Judgments of Businesspeople Who Shake Hands in the Era of COVID-19

Daniel L. Rosenfeld and A. Janet Tomiyama

University of California, Los Angeles

Author Note:

Daniel L. Rosenfeld and A. Janet Tomiyama, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Daniel L. Rosenfeld, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, 1285 Franz Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA. E-mail address: rosenfeld@g.ucla.edu

Abstract

Traditionally, handshaking has conferred benefits for businesspeople—signaling politeness, establishing an intention to cooperate, and promoting deal-making. How might the psychological meaning of handshaking have shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led handshaking to become touted as an imminent threat to public health? Through a highly powered, preregistered study ($N = 595$), we compared U.S. adults' perceptions of a businessperson who shakes hands vs. refrains from shaking hands during the era of COVID-19. Participants judged handshakers more negatively than non-handshakers, in terms of both global attitude toward them ($d = 2.21$) and approval of their job performance ($d = 2.66$). Mediation analyses suggest that businesspeople were judged negatively for shaking hands principally because doing so made them seem less competent and less moral. Judgments of handshaking were more negative among liberals than conservatives and among women than men. To maximize others' perceptions of them, it would behoove businesspeople to refrain from shaking hands for the foreseeable future. The months and years ahead may be an unprecedented time to rediscover the psychology of handshaking and its role in the workplace.

Keywords: COVID-19, handshaking, leadership, morality, person perception

Judgments of Businesspeople Who Shake Hands in the Era of COVID-19

A handshake can go a long way. It is often one of the first means by which two individuals greet and evaluate one another, making it not only a social ritual but also a key factor in person perception (Chaplin et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2008). The act of shaking hands signals cooperative intent, promotes deal-making, and increases compliance with requests (Guéguen, 2013; Schroeder et al., 2019), and the quality of one's handshake can affect how suitable for employment one seems (Stewart et al., 2008). Under normal circumstances, refraining from shaking hands with others would severely undermine a businessperson's image. But what happens when a pandemic emerges, and handshaking suddenly becomes touted as an imminent threat to public health?

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted widespread reconfigurations of social norms and perceptions. Because the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) spreads efficiently through human-to-human contact (He et al., 2020), the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention has issued guidelines prohibiting handshaking in the workplace (CDC, 2020). This public health recommendation starkly contrasts cherished norms within business settings, creating a moral conflict between desires to uphold traditional values and social customs on one hand and to reduce the spread of COVID-19 on the other hand. The era of the COVID-19 pandemic thus raises unprecedented questions about business ethics, moral cognition, and person perception (Rosenfeld et al., 2020). It has yielded an unfamiliar social landscape, making the question of whether handshaking now benefits or threatens a businessperson's image open for empirical clarification.

Here, we focus on three key dimensions of person perception that are likely responsive to different handshaking behaviors in the era of COVID-19: (1) competence, (2) sociability, and (3)

morality. These dimensions reflect characteristics outlined by the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002) and subsequent modifications of it, along which groups or individuals are evaluated. While the stereotype content model originally proposed a two-dimensional framework of competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2002), more recent research has empirically demonstrated utility in a nuanced conceptualization of warmth that distinguishes between two facets of it: sociability and morality (e.g., Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). This distinction may be particularly fruitful in considering attitudes toward those who engage in versus refrain from handshaking in the era of COVID-19.

In the absence of a pandemic, shaking hands over business typically signals warmth for its affirmations of both sociability (i.e., by displaying friendliness) and morality (i.e., by establishing trust, promoting social cooperation). In the presence of COVID-19, however, the moral implications of handshaking in particular are more mixed in valence, with its negative moral implications highly salient due to widespread perceived threat of the virus, continuing high prevalence, and ubiquitous media discussions of COVID-19. While shaking hands may still be seen as a sociable behavior, it now concurrently embodies (a) a threat to the health and safety of the individuals shaking hands, to those in their close social networks, and to public health more broadly, for its risk of transmitting SARS-CoV-2; and (b) a violation of widespread social norms and recommendations from government and public health agencies. It may also be deemed as (c) an impure act, for its potential to transmit pathogens between people and thus to elicit basic emotional responses of disgust. Accordingly, handshaking can readily be perceived as violating multiple core foundations underlying moral judgment and evaluation (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2009; Schein & Gray, 2018), as it may promote harm and suffering through illness, disrespect the positions of authorities, and taint the body's purity. As such, there is reason

to suspect that businesspeople who shake hands in the era of COVID-19 may be perceived as moral transgressors. For failing to follow national public health guidelines and rejecting scientific insights—thus increasing the risk of their workforce contracting SARS-CoV-2 and losing productivity—businesspeople who shake hands are also likely to be judged as less competent than are those who refrain.

