



Measuring mediating factors in the use of interpersonal sensitivity in organizations ☆☆☆

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ABSTRACT

The very nature of their position requires superiors to engage in behavior that may have adverse consequences on subordinates. Such deportment might harm the individual (employee) yet enhance the overall good of the organization. Researchers in organizational behavior refer to supervisor demeanor that is hurtful to subalterns as “necessary evils” (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Their research suggests that several factors influence whether “necessary evils” are executed using interpersonal sensitivity—a variable that has been found to have a salubrious impact on a firm. The present study develops subscales to assess those mediating factors, as well as interpersonal sensitivity. After conducting psychometric analyses, 65 measurement items are identified that tap 20 distinct constructs. Evidence is presented for sufficient reliability and validity of the constructs. Nonetheless, the developed scales require further refinement.

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1. Introduction

Managers and supervisors often are required to cause harm to their subordinates for the good of the organization. Examples include terminations, demotions, reductions in compensation or benefits, and failures to grant expected promotions. Such efforts are undertaken for their putative salutary impacts: increased profitability, enhanced employee morale, improved coordination among units, or augmented efficaciousness of firm resources (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). Behaviors that induce harm to employees for a greater good are referred to as “necessary evils,” which “refer to...work-related tasks in which an individual must, as part of his or her job, perform an act that causes emotional or physical harm to another human being in the service of achieving some perceived greater good or purpose” (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005: 245).

When supervisors must give bad news to subordinates, the interaction between the performer (the supervisor—or purveyor of the bad news) and the target (the recipient of the bad news) is likely to be emotionally charged for both parties. When the performer is offering negative input that was not necessarily anticipated by the target, he or she

must observe the target's emotional and behavioral reactions to the performer's inimical input. As such, the performer faces major challenges in executing the necessary evil. One possible means of mitigating some of the damage being done through the necessary evil is for the performer to engage in this behavior in an interpersonally sensitive manner, which entails attending to the target's needs, rights, and feelings (e.g., Bies, 2001). Interpersonally sensitive behavior has been shown to protect the personal welfare of both the target (e.g., Bies & Moag, 1986) and the organization (e.g., Brockner, 1992) and can restore “a sense of humanity and connection to the experiences...at work” (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000: 26). Indeed, Campbell, White, and Durant (2007) propose that communication behaviors of the performer of necessary evils may influence target's perception of justice and emotional responses.

Notwithstanding the potentially auspicious effects of conducting necessary evils in an interpersonally sensitive manner, such efforts can be fraught with great challenges and discomfort for performers of that behavior (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). Indeed, research shows that one means of engaging in necessary evils is to psychologically disengage from the target, thus somewhat insulating the performer emotionally from the target (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). After all, providing bad news to subordinates could harm the performer's self concept, induce feelings of questionable morality on the part of the performer, and conduce to other intense feelings and thoughts that are dysfunctional (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008).

Molinsky and Margolis (2005) develop a model (for brevity hereafter referred to as the “M&M model”) of the factors that may contribute to individuals' engaging in interpersonally sensitive behavior

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when executing a necessary evil. The model is predicated chiefly from work in industrial psychology (e.g., Eisenberg, 2000; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Sussman & Sproull, 1999). Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggest that subsequent empirical work explore the relationships among the various constructs in their model. A review of germane literature reveals that virtually no previously published research has attempted to do so. A major reason for the lack of such work is the absence of a scale to measure the M&M model (Campbell et al., 2007; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005).

To overcome this limitation, the present study develops scales that tap the constructs of the M&M model and assesses them psychometrically. Establishment of such a scale is imperative before the model can be tested. The balance of this paper will present the M&M model, describe the scale development and data collection efforts, report the psychometric properties of the scale, and offer future research suggestions.

2. Constructs in the M&M model

The notion behind the M&M model is that the psychological challenges performers face when conducting a necessary evil can militate against the use of interpersonally sensitive treatment toward the target. Essentially, a combination of contextual variables and their concomitant consequences may or may not foster engaging in interpersonally sensitive behavior. Molinsky and Margolis (2005) posit four *sequential* sets of variables in their model: (1) nine critical dimensions of necessary evils that influence how the performer experiences the necessary evil; (2) four psychological states of the performer that reflect his/her subjective experience of the necessary evil (experienced responsibility, perceived justifiability, experienced task difficulty, and experienced palpability); (3) an internal drama that represents four broad domains of thoughts and feelings the performer has from executing the necessary evil (guilt, sympathy, anxiety, and cognitive load); and (4) the performance of the necessary evil either in an interpersonally or not interpersonally sensitive manner. Presumably, the nine dimensions of a necessary evil have an impact on the four psychological states. These four psychological states, in turn, affect the performer's thoughts and feelings (internal drama), which then influence whether or not the performer engages in interpersonal sensitive behavior when enacting the necessary evil.

