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# Moral Perceptions in the Workplace

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MORAL DECISIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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HURON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

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## Abstract

Substantial prior research has investigated various aspects of interpersonal perceptions, such as the dimensions of warmth and competence. Researchers have suggested that morality as a human trait is a salient basis for forming perceptions of people, including how warm and competent they are perceived. The present study was designed to examine how people's moral decisions affect warmth, competence, and morality perceptions in the workplace, how attractive these decisions make an individual for prospective project cooperation, as well as the perceived tendencies of individuals' workplace decisions. The present study confirmed previous findings in the moral psychology literature, and also begins to examine the potential implications of moral decisions and perceptions in the workplace. Study limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* warmth, competence, morality, workplace

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## Introduction

Interpersonal perceptions are undoubtedly an integral component of the social world. Given how often each and every person might communicate with others, it is unsurprising that much of how we form impressions of each other goes beyond the immediate meaning of the utterances we share with one another. The pervasiveness of interpersonal and social perceptions has given rise to a rich psychological literature, and suggest merit to the study of how people perceive one another in various settings. While various frameworks for studying interpersonal perceptions have been applied to different facets of life, it appears that insufficient inquiry has been made into how people perceive one another's moral judgements in a setting where most spend a substantial portion of their waking hours: the workplace.

Based on the social perception literature, two key universal dimensions of social cognition have been identified, namely *warmth* and *competence* (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007). With probable roots in an evolutionary survival context, the warmth dimension assesses the intent of an individual, whereas the competence dimension assesses the degree to which people are able to act upon their intentions. The importance of both warmth and competence have been supported by many years of research, with their applicability demonstrated in various facets of life and experimental settings. For this reason, as well as the connection to the foundational evolutionary roots of humans, warmth and competence may be deemed as universal. Both of these dimensions operate in a social context, altering how we perceive others. Warmth consists of five traits which include: appearing to be warm, good-natured, tolerant, sincere, and moral. Competence consists of five traits which include: appearing to be competent, confident, independent, competitive, and intelligent. As noted by Fiske and colleagues (2007), any combination of high/low perceptions on these dimensions (e.g., high/low on both, high on

competence and low on warmth, etc.) produce distinct and predictable judgements about a person. Fiske et al. (2007) present a schematic representation of the affective stereotypes these judgements create: high competence and low warmth elicits envy; high competence and high warmth elicits admiration; low competence and high warmth produce tendencies towards pity; and low ratings on both dimensions elicits contempt.

While the warmth and competence dimensions have now long been established as universal and reliable, less attention has been paid to *morality* as a factor bearing significant weight on social cognition. Research suggests that morality as an indication of character warrants separate inquiry (Goodwin, Piazza & Rozin, 2014; Wojciszke, 2005). An individual's tendency to make decisions aligned with acceptance or rejection of harm have been demonstrated to influence interpersonal perceptions, specifically in terms of predicting personality (Rom, Weiss & Conway, 2017). More precisely, the inference of cognitive processing that underlies the moral judgements of others has been shown to influence personality judgements. In the morality literature, both in philosophy and psychology, a dichotomy between *utilitarian judgements* and *deontological judgements* is used to distinguish between two salient modes of moral decision making. Often illustrated in the form of dilemmas, such depictions have a long-standing origin in philosophy, with the infamous trolley problem being an example of a moral dilemma (Thompson, 1985). In moral dilemma research, one dilemma decision typically involves inflicting some sort of harm for the sake of maximizing some sort of good consequence (accepting outcome-maximizing harm), while the other involves avoiding directly inflicting harm to the same end (rejecting outcome-maximizing harm). As such, the deontology/utilitarianism distinction is depicted by these dilemmas. Deontologically-oriented decisions are characterized by rules, (i.e., which choices are permitted or forbidden), as well as



the intrinsic motivational rule behind an action (Alexander & Moore, 2007). Consequentially-oriented decisions (utilitarian) are based upon the outcomes of a particular choice, with the ideal outcome maximizing utility (desired consequences) (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2003). The psychological literature has entertained this deontological/utilitarian distinction as well; both decision types have been shown to be distinct and perhaps even rely on different mental processes (Conway & Gawronski, 2013). The authors demonstrate, following a process dissociation approach, that deontological inclinations are related to the empathic processes and perspective-taking, whereas utilitarian inclinations share a relationship with a need for cognition, an individual difference variable reflecting the degree to which a person enjoys and engages in thinking (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982). The empirical independence of these types of decision-making inclinations supports the use of such distinctions in subsequent research. Furthermore, evidence suggests that people not only strategically shift their moral dilemma responses for impression management (the process individuals might use for controlling how others form impressions of them, Leary & Kowalski, 1990), but can accurately predict how others will perceive them based on their choice (“meta-perceptions”) (Rom & Conway, 2018). Generally, Rom and Conway’s findings indicate that rejecting harm (consistent with deontology) creates impressions of warmth at the expense of appearing competent, whereas accepting outcome-maximizing harm (consistent with utilitarianism) has the opposite effect. Evidence also suggests that deontological judgements in moral dilemmas might signal trustworthiness to others, making a person more suitable for prospective cooperation (Everett, Crockett & Pizarro, 2016; Everett, Faber, Savulescu, & Crockett, 2018). Based on the demonstrated impact of moral perceptions on interpersonal judgement, as well as the potential paramount importance of morality in person-

person evaluations (Wojciszke, 1998; 2005), investigation into the outcomes of such judgements is deemed worthwhile.

Within an organizational setting, interpersonal perceptions and relationships are in play among coworkers. People spend a significant amount of time at their jobs, which will often be situated within an organizational structure of some form. However, the corporate environment is not necessarily the same as the everyday social environments people might encounter outside of their jobs; the workplace often has a different structure and different expectations. For example, a workplace might have a bureaucratic structure, with a hierarchy of responsibility, competence, and power. Given the significant number of hours people spend at work, it would be worthwhile to investigate how the already-established dimensions of social cognition might operate in and affect behaviour in the workplace, specifically as a result of moral dilemma decisions. There is a gap in the literature with respect to moral perceptions in an organization; the present study is designed to help fill this literature gap.

