The threat of moral transgression: The impact of group membership and moral opportunity

Jojanneke van der Toorn*, Naomi Ellemers* & Bertjan Doosje†

* Department of Psychology, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
† Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Jojanneke van der Toorn, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, Leiden, South Holland, The Netherlands, 2300 RB. E-mail: j.m.van.der.toorn@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Received: 9 October 2014
Accepted: 30 March 2015
doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2119

Keywords: intergroup relations, group processes, Morality, rationalization, threat

Abstract
When other ingroup members behave immorally, people’s motivation to maintain a moral group image may cause them to experience increased threat and act defensively in response. In the current research, we investigated people’s reactions to others’ misconduct and examined the effect of group membership and the possible threat-reducing function of moral opportunity—the prospect of being able to re-establish the group’s moral image. In Study 1, students who were confronted with fellow students’ plagiarism and who received an opportunity to improve their group’s morality reported feeling less threatened than students who did not receive such opportunity. In Study 2, students reacted to a recent academic fraud case, which either implicated an ingroup (scholar in their own discipline) or an outgroup member (scholar in another discipline). Results indicated that participants experienced more threat when an ingroup (versus an outgroup) member had committed the moral transgression. However, as hypothesized, this was not the case when moral opportunity was provided. Hence, the threat-reducing effect of moral opportunity was replicated. Additionally, participants generally were more defensive in response to ingroup (versus outgroup) moral failure and less defensive when moral opportunity was present (versus absent). Together, these findings suggest that the reduction of threat due to moral opportunity may generally help individuals take constructive action when the behavior of fellow group members discredits the group’s moral image.

Moral judgments indicate evaluations of behavior in terms of good versus bad, or right versus wrong (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). People want to see themselves and be seen by others as moral and they desire to be part of moral groups (Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). When faced with ingroup members’ moral transgressions, whether committed in the past (e.g., the Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade) or the present (e.g., banks who make substantial profits by rigging their figures or interest rates), the motivation to view the ingroup as moral may lead people to experience threat. They can engage different self-protective mechanisms to manage their discomfort. For instance, they may rationalize their group members’ transgressions (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006), consider those who display anti-normative behavior as non-prototypical group members (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002), or disidentify with the group in question (Glasford, Pratto, & Dovidio, 2008). However, such defense mechanisms—invoked to protect the group (and thus the self)-image—stand in the way of constructive action (e.g., to repair past transgressions or to prevent future transgressions; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Tarrant, Branscombe, Warner, & Weston, 2012). To date, little work has examined the conditions under which such threat and defensive coping responses may be reduced. We propose that providing people with opportunities to re-establish the moral group image will diminish the experience of threat and decrease defensiveness, increasing the likelihood that constructive measures are taken.
The current research examines the influence of group membership (ingroup versus outgroup) and moral opportunity (present versus absent) on affective, cognitive, and behavioral indicators of people’s reactions to immoral behavior of another individual. As such, the present research contributes to prior work in several ways. First, we take a novel approach to the possible reduction of threat and defensive responses by explicitly pointing to opportunities to address moral shortcomings of the group—instead of defending one’s self-image from being tainted by them (cf. Castano et al., 2002; Glasford et al., 2008). Second, by distinguishing between ingroup and outgroup immorality, this investigation adds to the as yet limited body of research (e.g., Leidner et al., 2010) on the role of group membership in responding to immoral conduct. Third, whereas existing psychological analyses of group-level moral transgressions focus on specific emotions (e.g., collective guilt; Doosje et al., 1998; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006; Roccas et al., 2006), we examine people’s primary threat responses to other people’s moral failure.

The Importance of Moral Judgments

Moral judgments concern evaluations of the actions and character of a person, with respect to the culture or subculture to which one belongs (Giner-Sorolla, 2012; Greene, 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Moral judgments are strongly felt and have unique and far-reaching implications for the self, one’s group, and society as a whole (Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013; Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012). People have a general motivation to see themselves and be seen by others in a positive light (Greenwald, 1980; Schlenker, 1980), especially when it comes to their morality (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002). This benefits their motivation and effort to do the right thing (e.g., Van Nunspeet, Derks, Ellemers, & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Van Nunspeet, Ellemers, Derks, & Nieuwenhuis, 2014) and causes them to behave in line with group norms (Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011). At the same time, the desire to be moral—and the far-reaching implications of being seen as lacking in morality—can elicit fear of not being able to live up to moral standards, resulting in defensive responses (e.g., Monin, 2007; Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008).

People similarly care about the image of the social groups to which they belong (their ingroups), as this has consequences for how they are seen by others as well as how they understand themselves (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Ellemers & Haslam, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1991). People’s evaluations of the morality of their group are important source of group pride and ingroup identification (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Leach et al., 2007), and moral behavior within groups helps people earn respect from other group members and feel included in the group (Pagliaro et al., 2011). Failure of the group to meet moral standards, conversely, constitutes a highly aversive experience (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002; Doosje et al., 1998, 2006), and threats to the group’s moral status are more strongly felt than threats to the group’s competence (Täuber & Van Zomeren, 2013). Recent research indicated, for example, that people are less inclined to interact with or provide assistance to group members lacking in morality than those lacking in competence, as they consider immorality a greater threat to the image of their group (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013; Pagliaro, Brambilla, Sacchi, D’Angelo, & Ellemers, 2013).

