



## Moral hypocrisy: impression management or self-deception?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Moral hypocrisy was exposed both between-subjects and within-subjects.
- We investigated whether hypocrites are self-deceptive – do they fool themselves?
- People let a fair coin decide monetary allocations only if they could fudge the results.
- Hypocrites placed a higher priority on Conformity values.
- The results suggest the primacy of impression management concerns over self-deception.

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### ABSTRACT

In three studies (S1–S3;  $N = 256$ ) we investigated whether moral hypocrisy (MH) is motivated by conscious impression management concerns or whether it is self-deceptive. In a dictator game, MH occurred both within participants (saying one thing, doing another; S1) and between participants (doing one thing when it is inconsequential, doing another thing when it affects payoffs; S2). People were willing to let an ostensibly fair coin determine payoffs only if they could fudge the results of the coin flip, suggesting that hypocrites do not deceive themselves (S3). Also supporting this view, MH was associated with adherence to Conformity values (S1–S2), indicative of a desire to appear moral in the eyes of others but not indicative of self-deception. Universalism values were predictive of moral integrity (S1, S3).

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What motivates moral action, the desire to be moral or the desire to appear moral in the eyes of others? A groundbreaking series of studies conducted by Batson and colleagues uncovered the commonness of moral hypocrisy (MH), the motivation to appear moral yet, if possible, avoid the cost of actually behaving morally (Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). However, failure to behave morally may also carry costs; the awareness that one is acting immorally threatens one's self-concept (e.g., Griffin & Ross,

1991). Guarding against such awareness, and thereby facilitating moral transgressions, is self-deception, a state in which "one's true motivation is masked from oneself" (Batson et al., 1997, p. 1346).

In the present study, we sought to contribute to research on the prevalence and mechanisms of MH. By definition, MH involves motivated impression management or other-deception, wanting to give the impression that one is more moral than would be warranted by one's behavior. We investigated, in a series of straightforward dictator games, whether MH is also self-deceiving. Besides experimental manipulations, we also approached the distinction between self-deception and other-deception from the perspective of individual differences. Particularly, the motives underlying MH were investigated within the framework provided by Schwartz' values theory (1992).

### Are moral hypocrites self-deceptive?

Why do people sometimes behave morally, even when such behavior appears to be against their self-interests? Primarily, two types of explanations have been offered. Social preference explanations suggest

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that people have a preference for fair or moral behavior and are willing to pay costs to satisfy this preference (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). Social signaling explanations, by contrast, suggest that people behave morally to demonstrate to others that they are moral, not because they would actually wish to be moral (e.g., Barclay & Willer, 2007).

Testifying to the importance of the desire to appear moral is a highly influential series of studies conducted by Batson et al. (1997, 1999, 2002). These studies conceptualized the overarching distinction between social preferences and social signaling explanations of morality in terms of moral integrity and MH. Moral integrity was defined as the motivation to actually behave morally. MH, in contrast, was defined as the motivation to appear moral yet, if possible, avoid the cost of actually behaving morally. Moral hypocrites will enact morality not with an eye on producing a good outcome but to appear moral yet still benefit themselves. In a typical design, Batson et al. (1997, Study 2) had participants assign tasks to themselves and an unknown other participant. One task was described as fun and rewarding, whereas the other was defined as boring. Participants were given the option of flipping a coin to assist in making the decision (this approach was the only way to assign the tasks fairly); however, it was made clear that the coin flip was not required. Typically, approximately half of the participants decided not to use the coin and instead directly assigned the desirable task to themselves. These participants were acting out of self-interest but were not hypocrites because they did not try to conceal their self-interest. Of more interest was the other half of the participants — those who decided to use the coin. Surprisingly, approximately 90% of the coin flippers tossed the better task for themselves. The aggregate data thus clearly indicated that these participants merely claimed to have let the coin decide, suggesting that they were hypocrites.

