On why hypocrisy thrives: Reasonable doubt created by moral posturing can deter punishment

Jan-Erik Lönnqvist [a],[1], Rainer Michael Rilke [b],[1], Gari Walkowitz [b],[*],[1]

[a] University of Helsinki, Swedish School of Social Science, Snellmaninkatu 12, 00014 Helsinki, Finland
[b] University of Cologne, Department of Corporate Development and Business Ethics, Albertus-Magnus-Platz, 50923 Cologne, Germany

HIGHLIGHTS

• In five bargaining games, proposers could blame unfair proposals on a coin flip.
• Responders did not believe that proposers actually let the coin decide.
• Responders and third parties were less punitive when the coin was blamed.
• People generally refrain from punishing if guilt cannot be proved beyond doubt.
• Unwillingness to punish when in doubt could explain the prevalence of hypocrisy.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In four bargaining games with an option to punish, participants could avoid punishment by shifting the blame for an unfair offer on a random coin flip. Punishments were not affected by whether the results of the coin flip could be verified, nor by beliefs about whether a coin had actually been flipped (Studies 1–3). Our results suggest that the rather blatant moral posturing of hypocrites was enough to create reasonable doubt about their guilt, and that such doubt deterred punishment. Alternative explanations of reluctance to punish hypocrites, such as free-riding from altruistic punishment (Study 2), or feelings of gratitude (Study 3) were not supported. Independent third parties were also less punitive toward those who blamed the coin (Study 4). Similar results were found in an online vignette study run with a more representative sample (Study 5). In sum, these findings suggest that hypocrisy thrives because it can deter punishment.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

A highly influential series of studies conducted by Batson and colleagues revealed that moral behavior is often motivated not by the desire to be moral, but by the desire to appear moral in the eyes of others (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). These studies uncovered the commonness of moral hypocrisy, the motivation to appear moral yet, if possible, avoid the cost of actually behaving morally. 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, but it was made clear that the coin flip was not required. Typically, half of the participants did not use the coin, instead directly assigning the desirable task to themselves. However, among those who claimed to have flipped the coin to determine task allocation, approximately 90% tossed the better task for themselves. The aggregate data thus indicated that coin flippers merely claimed to have let the coin decide, suggesting that they were hypocrites. The commonness of hypocrisy is consistent with more general social signaling explanations of morality, which suggest that people behave morally to demonstrate that they are moral, not because they would actually wish to be moral (e.g., Barclay & Willer, 2007; Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; Dana, Weber, & Kuang, 2007; Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010). Indeed, in a recent review of his own and others' work on moral motivation and moral hypocrisy, Batson (2014, p. 53) concluded that "it is not clear that true moral motivation plays much of a role in producing moral

behavior" (see this review also for the distinction that Batson makes between genuinely moral behavior and empathy induced altruistic behavior — only for the latter does he find empirical support).

The above-described commonness of (rather blatant) moral hypocrisy could be considered rather surprising. In interpersonal communication, people dislike liars and increase their own use of deception when they are lied to (Tyler, Feldman, & Reichert, 2006). On the other hand, research in experimental economics shows that deception that precedes an unfair action more than doubles the punishment rate as a response to that action (Brandts & Charness, 2003). Furthermore, feigning morality could be expected to be the most dangerous form of deception — people react more strongly (in terms of punishment assigned and negative emotions felt) to acts of betrayal in which appearance and reality are opposites of one another (e.g., the campus police officer who commits rape; Koehler & Gershoff, 2003). The moral posturing of hypocrites is likely to create resentment in others (Monin, 2007), which could explain why the exposure of hypocrisy creates malicious or gleeful pleasure in others (e.g., a student criticizing others about plagiarizing and then getting caught plagiarizing evokes *schadenfreude* in others; Powell & Smith, 2013). Finally, work in evolutionary psychology suggests that we as a species would, due to adaptive pressure, be expected to be well equipped to detect hypocrisy (e.g., Kurzban, 2012). Based on results such as those described above, blatant deception involving moral posturing could be expected to make hypocrisy a less advantageous strategy than being straight out unfair. However, we suggest that hypocrisy may thrive because even the slightest doubt that hypocrites manage to cast upon their guilt may often be enough to deter punishment. In Anglo-Saxon and continental judiciary systems, there is almost sacrosanct belief in the principle that a defendant may not be convicted when reasonable doubts about the defendant's guilt remain and that in doubt courts must decide for the defendant (e.g., Shapiro, 1991). Our aim was to investigate whether this principle may be relevant not only as a principle guiding judiciary processes, but also, as we suggest, as a principle guiding individuals' everyday moral behavior in contexts in which questions of guilt and punishment arise.

