When Psychological Closeness Creates Distance from One's Moral Compass

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Abstract:
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Key words: Dishonesty; Interdependence; Perspective taking; Psychological closeness; Unethical behavior; Vicarious self-justification; Vicarious dishonesty

When Psychological Closeness Creates Distance from One's Moral Compass

Does feeling psychologically close to another person who acts unethically make one behave more or less dishonestly? Imagine that you joined your organization at the same time as another colleague, who begins to take office supplies for home use. Or suppose you find out that a peer who shares your birth date is inflating her expense report or cheating on her taxes. As you learn about these dishonest behaviors, how would you react to them? You might suppose that you would view them critically, judge the behaviors as harshly as an objective observer, and distance yourself from these individuals, whose morality seems to be tainted. In this paper, we make the opposite prediction: We propose that if a person is psychologically connected to someone who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior, she may become vicariously motivated to justify that person's actions and thus more likely to behave less ethically herself. We propose that even the subtlest of psychological connections, such as sharing the same birthday, can influence the likelihood that an individual will cross ethical boundaries.

From an Isolated to a Social Moral Self

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of psychologists have invoked the concept of a "moral self" to describe an interior psychological state that is integral to the definition of the self (Noam & Wren, 1993). In this research stream, morality has been discussed by examining the self in isolation. For instance, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) have demonstrated a link between physical and moral purity by showing that cleansing behavior can "wash away one's sins." After recalling a moral transgression from their lives, participants in Zhong and Liljenquist's (2006) studies were more likely to think of cleansing-related words, and they showed a desire to engage in cleansing behavior. Related research has demonstrated a link between immorality, physical self-punishment, and moral redemption. Wallington (1973) found that people who violate moral rules actively cause themselves to suffer physically. In an ostensible test of perceptual sensitivity, participants who had previously

been induced to lie to the experimenter delivered more severe electric shocks to themselves than did those who had not been given the opportunity to lie (Wallington, 1973). Consistent with these research findings, Blasi (1984) suggested that the link between moral self-judgment and subsequent actions lie in the degree to which morality and moral concerns are integrated into the person's sense of self. Building on Erikson's work on identity formation (1968) and Loevenger's theory of ego development (1976), Blasi (1993) argued that people are motivated to make their actions consistent with their ideals of a moral self, and that "self-consistency is the motivational spring of moral action" (Blasi, 1993: p. 99). As a result, a motive for moral action results from one's desire to act in ways consistent with one's own sense of self as a moral being.

While this stream of research focuses on morality as an important defining dimension of the self, we propose that morality has also a social component: Whether we behave unethically depends on whether those we feel psychologically close to behave dishonestly. Many social psychology studies have demonstrated the power of social proof to influence other people's behaviors across various contexts (e.g., Cialdini, 1993; Goldstein, Martin, & Cialdini, 2008). For instance, Milgram, Bickman, and Berkowitz (1969) demonstrated that when a confederate stopped on a busy New York City pavement and gazed skyward for 60 seconds, most passers-by simply walked around the man without glancing to see what he was looking at. Yet, when the researchers added four more men to that group of sky-gazers, the number of passers-by who joined them more than quadrupled. In another study, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) fund that hotel guests who learned that most other guests had reused their towels (the social-proof appeal) were 26 percent more likely to recycle their towels than were those who were only exposed to a general environmental-protection message. Furthermore, hotel guests who learned that most other guests who had stayed in the same room had reused towels were even more likely to do so themselves (a 33% increase) than were guests who learned the reuse percentage for the hotel in general.

These studies show the powerful effects of multiple others' behavior on our own. How do the actions of just one other person influence our behavior? Social psychology research has demonstrated that just the priming of a role model (e.g., parents) helps people regulate their moral behavior and influences their judgment. For instance, Eibach, Libby and Ehrlinger (2009) found that when the parental role is primed parents express more moral disapproval of harmless but offensive acts than nonparents. In a similar vein, Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) found that priming different types of relationship partners (e.g., best friend or mother versus coworker) produced goal-directed behavior (e.g., helping). Priming role models can also have an impact on one's own evaluation of the self. In fact, Baldwin, Carrell and Lopez (1990) found that individual's self-evaluations were more negative and self-critical after primes of disapproval rather than approval from authority figures.

Related research has found similar effects on individual judgment and behavior not as a result of priming of different relationship partners or role models, but as a result of observing somebody else's misconduct. Gino and her colleagues (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Gino, Gu, & Zhong, 2009) have shown that our moral behavior is affected by the moral actions of *just one* other person. Gino, Ayal, and Ariely (2009) found that when people are exposed to an in-group member's unethical behavior, they align with the behavior and behave dishonestly themselves. Building on prior work on social norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Cialdini & Trost, 1998) and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1982), Gino et al. (2009) explained that the degree to which people are influenced by social norms of dishonesty depends, to some extent, on the relationship between the initiator and the follower. People tend to perceive questionable behaviors exhibited by in-group members to be more legitimate than those exhibited by out-group members.

