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The Dilemma of Dirty Money

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Abstract

Money generally is seen as good, but what about when it is morally tainted? Does this affect whether people want money or how they would spend it? In this article, we review a nascent literature on “dirty money,” and then organize these findings using a framework that formalizes the idea that dirty money creates a valuation conflict because it is both “good” (the money part) and “bad” (the dirty part). To understand how this conflict is adjudicated, we draw on the literature on self-control, which provides a way to think about how dueling impulses come into being and wax and wane over time until one prevails. We conclude by outlining promising direction for future research and considering their broader implications for the field.

The Dilemma of Dirty Money

In May 2019, the Metropolitan Museum of Art ("the Met") announced that it would no longer accept gifts from one of the most philanthropic families in modern times: the Sacklers (Harris, 2019). This decision represented a dramatic about-face because for years, the Met had gratefully accepted major contributions from the Sackler family, even as the Sacklers amassed a multi-billion dollar fortune through sales of opioids, which over 100 Americans overdose on and die from every day.

Here we suggest that the dilemma of "dirty money" opens a fascinating window onto a real-world problem that can stimulate new, interdisciplinary psychological science. We begin by providing an overview of a nascent literature investigating the conditions under which people would want dirty money (like the Met), and how they would spend such money if they had it (perhaps like the Sacklers). Inspired by these findings, we next explore how dirty money represents a valuation conflict and consider how a framework from the literature on self-control provides a way to organize existing research and plan new research. We conclude by outlining promising directions for future work.

A Timeless Issue

The idea that money can be "dirty" has been with us for thousands of years. For example, in 70 AD, the Roman emperor Vespasian instituted a "urine tax." His son lambasted him for accepting "dirty money," to which Vespasian famously demurred, picking up a gold coin and saying, "Pecunia non olet" ("Money doesn't stink").

This adage suggests that the value of money isn't tainted by its origins, but decades of research reveal that an object's value is often influenced by its history (e.g., Bloom, 2010; Friedman et al., 2011; Gelman & Echelbarger, 2019; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Rozin et al., 2007; Rozin et al., 1986). For example, Hitler's personal copy of an English dictionary is considered to be more noxious than a copy of *Mein Kampf* (Fedotova & Rozin, 2018), indicating that an object's origins can alter its value. Might money be an exception to this rule? After all, money—unlike anything else in the world—is designed to be fungible (but see Uhlmann & Zhu, 2013).

To address this question, Tasimi and Gelman (2017) asked participants to imagine how much they would want money offered by different people and acquired in different ways. Participants consistently reported they would want stolen money the least—even when compared to non-stolen money offered by someone who stole an equivalent (but different) sum of money. Moreover, stolen money was considered just as undesirable as money that was sneezed on, and in some cases, it was considered worse (for related evidence, see Flusberg & LaPlace, 2019). Thus, money can be "dirty" and hence devalued for all sorts of reasons, but what seems to make it especially dirty is when it is *morally* dirty.

In recent years, a growing number of psychologists have directed their attention to this form of dirty money (i.e., money earned in a manner that directly or indirectly harmed others) in research investigating (1) whether people would want dirty money and (2) how they would spend it if they had it (for a review, see Gasiorowska, 2019). Prior work has shown that people are less motivated to earn dirty money than "clean money," and that they believe that dirty money has less purchasing power than clean money (Stellar & Willer, 2012). What is more, new research indicates that brain regions implicated in valuation are less activated when people are receiving dirty money (Crockett et al., 2017). Given these findings, it should come as no surprise that people would spend clean and dirty money differently (e.g., Chen, Chen, & He, 2017; Kardos & Castano, 2012). For example, participants reported that they would spend clean money on something like dinner at a restaurant, but that they would spend dirty money on something like a donation to a charity (Tasimi & Gelman, 2017). This result is consistent with other work showing that money acquired under negative circumstances is more likely to be spent on virtuous than hedonic causes (e.g., Levav & McGraw, 2009; Zelizer, 1994).