In considering the effects of handshaking on person perception during the COVID-19 era, an important individual difference variable may be political ideology. Given that conservatives place greater value on tradition (Jost et al., 2009) and feel less concerned by COVID-19's health risks (Rothgerber et al., 2020) than do liberals, conservatives may impose less negative judgment on businesspeople who shake hands, or may even judge them positively for upholding tradition. Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak within the U.S., conservative political leaders have publicly affirmed tradition as a moral value and have rejected COVID-19's threat, leading to politicization of the pandemic (Rothgerber et al., 2020). For example, during a news conference in March 2020, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said, "In our line of work, you shake hands when someone wants to shake your hand . . . I expect the President will continue to do that. I'll continue to do it." (Cummings, 2020). The era of COVID-19 yields an increasingly polarized moral landscape: The very behavior that seems reprehensible to liberals may seem commendable to conservatives.

Hypotheses

Through a highly powered, preregistered study, we tested four hypotheses: (1) Participants would evaluate a businessperson who refrains from shaking hands more positively than a businessperson who shakes hands; (2) The effect of handshaking behavior on evaluation would be mediated by perceptions of the businessperson's competence and morality, such that a

non-handshaking businessperson would be rated as more competent and more moral than a handshaking businessperson (we set no directional hypothesis for the mediating effect of sociability); (3) the effect of handshaking behavior on evaluation would be moderated by political ideology, such that the effect of refraining from handshaking on evaluation would be less positive among participants who are more conservative relative to liberal. (4) We also set to explore moderation by participant gender and target gender, setting no directional hypotheses.

Method

This study's sample size, materials, procedure, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered via the Open Science Framework (OSF) (see https://osf.io/fx32g/?view_only=bf7129948d6949469659f1f5835f7282 for preregistration).

Participants

Participants were 600 adults from the United States, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). After excluding five participants who failed an attention check in the survey, 595 participants (301 men, 289 women, 5 other) between the ages of 18 and 89 ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.84$, $SD = 13.75$) were retained for analyses. This sample provided 80% power to detect small main effects of $d = 0.23$ and small mediated effects (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

Materials

Handshaking Vignette

Participants read one of four possible vignettes that described a businessperson. In a 2 x 2 design, the vignettes varied randomly along two factors: (1) the handshaking behavior (handshaking vs. non-handshaking) and (2) the gender (man vs. woman) of the target businessperson. The names "John" and "Jane" indicated target gender as man versus woman,

respectively, with each vignette presented depicting one of these names and corresponding pronouns (he/him for John, she/her for Jane).

The full text of the non-handshaking man condition appears below. In the handshaking condition, the last two sentences were replaced with the italicized text in parentheses: “John is the manager of a large division at his company. John became manager only 6 months ago but has worked in this division for the past 15 years. John has led his division reasonably well so far this year, reporting earnings that are in line with expectations. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, John has decided to refrain from shaking hands with any business partners or employees during the upcoming months. John recognizes coronavirus guidelines and will continue conducting business without shaking hands until concerns about the coronavirus are resolved. *(Despite the coronavirus pandemic, John has decided to continue shaking hands with business partners and employees during the upcoming months. John recognizes coronavirus guidelines but believes that handshaking is a core part of conducting business.)*”

Perceived Morality

Perceived morality ($\alpha = .95$) was assessed by participants rating the manager in terms of how “moral,” “honest,” “sincere,” “trustworthy,” and “well-intentioned” [he/she] is (adapted from Leach et al., 2007 and López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015). Each trait was rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

Perceived Sociability

Perceived sociability ($\alpha = .98$) was assessed by participants rating the manager in terms of how “kind,” “warm,” “friendly,” “likeable,” and “good-natured” [he/she] is (adapted from Leach et al., 2007 and López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015). Each trait was rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

Perceived Competence

Perceived competence ($\alpha = .96$) was assessed by participants rating the manager in terms of how “competent,” “confident,” “intelligent,” “skillful,” “capable,” and “efficient” [he/she] is (adapted from Leach et al., 2007 and López-Rodríguez & Zagefka, 2015). Each trait was rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

Global Attitude

Global attitude toward the manager was assessed using the following attitude thermometer item: “Please move the slider below to indicate how favorably you feel toward this manager.” Ratings ranged from 1 (extremely unfavorable) to 10 (extremely favorable).

