



Vicarious hypocrisy: Bolstering attitudes and taking action after exposure to a hypocritical ingroup member



Elizabeth S. Focella^{a,*}, Jeff Stone^a, Nicholas C. Fernandez^a, Joel Cooper^b, Michael A. Hogg^c

^a University of Arizona, USA

^b Princeton University, USA

^c Claremont Graduate University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Vicarious hypocrisy occurs when observing an ingroup member behave hypocritically.
- Vicarious hypocrisy (VH) motivates ingroup members to bolster their attitudes.
- VH motivates highly identified ingroup members to perform the advocated behavior.
- VH is moderated by the hypocrite's perceived responsibility for the hypocrisy.
- VH is attenuated by affirming the valued social identity & by a misattribution cue.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 December 2014

Revised 7 August 2015

Accepted 24 September 2015

Available online 28 September 2015

Keywords:

Cognitive dissonance

Hypocrisy

Vicarious

Attitudes

Self-affirmation

ABSTRACT

Four studies tested the prediction that when highly identified group members observe another ingroup member behave hypocritically, they experience vicarious hypocrisy, which they reduce by bolstering their support for the ingroup hypocrite's message. Participants in Experiment 1 ($N = 161$) who witnessed a similar ingroup member act hypocritically about using sunscreen reported more positive attitudes toward using sunscreen than participants exposed to an outgroup hypocrite or to a dissimilar ingroup hypocrite. The effect of vicarious hypocrisy on attitude bolstering was attenuated in Experiment 2 ($N = 68$) when ingroup identity was affirmed. In Experiment 3 ($N = 64$), more highly identified participants acquired sunscreen when a fellow ingroup member's hypocrisy was attributed to high compared to low choice. Experiment 4 ($N = 68$) showed that a misattribution cue attenuated the effect of vicarious hypocrisy on sunscreen acquisition. The discussion focuses on the vicarious dissonance processes that motivate some observers to defend, rather than reject, a hypocritical ingroup member.

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1. Introduction

How do people react when a member of a valued ingroup performs an act of hypocrisy? Consider the president of a campus group who distributes a message advocating the use of sunscreen to reduce the risk for skin cancer, only to later be seen by the group's members with a sunburn after a weekend at the beach. Would the group president's act of hypocrisy threaten to discredit the group as a whole, and consequently, cause group members to derogate and ignore the president's advice to use sunscreen? Or would they perceive their leader's hypocrisy as a challenge to their positive image of their group, and in order to reduce the perceived threat to their group, become motivated to use sunscreen?

The present research tests the novel prediction that, rather than derogate the deviant, ingroup members will show stronger support for the ingroup hypocrite. Our prediction derives from recent research showing that ingroup deviance can induce a state of vicarious cognitive dissonance among ingroup members (Cooper & Hogg, 2007). As with the dissonance that follows personal hypocrisy (Stone, 2011; Stone & Fernandez, 2008), ingroup members should perceive the ingroup hypocrite's deviance as a threat to the image of the group as having integrity — as being honest and sincere about its normative prescriptions for behavior. To reduce dissonance and restore their perception of the group's integrity, ingroup members will bolster their support for the ingroup hypocrite and his or her message. Thus, rather than derogate the ingroup hypocrite as might be predicted by the black sheep effect (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988), we predict that ingroup members will support the ingroup deviant by bolstering their attitudes toward the hypocrite's message, and by taking action that is consistent with the ingroup hypocrite's advice.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh 800 Algoma Blvd., Oshkosh, WI 54901, USA.
E-mail address: focellae@uwosh.edu (E.S. Focella).

1.1. The black sheep effect

The black sheep effect occurs when people show extreme disfavor toward ingroup members who violate important group norms (Hutchison, Abrams, Gutierrez, & Viki, 2008; Marques & Páez, 1994; Marques et al., 1988). Specifically, whereas ingroup members report more positive evaluations of a desirable ingroup compared to outgroup member, they will report more negative evaluations of an undesirable ingroup member compared to an undesirable outgroup member. The black sheep effect is strongest among observers who are highly identified with the ingroup (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Hutchison et al., 2008), and when the deviant's behavior is relevant to the group norms (Marques et al., 1988), or in some way challenges the entitativity or the status of the ingroup (Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010).

The desire to maintain a positive social identity for the ingroup is thought to drive the black sheep effect. According to the *subjective group dynamics* model (e.g., Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001), the process begins when ingroup members detect a discrepancy between (a) the existence of an undesirable ingroup member and (b) the positive image of the valued group. Because the discrepancy threatens to undermine the positive image of the valued group, highly identified ingroup members are motivated to purge the group of the deviant by derogating him or her (Marques & Páez, 1994). Whereas the subjective group dynamics model maintains that the presence of an ingroup deviant necessarily requires derogation of the black sheep in order to promote positive intergroup differentiation, other research suggests that denigrating the ingroup deviant may serve the intrapersonal goal of self-image maintenance (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003; Eidelman, Silvia, & Biernat, 2006). As such, ingroup members may be able to substitute other strategies for reducing the personal threat, including disidentification with the ingroup (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003). The ongoing debate about the black sheep effect indicates that other responses may occur, including the possibility that under some conditions, both group and individual concerns are best served by *embracing* the ingroup deviant and his or her transgression. We propose that an act of hypocrisy by an ingroup member represents a form of deviance that, while posing a significant threat to ingroup members, motivates them to increase their favorability toward the ingroup deviant by supporting his or her message.