Batson and colleagues proceeded to ask whether moral hypocrites recognized behaving immorally: did moral hypocrites deceive themselves into believing that they were moral despite their behavior to the contrary? Referring to Alfred Mele's (1987) definition of 'ordinary self-deception' as holding two conflicting views simultaneously, Batson and colleagues argued that people are self-deceived if they can avoid confronting a discrepancy between their behavior and their moral standards. Such 'ordinary self-deception', the authors argued, is sufficient "to reach the goal of appearing moral to one-self" (Batson et al., 1999, p. 527). Supporting the idea that MH involves self-deception, Batson et al. (1999) conducted an experiment in which self-awareness, ostensibly working against self-deception, reduced MH. In this study, participants could see themselves in a mirror during the decision task. The introduction of a mirror was argued to increase self-awareness and thereby decrease self-deception. Because the mirror eliminated hypocrisy (in the mirror condition, 5 out of the 10 participants who flipped the coin assigned themselves the positive outcome), Batson et al. (1999) argued that moral self-deception is a prerequisite of MH. Consistent with the idea that self-deception may play a role in explaining moral failures, several other studies (e.g., Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012; Verplanken & Holland, 2002) have shown that ostensibly raising self-awareness leads to more ethical decision-making. In essence, according to this line of thought, moral failures are facilitated by self-deceptive processes that allow people to maintain their positive view of themselves whilst simultaneously reaping the benefits of transgressing morally.

We believe that the mirror introduced by Batson et al. (1999) may also have had effects other than raising self-awareness. Most pertinent to the distinction between other-deception and self-deception, the presence of a mirror is known to increase the sense of being watched (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992). More generally, self-attention or self-consciousness causes a heightened feeling of being observed (e.g., Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992) and transparent to others (Vorauer & Ross, 1999). Importantly, such decreases in the subjective sense of anonymity are known to increase moral behavior (e.g., Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010). This finding means that a decrease in the subjective sense of anonymity, rather than a decrease in self-deception, could have

been responsible for the reduced rates of MH that Batson et al. (1999) reported on.

Based on the above reasoning, we believe that it is necessary to ask whether the conclusion that moral hypocrites engage in self-deceptive processes is warranted. Were those of Batson's participants who flipped the coin actually self-deceptive in the sense that they believed that they would abide by the result of the coin flip whilst simultaneously knowing that they would not? The lucky participants, who let fate do the dirty work for them, and those particularly adept at deceiving themselves (e.g., "mulligan", "best out of three coin flips", see Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011), could eventually persist in this self-righteous belief even after the coin flip. Or were coin flippers merely engaged in impression management — were they choosing to flip the coin only for the sake of appearing moral, with full knowledge from the beginning that they would fudge the results if necessary? If the latter is true, then the introduction of a binding coin, i.e., a coin flip that cannot be rigged, should dramatically decrease the number of participants choosing to flip the coin.

### Personal values and moral behavior

One way to distinguish self-deception from motivated other-deception is to examine individual difference variables that could be differentially related to these two types of deception (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). In the present context, this approach means examining how hypocrites differ from those who are more frank about their selfishness: are the characteristics that distinguish moral hypocrites indicative of self-deceptive processes or merely other-deceptive processes? We draw on the framework provided by Schwartz (1992) values theory to investigate individual differences.

Values can be defined as transsituational goals that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group (Schwartz, 1992). According to Schwartz' model, people in most cultures distinguish between at least ten basic values (the number of cultures in which the same ten basic values have been found was recently reported as 77; Schwartz, 2009) differentiated by motivational content: Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, Security, Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, and Self-Direction.

Conformity values are generally regarded one of the moral values (Schwartz, 2007) and should, both on conceptual grounds and based on prior empirical results (reviewed below), be particularly pertinent to the present issue. People high in Conformity values will by definition strive not to upset or harm others and will want to behave according to social expectations or norms (Schwartz, 1992; for empirical evidence, see Lönnqvist, Walkowitz, Wichardt, Lindeman, & Verkasalo, 2009, Study 1). However, their reliance on external guidelines also means that they may have failed to internalize other moral values (Lönnqvist et al., 2009, Study 2; see also Lönnqvist, Leikas, Paunonen, Nissinen, & Verkasalo, 2006). Indeed, whereas certain values, such as Universalism, are thought to give rise to a moral obligation to act morally to preserve one's sense of self-worth (e.g., Beck & Ajzen, 1991; Maio & Olson, 1995; Schwartz, 1977; Schwartz & Tessler, 1972), those people high in Conformity have been shown not to feel morally obligated to behave according to their other moral values (Lönnqvist et al., 2009, Study 3). The self-concept of those adhering to Conformity is thus less sensitive to whether they are acting morally.

Further supporting the view that those who highly value Conformity think of morality in terms of maintaining the conventions provided by society, level of moral reasoning, as conceptualized through either Kohlberg's (1984) stages or the moral schemes of the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979), is inversely related to Conformity values (Helkama, 2004; Myrsky, Juujärvi, & Pessa, 2010). Those adhering to Conformity values may feel so strongly obliged by the values and norms that society provides that questions regarding morality seldom if ever arise, as also suggested by some recent results according to which those who highly

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