Does It Pay to Be Moral? How Indicators of Morality and Competence Enhance Organizational and Work Team Attractiveness

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Based on a social identity analysis, the authors argue that people are attracted to teams and organizations with positive features. Such features can refer to the competence and achievements of the organization, or to its moral values and ethical conduct. However, in work contexts, ethics and achievements do not necessarily go together. The paper reports three studies that examine the relative and combined impact of perceived competence vs morality of a team or organization on its attractiveness to individuals. Study 1 (n = 44) reveals that students prefer to seek employment in a moral rather than a competent organization, when forced to choose between these organizational features on a bipolar scale. Study 2 (n = 100) replicates these findings in a design where the competence and morality of a fictitious organization were manipulated orthogonally. Study 3 (n = 89) examines responses to experimental task teams that systematically differed from each other in their competence and morality. Results of all three studies converge to demonstrate that the perceived morality of the team or organization has a greater impact on its attractiveness to individuals than its perceived competence. The authors discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Introduction

In an ideal world, businesses show their competence by performing well, and their morality by engaging in ethical business conduct. However, as we have been reminded by recent events, these two organizational features do not necessarily go together (Barraquier, 2011; Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2007; Maclagan and Snell, 1992). In some organizations, priority is given to achieving success, if necessary by compromising moral considerations. In other organizations, moral conduct is the key value, even if this implies being less successful. Based on recent findings, we hypothesize that, when there is a trade-off, people will tend to attach more importance to the morality than to the competence of work teams and organizations. That is, we predict a greater impact of the extent to which teams or organizations are seen to act in ways that we tend to consider as morally ‘good’ – as they display ethical conduct by being honest or reliable – than of the likelihood that teams or organizations seem competent or ‘effective’ in their task performance or economic achievements. We report three studies to examine this, by assessing how the perceived competence and morality of organizations and work teams affects their attractiveness.

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Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; see also Ellemers and Haslam, 2011) posits that people are attracted to groups, teams and organizations that can afford them a positive social identity. Indeed, it has been shown that employees cooperate with an organization to the degree that the organization contributes favourably to their self-image (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Blader and Tyler, 2009; Van Dick, Ullrich and Tissington, 2006). In theory, any characteristic or feature that can help distinguish the group or organization in a positive way from other groups or organizations can contribute to its attractiveness to individuals. Nevertheless, it is often presumed that competence is the most important determinant of how a group is evaluated, especially in a context where collective performance is relevant. Thus, competence tends to be treated as a status-defining characteristic that positively distinguishes the in-group from the out-group (Bettencourt et al., 2001). When other group characteristics, such as group morality, are emphasized, this tends to be perceived as a compensation strategy to maintain a positive group identity, despite the lack of group competence (Lemaine, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

However, recent research has revealed that moral judgments – rather than competence judgments – are central in the impressions people form of other individuals and groups (Brambilla and Leach, in press; Goodwin, Piazza and Rozin, 2014). Evaluations of other people’s morality (rather than their competence) also dominate behavioural responses towards them, such as the willingness to approach and help rather than avoiding and ignoring them (for overviews, see Brambilla and Leach, in press; Pagliaro, 2012). Accordingly, in contexts where morality (e.g. honesty) and competence (e.g. smartness) are incompatible, people have been found to prefer the groups to which they belong to be moral rather than competent (Ellemers, 2012; Ellemers and Van den Bos, 2012; Ellemers, Pagliaro and Barreto, 2013). In these studies, the morality of one’s group was more strongly related to group pride and identification than its competence or sociability (Leach, Ellemers and Barreto, 2007). Additionally, individual group members were more willing to adjust their behaviour to what the group considered moral, rather than what they considered competent (Ellemers et al., 2008), as they felt this was the best way to obtain respect from other group members (Pagliaro, Ellemers and Barreto, 2011). Indeed, moral judgments also dominate the way people respond to others in their group. People are more inclined to avoid members of their group who seem immoral rather than incompetent, as they see these as a threat to the group’s image (Brambilla et al., 2013). Thus, different studies suggest that moral traits and behaviours of a group constitute a more important source of value for individual members than other positive group features such as the group’s competence.

