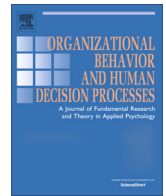




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Hypocrisy by association: When organizational membership increases condemnation for wrongdoing

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ABSTRACT

Hypocrisy occurs when people fail to practice what they preach. Four experiments document the *hypocrisy-by-association* effect, whereby failing to practice what an organization preaches can make an employee seem hypocritical and invite moral condemnation. Participants judged employees more harshly for the same transgression when it was inconsistent with ethical values the employees' organization promoted, and ascriptions of hypocrisy mediated this effect (Studies 1–3). The results did not support the possibility that inconsistent transgressions simply seemed more harmful. In Study 4, participants were less likely to select a job candidate whose transgression did (vs. did not) contradict a value promoted by an organization where he had once interned. The results suggest that employees are seen as morally obligated to uphold the values that their organization promotes, even by people outside of the organization. We discuss how observers will judge someone against different ethical standards depending on where she or he works.

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1. Introduction

People receive condemnation as hypocrites when they fail to practice the ethical values they preach. Consider the outraged reactions to former Senator Al Gore, who promoted environmental conservatism but spent \$30,000 per year on his home energy bill (Tapper, 2007), former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer who crusaded against sex trafficking but patronized prostitutes (Hakim & Santos, 2008), or the county judge who urged students to drive sober but was arrested for drunk driving (Lane, 2014). Arguably, these individuals would have received less condemnation for their behavior if they had not previously preached against it – in other words, judgments of them included an added hypocrisy penalty. Being perceived as hypocritical not only affects how harshly people are judged, but also can increase the punishment they receive for wrongdoing, can tarnish their reputation, and can even undermine their effectiveness as leaders (e.g., Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2013; Palanski & Yammarino, 2011).

Organizations, like people, preach adherence to certain ethical values. For example, Greenpeace promotes environmentalism, the government encourages tax compliance, and a variety of firms

avow a commitment to diversity. However, not all members of an organization will always act consistently with the values it preaches. An office assistant at Greenpeace may have a high carbon footprint, or a manager at a firm that values diversity may forward a racially insensitive joke over email. How do people interpret these actions and react to the individuals responsible for them? Do the actions seem more contemptible in light of the actors' organizational membership? In other words, do people levy a hypocrisy penalty against someone who fails to uphold the values that his or her organization has promoted? The traditional understanding of hypocrisy – failing to practice what you preach – would suggest not, because in these cases the organization, not the individual, does the preaching. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that mere membership in an organization can make someone's behavior seem hypocritical. A Greenpeace employee was widely disparaged in the press for regularly traveling by plane instead of a more eco-friendly mode of transport (Davies, 2014), even though plenty of other people frequently make similar plane trips. Similarly, a report that 3% of US federal employees were delinquent on taxes sparked outrage, even though non-federal employees are more than 2.5 times more likely to be delinquent (Korte, 2014). If the individuals in question had worked for different organizations, perhaps they would not have garnered the same attention and derogation. But if these individuals are indeed hypocrites, they are only so by dint of their organizational association.

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The present research investigates the possibility that this *hypocrisy-by-association* effect drives social judgments of wrongdoing. We propose that people receive greater condemnation for the same transgression when it contradicts an ethical value that their organization promotes. By “ethical value” (hereafter: “value” for short), we mean a belief, principle, goal, or standard that indicates concern with the interests and welfare of individuals or society (for a similar definition, see Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). By “transgressions,” we mean behaviors that violate an ethical value. Organizations often promote domain-specific ethical values, such as environmentalism, diversity, or nonviolence. Thus, the same transgression may violate a value that is promoted by one organization but not another. The present research examines how employees who transgress their current or former organization’s values are judged by people outside of the organization – those who might learn about the transgression in the newspaper, while sitting on a jury, or when interviewing the transgressor for a new job.

Our investigation of the hypocrisy-by-association effect sheds new light on the psychology of social judgment in organizational contexts. We examine whether employees who fail to conform to values promoted by their organization will face condemnation as hypocrites, even if they did not explicitly promote those values themselves. We posit that working for an organization whose values one is unwilling or unable to follow can have serious consequences for how one is judged at the time and for one’s reputation going forward.

