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Reactions to morally motivated deviance

Florien M Cramwinckel¹, Kees van den Bos² and Eric van Dijk¹

People value morality in themselves and others. They want to be moral and good individuals, associate themselves with others who share their moral values, and belong to moral groups. As an ironic consequence of the importance of morality, people sometimes respond negatively to morally motivated deviants, and dislike others who overtly display moral behavior. These negative reactions may not only reduce the chance that people will learn from the exemplary behavior of others, it may also prevent moral exemplars from displaying moral behavior in the future, which makes these reactions problematic. Important questions that will be discussed in this review are why and when people respond negatively to morally motivated others.

Addresses

¹ Leiden University, The Netherlands² Utrecht University, The NetherlandsCorresponding author: Cramwinckel, Florien M
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Morality is deeply valued by people, and being and appearing moral is a very important goal in life for many of us [1,2^{**},3^{*},4]. People value morality not only in themselves, but also evaluate others on their apparent morality [5,6]. Furthermore, we strive to belong to moral groups, and care a lot about the moral standing of our group, perhaps even more than about other aspects such as competence [7,8]. People's moral behavior is also influenced by what others do. For example, watching someone else act morally can inspire people to do good themselves [9,10]. Furthermore, being asked to engage in immoral behavior can easily persuade people to act immorally [11]. One could thus argue that morality plays a very important role in people's lives, especially in regulating people's behavior in social situations [8,12,13].

However, the importance of morality seems to have an ironic consequence: People sometimes react particularly

negative toward others who display morally motivated behavior. More specifically, morally motivated people can face rejection and severe negative reactions from their peers [2^{**},14–16,17^{*},18]. For example, there is empirical support that demonstrates that people who eat meat dislike others who refuse to eat meat out of moral concerns, and feel threatened by these moral refusers [2^{**}]. Furthermore, other recent studies show that people dislike others who refuse to perform a racist task [18]; have negative evaluations of activists that try to achieve equality [17^{*}] and of people who donate to charity [19] and even punish those who perform pro-social behavior [20].

In this review, we will focus on reactions toward *morally motivated deviance*, which we define as behavior that is (a) displayed for moral reasons and (b) different from the average behavior. We will investigate why and under which circumstances people react negatively to morally motivated deviants. One reason why we think this is important is because morally motivated deviants can be the catalysts of social change that benefits all of us [17^{*}].

To reduce these negative reactions—which may be very beneficial for society as a whole—we first need to learn why they happen, and under which circumstances they occur. We think that reactions to morally motivated deviance may crucially depend on the type of social context people are in. More specifically, we argue that in interpersonal situations, reactions to morally motivated deviants may be best understood as reactions to moral refusers: people who—out of moral reasons—refuse to perform behavior that the target has performed. In these interpersonal settings, moral refusers may be derogated because they threaten targets' self-concepts and their sense of moral adequacy [2^{**},15,18,21^{*}].

In group contexts, however, morally motivated deviants deviate from the average behavior of the other group members, and have moral reasons for doing so. In these group settings, morally motivated group members may be valued because they can improve the moral standing of the group as a whole [7,8,22–25]. This may be especially likely in inter-group settings where groups compete with each other. We will discuss recent literature from different domains that helps to shed light on these issues and identify gaps in the literature that may be addressed by future research.

Why is morally motivated deviance evaluated negatively?

Why do people react negatively toward those who show morally motivated behavior?

One of the most important reasons may be that people can feel threatened¹ by morally motivated others, especially when these others behave ‘more moral’ than people themselves. This threat is argued to stem from the fact that people engage in social comparisons, and upward social comparison in the moral domain may be especially harmful for one’s self-concept [15].

Some of the first empirical evidence to support this argument comes from Monin *et al.* [18], who showed that people’s dislike for others who refused to engage in a racist task attenuated when people had the chance to self-affirm important values before being confronted with such a moral refuser. This research thereby provided indirect evidence of threat to people’s self-concepts as the underlying mechanism. Important to note is that people disliked these moral refusers only when they themselves performed the potentially objectionable behavior before they were confronted with a moral refuser. These findings suggest that personal involvement is a necessary condition for rejection of the moral refuser.

