

# Is It Better to Be Moral Than Smart? The Effects of Morality and Competence Norms on the Decision to Work at Group Status Improvement

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Three studies examined strategies of status improvement in experimentally created (Study 1 and 2) and preexisting (Study 3) low-status groups. Theory and prior research suggested that an in-group norm that established a particular strategy of status improvement as moral (rather than competent) would have a greater effect on individuals' decision to work at this strategy. Both Study 1 and Study 2 found that morality norms had a greater impact than competence norms on individuals' decision to work at group (rather than individual) status improvement. In both studies participants also needed less time to decide on a strategy of status improvement when it was encouraged by a morality norm rather than a competence norm. Study 3 used a preexisting low-status group (i.e., Southern Italians) to further confirm that morality norms have a greater effect on the decision to work at group status improvement than do competence norms. Results are discussed in terms of social influence and identity management strategies.

*Keywords:* identity management strategies, social norms, morality, competence, decisional dilemma

As members of groups, people are faced with the dilemma of working to improve their individual status or working to improve the status of their group as a whole. This dilemma is particularly salient for members of low-status groups, who are more concerned about improving their status than are members of high-status groups (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Some researchers have argued that members of low-status groups inherently prefer individual status improvement and are thus willing to pursue group status improvement only when individual strategies fail (e.g., Taylor & McKimman, 1984; Wright, 2000; but see Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). This presumption is consistent with the fact that individual improvement is seen as the royal road to achieving higher status in Western societies (Ellemers & Barreto, in press; Ellemers & Van Laar, in press). Thus, members of low-status groups may decide to work at the improvement of their group's status only when there are major incentives that outweigh the obvious incentives for individual status improvement.

Group norms are one powerful incentive for individuals to work at group status improvement. Indeed, "injunctive norms" (Cialdini

& Goldstein, 2004), which prescribe group status improvement as what individuals should do, have been shown to counter individuals' preference for improving their individual status (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002; McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). However, little attention has been paid to the precise content of the norms that serve as incentives for in-group status improvement. Thus, to complement previous work, we examine whether morality- and competence-based in-group norms serve as differential incentives. More specifically, in three studies we examine how morality- and competence-based group norms affect individuals' decision to improve their individual status or that of their low-status in-group. We also address the extent to which following morality- or competence-based norms presents a dilemma to individuals, by examining the time needed to decide whether to follow the norm (in Studies 1 and 2) as well as the self-reported difficulty in choosing between individual and group status improvement (in Study 3). As we outline in more detail below, there is good reason to expect moral norms to provide a more powerful incentive than competence norms for individuals to work at group status improvement.

## Individual Versus Group Status Improvement

Social identity theory posits that people generally aim to belong to (high-status) groups that compare positively to other groups, as this can contribute to positive self-evaluation (Tajfel, 1981). Members of low-status groups should hence be motivated to improve their status in an effort to gain positive self-evaluation. This can be done via two strategies (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). First, members of low-status groups can work at improving the status of their group as a whole. Group status improvement can be pursued through optimizing group members' joint performance,

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for instance. Second, members of low-status groups can work to improve their individual status, for example, by associating themselves with a high-status group (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Ellemers, 1993). The distinction between individual and group status improvement is important partly because limited time and energy imply that the pursuit of one strategy comes at the expense of the other. Individual and group strategies of status improvement may also be incompatible because they are characterized by a fundamentally different cognitive, affective, and behavioral pattern (Ellemers, 1993, 2001). For example, members of low-status groups who pursue individual status improvement tend to cognitively and emotionally distance themselves from the group (e.g., Doosje, Spears, & Koomen, 1995). They also tend to subscribe to negative stereotypes of their group (e.g., Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004). The response pattern associated with individual status improvement is thus incompatible with the pursuit of group status improvement, which requires individuals to draw together and combine their efforts with those of other in-group members to challenge negative stereotypes of their group (Ellemers & Barreto, in press; Ellemers & Van Laar, in press). In the present research we explicitly address situations in which individual and group status improvement are incompatible, to assess how group members decide between them.

### The Impact of Group Norms

Previous research has examined several factors that affect the decision between individual and group status improvement. Some of this work has addressed structural characteristics of the relation between low- and high-status groups (such as the permeability of group boundaries and the stability of intergroup status relations; e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Lalonde & Cameron, 1993; Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; Wright, 2000; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990; Wright & Tropp, 2002). Other work has focused on how the social context affects individuals' decision between individual and group status improvement. For example, Barreto and Ellemers (2000) examined how being held accountable by the in-group affected low-status group members' decision for group rather than individual status improvement. In two experiments they found that group members who preferred individual status improvement opted for group status improvement when they could be held accountable to in-group members who viewed group status improvement as normative for the group.

Previous findings thus suggest that group norms can lead group members to opt for group status improvement, even if they prefer to work individually. This is consistent with a range of studies showing that in-group norms can lead individuals to think, feel, and act in ways more consistent with their in-group's expectations than with their individual inclinations (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997; McAuliffe et al., 2003; Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001; Sherif, 1966). In fact, in-group norms are such a powerful influence that they can even lead people to think of themselves more as individuals than as group members if the norm prescribes individualism (Jetten et al., 2002). Thus, although norms are a group-level phenomenon, they can encourage either individual- or group-oriented responses depending on what the norm prescribes. In the present article, we extend previous research by distinguishing morality-based norms from competence-based norms. We examine the differential effectiveness of these two norms in leading indi-

viduals to behave in line with norms that encourage individual status improvement or group status improvement.

### Competence Versus Morality Norms

In previous research, individuals have been led to believe that a general norm established individual or group status improvement as what was valued by other group members (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Jetten et al., 2002; McAuliffe et al., 2003). Such norms can be a powerful influence on behavior, even when very general in nature. However, we propose that the content of the norm also matters. A group norm that suggests that individuals should pursue group status improvement because it is the moral thing to do should be quite different from a norm that suggests that this strategy is the smart thing to do. Indeed, morality- and competence-based norms are likely to serve as differential incentives for group behavior.

Morality and competence are central to people's judgments of themselves and others, at the individual level (De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999, 2000; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994; Van Lange & Liebrand, 1991) as well as at the group level (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Phalet & Poppe, 1997). Although morality and competence are both relevant to positive self-evaluation, there is a broad consensus that competence is particularly important to personal self-esteem (e.g., Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). For instance, the desire to be competent motivates achievement in work and in a variety of other domains (Kanfer, 1994; McClelland, 1987). At the group level, group competence is also seen as an important basis of individuals' positive evaluation of their group (see Crocker, Blaine, & Luhtanen, 1993; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Accordingly, good performance or high status in competence-related domains is associated with higher in-group identification and favoring the in-group over out-groups (e.g., Blanz, Mummendey, & Otten, 1995; Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997; for a review, see Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr, & Hume, 2001). In much of this work, group achievement in domains other than competence, such as morality or sociability,<sup>1</sup> is viewed as a less important basis of positive in-group evaluation (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). For these reasons, competence-based norms may be expected to provide a powerful incentive for individuals to decide between group and individual strategies of status improvement. For example, individuals exposed to a group norm that suggests group (rather than individual) status improvement as "the smart thing to do" might be expected to opt for group status improvement and show little hesitation in making this decision.

