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# Moral hypocrisy and the hedonic shift: A goal-framing approach

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## Abstract

The most investigated form of moral hypocrisy is *pragmatic* hypocrisy in which people fake moral commitment for their own advantage. Yet there is also a different form of hypocrisy in which people take a moral stance with regard to norms they endorse without thereby also expressing a commitment to act morally. Rather they do it in order to feel good. We call this *hedonic moral hypocrisy*. In our research, we posit that this kind of hypocrisy comes about when people's overarching goals are shifted in a hedonic direction, that is, in the direction of focusing on the way one feels, rather than on moral obligation. Hedonic shifts

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come about by cues in the environment. People are sometimes sincere when expressing a moral stance (i.e. they mean it and also act on it), and sometimes, when they are subject to a hedonic shift, they express a moral stance just to make them feel good. This also implies that they then decline to do things that make them feel bad, such as behaving morally when it takes unrewarded effort to do so. In two experimental studies, we find that there is such a thing as hedonic moral hypocrisy and that it is indeed brought about by hedonic shifts from cues in the environment. This seriously undermines the meaning of a normative consensus for norm conformity. Seemingly, for norm conformity without close social control, it is not enough that people endorse the same norms, they also have to be exposed to situational cues that counteract hedonic shifts. In the discussion, it is suggested that societal arrangements that foster the focus on the way one feels and nurture a chronic wish to make oneself feel better (for example, in the fun direction through advertisements and entertainment opportunities, or in the fear direction by populist politicians, social media, economic uncertainties, crises, or wars and displacements) are likely to increase hedonic hypocrisy in society.

### **Keywords**

Goal-framing, hedonic hypocrisy, human nature, moral behavior, moral judgments, norm conformity, personality, shifting salience effects

### **Introduction**

“Our activity ... is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers, we are merchants of morality.” (Goffman, 1959: 251). Why would we play the role of “performer” and be morally hypocritical, be a “merchant of morals”? The meaning of Goffman’s famous words about our presentation of self in everyday life seems to be clear in the light of a dramaturgical approach. Yet, his explanation on how this works only seemingly solves the puzzle of moral hypocrisy. He explains that “the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces us to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage.” In part, this is theoretically (not empirically) trivial, because there is a pragmatic form of hypocrisy in which people fake moral<sup>1</sup> commitment for their own advantage. For example, people may be more or less forced to pay lip service to social norms they don’t endorse, as might be the case in dictatorships and communities with very tight social control. They may even be enticed to enforce norms they don’t endorse, just to appear as if they endorsed the norms (Willer et al., 2009). People may also be merchants of morals in the sense that they take the moral high road vis-à-vis others but transgress their own morals when the material gain is high enough (e.g. in tax returns). Yet,

in part, Goffman's way of the stage is not trivial, because casual empiricism suggests a truly puzzling phenomenon that we call "hedonic" moral hypocrisy:<sup>2</sup> People may be sincere when they express commitment to their own moral norms. But expressing such a commitment can also be used to make one feel good because it signifies to self and others that one is "virtuous," a moral person. Thus, in one situation, people's expression of moral commitment is sincere, in another situation it is not sincere, *even concerning their own moral norms and even without expecting some material advantage for transgressing*. For example, people who find caring for others important may at times say so and "mean it" (also by acting on it) and at times only express this commitment to make themselves feel good about themselves. If true, this would relativize the power of normative consensus. Circumstances that would make people hedonically hypocritical could create widespread discrepancies between people's own moral norms and actual moral behavior. At first blush, this might look like a "relative price effect" by which behavior becomes less frequent as the price (in terms of effort) for that behavior goes up, but it cannot be the whole story because attention to the price of behavior varies with the circumstances (Heyman and Ariely, 2004; Lindenberg and Frey, 1993).

The question is What mechanisms are at work that make hedonic hypocrisy possible and can it be shown empirically that it depends on situational factors? In the following, we introduce a brief explanation of a possible mechanism for hedonic hypocrisy (and the situational factors influencing it) and then test the explanation in two experimental studies.

## **A theory of hedonic hypocrisy**

An important advance in the study of hedonic hypocrisy is the research on "moral wiggle room" (Dana et al., 2007) or "self-serving altruism" (Gino et al., 2013). The theory behind this research is that people like to *feel* moral concerning their own moral norms. They act morally when they are confronted with clear choices regarding "right" or "wrong," but exploit any ambiguity or flexibility regarding what is right or wrong to behave egoistically and interpret it in such a way that they still feel moral. This is also what Batson et al. (1999) suggested earlier on. This is highly relevant research because it points to the important role of feeling moral (not just appearing moral, as, among others, Batson, 2011, would suggest). However, it does not go far enough in explaining the underlying mechanisms of hedonic hypocrisy, because in this research, the goal to *feel* moral, which drives the theory, is basically constant. Situational influences on the goal to feel moral are not considered and the goal to feel moral is never confronted with sincerity, that is, the goal to *be* moral.

With regard to the goal to *be* moral, an important lead can be found in the work of Monin and Merritt (2012). They argue that moral hypocrisy should be conceived as a lack of integrity or sincerity. The counter concept to moral hypocrisy, they suggest, is sincerity. In fact, their suggestion implies that we cannot deal with hypocrisy if we are not able to deal with sincerity. Monin and Merritt suggest we look at what people meant to do rather than the inconsistency of verbal expressions and action. This applies to both pragmatic and hedonic hypocrisy.

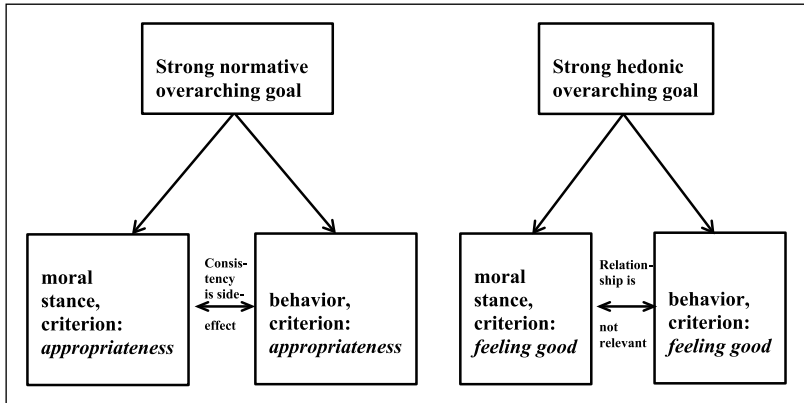
For hedonic hypocrisy, we build on these suggestions and we propose a goal-based approach that deals with situational changes in salience of goals, and particularly with changes (called “hedonic shifts”) in the goal that is focused on the way one feels. For quite some time, it has been known that the readiness of stored mental constructs to influence mental processes and behavior depends on situational factors (Cialdini et al., 1990; Fiske and Taylor, 2013). This variation in readiness has prominently been the focus of research on goals (Bargh and Gollwitzer, 1994). Goals are highly sophisticated mental phenomena. They combine cognitive and motivational elements and represent a network of concepts, prominently those concerning means and causal knowledge. Situational cues and affordances can activate a particular goal and, at the same time, inhibit other goals (Gollwitzer and Bargh, 1996; Kruglanski and Kopetz, 2009). This effect fits well with the finding that making different identities salient changes the set of one’s preferences considerably (see LeBoeuf et al., 2010). Goal-framing theory (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007; Steg et al., 2016) applies these insights to overarching goals. Our explanation can be briefly expounded in seven points:

