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Hypocrisy and culture: Failing to practice what you preach receives harsher interpersonal reactions in independent (vs. interdependent) cultures[☆]

Daniel A. Effron^{a,*}, Hazel Rose Markus^b, Lauren M. Jackman^b, Yukiko Muramoto^c, Hamdi Muluk^d

^a Organisational Behaviour Subject Area, London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, United Kingdom

^b Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Jordan Hall, Building 420, 450 Serra Mall, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

^c Department of Social Psychology, The University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan

^d Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Failing to practice what you preach is often condemned as hypocrisy in the West. Three experiments and a field survey document less negative interpersonal reactions to misalignment between practicing and preaching in cultures encouraging individuals' interdependence (Asian and Latin American) than in those encouraging independence (North American and Western Europe). In Studies 1–3, target people received greater moral condemnation for a misdeed when it contradicted the values they preached than when it did not – but this effect was smaller among participants from Indonesia, India, and Japan than among participants from the USA. In Study 4, employees from 46 nations rated their managers. Overall, the more that employees perceived a manager's words and deeds as chronically misaligned, the less they trusted him or her – but the more employees' national culture emphasized interdependence, the weaker this effect became. We posit that these cultural differences in reactions to failures to practice what one preaches arise because people are more likely to view the preaching as other-oriented and generous (vs. selfish and hypocritical) in cultural contexts that encourage interdependence. Study 2 provided meditational evidence of this possibility. We discuss implications for managing intercultural conflict, and for theories about consistency, hypocrisy, and moral judgment.

1. Introduction

Practicing what you preach is not always easy. For example, leaders may struggle to enact policies that fit their stated ideals, and employees may feel obligated to pay lip service at work to values that do not guide their behavior at home. In Western cultural contexts, failing to practice what you preach can have grave interpersonal consequences. The present research examines the possibility that outside the West, misaligned practicing and preaching seems more appropriate and has less severe consequences. Specifically, we predict that people react less negatively to such misalignment in cultures encouraging individuals' *interdependence* (e.g., Asia and Latin America) compared to cultures encouraging individuals' *independence* (e.g., North America and Western Europe).

In Western contexts, “failing to practice what you preach” is often judged as hypocrisy (Stone & Fernandez, 2008), so it is no surprise it elicits negative reactions. For example, it can be seen as hypocritical to “say one thing but do another” (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005), or to excuse yourself while condemning others for the same misdeed

(Lammers, 2012; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). Research in the West has focused on two negative interpersonal consequences of misaligned practicing and preaching. The first is moral condemnation. Vignette experiments show that the same misdeed seems more hypocritical and thus receives greater moral condemnation when it contradicts values the transgressor has previously endorsed than when it does not (Barden et al., 2005; Barden, Rucker, Petty, & Rios, 2014; Effron, Lucas, & O'Connor, 2015; Jordan, Sommers, Bloom, & Rand, 2017; Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2013; Powell & Smith, 2012). For example, an academic might seem less moral and more deserving of punishment for committing plagiarism if she had previously given a speech about the importance of academic integrity than if she had not. The second interpersonal consequence is distrust. Field studies show that when employees perceive managers as chronically “saying one thing but doing another,” they distrust the managers, which dampens the employees' motivation, organizational commitment, and performance (for a review, see Simons, Leroy, Collewaert, & Masschelein, 2014).

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: deffron@london.edu (D.A. Effron).

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Although this previous research often equates hypocrisy with inconsistency, the two are actually distinct constructs (Monin & Merritt, 2012). We distinguish between failures to practice what you preach – termed *word-deed misalignment* (Simons, 2002) – and hypocrisy, which we view as a morally discrediting attribution for such misalignment (cf. Cha & Edmondson, 2006). Specifically, we argue misalignment seems hypocritical only if it appears motivated by a self-serving desire to seem more virtuous than you really are (cf. Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). When people attribute word-deed misalignment to a different motive, they view it as less hypocritical and condemn it less severely (Barden et al., 2005; Barden et al., 2014). For example, when a person advises others to “do as I say, not as I’ve done,” observers tend not to listen because they view her advice as hypocritical – unless she has suffered for what she has done. In that case, they interpret her advice as a genuine attempt to help them and are more inclined to listen (Effron & Miller, 2015). More generally, the same act of misalignment can seem more hypocritical or more benign, depending on the situations in which it occurs. We propose that culture, like situations, powerfully shape how people understand word-deed misalignment. Such misalignment may not seem as hypocritical – and thus not elicit the same degree of negative interpersonal reactions – in all cultural contexts.

Some theoretical perspectives imply that word-deed misalignment will have negative interpersonal consequences in all cultures. A person who preaches without practicing a value can be seen as sending a “false signal” about his or her morality (Jordan et al., 2017). A tendency to respond to such false signals with moral condemnation and distrust should help people in all societies avoid exploitation by individuals who merely appear benevolent. Also, evolutionary pressures may have created a fundamental human aversion to false moral signals, because early humans’ survival depended in part on their ability to avoid exploitation (Kurzban, 2010). Finally, violating a value that one expects others to follow could seem unfair, which would violate moral codes across cultures (Graham et al., 2011).

