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Research article

Outrage towards whom? Threats to moral group status impede striving to improve via out-group-directed outrage

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Abstract

Threats to group status can elicit different responses, ranging from those that motivate striving for improvement to those that motivate defending the threatened social identity. We examine why moral threats to group status may inhibit individuals' striving to improve. Specifically, we predicted that a threat to the group's moral status evokes a defensive emotional focus on the out-group that impedes individuals' striving to improve. Two studies (N = 76 and N = 90) showed that moral (as opposed to nonmoral) threats elicited more outrage directed at the out-group and, by trend, less outrage directed at the in-group. The follow-up study further demonstrated that moral threat impeded striving for improvement because of the relative focus of outrage on in-group versus out-group. Moreover, and consistent with our group-based analysis, this pattern was most pronounced among strongly identified group members. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of framing groups' shortcomings in moral versus nonmoral terms. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Following the global economic recession in 2008, bankers were accused of greediness and immorality and thus became the targets of societal outrage (e.g., The Telegraph, 25/12/2008). Even stronger outrage followed when the banks were going back to business soon after the collapse, including large bonuses for the same risk-taking bankers that were perceived as having caused the crisis in the first place (e.g., The New York Times, 5/11/2009). The present research aims to offer an explanation as to why group members, rather than striving to improve, often appear to neglect their moral shortcomings (Monin, Pizzarro, & Beer, 2007). We argue that threats to group status can foster different kinds of responses, ranging from a motivation to improve the in-group's standing in the threatened domain to a motivation that prioritizes defending the threatened social identity over improving it. In the concluding remarks of his paper on social comparisons in the moral domain, Monin (2007, p. 64) expressed his hope "to develop strategies that will help people stop gnawing their teeth at saints and to be inspired to work on their own halos." This quote illustrates that different responses to threats to moral status are possible, one of which ("gnawing one's teeth") appears to be more prevalent.

We aim to test a specific hypothesis in the current research as to why this might be the case in the context of intergroup relations. Specifically, we predicted that a threat to the group's moral (as opposed to nonmoral) status evokes a defensive emotional focus on the out-group that impedes individuals' striving to improve. "Focus" refers to the extent to which emotions target the out-group or the in-group (e.g., outrage focused on the in-group or the out-group). Although the notion that threats to group status might evoke defensive reactions is not new (e.g., Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), the present research aims to extend existing knowledge by zooming in on the emotional process that leads to the specific responses of striving to improve versus striving to defend a social identity in the face of threat. We believe this is an important step to make to fully understand what drives group members' responses to different types of group threat. The present research thus contributes to prior research in two ways. Firstly, we extend knowledge about individuals' responses to moral and nonmoral threats to the group level. Secondly, we examine the extent to which outrage directed at the in-group versus the out-group reflects the emotional process responsible for group members' prioritizing of improvement or defense of their social identity.

The Particularities of Threats to Moral Status

Morality has been identified as a fundamental dimension that people use to form impressions about themselves and others (e.g., Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Wojciszke, 1994, 2005).[1] Generally, being accused of immorality hurts more than being accused of incompetence. There are several reasons

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[1]Some researchers distinguish between warmth and competence (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 2007); other authors further differentiate the warmth dimension into sociability and morality (e.g., Leach et al., 2007). Note that our choice of investigating the dimensions of morality and competence is fully based in our research question and is not an expression of approval or disapproval of either of the preceding conceptualizations. Moreover, our referring to nonmoral threats is based on the assumption that threats in any domain other than morality (thus, including warmth or sociability) will be less likely to elicit defensive responses.

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for this skewness in evaluative relevance of the two fundamental dimensions. Firstly, when we infer underlying traits from behavior, more attention is drawn to immoral behavior than to moral behavior (Wojciszke, 1994, 2005). This is because acting morally is sanctioned by society and consequently does not provide a good proxy for people's real intentions. Unsurprisingly, negatives have been shown to be more diagnostic than positives in the moral domain, whereas the opposite is true for the competence domain (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987, 1989). Consequently, a single immoral act has more impact on how an individual or group is evaluated than a number of acts of incompetence. Secondly, as indicated by the aforementioned research, the potential consequences of being judged immoral are more severe than the consequences of being judged incompetent. Being judged as immoral (i.e., being bad) involves the risk of being excluded from the moral community. Targets of moral exclusion are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving, and harming or exploiting them seems appropriate, acceptable, or just (cf. Opotow, 1990). Furthermore, some have even argued from an evolutionary perspective that judging others' morality (i.e., do they have good or bad intentions) may be more critical for survival than judging their skills to act on these intentions (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

Importantly, a growing body of research indicates that morality is a crucial dimension also for social identity and thus for moral threats to group status (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Leach et al., 2007; Scheepers, Spears, Manstead, & Doosje, 2009). For instance, Leach et al. (2007) suggested that groups may compete for moral status more than for material status. Because morality is so important to individuals and groups, failure to meet moral standards is a particularly aversive experience (Monin, 2007; Tetlock, 2002). One might therefore expect that shortcomings in the moral domain motivate striving for being better. Yet little is known about whether moral threats motivate social identity improvement or defense and whether emotional processes are important in explaining this.

In this respect, research on individuals' responses to moral threats (e.g., Monin, 2007; Monin et al., 2007; Tetlock, 2002) suggests that defensiveness is the most prominent reaction, whereas striving for improvement appears to be a rather under-represented strategy. Monin (2007, p. 64), for instance, referred to only one study by Nadler and Fisher (1986) that suggests that a stronger threat might make individuals more unhappy but also makes them strive to be better. Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000) even referred to a "defensive overkill" (p. 868) among participants in their studies. Monin (2007) argued that individuals will engage in defensive strategies to defuse the threat elicited by being confronted with a morally superior comparison target. The "do-gooder derogation" is one of these strategies: The threatened individual puts down the morally superior other when the virtuous nature of the other's behavior is too obvious to be denied (Monin, 2007). This derogation of morally superior others has been shown to be a consequence of anticipated moral reproach (Monin et al., 2007). Consistent with the notion that morality is central to people's self-concept (Leach et al., 2007; Wojciszke, 1994, 2005), individuals are very sensitive to moral reproach (Sabini & Silver, 1982). Thus, research on individuals' responses to moral threats suggests that individuals adopt a relatively strong outward-directed focus—thus, outrage is directed at "perpetrators" (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000) and "moral heroes" in anticipation of moral reproach (Monin et al., 2007). We believe that this will also be evident for moral threats to group status, which we believe should evoke outrage that is defensively directed at the out-group "perpetrators."

