Disgraced Professionals: Revelation of Immorality Decreases Evaluations of Professional Competence and Accomplishment

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Abstract

Competence and morality are two of the most important dimensions in social evaluation. Recent studies have suggested the primacy of morality, showing that information about immorality of an ordinary target person decreases evaluation of their competence. We examined the effect of moral taint on multiple non-moral judgments: ratings of the competence, accomplishment, and contribution of fictitious professionals who were described as highly successful in various fields. Moral taint significantly decreased participants' non-moral social evaluations of professionals regardless of their field. Mediation analyses showed that the negative impact of immoral character on competence judgments is more strongly mediated by the decrease in participants' psychological involvement with the target, rather than a decrease in perceived social intelligence of the target. These findings suggest that motivation to distance oneself from immoral others plays a critical role in the revision of social evaluations.

Keywords: morality, competence, social evaluation, coherence, #MeToo

Introduction

The rise of the #MeToo movement in recent years has brought revelations of many cases of sexual violence committed by people in powerful positions. Much to the public's shock and dismay, some of the figures accused by alleged victims were not only respected for their expertise, skill, and talent, but also for their moral and likable character. Bill Cosby, for example, was accused by more than 50 victims of sexual assault that spanned decades (Francescani & Fisher, 2019). His case was particularly appalling to many because of the wholesome fatherly persona he had presented to his audience.

History has seen many cases in which highly successful figures have been of dubious moral character. The conflicting information about those individuals raises a long-standing question—whether art can be separated from the artist. Can we denounce Richard Wagner for his strong anti-Semitic beliefs while still enjoying his opera? Can we make a fair judgment of Pablo Picasso's brilliance as an artist after realizing that he was abusive to multiple women and his son? In this paper, we focus on how discovery of immoral acts 'taints' judgments of the past accomplishments and competence of individuals who are prominent in their field—a situation increasingly common in the age of internet and new media.

Generally speaking, judgments about others often incorporate a variety of information with conflicting valences. The interplay of positive and negative information about a target individual can result in complex patterns of social judgments. Imagine that a kind and likable person is ineffective at work. Her colleagues' critical judgments about her competence might be mitigated because of her likable personality. However, if her perceived lack of competence is extreme, that information might negatively affect colleagues' judgment of her personality and moral character.

A longstanding view of impression and attitude formation is that the process is driven by cognitive and motivational pressure for *coherence* (Asch, 1946; Heider, 1946). The core hypothesis is that beliefs and attitudes undergo dynamic shifts until a state of equilibrium is reached. In modern work, coherence-based reasoning has been interpreted as a form of constraint satisfaction (e.g., Thagard, 1989; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Simon, Stenstrom, & Read, 2015). In this view, people achieve a coherent view of others by shifting inconsistent perceptions and beliefs so as to increase their coherence with other information. For example, Kunda and Thagard (1996) proposed a parallel constraint-satisfaction model to explain how stereotypical beliefs can shift everyday perception of others' behaviors. In their illustration, a person's implicit tendency to think of a Black person as aggressive would cohere with the interpretation of an ambiguous action as aggressive. Given sufficient situational ambiguity to enable such coherence shifts, people will arrive at different factual judgments that better cohere with conclusions supported by prior beliefs and motivations (Alicke, 2000; Lee & Holyoak, 2019; Simon et al., 2015; Ditto et al., 2009). Given the general tendency to seek coherence, judgments about an individual's competence, accomplishments, and contributions may be influenced by moral evaluations.

Competence and warmth are two basic dimensions that have been considered fundamental to impression formation (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). The first dimension (competence/agency) has typically been linked to an individual's ability, intelligence, and skill, whereas the second dimension (warmth/morality/communion) has often been linked to likability, friendliness, and trustworthiness in

social relationships. Wojciszke et al. (1998) found that 82% of the variability in undergraduate students' global impressions of others was explained by these two basic dimensions.

The intrinsic motivation to seek potential cooperators who are generous and caring leads people to consider traits that signal warmth, sociability, and morality as generally more important than traits linked to competence (Wojciszke et al., 1998; Goodwin, 2015). Brambilla, Carraro, Castelli, and Sacchi (2019) showed that morality information has primacy over other kinds of information in impression updating. Following Goodwin (2015), they divided the warmth dimension into sociability (friendliness, likability, and kindness) and morality (honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness). Their participants were given two descriptions of behaviors of a target person that differed in valence (positive vs. negative) and dimension (morality vs. sociability vs. competence). All descriptions were matched on the absolute value of the valence ratings. Participants rated the global impression of the target (on a scale from extremely negative to extremely positive) each time they received a description of behavior. Results showed that information on the morality dimension had a greater effect on impression updating than did the other dimensions.

