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Reply to Wojtek Przepiorka: Testing goal-framing and hedonic hypocrisy

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Abstract

It is always an honor when, after one publishes a study, somebody takes the time and effort to figure out how it could have been done better (Lindenberg et al., 2018; Przepiorka, 2019). It is a public service, and we are grateful for the effort. Although we are and remain quite proud of our studies and their results, there is, as in any study, always room for improvement and it is certainly important to test hypotheses also via other designs. However, we feel there are a number of misinterpretations, omissions, and confusions in Dr. Przepiorka's comments, each of which we would like to discuss.

Keywords

Przepiorka, goal-framing, hedonic hypocrisy

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Study 1: Which hypotheses?

The first issue is the reconstruction of what we have been doing. Even though Dr. Przepiorka states that “hedonic moral hypocrisy offers an excellent testbed for goal framing theory” (with which we agree), we do not understand his decision to formulate hypotheses of his own making, rather than stating our hypotheses. The basis for our studies is the influence of overarching goals (normative or hedonic) on expressing a moral stance and on moral behavior. The salience of these goals can “shift” and thereby affect both moral behavior and what is meant by expressing a moral stance. A salient normative goal focuses individuals on appropriateness, and a salient hedonic goal focuses them on improving the way they feel. Our first hypothesis is tested in Study 1 and concerns a comparison between a hedonic and a normative shift. A basic assumption is that expressing a stringent moral stance (i.e. presenting oneself as virtuous, as a moral person) can be sincere or it can be a way to improve the way one feels. Expressing a moral stance just to feel good is what we call “hedonic hypocrisy.” How did we test this? In this study, mood is used to induce a difference in the desire to improve the way one feels. Subjects in a happy mood were assumed to have less desire to improve the way they feel than subjects in a sad mood. If subjects in a sad mood take a more stringent moral stance than subjects in a happy mood only in the hedonic condition but not in the normative condition, it suggests that in the hedonic condition subjects make use of a stringent moral stance to feel better, which is hedonic hypocrisy (even without involving behavior). Thus, our first hypothesis is as follows: (H1) When the hedonic goal is salient and people are given the opportunity to express a moral stance, then people in a sad mood should take this opportunity to make themselves feel better by expressing a more stringent moral stance than happy people with a salient hedonic goal. By contrast, when the normative goal is salient, a moral stance is sincere and not likely to be used to improve the way one feels, and thus, mood (i.e. being happy or sad) should have no influence on the stringency of the expressed moral stance.

According to Dr. Przepiorka, our first hypothesis is that “(H1) The stronger the hedonic shift, the more likely will actors who are in a sad mood take a moral stance.” In this version, the most important part of our hypothesis, the difference between hedonic and normative goals, is left out. As a consequence, he does not look at the results of the comparison of conditions. According to our hypothesis, we have to look in Study 1 at whether or not mood has an influence on the stringency of moral judgment only when the focus is on feeling better (i.e. in the hedonic condition with sad mood) and not in the normative condition (with a

focus on acting appropriately). We find that indeed mood influences the stringency of a moral stance only in the hedonic condition, and there only for the induced sad mood, supporting our first hypothesis.

Focusing on mood rather than on the difference between goal conditions, Dr. Przepiorka suggests that our method of mood induction may have made subjects in the bad-mood condition experience a normative shift, because they may have thought of situations of experienced injustice. There are several problems with this suggestion. In our experiment, we used a standard instrument to influence mood by asking participants to briefly describe a personal memory in which they felt intensely happy (positive mood) or unhappy (negative mood). If this method made subjects with a bad induced mood experience a normative shift, then this should also have happened in the normative shift condition and subjects in that condition with a sad induced mood should then be even more stringent in their moral stance than subjects in that condition with a happy induced mood. But they are not. In the normative condition, the stringency of moral stance is, as predicted in our first hypothesis, not affected by the mood manipulation. But then, due to Dr. Przepiorka's truncated version of H1, he did not look at the differences between hedonic and normative shift conditions.

Study 1: Confusion of “lady justice” and experiencing injustice

There is another reason why Dr. Przepiorka's critique of our mood induction does not hold. In the unlikely case that most subjects with an induced sad mood indeed remembered an injustice when asked to describe a personal memory that made them intensely sad, it should have created a hedonic and not a normative shift, because experiencing an injustice has been shown to make people angry, vengeful, and emotional (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). Such a shift would even increase their focus in improving the way they feel, rendering their moral stance even more stringent than that of subjects in a happy mood (lending extra support for our hypothesis). To create a normative shift, our subjects in that condition evaluated a picture of “lady justice.” Dr. Przepiorka seemingly confused the experience of injustice with being primed with lady justice in our 43 experiments. Lady justice reminds subjects of the importance of norms and that they will be judged, whereas experiencing an injustice confronts people with the emotional consequences of being treated unfairly. The former creates a normative shift, the latter a hedonic shift. Confusing the two situations leads to the wrong conclusions.