The Effect of Group Membership on Moral Judgments

As people are motivated to see their groups as moral, they compete for moral status with other groups. Research on ethnocentrism showed that in a range of cultures all over the world, morality was the only characteristic that people consistently ascribed more to their ingroups than their outgroups (Brewer & Campbell, 1976; Levine & Campbell, 1972). At the same time, people are more likely to explain away immoral acts when the perpetrator is part of their own group, and judge wrongdoings more harshly when committed by outgroup compared with ingroup members. Tarrant et al. (2012), for example, showed that participants justified torture committed by the ingroup by describing it as more morally acceptable than torture committed by the outgroup (also see Leidner et al., 2010; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). These paradoxical findings tend to be explained by arguing that immoral conduct committed by the group or fellow group members represents a threat to one’s social identity, as it jeopardizes the image of the ingroup as being more moral than other groups (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2013; Branscombe et al., 1999). Hence, immoral acts perpetrated by ingroup members are likely to raise denial or rationalization (Doosje et al., 1998; Iyer, Jetten, & Haslam, 2012; Roccas et al., 2006; Täuber & Van Zomeren, 2013).

To our knowledge, however, no research has directly examined people’s primary threat responses in the wake of immoral ingroup (versus outgroup) conduct. Rather, research on group morality has focused on the discrete emotions people experience, with guilt and shame...
being the most commonly studied (Branscombe et al., 2002; Čehajić-Clancy, Elfron, Halperin, Liberman, & Ross, 2011; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2007; Doosje et al., 1998; Gausel, 2012; Gausel & Brown, 2012; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In the current research, our first aim is to empirically test the commonly held assumption that an immoral act is experienced as more threatening when it is perpetrated by an ingroup representative rather than an outgroup representative.

**Moral Opportunity as a Threat-Reducing Tool**

Ingroup members’ immoral actions should especially result in threat and denial when people feel unable to do something about it (e.g., Gausel & Leach, 2011). Past research indicates that strategies to affirm the self-image or group image may serve a threat-buffering function. According to self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), people can tolerate a threat to a specific aspect of their identity as long as they are able to maintain a global sense of self-integrity. This may for instance be accomplished by affirming a valued aspect of one’s self identity (self-affirmation) or one’s group identity (group affirmation). Both strategies can be effective in reducing threat and dysfunctional responses such as motivation loss (Derk, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2009). Whereas most research has concerned affirmation in the competence domain (e.g., Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007), there is some indication that affirmation may be an effective tool in the context of morality as well. After having considered important personal or collective values or successes, people reported less defensiveness when confronted with their ingroup’s moral transgressions (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011; Miron, Branscombe, & Biernat, 2010; Peetz, Gunn, & Wilson, 2010; see also Doosje et al., 2006).

Thus, it seems that affirming the group’s morality may reduce the emergence of threat and hence decrease people’s inclination to rationalize the moral failure of their group. We note, however, that in these studies, threat-buffering affirmation strategies are invoked first, before the identity threat is encountered. This does not fit real-life instances in which people first tend to be confronted with information about their group’s moral failure and only after seek an opportunity to engage in such threat-buffering strategies. Hence, reading about group members’ transgressions in the papers, being confronted with it in conversation with others, or being actively challenged to reflect on the matter in public all are likely to raise denial and rationalization as a way to cope with such threat.¹ We submit that a future-oriented strategy may be more fruitful in these circumstances. Specifically, we propose that—even after being confronted with the ingroup’s moral transgressions—being offered the prospect of improving the group’s morality in the future should provide an alternative way to reduce feelings of threat (see also Does, Derks, & Ellemers, 2011). Such moral opportunity should diminish people’s tendency to defend the status quo or to rationalize the wrongdoing, making them more inclined to respond by taking constructive action towards improvement of the current situation. This conceptualization of moral opportunity bears some resemblance to cognitive dissonance reduction strategies, which unlike affirmation strategies directly address the behavior that causes the dissonance (Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997; see also Glasford et al., 2008). However, moral opportunity does not allow people to undo their fellow group members’ immoral conduct but rather offers prospects to restore the group image after it has been damaged. In the current research, we examine the threat-reducing function of moral opportunity, by providing people with concrete possibilities to take action to re-establish the group’s moral image in the future.

**Coping with Ingroup Moral Transgressions**

We have suggested that ingroup members’ immoral conduct elicits threat and increases defensive coping responses. Such defensiveness may, among other things, take the form of rationalizing or even denying the conduct and its consequences, or the deflection of blame away from the ingroup. The latter can be done by, for example, attributing a similar level of immorality to other groups or by ceasing to consider those who have displayed immoral behavior as representative or proper group members. Indeed, research on the so-called Black Sheep Effect (e.g., Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) has shown that people respond particularly harshly to fellow ingroup members who have damaged the reputation of the group (e.g., Hornsey & Jetten, 2003; Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001; Marques & Páez, 1994). Derogating such deviants and excluding them from the ingroup may help the rest of the group maintain a positive identity (Abrams, Marques, Brown, & Henson, 2000; Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Castano et al., 2002; Hutchison & Abrams, 2003; ¹Our proposition that people who are not provided an opportunity to address group members’ moral transgressions would be motivated to rationalize the wrongdoing is consistent with existing theorizing that people rationalize circumstances they cannot change (e.g., belief in a just world; Lerner, 1980).
Marques & Páez, 1994; Marques et al., 1988). Although most of this work has examined responses to individuals who undermine the perceived competence of the group, in principle, similar tendencies are likely to be raised when the group’s morality is at stake. Devaluing and excluding immoral ingroup members can provide a way to deflect moral blame away from the group. Indeed, Doosje, Zebel, Scheermeijer, and Mathyi (2007) found that, in response to Muslim terrorism, Islamic participants were less likely to generalize the negative behavior of one ingroup member to the ingroup as a whole than non-Islamic participants were.