Approval Rating

Approval rating was assessed by the following 4 items ($\alpha = .95$): “I approve of this person’s behavior as manager,” “This manager runs [his/her] division well,” “More managers should act like this person,” and “This manager is a good leader of [his/her] division.” Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Political Ideology

Political ideology was assessed by the question, “On the following scale from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative), how would you rate your political views?”

Procedure

First, participants consented to take part in this research. Then, participants indicated their gender and political ideology. Next, participants read one of the four possible handshaking vignettes, at random. Following the vignette, participants completed the measures of perceived morality, sociability, and competence. Then, participants completed the measures of global attitude and approval rating. Lastly, participants completed demographic questions. This study

protocol conformed to APA standards on the ethical treatment of participants, receiving Institutional Review Board approval and obtaining informed consent from all participants.

Results

Data and analysis scripts are available at

https://osf.io/6yp8r/?view_only=cd6f4705c0d449b0a61c1ae790082e9b.

Welch's *t*-tests revealed very large differences (all $d > 1$) in participants' perceptions of the handshaking manager vs. non-handshaking manager across all outcomes (see Table 1). As hypothesized, abstaining from handshaking led to more favorable global attitude, higher approval rating, higher perceived morality, and higher perceived competence. Participants also perceived the non-handshaking manager as more sociable than the handshaking manager, with this difference being of smaller effect relative to other outcomes, as expected.

Outcome	<u>Yes Handshake</u> (<i>n</i> = 301) Mean (SD)	<u>No Handshake</u> (<i>n</i> = 294) Mean (SD)	95% CI of Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Global Attitude	3.35 (2.68)	8.26 (1.63)	[-5.27, -4.55]	27.05***	2.21	< .001
Approval Rating	2.95 (1.53)	6.21 (0.81)	[-3.46, -3.07]	32.65***	2.66	< .001
Morality	3.81 (1.49)	6.12 (0.77)	[-2.50, -2.12]	23.62***	1.95	< .001
Sociability	4.19 (1.59)	5.67 (0.95)	[-1.69, -1.27]	13.85***	1.13	< .001
Competence	3.96 (1.57)	6.03 (0.78)	[-2.28, -1.88]	20.45***	1.67	< .001

Table 1: Perceptions of the handshaking manager vs. non-handshaking manager.

Mediation Analyses

We conducted two separate mediation analyses—using path analysis via structural equation modeling with the lavaan package in R—to test whether perceived morality, sociability, and/or competence mediated the effect of handshaking behavior on global attitude (see Figure 1)

and approval rating (see Figure 2). Results supported our hypotheses that higher perceived morality and competence would principally explain more positive judgments of the non-handshaking target compared to the handshaking target.

Figure 1: Mediation model for the effect of handshaking behavior on global attitude through perceived morality, competence, and sociability. All path coefficients are standardized (β).

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

The total indirect effect of perceived morality, sociability, and competence on global attitude was significant, $b = 2.89$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.51, 3.28]. Accounting for all three mediators together explained 59% of the total effect of handshaking behavior on attitude, reducing the effect of handshaking from $b = 4.87$ ($\beta = .80$, $p < .001$) to $b = 1.98$ ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), thus indicating partial mediation. Each mediator explained unique variance ($p < .001$), with perceived morality explaining 26% (95% CI = 20% - 31%) of the total effect, perceived competence explaining 26% (95% CI = 21% - 31%), and perceived sociability explaining 8% (95% CI = 5% - 11%).

Figure 2: Mediation model for the effect of handshaking behavior on approval rating through perceived morality, competence, and sociability. All path coefficients are standardized (β).