As mentioned earlier, it is already known that people might shift their behavioural choices for the sake of managing impressions made upon others, specifically with respect to moral dilemma choices (Rom & Conway, 2018). How relevant is impression management in an organizational context? Research in this area continues to be relevant (Bolino, Long & Turnley, 2016). In their annual review, Bolino and colleagues summarize the current state of workplace impression management research. Strategies are employed by people in attempts to appear more likeable or competent (constructs perhaps similar to the universal warmth and competence dimensions) as well as many others, depending on objectives. Pertaining to workplaces, the dimensions of social cognition have many potential influences, such as effects on organizational commitment mediated by job satisfaction (Bufquin, DiPietro, Orłowski & Partlow, 2017).

Evidence suggests that warmth and competence are indeed pervasive dimensions in organizations, affecting levels ranging from perceptions in one-on-one interactions to perceptions of entire organizations and industries (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011). Moral decisions, and morality in itself as a salient interpersonal perceptual basis, would appear to be a welcome addition to the study of impressions and perceptions in the workplace.

The present study is designed to investigate the interpersonal impressions of decisions to accept or reject outcome-maximizing harm in the context of a workplace. The purpose is to evaluate warmth and competence ratings, as well as practical workplace outcomes, as a function of target and moral dilemma choice. Participants were asked to rate themselves, a hypothetical co-worker, or a superior on social cognition dimensions, indicate the likelihood of wanting to cooperate with this person, and indicate the perceived organizational decision tendencies of the person. These measures are to be compared to analogous ratings for the self, in which the participant makes the moral dilemma choice. The addition of the self is consistent with a distinction found in the industrial/organizational psychology literature, particularly in the domain of performance measurement (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). Given the evidenced association of deontological decision-making with warmth in the literature, and the association between warmth and trust (Everett et al., 2016), it is predicted that deontologically-oriented “colleagues” will be more inviting to work with. At present, effects as a result of manipulating the workplace role (the target) are largely exploratory. There is evidence to suggest that non-consequentialist decision makers may be favoured as partners to varying degrees depending on the social relationship at hand (Everett et al., 2018). When the social relationship is close, and continued cooperation is expected, being non-consequentially oriented (consistent with harm rejection) should be beneficial. As such, co-workers may appear more competent when making decisions

aligned with harm rejection, while harm acceptance may be more suitable for more removed social relationships where a consideration of the overall good is required (e.g., a boss). These predictions are based on the work of Everett and colleagues (2018) who examined role suitability; increased social distance from the person being evaluated may lead to competence being favoured, whereas reduced distance (closeness) leads to warmth being favoured. Applied to the workplace, the present study is also designed to assess how different moral choices might affect the types of organizational decisions one might be expected to make. This can be illustrated on a continuum, from decisions favouring the interests of the individual person (consistent with rejection of harm) and decisions favouring the maximization of the greater good for an organization as a whole (acceptance of harm for maximization of overall outcome). A harm-rejecting agent might be perceived as more likely to make decisions favouring the interests of the individual person, while a harm-accepting agent may be perceived as more likely to favour outcomes in favour of an entire organization. Based on the presented literature, a set of testable hypotheses was constructed, summarized below:

*Hypothesis 1.*

Any deontological (harm rejection) moral inclinations are expected to be perceived as warmer and more moral than utilitarian (harm acceptance) inclinations.

*Hypothesis 2.*

Harm acceptance choice-makers are predicted to be perceived as more competent than their harm rejection counterparts.

*Hypothesis 3.*

Harm rejection choice-makers are expected to be rated as favouring decisions in the best interests of the individual person as opposed to the organization, more so than those who choose harm acceptance.

*Hypothesis 4.*

Harm acceptance choice-makers are expected to be rated as favouring decisions in the best interests of the entire organization as opposed to the individual person, more so than those who choose harm rejection.

*Hypothesis 5.*

Participants will be more likely to cooperate with a harm rejecting agent than a harm accepting one.

*Hypothesis 6.*

A harm accepting boss should be perceived as more competent than a harm accepting co-worker.

*Exploratory components*

Interaction effects between target and dilemma choice for warmth, competence, morality, cooperation, and work decision are all exploratory.

## **Method**

### **Open science**

Pre-registration of the hypotheses, materials, and the data analysis plan can be found at <https://osf.io/gwv59/>.

### **Participants**

A total of 350 participants were recruited from Amazon's crowdsourcing website, Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants had to be at least 18 years of age, have at least a 95%

approval rating, and have not participated in related studies conducted in our lab. Based on a power analysis using G\*Power (version 3.1.9.2; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), a required sample size of 269 was determined as the minimum required to obtain .80 power assuming a medium effect size ( $f = .25$ ). To ensure a sufficient number of participants in each condition of the study, sample size was increased to 350 to ensure a minimum of 50 participants in each condition (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013) after any exclusions.

## **Materials**

**Warmth, Competence, and Morality.** The 10-item measure for warmth, competence and morality was adapted from Fiske and colleagues (2002). Each item was assessed with a 7-point scale, asking participants how well each of the following traits describes the target individual: competent, confident, independent, competitive, intelligent, warm, good natured, tolerant, sincere, and moral. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Traits associated with warmth included being warm, good natured, tolerant, and sincere. The mean of these items were taken as an index of warmth ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Traits associated with competence included being competent, confident, independent, competitive, and intelligent, and the mean of these items were computed as an index of competence ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Morality ratings consisted of one item. Ratings of these traits were presented in a randomized order.