First, part of the expressive communication about oneself is taking a moral stance that signals to self and others that one is a morally committed person. Second, expressing to self and others that one is a moral person by taking a stringent moral stance makes one feel good. Third, sincerity and hedonic hypocrisy depend on the overarching goal that is salient when a moral stance is taken. Overarching goals filter the selective activation of whole sets of more concrete subgoals by affecting what we attend to and what we ignore, what we like and dislike, what alternatives we consider, and what criteria for goal achievement are being applied. Depending on which overarching goal of a person is most strongly activated (“salient”) at a given moment, a different set of preferences is activated and different alternatives will be considered. Fourth, two overarching goals are particularly relevant for sincerity versus hedonic hypocrisy: the *normative* goal “to do what is right and morally appropriate” versus the *hedonic* goal “to do what feels good.”<sup>3</sup> Both overarching goals are chronically activated to some degree, but situationally one is more strongly activated (“salient”) than the

other, depending on the cues in the situation. When the normative goal is salient, hedonic aspects are pushed into the background and inhibited to various degrees, and a moral stance expresses a person's feeling of obligation to behave morally. It is sincere in this sense. When the hedonic goal is salient, the normative goal is pushed into the background, and a moral stance may be expressed to improve the way one feels right now, rather than to convey a goal to behave morally. This latter effect is stronger, the more salient the hedonic goal. Fifth, importantly, cues in the environment can change the salience of overarching goals. This can create considerable situational changes in what alternatives a person chooses in that situation, what she reacts to and how, and what goal criteria are used (Keizer et al., 2013).

Sixth, (a) when the hedonic goal is salient, persons are very likely to seek opportunities and affordances that may make them feel better (such as taking a moral stance), but also to shy away from, and avoid, activities and situations that would make them feel worse (such as exerting effort, sacrificing). In other words, one does not feel bad about not acting on one's expressed moral commitment if this expression was done to feel good rather than to reveal one's moral commitment. What makes one feel bad is making a hedonic sacrifice (such as exerting effort). Thus, when acting morally involves such a sacrifice, the focus on feeling good can create hedonic hypocrisy because what feels good is both taking the moral stance and avoiding the sacrifice. (b) This effect is stronger, the more salient the hedonic goal.

Seventh, the strong tendency for consistency (Gawronski and Strack, 2012) is not sidelined in hedonic hypocrisy. Rather, the theory of overarching goals implies that the relevant drive for consistency in the expressive moral domain is not focused on the relationship between moral stance and behavior, but rather on the consistency between the salient overarching goal and moral stance on the one hand and the salient overarching goal and behavior on the other. Traditionally, hypocrisy has been applied to an inconsistency between expressed moral commitment and displayed moral behavior. Yet, in line with the reasoning by Monin and Merritt (2012), mentioned above, and based on goal-framing theory, we argue that hypocrisy can also concern one's being hypocritical even though the expressed moral stance is about norms that are *unrelated* to the moral behavior that is asked for in a particular situation. It is a matter of where the consistency pressure comes from: does it come from the relationship between moral stance and behavior ("practice what you preach") or from the relationship between overarching goal with both the moral stance and with behavior? We claim that it is the latter: we always have to deal with a *dual consistency*, one between moral stance and overarching goal and one between overarching goal and behavior. Thus, with a salient normative goal, both the moral stance and the behavior should be consistent with "appropriateness" (which makes the



**Figure 1.** Theory: Consistency pressure regarding moral stance and anticipated behavior applies first and foremost to the relation with the overarching goal, not to the relation of moral stance to anticipated behavior. For people with a strong hedonic goal this means that a stringent moral stance and behavior will not be consistent with each other if the anticipated moral behavior would be expected not to feel good (e.g. much effort) even though it is morally the appropriate behavior. A hedonic shift can thus create hedonic moral hypocrisy.

consistency between moral stance and behavior then a side effect). With a salient hedonic goal, both the moral stance and the behavior should be consistent with “feeling good” (Tice et al., 2001; see also Rustichini and Villeval, 2014), making the relationship between moral stance and behavior not relevant in terms of consistency, thus also allowing blatant but psychologically irrelevant inconsistencies (see Figure 1). The fact that there is no independent consistency pressure between moral stance and behavior has important consequences. Thus, when a moral stance is expressed in the context of a salient hedonic goal (i.e. to make one feel good), the framing of this expression is disconnected from the activation of moral concerns (such as guilt or feeling bad about not acting on the basis of the expressed commitment). To repeat, “Feeling bad” in such a situation comes from *hedonic* discomfort (such as exerting effort) not from moral discomfort (such as feeling guilty). The dual consistency pressures that are linked to the salient overarching goal rather than to the relationship of moral stance to behavior thus allow a form of hypocrisy that is based on doing what feels good rather than on “practice what you preach.” This implies that for somebody to be hedonically hypocritical, the norms concerning the moral behavior asked for in a particular situation and the norms expressed in the moral stance (which presumably signals “I am a moral person”) don’t have to match.

## Hypotheses

From this theory, we can derive a number of testable hypotheses. Our *first hypothesis* concerns the effect of mood on the stringency of moral stance. This makes it possible to be hedonically hypocritical even when no behavior is involved: the expressed moral stance is then simply meant to make one feel good, rather than to express a moral commitment. When the hedonic goal is salient and people are given the opportunity to express a moral stance, then people in a sad mood (who have a higher need to make themselves feel better than people in a happy mood) should take this opportunity to make themselves feel better by expressing a more stringent moral stance than happy people. By contrast, when the normative goal is salient, moral stance is 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. Even though no behavior is involved, the stringent moral stance is sincere in the latter case and hedonically hypocritical in the former case.

