Research Statement
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Most people view themselves as virtuous, yet few of us rigidly adhere to our moral principles. We care about honesty but sometimes bend the truth, endorse egalitarianism but sometimes express prejudice, value generosity but sometimes act selfishly. We also selectively enforce our moral principles, condemning some people more than others for the same wrongdoing. For example, people may excuse a lie if it is told by a leader they support, and organizations may tacitly condone abusive behavior if it is perpetrated by a star performer. In short, when judging their own and others' behavior, people have a remarkable capacity for *moral flexibility*.

I study the psychology of moral flexibility. Situated in the field of behavioral ethics, my research has used laboratory experiments, longitudinal field studies, and multi-organizational surveys to address core organizational topics related to dishonesty, hypocrisy, and prejudice. My primary stream of work examines the psychological processes that enable moral flexibility. This work seeks to explain why people are so inconsistent about upholding and enforcing their moral principles. My secondary line of work examines how people respond to *others* who display moral flexibility. When leaders, public figures, or colleagues fail to live up to the principles they espouse, when and why do we condemn them as hypocrites?

I will first highlight four sources of moral flexibility: behavioral history, imagination, repetition, and other people. Next, I will discuss when and why people think such flexibility, in others, rises to the level of hypocrisy. Finally, I will present my plans for future research.

I. What Facilitates Moral Flexibility?

A. How Our Behavioral History Facilitates Moral Flexibility

My early research examined how people derive moral flexibility from their behavioral history. Once people feel their past behavior has proven that they are virtuous, they become more likely to take morally dubious actions – a phenomenon called **moral licensing** (for reviews, see Effron, 2016; Effron & Conway, 2015; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). My work on moral licensing has been cited over 2,000 times[1] in OB, psychology, marketing, economics, and environmental sciences; it is regularly discussed outside of academia (e.g., by science writer Malcolm Gladwell, the team behind Freakonomics, *The New York Times*, and *National Public Radio*); and I have given talks on licensing to practitioners ranging from police officers to beauty and wellness entrepreneurs. One reason for this work's impact is that moral licensing appears to represent a counterexample to the fundamental social psychological tenant that people strive to act consistently with their past behavior; with moral licensing, doing good leads to doing bad. Another reason is that moral licensing offers a compelling explanation for how corporate social responsibility, diversity policies, ethical consumerism, and environmental conservation efforts sometimes ironically undermine the very goals they aim to achieve. Here, I highlight three of my foundational contributions to understanding moral licensing.

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[1] Google Scholar citation count as of September 23, 2021.

First, my work reveals how **real-world political contexts can license people to express potentially prejudiced views**. In one of the first demonstrations of moral licensing, we found that giving Obama supporters a chance to endorse Obama made them more likely to say they preferred to hire Whites instead of Blacks for a hypothetical job (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Apparently, they felt comfortable expressing this racially dubious preference because they thought that endorsing Obama proved they were not racist. A recent investigation, with post-doc and doctoral collaborators, examines boundary conditions in a contemporary political context (Giurge, Lin, & Effron, 2021).

Second, **my work clarifies the theoretical underpinnings of moral licensing**. We posited and found evidence for two mechanisms (Effron & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). Virtuous behavior can provide "moral credits" that can be "spent" on a license to commit even a blatant transgression. Through this mechanism, prior good deeds balance out subsequent wrongdoing. This is the most common understanding of moral licensing. But we showed that virtuous behavior can also provide "moral credentials" that attest to a person's good character and change the way subsequent behavior is construed. Through this mechanism, prior good deeds make morally ambiguous behavior seem as if it did not represent wrongdoing at all. Understanding these different mechanisms improves predictions about when moral licensing will occur.

