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*Published in:*  
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

*DOI:*  
[10.1016/j.jesp.2011.08.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.08.014)

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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2012

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Täuber, S., & van Zomeren, M. (2012). Refusing intergroup help from the morally superior: How one group's moral superiority leads to another group's reluctance to seek their help. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(1), 420-423. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.08.014>

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## FlashReport

## Refusing intergroup help from the morally superior: How one group's moral superiority leads to another group's reluctance to seek their help

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 29 June 2011

Revised 19 August 2011

Available online 28 August 2011

## Keywords:

Moral threats

Moral group status

Disadvantaged groups

Strategic responses

Intergroup help-seeking

Status improvement

## ABSTRACT

We examine how group members paradoxically refuse intergroup help where they might need it most: in the moral status domain. Based on the Sacred Value Protection Model (Tetlock, 2002), we predicted and found that group members felt stronger group-based anger and a stronger motivation to reaffirm their group's moral status when an outgroup was morally superior to them. Despite this moral motivation, however, we also predicted and found that group members more strongly refused intergroup help to improve their moral status vis-à-vis the morally superior outgroup (compared to an uninvolved outgroup). Consistent with the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), group members thus strategically refused intergroup help to defend their group identity. Supporting this interpretation, particularly highly identified group members were most likely to refuse intergroup help when they needed it most. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

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In the spring of 2011, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon encouraged Hungary to seek advice from the Council of Europe and the UN on their new constitution to guarantee the inclusion of freedom of press and commitment to human rights (United Nations News Service, 18.04.2011). The Hungarian parliament, however, was reluctant to seek such intergroup help and thus unilaterally approved the new constitution (The New York Times, 2011). In this article we propose that an important and under-theorized explanation for why groups sometimes paradoxically refuse to seek intergroup help (Nadler, 2002; Täuber & van Leeuwen, in press; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010) is based in individuals' strategic concerns for their group's moral status.

Specifically, we propose that concerns about one's group's moral status (which includes not only self-evaluative aspects but also the group's moral image in the eyes of others) are more emotive and motivating for group members than concerns about one's group's non-moral status. Despite this motivation to reaffirm the group's moral status, however, we propose that individuals, and high identifiers with the group in particular, will be more likely to strategically refuse to seek intergroup help vis-à-vis the morally superior outgroup compared to an outgroup that is not the source of the threat to the group's moral status. Thus, although group members are generally motivated to reaffirm their group's threatened moral status, they strategically take into account to whom they express this motivation. It follows that group members sometimes refuse help where they need it most: in the moral domain.

Our line of thought integrates insights from theory and research on the motivational relevance of the moral domain (Tetlock, 2002; see also Tetlock et al., 2000 and Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009) with insights from theory and research on (particularly highly identified) group members' strategic responses to threats to their group identity (e.g., Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Specifically, the Sacred Value Protection Model (SVPM; Tetlock, 2002) views individuals as 'intuitive theologians' that are motivated to protect sacred values within their community from outside attacks (Tetlock, 2002). The SVPM therefore proposes that the perceived threat of sacred values results in anger-like emotions such as moral outrage and the wish to reaffirm these values (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000; Van Zomeren & Lodewijckx, 2005). We extend these insights to the group level by suggesting that threats to the group's moral status should evoke group-based anger and their motivation and the motivation to reaffirm the group's moral status. We break new ground by suggesting that one means to this end is seeking intergroup help (if that possibility arises). Thus, threats to the group's moral status will lead to stronger group-based anger and a stronger desire to reaffirm the group's moral status, and thus to a stronger willingness to seek intergroup help on that domain than threats to the group's non-moral status (e.g., competence).