A hedonic shift is the effect of cues in the situation on the salience of the hedonic goal. Our other hypotheses concern the link of moral stance to behavior, given a hedonic shift. Our *second hypothesis* is that 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 hedonic hypocrisy. Our *third hypothesis* concerns the effect of effort on moral hypocrisy. 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 nor no effect on acting morally and hedonic hypocrisy. Our *fourth hypothesis* concerns the possibility that hedonic shifts make one hypocritical even when the moral stance is not related to the moral behavior asked in the specific situation.

Will these hypotheses stand up to test? Experiments that allow causal inference seem the most adequate to answer this question. In such experiments, a condition with cues that shift the salience of the hedonic goal upward can be compared to a situation in which this is not the case or with a condition with cues that shift the salience of the normative goal upward. By assigning subjects randomly to a hedonic shift condition, we make sure that differences in hedonic hypocrisy, if any, are due to the particular condition and not to differences in the subjects' inherent moral commitment. In the following, we will test the first hypothesis in Study 1 and the other three hypotheses in Study 2.



## Study 1: the hedonic effect of mood on the stringency of moral stance

People in a bad mood are clearly more in need of improving the way they feel than those in a good mood (Tice et al., 2001). The important questions to be answered for testing our first hypothesis are (a) Do people, when shifted hedonically, use a stringent moral stance to improve their mood? (b) Do people, when shifted normatively, *not* use a moral stance to improve their mood? The prediction then is the following: When subjects in the hedonic shift condition are confronted with the request to express a moral stance, those with a bad mood should use this opportunity to improve the way they feel by expressing a stringent moral stance. When subjects in the hedonic shift condition are in a good mood, however, they are not expected to be particularly motivated to enhance the way they feel and thus predicted to express a less stringent moral stance than those in a bad mood. If a moral stance in the hedonic shift condition is indeed used to improve the way one feels (as repair for a bad mood), there should be no difference in mood between the two mood conditions *after* the expression of a moral stance. For subjects in the normative shift condition, the expectations are completely different. Their expressed moral stance should be stringent, but because the normative and not the hedonic goal is salient, mood states (i.e. the difference in need to improve the way one feels) should make little difference with regard to the expressed moral stance.

### *The experiment<sup>4</sup>*

The main part of the experiment consisted of six blocks: First, shifting the overarching goals in a hedonic or a normative direction (independent variable), followed by mood induction (independent variable), and then eliciting a moral stance (as a dependent variable) with regard to environmental behavior. Because we used this particular moral stance, we subsequently assessed biospheric (i.e. environmental) values (as control variable related to the moral stance). At the end, we administered a mood test, and we offered funnel questions about understanding the questions and demographics. Participants were 80 students (25 males and 55 females) recruited from several faculties of a Dutch university with a promotional flyer (offering €5 for participation).

*Goal shift manipulation.* Subjects were randomly assigned to the normative shift condition or the hedonic shift condition.<sup>5</sup> Our manipulation of overarching goals makes use of quite stereotypical cue effects and effect differences for males and females. These cue effects, whatever their political

correctness, are chosen on the basis of the literature and with the aim to maximize the effect. To create an upward hedonic shift for male participants in the hedonic shift condition, we used the picture of a sexy model and asked subjects to evaluate the model on three hedonic dimensions (beauty, attractiveness, and pleasure), using 7-point Likert-type scale. Men have been shown to have a greater degree of hedonic activation (in the amygdala and the hypothalamus) when viewing erotic images than women (Hamann et al., 2004, see also Bradley et al., 2001). Some previous studies in Belgium had also used a hedonic upshift manipulations for men (in this case operationalized as impatience in the form of discounting of monetary rewards) successfully by exposing them to pictures of attractive women in bikinis. For women in the hedonic shift condition, we used the picture of an attractive looking chocolate cake and asked subjects to evaluate it on three hedonic dimensions (beauty, attractiveness, and pleasure). The hedonic impact of chocolate had been shown to be higher for women than for men (Rozin et al., 1991). Chocolate is very popular in the Northern European Countries (Chocolates, Biscuits & Confectionery of Europe (CAOBISCO), 2013). In addition, experiments in Belgium had found that sweets increased hedonic reactions (impatience) for females (Briers et al., 2006). In short, even though it followed stereotypical differences between men and women, our experimental manipulation of a hedonic shift was carefully chosen.

The upward shift of the normative goal was induced by asking male and female participants to study a picture of a statue of lady justice and evaluate it, using 7-point Likert-type scales, on three normative dimensions (solemnity, dignity, and righteousness). We did not include a manipulation check, because questions measuring the strength of hedonic or normative goals are themselves activators of overarching goals that could disturb our activation procedure. Instead, we relied on the indirect evidence for our manipulations based on the differences between the goal-shift and mood conditions (Spencer et al., 2005).

*Mood induction.* To manipulate *mood*, participants were asked to briefly describe a personal memory in which they felt intensely happy (positive mood) or unhappy (negative mood). This manipulation proved successful in past research (e.g. Manucia et al., 1984; Schwartz and Clore, 1983).

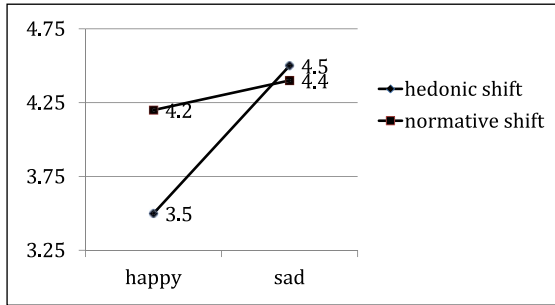
*Expressed moral stance.* For measuring the moral stance, we made two basic assumptions. First, agreeing with a norm means endorsing it, expressing commitment to the norm. Second, since we want to use norms that subjects endorse at least to some degree (i.e. that are widespread in the student population), we use norms concerning saving the environment. The moral

dimension is related to serving collective goals and interests, and by now, concern for resources of future generations has the status of a collective concern, especially for younger and more highly educated people. Thus, norms concerning wasting or damaging natural resources can be assumed to be moral norms in our student population. We measured biospheric values (BVs), as a control variable, because such norms are presumably stronger for people with stronger BVs (Steg et al., 2011). The moral stance may thus be governed by the BVs rather than differences in mood; hence, the question is whether moral hypocrisy concerning environmental norms would still be observed even if we control for BVs. In measuring BVs, we assumed that expressing these values (contrary to a moral stance) is not used to improve one's mood. We also tested whether this assumption holds (see below).

