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What Makes Hypocrisy? Folk Definitions, Attitude/Behavior Combinations, Attitude Strength, and Private/Public Distinctions

Sean M. Laurent^a  and Brian A. M. Clark^b

^aUniversity of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; ^bUniversity of Oregon

ABSTRACT

Past research has rarely examined what makes behaviors appear more or less hypocritical. This work expands our understanding, identifying and exploring factors contributing to perception of hypocrisy. An initial study surveyed participants' definitions of the concept. Experiments 2a/2b then demonstrate that attitude-behavior inconsistency is viewed as most hypocritical, followed by attitude-attitude and behavior-behavior inconsistency. Experiments 3 and 4 examined how perception of hypocrisy depends on attitude strength, communication method, and whether attitudes/behaviors are privately or publicly held/enacted. We conclude that hypocrisy is perceived as strongest when attitudes are publicly imposed on others in an attempt to appear morally superior.

Hypocrisy is not a new concept. For example, it is referenced in the Bible (e.g., Matthew 23:3) and the Qur'an (e.g., 9:101). Type the word *hypocrisy* into a search engine such as Google and you will find more than 35 million results. If you want to hear someone call someone a hypocrite, turn on talk radio: You won't have to wait long. Considering the sheer frequency with which the word is applied to others' conduct, one might surmise that it is a very important dimension in person perception. Yet, the basic underlying factors that lead to perception of hypocrisy have not received much attention.

Modern-day research suggests that calling someone a hypocrite represents a moralistic character judgment (Monin & Merritt, 2011). Consistent with this, people don't like hypocrites (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Jordan, Sommers, Bloom, & Rand, 2017), want to punish them (Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2013), and rejoice in their misfortune (Powell & Smith, as cited in Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). People may even chronically anticipate hypocrisy: Disclaimers that one possesses a negative trait prompt perceivers to assume that the person possesses the disclaimed trait (El-Alayli, Myers, Petersen, & Lystad, 2008). With a few exceptions, though, hypocrisy research has primarily focused on people doing bad things in the lab

but trying to look good while doing them (Batson, 2008; Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson et al., 2003; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Lönnqvist, Irlenbusch, & Walkowitz, 2014; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). This suggests that people can be hypocrites even when they are only acting rationally (Watson & Sheikh, 2007) or doing what experimenters tell them to do (Fernandez-Dols et al., 2010).

Given the distant origins of the concept and its frequent use as a label for others' behavior in everyday discourse, one might surmise that research has fully mapped out how people think about the concept, telling us when and how people apply the term to others' behavior. Yet, surprisingly little empirical work has examined how everyday people conceptualize hypocrisy or the factors that make people seem more or less hypocritical. The main aim of the current research is therefore to further contribute to this limited knowledge base. We do so by first exploring folk definitions of hypocrisy. We follow this with several experiments that examine previously proposed but untested hypotheses, help confirm some past findings using new methods, and provide new insights into how people think about the concept

Perceiving hypocrisy: What do we know?

Although hypocrisy can be conceptualized as the application of different evaluative standards to one's own (or one's ingroup) behavior relative to others' behavior (e.g., Lammers, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008), a more frequent conceptualization typically involves a person (a) publicly stating an attitude/belief about how others' should behave (or telling others how they should/should not behave, which implies an attitude toward the behavior), and then (b) subsequently acting in a way that directly contradicts the stated attitude (Alicke, Gordon, & Rose, 2013; Barden et al., 2005; Jordan et al., 2017). However, hypocrisy is sometimes also attributed without a behavioral component, such as when people take one position on an issue and then reverse their stance.

For example, Aronson and colleagues (Aronson, 1999; Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992; Fried, 1998; Fried & Aronson, 1995; Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994; see also Lammers et al., 2010; Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002) framed hypocrisy as cognitive dissonance arising from discrepancies between two opposing thoughts or between contrary thoughts and behavior. However, this work was not aimed at understanding what makes people seem hypocritical; instead, its goal was to show how hypocrisy can be harnessed to positively impact behavior. In work that more directly examined how people think about hypocrisy, Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt (2017) explored how changes in attitudes by moral leaders are sometimes viewed as brave moral evolutions and at other times as hypocritical flip-flops, such as when actors appear to be disingenuously or pragmatically espousing a stance. These studies suggest that changes in attitudes alone can be viewed as hypocritical. Despite this, because attitude–attitude contradictions have not been directly compared with attitude–behavior contradictions, it is unknown whether the latter represents a more severe form of hypocrisy (i.e., whether it seems “more” hypocritical).

Other work on perceptions of hypocrisy has examined this latter form. Barden et al. (2005) explored the ordering of attitudes and behaviors and found that greater hypocrisy is perceived when behaviors follow attitudes relative to the reverse order. Explanation of the effect focused on how expressing an attitude implies a belief or opinion about how others should act and how contradicting this belief in subsequent behavior suggests that the person either is not living up to self-imposed standards or was insincere about their beliefs. Reversing this order, however, leads to

inferences that the person simply changed their mind. Highlighting a distinct role for *where* behaviors are performed in perception of hypocrisy, the authors also theorized that the worst form of hypocrisy is when an actor's attitude-contradicting behavior is performed *privately* rather than publicly, as this implies two violations: the behavioral contradiction itself and the *hiding* of this information from others. However, this idea was not directly tested.

Although hiding attitude inconsistent behavior is likely viewed negatively, there are reasons to believe that the public–private distinction may not be particularly important for judging hypocrisy. For example, actors might publicly perform a behavior in front of the same person they imposed a standard on (similar to “honest” hypocrites who admit to performing the behaviors they condemn; Jordan et al., 2017), or they might impose a behavioral standard on one person and then publicly violate that standard in front of another person. In the former case, public behavior does not seem exceedingly deceptive. In the latter case, it does. Yet, in both cases, the behavior may be seen as similarly hypocritical because of the contradiction of an imposed standard. Thus, whether behaviors are public versus private may not be an important distinction; more important might be whether actors are transparent about their inconsistency and whether they impose standards on others, which are testable hypotheses.

Related to this idea, Jordan et al. (2017) investigated why people do not like hypocrites. Although this work examined evaluations of hypocrites and not perceptions of hypocrisy,¹ it is important for its contribution to our understanding of why hypocrisy is so reviled. Supported in five studies, their hypothesis was that hypocrites are disliked because they falsely signal their own moral values in order to deceive others and appear morally superior. This argument is powerful because it resonates with many of the ways hypocrisy has been conceptualized: By applying different standards to one's own and others' behaviors and criticizing others for doing things one does oneself, hypocrisy is seen as deliberately deceptive, self-serving, and immoral. Yet this conclusion in part challenges a finding by Alicke et al. (2013) that hypocrisy attribution does not necessarily require the intent to deceive. In addition, it is unclear whether openly admitting that one engages in the behaviors one has said are wrong before performing them—as in Jordan et al.—affects hypocrisy perception in the same way as openly performing those behaviors without directly acknowledging one's own inconsistency.

In a comprehensive article that focused not on extent of hypocrisy perceived but on the frequency of its attribution (i.e., judgments regarding whether behavior is or is not categorically hypocritical), Alicke et al. (2013) explored several theoretically relevant philosophical and psychological inputs to hypocrisy. They found that hypocrisy (a) does not necessarily require the intent to deceive, (b) is distinct from simple weakness of will, (c) may sometimes involve self-deception, (d) requires inconsistency (i.e., between attitudes and behaviors), (e) is typically not attributed when outcomes are positive or inconsistency is pro-socially motivated, and (f) is more frequently attributed when outcomes are more severe. Of interest here, the authors also found that some people attributed hypocrisy even when no public pronouncement of attitudes was made, although public pronouncements did increase its attribution. This suggests that the content and form of how attitudes are communicated is important for hypocrisy.

