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## Complicity without connection or communication



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## ABSTRACT

We use a novel laboratory experiment involving a die rolling task embedded within a coordination game to investigate whether complicity can emerge when decision-making is simultaneous, the potential accomplices are strangers and neither communication nor signaling is possible. Then, by comparing the behavior observed in this original game to that in a variant in which die-roll reporting players are paired with passive players instead of other die-roll reporters, while everything else is held constant, we isolate the effect of having a potential accomplice on the likelihood of an individual acting immorally. We find that complicity can emerge between strangers in the absence of opportunities to communicate or signal and that having a potential accomplice increases the likelihood of an individual acting immorally.

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## 1. Introduction

Complicity “the fact or condition of being involved with others in an activity that is unlawful or morally wrong” (Oxford English Dictionary), is difficult to study in the field. Successful complicity, by definition, is never observed and the few cases of apparent complicity that have been brought to light offer little foundation for generalizable insights. In many cases, complicity appears likely but cannot be proven, owing to a lack of evidence of directly relevant communication between the likely accomplices, but is suspected for two reasons. First, the accomplices are in decision-making contexts in which coordination is advantageous and there are opportunities to reciprocate either by directly assisting one another in an immoral act, by lying to protect one another’s and/or their collective reputations, or by turning a blind eye upon each other’s wrongdoing. In short, one likely accomplice is helping the other, knowing or anticipating that the other is reciprocating. Second, the likely accomplices share social ties, i.e., they are associates or colleagues and possibly also friends. However, we cannot infer from the existing case studies whether both of these features are necessary pre-conditions for the emergence of complicity. Put another way, the case studies do not lead to insights about precisely what “being involved with others” means in such contexts. In addition, in some cases, the likely accomplices appear to be types of individual that, *a priori*, we would not expect to engage in activities that are “unlawful or morally wrong” and this begs the question does the “being involved with others” increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in an activity that is “unlawful or morally wrong”. Consider, for example, the inquiry in the 1990s which revealed that many babies had died after heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary because medical professionals had not been applying appropriate standards of safety and had remained

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collectively silent about the issue for half a decade. *A priori*, one would not expect individuals who have selected into caring professions in medicine to behave immorally. So why did they? Was it because of their shared social ties and opportunities to communicate? Or was it owing to something less obvious, but arguably more fundamental, about the decision-making context they found themselves in?

In this paper, first, we investigate whether individuals are willing to engage in complicit acts when they neither know nor are able to communicate with their potential accomplices. More specifically, we look at whether individuals are prepared to lie in order to coordinate with a stranger with whom they are unable to communicate in any way. Second, we investigate whether, *ceteris paribus*, having a potential accomplice – specifically, one who is a stranger with whom one cannot communicate – increases the likelihood of an individual acting immorally, i.e., whether there is a pure *potential accomplice effect*.

If social ties are a necessary pre-condition for complicity, interventions that moderate social tie formation and maintenance between colleagues, such as staff rotation (Abbink 2004), might be sufficient to combat complicity. And if communication between accomplices is necessary for success in complicity, monitoring communication between potential accomplices could provide the basis for an effective deterrent. However, if social ties and opportunities to communicate are not necessary, i.e., if the mere existence of someone who is facing the same moral dilemma and individual and collective incentives and with whom it would be advantageous to coordinate increases the likelihood of an individual behaving immorally, other forms of intervention will be necessary.

To investigate whether complicity can emerge between strangers in the absence of communication of any kind, we designed and invited individuals to play the Complicity Game (CG thereafter), which combines the die-under-cup paradigm of Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi (2013) with a coordination game. Specifically, in the CG two anonymous players are randomly paired. Simultaneously, each is asked to roll a die in private and report the outcome. The report of each player determines the monetary payoff received by the other. In addition, each player receives a bonus if both reports are 5 and a higher bonus if both reports are 6.<sup>1</sup> In this game, the distribution of die roll reports will deviate from the uniform distribution of fair die rolls if the value players place on ensuring high monetary payoffs for themselves and others and on coordinating with others facing the same choice outweighs any psychological discomfort they experience when lying. Then, to isolate the *potential accomplice effect*, we designed a variant of the game in which there is no potential accomplice, while everything else, including any altruistic motivation for lying and the subjective distributions of anticipated monetary payoffs conditional on own die roll reports, remains unchanged compared to the CG.

Finally, in another variant of the game, we removed the moral dilemma, while holding everything else, this time including the presence of an active playing partner, constant. In this variant each player reports a number between 1 and 6 without, first, rolling a die.

In the absence of any moral dilemma, 97 percent of players reported a 6—they tried and usually succeeded to coordinate on the monetary payoff dominant equilibrium. A significantly lower 59 percent of the players participating in the CG reported a 6 indicating that the moral dilemma had a bearing on their decision-making. Finally, a significantly lower again, 41 percent of the players participating in the ‘no potential accomplice’ variant of the game reported a 6. These results indicate that a significant proportion of people are willing to behave immorally with the aim of coordinating to achieve a higher payoff, i.e., they are willing to engage in complicity, and having a potential accomplice increases individual willingness to behave immorally even when that accomplice is a stranger and communication is not possible.

Our findings contribute to the growing behavioral and experimental literature on immoral behavior. In this literature, behaving immorally is associated with an intrinsic, psychological cost (Abeler et al., 2014; Gneezy et al., 2016). However, this cost appears to be context specific. For example, people behave more honestly when they have been religiously or morally primed (Mazar et al., 2008), when they have to report their immoral intentions before they act (Jiang, 2013), when deviating from honesty might reduce their own earnings by suppressing others’ effort (Ederer and Fehr, 2007), and when immoral actions harm others (Gneezy, 2005; Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi, 2013). Alempaki et al. (2016) found that senders in a sender-receiver game lie less when the receivers played fairly in a prior dictator game.

Closely related to our study is that of Weisel and Shalvi (2015), who found that, in a sequential two-player game in which both must lie for each to secure a positive monetary payoff, when the first mover lied, the second mover reciprocated by also lying. Also related is the study of Kocher et al., 2016, who found, first, that people were considerably more inclined to lie when in groups within which communication was possible compared to when they were acting alone and, second, that people were marginally more inclined to lie in groups within which communication was possible when they had to coordinate on a lie with their co-group members in order to receive a positive payoff. However, in both of these studies some form of communication was possible. In the latter, the subjects in the group treatments could “chat” on-line before making their decisions in private, while in the former the first mover could signal intent through choice of action and the second mover observed this signal prior to making their choice. Further, neither of these studies endeavored to isolate the effect of having a potential accomplice while holding all other aspects of the decision-making environment constant. In Weisel and Shalvi (2015), the game always involved strategic complementarities and, while Kocher et al., 2016 compared the decisions made by people when acting alone to the decisions they made when in groups, many other aspects of the decision-making

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<sup>1</sup> This bonus structure is explained in detail in section 3 of the paper.

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