Moral Threats to Group Status and the Defensive Focus of Outrage

Our argument is that moral (rather than nonmoral) threats to group status motivate the defense of one's social identity (rather than the improvement of one's group status) because of the out-group-directed (rather than in-group-directed) outrage one experiences. This argument is in line with the sacred value protection model (for a review, see Tetlock, 2002). This model suggests that moral threats evoke affective arousal that can translate into defensive, other-focused moral outrage. Although operationalizations of moral outrage in this line of work include not only anger-related emotions but also related perceptions and behavioral tendencies (e.g., unfairness and hostility), it is clear that in Tetlock's analysis of moral threats, affective processes play a major role. This maps onto our idea that moral threats to group status evoke the affective experience of out-group-directed outrage that is associated with the defense of one's social identity (rather than to the improvement of one's group status). However, Tetlock's analysis does not include an examination of how individuals respond to nonmoral threats, which we believe are more likely to be associated with in-group outrage and the striving for status improvement.

This line of thought can be recognized in different streams of thought in the literature. For instance, some research suggests that an emotional focus on the in-group is associated with the desire to have the in-group correct a perceived wrong (Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2007; Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2007; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007), which can be viewed as an attempt to improve the social identity under threat. Specifically, Iyer et al. (2007) argued that in-group-directed anger indicates that group members accept their responsibility for wrongdoing, and thus, their in-group-directed anger is related to a desire to compensate or make up for the shortcoming, or to improve the group's standing (Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009). This is consistent with research showing that nonmoral threats to group status (such as those based in competence) usually motivate striving for improvement at both the individual and group levels (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004; Sassenberg & Woltin, 2008). When failing in a competence-related task, individuals alone and in groups often try extra hard: They display more effort, are more persistent, or seek external sources of help (Ouwerkerk, de Gilder, & de Vries, 2000; Sassenberg & Woltin, 2008). All these findings corroborate the idea that an emotional focus on the in-group is likely to motivate group status improvement.

Other research, however, showed that members of advantaged groups are less willing to act on behalf of intergroup equality (for instance, through signing petitions or participating in specific political action) when they focus on

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the out-group (compared with when they focused on their in-group; Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008; Iyer et al., 2007; Leach et al., 2006). Out-group-directed anger has also been linked to avoidance tendencies (Smith et al., 2007) and an unwillingness to engage in contact with the out-group (Esses & Dovidio, 2002; cf. Mackie et al., 2007). Thus, there are also some indications in the literature that fit the idea that the defense of one's social identity can result from an emotional focus on the out-group. The current work brings together the hypothesized effects of moral versus nonmoral threats to group status by suggesting that moral threats are more likely than nonmoral threats to evoke defensive processes that are explained by an emotional focus on the out-group (rather than on the in-group). As such, it extends Tetlock's analysis of moral threat to the group level and zooms in on (moral) outrage as the relevant emotion that can target one's threatened in-group or a relevant out-group.

The Role of Identification with the In-group

If moral (vs nonmoral) threats to group status elicit more out-group-directed outrage and if this inhibits striving to improve the group's status, then it follows that it should be those who identify most strongly with the group who also show these responses most strongly. Indeed, the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) hold that strongly identified group members will typically display more identity-relevant behaviors than weakly identified group members. Social-identity-relevant behaviors include, for instance, acting according to the group's norms (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007). We assume on the basis of this line of thought that framing threats to group status in moral terms should highlight a group norm of defending the social identity under threat, whereas framing threats to group status in nonmoral terms should highlight a group norm of improving social identity. This predicted effect of threat on striving to improve should be more pronounced among strongly as opposed to weakly identified group members. Thus, in-group identification should act as a *moderator* of the effect of threat on striving to improve through outrage directed at in-group versus out-group.

Overview and Hypotheses

From our argument that moral (rather than nonmoral) threats to group status motivate the defense of one's social identity (rather than the improvement of one's group status) because of the out-group-directed (rather than in-group-directed) outrage one experiences, we derive three specific hypotheses. First, threats to a group's moral status will elicit more outrage directed at the out-group (i.e., at the "perpetrator", cf. Tetlock et al., 2000) and less outrage directed at the in-group compared with threats to a group's nonmoral status (the *outrage hypothesis*). From the definition of outrage as the experience of "an aversive arousal state that has cognitive, affective and behavioral components" (Tetlock, 2003, p. 321), we zoom in on the emotional component of outrage as activated by threats to group status. Thus, we use the umbrella concept of outrage based on Tetlock's work on sacred value protection, where outrage is seen as a motivated and defensive response, and zoom in on the emotional component of outrage.

Second, and central to our theorizing, we predict that the extent to which outrage is directed at out-group versus the in-group impedes group members' striving for improving social identity in the threatened domain (the *impediment hypothesis*). In the current studies, we operationalize this by group members' desire to improve shortcomings associated with the social identity under threat. Specifically, we provide groups with a brief report regarding their shortcomings in the domain of integrating immigrants (follow-up study) issued by a neutral source of information. Group members are then asked to indicate the need to improve in this domain.

Third, from our reasoning that both striving to improve and striving to defend the threatened social image are based in social identity, we predict that the effect of threat on outrage directed at in-group versus out-group will be more pronounced among strongly, but not among weakly, identified group members (the *identification hypothesis*).