1.2. The psychology of hypocrisy

An act of hypocrisy is often defined in social psychology as saying one thing but doing another (e.g. Aronson, 1999; Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Research has primarily investigated two forms of hypocrisy: moral hypocrisy and personal hypocrisy. Moral hypocrisy is a subtle form of egoism people display by proposing a moral course of action but failing to perform the moral act when they have the opportunity (Batson, 2011). Research on moral hypocrisy tackles the question of why people do not act with moral integrity.

In contrast, the present research draws from previous work on personal acts of hypocrisy and the dissonance processes that motivate people to maintain their self-integrity (Stone, 2011; Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Personal hypocrisy occurs when people advocate a pro-social course of action and then reflect on instances in the past when they failed to perform the advocated course of action (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994). The discrepancy between their pro-attitudinal advocacy and their past failures activates highly important cognitions linked to self-integrity (Aronson, 1999). People perceive an act of personal hypocrisy as a threat to their self-integrity, which reflects their core self-beliefs about honesty and sincerity (Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). Following a hypocritical act, restoring perceptions of self-integrity requires that people act in a more honest and sincere manner than in the past. Thus, when

they behave like a hypocrite, people are motivated by dissonance to be honest and sincere about what they advocated to others, which they can directly accomplish by bringing their behavior into line with the prosocial course of action. Thus, an act of personal hypocrisy appears to cause a form of dissonance that motivates people to practice what they preach.

A novel observation in the current paper is that the experience of personal hypocrisy, and the dissonance that it creates, can also occur at the group level. When people witness the hypocrisy of a fellow ingroup member, they may perceive a threat to their image of their group as honest and sincere about important issues. Recent research by Barden, Rucker, Petty, and Rios (2014) shows that when ingroup members observe a fellow ingroup member advocate a course of action and then learn that the individual does not perform the target behavior, they rate the individual's behavior as more hypocritical than if they observe the discrepancy in the reverse order (i.e., learn of the ingroup member's transgression before the advocacy). However, when the hypocrite is an outgroup member, the same discrepancy is rated as less hypocritical, and the order in which observers learn of the discrepancy does not moderate the effects. This research suggests that ingroup members may be especially sensitive to the hypocritical behavior of another ingroup member, but it does not address whether ingroup members are motivated to derogate or embrace the hypocritical deviant and his or her message.

A study by Gaffney, Hogg, Cooper, and Stone (2012) suggests that ingroup observers may be inclined to support the hypocrite's message. Gaffney et al. (2012) found that participants reported significantly more positive attitudes toward a hypocritical group member's initial message when an outgroup observer commented on the hypocrisy compared to when an ingroup member commented on the hypocrisy and compared to when the hypocrisy was unacknowledged. Thus, consistent with the subjective group dynamics model (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001), participants were more motivated to respond to the ingroup hypocrite in the presence of an outgroup member, but in contrast to previous research on the black sheep effect, they appeared to support, rather than derogate, the ingroup hypocrite's message. We suggest that this bolstering response by ingroup members to an ingroup hypocrite may be a form of vicarious cognitive dissonance.

1.3. Dissonance caused vicariously by the behavior of others

The prediction that an ingroup member can cause dissonance among highly identified ingroup observers derives from recent research on vicarious cognitive dissonance (Cooper & Hogg, 2007; Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003). Norton et al. (2003) integrated research on cognitive dissonance theory and social identity theory to describe the process by which people experience dissonance vicariously after witnessing the inconsistent behavior of another individual. Similar to the processes that guide research on the black sheep effect, research on self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) suggests that when people are highly identified with their group, and their group membership is made salient, they engage in a depersonalization process by which they no longer define the self solely by their distinct characteristics, but by their group membership. Under the conditions of depersonalization, ingroup members become potent sources of influence, and people are likely to follow the advocated norms of their group. Norton et al. (2003) reasoned that depersonalization should also influence cognitive dissonance processes when people observe the inconsistent behavior of others, and predicted that observing a counter-attitudinal act by a prototypical ingroup member should cause highly identified ingroup perceivers to experience dissonance and the motivation to reduce it. In support of this prediction, Norton et al. (2003) showed that when a group identity is salient and observers strongly identify with the group, the act of witnessing another group member engage in a counter-attitudinal behavior causes

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