In sum, we argue that people may cope with ingroup members’ immoral acts in various ways, by rationalizing and denying the severity of the crime or its consequences or by placing blame on other groups or on individual culprits rather than confronting this as a problem that affects the ingroup as a whole.

The Present Research
In the present research, we examined the effects of group membership and moral opportunity on responses to moral transgressions. We hypothesize that a moral transgression is experienced as more threatening when committed by an ingroup member, and will lead to more defensive coping than when the same transgression is committed by an outgroup member. However, when opportunities are provided to repair or improve the moral image of the ingroup, the ingroup member’s transgression will be experienced as less threatening and will induce less defensive coping than when no such opportunity exists. When the immoral behavior is perpetrated by an outgroup member, overall, the transgression will be experienced as less threatening and elicit less defensive coping—causing the presence versus absence of moral opportunity to be less relevant. In Study 1, we will examine the threat-reducing effect of moral opportunity when fellow ingroup members jeopardize the moral image of the ingroup. In Study 2, we will also include an outgroup condition to be able to further investigate the role of group membership in participants’ responses to moral group threats. Obviously, individuals need to subjectively categorize as a member of the group to be able to argue that they differentiate in their responses to ingroup versus outgroup members (Branscombe et al., 2002). Only when individuals think of themselves as members of a specific group should they feel more threatened by the moral transgressions of an ingroup member compared with an outgroup member. This is why we made salient the focal ingroup categorization in all experimental conditions, and checked whether all participants were sufficiently identified with the ingroup to display the responses we predicted.

STUDY 1
In Study 1, we examined the threat-reducing potential of moral opportunity by incorporating it in how fellow ingroup members’ moral transgressions were communicated. To this end, we investigated students’ reactions to a news article explicating high rates of fraud and plagiarism among their fellow students. Moral opportunity was provided by telling participants that they would receive a chance to improve the moral image of the group in the future. In all cases, the importance of behaving morally was emphasized, but this either indicated the presence of moral opportunity (elaborating on the importance of improving moral conduct by discussing morality as an ideal goal they might aspire to achieve) or with statements where such a moral opportunity was absent (the importance of avoiding immoral conduct was emphasized by addressing the responsibility to behave morally as an obligation that cannot be breached).

Method
Participants and Design
Sixty-one Leiden University students were recruited in communal areas of the Colleges of Social Sciences, Law, and Medicine at Leiden University. They received a candy bar and a chance to win a €100 gift certificate for their participation. Two participants were excluded due to outlying values on the dependent variable. This resulted in a total of fifty-nine participants (71.2% female; 50.8% Social Sciences, 44.1% Law, and 5.1% Medicine students; mean age = 22.22, SD = 2.36) who were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (moral opportunity present versus absent) in a between-subjects design.

Procedure and Measures
After giving informed consent, participants were handed one of two questionnaires, depending on experimental condition. Following the assertion of Lau (1989) that “any factor that increases the salience of group membership increases the probability of identifying with the group” (p. 222), we told participants that we were interested in how they perceive certain issues as a student in their respective college (Social Sciences, SD = 2.36) who

---

2Those values that were more than 1.5 times the interquartile range above the 75th percentile or 1.5 times the interquartile range below the 25th percentile.
Law, or Medicine) and would first like to know how they feel about their membership in that group. They then filled out a 6-item group identification measure with response options ranging from 1 (somewhat agree) to 7 (completely agree). The scale purposefully started at somewhat agree rather than completely disagree, so as to further increase the likelihood that participants considered the experimental situation in terms of their identity as a Social Sciences, Law, or Medicine student. Example items are “I feel strong ties with Social Sciences/Law/Medicine students” and “I identify with other Social Sciences/Law/Medicine students” (adapted from Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; α = .88).

Next, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate their responses to recent events in the news and that they would be asked to read and respond to questions about the accompanying article. They, then, read one of two news messages, which were presented as a feature article in the university newsletter and which were factually equivalent but differed in terms of message frame (moral opportunity present versus absent). The news messages discussed the results of a recent large-scale study that had been executed within the various faculties on behalf of the university’s Board of Directors. In both conditions, the study findings demonstrated especially high rates of fraud and plagiarism among students in the participant’s college, calling into question their morality and integrity. In the moral opportunity present condition, the wording of the article focused on actions that might be taken to improve moral conduct in the future. For example, the study results were said to show that “the state of affairs needs to improve.” In addition, the college’s student board was said to be dedicated to “reaching an improvement of the situation,” for example by appointing a student committee aimed at encouraging honest behavior. In the moral opportunity absent condition, the article instead focused on actions that might be taken to avoid immoral conduct. In this condition, the study results were said to show that “the state of affairs is not in order” and the college’s student board is dedicated to “preventing these mistakes,” by appointing a committee aimed at reducing dishonest behavior.