For example, similar to how contradictions of private beliefs in behavior are seen by some as hypocritical and by others as not, behavioral contradictions of weakly held attitudes might seem moderately hypocritical, even though little or no contradiction is directly implied. That is, even an ambivalently stated *suggestion* that some behavior might not be appropriate could lead to perception of hypocrisy when the actor performs that behavior, perhaps to the extent that the actor seems to be preemptively claiming high moral standards (e.g., Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). Moreover, although relative to contradicting weakly held attitudes, contradicting strongly held attitudes should seem more hypocritical, it also seems possible that when people *directly impose* standards on others or *criticize* others for their behavior, they should be seen as particularly hypocritical when they perform the same actions they condemn.

We note that a partial test of this hypothesis was indirectly performed by Alicke et al. (2013). Specifically, the authors varied whether an agent privately held an attitude, publicly stated the same attitude, or criticized someone for behavior that contradicted the attitude. In these cases, no difference in the frequency of hypocrisy attribution emerged between the two public versions, although both were more frequently seen as hypocritical relative to when attitudes were privately held. However, it is possible that the extent of perceived hypocrisy differed across the cases even though both forms were viewed as categorically hypocritical. In addition, because this study was not designed to address questions regarding

strength of attitudes and did not include versions representing weakly (i.e., ambivalently) held attitudes or strong attitudes imposed without criticism, questions about perceived hypocrisy in these cases remain.

The present research

The present research had several goals. First, a novel study aimed to discover whether ordinary people define hypocrisy in the same way it has been defined by dictionaries and interested researchers. To do this, we simply asked people what they think hypocrisy is, examined their definitions for common themes, and compared these themes with previous conceptualizations and definitions. After confirming that hypocrisy is prototypically viewed by ordinary people as behavior that contradicts previously expressed attitudes—a sensible assumption, but one that has not yet received empirical support—and uncovering other aspects of how hypocrisy is commonly defined, we conducted a series of targeted experiments. Our goal was to test several hypotheses about hypocrisy that either have not been directly tested or have received only limited attention.

In Experiments 2a and 2b, we directly compared with each other two forms of hypocrisy that have been separately examined but not previously contrasted: attitude–behavior contradictions (e.g., Alicke et al., 2013; Barden et al., 2005; Jordan et al., 2017) and attitude–attitude contradictions (Aronson, 1999; Kreps et al., 2017). Also included was a behavior-opposing-behavior control condition that stripped behaviors of attitudinal content to demonstrate that “simple” inconsistency (i.e., doing one thing and then doing the opposite) without any true contradiction is not commonly viewed as hypocritical. We hypothesized that attitude–behavior (AB) pairs would be seen as highly hypocritical, attitude–attitude (AA) pairs as moderately hypocritical (but less hypocritical than AB pairs), and that control (behavior–behavior [BB]) pairs, without attitudinal content, would not be seen as particularly hypocritical.

In Experiment 3, we examined the role of attitude strength and form of communication on hypocrisy. Relative to contradicting strongly held attitudes with behavior, contradictions of weak and uncertainly held attitudes should be seen as less (but still moderately) hypocritical because the attitudes are less at odds with the behavior, although they still contradict it. Similarly, although hypocrisy judgments may be near a ceiling when attitudes are expressed as strongly held, we wanted to examine whether greater hypocrisy

would be attributed when contradictory behaviors followed attitudes that are strongly held *and* directly imposed on others, or when others' behavior is explicitly criticized. Because hypocrisy has been framed as a moral violation (e.g., Batson et al., 1997) and public declarations of beliefs appear to be one way to attempt appearing morally superior (Jordan et al., 2017; see also El-Alayli et al., 2008), we also measured judgments of immorality, beliefs that agents are trying to appear morally superior, and opinions about the strength of agents' beliefs.

In Experiment 4, we explored several hypotheses regarding the public versus private nature of attitudes and behaviors on extent of perceived hypocrisy. Specifically, it has been (a) hypothesized—but not directly tested—that greater hypocrisy is perceived when attitude-inconsistent behaviors are privately rather than publicly enacted (Barden et al., 2005); (b) shown that hypocrites are disliked the most when their behavior appears deliberately deceptive rather than openly admitted (Jordan et al., 2017), even though perceiving hypocrisy may not require deception (Alicke et al., 2013); and (c) demonstrated that hypocrisy is more frequently attributed—although the relative *strength* of perceived hypocrisy judgments is not known—when attitudes are publicly (vs. privately) pronounced (Alicke et al., 2013). Because each of these hypotheses represents a somewhat different expectation for how private–public attitude–behavior combinations will impact perceived hypocrisy, we created conditions that varied each aspect and examined contrasts that tested each prediction. When both attitudes and behavior were public, we also varied whether the behavior was hidden from the person who had been exposed to the attitude or was transparently performed in front of the same person. To test whether immorality, perceived moral superiority, and belief that the actors were sincere in their attitudes were impacted by condition in the same way as was perceived hypocrisy, we included the same additional variables as in Experiment 3.

Study 1: Folk definitions

After examining 40 dictionary definitions of the words *hypocrisy*, *hypocritical*, and *hypocrite* and eliminating circular definitions (e.g., hypocrisy is “an act or instance of hypocrisy,” or a hypocrite is “a person given to hypocrisy,” etc.), 29 nonidentical definitions suggested three prominent themes: deceit, (im)morality, and inconsistency. Deceit was the strongest theme, with references to falseness (pretense, feigning,

insincerity, etc.) in 25 of the definitions. Immorality and inconsistency emerged as secondary, largely non-overlapping themes, each appearing in about half of the definitions. However, inconsistency might be considered implicitly present in some definitions not classified as such (e.g., falsely claiming to live by certain standards implies that one is contradicting those standards).

Study 1 aimed to uncover how laypeople conceptualize hypocrisy by asking them to define it in their own words. Definitions were coded in line with our goal of capturing folk understanding and placing it within a framework of existing scholarship. Most of our codes were therefore derived by examining previous theory and research (e.g., Alicke et al., 2013; Barden et al., 2005; Batson et al., 1997; Jordan et al., 2017; Lammers et al., 2010; Monin & Merritt, 2011; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). Additional codes naturally emerged from examining the definitions.

Method

Open practices and data

All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in all studies are disclosed. All sample sizes were determined prior to data collection, and no analyses were performed until data were collected. Data for all studies reported herein, as well as materials supporting these data (i.e., coding instructions, instructions for experiments, experimental stimuli, and experimental replications), are freely available at <https://osf.io/vzqad/>.

Participants

Introductory psychology students at a state university in the Pacific Northwest ($N=913$; $M_{\text{age}}=20.09$, $SD=3.81$; 71.7% female) participated in partial fulfillment of a course research requirement. The sample was primarily White (78.5%; 12.5% Asian, 1.5% African American, 1.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 4.8% other). Random subsamples were drawn from the total sample of 913 cases, forming a working sample of 546 cases. We explain this process next.

Procedures and coding

Our single, open-ended item was part of a larger survey that participants completed online (average completion time was 24 min). Participants were given the prompt, “In your own words, please define the

concept of hypocrisy; what it is to be hypocritical.” Codes were binary, capturing the presence or absence of particular features in each definition.² Because many participants provided lengthy definitions (or multiple definitions), codes are not independent. The final codes are framed next as questions. Illustrative examples here and in the Results and Discussion sections are direct quotes of participants’ definitions.