Third, my work demonstrates how **people strategically cultivate their "moral credentials."** Rather than passively waiting for evidence of their virtue to accumulate, people will actively create such evidence when they want to feel licensed to act less virtuously (see Effron & Conway, 2015). My research identifies three key strategies people use "prove" their virtue to others and to themselves: acting more virtuously in the present (Merritt, Effron et al., 2012), reinterpreting their past behavior as diagnostic of a virtuous character (Effron, 2014), and using their imaginations to invent bad deeds they *could have* done, but did not do (Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2013). For example, to feel that they had proven they were not racist, White participants overestimated the number of racist behaviors they *could have* performed – but did not perform – during the experiment (Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012). This finding pointed towards a broader insight, which I examined in the research described next: Imagination is a potent source of moral flexibility.

B. How Imagination Facilitates Moral Flexibility

Imagination is essential to our everyday lives, and psychological theories emphasize its positive consequences: To learn from our mistakes, we imagine how the past might have been different; to make plans, we imagine what the future might bring (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Epstude, Scholl, & Roese, 2016). But in the moral domain, my research reveals, imagination can also have a dark side. My work identifies several ways in which we use our imaginations to let ourselves – and the people we like – get away with wrongdoing.

Classic theories of motivated reasoning hold that people may selectively notice, seek, and remember facts, but that they rarely believe what they want without any facts (e.g., Kunda, 1990). By contrast, my work reveals how motivated reasoning can become untethered from facts. To reach the moral conclusions we want, we can simply use our imaginations. Specifically, as I describe next, we derive moral flexibility from imagining alternatives to the past, possible futures, and potential consequences of our moral behavior. This research can help explain how

leaders get away with dishonesty in our "post-truth world," as I have discussed in a *New York Times* Op-Ed (Effron, 2018b) and various press interviews (e.g., with the *Washington Post*).

1. Imagining alternatives to the past. When Donald Trump's administration faced criticism for falsely claiming that his 2016 inauguration was the best-attended in history, the administration responded by suggesting that attendance *would have* been higher if the weather had been nicer. Logically, this response does not make the falsehood true. *Psychologically*, however, it might make the falsehood feel subjectively closer to the truth, and thus less unethical to tell. More generally, **imagining how a lie *could have been true if circumstances had been different* may make the lie seem less unethical to tell**. Three experiments support this hypothesis – especially when lies align with people's politics (Effron, 2018a). The reason, the data suggest, is that people have an easier time imagining a lie if it aligns with their politics, even when they acknowledge the lie is false. These results demonstrate how our ability to imagine alternatives to the past (i.e., *counterfactual thinking*) grants us the moral flexibility to excuse the lies we like. Partisans may disagree about the morality of telling a particular lie – not because they disagree on whether it is true, but because they disagree on whether it *could have been* true.

Counterfactual thinking also grants us the moral flexibility to dismiss criticism we do not want to hear. People will dismiss criticism as hypocrisy if the critic has displayed double standards. For example, if a manager reprimanded you for speaking too much during a meeting, you would probably think it was hypocritical if the manager declined to reprimand colleagues who had spoken even more. But what if none of your colleagues spoke more than you? You might still perceive hypocrisy if you imagined that the manager *would have* declined to reprimand your colleagues *if* they had spoken more. In other words, **people may dismiss criticism as hypocritical when they imagine the critic *would have* displayed double-standards if given the chance**. Three experiments, led by my Ph.D. student Beth Anne Helgason, find evidence for this *counterfactual-hypocrisy effect*, and demonstrate how it leads political partisans to condemn critics of the leaders they support (Helgason & Effron, revise and resubmit-a). In-progress research examines how this effect interferes with workers learning from criticism in organizational settings.

These projects suggest that, to support the moral conclusions we want to reach, we need not rely on what it actually true in the present; we can simply imagine how the past might have been. As the next section illustrates, we can also imagine what the future might bring.