In the hedonic bad mood condition, expressing a stringent moral stance is presumably done to make one feel better. To measure the stringency of an expressed moral stance, participants evaluated four scenarios of environmentally harmful behavior (7-point scale ranging from being totally ok (1) to being definitely wrong (7)) in situations in which the moral choice (i.e. agreeing or disagreeing with something) reflects being "virtuous," that is, one that can be expected to be met with approval (and thus to improve the way one feels). One was about taking the car rather than walking to work; one was about dumping turpentine down the drain rather than taking the trouble to bring it to the chemical disposal site; one was about turning up the thermostat rather than taking the trouble to fetch a sweater upstairs; and one was about throwing glass in the general container rather than taking the trouble of separating the trash. A moral stance score was computed by averaging the judgments of the four scenarios (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.70$ ,  $M=4.29$ , standard deviation (SD)=1.09); the higher the score, the more stringent the expressed moral stance.

For measuring values, we applied a frequently used instrument taken from De Groot and Steg (2008). By placing the value assessment after the moral stance, we could be reasonably confident that expressing BVs would not be used to repair one's mood, since mood repair (if any) happened already through expressing the moral stance. Extra evidence that the environmental judgments expressed subjects' own norms is the fact that all subjects endorsed BVs with at least "important."

*Mood repair test.* To test this null-result, participants were, at the end of the experiment, asked to fill in a 9-point Manikin scale where 1 meant "very happy," and 9 "very sad." The functionality of this Manikin scale for measuring mood has been established before (Bradley and Lang, 1994).



**Figure 2.** Effects of overarching goals (normative, hedonic) on the severity of a moral stance (Y axis), depending on the mood condition (happy, sad). Given a hedonic shift, only subjects in the sad mood condition express a moral stance that is as stringent as for subjects in the normative shift condition.

## Results

Since we predicted that the only difference in the stringency of moral stance would be in the hedonic condition between good and bad mood (a combination of effects that would suppress detecting an interaction effect), our test for these very specific predictions consisted of univariate fixed-effect analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with BVs as covariate, one for each goal condition. Figure 2 shows the mean moral stance for each goal condition. The ANOVA models for each goal condition are both significant:  $F(2, 37) = 9.667$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for the hedonic shift conditions, and  $F(2, 39) = 3.620$ ,  $p = 0.037$  for the normative shift condition. For the hedonic shift condition, moral stance is significantly associated with BVs, as we would expect ( $F(1, 39) = 13.085$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). But we also see that mood (happy/sad) has a separate significant effect on moral stance: the sad mood is, as predicted, associated with a more stringent moral stance ( $F(1, 39) = 5.592$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ). In the normative goal condition, moral stance also has the expected positive association with BVs ( $F(1, 39) = 7.038$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ), but mood has, as predicted, no effect on moral stance ( $F(1, 39) = 0.904$ ,  $p = 0.345$ ).<sup>6</sup> That expressing one's BVs was not used to improve the way one feels is supported by the fact that (as expected) BVs did not differ between the goal-shift conditions ( $BV_{\text{norm}} = 3.89$ ,  $BV_{\text{hedon}} = 3.65$ ,  $t(78) = 0.768$ ,  $p = 0.445$ ). This also holds for BVs in the different mood conditions ( $p = 0.822$  within the hedonic shift condition, and  $p = 0.127$  within the normative shift condition).

Possible evidence that mood was actually repaired after expressing the moral stance came from our post-moral-stance measurement of mood. A univariate fixed-effect ANOVA with final mood state as dependent variable and goal and mood conditions as fixed factors showed that there was no

difference between conditions and also no interactions effect between goal and mood conditions ( $F(3, 79)=0.336, p=0.800$ ). On average, all participants were in a pleasant mood at the end of the experiment: on a scale from 1 (“very happy”) to 9 (“very sad”), the mean score was  $M_{\text{mood}}=3.24$ ,  $SD=1.33$ , indicating that on average participants were in a pleasant mood at this stage of the experiment. 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.

## Discussion

An important mechanism behind hedonic hypocrisy expressed in our first hypothesis was corroborated by this study: with a salient normative goal, mood does not influence the stringency of a moral stance, but with a salient hedonic goal, a sad mood leads to a more stringent moral stance than a good mood. Subjects had been randomly assigned to goal and mood conditions, so that there was no reason to assume systematic differences in moral stance between conditions before treatment. The fact that we did find a difference between the good and bad mood conditions within the hedonic condition and not within the normative conditions suggests that expressing a stringent moral stance was indeed used to repair a sad mood by making one feel good about oneself with a “virtuous” moral stance in the hedonic shift condition, but not in the normative shift condition. This difference in effects between normative and hedonic shift conditions supports our first hypothesis.

An alternative explanation, based on negative state relief theory (Cialdini et al., 1981), could be that sad memories make people use stringent moral stances as a relief for their sad mood, whereas people in a happy mood don't do that. Indeed, this and the goal-framing explanation use a very similar logic about the effect of sad mood in a hedonic state. But where the two theories differ is in the role of overarching goals. In state relief theory, overarching goals play no role, whereas in goal-framing theory, they do. The results support the latter by showing that the effect of mood on moral stance occurs only in the hedonic condition and it thus conditioned by the salient goal.

Study 1 made a first step testing the theory concerning hedonic hypocrisy. Yet, the implication that if people take amoral stance only to feel good, they will not act on it when it takes effort to do so still remains to be tested. Thus, for our second study, the general question was Is it true that a hedonic shift will create moral hypocrisy by making people not only take a stringent moral stance just to improve the way they feel but also by reducing their willingness to do things that take effort (because that would make one feel worse)?

## Study 2: hedonic hypocrisy and behavior

Here, we define hedonic hypocrisy in terms of giving oneself a moral air (by expressing a stringent moral stance) and yet not acting morally when an occasion to do so arises. The central questions of Study 2 concern the test of all the other three hypotheses: (a) does a stronger hedonic shift indeed lead to more hedonic hypocrisy? Because subjects who do not take a stringent moral stance are not hedonically hypocritical, irrespective of whether or not they behave morally, the prediction is thus not that hedonically hypocrite subjects would behave less morally than non-hypocritical subjects, but rather that there are more hedonically hypocritical subjects in the hedonic shift conditions compared to the normative condition. (b) Does a hedonic shift indeed make it more likely that a higher effort level for moral behavior leads to more hedonic hypocrisy? (c) Is true that the relevant consistency criterion involves the fit of both moral stance and of behavior with the salient overarching goal, rather than the fit between moral stance and moral behavior? If true, this would mean that in a normative condition, both the moral stance and the behavior must be related to “appropriateness,” and in a hedonic condition, both the moral stance and the behavior must be related “to feeling good.” The operational version of this hypothesis is with a hedonic shift, hedonic hypocrisy is likely to occur even though the moral stance is not related to the behavior. Without such a shift, hedonic hypocrisy is not likely to occur.