After reading the article, participants indicated the extent to which they felt threatened by rating their agreement with the following items on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much): “When I think about the immoral behavior of my fellow students, I feel threatened” and “When I think about the immoral behavior of my fellow students I feel attacked” (r[57] = .65, p < .001). They were also asked how credible and how interesting they perceived the news article to be on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much; r[57] = .41, p < .001).

Lastly, participants were informed about the exact purpose of the study, were given the candy bar and a lottery ticket, and were thanked for their participation.3

Results

Ingroup Identification

Participants’ mean ingroup identification was slightly, but not significantly, higher than the midpoint of the scale (M = 4.15, SD = 1.22), t(58) = 0.96, p = .342. Given that the response options ranged from “somewhat agree” to “completely agree,” this indicates sufficient identification with the ingroup.

Credibility and Interest Value

Participants generally perceived the article as credible and interesting with the mean (M = 4.32, SD = 1.16) being significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale, t(58) = 2.13, p = .038. No significant differences were obtained between the two experimental conditions, t(57) = 1.05, p = .300.

Threat

Results of a one-way ANOVA revealed a marginally significant effect of moral opportunity on sense of threat, F(1, 57) = 3.01, p = .088, η² = .05. Participants reported feeling less threatened when moral opportunity was present (M = 1.65, SD = 0.81) compared with when it was absent (M = 2.09, SD = 1.10). This effect reached statistical significance after adjusting for participants’ group identification and the perceived credibility and interest value of the article, F(1, 57) = 4.16, p = .046, η² = .07. As might have been anticipated, ingroup identification was also significantly related to threat, F(1, 57) = 4.06, p = .049, η² = .07, indicating that participants generally experienced a greater sense of threat to the extent that they were more highly identified.4

We also explored participants’ dejection-related and agitation-related emotions, the perceived seriousness and personal impact of the news article, felt challenge, shame, guilt, and rejection, support for reparative measures, and defensiveness. When moral opportunity was present (versus absent), participants perceived the immoral behavior as significantly less serious and felt significantly less shame and rejection. No other statistically significant effects were obtained.

4Regression analysis testing whether group identification and the perceived credibility and interest value of the article interacted with moral opportunity yielded no significant interaction terms, β = .02, t(53) = .15, p = .880 and β = .14, t(53) = 1.05, p = .300, respectively. Despite the addition of the interaction terms, the main effects of moral opportunity and group identification remained significant, β = −.27, t(53) = −2.04, p = .046 and β = −.28, t(53) = 2.10, p = .040.
Discussion

In Study 1, we hypothesized and found that framing a message about moral ingroup transgressions in terms of moral opportunity reduces students’ sense of threat from reading the article, compared with the situation where they receive the same information about moral ingroup transgressions without providing such moral opportunity. As such, we obtained initial empirical support for our hypothesis that giving participants a sense that they can take action to re-establish the group’s moral image in the future lessens the threat they experience in response to their fellow group members’ moral transgressions. The question remains whether a similar effect would be obtained when participants are confronted with the moral transgressions of outgroup members. This we examined in Study 2.

STUDY 2

In the second study, we examined the joint effects of group membership and moral opportunity in the context of actual scientific fraud cases in the Netherlands, involving a Dutch psychologist and a Dutch medical scientist. These cases were highly comparable in the sense that both involved large-scale data fabrication. Cases such as these urge questions as to whether the deviant behavior is reflective of the group as a whole. Indeed, in the cases we selected for this study, much of the public’s attention was focused on the extent to which the fraudulent behavior was made possible by practices characteristic for the discipline. Accordingly, even though the fraud was perpetrated by a single researcher working in a specific research group, in both cases it was strongly felt as having the potential to undermine the moral stature of the research field as a whole and people were quick to dissociate themselves and their group from the fraudster in question (e.g., European Association of Social Psychology, 2012; Smit, 2012).

Method

Participants and Design

Ninety-six Leiden University psychology students participated in this study. Four participants were excluded due to already having participated in a pilot study⁵ and two participants were excluded because they failed to comply with experimental instructions to prepare for a group discussion. The resulting 90 participants (75.6% female; mean age = 19.92, SD = 1.92) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Group membership: ingroup versus outgroup) × 2 (Moral opportunity: present versus absent) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure

After giving informed consent, the categorization of students and academics in psychology was made salient to clarify participants’ identity as (upcoming) psychologists. Next, they read an alleged newspaper article, which constituted the group manipulation; the two versions of the newspaper article referred to scientific fraud either committed by a Dutch psychologist (ingroup condition) or a Dutch medical scientist (outgroup condition), respectively. Participants were then asked to prepare for a group discussion in which they would have to do a group task together with other participants. This interactive group task was either presented as an opportunity to demonstrate and improve the group’s morality (moral opportunity present condition) or not (moral opportunity absent condition).⁶ Before participants engaged in this task, we measured their experience of threat and how they coped with the transgression.⁷ We also included an open-ended question asking participants to explicate the fraud case in their own words. We registered the time they invested

⁵For the purposes of scale construction, we conducted a pilot study on a sample of 49 Leiden University psychology students. One participant was excluded because of suspicion regarding the manipulation and two participants were excluded because of not complying with the experimental instructions to prepare for a group discussion. The resulting 46 participants (82.6% female; mean age = 19.98, SD = 4.11) completed the Study 1 materials. Sufficiently high reliabilities were obtained for the measures of ingroup identification (α = .82), threat (r[44] = .60, p < .001), and rationalization (α = .64).

