

## Vicarious dishonesty: When psychological closeness creates distance from one's moral compass

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 27 December 2010

Accepted 28 March 2012

Available online 9 May 2012

Accepted by Madan Pillutla

#### Keywords:

Ethics

Dishonesty

Interdependence

Perspective taking

Psychological closeness

Unethical behavior

Vicarious self-justification

Vicarious dishonesty

### ABSTRACT

In four studies employing multiple manipulations of psychological closeness, we found that feeling connected to another individual who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior leads people to behave more selfishly and less ethically themselves. In addition, psychologically connecting with a scoundrel led to greater moral disengagement. We also establish that vicarious justification is the mechanism explaining this effect: When participants felt psychologically close to someone who had behaved selfishly, they were more likely to consider the behavior to be less shame-worthy and less unethical; it was these lenient judgments that then led them to act more unethically themselves. These vicarious effects were moderated by whether the miscreant was identified with a photograph and by the type of behavior. Importantly, we establish a general process of vicariousness: psychological closeness produced both vicarious generosity and selfishness depending on the behavior of the person one feels psychologically connected to. These findings suggest an irony of psychological closeness: it can create distance from one's own moral compass.

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### Introduction

In the summer of 1993, Quincy, Illinois was one of many towns who was overrun by rising tides along the Mississippi River and suffered extensive and systemic damage. Upon hearing of this town's precarious situation, Quincy, Massachusetts leaped into action, sending a lifeline of supplies (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998). As this example illustrates, even small cues such as sharing the same name can psychologically bond us to others and are sufficient to inspire acts of altruism and helping towards them.

Now consider the case of finding out that a peer who shares your birthday is inflating their expense reports. As you learn about these dishonest behaviors, how would you react? You might view them critically and choose to distance yourself from this morally tainted individual. In this paper, we make the opposite prediction: when a person feels psychologically close to someone who engages in dishonest behavior, they will become vicariously motivated

to justify that person's actions and thus more likely to behave unethically themselves in subsequent situations.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, we propose that the bonds that bind, even when those connections are minimal and modest, lead people to vicariously re-enact and replicate another person's traits and behaviors. Further, we propose that these vicarious processes are robust across domains and valences, just as likely to occur when the observed behavior is negative as when it is positive.

### From an isolated to a social moral self

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of researchers 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, morality has mostly been discussed by examining the self in isolation. For instance, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) have shown a link between physical and moral purity by demonstrating that cleansing behavior can "wash

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, we use the terms "dishonest (honest)", "unethical (ethical)", and "immoral (moral)" interchangeably. We study both dishonest (honest) behaviors, as well as selfish (generous) ones. Although different in nature, both types of behavior share the common feature of advancing one's own self-interest at the expense of others and involve a conflict between a short-term monetary benefit and a longer-term social benefit (e.g., having a better reputation or behaving consistently with the goal of being moral and good).

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away one's sins." Related research has found a link between immorality, physical self-punishment, and moral redemption. For instance, Wallington (1973) demonstrated that people who violate moral rules actively cause themselves to suffer physically. Consistent with these 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. According to Blasi (1993), people are motivated to make their actions consistent with their ideals of a moral self, and self-consistency motivates moral action. Similarly, Aquino and Reed (2002) proposed that people possess a cognitive schema of the moral self that is organized around a set of moral trait associations. They developed a method for measuring the self-importance of moral identity based on the assumption that its cognitive salience within a person's overall self-schema has some temporal stability. That is, moral identity is more chronically accessible for some people than others across situations. Supporting this argument, moral identity predicted morally relevant behaviors (i.e., donating food to the needy, donating money to out-groups) over a period of several weeks (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed & Aquino, 2003). What follows from Blasi's work and Aquino and Reed's research on moral identity is that 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.

Building on the idea that morality is a defining and fundamental dimension of the self, we propose that morality also has a social component: Whether individuals behave unethically or ethically depends on the actions of those around them. In particular, drawing on vicarious self-perception theory (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), we suggest that feeling psychologically close to another person is enough for this person's behavior (whether the behavior is ethical or unethical) to affect our own. We examine both vicarious dishonesty and vicarious generosity. In doing so, we both establish a general principle of vicariousness but also identify an interesting asymmetry in the effects of psychological closeness.

#### *The influence of others' moral behavior*

The (un)ethical behavior of others can influence our own through various mechanisms. First, especially in situations where there is ambiguity about the appropriate way of behaving, we may look to others and use their behavior to understand the prevailing norms. Others' behavior thus defines the social norm or provides the social proof that then leads us to behave in a similar manner as those around us (e.g., Cialdini, 1993; Goldstein, Martin, & Cialdini, 2008b). For instance, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008a) found that hotel guests who learned that most other guests had reused their towels (the social-proof appeal) were 26% more likely to recycle their towels than were those who were only exposed to a general prosocial 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. Related research has found similar effects on behavior as a result of observing somebody else's misconduct. When people are exposed to an in-group member's unethical behavior, they align with the behavior and behave dishonestly themselves since the in-group member's behavior provides information about what's appropriate in the given context (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009a; Gino, Gu, & Zhong, 2009b).

Second, when people are already aware of the normative behavior in a given situation thanks to the presence of a clear role model, they follow this person's actions automatically. In fact, just the priming of a role model helps people regulate their moral behavior and influences their judgment. For instance, Eibach, Libby, and Ehr-

linger (2009) found that when the parental role is primed parents express more moral disapproval of harmless but offensive actions than nonparents. In a similar vein, Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) found that priming different types of relationship partners (e.g., best friend or mother vs. coworker) produced prime-consistent behavior such as helping. These streams of research identify two important mechanisms through which others' moral behavior influences our own: establishing the norms for appropriate behavior, or reminding people of how role models act through priming.