The question remains, however, whether this is also true in work contexts, where individuals, teams and organizations are primarily evaluated in terms of their competence at achieving central work goals. Indeed, the competitive success of a business is generally considered the key indicator of its value, also for individual employees who can then expect to enjoy long-term employment prospects, bonuses or promotion opportunities (Powell, 1984; Taylor and Bergmann, 1987). It has been established that initiatives and activities that demonstrate the organization’s perceived morality – for instance indicating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – can contribute to the satisfaction and commitment of its workers (Ellemers et al., 2011). However, the relative impact of the organization’s morality compared with its competence is, as yet, unclear. Although moral conduct can sometimes complement competence by promoting competitive business success (Vilanova, Lozano and Arenas, 2009), we are particularly interested in the situation in which these two types of organizational or team features are in conflict with each other. What if investing in ethical business conduct implies being less competent at achieving a successful performance? What if the aim to achieve performance improvement overrules the desire to be moral? Little is known about whether the preference of individual employees to work in moral teams or organizations remains when this implies a potential sacrifice in terms of competence-related features, such as business success or opportunities for personal career development. In the current research, we examine the relative importance of morality vs competence in determining the attrac-
tiveness of work teams and organizations, in contexts where these features are incompatible.

Organizational trade-off between morality and competence

Owing to the current and projected labour shortages in some fields, attracting highly qualified applicants is becoming increasingly important for organizational success (Henkens, Remery and Schippers, 2008). A number of organizations have started to promote their moral features by investing in CSR initiatives as a way to attract prospective employees and to gain competitive advantage (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). In support of this approach, organizational engagement in CSR initiatives has been shown to enhance perceived organizational morality, which in turn can lead to increased organizational commitment and job satisfaction among employees (Ellemers et al., 2011). In addition, applicants are more inclined to pursue a career at organizations when the actions of these organizations are considered to comply with ethical standards (Turban and Greening, 1996).

An important limitation of this prior research is that it has neglected to specify the organization's standing in terms of its competence-related attributes, even though these are traditionally seen as key determinants of applicants' attitudes and behaviours towards a job (Powell, 1984; Taylor and Bergmann, 1987). Although it has been established that organizational morality can have added value if all other organizational factors remain equal, the potential trade-off between morality and other competence-related organizational features has not been explicitly addressed. Nevertheless, people commonly encounter situations in their social or work life where different considerations or preferences are incompatible, because the successful pursuit of scarce resources conflicts with their personal values (Tetlock, 2003). Similarly, organizations often encounter tensions between moral and economic business objectives (Harris and Bromiley, 2007; Maclagan and Snell, 1992). Pursuing non-financial business objectives can potentially elicit positive outcomes for an organization, but financial returns and long-term survival can be at risk when organizations place too little emphasis on their economic objectives (Margolis and Walsh, 2003; Vogel, 2005). The complex trade-off between morality and competence is therefore likely to be an integral aspect of most work contexts (Barraquier, 2011; Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2007).

Conflicting objectives for individuals within organizations can also create a potential dilemma for prospective employees during the selection process. Depending on the job offers they receive, applicants might need to decide whether they prefer to work for a highly moral organization that has less to offer in terms of competence-related aspects (e.g. opportunities for personal and career development), or whether they prefer to work for a highly competent organization that has a lot to offer them, but is less concerned about business ethics. Research to date has not explicitly pitted the impact of moral organizational features against the impact of competence organizational features as a way to examine whether prospective employees are willing to work for an organization aligned with their moral values even when this may jeopardize long-term employment or advancement opportunities. The current research aims to fill this gap by systematically investigating the combined and interactive effects of morality and competence on the attractiveness of work teams and organizations to their prospective members.

