

Calculating Hypocrites Effect: Moral judgments of word-deed contradictory transgressions depend on targets' competence

Mengchen Dong^{1,2}  | Jan-Willem van Prooijen¹ | Paul A. M. van Lange¹

¹Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

²Center for Humans and Machines, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence

Mengchen Dong, Center for Humans and Machines, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany.
Email: dong@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

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Abstract

People often say one thing while doing another, and are therefore criticized as hypocrites. Despite the widespread criticism of hypocrites, relatively less is known about factors that influence moral judgment of hypocrisy. In particular, why are some word-deed inconsistencies condemned more harshly than others? The current research focuses on word-deed inconsistency as a common manifestation of hypocrisy, and examines targets' competence as one important factor that influences moral judgment of hypocrisy. We propose and test a *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* that people perceive hypocrites as less moral than non-hypocrites (i.e., who transgress with vs. without inconsistent claims), particularly when the targets are high rather than low on competence. Across four studies where competence was either measured (Study 1) or manipulated as expertise (Study 2), occupational status (Study 3) and skills (Study 4), we found support for the presumed *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*. When the targets were high (vs. low) on competence, people interpreted their misaligned words with deeds as more intentional (Study 2) and self-interested (Study 4), which in turn accounted for their severity of moral judgment. Moreover, the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* applied even when the targets were competent in domains unrelated to their hypocritical deeds (Study 3). We conclude that perception of competence is an important factor that determines when, and for whom, hypocrisy incurs moral outrage.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The media are saturated with accusations of hypocrisy. In recent years, for example, hypocrisy in environmental domains attracts increasing public attention. Canada's Green Party leader Elizabeth May held a disposable cup in a photograph. However, to prevent prospective criticism of hypocrisy, her team digitally altered the single-use cup to a reusable one, which caused even more criticism. Likewise, during the coronavirus pandemic, the chief advisor of the UK Prime Minister Dominic Cummings was revealed to breach the stay-at-home guidelines and travel from London to Durham during

the COVID-19 lockdown. While facing public calls to resign, the government defended him as acting "reasonably, legally, and with integrity", which further damaged public trust and confidence in the government (Fancourt et al., 2020).

Almost everyone practices hypocrisy from time to time, "saying one thing while doing another" or "failing to practice what they preach" (Barden et al., 2005; Effron & Miller, 2015; Effron et al., 2018). But why is hypocrisy judged severely for some but not others? Judgments of hypocrisy can be particularly relevant when it harms social trust and collective welfare. Identical wrongdoings can incur stronger blame (Effron et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2017;

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Smith et al., 2009) and harsher legal punishment (Laurent et al., 2014) when perceived as hypocritical rather than not. Then, how do people determine deserved condemnation or punishment for hypocritical wrongdoings? Answers to these questions require a better understanding of people's moral judgment of hypocrisy, and can be important to some applied settings like organizational disciplines and legal decision making. For instance, an employee's violations of affiliated organization's ethical values may be seen as hypocritical (Effron et al., 2015), especially when the targets have relatively high positions and represent the organization's public image. Companies may need to better understand social judgments of such incidents before determining punitive measures and PR strategies. Moreover, to reach a consensus on a verdict, jurors may need to discuss how hypocritical and calculating they believe the defendant is.

Despite the widespread criticism of hypocrites, relatively less is known about factors that influence moral judgment of hypocrisy. Based on previous insights suggesting word-deed inconsistency as a common manifestation of hypocrisy (Barden et al., 2005; Dong et al., 2021; Effron et al., 2018), the current research examines targets' competence as one important factor that influences moral judgment of hypocrisy. As illustrated by the political scandals, both May and Cummings were in a high-status position that people would associate with high levels of competence. They therefore were expected to better comply with morals and ethics, especially when they preach these values to others. In particular, we propose and test a *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* that people perceive hypocrites as less moral than their openly transgressive counterparts (i.e., who commit a transgression without a misleading moral claim), particularly when the targets are high rather than low on competence. This is because when targets are high on competence, people are more likely to interpret their misaligned words with deeds as intentional and calculating to pursue self-interest (e.g., earn undeserved moral credit, or avoid reputational damage or punishment). Below we elaborate on these ideas in more detail.

1.1 | Hypocrisy and moral judgment

People's perception of others' hypocrisy can comprise two different questions: (1) What behaviors do people consider as hypocritical? And (2) what factors influence the extent to which people condemn such hypocrisy? Previous research has sought to particularly answer the first question, and consistently revealed that private transgressions of previous public claims are among the most typical cases (sometimes termed as word-deed inconsistency; Barden et al., 2005; Effron et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2017; Laurent et al., 2014). When it comes to the second question—what determines moral condemnation of hypocrisy—scientific understanding is limited, however.

Theoretical insights might be gained from observer licensing theory, which suggests that a previous good deed can make

people excuse and license a following bad deed in a different domain (Effron & Monin, 2010). However, observer licensing theory is restricted to situations where previous good and subsequent bad deeds take place in an identical behavioral domain, which prompts the perception of hypocrisy (Effron & Monin, 2010). Instead, some studies converge to show that perceived hypocrisy incurs harsher moral judgments and punitive decisions (Effron et al., 2015; Laurent et al., 2014). When accompanying inconsistent words with deeds, transgressions can be seen as deceptive to earn undeserved moral credits (Effron & Miller, 2015; Effron et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2017).

The above evidence suggests that hypocritical transgressions should be seen as less moral than non-hypocritical ones. However, other studies suggest that word-deed inconsistency can either be interpreted as hypocrisy or genuine attitude change (Barden et al., 2005), and either as self-interested (e.g., for unharmed reputation) or other-oriented (e.g., to advise others against misdeeds that one suffered from; Dong et al., 2021; Effron & Miller, 2015). It is still not clear what information people rely on to infer others' intentions and motives behind this seemingly hypocritical deeds.

1.2 | Competence and calculating hypocrites

The current research tests how competence perceptions influence people's moral judgment of hypocritical transgressions. Here, we draw on both impression formation and moral judgment literature, and conceptualize competence as people's perceived capacities to execute intended goals and avoid goal deviations (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, 2018; Gray & Wegner, 2011; Malle & Knobe, 1997). In moral and ethical domains, this goal can be implied by social norms, and can become more evident when a person makes explicit claims. We reason that perception of moral hypocrisy usually concerns how people interpret the actors' word-deed inconsistency (Barden et al., 2005; Effron et al., 2018), and competence information often implies the actors' capacities to align their actual deeds with their intended goals (Fiske, 2018; Malle & Knobe, 1997). Thus, people are more likely to see competent targets' hypocrisy as deliberate and intentional, to disguise their selfish deeds under a veil of moral or prosocial words.