2.1. Nine dimensions of necessary evils

The M&M model posits that there are nine core dimensions of a necessary evil. These nine characterize the behavior that must be executed, and the variance across them has an influence on the performer's subjective experience. The nine dimensions are subsumed into three major categories of variables: two *dimensions of the task*, three *dimensions of the agency*, and four *dimensions of the impact*.

One dimension of the *task* refers to the *complexity* with which the necessary evil must be executed. Task complexity pertains to the array of skills that the performer must execute vis-à-vis the necessary evil and deal with technical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. A necessary evil increases in complexity as the number and range of skills required augments. The second dimension of the task deals with the *frequency* with which a necessary evil is executed by the performer. Frequently performing a given necessary evil may desensitize a performer, thus reducing the likelihood that the necessary evil will be done with sensitivity.

Factors relating to the *agency* dimension pertain to how active the performer was in selecting and enacting the necessary evil. One variable is the *causal role* the performer and the target had in necessitating the act itself (i.e., who was truly responsible for causing the conditions requiring the necessary evil?). Another variable is the *involvement* the performer had in staging the necessary evil: Was he or she only the "executioner" of the evil, or did he or she help develop the action that would be taken against the target? *Legitimacy* is the

third agency dimension of interest. This deals with the degree to which the behavior is perceived to be appropriate within a system of organizational norms.

Necessary evils differ with respect to the nature of their *impact*. One is the *magnitude of the harm and benefit* derived from the necessary evil. A second is the *ratio of the harm to benefit*. The smaller the ratio, the more beneficial the necessary evil is. The third factor is the *salience of the harm and benefit*. This deals with how evident (or visible) the harm and benefit are to the performer when the necessary evil is performed. For example, a pained look on the target will be very vivid to the performer. Finally, the *identity of the target* can influence the performer's experience. The degree to which the performer identifies with the target (e.g., similarity in career or company background) can have a psychological impact on the performer.

2.2. Four psychological states of interpersonal sensitivity

The performer's assessment of the nine core dimensions of a necessary evil has an indirect influence on whether the performer will perform the necessary evil in an interpersonally sensitive manner. The M&M model contains four psychological dimensions that can indirectly affect use/nonuse of interpersonal sensitivity: experienced responsibility, perceived justifiability, experienced task difficulty, and experienced palpability.

Experienced responsibility refers to the degree to which the performer feels personally responsible for causing the target harm or discomfort. This feeling is a function of (1) the extent to which the performer created the conditions that caused the need to enact the necessary evil, (2) the performer's involvement in the necessary evil (from planning to execution), and (3) the legitimacy with which the necessary evil was executed (e.g., sanctioned by the organization or higher-level approval).

Perceived justifiability is the degree to which the performer perceives that the good caused by the necessary evil outweighs adverse consequences. When the target is perceived to be the cause of the necessary evil, when the necessary evil is viewed as justifiable, when the necessary evil is a frequent occurrence for the performer, when the benefit exceeds the harm of the necessary evil, and when the performer and the target are not closely related or aligned, perceived justifiability is enhanced.

The complexity of the task and the frequency with which it is conducted will have an impact on the *difficulty* the performer perceives the task to be. To the extent that the complexity is low and the behavior is enacted frequently, the performer will feel that the effort required to launch the necessary evil is not onerous.

Experienced palpability pertains to the degree to which the intensity of the harm and benefit induced by the necessary evil is vivid to the performer at the time of execution. The frequency of the necessary evil, the magnitude of the harm to benefit, the salience of the harm and benefit, and the identity of the target influence the performer's experienced palpability.

2.3. Internal drama and performer's reaction toward the target

The M&M model proposes that the foregoing four psychological states can induce an *internal drama* for the performer. Internal drama comprises a set of thoughts and feelings performers have vis-à-vis the preceding psychological states. Four reactions are posited: guilt, sympathy, cognitive load, and performance anxiety. The internal drama is proposed to have an influence on whether or not the performer will execute the necessary evil in an *interpersonally sensitive* fashion. Conceivably, sympathy and guilt will conduce to interpersonal sensitivity, but cognitive load and performance anxiety may not have a similar effect.

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