Based on previous findings indicating the importance of group morality (reviewed above), we propose that the primary importance of morality as a source of group value may hold even in a work context. That is, we predict that moral features will be more decisive than competence features in determining the attractiveness of a particular work team or organization, in contexts where these features are incompatible. Although we acknowledge that competence-related features will tend to be highly important at work, we suggest that morality-related features will be the main source of group value, even in a work context.

Overview

We conducted three studies to test the prediction that morality rather than competence would be the main determinant of the attractiveness of organizations and work teams. Studies 1 and 2 examined how morality and competence features can influence the evaluation of organizations;
Study 3 focused on the evaluation of work teams with different levels of morality and competence. In Study 1, we aimed to examine whether morality or competence features are perceived as more valuable in attracting individuals to organizations. Study 2 was conducted to assess how evaluations of a specific (fictional) organization depended on manipulations in which organizational morality and competence were made to seem incompatible. In Study 3, participants interacted in experimental (simulated) work teams, characterized by different morality and competence levels. We then examined the individual’s evaluation of the work team in this more immersive situation.

Study 1

The main goal of Study 1 was to examine the relative importance of morality features – in comparison with competence features – for organizational attractiveness. Student participants were asked to indicate directly how important it was to them that their future employer possessed specific morality and competence features. Additionally, participants indicated their preference for morality vs competence features of the organization they would be willing to work for. We assessed this in a forced-choice format, as a way to examine the effect of a trade-off between these features on the evaluation of organizations. Based on previous findings on the importance of morality in comparison with competence in group pride and identification (Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach, Ellemers and Barreto, 2007), we predicted that morality would be perceived as a more important determinant of organizational attractiveness than was competence.

Method

Participants and procedure. Forty-four psychology students (33 females, 11 males) at Leiden University in the Netherlands completed the study in a classroom in return for course credit. The age of the participants ranged from 17 years to 22 years ($M = 18.77$, $SD = 0.96$).

Materials. Participants were first asked to rate the general importance of several organizational characteristics on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unimportant) to 7 (very important). Three organizational characteristics were used to assess the importance of morality: ‘Honest advertising campaigns’, ‘No false promises to employees’ and ‘Openness of annual report’ ($\alpha = 0.42$). The importance of competence was measured with the characteristics ‘High profitability’, ‘Guarantee for a long-term contract’ and ‘Good promotion opportunities’ ($\alpha = 0.48$). A single item was then presented in a forced-choice format (on a 6-point bipolar scale) in which participants were asked to choose whether morality or competence features were more relevant for them if they considered working for an organization. Finally, nine forced-choice items were used to assess the relative importance of morality features compared with competence features at a more abstract level (see Leach, Ellemers and Barreto, 2007). Each item pitted a morality against a competence trait on a 6-point bipolar scale, and asked participants to indicate which of these two traits would be most valuable to them in a future employer. Morality was indicated with the traits ‘honest’, ‘sincere’ and ‘trustworthy’. Competence was assessed with the traits ‘capable’, ‘intelligent’ and ‘skilled’.

Results

The average scores on the morality and the competence scales were calculated to indicate the perceived importance of both clusters of organizational characteristics to the participants. A paired sample t-test showed that participants rated organizational moral characteristics as significantly more important ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 0.66$) than organizational competence characteristics ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 0.61$), $t(43) = 2.77$, $p < 0.01$.

The findings on the 6-point bipolar scale items were recoded, so that a high score always indicated a greater preference for morality than for competence characteristics. One-sample t-tests were used to examine whether the scores differed from the scale mid-point (3.5). In support of our

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1Owing to the relatively low reliability of the morality characteristics and the competence characteristics scales, a Principal Components Analysis (PCA, using varimax rotation) was conducted, which confirmed that the six items clustered into two factors, as intended. The first factor (competence) had an eigenvalue of 1.77, and explained 29.51% of the total variance. The second factor (morality) had an eigenvalue of 1.44, and explained 24.03% of the total variance.