The Present Research

We tested these predictions in two studies using the same paradigm: Participants read a report ostensibly published by a neutral, uncommitted source stating that the participants' in-group was performing poorer than an out-group. This procedure served to ensure that the predicted effects are due to threat to competence and morality, being qualitatively different (as shown by Täuber & van Zomeren, 2012), rather than to participants feeling more or less provoked by statements issued by the superior out-group regarding their competence and morality. This feature of our manipulations is important to keep in mind as it fundamentally differentiates our approach from research on the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002). To avoid potential misunderstanding, we note that our experimental procedure did not involve criticism issued by in-group or out-group members, but by a neutral third party.

In both studies, the in-group's shortcomings were framed in moral versus nonmoral terms. A pilot study served to test the paradigm and the outrage hypothesis in the context of climate change, which can be considered an issue that is relevant for nations worldwide (e.g., UN Chronicle, 2007). A second study aimed to replicate support for the outrage hypothesis with respect to an issue that was more central to and defining of participants' specific social identity (i.e., the Dutch identity). This follow-up study served to test the impediment hypothesis, which is crucial to our theorizing on the motivational relevance of different types of threat, and the identification hypothesis, which is crucial to our theorizing on the relevance of striving to improve and striving to defend a social image for participants' social identity.

Before turning to the first study, we want to reflect briefly on the domains of morality and competence: One might argue that the potential to improve morality and competence is not comparable. Such a view is connoted with a conceptualization of competence as a maximal goal that can be strived for gradually and morality as a minimal goal for which only an either–or decision is possible (Fritsche, Kessler, Mummendey, & Neumann, 2009). As obvious from such a point of view, the potential to repair incompetent behavior should be greater than the potential to repair immoral behavior.

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The 10 commandments illustrate the difference between minimal and maximal goals. "Thou shall not kill" is clearly a minimal goal, as there is no way to kill a little less or a little more. Once somebody has murdered another person, he or she will be a murderer for all time. Thus, minimal goals are either–or decisions, and consequently, there is no way to improve gradually.

We hence put some effort in construing morality and competence in such a way that in both domains, improvement was feasible. Put differently, we have created materials that frame morality in terms of maximal goals (Fritsche et al., 2009), thus as something that at the very least *can* be improved. We achieved this by using domains of failure that actually provide scope for improvement, such as measures against climate change (pilot study) and policy targeting immigration (follow-up study). This procedure may sound rather artificial, but the moralization of previously nonmoral issues has been evidenced in public discourse on a variety of topics (Rozin, 1999). The reason for adjusting morality rather than competence is straightforward: Framing competence in terms of a minimal goal (to make it more comparable with morality) would yield two dimensions that are potentially perceived as irreparable—and therefore not suitable to investigating motivations to improve. Framing both competence and morality as being mendable is imperative for investigating group members' motivation to improve group status or defend social identity.

PILOT STUDY

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Seventy-six participants ($M_{age} = 19.88$ years, $SD_{age} = 2.17$ years; 58 women) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (threat to group status: moral vs. nonmoral) of a between-subjects design. Participants were undergraduate students and took part in the study in exchange for course credit. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were welcomed by the experimenter and seated in separate cubicles. The experimenter handed out the questionnaire, which introduced the purpose of the study as investigating people's attitudes regarding climate change. Participants were instructed to read the following report carefully as they would be asked to answer questions about the report later.

The report was ostensibly published by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). We used the official logo of the IPCC to lend more credibility to this claim. The report referred to the consequences of climate change and measures taken against climate change by different nations. Against this background, one sentence of the report compared The Netherlands with Germany. This sentence stated, "Research by the IPCC showed that The Netherlands are dealing with the challenges of climate change much worse than for instance Germany". Following directly on this sentence, the report concluded that "The Netherlands run risk of being seen as immoral (moral threat condition)/incompetent (non-moral threat condition) within Europe if they fail to achieve as much as other countries with regard to combating climate change."

Participants then filled in a questionnaire comprising the dependent variables (all items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from $-3 =$ *not at all* to $3 =$ *completely*). Two items assessed the extent to which participants perceived the report as credible ("I found the article believable") and relevant ("The Netherlands need to follow the suggestions of this article").

Group-based outrage was measured by asking "When thinking about the situation described in the report, to what extent do you as a Dutch feel the following emotions towards The Netherlands (ingroup-directed)/towards Germany (outgroup-directed)?": annoyed, irritated, outraged, angry, despised, disgusted, and contemptuous (combined into an index of *outrage*). These items were combined into scales (in-group-directed outrage: $\alpha = .92$; out-group-directed outrage: $\alpha = .93$).[2] After filling in the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

We note that we derived outrage-related emotions from research on the sacred value protection model (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000). According to Tetlock et al. (2000), moral outrage reflects an act of defending norms. Consequently, these authors measured outrage with items such as angry, upset, insulted, negative, immoral, unfair, disgusted, saddened, outraged, or disappointed. While closely adhering to these items, we tried to create a list of outrage-related emotions that were equally applicable to participants who reacted to moral and to nonmoral threats. Therefore, we for instance excluded references to immorality and unfairness. These adjustments do not reflect an intention to introduce a new concept of moral outrage. Rather, they reflect a compromise between closely following scales used in prior research (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000; Thomas & McGarty, 2009) while maximizing the utility for addressing the present research questions.

Results

Assessment of the International Panel on Climate Change Report

An ANOVA did not reveal an effect of the threat manipulation on perceived credibility of the report, $F < 1.79$, $p > .184$. Participants' perceived the report as highly credible ($M = 0.83$, $SD = 1.53$), which was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(75) = 4.73$, $p < .001$. An ANOVA did not reveal an effect of the threat manipulation on participants' perception of the report as relevant, $F < 0.70$, $p > .43$. Participants' perceived the report as highly relevant ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 1.38$), which was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(75) = 3.92$, $p < .001$.

