Other-serving double standards: People show moral hypercrisy in close relationships

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Extending research on self-serving moral double standards (hypocrisy), we examine the reverse pattern of other-serving *hypercrisy* toward close relationship partners. In three studies (*N* = 1,019), for various imagined transgressions, people made more lenient moral judgments for their close friends (Studies 1 & 2) and romantic partners (Study 3) compared to themselves. This hypercrisy effect emerged both for transgressions toward third parties (Study 1) and toward each other (i.e., within the relationship; Studies 2 & 3). Moreover, it was moderated by perceptions of the relationship: Participants who more strongly believed their relationship to be a zero-sum game (i.e., needs can only be met competitively) showed greater leniency for themselves and attenuated hypercrisy for mutual transgressions (Studies 2 & 3). Investigating people's close others rather than strangers as targets of moral judgment thus suggests that other-serving hypercrisy is more prevalent than previously thought, but sensitive to people's conceptualizations of their relationships.

Keywords: Double Moral Standards; Close Relationships; Moral Hypercrisy; Moral Hypocrisy; Moral Judgment; Zero-Sum Beliefs

Double Moral Standards: Hypocrisy versus Hypercrisy

Abundant research documents self-serving biases in moral judgment. A manifestation of such self-serving biases is moral hypocrisy, here defined as the endorsement of more lenient moral standards for one's own compared to others' behaviors (e.g., Lammers et al., 2010; Monin & Merrit, 2012; Valdesolo & De Steno, 2008). People often view their own transgressions in a more positive light, for example, when they feel powerful or look at situations abstractly as opposed to concretely (Lammers, 2012; Lammers et al., 2010). While such double moral standards help people to pursue immoral goals while maintaining a sense of morality (Monin & Merritt, 2012), their individual benefits stand in stark contrast to their social risks: Moral hypocrites are disliked and mistrusted (Jordan et al., 2017). Hypocrisy thus appears to be a double-edged sword that serves one's self-interest while jeopardizing one's reputation and relationships. Moreover, findings from many areas of research counter such sinister views on humankind's morality: People often spontaneously cooperate (Evans & Rand, 2019) and place great importance on fairness and equity (e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Stafford & Canary, 2006). More specifically, people strongly value their social relationships, and instead of ruthlessly enforcing their own interests often go long ways to meet others' needs (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003).

Taken together, these considerations raise the question of how prevalent moral hypocrisy really is. Rather than reflecting a uniform pattern, whether we show such self-serving double moral standards may depend critically on who the target of moral judgment is, and the relationships in which we find ourselves with them. In the present research, we therefore investigate double moral standards with respect to close others, most importantly, with respect to mutual transgressions toward versus incurred through them. Specifically, we examine moral

hypercrisy, defined as being more critical with oneself compared to others (Lammers et al., 2010). We further investigate the moderating role of how people perceive their relationship to work in terms of needs fulfilment (i.e., as a zero-sum vs. nonzero-sum game).

Indeed, a few studies in the domain of moral judgment have identified circumstances under which people may not tend toward hypocrisy, but *other-serving* hypercrisy: Lammers and colleagues (2010) observed that both powerlessness and illegitimate power inspired participants to make stricter moral judgments for identical transgressions committed by themselves compared to other persons. Yet, this partly unpredicted and novel effect was smaller and less reliable compared to the hypocrisy observed in states of elevated power. Consequently, these authors argued that people need to overcome a default hypocritical tendency for other-serving moral standards to emerge. Relatedly, another study found hypercrisy as a downstream consequence of feelings of envy (Polman & Ruttan, 2012).

In contrast, more recent work examining the experience of distrust (vs. trust) as antecedents of hypocrisy observed hypercrisy under conditions of elevated trust toward hypothetical, unfamiliar targets. Nevertheless, inducing trust only inconsistently evoked a pattern of other-serving hypercrisy (Weiss et al., 2018). Together, these scattered and often unexpected findings from the hypocrisy literature suggest that people may not always exhibit self-serving hypocrisy, and sometimes even show other-serving double moral standards, depending on how they construe their social interactions and relationships, such as that they depend on others, are inferior to them, or are entitled to less.

Moral Judgment and Close Relationships

However, these prior studies on the antecedents of double moral standards addressed situations involving unfamiliar, unspecified, or hypothetical targets (e.g., Du et al., 2019;

Lammers et al., 2010; Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008; Weiss et al., 2018). They thus neglected meaningful interpersonal contexts. At the same time, people regularly observe, evaluate, and commit selfish behaviors and immoral acts in their daily lives, and transgressions often take place within their immediate social environments and personal relationships (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2014). Moral cognition arguably evolved in and for dealing with close others in communities, rather than strangers (Bloom, 2011). Scholars have consequently pointed out that restricting empirical investigations to unidentified, hypothetical targets limits generalizability to everyday moral judgment, and called for a consideration of identity, including relationship characteristics, of both judge and target of moral behavior (e.g., Hester & Gray, 2020).

An increasing body of theoretical and empirical work supports the notion that the kind and strength of interpersonal relationships matter strongly for moral evaluations and behaviors (e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Rai & Fiske, 2011). People apply different moral motives or values to the behaviors of different targets (Rai & Fiske, 2011; Waytz & Young, 2018). Recent experimental studies found that we not only judge transgressions or prosocial behaviors differently depending on actors' relationship with the target (Earp et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2016; McManus et al., 2020); People also react differently to observing close others victimized, and spare kin and closer, compared to less close, transgressors to third parties from punishment (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2018; Lieberman & Linke, 2007; Weidman et al., 2020). It has been proposed that such effects are at least partly motivated by protecting the mutual relationship (Weidman et al., 2020). Moreover, when it comes to close others' transgressions, loyalty concerns may alleviate moral judgments, and shared group membership, more generally, often

elicits biased moral judgments (e.g., Endevelt et al., 2021; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007; Waytz & Young, 2018).