- Did the definition cite an attitude paired with a behavior, a pair of attitudes, or a pair of behaviors? An example containing all three possibilities is, “to do or say something that is wrong, but then proceed to do or say that same thing and justify that it is okay.”
- Was the definition an aphorism, an abstract principle, or a concrete example? Examples of aphorisms are “saying one thing and doing another” and “not practicing what you preach.” Although aphorisms are abstract, abstract definitions are not necessarily aphorisms (e.g., “to go against what you say”). Concrete definitions, when present, were always appended to abstract definitions (e.g., “To say one thing and act in a way that disagrees with what’s said. Like, saying that using real fur on clothing is bad, but wearing a coat made from fur.”).
- Did definitions reference morality by mentioning what people should/ought (not) do, citing (im)morality, right/wrong, good/bad? For example, “when somebody does something they say they don’t believe is right.” Similarly, did definitions mention lying, being untruthful, fake, etc. (e.g., “basically, tell lies to others frequently”)?
- If an attitude component was present, was it discussed as privately held, publicly and generally expressed, or imposed on another person? Attitudes were coded as private if no indication was given that others might be aware of the attitude (e.g., “contradict [*sic*] your beliefs through your actions”) or it was ambiguous whether others are likely to be aware of the attitude (e.g., “when you look down on people that do an act but you do the same act”). Attitude components were coded as public if they were presented such that it could be or is known to others. Definitions could be coded as both private and public (e.g., “to expect and to tell others to behave in a way you yourself do not”). Imposition was coded if definitions mentioned criticizing, condemning, chastising, ordering, instructing, preaching to, or otherwise telling others that they should (not) do

something. Although imposing standards (e.g., “to speak ill of or advise not to do a certain activity which you do yourself”) is necessarily public, not all public expressions are impositions (e.g., “to say something and do something that contradicts [*sic*] what you said”).

- If an attitude was mentioned, was it expressed as a prescription or a proscription? Prescriptions (proscriptions) were coded if definitions mentioned that others should/ought (not) do something, that something is a moral/right/correct/good (immoral/wrong/incorrect/bad) way to act, that the actor “stands for” (“against”) something, and when the actor tells someone (not) to do something.
- Did definitions pair attitudes with behaviors in the conventional temporal order (i.e., “say and then do”) or the reverse? The main cue for coding was the word “then” positioned between the attitude and the behavior. However, position could also be indicated by “previously,” “prior,” “after,” etc., or by positioning of past and present tense verbs. For example, “when you do the exact thing that you said is wrong,” “do” and “said” indicate that the attitude was expressed before the behavior was enacted.

The coding system was developed using a random subsample of 100 definitions. Once the system was formalized, the first two authors independently coded a new random subsample ($n = 300$) that did not include the original 100. After resolving the few discrepancies through discussion, codes were refined further into explicit instructions and two undergraduate research assistants were trained using a different non-overlapping random subsample ($n = 50$) that were not included in the final aggregation of results. After training, these two coders coded another new random subsample ($n = 250$). Again, the first two authors resolved the few discrepancies through discussion. Responses that could not be coded were excluded (e.g., when responses were not understandable or no definition was provided).

The final sample used in analyses included 546 independent free-response definitions. After deletions of noncodable responses, 299 of these were independently coded by the authors (average percentage agreement was 97%, range = 94–99%]; kappas ranged from a low of .62 to a high of .97, average = .83). The two trained undergraduate coders independently coded an additional 247 responses (average agreement was 97%, range = 94–100%]; kappas from .40 to .96, average = .81). For four codes where κ s < .70,

percentage agreement was very high (>95%), and the low reliabilities were a result of very few “yes” responses (range = 3–12 “yes” responses out of 546 possible in each category).

Prior to aggregating codes, the authors resolved all coding disagreements through discussion. Following this, each code was examined for differences in the frequency with which yes and no codes were assigned depending on who performed the coding (i.e., the authors vs. undergraduate research assistants). Two of these comparisons suggested dependency between frequencies and coders (where definitions cited a prescription for behavior and where definitions mentioned the concept of deceitfulness). An examination of the actual definitions provided by participants in these two subsamples suggested that coding differences reflected true random sample-based differences that, relative to each other, indicated likely under- and overestimations of the true population frequency of the codes, rather than systematic differences in use of the coding scheme by coders. Given high overall coder reliability and reliability of different codes across sets of coders, all responses were aggregated. In the aggregated data set, reliability was high (average agreement was 97%, range = 94–99.6%; kappas ranged from .58 to .95, with an average of .82).

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents frequencies of all codes, along with overall coder agreement and associated reliabilities. Examining Table 1, several notable features emerge. More than 90% of definitions cited an actor contradicting an attitude with their behavior, a feature cited in only about half of the dictionary definitions we collected and highlighting how this combination is particularly reflective of hypocrisy. Twenty percent of

definitions cited attitudes paired with attitudes, but many of these definitions were part of larger definitions also including behaviors (e.g., “when a person says or does one thing and then says or does the complete opposite”). Overall, few definitions included BB pairs (5%). When they did, these were typically part of a larger definition that also included attitudes.

Although most dictionary definitions of hypocrisy specifically reference lying or deceit, only 5% of respondents cited this element. Of course, contradicting an attitude with a behavior suggests insincerity but does not rule out, for example, self-deception (Alicke et al., 2013) or a lack of self-awareness concerning the contradiction. Contradicting an attitude with a behavior also does not rule out holding oneself and others to different standards. Many dictionary definitions of hypocrisy also cite virtue, morals, or religious beliefs, but the folk definitions of hypocrisy we examined focused less on these ideas. Still, about one definition in five (~20%) did mention concepts such as good/bad, moral/immoral, or right/wrong, showing that morality plays some role in naturally emergent folk concepts of hypocrisy.

Most definitions were relatively abstract (e.g., “telling others they should act in one way while you don’t act in that way”), which makes sense given that participants were asked to provide definitions. Still, about 3% of participants did cite concrete examples.

Almost half of participants (46%) cited an imposition of standards on others. Looking back at our collection of dictionary definitions, only two of the 29 referenced this. Furthermore, *proscriptions* (i.e., telling others how *not* to behave; 37%) were cited almost four times more often than *prescriptions* (i.e., telling an actor they *should* behave in a particular way; 10%). This suggests that people think contradictions after being told what *not* to do is more representative of

Table 1. Aggregated frequencies of free-response hypocrisy definition codes.

Code	Yes	No	% Yes	% Agreement	κ
Attitude–Behavior	498	48	91	97	.82
Attitude–Attitude	107	439	20	95	.83
Behavior–Behavior	28	518	5	96	.58
Attitude–then–Behavior	167	379	31	97	.93
Behavior–then–Attitude	31	515	6	98	.75
Private Attitude	132	414	24	94	.83
Public Attitude	479	67	88	95	.77
Imposition of standards	251	295	46	96	.92
Prescription	54	492	10	97	.80
Proscription	201	345	37	98	.95
Deceit	29	517	5	98	.79
Morality	76	470	14	95	.80
Abstract	532	14	97	99.6	.82
Concrete	15	531	3	98	.70
Aphorism	109	437	20	96	.87
“Say One Thing and Do Another”	154	392	28	98	.94

Note: A total of 546 definitions were coded (“% Yes” is “Yes” divided by 546). Codes are not independent.

hypocrisy than after being told what *to* do (for a related discussion, see Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). These frequencies are likely an underestimation of the true occurrence of prescriptions and proscriptions, because when impositions were not clearly prescriptions or proscriptions (e.g., “when someone doesn’t practice what they preach”), an imposition of standards was coded as present but was not coded as either a prescription or proscription.

Closely related to and not independent of impositions, almost all (88%) definitions referenced a publicly expressed attitude. Publicly expressed attitudes sometimes referenced impositions (e.g., “telling others to do something”) but sometimes referred simply to stating an attitude (e.g., “saying one thing, but doing another”). The high frequency of this code suggests that a public declaration of one’s attitudes is a prominent feature of hypocrisy (Alicke et al., 2013). In addition, about one fourth of definitions (24%) alluded to *privately* held attitudes/beliefs (e.g., “behaving in a way you once *thought* [emphasis added] was wrong”), which shows that hypocrisy can be perceived even when an attitude is privately held and no intent to deceive others is realistically present. As public and private codes were not mutually exclusive, some definitions were coded as containing both private and public elements (e.g., “when a person *says* or *believes* [emphasis added] something, but then acts in ways that contradict it”).

Consistent with Barden et al. (2005), a pattern emerged in the temporal order of attitudes and behaviors. That is, in 84% of cases of the subset where temporal information was included (31%), it followed an attitude-then-behavior pattern (e.g., “when somebody says they think something is bad, but then they do that same thing later”). However, a non-negligible 16% referenced hypocrisy as a behavior followed by a contradictory attitude (e.g., “when a person does something wrong, and then gets upset later when other people do the same thing”). This suggests that although prototypically, hypocrisy involves behavior following attitudes, for some perceivers or in particular types of cases, temporal order may not matter or hypocrisy may be more easily invoked when behaviors are followed by contradictory attitudes.