**Work decisions.** Work decisions were assessed with a single item. Participants were asked “To what extent do you think (*your/this co-worker’s/this boss’s*) decisions would favour the best interests of the individual person versus the organization?” Responses were provided on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 “Completely concerned with the interests of individuals” to 7 “Completely concerned with the interests of the organization.” The midpoint of the scale indicated equal concern for both the interests of the individual and the organization.

**Cooperation.** Likelihood of cooperation was assessed with a single item. Participants were asked “How likely is it that you would want to cooperate with (*this co-worker/boss*) on a project for work?”. In the self-rating conditions, participants were asked “How likely is it that others would want to cooperate with you on a work project?”. These items were rated on a 7-point scale, from 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (extremely likely).

### **Procedure**

Participants were invited to complete a survey through an Amazon Human Intelligence Task (HIT) advertisement. The advertisement was labelled as a survey about workplace social perceptions. After obtaining consent, participants underwent a verification check (Captcha V2), and randomly assigned to either the self, co-worker or superior condition. In the case of the self condition, participants were presented with the crying baby moral dilemma and asked to make a decision consistent with either utilitarian (harm-acceptance) or deontological (harm-rejection) principles.

“Please answer the following difficult question:

It is war time. Enemy soldiers have taken over your village. They have orders to kill all remaining civilians. You and some of your townspeople have sought refuge in the cellar of a large house. Outside you hear the voices of soldiers who have come to search the house for valuables. A baby with no parents begins to cry loudly. You cover her mouth to block the sound. If you remove your hand from the baby’s mouth her crying will summon the attention of the soldiers who will capture the townspeople hiding out in the cellar and kill them.

Is it appropriate for you to cover the baby’s mouth in order to save the townspeople from being killed, even though this will smother the baby?”

Participants in the self condition were asked to indicate their response from two options: “Yes, this is appropriate” or “No, this is not appropriate”. As such, this level of condition assignment was self-selected and not random. For co-worker and superior conditions, participants were randomly presented the same dilemma, with either a utilitarian or deontological decision displayed made by the hypothetical co-worker or superior. In these two conditions, participants were randomly assigned to the harm acceptance or harm rejection conditions. In all conditions, participants were asked to imagine that they are part of a project team at work, to add context to the target manipulation. The presented dilemma is as follows:

After presentation of the dilemma and decision, participants were asked to rate either themselves, the co-worker, or superior on dimensions of warmth, competence and morality. Participants subsequently rated the target on work decisions and likelihood of cooperation. Finally, participants filled out items assessing demographics, and were presented with the debriefing form and compensation code for their participation.

## **Results**

### **Participant Decisions**

In the self condition, in which participants had to choose to accept harm or reject harm in response to the dilemma, 24.79% ( $n = 29$ ) of participants chose harm rejection compared to 75.21% ( $n = 88$ ) of participants who chose harm acceptance.

### **Target Perceptions**

Pearson product moment correlations were conducted between warmth, competence, morality, cooperation and work decisions (see Table 1). Warmth was positively correlated with competence, morality, and cooperation. Competence was positively correlated with morality,



cooperation, and work decision. Morality was positively correlated with cooperation. Finally, there was no correlation between cooperation and work decisions.

All ratings were submitted to a 2 (outcome: harm rejection vs. acceptance) x 3 (target: self vs. boss vs. co-worker) between-subjects ANOVA. Given that there are 9 possible pairwise comparisons for each character rating or dependent variable (i.e., 3 comparisons for a target main effect and 6 for the interaction), the criteria for statistical significance was corrected for by pairwise comparisons to control for Type I error. This was done by dividing  $\alpha = .05$  by the number of possible pairwise comparisons for each dependent variable ( $.05/9 = .006$ ). Therefore the  $p$ -value used was set at  $p < .006$  for any pairwise comparison.

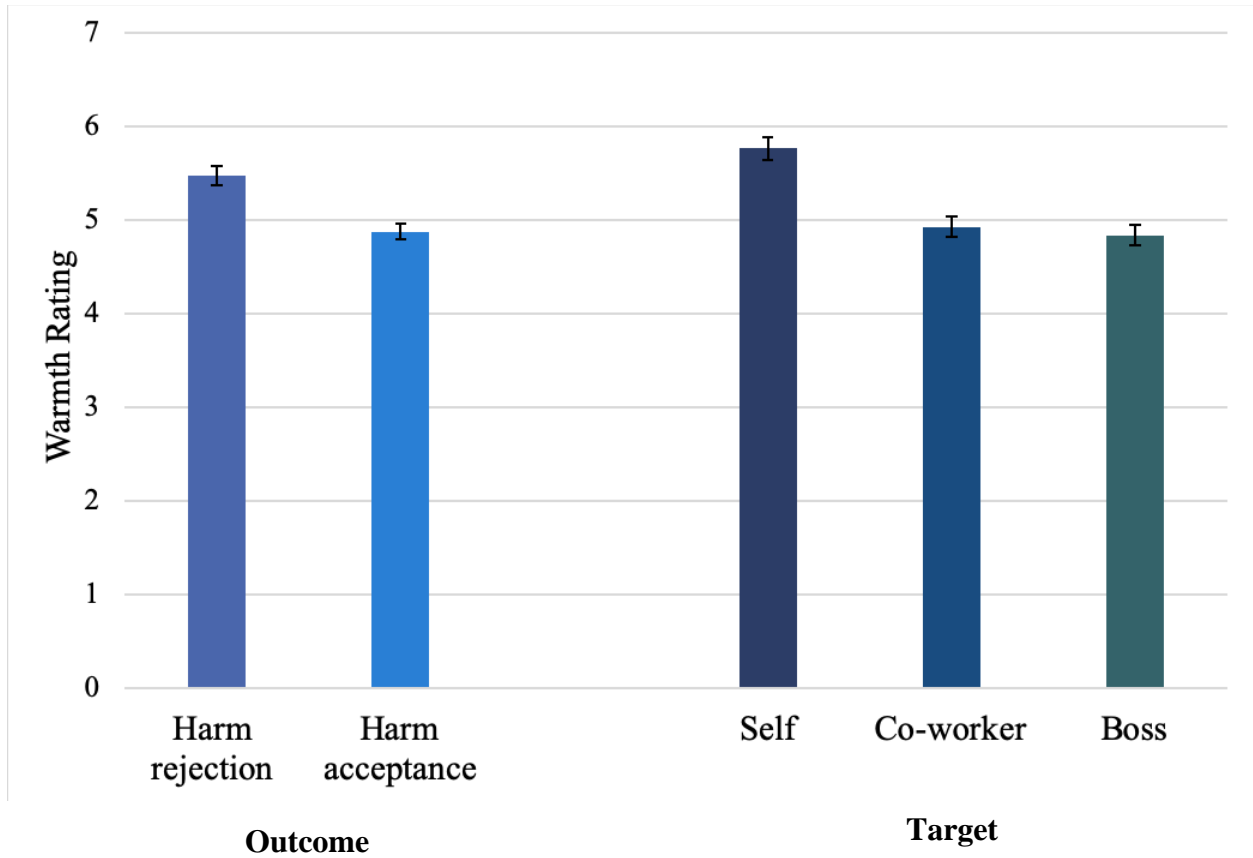
**Warmth.** For warmth ratings, there was a significant main effect for outcome,  $F(1, 344) = 21.76, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .060$ , such that individuals who chose harm rejection ( $M = 5.38, SD = 1.25$ ) were perceived as more warm than those who chose harm acceptance ( $M = 4.98, SD = 1.19$ ). There was also a main effect for target,  $F(1, 344) = 19.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .101$ . Post-hoc comparisons for target showed that participants made higher warmth ratings for themselves ( $M = 5.66, SD = .95$ ) than for a boss ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.33$ ),  $p < .001$ , or a co-worker ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.22$ ),  $p < .001$ . Ratings for the boss and co-worker did not differ from each other,  $p = .552$ . There was no interaction between outcome and target,  $F(2, 344) = 1.36, p = .258, \eta_p^2 = .008$ . See Figure 1 for an illustration of results.