Outrage

We first examined the data descriptively. Inspection of the outrage scales revealed that overall, participants reported stronger in-group-directed outrage than out-group-directed outrage ($M = -0.44$, $SD = 1.31$ and $M = -2.56$, $SD = 0.69$,

[2]Importantly, principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation (delta was set to 0) revealed a one-factor solution in both studies. The factor accounted for 62.88% and 74.33% of variance in the pilot study and the follow-up study, respectively. All item loadings were greater than .73 and .80, respectively.

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respectively), $t(74) = 12.77$, $p < .001$. This finding is not surprising given that the report ostensibly issued by the IPCC focused almost exclusively at the participants' in-group, mentioning the out-group in only one out of approximately 20 lines. Outrage directed at in-group and out-group were uncorrelated ($r = .06$, $p > .59$, $N = 75$).

We analyzed in-group-directed and out-group-directed outrage as a within-subjects factor and threat (moral vs nonmoral) as a between-subjects factor in a mixed-model ANOVA. The analysis revealed a marginal interaction of threat and outrage, $F(1, 73) = 2.67$, $p = .106$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Tests for simple main effects revealed no effect of threat on in-group-directed outrage, $F(1, 73) < 0.50$, $p > .50$, but there was a significant effect of threat on out-group-directed outrage, $F(1, 73) = 4.94$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Participants in the moral threat conditions reported significantly more outrage directed at the out-group ($M = -2.46$, $SD = 0.85$) than participants in the nonmoral threat conditions ($M = -2.80$, $SD = 0.35$).

Discussion

Findings of the pilot study provide first insights into the psychological particularities of moral threats to group status. Moral threat to group status evoked more out-group-directed outrage compared with nonmoral threat. A trend for the opposite pattern was observed for in-group-directed outrage, which was somewhat lower in the moral threat condition than in the nonmoral threat condition. However, this pattern of results was not statistically reliable. Despite these promising preliminary findings, the pilot study has limited potential to address the other hypotheses we derived. We designed a second study that allowed us to test our predictions with a refined manipulation. Climate change, which provided the background for the pilot study, is perceived as a global responsibility (UN Chronicle, 01/06/2007) and might have been too general to threaten a specific social identity, or it might be a rather peripheral topic for the social identity under scrutiny. We consequently related threat to a topic that was central to and defining of the Dutch identity in the second study, so that we could assess the role of identification for the relation between threat to group status and outrage directed at the in-group and the out-group. If the stronger out-group-directed outrage reflects a defensive reaction on the basis of a threatened social identity, as we assume, identification with the social group under threat should moderate the effect of threat on striving to improve through outrage directed at in-group versus out-group (the identification hypothesis). To test the impediment hypothesis, we directly measured group members' striving to improve.

FOLLOW-UP STUDY

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Ninety Dutch participants ($M_{age} = 20.49$ years, $SD_{age} = 4.84$ years; 75 women) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (threat to group status: moral vs nonmoral) of a between-subjects design. Before reading the report that administered the manipulation, participants indicated how much they identified with The Netherlands on three items (e.g., "I identify with The Netherlands", $\alpha = .94$). If not indicated otherwise, all items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from −3 (*not at all*) to 3 (*completely*). On average, participants strongly identified with the in-group ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 1.13$), which was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(89) = 14.42$, $p < .001$.

Following the same experimental procedure as in the pilot study, participants first read a report ostensibly published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). We used the official logo of the OECD to lend more credibility to this claim. The study was run shortly after the right-populist party PVV (the "Freedom Party"), an explicit anti-immigration (and in particular anti-Muslim) party, was elected into a position to significantly influence the Dutch government. Thus, the report focused on a psychologically more proximal event and on a topic that for most Dutch is core to how they see themselves, namely being tolerant and liberal, especially with regard to immigration issues. Importantly, these characteristics are also recognized as indicative of the Dutch identity by other nations (e.g., The New York Times, 13/08/2011).

The report related to the results of the general elections and took these as a reason to compare Germany's achievements regarding integration of immigrants with those of The Netherlands. In both conditions, the report concluded that Germany was superior to The Netherlands with respect to immigration issues in general and Muslim immigration in particular. In the moral threat condition, the report concluded that "The Netherlands run the risk of being seen as immoral if they fail to achieve as much as other countries with regard to immigration issues." Participants in the nonmoral threat condition read the same report except for the last sentence, thus without any reference to the in-group's morality. Thus, different from the pilot study, the nonmoral threat condition did not refer to a different dimension (i.e., competence). Rather, the scenarios differed only to the extent that the group's shortcoming was called immoral (in the moral threat condition) or not (in the nonmoral threat condition). At the same time, the scenarios were supposed to be morally laden to the same extent. This allows for a conservative test of our idea that the moral framing is a crucial determinant of the predicted motivated denial of a need to improve.

Participants then filled in a questionnaire comprising the same dependent variables as in the pilot study. The same two items as in the pilot study assessed participants' perception of the report as credible and relevant. Two additional items measured participants' *moral engagement with the topic* of Muslim immigration ("I have the idea that there is a clear-cut distinction between moral and immoral when the integration of Muslims is concerned" and "When the integration of Muslims is concerned, rules regarding what is moral and what is immoral apply to everyone", from −3 = *not agree at all* to 3 = *totally agree*). At the time of testing, the Dutch people had elected an anti-immigration party, suggesting that a significant portion of Dutch people may not view "achievements regarding the integration of immigrants" as morally desirable. These two items served to check that participants engaged with the researched topic in the ways intended.

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Reliabilities of the outrage scales were good (in-group-directed outrage: $\alpha = .95$; out-group-directed outrage: $\alpha = .94$). Six items measured *striving for improvement* (e.g., "I think it is important that The Netherlands deal with immigrants equally well as other nations" and "I think that the reputation of The Netherlands has to improve", from $-3 =$ *not agree at all* to $3 =$ *totally agree*). These items were averaged to form a scale ($\alpha = .82$). On average ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 0.81$), participants' reported striving to improve was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(89) = 19.38$, $p < .001$.

