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THE INTRAGROUP LEVEL

When and why reputational concerns influence
immoral behaviour

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Abstract

Immoral conduct, such as tax evasion or corruption, can have tremendous societal costs. Public policies aimed at curtailing immoral behaviour often try to capitalize on the fact that people care about what others think of them. That is, policies are geared towards enhancing people's *reputational concerns*. However, research has yielded conflicting findings on the relationship between reputational concerns and immoral behaviour. In some situations, reputational concerns decrease immoral behaviour, whereas in other cases they are inconsequential or even counterproductive. This chapter reviews when and how reputational concerns influence people's immoral behaviour, considering when reputational concerns decrease immoral behaviour, when they have no influence on immoral behaviour, and finally, when they inadvertently increase immoral behaviour. As such, the chapter elucidates when and why public policies that enhance people's reputational concerns have desired consequences by decreasing immoral behaviour.

- People's concerns about what others in their group think of them (i.e., reputational concerns) influence their (im)moral behaviour.
- People want to make a favourable impression on their group members; having a negative reputation can have undesired consequences (e.g., exclusion from the group).
- Reputational concerns can therefore help to avoid these negative consequences by increasing moral behaviour.
- However, reputational concerns may also fail to affect (im)moral behaviour and may even increase immoral behaviour.
- Whether interventions that target reputational concerns have a positive, negative or no effect on (im)moral behaviour depends on the observability of people's behaviour, people's awareness of the consequences of their behaviour, and what behaviour is prescribed by social norms.

Introduction

In 2001, Norway implemented a radical shift in its tax policy: The country introduced a system of public disclosure of tax and income information (Bø et al., 2015). From then onwards, Norwegian tax payers could obtain each other's income and tax reports via an online system. The idea behind this is simple: If someone perceives that the income and taxes reported by a member of their social group do not correspond with that person's lifestyle, the observer could discuss this mismatch with other relevant group members or powerful strangers, potentially leading to a loss of reputation (and possibly formal sanctioning) of the target person. For instance, when a neighbour or acquaintance observes their group member driving an expensive car while also reporting a low income, they could discuss this with other neighbours, friends or parents, or public officials. Fear of such reputation loss should, in turn, stimulate taxpayers to minimize the possibility that other people would perceive differences between their reported and actual income, and thus, to honestly report their income.

The policy described above is an example of how reputational concerns, defined as people's concerns about what other people think about them (Caldwell, 1986), influence people's behaviour. Reputational concerns operate among individuals within groups and communities and are particularly relevant when it comes to immoral behaviour because morality is a fundamental dimension on which people judge others (Abele et al., 2021; Leach et al., 2007). In general, people want to make a favourable impression on others in their social group, and thus be seen as behaving morally, because having a negative reputation (i.e. group members believing that one behaves in an undesirable way or has negative attributes) can have serious consequences, such as direct confrontation, gossip, ostracism (Molho et al., 2020) or legal punishment (e.g., fines or imprisonment). As a result, people have developed reputational concerns to avoid these negative consequences and increase their chances of survival (Nowak, 2006; Nowak & Sigmund, 2005).

Because upholding moral behaviour is crucial for the functioning of social groups and societies at large (van Kleef et al., 2019), policies that affect people's reputational concerns, such as the Norwegian tax policy, could be a powerful tool. Indeed, research on moral behaviour has demonstrated that people are more likely to honestly report taxes when income reports are publicly disclosed (Bø, Slemrod, & Thoresen, 2015), and others can observe their behaviour (Coricelli, Rusconi, & Villeval, 2014; Andreaoani & Petrie, 2004; Köbis et al., 2019). However, reputational concerns do not always have the desired effect; sometimes, they fail to affect immoral behaviour and sometimes, they even increase it. This state of affairs makes managing immoral behaviour exceedingly difficult.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the intricate effects of reputational concern on (im)moral behaviour and generate possible explanations for these inconclusive findings. We start with explaining how we delineate moral behaviour in the intragroup context in this chapter. Then, we review three recent strands of research on reputational concerns and moral behaviour. First, we discuss studies that have found the desired effect of reputational concerns decreasing immoral behaviour. Second, we discuss studies that found no effects of reputational concerns, allowing us to identify the conditions associated with this lack of effects. Third, we discuss studies that have found reputational concerns to increase rather than decrease immoral behaviour, enabling us to point to the factors that could explain such counterproductive effects. We then synthesize the insights derived from the three previous sections into an overview of the conceptual factors that explain when and why reputational concerns function as an effective means to discourage immoral behaviour. We end the chapter by discussing suggestions for future research and practical implications.