More specifically, we posit that two factors underlie people's moral condemnations of competent hypocrites: (1) perceived (un) intentionality and (2) perceived underlying self-interested motives. Research on moral judgment suggests that observers generate harsher moral judgment and moralistic punishment for unambiguous (vs. ambiguous) and high- (vs. low-) severity transgressors when they are high rather than low on competence (Karelaia & Keck, 2013; Polman et al., 2013). When targets openly transgress, their intentions and motives can be more ambiguous. Under this circumstance, people can give moral credentials to, and interpret identical transgressions favorably (e.g., less intentional) for, competent rather than incompetent targets (Effron & Monin, 2010; Kakkur et al., 2020; Karelaia & Keck, 2013; Polman et al., 2013). When transgressors

behave hypocritically, however, their public moral claims signal their awareness that their misdeeds are immoral, leaving little wiggle room for attributions of unintentionality (Effron & Monin, 2010; Polman et al., 2013). Moreover, competent (vs. incompetent) hypocrites can receive more severe judgments because they are seen as intentional and calculating in both their self-presentation and subsequent transgressions (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Guglielmo & Malle, 2010). Such intended word-deed inconsistencies are also more likely to be associated with selfish motives to pursue self-interest (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008) while maintaining moral and prosocial reputations (Effron & Miller, 2015; Jordan et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2018). Based on the above line of reasoning, we propose a *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* such that competence should amplify negative moral judgments of hypocritical as compared to non-hypocritical transgressors. The deceptive moral claims induce stronger inferences of intentionality and self-interest, especially for competent (vs. incompetent) transgressors.

1.3 | Overview of the current research

The *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* posits an interaction effect between competence perception and behavioral hypocrisy on moral judgment. In the current research, we test this hypothesis across four studies. Study 1 preliminarily tested whether measured perception of competence would moderate people's moral judgment of hypocrites as compared to open transgressors. Studies 2 to 4 then examined the causal effect of competence with varied manifestations of expertise (Study 2), occupational status (Study 3), and skills (Study 4). Moreover, to test the assumed mechanisms, we measured observers' perceived (un)intentionality in Study 2, induced a domain-general competence condition in Study 3, and manipulated hypocrites' self- versus other-oriented motives in Study 4, which are elaborated in the introductions of the respective studies.

Across the four studies, we determined our sample sizes a priori, and stipulated exclusion criteria based on the similar comprehension and attention check questions before any data analysis. We controlled for participants' age and gender in all analyses, and reported all the manipulations, measures, and exclusions. All the experimental materials and ancillary results (e.g., a replication study of Study 1, sociability judgment in Study 3, and behavioral expectation judgment in Study 4) can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 measured perceived competence and moral impression after presenting targets' hypocritical versus non-hypocritical behavior in charity donations. We presume that participants should evaluate hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites) as less moral persons when seeing them as more (vs. less) competent, that is, capable to practice what they preach but intentionally transgress.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

With no prior reference of effect size, we predetermined to recruit 200 participants, that is, 100 participants in each between-participants condition (Simmons et al., 2018). Two hundred and twenty-one participants completed our survey on the crowdsourcing platform Prolific (Peer et al., 2017), while 162 participants were included in our analyses based on their correct answers to the check questions (83 males; $Mage = 31.7$ years, $SD = 10.5$).

2.1.2 | Design and procedure

Study 1 employed a design with moral hypocrisy (hypocrisy vs. non-hypocrisy) as independent variable, and perceived competence as a continuous independent variable. Participants imagined themselves as a HR manager in a company, and were asked to read an assessment form of a fictitious intern. We presented a donation website X as an important commercial partner of the company. In the non-hypocrisy condition ($n = 81$), participants read a gender-matched intern's records on the donation website X, indicating that the intern did not donate at all on the website. In the hypocrisy condition ($n = 81$), participants additionally read extracts from the intern's self-report, indicating that the intern condemned others' inaction in donating on the website X. Participants in the two conditions judged the intern in terms of both competence (e.g., capable; $\alpha = .95$ across seven items) and morality (e.g., trustworthy; $\alpha = .94$ across seven items). All the questions were answered based on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Calculating Hypocrites Effect

A hierarchical regression analysis revealed that after controlling for age ($p = .62$) and gender ($p = .33$),¹ people perceived hypocrites (=1) as less moral than openly selfish targets (=−1), $B = -.46$, $SE = .06$, $t = -7.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, 95% CI [−.59, −.34], and deemed both targets as more moral to the extent they rated them as more competent, $B = .76$, $SE = .06$, $t = 13.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .55$, 95% CI [.65, .88]. More importantly, perceived competence ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.11$) moderated the effect of the hypocrisy manipulation on participants' moral judgment, $B = -.22$, $SE = .05$, $t = -4.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, 95% CI [−.32, −.11]. As shown in Figure 1, simple slope analysis revealed that people judged hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites) more negatively when they perceived the targets as high (+1 SD); $B = -.70$, $SE = .08$, $t = -8.40$, $p < .001$, 95%

¹In Studies 1 through 4, controlling for age and gender did not change the results' pattern of significance. We did not find any consistent effects of age or gender, either. However, to be consistent across the studies (and as pre-registered in Studies 3 and 4), we reported all the results with age and gender as covariates.

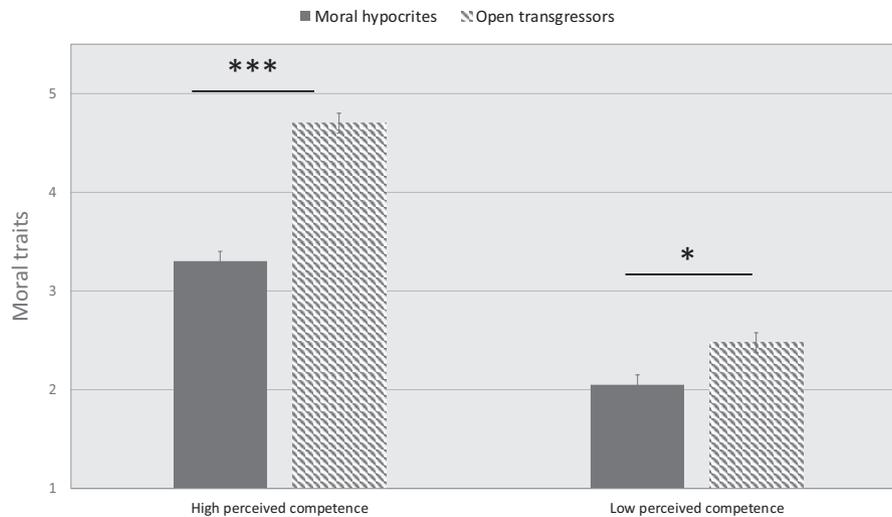


FIGURE 1 Calculating Hypocrites Effect on moral traits as a function of perceived competence in Study 1. Error bars represent standard errors. *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

CI [-.86, -.53]) rather than low on competence (-1 SD; $B = -.21$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.51$, $p = .01$, 95% CI [-.38, -.05]).