Moral Hypercrisy in Close Relationships

Rather than comparing different targets (e.g., kin vs. non-kin) or relationship contexts between third parties with respect to moral judgments, some prior research in the domain of close relationships has more directly compared people's moral reactions to their own versus close others' behaviors. For example, Selterman and Koleva (2015) investigated hypothetical norm violations such as sexual or emotional closeness to third parties. A partner-serving moral judgment tendency emerged for within-relationship privacy violations (e.g., secretly checking one's partner's e-mail) in one study, but not another. In contrast, in the latter study, emotional threats (e.g., keeping romantic memorabilia from previous relationships) were judged more harshly for one's partner, but less harshly for one's best friend compared to the self. However, evidence of diverging moral standards with respect to either romantic partners or best friends was generally scarce and inconsistent.

Other work revealed that people may interpret somewhat ambiguous behaviors (e.g., online flirtation) as more indicative of infidelity for their romantic partners than for themselves (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016). Notably, these studies included judgments relating to participants' hypothetical partners, and focused on relatively moderate to more severe and typically sexual or infidelity-related behaviors. Other work more specifically investigated former partners' perspectives on and coping mechanisms following their separation, finding that these tend to blame each other more strongly than themselves (e.g., Amato & Previti, 2003).

Yet, diverging moral standards for people's own versus their actual, current close others' transgressions were not the focus of these prior studies. In addition, there seems to be a lack of

research on double moral standards with respect to relatively mild, mundane transgressions within ongoing relationships, comparable to those investigated in prior studies on moral hypocrisy. The present research therefore bridges the literatures on double moral standards (i.e., hypocrisy), the impact of relationships on moral judgment, and moral judgment of transgressions within in close relationships. In doing so, we a) seek evidence of hypercritical moral judgments toward close others (i.e., rejecting the null of hypocrisy or equity), and b) examine the moderating role of people's perceptions of their close relationships in terms of zero-sum beliefs.

But why should people show hypercritical moral standards toward their romantic or otherwise close relationship partners? After all, hypercritical standards are inconsistent with equity in relationships, which people strongly value (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 2006). Moreover, people see themselves as more similar to and exhibit overlapping representations of the self and close relationship partners (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Weiss et al., 2020), potentially promoting equitable moral standards. Yet, our closest relationships are not typically characterized by reciprocity and proportionality of costs and benefits, but by need-based support and care (e.g., Rai & Fiske, 2011). Particularly in romantic relationships, partners go long ways to fulfill their partner's needs, that is, they are responsive and empathic (Mills & Clark, 2001). People regularly sacrifice their self-interest to promote their relationships or their partners' well-being (e.g., Zoppolat et al., 2020). Empathy toward the partner should promote strict moral standards not only for third parties (e.g., Lieberman & Linke, 2007), but also the self to avoid behaviors that may hurt the partner's interest.

Similarly, empathic concern for one's close others and giving them the benefit of the doubt should promote understanding and constructive reactions to their transgressions—those toward third parties, but also those toward oneself. Indeed, people also tend to be more

empathetic about and forgiving of transgressions within closer relationships (McCullough et al., 1998). The abovementioned processes should thus impact judgmental standards for one's own and one's close others' moral failings in opposite directions, resulting in other-serving, as opposed to equitable or hypocritical, moral standards toward close relationship partners.

As opposed to hypocrisy or equitable moral standards, such hypercrisy should prove functional in maintaining and developing relationships. If the other is seen as a valuable relationship partner, and people are motivated to promote intimacy, a relative leniency toward one's close other's occasional mundane transgressions, on the one hand, may prevent escalation of conflict. Relatively strict self-related standards, on the other hand, may help to prevent or repair one's own transgressions, and establish "idiosyncrasy credit" (Hollander, 1958). Meeting or even exceeding close others' expectations should foster trust in them, which in turn may reinforce caring behaviors (Mills & Clark, 2001) and regulate double moral standards (Weiss et al., 2018). Thus, particularly *diverging*, that is, other-serving (vs. equitable), moral standards may promote relationship development via "upward spirals" (Crocker & Canevello, 2015; Mills & Clark, 2001).

The Role of Zero-Sum Beliefs about the Relationship

Yet, not all close relationships may afford hypercritical double standards, depending on how they are construed by relationship partners. More specifically, people differ in their perceptions of how their relationship works in terms of needs fulfillment (Crocker et al., 2017): Can both relationship partners' needs be met at the same time? Or will one of them suffer when the other thrives? *Non-zero-sum beliefs* about a relationship entail the expectation that each partner's sacrifices benefit not only the close other, but also the relationship and ultimately oneself. Individuals who perceive their relationship in win-win terms trust that their needs can be

met in collaboration with their close other (Crocker et al., 2017). Hypercritical, other-serving moral judgment tendencies may help individuals sustain and promote such individually and mutually beneficial relationships.