2. Imagining possible futures. Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes raised over $700 million by falsely claiming to have invented a new medical technology (Carreyrou, 2018). The technology did not actually exist, but perhaps the people who knew about her dishonesty were willing to look the other way because they imagined the technology *might* exist in the future. As Holmes predicted, "We will fail over a thousand times till we get this thing to work, but we will get it on the 1,001st time" (Parloff, 2014). More generally, **people may find a lie less morally problematic when they imagine how it *might* become true in the future**. Five experiments support this hypothesis (Helgason & Effron, revise and resubmit-b). In one, MBA students considered a friend who, despite actually knowing nothing about financial modeling, falsely claimed expertise in financial modeling on his CV. Students found the friend's lie less unethical when they were asked whether they thought he would take a financial modeling course in the future. Apparently, imagining how he *might* acquire some knowledge of modeling made his lie

seem more excusable – without, of course, actually making it true. This effect was particularly pronounced when people were motivated to excuse the lie, because such motivation made it easier for them to imagine that the lie would eventually become true. Our capacity to imagine the future as we want gives us the flexibility to reach the moral conclusions we prefer.

In other research, I have examined how imagining the future can motivate people to cheat. Consider a worker faced with a series of opportunities to get away with overbilling clients. To decide what to do, she might imagine how guilty she would feel in the future if she overbilled – or how regretful she would feel if she missed the chance to make money by overbilling. My colleagues and I predicted that she would imagine more regret on her "last chance" to overbill. Our four studies show that **when people face a series of opportunities to cheat, they are most likely to cheat at the end to avoid regret** (Effron, Bryan, & Murnighan, 2015). In one experiment, we hired hundreds of research assistants over the Internet, explained that we would pay them based on how long they reported spending on each of several tasks, and surreptitiously measured how long they actually took. Regardless of whether we gave them 7 or 10 tasks to complete, they overbilled us more for their last task than for earlier tasks. Other results support our explanation based on anticipated regret, and rule out the possibility that people worry less about getting caught or have less self-control on the last cheating opportunity. Organizations with limited resources to monitor employees' honesty might be advised to deploy such resources when cheating is most likely: at the end of a series of cheating opportunities.

3. Imagining the impact of our good deeds. Thus far, I have focused on how our imaginations give us the moral flexibility to excuse the lies we like, to condemn the critics we dislike, and to succumb to temptations to cheat. In other work, I examine how we use our imaginations to inflate the positive consequences of our good deeds. How virtuous should a person feel for donating $100 to charity? To answer this question, the person might imagine how the donation will help the charity, or imagine what others might think about the donation. Such imagination, my research suggests, is likely to help the person feel more virtuous than perhaps they deserve.

One project finds that **people imagine an identical charitable behavior will do more good when they perform it than when others perform it**. For example, participants thought their own $100 donation could buy more books for poor children and save more endangered animals than another person's $100 donation could (Polman, Effron, & Thomas, 2018). Another project suggests that, **to reassure themselves about their moral standing, people will imagine that their behavior has proven their morality to others**. For example, participants overestimated how generous they would seem to others for donating $0.50 to the Red Cross – but only in an experimental condition that motivated them to feel moral (Effron, 2014). These two projects suggest that, when reflecting on their good deeds, people can make mountains of morality from molehills of virtue. In this way, imagination may give us the flexibility to feel moral despite engaging in only minimally virtuous behavior.

C. How Repetition Facilitates Moral Flexibility

Our behavioral history and our imaginations are not the only sources of moral flexibility. In a new series of projects, I examine how **social media may be facilitating moral flexibility by repeatedly exposing us to the same information**. With these projects, I aim to contribute to the public discourse about misinformation and digital ecosystems (for example, I have discussed this

work in a presentation to the Australian Government's Department of Finance, in a live TV interview on MSNBC, and with reporters for outlets such as *The Washington Post, Vox, Forbes,* and the Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun*).

The spread of "fake news" on social media can damage organizations' reputations, undermine public health efforts, and erode the foundations of democracy. When a fake-news headline "goes viral," the same person is likely to encounter it multiple times. We find that **people think a piece of fake news is less unethical to share if they have seen it before**, which leads them to be more likely to share it themselves (Effron & Raj, 2020). Our results show that even though our research participants did not *believe* the fake news, repeated encounters with it made them more inclined to *excuse* it. Despite thinking that spreading misinformation is unethical in general, people may think it is less unethical to spread a specific piece of misinformation after repeated exposure to it. The concerning implication beyond social media is that leaders can reduce the moral condemnation for dishonesty simply by repeating their lies – even if no one believes them.