Finally, many respondents (20%) simply used an aphorism to define hypocrisy (e.g., “not practicing what you preach”). One aphorism, in particular, was very popular: “saying one thing, and doing another.” Because of this, we decided to code for a “common definition.” To capture the structure and sentiment of this definition, only verbatim phrases and close

variants (e.g., “when a person says one thing, but then does the opposite”) were coded in this way. Even so, more than one fourth (28%) of respondents defined hypocrisy in this way, suggesting that if any single definition of hypocrisy represents a common “folk” definition, this is the one.

Experiments 2a and 2b: The attitude-behavior assumption

To our knowledge, Study 1 is the first of its kind to report how laypeople conceptualize and define hypocrisy in their own words. Although 91% of folk definitions referenced an attitude-behavior combination, the frequency with which AA pairs appeared in definitions (20%) suggests that hypocrisy can also be attributed to actors who hold or express two contradictory attitudes, a notion supported in work by Kreps et al. (2017). However, hypocrisy was seldom defined as opposing behaviors (only 5% of folk definitions).

In Experiments 2a and 2b, we directly examined whether AB pairs would be respectively perceived as more hypocritical and more frequently categorized as hypocritical than AA pairs. We also included a condition that contained behavior-opposing behavior (BB) pairs that were fully stripped of attitudinal content. This condition was meant as a control but was also included to demonstrate that some attitude component (either stated or implied in behavior) is necessary for hypocrisy to be attributed.

Method

Participants and screening (Experiment 2a)

Participants were recruited for an online survey through Craigslist, Facebook, and word of mouth and from introductory psychology courses at a state university in the Pacific Northwest. On Craigslist, recruitment ads were posted in all areas of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming, as well as British Columbia, and Alberta (104 sites total). A total of 926 people responded to the survey. Participants recruited from introductory psychology courses partially fulfilled course requirements and completed a suite of personality measures after responding to the scenarios and demographics questions. Nonstudent participants were uncompensated and much appreciated volunteers.

Data from the 510 respondents who completed the entire set of hypothetical scenarios were examined for signs of careless responding or inattention to the task (i.e., thoughtless responding). Screening decisions were made and executed prior to any data analysis. First, we computed the mean of each item across participants. We then computed correlations between participants' responses and item means. Because random responses should tend to be weakly correlated with responses provided by thoughtful responders, and non-normative responses should tend to be negatively correlated with normative responses, participants' data were excluded if correlations were less than $r = .20$ ($n = 15$) or negative ($n = 6$). Second, four screening scenarios were dispersed throughout the stimulus set. Each involved irrelevant AB pairs (e.g., "A person eats a salad at dinner and a piece of pie for dessert. Later, the same person goes to bed early because they have a meeting first thing in the morning."). To allow some leeway, cases were removed when a response was higher than 2 on the 10-point (0-to-9) hypocrisy scale for any of these screening items. Using this screen, 31 additional cases were deleted, leaving a final sample size of 458.

The vast majority of participants included in the final set were recruited from sources other than introductory psychology courses (82.3%). Many participants, but not all, fully completed the demographics questionnaire. Based on the available data, we therefore estimate that the final sample was mostly female (70%), mostly U.S. residents (90%), and mostly White (84%), with a mix of religious, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participants (Experiment 2b)

Introductory psychology students ($n = 98$) at a state university in the Mountain West participated in partial fulfillment of a course research requirement. The sample was majority female (58.2%) native speakers of English (95%), with most reporting their race/ethnicity as White (87.8%) and their religion as Christian (45.9%) or "other" (28.6%). Political affiliations were a mix of Republican (38.8%) and Democrat (16.3%), with the remainder reporting other affiliations (e.g., Independent, Libertarian). Political ideology had a slight conservative slant as well: 16.3% very liberal or liberal, 60.2% somewhat liberal, moderate (middle of the road), or somewhat conservative, and 22.4% conservative or very conservative.

Materials and procedures

We created 97 hypothetical scenarios and manipulated their content to represent contradictory AB, AA, or control (BB) pairs that contained two opposing behaviors without any attitudinal content. Thus, each of the 97 scenarios had three versions representing the three pairing conditions (AB, AA, and BB). Each participant rated all 97 scenarios. However, so that participants would see each scenario in only one form (i.e., AB, AA, or BB), we created three sets of the 97 scenarios and randomly assigned participants to see only one of the three sets. This led to having 32 or 33 scenarios representing each condition within sets. Scenario order within each set was randomized to the same fixed order.

Each scenario consisted of two sentences, phrased generally as follows: *A person says (does) X. Later, the same person says (does) Y.* The following is a specific example of how we manipulated one scenario (all scenarios are available in the OSM).

AB: "A person says that people should not use animals to make clothing. Later, the same person buys a fur coat." AA: "A person says that people should not use animals to make clothing. Later, the same person says that it's fine for people to make clothing out of animals." BB: "A person does not buy a fur coat when given an opportunity to do so. Later, the same person buys a fur coat at another store."

In Experiment 2a, participants indicated how hypocritical each pair was on a 10-point scale, presented as a number line (0 = *not at all hypocritical*, 9 = *extremely hypocritical*).³ In Experiment 2b, responses could be *no* (0) or *yes* (1), indicating whether each pair was categorically hypocritical.

Results

Exploratory data analysis

In examining frequency distributions and summary statistics, we found that the BB version of one scenario had means indicating substantially greater hypocrisy than other BB scenarios (Experiment 2a: $M = 6.44$ on the 0-to-9 rating scale; Experiment 2b: $M = .88$ on the 0 vs. 1 dichotomous scale). Examination revealed that we had mistakenly included an (imposed) attitude component: "A person does not use drugs *after telling their child that they should not use drugs* [emphasis added]. Later, the same person uses drugs." We excluded responses to this scenario in subsequent analyses.

Attitude/behavior pairing

In Experiment 2a, we first computed mean responses across scenarios for each level of the pairing variable and examined the overall effects of pairing condition (repeated measure: AB, AA, and BB).⁴ The main effect of pairing was large, $\eta_p^2 = .71$. Supporting our prediction, a planned contrast showed that AB pairs ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 1.44$) were perceived as more hypocritical than AA pairs ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 2.62$, $d = 1.17$). AB pairs were also rated as more hypocritical than BB pairs, which were not seen as particularly hypocritical ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 1.38$, $d = 3.59$). BB pairs were rated as less hypocritical than AA pairs ($d = 1.23$).

In Experiment 2b, we computed mean proportions of “yes” responses across scenarios within each of the three levels of the pairing variable and conducted a similar analysis. The main effect of pairing was again large, $\eta_p^2 = .69$. Providing additional support for hypotheses and replicating Experiment 2a, a planned contrast showed that AB pairs ($M = 0.87$, $SD = 0.15$) were perceived as more hypocritical than AA pairs ($M = 0.55$, $SD = 0.41$) and BB pairs ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.14$), respectively ($ds = 1.04$ and 5.03). BB pairs were rated as less hypocritical than AA pairs ($d = 1.34$).

Discussion

The pattern of means in both experiments approximated the frequencies with which people referenced AB pairs (91%), AA pairs (20%), and BB pairs (5%) in Study 1, and effect sizes for planned comparisons were large. Participants indicated that attitudes contradicted by behaviors (AB) were most hypocritical, but even when no behavioral component was present (i.e., AA pairs), attitude inconsistency was seen as moderately hypocritical. The low average hypocrisy ratings for BB pairs confirms that some form of attitude content appears to be required for hypocrisy to be perceived, whether inferred, instantiated by a statement or imposition, or perhaps in some cases behaviorally indicated (i.e., some behaviors very likely suggest a strong attitude even without explicit declaration, such as “attending a pro-cause rally”). Thus, contradiction or inconsistency is a fundamental aspect of hypocrisy, with the strongest form being the contradiction of attitudes with behavior, followed by inconsistency in one’s stance toward an issue.