Moral behaviour viewed from an intragroup perspective

Before discussing pertinent research, it is important to clarify how we define moral behaviour. Morality refers to what is “right” and “wrong”, and to a code of conduct that is accepted by society (Gert & Gert, 2020). According to Moral Foundations Theory, people generally consider at least five foundations as morally important. These are: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al., 2013).¹ Whereas there are differences between social groups in the extent to which they regard violations of the last three foundations as immoral, the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundation are considered morally important across cultures and independent of political affiliation (Graham et al., 2013). Most research on the impact of reputational concerns on behaviour has focused on behaviours that relate to these two foundations. In this chapter, we focus on these two moral foundations in the context of social groups, and discuss research that addresses related behaviours—particularly prosocial versus proself behaviours, and fairness and cheating behaviours. In other words, we consider morality as individual prosocial behaviour and fair behaviour towards others in one’s social community, and we consider reputation as the public image pertaining to such behaviour within the same community.

When reputational concerns decrease immoral behaviour

Numerous studies show that reputational concerns can decrease immoral behaviour. For instance, studies have found that reputational concerns increase prosocial behaviour. Wu et al. (2016) studied prosocial behaviour in a public goods game. In this game, participants were part of a group and had to decide to provide monetary benefits to the group or not. Participants would be better off individually if they decided to not benefit the group and keep the money for themselves. However, the group as a whole would be better off if everybody would invest all their money to the group, in which case the money would be multiplied and then distributed equally across the group members. Participants thus experienced a conflict between choosing selfishly and thereby maximizing their individual outcomes, versus cooperating (choosing to prosocially benefit their group members). Wu et al., (2016) manipulated whether participants could gossip about one another (i.e., exchange information about them behind their backs, Dorez Cruz et al., 2021), and found that when the possibility to gossip existed, participants were more concerned about their reputation than when gossip was not possible. Increased reputational concern, in turn, led them to behave more prosocially in the public goods game by giving more money to the group and keeping less for themselves. Several other studies also indicate that gossip can increase prosocial behaviour (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, 2012; Molho et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015, 2016), and that reputational concerns are an underlying mechanism explaining this relationship (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Wu et al., 2016). Thus, manipulating reputational concerns via gossip can increase prosocial behaviour.

Not only in the domain of care/harm (as illustrated by the examples on prosocial behaviour) but also in the domain of fairness/cheating, studies illustrate that reputational concerns can decrease immoral behaviour. The die-rolling paradigm (Fischbacher & Föllmi-Heusi, 2013) is a widely used method to measure whether people behave honestly. In experiments using the die-rolling task, participants receive a fair die, and are asked to roll it and report the number they have rolled. They are incentivized to misreport the number, because they earn more money for reporting a higher number. If participants roll the die in private, it is not possible to directly observe if they reported truthfully or lied, but it is possible to compare the reported die-roll distribution to the

expected distribution of die rolls of a fair die. If the reported die-roll distribution differs significantly from a distribution that would be expected based on chance, then it can be assumed that people were dishonest when reporting the die rolls. A meta-analysis summarizing 90 studies using the die-rolling task demonstrated that reputational concerns are an important reason why people behave honestly in this task (Abeler et al., 2019). As an example of a study demonstrating this, Bašić and Quercia (2022) found that the die-roll numbers people reported were more similar to a random distribution when their behaviour was observed than when it was not, indicating that people reported more honestly when their behaviour was observed.

Increasing reputational concerns has been shown to increase moral behaviour in other task contexts as well. For example, Mazar et al. (2008) had participants engage in a computational task in which they had to search two numbers that add up to ten from 20 matrices containing 12 three-digit numbers. After this, they had to report how many matrices they had solved successfully to receive bonus payment (the more matrices participants resolved, the more bonus payment they received). Mazar et al. (2008) manipulated whether participants' reports of the number of matrices they solved would be shredded (thereby making their behaviour not identifiable anymore and thus lowering reputational concerns) or not (making the behaviour identifiable, hence resulting in higher reputational concerns). Results showed that people lied more often in the shredder condition than in the no-shredder condition.

In sum, across two broad domains of moral behaviour, prosociality and honesty, there is evidence that reputational concerns, under the right conditions, can increase honesty and prosocial behaviour.