Stellar and Willer (2018) performed a study that focused on the interplay between ratings of morality and other dimensions. Their participants were presented with information about a target person that signaled their moral character (e.g., 'stole expensive items from a store', 'diligently cared for a parent'), and level of competence ('He has been working at his company for five years and has done a reasonably good job') in varying formats and contexts. Participants then rated the target individual on the competence dimension (e.g., 'How good do you believe he is at his job?'). In both within- and between-subject designs, Stellar and Willer found that immoral character significantly lowered competence ratings. This pattern contrasted with evidence that participants believed evaluation of moral character should be made independently of competence judgments.

In this paper, we expand on Stellar and Willer's (2018) findings using more realistic settings and a richer set of descriptions about targets. In the experiments of Stellar and Willer, the target individuals were mostly ordinary people without notable accomplishments, and only minimal descriptions were provided. Thus, the relatively strong influence of information about immorality observed in Stellar and Willer's studies may have been due to the fact that their participants were given little evidence to support the competence of the targets.

In the present study, we used vignettes describing fictitious successful professionals working in a number of different fields, with information about their important achievements. The descriptions included detailed information related to their professional competence, credentials, and achievements. By maintaining a balance between positive-competence and negative-morality information, we can conduct a more rigorous test of the influence of morality on the assessment of non-moral dimensions. By providing realistic details in the descriptions, participants' social judgments can be based on richer information, as would be the case if they were making similar judgments about their friends, acquaintances, or influential public figures.

Stellar and Willer (2018) proposed that perceived social intelligence—the ability to understand and deal with others and to know social rules (Kosmitzki & John, 1993)—of the target person serves as a mediator variable linking morality and competence judgments. That is, they suggested that participants perceive targets with immoral character as having lower social intelligence, which leads to lower judgment of competence, especially if a relevant task requires social interaction. In addition to social intelligence, we assessed another potential mediator variable: psychological involvement with the target. Given the motivation to maintain a positive self-image (e.g., Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), we predicted that immoral character will lead participants to feel relatively detached from the target individual, thereby decreasing their non-moral evaluations of the target. The influence of involvement may be especially potent when participants are given rich and detailed information about the target. Previous studies of the impact of immorality did not provide detailed information about the target, and did not measure psychological involvement with targets.

Experiment

Method

Participants and Design An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power. In order to detect a small-to-medium ($\eta_p^2 = .02$) effect with a power of .95, α level of .05, and a correlation of .4 between repeated measurements (estimated from a pilot study) in a 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA design, 194 participants would be needed. Amazon Mechanical Turk was used to recruit 230 participants residing in the U.S. Of these participants, 28 were dropped from the analysis because they did not pass either of two attention checks, leaving 202 participants (93 females, M_{age} = 38.2, SD_{age} = 11.6) They received $1.0 as compensation for their participation. Median time spent on the entire survey was 5.3 minutes.

The experiment had a 2 (profession type: entertainer/researcher) × 2 (moral violation: present/absent) design. Profession type was manipulated between subjects, whereas the moral violation condition was manipulated within subjects.

Materials and Procedure Participants were instructed to read descriptions of two professionals in different fields on a Qualtrics survey and make judgements about them after careful consideration. Each description presented a hypothetical professional, complete with an AI-generated face of a middle-aged Caucasian male (from https://thispersondoesnotexist.com; two of the nine

preselected images were randomly shown to each participant as two professionals). The first paragraph presented a brief biographical description of the professional, including his education and career. The second paragraph introduced the target's main accomplishment in their respective field. The last paragraph of the description for the control condition detailed the professional's hobby (either creative writing or outdoor activities); the analogous paragraph for the violation condition described a seriously immoral action (either multiple sexual assaults or a drug-related murder). All four manipulation paragraphs were matched in length (about 75 words). For example, one of the introductions describing a biologist in the violation condition was the following:

Raymond Johnson is a biologist who specializes in ichthyology. More specifically, his main research interest is in the evolution of ancient species of fish. He received his PhD from the West Virginia University in 1990, and is now an associate professor at Davidson College. Johnson received the Annual Excellence in Research Award from Davidson College in 2011. Below we describe one of his most important discoveries.