In order to test these conjectures, we use different kinds of norms for the expressed moral stance and the moral behavior, and we vary both the intensity of the hedonic shift and the intensity of the sacrifice (effort) involved in acting morally. With a high-intensity hedonic shift, we should observe a combination of stringent moral stance and effort avoidance (i.e. avoid feeling bad), so that even a small hedonic sacrifice will suffice to tempt people not to act morally. Conversely, with a low intensity hedonic shift, only a more sizable sacrifice should make people hedonically hypocritical. Without a hedonic shift, people should be both stringent in their moral stance and willing to behave morally, even when this is costly in terms of effort (within limits, see Lindenberg and Steg, 2007).

As in the first experiment, negative state relief theory (Cialdini et al., 1981) might supply an alternative interpretation (based on mood) for the effects we observe, because the theory predicts that both a stringent moral stance and moral behavior are the result of subjects repairing a bad mood. Thus, subjects in a bad mood would in any case be less likely to be hypocritical than subjects in a good mood, no matter what the hedonic shift condition is. Goal-framing theory, by contrast, predicts that a bad mood will only lead to a more stringent moral stance when there is a hedonic shift. It

also predicts that with a hedonic shift, subjects in a bad mood would be less likely to act morally and more likely to be hypocritical. In short, the predictions differ considerably.

The effects of the hedonic shifts may be blocked or at least diminished if subjects have a strong predisposition to make a good impression (trait impression management). How strong are the situational effects of hedonic shifts in comparison to these dispositional effects? We included trait impression management to compare the situational influence of the hedonic shift conditions with the influence of such a trait, but for reasons of space, we reported this part in the Supplemental Material (SI).

### *The experiment<sup>7</sup>*

To test the effect of the intensity of the hedonic shift on effort sensitivity and effort avoidance, we varied two things: the intensity of the hedonic shift and the amount of effort needed for the moral behavior. For this purpose, we chose to create the hedonic shift in a way that would allow us to graduate the intensity of the shift: with ambient smells (as detailed below). The main part of the experiment was structured into seven blocks: first, the hedonic shift manipulation via the ambient smell, which was present throughout the experiment (independent variable); second, an impatience test (as a manipulation check, reported in the Supplementary Material (SI) in more detail); third, a mood assessment; fourth, a set of moral endorsements to establish a moral stance (as our first dependent variables); fifth, a seemingly incidental request to help (as our second dependent variable); sixth, the assessment of trait impression management. Finally, seventh, we supplied the same funnel questions as in our first study. Participants were 135 students (40 males and 95 females) from the psychology department of a Dutch university who participated for course credit.<sup>8</sup>

*Goal shift manipulation.* We reasoned that students who volunteer for experiments not for money but in order to fulfill their obligatory course requirements generally come to do what is expected of them, to follow instructions and behave appropriately (i.e. have a fairly salient normative goal). We thus used this as a “normative” basis condition that is compared to two intensities of a hedonic shift. For this shift, we wanted to use a way to make subjects more hedonic that could be graduated in its effect: ambient smells. There is an olfactory–limbic interconnection so that ambient smells activate visceral reactions, thereby strengthening the hedonic goal (Li, 2008; Schnall et al., 2008). Because smell is known to be a stronger hedonic stimulus than visual or auditory stimuli (Royet et al., 2000), it promised to be an effective means

for our hedonic shift manipulation. And because a pleasant smell has been shown to elicit a weaker hedonic reaction than an unpleasant smell (Carretie et al., 2001; Zald and Pardo, 1997), we decided to make use of this variation to graduate the hedonic shift. There were thus three goal conditions: the normative condition without ambient smell; a condition with a light visceral stimulus (an ambient pleasant cake smell) for a light hedonic shift; and a stronger visceral stimulus (an unpleasant ambient fart smell) for a stronger hedonic shift condition (see SI for more details of the manipulation).

*Manipulation check.* As the hedonic goal is oriented toward the short term (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007), subjects in the hedonic shift condition should show more impatience than subjects in the normative condition. A hedonic shift is supposed to create impatience (Li, 2008). This allowed us to use it as a manipulation check on our hedonic shift conditions. We therefore included a variant of a test for delay discounting used by Van den Bergh et al. (2008). We used two versions, one positively and one negatively worded for all subjects. In the positive version, we asked participants to imagine they had won €15 in a lottery and asked how much money they would like to have in a month such that it would be as much worth to them as the €15 right now. In the negative version, we asked how much money they would like to pay in a month for a fine of €15 so that it would be worth as much as paying the fine right now (assuming there is no risk that they couldn't pay in a month). We used a log function of the area under the curve (Myerson et al., 2001) for a univariate ANOVA.

*Mood.* Mood was assessed, using the same Manikin test (Bradley and Lang, 1994) as in Study 1 (a 9-point Manikin scale where 1 meant “very happy” and 9 “very sad”).

*Moral stance.* In order to make sure that the norms we use are endorsed by the subjects prior to the experiment, we let students express a moral stance with moral norms that a prior pilot study showed to be endorsed in our student population (see SI for detail). To use a moral stance that comes close to everyday social situations, we made use of a set of seven endorsements regarding social norms with a compound measure of severity of each endorsement (Lindenberg and Steg, 2013) that invites taking a moral stance. It does not only contain judgments about the importance of the particular norm for oneself, but also the disapproval of transgression by others and the expressed degree of one's own conformity to this norm (all on a 7-point Likert-type scale). These norms were not rock-bottom such as “do not steal” but day-to-day social norms. This pretest made us quite confident that these