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

The total indirect effect of perceived morality, sociability, and competence on approval rating was significant, $b = 1.72$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.50, 1.94]. Accounting for all three mediators together explained 53% of the total effect of handshaking behavior on approval rating, reducing the effect of handshaking from $b = 3.25$ ($\beta = .83$, $p < .001$) to $b = 1.53$ ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$), thus indicating partial mediation. Perceived morality and competence each explained unique variance ($p < .001$), with perceived morality explaining 24% (95% CI = 20% - 29%) of the total effect and perceived competence explaining 30% (95% CI = 26% - 35%). Perceived sociability, however, was not a significant mediator ($p = .100$), explaining no unique variance (95% CI = -4% - 0%).

Moderation Analyses

Political Ideology

The hypothesized interaction effect between participant political ideology and target handshaking behavior on global attitude toward the target was significant, $b = -0.56$, $SE = 0.10$,

95% CI [-0.75, -0.37], $\beta = -0.30$, $t(589) = 5.77$, $p < .001$, such that the positive effect of a target's refraining from handshaking on participants' attitude toward them was smaller among conservative compared to liberals. The same interaction effect occurred for approval rating, $b = -0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.40, -0.19], $\beta = -0.26$, $t(591) = 5.50$, $p < .001$.

Post hoc Analyses. To understand this interaction effect more concretely through simple effects, we examined the effect of handshaking behavior on global attitude and approval rating through *post hoc* Welch's *t*-tests conducted separately among liberals and conservatives. Our measure of political ideology permitted categorizing participants who selected responses 1-3 as liberal ($n = 307$) and responses 5-7 as conservative ($n = 188$). Liberal participants expressed more positive global attitudes toward the non-handshaking target ($M = 8.24$, $SD = 1.53$) than the handshaking target ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 2.25$) by a difference of $d = 2.91$, $t(274.42) = 25.47$, $p < .001$, and gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking target ($M = 6.23$, $SD = 0.77$) than the handshaking target ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.31$) by a difference of $d = 3.38$, $t(274.42) = 25.47$, $p < .001$. Effects were relatively smaller among conservative participants, who expressed more positive global attitudes toward the non-handshaking target ($M = 8.21$, $SD = 1.83$) than the handshaking target ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 3.14$) by a difference of $d = 1.45$, $t(142.80) = 9.84$, $p < .001$, and gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking target ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 0.93$) than the handshaking target ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.75$) by a difference of $d = 1.87$, $t(135.57) = 12.68$, $p < .001$. Thus, while liberals and conservatives differed substantially in their evaluations of the manager's handshaking behavior, both groups nevertheless applauded the manager for refraining from shaking hands.

Gender

Participant Gender. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant interaction effect between participant gender and target handshaking behavior on global attitude toward the target, $F(1, 584) = 15.11, p < .001$, such that handshaking behavior had a larger effect on women's attitudes than men's. Whereas men expressed more positive attitudes toward the non-handshaking target ($M = 7.93, SD = 1.79$) than the handshaking target ($M = 3.71, SD = 2.68$) by a difference of $d = 1.85, t(261.92) = 16.05, p < .001$, women expressed more positive attitudes toward the non-handshaking target ($M = 8.59, SD = 1.38$) than the handshaking target ($M = 2.96, SD = 2.64$) by a larger difference of $d = 2.67, t(217.42) = 22.76, p < .001$.

A similar interaction effect emerged between participant gender and target handshaking behavior on approval rating of the target, $F(1, 586) = 14.03, p < .001$. Whereas men gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking target ($M = 6.09, SD = 0.89$) than the handshaking target ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.60$) by a difference of $d = 2.23, t(235.84) = 19.43, p < .001$, women gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking target ($M = 6.34, SD = 0.70$) than the handshaking target ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.43$) by a larger difference of $d = 3.23, t(211.77) = 27.66, p < .001$.

Target Gender. Two-way ANOVAs indicated that interaction effects between target gender and handshaking behavior were not significant on global attitude, $F(1, 589) = 0.65, p = .422$, or approval rating, $F(1, 591) = 2.37, p = .124$, suggesting that the target's gender did not affect how they were evaluated for handshaking vs. refraining from handshaking.

