **(Un)ethical**
•• **behavior in organizations**. *Annu Rev Psychol* 2014, **65**:635-660.
This chapter reviews current insights on ethical behavior and the impact of ethical climates in organizations.

38. Tenbrunsel AE, Diekmann KA, Wade-Benzoni KA, Bazerman MH: **The ethical mirage: a temporal explanation as to why we aren't as ethical as we think we are**. *Res Organ Behav* 2010, **30**:153-173.

39. Kouchaki M, Smith IH: **The morning morality effect: the influence of time of day on unethical behaviour**. *Psychol Sci* 2014, **25**:95-102.

40. Bazerman MH, Tenbrunsel AE: *Blind spots: why we fail to do*
•• *what's right and what to do about it*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2011.
This book examines the ways in which people overestimate their ability to behave morally and unintentionally fail to do what is right.

41. Leidner B, Castano E: **Morality shifting in the context of intergroup violence**. *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2012, **42**:82-91.

42. Blanken I, Van de Ven N, Zeelenberg M: **A meta-analytic review of moral licensing**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2015 http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146467215572134.

43. Kaiser CR, Major B, Jurcevic I, Dover TL, Brady LM, Shapiro JR:
• **Presumed fair: ironic effects of organizational diversity structures**. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2013, **104**:504-519.
This paper reports a series of studies showing how the presence of organizational structures intending to provide equality can unwittingly elicit and perpetuate bias.

44. Sassenberg K, Ellemers N, Scheepers D, Scholl A: **"Power corrupts" revisited: the role of construal of power as opportunity or responsibility**. In *Power, politics, and paranoia: why people are suspicious about their leaders*. Edited by van Prooijen J-W, van Lange PAM. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2014:73-87.

45. Janoff-Bulman R, Carnes NC: **Surveying the moral landscape: moral motives and group-based moralities**. *Pers Soc Psychol Rev* 2013, **17**:219-236.

46. Harinck F, Ellemers N: **How values change a conflict**. In *Conflicts within and between groups: functions, dynamics, and interventions current issues in social psychology*. Edited by de Dreu CKW. London: Psychology Press; 2014:19-36.

47. Does S, Derks B, Ellemers N, Scheepers D: **At the heart of egalitarianism: how equality framing shapes cardiovascular challenge vs. threat in whites**. *Soc Psychol Pers Sci* 2012, **3**:747-753.

48. Skitka LJ: **The psychology of moral conviction**. *Soc Pers Psychol Compass* 2010, **4**:267-281.

49. Haslam N, Loughnan S: **Dehumanization and**
• **infrahumanization**. *Annu Rev Psychol* 2014, **65**:399-423.
This chapter reviews recent work demonstrating the different reasons why and the ways in which we can reduce the perceived humanness of other individuals and groups.

50. Miron AM, Branscombe NR, Biernat MR: **Motivated shifting of justice standards**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **36**:768-779.

51. Peetz J, Gunn GR, Wilson AE: **Crimes of the past: defensive temporal distancing in the face of past in-group wrongdoing**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **35**:598-611.