Table 1

*Bivariate Correlations between Warmth, Competence, Morality, Cooperation and Work**Decisions*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Warmth	(.85)	-	-	-	-
2. Competence	.468***	(.88)	-	-	-
3. Morality	.808***	.416***	1.000	-	-
4. Cooperation	.549***	.598***	.537***	1.000	-
5. Decision	-.091	.251***	-.032	.071	1.000

*Note.* Two-tailed tests. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate internal consistency reliability coefficients.

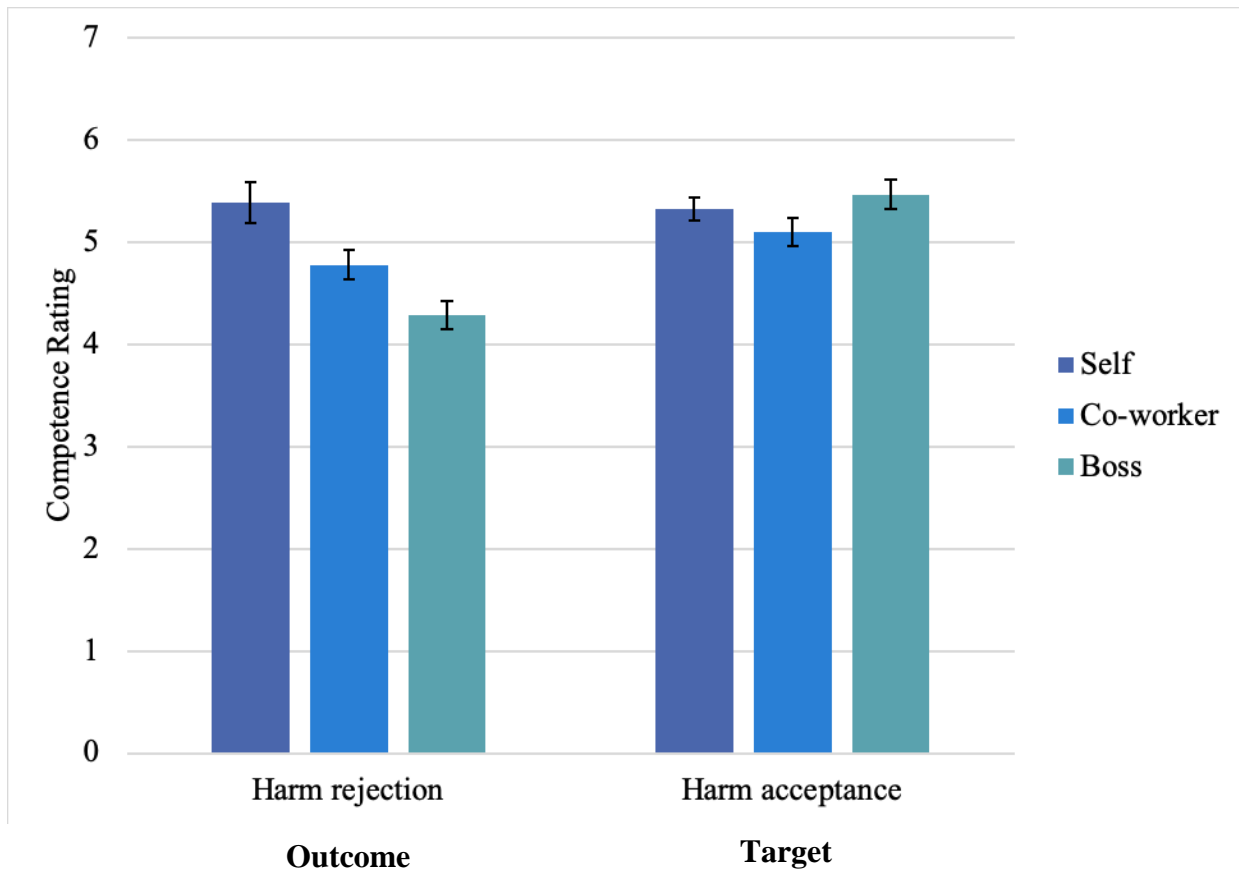


*Figure 1.* Ratings of warmth based on outcome (left side) and target (right side). Error bars reflect standard errors.

