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Can We Identify with a Nation Low in Morality? The Heavy Weight of (Im)Morality in International Comparison

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RUNNING HEAD: Identification with a Low Morality Nation

**Can We Identify with a Nation Low in Morality? The Heavy Weight of (Im) Morality in  
International Comparison**

Silvia Moscatelli<sup>1</sup>, Michela Menegatti<sup>1</sup>, Flavia Albarello<sup>1</sup>, Felicia Pratto<sup>2</sup>, and Monica Rubini<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Bologna

<sup>2</sup>University of Connecticut

Corresponding author: Silvia Moscatelli, Dipartimento di Psicologia, Università di Bologna. Viale  
Berti Pichat 5, 40126 Bologna, Italy.

**Abstract**

Research has shown that the perceived morality of the ingroup is a primary source of group pride and ingroup identification. The present research examined whether this is true even when a group has a poor reputation for morality in terms of dishonesty and corruption, such as in the case of Italians. To address this issue, two studies analyzed the role of the three fundamental dimensions of social judgment – morality, competence and sociability – in predicting Italians' identification with their nation when the salience of social comparison and the status of the comparison outgroup were varied. Findings showed that perceived morality predicted ingroup identification when participants did not engage in social comparison. Under salient social comparison, individuals based group identification on other dimensions: Perceived sociability was the main predictor of identification when respondents compared with a higher status outgroup (Germans; Study 1;  $N = 109$ ), whereas perceived competence was the main predictor of identification when participants compared with a lower status outgroup (Romanians; Study 2;  $N = 121$ ). Overall, findings showed compensation processes in social identification: When social comparison is salient, members of a low morality group base identification on the dimension which allows positive differentiation from the outgroup.

**Keywords:** Morality, Competence, Sociability, Ingroup Identification, Social Comparison

## **Can We Identify with a Nation Low in Morality? The Heavy Weight of (Im) Morality in International Comparison**

Scandals concerning political and economic establishments or leaders engaging in corruption, bribery, and illicit deals receive extensive media attention. Such publicity might contribute to confirm an international reputation for low trustworthiness for the whole nations involved. On the domestic front, individuals may lose trust in their leaders as well as in their fellow citizens, and find it hard to maintain a satisfying identity as members of their own nation.

Although political and economic scandals have occurred in several nations in previous decades, among Western countries Italy seems to experience repeated, major corruption. Massive cases of political corruption such as *Tangentopoli* ("Bribesville") in the 1990s, or the trials for tax-fraud involving personalities such as the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, are internationally known. Surveys have revealed that other European countries consider Italy to be among the most corrupt nations in Europe (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2013). Italians themselves share such a negative view of their country and judge Italians as more dishonest, corrupt and slyer than other Europeans (Giannini, Gori, & Dinoto, 2010; Transparency International, 2014). Italy is, then, an ideal place to study how people might maintain positive ingroup identification when their group has a reputation (which Italians themselves hold) as being fundamentally immoral.

According to a recent socio-psychological model of social judgment (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), ingroup morality – compared to other fundamental dimensions of group judgment such as competence and sociability – is the primary source of individuals' feelings of pride in their group. As such, maintaining positive ingroup identification poses particular challenges for members of groups that are perceived as relatively low in morality in their proximal social context (as in the case of Italy in Europe). Thus, the purpose of the present research is to examine how individuals maintain their identification with an ingroup that has a poor reputation for morality, conceived here as low social correctness and honesty (Leach et al., 2007). Would members of these groups still

base their identification on morality, or would other dimensions be “switched off” or “switched on” to sustain positive ingroup identification?

To answer these questions, it is important to consider that the perception of one’s own group is closely connected to the social context in which it is grounded (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Hayes, 1992; Hopkins, Regan, & Abell, 1997). As claimed by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and social categorization theory (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994), group evaluations are inherently comparative. Own-group perceptions are influenced by the constraints deriving from social comparison with relevant outgroups and might depend on outgroup characteristics: For instance, it has been found that a group’s perceived competence is related to the social status of the comparison outgroup (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Research has shown, however, that European nations maintain reciprocal stereotypes referring to efficiency, warmth, emotionality, morality (Linssen & Hagendoorn, 1994; Phalet & Poppe, 1994), and that such stereotypes are based on people’s understandings of economic development, intergroup relations, cultural and religious values (Durante et al., 2012; Linssen & Hagendoorn, 1994; Pennebaker, Rime, & Blankenship, 1996). Thus, the perception of Italy as relatively low in morality, as well as the stereotypic representations of other European countries (e.g., “Germans are industrious”; Krueger, 1996), are deeply-rooted in Europe and are likely to be relatively persistent in such a context (for a similar reasoning, see Bennet & Sani, 2008).

In order to clarify how Italians cope with their reputation for corruption and dishonesty, we analyzed the relative weight of morality and the other fundamental evaluation dimensions – i.e., competence and sociability (Leach et al., 2007) – in predicting ingroup identification. We also examined how identification processes are influenced by variations in the comparative context in terms of salience of comparison (e.g., Brown & Haeger, 1999) and type of comparison outgroups (Tajfel, 1981). We conducted two experiments involving two outgroups that are quite prominent in the Italian political context (Albarello & Rubini, 2011): Germans (Study 1), who are often mentioned in Italian news because of their strong influence on European economic policy, and who

are perceived as higher status (and higher morality) group, and Romanians (Study 2), who are target of negative stereotypes, are judged as low in morality, and represent a lower status group.

### **The Primacy of Morality in Ingroup Evaluations**

Research on social judgment has emphasized that individuals ground their evaluation of groups on a number of key dimensions (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). According to Leach et al. (2007) groups are judged along the three basic dimensions of (a) competence, which refers to their ability to pursue intentions and goals, (b) morality, seen as perceived correctness of social behavior, honesty and trustworthiness, and (c) sociability, the ability or intention to have good relationships with others.