In this paper, we focus on a third mechanism that operates also in cases in which the norm for appropriate behavior is clear. We propose that individuals perceive questionable behaviors exhibited by another person to be more acceptable when they feel psychologically close to rather than distant from the person. Even when very subtle bonds exist between individuals, we suggest that the ethical actions of one person influence those of another, providing evidence for a "social moral self." Even when the connection to this other person is the minimalist of connections, the influence of that person's actions can be strong enough to produce vicarious behavior, both dishonest and honest.

#### **Psychological closeness and vicarious dishonesty**

Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion theory argues that people's sense of self can be broadened to include others, and that this is likely to occur when these others are people we feel close to (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). We define psychological closeness as feelings of attachment and perceived connection toward another person or people. People feel close to others not only when they share a common group membership or identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), but also when they share 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 (Cialdini & DeNichols, 1989; Finch & Cialdini, 1989; Miller et al., 1998). People also feel psychologically close to others when they are asked to take their perspective and put themselves in their shoes, or when they are from an interdependent culture or in an interdependent mindset (e.g., Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009).

Once psychological closeness forms, people take on the properties of the person they feel close to and psychologically afford them "self" status (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). As a result, when individuals perceive another person to be part of the self, actor-observer perspective differences are reduced and this other person's characteristics become one's own (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Building on research suggesting that one's own self-concept can expand to include others, Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) proposed that when people observe the behavior of a person they feel psychologically close to, they make inferences about that person's attributes and these inferences can carry over to inferences about one's own attributes as if one had engaged in the same behavior. This vicarious self-perception processes can then lead individuals to behave in ways that are consistent with the behavior they observed initially, and this is more likely to occur the closer one feels to the initiator (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; Kouchaki, 2011). Thus, feelings of psychological closeness create vicarious possibilities, even when those feelings are subtly induced.

When people feel connected to others they experience their emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), including joy (Murphy, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002), embarrassment (Miller, 1987), and pain (Batson, 1991; Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006). In addition, people tend to vicariously justify the actions of those to whom they feel psychologically close (Gunia et al.,

2009). For instance, Gunia et al. (2009) found that when a person felt psychologically close to another, they escalated their commitment by investing further in a failing program orchestrated by the initial actor, even when such investments were personally costly to the participant. Thus, 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.

Drawing on vicarious self-concept theory (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), we propose that psychological closeness, however subtle, to another person who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior creates distance from one's own moral compass. Similarly, psychological closeness to another person who engages in generous or honest behavior brings one closer to one's own moral compass. Because of psychological closeness, we predict that individuals will be motivated to vicariously justify the other person's actions and to judge their selfish or unethical behavior as less morally problematic, but more morally righteous when the other person's actions are generous or ethical. In the case of unethical or selfish behavior, this vicarious self-justification of nefarious deeds and dismissal of its moral components will lead people who have formed a psychological connection with a wrongdoer to behave less ethically themselves. In the case of ethical or generous behavior, instead, it will result in vicarious honesty.

The current research provides several contributions to the existing literature. First, we propose and find that subtle psychological connections with wrongdoers can lead us to behave unethically, even when there is no ambiguity about the norm of appropriate behavior. We also investigate the mechanism explaining why this occurs, showing that experiencing feelings of psychological closeness influences our perception of the unethicality of others' behavior and our emotional reactions to it. Second, we establish the influence of psychological closeness by employing different operationalizations of this construct, including perspective taking, shared characteristics, and priming of an interdependent mindset. Although these different factors may produce different fine-grained effects on moral behavior, they all share a common effect by changing how we view and judge the ethically questionable behavior of those we feel close to. Finally, although unethical and ethical behaviors are generally studied independently and in separate literatures, here we examine the effects of psychological closeness on both vicarious dishonesty and vicarious honesty. Our results show that psychological closeness produces both vicarious generosity and immorality depending on whether the psychologically close individual behaved unethically rather than ethically.

## Overview of experiments

We tested our main hypotheses in four experiments that employed multiple forms of psychological closeness and different outcome measures. In Experiment 1, we tested whether psychological closeness manipulated through perspective taking would influence one's own intentions to behave selfishly, and whether it would lead participants to view the selfish behavior as less unethical and shame-worthy. In Experiment 2, we examined the impact of a more generalized form of psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset through priming. We also introduced a second manipulation, whether the person behaving selfishly was identified or not, to test whether identifiability increased vicarious dishonesty or moderated the effect of the interdependent mindset.

In Experiment 3, we extended our investigation by considering real, unethical behavior and by manipulating psychological closeness in a more subtle way, i.e., sharing the same birth date with the wrongdoer. Further, we test whether psychological closeness

creates a distance from one's own moral compass by measuring moral disengagement. Finally, in Experiment 4 we compare the effects of psychological closeness on selfish and generous behavior and find evidence both for a general principle of vicariousness and for an asymmetry: psychological closeness ironically produced stronger effects when the actions of the person one feels psychologically close to are selfish rather than generous.

## Manipulating psychological closeness

The clouding of self and other that occurs through psychological closeness is common in close relationships (Aron et al., 1991; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997) but it can also result from people's cognitive orientation or mindsets. For instance, individuals who construe the self as interdependent define themselves in terms of their groups' attributes and are thus likely to experience a sense of relatedness toward others (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kuhnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Similarly, perspective-takers psychologically take on the characteristics of others, seeing others' central attributes as more self-descriptive (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2008, 2010). Taking the perspective of others commonly lead people to treat the actions of those as their own (Galinsky et al., 2008) and to experience the same outcomes such as cognitive dissonance (e.g., Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003) or specific emotions (e.g., Jackson et al., 2006). Thus, psychological closeness can be triggered through perspective taking or by priming an interdependent mindset. In addition, it can also be invoked through more subtle manipulations like sharing common features like the same first name or birthday (Cialdini & DeNichols, 1989).