⁶We also included a condition in which participants anticipated an opportunity to demonstrate and increase the group’s image as competent (N = 45) to see if any opportunity to restore a positive group image would reduce threat and rationalization in the face of ingroup immorality. Adding this condition to the design did not substantially alter the main findings reported here. However, this condition did not yield consistent (nor significant) results and we decided not to include it in the main analyses. The absence of significant competence opportunity effects may suggest domain specificity in dealing with moral threats, but more systematic research is required. In line with previous research (Ellemers et al.; Leach et al.), rather than solely manipulating the opportunity domain (morality versus competence) in which a moral ingroup threat could be addressed, a fruitful future course of inquiry may be to compare threats to the ingroup’s incompetence to its immorality, as well as considering how these affect responses to moral versus competence opportunities. We tried to do so in a parallel study to Study 1 but have so far not succeeded in developing an effective procedure.⁷We also explored the perceived psychological demands of the upcoming group task and participants’ perceived ability to cope with them, other affective responses to the transgression, and the extent to which participants were willing to take responsibility for the fraud. These measures are not reported here, as they either had very low reliabilities or are beyond the focus of this article.
in this task and the number of words they used for their account as behavioral indicators of participants’ willingness to engage in considering and clarifying the fraud case in question.\footnote{Inspection of the bivariate dependent variable relationships only yielded a significant relationship between threat and the deflection of blame to other groups, $r(88) = .27$, $p = .011$, such that the more threat participants experienced, the more likely they were to deflect blame away from the group by implicating science as a whole. All other $r < .20$.} Next, participants were given a few minutes to collect their thoughts and prepare for the purported group session. This group session never took place, however, which was explained in the debriefing.

**Manipulations**

**Group Manipulation.** Participants were asked to read a newspaper article that describes a recent case of scientific fraud. In the ingroup condition the fraudster was a Dutch former psychology professor, in the outgroup condition it was a Dutch former medical professor (both were mentioned by name). Participants were instructed to read the article carefully as they would be asked about it later. The article portrayed the fraud as a serious attack on the integrity of the field and described how the professor cheated for years and committed large-scale scientific fraud by fabricating the research data of at least 30 publications in renowned scientific journals and various book chapters. The article furthermore noted the public’s dismayed reactions to the fraud and that it raised serious concerns regarding the morality of the field.

**Moral Opportunity Manipulation.** In all cases, participants were reminded that the fraud case elicited a fervent public debate and were told that a national committee had been erected to investigate the wider impact of the affair. In the moral opportunity present condition, participants were subsequently told that this committee is interested in hearing what students have to contribute to this debate, as the public opinion on the morality of the sciences can still be influenced. They would therefore be given the opportunity to discuss the situation with other participants in the second part of the experiment and to develop suggestions to improve the moral image of the sciences that could be submitted to the committee. In the moral opportunity absent condition, participants were told that the committee is not interested in hearing what students have to contribute to this debate, as the public opinion on the morality of the sciences is basically set. Instead of discussing the moral image of the sciences, students would therefore be asked to discuss the importance of scientific education with other participants in the second part of the experiment, as a way to provide the committee with ideas about the improvement of study programs. By telling participants in both conditions that they were expected to engage in a group discussion with other participants, we made sure that differential effects of these manipulations would be due to group membership and moral opportunity and not the absence or presence of an anticipated group discussion.

**Measures**

**Ingroup Identification.** We told participants that we were interested in how they perceive certain issues as a future psychologist and would first like to know how they feel about their membership in that group. To assess their identification with the group of psychologists, they were then asked to complete a similar 6-item group identification measure as was used in Study 1 ($1 = \text{somewhat agree}; 7 = \text{completely agree}$). Example items are “I identify with the field of psychology” and “It is important to my self-image to be part of the group of psychologists” ($\alpha = .83$; adapted from Doseje et al., 1995).

**Threat.** As a measure of threat, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they felt “threatened” and “attacked” when they read about the fraud case ($1 = \text{not at all}; 7 = \text{very much}$; $r(88) = .61$, $p < .001$).

**Coping with the Transgression.** To assess how participants coped with the transgression, we measured the extent to which they placed blame on the various parties involved and their rationalization of the transgression.

**Deflecting Blame Away from the Group.** In the case of scientific fraud within a particular field, blame can be deflected away from the group by either emphasizing that the focus should be on the fraudster (the person) over the specific academic field (the group) or on science as a whole (all groups) over the specific academic field (the group). We measured both possibilities using four items in which each asked participants to indicate by choosing between two opposing statements which priorities they think the committee should have. Two items concerned the juxtaposition between implicating the fraudster (the person) versus the specific academic field (the group): (1) “Making sure the person who committed the fraud can never execute his profession again,” versus “Figuring out how the colleagues in the field could have let it come this far” and (2) “Making sure that the person who committed the fraud pays damages to those he has disadvantaged” versus “Helping the field in letting the affected persons pick up their scientific research again” (we varied the order in which
the options were presented such that the person blame option was second on the first item and first on the second item). Two other items concerned the juxtaposition between implicating science as a whole (all groups) over the specific academic field (the group): (1) “Sharpening the guidelines within science as a whole” versus “First taking on the most serious wrongs within the specific field,” and (2) “Establishing a science-wide committee to discover other cases of fraud” versus “Letting the field establish an internal committee to better investigate this fraud” (we varied the order in which the options were presented such that the option blaming all groups was first on the first item and second on the second item). A deflecting blame to the person variable was computed by assigning 2 to participants who implicated the fraudster (the person) over the specific academic field (the group) on both items, 1 to participants who did this on one of the two items, and 0 to participants who did this on neither of the two items. Similarly, a deflecting blame to all groups variable was computed by assigning 2 to participants who implicated science as a whole (all groups) over the specific academic field (the group) on both items, 1 to participants who did this on one of the two items, and 0 to participants who did this on neither of the two items. Hence, high scores on both variables constructed in this way indicated deflecting blame away from the group.