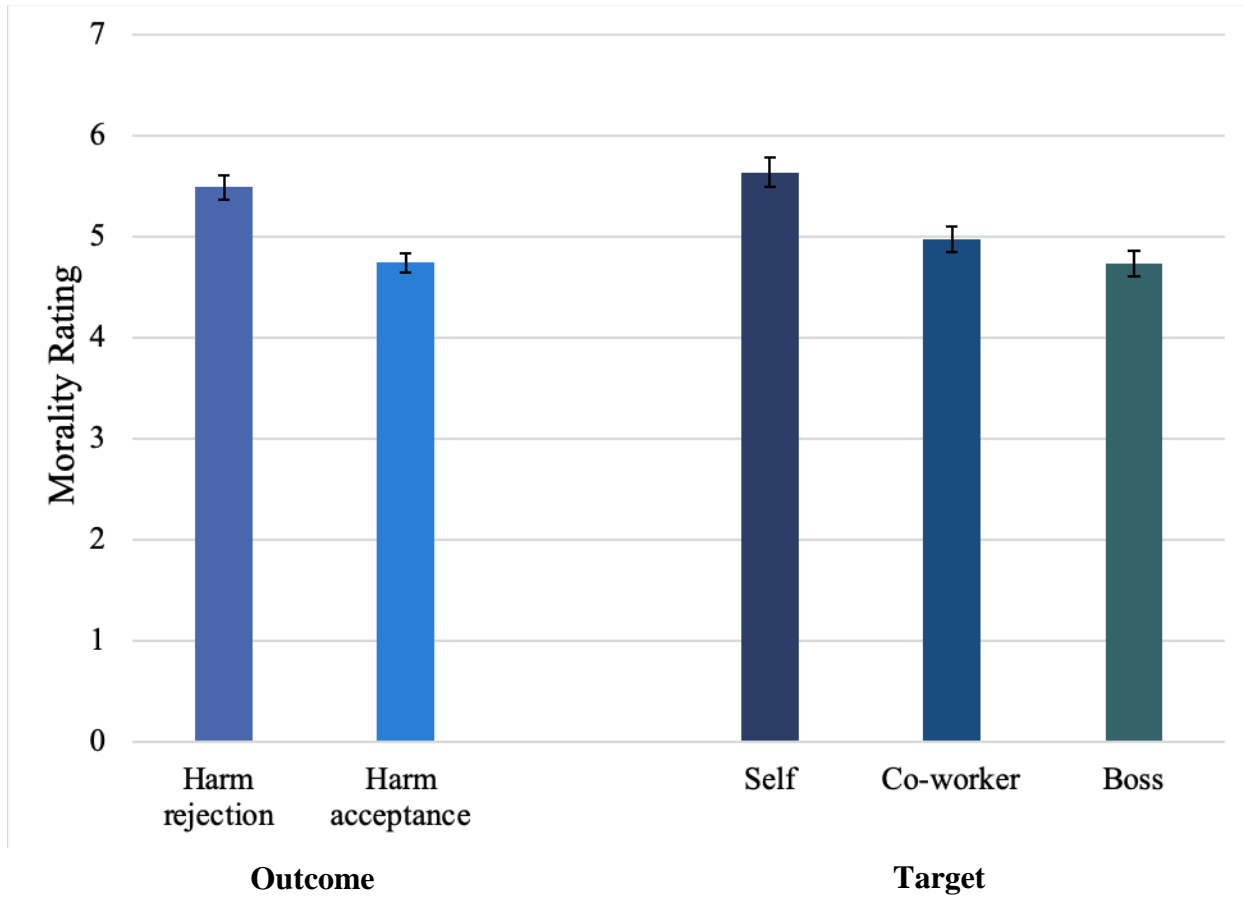
**Competence.** For competence ratings, there was a significant main effect of outcome,  $F(1, 344) = 15.43, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .043$ , such that individuals who chose harm rejection ( $M = 4.71, SD = 1.28$ ) were perceived as less competent than those who chose harm acceptance ( $M = 5.30, SD = .97$ ). There was also a significant main effect of target on competence ratings,  $F(2, 344) = 5.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .032$ , such that participants rated themselves ( $M = 5.34, SD = .95$ ) as more competent than a co-worker ( $M = 4.94, SD = 1.13$ ),  $p = .006$ , or a boss ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.30$ ).  $p = .002$ , but no differences in competence ratings were observed between the latter two conditions,  $p = .650$ . These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between outcome and target,  $F(2, 344) = 9.07, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .050$ . This interaction was decomposed by conducting post-hoc tests within each type of decision. For harm rejection, competence ratings differed among the targets,  $F(2, 344) = 10.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .057$ . Participants made higher competence ratings for themselves compared to a boss,  $p < .001$ . Competence ratings for a co-worker did not differ from self ratings,  $p = .013$ , or ratings for a boss,  $p = .014$ . For harm acceptance, however, competence ratings did not differ among the targets,  $F(2, 344) = 1.70, p = .184, \eta_p^2 = .010$ , all  $ps > .069$ . Figure 2 displays the results of the competence rating interaction.