Although competence is an important source of positive self-evaluation, some work suggests that morality is more important. For example, studies with more and less individualistic cultural groups have shown individuals in both groups to view their morality as more important than their competence in how they feel about themselves (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002). Morality is also

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes morality and sociability are combined into a single broader construct relevant to social interactions, which is contrasted with competence (see Wojciszke, 2005; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). In line with what has been argued and empirically demonstrated elsewhere, however (see Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), in the current research we consider morality as a more narrowly defined construct that is distinct from sociability and warmth (as well as competence).

important to group-level self-evaluation. In a recent article, Leach et al. (2007) showed in-group morality (i.e., honest, trustworthy) to be distinct from sociability (i.e., warm, kind) and competence (i.e., competent, intelligent). Although all three characteristics were considered important to people's membership in a variety of in-groups, morality was most associated with identification with, pride in, and positive evaluation of the in-group. Morality was less important for the evaluation of out-groups. Thus, morality, rather than competence, appears to be the characteristic most important to the self-concept, at both the individual and group levels.

Likely because morality is an important basis of positive self-evaluation, moral standards are an important guide for individual behavior. Indeed, Schwartz's (1992) cross-cultural studies show a general tendency for people to view morality as a more important guiding principle in their lives than competence, intelligence, or achievement. The importance of moral standards is also shown in research on the theory of planned behavior. In his review, Manstead (2000) showed that a feeling of moral obligation was an independent predictor of motivated behavior, across a variety of situations. Moral standards affect behavior in part because people are concerned about others' reactions to a violation of moral standards (Cialdini, 1994; Higgins, 1987). Concern for the social costs of violating moral standards can be so strong that individuals decide to sacrifice their individual self-interest to conform to others' expectations that they meet the moral standard (e.g., Young, Nussbaum, & Monin, 2007).

Given the importance of morality to the self-concept and to the regulation of behavior, moral norms may be expected to have a powerful influence on individuals' behavior in groups. Although the effect of morality norms on individuals' decision to work at group or individual status improvement has not been examined before, there is good reason to expect that morality norms will have greater influence than competence norms. If morality norms are a powerful guide for this kind of behavior, then morality norms should more quickly and easily resolve the dilemma members of low-status groups face when deciding between individual and group status improvement. As we predict competence to be less important to the self-concept and to the regulation of individual behavior, competence norms should do less to resolve this dilemma. Compared with morality norms, competence norms should also provide less of an incentive to members of low-status groups to work at group status improvement.

The central prediction we examine in the present research is that morality norms should have a greater impact than competence norms when members of a low-status group decide between individual and group status improvement. In three studies we examine whether members of low-status groups decide to follow individual or group strategies of status improvement when forced to decide between these conflicting options. We manipulate the content of the group norm by telling participants that their fellow in-group members believe that a particular strategy is either the moral or the competent thing to do. When group status improvement is encouraged by a morality norm, we expect that individuals will decide to pursue this strategy rather than individual status improvement (in all three studies) and will make this decision quickly (in Study 1 and 2). We also explore whether they indicate experiencing the decision between the strategies as less difficult when following morality norms (in Study 3). Study 1 and Study 2 examine members of experimentally created low-status groups. Study 3 focuses

on a preexisting low-status in-group by examining Southern Italians and their group's status in relation to Northern Italians.

## Study 1

Study 1 was designed as a first test of our prediction that moral norms are more effective than competence norms in encouraging members of a low-status group to work at improving the status of their in-group, even when individual status improvement is made attractive. A further aim of this study was to establish that members of low-status groups decide for group status improvement (rather than individual status improvement) only when this is the normative strategy—not merely because they are aware that their behavior is evaluated by other in-group members. Thus, we compared the effect of morality and competence norms that encourage either group or individual status improvement.

This study also examined our prediction that the power of morality norms is shown in their enabling individuals to decide more quickly between competing strategies of status improvement. Deciding more quickly between competing strategies implies that one strategy is clearly more attractive than the other. When competing strategies are more equally attractive, the decision between them is more of a dilemma. Dilemmas take more time to decide. Although the time taken to decide between competing options has not been used before in the study of status improvement, it is well known in the consumer choice literature. Research in that area has demonstrated that higher levels of conflict between choices lead to longer decision latencies (Audley, 1960; Berlyne, 1960; Bockenholt, Dietrich, Aschenbrenner, & Schmalhofer, 1991; Espinoza-Varas & Watson 1994; Kiesler, 1966; Tyebjee, 1979). Thus, longer decision latencies are taken to indicate a decisional dilemma (Tyebjee, 1979). If morality norms are stronger than competence norms, morality norms should more quickly resolve the dilemma in deciding between group and individual status improvement. As a result, morality norms should result in shorter decision latencies when individuals decide whether to follow the strategy suggested by the norm.

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

Eighty-nine University of Chieti–Pescara students participated for course credit (68 women and 21 men, evenly distributed across conditions; mean age = 20,  $SD = 1.06$ ). A minimum of 4 and a maximum of 5 participants were present at each session, which lasted approximately 1 hr, after which participants were fully debriefed and received course credit. The study orthogonally manipulated the competence versus morality norm and the group versus individual strategy of status improvement it suggested, in a between-participants factorial design. Between 21 and 23 participants were assigned to each condition.

### *Procedure*

*Group formation.* The experiment took place in a research lab, where tasks were administered on a PC. Participants were asked to perform an “associative thinking” task, allegedly to investigate how efficient different “problem-solving styles” were in groups (see Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). According to their task performance they would be assigned to a group of either inductive or

deductive problem solvers (see Doosje et al., 1995). In truth, all participants were told that they were inductive problem solvers and would thus be working with others who had this style. Participants were then asked to indicate to which group they belonged. When their answer was incorrect, the PC corrected them.

After the manipulations described below, identification with the in-group was checked with three items (“I feel strong ties with the inductive thinkers,” “I have the feeling that I fit in the group of inductive thinkers,” and “I feel good about being an inductive thinker”; Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). Answers were given on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). This scale was internally consistent (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ). As intended, participants were equally able to identify with this experimentally created in-group ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) in each of the experimental conditions,  $F(3, 85) = 1.96$ , *ns*,  $\eta_p^2 = .019$ .

*Induction of low group status.* After group formation, a group task (consisting of a series of organizational problems) was introduced, allegedly in order to determine which group was best at problem solving (Task 1; see Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg, 1993). For each of these problems, the participant had to select one of two solutions. After completion of this task, the PC provided participants with bogus feedback indicating that the in-group’s score (16 points) was lower than that of the out-group (22 points) as well as that of the student population as a whole (19 points). Thus, low group status was induced in all conditions in order to motivate group members toward (either individual or group) status improvement. The induction of low group status was checked by asking participants to indicate their group’s score as lower than, equal to, or higher than the other group’s score. Participants who gave an incorrect answer were corrected by the PC before they were allowed to proceed.

*Strategies for status improvement.* At this point, participants were told that we would use a second task to investigate how individual and group performance could be optimized. Task 2 involved five trials of the same type of organizational problems used in Task 1. However, on each trial in Task 2, participants had to decide whether they wanted to be tested individually or with their group. It was explained that each time participants decided to be tested individually, they would allow the experimenters to learn more about their individual potentialities and how these might be improved. Likewise, each decision to be tested with the group was said to contribute to the study of group potentialities and how these might best be used to optimize the efficiency of the group’s problem solving. In this way, it was stressed that on each trial participants could decide either to contribute to their individual self-improvement (by deciding to be tested individually) or to contribute to the improvement of the group (by deciding to be tested as a group).