People's tendency to judge misinformation less harshly after repeated exposure to it represents one example of a broader phenomenon I call the *moral-repetition effect*. Fake news is not the only type of content that "goes viral." Accurate reports about corporate scandals, leaders' ethical lapses, and other transgressions can spread fast and far through social media, continuous news coverage, and gossip. When such reports do spread, the same person is likely to hear about the same transgression multiple times. Seven recent experiments reveal that **people judge the same transgression as less unethical if they have heard about it before** (Effron, under review). I find evidence that this moral-repetition effect occurs because wrongdoings provoke less negative affect when they are familiar, and negative affect influences moral condemnation. Accordingly, encouraging people to base their moral judgments on reason, rather than on emotion, leads them to condemn a transgression just as harshly regardless of whether they have seen it before. In this context, careful thinking reduces moral flexibility.

A **longitudinal field experiment**, led by Ph.D. student Raunak Pillai, shows that **the moral-repetition effect can occur in naturalistic settings** (Pillai, Fazio, & Effron, in preparation). People frequently encounter descriptions of wrongdoing while checking their smartphones. To simulate this experience, we text-messaged descriptions of different wrongdoings to participants over a two-week period, randomizing the number of times we sent each message. Replicating the moral repetition effect, the more messages we sent about a particular wrongdoing, the less unethical participants ultimately found the wrongdoing.

My research on repetition and moral flexibility makes **three key theoretical contributions**. First, the project on fake news highlights that misinformation spreads not only because people fail to distinguish between fact and fiction (Pennycook et al., 2021), but also because their moral judgments about misinformation are flexible. Thus, interventions to fight our current "info-demic" of misinformation should aim to make fake news seem more unethical, not just less believable. Second, whereas much research emphasizes how social media amplifies moral outrage (e.g., Crockett, 2017), my work demonstrates how social media will sometimes dampen such outrage. When a social-media post describing wrongdoing "goes viral," many different individuals will see it and become outraged; but at the same time, a single individual may repeatedly encounter it, and thus become less outraged. In this way, my work highlights a tension between individual and collective outrage. Third, this work offers a new perspective on moral

flexibility. My earlier research examined varieties of moral flexibility that require mental effort. For example, such flexibility involved reflecting on one behavioral history, imagining counterfactual pasts, or predicting possible futures. By contrast, the moral-repetition effect demonstrates how our reliance on emotion can lead us to reach different moral conclusions in different situations. Moral flexibility need not require mental effort.

D. How Other People Facilitate Our Moral Flexibility

As with much micro-OB research on behavioral ethics, the work I have reviewed thus far adopts an individual-focused perspective on moral flexibility. A person's capacity for moral flexibility, I have argued, depends on how they have behaved in the past, what they can imagine, and what stimuli they have repeatedly encountered. In ongoing work, however, I have been examining how **people also derive moral flexibility from their social context** – the groups, organizations, and societies in which they hold membership. Thus far, this research has highlighted three ways in which we look to others to facilitate our moral flexibility: We are more likely to let ourselves and others off the hook for prejudice if we hold membership in a tightly-knit group; we think "everybody else is doing" is a better justification when we are inclined to excuse unethical behavior; and we use socio-historical events, like elections, to justify expressing "politically incorrect" views. Together, this research demonstrates the importance of considering the social aspects of moral flexibility.