Converging evidence was further provided by Cramwinckel *et al.* [2^{••}], who showed that people felt threatened when they had just eaten meat and were afterwards confronted with the reaction of a confederate who refused to eat meat out of moral concern. This threat was observed in important physiological markers, such as blood pressure, heart rate and cardiovascular reactivity, and could thus be measured on a physiological level [27,28,29]. Ironically, people who considered morality as extremely important were found to be especially vulnerable to experiencing threat after being confronted with the behavior of morally motivated others. Importantly, people only experienced physiological self-threat when refusers had moral motives for their behavior, but not when the refusers had non-moral motives for their behavior. Apparently, it is not deviant behavior per se that is threatening to people, but rather the moral motivation underlying it. People thus do not feel threatened because the refuser refuses to eat meat, but because he/she has *moral reasons* for refusing to eat meat.

Although most of our current knowledge comes from research in the interpersonal domain, morality is also

relevant for regulating social behavior within groups [8,30]. Thus, it is important to investigate how people in group settings react to morally motivated deviants. In an intra-group setting, such as within a group of friends, morally motivated deviants may be very threatening. In-group members are especially relevant targets for social comparisons because people’s in-groups play important roles in their self-definition [31].

There is ample empirical evidence that people dislike, derogate, and reject deviants [16,31,32,33[•],34–41]. For example, Parks-Stamm [31] demonstrated that people’s self-evaluations are threatened by confrontations with high-performing (and thus deviant) in-group members² [42–44]. She further demonstrated that people could protect their threatened self-concepts by excluding high-performing in-group members from their group. Furthermore, Cameiro and Ribeiro [40] demonstrated that people disidentify from valued in-groups when they are confronted with in-group deviants, unless they had the chance to derogate in-group deviants. Apparently, deviants threaten people’s identification with the in-group and derogation helps to resolve this threat. The notion that people can feel threatened by the deviant behavior of group members is also supported by Jamieson *et al.* [21[•]] who investigated how people respond to being either a target or an actor of dissent during group discussions. They showed that in-group members experienced physiological threat when another group member consistently deviated from their own behavior.

Deviant can not only threaten people’s self-concepts, but also the unity within a group. Cohesive groups where members conform to the average behavior provide people with a strong and positive group-identity. Therefore, group members generally like normative (or average) members and punish, exclude, or dislike deviant members [34,37,41,45]. Important to note here is that according to this line of reasoning, people will react negatively to deviance regardless of whether the deviants’ behavior is above or below the norm. There is indeed robust evidence that shows that people also often engage in anti-social punishment, which means the punishment of people who contribute generously to the collective [46^{••},47–55].

This has often been studied in the field of behavioral economics or economic psychology, by using public goods games. In these games, people choose how much they contribute to, and take from, the collective resources. It has often been demonstrated that people not only punish and exclude those who contribute very little, but also those who contribute very much. For example, Hermann, Thöni, and Gächter investigated the prevalence of anti-social

¹ We operationalize threat in a similar fashion as Cramwinckel and colleagues [2^{••}], and in line with the bio-psychosocial model (BPSM) of challenge and threat as posed by Blascovich *et al.* [26]. According to these perspectives, threat arises when people experience a self-evaluative situation (i.e., a situation where people feel they will be evaluated by themselves or others, on a dimension that is important to them), and feel that they do not have the capacity to cope with this situation. For example, it is important for people to portray themselves as moral, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Threat arises when people do not feel they are able to portray themselves convincingly as a moral person (either to themselves or to others), for example, because they were involved in behavior that is morally questioned by the moral refuser.

² These findings resemble the tall poppy syndrome, or the finding that people negatively evaluate high-performing group-members and experience *schadenfreude* when these “tall poppies” fail.

punishment and demonstrated its existence in 16 different participant pools all over the world [47]. Most of the research so far investigates this phenomenon from an evolutionary perspective, and focuses on questions such as ‘What are the effects of antisocial punishment on the co-evolution of punishment and cooperation? And can the punishment of cooperators be explained in an evolutionary framework?’ [55] (pp. 2). As a consequence, the process of *why* people react negatively toward group members who act more moral than the rest of the group, and under which circumstances they are especially likely to do so, remains underinvestigated.

An exception is the research by Irwin and Horne [46**], who investigated the extremity of deviance as an underlying mechanism for the punishment of people who contribute a lot to the collective. They demonstrated that group members are especially likely to punish this pro-social behavior when there is a strong group norm, and less so when the group norm is weaker. So, according to this research, the more deviants differ from the average group behavior, the more severe reactions they will face. This fits neatly with the idea that deviants are disliked as a consequence of disrupting the unity within a group. This noted, it still leaves open the question of whether certain types of deviance are more threatening than others.