In contrast, people who construe their relationship as "competitive or zero-sum—one person's gain is another's loss" (Crocker et al., 2009, p. 252) believe that mutually beneficial ways of serving both partners' interests and solving conflicts are not possible. Given the harmful impact of one partner's self-interest on the other, such *zero-sum beliefs* may be associated with more reciprocal, equity-oriented (tit-for-tat) evaluations of mutual selfish transgressions—that is, attenuated moral hypercrisy: Experiencing the relationship as a zero-sum game should reduce trust in one's partner's motivation to consider one's interests (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003), and thus promote a tendency for self-serving behaviors (see Crocker et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2018). In other words, zero-sum beliefs should hamper the willingness to sacrifice one's self-interest for the close other, promoting relatively lenient standards for one's own transgressions.

In line with this argument, empirical work indeed found zero-sum beliefs to be associated with lower responsiveness to romantic partners' needs (Crocker et al., 2017). Low trust has similarly been theoretically associated with a reduced willingness for sacrifice (Wieselquist et al., 1999), and predicts self-protective behaviors in relationships (Murray et al., 2011). It further fuels moral violations and impairs cooperation across social contexts (e.g., Balliet & van Lange, 2013; Weiss et al., 2018; 2020), whereas increased trust can promote empathy with others' needs (Burgmer et al., 2021). In contrast, zero-sum beliefs may elicit less benevolent interpretations and judgments of close others' transgressions towards oneself. In sum, stronger zero-sum beliefs should differentially predict reactions to one's own and close others' transgressions, and therefore attenuate moral hypercrisy. While potentially detrimental for the relationship in the

long run, such a moderating impact of zero-sum beliefs should be adaptive for the individual in preventing exploitation by a close other with whom the relationship appears to work in zero-sum ways.

Despite relationship-relevant beliefs having been a prolific research area over the past years (e.g., Kammrath & Peetz, 2012), there has been only little research on the downstream consequences of zero-sum beliefs (but see Crocker et al., 2017). Yet, prior research indicates that people's construal of their social interactions may be a powerful moderator of hypocritical versus hypercritical double moral standards (Lammers et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2018). We therefore expected double moral standards to be critically shaped by zero-sum beliefs.

The Present Research

Integrating different literatures on the antecedents of double moral standards, the effects of relationships on moral judgment, and moral judgments within close relationships, the present research investigates whether people tend to judge transgressions more leniently for their close relationship partners compared to themselves (moral hypercrisy). This pattern should emerge both for transgressions toward third parties extraneous to the mutual relationship (Study 1) and transgressions within the relationship (Studies 2 & 3). Further, these other-serving double moral standards should be attenuated for individuals with stronger relationship-specific zero-sum beliefs (ZSB), integrating a relationship-specific moderator and thereby providing evidence that hypercrisy is a malleable phenomenon within close relationships. These hypotheses were tested with respect to close friends (Studies 1 & 2) and romantic relationship partners (Study 3; Supplemental Study 4).

We report all relevant measures, experimental conditions, and data exclusions. Design and analyses of Studies 1 and 2 were preregistered. Materials, additional analyses, sensitivity power analyses and an extended replication of Study 3 (Supplemental Study 4) are available in the Supplemental Online Materials (SOM), and data and code are available on OSF (https://osf.io/76hy9/).

Study 1

Study 1 was designed as an initial test of moral hypercrisy toward close others. To that end, we employed a diverse set of transgression scenarios used in prior research on moral hypocrisy and examined whether people judge these more leniently for their close friends compared to themselves. We reasoned that close friends as targets would provide a conservative test of our hypothesis, because people might see themselves as benefiting from their romantic partners' transgressions towards third parties (e.g., financially), potentially biasing moral evaluations (e.g., Bocian et al., 2020).

Depending on condition, participants were asked to evaluate these transgressions from their own perspective or with their best or a close friend in mind. We expected to find an effect of target condition consistent with hypercrisy, that is, more lenient moral judgments for close friends' compared to one's own transgressions, providing evidence against equity norms or moral hypocrisy. In an additional "standard" condition closely following prior research (e.g., Lammers, 2012; Weiss et al., 2018), participants evaluated identical transgressions with strangers as perpetrators (i.e., targets of judgment). First and foremost, this control condition served to establish that people indeed judge their close others' transgressions more favorably compared to others' with whom they do not share a relationship. Second, despite the notion of

wide-spread self-serving double standards in the moral judgment literature (e.g., Lammers et al., 2010; Monin & Merrit, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007), only few studies have demonstrated the "classic" hypocrisy effect in a "neutral" or baseline control condition (Polman & Ruttan, 2012, Study 1; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008). Therefore, this condition additionally served to examine whether people indeed judge strangers' transgressions more strictly compared to their own.

Method

Participants and design. Based on the effect sizes found in two prior studies that investigated target effects on moral judgment (Weiss et al., 2018, Study 3, trust condition; Polman & Ruttan, 2012, Study 1, neutral condition) we aimed at approximately 150 participants per experimental condition (https://aspredicted.org/pq3c8.pdf). We obtained data from 479 U.K. citizens on Prolific Academic for a survey on behavior perceptions who received £0.50. Data from 27 participants were excluded from analyses.[1] Fifteen participants in the friend condition did not confirm that they had thought of their best/close friend (but rather different people they knew, fictitious people or people they did not know, or their romantic partner). Twelve participants failed an attention check. After exclusions, 452 participants (319 females, 131 males, 2 diverse/n.a., $M_{age} = 34.01$, $SD_{age} = 12.06$) were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions (target: *self* vs. *friend* vs. *stranger*).