2.2.2 | Discussion

Study 1 provided preliminary evidence for the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*, in that perceived competence is associated with more negative moral impression of hypocrites. Those who considered moral hypocrites as high (vs. low) on competence judged them as particularly immoral as compared to open transgressors.

3 | STUDY 2

Studies 2 to 4 manipulated competence to examine its causal effects. Study 2 conceptualized competence as expertise, and examined people's moral condemnation of falsification when it was hypocritical versus non-hypocritical. Even for identical moral transgressions, we expect harsher judgment of hypocritical than open transgressions when the targets have more rather than less expertise in the behavioral domain. We further explored the presumed mechanism of perceived (un)intentionality, such that hypocritical transgressions should be seen as more intentional when featured by a target person with more (vs. less) expertise, which in turn mediates moral judgment of competent hypocrites.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

To detect the competence by moral hypocrisy interaction effect ($\eta_p^2 = .04$ from Study 1), a priori power analysis indicated a sample of

$N = 255$ for 90% power assuming an alpha level of .05. Two hundred and forty-seven participants completed our survey on Prolific. After discarding participants who failed the check questions, two hundred and thirty-three participants were included in further analyses (113 males; $M_{age} = 34.3$ years, $SD = 11.9$).

3.1.2 | Design and procedure

Study 2 employed a 2 (competence: high vs. low) by 2 (moral hypocrisy: hypocrisy vs. open transgression) between-participants design. We examined participants' moral appraisals of an identical transgressive behavior as the dependent variable. Participants read several parts of information about a gender-matched market investigator.

First, participants were presented with competence information of the target. In the high competence condition ($n = 112$), the target "has worked in the company for three years" and "accumulated rich experience"; in the low competence condition ($n = 121$), the target "has worked in the company for the last three months" and "still has a lot to learn". As a manipulation check, participants then rated the target person on seven competence-related adjectives (as in Study 1, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .93$).

Then, in the hypocrisy condition ($n = 114$), participants read that the target once published in the company's internal magazine advocating the importance of research ethics in marketing research, while later was revealed by a client company as falsifying data. In contrast, in the open transgression condition ($n = 119$), the target was simply exposed as committing data falsification but did not advocate research ethics in public.

After reading all the above information about the target person, participants evaluated their appraisals of the transgressive behavior (4 items, $\alpha = .89$; e.g., "Do you think ...'s behavior to falsify the data

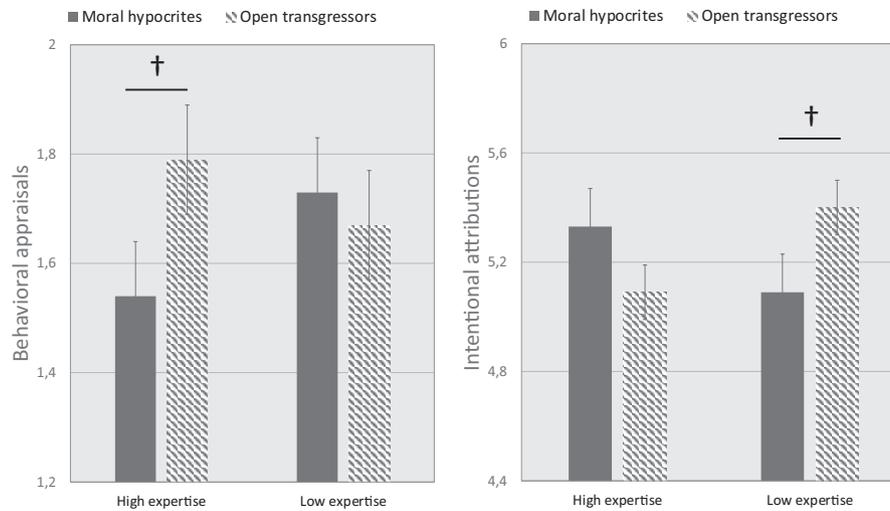


FIGURE 2 Calculating Hypocrites Effect on behavioral appraisals (left panel) and intentional attributions (right panel) with competence as expertise in Study 2. Error bars represent standard errors. † $p < .10$

report is acceptable?”, rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *absolutely unacceptable* to 7 = *absolutely acceptable*), and answered six questions about intentional attribution ($\alpha = .68$ for six items; adapted from Magee, 2009; e.g., “Are ...’s decisions the product of his/her own will?”).

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Manipulation check

As intended, participants rated the more experienced target ($M = 6.02$, $SD = .91$) as significantly more competent than the less experienced target ($M = 5.21$, $SD = .97$), $t(231) = 6.59$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.60$. However, we do note that participants perceived the target in the low competence condition still as quite competent.

3.2.2 | Calculating Hypocrites Effect

Across Studies 2 to 4, the descriptive information in each condition can be found in the Supplementary Materials. After controlling for age ($p = .06$) and gender ($p = .95$), the interaction between competence (high = 1 vs. low = -1) and moral hypocrisy (hypocrisy = 1 vs. non-hypocrisy = -1) marginally predicted people’s appraisals of a moral transgression ($B = -.09$, $SE = .05$, $t = -1.69$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), while the main effect of neither moral hypocrisy ($B = -.05$, $SE = .05$, $t = -.90$, $p = .37$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$) nor competence ($B = -.02$, $SE = .05$, $t = -.36$, $p = .72$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$) was significant. When the targets were high on competence, identical transgressive behavior was appraised more negatively for hypocrites than for non-hypocrites ($B = -.14$, $SE = .07$, $t = -1.93$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$); however, people did not appraise hypocrites’ versus non-hypocrites’ transgression differently

when they were low on competence ($B = .04$, $SE = .07$, $t = .51$, $p = .62$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$; see Figure 2). In sum, the overall interaction was not significant, however, the post-hoc test results were consistent with the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*. In the discussion below we address this issue more elaborately.