**Morality.** For morality perceptions, there was a significant main effect for outcome,  $F(1, 344) = 22.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .063$ . Those making harm rejection choices ( $M = 5.41, SD = 1.48$ ) were perceived as more moral than those making harm acceptance choices ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.41$ ). There was also a significant target main effect,  $F(2, 344) = 11.099, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .061$ , on morality perceptions. Post-hoc comparisons for target revealed that participants rated themselves as more moral ( $M = 5.90, SD = .86$ ) than a boss ( $M = 4.74, SD = 1.64$ ),  $p < .001$ , or a co-worker ( $M = 4.97, SD = 1.46$ ),  $p = .001$ . There was no difference in morality perceptions between the

boss and co-worker,  $p = .190$ . See figure 3 for an illustration of morality results. There was no interaction between outcome and target,  $F(2, 344) = 2.29, p = .103, \eta_p^2 = .013$ .



*Figure 2.* Ratings of competence as a function of outcome and target. Error bars reflect standard errors.



*Figure 3.* Ratings of morality based on outcome (left side) and target (right side). Error bars reflect standard errors.

**Cooperation.** For cooperation, the main effect for outcome was not significant,  $F(2, 344) = .66, p = .416, \eta_p^2 = .002$ . There was no difference in perception of cooperation for those who rejected harm ( $M = 4.86, SD = 1.69$ ) compared to those who accepted harm ( $M = 5.23, SD = 1.26$ ). A significant main effect of target was observed,  $F(2, 344) = 17.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .090$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that cooperation ratings were higher for the self ( $M = 5.73, SD = 1.08$ ) compared to both a co-worker ( $M = 4.79, SD = 1.37$ ),  $p < .001$ , and a boss ( $M = 4.70, SD = 1.68$ ),  $p < .001$ . Finally, cooperation ratings made for a co-worker and boss did not differ,  $p = .622$ . There was no interaction between outcome and target,  $F(2, 344) = 2.07, p = .128, \eta_p^2 = .012$ . Figure 4 illustrates results for cooperation.

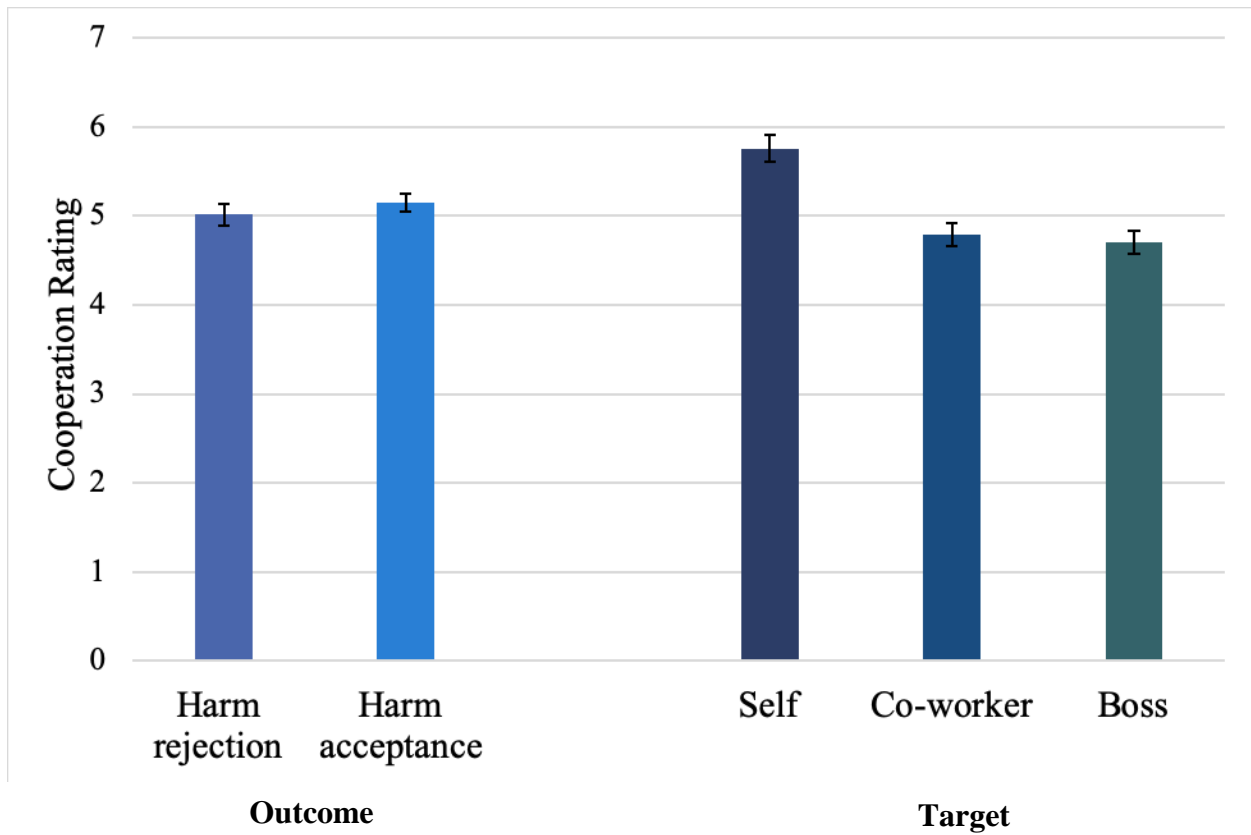
**Work decisions.** A significant main effect for decision was observed for outcome,  $F(1, 344) = 12.369, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , with individuals who chose harm rejection ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.33$ ), being perceived as favouring the interests of individuals more so than those who chose harm acceptance ( $M = 4.30, SD = 1.38$ ). Work decisions did not differ for target with similar ratings for the self ( $M = 3.97, SD = 1.08$ ), a co-worker ( $M = 4.19, SD = 1.46$ ), and a boss ( $M = 4.14, SD = 1.56$ ),  $F(1, 344) = .89, p = .412, \eta_p^2 = .005$ . The interaction between outcome and target was also not significant,  $F(2, 344) = 2.27, p = .105, \eta_p^2 = .013$ . Figure 5 illustrates the results for work decisions.