Study 1: Mood repair test and causal order

Dr. Przepiorka suggests that it is “unclear whether the expression of moral stance indeed makes participants feel better as the mood repair test is only administered thereafter.” We disagree with this critique because the hypothesized causal sequence goes from expressing a moral stance to mood repair and not the other way around. We manipulated mood at the beginning but assessed mood at the end of the experiment and found that, on average, participants were in a pleasant mood at the end of the experiment irrespective of which mood was induced in the beginning. We interpreted this result as indication that subjects in the hedonic sad condition indeed used a stringent moral stance to “repair” their mood (i.e. to make them feel better) and thus achieve a pleasant mood like the others. For this mood repair test, we had to follow the presumed causal sequence and administer the mood repair test *after* the moral judgments and not before. We concluded as follows: “While this is no definite proof, this finding supports the assumption that expressing a stringent moral stance helps (and was used) to repair a depressed mood state.” It is correct, as Dr. Przepiorka suggests, that adding a control condition in which subjects were not asked to make a moral judgment would have been an *extra* test of the mood repair effect of moral judgments, and it might well be performed in future research. But we feel Dr. Przepiorka’s conclusion that “results of experiment 1 are inconclusive with regard to H1” does not hold. The results are quite conclusive with regard to our first hypothesis.

Study 2: Which hypotheses?

The second study deals with the *relationship between the hedonic shift and action* (not at all with mood). It tests three hypotheses. The first of these three (H2) concerns the link of moral stance to behavior, given a hedonic shift. It reads: (H2) a stronger hedonic shift makes it more likely that people will take a stringent moral stance and yet not act morally. Thus, the strength of a hedonic shift should positively influence the likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy. Dr. Przepiorka comes up with a quite different hypothesis, as if our study were about the effects of a sad mood. According to Dr. Przepiorka, our second hypothesis is that the “(H2) The stronger the hedonic shift, the more likely will actors who are in a sad mood take a moral stance *and* not act morally (i.e. be hedonically hypocritical).” Przepiorka transforms our hypothesis into one about mood effects.

He does the same with our third hypothesis. This hypothesis concerns the effect of effort on moral hypocrisy: (H3) Given a hedonic shift, the higher the sacrifice for behaving morally (in terms of effort), the less

likely people will act morally and the more likely that they are hedonically hypocritical. Without a hedonic shift, the level of sacrifice for behaving morally (in terms of effort) will have less or no effect on acting morally and on hedonic hypocrisy.

According to Dr. Przepiorka, our third hypothesis is also about mood: “(H3) Given a hedonic shift, the larger the effort necessary to act morally, the more likely will actors who are in a sad mood be hedonically hypocritical (i.e. take a moral stance *and* not act morally).” True, as an *extra* test of our theory, we measured mood in the second study and found that the results support our hypothesis from the first study. This may have tempted Dr. Przepiorka to reformulate our second and third hypotheses in terms of mood effects. But more importantly, aside from the confusion about what our hypotheses are about, Dr. Przepiorka again does not include the important comparative part in his version of our third hypothesis. We explicitly state that without the hedonic shift (i.e. with a more salient normative goal), the level of sacrifice (effort) will have less or no effect on acting morally and on hedonic hypocrisy. In both our studies, the most important focus is on the comparison between salient normative and hedonic goals. Leaving this out misses the point of the experiments.

Study 2: Hedonic hypocrisy versus practice what you preach

That there is hypocrisy in the sense of people not practicing what they preach has been amply shown in the literature. Our fourth hypothesis concerns the important point about dual consistency which is the basis for a different kind of hypocrisy. It concerns the possibility that hedonic shifts make one hypocritical even when the moral stance is not related to the moral behavior asked for in the specific situation. We suggested that in the expressive moral domain, the consistency pressure is not between moral stance and behavior (i.e. not “practice what you preach”) but consists of a dual consistency pressure, on the one hand, between one’s moral stance and one’s salient overarching goal, and, on the other hand, between one’s behavior and one’s salient overarching goal. Thus, with a salient normative goal, the focus for moral stance and for behavior is both “appropriateness.” With a salient hedonic goal, the focus for moral stance and for behavior is “to feel good.” In the latter case, what feels good is to express a stringent moral stance (i.e. to present oneself as a virtuous person), and what feels good about behavior is avoiding unrewarded effort (and thus not act morally if that takes effort). In this way, one can be hypocritical even when moral stance and the moral behavior are unrelated. We tested this successfully by using social norms from everyday life (not including the norm to

help somebody in need) as a basis for expressing a moral stance, and helping somebody in need as the moral behavior asked of the subjects.