Based on this nascent body of work, it seems that people disproportionately devalue dirty money and, if they happen to have it, choose to spend it in virtuous ways—but why? We propose that such responses can be organized into a framework that brings to light the idea that dirty money represents a valuation conflict because it is both good (the money part) and bad (the dirty part). In the next section, we adopt a framework from the literature on self-control that captures this idea of dueling impulses and formalizes how these impulses wax and wane over time until one prevails. We will propose that this framework can help illuminate past work on dirty money and inspire future research on it as well.

A Self-Control Framework

Here we advance a framework for understanding dirty money that is based on the idea that different valuations compete within an individual, that these valuations are guided by good-bad discriminations, and that it is this competition that gives rise to motivated behavior (see Gross, 2015). Dirty money, in this sense, represents an instance of a valuation conflict because it involves the concurrent activation of two (or more) valuations with conflicting action impulses (e.g., a valuation that cares about materiality may think "good" while a valuation that cares about morality may think "bad"). The process model of self-control (Duckworth et al., 2014) strikes us as a useful way to think about the psychological processes that may support the resolution of any valuation conflict by considering a *situation-attention-appraisal-response* sequence (cf. Gross, 1998).

To illustrate how the process model of self-control works, imagine that you are trying to lose weight and, after a long workout, you return to your apartment to discover that your roommate has baked brownies. One valuation that cares about hunger may think “good” (how good they’ll taste!) while another valuation that cares about health may think “bad” (how fattening they’ll be!). This valuation conflict—like any other—may be adjudicated passively (the stronger valuation wins), or a “higher-order” valuation (e.g., one that cares about identity; see Berkman et al., 2017) may be enlisted that enhances or suppresses one or both of these “lower-order” valuations until one wins. The strength of these hierarchically arranged valuations is likely to vary as a function of context, particularly whether a decision is made in private or in public (e.g., caring about being a “healthy eater” in the case of dietary self-control). Interestingly, existing research on dirty money has typically studied people’s decisions in private settings (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk, private computer stations or testing rooms). We suspect that concerns about reputation are important when making decisions about dirty money, but it is striking that people continue to devalue it even when others are unaware of their decisions.

The process model of self-control posits that strengthening one valuation, weakening another, or strengthening one *and* weakening another can shift the balance between two conflicting valuations. To illustrate, in the case of the brownies, modifying one’s *situation* (e.g., avoid the kitchen), *attention* (e.g., avoid looking at the brownies), *appraisal* (e.g., think about how brownies are fattening), or *response* (e.g., don’t eat the brownies) can all shape the adjudication of this conflict. It should be noted that this situation-attention-appraisal-response sequence spirals over time in an iterative process and builds or diminishes in strength until a conflict is resolved.

Turning back to the dilemma of dirty money and how it could benefit from the process model of self-control (see Figure 1), think back to the Met. Recall that, for decades, the Met accepted money from the Sacklers until they decided they no longer would. What changed? A precipitous decrease in the value of money is unlikely to be the operative factor here. Instead, people were protesting at institutions that accepted Sackler money (Moynihan, 2019), and other prominent museums announced that they would no longer accept money from the Sacklers (Harris, 2019). It's therefore possible that the Met's *attention* may have focused on the source of the Sacklers' money rather than the amounts they were known to give (the reverse may have been true up until this point). Moreover, their *appraisal* of the money may have shifted from "good" to "bad," which, in turn, drove their *response* to reject further gifts from them (for an illustration of this potential process, see Figure 2).