Although these various forms of psychological closeness likely produce different fine-grained effects on moral behavior, here we focus on an attribute that we believe all of these manipulations share in common: they produce feelings of relatedness and create greater self-other overlap. As a result, we predict that these seemingly disparate manipulations have similar capacities to create vicarious processes. Thus, across our studies, we manipulate psychological closeness in different ways to establish the robustness of vicarious morality.

## Experiment 1: perspective taking and vicarious selfishness

Our first study manipulated psychological closeness through perspective taking and measured vicarious selfishness. Specifically, we tested whether taking the perspective of a person who acted selfishly would lead the perspective-taker to show greater intentions to act selfishly themselves. 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 creates social bonds (Galinsky et al., 2005).

In the study, participants learned that another person had chosen to behave selfishly during a previous experiment. Participants first were asked to take this person's perspective or were assigned to a control condition, and then to indicate how selfishly they would behave if they found themselves in the same situation. Participants also evaluated the ethicality of the person's actions and indicated the extent to which they found them shameful.

### *Perceived shame-worthiness and unethicality of others' actions*

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 thus to report they would behave the same way if they were in that person's shoes. That is, we expected par-

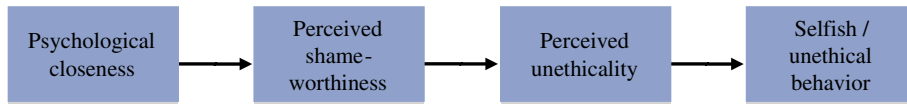


Fig. 1. Theoretical model tested in Experiment 1.

Participants' intentions to act selfishly to be affected by psychological closeness. We also expected participants' judgments of the person's actions (i.e., their perceived shame-worthiness and unethicity) to mediate this relationship. In particular, we expected psychological closeness to lead participants to perceive the actions as less shameful and more morally appropriate. As a result, these judgments would increase participants' intentions to behave selfishly themselves. Emotional reactions to ethical/unethical behavior, in fact, form the basis for moral judgment (e.g., Caruso & Gino, 2011; Haidt, 2001). We suggest that when people feel psychologically close to another person who engaged in morally questionable behavior, they are likely to judge the actions of the other person as more morally appropriate. Thus, we predicted that participants in the perspective-taking condition would judge the selfish behavior as less shame-worthy and less morally wrong than would participants in the control condition. In addition, we predicted that these judgments would explain the link between psychological closeness and participants' decision to act selfishly, as depicted in Fig. 1.

Method

One-hundred three students from local universities in the southeastern United States ( $M_{age} = 23.29, SD_{age} = 5.20$ ; 45 male) participated in the study for \$6. 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 instructions read, "In this study, you will read a description of something that happened to a college student. His picture is below."

Perspective-taking manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: perspective taking vs. control. We manipulated perspective taking by using the same instructions employed by Gunia et al. (2009). Participants in both conditions were shown a picture of an alleged recent participant and were asked to write about a typical day in his 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.

*Pilot study.* We conducted a pilot study on a non-overlapping group of participants to test the validity and effectiveness of our perspective taking manipulation of psychological closeness. Seventy-six individuals ( $M_{age} = 27.39, SD_{age} = 5.17$ ; 36 male) participated in this pilot study for \$4. They were randomly assigned to either the perspective taking condition or the control condition. They first engaged in the same writing task used in the main study and then answered a series of questions. We asked them to indicate the extent to which they took the target's perspective during the writing task on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent). Next, they indicated the extent to which they felt similar, related, and psychologically close to the target. We averaged these three items into a single measure of psychological closeness ( $\alpha = .89$ ). We also asked participants to indicate how closely they felt to the target using the common self-other overlap measure (see Fig. 2). Finally, participants completed the short version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; see Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), asking them to report, at the present moment, the extent to which they felt 10 positive emotions ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and 10 negative emotions ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The results are summarized in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, our manipulation effectively promoted feelings of psychological closeness but did not influence participants' positive or negative affect.

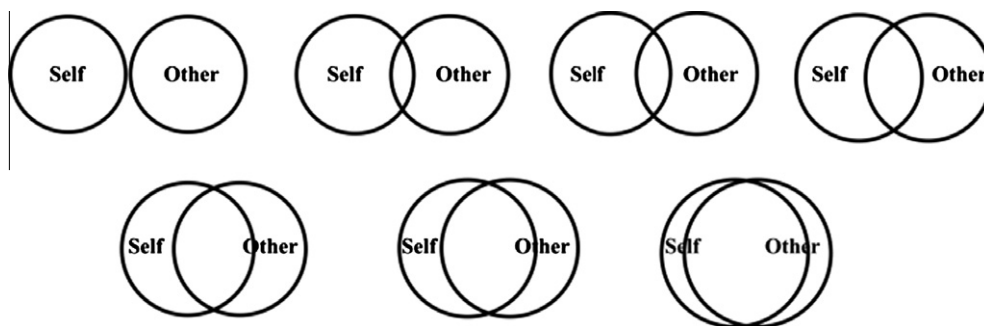


Fig. 2. Self-other overlap measure included in the pilot studies.

Table 1 Summary of results for pilot study 1. The table includes means, standard deviations in parentheses and t-tests.