Agreement with the item "I would like The Netherlands to improve their moral reputation because this has to do with how others see me" (from $1 =$ *not agree at all* to $7 =$ *totally agree*) served as a manipulation check. After filling in the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Check

An ANOVA revealed the expected effect of threat (moral vs nonmoral) on the manipulation check item, $F(1, 88) = 5.00$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$. Participants in the moral threat condition agreed with the statement more ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.53$) than participants in the nonmoral threat condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.58$).

Assessment of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Report

An ANOVA did not reveal an effect of the manipulation on the report's credibility, $F < 1.40$, $p > .24$. Participants perceived the report as highly credible ($M = 0.98$, $SD = 1.10$), which was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(88) = 8.40$, $p < .001$. An ANOVA did not reveal an effect of the manipulation on participants' perception of the report as relevant, $F < 2.90$, $p > .09$. Participants perceived the report as highly relevant ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 1.09$), which was significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(89) = 5.53$, $p < .001$.

Moral Engagement with the Topic

An ANOVA with threat as the between-subjects factor revealed no effect of the manipulation, both F's < 0.07, p's $> .80$. Participants indicated strong moral engagement with the topic of Muslim immigration ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 1.47$ and $M = 0.81$, $SD = 1.27$), with both items being significantly above the mid-point of the scale, both t's$(89) > 4.37$, p's $< .001$.

Outrage

As in the pilot study, inspection of the outrage scales revealed that in general, outrage was directed more at the in-group ($M = -0.07$, $SD = 1.43$) than at the out-group ($M = -2.50$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(88) = 14.19$, $p < .001$. As in the pilot study, in-group-directed and out-group-directed outrage were uncorrelated ($r = -.02$, $p > .87$, $N = 89$).

Analysis with in-group-directed and out-group-directed outrage as the within-subjects factor and threat (moral vs nonmoral) as the between-subjects factor in a mixed-model ANOVA revealed an interaction of threat and outrage, $F(1, 87) = 7.15$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Tests for simple main effects revealed a marginal effect of threat on in-group-directed outrage, $F(1, 87) = 3.09$, $p = .082$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. By trend, participants in the moral threat conditions reported less outrage directed at the in-group ($M = -0.34$, $SD = 1.41$) than participants in the nonmoral threat conditions ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 1.42$). Tests for simple main effects revealed a significant effect of threat on out-group-directed outrage, $F(1, 87) = 5.74$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Participants in the moral threat conditions reported significantly more outrage directed at the out-group ($M = -2.32$, $SD = 0.84$) than participants in the nonmoral threat conditions ($M = -2.68$, $SD = 0.55$).

A regression analysis examined whether participants' relative outrage directed at in-group and out-group was affected by the extent to which their social identity was important to them. To this end, we computed a difference between in-group-directed and out-group-directed outrage. Values above 0 indicate more in-group-directed than out-group-directed outrage; values below 0 indicate more out-group-directed than in-group-directed outrage. The regression model included threat (coded as $-1 =$ *nonmoral* and $1 =$ *moral*), identification, and the resulting interaction term as predictors. Threat and identification were entered in one step; the interaction term was entered in a second step. Entering the interaction term significantly increased the variance explained, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 85) = 6.66$, $p_{\text{change}} = .012$, $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.07$. We consequently report the second model. The regression model was significant, $F(3, 85) = 5.06$, $p = .003$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.12$. The effect of threat was significant ($\beta = -.26$, $t = -2.63$, $p = .01$), indicating that moral threat to group status was associated with more out-group-directed outrage, whereas the opposite pattern emerged for nonmoral threats. No main effect of identification was evident ($\beta = -.15$, $t < 1.43$, $p > .15$). Importantly, the predicted interaction of threat and identification was significant ($\beta = -.26$, $t = -2.58$, $p = .012$).

Breaking up the interaction into simple slopes at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of the identification scale (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that relative outrage was unaffected by type of threat among weakly identified group members ($\beta = .00$, $t < 0.01$, $p > .99$). By contrast, relative outrage was strongly affected by type among strongly identified group members ($\beta = -.53$, $t = -3.70$, $p < .001$). Specifically, when threat was framed in nonmoral terms, strongly identified group members directed outrage more on the in-group than on the out-group (indicated by values above 0). By contrast, when threat was framed in moral terms, strongly identified group members directed outrage more on the out-group than on the in-group (indicated by values below 0). The simple slopes are shown in Figure 1.

Striving to Improve

Striving to improve was analyzed in a regression analysis with threat (coded as $-1 =$ *nonmoral* and $1 =$ *moral*), identification, and the resulting interaction term as predictors. Threat and identification were entered in one step; the interaction term was entered in a second step. Entering the interaction term significantly increased the variance explained, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 86) = 7.31$,

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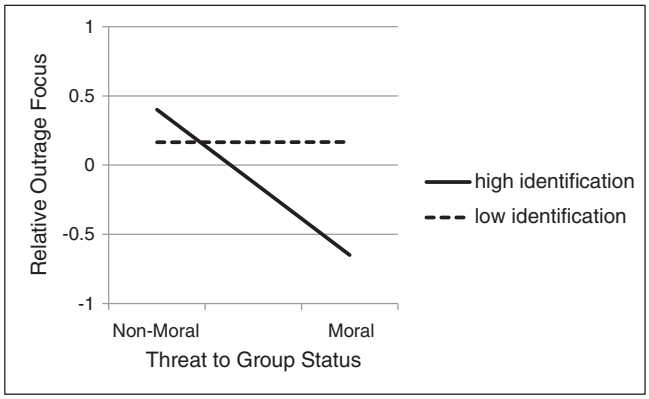

Figure 1. Relative outrage directed at in-group (indicated by values above 0) versus out-group (indicated by values below 0) as a function of threat (moral vs nonmoral) and identification in the follow-up study

$p_{\text{change}} = .008$, $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.07$. We consequently report the second model. The regression model was significant, $F(3, 86) = 6.10$, $p = .001$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.15$. The effect of threat was significant ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.16$, $p = .034$), indicating that moral threat to group status was associated with lower levels of striving to improve. A main effect of identification was observed ($\beta = .22$, $t = 2.16$, $p = .033$), indicating that strongly identified group members were striving to improve more than weakly identified group members. Importantly, the predicted interaction of threat and identification was significant ($\beta = -.27$, $t = -2.70$, $p = .008$).