To mirror real-world incentives for individual status improvement (Ellemers & Barreto, in press; Ellemers & Van Laar, in press), the study was designed to make individual status improvement attractive across conditions. Therefore, participants were told that each time they decided to work individually they might earn an individual reward (i.e., they could gain one point). If they decided to work with the group they would not earn this individual reward. Participants were also told that each decision they and other in-group members made would be shown to all in-group members after completion of the task, when they might be asked to explain their decisions to other in-group members. The (anticipated) visibility of participants’ decisions to the in-group was in-

tended to increase the importance of adhering to in-group norms across conditions. Where such decisions are not visible to the in-group, higher identifiers adhere to group norms more than lower identifiers (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). Thus, it was important to keep the incentive to adhere to group norms constant across participants.

### *Manipulation of Group Norm*

Adapting the procedure developed by Barreto and Ellemers (2000), we induced in-group norms by telling participants how their fellow in-group members evaluated those who pursue individual versus group status improvement. To be able to provide this information in a convincing way, we first asked participants to themselves evaluate an in-group member “that focuses on his or her own possibilities and therefore chooses to work individually” and an in-group member “that focuses on the possibilities of the group and therefore chooses to work with the group.” The bipolar response scales provided asked participants to rate the hypothetical in-group member from 1 (*absolutely stupid; absolutely immoral*) to 7 (*absolutely smart; absolutely moral*). In addition to enabling false feedback about the in-group norm, this procedure also allowed us to check whether participants’ a priori evaluations of these strategies affected the impact of our norm manipulations.<sup>2</sup>

The in-group norm was established by providing false feedback regarding in-group members’ evaluation of the two strategies. The strategy suggested by the norm was manipulated with information about the mean level of support each strategy received from in-group members. When the preferred strategy was group status improvement, participants were told that members of their group valued group status improvement more (i.e., rated 6.1) than individual status improvement (i.e., rated 2.4). When the preferred strategy was individual status improvement, these scores were reversed.<sup>3</sup>

We also manipulated why in-group members were said to prefer one strategy over another. In the morality norm condition, in-group members were said to evaluate one strategy of status improvement as more moral (i.e., 6.1 where 7 indicates *absolutely moral*) and the other strategy as less moral (i.e., 2.4 where 1 indicates *absolutely immoral*). In the competence norm condition, in-group members were said to evaluate one strategy of status improvement as more “smart” and the other as more “stupid.” Comprehension of the group norm manipulations was checked by asking participants to indicate what the group thought of each strategy. Participants

<sup>2</sup> Participants’ own evaluations of these two strategies before the group norm was introduced revealed an equally positive evaluation of group members who endorse group status improvement ( $M = 4.99$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) and those who pursue individual status improvement ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). Consequently, controlling for participants’ a priori evaluations of these strategies did not alter the effects reported here.

<sup>3</sup> At first sight, it may seem awkward for a group norm to evaluate individual status improvement more positively than group status improvement. However, it is important to note that in the experimental procedure individual self-improvement was always rewarding; participants could earn points only when working individually. In this context, we think it is quite feasible that working at individual self-advancement emerges as the preferred course of action. That is, under these circumstances it is conceivable that people prefer that all members of their group try to gain points individually instead of forgoing the chance to earn individual points in order to learn how to improve as a group.

who were unable to indicate how the in-group had evaluated the two different strategies were provided with the correct information before they were allowed to proceed.

### Dependent Measures

*Strategy of status improvement* was measured by counting the decisions made during Task 2 in the following manner: Each decision made to work individually was given a score of 0 and each decision to work with the group was given a score of 1 (see Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). Thus, scores could range from 0 (decision to work individually on all trials) to 5 (decision to work for the group on all trials). This scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

*Decision latencies* indicating the time taken to decide between individual and group status improvement in the five trials of Task 2 were measured by the PC (in seconds). When combined, these scores created an internally consistent scale ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Following Fazio (1990) we standardized reaction times. On the basis of Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) we deleted the (three) scores that fell more than three standard deviations from the mean.

### Results

A 2 (competence vs. morality norm) by 2 (group vs. individual status improvement) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to examine each dependent measure. In all analyses, participants' in-group identification was entered as a covariate.<sup>4</sup> The relevant contrasts between conditions were examined with analysis of the simple main effects.

#### Strategy of Status Improvement

The covariate, in-group identification, did not have a significant effect,  $F(1, 84) = 0.07, ns$ . As anticipated, there was a significant main effect of the strategy advocated by the norm,  $F(1, 84) = 38.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ . When the norm valued group status improvement, participants were more likely to opt for this type of strategy ( $M = 3.06, SD = 1.76$ ) than when the group norm valued individual status improvement ( $M = 1.11, SD = 0.73$ ). More relevant to our central prediction, whether the norm was competence or morality based also had a significant main effect,  $F(1, 84) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . As hypothesized, the moral norm led participants to work more at group status improvement ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.82$ ) than the competence norm ( $M = 1.69, SD = 1.12$ ).

As detailed above, a morality norm led members of a low-status group to work more toward group status improvement than a competence norm. Given our research design, this effect should be caused by the condition in which the morality norm actually advocated group status improvement. Thus, we examined the simple main effects of the morality and competence norm within the group and individual status improvement conditions (see Table 1). As expected, the morality norm led to greater group status improvement than the competence norm only when these norms suggested group status improvement,  $F(1, 84) = 7.62, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .08$ . That is, participants were more inclined to work toward group status improvement when the norm was based on morality rather than competence, but only when group status improvement was the normative strategy. When norms endorsed the strategy that also

Table 1

*Adjusted Means (and Standard Deviations) for Decisions to Work at Group (Rather Than Individual) Status Improvement as a Function of Competence Versus Morality Norms Encouraging Group Versus Individual Status Improvement (Study 1)*

	Competence norm	Morality norm	Total
In-group norm			
Group status improvement	2.45 <sup>b</sup> (1.95)	3.71 <sup>a</sup> (1.31)	3.06 (1.76)
Individual status improvement	0.96 <sup>c</sup> (1.10)	1.26 <sup>c</sup> (1.39)	1.11 (0.73)
Total	1.69 (1.12)	2.43 (1.82)	

*Note.* Scores could range from 0 (always individual status improvement) to 5 (always group status improvement). Different superscripts indicate significant differences between means as shown by a test of simple main effects.

was more individually rewarding (individual status improvement), there was no difference between morality and competence norms,  $F(1, 84) = 0.49, ns, \eta_p^2 = .006$ . Although these planned contrasts were consistent with our hypotheses, the omnibus two-way interaction between the norm manipulations was not significant,  $F(1, 84) = 1.14, ns, \eta_p^2 = .02$ .

#### Decision Latencies

Participants' response latencies on Task 1 (i.e., the task used to induce low group status) were entered as an additional covariate in the analysis of decision latencies for Task 2. This controlled for the effect of individual variations in speed of response that were independent of the experimentally manipulated factors. As anticipated, response latency for Task 1 was a significant covariate,  $F(1, 80) = 21.33, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$ , but in-group identification was not a significant covariate,  $F(1, 80) = 0.32, ns$ .

