Social Value Orientation As a Moral Intuition: Decision-Making in the Dictator Game

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We studied the decision making process in the Dictator Game and showed that decisions are the result of a two-step process. In a first step, decision makers generate an automatic, intuitive proposal. Given sufficient motivation and cognitive resources, they adjust this in a second, more deliberated phase. In line with the social intuitionist model, we show that one’s Social Value Orientation determines intuitive choice tendencies in the first step, and that this effect is mediated by the dictator’s perceived interpersonal closeness with the receiver. Self-interested concerns subsequently lead to a reduction of donation size in step 2. Finally, we show that increasing interpersonal closeness can promote pro-social decision-making.

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The types of consumer decisions studied by social marketers often have a social dilemma-type structure. They involve a conflict, either between pursuing the collective interest (e.g., avoiding environmental degradation by buying eco-friendly laundry detergent or by using public transport rather than one’s own car) and one’s personal interest (e.g., buying a cheaper non eco-friendly laundry detergent or the comfort and flexibility of taking one’s own car), or between one’s delayed self-interest (e.g., eating a healthy salad and a piece of fruit as a snack) and one’s immediate self-interest (e.g., eating a pizza, and a chocolate mousse for desert). We studied the decision-making process in such situations in which self-interest conflicts with the collective interest. Based on the findings, we propose some public policy recommendations for the promotion of social desirable, or social responsible consumer behaviors.

In this context of social dilemmas, social value orientation (SVO) is a heavily studied concept (e.g., Van Lange et al., 1998; e.g., Mark Van Vuurt et al., 1995). It categorizes people according to preferred patterns of outcomes between the self and others in interdependence situations. Commonly used categorizations distinguish people who are cooperators, individualists, or competitors. Cooperators (or pro-socials) prefer to maximize group outcomes and equality in outcomes. Individualists and competitors (or pro-selfs) prefer to maximize personal outcomes. Van Lange, De Bruin, Otten, and Joireman (1997b) argued that these tendencies develop during our lifetime through experiences with interdependence situations. The analogy with moral intuitions, which, according to Haidt (2001), are automatically activated moral judgments that develop through social and cultural interactions, made us expect that these social value orientations may be automatically activated preferences for pursuing the public interest versus pursuing the self-interest.

This idea contrasts with the commonly held belief that pursuing the self-interest is an automatically activated goal (van den Bos et al., 2006), and that engaging in pro-social (consumer) behavior requires some kind of cognitive operation. We hypothesized that this would be true for pro-selfs, but not for pro-socials. On the other hand, we expected that if decisions would be based on a more elaborated thinking process, pursuing the self-interest would be a salient motive for all people. We attribute this to the fact that behaving selfishly has become a social norm in our society (Miller, 1999) and that private costs and benefits are more salient than public costs and benefits (Rothschild, 1979; Warlop et al., 2003) when thinking about outcome distributions.

A series of four studies, in which Dictator Games were played as a simulation for decision making in real life social dilemmas (like consumers’ conflicts between pursuing collective or private interests), supported these hypotheses. In a Dictator Game two participants are paired. One of them receives an amount of money and is instructed to divide the money between himself and his partner. The size of a dictator’s “donation” is a measure for cooperation level, or the degree to which one is motivated to pursue the collective interest. We showed that decisions to pursue the collective interest are the result of a two-step process. In an initial, automatic and intuitive step, participants anchored their donations according to their social value orientations. We elicited such intuitive decisions using a distraction manipulation, which existed of asking half of our participants to remember a 7-digit number. Pro-socials intuitively tended to support the collective interest to a larger degree than pro-selfs. In a second step, in which dictators think more elaborately about the decision at hand, both pro-socials and pro-selfs tended to benefit their immediate self-interest.

Additionally, we showed that the automatic effect of social value orientations is partly due to a differential perception of the closeness of one’s relationship with the interaction partner. Pro-socials chronically feel “closer” to anonymous other people than pro-selfs. This is, at least partly, the reason for their intuitive tendency to value collective interests. Interestingly, we also showed it is possible to influence such perceptions and the resulting automatic decisions. By making people feel “closer” to their interaction partner, donation sizes increase if the decision is made automatically, but not when it is contemplated more elaborately.

The present results may offer new perspectives on the way social marketing strategies may reach their objectives of promoting behavior that benefits the collective interest (like consumer decisions supporting environmentally friendly products, fair trade or items produced in circumstances in which human rights are not violated) or individual’s long-term self interest (e.g., eating healthy, abstaining from smoking or consuming illegal drugs). They suggest that techniques, which activate people’s pro-environmental, ethical, or health values, while preventing them from contemplating extensively on a current decision, could be efficient tools to achieve these goals. Obviously, being able to activate such values implies that these values need to develop first, and in this respect traditional social marketing techniques based on argumentation and education are indispensable. Based on our results we propose, however, that the motivation to contemplate should be minimized on the moment actual decisions are made, since a thinking process tends to result in people pursuing their immediate self-interest.

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