Participant Gender x Target Gender (*post hoc*). Through *post hoc* regression analyses, we tested for three-way interactions between handshaking condition, participant gender, and target gender on global attitude and approval ratings. The three-way interaction effect was not significant for attitude, $b = 0.48, SE = 0.73, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.95, 1.91], \beta = 0.07, t(580) = 0.66, p =$

.510, or approval rating, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.40$, 95% CI [-0.65, 0.92], $\beta = 0.03$, $t(582) = 0.33$, $p = .739$, suggesting that differences between men's and women's evaluations of a target's handshaking behavior did not vary depending on whether the target was a man or woman.

Political Ideology x Gender (post hoc)

Might differences between liberals' and conservatives' evaluations of a target's handshaking behavior vary depending on (a) whether they themselves are a man or woman or (b) whether the target is a man or woman? We explored this question by testing for three-way interaction effects between handshaking condition, political ideology, and gender (of the participant and of the target, tested separately) on global attitude and approval ratings through two sets of *post hoc* regression analyses.

Participant Gender. The three-way interaction effect concerning participant gender was not significant for global attitude, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.19$, 95% CI [-0.34, 0.41], $\beta = 0.02$, $t(580) = 0.19$, $p = .853$, or approval rating, $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.32], $\beta = 0.10$, $t(582) = 1.02$, $p = .306$, suggesting that differences between liberals' and conservatives' evaluations of a target's handshaking behavior did not vary depending on their own gender.

Target Gender. The three-way interaction effect concerning target gender was significant for both global attitude, $b = -0.47$, $SE = 0.19$, 95% CI [-0.85, -0.09], $\beta = -0.26$, $t(585) = 2.45$, $p = .014$, and approval rating, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [-0.45, -0.03], $\beta = -0.21$, $t(587) = 2.21$, $p = .028$, suggesting that differences between liberals' and conservatives' evaluations of a target's handshaking behavior did vary depending on the target's gender.

Among liberals, the two-way interaction effect between handshaking condition and target gender was not significant for attitude, $F(1, 301) = 1.20$, $p = .274$, or approval rating, $F(1, 303) =$

0.05, $p = .818$, suggesting that liberals' evaluations of the target for handshaking vs. refraining from handshaking did not differ depending on the target's gender.

Among conservatives, however, the two-way interaction effect between handshaking condition and target gender was significant for both attitude, $F(1, 184) = 5.15, p = .025$, and approval rating, $F(1, 184) = 5.49, p = .020$. Whereas conservatives expressed more positive attitudes toward the non-handshaking man ($M = 8.45, SD = 1.56$) than the handshaking man ($M = 3.86, SD = 2.90$) by a difference of $d = 1.97, t(63.09) = 9.22, p < .001$, they expressed more positive attitudes toward the non-handshaking woman ($M = 7.98, SD = 2.04$) than the handshaking woman ($M = 5.06, SD = 3.26$) by a smaller difference of $d = 1.07, t(78.28) = 5.29, p < .001$. Likewise, whereas conservatives gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking man ($M = 6.31, SD = 0.85$) than the handshaking man ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.65$) by a difference of $d = 2.37, t(61.39) = 11.10, p < .001$, they gave higher approval ratings to the non-handshaking woman ($M = 5.96, SD = 0.99$) than the handshaking woman ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.81$) by a smaller difference of $d = 1.49, t(72.18) = 7.33, p < .001$.

Discussion

Traditionally, handshaking has conferred benefits for businesspeople—signaling politeness, establishing an intention to cooperate, and promoting deal-making (Guéguen, 2013; Schroeder et al., 2019). The current study's results starkly contrast longstanding perceptions, suggesting that in the era of COVID-19, businesspeople are judged negatively for shaking hands principally because doing so makes them seem less competent, less moral, and (to a smaller degree) less sociable. Judgments of handshaking appear to be more negative among liberals than conservatives and among women than men; nevertheless, even conservatives and men view handshaking negatively. Moreover, conservatives—but not liberals—may take a

businessperson's gender into consideration when evaluating their handshaking behavior, judging businesswomen less harshly than businessmen for shaking hands.