When reputational concerns do not influence immoral behaviour

Whereas the studies we discussed previously highlight the positive effects of reputational concerns on immoral behaviour in line with the Norwegian tax policy example we discussed earlier, there are instances when measures taken to increase reputational concerns were not found to influence immoral behaviour. One set of measures that was found to have no effect on moral behaviour concerns manipulations that suggest the mere presence of others, whereas these others cannot actually observe one's behaviour (i.e., the observers are present but unable to obtain information about one's actual behaviour). For example, a study examining whether the mere presence of others influences immoral behaviour found no impact at all (Köbis et al., 2019). In this study, participants rolled a die and reported the outcome, and earned more bonus payment the higher the number they reported. Köbis et al. (2019) manipulated whether somebody else was merely present with the participant in the room without this person being able to observe the participant's actual behaviour, versus whether somebody else was present and could observe how the participant behaved. They found that mere presence did not influence people's decisions to act morally (Study 3) while the direct observation of one's behaviour did (Köbis et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies using images of watching eyes found no impact of the presence or absence of such watching eyes on honest behaviour (Pfattheicher et al., 2019).

Another type of manipulation that has not been found to have an effect on immoral behaviour relates to the extent to which being observed can have consequences for the focal person. In Wu et al. (2016)'s experiment, participants engaged in a public goods game and could decide to benefit the group or to selfishly keep all the available money to themselves. The possibility that other participants could gossip about their behaviour increased prosocial behaviour but only in those situations in which the gossip was transmitted to somebody with whom participants would

interact again. In a situation in which the gossip was sent to somebody with whom they would never interact, introducing gossip did not influence prosocial behaviour.²

In sum, when people performed incentivized tasks in the mere presence of another person who was unable to observe their behaviour, or when any information another person could transmit about them would not have any consequences, levels of honesty and prosociality were unaffected. Potentially, in situations in which another person is present but cannot see one's behaviour, people are not really concerned about their reputation. Similarly, watching eyes or inconsequential gossip, might not influence people's concern about their reputation and thereby not alter their behaviour.

However, it is important to note that while in the studies described here, no significant effects of reputational concern on immoral behaviour were found, this is not evidence for a null effect (see Lakens et al., 2018). For this conclusion, equivalence tests are necessary. Future studies including such equivalence tests are needed to further understand the non-significant effects of reputational concerns on immoral behaviour.

When reputational concerns increase immoral behaviour

Besides decreasing or not affecting immoral behaviour, reputational concerns may inadvertently increase immoral behaviour. One instance in which such an undesirable consequence of reputational concerns occurs is when a bad reputation, once earned, cannot be restored. In an experiment by Coricelli et al. (2014) participants could lie for their personal benefit, and in case their lie would be detected, a picture of them would be shown to all other group members along with the information that they lied. The authors compared two conditions: one in which the detected liar was pardoned after some rounds and reintegrated into the group, and one in which the liar wasn't reintegrated. In the treatment in which liars were not pardoned, lying increased in comparison to when liars were pardoned and reintegrated after their lie was made public.

Another adverse consequence reputational concerns can have is that when people are trying to maintain an honest reputation, they might actually lie in order to appear honest. Evidence for this comes from a set of studies that employed a die-rolling task in which the researchers programmed the die to roll specific numbers such that participants would be very lucky (i.e., the die would roll 5, 6, 6, 5) or not (die rolls would result in random numbers). Participants who were in the lucky condition lied "downward" (i.e., reported lower numbers than they actually rolled), forgoing bonuses in order to appear honest (Choshen-Hillel et al., 2020). This demonstrates that a concern to be perceived as dishonest can actually, paradoxically, increase dishonesty.

Lastly, differences in moral behaviour have been found between situations in which people were observed by peers (such as friends) versus other observers. In one experiment, peer presence increased cheating in a die-rolling task in comparison to doing the task alone, presumably because it increased competition among peers to earn more money in the experiment (Bäker & Mechtel, 2019). As such, in those situations, increasing reputational concerns via increasing observability does not decrease immoral behaviour, but rather increases it.

In the realm of prosocial behaviour, reputational concern has also sometimes been found to increase immoral behaviour. Steinel et al. (2010) found that people who occupied a marginal position in a group, yet had a high need to belong to that group, behaved more cooperatively as representatives in an intergroup negotiation when their fellow group members seemed to favour cooperation, but behaved more competitively when their fellow group members seemed to favour competition.