Experiment 3: Attitude strength and form of communication

Experiment 3 tested the effects of attitude strength and form of communication (i.e., simply stating one’s

attitude, imposing a standard for behavior on others, or criticizing others’ behavior) on perceived hypocrisy.⁵ Four versions of attitude strength and communication were used: “weak” (ambivalence/uncertainty about the attitude), “strong” (clear statements that a behavior is morally wrong), “impose” (telling others they should not engage in a morally wrong behavior), and “criticize” (berating someone for engaging in behavior described as immoral).

Judgments of moral character—strongly implicated in dictionary definitions of hypocrisy and inherent to some conceptualizations (e.g., Batson, 2008) but not present in the majority of naturally emergent definitions in Study 1—were also included to examine whether they were influenced by the same manipulations and tracked attribution of hypocrisy. Similarly, because Jordan et al. (2017) found that negative evaluations of hypocrites are based on their falsely signaling moral superiority, we measured perceptions regarding actors’ attempts to appear morally superior. Finally, to examine the role that perceived strength of actors’ beliefs plays in hypocrisy, we asked to what extent perceivers thought the actors’ attitudes were strongly held.

Overall, we hypothesized that behavior that opposes weakly endorsed attitudes would be perceived as less hypocritical than contradictions of strongly endorsed attitudes but would still be seen as moderately hypocritical. This is because some behavioral contradiction is implied after simply stating that a behavior might be “wrong” (e.g., “If it might be wrong, why do it?”) and because statements like these might suggest to observers that an actor is trying to (weakly) establish a moral position. We hypothesized that hypocrisy ratings in the strong, imposed, and critical conditions would all be higher than in the weak condition. We were less certain, however, whether imposing behavioral standards or criticizing others for their behavior would substantially increase perception of hypocrisy above the case when actors simply take strong stances on a position prior to performing the same behavior. That is, although these forms of hypocrisy might seem “worse” in some ways, each behavioral contradiction may appear so plainly hypocritical that there is little room to rate one form as much more hypocritical than another. For other measures, we mostly wanted to examine how judgments of actors’ immorality, faking moral superiority, and perceived attitude strength responded to the manipulation and correlated with hypocrisy judgments.

Method

Participants

After removing cases for failure to correctly respond to one or more simple attention checks ($n = 4$),⁶ participants were 138 U.S. residents (representing all regions in the country) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk website and paid a small sum for their participation ($M/SD_{\text{age}} = 36.33/10.57$; 51.5% male, 47.1% female, 1.4% "other"). On a question asking "For most matters, where on the following scale would you generally rate yourself?" (1 = *extremely liberal*, 5 = *middle of the road*, 9 = *extremely conservative*), the sample mean was 3.65 ($SD = 2.19$).

Procedure

Assignment to conditions was random. Participants rated one version (weak, strong, impose, or criticize) of three vignettes (abstract, meat, and theft).⁷ The "meat" vignette involved a person saying that eating meat is wrong and then eating a hamburger. The "theft" vignette was adapted from Jordan et al. (2017) and involved a person saying that it is wrong to download music without paying for it and then downloading music without paying for it. Participants were presented with all vignettes for 15s before being allowed to continue. Time until continuing was not recorded. Following this, each vignette was presented again one at a time in random order along with associated measures.

Vignette example

The following is the full text of the abstract vignette. Weak: "A person says to someone that he thinks doing X might be wrong, although he's not sure how he feels." Strong: "A person says to someone that he thinks doing X is very wrong." Impose: "A person tells someone emphatically that they shouldn't do X, because it is very wrong." Criticize: "A person angrily criticizes someone for doing X, implying that doing X is very wrong." Following each of these sentences was "Later that day, the person does X."

Measures

Participants rated their agreement with the following statements on the same 9-point scales: "The person (John, Adam) ... " "is a hypocrite," "is immoral," "is dishonest," "wants to appear morally superior to others," "is trying to convince others that he sincerely

believes [behavior; e.g., 'doing X'] is wrong," "strongly believes that [behavior; e.g., 'doing X'] is wrong" (1 = *not at all/totally disagree*, 5 = *in between*, 9 = *completely/totally agree*). The hypocrite item was always presented first; remaining items were presented in individual random orders. Across vignettes, "hypocrite" was averaged to create a "hypocrisy" composite ($\alpha = .94$), "immoral" and "dishonest" were averaged to create an "immorality" composite ($\alpha = .91$), "wants to appear" and "trying to convince" were averaged to create a "faking" composite ($\alpha = .92$), and "strongly believes" was averaged to create a "belief strength" composite ($\alpha = .87$).

Results and discussion

First, effect sizes for the overall effects of condition on judgments were computed. This was followed by repeated contrasts that compared weak against strong, strong against impose, and impose against criticize. Means and standard deviations for all dependent variables are presented in Table 2 along with correlations.

Omnibus effect sizes for hypocrisy ($\eta_p^2 = .40$), immorality ($\eta_p^2 = .32$), and faking ($\eta_p^2 = .38$) were large. The effect size for belief strength was small, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As can be seen in Table 2, moderate hypocrisy was perceived (i.e., between "disagree completely" and "agree completely") even when actors' attitudes were ambivalent and uncertain. This is interesting because behavior that contradicts an attitude one is unsure about does not seem particularly inconsistent. However, correlations with other measures in this condition help explain this. Unlike in other conditions, there was a positive correlation between hypocrisy and belief strength (in other conditions,

Table 2. M, SD, d, and measured variable correlations in Experiment 3.

Variable	Weak M (SD)	Strong M (SD)	Impose M (SD)	Criticize M (SD)	
HP	4.88 (2.35)	7.96 (1.37)	7.99 (1.67)	8.28 (1.29)	
IM	4.07 (1.96)	6.41 (1.57)	6.44 (1.80)	7.09 (1.32)	
FK	4.29 (2.23)	7.25 (1.60)	7.04 (1.48)	7.56 (1.35)	
BS	3.14 (1.68)	4.04 (2.48)	4.10 (2.28)	3.69 (2.41)	All
r HP,IM	.92	.52	.45	.47	.77
r HP,FK	.79	.58	.57	.62	.80
r HP,BS	.46	-.28	-.21	-.41	.03
r IM,FK	.85	.67	.33	.25	.73
r IM,BS	.39	.18	-.36	-.14	.08
r FK,BS	.52	.10	.09	-.14	.20
Effect Sizes (d)	Weak vs. Strong	Strong vs. Impose	Impose vs. Criticize		
HP	1.60	0.02	0.19		
IM	1.32	0.02	0.41		
FK	1.53	0.14	0.37		
BS	0.42	0.03	0.17		

Note: All effect sizes are reported as absolute values. HP: hypocrisy; IM: immorality; FK: faking; BS: belief strength.

correlations were negative), and greater belief strength was associated with greater immorality and faking, which were themselves associated with greater hypocrisy. Thus, to the extent that observers think an agent truly (even if weakly) believes that doing something is wrong, if the actor contradicts this belief with behavior, it implies hypocrisy and immorality and suggests that the public mention of the attitude was in service of falsely signaling moral credentials.

Contradicting strongly held attitudes implied high hypocrisy, and it did not appear to matter much whether these attitudes were simply stated or imposed on others. Although Alicke et al. (2013) did not describe their work as specifically aiming to test differences in communication type (i.e., strong vs. criticize), this finding is consistent with theirs. Two things are still worth noting. First, means for all variables were highest in the criticize condition (see Table 2), suggesting that criticizing others for their behavior had some impact on hypocrisy beyond simple imposition of attitudes on others. However, the effect size for hypocrisy (i.e., comparing the impose and criticize conditions) was relatively small and should probably be treated with caution.⁸ Yet, it was also interesting that a moderate effect size was found for the same comparison on immorality, which was strongly correlated overall with hypocrisy. This suggests that although it may not be much more *hypocritical* to revile someone and then contradict this in one's own behavior, it does seem to be a particularly obnoxious and distasteful form of hypocrisy.