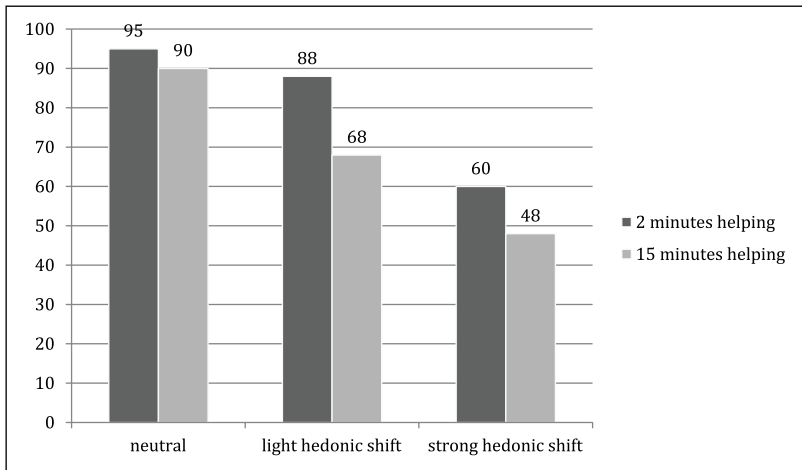


seven norms are reasonably well established in the student population and yet able to vary in stringency. They all are dealing with negative externalities for others (which gives them a “moral” character). Sample norms are “to throw trash in the trashcan and not on the street” and “to be silent in the library” (see SI for more detail). For each of these norms, three questions were asked on a 7-point Likert-type scale: “do you find this norm important” (1 = very unimportant and 7 = very important); “How do you judge others not keeping to this norm?” (1 = very negative and 7 = very positive, reverse coded); and “Do you yourself keep to this norm?” (1 = never and 7 = always). Alphas for the three judgments per norm ranged between 0.66 and 0.89. The average score of these three answers over the seven norms indicates the degree of expressed stringency of a moral stance.

*Moral behavior.* When the experiment was seemingly ended, after the moral endorsements, we introduced the moral behavior as a voluntary extra task. Selflessly helping others in need is a kind of moral behavior and a generally shared social norm (Osswald et al., 2010). We operationalized moral behavior as being willing to help a fellow student in urgent need of volunteers (about filling out a questionnaire), without any extra credits. We purposefully chose an “unexpected” request for help, so that subjects could decline to help without ill feelings, since they easily could come up with a good excuse not to do it (“didn’t anticipate this, have no time”). Since subjects in all hedonic shift conditions could have a good excuse not to help the student in need because they did not know it in advance and might not have time, there is “moral wriggle room” (Dana et al., 2007) and it is the same for all conditions.

Related to helping were two *sacrifice conditions* that varied the effort required for helping. In the *low* sacrifice condition, it was said that the questionnaire takes about 2 minutes to fill in. In the *higher* sacrifice condition, it was said that it takes about 15 minutes to fill in. Participants were told that if they agreed to volunteer, they would proceed to a different room (i.e. a room without ambient smell) after the experiment and fill in a questionnaire (of either 2 or 15 minutes length). Those who agreed to help actually had to fill in a questionnaire.

*Hedonic hypocrisy.* We conceptualized hedonic hypocrisy as giving oneself moral airs concerning norms one endorses (by expressing that one finds the string of day-to-day social norms important, by disapproval of other who don’t follow these day-to-day social norm, and by claiming to follow these norms oneself) and by, a minute later, not being willing to help a fellow student in need. Participants who have at least a median stringency of moral stance but refused to help were considered hedonically hypocritical. We



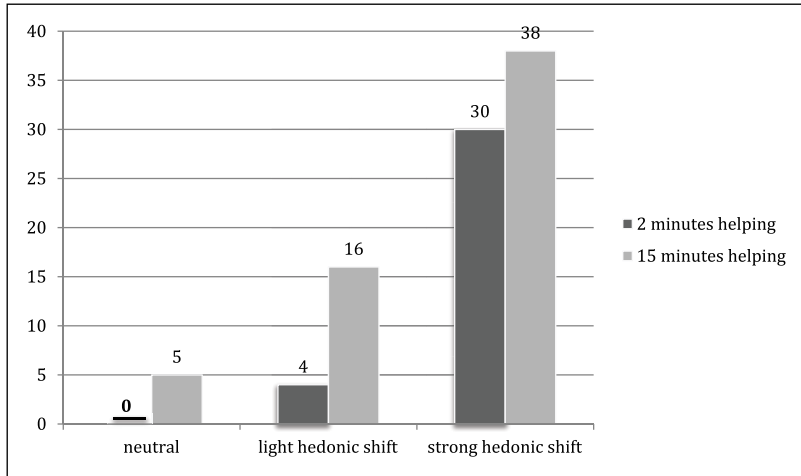
**Figure 3.** Percentage of participants who are willing to help (Y axis), dependent on hedonic shift condition and two effort levels for helping (2 vs 15 minutes).

chose for the median rather than the scale midpoint because the severity of moral stance can differ for different norms, and hypocrisy is conceptually taking a moral stance at the higher end of the distribution without acting on it. The median stringency of the moral stance was 5.13 (on a 7-point scale).

## Results

*Impatience as manipulation check.* We found no effect for the positive version of the impatience measure, but we did find an effect for the negatively worded measure in the predicted direction: an overall significant difference between the goal conditions in the discounting rate<sub>log</sub> ( $M_{\text{normative}} = 0.965$ ,  $M_{\text{light}} = 0.951$ ,  $M_{\text{strong}} = 0.911$ ,  $F = 3.252(2)$ ,  $N = 131$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ), where a lower score indicates more discounting. Given that losses loom larger than gains, the reason we only found an impatience effect for the negatively worded measure might be that dealing with a debt responds more sensitively to a hedonic shift than dealing with a gain (for more detailed results, see SI).

*Helping.* We did not expect the severity of the moral stance to differ between the goal conditions, and we also find no significant differences:  $M_{\text{norm}} = 5.10$ ,  $M_{\text{lightheadon}} = 5.28$ , and  $M_{\text{stronghedon}} = 5.36$  ( $F(2, 134) = 1.114$ ,  $p = 0.331$ ). Rather, we expected helping to differ in the hedonic shift conditions. An omnibus  $\chi^2$  test for helping in the goal and sacrifice conditions showed a significant result ( $\chi^2(5) = 21.966$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\phi = 0.403$ ). In the hedonic shift conditions,



**Figure 4.** Percentage of participants who are hedonically hypocritical, dependent on hedonic shift condition and two effort levels for helping (2 minutes versus 15 minutes)

we see the effort level having an effect on helping. In the 2-minute light hedonic shift condition, 88% helps versus 68% in the 15-minute condition. In the 2-minute strong hedonic shift condition, the percentage is 60% in the 2-minute condition, compared to 48% in the 15-minute condition (Figure 3). In the normative 2-minute condition, 95% of the subjects help, compared to 90% in the normative 15-minute condition. Thus, in the normative condition, the effort level plays, as expected, practically no role. Looking just at the effect of the goal conditions, we see that more participants were willing to help in the normative condition than in the hedonic shift conditions: 93% of the participants in the normative condition were willing to help, versus 67% in the combined hedonic shift conditions, which is a significant difference ( $\chi^2(1)=10.98$ ,  $p=0.001$ ,  $\phi=0.285$ ). Within the hedonic shift condition, the helping effect is indeed graduated: In the light hedonic shift condition, 78% of the participants were willing to help, versus 54% in the strong hedonic shift conditions, which is a significant difference too ( $\chi^2(1)=6.04$ ,  $p=0.014$ ,  $\phi=0.258$ ).

