

Short Report

Moral Hypocrisy

Social Groups and the Flexibility of Virtue

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People are capable of performing unambiguously immoral acts (Darley, 1992; Staub, 1989), but appear equipped with the psychological mechanisms to relieve themselves of responsibility (Bandura, 1990, 1996). Indeed, *moral hypocrisy* has been conceptualized as an individual's ability to hold a belief while acting in discord with it (Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997). An equally unsettling, and perhaps more socially relevant, type of hypocrisy could be an interpersonal phenomenon whereby individuals' evaluations of their own moral transgressions differ substantially from their evaluations of the same transgressions enacted by others.

If such hypocrisy is common, there is good reason to theorize that this asymmetric charity might extend beyond the self. Specifically, group affiliation might stand as a limit on the radius of one's "moral circle," qualifying in-group members for the same leniency that individuals apply to their own transgressions. To the extent that the group stands as an important source of self-definition, one may have an interest in protecting the sanctity of that entity. Indeed, "in-group morality" has been posited as a fundamental moral intuition (Haidt & Graham, in press).

To examine these hypotheses, we modified a paradigm developed by Batson et al. (1997). In one condition, subjects were required to distribute a resource (i.e., time and energy) to themselves and another person, and could do so either fairly (i.e., through a random allocation procedure) or unfairly (i.e., selecting the better option for themselves). They were then asked to evaluate the morality, or fairness, of their actions. In another condition, subjects viewed a confederate acting in the unfair manner, and subsequently evaluated the morality of this act. We defined hypocrisy as the discrepancy between the fairness judgments for this same transgression when committed by the self or by the other.

To determine if hypocrisy would extend beyond the self, we included two additional conditions in which subjects judged the unfair action of a confederate who was either a member of their

in-group or a member of an out-group. If hypocrisy emerged in these conditions as well, it would suggest flexibility in the radial boundaries of hypocrisy as a function of the target's affiliation with the self. Using minimal groups to demonstrate such variability would constitute the most strict and compelling test of our hypothesis, revealing the deep-seated nature of hypocrisy.

METHOD

Seventy-six subjects were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In all conditions, subjects judged the fairness of the same action, and this judgment served as the primary dependent variable.

In Condition 1, subjects were told that the experimenter was examining performance on two different tasks. The green task consisted of a brief survey combined with a short photo hunt that would take 10 min to complete. The red task consisted of a series of logic problems combined with a longer and somewhat tedious mental rotation measure that would take 45 min to complete. Subjects were then informed that, in accord with a newly developed assignment procedure meant to keep experimenters blind to conditions, some subjects would make decisions about which of the two tasks they or other subjects would complete. Specifically, subjects were told that they could choose to assign either themselves or a future subject to the green condition; the person not assigned to the green condition would necessarily complete the red task. They were given the choice of using a computerized randomizer or assigning tasks according to preference. The experimenters then left the room and allowed subjects to make their decisions. Subjects subsequently responded to a series of questions regarding their views of the experimenter-blind assignment procedure. Embedded in this questionnaire was the target question: "How fairly did you act?" Subjects answered this question using a 7-point scale ranging from *extremely unfairly* to *extremely fairly*.

In Condition 2, each subject's task involved observing and providing feedback on the actions of a confederate completing procedures identical to those completed in Condition 1. Through the use of yoked computer monitors, subjects saw confederates read the instructions and assign themselves to the green

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condition and a future subject to the red condition without using the randomizer. Subjects then completed an evaluation form that included a set of distractor questions regarding opinions of the experimenter-blind assignment procedure, as well as the target question, “How fairly did the subject act?” rated on the same 7-point scale as in Condition 1.

Conditions 3 and 4 mirrored Condition 2 with the addition of a minimal-group manipulation designed to make the enactor of the moral transgression either an in-group or an out-group member. In each session, two confederates played the roles of other subjects. Subjects first completed a questionnaire requiring frequency estimates for different types of events. They were then “categorized” by the computer into one of two groups: overestimator or underestimator (cf. DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett, & Cajdric, 2004). Subjects next received instructions indicating that they would observe and evaluate a new experimenter-blind assignment procedure that either the in-group or the out-group confederate was about to complete. From that point forward, the experiment unfolded as in Condition 2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two subjects in Condition 1 were removed from analysis for acting altruistically or using the randomizer; all others assigned themselves to the green condition. In accord with predictions, a planned contrast (with contrast weights of 1, −1, 1, and −1 for Conditions 1 through 4, respectively) confirmed the existence of hypocrisy at both the individual and the group levels, $F(1, 72) = 11.75$, $p = .001$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $d = 1.11$. As shown in Figure 1, hypocrisy appears to be a fundamental bias in moral reasoning: Individuals perceived their own transgressions to be less objectionable than the same transgression enacted by another person. Moreover, this hypocritical view extended to judgments of others. Subjects readily excused other individuals’ unfair acts if these others belonged to subjects’ emergent social groups. Indeed, subjects viewed transgressions committed by in-group members to be as acceptable as their own.

Evidence of hypocrisy at both the individual and group levels adds to the growing view of the context-dependent nature of moral reasoning (cf. Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). At a basic level, preservation of a positive self-image appears to trump the use of more objective moral principles. It is equally disconcerting, however, that the stain of hypocrisy actively spreads

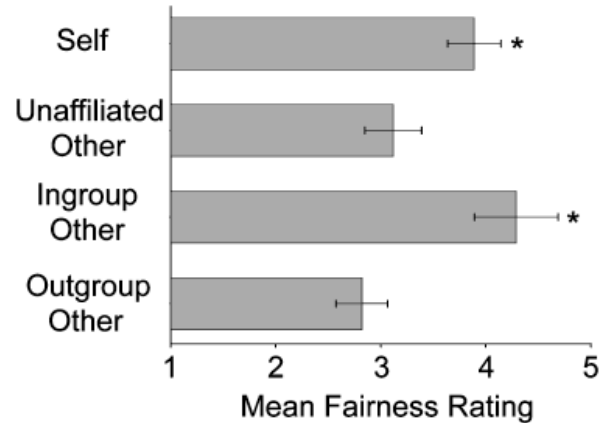


Fig. 1. Mean fairness judgments as a function of condition. Error bars indicate ± 1 SE. Bars marked with asterisks differ from those without asterisks ($t_s > 2.08$, $p_s < .05$, $p_{rep_s} > .89$).

to group-level social identities, and in so doing may inflame intergroup discord.

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(RECEIVED 11/6/06; REVISION ACCEPTED 2/6/07;
FINAL MATERIALS RECEIVED 2/7/07)