	Took NS's perspective	Psychological closeness	Self-other overlap	Positive affect	Negative affect
Perspective taking	5.45 (1.48)	3.37 (1.68)	2.85 (1.62)	2.77 (1.01)	1.34 (0.64)
Control	4.16 (1.76)	2.69 (1.21)	2.14 (1.19)	2.54 (0.87)	1.26 (0.44)
t-Test	$t(74) = 3.40, p = .001$	$t(74) = 2.06, p = .043$	$t(74) = 2.20, p = .031$	$t(74) = 1.05, p = .30$	$t(74) = 0.66, p = .51$



### Experimental scenario

Next, participants read the following scenario (adapted from Gino et al., 2009b, 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, NS 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). NS was given \$10 to divide between himself and the participant in the other room he had been paired with (i.e., his counterpart). The experimenter told NS that he could offer his counterpart any portion of the \$10, from nothing to the entire amount, or any amount in between. The counterpart would keep whatever amount NS decided to offer, and NS would keep whatever he didn't offer. The counterpart knew all of the rules and all of the information that NS knew.

After explaining the study procedure, the experimenter gave NS an envelope with 9 \$1 coins and four quarters. The experimenter instructed NS 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, NS 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 evaluated NS's behavior (see below).

### Dependent variables

**Judgments of target's behavior.** Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the target's behavior was shameful and was embarrassing using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We averaged these two emotions into a composite measure of shame-worthiness ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Using a similar 7-point scale, participants then indicated how wrong, morally inappropriate and unethical they found the behavior to be ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Behavioral intentions.** Finally, participants completed our main dependent variable. They indicated how much money they would leave in the envelope.

### Results

As predicted, participants in the perspective-taking condition reported they would leave less money ( $M = \$3.41$ ,  $SD = \$2.25$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M = \$4.54$ ,  $SD = \$1.66$ ),  $t(101) = -2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ . Further, participants in the perspective-taking condition judged the target person's selfish behavior as less shame-worthy ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) and less unethical ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) than did participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ,  $t(101) = -2.37$ ,  $p < .02$ , and  $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ,  $t(101) = -2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively).

### Path analysis

To test the set of relationships specified by our theoretical model (Fig. 1), we conducted a three-path mediation model (Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). First, we regressed perceived unethicality on our psychological closeness manipulation (1 = perspective taking, 0 = control) and shame-worthiness. The extent to which participants rated NS's behavior as shame-worthy significantly affected their ratings of unethicality ( $\beta = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the effect of psychological closeness on unethicality was no longer statistically significant when we added shame-worthiness to the model (from  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .047$  to  $\beta = -.02$ ,  $p = .77$ ; 95% bias-corrected CI,

$[-1.21, -.11]$ ). Next, we regressed amount left for the counterpart on our psychological closeness manipulation, shame-worthiness (the "stage 1" mediator), and unethicality ratings (the "stage 2" mediator). Participants' perceived unethicality of NS's behavior predicted the dollar amount they reported they would leave for their counterpart (from  $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the direct effect of our psychological closeness manipulation on this amount was only marginally significant when the mediators were included in the model ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $p = .06$ ; 95% bias-corrected CI,  $[-0.92, -0.03]$ ). Taken together, these findings are consistent with our theoretical model depicted in Fig. 1.

### Discussion

These findings provide evidence that psychological closeness – in this case manipulated through perspective taking – leads people to report they would follow the example of one bad apple. When participants felt psychologically close to another person who had engaged in selfish behavior, they reported being more likely to behave selfishly themselves. In addition, they judged the selfish behavior as less shame-worthy and as less morally inappropriate, and these judgments explained the relationship between psychological closeness and the amount of money participants indicated they would leave for their counterpart. Psychological closeness reduced ratings of perceived shame-worthiness and unethicality, which, in turn, increased intentions to behave selfishly.

### Experiment 2: interdependent mindset and vicarious dishonesty

We designed a second study to extend the findings of Experiment 1 by examining the impact of a generalized form of psychological closeness. Instead of manipulating psychological closeness through perspective taking, in Experiment 2 we activated an interdependent mindset through priming.

In addition, in Experiment 2, we further explore the link between psychological closeness and dishonest behavior by manipulating whether the person behaving selfishly was identified or not. In this way, we can examine whether identifiability increase vicarious dishonesty directly or moderates the relationship between psychological closeness and vicarious dishonesty. Research on the "identifiable victim effect" has found that people tend to be far more concerned about and show more sympathy toward identifiable victims than statistical victims (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; Loewenstein, Small, & Strnad, 2006; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Simply telling people that a specific victim exists increases caring, even when no personalizing information about the victim is available. Identification decreases the social distance between victim and responder (Small & Loewenstein, 2005) and changes the affective reactions the responder shows to the victim (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b).

These findings suggest that individuals are more likely to experience psychological closeness to others who are identifiable rather than unidentifiable. In addition, we predict that identifying the wrongdoer would moderate the relationship between psychological closeness and vicarious selfishness. Specifically, we hypothesize that priming interdependence will motivate participants to follow the selfish actions of another person even more strongly when this person (i.e., the wrongdoer) was identified than when he was not. As suggested earlier, different forms of psychological closeness likely produce various fine-grained effects on moral actions. Showing that interdependence only leads to vicarious selfishness when wrongdoers are identified provides evidence supporting the hypothesis that psychological closeness, rather than other aspects

of an interdependent mindset, induces assimilation to another person's moral transgressions.

### 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.

#### Interdependence manipulation

We used the writing task to manipulate psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset (see Experiment 4, Gunia et al., 2009 for a similar manipulation). 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 read the same scenario as in our first study. 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."