1.1. Judgments of hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is defined as “the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one’s own behavior does not conform” (hypocrisy, n.d.). People feel and appear hypocritical when they fail to “practice what they preach” (Stone & Fernandez, 2008), “say one thing but do another” (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Barden, Rucker, Petty, & Rios, 2014), hold themselves to more lenient ethical standards than others (Lammers, 2012; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007), present themselves as more moral than they actually are (Gilbert & Jones, 1986), or disingenuously display support for ethical values (Monin & Merritt, 2012). Implicit in these characterizations of hypocrisy is the assumption that a hypocrite tries to intentionally mislead others to grant him greater moral standing than he deserves (Hale & Pillow, 2015).

Research suggests that endorsing a particular value morally obligates people to follow it themselves. People feel angry and disgusted when they observe hypocrisy (Laurent et al., 2013). They are less inclined to let hypocrites off the hook for bad behavior in light of prior good deeds (Effron & Monin, 2010), and they enjoy seeing hypocrites punished (Powell & Smith, 2012; Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). In organizational contexts, leaders who fail to practice what they preach undermine followers’ trust, commitment, performance, and willingness to adopt change (Cha & Edmondson, 2006; Davis & Rothstein, 2006; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Piccolo, 2015; Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012; Palanski & Yammarino, 2011; Simons, 1999, 2002). Leader hypocrisy can even promote deviant and unethical behaviors within firms (Dineen, Lewicki, & Tomlinson, 2006; Peterson, 2004).

We suggest that by focusing on the failure of individuals to practice what they themselves preach, prior research has captured only a narrow range of circumstances that lead to ascriptions of hypocrisy, neglecting a type of hypocrisy that is germane to organizations. Going beyond this research, we propose that individuals who fail to practice what their organization preaches also risk moral condemnation. In essence, organizational membership can make people vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy.

1.2. Organizational membership sets ethical standards

Why would a person seem hypocritical if she transgressed values promoted by her organization? On the one hand, such behavior does not fit the conventional understanding of hypocrisy: Organizational membership does not require “preaching,” explicitly claiming to share the organization’s values, or intentionally tricking people into overestimating one’s morality. On the other hand, observers may treat organizational membership *as if* it were a form of preaching. By joining an organization, employees may be seen as endorsing its values – that is, publicly presenting themselves as supporting them. The endorsement is merely implicit, however, in the sense that it is implied by membership itself even if an employee has not explicitly promoted the values. In other words, joining an organization may not be a literal declaration of support for its values, but it may be perceived as if it were. A person who transgresses values that he *explicitly* endorsed is seen as morally disingenuous – a hypocrite who has tried to mislead people about his moral standing. Moving beyond this observation, we propose that transgressing a value that one seems to have *implicitly* endorsed is sufficient to make one seem hypocritical, and that organizational membership is perceived as such an endorsement. As a consequence, employees will receive harsher condemnation for the same transgression when it specifically violates their organization’s values than when it does not. In other words, an employee who violates her organization’s values elicits increased condemnation, as if she had presented herself as more moral than she really is.

In this way, we propose, organizational membership does more than merely signal what employees are likely to value; it prescribes the values that they are obligated to uphold, thereby establishing a higher moral standard against which they are judged. For example, people may reasonably assume that an office manager at Greenpeace cares about environmentalism. However, if they learned that he never recycles at home, we predict that they would not simply revise their assumption and conclude that he took the job for reasons unrelated to its values (e.g., the location or lifestyle it afforded); they would derogate his moral character and want to punish him, condemning him more than they would a non-Greenpeace employee for the same failure to recycle. Such reactions would indicate that they were holding him to a higher ethical standard than they would hold employees of other organizations, treating him as if he had hypocritically transgressed values that he had (implicitly) presented himself as having. Thus, the existence of a hypocrisy-by-association effect would suggest that people do not merely assume that an employee shares her organizations’ values, but that they believe that she is morally obligated to uphold those values.

We suggest that when employees’ transgressions contradict values that the organization has promoted, even people outside the organization will negatively evaluate the employees’ moral character and recommend more severe punishment – reactions that damage the employees’ reputations and their prospects for future employment. Our theorizing points to our central hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Objective observers will condemn an employee’s transgression more harshly when it is inconsistent (vs. not inconsistent) with values that his or her organization promotes.

We refer to this hypothesized effect as an *inconsistency penalty*. By “condemn,” we mean negatively evaluate employees’ character and behavior, and desire to punish them or to deprive them of rewards (e.g., a disinclination to hire them in the future). We use the term “objective observers” to mean people outside the employee’s organization who can form a judgment about his or her behavior.

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