Materials and procedure. In all conditions, participants saw six short scenarios in a fixed random order that have been established and frequently used in prior research on moral hypocrisy (e.g., Du et al., 2019; Lammers et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2018). In each scenario, the target person considered a transgression for selfish reasons. For example, the target was

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[1] Across studies, multiple exclusion criteria may apply.

considering to overreport their hours worked from home to inflate their payment, to keep too much change received from a cashier at the grocery store, or to speed on the highway to make it to an appointment. In the *self* condition, participants were considering these six transgressions from their own perspective. For example, the overreporting scenario (adapted from Lammers, 2012) in the self condition read: "You work at a company. You usually work from home, and the boss is very satisfied with your work overall. The salary is based on the hours worked, which you report at the end of each week. Lately, you have been short of money, and have increasing difficulties paying the rent and other daily expenses. The company cannot check how many hours have been worked, and besides, it is doing very well financially. Therefore, you think about reporting a few more hours than you have actually worked." In the *stranger* condition, these situations were described from unidentified other persons' perspectives (e.g., Weiss et al., 2018).

In the *friend* condition, before reading the scenarios, participants were asked to think of their best or a close friend and to enter that person's (nick) name in a text box. They were instructed to complete all of the subsequent tasks with this friend in mind and to imagine their friend being in the described situations. The scenarios were phrased with "your friend" (and "he/she") as agent and target of judgment. As our dependent variable, for each scenario, participants were asked to indicate how acceptable they would find each behavior on nine-point scales (e.g., "How acceptable would you find it for you to report a few more hours than you have actually worked in order to make some extra money?", 1 = *not at all acceptable*, 9 = *completely acceptable*). Responses were collapsed across scenarios to form a moral judgment index, with higher values indicating greater perceived acceptability (Cronbach's α = .79, M = 4.15, SD =

1.68). As an attention check, participants were asked to select "very much" in response to an additional rating item after the last scenario.

Results and Discussion

In a one-way ANOVA, a significant main effect of target condition on moral judgment emerged, $F(2, 449) = 14.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .060$, 90% CI [.027, .096][2]. Contrast analyses indicated that participants who judged their friends' transgressions ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.63$) were indeed more lenient than participants who judged their own transgressions ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.70$), $t(449) = 4.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$, 95% CI$_d$ [0.27, 0.73] (see SOM Tables 1, 2, 4, for results across individual scenarios in Studies 1-3).[3] Participants did not judge their own transgressions more leniently than strangers' transgressions ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(449) = 0.71$, $p = .476$. However, participants judged their friends' transgressions more leniently than strangers' transgressions, $t(449) = 4.96$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$, 95% CI$_d$ [0.35, 0.81].

These findings suggest that across various transgressions taken from the hypocrisy literature, people exhibit other-serving hypercrisy, judging identical transgressions more leniently for their close friends than for themselves. Notably, the present study did not find self-serving hypocrisy in people's judgments of their own versus strangers' transgressions, a result to which we will return in the General Discussion. Nevertheless, and most important to the present research, people seem to show other-serving moral hypercrisy specifically toward close others, but not toward strangers. They further do so under circumstances where they and their close others are not directly affected by each others' transgressions.

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[2] For one-sided tests (*F*-tests), 90% confidence intervals are reported (Steiger, 2004).

[3] To account for potential scenario effects, for all studies, we additionally performed multilevel analyses fitting a random slope model to the data. Analyses confirmed the central hypercrisy effect of target condition on moral judgment. Additional analyses for Studies 2, 3, and Supplemental Study 4 confirmed the interaction effect of ZSB and target condition.

Study 2

In addition to observing and judging close others' moral transgressions toward third parties, people regularly commit and are target of selfish behaviors *within* their close relationships. Consequently, Study 2 was designed to extend Study 1 in important ways: In a pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/9cw8h.pdf) laboratory study in a different culture and language, it investigates whether people will also show other-serving hypercrisy with respect to mutual transgressions. Additionally, Study 2 examines how people's relationship beliefs moderate such moral hypercrisy. To that end, we developed novel, realistic transgression scenarios and asked participants to evaluate these with their best or a close friend in mind, that is, either from their own or from their friend's perspective.

We hypothesized that people would exhibit hypercritical tendencies with respect to their close friends, that is, more lenient moral judgment in the target compared to the self condition. This hypercrisy effect would again provide evidence against equity norms or moral hypocrisy in close relationships. However, it should be moderated by participants' zero-sum beliefs about their relationship (i.e., attenuated hypercrisy for stronger ZSB).

Method

Participants and design. Again aiming at approximately 150 participants per experimental condition, we recruited 339 German university students in the cafeteria who completed a "study on situation perception" on computers in individual cubicles and received a chocolate bar or a coffee voucher. Data from 32 participants were excluded from analyses because they did not confirm that they had thought of the same person throughout the study ($n = 14$), an actual person they knew ($n = 5$), and a person with whom they had a *friendship* (vs.

romantic relationship) ($n = 13$), or had failed an attention check ($n = 8$). Data from one additional participant were excluded because he reported to the research assistants that he had imagined multiple different persons. After exclusions, 307 participants (202 females, 104 males, 1 diverse, $M_{age} = 23.97$, $SD_{age} = 6.00$) were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (target: *self* vs. *friend*).

Materials and procedure. Participants were asked to think of their best or a close friend and to enter their (nick) name in a text box. Subsequently, they answered a five-item non-zero-sum beliefs questionnaire developed by Crocker and colleagues (2017) which we had adapted to close friendships (e.g., "In my friendship I feel that when one person gets what he/she wants, the other person usually suffers," "… it is usually possible to resolve disagreements in mutually beneficial ways", reversed). Items were answered on a seven-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), and three items were reversed to form an index of ZSB ($\alpha = .78$, $M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.88$). Higher values thus indicate a stronger belief that the friendship works like a zero-sum game.