**Pilot study.** To test the validity and effectiveness of priming an interdependent mindset to manipulate psychological closeness, we conducted a pilot study on a non-overlapping group of participants ( $N = 73$ ;  $M_{age} = 30.44$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.08$ ; 32 male). Participants were randomly assigned to either the interdependent-mindset condition or the control condition as in the main study. They completed the writing task with our manipulation and then answered various questions. First, they indicated the extent to which they felt it would be easy to take the perspective of another person using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Next, they indicated the extent to which they felt similar, related, and psychologically close to other people. We averaged these three items into a single measure of psychological closeness ( $\alpha = .89$ ). We also asked participants to indicate how closely they felt to other people using the self-other overlap measure. Finally, participants completed the short version of the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988), assessing both positive ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and negative emotions ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

In addition, we included three measures of perceived control to test whether priming an interdependent mindset increases participants' sense of control. First, participants indicated their perceived control on five hard-to-control outcomes (e.g., To what extent are you able to have some control over what happens in the econ-

omy?) using a 7-point scale (1 = very little control to 7 = a great deal of control) ( $\alpha = .81$ ; from Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). Second, we told participants to imagine they could win additional money depending on the outcome of a die roll, and to also imagine they could chose whether to roll the die themselves or have the experimenter roll it for them. As in previous studies employing this measure (e.g., Langer, 1975), this choice measured feelings of control. Third, we assessed locus of control by using the Rotter's (1966) Internal-External control scale, a 29-item, forced-choice scale (which includes six filler items) which measures people's generalized expectancies for internal vs. external control of reinforcement. People with an internal locus of control believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain, while those with an external locus of control believe that their own behavior does not matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control.

The results of this pilot study are summarized in Table 2. As Table 2 shows, priming participants with an interdependent mindset promoted feelings of psychological closeness but did not influence participants' affect or their perceived level of control. These results suggest that our manipulation effectively triggers a sense of psychological closeness.

#### Dependent variables

**Identifiability manipulation.** We manipulated identifiability of the person behaving selfishly by including a picture of his in the identified-wrongdoer condition. There was no picture in the unidentified-wrongdoer condition (see Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010).

**Judgments of ethicality.** Participants then indicated how wrong, inappropriate and unethical they found the person's behavior to be using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = not at all, to 7 = very much ( $\alpha = .90$ ). We note that given the high, positive correlation between judgments of shame-worthiness and judgments of unethicality we found in Experiment 1, in Experiment 2 we decided to focus only on moral judgments of others' actions.

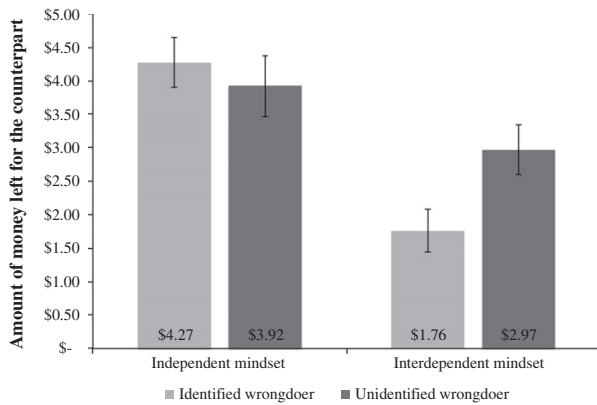
**Selfish behavior.** Finally, participants were asked to indicate the amount of money they would leave in the envelope for their anonymous counterpart.

### Results

As predicted, participants primed with interdependence reported they would leave less money than did participants primed with independence,  $F(1, 143) = 20.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .13$ . The effect of identifiability was not significant ( $p = .26$ ). We also found a significant interaction between interdependence and identifiability,  $F(1, 143) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$  (depicted in Fig. 3). Participants in the interdependent-mindset condition reported they would leave less money when the wrongdoer was identified than when he was not ( $t(79) = -2.44$ ,  $p < .02$ ), whereas participants in the independent condition reported they would leave about the same

**Table 2**  
Summary of results for pilot study 2. The table includes means, standard deviations in parentheses and *t*-tests.

	Perspective taking	Psychological closeness	Self-other overlap	Positive affect	Negative affect
Interdependence	5.47 (1.22)	5.06 (0.97)	4.13 (1.56)	2.73 (1.01)	1.38 (0.68)
Control	4.83 (1.41)	4.46 (1.24)	3.44 (1.31)	2.98 (0.84)	1.27 (0.46)
<i>t</i> -Test	$t(71) = 2.04$ , $p = .045$	$t(71) = 2.25$ , $p = .028$	$t(71) = 2.05$ , $p = .045$	$t(71) = -1.14$ , $p = .26$	$t(71) = 0.84$ , $p = .41$
	Self rolls die		Perceived control		Internal locus of control
Interdependence	81.3%		3.04 (1.19)		11.75 (4.61)
Control	80.5%		2.74 (1.00)		11.41 (4.66)
<i>t</i> -Test	$\chi^2(1, N = 73) < 1$ , $p = .94$		$t(71) = 1.15$ , $p = .25$		$t(71) = 0.31$ , $p = .76$



**Fig. 3.** Amount of money left for the counterpart, Experiment 2. Error bars represent standard errors.

amount of money regardless of whether or not the selfish person was identified ( $t(64) < 1, p = .55$ ).

Participants primed with interdependence considered the person's behavior as less unethical than did participants primed with independence,  $F(1, 143) = 5.28, p < .03, \eta_p^2 = .04$ , but this was not moderated by identifiability,  $F < 1$ . We examined whether perceived unethicality mediated the effect of interdependence on the amount of money left in the envelope (Baron & Kenny, 1986). When perceived unethicality was included in the equation, the effect of interdependence was reduced (from  $\beta = -.36, p < .001$  to  $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ) and perceived unethicality predicted selfishness ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect did not include zero ( $-1.074, -0.115$ ), suggesting a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007).