This research suggests that when strong bonds exist between individuals (e.g., because people belong to the same group), the ethical actions of one person influence those of the others, thus providing evidence for a "social moral self." But how strong must this bond be in order to observe such contagious dishonesty? In this paper, we suggest that even when the connection to another

person who behaved dishonestly is very weak, the influence of this person's unethical behavior on one's own can be very strong – thus leading to vicarious dishonesty.

Psychological Closeness and Vicarious Dishonesty

Research has shown that people feel connected to others not only when they share a common group membership (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), but also when they share much subtler similarities. For example, people experience a sense of psychological closeness to another person when they share common attributes, such as a similar name (Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005) or the same birthday (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998). Related research has found that mere similarity of age, marital status, or ethnic background influences the development of friendships (e.g., AhYun, 2002; Newcomb, 1961). Furthermore, the likelihood of becoming friends increases with mere proximity (e.g., living nearby; Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, & Zheng, 1995; Nahemow & Lawton, 1975) and mere assignment to the same group (e.g., belonging to the same work unit; Hogg & Tindale, 2001; Segal, 1974). Given that friendship is associated with psychological closeness, these studies provide further evidence of the influence of superficial situational factors on feelings of psychological closeness.

Psychological closeness produces important behavioral consequences. For instance, when two individuals feel psychologically connected, they are more likely to cooperate (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002) and favor one another financially (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). In addition, as people grow closer, even when this closeness is just psychological, the line between self and other becomes blurred and harder to delineate, leading to increased self–other overlap. Aron and Arons' (1986) self-expansion theory argues that people's sense of self can be broadened to include others. Once psychological closeness forms, individuals take on the properties of the person they feel connected to and psychologically afford them "self" status (Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). When people perceive another person to be part of the self, allocation of resources becomes

communal, actor–observer perspective differences are lessened, and the other's characteristics become one's own (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

This clouding of self and other is very common in close relationships (Aron, et al., 1991; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) and friendships, and can also result from people's cognitive orientation or mindsets. For instance, people who construe the self as interdependent define themselves in terms of their groups' attributes (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kuhnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, individuals who dispositionally tend to take the perspective of others, or who are asked to do so, psychologically take on the characteristics of others, seeing others' central attributes as more self-descriptive (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2008).

Even when subtle, these psychological connections create numerous vicarious possibilities. When people feel connected to others, they notice and experience others' emotions (Hatfield et al., 1994), including joy (Murray et al., 2002), embarrassment (Miller, 1987), and pain (Batson, 1991; Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006). In addition, feelings of psychological closeness can lead individuals to vicariously feel depleted because of others' attempts to exert self-control (Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh, 2009) and even feel others' cognitive dissonance, leading them to modify their own attitudes as if they themselves felt discomfort for experiencing discrepancies and conflicts in their thinking (Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003). More recently, Gunia, Sivanathan, and Galinsky (2009) found that a psychological connection between two decision makers leads the second decision maker to escalate commitment by investing further in a failing program orchestrated by the initial decision maker, even in the face of direct financial costs to the second decision maker. Taken together, these studies suggest that psychological closeness blurs the boundaries between the self and others, and, as a result, can lead individuals to experience and behave more consistently with others' internal states than with just their own.

In this paper, we examine the effects of feelings of psychological closeness on one's own ethical behavior. We suggest that a psychological connection to another individual who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior, however subtle, creates distance from one's own moral compass. Research shows that people vicariously justify the actions of those to whom they feel psychologically close (Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009) and vicariously experience their emotional states (Batson, 1991; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Miller, 1987; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). Because of the psychological connection, one becomes vicariously motivated to justify the other person's selfish or unethical actions and to judge these actions as less morally problematic. We predict this should lead individuals who have formed a psychological connection with a wrongdoer to behave selfishly themselves—for example, by keeping more money for themselves when asked to share a fixed amount with others—or even dishonestly, as by inflating their task performance and thus earning more money than they deserved. We tested this prediction in five studies that employed multiple forms of psychological connectedness and considered both selfish and dishonest behaviors.

Experiment 1: Perspective Taking and Dishonesty

Our first study manipulates psychological connectedness through perspective taking. In Experiment 1, we test whether perspective taking increases understanding of a person's decision to behave selfishly. Through perspective taking, a perceiver attempts to put him- or herself in the shoes of an actor, thereby imagining that person's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. One of the benefits of perspective taking is that it promotes coordination of social goals and thus creates social bonds (Epley, Caruso, Bazerman, 2006; Epley & Caruso, 2009; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). In the study, participants learned that another individual, "BG," had chosen to behave selfishly during a previous experiment. Participants first were asked to either take BG's perspective or to be objective, and then to indicate how selfishly they would behave if they found themselves in the same situation. We predicted that taking the perspective of the person who behaved selfishly would lead participants to

be less critical of that person's behavior and to report they would behave the same way if they were in that person's shoes.

