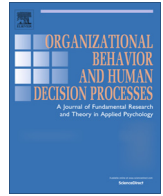




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# Do as I say, not as I've done: Suffering for a misdeed reduces the hypocrisy of advising others against it <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Not everyone who has committed a misdeed and wants to warn others against committing it will feel entitled to do so. Six experiments, a replication, and a follow-up study examined how suffering for a misdeed grants people the legitimacy to advise against it. When advisors had suffered (vs. not suffered) for their misdeeds, observers thought advisors had more of a right to advise and perceived them as less hypocritical and self-righteous; advisees responded with less anger and derogation; and advisors themselves felt more comfortable offering strong advice. Advisors also strategically highlighted how they had suffered for their wrongdoing when they were motivated to establish their right to offer advice. Additional results illustrate how concerns about the legitimacy of advice-giving differ from concerns about persuasiveness. The findings shed light on what prevents good advice from being disseminated, and how to help people learn from others' mistakes.

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## 1. Introduction

People who have previously engaged in bad habits or ethical transgressions may want to help others avoid making the same mistake. For example, a manager who used to procrastinate or inflate expense reports may now wish to dissuade employees from doing so, or a scientist may want to advise students against using questionable research practices that she herself used to employ. Experience committing a misdeed may make people particularly qualified to give sound advice, but their exhortations to “do as I say, not as I've done” could be met with charges of hypocrisy. Anticipating this, would-be advisors may be reluctant to offer their counsel, and good advice may not get disseminated. Is there a way to comfortably offer advice in such situations without incurring advisees' wrath? The present research reveals conditions under which it is socially acceptable to preach what you have not practiced. In so doing, we demonstrate how perceptions of legitimacy

play a crucial role in people's willingness to give advice and in others' reactions to receiving advice.

We propose that people who preach against misdeeds that they themselves have committed will be seen as illegitimate spokespersons unless they paid a price for those misdeeds. We define “misdeeds” broadly as behaviors that, although tempting, are harmful, socially frowned upon, or maladaptive – from ethical transgressions such as fraud and infidelity to bad habits such as smoking and procrastination. People typically commit misdeeds to capture a personal benefit: They may cheat for financial gain, smoke because it feels good, or procrastinate on unpleasant tasks so that they can enjoy more pleasurable activities in the moment. Advising against misdeeds that they have committed, we suggest, seems less hypocritical if any benefits derived have been tempered by personal suffering. For example, if a manager used to profit from overbilling her clients and never got caught, then her employees would likely find it illegitimate for her now to advise them to bill honestly. On the other hand, they might find such preaching especially legitimate if her dishonesty had cost her important clients, damaged her reputation, and resulted in litigation. Importantly, having suffered for dishonesty does not ensure that the manager will be persuasive, only that she will be seen, unlike the manager who did not suffer, as having the right to inveigh against overbilling. More generally, we propose that suffering for a misdeed legitimizes advising against it.

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In what follows, we explain this claim and predict three important consequences: (a) advising others to avoid a misdeed that one has committed elicits less negative reactions when one has suffered for the misdeed, (b) anticipating this, advisors who have benefitted from a misdeed express less disapproval of it than they actually feel, and (c) when required to advise another person to avoid a misdeed that they themselves committed, people will present themselves as having suffered for it – particularly if they are sensitive to perceptions of social legitimacy.

### 1.1. Suffering as a source of psychological standing

Not everyone is perceived as equally entitled to express a view about an issue. Sometimes, personal characteristics disqualify people from speaking up. For example, among men and women with similar attitudes related to health care coverage of abortion, women felt more comfortable publicly expressing these attitudes (Ratner & Miller, 2001). Because abortion is considered more of a “women’s issue,” men apparently felt that it was not their place to speak up. Other times, past actions disqualify people from expressing a view. For example, in leaving their home country, emigrants may be perceived as forfeiting their right to criticize it (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). In a similar manner, previously succumbing to a temptation can deny people the legitimacy to advise others to resist it. We describe the subjective sense of legitimacy or entitlement to act or to speak up as *psychological standing* (Miller, 1999; Miller & Effron, 2010; Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009). When people lack the psychological standing to express a particular attitude, even one with which others agree, they will feel uncomfortable and inhibit themselves from speaking up, or risk censure.