## Discussion

Several of the non-exploratory directional hypotheses were supported in this study. When individuals chose to reject harm (upholding deontology), they were perceived as both warmer and more moral than those who chose to accept outcome-maximizing harm (upholding utilitarianism). Deontological decision-making relies largely in the intrinsic rule-based justifications behind an action (regardless of whether it maximizes outcome), while utilitarian

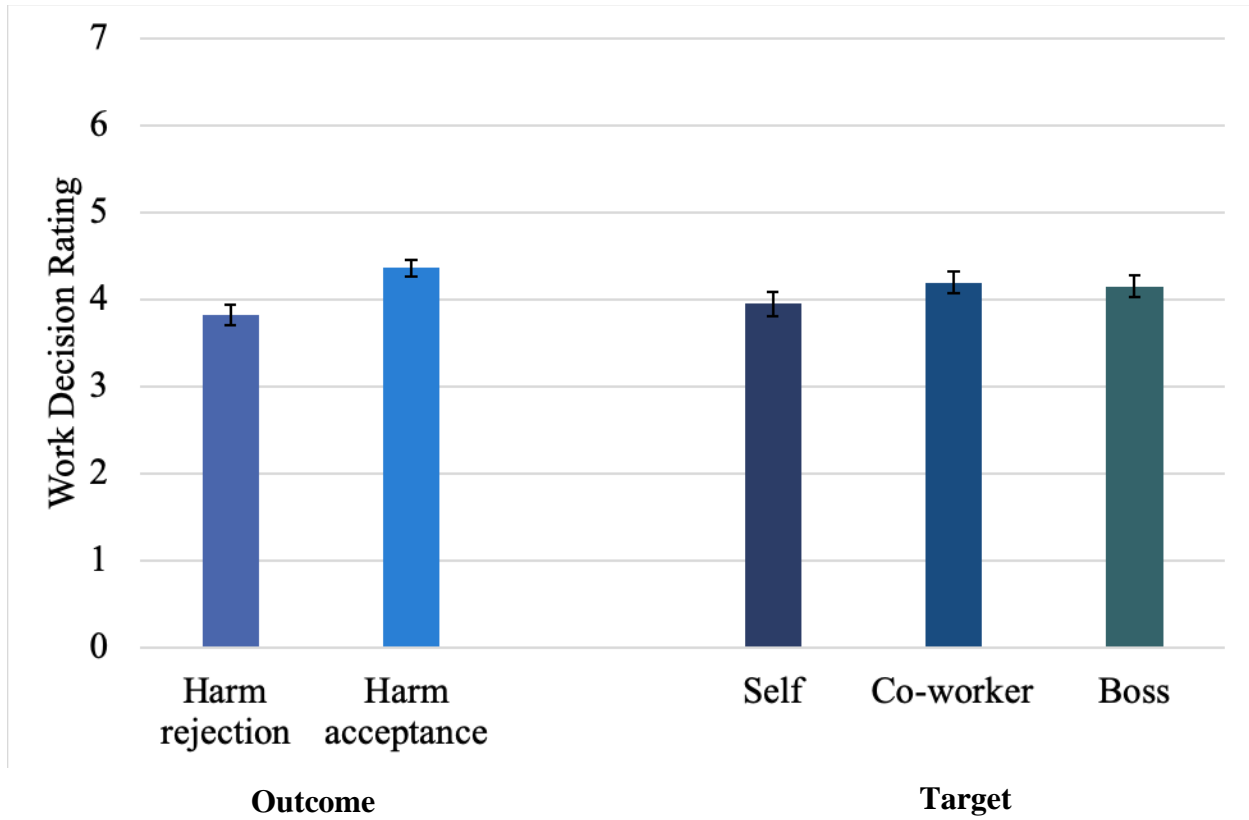






*Figure 4.* Ratings of cooperation likelihood based on outcome (left side) and target (right side).

Error bars reflect standard errors.



*Figure 5.* Ratings of work decisions based on outcome (left side) and target (right side). Error bars reflect standard errors.

decision making is characterized by seeking the greatest possible good as a result of said choice. Those making harm acceptance choices were rated as more competent than those who made harm-rejection choices. Finally, those accepting outcome-maximizing harm were shown to be perceived as favouring the entire organization, while those rejecting harm were simultaneously shown to be perceived as favouring the individual person. Although there was an interaction effect for competence ratings, it was not quite as hypothesized. The interaction differences in competence ratings occurred for harm-rejection decisions (as opposed to harm acceptance) and occurred between the self-rating conditions and boss/co-worker conditions. The hypothesis of harm-rejecting agents being favoured for cooperation was not supported.

The demonstrated effect of harm rejection choices on warmth and morality ratings is consistent with prior work on the perception of moral decisions (e.g., Everett et al., 2018). Interestingly, participants in the self conditions rated themselves as warmer than ratings for a boss or a co-worker. This suggests an overall tendency for participants to perceive themselves more favourably on this dimension, compared to instances where the judgement of others is involved. Again, consistent with prior work by the likes of Everett and colleagues (2018), individuals making harm-acceptance choices were perceived as more competent than those making harm-rejection choices. Much like warmth ratings, participants in the self condition rated themselves as more competent overall compared to the other targets (co-worker, boss), suggesting a tendency for individuals to evaluate themselves and their moral choices more favourably than those made by others. Similarly, participants rated themselves more favourably than a boss or co-worker when thinking about cooperation. While no effects were found as a result of outcome, those in the self condition rated themselves as a better cooperation partner

than those rating a co-worker or a boss. These effects highlight the tendency for individuals to rate themselves more positively than others following moral decisions.

Competence ratings were higher for harm acceptance choices than for harm-rejection choices, consistent with past research (Everett et al., 2018). Overall, participants yet again rated themselves as more competent than a co-worker or a boss. Interestingly, the interaction observed was not as predicted, occurring for harm-rejection choices as opposed to harm-acceptance choices. Again, participants rated themselves as most competent, but only more competent than the boss. Potential reasons for failing to obtain the effects expected based on role-suitability research are explained in the limitations section.