As intended, an ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of the strategy encouraged by the norm, on decision latency,  $F(1, 80) = 3.56, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . When the norm encouraged group status improvement, participants needed more time to decide which strategy to pursue ( $M = 4.70$  s,  $SD = 2.41$  s), than when the norm endorsed individual status improvement ( $M = 3.65$  s,  $SD = 1.50$  s; see Table 2). This is consistent with intentions. A norm advocating group status improvement would go against the strategy that was more individually rewarding (as the way to earn points), inducing a decisional dilemma. A norm endorsing individual status improvement would support the individually rewarding strategy, implying no dilemma.

As predicted, participants took less time to decide on a strategy of status improvement when group status improvement was advocated by a morality norm rather than a competence norm (see Table 2). That is, a test of simple main effects showed that when group status improvement was advocated, the morality norm led to a quicker decision than did the competence norm,  $F(1, 80) = 2.47, p < .057, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . In fact, in the moral norm condition participants decided equally quickly, regardless of whether the norm advocated group status improvement or endorsed individual status improvement,  $F(1, 80) = 0.34, ns, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Thus, only in the

<sup>4</sup> When we included in-group identification as a factor in the design, this revealed no significant main or interaction effects (all  $F$ s < 1).

Table 2  
*Adjusted Means (and Standard Deviations) for Decision Latencies (in Seconds) as a Function of Competence Versus Morality Norms Encouraging Group Versus Individual Status Improvement (Study 1)*

	Competence norm	Morality norm	Total
Group status improvement	5.16 <sup>a</sup> (2.75)	4.22 <sup>b</sup> (1.96)	4.70 (2.41)
Individual status improvement	3.71 <sup>b</sup> (1.28)	3.60 <sup>b</sup> (1.72)	3.65 (1.50)
Total	4.45 (2.26)	3.91 (1.85)	

*Note.* Different superscripts indicate significant differences between means as shown by a test of simple main effects.

competence norm condition did participants show evidence of a decision delay (indicating a decisional dilemma) when the norm advocated group status improvement rather than individual status improvement,  $F(1, 80) = 4.45, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . Even though these effects are consistent with predictions, there was no omnibus two-way interaction,  $F(1, 80) = 1.09, ns, \eta_p^2 = .013$ .

### Discussion

In line with previous findings, this experiment confirmed that group norms can lead members of low-status groups to opt for group rather than individual strategies of status improvement. However, unlike previous studies, we showed that a morality norm was more effective in doing this than was a competence norm. It is important to note that the present study contrasted norms that advocated group status improvement with norms that advocated individual status improvement. This allowed us to establish that it is the specific strategy advocated by the norm that is decisive in making group members opt for group status improvement. Thus, the activation of morality concerns in itself does not have this effect. Individuals' accountability to fellow in-group members also could not explain the present results, as their decisions were public across conditions.

These data suggest that a norm indicating that opting for group status improvement instead of individual status improvement is considered moral by the group is quite effective in leading group members to follow the norm. In addition, people are relatively quick in deciding to go along with morality-based in-group norms. The decision whether to follow group norms apparently creates more of a decisional dilemma when group status improvement (rather than individual status improvement) is valued as competent. Even though omnibus tests of interactions were not significant, we think the results obtained point to the greater force of moral norms in comparison to competence norms.

Although the results of this first study tended to be consistent with predictions, not all results were statistically robust. Thus, a replication is called for. As the present study exposed participants to either a competence norm or a moral norm, it did not allow a direct comparison of the relative impact of these two norms. Thus, we cannot exclude the possibility that participants inferred the morality of the norm from its competence, or vice versa. The present design also failed to rule out the possibility that participants thought the in-group was unlikely to endorse a particular course of behavior as competent if they considered it immoral, or

vice versa. Indeed, participants might think that other in-group members would not advocate a particular strategy as moral when they thought it would be stupid to behave in this way. This is why we conducted a second study that replicated and extended the present study by providing in-group members with information about the evaluation of individual versus group status improvement strategies in terms of both morality and competence norms.

### Study 2

In this second study, group morality and competence norms were manipulated simultaneously. Thus, participants were provided with bogus feedback regarding whether in-group members evaluated a strategy of status improvement as moral and as competent. More specifically, in one condition participants were told that their fellow in-group members evaluated group status improvement as more competent and as more moral than individual status improvement. In another condition, participants were told that the in-group evaluated individual status improvement as more competent and as more moral than group status improvement. In addition to these two conditions where morality and competence norms converged to advocate a particular strategy of status improvement, we included two divergent conditions. These two divergent conditions build on Study 1 by allowing a direct comparison of the relative impact of morality versus competence norms. Thus, in one of these divergent conditions, in-group members were said to view group status improvement as more moral but less competent than individual status improvement. In the other divergent condition, in-group members were said to view group status improvement as more competent but less moral than individual status improvement. The two divergent conditions create a trade-off in which deciding to work for group status improvement in line with one norm (e.g., morality) comes at the expense of being seen as lacking the other characteristic (e.g., competence). Thus, we presented people with a new dilemma that pitted following a competence norm against following a morality norm.

On the basis of the Study 1 results and our conceptual argument, we predicted moral norms to have a greater effect on behavioral decisions than competence norms. As a result, when the two norms are divergent, we expect individuals to opt for group status improvement when it is considered the moral strategy. Thus, participants should follow the moral norm even when this decision implies that they will be considered less competent by their group. By contrast, when group status improvement is seen as the more competent but less moral strategy, people should be less inclined to follow this competence norm.

The greater importance of moral norms should also emerge in the time it takes participants to make a decision when morality and competence norms are divergent. If morality norms are as powerful a guide for group behavior as we suggest, then in-group members should experience less of a dilemma when it is clear that group status improvement is seen as more moral by fellow in-group members. In fact, participants should more quickly decide to follow the moral strategy, regardless of how it is evaluated in terms of competence. However, when a competence norm encourages group status improvement, individuals should need more time to decide on this strategy as they should also consider how the morality of the strategy is viewed by in-group members. Thus, when competence and morality norms are divergent, the weaker

effect of competence norms should be apparent from longer decision latencies when group status improvement is advocated by the competence norm but discouraged by the morality norm. Participants should need less time to decide for group status improvement when this strategy is advocated by the morality norm but discouraged by the competence norm.

### Method

#### Design and Participants

The design of Study 2 was a 2 (competence norm: competent vs. incompetent) by 2 (morality norm: moral vs. immoral) between-participants factorial experiment. A total of 123 students of the University of Chieti–Pescara took part (104 women and 19 men, evenly distributed across conditions). The mean age of the participants was 20 ( $SD = 0.97$ ). Between 30 and 32 participants filled the four cells of the design. A minimum of 4 and a maximum of 5 participants were present at each session. Each session lasted approximately 1 hr, after which participants were fully debriefed and received course credit.

#### Procedure

Up to the manipulation of the two group norms, the procedure was the same as in Study 1.