Breaking up the interaction into simple slopes at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of the identification scale (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that striving to improve was generally lower and unaffected by type of threat among weakly identified group members ($\beta = .06$, $t = 0.43$, $p > .67$). By contrast, striving to improve was strongly affected by type of threat among strongly identified group members ($\beta = -.48$, $t = -3.47$, $p = .001$). Specifically, strongly identified group members' reported striving to improve in the moral threat condition dropped to the level displayed by weakly identified group members. Figure 2 displays the simple slopes.

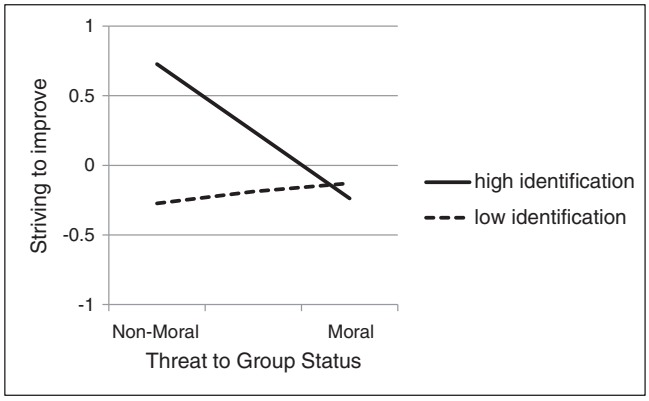

Figure 2. Striving to improve the social identity under threat as a function of threat (moral vs nonmoral) and identification in the follow-up study

Moderated Mediation Analysis

To test the hypothesis that the effect of threat on striving to improve through outrage is moderated by identification with the social group, we tested a moderated mediation model using the procedure recommended by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). The model was tested with an SPSS macro (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY; Preacher et al., 2007) based on 5000 bootstrap intervals. Importantly, the analysis revealed that the interaction term of threat and identification remained significant ($\beta = -.38$, $t = -2.58$, $p = .012$) when controlling for relative outrage as the mediator. Thus, our hypotheses were supported, such that the indirect and negative effect of threat to moral group status on striving to improve through relative outrage was observed when identification was high (specifically, when identification was ≥ 1.63), but not when identification was low. The bootstrapping intervals corroborated this finding as they did not include 0, bias-corrected and accelerated 95% CI [−0.507, −0.086].

Discussion

The second study replicated the preliminary findings of the pilot study by showing that threats to a group's moral (as opposed to nonmoral) status elicited more out-group-directed outrage and somewhat less in-group-directed outrage. The difference in in-group-directed outrage caused by framing threat to group status in moral versus nonmoral terms was more pronounced in the main study compared with that in the pilot study. This is in line with the idea that this is due to the more specific centrality of the threatened domain for participants' social identity in the second study (i.e., tolerance and liberalism for the Dutch). We found evidence for the prediction that out-group-directed outrage impedes striving for improvement, whereas in-group-directed outrage facilitates striving for improvement. This supports the impediment hypothesis and is consistent with prior research that pointed out the relevance of focusing inwards for changing the in-group for the better (e.g., Harth et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2007; Leach et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 2009). In addition, these results extend prior research by showing that focusing outwards will likely impede striving to improve.

The measures referring to participants' engagement with the topic indicate that both experimental conditions were perceived as morally laden. However, the predicted defensive responses were evident only in the condition that explicitly referred to group morality. This supports our prediction that the determinant of a motivated denial of the need to improve among group members is framing the in-group's shortcoming in moral terms. To us, this is one of the most stimulating insights of this line of research because it highlights how such defensive responses can be avoided by means of framing shortcomings differently. More importantly, the second study provided unequivocal support for the prediction that the different responses to threat framed in moral and nonmoral terms are moderated by identification with the social identity under threat (the identification hypothesis). Put differently, attempts to both improve the threatened social identity and defend it appear to be based in a relevant social identity and thus reflect group-based responses (Klein et al., 2007).

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This yields support for our group-based analysis of reactions to moral versus nonmoral threat. The potential theoretical and practical implications of these findings will be considered in the general discussion.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current studies aimed to offer an explanation for the observation that group members often appear to neglect (rather than strive to) improve their moral shortcomings. From the different lines of thought in the literature on the effects of group-based emotions on social action (e.g., Iyer et al., 2007; Leach et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 2009) and in the literature on threats to morality (Monin et al., 2007; Tetlock, 2002, 2003), we argued that the nature of threats to group status is decisive in motivating improvement versus defense of social identity. Specifically, the sacred value protection model (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000) suggests that moral threats evoke affective arousal that can translate into defensive other-focused moral outrage but is silent about the consequences of nonmoral threats such as striving for status improvement. The current studies suggest that the type of threat is important in directing the focus of outrage experienced and that this focus is associated with the motivation to defend one's social identity or to improve one's group status.

Our theorizing that moral threats elicit stronger outrage directed at the out-group than at the in-group, whereas the opposite should hold for nonmoral threats, was captured in the outrage hypothesis. The impediment hypothesis captured our reasoning that the extent to which outrage is directed more at the out-group than at the in-group poses the crucial impediment to group members' striving to improve the threatened social identity. We suggested that both improving and defending social identity are displays of behavior that is congruent with different norms activated by moral versus nonmoral threats to group status (Klein et al., 2007). Because strongly, as opposed to weakly, identified group members are more likely to act according to the norms of the in-group (Turner et al., 1987), we predicted that the effects of threat on improving and defending social identity should be more pronounced among strongly, as opposed to weakly, identified group members in the identification hypothesis.