Method

One-hundred twenty-six students and employees from local universities in the southeastern United States (M_{age}=23, SD_{age}=4.95; 58 male) participated in the study in exchange for $5. Participants read a scenario describing the behavior of a male, college-aged student who allegedly participated in a previous experiment and behaved selfishly; next, they were asked to answer a few questions about the scenario. The scenario referred to the student as BG. The instructions read, "In this study, you will read a description of something that happened to a college student. We will refer to him as BG. His picture is below."

The study employed a 2 (perspective taking: perspective-taking vs. objective) X 2 (amount to be divided: $10 vs. $50) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these four experimental conditions.

We manipulated perspective taking by using the same instructions employed by Gunia et al. (2009). Before reading about BG's decision, participants in the *perspective-taking* condition were instructed to take his perspective by imagining how he might have felt and what he might have thought as he made his decision. Participants in the *objective* condition were instructed to be objective when evaluating BG's decision, without getting caught up in BG's thoughts or feelings.

In addition to perspective taking, we manipulated the egregiousness of BG's selfish behavior to test for the potential moderating role of this variable. We manipulated this second factor by varying the amount of money BG was asked to allocate between himself and another participant in the experiment in which he took part. Participants read one of two versions of the following scenario, which described a dictator game modified from Gino, Gu, and Zhong (2009, Experiment 3):

> Please consider the following description of a research study, which was conducted in a lab at UNC a while back. At the beginning of the session, the experimenter explained that the study goal was to understand how people make decisions. In the task, BG had been randomly

> paired with another participant who was in another room in the lab (who would not be identified at that moment, nor later). BG was given *$10* [*$50*] to divide between himself and the participant in the other room he had been paired with (i.e., his counterpart). The experimenter told BG that he could offer his counterpart any portion of the *$10* [*$50*], from nothing to the entire amount, or any amount in between. The counterpart would keep whatever amount BG decided to offer, and BG would keep whatever he didn't offer. The counterpart knew all of the rules and all of the information that BG knew. After explaining the study procedure, the experiment gave BG an envelope with *9 $1 coins and 4 quarters* [*4 $10 bills, 9 $1 coins and 4 quarters*]. The experimenter instructed BG to take the amount of money he wanted to keep for himself, and leave the rest of the money in the envelope to be sent to his counterpart in the other room. Not too long after hearing the instructions, BG made up his mind: He poured all the money on the desk and then started putting all the money in his own pocket.

After reading this scenario, participants were asked to indicate how much money they would leave in the envelope if they were to participate in the same study. We also included a few bogus questions to distract participants from our focus.

Results and Discussion

We predicted that participants in the perspective-taking condition would report being willing to leave a lower amount of money for their counterpart as compared to participants in the objective condition. Consistent with our prediction, the amount of money participants indicated they would leave in the envelope was significantly lower in the perspective-taking condition than in the objective condition, $F(1,122) = 15.61$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.11$. Further, as one might expect, the amount was higher in the $50-dictator game condition than in the $10-dictator game condition, $F(1,122)=200$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.62$. Interestingly, the perspective-taking X amount-to-be-divided interaction was also significant, $F(1,122)=7.32$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.06$. Participants in the perspective-taking condition indicated they would leave less money than did participants in the objective condition both when the dictator game involved allocating $10 ($M$=\$3.29, SD=\$2.15 vs. M=\$4.72, SD=\$1.73; $t(68)=-3.06$, $p<.01$), and when it involved allocating $50 ($M$=\$16.40, SD=\$11.32 vs. M=\$24.03, SD=\$7.35; $t(54)=-3.04$, $p<.01$).

These findings provide some initial evidence that psychological closeness – in this case manipulated through perspective taking – leads people to report they would follow the example of bad apples, independent of the size of the incentives to behave selfishly.

Experiment 2: Same Birthday, Same Dishonest Behavior

In Experiment 2, we seek to further demonstrate the robustness of the link between psychological closeness and dishonesty by examining a different and more subtle form of psychological connection (a shared attribute, namely the same birthday) and by using a behavioral measure of unethical behavior. In this study, participants had the opportunity to lie by over-reporting task performance, thus earning money they did not deserve.

Method

Seventy-two college students from local universities in the southern United States (M_{age}=21, SD_{age}=1.34, 39 male) participated in the study for a maximum payment of $12. Participants received a $2 show-up fee and had the opportunity to earn an extra $10 during the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions upon arrival: *shared attributes* or *different attributes*.

For the study, we hired a student who served as a confederate. We made it clear to the participants at the onset of the experiment that this student was cheating to the greatest extent possible (see Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009, for a description of a similar procedure).

We conducted each session with only one participant, plus the confederate. In each session, when participants (i.e., each real participant and the confederate) first arrived at the study location, they answered a short questionnaire that contained several demographic questions. They then learned that they would engage in an anonymous problem-solving task under time pressure and that another participant would work on the same task in the same room.