However, despite this moral motivation to seek intergroup help, individuals are also strategically motivated to protect their group's status in the public realm. Tetlock (2002) uses the metaphor of 'intuitive politicians' to refer to this motivation, which fits with insights from the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE; Reicher et al., 1995). This model predicts that group members, and

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particularly higher identifiers with the group, are sensitive to intergroup power and status differentials which leads them to strategically adapt their responses toward other groups. In the context of intergroup help, this means that group members will be more likely to refuse help from a superior outgroup than from an uninvolved outgroup. Thus, group members are strategic to the extent that they will be sensitive to the audience to whom they express their motivation to improve the group's status.

Putting the insights from both models together, we come to the ironic prediction that group members are most likely to refuse intergroup help when they need it most—after a threat to their group's moral status. Specifically, our line of thought consists of two hypotheses. First, in line with the SVPM, a threat to the group's moral (versus non-moral) status should lead to stronger group-based anger and a stronger desire to reaffirm the group's moral status. Second, and in line with the SIDE model, group members should be most likely to refuse intergroup help in the moral domain vis-à-vis the morally superior outgroup. To test these hypotheses, we manipulated whether a group threat was based on the group's moral status or on the group's competence, and whether the source of intergroup help was the superior outgroup, or an uninvolved outgroup.

## Method

### Participants and design

Ninety-eight undergraduate students took part in the study ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.70$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ; range 18 to 24; 80 female). Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (threat to group status: moral vs. non-moral) by 2 (source of intergroup help: superior outgroup vs. uninvolved outgroup) between-subjects design.

### Procedure and dependent measures

At the start of the study, participants completed a 4-item measure of group identification (e.g. "I identify with Germany";  $\alpha = .90$ ; all dependent measures were assessed using 7-point Likert-type scales from 1 = not at all to 7 = completely). Participants then read a report that included the experimental manipulation of threat to group status. This report was ostensibly published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It stated that "Germany performed poorer than France regarding its economic development, but equally well regarding its fight against poverty in old age" (indicating low group status in a non-moral domain), or "Germany performed poorer than France regarding its fight against poverty in old age, but equally well regarding its economic development" (indicating low group status in a moral domain). Participants indicated to what extent they as Germans experienced anger, irritation, and disgust when thinking about the OECD report. These items were averaged to form a scale of group-based anger ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Participants then learned that as part of the inaugural visits of the new German Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was going to meet the French Minister of Foreign Affairs (i.e., a representative of the superior outgroup). Participants indicated which ingroup achievements their representative should communicate in this meeting. Two items reflected reaffirmation of the ingroup's moral status ("Germany's successes in achieving equal wages among men and women," and "Germany's innovative methods to achieve justice with regard to pensions";  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, two items reflected reaffirmation of the ingroup's competence ("Successes of German soldiers in nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq"; and "Germany's successes in sport competitions such as winter sports";  $r = .21$ ,  $p = .035$ ).

Finally, participants read that several European countries signed bilateral contracts regarding the exchange of expert help. Participants learned that France (vs. Great Britain) was the first European country that signed such a contract with Germany. Manipulating the audience

to whom participants could express their motivation for status improvement, participants were asked to indicate for which areas the German minister of Foreign Affairs should seek help from France (superior outgroup condition) or from Great Britain (uninvolved outgroup condition). Areas of expertise referred to economy and fight against poverty in old age, thus reflecting the domains in which ingroup status was threatened vs. not threatened.

## Results

Unless indicated otherwise, all analyses were analyses of variance with threat to group status and source of intergroup help as between-subject factors. We first tested whether randomization was successful through an analysis of group identification (measured before the experimental manipulations). In support of effective randomization, this variable was not affected by the experimental conditions, all  $F$ 's  $< 1.00$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .40$  ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ , which is significantly different from the mid-point of the scale,  $t(97) = 9.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Hypothesis testing

Supporting our first hypothesis and thus the SVPM, results showed a significant main effect of threat to group status,  $F(1,97) = 4.39$ ,  $p = .039$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . As predicted, participants in the moral threat conditions experienced stronger group-based anger ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) than participants in the non-moral threat conditions ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). Further in line with predictions, no other effects were significant,  $F$ 's  $< 1.4$ ,  $p$ 's  $> .24$ .