Rationalization. As a measure of rationalization, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements (1 = not at all; 7 = very much): “The fraud case concerns an incident and should not be paid so much attention,” “There actually is no longer a problem, as the professor in question has already been fired,” “We should just be glad that we discovered the fraud and not give it too much thought,” and “Fraud occurs in every sector; if it hadn’t been him, it would have been someone else.” Because the reliability of the rationalization measure improved considerably when dropping the fourth item (from $\alpha=.52$ to $\alpha=.73$), we computed the mean of the first three items.$^9$

Behavioral Engagement. As a behavioral measure of participants’ willingness to consider and engage in the moral transgression that was presented, we counted the number of words and characters they used and assessed the time they took to answer the open-ended question to explicate the fraud in their own words. We used the number of words in our analyses, as it was very highly correlated with both the number of characters, $r(88) = .98$, $p < .001$, and the time used, $r(88) = .73$, $p < .001$.\(^{10}\)

**Results**

**Ingroup Identification**

As intended, participants were sufficiently identified with their ingroup overall, as they scored significantly higher than the midpoint of this scale ($M=4.88$, $SD=.99$), $t(89) = 8.46$, $p < .001$.

**Threat**

A 2 (Group: ingroup versus outgroup) × 2 (Moral opportunity: present versus absent) between-subjects ANOVA on threat yielded a marginally significant main effect of moral opportunity, $F(1,86) = 3.34$, $p = .071$, $\eta^2 = .037$, suggesting that participants with moral opportunity felt less threatened ($M=2.71$, $SD=.20$) than participants without moral opportunity ($M=3.23$, $SD=.20$). As predicted, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect, $F(1,86) = 3.98$, $p = .049$, $\eta^2 = .044$. The relevant means indicate that among participants in the ingroup condition, those with moral opportunity reported significantly less threat ($M=2.54$, $SE=.28$) compared with those without moral opportunity ($M=3.62$, $SE=.27$), $F(1,86) = 7.82$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .083$. Among participants in the outgroup condition, those with moral opportunity indicated the same level of relatively low threat ($M=2.88$, $SE=.29$) as those without moral opportunity ($M=2.83$, $SE=.29$), $F(1,86) = .01$, $p = .908$, $\eta^2 = .0001$ (see Figure 1). Looking at it another way, when moral opportunity was absent, participants in the ingroup condition felt significantly more threatened compared with participants in the outgroup condition, $F(1,86) = 3.98$, $p = .049$, $\eta^2 = .044$, but when moral opportunity was present, they did not, $F(1,86) = .70$, $p = .404$, $\eta^2 = .008$. These findings support our reasoning.

Replicating Study 1, the level of ingroup identification was significantly related to threat, $F(1,85) = 6.81$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .074$, indicating that participants generally experienced a greater sense of threat to the extent that

---

$^9$Similar, but slightly weaker, results were obtained when using the four-item measure in our analyses.

$^{10}$We had an independent coder who was blind to our experimental manipulations and hypotheses code the responses for the presence of rationalizing arguments (e.g., “other fields and disciplines are not free of blame either,” or “the fraudster is to blame, not the field”). A moral opportunity x group membership logistic regression and ANOVA yielded no significant differences as to (a) whether participants came up with rationalizing arguments or not and (b) the number of rationalizing arguments they raised.
they were more highly identified. However, adjusting for participants’ ingroup identification did not alter the two-way interaction effect between Group and Moral opportunity, $F(1,85) = 3.98, p = .049, \eta^2 = .045$.

Coping with the Transgression

We conducted a 2 (Group: ingroup versus outgroup) x 2 (Moral opportunity: present versus absent) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance on the deflection of blame to the person, the deflection of blame to all groups, and rationalization (after standardization of the dependent variables). The multivariate interaction effect did not reach significance, $F(3,84) = 0.81, p = .484, \eta^2 = .029$. However, we obtained a significant multivariate main effect for group, $F(3,84) = 3.83, p = .013, \eta^2 = .120$, and a marginally significant multivariate main effect for moral opportunity, $F(3,84) = 2.14, p = .101, \eta^2 = .071$.

Univariate follow-up tests indicated that the significant main effect of group was driven by the variables assessing the deflection of blame away from the group (by instead blaming the person), $F(1,86) = 4.51, p = .037, \eta^2 = .050$, and rationalization, $F(1,86) = 8.07, p = .006, \eta^2 = .086$. Participants in the ingroup condition were more likely to deflect blame away from the group ($M = .69, SE = .09$) and to rationalize the fraud ($M = 3.01, SE = .15$) compared with participants in the outgroup condition ($M = .41, SE = .10$ and $M = 2.37, SE = .16$, respectively). Hence, these two measures indicate that ingroup members responded more defensively to the threat of moral opportunity.