In sum, increasing reputational concerns can reduce honesty and prosociality and thus increase immoral behaviour. This can happen, first, when people are not reintegrated into their group after engaging in a misdeed; second, when engaging in moral behaviour makes one appear immoral (i.e., when being honest makes one appear dishonest or not helpful); third, when one is observed by peers with whom one is in competition; and lastly, when one's fellow group members support a competitive stance toward an outgroup member. In the following we will integrate these findings and discuss the conceptual factors that determine how reputational concerns influence immoral behaviour in the next section.

Emerging patterns, practical implications and future directions

Our review reveals that, in line with what policy makers intend when implementing policies to increase reputational concerns, in many situations reputational concerns decrease immoral behaviour. This happens, for example, when people know others can observe their behaviour and/or gossip about them. In other situations, measures intended to increase reputational concerns, although potentially costly, do not increase immoral behaviour. This happens, for instance, when people do not actually feel observed. Similarly, when people know gossip can be transmitted to another person, but they will never interact with that person, increasing reputational concerns do not influence immoral behaviour. Lastly, we reviewed studies that show that measures intended to increase reputational concern can inadvertently increase immoral behaviour. This happens, for instance, when a bad reputation, once earned, cannot be restored (see also Shnabel, this volume, for a discussion of restoration opportunities), when people feel they have to lie to appear honest, and in the context of peer competition. In those situations, rather than decreasing immoral behaviour, increasing reputational concerns can ironically increase immoral behaviour.

Researchers have manipulated reputational concern in various ways. These manipulations include, among others, being observed by others, others gossiping about one's behaviour or at least having the opportunity to do so, the mere presence of others, and being observed by watching eyes. The findings show that these different ways to trigger reputational concern are not equally successful in either bringing about the desired reputational concern and/or bringing about the desired decrease in immoral behaviour. Here, we summarize the key factors that emerge from our review as influencing reputational concern and/or immoral behaviour (see also Figure 21.1).

The first factor is the observability of people's actual immoral behaviour. The different manipulations researchers have used differ in terms of the extent to which others can really observe one's behaviour. For the watching eyes manipulation, the observability of one's behaviour is obviously low: a mere picture of watching eyes does not mean that one's behaviour is actually visible to someone else. The same applies to mere presence: When others are present while one is engaging in immoral behaviour, but they have no way of actually knowing how one behaved, observability of one's behaviour is low. In the die rolling game, when others are observing one's reports of the die rolls, but not the actual numbers one rolled, observability is arguably higher than for the two aforementioned manipulations. Observability is still not perfect, though; it would be at the highest possible level in case observers would be able to see both participants' actual die rolls and their reports of these die rolls. If the observability is high, reputational concerns have an impact on behaviour, while when observability is low (as it is the case for the "watching eyes" or "mere presence" manipulation), manipulations did not impact immoral behaviour.

The second factor that emerges from our review as potentially crucial is the extent to which observations of one's immoral behaviour are consequential. Manipulations aimed to increase reputational concerns only do so effectively when information about one's behaviour can