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hypothesis, morality features of an organization were considered to be significantly more relevant to participants than were the competence features of an organization \((M = 4.70, SD = 1.19), t(43) = 6.70, p < 0.001\). Similarly, average scores of the more abstract organizational traits revealed that participants rated morality traits as significantly more important than competence traits in determining the value of a future employer \((M = 4.28, SD = 0.78), t(43) = 6.64, p < 0.001\).

**Discussion**

Study 1 provides initial evidence that morality is considered to be a more important organizational feature than is competence. Results showed that morality was perceived as more important than competence when participants were asked directly to rate the importance of several organizational features. Similarly, when participants were confronted with a forced choice between organizational features and more abstract traits indicating morality vs competence, participants consistently preferred morality features and traits to competence features and traits.

Even though these initial results are in line with our main prediction, a limitation of Study 1 was that we asked participants about their ideal situation. Thus, the organization in question remained relatively abstract, because of the focus on individual organizational features rather than the organization as a whole. Therefore, we conducted Study 2 to replicate and extend the current results by orthogonally manipulating the morality and competence features of a specific (fictional) organization.

**Study 2**

Study 2 assessed the attractiveness of and intentions to apply to a specific organization, which was characterized in terms of its competence and morality. The description of this (fictional) organization depended on experimental condition, and was based on the morality and competence features and traits that were used in Study 1.

**Method**

**Participants.** One hundred students (78 females, 21 males, 1 not indicated) at Leiden University were asked to participate on a voluntary basis. The age of the participants ranged from 17 years to 28 years \((M = 20.42, SD = 2.36)\).

**Design and procedure.** The hypotheses were tested in a two (organizational morality: high vs low) by two (organizational competence: high vs low) design. Participants were asked to read information about a fictional organization, which contained the experimental manipulation of organizational morality and competence. In the high-morality condition, the organization was described as a reliable, honest and sincere employer that strived to use honest advertising campaigns, to fulfil promises made to employees, and to show openness in their annual report. In the low-morality condition, a similar but negatively framed description of the organization was presented (i.e. depicting the organization as unreliable, not honest and not sincere). In the high-competence condition, the organization was described as an intelligent, capable and skilled employer that offered good promotion opportunities and long-term contracts to its employees, and the organization was highly profitable. The low-competence condition contained similar but negatively framed information about the organization (i.e. the employer was characterized as not intelligent, not competent and unskilled).

**Materials**

**Manipulation checks.** To check the experimental manipulations, participants were asked to indicate how they estimated the morality and competence level of the organization \((1 = \text{very low}, 7 = \text{very high})\).

**Organizational attractiveness.** Perceived organizational attractiveness as a potential employer was assessed with five items (e.g. ‘This organization is an attractive employer’, \(\alpha = 0.96\)) on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Intentions to apply.** Intentions to apply for a position at the described organization were measured with four items (e.g. ‘I would request more information about job vacancies at this organization’, \(\alpha = 0.93\)) on a 7-point Likert scale.

**Results**

A two-way analysis of variance was carried out for each outcome measure. Significant interaction
effects on organizational attractiveness and intentions to apply were analysed by contrasting the high-morality and low-competence condition to the low-morality and high-competence conditions, as our primary interest was to examine trade-off effects between morality and competence features.

**Manipulation checks.** The analysis of estimated organizational morality revealed a significant main effect of the morality manipulation, F(1, 96) = 181.55,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.65$. As intended, participants in the high-morality condition estimated organizational morality as higher (M = 5.08, SD = 1.65) than did participants in the low-morality condition (M = 1.98, SD = 0.96).\(^2\)

The competence manipulation had a significant main effect on estimated organizational competence, F(1, 96) = 129.86,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.58$. Participants in the high-competence condition estimated organizational competence as higher (M = 5.20, SD = 1.40) than did participants in the low-competence condition (M = 2.74, SD = 1.14).\(^3\)