In the *shared-attributes* condition, once the confederate and the participant returned their filled-out questionnaire to the experimenter, the experimenter commented, “Interesting: you two were born in the same month, [<month>], and are of the same school year, [<school year>]. Well, let’s go to the main task of the study.” (The experimenter mentioned the participant’s birthday month in place of <month>, and their school year in place of <school year>.) Thus, participants in this

condition saw that the confederate shared two attributes with them: their birthday month and school year.

In the *different-attributes* conditions, the experimenter commented, "Interesting: you two were born in different months, and are of different school years. Well, let's go to the main task of the study." Thus, in this condition, participant and confederate shared no attributes.

For the problem-solving task, participants received a brown envelope that contained ten dollars (nine one-dollar bills and four quarters) and an empty white envelope, along with two sheets of paper. The first was a worksheet with 20 matrices, each with a set of 12 three-digit numbers (e.g., 4.78; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). The second was a collection slip on which participants were to report their performance. On the back of the collection slip we included instructions for the task and a different matrix as an example.

Participants were told they would have five minutes to find two numbers per matrix that added up to 10. For each pair of numbers correctly identified, they would keep $0.50 from their supply of money; they were also asked to transfer the remaining amount to the white envelope and drop it in a designated box along with the collection slip. Note that five minutes is not enough time to solve all 20 matrices. In previous studies (Mazar et al., 2008; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009), people were able to find 7 of the 20 pairs on average. In addition, there was no apparent identifying information anywhere on the two sheets, so results seemed anonymous. Thus, participants had both an incentive and opportunity to over-report their performance to earn more money.

One of the three-digit numbers of the matrix used as an example on the back of the collection slip was different for each participant and was equal to one of the three-digit numbers of a matrix in the test sheet. This allowed us to match the worksheet with the collection slip of each participant and compute the difference between self-reported performance and actual performance. Positive differences indicate that the participants over-reported their performance and cheated on the task.

About one minute after the problem-solving task started (such a short time that it would have been clear to the participant who was in the room with the confederate that the person was lying or cheating), the confederate stood up and said loudly: "I've solved everything. My envelope for the unearned money is empty. What should I do with it?" The experimenter reminded him about the procedure, and then asked the confederate to just wait patiently for the other participant to finish. Once the five-minute task had ended, the experimenter asked participants to write down the number of correctly solved matrices on the collection slip and drop it with the remaining money in the designated box prior to leaving the room.

Results and Discussion

We conducted an ANOVA with participants' real and self-reported performance as a within-subjects factor and psychological closeness as a between-subjects factor. As predicted, self-reported performance was higher than real performance ($F[1,70]= 60.04$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.46$), indicating that cheating occurred. The main effect of psychological closeness was significant ($F[1,70] =5.57$, $p<.03$, $\eta^2=.07$). More interestingly, we found a significant interaction ($F[1,70]=14.87$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.18$). Participants in the shared-attributes condition reported significantly higher levels of performance ($M=11.32$ matrices, $SD=3.86$) than did participants in the different-attributes condition, ($M=8.54$, $SD=3.47$), $t(70)=3.21$, $p=.002$. Yet, real performance did not significantly differ between these two conditions ($M=7.41$, $SD=2.02$ vs. $M=7.23$, $SD=2.33$, $t(70)<1$, $p=.73$). Furthermore, the average number of matrices by which participants overstated their performance was higher in the shared-attributes condition than in the different-attributes condition ($M=3.92$, $SD=3.34$ vs. $M=1.31$, $SD=2.26$, $t[70]=3.86$, $p<.001$), and the percentage of participants who overstated their performance was also higher (65% vs. 29%, $\chi^2[1,N=72]=9.51$, $p=.002$).

These results provide strong support for the predicted relationship between psychological closeness and unethical behavior. Even when psychological closeness was very subtle and born out

of shared attributes, it influenced individuals' behavior and their tendency to cross ethical boundaries.

Experiment 3: Interdependence and Dishonest Behavior

Experiment 3 had three main objectives. First, it extended the findings of the previous two studies by examining the impact of a generalized psychological connection. Second, we started exploring the psychological mechanism linking psychological closeness and dishonest behavior. Finally, we manipulated whether the person behaving selfishly was identified or not by either providing a picture of NS or not (Small & Loewenstein, 2003; 2005; see also Loewenstein, Small, & Strnad, 2006; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). We predicted that priming interdependence would motivate participants to follow the selfish actions of another participant more strongly when this participant (i.e., the wrongdoer) was identified than when he was not.

Method

One-hundred forty-seven students from local universities in the southeastern United States (M_{age}=20, SD_{age}=0.81; 92 male) participated in the study. They received class credit in their introductory organizational behavior class for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to either an *interdependent* prime condition or *independent* prime condition (i.e., our control condition). At the beginning of the study, the experimenter told participants that they would participate in two separate experiments: a writing task followed by a judgment task.

We used the writing task to manipulate psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset (see Gunia et al., 2009, Experiment 4). For the writing task, participants in the *interdependent* condition were instructed to spend five-to-ten minutes writing about a situation in which they worked with others to complete a task, focusing on the collaboration process. Those in the *independent* condition were instructed to spend five-to-ten minutes writing about a situation in which they worked alone to complete a task.