**Hedonic hypocrisy.** An omnibus  $\chi^2$  test for hypocrisy in the goal and sacrifice conditions showed a significant effect of these conditions on hedonic hypocrisy ( $\chi^2(5)=20.718$ ,  $p=0.001$ ,  $\eta=0.392$ ). In the hedonic shift conditions, we see the effort level having an effect on hypocrisy. In the 2-minute light

hedonic shift condition 4% is hypocritical versus 16% in the 15-minute condition. In the 2-minute strong hedonic shift condition, the percentage is 30%, compared to 38% in the 15-minute condition (Figure 4). In the normative 2-minute condition, no subject is hypocritical, and in the normative 15-minute condition, only 5% is hypocritical. Thus, for hypocrisy too, the effort level plays virtually no role in the normative condition. Looking just at the effect of the goal conditions, we see that in the normative hedonic shift condition, 2% of the participants are hypocritical. In the light hedonic shift condition, 10% are hypocritical, and in strong hedonic shift condition, 34% are hypocritical. Does the willingness to help decrease indeed with increasing hedonic shifts because of increasing hedonic hypocrisy or for some other reason? We can check on this by looking at a condition in which we expect (and find) a fairly large number of non-helpers: the strong hedonic shift condition. If the behavioral effects in this condition had nothing to do with hedonic hypocrisy but only with the willingness to help, the proportion among the non-helpers of hedonically hypocritical and not-hypocritical 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, just as they did for the moral behavior (helping someone in need), the intensity of the hedonic shift and the level of effort matter for hedonic hypocrisy, which supports our second and third hypotheses. And because we find these effects even though the particular moral stance was unrelated to the moral behavior in question, we also see that the fourth hypothesis about goal consistency is supported. Additional support for our findings comes from the fact that we find very similar results when using vignettes of moral dilemmas (such as the famous trolley dilemma where you can save five men by deliberately killing one man through hitting a switch of a trolley). These results are reported in the SI.

### *Mood effects*

In the normative condition, we find no effects of mood on moral stance, moral behavior or hypocrisy. This contradicts the prediction of state relief theory and supports a version of our first hypothesis (“mood effects on prosocial behavior and hedonic hypocrisy are dependent on a hedonic shift”). In the light hedonic shift condition, there are also no mood effects. All mood effects are concentrated in the strong hedonic shift condition. There, we find, as expected by both goal-framing and state relief theories, a positive effect of bad mood on stringent moral stance (median or higher),

but it is only marginally significant ( $\chi^2(1)=2.755$ ,  $p=0.097$ ). However, supporting the predictions of goal framing against the state relief predictions, we also find a significant negative effect of bad mood on moral behavior ( $\chi^2(1)=5.711$ ,  $p=0.017$ ,  $\phi=0.373$ ) and a significant positive effect of bad mood on being hedonically hypocritical ( $\chi^2(1)=8.785$ ,  $p=0.003$ ,  $\phi=0.463$ ).

## Discussion

Because, in theory, being hedonic increases both the stringency of the moral stance and the degree of effort avoidance, we expected a graduated likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy that increased with the strength of the hedonic shift *and* with the amount of the required effort for helping. The results of Study 2 show the likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy increased with the strength of the hedonic shift *and* with the amount of required effort for helping behavior. By varying the effort level involved in helping, we could also show that in the light and strong hedonic shift conditions, the likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy increased as the sacrifice became larger. In short, these two ways of testing the influence of hedonicity on hedonic hypocrisy produced support for the hedonic shift hypotheses based on goal-framing theory. We also saw that the goal-framing predictions with regard to the effect of (bad) mood on moral stance, moral behavior, and hypocrisy were better supported than the predictions from state relief theory (for which both moral stance and moral behavior are simply instruments for making one feel better). This is an important finding as state relief theory is arguably the closest competitor to goal-framing theory with regard to the hedonic hypocrisy. Moral wiggle room can also not explain our results because the wiggle room was identical for all conditions.

## General discussion

Hedonic hypocrisy is a special form of hypocrisy that has not received much attention in the literature so far. Casual empiricism has it that next to pragmatic hypocrisy (which refers to pretending commitment to norms one does not endorse in order to realize some advantage or transgressing one's own norms for financial gain), there is a form of moral hypocrisy that may in fact be even more widespread than pragmatic hypocrisy. It refers to the fact that in some situations, people are sincere when they express commitment to norms they endorse, and in other situations, their expression of moral commitment is not sincere, even concerning norms they endorse and even without expecting some extrinsic advantage for transgressing the norms. We call this form *hedonic* hypocrisy. There are examples abound from everyday

life, such as people endorsing the norm to contribute to collective goods in general and expressing their commitment to a civic spirit, but not actually contributing to a concrete collective good.

Theoretically, hedonic hypocrisy is puzzling: how can it be that one is hypocritical even concerning one's own norms and when there is no enticement to "sell" one's moral convictions? Theories of "moral wiggle room" that focus on people's goal to *feel* moral (Dana et al., 2007) basically assume that everyone is hedonically hypocritical, but they neglect that people by and large also have a goal to *be* moral, not just to feel moral. The puzzling question is then, how people can change from one goal to the other and back.

A prominent step toward solving the puzzle of hedonic hypocrisy is that we have to take situational goals into consideration (Monin and Merritt, 2012). On this basis, moral hypocrisy can be seen as not having an overarching moral goal when one appears or claims to have one. This goal approach is promising for solving the puzzle. However, because people sometimes are and sometimes are not hedonically hypocritical, we needed to go more deeply into the shifting salience of overarching goals (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007). Overarching goals govern what we attend to and what we ignore, what we like and dislike, what alternatives we consider, and what criteria for goal achievement are being applied. In this study, we suggested on the basis of goal-framing theory (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007; Steg et al., 2016) how the shifting salience of overarching goals can actually create hedonic hypocrisy and under what conditions. We focused on two overarching goals: a normative goal to act appropriately (to do what is considered morally right and to follow situationally relevant norms) and a hedonic goal to improve the way one feels. The important feature of overarching goals is that their relative salience can change, especially due to cues in the environment (Keizer et al., 2008, 2013). A shift in the hedonic direction will increase people's focus on doing things that feel good or make them feel better, whereas a shift in the normative direction will increase people's focus on doing what is morally appropriate according to situationally relevant norms. Attention to this effect of overarching goals is also what differentiates goal-framing theory from theories of "moral wiggle room" (Dana et al., 2007; Gino et al., 2013) and state relief (Cialdini et al., 1981). For the latter two theories, there is no moral sincerity, as moral stance and moral behavior are always means to make one feel better; nor do these theories consider shifting goal salience effects. By contrast, for goal-framing theory, the normative overarching goal allows a state of sincerity, and deviations from sincerity are created by upward shifts in the salience of the hedonic goal. In short, hedonic hypocrisy is made possible because, with a hedonic goal shift, people focus on affordances to make them feel better

(such as giving themselves moral airs) and on avoiding situations that would make them feel worse (such as avoiding the anticipated effort needed to help somebody in need).