Several studies have shown that morality, sociability, and competence make unique contributions to social judgment. Among them, morality is primary in forming impressions of individuals and groups (Brambilla, Sacchi, Menegatti, & Moscatelli, 2016; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Perceived morality predicts a positive global impression of groups over their competence or sociability, whereas low morality outgroups are seen as threatening to the safety of one's own group (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013).

Moreover, people are prouder of moral ingroups than of successful or sociable ingroups (Leach et al., 2007) and are motivated to maintain the ingroup image as moral. For instance, when group members are reminded of their ingroup's severe misbehavior (e.g., atrocities committed by the ingroup in the past), they can react defensively by minimizing the emotional suffering of the victims (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010), or they can show a shift in the moral principles they refer to (Leidner & Castano, 2012). Moreover, people tend to resolve the uneasiness associated with ingroup violation to personal beliefs (e.g., U.S. bombing on civilians during the Iraq war) by engaging in group-affirmation and social identity enhancement strategies (such as outgroup derogation), rather than by addressing the misdeeds of the ingroup (Glasford, Dovidio, & Pratto,

2009). However, it remains to be understood how individuals can maintain identification when the ingroup as a whole is perceived to have low social correctness and honesty.

### **The Role of Contextual Factors: Social Comparison and Group Status**

To address how groups that have a reputation for low morality grapple with ingroup identification, we turned to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which holds that individuals are motivated to gain a positive sense of their social identity by emphasizing the aspects in which their ingroup can outdo the outgroup. According to the theory, when the ingroup is judged as inferior to the outgroup on some valued dimensions – as in the case of disadvantaged, low status groups – and individual mobility to more positively evaluated groups is not possible, group members may engage in social creativity strategies, that is, they might find alternative ways to improve the evaluation of the ingroup (Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993).

In order to cope with negative outcomes of social comparison, members of low status groups can adopt various strategies: They might compare with a lower status (instead of a higher status) outgroup (e.g., Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001), decrease the importance of the attribute on which the outgroup superiority is based (e.g., Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999), or re-evaluate the negative attributes of the ingroup (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). Group members can even show a compensation bias (Tajfel, 1981), that is, they can compensate for a negative comparison outcome by emphasizing the importance of the dimensions where they can reach a positive ingroup distinctiveness (Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001).

Notably, although social identity theory assumes that a positive ingroup evaluation can be achieved on any ingroup attribute (e.g., Oakes et al., 1994), most research has taken for granted that relative group status is based on competence (e.g., Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001). This suggests that alternative ingroup characteristics (e. g., artistry) are more likely to come into play as dimensions of positive evaluation when ingroup members engage in comparison with more successful outgroups (Lalonde, 1992).

Research on group stereotypes may help us understand the dimensions in which groups can compensate for a devalued identity. The stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002), according to which group perception is based on the basic dimensions of competence and warmth (which in turn encompasses sociability and morality from the Leach et al., 2007 model), has underlined the occurrence of a compensatory relationship between these two dimensions. Specifically, groups with higher social status are attributed higher competence, but lower warmth, than lower status groups, that are seen as warm but little competent (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005).

As mentioned, most studies in the stereotype content model framework (e.g., Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Demoulin, & Judd, 2008), as well as studies on social creativity (e.g., Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001), have shown that groups perceived as relatively lower in a certain characteristic are often rated as higher on another dimension. However, previous studies have not directly considered how adopting creativity strategies contributes to positive social identity (focusing for instance on the influence of extant ingroup identification on members' reactions to ingroup devaluation; Mummendey et al., 1999) especially in international comparison. Taking a more dynamic perspective, this research examines how members of a morally-devalued national group maintain their ingroup identification by relying on alternative dimensions of evaluation, and how this process is influenced by the salience of social comparison and the features of the national outgroup they compare with.

### **Research Overview and Hypotheses**

To address the dynamics of coping with a reputation for low morality, we conducted two experiments involving two possible targets of social comparison for Italians: Germans and Romanians. In the Italian context, these outgroups are perceived as having different social status and morality. Germans are widely considered as a higher status and economically successful group, and are also judged as highly moral (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2012, 2013). Romanians are seen as a lower status country and are stereotyped as “thieves” and sly (i.e., low in morality; Albarello & Rubini, 2011). As regards Italians, they are stereotyped – and consider themselves – as more

friendly, chatty, and hospitable than members of other European countries (Cuddy et al., 2009; Giannini et al., 2010). They are also generally seen as efficient and industrious, although to a lower extent than Germans (Cuddy et al., 2009; Krueger, 1996). Thus, despite their reputation for low morality in the European context, Italians do have other dimensions on which they can positively compare.

In order to manipulate the salience of social comparison, in both experiments Italian respondents evaluated the ingroup and reported ingroup identification before knowing they had to rate an outgroup (absent social comparison), or after having rated the outgroup (salient social comparison; similar to Hopkins et al., 1997 manipulation). In line with research on the primacy of morality within groups (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012), we expected that morality would be the main predictor of ingroup identification as long as social comparison was absent. However, when respondents engage in social comparison, they should be more aware of the ingroup's low morality and, as a consequence, base their identification on alternative dimensions. Therefore we expected that under conditions of salient social comparison, respondents would rely on the dimension(s) which allow them to positively distinguish Italians from the comparison outgroup.