3.2.3 | Roles of intentional attribution

While the main effect of neither moral hypocrisy ($B = -.02$, $SE = .07$, $t = -.27$, $p = .79$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$) nor competence ($B = -.03$, $SE = .07$, $t = -.36$, $p = .72$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$) on attribution ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.05$) was significant after controlling for age ($p = .04$) and gender ($p = .35$), a significant interaction between competence and hypocrisy ($B = .15$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.16$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$) revealed that people made less intentional attributions when incompetent targets hypocritically (vs. openly) transgressed ($B = -.17$, $SE = .09$, $t = -1.92$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), but made no difference for competent targets’ hypocritical versus open transgressions ($B = .13$, $SE = .10$, $t = 1.21$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; also see Figure 2).

Intentional attribution was negatively correlated with people’s appraisals of the transgression ($r = -.39$, $p < .001$). Using Model 7 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5,000 bootstrapping samples, we further examined the mediation of intentional attribution in the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* (i.e., the interaction between competence and hypocrisy) on behavior appraisals. The moderated mediation model suggested that people’s attribution of unintentionality accounted for their moral leniency ($B = -.08$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI $[-.17, -.01]$; direct effect: $B = -.05$, $SE = .05$, $t = -1.06$, $p = .29$, 95% CI $[-.14, .04]$), while only when hypocrites (as opposed to open transgressors) were low ($B = .04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI $[.005, .10]$) rather than high ($B = -.04$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI $[-.10, .01]$) on competence.

3.2.4 | Discussion

Study 2 manipulated competence with information about work expertise but did not reveal a significant competence by hypocrisy interaction effect. Our tentative explanation is that as compared to targets with rich work experience, less experienced targets were considered still rather high on competence ($M = 5.21$, $SD = .97$, on a 7-point scale). We did not find a main effect of hypocrisy either, which was well-established in previous research (e.g., Effron et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2017) and our Study 1. We suspect that people considered data falsification in itself extremely immoral ($M = 1.69$, $SD = .78$, on a 7-point scale), leading them to not evaluate such behavior as strongly different for hypocrites versus open transgressors.

However, consistent with the theorizing of the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*, further post-hoc analysis suggested that people were inclined to judge hypocritical (vs. open) transgressions more harshly when they considered the targets high instead of low on competence. Moreover, (un)intentional attributions mediated people's different judgments of competent (vs. incompetent) targets' hypocritical (vs. open) transgressions. Competence implies stronger goal-attainment capacities; people thus attributed incompetent—but not competent—targets' hypocrisy to an unintentional failure to reach their moral goals, which in turn accounted for the leniency of their moral judgments.

4 | STUDY 3

Study 3 was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://tinyurl.com/y3ajzqyn>). We manipulated competence with occupational status in Study 3, and examined moral impressions of hypocritical and non-hypocritical transgressors of organizational ethical values. Moreover, we added a condition of competence where the targets served a high position in an organization unrelated to their act of hypocrisy. Whereas hypocrisy usually happens in the context of a specific issue, competence can either be domain-specific (e.g., expertise in Study 2) or domain-general. For example, non-profit organizations widely use celebrities as a marketing strategy to raise public awareness of social matters (e.g., anti-sweatshop purchase in the present study; for a review, see Erdogan, 1999), based on their success in areas unrelated to the advertised behavior (i.e., domain-general competence). Although competence usually builds on domain-specific skills and experience (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), we deem the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* as domain-general. When the targets explicitly claim their moral or ethical goals, their high-status position should signal their intentionality to fail these claims, regardless of whether their position is related to the claims, or not.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants

As in the pre-registration plan, a priori power analysis yielded a sample of $N = 517$, to examine a small ($\eta_p^2 = .02$) competence by

hypocrisy interaction effect with 90% power at an alpha level of .05. We intended and recruited a total number of 600 participants from Prolific while retaining a final sample of $N = 464$ (214 males; Mage = 31.5 years, $SD = 10.6$) after a few comprehension and attention checks.

4.1.2 | Design and procedure

Study 3 employed a 3 (competence: related high vs. related low vs. unrelated high position) \times 2 (moral hypocrisy: hypocrisy vs. open transgression) between-participants design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions to read about a gender-matched target's behaviors in terms of sweatshop purchases.

First, competence information indicated that the target person served a high ("executive officer"; $n = 162$) or a low ("junior secretary"; $n = 166$) position in an anti-sweatshop organization ("HUMANWELFARE.org"), or a high position in an unrelated organization ("executive officer" of "ANIMALMERCY.org"; $n = 136$). As a manipulation check, participants were then asked to rate the target on four adjectives (e.g., efficient) in terms of both general competence ($\alpha = .94$) and specialized competence (i.e., "in terms of anti-sweatshop issues"; $\alpha = .97$).

We then administered the moral hypocrisy manipulation. In the hypocrisy condition ($n = 218$), the target person advertised for an anti-sweatshop campaign while personally buying from sweatshops, while in the open transgression condition ($n = 246$), the target person bought from sweatshops while not preaching against it. As dependent measures, participants indicated their moral impressions of the target person (e.g., honest; $\alpha = .92$ for four items).

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Manipulation check

Participants rated the targets in the three competence conditions differently on both general competence, $F(2, 461) = 61.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, and specialized competence, $F(2, 461) = 171.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$. Although participants rated targets in a related low position as quite high in competence ($M_{\text{general}} = 5.28$, $SD = 1.16$; $M_{\text{specialized}} = 5.67$, $SD = 1.13$), pairwise comparisons (LSD) showed that people perceived targets with a related high position as more competent in terms of both general ($M = 6.32$, $SD = .87$, $p < .001$) and specialized competence ($M = 6.42$, $SD = .84$, $p < .001$), while people judged targets with an unrelated high position as generally more competent ($M = 6.31$, $SD = .77$, $p < .001$) but less competent specifically in anti-sweatshop issues ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.69$, $p < .001$). Finally, people did not judge targets with a related versus an unrelated high position differently ($p = .90$) on general competence. These results suggest that the competence manipulation worked as intended.