Main Accomplishment: Investigation of Evolution of Coelacanth Fish

Johnson studied the evolutionary timeline that shows how modern tetrapods and lungfish can be traced back to coelacanth fish. In his most well-known paper, Johnson presented convincing evidence that three-lobed tails of coelacanth fish are used to swim. This finding helped ascertain the fact that modern-day fish are related to lungfish and tetrapods.

In October 2018, multiple sources reported horrendous news involving Johnson. He was arrested for fatally shooting his neighbor with a handgun. It was revealed that Johnson and the victim—a 45-year-old businessman—had been dealing and using hard drugs including cocaine and heroin. However, the two often got into fights over distributing money and drugs. One night, Johnson became extremely furious at the victim after arguing, and shot him to death.

Participants were then asked to make social judgments about the professional on four separate axes: competence (two items, rs > .54 [1]; *Raymond Johnson is a talented biologist*; *Raymond Johnson is a brilliant biologist*), accomplishment (three items, αs > .83; e.g., *His investigation of evolution of coelacanth fish has likely progressed biology in concrete ways*), contribution (three items, αs > .79; e.g., *Society has benefited from Raymond Johnson*), and involvement with target (four items, αs > .81; e.g., *I feel that I can relate to Raymond Johnson*; *I see Raymond Johnson as a natural, down to earth person*; *I am interested in Raymond Johnson*; *When met in person, I think Raymond Johnson will make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends*). Three of the four involvement items were modified from a study by

Bocarnea and Brown (2007). Participants rated the degree to which they agreed with these statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1: *strongly disagree*, 2: *disagree*, 3: *slightly disagree*, 4: *neither agree nor disagree*, 5: *slightly agree*, 6: *agree*, 7: *strongly agree*). These survey items were tailored to the description of each professional and accomplishment being evaluated. For example, in one of the accomplishment questions, the blanks in the statement "[Main accomplishment] has likely progressed [his field] in concrete ways" were filled differently for each professional.

An additional set of questions was presented to measure the perceived social intelligence of the professional (Kosmitzki & John, 1993), in order to replicate Stellar and Willer's (2018) findings. For this measurement, participants read 10 attributes (e.g., *Knowing social rules and norms*; *Understanding people*; *Open to experiences and ideas*), and reported the extent to which they thought each attribute would be characteristic of the professional (αs > .88). All of the social intelligence items were the same across conditions and rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1: *very uncharacteristic*, 2: *uncharacteristic*, 3: *uncertain*, 4: *characteristic*, 5: *very characteristic*).

The two fictitious targets shown to each participant had the same type of profession: entertainer or researcher. Participants in the entertainer group were shown descriptions of either a comedian and an actor or a musician and an athlete, whereas participants in the researcher group were shown descriptions of either an economist and a philosopher or a chemist and a biologist. The two descriptions in each of the pairs were matched in their levels of perceived accomplishment, competence, and contribution ratings as much as possible based on the results from an independent pilot study (n = 29). The pairs of professionals, the order of presentation of the two professionals (e.g., musician → athlete or athlete → musician), the order of violation and control manipulations (violation → control or control → violation), and the type of violation (sexual assaults or drug-related murder) were all independently counterbalanced within each of the entertainer and researcher groups. The type of filler paragraph in the control condition (creative writing or outdoor activities) was randomly determined for each participant by Javascript codes embedded in the Qualtrics survey. Attention check questions were embedded in the list of social intelligence questions, instructing participants to "choose 'very uncharacteristic'". Data from participants who did not choose 'very uncharacteristic' at least once were excluded from analyses.

After the survey items for the second professional were completed, participants answered questions regarding demographics and believability of scenarios. About 64% of the participants believed that the stories were real, 25% suspected that the stories were not real, and 11% did not believe that the stories were real. Hence, our scenarios were perceived by many of our participants to be realistic.