#### Manipulation of Group Norms

Parallel to Study 1, the group norm manipulation was introduced by first asking participants to indicate on 7-point scales to what extent they valued *as moral* (vs. *immoral*) and *as smart* (vs. *stupid*) a group member that chose to work individually and a group member that chose to work with the group.<sup>5</sup> As participants were led to believe that we asked all participants these questions, we could provide them with false feedback regarding how the in-group had evaluated the competence and morality of these two strategies.

In two cells of the design the two norms converged either (a) to encourage group status improvement (over individual status improvement) because the in-group saw group status improvement as competent and moral or (b) to discourage group status improvement (compared with individual status improvement) as incompetent and immoral. In the other two experimental conditions these norms diverged. Thus, compared with individual status improvement, group status improvement was (c) encouraged as competent but discouraged as immoral or (d) discouraged as incompetent but encouraged as moral.

#### Dependent Measures

The manipulation checks and dependent variables were the same as in Study 1. Again, we established that participants in all experimental conditions were equally able to identify with the in-group ( $\alpha = .85$ ;  $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ),  $F(3, 119) = 2.28$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . The measure for strategy of status improvement ranged from 0 (decision to work individually on all trials) to 5 (decision to work with the group on all trials). This scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Decision latencies on the five

trials in Task 2 were measured by the PC and were internally consistent ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

### Results

A 2 (competence norm: competent vs. incompetent) by 2 (morality norm: moral vs. immoral) ANCOVA analyzed each dependent measure. As in Study 1, participants' in-group identification was included as a covariate.

#### Strategy of Status Improvement

In-group identification was not a significant covariate,  $F(1, 118) = 0.16$ ,  $ns$ . As intended, both norm manipulations had main effects on the behavioral decisions participants made. Participants decided to work at group status improvement to a greater degree when an in-group norm suggested that this strategy was competent ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) rather than incompetent ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $F(1, 118) = 4.86$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ .

The morality norm also had a significant main effect on participants' behavioral decisions,  $F(1, 118) = 77.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .40$ . Participants decided to work at group status improvement to a greater degree when an in-group norm suggested that this strategy was moral ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) rather than immoral ( $M = 1.13$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). Thus, in line with our central hypothesis, the morality norm had a much larger effect ( $\eta_p^2 = .40$ ) than the competence norm ( $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ). In fact, there was no interaction between the two norm conditions,  $F(1, 118) = 0.16$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ . That is, the effect of the moral norm was significant regardless of whether group status improvement was evaluated as competent,  $F(1, 118) = 41.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .26$ , or incompetent,  $F(1, 118) = 37.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .24$ , by the in-group (see Table 3).

#### Decision Latencies

Decision latencies were first standardized as in Study 1, which resulted in the exclusion of one deviant score. In an ANCOVA parallel to that in Study 1, response latencies on Task 1 were a significant covariate,  $F(1, 116) = 73.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .39$ . In-group identification was not a significant covariate,  $F(1, 116) = 0.15$ ,  $ns$ .

The analysis did not reveal reliable main effects, but a significant interaction was obtained,  $F(1, 116) = 6.08$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . Inspection of means (see Table 4) and analysis of simple main effects confirmed that when group status improvement was encouraged by a morality norm, the competence norm had no effect on the time it took participants to decide on this strategy,  $F(1, 116) = 0.86$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ . Thus, as predicted, participants were

<sup>5</sup> Participants' own a priori evaluations of these two strategies revealed that the endorsement of group status improvement was evaluated more positively in terms of morality ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and in terms of competence ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than individual status improvement: for morality ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $F(1, 122) = 4.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ; for competence ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ),  $F(1, 122) = 38.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . We checked for possible effects of these a priori evaluations. Participants' initial evaluations of the two strategies did not emerge as significant covariates when analyzing the results of this study and did not alter the observed effects of our experimental manipulations.

Table 3  
*Adjusted Means (and Standard Deviations) for Decisions to Work at Group (Rather Than Individual) Status Improvement as a Function of Competence and Morality Norms (Study 2)*

Morality norm	Competence norm		Total
	Competent	Incompetent	
Moral	3.53 <sup>a</sup> (1.32)	3.03 <sup>a</sup> (1.47)	3.28 (1.40)
Immoral	1.40 <sup>b</sup> (1.35)	0.87 <sup>c</sup> (0.69)	1.13 (0.67)
Total	2.50 (1.70)	1.96 (1.63)	

*Note.* Scores could range from 0 (always individual status improvement) to 5 (always group status improvement). Different superscripts indicate significant differences between means as shown by a test of simple main effects.

always quick in deciding to go along with the morality norm when it encouraged group status improvement, regardless of how the competence norm evaluated this strategy. Thus, in this case, the divergence between morality and competence norms did not result in a decisional dilemma. By contrast, when group status improvement was encouraged by a competence norm, participants needed more time to decide whether to work at this strategy when it was discouraged by a morality norm,  $F(1, 116) = 6.47, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ .

### Discussion

The main aim of Study 2 was to compare the relative effects of morality versus competence norms in determining individuals' decisions to work at group status improvement. When the two norms diverged in the strategies of status improvement they encouraged, morality norms were more decisive in guiding the behavior of in-group members. As such, this study suggests that people find it more important that other members of their group evaluate them positively in terms of their morality than in terms of their competence.

In addition to the greater impact of moral norms on the decision for a status improvement strategy, we also found that morality norms provoke less of a decisional dilemma than competence norms. Indeed, we observed an asymmetry in the extent to which a divergence between competence and morality norms presented participants with a dilemma. As predicted, when other in-group members viewed group status improvement as the moral strategy, participants quickly decided to follow the morality norm. In fact, the morality norm led to quicker decisions for group status improvement regardless of how this strategy was viewed by competence norms. Thus, individuals opted for group status improvement when this was seen as moral—even when this decision made them seem less competent. Additionally, participants did not show evidence of a decision delay when their behavior would be viewed as moral but incompetent. However, when a competence norm encouraged group status improvement, participants did hesitate in deciding for a strategy that was viewed as immoral. Indeed, the behavioral decisions they made showed that eventually they did not opt for group status improvement when this would be evaluated as competent but immoral. In our opinion, these results provide additional evidence for the notion that people attach more

importance to morality norms than to competence norms in deciding between individual and group status improvement.

In Studies 1 and 2 we have assessed how group norms affect the members of experimentally created low-status groups when they have to decide between working at group and individual strategies of status improvement. In doing this, we have examined whether moral norms offer a more important guideline for the behavior of individual group members than competence norms. Although the results of both studies converge and are in line with predictions, they raise two further questions that need to be addressed.

First, the paradigm we used in Studies 1 and 2 relied on experimentally created in-groups, where the implications of individuals' behavioral decisions were relatively limited and the self-relevance of the in-group norms may have been relatively low. On the one hand, one may argue that in these experiments all aspects of the situation were equally artificial and context specific, and hence the relatively greater impact of morality norms over competence norms is nevertheless informative. On the other hand, it would be useful to corroborate this pattern of results in a study of members of real low-status groups, in a more natural context, where people are more invested in their group and have a deeper understanding of the social reality and the way in which they would try to influence their place in it. Additionally, whereas in Studies 1 and 2 we examined bipolar choices on an experimental task, the study of a natural in-group would also enable an examination of the broader range of behavioral strategies for individual versus group status improvement available in real-world situations.