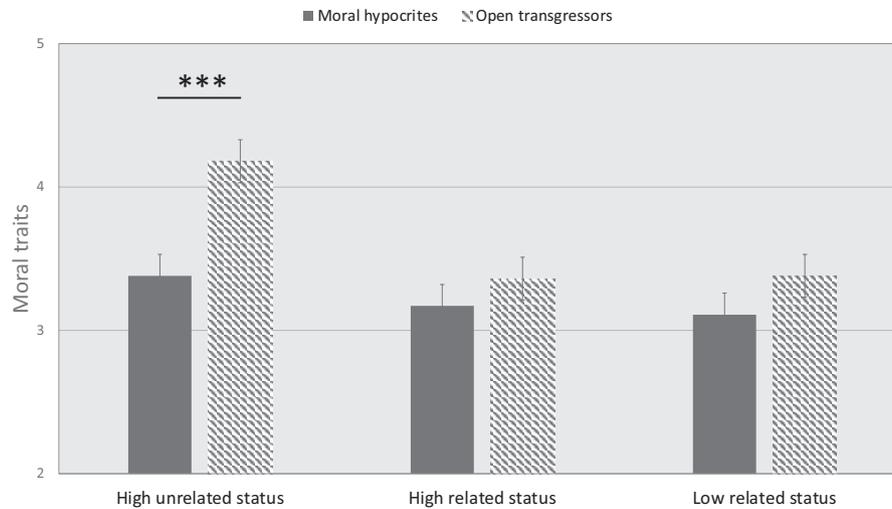


FIGURE 3 Calculating Hypocrites Effect on moral traits with competence as occupational status in Study 3. Error bars represent standard errors. *** $p < .001$

4.2.2 | Calculating Hypocrites Effect

We performed a linear regression analysis to examine the effects of moral hypocrisy (hypocrisy = 1 vs. open transgression = -1) and competence (coded as two variables: [1] specialized competence: related high position = 1 vs. related low position = -1 vs. unrelated high position = 0; [2] general competence: unrelated high position = 1 vs. related low position = -1 vs. related high position = 0) on moral impression. After controlling for age ($p = .74$), and gender ($p = .35$), we found significant effects of moral hypocrisy, $F(1, 455) = 10.24$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, specialized competence, $F(1, 455) = 3.60$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, general competence, $F(1, 455) = 13.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and the hypocrisy by general competence interaction, $F(1, 455) = 3.97$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. However, the hypocrisy by specialized competence interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 455) = 3.60$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. People judged hypocrites more negatively on moral traits than non-hypocrites, only when the targets were high ($B = -.31$, $SE = .09$, $t = -3.32$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-.49, -.13]) rather than low ($B = -.10$, $SE = .09$, $t = -1.04$, $p = .30$, 95% CI [-.28, .09]) on general competence (see Figure 3). Therefore, people's perception of general, but not specialized, competence intensified their negative moral impression of hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites).

4.2.3 | Discussion

In Study 3, we partially confirmed the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* by showing that people judged high (but not low) status hypocrites more harshly than open transgressors when the targets were generally more competent (that is, had high status independent from the domain of hypocritical behavior). Moreover, we demonstrated that people's negative perception of hypocrites was mainly manifested in moral but not sociable traits (see Supplementary Materials).

We did not find the expected *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* operationalized as high versus low status in an organization related to the hypocritical acts. It may be seen as moral hypocrisy when a target person affiliated to an organization fails to practice the ethical values that the organization promotes (i.e., hypocrisy-by-association effect; Effron et al., 2015). The hypocrisy-by-association effect may explain why people did not judge targets of high (vs. low) specialized competence differently depending on our hypocrisy manipulation. Affiliation to an anti-sweatshop organization already made their behavior of sweatshop purchases hypocritical, regardless of whether or not they preached against it.

5 | STUDY 4

Study 4 manipulated competence as good versus poor performative skills in the domain of hypocritical acts (i.e., pro-environmentalism). With expanded measures of moral judgment (behavioral appraisals as in Study 2, moral traits as in Studies 1 and 3, and additionally recommended punishment), we again pre-registered this study on the OSF (<https://tinyurl.com/y2efjm8k>) before implementation.

Moreover, we introduced the manipulation of hypocrites' other-oriented or self-oriented motives in Study 4—to test the presumed mechanism of self-interested motives. The *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* posits that people resent competent hypocrites because their transgressions are more likely to be seen as intentionally pursuing self-interest. If observers employ such calculating attributions in judgments of competent hypocrites, they should be sensitive to the specific motives underlying their hypocritical acts. Put differently, people would judge competent (vs. incompetent) hypocrites as extremely immoral as compared to open transgressors, when hypocrites pursue self-interest (vs. public interest).

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

A priori power analysis yielded a sample of $N = 402$, to detect a small competence by hypocrisy interaction effect ($\eta_p^2 = .02$) with 90% power assuming an alpha level of .05. We thus predetermined to recruit 500 participants as in the pre-registration. Four hundred and two participants were included in our final analyses (211 males; $M_{age} = 30.8$ years, $SD = 9.7$) after the comprehension and attention checks.²

5.1.2 | Design and procedure

Study 4 was a 2 (competence: high vs. low) \times 3 (target type: open transgressor vs. moral hypocrite for self-interests vs. moral hypocrite for public interests) between-participants design. We randomly assigned participants to one of the six conditions, which described a gender-matched target working for an environmental organization.

We first presented competence information. In the high competence condition ($n = 195$), the target was described as “has a great chance to be promoted” and “schemes on environmental activities have always been positively evaluated and produced significant effects in practice”; in the low competence condition ($n = 207$), the target was described as “has little chance to be promoted” and “schemes on environmental activities have always been rejected or produced little effect in practice”. Seven competence-related adjectives (e.g., intelligent; $\alpha = .97$) were presented as manipulation check.

Then the manipulation of hypocrisy followed. Participants first read that the target delivered a speech to condemn non-environmentalists in the hypocrisy conditions ($n = 255$), while information about the speech was absent in the open transgression condition ($n = 147$). Participants in both conditions then read the targets' un-environmental practices in his/her personal life.

To distinguish between self- versus other-oriented hypocrisy, participants read that the speech to condemn non-environmentalists was delivered for the benefits of the self (“to get promoted to a higher managerial position”; $n = 126$) versus the public (“to encourage more people to commit to pro-environmental practices”; $n = 129$). In the open transgression control condition, participants only read one paragraph depicting the target's un-environmental daily behavior, without information on the speech and the motives of the speech.

After reading all the above information, participants answered questions concerning three aspects of their moral judgments as dependent variables: moral traits of the target person (e.g., sincere; $\alpha = .92$ for 7 items), behavioral appraisals of the target's un-environmental behavior (e.g., acceptable; $\alpha = .90$ for 5 items), and

additionally recommended punishment (e.g., “Do you think that the environmental organization should dismiss ...?”; $\alpha = .83$ for 4 items).