### **Preliminary Studies**

Although the comparison outgroups were chosen on the basis of previous findings collected in Italy by Albarello, Rubini and Palmonari (2009), we carried out two preliminary studies to ensure that in the period of data collection (spring 2013) Germans and Romanians were still perceived as having, respectively, higher status and lower status than Italians. In Preliminary Study 1, 23 Italian university students (75% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.25$ ,  $SD = 2.83$ ) rated the extent to which Italians/Germans (in counter-balanced order) had social prestige, had reached economic success, and had reached a high level of education (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). A paired-sample comparison on the averaged perceived status scores ( $\alpha_{\text{Italians}} = .71$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Germans}} = .62$ ) confirmed that Italians were attributed lower social status ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than Germans ( $M = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ),  $t(31) = 8.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .778$ . In Preliminary Study 2, 29 Italian university students (65.5%

females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.66$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) rated the social status of Italians ( $\alpha = .70$ ) and Romanians ( $\alpha = .70$ ). Findings demonstrated that Italians were attributed higher status ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) than Romanians ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ),  $t(28) = 9.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .742$ . In both studies, the order of group presentation did not affect the results.

### Study 1

Study 1 tested how particular dimensions come to be important for identification when individuals compare with a high status outgroup. As mentioned, Germans are generally assigned high status, and are depicted as highly efficient and hardworking (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2009). They are also seen as cold but highly trustworthy (Cuddy et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2012). Accordingly, we expected that perceived ingroup morality would be the main predictor of identification when respondents did not engage in social comparison, but would show lower or no association with identification when social comparison with the reputedly honest Germans was salient (*morality hypothesis*). We also expected that perceived competence might be associated to ingroup identification when participants did not engage in social comparison. However, given the stereotypical representation of Germans as more efficient and more competent than Italians (Cuddy et al., 2009), we predicted that competence would show lower or no association with identification in the salient comparison condition (*competence hypothesis*). Perceived sociability, too, might be related to identification in the absent comparison condition. However, we predicted that the relationship between sociability – which is plausibly a strength for Italians in comparison with Germans – and ingroup identification would be stronger under salient social comparison (*sociability hypothesis*). To test the hypotheses, we first estimated a model in the total sample whereby perceived morality, competence and sociability were regressed on identification. Then, we used a multi-group approach to examine differences in each path coefficient as a function of salient vs. absent social comparison.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants were 115 students of Psychology (46%) and Political Science (54%) in a University in northern Italy. Six students were excluded as they came from other countries. The final sample was composed of 109 participants (64.2% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.43$ ,  $SD = 3.12$ ), all of Italian nationality.

**Procedure and measures.** Participants filled in a questionnaire at the end of classes, on a voluntary basis. In the absent comparison condition, they rated Italians on morality, competence, sociability, and filled the identification and the perceived status measures before knowing that they had to rate another group. They were then asked to evaluate Germans on morality, competence and sociability. In the salient comparison condition, participants rated Germans before completing all measures concerning Italians.

Perceived morality, competence, and sociability of Italians and Germans were assessed through a list of 9 positive traits outlined in a pretest<sup>1</sup>. Participants rated how much they considered Italians and Germans to be honest, sincere, trustworthy (morality;  $\alpha_{\text{Italians}} = .82$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Germans}} = .91$ ), capable, competent, intelligent (competence;  $\alpha_{\text{Italians}} = .74$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Germans}} = .81$ ), and friendly, kind, sociable (sociability;  $\alpha_{\text{Italians}} = .82$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Italians}} = .79$ )<sup>2</sup>. Identification with Italians was measured by means of three items: “I am proud of being Italian”; “Being Italian is very important to me”; “I feel good about Italians” ( $\alpha = .88$ ). For all measures, the response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Perceived status of ingroup ( $\alpha = .63$ ) and outgroup ( $\alpha = .75$ ) was measured as in Preliminary study 1. Afterwards, participants reported their political orientation (1 = *Left-wing*; 5 = *Right-wing*)<sup>3</sup>. As a manipulation check, participants indicated the two nations they had been asked to rate. All participants reported the nations correctly. Participants were then debriefed, thanked, and released.

## Results

**Social status.** A 2 (social comparison: absent, salient)  $\times$  2 (target group: Italians, Germans; *within participants*) ANOVA on perceived social status confirmed that Germans were attributed higher status ( $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than Italians ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $F(1, 107) = 307.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .742$ . No other effects were significant,  $F_s < 2.73$ ,  $p_s > .011$ .

**Group evaluation and ingroup identification.** We checked whether ratings of Italians and Germans were in line with the assumed stereotypic representations of the two groups. To this aim, ratings were submitted to a 2 (social comparison)  $\times$  2 (target group)  $\times$  3 (evaluative dimension: morality, competence, sociability) ANOVA, with the last two factors as within participants. Besides showing a main effect of dimension,  $F(2, 106) = 74.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .585$ , and a significant comparison condition  $\times$  dimension interaction,  $F(2, 106) = 3.40, p = .037, \eta^2 = .060$ , the analysis revealed a more interesting target group  $\times$  dimension interaction,  $F(2, 106) = 139.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .724$ . Italians were seen as more sociable ( $M = 5.24, SD = 1.01$ ) than competent ( $M = 4.53, SD = 0.90$ ) or moral ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.05$ ),  $ps < .001$ , and more competent than moral,  $p < .001$ . Germans were rated as more competent ( $M = 5.40, SD = 0.96$ ) than moral ( $M = 4.38, SD = 0.95$ ) or sociable ( $M = 3.27, SD = 1.04$ ), and more moral than sociable, all  $ps < .001$ . As a result, Italians were rated as less moral, less competent, and more sociable than Germans,  $ps < .001$ .