Two studies provided clear support for our hypotheses. The outrage hypothesis was supported in a pilot study in the context of a universally relevant topic (i.e., climate change) and replicated in a follow-up study, which related threat to a topic that was core to participants' social identity (i.e., tolerance and liberalism for Dutch participants). Both studies showed that moral threat elicited stronger out-group-directed than in-group-directed outrage and that the reverse pattern held for nonmoral threat. The second study further provided support for the impediment hypothesis and the identification hypothesis. Consistent with expectations, more outrage directed at the morally superior out-group created an impediment to the motivation to improve the group's standing in the threatened domain. By contrast, and also consistent with expectations, more outrage directed at the in-group motivated striving to improve. As predicted, the effects of threat on defending versus improving the threatened social identity were more pronounced among strongly compared with weakly identified group members.

Results of both studies thus support the idea that in-group-directed versus out-group-directed outrage offers an important and understudied explanation for the question of why threats to group status sometimes motivate improvement and sometimes motivate defense of the social identity under threat. It is important to note that the proportion of in-group-directed and out-group-directed outrage appears to be the driving force for these processes. Thus, although participants across both studies indicated very little out-group-directed outrage in absolute terms, moral threats were associated with a smaller distance between outrage directed at the in-group and the out-group compared with nonmoral threat. We discuss the implications of our argument and findings in the following.

Motivational Relevance of Moral Threats to Group Status

Our findings support the notion that there is something particular about moral threats to group status in terms of its psychological consequences. In line with our argument, we found that moral threats to group status yielded a stronger relative focus of outrage on the out-group and that this focus impeded improvement of the social identity under threat. On the basis of our theoretical framework, we interpret these findings as reflecting a defense of social identity. This interpretation is substantiated by the finding in the second study that these effects were driven by those who identified strongly with the group under threat. Indeed, this moderation effect is important because it suggests that we successfully manipulated threats based in social identity. This effect is in line with other findings in the literature on group-based emotions such as the defensive processes associated with group-based guilt for high but not for low identifiers (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998, 2006). Specifically, the motivated denial of the in-group's need to improve that the present research demonstrated is consistent with the notion that high identifiers are particularly willing "... to search for means of avoiding feelings of guilt" (cf. Doosje et al., 2006). Although our focus here was not on group-based guilt but on outrage, we believe that, at a more general level, similar processes may be at work.

Similarly, we believe that our results about outrage are meaningful with respect to Gausel and Leach's (2011) recent analysis of shame. These authors argued that shame motivates intentions to repair a damaged social image when it is appraised as being caused by a specific self-defect. By contrast, when shame elicits concerns of being condemned by others, a defensive response is more likely. Concern for condemnation by others elicits defensive responses (i.e., hiding, withdrawing, or avoiding the source of threat) through feelings of rejection, whereas, by contrast, perceiving the social self as having a specific self-defect elicits striving to improve (i.e., repairing or reforming the defective aspect of the self) through feelings of shame. This line of thought maps onto our general line of reasoning and our empirical findings about defense or improvement of group status. That is, in our view, moral threats should be associated more with a defensive emotional focus on the out-group (conceptually paralleling concerns for condemnation by others). We believe

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that, at a general level, similar processes may be at work independent of one's focus on shame or outrage. Future theorizing should try to integrate these ideas and findings from different foci of research (e.g., the defensive or nondefensive responses to moral or nonmoral threats as potentially reflected in emotions such as outrage, shame, and guilt). In this respect, Tetlock's work may offer useful pointers to explain the psychological consequences of moral threats to group status.

Implications and Integration with Prior Research

The studies presented here extend existing research in some important ways. First, we demonstrate the psychological particularities of moral threats at the group level (while also examining the psychological particularities of nonmoral threats). Our line of thought integrates existing research that showed that defensive responses arise from threats to groups' moral status (Branscombe et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002) with the affective experience of moral outrage that is activated by the motivation to protect sacred values (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000). This integration extends our understanding of the psychological consequences of threats framed in moral versus nonmoral terms and the profoundly different responses flowing from these threats.

Second, our conceptualization of outrage focus as a dependent variable that is contingent on the specific type of threat to group status complements earlier work that investigated the impact of in-group versus out-group focus as an independent variable (Harth et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2007; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Leach et al., 2006). Specifically, research showed that a focus on the in-group as opposed to the out-group motivates *advantaged* groups' willingness to overcome intergroup inequality (e.g., Harth et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 2009). Our findings extend these works by showing that, also as a dependent variable and from a disadvantaged group's perspective, focus on the in-group appears to be a crucial prerequisite for striving to improve.

Third, we extend prior research showing that group-based emotions motivate collective action (e.g., Thomas et al., 2009) by broadening the analyses to encompass affective processes activated by threats to group status. This resonates with the notion that although moral outrage is often assumed to be other directed, this is not part of its very definition (Tetlock, 2003). Our studies suggest that a broader conceptualization of outrage is valuable for capturing the processes that flow from different threats to group status. Although our pattern of results does not suggest that group members viewed the emotion items as different discrete emotions (such as, for instance, anger and contempt), we believe it would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which discrete emotions play a role in group members' motivations to improve versus defend their social image in future research.