Further examination of correlations in conditions other than weak is also informative. First, the correlations of immorality and faking with hypocrisy, although moderate to large, were smaller in the strong, impose, and criticize conditions than in the weak condition. Second, although immorality and faking were highly correlated in the strong condition, correlations were smaller in impose and criticize conditions, suggesting that how attitudes are communicated affects relations among perceptions of hypocrisy, immorality, and false signaling and that perception of hypocrisy and evaluation of hypocrites is complex.

Experiment 4: Private and public attitudes and behaviors

As outlined in the introduction, Experiment 4 was conducted to examine several hypotheses about how the private versus public nature of attitudes and behaviors impact hypocrisy perception.⁹ We manipulated

whether attitudes/behaviors were privately held/enacted or publicly imposed/performed. When attitudes and behaviors were public, we also varied whether behaviors were performed in front of the person the actor imposed the standard on or not in front of this person. This resulted in five conditions: private attitudes paired with private and public behaviors, and public impositions paired with transparent public behaviors (i.e., in front of the person the actor imposed a standard on), nontransparent public behaviors (i.e., not in front of the person the actor imposed a standard on), and private behaviors (i.e., in front of no one). We again asked questions related to immorality and faking moral superiority. Instead of asking about strength of actors' beliefs, we asked about the sincerity of actors' beliefs.

If privately versus publicly performing attitude-contradicting *actions* is seen as more hypocritical, then regardless of whether *attitudes* are private or imposed on others, hypocrisy should be higher when behaviors are private rather than public (H1a). However, the private–public behavior distinction might matter only when attitudes are publicly imposed. If so, then hypocrisy should be greater in the public attitude/private behavior condition relative to the two public attitude/public behavior conditions (H1b). Related to this, if transparency about one's inconsistency—which is only possible when one's attitude is known to others—lowers perceptions of hypocrisy, then hypocrisy should be lower in the public attitude/transparent public behavior condition (similar to honest hypocrites; Jordan et al., 2017) relative to the public attitude/public (not transparent) and private behavior conditions (H2). Finally, if imposing standards on others and contradicting these standards is particularly hypocritical—a distinct possibility given Study 1 and work by Alicke et al. (2013)—then overall, the contradiction of publicly imposed standards should be seen as more hypocritical than the contradiction of privately held attitudes (H3).

Method

Participants

After removing cases for not correctly responding to one or more simple attention checks or spending less than 10 s reading presented vignettes ($n = 15$),¹⁰ participants were 186 U.S. residents from 43 states (representing all regions in the country) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk website and paid a small sum for their participation (age $M = 38.01$, $SD = 11.24$; 50% male, 49.5% female, 0.5% "other"). Using the same

Table 3. Means comparisons and effect sizes for tests of H1-H3.

Hypothesis	Private-Private	Private-Public	Public-Public (Transparent)	Public-Public (Not Transparent)	Public-Private
1a	A	B	B	B	A
1b			A	A	B
2			A	B	B
3	A	A	B	B	B
Effect Sizes (<i>d</i>)		H1a	H1b	H2	H3
Hypocrisy		0.15	0.40	0.23	0.78
Immorality		0.22	0.08	0.06	0.91
Faking		0.17	0.76	0.85	1.28
Belief Sincerity		0.33	0.45	0.09	0.34

Note: Within rows, contrasts compared "A" means with "B" means. Means sharing the same letter were averaged. All effect sizes are reported as absolute values. For H1a, the effect size for hypocrisy was in a direction opposite from predicted.

ideology question as in Experiment 3, the sample again leaned slightly liberal ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.43$).

Procedure

Assignment to condition was random. Participants rated three vignettes (abstract, meat, theft)¹¹ in one pairing combination (private attitude paired with private or public behavior; public attitude paired with public-transparent, public-not transparent, or private behavior). Participants were first presented with all vignettes and allowed to read them at their own pace ($M = 50.52$ s, $SD = 67.44$). Following this, each vignette was presented again in random order one at a time along with associated measures.

Vignette example

The following example is the full text from the abstract condition. Private (attitude)/private (behavior): "A person thinks to himself, 'Doing X is wrong. People shouldn't do X.' The person never tells anyone how he feels about X and never tells anyone that they shouldn't do it. Later that day, home alone, the person does X." Private/public: "A person thinks to himself, 'Doing X is wrong. People shouldn't do X.' The person never tells anyone how he feels about X and never tells anyone that they shouldn't do it. Later that day, the person openly does X in front of A, who sees him doing it." Public/public (transparent): "A person tells A, 'Doing X is wrong. People shouldn't do X.' Later that day, the person openly does X in front of A, who sees him doing it." Public/public (not transparent): "A person tells A, 'Doing X is wrong. People shouldn't do X.' Later that day, the person openly does X in front of B, who sees him doing it. B doesn't know A, and A isn't there when the person does X." Public/Private: "A person tells A, 'Doing X is wrong. People shouldn't do X.' Later that day, home alone, the person does X."

Measures

On 9-point scales, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: "(The person, John, Adam) ... " "is a hypocrite," "is immoral," "is dishonest," "wants to appear morally superior," "wants to convince people he sincerely believes that [behavior; e.g., 'doing X'] is morally wrong," and "sincerely believes that [behavior; e.g., 'doing X'] is morally wrong" (1 = *not at all/totally disagree*, 5 = *in between*, 9 = *completely/totally agree*). The hypocrite item was always presented first; remaining items were presented in random orders. Across vignettes, "hypocrite" and "sincerely believes" were averaged to create hypocrisy ($\alpha = .94$) and "belief sincerity" ($\alpha = .83$) composites, "immoral" and "dishonest" were averaged to create an "immorality" composite ($\alpha = .87$), and "wants to appear" and "wants to convince" were averaged to create a "faking" composite ($\alpha = .93$).

Results and discussion

We first report omnibus effect sizes for all variables. For all variables except belief strength ($\eta_p^2 = .06$), effect sizes were relatively large: hypocrisy ($\eta_p^2 = .16$), immorality ($\eta_p^2 = .18$), and faking ($\eta_p^2 = .34$). This was followed by contrasts (see Table 3 for contrasts and effect sizes of comparisons) that tested the outlined hypotheses. Although hypotheses specifically regard perceived hypocrisy, each variable was examined for each contrast. Table 4 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations among all measured variables.

Hypothesis 1

If perceptions of hypocrisy are related to whether attitude-contradicting behaviors are privately or publicly performed, then regardless of whether attitudes are private or public (H1a), or only when attitudes are

Table 4. M, SD, and correlations of measured variables in Experiment 4.

	Private-Private M (SD)	Private-Public M (SD)	Public-Transparent M (SD)	Public-Not Transparent M (SD)	Public-Private M (SD)	
HP	6.16 (2.84)	6.85 (2.41)	7.91 (1.82)	8.01 (1.29)	8.46 (0.86)	
IM	4.73 (2.09)	5.11 (1.87)	6.56 (1.67)	6.36 (1.53)	6.57 (1.09)	
FK	3.99 (2.62)	3.79 (2.10)	5.45 (2.28)	6.79 (1.59)	7.35 (1.24)	
BS	4.51 (2.29)	4.28 (2.38)	3.56 (1.99)	3.21 (1.89)	4.25 (1.92)	All
<i>r</i> HP,IM	.68	.43	.36	.44	.28	.58
<i>r</i> HP,FK	.64	.23	.32	.35	.60	.53
<i>r</i> HP,BS	-.24	-.33	.03	-.32	-.22	-.25
<i>r</i> IM,FK	.64	.26	.28	.19	.10	.49
<i>r</i> IM,BS	-.13	-.35	-.52	-.04	.02	-.27
<i>r</i> FK,BS	-.30	-.27	.23	-.08	-.09	-.17
<i>n</i>	39	37	36	39	35	186

Note: HP: hypocrisy; IM: immorality; FK: faking; BS: belief sincerity.

public (H1b), private actions should be viewed as more hypocritical than public actions. No support was found for H1a. In fact, public behaviors were seen as slightly *more* hypocritical and immoral than private behaviors, although effect sizes were small. For H1b, results were consistent with the hypothesis that when attitudes are first expressed publicly, private behavior is seen as more hypocritical than public behavior, although the effect size was not large.¹² However, for faking, the effect size for this comparison was much stronger.