In further support of our first hypothesis, results showed a significant main effect of threat to group status on reaffirmation of ingroup morality,  $F(1,97) = 5.50$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . The pattern of means was similar to that of group-based anger: participants in the moral threat conditions indicated a stronger desire to reaffirm ingroup morality ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than participants in the non-moral threat conditions ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). Further in line with predictions, no other effects were significant,  $F$ 's  $< .3$ ,  $p$ 's  $> .60$ .

By contrast, threat to group status did not affect participants' reaffirmation of the ingroup's competence ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.06$  and  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .99$ , for moral and non-moral threats, respectively). Supporting the idea that non-moral threats are less motivationally relevant than moral threats, the mean level of reaffirmation of ingroup competence was much smaller than the mean level of reaffirmation of group morality,  $t(97) = 14.38$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Seeking help

In support of our second hypothesis, we obtained the predicted interaction of threat to group status and source of help on willingness to seek out morality-related help,  $F(1,94) = 4.44$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Simple main effects analysis revealed that source of help significantly affected willingness to seek morality-related help in the moral threat conditions,  $F(1,94) = 7.88$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ . However, there were no effects of source of help in the non-moral threat conditions,  $F(1,94) < .10$ ,  $p > .80$  (see Fig. 1). Participants were thus least likely to seek intergroup help to improve their group's moral status from the morally superior outgroup.

By contrast, we found only a main effect of threat on willingness to seek out competence-related help,  $F(1,94) = 9.61$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . Participants in the non-moral threat conditions were more willing to seek competence-related help ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than participants in the moral threat conditions ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). No other effects were significant,  $F$ 's  $< 1.4$ ,  $p$ 's  $> .24$ . These findings support the idea that group members are more willing to seek intergroup help in a non-moral domain and irrespective of the audience.

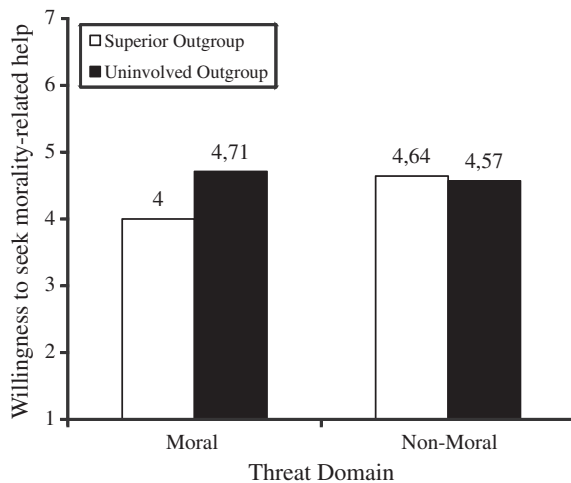


Fig. 1. Willingness to seek morality-related help as a function of threat to group status and source of help.

#### The moderating role of group identification

To more closely inspect our claim that the refusal to seek intergroup help in the moral domain vis-à-vis the morally superior outgroup is strategically based in protecting the group's identity, we tested whether it is the high identifiers that most pronouncedly show this effect.

We thus performed a moderated regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) using participants from the moral threat conditions to test the prediction that high identifiers respond more strategically to threats to their ingroup's morality (with source of help, identification, and the resulting interaction term as predictors). The regression model was significant,  $F(3,48) = 3.82, p = .016, R^2_{adj} = .15$ . Moreover, the interaction of source of help and identification was marginally significant ( $\beta = .25, t = 1.87, p = .067$ ). Further probing of the interaction revealed that, consistent with predictions, source of help significantly affected willingness to seek morality-related help among high identifiers ( $\beta = .63, t = 3.29, p = .002$ ), but not among low identifiers ( $\beta = .10, t < .6, p > .60$ ). These simple slopes are depicted in Fig. 2.