The marginally significant main effect of moral opportunity was driven by the variable assessing the deflection of blame away from the group (generalizing it to other groups in science), $F(1,86) = 5.82, p = .018, \eta^2 = .063$. This effect indicates that participants with moral opportunity were less likely to deflect blame away from the group ($M = 1.14, SE = .11$) compared with participants without moral opportunity ($M = 1.50, SE = .10$), which partially supports our predictions.

Again, when adjusting for participants’ ingroup identification, these effects were nearly identical, $F(3,83) = 3.95, p = .011, \eta^2 = .125$ for the multivariate main effect of group and $F(3,83) = 2.51, p = .064, \eta^2 = .083$ for the multivariate main effect of moral opportunity. Ingroup identification was not significantly related to any of the coping variables, all $Fs < 1$.

Behavioral Engagement

A 2 (Group: ingroup versus outgroup) x 2 (Moral opportunity: present versus absent) between-subjects ANOVA on behavioral engagement yielded a significant main effect of group, $F(1,86) = 4.49, p = .037, \eta^2 = .050$, with mean values indicating that overall participants in the ingroup condition were less inclined to engage in considering and explicating the fraud in their own words, as they devoted less words to this task ($M = 37.70, SE = 2.96$ versus $M = 46.88, SE = 3.16$). The main effect of moral opportunity and the interaction effect were not significant, $Fs < 2$. Nevertheless, the observed means are consistent with the hypothesized interaction pattern, in that the difference in behavioral engagement between ingroup and outgroup conditions only emerged when moral opportunity was absent. That is, only when moral opportunity was absent, were participants less inclined to engage in considering and explicating the moral transgression in the case of an ingroup compared with an outgroup perpetrator ($M = 34.00, SE = 4.10$ versus $M = 49.29, SE = 4.47$), $F(1,86) = 6.35, p = .014, \eta^2 = .069$. However, this relative reluctance to display behavioral engagement in the ingroup condition is no longer present when moral opportunity is provided ($M = 41.39, SE = 4.27$ versus $M = 44.48, SE = 4.47$), $F(1,86) = 0.25, p = .619, \eta^2 = .003$.

When adjusting for participants’ group identification, the main effect for group was nearly identical, $F(1,85) = 4.33, p = .040, \eta^2 = .048$. Ingroup identification was not significantly related to behavioral engagement, $F(1,85) = 0.18, p = .672, \eta^2 = .002$. 

---

11 Regression analysis in which we also tested the two-way and three-way interactions between group, moral opportunity, and ingroup identification, which yielded a significant interaction for group and moral opportunity only, $\beta = -.21, t(82) = -1.97, p = .052$, consistent with our hypothesis.
Discussion

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a different context, using a convergent operationalization of moral opportunity. In addition, we examined the role of group membership in participants’ responses to moral transgressions and the effectiveness of moral opportunity. In further support of our hypotheses, the results from Study 2 indicated that participants experienced more threat when an ingroup (versus an outgroup) member committed a moral transgression, but not when moral opportunity was provided. Additionally, participants in the ingroup condition were more likely to deflect blame away from the group and to rationalize the immoral conduct and less inclined to discuss the fraud than participants in the outgroup condition. Lastly, participants with moral opportunity were less likely to deflect blame away from the group than participants without moral opportunity. As such, we broadened the empirical basis for our main conclusion that moral opportunity reduces the sense of threat people experience when ingroup members behave immorally.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research investigated people’s reactions to the moral transgressions of others and examined the effect of group membership and the threat-reducing function of moral opportunity, the provision of an opportunity to re-establish the group’s moral image in the future. As hypothesized, results from Study 1 indicated that moral opportunity reduces the sense of threat people experience when ingroup members behave immorally. In Study 2, using a different but converging method, we found that although participants experienced more threat when an ingroup (versus an outgroup) member committed a moral transgression, this was no longer the case when moral opportunity was present (versus absent). We further observed that participants’ reluctance to consider and engage in recounting the immoral conduct of an ingroup member compared with an outgroup member was no longer visible when moral opportunity was provided.

Taken together, these results suggest a threat-reducing function for moral opportunity when fellow group members discredit the group’s moral image. Whereas being asked to consider immoral conduct by an ingroup member was experienced as more threatening than considering the same behavior when displayed by an outgroup member, receiving an opportunity to repair the group’s moral image in the future significantly reduced the likelihood that participants responded differently to ingroup versus outgroup misconduct. Moral opportunity furthermore reduced the likelihood that group members respond defensively and helped to overcome their reluctance to consider the case in more detail and behaviorally engage in conveying information about the case to others outside science. Moral opportunity did not improve participants’ ratings on all coping measures, however, as rationalization and deflecting blame to the person were unaffected by the manipulation. In addition, threat was only related to the deflection of blame from the ingroup to other groups, suggesting that moral opportunity’s threat-reducing function might have limited downstream consequences in terms of the reduction of defensiveness. However, we submit that our coping measures may have been too much focused on the past and too little focused on what one might establish in the future. An interesting direction for future research would be to examine the potential utility of moral opportunity for motivating participants to actively improve group conduct. The current findings suggest there may be particular value in reparation measures that focus on opportunities to improve moral practices in the future rather than ways of redressing the moral transgressions of the past (see also Does et al., 2011). Thus, rather than asking individual group members whether they think they should take responsibility for the consequences of past moral transgressions, it might be more appropriate to capture the impact of providing people with moral opportunity by assessing their willingness to be involved or invest effort in the development or adoption of novel measures to improve moral behavior in the future (see also Zimmermann, Abrams, Doosje, & Manstead, 2011). The fact that the coping and behavioral engagement measures were not forward-looking, and focused on improvement of the group image might explain why we did not obtain a strong moral opportunity effects there. Another limitation of the current research is our focus on the domain of morality. Future research may systematically compare threats to the ingroup’s incompetence to its immorality and test the possible threat-reducing function of moral versus competence opportunities.