However, we propose that aversion to word-deed misalignment arises in some important part from culturally grounded assumptions about the nature of the self and the drivers of human behavior. These assumptions are reflected in *models of self* – elements of culture revealed and fostered in individuals’ psychological tendencies, in everyday social interactions and norms, in institutional policies, and in pervasive cultural ideas and values (Markus, 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). These models guide people’s behavior and shape how they understand and explain others’ actions.

According to the *independent* model, the self has a true essence, is defined by internal attributes, and is separate from social contexts (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Lillard, 1998; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Riemer, Shavitt, Koo, & Markus, 2014; Triandis, 1995). This model assumes a person’s core identity remains constant across time and situations, even if he or she does not always behave the same way. The *interdependent* model, by contrast, defines the self by social roles, relationships, norms, and contexts (Fiske et al., 1998; Lillard, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Riemer et al., 2014; Triandis, 1995). Because each person occupies multiple social roles, acts in different contexts, and owes attention, concern and loyalty to multiple individuals and groups, an interdependent self must be flexible and fluid across time and situations. Although all cultures require and foster both independence and interdependence, the independent model is more prominent and normatively sanctioned in the West (i.e., North America and Western Europe), whereas the interdependent model is more prominent and sanctioned in the non-Western cultures that characterize most of the world (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2014).

We propose that the independent model fosters more negative reactions than the interdependent model to people who fail to practice what they preach because each model suggests a different

interpretation of the preaching. A negative interpretation is that their preaching has the selfish aim of creating the false appearance of virtue (i.e., hypocrisy). For example, an employee might publicly promote safety regulations despite privately ignoring them because she wants to earn a promotion, seem superior to her coworkers, or deflect attention from her shortcomings. A more positive explanation ascribes the preaching to generous, other-oriented intentions. For example, the employee may not personally care about safety, but promote it anyway because she wants to help her colleagues avoid punishment for violations, to bolster her organization’s reputation, or to help her boss implement a safety initiative. According to such explanations, word-deed misalignment reflects a willingness to put others before the self rather than implying hypocrisy.

The negative explanation for preaching, with its emphasis on selfishness and hypocrisy, resonates with the independent model of self. To believe a person’s preaching reflects feigned virtue requires drawing a distinction between how virtuous people “truly” are and how virtuous their public behavior is. This distinction is ingrained in the independent model’s view that the self has a true essence separate from social contexts. The multiple faces a person chooses to show to the world are like masks, concealing the true self. The distinction between apparent and actual virtue makes less sense in the interdependent model, in which social contexts are defining elements of self. According to this model, virtue does not only come from within, but is bestowed by other people based on public behavior. The multiple faces a person must show to the world do not mask but constitute the self. For example, Japanese distinguish between the public or “front self” (*omote*) and the private or “back self” (*ura*). Importantly, both selves are authentic, and knowing when to restrain the “back” in deference to the “front” self is a valued skill. When the two conflict, Japanese are expected to favor the *omote* (Doi, 1986; Lebra, 2004; Riemer et al., 2014).

The positive explanation for preaching, with its emphasis on other-oriented intentions, resonates better with the interdependent model. Interdependence requires fulfilling relational obligations, preserving harmony, and being socially sensitive (Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002; Riemer et al., 2014). To meet these requirements, people must modify their words and deeds depending on whom they are with – which will sometimes require preaching without practicing. Observers in interdependent contexts are thus likely to assume that actors’ preaching arises, at least in part, from other-oriented intentions. For example, in Asian cultures, “publicly agreeing, while privately disagreeing, with others may be seen as exemplifying tact and sensitivity rather than submission and cowardice” or hypocrisy (Hodges & Geyer, 2006, p. 7).

To summarize, people could have either selfish or generous reasons for preaching a value despite not practicing it. Observers in all cultures are capable of entertaining both types of reasons when seeking to explain an actor’s behavior. However, we expect the selfish reasons to be more plausible and salient to actors in cultures that encourage independence. Given cultural differences in how people interpret word-deed misalignment, we expect cultural differences in how negatively people react to it. Specifically, we formulated the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis. *Word-deed misalignment will provoke greater moral condemnation and distrust in cultures that emphasize independence relative to those that emphasize interdependence.*

To our knowledge, we are the first to test this prediction. In so doing, we build on previous work documenting cultural differences in how people think about inconsistency. People in Asia are less likely than people in the West to expect themselves and others to act consistently across situations (Choi & Nisbett, 2000; English & Chen, 2007). Among people who hold a more interdependent model of self, cross-situational inconsistency is less predictive of well-being (Church et al., 2014; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Suh, 2002). In Asian versus Western cultures, making choices that appear inconsistent with personal

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