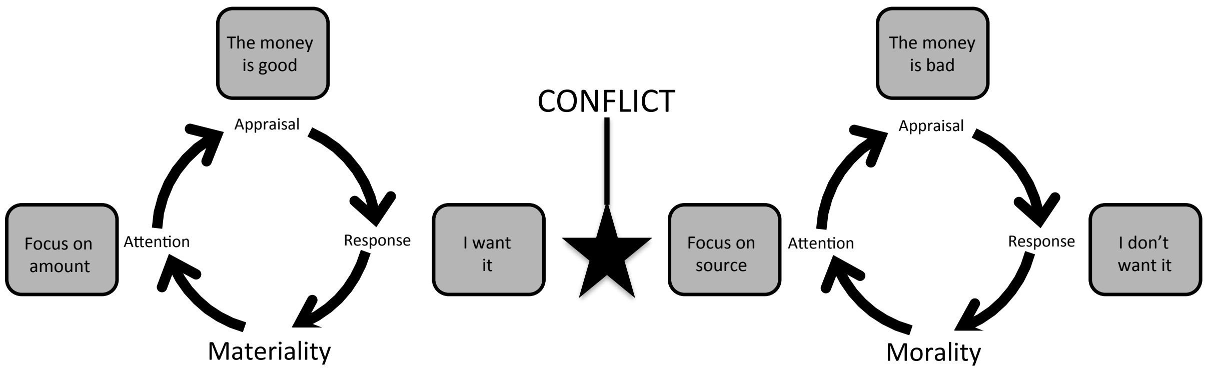

Figure 1. Applying the process model of self-control to the dilemma of dirty money, in which two concurrently activated valuations with conflicting impulses (materiality and morality) develop in an iterative cycle until one valuation wins out.

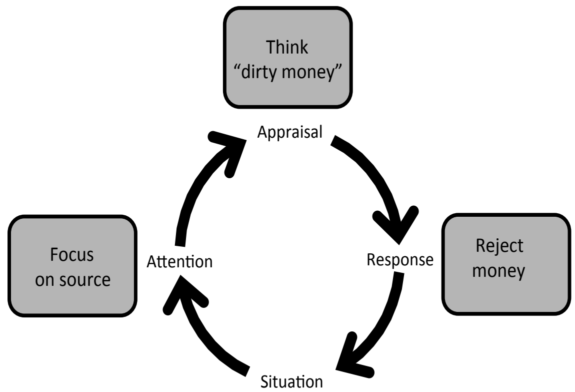

Figure 2. Examples of strategies that can strengthen a morality valuation in the dilemma of dirty money.

Using this framework, we might predict that the more people attend to the “dirtiness” of money, the more negative their appraisal of it should be. And indeed, research we previously described suggests that the more closely dirty money is implicated in a moral misdeed, the more attention people pay to it and, thus, devalue it (Tasimi & Gelman, 2017). Our framework also makes the prediction that appraisals guide responses. Consistent with this prediction, earlier work shows that the greater the guilt people report they would experience from acquiring dirty money, the less likely they would be to spend such money (Kardos & Castano, 2012). Moreover, existing research supports yet another prediction made by our framework, specifically, that negatively appraised money would be spent in ways that do not make people feel any worse (e.g., people would spend negatively appraised money on virtuous causes; see Levav & McGraw, 2008). Given this preliminary yet promising support, we next consider how our framework offers a principled vision for future research.

Future Directions

Thus far, we have (1) highlighted the timeless issue of "dirty money" and (2) provided a framework for thinking about the psychological processes that govern the resolution of this kind of dilemma. We turn now to an exploration of how this framework might shed light on the micro-temporal (seconds to minutes) and macro-temporal (months to years) dynamics of this valuation conflict and how these dynamics may vary across individuals.

A Cognitive Perspective

At the heart of our framework is the idea that dirty money creates a valuation conflict. But what distinguishes dirty money from other valuation conflicts that involve the clash between materiality and morality (e.g., behavioral economic tasks like the Dictator Game)? And how is it that people adjudicate between these two valuations (materiality and morality) when they are in conflict? That is, does one (materiality) have to be inhibited (e.g., Buckholtz, 2015), or might the two be integrated into overall subjective value (e.g., Berkman et al., 2017)? From our point of view, advances in mouse-tracking methods would be informative in answering these two questions (see Freeman, 2018). These methods, which hold the power to expose the microstructure of real-time decisions, can (a) shed light on whether dirty money represents a special instance of a broader family of valuation conflicts and (b) illuminate the underlying nature of a more general class of valuation conflicts.