Subsequently, participants were instructed to think about their friend again and to imagine the following situations which might occur in their friendship. They were then presented with six short scenarios in a fixed random order: For example, participants read that they and their friend wanted to meet regularly, but that the target person considered to tell a white lie to cancel a meeting, or to secretly return a gift into which the other person had invested a lot of thought. For example, the get together scenario in the self condition read: "Imagine you and your friend have agreed to meet on a regular basis because it is important to both of you to spend enough time together. Now, when the next get together is coming up, you simply don't feel like meeting your friend. Instead of telling him or her, however, you consider making up a white lie:

You could text your friend that you cannot make it to the get together because you have a headache."

Participants' moral judgment was assessed with four items on nine-point scales (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*) per scenario, which were designed to assess moral judgment in a more subtle manner in order to avoid potential demand effects. The items read: "I (He/she) would have understandable reasons to cancel the get together under the pretext of a headache," "It would be quite mean if I (he/she) canceled the meeting under the pretext of an headache" (reversed), "Under these circumstances, it would be okay if I (he/she) canceled the meeting under the pretext of an headache," and "It would be inconsiderate if I (he/she) canceled the get together under the pretext of a headache" (reversed). Responses were collapsed across items and scenarios to form a moral judgment index (α = .63, M = 3.88, SD = 1.30), with higher values indicating greater perceived acceptability. Before reporting demographics, participants completed another short survey unrelated to the present work, including an attention check asking them to select a certain response to a rating item embedded in a questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Moral hypercrisy. As predicted, and replicating the previous hypercrisy effect, participants who judged their friends' transgressions (M = 4.58, SD = 1.06) were indeed more lenient than participants who judged their own transgressions (M = 3.17, SD = 1.12), $t(305)$ = 11.30, p < .001, d = 0.54, 95% CI$_d$ [0.19, 0.88].

Moderation by ZSB. Next, we regressed moral judgment on ZSB, target condition (0 = self, 1 = friend), and their interaction. The predicted interaction effect was significant, b (SE) = -0.350 (0.141), $t(303)$ = -2.48, p = .014, 95% CI$_b$ [-0.628, -0.072], indicating that ZSB moderated the effect of target on moral judgment (SOM Table 3). Furthermore, there was a significant

conditional effect of ZSB on moral judgment in the self condition, such that participants who held stronger ZSB about their relationships were more lenient with respect to their own transgressions, b (SE) = 0.218 (0.102), $SE = t(303) = 2.13$, $p = .034$, 95% CI_b [0.017, 0.420]. ZSB, however, did not significantly predict moral judgment in the friend condition, b (SE) = -0.131 (0.097), $t(303) = -1.36$, $p = .177$, 95% CI_b [-0.322, 0.060] (Figure 2). The hypercrisy effect was significant for participants with ZSB < 4.13 (Johnson-Neyman significance region), with participants at both 1 SD below and above the mean being more lenient when judging their friends' compared to their own transgressions ($ps < .001$).

Study 2 thus revealed that beyond transgressions toward third parties, people exhibit moral hypercrisy toward their close friends *within* the mutual relationship: Participants judged identical behaviors more leniently for their close friend transgressing toward them than for themselves transgressing toward their friend. However, this other-serving judgment tendency was attenuated for participants who perceived their friendship to work in win-lose terms. Specifically, zero-sum beliefs particularly predicted participants' leniency when judging their own transgressions within their relationships.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Study 3

Study 3 closely replicated Study 2, with one important modification: It targeted romantic relationships as the paradigmatic case of close relationships. Consistent with the previously observed hypercrisy effect, we again predicted a main effect of target condition, with more

lenient moral judgment for the partner compared to the self. Additionally, we again expected a moderation effect by zero-sum beliefs.

Method

       Participants and design. We again aimed at approximately 150 participants per experimental condition. We obtained data from 301 U.S. adults on Amazon Mechanical Turk for a survey on "behavior perceptions in relationships" who received $0.40. Despite instructions to participate only if they currently had a relationship partner (applying to both experimental conditions), 41 participants were excluded from analyses because they did not confirm both that they were currently in a relationship ($n = 34$) and had answered the questions with regard to their current partner ($n = 36$). $N = 260$ participants remained (122 females, 134 males, 4 other, $M_{age} = 34.42$, $SD_{age} = 10.37$), who were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (target: *self* vs. *partner*).

       Materials and procedure. Participants first answered the five-item non-ZSB questionnaire (Crocker et al., 2017) on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with respect to their current romantic partner (e.g., "In my romantic relationship, I feel that what is good for one of us is often bad for the other;" $\alpha = .87$, $M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.17$). Responses were again coded such that higher values indicated higher ZSB.

       Subsequently, participants were instructed to think about their relationship again and to imagine different situations that might happen in this relationship with their partner. They were presented with adaptations of the six short scenarios from Study 2. Each described the target considering a transgression for selfish reasons that undermined their partner's interest or constituted a norm violation in a romantic relationship (Rusbult et al., 2002). In the *self* condition, participants were considering these transgressions from their own perspective,

whereas in the *partner* condition, situations were described from their partner's perspective. For example, participants imagined that they (vs. their partner) considered secretly returning a gift into which the other person had invested a lot of thought, or canceling their attendance at their partner's family feast. The family feast scenario in the self condition read: "Imagine your partner's family invites you and your partner to a big family feast. For your partner and his or her family, it means a lot that you will also be there. So you promised your partner to join him or her. However, when the two of you talk the day before the feast, you think about meeting up with some friends instead, because you don't feel like going to the family feast."