### Discussion

These findings indicate that if an individual feels psychologically close to another person who engaged in selfish behavior, they become vicariously motivated to judge the actions of the other person as morally appropriate and is thus likely to behave less ethically themselves. This effect of psychological closeness on vicarious selfishness is even stronger when the person is identified through a photograph. Identifiability only mattered when the person already had a psychological closeness mindset activated. Thus, an interdependent mindset combined with an identified miscreant created a toxic brew of selfish intentions. However, identifiability did not moderate the effects on judgments of ethicality and ethicality mediated the direct, un-moderated effect of interdependence on vicarious dishonesty.

### Experiment 3: same birthday, same dishonest behavior

In Experiment 3, we seek to further demonstrate the robustness of the relationship between psychological closeness and dishonesty by examining a different and more subtle form of psychological connection – a shared attribute in the form of 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. In addition, this study examines whether psychological closeness creates a distance from one's own moral compass by measuring participants' general views of dishonesty before and after having the opportunity to cheat.

### Method

Eighty-two students from local universities in the southern United States ( $M_{age} = 22.07, SD_{age} = 2.45, 45$  male) participated in the study for a maximum payment of \$12. Participants received a \$2 show-up fee and could earn an extra \$10 during the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions upon arrival: *shared attributes* or *control* condition.

### Pre-experimental survey

A week prior to the lab session, all participants answered an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of many questions and included a scale measuring moral disengagement about cheating. This scale, developed by Shu, Gino, and Bazerman (2011), includes six items measuring people's attitudes about cheating (e.g., "Sometimes getting ahead of the curve is more important than adhering to rules," and "Cheating is appropriate behavior because no one gets hurt"). Participants indicated their agreement with each of the six items using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). We averaged participants' responses across the six items into a single moral disengagement about cheating score ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The higher the score, the higher the level of moral disengagement (i.e., participants think cheating is morally appropriate).

### The experiment

We conducted each session with only one participant, plus a confederate. The confederate made it clear to the participants at the onset of the study that cheating to the maximum extent was possible and did not produce consequences. As instructed, the confederate clearly cheated and he did not get caught for his dishonest behavior.

### Shared-attributes manipulation

In each session, when participants (i.e., each real participant and the confederate) first arrived at the study location, they answered a short questionnaire with 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 learned that the confederate shared two attributes with them: their birthday month and school year.

In the *control* condition, the experimenter did not make any comment.

### Cheating opportunity

For the problem-solving task, participants received a brown envelope that contained 10 dollars (nine one-dollar bills and four quarters) and an empty white envelope, along with two sheets of paper (see Gino et al., 2009a for a similar procedure). The first sheet 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 had 5 min 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 had to transfer

the remaining amount to the white envelope and drop it in a designated box along with the collection slip. Note that 5 min is not enough time to solve all 20 matrices. In previous studies (Mazar et al., 2008; Gino et al., 2009a), 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.

However, we used a method that at the end of the study would allow us to match the worksheet with the collection slip of each participant and compute the difference between self-reported performance and actual performance. 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. Positive differences between self-reported and actual performance indicate that the participants over-reported their performance and cheated on the task.

#### Confederate declaration

About 1 min 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.

#### Dependent variables

**Actual and reported performance.** Once the 5-min task 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. This comprised our measure of reported performance. Afterwards, the experimenter scored the actual performance of each participant. Thus, we could compare reported to actual performance.

**Final questionnaire.** As their last task, participants completed a short questionnaire that included the six-item measure of moral disengagement about cheating ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### Results

##### Cheating on the problem-solving task

We conducted an ANOVA with participants' real and self-reported performance as a within-subjects factor and psychological closeness as a between-subjects factor. Self-reported performance was higher than real performance ( $F[1,80] = 73.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .48$ ), indicating that cheating occurred. The effect of psychological closeness was also significant ( $F[1,80] = 6.25, p = .014, \eta^2 = .07$ ). More interestingly, we found a significant interaction ( $F[1,80] = 15.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ ), depicted in Fig. 4. Participants reported higher levels of performance in the shared-attributes condition than in the control condition,  $t(80) = 3.33, p = .001$ . Yet, real performance did not differ between conditions,  $t(80) < 1, p = .62$ .

Furthermore, the average number of matrices by which participants overstated their performance was higher in the shared-attributes condition than in the control condition ( $M = 3.86, SD = 3.31$  vs.  $M = 1.45, SD = 2.15, t[80] = 3.89, p < .001$ ), and the percentage of participants who overstated their performance was also higher (64.3% vs. 37.5%,  $\chi^2[1, N = 82] = 5.88, p = .015$ ). These results held even when controlling for individual differences in moral disengagement: the nature and significance of the results did not change when we conducted the same analyses and added participants' score of moral disengagement at Time 1 as a covariate.

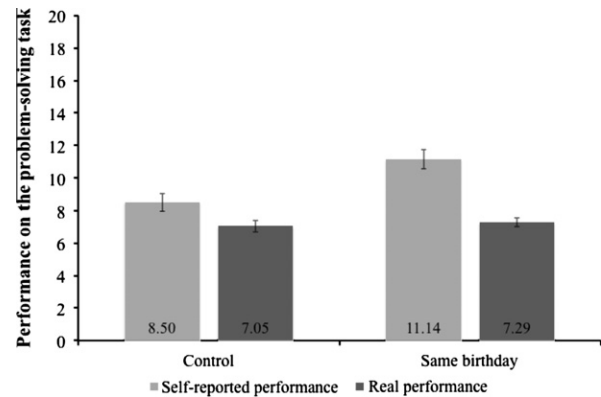


Fig. 4. Performance on the problem-solving task, Experiment 3. Error bars represent standard errors.