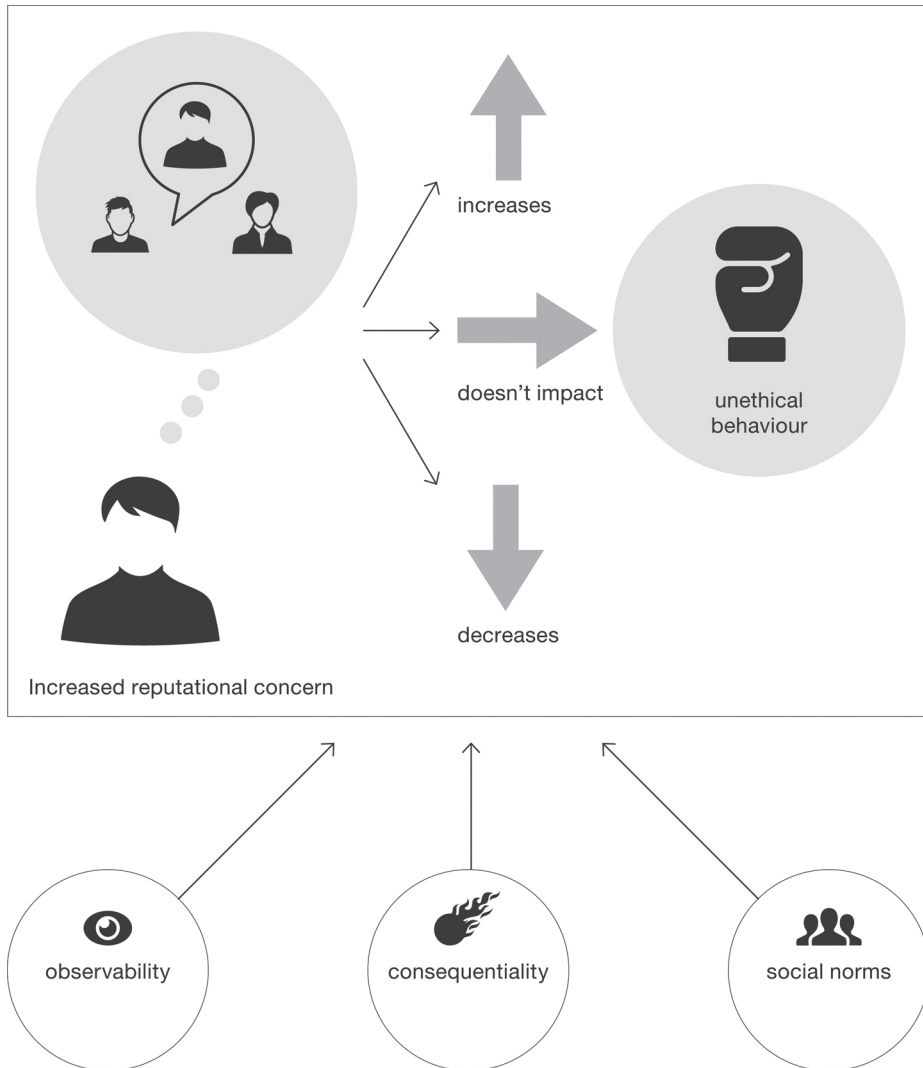


Figure 21.1 Interventions targeting reputational concerns can have positive, negative or no effect on (im)moral behaviour, depending on the observability of people’s behaviour, people’s awareness of the consequences of their behaviour, and what behaviour is prescribed by social norms.

potentially reach others that could impose consequences on the person deciding whether or not to behave immorally. When someone has the certainty that information about their immoral behaviour *cannot* reach others who could impose consequences on them, knowing that one is observed is unlikely to trigger reputational concerns.

The third factor that emerged from our review is the (implicit) social norm that is activated by a reputational concern manipulation or policy. Social norms are defined as principles or rules that are commonly accepted within a group and guide and/or constrain behaviour (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). The research demonstrating counter-productive effects of interventions that increased reputational

concern we reviewed, showed that measures taken to increase reputational concern make people engage in those behaviours that they believe will make them “look good” in the eyes of observers. When there is an implicit norm of competition in the group, making behaviour visible to group members may make them behave more competitively rather than more prosocially or more honestly (Bäker & Mechtel, 2019; Steinel et al. 2010).

In summary, our review sheds light on three crucial factors that influence the effects of policies that target reputational concerns, namely observability, consequentiality and social norms (see Figure 21.1). These factors point to the essence of what can make reputational concerns work to reduce immoral behaviour and highlight the intragroup nature of reputational concerns. That is, in the context of a highly cohesive, small group, observability is typically high (members can observe one another’s [im]moral behaviours). Consequentiality is typically also high, in that people know that the reputational damage that immoral behaviour could cause can have severe consequences—such as social exclusion or punishment. Finally, highly cohesive small groups tend to have salient social norms with regard to moral behaviour as this is in the interest of their survival (Feldman, 1984). Together, these factors should lead people to alter their behaviour in a way that is congruent with the group norms, and thus decrease the chance they would engage in immoral behaviour, in order to avoid being excluded from the group or punished by group members.

The factors explaining whether reputational concerns decrease immoral behaviour that emerged from our review fit theories about social norms (Bicchieri, 2016). In this chapter, we highlight an important, yet often overlooked, route for enforcing social norms: via reputational concerns. We highlight two factors, namely observability and consequentiality, that help explain when reputational concerns help to enforce social norms. Importantly, however, whether by increasing reputational concerns, one increases or decreases immoral behaviour, depends on the third factor that we identified: the salient social norm. If the underlying social norm prescribes engaging in moral behaviour, such as prescribing cooperation among group members, increasing observability and consequentiality will increase cooperation (see e.g., Wu et al., 2015). However social norms can also encourage immoral behaviour, by setting a norm to compete with others. In these settings, increasing observability and consequentiality will lead to the enforcement of norms that foster immoral rather than moral behaviour (see e.g., Abbink et al., 2017; Steinel et al. 2010).