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Manipulation check

As intended, participants rated the well-performing target ($M = 6.17$, $SD = .69$) as significantly more competent than the poor-performing target ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(400) = 33.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.40$.

5.2.2 | Calculating Hypocrites Effect

As described in the pre-registered analysis plan, we performed a multivariate linear regression analysis to examine the effects of competence (high = 1 vs. low = -1), target type, and their interactions on the averaged ratings of moral traits ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.12$), behavioral appraisals ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.11$), and recommended punishment ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.47$). Target type was coded into two variables: moral hypocrisy (non-hypocrite = -2 vs. moral hypocrite for self = 1 and public interests = 1) and motives of hypocrisy (non-hypocrite = 0 vs. hypocrisy for self-interests = -1 vs. hypocrisy for public interests = 1).

After controlling for age ($p = .09$) and gender ($p = .004$), the main effects of competence, multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = .89$, $F(3, 391) = 17.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, moral hypocrisy, multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = .81$, $F(3, 391) = 30.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, and motives of hypocrisy, multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = .94$, $F(3, 391) = 9.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, were all significant. Although the multivariate competence \times moral hypocrisy interaction was not significant, multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = .99$, $F(3, 391) = 1.93$, $p = .12$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, as shown in Figure 4, the predicted univariate competence \times moral hypocrisy interaction was significant for moral traits, $F(1, 393) = 4.06$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and recommended punishment, $F(1, 393) = 4.02$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, but not for behavioral appraisals, $F(1, 393) = 1.07$, $p = .30$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. We did not find a significant competence \times motives of hypocrisy interaction on moral judgments overall, multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda > .99$, $F(3, 391) = .52$, $p = .67$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, or for any of the three aspects of moral judgments, including moral traits, $F(1, 393) = .61$, $p = .43$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, behavioral appraisals, $F(1, 393) = .20$, $p = .66$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and recommended punishment, $F(1, 393) = 1.42$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$.

We then elaborated on the interaction between competence and moral hypocrisy on moral traits and recommended punishment. Specifically, people judged moral hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites) more negatively on moral traits when they were high ($B = -.35$, $SE = .05$, $t = -6.95$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.45, -.25]) rather than low ($B = -.21$, $SE = .05$, $t = -4.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.30, -.11]) on competence. Likewise, people believed that moral hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites) should be punished more harshly when they were high ($B = .44$, $SE = .07$, $t = 6.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.30, .57]) rather than low ($B = .25$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.12, .38]) on

²Different from the pre-registered analysis plan, we did not use the comprehension questions after information of motives of hypocrisy as an exclusion criterion. The reason is that people seem to understand hypocritical behavior of different motives as beneficial to both the self and the public. For example, in the “moral hypocrite for public interests” condition, 102 out of 129 participants thought that the target also intended to “further his own career”.

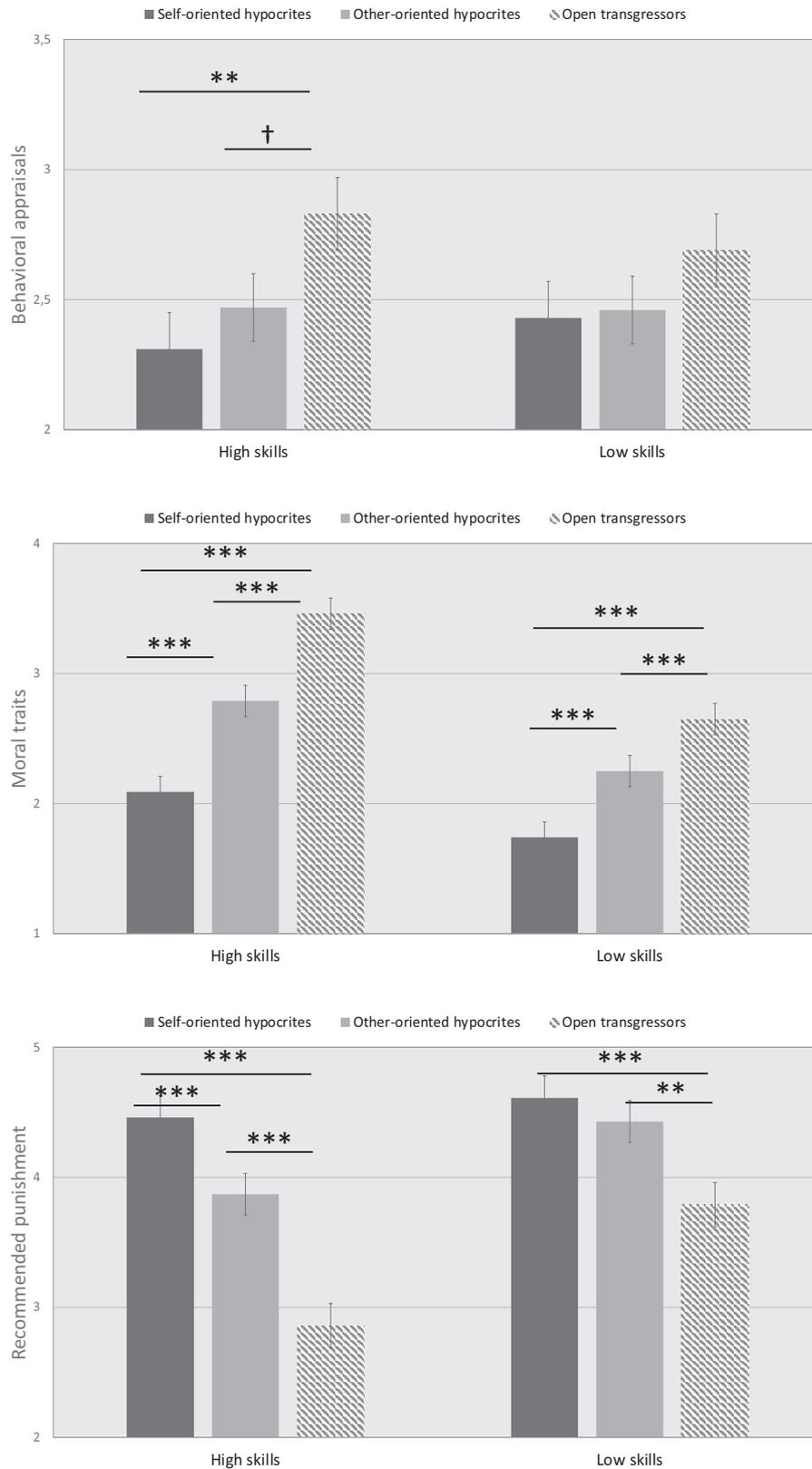


FIGURE 4 Calculating Hypocrites Effect on behavioral appraisals (upper panel), moral traits (middle panel), and recommended punishment (lower panel), with competence as performative skills in Study 4. Error bars represent standard errors. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

competence. These findings supported the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* in people's inferred moral characters, and recommended punishment of, competent hypocrites.