\(^2\)A main effect of competence, F(1, 96) = 26.31,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.22$, and an interaction effect between morality and competence, F(1, 96) = 12.70,  p = 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.12$, on estimated organizational morality also emerged. Importantly, however, the size of the intended effect was significantly larger than the main effect of competence, Z = 4.93,  p < 0.001, and the interaction effect, Z = 5.60,  p < 0.001. Indeed, the main effect of perceived morality was reliably sustained in both competence conditions. That is, in the high-competence condition, high morality resulted in higher estimated organizational morality (M = 6.08, SD = 0.91) than did low morality (M = 2.16, SD = 1.11), F(1, 96) = 145.15,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.60$. Similarly, in the low-competence condition, high morality resulted in higher estimated organizational morality (M = 4.08, SD = 1.63) than did low morality (M = 1.80, SD = 0.76), F(1, 96) = 49.10,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.34$. Thus, even though the effect of the morality manipulation on estimated morality was more pronounced in the high-competence condition, the participants in all experimental conditions perceived the morality manipulation as intended.

\(^3\)In addition, a main effect of morality on estimated organizational competence was found, F(1, 96) = 38.53,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.29$. Overall, organizational competence was perceived to be higher in the high-morality condition (M = 4.64, SD = 1.70) than in the low-morality condition (M = 3.30, SD = 1.59). Again, it is important to note that this additional effect was significantly smaller than the intended main effect, Z = −3.12,  p < 0.001. Also, there was no interaction, F = 2.48,  p = 0.12, indicating that the intended effect of the competence manipulation held up in both morality conditions. We interpret these spillover effects of our manipulations as reflecting the natural state of affairs, where people who receive information about positive or negative organizational features in one domain, tend to assume the organization will have similarly positive or negative features in other domains. This is another reason why our experimental methodology – in which we explicitly provide independent information about the organization’s morality as well as its competence – has added value beyond real-life observations of perceived organizational attractiveness.

### Table 1. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of organizational attractiveness as a function of morality and competence (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.10 (0.60)</td>
<td>3.46 (1.19)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.62 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.72 (0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.36 (1.95)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Organizational attractiveness.** The analysis of organizational attractiveness yielded significant main effects of morality, F(1, 96) = 215.10,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.69$, as well as competence, F(1, 96) = 99.00,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.51$. Morality explained significantly more of the variance in organizational attractiveness than did competence, Z = 2.40,  p = 0.008, providing a first indicator that organizational attractiveness was more strongly influenced by information about its morality than by its competence. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between morality and competence, F(1, 96) = 24.19,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.20$. A contrast analysis showed that, as predicted, the organization was perceived to be a more attractive potential employer in the high-morality and low-competence condition than in the low-morality and high-competence condition, F(1, 96) = 11.12,  p = 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.10$ (see Table 1).

**Intentions to apply.** Significant main effects on intentions to apply were found for both morality, F(1, 96) = 94.50,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.50$, and competence, F(1, 96) = 35.58,  p < 0.001, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.27$. However, these were qualified by an interaction between morality and competence, F(1, 96) = 4.31,  p = 0.04, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Again, the morality main effect explained significantly
more variance in the intentions to apply than the competence main effect, $Z = 2.41$, $p = 0.008$, which suggests that organizational morality is the primary concern to decide whether to apply for a position at an organization. Indeed, the interaction effect and additional contrast analysis confirmed that participants reported stronger intentions to apply to the organization in the high-morality and low-competence condition than in the low-morality and high-competence condition, $F(1, 96) = 7.05$, $p = 0.009$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$ (see Table 2).

### Discussion

The results from Study 2 confirm our reasoning that, even though both morality and competence features can contribute to organizational attractiveness and the decision to apply for a job, morality weighs more heavily than competence when these organizational features are made to seem incompatible. Moral (but less competent) organizations were evaluated more positively than competent (but less moral) organizations. It is important to note that the mean scores of the outcome measures in the high-morality and low-competence condition were still relatively low in view of the range of the 7-point response scale. This shows that participants clearly preferred an organization that valued both morality and competence features. However, in contexts where morality and competence features conflicted, morality was the principal determinant of a positive evaluation of an organization, which is most directly relevant to our predictions.