1. Membership in a tightly-knit group or organization. Are White Americans better characterized as a unified group with a shared history and common political interests – or as a large number of subgroups from different regions and backgrounds with divergent interests? What about Christians, or EU-members? The answers are of course subjective; the same demographic group can seem like a cohesive, unified *entity* whose members pursue common goals and have similar characteristics (an *entitative* group) or it can seem like a loose-knit collection of independent individuals who have little in common (i.e., a *less-entitative* group). The degree to which people perceive a demographic group as entitative will vary among individuals and across historical contexts, and can be influenced by political rhetoric. These perceptions matter for intergroup relations. Whereas prior work shows how seeing an *outgroup* as entitative can stoke stereotyping and prejudice, our work reveals that viewing an *ingroup* as entitative can increase people's comfort expressing such prejudice. That is, **membership in a highly cohesive group licenses people to publicly express the anti-outgroup prejudices they privately hold**. In one of our eight studies, describing Christians as a highly entitative group increased Christian participants' expression of anti-Muslim attitudes – but only if participants were likely to already privately harbor such attitudes (Effron & Knowles, 2015).

We find evidence for two explanations (Effron, Kakkar, & Knowles, 2018). First, people think prejudice is less illegitimate if it is expressed by a member of an entitative group. Specifically, prejudice expressed by entitative-group members is more likely to seem motivated by an understandable desire to defend group interests (e.g., "I don't like them because they are taking our jobs") than by irrational hatred (e.g., "I don't like them because they are inferior"). This is because group members more clearly have common interests to defend when the group seems like a single entity. Second, members of entitative groups may anticipate that their prejudice will be blamed on their group rather than on themselves. This is because group members are assumed to have more power to influence each other's behavior when they appear to be a unified entity.

In more recent work, my colleagues and I examine the **consequences of characterizing business organizations as unified entities**. For example, Uber could highlight that its technology coordinates its drivers' behavior, creating a highly entitative group of employees – or it could frame its technology as merely matching consumer with drivers, who form a loosely-knit, non-entitative group of contractors. In two field surveys and four experiments, we find that presenting Uber and other business organizations as highly entitative increases consumers' attraction for it, but also increases the blame consumers assign to senior leaders when one of the organization members transgresses (Effron, Kakkar, & Cable, under 2nd round review). Moving beyond scholarly debates about whether theories *should* treat an organization as a unified entity (e.g., King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), these results demonstrate the importance of understanding what happens when the public *does* perceive an organization as a unified entity.

2. Others' wrongdoing. The research just described highlights group membership as a source of moral flexibility. Others' wrongdoing is another source. The field of behavioral ethics has long highlighted how people can cross the ethical line by "following the crowd" (see Moore & Gino, 2013). But how much do people think that "following the crowd" justifies wrongdoing? The answer may depend on whose perspective they take. Experiments led by my current Ph.D. student Julia Langdon find that the more perpetrators there are who harm a victim, the less unethical people think the harm is – but especially if people take the perspective of one of the perpetrators (Langdon, Effron, & Berman, in progress). **"Everyone else is doing it" may seem like a better justification for crossing the ethical line when you are sympathetic to someone who crossed it.** In this way, others' behavior can grant people the flexibility to selectively excuse wrongdoing.

3. Socio-historical events. People can also derive moral flexibility from socio-historical events in their society, such as elections. Such events can signal or create new social norms, and can thus change the way we are willing to behave. For example, my colleagues and I reasoned that Americans might interpret the 2016 election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton as a signal about how their fellow citizens thought about gender in America. An exploratory study – led by Ph.D. student Oriane Georgeac – surveyed over 2,000 voters and found that **Trump supporters expressed more sexism in the two weeks after Trump's election compared to the two weeks before it** (Georgeac, Rattan, & Effron, 2019). We speculated that Trump's supporters may have interpreted his election as a repudiation of "political correctness," which gave them the flexibility to express views about gender they had previously kept to themselves.