Second, the use of decision latencies provides an unobtrusive measure of the extent to which participants show evidence of a decisional dilemma. This unobtrusive measure has the advantage of being less susceptible to self-presentational concerns than the behavioral decisions people make. However, decision latencies can be assessed only with specific equipment in a laboratory context and thus do not easily lend themselves to more natural settings. It is also the case that the response latency measures used in Studies 1 and 2 may not necessarily correspond to individuals' conscious experience of a decisional dilemma. Indeed, it is quite possible that participants were quicker to decide on the strategy advocated by morality norms without consciously experiencing this decision as easier to make. For these reasons, it is useful to explore whether effects similar to those obtained in Studies 1 and 2 can be obtained with self-report measures of decisional difficulty. This is what we set out to do in Study 3.

Table 4  
*Adjusted Means (and Standard Deviations) for Decision Latencies (in Seconds) as a Function of Competence and Morality Norms (Study 2)*

Morality norm	Competence norm		Total
	Competent	Incompetent	
Moral	3.69 <sup>a</sup> (1.85)	4.09 <sup>a</sup> (1.90)	3.88 (1.87)
Immoral	4.48 <sup>b</sup> (1.55)	3.65 <sup>a</sup> (2.02)	4.05 (1.83)
Total	4.07 (1.74)	3.87 (1.96)	

*Note.* Different superscripts indicate significant differences between means as shown by a test of simple main effects.

### Study 3

The aim of Study 3 was twofold. First, we attempted to corroborate and extend our previous findings by using a different methodology to study members of a natural low-status group, namely, Southern Italians (in relation to Northern Italians). Second, we explored whether the experience of a decisional dilemma emerges in participants' self-reported difficulty in deciding between group and individual status improvement. As in Study 2, the design of Study 3 pitted morality and competence norms against each other. This was done in order to create two conditions where morality and competence norms converged in their encouragement of group status improvement strategies (or individual status improvement) and two conditions where morality and competence norms diverged. As in Study 2, by pitting divergent norms against each other we aimed to assess their relative strength in encouraging group (vs. individual) status improvement. In the present study, group norms were manipulated by providing participants with bogus feedback about the way that in-group members in previous research had evaluated group versus individual status improvement strategies in terms of their morality and competence.

On the basis of our theoretical analysis and the results of Studies 1 and 2, we predicted that a morality (rather than competence) norm would more strongly affect individuals' decision for group (vs. individual) strategies of status improvement. Although Studies 1 and 2 showed morality norms to also produce less of a decisional dilemma for participants, it is unclear whether they are aware of the fact that moral norms lead them to decide more quickly between strategies of status improvement. It is entirely possible that the self-report measure of decisional difficulty may be too direct and obvious to capture the occurrence of a decisional dilemma we measured with more unobtrusive measures in Studies 1 and 2.

### Method

#### Design and Participants

Study 3 was a 2 (competence norm: competent vs. incompetent) by 2 (morality norm: moral vs. immoral) between-participants factorial experiment. A total of 100 students of the University of Chieti-Pescara took part (80 women and 20 men, evenly distributed across conditions). Their mean age was 21.34 ( $SD = 2.2$ ). Between 24 and 27 participants filled the four cells of the design. Completion of the study took approximately half an hour, after which participants were fully debriefed. They received course credit for participating.

#### Procedure

Participants were recruited before a class in social psychology. They were asked to anonymously answer a paper-and-pencil questionnaire regarding employment in the south of Italy. Even though participants were told that their responses would remain anonymous, they were informed that they would be asked to discuss their responses with other research participants after they had completed the questionnaire. Like the ostensible sharing of responses with the in-group in Studies 1 and 2, anticipation of an in-group discussion was designed to enhance the relevance of the in-group norm manipulations for all participants.

In the introduction, the questionnaire stated that the Italian government was conducting a survey to better understand the

opinion of Southerners on questions related to work and employment. Participants were then asked to indicate in which part of Italy they were born (South Italy; Middle-South Italy; Middle-North Italy; North Italy). Because all participants declared that they were born in South or Middle-South Italy, they were all included in the study. As explained below, the study established people from the (Middle-)South of Italy as a low-status group in terms of employment opportunities.

Participants were then informed that a 2006 survey conducted by the National Institute for Statistics had compared the actual employment opportunities in different areas of Italy. That research had allegedly demonstrated that the economic situation was much less favorable in the (Middle-)South of Italy compared with the (Middle-)North. In addition, participants were told that the 2006 survey highlighted two different ways in which people tried to deal with this difference in opportunities. One was for individuals to find a way to improve their personal position, despite being from the South (i.e., individual status improvement). Another strategy was for individuals to redress the difference between the South and North more generally (i.e., group status improvement). Examples of the two strategies were provided to further illustrate each one and to indicate how the two strategies differed from each other. For instance, individual status improvement could be realized by moving to the North or pursuing a higher level of education. By contrast, people who become politically active or lobby for additional government support for the South were characterized as pursuing group status improvement. It was further explained that as time and effort are limited, these two strategies tend to be incompatible with each other. Thus, investing in group status improvement would likely imply that less energy and resources are available for individual status improvement, and vice versa. By providing this information to participants we framed the different status improvement strategies in a way consistent with our conceptualization and with Studies 1 and 2.

#### Manipulation of Group Norms

As in Study 2, participants were asked to evaluate the morality and competence of the two strategies of status improvement after they were presented. This was done to credibly introduce the group norm manipulation and to be able to control for participants' own a priori evaluations of the two strategies. Participants evaluated these strategies on scales ranging from 1 (*absolutely stupid/absolutely immoral*) to 9 (*absolutely smart/absolutely moral*).<sup>6</sup> They were then provided with bogus feedback about other in-group members' evaluation of these strategies in the form of presumed results from the 2006 survey. Half of the participants were exposed to convergent group norms. Thus, they were informed that a sample of 3,000 Southerners had evaluated group status improvement either as *smart and moral* or as *stupid and immoral*. The other participants received one of two divergent norm manipulations. Thus, they were informed that a sample of

<sup>6</sup> Participants' own evaluations of these two strategies, before the group norm was introduced, revealed that the endorsement of group status improvement was evaluated equally positively as the pursuit of individual status improvement, both in terms of morality ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ , and  $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ , respectively) and in terms of competence ( $M = 5.84$ ,  $SD = 2.16$ , and  $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ , respectively).

3,000 Southerners had evaluated group status improvement either as *smart but immoral* or as *stupid but moral*.

### Dependent Measures

The decision to invest in group status improvement was assessed by asking participants to indicate to what extent they would engage in three different group status improvement strategies: "Create a social network to facilitate employment in the Middle-South," "Become politically active on behalf of the Middle-South," "Develop an employment program for the Middle-South that qualifies for support from the European Union"). Responses were given on a scale ranging from 0 (*absolutely not*) to 10 (*absolutely*). Responses to these three questions were averaged to construct a scale ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

Self-reported difficulty in deciding about their engagement in group status improvement strategies was assessed by asking participants to characterize their decision on five bipolar, 9-point, semantic differential items taken from Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957; i.e., *easy-difficult*; *fast-slow*; *certain-uncertain*; *simple-complex*; *self-evident-required thought*). Responses to these five items were averaged such that higher scores indicate more self-reported difficulty ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

In-group identification was measured as a control variable, by means of four items ("Being from the South is important to me," "I identify with the Southerners," "I feel strong ties with other Southerners," and "I feel I belong to the Southerners";  $\alpha = .90$ ). The response scale ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 9 (*totally agree*). As intended, participants in all conditions identified equally strongly with the in-group ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 2.26$ ), regardless of the norm manipulations,  $F(3, 96) = 0.26$ , *ns*,  $\eta_p^2 = .008$ . Thus, differences in in-group identification cannot account for any results of our experimental manipulations.