Together, Studies 1 and 2 converge to suggest that morality is considered to be the main source of value in attracting individuals to seek employment at a particular organization. In most work contexts, however, the organization as a whole remains a relatively large and abstract entity, while day-to-day interactions take place in work teams. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that workers in organizations tend to be more committed to their own work team than to the organization as a whole, and that work team commitment is a better predictor of their performance, as rated by their supervisors (Ellemers, De Gilder and Van den Heuvel, 1998). Accordingly, it may well be that people primarily care about the properties of their work team, as this determines the quality of their day-to-day interactions at work, and directly affects their personal well-being and performance in the team. This is why we set out to examine the impact of the competence and morality of a specific work team on its perceived attractiveness to prospective work team members in Study 3. This has the added benefit of allowing us to use a more immersive methodology, where participants actually enter a moral or a competent work context.

### Study 3

In Study 3, participants were asked to collaborate on a task with an experimentally created work team, of which the morality and competence levels were manipulated. This allowed us to establish the impact of morality in comparison with competence on the attractiveness of a work team in a more immersive and directly self-relevant work context. In addition to assessing team attractiveness, we examined whether the effects of high levels of morality also extend to promoting stronger identification with the team than high levels of competence. In line with the results of our previous studies, we predict that morality will have a stronger effect on the evaluation of a work team than does competence. We argue that team morality might also have a stronger impact than team competence on team identification.

### Method

**Participants and design.** Eighty-nine students (59 females, 30 males, $M_{age} = 20.12$, $SD = 2.35$) at Leiden University were randomly assigned to the conditions of a two (team morality: high vs low) by two (team competence: high vs low) design. Participants could opt to receive course credit or payment of €8.00 for participation.

**Procedure.** Upon entry in the laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles that
contained a computer to provide information. Participants were led to believe that they had to collaborate on a task with two other participants, and that they were able to communicate with their team members through a webcam. Participants were informed that the team task they were about to do addressed their moral concerns as well as competence concerns. To get acquainted with each other before starting to work on this task, each team member was required to describe their general moral and competent behaviour in two separate webcam recordings, respectively, and to provide an example of a situation in which their (lack of) moral and competent behaviour was displayed. Two webcam videos allegedly containing communications from each team member were then presented. In fact, these were pre-recorded videos, prepared by two confederates. These contained the experimental manipulations. In the morality videos, the first confederate told about the (refusal to) donate money to charity and (not) helping a friend. The second confederate told about (not) returning money when a cashier accidentally gave too much change. In the competence videos, the first confederate described his or her superior or inferior performance at the university (a result on a particular test) and at work. The second confederate described his or her winning or failing performance during an important sports game. Videos of female confederates were presented to female participants and videos of male confederates were presented to male participants in order to rule out gender effects. After participants recorded their own videos to introduce themselves to their team members, the manipulation checks, the team attractiveness measure and the identification measure were introduced. Then they were asked to consider different business dilemma situations, as a preparation for the upcoming team task. Responses to all outcome measures were provided on Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). After completion of the study, participants were debriefed and informed that the experiment was completed, and they would not have to collaborate on a task with their team members.

**Materials**

**Manipulation checks.** Three items were used to check the experimental manipulation of each team member’s morality (e.g. ‘Team member A appears to be honest’, $\alpha = 0.89$) and competence (‘Team member A appears to be intelligent’, $\alpha = 0.87$), which were based on the morality and competence traits from Leach, Ellemers and Barreto (2007). The ratings for both team members were averaged to assess the team’s perceived morality ($r(87) = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and competence ($r(87) = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$).

**Team attractiveness.** The five items that were used to measure organizational attractiveness in Study 2 were modified to assess team attractiveness (e.g. ‘I respect this team’, $\alpha = 0.86$).

**Identification.** Identification with the team was measured with four items (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje, 1999; e.g. ‘I identify with this team’, $\alpha = 0.88$).