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[1] All reliability measurements were calculated separately for the violation and control conditions. The lower statistics of the two are reported here.
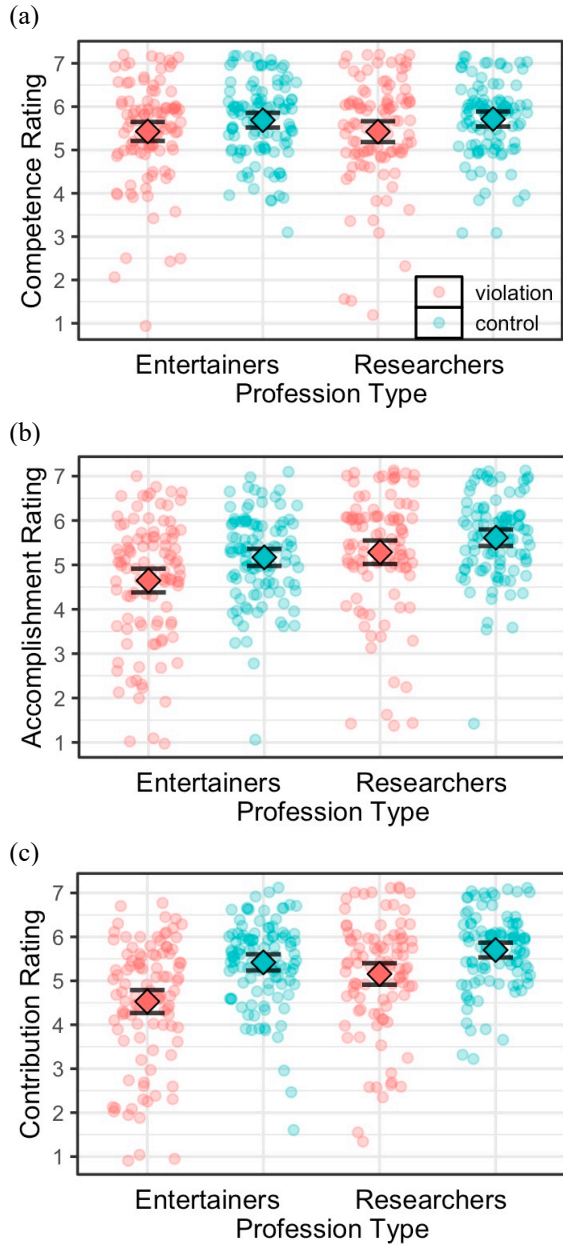
(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 1: Ratings of (a) competence, (b) accomplishment, and (c) contribution in the presence versus absence of information about a moral violation by entertainers (left two columns) and researchers (right two columns). Diamonds indicate condition means. Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval.

Results

The pattern of results is summarized in Figure 1. We conducted a 2 (profession type) × 2 (morality violation condition) mixed ANOVA for the competence score. Participants in the control condition rated the professional's competence as higher ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 0.06$) than they did in the moral violation condition ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.08$), $F(1, 200)$ = 10.00, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .048$. The two profession types did

not differ overall in rated competence, $F(1, 200) = 0.09$, $p = .92$), and the interaction between the two factors was not significant, $F(1, 200) = 0.03$, $p = .86$.

An analogous ANOVA for the accomplishment score was conducted. Accomplishment scores were significantly lower in the moral violation condition ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.40$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 0.99$), $F(1, 200) = 20.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .092$. Scores were lower overall for entertainers than for researchers, $F(1, 200) = 15.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .072$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 200) = 1.07$, $p = .30$). To control for the difference due to profession type, we conducted follow-up paired t-tests using the within-subject difference of accomplishment scores (control – violation) for entertainer and researcher groups separately. Both entertainers ($t(103) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.40$) and researchers ($t(97) = 2.35$, $p = .021$, $d = 0.24$) showed a significant decrease in rated accomplishment when described as guilty of immoral actions.

Finally, we conducted an ANOVA for the contribution score. Contribution scores were significantly lower in the moral violation condition ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.09$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.06$), $F(1, 200) = 57.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .224$. Scores were lower overall for entertainers than for researchers, $F(1, 200) = 12.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .061$. The interaction was marginally significant, $F(1, 200) = 3.36$, $p = .068$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$. Follow-up paired t-tests were performed using the within-subject difference scores as the dependent variable (control – violation). Both entertainers ($t(103) = 6.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$) and researchers ($t(97) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.41$) showed a significant decrease in rated contribution when described as guilty of immoral actions.

Mediation Analysis To conduct mediation analyses, we used MEMORE version 2.1, a macro for SPSS developed to conduct mediation and moderation analyses with repeated measures (Montoya & Hayes, 2017). All mediation analyses reported here used $n = 20,000$ as sample size for bootstrapping.