The manipulation of social comparison affected group evaluations to a small extent. The comparison condition  $\times$  target group interaction was significant,  $F(1, 107) = 6.77, p = .011, \eta^2 = .059$ . Ratings of Italians in the absent comparison condition were overall higher ( $M = 4.69, SD = 0.63$ ) than in the salient comparison condition ( $M = 4.22, SD = 0.72$ ),  $p = .013$ , whereas ratings of Germans did not differ between conditions,  $p = .403$ . Accordingly, in the absent comparison condition ratings of Italians were higher than those of Germans,  $p = .003$ , whereas ratings of the two groups did not differ in the salient comparison condition,  $p = .543$ . The three-way interaction was not significant,  $F(2, 106) = 1.34, p = .268$ . Thus, the patterns of evaluation were in line with the representations of the two groups reported in previous research (Giannini et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2012), and were quite stable across social comparison conditions. Finally, social comparison did not affect ingroup identification ( $M_{\text{absent comparison}} = 4.27, SD = 1.46$ ;  $M_{\text{salient comparison}} = 4.28, SD = 1.67$ ),  $F(1, 107) = 0.01, p = .981$ .

**Italians' perceived morality, competence, and sociability as predictors of ingroup identification.** Table 1 shows the correlations among ratings of morality, competence, sociability of

Italians and ingroup identification. To test our hypotheses, we employed AMOS 21 software. First, we estimated a model (with the maximum likelihood method) in the total sample. The model consisted of four latent variables, all defined by three observed indicators. Perceived morality, competence and sociability (i.e., independent variables) were allowed to correlate with each other and were regressed on identification (i.e., dependent variable). We tested the model fit by means of various indices: the  $\chi^2/df$  ratio, that should be lower than 3 (Kline, 2011), the *Comparative Fit Index* (CFI), that should exceed .90 to be considered acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and the *Root Mean Square Error of Approximation* (RMSEA), that should be lower than .08 (Kline, 2011).

The model fit the data very well:  $\chi^2 = 48.812$ ,  $df = 28$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.017$ ,  $CFI = .999$ ,  $RMSEA = .013$ . Ingroup identification was predicted by both morality,  $\beta = .292$ ,  $p = .020$ , and sociability,  $\beta = .397$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas it was not related to competence,  $\beta = .003$ ,  $p = .979$ . Although we also tested the alternative model with identification as a predictor of morality, competence and sociability ratings, the fit indicators were weaker than those of the main model,  $\chi^2 = 81.070$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.590$ ,  $CFI = .953$ ,  $RMSEA = .070$ . The two models were compared using Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC; Keith, 2006) index. Since the model with the smallest AIC value is the best fitting one (with a difference of 10 points or more considered as strong; Raftery, 1995), the higher quality of the main model,  $AIC = 108.812$  compared to the alternative model,  $AIC = 135.070$ , was supported.

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 Insert Table 1  
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In order to examine whether the path coefficients differed as a function of the comparison condition, we used a multi-group approach. Because we had specific hypotheses about the path coefficients that should differ between conditions, we compared a model in which the regression coefficients were free to vary across conditions (i.e., unconstrained model), with three models

where each regression coefficient was fixed equal: Model 1 where the path coefficient between morality and ingroup identification was fixed, Model 2 where the path coefficient between competence and ingroup identification was fixed, and Model 3 where the path coefficient between sociability and ingroup identification was fixed.

Considering Model 1, an inspection of path coefficients (Figure 1) revealed that consistent with the morality hypothesis, perceived morality was a strong predictor of ingroup identification in the absent comparison condition, whereas it did not predict identification in the salient comparison condition. Accordingly, Model 1 was significantly different from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.764$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\Delta CFI = 0.008$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = 0.003$ .

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 Insert Figure 1  
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In line with the competence hypothesis, competence was not significantly related to identification either in the absent or in the salient comparison condition. Model 2 did not significantly differ from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 0.138$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .710$ ,  $\Delta CFI = 0.002$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = -0.002$ . Supporting the sociability hypothesis, sociability was a significant predictor of ingroup identification in the salient comparison condition, but was not associated with identification in the absent comparison condition. Model 3 was significantly different from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 7.165$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\Delta GFI = -.007$ ,  $\Delta CFI = -.010$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = .004$ .

## Discussion

Overall, these findings highlight the interplay of different evaluation dimensions in predicting Italians' identification with the ingroup. Consistent with previous research (Giannini et al., 2010; Krueger, 1996; Pew Research Center, 2012), respondents judged Germans as more competent and moral, but less sociable, than Italians. Although ratings of Italians were overall lower when participants engaged in social comparison, the patterns of group evaluations were quite

stable across comparison conditions. Thus, participants seemed to be well aware of the long-standing representations of the two nations. This might explain why they did not compensate for their ingroup's disadvantage on the dimensions available – at least at the mean level.

However, the salience of social comparison provoked a change in the predictors of ingroup identification. When the comparison with Germans was salient, respondents based ingroup identification on the only dimension that allows them to claim ingroup superiority over the outgroup, that is, sociability. Conversely, when respondents did not engage in social comparison, morality was the main predictor of identification, a finding in line with the notion of the primacy of morality in group evaluation (Leach et al., 2007).

Finally, it should be noted that respondents recognized Germans' higher competence, but did not see competence as a weak point for Italians in absolute terms (ratings of ingroup competence were higher than the mid-point of the scale in both comparison conditions,  $t_s > 2.38$ ,  $p_s < .021$ ). Since competence is associated with high status (Fiske et al., 2002), we argued that competence might represent a more useful and more gratifying basis of ingroup identification than sociability in the comparison with a lower status outgroup. This hypothesis was tested in Study 2.