Upon completion of the writing task, participants were asked to read the same scenario as in the $10-dictator game condition of Experiment 1. The instruction read, "You will now read a scenario describing a college student's behavior during a recent lab study conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and then will be asked to evaluate it. We'll refer to this student as NS." We manipulated identifiability of the person behaving selfishly by including a picture of NS in the identified-wrongdoer condition and by providing no picture in the unidentified-wrongdoer condition. Similar subtle manipulations, like the inclusion of a picture of just a name, have been shown to be successful in previous research (e.g., Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2009).

Participants were then asked to indicate how wrong, inappropriate and unethical they found NS' behavior to be using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1=Not at all, to 7=Very much. In addition, they were asked to indicate how they would behave if they were to participate in the same experiment as NS by specifying how much money out of $10 they would leave in the envelope for their anonymous counterpart.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants primed with interdependence reported they would leave significantly less money than did participants primed with independence, $F(1,143)=20.78$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.13$. Whether the described person behaving selfishly was identified or not did not influence participants' reported decisions, $F(1,143)=1.26$, $p=.26$, $\eta^2=.009$. Interestingly, the interdependence X identifiability interaction was significant, $F(1,143)=4.20$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.03$. Participants in the interdependent condition reported they would leave less money when NS was identified than when he was not (M=\$1.76, SD=\$2.14 vs. M=\$2.97, SD=\$2.29; $t(79)=-2.44$, $p<.02$), while participants in the independent condition reported they would leave about the same amount of money independent of whether or not we provided a picture for NS (M=\$4.27, SD=\$2.19 vs. M=\$3.92, SD=\$2.56; $t(64)<1$, $p=.55$). Furthermore, participants primed with interdependence considered NS' behavior as

less unethical, wrong, or inappropriate (α=.90) than did participants primed with independence, $F(1,143)=5.28$, $p<.03$, $\eta^2=.04$.[1]

We examined whether these unethicality ratings mediated the effects of psychological closeness (manipulated by activating an interdependent mindset) on the amount of money left in the envelope (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The effect of psychological closeness was significantly reduced (from β=-.36, $p<.001$ to β=-.24, $p<.001$) when unethicality ratings were included in the equation, and unethicality ratings were a significant predictor of the dependent variable (β=.61, $p<.001$). A bootstrap analysis showed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect (0.59) excluded zero (-1.074, -0.115), suggesting a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

These findings provide strong evidence that if an individual is psychologically connected to another person who engaged in selfish behavior, she becomes vicariously motivated to judge the actions of the other person as appropriate and is thus likely to behave less ethically herself.

Experiment 4: Adding a Control Condition to Perspective Taking

We designed a fourth experiment to enhance the generalizibility of our findings by comparing perspective taking to a no-instructions control condition. This control condition allows us to demonstrate that the effects observed in Experiment 1 are not driven by the objectivity instructions. In addition, Experiment 4 tested whether feelings of embarrassment would mediate the relationship between psychological closeness and selfish behavior.

Method

Sixty-four college students (M_{age}=21, SD_{age}=1.88; 32 males) were randomly assigned to either the perspective-taking or the control condition. Participants received $5 for their participation

[1] We conducted a 2 (interdependence) X 2 (identifiability) ANOVA using unethicality ratings as the dependent variable. Only the main effect of interdependence reached significance.

in the study. Experiment 4 used the same scenario as in the $10-dictator game condition of Experiment 1 but varied the instructions used to manipulate perspective taking.

Participants in both conditions were shown a picture of an alleged recent participant, a college-aged male referred to as "NS," and were asked to write about a typical day in NS's life. Those in the *perspective-taking* condition were instructed to imagine and describe a typical day in his shoes, looking at the world through his eyes. Those in the control condition received no additional instructions.

Participants were then asked to read about NS' selfish behavior during a recent study and to indicate how they would behave if they were to participate in the same experiment. Specifically, participants read the $10 dictator game version of the scenario used in Experiment 1 and indicated how much money they would leave in the envelope for their anonymous counterpart. In Experiment 4, participants also were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought NS' behavior was embarrassing or shameful (on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1=not at all, to 7=very much). These two emotions were highly correlated (r=.73, p<.001); thus, we averaged them into a composite measure (α=.84). Consistent with the findings of our previous studies, we predicted that participants who had taken NS's perspective would indicate they were more likely to behave selfishly and would be less critical of NS's behavior than would those who had not taken his perspective.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the perspective-taking condition reported they would leave less money (M=$2.63, SD=$2.30) than those in the control condition (M=$4.19, SD =$2.16), t(62)=-2.78, p<.01. Further, participants in the perspective-taking condition judged NS' selfish behavior as less shameful and embarrassing (M=3.47, SD=2.10) than did participants in the control condition (M=4.58, SD=1.34), t(62)=-2.50, p<.02.