First, we attempted to replicate Stellar and Willer's (2018) finding that perceived social intelligence mediates the influence of morality on competence judgment. After collapsing across the entertainer and researcher conditions, social intelligence rating was entered as the only mediator variable ('model=1' in MEMORE). Results showed that the direct effect of immorality on competence judgment was not significant ($b = -0.07$, 95% CI = [-0.30, 0.16], $t(199) = -0.59$, $p = .55$), whereas the indirect effect through social intelligence was significant ($b = -0.20$, 95% CI = [-0.43, 0.00]). Next, we tested a more comprehensive mediation model including both involvement with target and perceived social intelligence as parallel mediators ('model=1' in MEMORE). The direct effect of immorality was not significant ($b = 0.07$, 95% CI = [-0.17, 0.32], $t(197) = 0.60$, $p = .55$). However, the indirect effect of immorality through social intelligence was also not significant ($b = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.31, 0.31]), whereas the indirect effect through involvement with target was significant ($b = -0.37$, 95% CI

= [–0.62, –0.12]). This result indicates that participants' emotional and intellectual involvement with the target was a stronger mediator than social intelligence in explaining the impact of 'moral taint'.

Next, we tested serial mediation models in which both mediators were entered and the first mediator also predicted the second mediator (see Figure 2; 'serial = 1' in MEMORE). We hypothesized that immorality will have an immediate negative effect on involvement with target, which will then decrease perceived social intelligence. Then, all three variables were tested as predictors for the competence rating (Figure 2a). For simplicity, we refer to the indirect effect from immorality to involvement to competence as *ind1*. All links along *ind1* were significant. Neither the indirect effect from immorality to social intelligence to competence (*ind2*; $b = 0.01$, 95% CI = [–0.13, 0.12]), nor that from immorality to involvement to social intelligence to competence (*ind3*; $b = 0.01$, 95% CI = [–0.18, 0.18]) was significant. Thus the influence of immorality on competence judgments was only channeled through a decrease in participants' psychological distance with the target, rather than through the perceived social intelligence of the target (see Figure 2a).

The same serial model was also used to predict accomplishment and contribution ratings (Figure 2b and 2c). When predicting the accomplishment rating, the direct effect of immorality was not significant ($b = 0.14$, 95% CI = [–0.11, 0.39], $t(197) = 1.11$, $p = .27$), whereas *ind1* ($b = –0.28$, 95% CI = [–0.52, –0.03]), *ind2* ($b = –0.12$, 95% CI = [–0.27, –0.01]), and *ind3* ($b = –0.57$, 95% CI = [–0.83, –0.34]) were all significant. When predicting the contribution rating, the direct influence of immorality was not significant ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI = [–0.21, 0.24], $t(197) = 0.10$, $p = .92$), whereas *ind1* ($b = –0.31$, 95% CI = [–0.57, –0.07]), *ind2* ($b = –0.18$, 95% CI = [–0.31, –0.07]), and *ind3* ($b = –0.25$, 95% CI = [–0.43, –0.10]) were all significant. In sum, participants' devaluations of the past work and contributions of immoral professionals were mediated through multiple pathways involving psychological distance with the target and perception of the target's social intelligence.

Discussion

Forming evaluations of others requires incorporating a rich and diverse set of information, which often involves conflicting valences. We propose that a coherence-generating mechanism underlies the process in which evaluations of another are formed. In particular, negatively-valenced information about moral character will trigger negative shifts in evaluations of professional competence and achievements, thereby increasing overall coherence of the impression of the target.