This strongly suggests that perceptions of hypocrisy (immorality, faking, and belief sincerity) do not primarily depend on whether attitude-contradicting behaviors are publicly or privately performed, regardless of whether attitudes are privately held or publicly imposed on others. Because hypocrisy was descriptively greater in the *public* behavior relative to the private behavior condition when comparing private versus public behavior alone, and this pattern reversed when attitudes were imposed, one tenable conclusion is that “private-ness” of behavior plays a small role in hypocrisy as a function of whether attitudes are private or public. Of course, one important consideration is that any greater attribution of hypocrisy for “private” behaviors will emerge only when those behaviors are actually discovered by an observer (i.e., when they become public).

Hypothesis 2

H2 examined whether performing a behavior unseen by the person on whom one has imposed a behavioral standard increases perceptions of hypocrisy. If true, then after imposing a behavioral standard on someone, transparently performing that same behavior in front of the same person should be seen as less hypocritical than performing it outside of their awareness (i.e., either privately or publicly, but not in front of the same person). The small effect size for this

comparison was not consistent with the hypothesis that transparency influences perception of hypocrisy,¹³ although the effect size for faking (i.e., the perception that the actor was trying to appear morally superior) was substantially larger, and the correlation between faking and hypocrisy was large and positive.

One explanation for the discrepancy between the current finding and those for honest hypocrites in Jordan et al. (2017) may be that in the latter case, actors imposed an attitude on others but then immediately acknowledged performing the same behaviors before performing them. This seems to suggest that (a) without saying it directly, actors are nevertheless admitting that they are hypocrites; (b) they don't take themselves and their beliefs very seriously; or (c), they don't actually believe what they are saying and that their imposition was not meant seriously. In addition, their transparency was potentially reinforced twice—first when they admitted that they perform the behavior and again when they actually performed it. In the current research, actors did not verbally admit to performing the behaviors they condoned; instead, they simply enacted the behaviors in front of the people on which they had imposed standards. Because their behavior was not accompanied by any admission, participants likely did not think they were offering their opinion in jest and may have assumed the actors hoped the observer did not notice their behavior. In addition, any perceived temporal gap between the actors imposing a standard and later performing the behavior might have suggested they were trying to mislead and gain reputational benefits.¹⁴ Although the lowered perception of faking in this condition cautiously argues against these ideas, it seems clear that something about the verbal admission in Jordan et al. served to more strongly attenuate perception that the actors were falsely signaling their moral worth, leading to lower perceived hypocrisy and more positive evaluations. One possibility that might be explored in future research is that (imposed) attitude-behavior

inconsistency will be viewed as hypocritical even when a person directly and explicitly acknowledges their hypocrisy (i.e., suggesting that hypocrisy is not primarily a function of faking), but to the extent that an attitude is expressed *in order to* deceive, judgments of hypocrisy will intensify.

Hypothesis 3

If behaviorally contradicting standards that have been imposed on others (vs. having standards but not imposing them on anyone; see also Alicke et al., 2013) increases perception of hypocrisy, then when actors never tell anyone their attitudes, they should be seen as less hypocritical than when they impose standards on others. This hypothesis was strongly supported. However, it is worth noting that moderately high hypocrisy was attributed even when actors never told anyone their attitudes, suggesting that simple inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors is the primary basis for hypocrisy, even when attitudes are privately held and have not been imposed on anyone.

General discussion

Hypocrisy is a concept that has withstood the test of time, and it is no less prevalent today than in the distant past. In fact, in the current era of rapid communication, social media, and 24-hr news cycles, people are likely attributing hypocrisy to others at a pace unmatched in history. For example, Twitter analytics show that the hashtag #hypocrite is being used in about 25 unique tweets per hour (as this is being written). The hashtag #hypocrisy, with about 17 per hour, isn't far behind. Similarly, web searches for "Hollywood hypocrisy" (about 9 million hits), "sports hypocrisy" (about 19 million hits), "religious hypocrisy" (about 19 million hits), "political hypocrisy" (about 24.5 million hits), and "business hypocrisy" (about 33 million hits) suggest that people out in the world are talking about hypocrisy, a lot.

Despite this, little research has examined factors that influence the extent of perceived hypocrisy. The present research provides several novel contributions to our understanding of hypocrisy attribution and helps to resolve some lingering questions that previous research has hinted at but not tested directly. First, by examining people's responses to an open-ended question asking them to define hypocrisy, we were able to directly examine folk understanding of the concept. Substantial variability in definitions suggested that hypocrisy is conceptualized in many ways.

Some factors referenced in dictionaries (e.g., deceit, moral judgment) rarely appeared in people's definitions. In contrast, some attributes that have been assumed to define hypocrisy—such as the pairing of attitudes and contradictory behaviors (Alicke et al., 2013; Barden et al., 2005; Jordan et al., 2017) and, to a lesser extent, of attitudes with contradictory attitudes (Kreps et al., 2017)—were prominent features of lay definitions. In fact, because so many people referenced it, one might simply define hypocrisy as saying one thing and then doing another (i.e., that contradicts it), as suggested by Barden et al. (2005).

Further experiments revealed that although this definition is a good starting place, perception of hypocrisy is affected by a variety of factors. For example, consistent with Kreps et al. (2017), Experiments 2a and 2b showed that moderate hypocrisy was attributed even when actors' only inconsistency was in their attitudes, although attitude-contradictory behavior pairs were more hypocritical. Speculatively, AA pairs might be seen as less hypocritical because there is no evidence that actors will ever *act* in ways that contradict their attitudes, or because it seems like they have simply changed their minds (Barden et al., 2005). On the other hand, when behaviors oppose attitudes, greater inconsistency is evident because contradictory behaviors also suggest and confirm attitude discrepancies, making it seem more likely that the initial attitude was falsely offered.

Concerning attitude-attitude contradictions, the present research presented only decontextualized attitude reversals. Yet some types of reversals might seem highly hypocritical even for ordinary people (i.e., rather than moral leaders; Kreps et al., 2017), particularly if one attitude is stated for a selfish reason and accompanied by criticism. For example, imagine someone berating someone for wearing a fur coat. Then imagine the same person later complimenting their work supervisor's fur coat. This selfishly motivated reversal might lead to particularly high ratings of hypocrisy, even without any behavioral component. Future research might examine this hypothesis.

Experiment 3 demonstrated a role for attitude strength in perception of hypocrisy, a finding that has not been previously demonstrated. Although a hypothesis regarding the form of communication did not receive strong support, perhaps because of a ceiling effect, participants did attribute greater hypocrisy to actors who contradicted strongly rather than weakly held attitudes, although in the latter case, moderate hypocrisy was still attributed. This is interesting because it shows that contradicting statements

about how people should act—even when statements indicate genuine uncertainty and ambivalence about the attitude—is probably seen as some form of moral commitment to an issue that should not be broken. This serves as a warning to any person who might make even an offhand comment that doing something *might* be a bad idea: Unless one is willing to avoid that behavior oneself, perhaps it is best to say nothing at all. Also of interest, there was a moderately strong impact of criticizing versus simply imposing attitudes on moral judgment, which was strongly correlated with hypocrisy. This suggests that although the form of communicating behavioral impositions (e.g., neutrally imposing attitudes on others vs. criticizing their behavior) may have only a minor impact on further raising hypocrisy perception above already high levels, it may be associated with more negative social judgment overall. With other factors held constant, hypocrites who criticize others for their behavior may be the “worst” kind of hypocrites.