## Study 2

Italians consider Romania as the least hardworking country in Europe (Pew Research Center, 2012), and Romanians as having lower status than themselves (Albarello & Rubini, 2011). They also see Romanians as delinquent, dishonest, and not very warm (Albarello, Foroni, Hewstone, & Rubini, 2017). It should be noted, however, that Italy and Romania scored equally on the Corruption Perceptions Index (2014). Moreover, Italians consider their nation as the most corrupt in Europe (Pew Research Center, 2012). Given Italians' deeply-rooted self-representation, it seems unlikely that a salient comparison with Romanians would result in a substantial change in the perception of ingroup morality. If anything, comparing with another European country – albeit considered as relatively low in morality – might remind Italians of their own reputation for corruption in the European context. Thus, as in Study 1 we assumed that perceived morality would

predict identification with Italians in absent comparison condition, but would show lower association with identification in the salient comparison condition (*morality hypothesis*).

In the comparison with Romanians, Italians can claim their higher sociability but also their higher competence. Accordingly, we reasoned that participants would rely on competence – which is the basic dimension underlying social status – to feel positively distinct from the outgroup. This reasoning is also supported by the literature on positive stereotypes (e.g., Czopp, 2008), according to which the expression of positive stereotypical beliefs can raise the awareness of the negative characteristics implied in the stereotype itself. Since sociability is a positive characteristic included in the stereotype of Italians (Giannini et al., 2010), it seems plausible that sociability would be a less satisfying dimension than competence in establishing the positivity of the ingroup over the outgroup. Accordingly, we expected that competence would show stronger association to ingroup identification in the salient comparison than in the absent comparison condition (*competence hypothesis*). Conversely, we expected that the weight of sociability in predicting ingroup identification would show no increase in salient vs. absent comparison condition (*sociability hypothesis*).

## Method

**Participants.** One-hundred and twenty-three students in Psychology (68.6%) and Political Science (31.4%) in a University in northern Italy volunteered to fill in the questionnaire during classes. Two were excluded as they came from other countries. The final sample was of 121 Italian respondents (69% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.01$ ,  $SD = 4.07$ ).

**Procedure and measures.** Procedure and measures were the same of Study 1. Respondents rated the ingroup on morality ( $\alpha = .80$ ), competence ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and sociability ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and reported ingroup identification ( $\alpha = .86$ ), before knowing that they had to rate Romanians (absent social comparison) or after (salient social comparison) rating the outgroup on morality ( $\alpha = .76$ ), competence ( $\alpha = .70$ ), and sociability ( $\alpha = .80$ )<sup>4</sup>. Participants also rated the status of Italians ( $\alpha =$

.63) and Romanians ( $\alpha = .75$ ). All participants indicated correctly at the end of the questionnaire the groups they had been asked to rate.

## Results and Discussion

**Social status.** A 2 (social comparison)  $\times$  2 (target group) ANOVA confirmed that Italians were attributed higher status ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than Romanians ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ),  $F(1, 119) = 132.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .526$ . No other effects were significant,  $F_s < 1.67$ ,  $p_s > .198$ .

**Group evaluations and ingroup identification.** A 2 (social comparison)  $\times$  2 (target group)  $\times$  3 (evaluative dimension) ANOVA on ratings of Italians and Romanians was conducted in order to verify whether ratings were in line with the stereotypic representations of the two groups. The analysis showed a main effect of dimension,  $F(1, 119) = 59.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .502$ , and a main effect of the target group,  $F(1, 119) = 38.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .245$ , due to Italians' overall higher ratings ( $M_{\text{Italians}} = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ;  $M_{\text{Romanians}} = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The social comparison  $\times$  dimension interaction was also significant,  $F(2, 118) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\eta^2 = .056$ .

Interestingly, the significant target group  $\times$  dimension interaction,  $F(2, 118) = 16.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .217$ , revealed that Italians were rated as more sociable ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than competent ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) or moral ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ),  $p_s < .001$ , and more competent than moral,  $p < .001$ . Romanians were rated as less moral ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than competent ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) or sociable ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $p < .001$ . Ratings of competence and sociability did not differ,  $p = .285$ . Italians obtained higher ratings than Romanians on all three dimensions,  $p_s < .001$ . The three-way interaction was not significant,  $F(2, 118) = 1.42$ ,  $p = .246$ . Thus, evaluations were in line with the stereotypic representations of the two nations, and were quite stable across comparison conditions. Finally, the comparison manipulation did not affect ingroup identification ( $M_{\text{no comparison}} = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $M_{\text{salient comparison}} = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $F(1, 119) = 0.59$ ,  $p = .444$ .

**Italians' perceived morality, competence, and sociability as predictors of ingroup identification.** Table 2 shows the correlations among ratings of Italians and ingroup identification.

As in Study 1, we first tested a model in the total sample. The model fit the data well:  $\chi^2 = 69.643$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p = .440$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.451$ ,  $CFI = .967$ ,  $RMSEA = .061$ ,  $AIC = 129.643$ . Identification was predicted by morality,  $\beta = .292$ ,  $p = .013$ , and competence,  $\beta = .403$ ,  $p = .002$ , whereas it was not related to sociability,  $\beta = .164$ ,  $p = .138$ . The alternative model with ingroup identification as a predictor fit the data less well than the main model,  $\chi^2 = 81.070$ ,  $df = 51$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.590$ ,  $CFI = .953$ ,  $RMSEA = .070$ ,  $AIC = 135.070$ .

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 Insert Table 2  
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In order to test the hypotheses, we used a multi-group approach. Supporting the morality hypothesis, morality was the main predictor of ingroup identification in the absent comparison condition, whereas it was not related to the dependent variable in the salient comparison condition (Figure 2). Accordingly, Model 1 was significantly different from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 3.905$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .048$ ,  $\Delta GFI = -0.005$ ,  $\Delta CFI = -0.006$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = 0.003$ . Competence was not related to the dependent variable in the absent comparison condition. However, in line with the competence hypothesis, competence was strongly connected to identification in the salient comparison condition, with Model 2 being significantly different from the unconstrained model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 6.073$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\Delta CFI = -.007$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = .003$ .