These enhanced self-perception effects are consistent with the workplace performance management and measurement literature, particularly the discrepancy between self, peer, and superior ratings of performance as part of 360-degree performance appraisal (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). While research on performance appraisal tends to be correlational in nature and relies on discrepancies in evaluations of an individual by multiple people, connection between the present study and the study of performance ratings can still be drawn. Harris and Schaubroeck (1988) suggest that egocentric biases might be one of the underlying reasons for self-ratings being so different from peer and supervisor ratings of performance. It may be the case that general egocentric tendencies also apply to evaluations of moral actions, as demonstrated by the character ratings (i.e., warmth, competence, and morality) in the present study. In a way, the present findings mirror the self, peer, and supervisor distinction of the performance appraisal literature, applied to character ratings in an experimental fashion. Participants also largely deem themselves as attractive partners for workplace cooperation, regardless of the moral choice they make. These observations are consistent with long-standing

research examining egocentric bias and social perceptions, even in hypothetical dilemmas upon which the present study relies (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). The findings in the present study suggest that attention to self-evaluations is important in morality research, and might be of interest in the domain of organizational psychology when investigating how people might perceive each other in a workplace environment. Furthermore, seeing that individuals largely perceive themselves as attractive team collaborators, attention must be paid to how this might impact cooperativeness in the workplace; not everyone can be an attractive team player, competent, warm, and moral.

Individuals making harm-acceptance decisions were rated as favouring the entire organization (conversely, harm-rejecting agents were rated as favouring the individual person). With that said, average ratings for both outcomes were near the midpoint of the scale. This is consistent with what was hypothesized. It is logical to predict that harm-accepting decisions (based on maximizing outcome for the greatest number of people) would be attributed to a propensity for organizational decisions favouring the “big picture”. Such findings may suggest that based on moral tendencies, an individual may be more or less suited for different roles within an organization. For example, should a position require impartial thinking and maximization of overall outcome (e.g., upper-level management), it may be wise to select for such traits. Conversely, should a position require attention to individual people (e.g., lower levels of an organization, jobs in the healthcare industry, personal support work etc.), a person favouring harm-rejection might be desirable. This may have implications for personnel selection, where personality test use is pervasive (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). While selection tests assessing constructs like integrity exist (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993), morality assessments (particularly for determining role suitability) might have something to offer as well.

## **Limitations and future research**

The present study has several limitations with respect to methodology and the possible inferences to be drawn. One of the most substantial shortcomings of this methodology is the use of a hypothetical moral dilemma that does not bear resemblance to actual dilemmas individuals may encounter in the workplace. Several researchers have raised concerns about the use of such dilemmas in moral psychology research as a whole (Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014). This raises the question of whether individuals would respond and react to realistic situations in the same way as the one used in the present study. Although the dilemma presented to participants in this study embodies the utilitarian/deontological distinction effectively (and perhaps real workplace dilemmas would be analogous in basic structure), many contextual details are nonexistent. This lack of context may have contributed to absence of support for the harm acceptance/rejection hypothesis with respect of likelihood of cooperation ratings, as details relevant to cooperation in a workplace setting were not captured. Evidence also suggests that people may not respond the same way when faced with an actual situation, even in a virtual environment (Patil, Cogoni, Zangrando, Chittaro, & Silani, 2014). That is to say, people may act differently than how they say they will act. This might also be an important consideration in future research examining people's behaviour as a function of their moral choices. This is not to say, however, that research using hypothetical situations is not worthwhile. While responses to thought experiments may not necessarily be predictive of behaviour, research has suggested that they are indicative of the affective and cognitive components of such decisions (Bostyn, Sevenhant, & Roets, 2018). Studies using hypothetical situations are an important first step, and future research may examine the mediating factors between affective/cognitive components of moral thinking and the resulting behaviour. Hypothetical scenarios also offer the straightforward

benefit of avoiding the logistical problem of actually placing participants in real situations. Research should continue to help identify how to make presented hypotheticals more realistic, salient, and predictive of behavioural outcomes.

A corollary to the lack of contextual details is the potential weakness of the organizational level manipulation. While robust differences were observed between the self-choice and other conditions, the distinction between co-worker and boss failed to produce effects. While the difference between making a choice oneself and evaluating someone else's choice is quite a salient and unmistakable distinction, the difference between the co-worker and boss conditions was more subtle. This manipulation likely was not strong enough. The distinction between these two hypothetical people might be more powerful with the addition of significantly more context. Simply mentioning that the person is a "co-worker" or a "boss" does not capture the potential intricacies of a workplace relationship with either person. Even intuitively, one would be inclined to assert a difference between people occupying either role. This manipulation is also inherently limited by participants' capacity to vividly imagine the situation being portrayed, as well as the intended target. Again, all the more reason for the inclusion of realistic contextual details in future research, which would be less reliant on participants' capacity to fill in relevant information via the imagination. Despite the weakness of this manipulation, it cannot be said that organizational level is not an important variable of interest. As research on moral psychology and social distance (Everett et al., 2018) and performance appraisal (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988) suggests, these types of distinctions are important to pursue, given the disparity between evaluations and expectations of different judgement targets.

Overall, the present study both confirms the results of previous research, and begins to explore the potential organizational implications of morality perceptions. Future research will need to move past the use of unrealistic hypothetical situations, and apply the harm acceptance/harm rejection distinction to realistic workplace scenarios. Qualitatively-focused research can help identify what moral dilemmas are actually present and salient to employees in various occupations, and examine the potential implications of different moral choices. Such research can also help identify relevant contextual factors which might play a role in moral decision making, again helping move beyond thought experiment-type dilemmas like the one used in the present study. Research might also examine the merits of morality assessment for personnel selection and placement.



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