Whereas some personal characteristics and past behaviors deprive people of standing, other characteristics and behaviors provide standing (e.g., Hornsey, Trembath, & Gunthorpe, 2004). For example, whereas uttering racial epithets would be grossly inappropriate for most people, membership in the relevant racial group can grant a person standing to utter them. Relatedly, we propose, whereas it would be inappropriate for most people to preach against a misdeed that they have practiced, suffering for the relevant misdeed can provide standing to so preach. Thus, we predict that those who have suffered for a misdeed are perceived as more entitled to advise others against committing it, are less likely to inhibit themselves from so advising, and elicit less negative reactions when they do advise.

Although a person will have difficulty persuading others to follow her advice if she lacks the psychological standing to offer it, psychological standing is conceptually distinct from persuasiveness. An unpersuasive advisor fails to influence people’s attitudes and behavior, whereas an advisor who lacks psychological standing commits a worse sin: violating a social norm about who is allowed to say what. Advisors who lack standing risk being perceived not only as ineffective, but also as insensitive, dislikeable, and – if they lack standing specifically because they have not practiced what they now preach – hypocritical. Their message will be met not with mere shrugs, but with anger and hostility from those they presume to advise. The anticipation of such negative reactions should make would-be advisors feel uncomfortable offering even what they and others would see as good advice. Thus, whereas unpersuasive advice may get offered but be ignored, advice that a person lacks the standing to deliver may not even get offered. For these reasons, we suggest that a complete account of advice-giving requires considering not only persuasiveness but also psychological standing. In addition to assessing whether people will follow her advice, a would-be advisor needs to know whether people will perceive her as entitled to offer it.

### 1.2. Hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and the standing to give advice

Hypocrisy, defined as “the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one’s own behavior does not conform” (Hypocrisy, n.d.), occurs when people fail to practice what they preach (Stone & Fernandez, 2008), when they display lower moral standards for themselves than for others (Lammers, 2012; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007), when they “say one thing, but do another” (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Barden, Rucker, Petty, & Rios, 2014), or when they create a false appearance of morality (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Gilbert & Jones, 1986). Hypocrites elicit more anger, condemnation, and punishment from observers than non-hypocrites do for the same misdeeds (Effron, Lucas, & O’Connor, in press; Effron & Monin, 2010; Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2013; Powell & Smith, 2012). One reason that hypocrites rankle is that they seem self-righteous – that is, they evince an unfounded certainty in their moral superiority (Hale & Pillow, 2015; Self-righteous, n.d.). When people preach against the same misdeed they practice, it seems that their preaching “does not come out of a concern for moral principles, but rather, [is] for the sake of gaining the moral high ground over another person” (Hale & Pillow, 2015). Even people who are not themselves the targets of such preaching (e.g., those who are not tempted to commit the misdeed) should recognize that the hypocrite’s claim to the moral high ground is illegitimate and think that he or she lacks the standing to preach. However, the hypocrite’s self-righteousness should be particularly galling to the targets of the preaching (e.g., advisees); as the ones being told to forego a temptation, they are liable to feel looked down upon, which provides an extra motive to derogate the preacher (Minson & Monin, 2012).

Advising against misdeeds you currently practice is blatantly hypocritical, but advising against misdeeds you *used* to practice is more ambiguous (Barden et al., 2005, 2014). On the one hand, the fact that you once flouted the advice you now encourage others to follow can make your advice seem like a self-righteous attempt to present yourself as more virtuous than you are. On the other hand, the fact that you no longer flout the advice could make you seem like you have seen the light, and that your preaching is a genuine attempt to help others keep their steps upon the path to virtue. We propose that people resolve this ambiguity differently depending on whether the advisor has suffered versus gotten away with the misdeed.

When advisors have enjoyed the misdeed’s benefit without suffering, the advice will seem self-righteous and hypocritical. The advisors will seem to be making an illegitimate claim to the “moral high ground.” The advice will be construed very differently when advisors have suffered for their misdeeds. The advice will seem less like an assertion of false moral superiority (an illegitimate act), and more like a genuine attempt to help others (a legitimate act). Appearing to have “learned their lesson,” advisors will seem less hypocritical, judgmental, or “preachy” – in short, more “holy” and less “holier-than-thou.” The advice may not be more convincing, but the advisor will seem less self-righteous. As a result, the indignation captured by the expression “what right do they have to say that . . .” will not arise when the advisor has suffered. In summary, we argue, people are seen as lacking the standing to preach against misdeeds from which they have benefitted, but as particularly entitled to preach against those for which they have suffered.

### 1.3. Previous research on advice

The literature on advice has focused mainly on identifying factors that affect the weight people give to others’ advice. These factors include characteristics of the advisor, such as expertise,

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