By manipulating whether attitudes were privately held or publicly imposed and whether behaviors were private, public, public and transparently performed, or publicly but not transparently performed, a final experiment allowed us to compare different theorized inputs to extremity of hypocrisy judgments. Specifically, Experiment 4 examined the role of privately versus publicly performing attitude-inconsistent behaviors, the role of overtly contradicting oneself versus potentially trying to hide one’s behaviors from others’ view, and the role of privately holding beliefs versus publicly imposing one’s beliefs on others.

Overall, no evidence (i.e., a reversal from the hypothesized direction) was found for the hypothesis that *acting* privately rather than publicly is associated with greater attribution of hypocrisy. However, a small effect was found suggesting that after publicly imposing standards, acting privately rather than publicly—whether public behavior was transparent or not—increased the perception that actors were trying to appear morally superior. Closely related to this, little evidence was found that actors seem less hypocritical when they advise someone against doing something described as morally wrong and then proceed to do that thing in front of the same person. Notably, perceptions that the actors were attempting to appear morally superior were lower when behavior was transparent. This shows that the manipulation of transparency worked; actors seemed like they were faking less in this condition. Nevertheless, this did not directly translate into substantially greater perception of hypocrisy, immorality, or sincerity of their beliefs.

Speculatively, although false signaling is an important reason people dislike hypocrites (Jordan et al., 2017), it is probably not an important input to attributions of hypocrisy. That is, although prototypically, hypocrisy indicates false signaling, people may falsely signal but not be hypocrites (e.g., people might impose a standard on others without believing in it or caring much about it and never act to contradict it) or be hypocrites without much false signaling (e.g., people may keep their attitudes to themselves or be honest or transparent about their hypocrisy).

The strongest support was found for the hypothesis that inconsistency following imposition is substantially more hypocritical than inconsistency without imposition. Relative to when actors kept their opinions to themselves, imposing standards on others was associated with a large increase in perceived hypocrisy as well as more negative moral evaluation and greater belief that actors were trying to appear morally superior.

Sincere attitudes, false signaling, hypocrisy, and moral evaluation

In their discussion of moral rebels, Monin et al. (2008) noted, “By claiming the moral high ground, rebels are effectively calling everything else the low road” (p. 77). This expression suggests that actors who make statements about how people should or should not act appear to be claiming moral high ground and admonishing others to join them while suggesting that others might be failing in their moral duties. For those who feel safely on high ground because they agree with the actors, this caution—perhaps annoying—is likely not too offensive. However, for those who disagree or engage in the proscribed behavior, the implied criticism is likely to prompt scorn and dismissal. Regardless of how one feels about the pronouncement, when a claim of high moral ground is later contradicted by an actor’s attitude reversal or a discovery of behavior that gives lie to the attitude, the actor will be disliked by all. For those who agreed with the imposition, the actor is seen as disingenuous and as supporting or engaging in a reviled behavior. For those who disagreed, the actor is seen as disingenuous and preachy, and is disliked for telling others to avoid doing something they themselves do.

This suggests that false signaling of moral superiority (Jordan et al., 2017) and the breaking of moral commitments (Kreps et al., 2017) are but two of the reasons we dislike hypocrites. They are also disliked

by some for supporting or performing behaviors viewed as wrong, by others for telling them not to do things they do not think are wrong, by most for claiming a moral high ground and suggesting others' behavior might fall short, and probably by all for their inconsistency. In sum, these reasons represent a potent combination that helps explain why hypocrisy is so abhorrent to so many.

Although speculative, one conclusion is that like moral evaluation, inferences regarding false signaling and attitude insincerity are primarily outputs from rather than inputs to initial judgments of hypocrisy. However, these inferences probably also serve to strengthen initial judgments of hypocrisy and to exacerbate the negative moral judgments that perceiving hypocrisy causes. When actors keep their inconsistency private, they are judged as hypocritical primarily because they are “going against what they believe.” The more sincere their attitudes are perceived to be, the more inconsistent (and therefore hypocritical) they seem, and perceptions of false signaling play less of a role.¹⁵ When actors impose standards on others, however, their contradictions and reversals seem particularly inconsistent because not only do these people fail to do what they say, but their claimed beliefs are inconsistent with their true beliefs (or they are simply weak). Thus, initial judgments of hypocrisy—along with evaluations of hypocrites—are worsened as a function of inferences about actors' *reasons* for making moral claims. *Hypocrisy* is the word we use to *explain* people's inconsistent behavior and their moral character by answering the question of why they tried to impose a standard on others: They were probably trying to appear morally superior.

What then makes hypocrisy? We argue that fundamentally, it is inconsistency. However, perceptions of inconsistency and the degree of inconsistency rely on a number of factors. This means that like hypocrisy, inconsistency is graded and scalable, and any information that suggests greater inconsistency will suggest greater hypocrisy. Therefore, “saying one thing and then doing another” is a good definition overall, modified by the idea that the psychological distance between the thing said and the thing done matters (see also Alicke et al., 2013).

It is also important to note that additional factors, aside from inconsistency, probably matter a lot, such as the relationship between perceivers and the people acting inconsistently. That is, if the word *hypocrisy* is used to understand and explain others' inconsistent behavior, it seems likely that friends would be more

lenient than enemies in their judgments of hypocrisy. This is certainly consistent with the way people attribute hypocrisy in politics: When those on the right or left are inconsistent in words or deeds, it is mostly those on the left and right, respectively, who holler “hypocrisy!”

Nevertheless, all other factors held constant, inconsistency is the heart of hypocrisy, particularly when flavored with telling others how to behave. Because of this, we argue that the most obvious and noxious form of hypocrisy involves not only inconsistency but imposition, whether direct (telling others how to act) or indirect (telling others that acting some way is wrong), precisely because actors appear to be (falsely) claiming a higher moral ground.

Open practices

All data and materials have been made publicly available via Open Science Framework and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/vzqad>. doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/VZQAD. Reporting of additional analyses and replication experiments can be found in the OSM at the same location.

Notes

1. We note that perceived hypocrisy was measured in three studies and reported separately in an online supplement to this article.
2. The full coding instructions are provided in the Online [Supplementary Materials](#) (OSM), available at <https://osf.io/vzqad/>.
3. Between these anchors, under the numbers 4 and 5, the words “moderately hypocritical” were used.
4. Some minor variability in hypocrisy ratings as a function of the interaction between stimulus set and pairing condition was found in both experiments. This suggested the presence of method variance. However, within each stimulus set, pairing-condition means were ordered in the same way as the aggregate analyses, with very similar effect sizes for comparisons between pairings.
5. A replication of this experiment, using a within-participants design (Experiment 3S), is reported in the OSM. Results were entirely consistent with those presented here, although some additional findings emerged.
6. Analyses that included these participants did not substantively differ from those that excluded them.
7. Vignette-level analyses are presented in the OSM. Results of those analyses are fully consistent with those reported here.

8. In the replication of this experiment that used a comparative (within-participants) design (Experiment 3S), the effect size for this comparison ($d = 0.15$) was similar to what was reported here.
9. A replication of this experiment, using a comparative (within-participants) design (Experiment 4S), is reported in the OSM. Although some variations emerged (see footnote 13), results were consistent with those presented here.
10. Given that average reading times were close to 1 min, we reasoned that anyone finishing in 10s or less probably hadn't read the vignettes closely. Analyses that retained these participants did not substantively differ from those presented here.
11. Vignette-level analyses are presented in the OSM. Results of these analyses were fully consistent with those reported here.
12. Using a within-participants design in Experiment 4S (reported in the OSM), tests of H1a and H1b both tended to show the *opposite* effect (e.g., greater hypocrisy when behaviors were public rather than private), suggesting that more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.
13. In the replication of this study, the effect size was small ($d = .07$) and in the opposite direction
14. We thank an anonymous reviewer for offering this last suggestion.
15. Of course, it is important to note that when attitudes are truly private and remain so, no one will ever know they exist, making any attribution of hypocrisy on their basis impossible.

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ORCID

Sean M. Laurent  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0130-7867>

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