II. How Do People Respond to Moral Flexibility in Others?

Whereas my primary stream of research examines how people grant themselves moral flexibility, my secondary stream examines how people respond to others' moral flexibility. Organizational life is ripe for such flexibility (Brunsson, 1989; Pfeffer, 1981). Bureaucratic barriers may prevent top leaders from enacting their espoused ideals, middle managers may have incentives to prioritize different ethical concerns when dealing with different stakeholders, and employees may feel obligated to uphold values at work that they transgress in their personal lives. When and why do people condemn such inconsistencies as hypocrisy? This question is important because hypocrites attract moral condemnation, undermine trust, and de-motivate work performance (see Effron, O'Connor, Leroy, & Lucas, 2018).

The prevailing view in organizational behavior is that laypeople equate hypocrisy with "failing to practice what you preach" (Simons, 2002). However, my colleagues and I argue that this view neglects to consider how people subjectively interpret inconsistency. We theorize that people will perceive an actor as hypocritical only if they interpret the actor's behavior as a claim to an *undeserved moral benefit* (Effron, O'Connor, et al., 2018). "Moral benefits" are privileges that society grants to people who have earned them through virtuous behavior and good character. Such benefits include the right to appear and to feel moral, to judge others' morality, and to influence others' moral behavior. Hypocrites are individuals we perceive as enjoying these benefits even though they lack the moral character or behavioral track record to deserve them. Thus, **"failing to practice what you preach" is neither necessary nor sufficient to receive condemnation for hypocrisy**, as the research below demonstrates.

A. Inconsistency Without Hypocrisy

Failing to practice what you preach need not seem hypocritical. Suppose a manager once had an affair with a subordinate, and now advises a colleague to avoid romantic relationships in the office. We find that people perceive the manager as hypocritical – unless he was caught and punished for the affair. More broadly, **people think it is legitimate to preach against a misdeed you used to practice – as long as you suffered for committing the misdeed** (Effron & Miller, 2015). We find that suffering makes the preaching appear more righteous than self-righteous – that is, more like a genuine attempt to help people avoid one's mistakes rather than a hypocritical attempt to appear more virtuous than you are.

Culture also shapes whether people interpret inconsistency between words and deeds as hypocrisy. Specifically, failing to practice what you preach receives a harsher moral penalty in cultures where people interpret preaching as an attempt to appear virtuous than in cultures where they interpret preaching as an attempt to help others. We find evidence for this claim in three experiments and a multi-organizational field study with participants from 46 nations (Effron, Jackman, Markus, Muramoto, & Muluk, 2018). In cultures that promote individualism/independence, transgressions spark harsher moral condemnation and greater distrust if they are inconsistent with the values the transgressors themselves have preached. However, this "inconsistency penalty" is smaller in cultures that promote individualism/interdependence, where we find that preaching tends to be interpreted as more helpful than self-serving. Our findings highlight the potential for cultural misunderstandings and conflict surrounding issues of alleged hypocrisy in multinational organizations.

B. Hypocrisy Without Preaching

The work just described illustrates how people can fail to practice what they preach without seeming hypocritical. Other work shows how people can seem hypocritical without preaching anything. Participants in one of our experiments evaluated a job candidate who interned at a marketing firm two summers ago, and who had recently been ticketed for reckless driving. When the firm happened to run a safe-driving campaign, compared to an unrelated campaign, participants thought his reckless driving was more problematic, found him less moral, said that he deserved a lower starting salary, and were less likely to recommend hiring him. Apparently, his tenuous association with a safe-driving cause was enough to make him seem hypocritical for

driving recklessly, even though he had never preached about safe driving. More generally, being associated with a virtuous cause confers the moral benefit of appearing virtuous; thus, if someone undermines a cause with which they are associated, they will seem hypocritical for claiming a moral benefit they do not deserve. As a result, we find in four studies, **people will be condemned for hypocrisy if they fail to practice what their *organization* preaches – a hypocrisy-by-association effect** (Effron, Lucas, & O'Connor, 2015). The same logic may explain why **leaders can seem hypocritical when they fail to practice what their *predecessors* preached – an *intergenerational-hypocrisy effect*** (Lucas, O'Connor, Effron, & Berry, 2020). A current organizational leader can appear virtuous by dint of her association with the values espoused by the organization's previous leader, even if the current leader never espoused those values herself. Violating those same values can thus make the current leader seem hypocritical for appearing more virtuous than she is.