We examined whether these feelings of embarrassment mediated the effects of psychological closeness (manipulated through perspective taking) on the amount of money left in the envelope (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The effect of psychological closeness was reduced to non-significance (from β=-.33, p=.007 to β=-.14, p=.15) when embarrassment was included in the equation, and embarrassment was a significant predictor of the dependent variable (β=.64, p<.001). A bootstrap analysis showed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect (0.91) excluded zero (-1.648, -0.271), suggesting a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

The results of Experiment 4 provide further evidence for the influence of psychological closeness on selfish behavior. When participants were psychologically connected to another individual who engaged in selfish behavior, they reported being more likely to behave selfishly themselves. In addition, they judged the selfish behavior as less embarrassing and shameful, and these judgments explained the relationship between psychological closeness and the amount of money participants indicated they would leave for their counterpart.

Experiment 5: In-group and Out-group Observers

Our first four studies have shown that psychological closeness, created through perspective taking, interdependence, and shared attributes, led individuals to follow the selfish and dishonest behavior of others. This experiment examines how the presence of an out-group observer moderates the effect of psychological closeness with a "bad apple" on individuals' own selfish behavior. In Experiments 1-4, as compared to a control condition, we found that participants were more likely to behave selfishly (Experiments 1, 3, and 4) and dishonestly (Experiment 2) when they were induced to feel psychologically close to a person behaving selfishly or unethically. In our experiments, all participants were individuals, such as "NS" or "BG." In a sense, they were in-group members since they were described as college students from the same university. We predict that when out-group

observers are present, individuals will respond differently to a selfish actor to whom they feel psychologically close.

Research has shown that individuals experience guilt associated with the historical unethical behaviors that members of their group engaged in (e.g., contemporary German citizens who reflect on the Holocaust) and feel motivated to compensate the victims of those behaviors (Doosie, Branscome, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Swim & Miller, 1999). More recent research (Fortune & Newby-Clark, 2008) has shown that people experience guilt for another person's inappropriate behavior (e.g., cheating in school) even when they are only slightly associated with the person (e.g., standing close to each other). These studies on associated guilt suggest that in-group members may feel motivated to seek restitution and compensation for the sins of those with whom they are associated.

When individuals are surrounded by in-group members who are similar to them, they are likely to imitate the behaviors of their peers because such behaviors signal appropriate norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1988), leading to contagion (Gino et al., 2009). But when a group member's transgression is witnessed not only by in-group members but also by an out-group, then individuals are likely to engage in compensatory behavior, as demonstrated in a recent study (Gino, Gu, & Zhong, 2009). It seems that the presence of an out-group increases individuals' tendency to question the norms set by in-group members. The possibility that out-group members may evaluate and judge the actions of in-group peers differently can heighten our awareness of the potential moral consequences of those actions (Schwartz, 1968). In addition, the presence of out-group observers is likely to trigger a self-categorization process that leads people to feel responsible for not only their own wrongdoing but also for that of their in-group members.

Based on this reasoning and previous findings, we predict that when out-group observers are not present, participants induced to feel psychologically close to a selfish actor will behave more selfishly than those in the control condition, replicating the findings of our first four studies; but

when out-group observers are present, participants induced to feel psychologically close to the selfish actor will behave less selfishly than those in the control condition.

Method

One-hundred seven students from universities in the southern United States (M_{age}=21, SD_{age}=4.54, 56 male) participated in the study in exchange of $7. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 (perspective taking: perspective taking vs. objective) X 2 (observers: out-group observers vs. in-group observers) between-subjects design.

We manipulated perspective taking using the same instructions as in Experiment 1A. We manipulated the nature of the observers by changing a few details of the scenario participants read after the perspective-taking manipulation. The instructions for the *out-group-observers* [*in-group-observers*] conditions read:

> Imagine you are participating in a research study, which is being conducted in Research Triangle Park. There are three other participants in the same lab room. From the badges on their backpacks and T-shirts, you recognize that two of them are from *Duke* [*UNC*]. The third participant is BG. The experimenter announces the following information about the study:
>
> > We are interested in how people make decisions. In this task, you are paired with another participant who is in another room in this lab (who will not be identified, now or later). You have $10 to divide between you and this participant you are paired with. You can offer this participant any portion of the $10, from nothing to the entire amount, or any amount in between. This participant will keep whatever amount you decide to offer, and you will keep whatever you don't offer. This participant will know all of the rules and all of the information that you know. There are no secrets.
>
> The experiment then gives each participant an envelope with 9 $1 coins and 4 quarters. The experimenter instructs you to take the amount of money you want to keep for yourself and leave the rest of the money in the envelope to be sent to the participant in the other room with whom you are paired. As you start thinking about what amount to take, you hear someone pouring the coins on the desk, you turn and see that BG has poured all the coins on the desk and is putting all the money in his own pocket. The other two participants from *Duke* [*UNC*] also see it.

After reading this scenario, participants indicated how much they would leave in the envelope if they were participating in the same study and the extent to which they thought BG's behavior was embarrassing and shameful (α=.88).