Combining these insights, we reason that people react negatively to deviance because deviants threaten people’s self-concepts, and the unity of the group as a whole. Morally motivated deviance may be especially threatening, because morality is particularly relevant for both individuals and groups [2**,15,22]. However, more research is needed to substantiate this latter claim, especially within group contexts.

When is morally motivated deviance evaluated positively?

Deviants do not always meet opposition. There may be contexts where they are not threatening, but accepted or even admired. For example, an interesting study by Frings *et al.* [33*] demonstrated that in-group deviants can be neither threatening, nor challenging for people. Also, in-group deviants can even evoke challenge responses (i.e., the motivational counterpart of threat) when group members feel they have the knowledge and resources to deal with the deviance. This demonstrates that deviance is not threatening per se. It also raises the question under which circumstances deviance is threatening and evokes negative reactions, and under which circumstances deviance is challenging and evokes positive reactions.

It has been argued that deviants may be admired when they are seen to have the group’s best interest at heart [56]. In these cases, deviance may be seen as a form of

vision and leadership, aimed at improving the group as a whole, rather than to be disruptive to personal or group self-esteem. This is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating that people have more positive evaluations of transgressing team leaders during sports matches when these transgressors are seen to have the team’s best interest at heart [45].

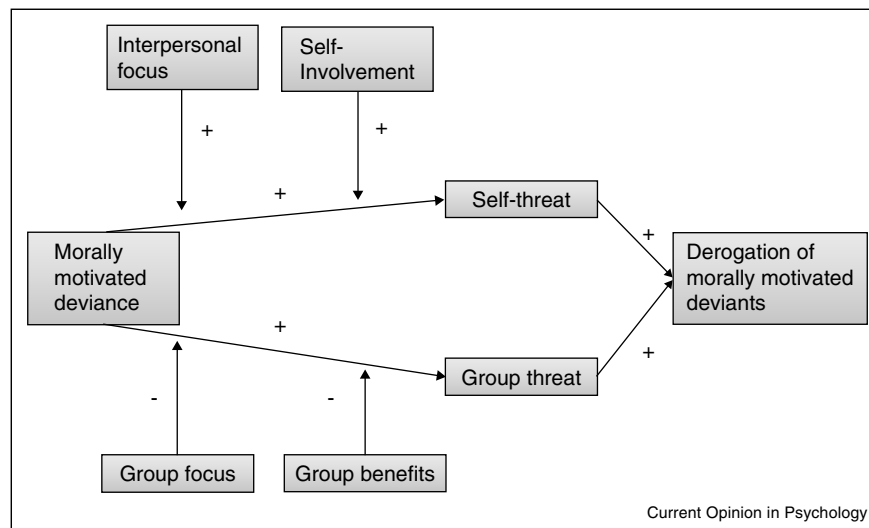
Furthermore, in highly competitive inter-group situations, people have a preference for leaders who show extreme pro-normative behavior [57], which can be described as behavior that is in line with group norms but above the average behavior of group members (e.g., supporting ideologically extreme candidates during times of election). Apparently, in these cases, the deviant behavior differentiates one’s group from competing out-groups, and is thereby group-serving. These findings seem to resonate with research showing that people are more lenient toward transgressors when they benefit personally from the transgressions. For instance, Bocian and Wojciszke [58] demonstrated that although people tend to negatively evaluate rule-breaking or cheating others, they have more positive evaluations of these transgressors when they benefited personally from the transgressions.

Morally motivated deviance may be a form of deviance that is beneficial for other group members, and evoke positive reactions as a consequence. One of the ways in which morally motivated deviance can be beneficial, is because it may increase the level of morality of the whole group. People consider their group’s morality to be the most important characteristic of their group, want to belong to moral groups [7,8,22–24], and are vigilant to moral threats to their group [59].

For example, Parks-Stamm [31] demonstrated that people excluded high-performing group members from their group when they were focused on themselves, but included these members when they were focused on the group as a whole. Apparently, focusing on oneself leads to a threatening comparison between one’s own performance and the superior performance of the deviant. However, focusing on your group as a whole leads to the positive reflection of the deviant’s excellent performance on the whole team. In a parallel fashion, focusing on what morally motivated deviants mean for you personally can be threatening, but focusing on what morally motivated deviants mean for your group’s moral standing may lead to positive reactions.