These findings highlight one way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured social norms and perceptions. As recent perspectives on social psychology have highlighted (e.g., Rosenfeld et al., 2020), even the most fundamental effects social scientists have long studied and “established” may now be in flux. For example, whereas previous research has highlighted that a good handshake can signal sociability (Schroeder et al., 2019), our data suggest that shaking hands now makes one seem *less* sociable. Consideration of this shift poses intriguing questions about how individuals can maximize their conveyed sociability in the workplace without shaking hands, particularly within interactions that conventionally commence with a handshake (e.g., negotiations, interviews). How individuals will establish sociability through compensatory behaviors—e.g., through increased small talk or performing other gestures, such as the Japanese convention of bowing—remains unclear and of immediate interest for research. Nonverbal behaviors develop rapport that is central to organizational phenomena (Bonaccio et al., 2016), and an understanding of these behaviors may foster optimization of employee satisfaction and productivity.

Yet while the direct effect of handshaking behavior on perceived sociability may be large, perceived morality and competence were much more explanatory of person perception. Divergences in mediated effects of perceived morality and sociability highlight the importance of distinguishing these two traits as distinct factors, which may explain organizational phenomena even beyond the COVID-19 crisis. Although morality and sociability were originally conceptualized within an overarching category of “warmth” in the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002), our data add to other work (e.g., Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Brambilla et al.,

2011; Leach et al., 2007) suggesting value in more recent extensions of the model that separate these constructs. This perspective may be useful as organizational psychologists understand an increasingly nuanced social landscape in which good-natured, sociable behaviors may now be deemed morally abhorrent and offensive should they violate social distancing norms. The meaning of ethical leadership may undergo some revisions, such as further diverging from its already-mixed relationship with charismatic leadership (e.g., Brown et al., 2005) and its positive links to agreeableness (Brown & Treviño, 2006), which would demonstrate utility in multidimensional conceptualizations of warmth in perceptions of leaders.

Knowing the specific moral modules underlying people's judgments of handshaking may inform future research and practice regarding ethical leadership by identifying which values are most important to affirm effortfully in the workplace. Understanding whether disapproval of handshaking individuals stems from perception of handshaking as a harmful behavior that spreads disease, a sign of disrespect to health and government authorities and guidelines, an impure action for one's own body, or multiple of these can empirically test predictions of opposing moral psychological theories (moral foundations theory [Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2009] vs. theory of dyadic morality [Schein & Gray, 2018]) and help support leaders' efforts to uphold moral integrity for themselves and among their employees. Relatedly, the interaction effects we observed between political ideology and judgments of handshaking call for deeper theoretical and applied conceptualization. Identifying whether liberal-conservative divergences in these judgments are tied to partisan differences in basic foundations of moral judgment (Graham et al., 2009) or more uniquely to politicization of the pandemic (Rothgerber et al., 2020) can inform how leaders may optimize their workforce's well-being. Tracking

partisan differences in workplace compliance with social distancing protocols, such as refrain from handshaking, may be worthwhile.

Our study's distinction between participants' general attitude toward the businessperson versus their approval of the businessperson's job performance proved fruitful, demonstrating convergence in total effects but divergence in mediated effects across outcomes. Namely, reduced perceived sociability explained why participants formed a more negative global attitude toward the handshaking target but did *not* explain why participants more strongly disapproved of the handshaking target's job performance. Thus, perceptions of sociability may be more strongly intertwined with judgments of an individual as a *person* rather than as a *businessperson*. Meanwhile, perceived competence offered more explanatory value for job approval rating than for global attitude: Handshaking may lower a businessperson's approval rating particularly because it makes them seem less competent. Perceptions of morality offered comparable mediated effects across both global attitude and approval rating.

Strengths and Limitations

Two methodological strengths of this study are its highly powered sample and its use of preregistration to distinguish transparently between planned and *post hoc* analyses. Another strength is its manipulation of the target's gender, which enabled testing generalizability of effects across businessmen and businesswomen. A limitation of this study is that it did not specify or manipulate the target's race or political ideology, which may reduce confidence in generalizability to these ends, given the role of social identity in social and moral judgments (Hester & Gray, 2020). Should decisions surrounding handshaking continue to reign salient in coming years, adopting an intersectional approach may be a valuable avenue for future research. An additional limitation is that these findings are only generalizable to the U.S.