We experimentally tested this prediction by examining how people's evaluations of a target's competence, level of accomplishment, and the magnitude of their contributions to their field shift to cohere with knowledge of the target's immoral actions (sexual assault or murder). Replicating previous work, we found that evaluations were significantly reduced when people learn of a moral transgression,
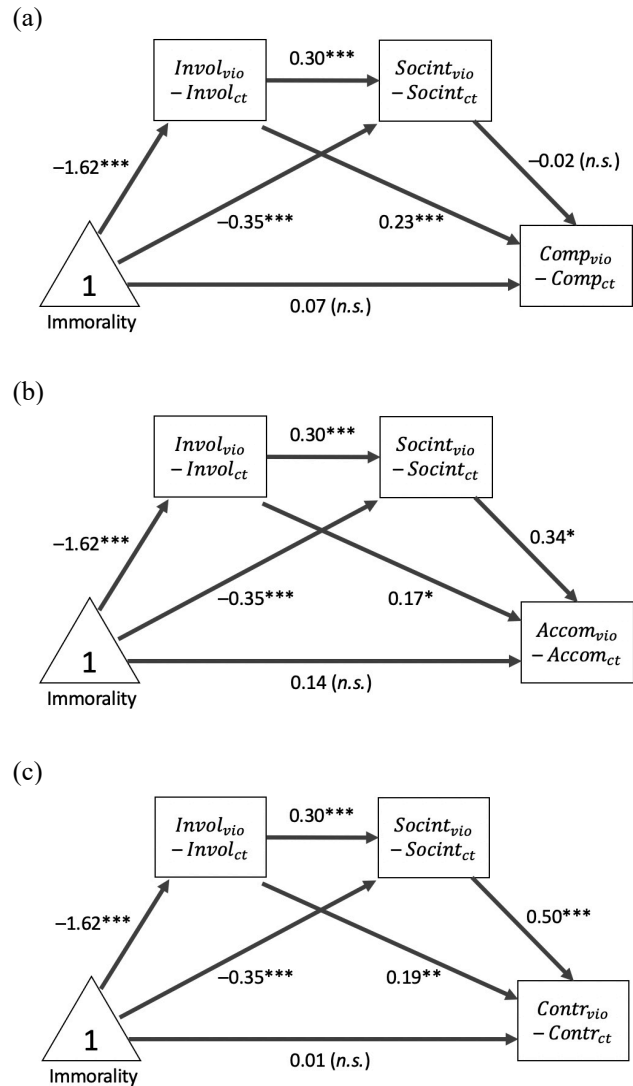

Figure 2: The effects of immorality on ratings of targets' (a) competence (*Comp*), (b) accomplishment (*Accomp*), and (c) contribution (*Contr*) are mediated by involvement with target (*Invol*) and/or perceived social intelligence of target (*Socint*). Weights indicate unstandardized regression slopes. MEMORE uses the within-subject difference of each of the variables as nodes in the model. Accordingly, the weights of arrows from the intercept (lower left triangle) indicate the within-subject effects of violation. Residuals and centering terms are omitted from the figure for clarity. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

indicating that evaluations of professional attributes shift to cohere with moral-based evaluations of their behaviors. Notably, the increased negativity of these professional evaluations was found both for a continuing trait and also for past activities (accomplishments and professional contributions).

Mediation modeling provided a more detailed picture of the mechanisms by which information about immorality impacts other judgments. We assessed the role of perceived

social intelligence (identified as a mediator by Stellar & Willer, 2018), and also subjective involvement with the target (including perceived likability of target). For competence judgments, the pathway through involvement was the only reliable predictor; for judgments of accomplishment and contribution, perceived social intelligence acted as an additional mediator. For all three judgments mediation was complete, such that the direct path from immorality was not significant after accounting for the mediator variables.

The impact of involvement as a mediator suggests that the observed coherence shifts are motivated by the desire to maintain a positive self-image (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), which leads people to psychologically distance themselves from a target described as immoral. Other mediators may certainly exist, including affective (e.g., anger toward the target) and non-affective (factual inferences about target's career or the reported transgression) variables (cf. Simon et al., 2015). Future work is needed to more closely examine the role played by moral considerations in forming judgments of the achievements of professionals. It would be useful to manipulate the severity of the moral violation (e.g., tax evasion versus murder) to assess which types of moral transgressions induce the largest shifts in judgments. It would also be useful to examine the impact of moral violations that are more directly pertinent to professional situations (e.g., plagiarism by a journalist).

The #MeToo movement on Twitter has brought a great many instances of sexual abuse to the spotlight. Much of the national discourse has focused on alleged abuse by well-known professionals and celebrities. Text-based analyses of social media data (e.g., Twitter conversations about the #MeToo movement) could illuminate how evaluations of professional achievements shift in the aftermath of coverage of immoral acts, and differences related to the perceived nature of those acts. For example, it may be possible to assess which moral foundations are activated when disgraced professionals are discussed by performing computational analyses using the eMFD software (Hopp, Fisher, Cornell, Huskey, & Weber, 2020), a toolkit for extracting moral sentiment from natural language text. Such research could help to reach a richer understanding of how moral evaluations trigger reevaluation of contributions made by professionals to their field and the world.

Acknowledgements

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