### Results

A 2 (competence norm: competent vs. incompetent) by 2 (morality norm: moral vs. immoral) ANCOVA was used to examine each dependent measure. As in Studies 1 and 2, in-group identification was entered as a covariate in all analyses. Because Study 3 examined members of natural groups and their preference for real-world strategies of status improvement, we also included their a priori evaluations of the morality and competence of the status improvement strategies as covariates in all analyses.

#### Group Status Improvement

In-group identification was a significant covariate,  $F(1, 89) = 17.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ . Thus, participants were generally more willing to invest in group status improvement as they identified more strongly with the group. However, participants' a priori evaluations of the morality and competence of group status improvement were not significant covariates.

As predicted, there was a significant main effect of the morality norm,  $F(1, 89) = 5.79$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . As shown in Table 5, participants were more likely to opt for group status improvement when they thought other in-group members evaluated this strategy as moral ( $M = 6.76$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) rather than immoral ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ). Also, as anticipated, neither the main effect of

Table 5  
*Adjusted Means (and Standard Deviations) for the Willingness to Invest in Group Status Improvement, as a Function of Competence and Morality Norms (Study 3)*

Morality norm	Competence norm		Total
	Competent	Incompetent	
Moral	6.61 (1.96)	6.92 (1.43)	6.76 (1.71)
Immoral	5.43 (2.34)	6.33 (2.40)	5.89 (2.39)
Total	6.02 (2.22)	6.61 (2.00)	

Note. Responses could range from 0 to 10.

competence norms nor the two-way interaction was significant (see Table 5). These findings replicate those previously obtained among members of artificially created groups. As in Studies 1 and 2, in the present study with a real-world in-group, morality norms had a greater effect on behavioral decisions than did competence norms.

#### Self-Reported Difficulty in Deciding

An ANCOVA showed none of the covariates to have significant effects. Neither in-group identification nor a priori evaluations of the morality and competence of group status improvement affected the self-reported difficulty of deciding about the different strategies of status improvement. In addition, neither of the manipulations had any effect, either singly or in interaction. Thus, participants' self-reports of the difficulty they experienced in deciding between individual and group status improvement did not reflect the greater impact of moral norms compared with competence norms.

### Discussion

The aim of Study 3 was to use a natural low-status in-group to further confirm that moral norms are a more powerful guide for in-group members' behavior than competence norms in deciding to work at group status improvement. In line with previous research (e.g., Ellemers et al., 1997), in this natural group situation we observed that in-group members were generally more likely to opt for group strategies for status improvement as they identified more strongly with the in-group. More relevant to our current investigation, and extending the results from Studies 1 and 2, we obtained further evidence for the importance of moral concerns (compared with competence concerns) in determining group members' behavioral decisions. Corroborating Studies 1 and 2—in which the effect of morality was always stronger than the effect of competence—in Study 3 only moral norms affected group members' willingness to engage in group status improvement. This confirms our prediction that moral norms have a greater impact on the behavioral preferences of individual group members than competence norms. It is important to note that even though participants anticipated having to discuss their preferences with other in-group members (like in Studies 1 and 2), in Study 3 this evidence was obtained in a more natural group setting where the behavioral decisions participants made would not be made directly visible to their fellow group members (unlike in Studies 1 and 2). This

makes it less likely that participants' decisions to invest in group status improvement in Study 3 were due to self-presentation concerns. Furthermore, in this study we asked about the willingness to engage in a range of more socially meaningful and potentially consequential behaviors. As a result we were able to establish the predicted effects of group norms while taking into account participants' own a priori evaluations of different strategies, as well as the degree to which they were predisposed toward group status improvement owing to their level of identification with the in-group.

Additionally, in Study 3 we explored whether self-reports constitute a more simple and straightforward way to obtain insight into the decisional dilemma participants experience and might offer an alternative to the decision latencies we used in our previous studies. However, we found no effects on the self-reported difficulty in deciding between individual and group status improvement. Thus, participants were unable to report the greater impact of moral norms over competence norms that was evident in their decision in favor of group status improvement. We think this illustrates the added value of the decision latency measures we used in Studies 1 and 2 to assess the occurrence of a decisional dilemma, and speaks against the operation of self-presentation effects in those studies.

### General Discussion

Members of low-status groups have to deal with the potential threat to their social identity posed by the fact that their group is likely to compare unfavorably to relevant out-groups (Tajfel, 1981; more recently, see Leach & Smith, 2006; Smith & Leach, 2004). As a result, members of low-status groups can try to improve their social standing either by pursuing individual (e.g., by dissociating the self from the group) or group (e.g., by engaging in collective action) status improvement (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Previous research has revealed that several different factors affect the choice for individual versus group status improvement, such as the level of in-group identification (Ellemers et al., 1997), beliefs about characteristics of the social structure (Ellemers, 1993), or the accountability to other in-group members (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000).

While it has been noted that social norms can induce people to opt for group status improvement, even when they would prefer to pursue individual status improvement in the absence of such normative considerations (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Jetten et al., 2002), previous research has not examined the effectiveness of *different kinds* of group norms in having this effect. This was the goal of the present research. We elaborated on the specific content of group norms in order to examine how norms affect the behavioral decisions group members make and the speed and ease with which they make these decisions. We examined both experimentally created (Studies 1 and 2) and natural (Study 3) low-status in-groups.

Together the findings reported here provide converging evidence that morality norms have greater impact on the behavior of members of low-status groups than do competence norms. In Study 1 we observed that when confronted with morality (as opposed to competence) norms, people are more likely to adjust their behavior to the group norm, and show less evidence of a decisional dilemma in doing this. In Study 2, our findings indicate

a stronger effect of moral (rather than competence) norms on the decision for a status improvement strategy. Furthermore, participants were quick to opt for group status improvement when this strategy was evaluated as moral by the in-group, even when they were aware that this might make them seem less competent in the eyes of their in-group. In Study 3 we obtained further evidence for our central prediction in that only moral norms (and not competence norms) were relevant to participants' willingness to engage in group status improvement. Thus, even though we found evidence that both types of group norms can affect the behavior of group members, morality concerns emerge as the greater determinant in people's decision whether to follow group norms.

The present work thus builds on and extends previous research showing that moral judgments can be more important than competence ratings in the evaluation of *others* (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). Additionally, we extend previous work showing that moral judgments are more important than competence judgments in determining the value of the *groups* people belong to as well as their willingness to identify with these groups (Leach et al., 2007). The current results suggest that it is also important for the *self* to be seen as moral by other members of an in-group, and that individual group members are willing to adapt their behavior accordingly. We think this is the case because being seen as moral is the best way to be a "good" group member. As such, it ensures individual inclusion and centrality in the group (Leach et al., 2007, Studies 4 and 5). Of course, being moral is also the best way to be a "good" individual (Schwartz, 1992). Thus, being moral enables positive self-evaluation on a dimension that is of central importance to the social self (Leach et al., 2007).