C. Hypocrisy Without Appearing Virtuous

The examples of hypocrisy just discussed involved individuals who were perceived as falsely signaling their virtue to others. However, challenging a recent theoretical account of hypocrisy (Jordan, Sommers, Bloom, & Rand, 2017), we argue that sending false virtue signals is not necessary to seem hypocritical, because appearing virtuous to others is not the only moral benefit a person can claim (Effron, O'Connor, et al., 2018). *Feeling* virtuous is a moral benefit, and thus must be earned through truly virtuous behavior or character. Consider a tobacco executive whose job it is to encourage smoking, but who secretly and anonymously donates to a cause that fights tobacco addiction. Although the executive appears *less* virtuous in public than he acts in private, participants still found him hypocritical because they interpreted his secret donation as an attempt to assuage his guilt. That is, they thought the executive was trying to purchase the moral benefit of a clean conscience without having adequately atoned for harming public health. Seven experiments reveal that **even if leaders do not *appear* more virtuous than they are, they still risk condemnation for hypocrisy if they seem to *feel* more virtuous than they deserve** (O'Connor, Effron, & Lucas, 2020).

D. Implications of Hypocrisy Findings

In addition to advancing theory, my hypocrisy research has important practical implications. First – as I have discussed in interviews for the *Financial Times, The Associated Press, The Atlantic,* and *BBC News* – it helps predict and explain why leaders sometimes get away with failing to practice what they preach, and sometimes face public condemnation. Second – as I discuss in my teaching – leadership courses and popular-press books may have overstated the importance of keeping one's words and deeds perfectly aligned. The most-negative organizational consequences of leaders "saying one thing but doing another," I argue, emerge when followers attribute such inconsistency to hypocrisy. Thus, understanding what "counts" as hypocrisy can thus help leaders know when it is crucial act consistently – and when they can instead change course for legitimate reasons without undermining their credibility.

III. Future Directions

I plan to expand my research in several new directions. Below, I discuss nascent lines of work about how advice can corrode ethical decision-making, how moral flexibility can facilitate the

spread of misinformation, and how hypocrisy aversion can be prevented from inhibiting moral action. As I explain, **these lines of work focus not only on identifying sources of moral flexibility, but also on designing interventions to promote more-ethical behavior**.

In pursuing these lines of work, I hope to **partner with more organizations to conduct field research**. I have previously consulted to Airbnb and a regional police force about designing experiments to reduce racial discrimination and dishonesty in their organizations. I am currently in conversation with a large, international bank about running field studies on ethical advice-giving, and I hope to collaborate with tech firms to test anti-fake-news interventions. To facilitate such research and collaborations, my LBS colleagues and I **recently applied for a 10-year, £10 million grant from the Leverhulme Trust; ours is one of nine short-listed applications awaiting a funding decision.**

A. (Un)Ethical Advice

One future direction will examine the moral psychology of advice. In a recent paper, we examine **when advisors will choose to disclose personal relationships that create conflicts of interest** (Effron & Raj, 2021). A new line of work, led by my Ph.D. student Beth Anne Helgason, will examine **how advice can corrode ethical decision-making**. Advice can improve the quality of decisions – but it may also license people to succumb to unethical temptations, for three reasons: people may strategically *seek* advice that justifies succumbing, people may be more likely to *follow* advice if it urges them to succumb (Helgason & Effron, 2020), and people may feel social pressure to *give* advice that licenses others to succumb. In short, advice can give people the moral flexibility to feel justified crossing the ethical line. In testing these ideas, our planned research will develop techniques to help people to give, seek, and take more-ethical advice.