Because this point is so important, we added an extra test using moral dilemma vignettes for the moral stance (such as the “dog vignette,” in which “Frank” is curious about how a dog tastes and cooks his dog that had just been run over by a car. Question: How wrong is it for Frank to eat his dead dog for dinner?). Clearly, eating your dog has little to do with helping somebody in need, and yet we get results about helping and hedonic hypocrisy that are very similar to those for the test with everyday social norms, which is reassuring with regard to the possibility that one can be hypocritical even when the moral stance is not about the moral behavior in question. With a stronger hedonic shift, subjects also take a stringent moral stance against eating one’s dog, indicating their moral indignation; however, when it comes to helping somebody in need right after they presented themselves as a virtuous person, they are not very likely to help. This is hedonic hypocrisy. With a salient normative goal, this is not likely to happen.

Did our manipulation indeed induce hedonic shifts? We also tested our hedonic shift manipulation by assessing impatience. Somebody who is more hedonic can be expected to also be more oriented toward the short term (i.e. be more impatient). This is also what we find: a positive association between the strength of the hedonic shift and impatience. We included yet another test of the hedonic shift effects, one regarding impression management as a trait (e.g. “I usually worry about making a good impression”). It could be that such a trait makes people hedonically hypocritical no matter what the overarching goal is. However, we find clear indications that for this trait to be activated in the expressive moral domain, a hedonic shift is necessary. Without a hedonic shift (i.e. with a salient normative goal), a predisposition to try to impress others seemingly has little effect on boosting hedonic hypocrisy. Unfortunately, none of these extra tests are mentioned by Dr. Przepiorka. Instead, he states that we should have also tested the “practice what you preach” kind of hypocrisy. Of course, this would have been an extra test of hedonic hypocrisy, and again, it might well be performed in future research. However, it is not a test without which the results about our fourth hypothesis remain inconclusive.

Study 2: Significant differences in hedonic hypocrisy

In study 2, we find, as hypothesized (H2), that hedonic shifts have a significant effect on the willingness to help somebody in need (93% (no shift), 78% (light shift), 54% (strong shift) respectively). Also, as predicted (H3), these effects are stronger for having to help for 15 minutes than for

2 minutes. Dr. Przepiorka suggests that these effects may be due to participants' time constraint. Our approach, he claims,

cannot disentangle the effect of the effort level on moral hypocrisy from its effect on participants' actual time constraints. A task lasting 15 minutes is simply more likely to interfere with participants' other plans than a task lasting only two minutes, irrespective of these participants' moral stances.

Again, Dr. Przepiorka misses the point of the experiment: comparing effects of different goal conditions induced by hedonic shifts. Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions, and thus, possible time constraints for subjects would hold equally across all hedonic shift conditions. In short, time constraints cannot explain differences between the conditions.

We also find, as hypothesized (H2), that the percentages of hedonic hypocrisy differ significantly across the hedonic shift conditions (2% (no shift), 10% (light shift), 34% (strong shift) respectively). Yet, Dr. Przepiorka suggests that this is not really a test of H2 because our results may be driven by something (yet unknown) that just affects the willingness to help with increasing hedonic shifts but does not affect hedonic hypocrisy itself. To show this, he compares the number of hypocrites with the number of non-helping non-hypocrites across hedonic shift conditions and concludes that there is no significant difference, which, according to him, shows that our hypothesis that hedonic hypocrisy increases with the hedonic shift does not hold. This is a potentially relevant point. However, in his calculations, he neglected exactly the same comparative component that he also neglected in the reconstruction of our hypothesis. He should have compared hypocrites and non-helping non-hypocrites in the strong hedonic shift condition. An omnibus test of the differences across all hedonic shift conditions is simply not appropriate in this case. It is easy to see why.

As predicted, subjects in the normative condition (no hedonic shift) almost all help. This means that there are almost no hypocrites and almost no non-helping non-hypocrites. Thus, in this condition, we expect no difference. In the light of hedonic shift condition, the percentages of hypocrites and non-helping non-hypocrites are slight larger, but still small. Only in the strong hedonic shift condition do we expect and find a sizable difference between hypocrites and non-helping non-hypocrites. If the behavioral effects in the strong hedonic shift condition had nothing to do with hedonic hypocrisy but only with the willingness to help, the proportion among hedonically hypocritical and not-hypocritical non-helping subjects should be about even. However, we see that the hypocritical non-helpers (74%) significantly outnumber the non-hypocritical non-helpers (26%; $z=2.09$; $p=0.036$). Thus, the evidence speaks for a genuine effect of hedonic

hypocrisy. In sum, there is significant evidence in this study that supports our hypotheses.

Conclusion

Although we are grateful that Dr. Przepiorka took the time to critique our studies, we must conclude that our results are quite solid. Of course, there is always room for doing studies better. It is also important to try to replicate results in studies by following different designs and including different measures. Hopefully our studies will inspire others to apply their experimental ingenuity to the important topic of hedonic hypocrisy and the power of shifting salience effects.

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