Participants indicated how acceptable they would find each behavior on a single item with seven-point scales (e.g., "How acceptable would you find it for yourself to cancel your attendance at the family feast, because you would rather spend time with friends?", 1 = *not at all acceptable*, 7 = *completely acceptable*). Responses were collapsed to form a moral judgment index, with higher values indicating greater perceived acceptability (α = .66, *M* = 3.03, *SD* = 1.05).

Results and Discussion

Moral hypercrisy. As predicted, and again replicating the previous hypercrisy effect, participants who judged their partners' transgressions (*M* = 3.34, *SD* = 0.97) were more lenient than participants who judged their own transgressions (*M* = 2.73, *SD* = 1.04), $t(258)$ = 4.91, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.61, 95% CI_d [0.36, 0.86].

Moderation by ZSB. Next, we again regressed moral judgment on ZSB, target condition (0 = self, 1 = partner), and their interaction. The predicted interaction between ZSB and target condition was significant, *b* (*SE*) = -0.274 (0.100), $t(256)$ = -2.73, *p* = .007, 95% CI_b [-0.472, -0.076], indicating that ZSB moderated the effect of target on moral judgment (SOM Table 5).

Further analyses revealed that there was a strong conditional effect of ZSB in the self condition, such that participants who held stronger ZSB about their relationships were more lenient with respect to their own transgressions, b (SE) = 0.417 (0.071), $t(256)$ = 5.87, $p < .001$, 95% CI$_b$ [0.277, 0.557]. In this study, ZSB also predicted more lenient moral judgments of the partner's transgressions, b (SE) = 0.144 (0.071), $t(256)$ = 2.02, $p = .044$, 95% CI$_b$ [0.004, 0.283] (Figure 1), but the conditional effect of ZSB on moral judgment was approximately three times stronger for the self than the partner. The hypercrisy effect was significant for participants with ZSB < 3.62 (Johnson-Neyman significance region), and for participants at 1 SD below the mean of ZSB ($p < .001$), but not above it ($p = .055$).

In line with our hypothesis and extending our prior studies, Study 3 found hypercrisy in romantic relationships across various transgressions. Critically, however, this effect again depended on how participants construed their relationship: Individuals with stronger zero-sum beliefs showed less other-serving, but relatively more equitable moral standards.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

General Discussion

Three studies found that people exhibit other-serving double moral standards toward their close friends and romantic partners: Participants judged transgressions more leniently from their close others' than from their own perspectives. This hypercrisy effect was found for various common behaviors, and across different cultures, languages and study settings. Moreover, hypercrisy emerged both for transgressions toward uninvolved third parties outside of the relationship (Study 1), and mutual transgressions within close relationships (Studies 2 & 3;

Supplemental Study 4). Taken together, these findings are incompatible with the idea of moral

standards consistently following equity norms or hypocritical tendencies within close

relationships. Nevertheless, hypercrisy was not uniform, but reliably moderated by people's

perceptions of their relationship. Those who more strongly believed that needs fulfilment was

only possible in competition rather than in collaboration with their close other showed attenuated

or no hypercrisy. Specifically, participants with relatively stronger zero-sum beliefs were more

willing to excuse their own selfish behaviors at their close other's and relationship's expense.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Consistent with previous research on moral hypocrisy (e.g., Lammers, 2012), we

investigated hypothetical, relatively mild and mundane transgressions to counteract potential

floor effects. Notably, even though people still judged these to be rather unacceptable (see SOM

for tests of deviation from the respective scale midpoints), these behaviors seem highly relevant

to people's daily lives and close relationships, given their realism and proximity to everyday

violations of fairness, care, honesty or loyalty norms (Hofmann et al., 2014). Yet, we did not

systematically sample transgressions or vary transgression domains (see Graham et al., 2011).

Furthermore, which specific behavior constitutes a moral violation is highly culture dependent

(Rai & Fiske, 2011), and conceptual replications of the present findings in non-Western cultures

are warranted.

In addition, it remains an open question whether the present findings generalize to more

severe transgressions within close relationships (see e.g., Selterman et al., 2018). Notably, some

prior research found stronger favoritism of close (vs. distant) others for more (vs. less) severe

transgressions (e.g., credit card fraud; Weidman et al., 2020), but did not include the self as a

target (and transgressor). Prior relationship research, in turn, found no consistent evidence of

double moral standards with respect to more moderate to severe within-relationship

transgressions (e.g., behaviors relating to emotional or sexual infidelity; Selterman & Koleva,

2015). Future work should thus systematically explore transgression severity as a potential

moderator. Possibly, in line with the moderating effects of zero-sum beliefs and (dis)trust (Weiss

et al., 2018), single transgressive behaviors that pose a more serious threat to the relationship and

the balance of needs fulfilment therein, and that provide less room for the benefit of the doubt,

may yield less hypercritical, and even hypocritical moral judgments (see Thompson &

O'Sullivan, 2016).

  Nevertheless, hypercrisy also emerged for scenarios from the literature on self-serving

moral hypocrisy (e.g., Du et al., 2019; Lammers, 2012; Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Weiss et al.,

2018), selectively so for close others (vs. strangers; Study 1), and was moderated by zero-sum

beliefs. It therefore seems unlikely that the present findings represent a methodological artifact

due to any specific material used.

  Moreover, as we were specifically interested in transgressions within close relationships,

Studies 2 and 3 necessarily conflated the manipulation of the transgressor (self vs. close other)

with the victim. Study 1, however, suggests that even when a third party—rather than the self—

is implicated as the victim, close others' transgressions are met with relative leniency, producing

hypercritical moral standards.

