

Hypocrisy Tendency in the Moral Evaluation and the Effect of Hidden Rule Preference in the Case of Bribery

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Hidden Rule (潛規則 in Chinese) refers to the rules, which only could be discussed ‘under the table, about how to interact with others in Chinese society. Individuals’ preference towards Hidden Rule could maintain the social order on the surface while benefiting individuals’ self-interest with the methods under-table. Such a property could promote inconsistent, hypocritical moral evaluation in public life. This research employs the Hidden Rule Preference Scale to measure individuals’ differences toward Hidden Rule and designs a scenario questionnaire of bribery to investigate the functions of the Hidden Rule. The results show that 1) in the situation with the bribery convention, individuals showed more hypocrisy tendency, which indicated greater within-individual standard deviation between behavior righteousness and appropriateness, and 2) individuals’ Hidden Rule Preference could promote individuals’ hypocrisy tendency marginally significantly.

Keywords: *hidden rule, hidden rule preference, hypocrisy, moral judgment*

Extended Abstract

Hypocrisy is often discussed as a phenomenon in modern public life. Alongside the hypocritical claims made by political elites, ordinary people can also display hypocritical tendencies in their everyday moral evaluations and attitudinal expressions. In the political psychology literature, attitudinal hypocrisy refers to inconsistencies in an individual’s attitudes or between their attitudes and their behavior. Research on hypocrisy differs from psychological theories on cognitive consistency in its focus on why and when people display hypocritical attitudes, especially in public life. In this study, we explore moral evaluations of bribery, which can display hypocrisy in recognizing bribery as morally wrong while accepting the practice as a practical method of social interaction.

From a cultural psychology perspective, the cultural factor of “hidden rules” (潛規則) might promote hypocritical tendencies in Chinese society. Hidden rules for social interactions are those that can only be

discussed “under the table.” At the macro level of Chinese societies, hidden rules co-exist with formal, “on the table” social rules. At the individual level, Chinese people have different degrees of attitudinal and behavioral tendencies toward hidden rules, which can be defined as their hidden rule preference (HRP). A person with a high HRP might behave openly as demanded by formal norms while interacting privately with others according to hidden rules, thus exhibiting what is commonly called *yang feng yin wei* (陽奉陰違) in Chinese. The origins of this attitudinal and behavioral tendency lie in the alienated traditional Confucianist culture, which strongly encourages people to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid interpersonal conflict. From the perspective of functionalism, a high HRP among individuals can maintain social order on the surface while benefiting self-interest through under-the-table methods. However, it can promote inconsistent and hypocritical moral evaluations in public life, including the moral evaluation of bribery.

There are certain conditions under which bribery can be theoretically regarded as hidden rule behavior. At the level of formal rules, bribery violates the fair dealing principle, which is widely accepted as a social norm by most societies and cultures. At the level of hidden rules, however, several social and organizational contexts in traditional Chinese societies acquiesce to bribery provided the dealing is kept under the table. In a kind of individual hypocritical tendency, some people criticize bribery in their public statements while accepting it as common practice behind the scenes.

Contextual and individual factors may influence moral evaluations of and hypocritical attitudes toward bribery. In a context in which bribery is widely accepted as common practice, it forms a hidden rule and is more widely recognized as acceptable; in the context of a community that has no tolerance for bribery, it does not form a hidden rule and is considered norm-violating behavior. We therefore expect that the general acquiescence of bribery influences individuals' moral evaluations of bribery behavior. Meanwhile, given that there are no obvious clues of hidden rules in most real-life situations, individuals' perceptions and preferences might also influence their moral evaluations of bribery behavior. We therefore expect individuals' levels of HRP to be positively associated with their tendency toward hypocrisy in their moral evaluations.

We adopted the questionnaire method to investigate individuals' moral evaluations of bribery (and non-bribery) behavior. To test the theoretical hypotheses, we designed four versions of a scenario and measured the participants' HRP using a previously constructed HRP scale. The scenario involved a person trying to promote his proposal in a guild. Four versions were constructed with a 2 (acquiescence of bribery within the guild or no acquiescence) \times 2 (the protagonist offers a bribe or does not offer a bribe) between-subjects design. The acquiescence of bribery was taken to indicate the existence of a hidden rule, and the protagonist's bribery behavior was taken to indicate hidden rule behavior.

After reading the scenario, the participants were asked to evaluate the protagonist's behavior by responding to two questions: one on the moral correctness of the

behavior and the other on the practical appropriateness of the behavior. The responses were given on 7-point Likert scales. In the design of the two questions, hypocrisy tendency (HT) was operationalized in line with the literature as the within-subject standard deviation between the scores for the two questions. For example, with x_1 representing a participant's moral correctness evaluation score and x_2 their practical appropriateness evaluation score, their HT was computed as in the following equation.

$$HT = \sqrt{\frac{(x_1 - \bar{x})^2 + (x_2 - \bar{x})^2}{2}}$$

The questionnaire responses were collected through an online survey platform. After excluding 95 invalid responses by manipulation check items, there were 417 valid responses. The participants were 158 Taiwanese and 259 mainland Chinese with a balanced gender and education ratio. In general, the results supported our hypotheses. First, a considerable number of participants showed hypocrisy in their evaluation of the four versions of the scenario. An HT for bribery behavior was indicated by a combination of a highly negative score for moral correctness and a slightly negative or neutral score for practical appropriateness; an HT for non-bribery behavior was indicated by a highly positive score for moral correctness and a slightly positive or neutral score for practical appropriateness. Second, the participants were more hypocritical in the cases of the acquiescence of bribery and of the occurrence of bribery behavior. Third, the two quasi-experimental factors showed a significant interaction effect. In the situations with no hidden rule, the participants showed more attitudinal hypocrisy toward bribery than non-bribery behavior, whereas the occurrence of bribery had no influence on HT in the situations with a hidden rule. Fourth, the participants' levels of HRP had a marginally significant and positive relationship with HT across the four situations, and did not interact with situational factors.

In summary, our results reveal the presence of attitudinal hypocrisy in moral evaluations of bribery behavior, indicated by the adoption of different attitudes toward the moral correctness and practical appropriateness

of the target behavior. There are individual and situational differences in the tendency toward hypocrisy promoted by the alienated traditional Confucian culture. Meanwhile, we anticipate other cultural elements that could promote hypocrisy in non-Confucianist cultures and are ripe for future investigation.