An alternative coding scheme was explored to compare respectively self-interested hypocrisy (V1: open transgression = -1 vs. moral hypocrisy for self = 1 and others = 0) or other-oriented hypocrisy (V2: open transgression = -1 vs. moral hypocrisy for self = 0 and others = 1) with open transgression. The overall effect of neither (1) competence by self-oriented hypocrisy interaction (multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = .99$, $F(3, 391) = 1.66$, $p = .18$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) nor (2) competence by other-oriented hypocrisy interaction (multivariate Wilk's $\Lambda = 1.00$, $F(3, 391) = .04$, $p = .99$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$) was significant. However, we found that after controlling for age ($p = .09$) and gender ($p = .004$), competence inclined to interact with self-oriented hypocrisy on recommended punishment ($F(1, 393) = 4.04$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) and moral traits ($F(1, 393) = 2.76$, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$), but not on behavioral appraisals ($F(1, 393) = .79$, $p = .37$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$). People perceived self-oriented—but not other-oriented—hypocrites (vs. open transgressors) as less moral (high competence: $B = -.70$, $SE = .09$, $t = -8.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.87, -.53]$; vs. low competence: $B = -.44$, $SE = .08$, $t = -5.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.60, -.28]$) and recommended harsher punishment (high competence: $B = .81$, $SE = .12$, $t = 6.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[.57, 1.04]$; vs. low competence: $B = .42$, $SE = .12$, $t = 3.66$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[.20, .65]$) when the targets were high rather than low on competence.

5.2.3 | Discussion

In Study 4, we replicated the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* with the manipulation of competence as specialized skills in the domain of hypocritical acts. People judged moral hypocrites (vs. non-hypocrites) more negatively on moral traits, and recommended more severe punishment for them, when the targets were high as opposed to low on competence. However, the predicted competence by hypocrisy interaction effect did not replicate on behavioral appraisals as in Study 1.

People were sensitive to the perceived ulterior motives of competent hypocrites. As compared to open transgressors, people formed more negative moral impressions and recommended harsher punishment especially for self-oriented—but not other-oriented—competent (vs. incompetent) hypocrites, which was conceptually consistent with the mechanism of calculating motive attribution underlying people's harsher judgments of competent hypocrites.

6 | INTERNAL META-ANALYSIS

Although the results across the studies tended to corroborate the presumed *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*, the strength and significance level of evidence varied across the specific studies. Therefore, we meta-analyzed the main effect of hypocrisy (vs. non-hypocrisy) in the high and low competence conditions respectively, after including

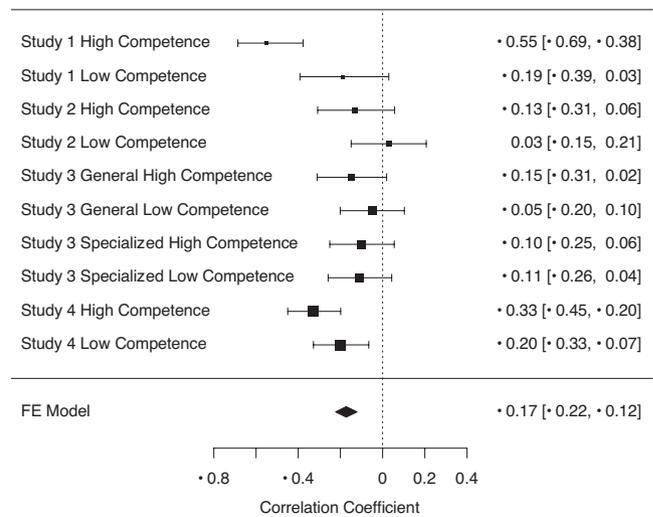


FIGURE 5 Meta-analyzed effects of hypocrisy (=1; vs. non-hypocrisy = -1) on moral judgments across the four studies, in the high and low competence conditions, respectively.

both general and specialized competence contrasts in Study 3, and integrating indexes of behavior appraisals, moral traits, and recommended punishment (reverse-coded) in Study 4 (i.e., $k = 10$, $N = 3,450$). We used fixed effects in which the mean effect size (i.e., mean correlation) was weighted by sample size. All correlations were Fisher's z transformed for analyses and converted back to Pearson correlations for presentation.

As shown in Figure 5, across the four studies, people perceived hypocrisy as significantly more negative than non-hypocrisy, $r_m = -.17$, $Z = -6.51$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.22, -.12]$. More importantly, consistent with the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*, the negative association between hypocrisy and moral judgments was larger for high competence ($k = 5$, $N = 686$; $r_m = -.24$, $Z = -6.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.31, -.17]$) than low competence targets ($k = 5$, $N = 741$; $r_m = -.11$, $Z = -2.93$, $p = .003$, 95% CI $[-.18, -.04]$).

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Accusations of hypocrisy abound in daily gossip, social platforms, and news coverage; however, scientific evidence on how people understand hypocrisy is still limited. A basic consensus of previous studies is that word-deed inconsistency can be a strong signal that induces the perception of hypocrisy (Barden et al., 2005; Dong et al., 2021; Effron et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2017; Laurent et al., 2014). Based on this conceptualization, the current research aims to add more insights into the question why people condemn manifestations of hypocrisy for some but not others. Four studies supported a *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* that higher competence intensified people's negative moral evaluations of hypocrites. With both perceptions (Study 1) and various manipulations (expertise in Study 2, occupational status in Study 3, and skills in Study 4) of competence, people considered hypocrites (as opposed to non-hypocrites) as less

moral persons (Studies 1, 3, and 4), appraised their identical transgressive behavior more negatively (Study 2), and recommended harsher punishment for them (Study 4) when they were high rather than low on competence. People's negative moral judgments of hypocrites applied even when the targets were competent in domains irrelevant to their hypocritical deeds (Study 3), and were especially true when they were competent and intended to promote own rather than others' interest (Study 4).