We tested this goal-framing conception of hedonic hypocrisy in two different studies. In our first study, we showed that a stringent moral stance can indeed be used to make one feel better. More specifically, given a hedonic shift, feeling bad (i.e. being in a bad mood) led to a more stringent moral stance than feeling good (i.e. being in a good mood). By contrast, for participants in the normative shift condition (focused on appropriateness), mood did not affect the stringency of the moral stance at all. Whatever strengthens the normative overarching goal, will also strengthen sincerity.

In the second study, we focused on the discrepancy between moral stance and behavior that transgressed one's own norms without expecting to gain from doing so. We predicted and found that the hedonic shift effect is graduated: the stronger the shift, the lower the likelihood of moral behavior and the higher the likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy (the discrepancy between a stringent moral stance and moral behavior). In addition, we found evidence for the effort avoidance effect of the hedonic goal: given a particular strength of the hedonic shift, the more effort is required for acting morally, the lower the likelihood of moral behavior and the higher the likelihood of hedonic hypocrisy. This is not just a matter of higher costs driving out moral behavior. Rather, the sensitivity to avoiding effort is especially strong with a hedonic shift. Without this shift, we found no evidence that the cost of moral behavior in terms of effort had an effect on the likelihood of moral action or on the likelihood of hypocrisy. Of course, in our experiment, even the high effort cost was not extreme. One would expect that truly high costs would have an effect on moral behavior even without a hedonic shift (Lindenberg and Frey, 1993).

Our studies underline the insight that human nature evolved, as it were, to let people be thoroughly influenced by the social environment, including influence on egoism and prosociality (Lindenberg, 2015b). This also increases the social significance of our findings. Hedonic hypocrisy undermines the workings of normative consensus because hedonically hypocritical people don't act on the very norms they endorse when that involves some effort. In contradistinction to the case of pragmatic hypocrisy, trying to increase normative consensus would thus not help to reduce hedonic hypocrisy. If a society has many established mechanisms or experiences that make people hedonic (e.g. in the fun direction through advertisements, entertainment, and general legitimacy of consumption or in the fear direction by populist politicians, social media, economic uncertainties, crises, or wars and displacements), it is also likely that it makes people more hedonically hypocritical, and social media may be a new outlet for the hedonically

motivated stringent moral stance and hedonic hypocrisy of many (see also Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017).

What would help to reduce hedonic hypocrisy is to increase the salience of the normative goal. Yet, that increase, if it is brought about at all, often comes with the closing of group boundaries at the expense of inclusion, with sub-groups becoming more exclusionary and intolerant (De Dreu et al., 2014). This leaves a formidable task for governments to create, maintain, and guard what has been called “weak solidarity” (Lindenberg, 2015a). In short, for very practical purposes such as policy, law, socialization practices, intervention programs, and informal human interaction, it makes a great deal of difference whether we deal only with pragmatic or also with hedonic hypocrisy.

Our studies have some limitations. First of all, the goal shifts are induced, but in the first study, only indirectly traced by their predicted consequences. This is a limitation often incurred in many activation studies because asking participants about their goals can interfere with the activation of the experimentally manipulated goals. Second, we tested only three kinds of moral stances: one with environmental norms, one with everyday norms, and one (reported in the SI) with vignettes of moral dilemmas. Might a moral stance with certain other norms not be subject to hedonic hypocrisy? Future research would have to answer this question. Third, our dependent behavioral variable in Studies 2 was helping, leaving open the question whether or not other kinds of prosocial behavior would be affected the same way. Assessing actual behavior, and graduating it according to effort needed, is already an advance over the many studies that only use “willingness to act,” but it would be desirable for future research to investigate different kinds of moral behavior in the context of hedonic hypocrisy.

Even though there are limitations to our studies, we believe that by elaborating a new paradigm for hedonic hypocrisy on the basis of goal-framing theory, and testing it from different angles, we advanced our understanding of the strong and yet subtle impact of cues in the environment on both the way we present ourselves and the way we act, as well as on the limited meaning of “normative consensus.” Despite the internalization of social norms and values, human beings are “merchants of morals” (Goffman, 1959) to the degree their social environment fails to support a normative overarching goal against hedonic shifts. This makes hedonic hypocrisy a truly social phenomenon.

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## Notes

1. By “moral” we refer to goals, attitudes, and behaviors that are positively directed toward the welfare of others or of the group as a whole, often codified in accepted social norms that indicate what is regarded as socially appropriate. Prosocial behavior and behavior that preserves the environment are subsets of moral behavior.
2. For simplicity’s sake, we will speak in the remainder of this article of “hedonic hypocrisy,” meaning “hedonic moral hypocrisy.”
3. A third overarching goal, called gain goal, oriented toward increasing one’s resources such as material advantages, is relevant for pragmatic hypocrisy, but this pragmatic hypocrisy is not part of the current investigation.
4. Some more details about the experiment can be found in the Supplementary Material (SI).
5. Because of hysteresis effects of overarching goals, the goal manipulation cannot easily be reversed within the short time span of an experiment. For this reason, our experiment has a between-subject rather than a within-subject design, even though the theory applies to within-subject effects. Our subject population was very homogeneous, except for gender. Gender differences in our results in Study 1 are reported in the SI.
6. If we leave biospheric values out, we get similar results. An independent t-test showed, that, in the hedonic condition, sad participants provided a more stringent moral stance than happy participants  $t(38)=-3.13$ ,  $p=0.003$ , whereas in the normative condition, no significant difference in moral stance between happy and sad participants was found,  $t(38)=-0.825$ ,  $p=0.42$ .
7. More details about the experiment are reported in the SI.
8. Gender differences in our results for Study 2 are reported in the SI.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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