Results and Discussion

A 2 (perspective taking) X 2 (observers) ANOVA using the money participants indicated they would leave for their counterparts revealed a significant main effect for observers (F[1,103]=10.33, p=.002, η^2=.09) and an insignificant effect for perspective taking (F[1,103]<1, p=.60, η^2=.003). More importantly, and consistent with our prediction, the perspective taking X observers interaction was significant, F(1,103)=12.58, p=.001, η^2=.11. When the observers were in-group members, participants reported they would leave *less* money when they felt psychologically close to BG than when they were not (M=$2.87, SD=$2.31 vs. M=$4.64, SD=$1.94; t(54)=-3.03, p=.004). These results replicate the findings of Experiments 1-3. But when the observers were out-group members, participants reported they would leave *more* money when they felt psychologically close to BG than when they were not (M=$5.80, SD=$2.84 vs. M=$4.49, SD=$1.73; t(49)=2.03, p<.05).

We conducted a similar analysis using ratings of embarrassment as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for observers (F[1,103]=5.29, p<.03, η^2=.05) and an insignificant effect for perspective taking (F[1,103]=.75, p=.39, η^2=.01). More importantly, and consistent with our prediction, the perspective taking X observers interaction was significant, F(1,103)=12.18, p=.001, η^2=.11.

Next, to examine whether feelings of embarrassments mediated the moderating effect of the out-group observers manipulation on the impact of perspective taking on selfish behavior (measured by the amount of money left in the envelope for the counterpart), we used the moderated path analysis procedures developed by Edwards and Lambert (2007). We expected that the out-group observers manipulation would moderate the effect of perspective taking on embarrassment, which would directly predict lower levels of selfish behavior. This constitutes a first-stage moderation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). As displayed in Table 1, regression analyses showed that when feelings of embarrassment were entered into the equation, the interaction between the perspective-

taking and the out-group observers manipulations became insignificant, and feelings of embarrassment were a significant predictor of selfish behavior. We computed simple effects of the perspective-taking manipulation at low and high levels of the out-group observers manipulation using bias-corrected confidence intervals, drawing 1,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample. Moderated mediation is demonstrated when the conditional indirect effects of the perspective-taking manipulation on selfish behavior via feelings of embarrassment differ in strength across low and high levels of the out-group observers manipulation. As shown in Table 2, this was the case. Accordingly, the presence of out-group observers moderated the indirect effects of perspective-taking on selfish behavior through feelings of embarrassment.

General Discussion

As John Donne (1975) once suggested, "No man is an island." Not only are people motivated to form and maintain bonds with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but several studies have shown that such social bonds form easily. Being randomly assigned to a group (Sherif et al., 1988) or sharing attributes, even when they are superficial (e.g., a birth date) (Miller et. al, 1998), is sufficient to create "psychological ties" among individuals. Prior work has found that when a person feels psychologically close to someone else, this bond produces various benefits. For instance, taking another person's perspective – a form of psychological closeness – increases the likelihood of helping (Batson, 1994) and conflict resolution (Paese & Yonker, 2001), reduces the use of stereotypes during impression formation (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), and diminishes egocentric biases in judgment (Savinsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2005).

In the present experiments, we investigated the consequences of various forms of psychological closeness on people's ethical judgments, intentions, and actions. We observed a consistent pattern of results across five studies in which we measured people's intentions to behave selfishly or dishonestly, as well as their real behavior. Our results show that taking the perspective of a person who behaved selfishly led people to report being more likely to behave selfishly themselves

(Experiments 1 and 4), and that feelings of embarrassments mediated this effect (Experiment 4). Psychological closeness also led to higher levels of dishonesty in Experiment 2, in which we considered real, unethical behavior. We found that when participants shared attributes with a confederate who cheated, they were more likely to behave dishonestly by inflating their task performance and thus earned undeserved money. The same findings were replicated in a follow-up study in which we manipulated psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset through priming (Experiment 3). The results of Experiment 3 also show that people with an interdependent mindset view the selfish behavior of others as less unethical or wrong. Taken together, these studies provide convincing evidence that even subtle forms of psychological closeness lead individuals to vicariously justify the actions of the person they feel connected to and thus to be more likely to behave less ethically themselves.

In addition to demonstrating the influence of psychological closeness on one's own ethical intentions and behavior (as in Experiments 1-4), and obtaining evidence to support our proposed mechanism of feelings of embarrassment (as in Experiment 4), Experiment 5 also demonstrated that the presence of out-group observers is an important moderator of the impact of psychological closeness on behavior. The results show that individuals respond to the selfish actions of a person they feel psychologically close to differently, depending on whether out-group observers are present or absent. When only in-group observers are present, feeling psychologically close to the wrongdoer increases one's own likelihood of acting selfishly. But when out-group observers are present, the opposite pattern occurs.