With regards to practical implications of the findings discussed here and suggestions for future research, based on the research findings we reviewed, we argue that the higher interventions that aim to increase reputational concerns score on the observability they afford, the more effective they will be in increasing reputational concerns. Future studies should empirically test this idea. In many studies, researchers so far only assumed that their manipulations influenced reputational concerns, but did not actually measure reputational concerns. Comparing the effects of different manipulations on reputational concerns as measured by self-report scales (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Wu et al., 2016) could help to pinpoint which ones actually increase reputational concerns and which ones do not. Insights derived from such studies will also be helpful for designing practical interventions that actually do what they are intended to do: increase reputational concern.

We also argue that the more interventions that are implemented to increase reputational concerns include the possibility that observations of one’s current actions have future consequences, the more effective they should be in increasing reputational concern. There is one important caveat here: When the consequences of immoral behaviour are irreversible, once implemented, they will no longer decrease immoral behaviour. The study by Coricelli et al. (2014) showed that participants

who were exposed for lying and not pardoned and reintegrated into the group, lied more rather than less over time. Therefore, in order to effectively stimulate positive consequences of reputational concern, policies have to make clear that moral transgressions are consequential, but transgressors have to be given the opportunity to redeem themselves and repair their reputation accordingly. Future studies could shed light on the ideal balance between severity of consequences and possibilities to repair one's reputation that is most successful in bringing about reputational concerns and moral behaviour. Specifically, studies might examine which combinations of consequences/punishment and reintegration are most successful in decreasing immoral behaviour by examining different forms of consequences (direct confrontation, gossip, ostracism, public exposure) and different time periods during which such consequences are effective. Obviously, insights generated by such studies are also directly relevant for designing practical interventions aimed to decrease immoral behaviour.

Furthermore, we argue that manipulations used in research, or policies implemented to increase reputational concern, are effective in decreasing immoral behaviour to the extent that the person deciding to engage in immoral behaviour perceives moral behaviour as the norm their group members want them to adhere to. When group norms implicitly or explicitly prescribe immoral behaviour, manipulations or policies that increase reputational concern may increase rather than decrease immoral behaviour. Future studies could test this by investigating the interactive effects of the social norm (such as being cooperative vs. competitive) and reputational concerns on moral behaviour. Policy makers can benefit from the insights generated by such research. For them, it is important to be aware of the social norms that are salient to people when interventions aimed to increase reputational concern are implemented. Only when these norms prescribe prosocial and honest behaviour, the intervention will solicit the desired effect.

Finally, a potentially important factor that we have not highlighted yet is group identification/belonging. If a specific individual does not need/want to belong to, or doesn't identify with, a specific group, then increasing reputational concerns is likely to have little effect on behaviour, as the individual does not fear to be excluded from the group. Future studies could test and extend this idea.

Conclusion

To decrease immoral behaviour and the societal costs it entails, many policies seek to make use of the fact that people care about what their group members think about them. As such, these policies are aimed at enhancing people's reputational concerns. This chapter revealed that some of these policies are more successful than others, and highlights observability, consequentiality and salient norms as three crucial factors that affect the extent to which reputational concern manipulations or policies are likely to trigger reputational concerns and decrease immoral behaviour. We hope these insights and the future research directions outlined above will stimulate further research on this important topic, so that humans' fundamental desire to uphold their reputation can be employed for the good of society.

Contributor statement

A.S.N. wrote a draft of this manuscript and B.B., M.T.M.D. and G.A.v.K. provided comments and improved the manuscript. A.S.N. and B.B. implemented the revision. All authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Notes

- 1 Graham et al. (2013) provide an overview of the adaptive challenges these five moral foundations provide a response to, as well as their triggers in our evolutionary history, their modern-day triggers, emotions that are related to each of them, as well as related relevant virtues. This overview falls outside the scope of this chapter but we refer readers to the table Graham et al. (2013) provide on page 68 and their discussion on pages 67–71.
- 2 It is important to note that in Wu et al.'s (2016) experiment, participants interacted anonymously, online. Thus, in both conditions, whether gossip was sent to a future interaction partner or not, participants were completely anonymous, and therefore anonymity cannot explain the findings.

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