##### Moral disengagement about cheating

We conducted an ANOVA to test whether the manipulation of psychological closeness affected participants' moral disengagement score at Time 2. Controlling for Time 1 moral disengagement scores, participants reported higher levels of moral disengagement at Time 2 in the shared-attributes condition ( $M = 4.67, SD = 1.64$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 4.22, SD = 1.61$ ),  $F(1, 79) = 4.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$ , demonstrating that psychological closeness created a distance from one's own moral compass. Note that the effect of the covariate was also significant,  $F[1,79] = 10.26, p = .002, \eta^2 = .12$ , suggesting that participants' moral disengagement score at Time 1 predicted their moral disengagement score at Time 2.

To investigate this result further, we examined how participants' view of cheating changed due to psychological closeness and their decision to overstate performance on the problem-solving task. We computed the difference between participants' score of moral disengagement about cheating at Time 2 (at the end of the lab session) and their score on the same measure at Time 1 (a week before the lab session). Positive values indicate an increase in moral disengagement, while negative values indicate an increase of moral stringency. We used this difference as the dependent measure in a 2 (psychological closeness: shared-attributes vs. control)  $\times$  2 (overstated performance on the problem-solving task: yes vs. no) between-subjects ANOVA. Overstating performance on the problem-solving task led to increases in moral disengagement ( $F[1,78] = 45.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$ ), whereas there was no main effect of shared attributes on changes in moral disengagement ( $F[1,78] = 2.50, p = .12, \eta^2 = .03$ ). More interestingly, we found a significant interaction ( $F[1,78] = 6.24, p = .015, \eta^2 = .07$ ). Participants' changes in moral disengagement as a result of cheating were higher in the shared-attributes condition ( $M = 1.31, SD = 1.12$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 0.02, SD = 2.19$ ),  $F(1,78) = 19.08, p < .001$ . Yet, the changes in moral disengagement for participants who did not cheat did not significantly differ depending on our psychological closeness manipulation ( $M = -1.61, SD = 1.04$  vs.  $M = -1.32, SD = 1.19, F(1,78) < 1, p = .47$ ).

#### Discussion

These results provide strong support for the predicted relationship between psychological closeness and unethical behavior. Even when psychological closeness was subtle and born out of shared birth month and year, it influenced participants' behavior and their tendency to cross ethical boundaries. Furthermore, psychological closeness created a distance from one's own moral compass: psychological closeness led to higher levels of moral disengagement about cheating. In addition, it changed the most when they (a)



shared attributes with a cheater and (b) they cheated themselves. After vicarious cheating promoted by psychological closeness, participants considered cheating as less morally wrong compared to before having the opportunity to cheat.

#### Experiment 4: an asymmetry in the effects of psychological closeness

So far, we have found that psychological closeness leads to vicarious selfishness or dishonesty by affecting individuals' judgment of the shame-worthiness and unethicity of the initiator's actions. In Experiment 4, we examine whether psychological closeness produces similar effects when the behavior in question is generous rather than selfish behavior. Prior research suggests that a shared identity or similarity with others who behaved prosocially can motivate positive and altruistic behavior (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2008a). However, no prior work has examined the effects of such shared identity on both moral and immoral behaviors. We do so in Experiment 4 by manipulating not only psychological closeness but also the nature of the behavior in question (i.e., selfish vs. generous).

#### Method

Two-hundred nine individuals from a representative pool of participants in United States ( $M_{age} = 30.59$ ,  $SD_{age} = 8.34$ ; 87 male) participated in the study for \$5. The study employed a 2 (psychological closeness: perspective taking vs. not)  $\times$  2 (initiator's behavior: selfish vs. generous) between-subjects design.

#### Experimental manipulations

We manipulated psychological closeness through perspective taking as in Experiment 1. To manipulate the initiator's action, we used an adapted version of the scenario employed in Experiment 1 and varied what participants were told about the student's action. In the selfish-behavior condition, the scenario ended by saying "Not too long after hearing the instructions, NS made up his mind: He poured all the money on the desk and then started putting all the money in his own pocket." Instead, in the generous-behavior condition, the ending informed participants that "Not too long after hearing the instructions, NS made up his mind: He left all the money in the envelope for the other participant and took no money for himself."

After reading the scenario, participants indicated the amount of money they would leave in the envelope for their counterpart if they were in the same situation.

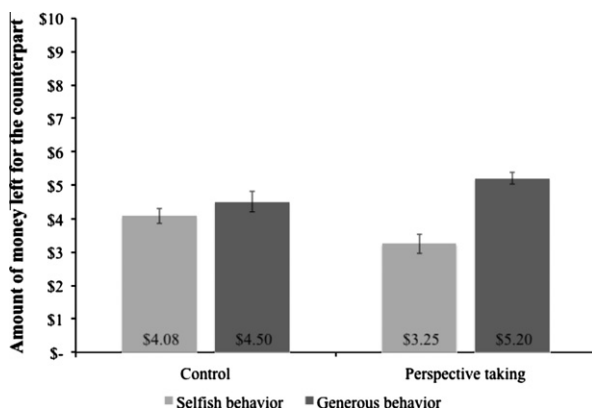


Fig. 5. Amount of money left for the counterpart, Experiment 4. Error bars represent standard errors.

#### Results and discussion

A 2 (psychological closeness)  $\times$  2 (initiator's behavior) ANOVA using participants' reported amount as the dependent measure revealed a significant interaction between our two manipulations ( $F[1,205] = 8.98$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ), depicted in Fig. 5. The effect of psychological closeness was significant for both vicarious selfishness,  $F(1,205) = 5.74$ ,  $p = .018$  and for vicarious generosity,  $F(1,205) = 3.76$ ,  $p = .054$ .