7.1 | Theoretical and practical implications

By examining the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*, the present contribution shows (1) how judgments of misdeeds are contingent on previous moral claims and (2) how competence information serves as a cue to infer intentionality and ulterior motives of word-deed inconsistency. Below we elaborate on these two main theoretical contributions, in relation to previous theorizing.

First, the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* expands the observer licensing theory (Effron & Monin, 2010; Kakkar et al., 2020; Polman et al., 2013), by illuminating when and why pre-existing good deeds do not excuse subsequent misdeeds, and instead induce more severe moral judgments. People do not judge moral transgressions in a vacuum; an important contextual factor is the transgressors' previous deeds. Observer licensing theory suggests that a preceding good deed can license a following transgression as if there is a "moral credit account" (Effron & Monin, 2010). This theory, however, does not elucidate judgment mechanisms where previous good and subsequent bad deeds take place in an identical behavioral domain. More specifically, people may evaluate good and bad deeds in an identical domain as a whole (e.g., hypocrisy), instead of respectively as addition or deduction to a "moral credit account". And people may not evaluate combinations of good and bad deeds only by their face value, but also by inferred ulterior motives. Put differently, moral judgments are determined by how people interpret the relation between good and bad deeds (e.g., as happening in independent or related domains), and how people construe the intentions and motives of such combined behaviors (e.g., to conceal own bad deed and gain undeserved credit, or to prevent others from committing the same transgressions; Dong et al., 2021; Effron & Miller, 2015; Effron et al., 2018).

Moreover, the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* illuminates the role of competence and its implications on intentionality and motive inferences in moral judgments. While previous studies on competence and morality suggest that people form more negative impressions of immoral (vs. moral) others and resent them more strongly in social interactions when they are competent rather than incompetent (Goodwin et al., 2014; Landy et al., 2016), the underlying mechanisms are still not clear. Our work suggests that when the targets are high (vs. low) on competence, self-claimed morals or ethics prompt a stronger perception of intentionality and self-interest in followed transgressions, and induce harsher moral judgments than open transgressions without conflicting claims. Considering word-deed

inconsistency as a unique but prevalent moral phenomenon, competence can be one important criterion for its normative judgments. More broadly, perceived competence may explain why people judge identical (im)moral deeds differently, depending on, for example, the targets' skill level (Guglielmo & Malle, 2010), leadership position (Karellaia & Keck, 2013;), social prestige (Dong et al., 2021; Polman et al., 2013), and socioeconomic status (Yuan et al., 2018).

The *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* has practical implications on various social contexts where moral judgments play a central role. For example, in first social encounters, competence impression may influence moral impressions of inconsistent actors (Studies 1, 3, and 4), and further affect interaction dynamics like decisions of recruitment or cooperation (Goodwin et al., 2014; Landy et al., 2016). In legal contexts, identical transgressions can induce different juror judgments depending on the availability of evidence suggesting expertise and previous commitment in the behavioral domain (Study 2). The "right" legal decisions may be better made by fully communicating these influential factors in juror deliberations. Also, in organizational settings, it may not be enough to establish punitive mechanisms based on the severity of unethical behavior. To maintain a just system, employees may deem that higher-status transgressors of organizational values deserve more penalties, especially when they transgress the very norms that they are trying to enforce on others (Study 4).

7.2 | Limitations and future directions

The current research examined and replicated the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* with various manipulations of competence and diverse manifestations of moral hypocrisy. However, some limitations should be noted, which merit future research.

First, although the current research examined moral hypocrisy in various behavioral domains, it did not cover the whole spectrum of morally relevant behaviors, especially the extremely severe or criminal ones (e.g., crimes against a person). Preaching against crimes (e.g., "we should not harm others physically") is usually widely acknowledged and may not help actors gain much approval. People's harsher moral judgments of hypocrites and especially competent hypocrites may be more salient for proscriptive (characterizing what is good to do) than prescriptive (characterizing what should not be done) moral violations (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009). These ideas are speculative, however, and deserve future empirical tests.

Second, despite a consistent pattern across some key societal domains, the evidence in support of the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* was small in magnitude (see the internal meta-analysis). Though the present research conceptualized hypocrisy as objective word-deed inconsistency and examined hypocrisy as a discrete variable (i.e., hypocritical as compared to open transgressions), people's subjective understanding can vary on a spectrum depending on, for example, what kind of inconsistency (e.g., between saying and doing; between organizational value and individual behavior) in

what domains (e.g., environmentalism, organizational values) they deem as hypocritical. For instance, liberals rather than conservatives may condemn environmental word-deed inconsistency of competent targets more harshly, given that liberals are more likely to moralize environmental topics (Feinberg & Willer, 2013) and deem environmental inconsistency as hypocritical (Kreps et al., 2017). This subjective perspective on hypocrisy can also help synthesize discrepant findings in our studies. The presumed *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* did not emerge when high- (vs. low-) status targets transgressed their affiliated organization's ethical values (Study 3). In this case, people may have attributed strong hypocrisy regardless of the transgressors' status or personal claims (Effron et al., 2015). Likewise, people condemned identical word-deed inconsistency more harshly when such inconsistency was introduced as self-oriented rather than other-oriented (Study 4). This finding may also relate to the fact that people perceived self- (vs. other-) oriented word-deed inconsistency as more hypocritical. Future research may integrate this subjective perspective on hypocrisy and investigate the influence of competence attributes on moral judgments through perceived hypocrisy.

8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, people's perception of hypocrites is in line with the *Calculating Hypocrites Effect*. In four studies, we found that people were prone to judge hypocrites as less moral than open transgressors, especially when hypocrites were high rather than low on competence. Such a *Calculating Hypocrites Effect* may have implications for a range of social situations such as the courtroom or other places where justice judgments are critical (e.g., moral hypocrisy by political or organizational leaders). Impressions of competence may lead people to apply different standards of justice for identical forms of moral hypocrisy. Aside from the societal implications, the present findings underscore the importance of competence for judgments of norm violations. Moral judgment plays a vital role in enforcing normative behavior; these findings may inform us why people use different standards for disapproval and punishment. Seeing the transgressors as calculating or not is crucial for why people judge identical transgressions differently.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1002/jts5.113>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data and analysis syntax (Anonymous, 2021) that support the findings of the studies are openly accessible in Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/khrw4/?view_only=87fe6a35c9d64feb3a95f462f9affb.

ORCID

Mengchen Dong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8547-3808>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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