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Reactions to morally motivated deviance

Florien M Cramwinckel[1], Kees van den Bos[2] and Eric van Dijk[1]

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

Addresses
[1] Leiden University, The Netherlands
[2] Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: Cramwinckel, Florien M (f.m.cramwinckel@gmail.com)

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Reactions to morally motivated deviance

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

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

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

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

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

Why is morally motivated deviance evaluated negatively?

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

One of the most important reasons may be that people can feel threatened[1] by morally motivated others, especially when these others behave 'more moral' than people themselves. This threat is argued to stem from the fact that people engage in social comparisons, and upward social comparison in the moral domain may be especially harmful for one's self-concept [15].

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

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

Although most of our current knowledge comes from research in the interpersonal domain, morality is also relevant for regulating social behavior within groups [8,30]. Thus, it is important to investigate how people in group settings react to morally motivated deviants. In an intra-group setting, such as within a group of friends, morally motivated deviants may be very threatening. In-group members are especially relevant targets for social comparisons because people's in-groups play important roles in their self-definition [31].

There is ample empirical evidence that people dislike, derogate, and reject deviants [16,31,32,33•,34–41]. For example, Parks-Stamm [31] demonstrated that people's self-evaluations are threatened by confrontations with high-performing (and thus deviant) in-group members[2] [42–44]. She further demonstrated that people could protect their threatened self-concepts by excluding high-performing in-group members from their group. Furthermore, Cameiro and Ribeiro [40] demonstrated that people disidentify from valued in-groups when they are confronted with in-group deviants, unless they had the chance to derogate in-group deviants. Apparently, deviants threaten people's identification with the in-group and derogation helps to resolve this threat. The notion that people can feel threatened by the deviant behavior of group members is also supported by Jamieson *et al.* [21•] who investigated how people respond to being either a target or an actor of dissent during group discussions. They showed that in-group members experienced physiological threat when another group member consistently deviated from their own behavior.

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

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

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

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