  While the present research focused on close friends and romantic partners, future studies

could examine relationship type more systematically. Prior work, for instance, has included

linear gradients of closeness to perpetrators and victims in predicting moral punishment

(Hofmann et al., 2018). Based on earlier findings on helping intentions or perceived helping

obligations (e.g., McManus et al., 2020), one may moreover expect stronger other-serving double moral standards in case of stronger genetic relatedness.

Contributions to Research on Moral Judgment

The present research bridges literatures on moral hypocrisy, moral judgment more broadly, and moral evaluations within close relationships. While prior work has investigated hypocrisy with respect to (largely hypothetical) strangers others and carry-over effects (e.g., Lammers, 2012), the present studies examined people's actual relationship partners, answering calls for considering aspects of the context and target identity (e.g., Hester & Gray, 2020). They are thus in line with theoretical accounts and recent empirical findings on how transgressors' relationships with either victims or observers (i.e., moral judges) impact moral evaluations (e.g., McManus et al., 2020; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Waytz & Yong, 2018; Weidman et al., 2020). Importantly, the present studies contribute to this literature by examining not only transgressions towards third parties (Study 1), but adding mutual transgressions within close relationships to the picture (see also Selterman & Koleva, 2015), and taking participants' perceptions of their relationships into account as a continuous moderator.

The present findings thereby critically extend our understanding of everyday moral judgment, suggesting that previous insights on double moral standards vis-à-vis strangers may not be generalizable to the more intimate relationship sphere within people's daily lives. Notably, while closely following prior methodology (e.g., Polman & Ruttan, 2012), Study 1 failed to find the "classic" hypocrisy effect with respect to people's own versus strangers' transgressions. Even though any single null finding should be interpreted with caution, this is not in line with the notion of uniform and robust self-serving moral judgment toward strangers under baseline conditions (see Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Rather, the

present results, including the moderating impact of zero-sum beliefs, underline the flexibility of

moral cognition. They resonate with findings that self-serving double standards are eliminated

when people perceive justice as restored or experience guilt (Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Wang et

al., 2021). Highly sensitive to characteristics of the situation, persons, and their relationships,

(double) moral standards thus appear highly functional in regulating valued social relationships

versus individual self-interest. While self-serving moral judgment has been extensively studied,

however, other-serving morality and its antecedents, mechanisms, and boundary conditions

clearly merit further attention.

Implications for the Moral Psychology of Close Relationships

People value equity and fairness within their close relationships (e.g., Stafford & Canary,

2006). From this perspective, one could have expected equal moral standards for the self and

close others. Indeed, the relevant prior work has found little to no evidence of other-serving

moral standards in close relationships (e.g., Selterman & Koleva, 2015). The present research

thus makes novel contributions to close relationship research, suggesting that at least in certain

contexts, and with respect to relatively more mundane transgressions, people may apply

inequitable, other-serving moral standards. This finding is in line with prior work showing that

people regularly show relationship-maintenance and sacrificial behaviors and are forgiving of

close others' transgressions (Karremans & van Lange, 2004; Visserman et al., 2017). Notably,

when framing needs fulfillment as a non-zero-sum game, tending toward close others' needs also

serves the mutual relationship and one's own interests (Crocker & Canevello, 2015). In contrast,

the notion of zero-sum beliefs reflects a competitive, self-promotional perspective on close

relationships, and is related to decreased closeness and relationship quality (Crocker et al., 2017).

Consistently, across studies, other-serving hypercrisy was absent for participants in a relationship

that they viewed to work in zero-sum rather than win-win ways. In particular, across three studies, the stronger participants' zero-sum beliefs, the more acceptable they found their own self-interested transgressions. Such more equitable moral standards may serve to navigate relationships with less responsive close others or that are characterized by competitive needs fulfilment.

A potential mechanism for the effect of perceiving one's relationship to work in zero-sum ways may be reduced levels of trust: Trust implies perceptions of the partner as being "motivated cooperatively (i.e., to seek joint maximum gain)" as opposed to "individualistically (i.e., to seek his/her own gain)" (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p. 596). Prior research suggests that low trust is associated with a tendency for uncooperative, selfish behaviors and rule violations (e.g., Balliet & van Lange, 2013; Weiss et al., 2018; 2020). In a similar vein, people who experience that needs cannot be fulfilled collaboratively within the relationship may question their partners' responsiveness and good will, and thus tend to pursue—instead of sacrifice—their self-interest, exhibiting attenuated or absent hypercrisy. Supplemental Study 4 (SOM) provides some preliminary evidence for this notion: While closely replicating Study 3 with a larger sample, it further suggests that the effect of zero-sum beliefs on moral judgment in the self condition is mediated by (reduced) levels of trust in the partner. These initial findings are also in line with prior findings that trust is associated with reacting more constructively to one's own sacrifices in close relationships (Righetti et al., 2015). In contrast, across the present studies, zero-sum beliefs were not consistently and strongly related to moral judgments of close others' transgressions.

In terms of relationship dynamics, overcoming a tit-for-tat mindset by behaving more cooperatively than the partner prevents negative escalation (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003). Hypercritical moral standards may thus be involved in relationship development specifically

with individuals who are perceived as valuable, responsive partners. Consistently, recent findings

suggest that having low(er) a priori expectations regarding one's romantic partner's sacrifice

shapes subsequent appreciation thereof and thus relationship satisfaction (Zoppolat et al., 2020).

Future research may explore further variables potentially associated with amplified other-serving

double standards, such as the pursuit of approach (vs. avoidance) relationship goals and intimacy

within the relationship (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2021).