Implications for Social Identification Processes

We show the relevance of identification processes for the impact of threat, thereby suggesting that both the motivation to improve and the motivation to defend a social identity under threat may reflect salient in-group norms. Our findings thus underline the flexibility of acting on behalf of the in-group (in terms of defending the group or improving the group's status). This flexibility has recently moved into focus in the normative conflict model of dissent (Packer, 2008). This model gives new impulses to our understanding of social identity by providing a plausible rationale for when high identifiers will conform to group norms and when they will deviate from these norms. Supporting Packer's (2008) theorizing, empirical studies demonstrate that high identifiers will deviate from group norms when they perceive these as being harmful for their group (Packer & Chasteen, 2010; Täuber & Sassenberg, 2012). Thus, apparently harmful behavior (i.e., deviance and dissent) for the group is performed with good intentions by high identifiers. These studies underline that although high identifiers will act on behalf of their group, their perception of what is best for the group can differ substantially depending on the context. Specifically, as we argued and showed, framing threat to group status in moral terms highlights a norm to defend social identity, whereas framing threat to group status in nonmoral terms highlights a norm to improve social identity. Consistent with prior research, strongly, more than weakly, identified group members are the ones who act on these norms.

Our research further offers some interesting implications regarding the norms that are emphasized by different types of threat. Although the observation that focusing on the out-group can elicit withdrawal and avoidance is not new (Esses & Dovidio, 2002; Smith et al., 2007), the motivational foundations for this are under-researched. One reason for this, we believe, is that defensive reactions can easily be dismissed as inaction. Findings of the second study support the suggestion that what may appear to be inaction actually reflects an active attempt to defend a threatened social identity, particularly among strongly identified group members. This response is thus social identity relevant (Klein et al., 2007) to the same extent as striving to improve when threats are framed in nonmoral terms. Given that detecting meaningful action is typically easier and more intuitive than detecting meaningful inaction, this element of the current studies is important. Moreover, it adds to theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence for the notion that nonaction is an identity-relevant and meaningful strategy to cope with threats to group status (Täuber & van Zomeren, 2012). These findings fit with the flexible response observed among high identifiers in the present research: Depending on the type of threat, high identifiers strived for improving their group or for defending their group—but both responses reflect a motivation to do what is best for the group.

Limitations and Prospects for Future Research

Of course, our studies are not without their limitations. For instance, one might argue that our findings are limited to Dutch participants' reactions to threat to group status. However, Täuber and van Zomeren (2012) demonstrated that moral (vs nonmoral) threats elicited similar responses among German participants. Their experiment revealed a reluctance to seek help from the superior out-group (but not from a neutral out-group) to improve the group's status in the threatened domain. Importantly, this pattern was only evident when threat to group status was framed in moral (vs nonmoral)

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terms. Moreover, reluctance to seek out-group help was evident among strongly, but not weakly, identified group members. Thus, we have reasons to assume that our findings generalize to other groups, although more research is needed to establish the external validity of our findings more conclusively.

The stronger out-group-directed outrage that was observed in both studies as a consequence of threat to group morality maps nicely onto what Monin (2007) has coined "do-gooder-derogation." Our findings suggest that this strategy to cope with moral threats also operates at the group level. One might argue that out-group-directed outrage is nothing more than out-group derogation. We believe, however, that out-group-directed outrage reflects an outcome that is much more specific to moral threats than mere out-group derogation. After all, the strong outrage directed at the in-group indicates that, across two studies, our participants held their in-group responsible to a greater extent than the out-group.

The difference in the extent to which group members directed outrage at the in-group and the out-group raises some interesting questions with respect to the spontaneous emotional focus that arises from different types of threat. Our studies manipulated threat by having intergroup comparisons issued by neutral, uncommitted sources of information (i.e., IPCC and OECD). Arguably, this is a conservative paradigm for investigating group-based responses to threat. If the superior out-group themselves issues the in-group's shortcomings, as is the case for instance in studies on the in-group sensitivity effect (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey et al., 2002), the spontaneous emotional focus of group members might be directed more strongly at the out-group than at the in-group also when threats are framed in nonmoral terms. Future research might investigate what determines the emergence of spontaneous emotional focus on in-group versus out-group as a response to threats to group status.

Furthermore, it seems important to note that the contexts we studied were contexts in which individuals could not easily discredit the message or the source and thus were quite vulnerable to the threat (as indicated by the overall high ratings of credibility and relevance of the information). Other contexts allow for doubting the credibility of the source of the threatening information or of the message itself, for instance, if issued by a rivaling out-group or an ally of the out-group (Hornsey, 2005). Under such conditions, we would expect individuals to deflect threat by derogating the threatening message and/or the source (e.g., "do-gooder derogation"; Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, 2007). This response can be considered less cognitively engaging than directing outrage at the out-group, the route that we have demonstrated in two studies. We believe that identifying the contextual features that trigger one route of threat deflection or the other is an important endeavor for future studies.

Conclusions

We end with a practical note of caution with respect to the use of moral framing in intergroup contexts. This follows from the finding that threats to group status that are framed in moral terms evoke a defensive emotional focus on the out-group that impedes group members' striving to improve. We nevertheless hope that the research presented here also gives some reason for optimism. First, seeming inaction may actually reflect social-identity-relevant behavior and can thus be viewed as an expression of commitment to the social identity under threat. Second, we believe the studies presented here point out a practical solution for situations in which individuals really want other groups to improve in certain domains. According to our findings, individuals better *not* frame these domains in moral terms. If individuals want other groups to strive to do better, framing their shortcomings in nonmoral terms avoids defensive responses and thus might be a subtle but effective strategy. In light of the increasing moralization of previously nonmoral issues in public discourse (e.g., Rozin, 1999), this is an important conclusion to be drawn from the current research.

However, this does not mean that this recommendation implies that moral framing is always a bad thing. In fact, recent research on collective action shows that having moral convictions or being confronted with moral framing increases individuals' willingness to improve the group's standing through collective efforts (e.g., Does, Derks, & Ellemers, 2011; Skitka, 2010; Skitka & Bauman, 2008). What might be different in these situations, however, is whether the moral threat is resisted or accepted. When individuals can resist the threat, they can muster the resources to improve their group's standing together. However, when individuals cannot resist the threat (as in the current studies), the road to group improvement becomes blocked. In these situations, we believe that a moral framing of group threat impedes that group's status improvement.

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