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 Insert Figure 2  
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In neither case sociability was significantly related to identification. In line with the sociability hypothesis, Model 3 and the unconstrained model did not significantly differ,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 0.751$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .386$ ,  $\Delta CFI = 0.000$ ,  $\Delta RMSEA = 0.000$ .

## Discussion

Results of Study 2 complement those of Study 1 by supporting the idea that ingroup identification can make use of different dimensions depending on the comparison context. The patterns of evaluations were in line with the stereotypic representations of the two groups. Overall, Italians were rated more positively than Romanians on all dimensions, a finding which suggests a general ingroup bias and is coherent with the quite negative representations of Romanians in Italy (Albarello et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Italians were judged more severely on morality than on other dimensions, and a salient comparison with Romanians did not result in higher perceived morality of Italians. Additional analyses actually revealed that ingroup morality ratings slightly decreased in salient ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) vs. absent comparison condition ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(119) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .072$ ). Thus, the comparison with a lower morality outgroup did not alter respondents' representation of Italians as low in morality. Indeed, ratings of Italians' morality actually decreased slightly in salient ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) vs. absent ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) comparison condition,  $t(119) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .072$ , although in both cases Italians were judged as more moral than Romanians ( $M_{\text{salient comparison}} = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $M_{\text{absent comparison}} = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ),  $t_s > 2.02$ ,  $p_s < .048$ .

Social comparison did however affect the strength of the *association* between the three evaluative dimensions and ingroup identification. As in Study 1, morality proved to be the main dimension underlying ingroup identification when respondents did not engage in social comparison, but was not related to identification in the salient comparison condition. In this condition competence, rather than sociability, was the main predictor of ingroup identification, as competence probably provided the most useful dimension to affirm ingroup superiority over the lower status outgroup.

### General Discussion

The present studies addressed the role of morality, competence and sociability as bases for identification with one's own nation. Findings supported that morality is crucial for ingroup identification (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012), even when the ingroup is judged as low in morality, as long as members do not engage in social comparison. However, contextual constraints, such as

the salience of social comparison and the type of comparison outgroup, might lead individuals to shift to different dimensions as basis for identification. In fact, when social comparison was salient ingroup identification was no longer associated to perceived morality, but was based on the dimension along which respondents could positively distinguish the ingroup from the outgroup.

In Study 1, respondents based their identification as Italians on sociability – which is a stereotypic attribute Italians can boast of in the comparison with the higher status outgroup of Germans (e.g., Giannini et al., 2010). In Study 2, competence turned out to work as the main predictor of ingroup identification when respondents compared to Romanians, underlining that competence is a more useful dimension of positive comparison than sociability when the outgroup has a lower status. This result is in line with the importance generally assigned to social status and competence in intergroup comparison (Fiske et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Overall, the findings of this research are in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1976), as they highlight the crucial role of social comparison in identification processes. At the same time, they extend previous theorization. First, they underline the important role played by morality and sociability – in addition to a group's prestige or success – as bases of a positive social identity. More importantly, the present results show that social comparison do not necessarily affect evaluations of ingroup and outgroups, but might elicit a compensation strategy in the *processes* underlying ingroup identification, which differs from the compensating bias described in research on social creativity (Ellemers et al., 1993) and group stereotypes (e.g., Judd et al., 2005).

In fact, the manipulation of social comparison did not result in compensation at the mean level: Participants who engaged in social comparison did not emphasize the dimensions on which the ingroup could outdo the outgroup. Even a salient (vs. absent) comparison with Romanians did not produce relatively higher evaluations of Italians' morality – if anything, ratings showed the opposite tendency. As argued before, in our view this is due to the fact that respondents found it hard to escape from the long-established stereotypic representations of the national groups involved in this research. Ingroup identification, too, was stable across comparison conditions, probably

because we considered group membership for which individual objective or subjective mobility is rather difficult (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

What is evident here is that respondents in the two studies based their identification on the evaluative dimension that enabled them to positively differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup in question. In this respect, the present findings are germane to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as they highlight that group members are motivated to maintain their ingroup identification despite the unfavorable outcomes of social comparison. They also reveal that, instead of varying the explicit evaluation of different dimensions or decreasing ingroup identification, group members can adopt the more dynamic *stratagem* of shifting the bases for ingroup identification. This is in our view the most novel finding of this research: We were able to point out how compensation, rather than implying variations in the mean levels of evaluations along different dimensions, resulted in a more subtle yet effective strategy based on changes in the relative strength of association between such different comparison dimensions and ingroup identification.

### **Limits and Future Research**

Although the focus on real groups is a strength of this research, future studies could examine the dimensions which sustain ingroup identification in experimental settings where morality, competence and sociability of ingroup and outgroups can be experimentally manipulated. Future research could also investigate whether compensation processes like those observed in this study are used to improve one's group image at the eyes of other countries. In this respect, the mass-media often highlight how, in recent years, Italy has been playing a leading role in helping refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. It is possible that Italians have been trying to cope with their reputation for dishonesty by relying on different facets of morality which were not considered in this research (e.g., care; Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Finally, it would be interesting to examine how a compensation strategy, as highlighted in this research, might affect social action (cf. Becker, 2012). For instance, it could prevent collective

or personal actions aimed at changing the status quo (e.g., requesting for more transparency from politicians and institutions, or voting for political parties which exclude corrupted politicians).

