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Morality is of particular importance to people: People want to be considered moral and want to belong to moral groups. Consequently, morality judgments have the potential to motivate individuals to behave in ways that are considered to be ‘good’. In the current dissertation, I adopted a social identity approach by building on the premise that a social identity can motivate individuals as members of a social group. Specifically, I examined the impact of intragroup morality judgments on group members’ motivational responses, and compared those to competence judgments as an alternative domain of evaluation.

In three empirical chapters, I investigated the impact of morality (vs. competence) judgments from different perspectives, namely judgments of 1) group member’s own prior behavior, 2) another group member’s behavior, as well as 3) the behavior of a prospective group member. In addition, I examined different types of motivational responses: Affective, cognitive, psychophysiological, and behavioral. The central hypothesis was that intragroup morality judgments generally impact more strongly on group members’ motivational responses than competence judgments.

In Chapter 2, I examined the impact of the group’s morality and competence judgments about group members’ own prior behavior, and focussed specifically on their affective and cognitive responses. The results of three experiments demonstrated that group members experience more negative affect, which in turn lowered their perceived coping ability after their prior behavior was evaluated as immoral rather than incompetent. However, when additionally given the opportunity to restore their image as a moral group member, the negative affective response was alleviated and perceived coping abilities were increased. In addition, I was able to rule out that morality judgments generate more intense affective responses overall, because being
evaluated as competent by others in a group elicits more positive affect than being evaluated as moral.

In Chapter 3, I examined how morality and competence judgments of group members’ own prior behavior, as well as of another group member’s prior behavior, impact on their psychophysiological responses. In two experiments, I demonstrated that negative judgments of morality (vs. competence) elicit a cardiovascular pattern indicative of threat rather than challenge in group members. This pattern occurred regardless of whether the judgment concerned own prior behavior or the prior behavior of another ingroup member. Intragroup judgments of immorality thus elicit a relative threat rather than challenge response in group members.

In Chapter 4, I examined how morality and competence judgments of prospective group members impact on the behavioral responses towards these prospective members. The results of three experiments demonstrated that prospective group members who are judged to be immoral rather than incompetent are more likely to be excluded from the group, because they impose a threat to the social identity. Conversely, group members are keener to include a prospective group member who is judged to be moral rather than competent. The morality of prospective group members thus elicits more pronounced behavioral responses from group members than their competence.

In sum, the research reported in this dissertation demonstrated that the motivational force of morality largely pertains to immorality. Judgments of immorality are shown to elicit a range of motivational responses in group members, such as negative affect, lowered perceived coping abilities, a cardiovascular pattern indicative of threat rather than challenge, and a greater inclination towards social exclusion. Morality judgments—generally more so than competence judgments—impact on group members’ striving to be a ‘good’ group member. Taken together, the current dissertation advances our understanding of the many ways in which morality judgments impact on motivation within groups.