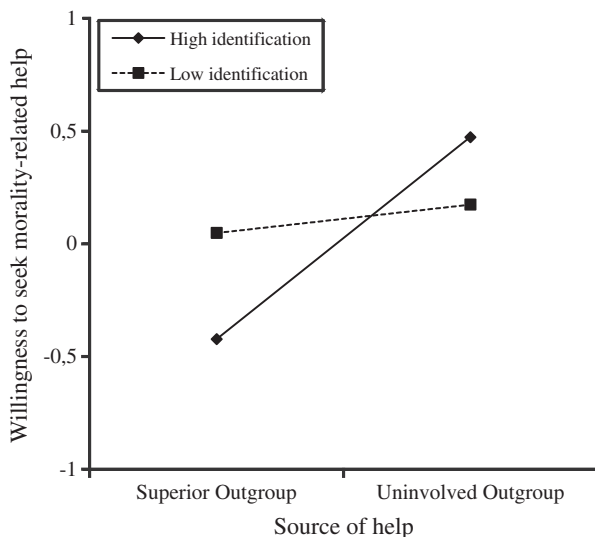


Fig. 2. Willingness to seek morality-related help as a function of source of help and group identification.

#### Ruling out alternative explanations

Although all these findings support our predictions, one issue that potentially hinders the interpretation of our results is the lack of a manipulation check of the threat to group status manipulation. Thus, it is unclear whether our predicted effects were indeed caused by the threats to group status instantiated by the OECD reports rather than by other variables such as differences in the stories' perceived relevance or credibility. To rule out the latter possibility, in a new study we randomly assigned thirty-six participants (29 women, age range from 19 to 59) to read either the moral or non-moral threat reports. They responded to a number of questions about the report (with responses on 7-point Likert-type scales, ranging from  $-3 = \text{not at all to } 3 = \text{very much}$ ). We predicted that we would find main effects of the manipulation on the (now included) manipulation checks (two items assessing perceived threat to Germany's moral/competent status), but not on other variables such as the intensity of the group threat (four items, i.e., "The facts that are stated in the current OECD report are as follows: threatening for Germany; threaten Germany's positive development; threaten Germany's welfare; should motivate German politicians to act";  $\alpha = .88$ ). Other variables in this study included individual threat (using the same items as for group threat, but referring to the participant as an individual;  $\alpha = .81$ ), credibility of the report (five items assessed how credible, valid, sound, cogent, and conclusive participants perceived the OECD report;  $\alpha = .93$ ), and relevance (three items separately assessed relevance of the ingroup's economic development and fight against poverty in old age, and the OECD report's relevance for Germany's positive future development).

We analyzed all scales with multivariate analyses of variance with threat (moral vs. non-moral) as between-subjects factor. As expected, results showed a main effect of condition on the two manipulation check items,  $F(1,35) = 4.34, p = .045, \eta^2_p = .11$  for threat to the ingroup's moral status and  $F(1,35) = 7.12, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .17$  for threat to the ingroup's competence. Participants in the moral threat condition indicated threat to Germany's moral status to a greater extent ( $M = .67, SD = 1.35$ ) than participants in the non-moral threat condition ( $M = -.36, SD = 1.60$ ). Participants in the non-moral threat condition indicated threat to Germany's competent status to a greater extent ( $M = .64, SD = 1.41$ ) than participants in the moral threat condition ( $M = -.47, SD = 1.06$ ). Thus, our manipulation was successful.

Supporting the validity of our manipulation, the results revealed no further differences between the conditions (for group-based and individual threat, both  $F_s < .80, p_s > .39$ ; for credibility,  $F < 1.8, p > .19$ , and for relevance, all  $F_s < 1.00, \text{all } p_s > .41$ ). Thus, the results of the new study show that our manipulation of threat to group status manipulated, as intended, the type of threat without manipulating its intensity or other variables related to threat such as credibility and relevance.<sup>1</sup>