B. The Moral Psychology of Misinformation

To fight the spread of misinformation, technology companies and social scientists are developing interventions to help people distinguish fact from fiction (see Lazer et al., 2018; Pennycook et al., 2021; van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Rosenthal, & Maibach, 2017). My research on fake news, described earlier, suggests that this approach may be insufficient, because sometimes people find it morally acceptable to spread misinformation that they know is false. Thus, interventions need to target not only people's beliefs about what is true, but also their moral judgments about what is right. Kickstarted by an **$85,000 grant from the Center for the Science of Moral Understanding**, I have recently begun a research program investigating **when and why people think misinformation is morally acceptable to spread, and what can be done about it**. Preliminary experiments find that encouraging careful thinking about morality – i.e., *moral deliberation* – reduces people's inclination to share news about business, politics, and health that they know is fake (Effron, Shulman, & Chan, in progress). My students and I are now designing follow-up studies to test how well this intervention could scale on social media.

Subsequent work will test two key theoretical ideas. The first is that people will find misinformation less unethical when it feels easy to cognitively process – whether because of its presentation format, its familiarity (Effron & Raj, 2020), or its alignment with one's ideology. Support for this idea would unite previous findings about misinformation and morality into a single theoretical framework, and suggest new interventions for reducing its spread. For

example, social media companies could present fact-checked falsehoods in fonts or formats that make them feel more difficult to cognitively process.

The second idea is that, to excuse the lies they like, people will strategically shift their standards for what constitutes misinformation. When people are motivated to *condemn* a falsehood, they may focus on how its *verbatim details* are false. For example, Brexit opponents took issue with the pro-Brexit campaign's false claim that the U.K. was sending the E.U. £350 million each week. But when people want to *condone* a falsehood, they may focus on how it conveys a general message, or *gist*, that is true. Some Brexit supporters defended the false claim on the grounds that E.U. membership cost *too much*, despite acknowledging the cost was not literally £350 million per week. My doctoral student and I have begun to explore this idea (Langdon & Effron, 2021), and we expect future research to reveal an underappreciated way in which misinformation fuels conflict. Even when partisans agree that a claim is factually wrong, they may disagree about whether its gist is true, and thus about whether making the claim is unethical.

C. Managing Concerns with Hypocrisy

A healthy aversion to hypocrisy can motivate people to practice the values they preach, but hypocrisy aversion also has downsides. First, it may inhibit people from taking a public stand about moral issues they care about. A business leader might decline to publicly endorse an environmental policy she privately supports, worried that her personal carbon footprint would make her seem hypocritical. Second, when leaders do fail to practice the principles they preach, they may undermine others' motivation to follow those principles. When business and political leaders travelled to Davos on private planes to discuss the climate emergency, they probably demotivated some members of the public from reducing their own carbon footprint. To avoid these two downsides, I plan to research how people's aversion to hypocrisy can be managed. For example, **how can we help people effectively champion good causes, even if they are imperfect advocates**? Ideally, advocates would perfectly embody the causes they promote, but in practice "if a spotless moral record were required to stand up for what's right, then most of us would remain seated" (Effron, O'Connor, et al., 2018, p. 73).

IV. Conclusion

We tend to hold people – especially ourselves – to different moral standards in different situations. My research reveals a number of psychological processes that enable this moral flexibility. For example, our capacity to adapt to negative emotional events leads us to condemn wrongdoing less harshly if we have heard about it before (Effron & Raj, 2020; Effron, under review); our ability to imagine the past and the future as we want allows us to excuse the lies we like (Effron, 2018a; Helgason & Effron, revise and resubmit-b); our beliefs about our ingroup can embolden us to endorse anti-outgroup prejudices that we would otherwise have compunction about expressing (Effron & Knowles, 2015); and our ability to convince ourselves of our virtuous character can make us feel comfortable crossing the ethical line (see Effron & Conway, 2015). At the same time, we have little tolerance for such moral flexibility in others if we believe that they are trying to appear more virtuous than they are – or to feel more virtuous than they deserve (see Effron, O'Connor, et al., 2018). Understanding these sources of moral flexibility can shed light on why we risk falling short of the ideals we espouse, and can point the way towards how individuals and organizations can better live up to their values.

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