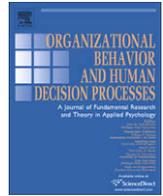




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## Dirty work, clean hands: The moral psychology of indirect agency

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## ABSTRACT

When powerful people cause harm, they often do so indirectly through other people. Are harmful actions carried out through others evaluated less negatively than harmful actions carried out directly? Four experiments examine the moral psychology of indirect agency. Experiments 1A, 1B, and 1C reveal effects of indirect agency under conditions favoring intuitive judgment, but not reflective judgment, using a joint/separate evaluation paradigm. Experiment 2A demonstrates that effects of indirect agency cannot be fully explained by perceived lack of foreknowledge or control on the part of the primary agent. Experiment 2B indicates that reflective moral judgment is sensitive to indirect agency, but only to the extent that indirectness signals reduced foreknowledge and/or control. Experiment 3 indicates that effects of indirect agency result from a failure to automatically consider the potentially dubious motives of agents who cause harm indirectly. Experiment 4 demonstrates an effect of indirect agency on purchase intentions.

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In 2005, Merck, a major pharmaceutical company, sold the rights to two slow-selling cancer drugs, Mustargen and Cosmegen, to smaller and lesser-known Ovation Pharmaceuticals. Merck's decision to sell the rights to sell the drugs had dire consequences for dependent users, some of whom saw their monthly drug costs jump from \$160 to \$1100 after Ovation raised the price (Berenson, 2006). The price increase was not based on changes in cost, and Merck continued to manufacture the drugs. Merck did not directly increase the price, and it is not certain that they profited from it, but it is likely that the pharmaceutical giant foresaw the price increase and shared at least indirectly in the resulting profit. That is, Merck presumably profited from the increased price to consumers, either through its sale price to Ovation or its revenues from manufacturing the drugs. Were Merck's actions ethical? And did the indirect nature of their actions affect how they were perceived?

When powerful people do morally questionable things, they rarely interact directly with their putative victims. Mobsters have hit men. CEO's have vice presidents, lawyers, and accountants. More specifically, the powerful are likely to carry out their intentions through the actions of other agents, with varying degrees of explicit direction and control. The present investigation explores the effects of indirect agency on moral judgment.

Jones (1991) suggests that ethical decision making is "issue contingent". That is, ethical decisions and behaviors are affected by the magnitude of the consequences, social consensus, proximity, probability of the effect, temporal immediacy, and concentration of the

effect. Together, these variables affect the *moral intensity* of the ethical decision (Jones, 1991). For example, an act that harms 1000 people would be more morally intense than the same act that harms only 10, and an act that harms someone in one's own city is more morally intense than an act that harms someone in a far away country. Moral issues of high intensity are both more salient (due to consequences) and more vivid (due to emotional arousal) than moral issues of low intensity. Furthermore, proximity, the element of moral intensity that we are most interested in, may affect perceived control and attributions of responsibility. Jones's theories suggest that harms carried out directly will be more morally intense than harms carried out indirectly.

Recent work in moral psychology examines the roles played by various forms of physical indirectness in the evaluation of harmful actions (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene et al., in press; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Royzman & Baron, 2002; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007). Royzman and Baron (2002), for example, contrast moving someone in front of oneself in order to block an incoming bullet (direct) with jumping out of a bullet's path, exposing someone else as a target (indirect). The present research differs from the foregoing in two key respects. First, it is not focused on *physical* indirectness. Had Merck raised the prices of its drugs *directly*, rather than selling the rights to Ovation, the physical chain of events connecting Merck to its disappointed customers would not necessarily have been any shorter. The indirectness in question is psychological, not physical. Second, the indirectness in question concerns the role of *secondary agents*. Merck (the *primary agent*) acted indirectly in the present sense because it acted through Ovation (the *secondary agent*).

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Milgram (1974) examined the role of secondary agents in a variant of his classic obedience experiment. He found that subjects were even more likely to shock a victim (when directed by an authority figure) when the subjects were allowed to act through a secondary agent (another confederate of the experimenter) who could be directed to administer shocks to the victim from a remote location. Milgram proposed that the presence of a secondary agent created psychological distance between the subject and the victim, and that this distance reduced the strain on the participant and made disobedience less likely. Milgram's experiments suggest that the presence of secondary agents can reduce strain for the actor, but do not address the question of how observers perceive harmful actions that are carried out through secondary agents.

We conducted four experiments to examine the moral psychology of indirect agency. Experiments 1A, 1B, and 1C document the effects of indirect agency under conditions favoring intuitive vs. reflective judgment. Experiments 2A and 2B aim to determine whether effects of indirect agency result from uncertainty concerning the primary agent's foreknowledge of, or control over, harmful outcomes. Experiment 3 tests the hypothesis that effects of indirect agency result from a failure to automatically consider the potentially dubious motives of agents who cause harm indirectly. And Experiment 4 moves from judging the ethicality of decisions to the conditions under which indirect agency affects purchase intention.