#### Discussion

In line with predictions based on the SVPM (Tetlock, 2002), group members reported stronger anger and were more strongly motivated to reaffirm their group's status when the threat concerned a moral (vs. non-moral) domain. Supporting our moral-strategic approach to intergroup help, requests for help that might improve the ingroup's status were affected by both the type of threat and the source of help when the group threat referred to a moral domain. Specifically, participants requested less morality-related help when the source of that help was the morally superior outgroup (vs. an uninvolved outgroup). In line with the SIDE model (Reicher et al., 1995), this pattern was found to be most pronounced for highly identified group members. This finding

<sup>1</sup> Supplementary material on this study is available from the authors.

supports the notion that especially high identifiers with the group strategically protect the group's moral status by refusing moral help from the morally superior outgroup.

A limitation of our main study is that our data do not allow a direct test of the relation between perceived threat and our dependent variables because the main study did not include a manipulation check. We can therefore not establish causally that it is the experience of moral threat to group status that explains our findings on group-based anger, the desire to reaffirm the group's moral status, and the refusal to seek help vis-à-vis the morally superior outgroup. In order to make a strong case for the internal validity of our findings, future research may manipulate ways to decrease threat after the manipulation we used. For instance, future research can use misattribution or self-affirmation manipulations (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Zanna & Cooper, 1974) that should knock out the effects of threat and thus the effects we observed in the current study. Another limitation of the study concerns the use of two specific groups (Germany and France). A critic may argue that because our findings are based on a single study, they may be limited to the particular groups under study. However, our analysis is based on the SVPM and the SIDE model which are general theoretical models that are not specific to certain groups. Thus, on theoretical grounds there is no reason to assume that our findings should not generalize to other groups. Furthermore, our results pertaining to the importance of the group's moral status are consistent with evidence for the presumed primacy of morality over competence in social judgments of very different groups (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, 1994, 2005). Future research can seek empirical support for the external validity of our findings.

Despite these limitations, our research indicates that refusal to seek outgroup help can sometimes reflect a collective strategy. This idea fits with the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM; Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher 1996a, 1996b). According to the ESIM, and in line with the model of intergroup helping relations as power relations (Nadler, 2002), the observed reluctance to seek help from a superior outgroup can be conceptualized as a challenge to existing power differentials. Through violating normative role distributions holding that low status groups are receptive to support from superior outgroups (Nadler, 2002), the refusal of help effectively turns the power-asymmetry upside down (cf. Drury & Reicher, 2009). A question that arises for future research is therefore whether the refusal to seek help is associated with feelings of empowerment—a concept that the ESIM theorizes to occur for highly identified group members in response to illegitimate behavior from superior groups. Moreover, future research should investigate whether there are important boundary conditions to our findings. For instance, our moral-strategic analysis might be limited to moral status threats in the present because the present (but not the past) can still be altered. This points to constraints on whether the group's moral status improvement can be improved. Future research should investigate this in more detail.

Finally, in line with Reicher's (2004) conceptualization of identity as a dynamic process, our findings indicate that the presence of different audiences emphasizes different group norms: group norms appear to prescribe status improvement in instrumental terms when an uninvolved outgroup is in audience. Conversely, group norms appear to prescribe the protection of the ingroup's moral status when a morally superior outgroup is in audience, which takes priority over instrumental concerns about status improvement. Thus, our findings show the predicted effect that although threats to a group's moral status motivate individuals to repair it, they are also strategic in expressing their need for status improvement to different audiences. As a consequence, they paradoxically refrain from seeking such help when they are most in need of it.

Summing up, our findings indicate that concerns about the moral status of one's group can interfere with instrumental opportunities to improve this status. By integrating the SVPM (Tetlock, 2002) and the SIDE model (Reicher et al., 1995), our research offers a strong pointer toward the importance of the group's status in the public eye, and to the strategic responses that flow from such profound threats to the group's status. These findings also suggest that publicly accusing a group of immoral behavior in the hope that they seek help in this domain might backfire if the source of threat is also the source of help. One practical recommendation based on our findings is that political agents might consider framing moral shortcomings in non-moral terms to avoid this pitfall.

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