However, other-serving double standards may also have detrimental consequences for

individuals, for example by fostering abusive relationships. Women who suffer from domestic

violence often excuse their partner's behaviors (Whiting et al, 2012). Victims typically

experience diminished self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017),

which may fuel hypercritical standards (Lammers et al., 2010). Future research could shed more

light on hypercrisy as a double-edged sword associated with both mutually and individually

beneficial, but also asymmetrical and potentially dysfunctional relationship dynamics.

In conclusion, by integrating different literatures, the present research extends the

previous focus on both individual self-enhancement and self-interest and hypothetical, unfamiliar

targets in research on double moral standards and moral judgment. It highlights the important

role of flexible and other-serving moral standards within people's actual, meaningful, close

relationships which they perceive to work in non-zero-sum ways.

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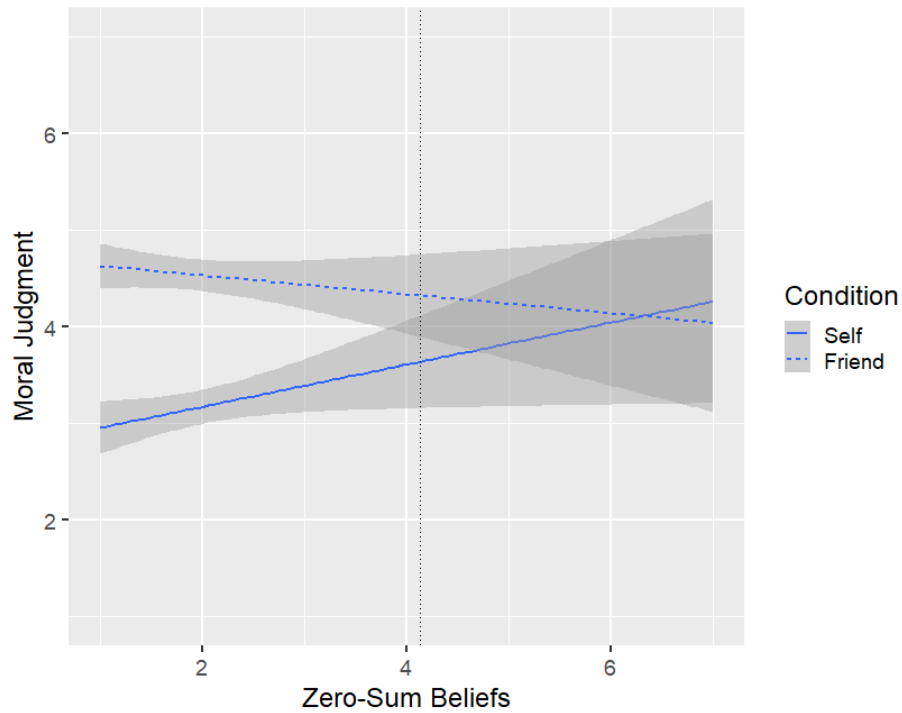
Figure 1. **Moral judgment as a function of target condition and zero-sum beliefs (Study 2).**

Participants' moral judgment of transgressions committed either by themselves or by their friend

as a function of ZSB (scale 1-7). Higher values indicate more lenient judgments (scale 1-9). The

effect of target condition is significant to the left of the dotted vertical line (Johnson-Neyman
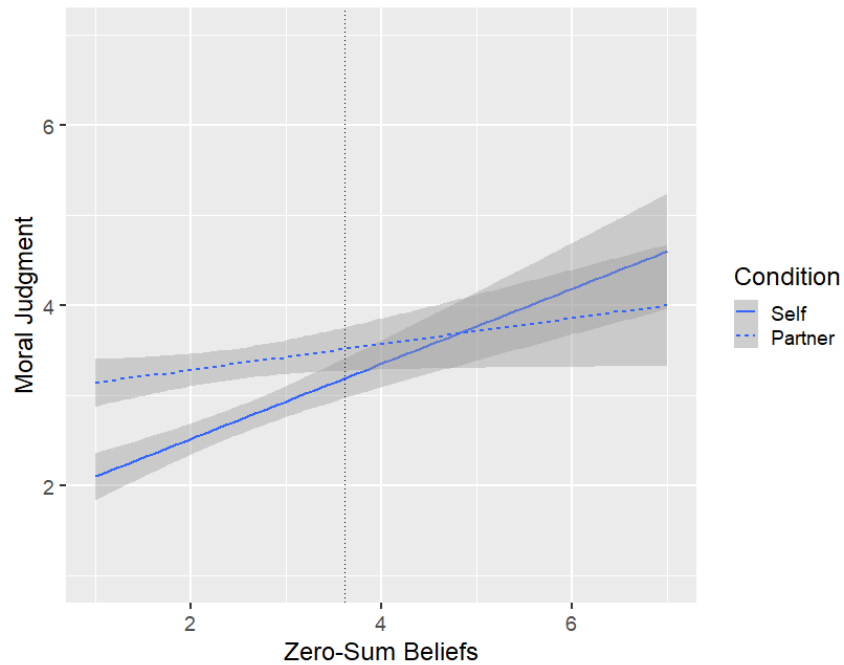
significance region).

Figure 2. **Moral judgment as a function of target condition and zero-sum beliefs (Study 3).**

Participants' moral judgment of transgressions committed either by themselves or by their

partner as a function of ZSB (scale 1-7). Higher values indicate more lenient judgments (scale 1-

7). The effect of target condition is significant to the left of the dotted vertical line (Johnson-

Neyman significance region).