Further analyses using simple effects also demonstrated that there was no difference in the amount participants indicated they would leave for their counterpart in the control condition depending on the type of the target's behavior,  $F(1,205) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .24$ . As expected, however, in the psychological closeness condition, the amount specified was higher when the target was generous rather than selfish,  $F(1,205) = 29.83$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Interestingly, in the psychological closeness condition, the difference between the amount of money participants indicated they would leave for their counterpart and the amount the target left (either \$0 or \$10) was smaller in the case of selfish behavior ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ) than it was in the case of generous behavior ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(104) = -4.55$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that the effects of psychological closeness were stronger when the target was selfish rather than generous.

#### General discussion

Four experiments investigated the consequences of various forms of psychological closeness on people's ethical judgments, emotional reactions, intentions, and real behavior. We observed a consistent pattern of results. Our findings show that taking the perspective of a person who behaved selfishly led people to report being more likely to behave selfishly themselves, and that judgments of shame-worthiness and perceived unethicity mediated this effect (Experiment 1). Feeling psychologically close to a selfish person led participants to view that selfish behavior as less shame-worthy and, as a result, also less unethical or wrong. We replicated these results in Experiment 2, where we manipulated psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset through priming. Psychological closeness also led to higher levels of dishonesty in Experiment 3, 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 earning undeserved money. Importantly, the results of this behavioral study show that psychological closeness creates a distance from one's own moral compass: Participants' views of how wrong cheating is changed the most when they shared small attributes with a wrongdoer and acted unethically themselves. Finally, in Experiment 4 we compared the effects of psychological closeness on selfish and generous behavior and we found that psychological closeness produced both vicarious selfishness and vicarious generosity. Interestingly, the effect of vicarious dishonesty was stronger for vicarious selfishness than for vicarious generosity.

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 close to and thus to be more likely to behave less ethically themselves.

#### Theoretical contributions and implications

The research presented here contributes to the field of moral psychology and ethical decision making in various ways. 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 (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Colby & Damon, 1992; Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Although we agree that this focus on enduring characteristics in the moral self can provide useful insights into the study of moral behavior and ethical decision making, we have proposed a view of the moral self that extends to the actions of others. Our view is consistent with Monin and Jordan's (2009) concept of dynamic self-regard (see also Jordan & Monin, 2008). As these 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." Consistent with this view, our research shows that subtle manipulations of psychological closeness can lead people to take on 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. This work has shown that codes of ethics and ethical culture are important predictors of unethical behavior in organizations (for a review, see Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000). Although such macro-components are certainly important, micro-elements such as feelings of psychological closeness can also have large consequences.

Finally, the present work contributes to existing work on ethical and unethical behavior. These two behaviors are often examined in independent literatures. Our research highlights the importance of considering them both within the same theoretical framework so as to examine similarities and potential asymmetries in factors predicting or explaining these behaviors.

#### *Future directions*

An important direction for future research is the investigation of factors that may help reduce or even eliminate vicarious dishonesty. For instance, one effective 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 may be to highlight the salience of group membership and the presence of outsiders. When a group member's transgression is witnessed not only by in-group members but also by an out-group, then people are likely to engage in compensatory behavior (Gino et al., 2009b). 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 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. Future research exploring these possibilities would further our understanding of effective ways to combat the influence of psychological closeness on vicarious dishonesty.

Future research could also examine the role of other forms of observation or monitoring that may improve our objectivity. Research has shown that the mere physical presence of others can highlight group norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) and restrict the freedom of individuals to categorize their unethical actions 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 psychologically close wrongdoers. 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 (Burnham & Hare, 2007; Haley & Fessler, 2005). Future research could employ similar manipulations to counteract the effects of psychological closeness on vicarious dishonesty.

Another direction for future research is to examine whether individuals realize that their judgments and actions are influenced by the (dis)honest behavior of others to whom they feel close. Recent work has suggested that individuals often fail to recognize the ethical challenge inherent in a situation or decision (Chugh, Banaji, & Bazerman, 2005). Feelings of psychological closeness may be one situation in which people's ethicality becomes further compromised.

Finally, future research could examine in more details the potential asymmetry in the effects psychological closeness has on vicarious honesty and dishonesty. The results of our last experiments indicated that the effects of psychological closeness were stronger in the case of vicarious dishonesty than in the case of vicarious honesty. This result may be driven by the fact that self-interest adds to the pressure to conform to another person's behavior in the case of dishonest behavior. Future work testing this possibility would further our understanding of how psychological closeness can lead to vicarious behavior.

#### **Conclusion**

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 such social bonds form easily. Being randomly assigned to a group (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1988) or sharing attributes, even when they are superficial (e.g., a birth date) (Miller et al., 1998), is sufficient to create "ties" among individuals that bind them together psychologically. 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) or conflict resolution (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008; Paese & Yonker, 2001), and reduces egocentric biases in judgment (Savinsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2005). We have consistently shown the reverse effect, that psychological closeness can lead people down an alley of disrepute.

Topical stories in the media exposing unethical practices in business and broader society have highlighted the gap between the decisions people actually make vs. 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. In the current research, we examined the ethical consequences of a previously overlooked factor, one's own feelings of psychological closeness to another person who has behaved selfishly, dishonestly or generously. Across four studies, we found that even the subtlest of psychological connections, such as sharing the same birthday, can influence the likelihood that an individual will act dishonestly. Our results show that psychological closeness can lead to vicarious dishonesty by creating distance from one's moral compass.

#### **Acknowledgments**

The authors greatly appreciate the support and facilities of the Center for Decision Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where the studies were conducted. This research

was supported by a grant from the University Research Council at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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