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** The check of the morality manipulation only yielded the predicted main effect of morality, $F(1, 85) = 47.93$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.36$ (all other effects were non-significant, $F < 1.62$, $p > 0.21$). Participants in the high-morality condition perceived the level of morality of their team members as higher ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 0.62$) than did participants in the low-morality condition ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.12$). Similarly, only a significant main effect of competence was found on the check of the competence manipulation, $F(1, 85) = 28.42$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.25$. The team members were perceived to be more competent in the high-competence condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 0.59$) than in the low-competence condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.93$). No other effects on the competence manipulation check were revealed, $F < 2.66$, $p > 0.11$.

**Team attractiveness.** A significant main effect of morality on team attractiveness was observed, $F(1, 85) = 10.53$, $p = 0.002$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$. No other effects emerged, $F < 0.40$, $p > 0.53$. Team

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4A PCA (using oblimin rotation) was conducted to confirm that team attractiveness and identification represent two distinct constructs. The analysis resulted in a two-factor solution, where attractiveness (eigenvalue = 5.27) explained 58.53% and identification (eigenvalue = 1.08) explained 11.97% of the total variance.
attractiveness was reported to be higher in the high-morality condition \((M = 4.47, \ SD = 0.88)\)
than in the low-morality condition \((M = 3.80, \ SD = 1.03)\).

**Identification.** The analysis of identification with the team only revealed a main effect of morality, \(F(1, 85) = 4.92, p = 0.03, \) partial \(\eta^2 = 0.06\). Participants in the high-morality condition identified more with the team \((M = 3.79, \ SD = 1.12)\) than did participants in the low-morality condition \((M = 3.25, \ SD = 1.13)\). Other effects were not significant, \(F < 0.82, p > 0.37\).

**Discussion**

As was the case with attraction to organizations in Studies 1 and 2, the results of Study 3 showed that morality rather than competence determined the positive evaluation of a work team in a concrete and immersive work context. Highly moral work teams were perceived to be more attractive and promoted stronger identification than did work teams with low levels of morality. Interestingly, at the team level, competence levels of other team members did not influence the evaluation of the work team in terms of its attractiveness and identification. Thus, we see a slightly different pattern at the team level – where morality is key – compared with the organizational level examined in Studies 1 and 2 – where both morality and competence contributed to the positive evaluation of an organization as a whole. These findings therefore suggest that in their day-to-day interactions with others in a work team, morality becomes the main source of value for the evaluation of the work team.

**General discussion**

The studies presented here complement prior research suggesting that morality is more important than competence is for a positive evaluation of individuals and groups in interpersonal interactions and social contexts. We set out to examine the relative importance of morality in comparison with competence in a work context where competence has traditionally been perceived as key. Using three different methodologies, our results suggest that morality has a stronger impact on the attractiveness of organizations (Studies 1 and 2) and work teams (Study 3) than does competence. That is, Study 1 demonstrated that participants preferred morality to competence features and traits when they were asked to choose between these organizational features directly. The results of Study 2 corroborated these results in a setting where participants were asked to respond to a specific organization that was described in terms of its competence and morality. That is, although both morality and competence influenced the evaluation of the organization, morality was a stronger determinant of organizational attractiveness and intentions to apply for a job than was competence. Indeed, when facing a trade-off, participants preferred a moral but less competent organization to a competent but less moral organization.

While the first two approaches addressed attractiveness of organizations, the third study focused on the effects of morality and competence in a work team context in which participants were actively involved. Participants were led to believe that they would collaborate on a task with a small work team, of which the morality and competence levels were manipulated. The results indicated that, at the team level, only morality promoted attractiveness and identification with the team. The perceived competence of other team members did not reliably affect the individual’s evaluation of the work team.

How can we explain the greater impact of morality at the team level compared with the organizational level? One possible explanation is that morality is particularly relevant to interpersonal interactions, in which people are motivated to determine the beneficial or harmful intent of their interaction partners (Brambilla *et al.*, 2013).