These results suggest that one way to improve the objectivity of one's judgments of others' behaviors and reduce the potential negative influence of their selfish actions on one's own is to highlight the salience of group membership and the presence of outsiders. Future research could examine the role of other forms of out-group observation that might improve our objectivity. For instance, the presence of a monitor as we judge the actions of others and decide how to behave may

produce similar effects to those observed in Experiment 4. Research has shown that the mere physical presence of others can highlight group norms (Cialdini et al., 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) and restrict the freedom of individuals to categorize their unethical behavior in positive terms. In one extreme test of this idea, Bateson, Nettle, and Roberts (2006) used the image of a pair of eyes to watch over an "honesty box" for contributions in a shared coffee room to give individuals the sense of being monitored; this image in itself was sufficient to produce a higher level of ethical behavior (i.e., it increased the level of contributions to the honesty box). These results suggest that being monitored by others may increase our moral awareness and, as a result, reduce the influence of wrongdoers to whom we feel connected as compared to a setting with no such monitoring. Other studies have shown that even when people are told their actions are anonymous, they respond to subtle cues of being watched, such as the presence of eye-like spots on the background of the computer on which they complete a task (Haley & Fessler 2005; Burnham & Hare, 2007). Future research could employ similar manipulations to counteract the effects of psychological closeness observed in our first four studies.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications

The research presented here contributes to research in moral psychology and ethical decision making. Prior work has treated morality as a defining dimension of the self. Blasi (1983, 2004) has argued that how central morality is to a person's self-identity greatly influences whether her moral actions align with her moral judgments. Building on this work, other scholars have suggested that there are stable differences among individuals that can help us predict their moral actions (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart, Yates, Fegley, & Wilson, 1995; Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). While we agree that these isolated moral-self approaches can provide useful insights into the study of moral behavior and ethical decision making, we proposed a view of the moral self that extends to the actions of others. Our view is consistent with Monin and Jordan's (in press) concept of dynamic self-regard (see also Jordan &

Monin, 2008). As these two scholars suggest, "people's thoughts and behavior are often guided by a "working" level of moral self-regard that fluctuates from moment to moment according to situational influences. (…) [S]ituations actually can affect aspects of the self-concept and can therefore influence behavior through this mediator, rather than moderate the link between self and behavior." Consistent with this view, our research shows that subtle manipulations of psychological closeness can lead people to share the internal states of a wrongdoer, justify this person's unethical actions, and behave dishonestly themselves.

Our research also extends prior work on the factors that motivate well-intentioned people to cross ethical boundaries. Prior research has shown that ethical climate, codes of ethics, and ethical culture are important predictors of the frequency of unethical acts within groups and organizational settings (for a review, see Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000, or Ford & Richardson, 1994). Although we recognize the importance of such macro-components, we believe that micro-elements, such as feeling psychologically close to another person who behaved selfishly or dishonestly, can also have large consequences.

Conclusion

Topical stories in the media exposing unethical practices in business and broader society have highlighted the gap between the decisions people actually make versus the decisions people believe they should make. In recent decades, a large body of work across many disciplines has tried to tease out why people behave in ways inconsistent with their own ethical standards or moral principles. Antecedents of ethical decision making and dishonest behavior range from individual differences, such as moral disengagement (Detert, Trevino & Sweitzer, 2008) and the self-importance of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed & Aquino, 2003), to situational factors that make individual choice all but irrelevant (Zimbardo, 2006). In this paper, we examined the ethical consequences of a previously overlooked factor, one's own feelings of psychological closeness to another person who has behaved selfishly or dishonestly. Across five studies, we found

that even the subtlest of psychological connections, such as sharing the same birth month, can influence the likelihood that an individual will act dishonestly. Thus, as our results show, psychological closeness can lead to vicarious dishonesty by creating distance from one's moral compass.

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Tables

Table 1. Experiment 5: Coefficient Estimates for Regression Analyses

	Feelings of embarrassment			Money left in the envelope for counterpart		
	B (SE)	β	*t*	B (SE)	β	*t*
Perspective taking	1.44 (.46)	-.40	-3.15**			
Out-group obs.	-.39 (.47)	-.11	-.84			
Perspective taking X Out-group obs.	2.30 (.66)	.52	3.49**			
R^2			.16***			
Perspective taking				-.20 (.45)	-.04	-.43
Feelings of embarrassment				1.09 (.13)	.81	8.48***
Out-group obs.				.30 (.43)	.06	.69
Perspective taking X Out-group obs.				.80 (.64)	.13	1.25
Embarrassment X Out-group obs.				-.27 (.18)	-.14	-1.51
R^2						.62***

Notes. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Table 2. Experiment 5: Analysis of Simple Effects

Moderator:	Stage		Effect		
Perspective Taking	First	Second	Direct	Indirect	Total
Yes	.87	.82*	.60	.71	1.31
No	1.44*	-1.09*	.20	1.57*	1.77*
Differences	2.30*	-.27	.80	2.29*	3.08*

Note: Tests of differences for the first stage, second stage, and direct effect are equivalent to tests of the corresponding coefficients reported in Table 1. Tests of differences for the indirect and total effect were based on 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from bootstrap estimates.