A Developmental Perspective

Our valuation perspective highlights interactions among valuations, and we would expect the strength of any valuation to change over development (for more on what holds value to children, adolescents, and adults, see Davidow et al., 2018). In addition, we would expect the hierarchical configuration of valuations to vary as a function of development. For example, the two valuations we are focally interested in here (materiality and morality) are present from the earliest months of life (e.g., infants tend to approach two crackers to one; see Feigenson et al., 2004; infants tend to avoid interactions with wrongdoers; see Hamlin, 2013), lending support to the impression that these valuations may reflect “lower-order” ones. By contrast, valuations like identity (e.g., Starmans, 2017) and reputation (e.g., Silver & Shaw, 2018), which we previously referred to as “higher-order” valuations, do not come online until later in life, raising questions about how typical interactions between lower-order valuations (e.g., materiality and morality) may shape the quality of higher-order valuations (e.g., identity) as they become established over the course of development.

To illustrate how research from a developmental perspective could address this issue, consider the following study. In it (Tasimi & Wynn, 2016), 12- and 13-month-olds were introduced to a do-gooder and a wrongdoer (i.e., a character that either helped or hindered another character open a box with a toy inside). Afterwards, each character offered the infant a different amount of crackers, with the wrongdoer always offering more than the do-gooder (for related evidence with older children, see Tasimi et al., 2017). When the do-gooder offered the infant one cracker while the wrongdoer offered two crackers, 19% of infants accepted the larger offering. But when the do-gooder offered one cracker while the wrongdoer offered eight crackers, 69% of infants accepted the larger offering. Given these findings, it becomes interesting to consider how the relative strengths of materiality and morality within a given child may shape who they come to see themselves as. For example, if a child tends to “avoid the ‘bad guy’ at all costs,” are they more likely to think that they are a “good person,” at least more so than a child that tends to “sell out”?

A Personality Perspective

Our framework also can be used to analyze the role of individual differences in how people respond to “dirty money.” Characterizing these individual differences—from what factors may predict them to whether they are stable over time—is likely to be of interest to researchers in personality psychology. For example, if some people are purely driven by self-interests (e.g., Yamagishi et al., 2014), would these people choose to spend dirty money on hedonic than virtuous causes and, also, experience little to no conflict when accepting dirty money? Moreover, it becomes tempting to ask: Are those infants who don’t “sell out” (as in the Tasimi & Wynn, 2016 work) more likely to devalue dirty money as adults (as in the Crockett et al., 2017 work)?

Conclusion

Even when we try to escape the real world, we can’t seem to escape the issue of dirty money. For example, as we learn in the television series, *The Sopranos*, Carmela Soprano leads a life in which she is no stranger to mink coats, diamonds, and luxury cars. However, this lifestyle is made possible by dirty money from her husband, Tony, who is a mob boss. In one episode, Carmela is in tears as a psychiatrist recommends that she leave Tony immediately. And then the psychiatrist tells her, “I’m not charging you because I won’t take blood money, and you can’t either.” Between its ability to permeate fictional enterprises and influence people’s behavior in the real world, dirty money represents a widespread social problem with important implications. We hope that the framework sketched here can help shed new light on this timeless—and timely—issue.

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Recommended Reading

Duckworth, A. L., Gendler, T. S., & Gross, J. J. (2014). (See References). An overview of the process model of self-control, which captures how conflicting valuations evolve over time and remain in conflict until one wins out.

Gasiorowska, A. (2019). (See References). A review summarizing the literature on dirty money.

Keefe, P. R. (2017). (See References). A real-world story about dirty money.

Tasimi, A., & Wynn, K. (2016). (See References). An example of research examining how materiality and morality are weighed and integrated in infants' decision-making.