Arguably, the importance of having positive interpersonal interactions looms larger in a team context than when considering one’s evaluation of the organization as a whole. In addition, the impact of competence features on attractiveness is likely to be greater at the organizational level compared with the team level, as the organization’s successes will tend to be more clearly related to relevant incentives for individuals considering employment in the organization. Nevertheless, competence and business success were clearly relevant. Yet, moral concerns proved to be more important. Thus, our findings consistently show that, in work contexts that require a trade-off between moral and competence features, the...
morality of teams and organizations is a more important source of attraction and value than their competence.

The current research showed that morality is a stronger determinant of organizational and work team attractiveness than competence is, even though competence tends to be a highly salient feature in work contexts. It is important to note that the participants in the current research consisted exclusively of students. Instead of seeing this as a weakness, this may in fact represent a strength of our research. First, we think students constitute a conservative sample to test our predictions, as they are documented to have a relatively lower endorsement of morality values than the general population (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). In addition, students seeking first employment are well suited to examine perceptions of organizational attractiveness, as they can respond freely to the descriptions they receive without being contaminated by prior work experiences. Indeed, students form a relevant target population for organizational recruitment, as most organizations seek to attract highly educated applicants, and often actively recruit on campus to benefit from the competitive advantage that this can bring (Schmidt Albinger and Freeman, 2000).

In principle, one may argue that students’ lack of actual work experience can also invalidate our findings, as they are unable to anticipate their true feelings when they actually work in a particular organization or work team. Addressing this concern, we first note that the present experimental findings converge with and extend covariations between perceived organizational morality and organizational commitment observed among employees across different organizations (Ellemers et al., 2011). Additionally, we posit that the discrepancy between prior expectations and actual work experiences is an issue worthy of consideration in its own right. Indeed, as work on realistic job preview has revealed (Phillips, 1998), the possibility of such a discrepancy makes it all the more important to be aware of what attracts people to the organization in the first place, to be able to assess whether the organization can live up to initial expectations. Thus, we think this work adds to existing insights, as it documents that organizational competence and business success are not the only sources of value to attract individuals to the organization. In other contexts, it has already been established that emphasizing prior successes may not be uniquely effective, and in fact can even backfire when this reduces rather than enhances the recruitment potential, for instance of volunteer organizations (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2008; 2014). The present research suggests that similar concerns may play a role in other types of organizations too: for instance, when people are suspicious about environmental, societal, personal or moral sacrifices that were made by the organization to achieve success. Importantly, instead of merely noting that it may not always be the best recruitment strategy to emphasize past successes, we point to a concrete alternative source of value that organizations may pursue in specifying and promoting their ethical business conduct.

Our current focus on attractiveness of teams and organizations also raises the question of whether organizational and team morality may still have positive effects once individuals are part of the organization: for instance, on their motivation and work performance. Indeed, research among employees working in different organizations indicates the importance of perceived organizational morality for relevant work attitudes such as their satisfaction and work commitment (Ellemers et al., 2011). Additionally, a recent study among schoolteachers in Italy revealed that the willingness of individual teachers to help a new school principal adjust was more strongly determined by the perceived morality of the new principal than his competence (Pagliaro et al., 2013). These results suggest that it is worthwhile to address morality in teams and organizations, as this probably not only benefits well-being and satisfaction of individuals working in these contexts, but may also enhance relevant task behaviour and performance outcomes that are usually associated with competence and success.

Conclusions

The current research highlights the importance of morality in comparison with competence in a work context. We have demonstrated that, when these organizational features are incompatible, prospective applicants perceive morality to be a more essential source of value than competence. When people anticipate collaborating on a task
with a work team, the morality of the work team determines whether the work team is positively evaluated. Thus, whereas competence and business success are traditionally emphasized as the primary feature to attract individuals to teams and organizations, our results suggest that enhancing the perceived morality of an organization may contribute to more effective recruitment of highly educated applicants.

References


Schmidt Albinger, H. and S. J. Freeman (2000). ‘Corporate social performance and attractiveness as an employer to
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