This is not to say that competence is irrelevant. People most certainly care about how fellow in-group members perceive their competence, as we have also shown here. Our evidence simply suggests that competence norms are a less potent incentive for individuals to adjust their behavior than morality norms. More specifically, our findings demonstrate that when both types of information are available, people attend to morality norms before they consider whether a particular course of action will seem competent. That is, they are quick in deciding to follow the course of action that is valued as moral by the group, regardless of the consequences this has for their perceived competence. This is all the more striking given that competence was clearly relevant in the contexts we examined. That is, in Studies 1 and 2, low group status was induced by providing participants with bogus information about the relative competence of their group on a problem-solving task, and status improvement referred to the optimization of (individual or group) problem-solving abilities. Likewise, in Study 3, group status differences as well as status improvement strategies referred to economic success, which relates more closely to competence than to morality. In this sense, these studies can be seen as putting our prediction that the effects of moral norms are more pronounced than those of competence norms to a strong test, given that competence concerns were more clearly contextually relevant than morality norms.

Taken together, our findings support the prediction that moral norms offer a stronger incentive for pro-normative behavior than competence norms. This extends previous research (Leach et al., 2007) showing that people find it more important that the groups they belong to are seen as moral rather than as competent. The present research suggests that the reverse relation may also be true,

in that through their moral behavior, group members may contribute to in-group value on a dimension that really matters for the group as well as the self.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

There are a few limitations to our approach worth mentioning. First, it is likely that more often than not, in the real world norms will be less explicit than in the experimental situations we created. If information is available about competence or morality norms, people most likely will infer one from the other (i.e., by assuming that the moral course of action also is the most competent one, and vice versa). This was shown in previous research on interpersonal perceptions (Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994). Thus, our experimental approach is likely to have exaggerated the distinctions between morality and competence norms. Be that as it may, there is good evidence that group morality and competence can be distinguished even where they are correlated (Leach et al., 2007, Studies 1–3). Indeed, it is easy to imagine situations in which the two norms would diverge. For instance, “bending the rules” to achieve success may be seen as competent but immoral behavior. Likewise, people who refuse to be helped by others can be seen as incompetent but moral.

Although we think the present research has yielded a number of novel and important observations, it also raises additional questions that should be examined in future research. For instance, whereas the decision latencies connected with the decision to opt for group status improvement (instead of individual status improvement) indicated the occurrence of a dilemma (in Studies 1 and 2), participants’ self-reports did not reflect their awareness that this was the case (Study 3). It is important to note that it is unlikely that this is due to social desirability effects or strategic self-presentation. Indeed, given that people attach primary importance to how they are evaluated in terms of morality, self-presentational concerns should motivate them to report experiencing less difficulty in going along with moral norms than with competence norms. However, this is not what we observed. Although we think our findings attest to the added value of using response latencies to indicate the occurrence of a decisional dilemma, they also suggest that further examination is needed of the relation between unobtrusively obtained decision latencies and self-report measures. Future research might explore people’s awareness of how they make these decisions as well as the strategic concerns that might play a role when reporting on such decisions.

A second avenue for further research might be to delve deeper into the concerns underlying the greater impact of moral norms compared with competence norms. A potential reason for the greater impact of moral norms is that competence norms may be seen as more flexible because people are known to be able to improve their performance. In contrast, morality norms may be seen as more inflexible as they may be seen to apply more generally across different times and contexts. We know that information about the competence and morality of *others* has different implications for the way they are judged (see also Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). The question remains whether this also has implications for the way people view *themselves* or prefer the self to be viewed by others. The present research suggests that being seen as moral at any one time is more important than

being seen as competent. Clearly, this also is a hypothesis worth further examination.

A related question is whether the greater tendency to go along with moral than with competence norms reflects a more generic difference in the effectiveness of these two types of social norms. Future research might build on the present studies by comparing morality and competence norms established by in-groups and out-groups. We know that people tend to attach more value to norms provided by those they perceive as in-group members as these norms are generally seen as more self-relevant standards of comparison (Leach & Vliek, 2008; Turner, 1991). This effect may be particularly strong in the case of moral norms, as failure to adhere to such norms is likely to be associated with fear of social exclusion. In primates, for instance, “moral behavior” is seen as central to group life, as it is associated with social inclusion and reciprocal helping (De Waal, 1996, 2006). Thus, it may well be that the greater impact of in-group compared with out-group norms is more pronounced in the case of moral norms, which may be seen as having the most obvious relational implications.

Another question that might be of interest to future research is whether it is possible to distinguish between situations in which people behaviorally comply with morality norms versus conditions under which they internalize these norms. In the present studies, we made group norms salient by leading group members to anticipate that they could be held accountable for the choices they made. The fact that we observed the predicted effects not only on behavioral decisions that could be monitored by other in-group members (in Studies 1 and 2) but also on participants’ anonymous responses (in Study 3) and on less obtrusive measures (i.e., their decision latencies) suggests that the influence of norms was not merely due to self-presentational concerns. Nevertheless, the present research does not allow us to reliably distinguish between responses that reflect behavioral compliance and responses indicating an internalization of group norms. Now that we have established that people are more inclined to behave in line with morality than with competence norms, it might be interesting to examine under which conditions people follow these norms to avoid social sanctions, and when they are most likely to internalize such norms into their self-concept and behavior across different social contexts.

Finally, in the present research we have focused on members of low-status groups, for whom individual and group status improvement were made to seem incompatible. One may argue that the approval of other in-group members might be particularly important for members of low-status groups, who need each other for help and support to cope with their plight (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Nevertheless, previous research has shown that in-group morality is important for members of high-status groups as well as low-status groups (Leach et al., 2007). This would suggest that, in principle, moral norms might also be more important than competence norms in groups with high status. In high-status groups, however, the goal of status improvement generally may be seen as less pressing than in groups with low status, suggesting that research on the effects of social norms in high-status groups should address other types of individual versus group goals than the ones examined here. Indeed, future research might further develop our understanding of the way in which people deal with different types of dilemmas between individual inclinations and group norms. Study 3 provides a first attempt to

broaden the scope of behaviors that might be sensitive to the operation of group norms—even though these were still all related to individual versus group status improvement. As previous work suggests that moral concerns may be relevant to a broader range of motivated behaviors (Manstead, 2000), future research might explore which types of behavioral decisions are most susceptible to the influence of moral norms rather than competence norms.

### Conclusion

With the present research, we set out to demonstrate that morality norms are an important guide for individuals' behavioral decisions to work at improving the low status of their in-group rather than improving their own personal standing. We showed that morality norms tend to be more important in this decision than competence norms. We also showed that morality norms helped resolve more quickly the dilemma in deciding between group and individual status improvement. In these ways, the present research contributes to a growing body of work that emphasizes the importance of morality in social life. In line with its importance to the individual self, morality appears to play a crucial role in regulating group-level behavior. This may be part of the reason why individuals care so much about the morality of their in-groups and gain positive self-evaluation from it (Leach et al., 2007). Viewing morality as a central dimension in group virtue and value generates a large number of intriguing lines of future research.

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