### Experiments 1A–C

In Experiment 1, we examined the effects of indirect agency under two distinct modes of evaluation: separate evaluation and joint evaluation. Under joint evaluation, multiple alternatives are simultaneously available for consideration, while under separate evaluation only one alternative is considered (Bazerman, Loewenstein, & Blount White, 1992). For example, Bazerman, Schroth, Shah, Diekmann, and Tenbrunsel (1994) asked MBA students which of two options they would prefer: a job paying an annual salary of \$75,000 while their classmates also made \$75,000 (*the fair option*), or a job paying \$85,000 while their classmates made \$95,000 (*the money option*). Students exhibited different preferences based on how the scenarios were presented. When presented separately, participants reported that they would be more likely to accept the *fair option* than the *money option*, despite the reduced salary. When the two options were evaluated jointly, however, the relationship was reversed, with participants more likely to accept the *money option* even though it seemed less fair. Students who saw the scenarios one at a time based their judgments more on fairness, an emotionally salient factor that can be evaluated in the absence of information about alternative outcomes. Those who saw scenarios together focused on absolute salary level, a factor made salient when both options are presented together and that most people, upon reflection, regard as the more important factor.

The tendency for separate evaluation to engender affective or intuitive judgment, and for joint evaluation to engender more cognitive or reflective judgment is not specific to this particular scenario (Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, & Wade-Benozi, 1998; Hsee, Blount, Loewenstein, & Bazerman, 1999; Hsee, Rottenstreich, & Xiao, 2005). In another study, Hsee (1996) asked participants to evaluate second-hand music dictionaries either separately or jointly. In separate evaluation, participants stated they would be willing to pay more for a dictionary with 10,000 entries whose condition was 'like new', whereas in the joint evaluation condition participants said they would pay more for a 20,000 entry dictionary whose cover was torn. The dictionary's esthetic properties were intuitively evaluable to participants and thus dominated separate evaluation. But in joint evaluation, the difference in

number of entries was salient and became the more important factor. In general, joint evaluation allows for the consideration of attributes that are difficult to assess in isolation and is therefore more likely to result in reason-based choice and less likely to be influenced by affective factors (Bazerman et al., 1998; Hsee, 1998).

In Experiment 1, we used a joint/separate evaluation paradigm to document the effects of indirect agency, pitting the effect of indirectness against another relevant factor, the magnitude of harmful consequences. Some scholars would argue that an effect of indirect agency is a bias (Royzman & Baron, 2002). For example, few would explicitly argue that a murderous mobster is less culpable if he acts through a hit man rather than pulling the trigger himself. Thus, we predict that effects of indirect agency, insofar as they exist, are more likely to be present under conditions favoring intuition (separate evaluation). But, if the comparison between indirect and direct agency is made more transparent under conditions favoring reflection (joint evaluation), the blame reduction for indirect agency will be reduced or eliminated and the consequences will be more salient. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H1a: Under separate evaluation, people will judge unethical acts more leniently when carried out indirectly than when carried out directly (even if the acts carried out indirectly entail greater harm).

H1b: Joint evaluation will reduce or eliminate the indirect vs. direct effect predicted under H1a.

Experiment 1A employed hypothetical scenarios modeled after the case of Merck and Ovation. In the direct scenario, the larger company directly raised the price of the drug, imposing hardship on patients. In the indirect scenario, the larger company sold the drug rights to the smaller company that went on to raise the price higher than the larger company did in the direct scenario, imposing even greater hardship on patients. We predicted that participants would find indirect action (with more severe consequences) to be less unethical when alternatives were presented separately, but that people would reverse their preferences when the alternatives were presented jointly. Experiments 1B and 1C tested the same hypotheses using alternative scenarios.

### Experiment 1A

#### Method

#### Participants

One-hundred and fifty people (128 females  $M_{age} = 32.7$ ,  $SD = 10.0$ ) recruited from an online subject pool completed the survey and a package of unrelated surveys in exchange for \$5.

#### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *separate evaluation – direct sale* (SE – direct), *separate evaluation – indirect sale* (SE – indirect), or *joint evaluation* (JE). In the SE-direct condition, participants read the following scenario:

A major pharmaceutical company, X, had a cancer drug that was minimally profitable. The fixed costs were high and the market was limited. But, the patients who used the drug really needed it. The pharmaceutical was making the drug for \$2.50/pill (all costs included), and was only selling it for \$3/pill. [The pharmaceutical firm raised the price of the drug from \$3/pill to \$9/pill, thus increasing the value of the drug to company X by \$10 million.]

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