Conclusion

The practical implications of our findings are clear: To maximize others' perceptions of them, it would behoove businesspeople to refrain from shaking hands for the foreseeable future. Businesspeople who work with women and liberal populations and should be especially vigilant, but even those who work with men and conservative employees would maximize their approval by avoiding shaking hands. We emphasize that despite significant group differences, shaking hands remains objectionable among conservative men, albeit less so than among liberal women.

These findings elucidate one of potentially many organizational behaviors that warrant reevaluation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prosociality of handshaking has effectively reversed in its meaning in the early era of COVID-19, and future research will be needed to track its development—to examine whether this novel disdain toward handshakers will persist permanently in a “new normal” of society, or whether it will progressively weaken and eventually revert back to a preference for handshaking. The months and years ahead may be an unprecedented time to rediscover the psychology of handshaking and its role in the workplace.

References

- Bonaccio, S., O'Reilly, J., O'Sullivan, S. L., & Chiochio, F. (2016). Nonverbal behavior and communication in the workplace: A review and an agenda for research. *Journal of Management*, 42, 1044-1074.
- Brambilla, M., & Leach, C. W. (2014). On the importance of being moral: The distinctive role of morality in social judgment. *Social Cognition*, 32, 397-408.
- Brambilla, M., Rusconi, P., Sacchi, S., & Cherubini, P. (2011). Looking for honesty: The primary role of morality (vs. sociability and competence) in information gathering. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41, 135-143.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17, 595-616.
- Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97, 117-134.
- CDC. (2020). COVID-19 employer information for office buildings. CDC. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/office-buildings.html>
- Chaplin, W. F., Phillips, J. B., Brown, J. D., Clanton, N. R., & Stein, J. L. (2000). Handshaking, gender, personality, and first impressions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 110-117.
- Cummings, W. (2020, March 12). Mike Pence said 'I'm still shaking hands,' defying his office's coronavirus hygiene advice. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/12/coronavirus-mike-pence-still-shaking-hands/5030219002/>

- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 878-902.
- Fritz, M. S., & MacKinnon, D. P. (2007). Required sample size to detect the mediated effect. *Psychological Science*, 18, 233-239.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral Foundations Theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 55-130.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 1029-1046.
- He, X., Lau, E. H., Wu, P., Deng, X., Wang, J., Hao, X., ... & Mo, X. (2020). Temporal dynamics in viral shedding and transmissibility of COVID-19. *Nature Medicine*, 26, 672-675.
- Hester, N., & Gray, K. (2020). The moral psychology of raceless, genderless strangers. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15, 216-230.
- Guéguen, N. (2013). Handshaking and compliance with a request: A door-to-door setting. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 41, 1585-1588.
- Jost, J. T., Federico, C. M., & Napier, J. L. (2009). Political ideology: Its structure, functions, and elective affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 307-337.
- Leach, C. W., Ellemers, N., & Barreto, M. (2007). Group virtue: The importance of morality (vs. competence and sociability) in the positive evaluation of in-groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93, 234-249.

- López-Rodríguez, L., & Zagefka, H. (2015). The effects of stereotype content on acculturation preferences and prosocial tendencies: The prominent role of morality. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 45, 36-46.
- Rosenfeld, D. L., Balcetis, E., Bastian, B., Berkman, E. T., Bosson, J. K., Brannon, T. N., Burrow, A. L., Cameron, C. D., Chen, S., Cook, J. E., Crandall, C., Davidai, S., Dhont, K., Eastwick, P. W., Gaither, S. E., Gangestad, S. W., Gilovich, T., Gray, K. J., Haines, E. L., . . . Tomiyama, A. J. (2020). *Conducting social psychological research in the wake of COVID-19*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Rothgerber, H., Wilson, T., Whaley, D., Rosenfeld, D. L., Humphreys, M., Moore, A., & Bihl, A. (2020). *Politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic: Ideological differences in adherence to social distancing*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Schein, C., & Gray, K. (2018). The theory of dyadic morality: Reinventing moral judgment by redefining harm. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22, 32-70.
- Schroeder, J., Risen, J. L., Gino, F., & Norton, M. I. (2019). Handshaking promotes deal-making by signaling cooperative intent. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 116, 743-768.
- Stewart, G. L., Dustin, S. L., Barrick, M. R., & Darnold, T. C. (2008). Exploring the handshake in employment interviews. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 1139-1146.