### **Conclusions**

The present research reveals that even members of a low morality group base their ingroup identification on perceived morality...when they can! When salient social comparison makes this option impracticable, different dimensions can fuel ingroup identification. Paraphrasing Tajfel's (1981) words, social identification does not operate in a vacuum and this research highlights the crucial role of contextual constraints and social comparison in shaping social identity processes (cf. Reicher, 2004). In this vein, we believe that the present studies respond to recent claims that theoretical explanations of social behaviors should take into account the meanings associated with any social identity and the socially shared environmental constraints (Fiedler, 2004; Reicher, 2004). To conclude, it is important to underline that ingroup identification and social comparison are central to the understanding of political relationships among different countries (e.g., Huddy, 2013). If a national group is blamed for being little trustworthy, this might decrease its chances of cooperating with other nations. Thus, examining the dynamics of national identification might be informative of the extent to which a nation has the potential to establish fruitful enduring international relationships.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Thirty-three students rated a pool of 15 traits for their morality-, competence-, and sociability-relatedness (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). For morality, we selected three traits for which the score on the morality-relatedness scale was higher ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) than on the competence-relatedness scale ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ),  $t_s > 7.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , and on the sociability-relatedness scale ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t_s > 2.97$ ,  $p < .006$ . For the selected traits scores did not differ from the mid-point of the scale on the sociability- and competence-relatedness scale,  $t_s < 1.57$ ,  $p_s > .125$ , whereas they were higher than the mid-point of the scale on the morality-relatedness scale,  $t_s > 6.50$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . For competence, we selected three traits which scored higher on the competence-relatedness scale ( $M = 6.36$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) than on the morality- ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t_s > .9.89$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , and sociability-relatedness scale ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $t_s > 6.35$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . For these traits, scores were significantly lower than the mid-point of the scale on the morality- and the sociability-relatedness scale,  $t_s > -3.88$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , whereas they were higher than the mid-point of the scale on the competence-relatedness scale. The three traits considered for sociability scored higher on the sociability-relatedness scale ( $M = 6.21$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) than on the morality- ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t_s < 6.76$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , or the competence-relatedness scale ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ),  $t_s < 7.85$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . The selected traits were higher than the mid-point of the scale on the sociability-relatedness scale,  $t_s > 12.39$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , whereas they did not differ,  $t_s < 1.09$ ,  $p_s > .091$ , or were significantly lower,  $t_s > -4.03$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , than the mid-point of the scale on the morality- and the competence-relatedness scale,

<sup>2</sup>In order to confirm that morality, sociability and competence operated as distinct evaluation dimensions, using AMOS 21 we ran Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation for ratings of Italians. Since the stereotype content model claims that social judgement relies on two main dimensions rather than three (Fiske et al., 2002), we compared a three-factor model (consisting of morality, competence, and sociability) with a two-factor model, consisting of warmth (morality and sociability items loaded on the same latent

variable) and competence. The three-factor model best fitted the data as supported by the lower AIC value (Kline, 2011),  $\chi^2 = 48.812$ ,  $df = 28$ ,  $p = .068$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.017$ , CFI = .999, RMSEA = .013, AIC = 77.047, compared to the two-factor model,  $\chi^2 = 121.827$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 4.687$ , CFI = .747, RMSEA = .185, AIC = 159.857. CFA analyses on ratings of Germans revealed that the three-factor model best fitted the data,  $\chi^2 = 49.378$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.052$ , CFI = .928, RMSEA = .090, AIC = 91.378, than the two-factor model,  $\chi^2 = 111.810$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 4.300$ , CFI = .756, RMSEA = .175, AIC = 149.810.

<sup>3</sup>Political orientation was measured in order to check whether it affected ratings of ingroup or outgroup. Respondents were heterogeneous in terms of political orientation (6.4% left, 21.2% left-of-center, 33% center, 28.4% right-of-center, 11% right). Preliminary analyses showed that political orientation did not affect the dependent variables,  $F_s < 1.46$ ,  $p_s > .216$ . The same applies to Study 2 (24.8% left, 30.6% left-of-center, 20.7% center, 11.6% right-of-center, 12.3% right),  $F_s < 1.64$ ,  $p_s > .112$ . Moreover, in no cases gender had effects on the measured variables,  $F_s < 2.17$ ,  $p_s > .112$ . Thus, gender and political orientation were not further considered.

<sup>4</sup>As in Study 1, a CFA on ratings of Italians showed that a three-factor solution best fitted the data,  $\chi^2 = 44.583$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.858$ , CFI = .951, RMSEA = .085, AIC = 86.583, than a two-factor solution,  $\chi^2 = 122.687$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 4.719$ , CFI = .771, RMSEA = .176, AIC = 160.687. Similarly, with respect to ratings of Romanians the three-factor solution had better indexes,  $\chi^2 = 58.185$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.133$ , CFI = .944, RMSEA = .097, AIC = 93.198, than the two-factor solution,  $\chi^2 = 64.665$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.487$ , CFI = .921, RMSEA = .111, AIC = 102.665.

*Table 1.* Correlations among Italians' Perceived Morality, Competence, Sociability, and Ingroup Identification (Study 1)

Variables	Total sample				No comparison				Salient comparison			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Morality	1	.43***	.42***	.41***	1	.39**	.35**	.53***	1	.39**	.49***	.34*
2. Competence		1	.41***	.27**		1	.32*	.28*		1	.46***	.27*
3. Sociability			1	.48***			1	.32*			1	.57***
4. Identification				1				1				1

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Table 2.* Correlations among Italians' Perceived Morality, Competence, Sociability, and Ingroup Identification (Study 2)

Variables	Total sample				No comparison				Salient comparison			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Morality	1	.49***	.33***	.48***	1	.51***	.37**	.59***	1	.50***	.34**	.41**
2. Competence		1	.43***	.55***		1	.44*	.60***		1	.43**	.51***
3. Sociability			1	.42***			1	.51***			1	.31*
4. Identification				1				1				1