The intuition that punishment may not be administered as long as reasonable doubts about guilt remain could have evolutionary roots. Research on problems regarding the evolution of cooperation initially suggested that Axelrod's (1984) tit-for-tat strategy was the most successful in playing the repeated prisoner's dilemma. However, later research has added the important caveat that this is true only in environments in which each player has perfect information — in more realistic settings, in which there is a measure of uncertainty regarding others' actions, strategies that are generous (i.e., cooperate more than their opponents), are the most successful in terms of payoff (Bendor, Kramer, & Stout, 1991). Such results suggest that the intuition to treat others as innocent until proven beyond reasonable doubt to be guilty could have evolutionary adaptive value. Although such an intuition may have its roots in evolution, it is also clearly a cultural product. Society has a primary interest in preventing mistaken punishments — such punishments lead to a long-run break-down of cooperation and deterred social welfare (Ambrus & Greiner, 2012; Grechenig, Nicklisch, & Thöni, 2010). Regardless of the type of mechanisms involved (biology, socialization, or some combination of the two), the development of an intuition not to punish when in doubt could in part explain the commonness of moral hypocrisy — hypocrites claim to be innocent, and such claims, even if not fully believed, may be sufficient to deter punishment.

The primary focus of the present research is on how people react to unfair outcomes under circumstances in which the unfair outcome is, or is not, accompanied by hypocritical deception. We will both assess beliefs regarding the occurrence of deception and investigate responses to such deception. Based on the literature, an unfair outcome could have been expected to be punished more severely if accompanied by rather blatant deception (e.g., Brandts & Charness, 2003; Tyler et al., 2006),

especially if that deception involved moral posturing as fair (Koehler & Gershoff, 2003; Monin, 2007; Powell & Smith, 2013). But this is not what we expected would happen. By contrast, we suggest that people, when dealing out punishment, are guided by the principle of treating others as innocent until they are proven beyond reasonable doubt to be guilty. This implies that the doubt created by the hypocrite's deception, even if not plausible, could suffice to deter punishment of the hypocrite's unfair action. Such a result would illustrate the benefits of hypocrisy and thereby also help explain its prevalence.

We employed a decision-making measure to investigate how people respond to unfair outcomes. The ultimatum game (Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarze, 1982) is a two-person game in which one player, the proposer, suggests the division of a given sum of money. The other player, the responder, either accepts or rejects the proposal. In case the responder accepts, both players are paid according to the proposal. In case the responder rejects, the money that was to be distributed is lost. In Study 1, the proposer could directly choose between a fair and an unfair outcome, or use a coin to determine the outcome. In one condition the coin flip was not verifiable (*doubt* condition), but in the other it was (*knowledge* condition). Regarding proposers, we first expected proposers to more frequently employ the coin when the outcome of the coin flip could be misreported (see Study 3 in Lönnqvist, Irlenbusch, & Walkowitz, 2014). Second, we expected the aggregate data from the coin flip to indicate that coin flippers merely claimed to have let the coin decide (i.e., we expected unfair outcomes to be more frequent than would be expected by chance), suggesting that they were hypocrites. However, our primary interest was on responders. Building on the notion that reasonable doubt regarding guilt is sufficient to deter punishment, we expected responders to be more lenient toward proposers who claimed to have flipped the coin to arrive at the unfair outcome than toward proposers who directly proposed the unfair outcome. Further supporting this prediction were data from two pilot studies indicating that (a) letting the coin decide was considered much fairer than directly choosing the unfair outcome, and (b) letting some presumably guilty persons go unpunished was considered much better than inadvertently punishing an innocent person. Furthermore, in case reasonable doubt is enough to deter punishment, allegedly flipping the coin should be as powerful a deterrent to punishment as verifiably flipping the coin, leading us to expect no differences between the *doubt* and *knowledge* conditions. Finally, we expected beliefs to be dissociated from decisions: although we expected responders to refrain from punishing proposers who claimed to have flipped the coin to arrive at the unfair outcome, we did not expect responders to believe such claims.

Study 1

Method

Study 1 was conducted with 200 participants (mean age = 24.8 years (SD = 4.8); 54% female) at the Cologne Laboratory of Economic Research. Participants were invited via the online recruitment system ORSEE (Greiner, 2004) using a mailing list with approximately 3700 subscribers who had signed up to take part in experiments. Upon arrival, participants were randomly (a) seated in computer cubicles that secured anonymity, (b) assigned a role (proposer or responder), and (c) paired into dyads consisting of one proposer and one responder. All experimental sessions were conducted on the computer using the experimental platform z-Tree (Fischbacher, 2007). Participants were compensated with a fixed amount of €2.5 along with the amount that they earned in the ultimatum game.

The proposer's task was to decide upon the division of €10. The proposer could offer an unfair 8/2 distribution (€8 for the proposer and €2 for the responder) or a fair 5/5 distribution (€5 for both). In the *doubt* condition (N = 100), the proposer was provided with a coin that was labeled 8/2 on one side and 5/5 on the other side. The proposer could