The current research contributes to the social psychological literature in several ways. First, it constitutes the first examination of the effect of moral opportunity on perceptions of threat, and a range of defensive responses that may impact the likelihood that constructive action is taken to prevent future moral transgressions. It also
offers initial evidence that the provision of moral opportunity may actually impact on behavioral engagement in attempts to consider and confront the transgression that was made. Hence, the present results offer a novel approach to the reduction of threat and defensive responses by focusing people’s attention on an opportunity to address the group’s moral image in the future. Whereas previous research (e.g., Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011) did not show conclusive effects for group affirmation in the context of moral ingroup failure, our findings demonstrate that providing people with an opportunity to re-establish the group’s moral image directly reduces the experience of threat. This is particularly remarkable given the fact that we had designed our experiments in such a way that participants were expected to be maximally threatened. We used a rather negative reporting style in communicating about the academic misconduct (see also Hornsey, 2005; Hornsey & Imani, 2004) and, following research demonstrating the extremely powerful effects of group identification on responses to ingroup immorality (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998), we primed participants’ ingroup identity in order to heighten identification. Our findings, thus, specifically apply when group membership is salient and group identification is high. By showing that moral opportunity reduces threat among people who identify with a group that is portrayed extremely negatively, we offer the strongest possible test of our hypotheses.

Our findings yield interesting insights in an important current topic, that of scientific fraud and plagiarism, which are highly emotive events, not just for those who saw their scientific work discredited or abused but also for those who are exposed to it through media reports, as they shed a highly unfavorable light on the group and even the broader scientific community. Second, by directly comparing responses to identical immoral acts depending on whether they were committed by an ingroup or outgroup representative, this investigation adds to the limited body of research on the role of group membership in responding to immoral conduct. Specifically, this feature of our Study 2 design enabled us to demonstrate that people’s responses to immoral behavior are not only determined by the severity of the transgression, but also depend on whether or not their own group identity is implicated. In addition, whereas prior examinations of group-level moral transgressions have focused on the emergence of specific emotions, the present research specifically examined people’s primary threat responses to ingroup moral failure. The results obtained in this way contribute to existing insights in that they reveal when and why emphasizing negative moral acts in which the ingroup is implied might backfire. That is, to the extent that such reminders of past immorality associated with the group raise a motivational state of threat, they are likely to elicit a range of defensive and mitigating responses that are not very helpful when the aim is to motivate group members towards improvement of the group’s morals.

The current research may have important implications for the study of intergroup reconciliation and harmony. During a conflict or war, people are reluctant to criticize the morality of their group, which may harm efforts at reconciliation by not fulfilling victims’ needs for acknowledgment, apologies, or reparations (Chapman, 2007; Lazare, 2004). Sustainable intergroup reconciliation requires acknowledgment that harm has been committed (Čehajić & Brown, 2010; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011) and the reduction of psychological threat is a first step in that direction. Hence, future research investigating ways to diminish extant intergroup conflict, should consider interventions that provide people with moral opportunity as a viable tool.

Providing people with moral opportunity may not only be more effective but is also likely to be more practical than previously studied group affirmation techniques. As noted previously, experimental investigations of the effectiveness of such affirmation have provided people with an opportunity to buffer their identity before being confronted with their group’s shortcomings. This is not the normal sequence of events in real-life situations. Thus, the strategy we examined, namely, reframing how moral transgressions are communicated or pointing to improvement opportunities after they are confronted them with the shortcomings of their group seems more realistic. Thus, our results suggest that there is added value in inviting group members to come up with concrete measures that may help improve the moral group image once the damage is done. Furthermore, standard affirmation procedures that ask parties to think of alternative ways in which their group is worthy and good (e.g., by listing characteristic values or achievements of their group) may have other limitations. That is, even if these may deflect feelings of threat in the short term (as a form of emotion-focused coping; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), they can also induce a sense of complacency or satisfaction with the current state of the group, making it unlikely that such threat-reducing measures will motivate or inspire attempts to improve the group in the future (eliciting problem-focused coping). Providing moral opportunity is different, because it has the potential of doing both: because people are motivated to think in terms of moral aspirations and future goals and are invited to think of concrete actions and measures that may improve the image of the group, they are also helped to deflect the
threat implied in considering current problems. As such, when confronted with ingroup members’ moral transgressions, the provision of moral opportunity may not only make people feel better but also increase the likelihood that substantial change actually occurs as people would be more open to criticism and suggestions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research program was made possible by a RUBICON grant awarded to the first author (Award #446-11-017) and a SPINOZA grant awarded to the second author (Award #01-80-104-00), by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). We thank Lynanne Bakker, René Kleinveld, Micha Poelman, and Suzanne Kuiper for their assistance with the data collection and analysis, and Aarti Iyer, Nicolay Gausel, and several anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web-site.

REFERENCES


Peetz, J., Gunn, G. R., & Wilson, A. E. (2010). Crimes of the past: Defensive temporal distancing in the face of past in-