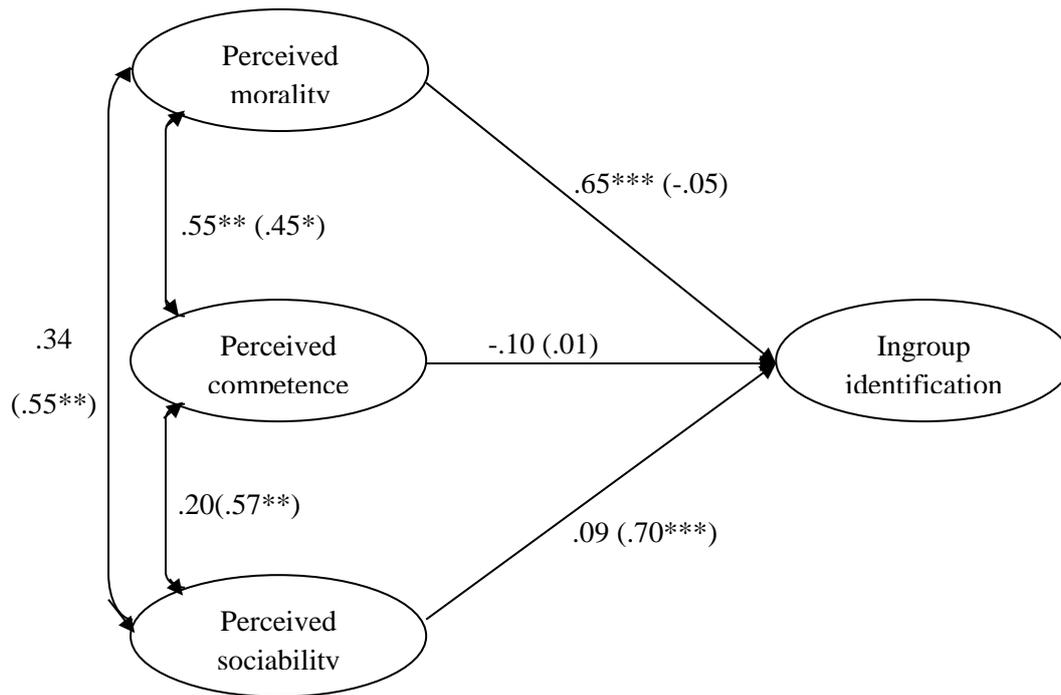
*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Figure captions

*Figure 1.* Standardized Solution of the Model Linking Perceived Morality, Perceived Competence and Perceived Sociability of Italians to Ingroup Identification in the Absent (Salient) Comparison Condition (Study 1).

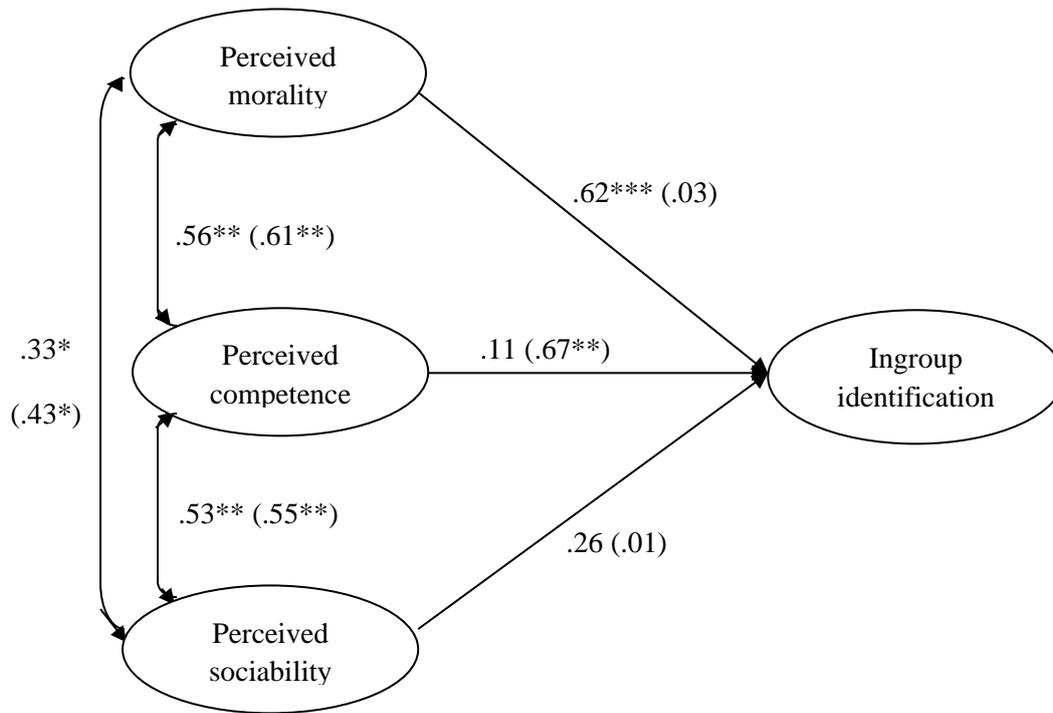
*Figure 2.* Standardized Solution of the Model Linking Perceived Morality, Perceived Competence and Perceived Sociability of Italians to Ingroup Identification in the Absent (Salient) Comparison Condition (Study 2).

Figure 1. Standardized Solution of the Model Linking Perceived Morality, Perceived Competence and Perceived Sociability of Italians to Ingroup Identification in the Absent (Salient) Comparison Condition (Study 1).



Note. Correlation and standardized regression coefficients in the salient comparison condition are in parenthesis. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Figure 2. Standardized Solution of the Model Linking Perceived Morality, Perceived Competence and Perceived Sociability of Italians to Ingroup Identification in the Absent (Salient) Comparison Condition (Study 2).



Note. Correlation and standardized regression coefficients in the salient comparison condition are in parenthesis.  $*p < .05$ .  $**p < .01$ .  $***p < .001$ .