To summarize, there seem to be competing forces that drive reactions toward morally motivated deviants in opposite directions [56], see [Figure 1](#) for a graphical display. Confrontations with morally motivated deviants can threaten people’s personal self-esteem, especially when people focus on the interpersonal aspects of the

Figure 1



Proposed conceptual model. Morally motivated deviance is operationalized as behavior that is (a) displayed for moral reasons and (b) different from the average behavior.

situation and/or are self-involved. This, in turn, leads them to derogate and reject the morally motivated deviants. Confrontations with morally motivated deviants in group settings can also threaten the group—for example, it's social cohesion. However, group benefits—such as an improved moral group image—or focusing on the group as a whole may steer people toward admiration of morally motivated deviants.

Recommendations and future research

To deepen our understanding of reactions to morally motivated deviance, several steps are needed. First, we need more insight in the process that leads people to react negatively to deviants. Even though deviance is a well-studied area of research within intra- and inter-group literature, there is a lack of research that focuses specifically on the reasons underlying deviant behavior. One important way to achieve better insight in the underlying processes is to explicitly investigate the motives for deviant behavior. These different motives may be crucial factors in explaining negative reactions. For example, Irwin and Horne [46••] have suggested that people may react negatively to deviants because they think that these deviants wanted to improve their own standing, or wanted to raise the bar for others. However, these researchers did not systematically test whether varying these possible underlying motives influenced reactions to these deviants. This noted, we know from the interpersonal literature that the exact same deviant behavior can be perceived as threatening when the underlying motivation is moral, but as non-threatening when the underlying motivation is non-moral. This is demonstrated by Cramwinckel *et al.* [2••] in two studies that focus explicitly on

different motivations for deviant behavior. Having (or claiming) a non-moral motivation for deviant behavior may therefore evoke positive reactions from peers, and may thus be a viable intervention strategy to reduce negative reactions to those who aim to do good.

Second, we need more research that simultaneously investigates reactions to deviance in interpersonal, intra-group and inter-group settings. As described above, insights from one domain might be very helpful in understanding important social-psychological phenomena in other domains. We hereby align ourselves with other scientists who argue that our understanding of important social psychological phenomena can benefit when we integrate the interpersonal, intra-group and inter-group domains, rather than studying them in isolation [56,60]. We further note that interpersonal, intra-group and inter-group processes may overlap, operate simultaneously and/or influence each other. For example, when people react to the behavior of a morally motivated deviant, they may not only be influenced by the setting that they are in at that exact moment. They may also take into account their personal relationship with this person (i.e., interpersonal domain), as well as this person's influence on their group dynamics (i.e., intragroup domain), and the way their own group compares to other groups (i.e., intergroup domain).

Another important avenue for future research may be to investigate reactions to morally motivated deviance in real (as opposed to hypothetical) situations, where targets are personally involved (see for instance the work by Cramwinckel *et al.* [2••]). Several studies demonstrate a difference between how people indicate to react in a

hypothetical scenario and how they actually react. For example, Monin *et al.* demonstrated that people only react negatively toward moral refusers when they are personally implicated in the potentially objectionable behavior. Another interesting example is provided by Baumert, Halmburger and Schmitt [61], who investigated differences between self-reported moral courage (e.g., reporting to intervene in a hypothetical bystander scenario) and actual moral courage (e.g., intervening in a bystander setting). They discovered that self-reported behavioral intentions do not map onto actual behavior. This *intention-action gap* [62] is found in a wide range of behavioral domains but may be especially relevant in the moral domain because people are so vigilant to moral threats [2**,3*,15,18,63].

Conclusion

To conclude, much has been learned in recent years about reactions to deviant behavior. In addition, much need to be learned in future research about this topic, especially how it plays out in real and immersive social settings, and how different motives for deviance might lead to different reactions. One reason why the study of morally motivated behavior is relevant, we think, is that morally motivated deviants often (although certainly not always) have good motives for their behavior. Viewed in this way, these people, who dare to deviate in the face of social backlash, can be especially helpful for groups and society as a whole. Therefore, it is important to understand what would make people appreciate and support, rather than derogate and reject, those who are different.

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