Special Session Summary    Current Research on the Role of Inferred Motives in Consumer Reactions  to Influence Agents

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SESSION OVERVIEW

A ubiquitous phenomenon in attribution research is the notion that individuals make inferences about the underlying motives of those who are trying to persuade them (Friestad and Wright 1994). When consumers believe that an individual or firm has an ulterior or profit-making motive, evaluations of the individual/firm are likely to be negative (e.g., Campbell 1999; Campbell and Kirmani 2000). In this session, we delve more deeply into the antecedents and consequences of inferences of ulterior motives in marketing situations. Illustrating the wide applicability of the phenomenon, the papers span a variety of contexts, such as pricing, bargaining, and interpersonal persuasion.

The first paper by Lee and Monroe establishes that inferences of ulterior motives affect variables that are of interest to marketers. Specifically, the paper shows that consumers’ inferences about a firm’s self-interested motives affect their perceptions of the firm and its products, which in turn influence purchase intentions and willingness to pay. In the context of (un)fair pricing, consumers’ inferences about the firm’s motives are manipulated both directly (study 1) and indirectly (study 2). In the first study, participants who learned about the social responsibility of a firm were more likely to buy and willing to pay more for the product than those who learned that the firm had a profit-making motive. In the second study, products were being sold by auction, and two cues were used to manipulate consumers’ inferences about the firm’s motives: the minimum bid amount and whether the proceeds would go to charity or to the firm. Participants evaluated the firm more favorably when the auction proceeds went to charity. Surprisingly, however, participants were willing to pay more for the product when the minimum bid was high rather than low, even though the high minimum bid was perceived to be less fair.

The second paper by Valenzuela, Srivastava, and Lee examines both the antecedents and consequences of inferred motives in the context of an ultimatum bargaining game. Specifically, the paper investigates the impact of cultural orientation (individualist vs. collectivist) on inferences and behavior under incomplete information. The fundamental attribution error suggests that bargainers will be more likely to perceive a low offer as being motivated by self-interest than as the result of situational constraints. If bargainers in Western cultures are more susceptible to the fundamental attribution error than those in East Asian cultures, then Western participants are more likely to reject relatively low offers when they do not know the total size of the pie than East Asian bargainers, who are more likely to consider the other party’s situational constraints. In a series of four studies, the authors show that when situational constraints are not made salient, there is no difference in Western and East Asian participants’ willingness to accept a low offer. However, when situational constraints are made salient, East Asian participants are more likely to accept a low offer than Western participants. The authors conclude that differences in participants’ inferences about the other party’s self-interested behavior were moderated by the participants’ implicit theories about the relative impact of the person and the situation.

The third paper by Hamilton and Kirmani examines whether inferences of ulterior motives necessarily lead to negative evaluations of an interpersonal influence agent, e.g., a financial planner. The authors identify several factors that may moderate the effects of inferred motives on attitude toward the agent, including the respondent’s goals, the degree of ambiguity about the agent’s ulterior motive, and the timing of ambiguity resolution. In two studies, the authors show that when an agent uses a deceptive tactic to gain a customer, respondents infer that the agent has an ulterior motive, leading to negative agent evaluations. However, agent evaluations are less negative when respondents are focused on the agent’s competence rather than on the agent’s honesty; a deceptive tactic that successfully lands a client may also indicate a competent agent, thereby increasing evaluations. When respondents focus on the agent’s honesty, agent evaluations are more favorable when they are “disarmed,” that is, when ambiguity about the agent’s motives is resolved at the beginning of the scenario, reducing counterarguments. These findings suggest that, counter to previous studies, inferences of ulterior motives do not necessarily generate negative agent evaluations.

Amna Kirmani briefly summarized the similarities across the three papers and their contributions. Together, the three papers show that inferences about an agent’s motives—whether this agent is a firm, another party in a negotiation, or a salesperson—have a strong impact on consumers’ responses. They identify several factors that moderate the effect of inferred motives, such as beliefs about market prices, implicit theories about human behavior, and goals. Each paper focuses on a different marketing context and on different manipulation of ulterior motives, which makes for a rich investigation of the phenomenon. After this summary, the audience participated in a discussion on areas for future research on inferred motives.

“THE JOY OF BEING A GOOD CITIZEN”
ANGELA Y. LEE AND KENT B. MONROE

Consumers’ assessment of a firm’s motives may have important implications for the firm’s long-term success. Campbell (1999), for example, shows that people are more likely to shop at a retailer who engages in fair versus unfair business practices, with unfairness inferred from the profit-taking motives of the firm. The objective of the current research is to further examine the impact of the firm’s reputation on people’s evaluation of a firm’s standard and non-standard pricing practices. The results of two studies show that consumers’ inferred motive of a firm affects their perception of the firm, which in turn influences evaluation of products. However, consumers may sometimes be willing to pay more when the price is perceived to be unfair versus fair.

In Study 1, we examine how a firm’s positioning of efficient business operation versus social responsibilities may influence consumers’ perception of the firm and the pricing of its product. We propose that when a firm is not perceived to be engaging in unfair pricing practices, its reputation (and the corresponding inferred motives) may still affect consumers’ evaluation of the firm’s products, and in turn influence their likelihood of purchasing the products. In particular, individuals are more likely to perceive a firm that emphasizes social responsibilities more favorably than one that focuses on efficient business operation.

Participants in Study 1 were either informed that a new line of skin and hair care products or a new shaving system would be introduced in local stores. Half of the participants then read a paragraph describing the efficient operation of the company, while
the remaining half read about the culture of a socially responsible company. Then all participants were presented with the description of a body wash or a shaving system that was priced at $8.49. Our results show that participants in the social responsibility condition who are more involved with the product (i.e., female participants in the body wash condition and male participants in the shaving system condition) evaluated the firm and the product more favorably relative to those in the efficient operation condition. They were also more likely to buy the product. Positioning of the company did not make a difference for the uninvolved participants (i.e., male participants in the body wash condition and female participants in the shaving system condition). Consistent with our hypothesis, the study shows that a firm positioned as socially responsible may enjoy a more positive reputation among consumers. The goodwill from its reputation in turn translates to more favorable evaluation and higher purchase intentions for its products. It is important to note that the higher purchase intention is not driven by participants’ differential perception of the price, but by the enhanced value of the product that is mediated by the favorable opinion that the participants held for the firm. Interestingly, these effects were observed only among participants who were involved with the product. These results provide evidence that the inferred motive effect requires cognitive resources.

In Study 2, we examine how a firm’s profit motive may affect individuals’ willingness to bid in an auction. In this study, profit motive is operationalized in two different ways: by varying the designation of the proceeds (charity or the firm) and by varying the minimum opening bid (below or the same as retail price). Participants were either told that all proceeds would go to Toys for Tots (a charitable foundation that gives toys to poor children during the holidays), or there was no mention of where the proceeds would go. Participants were also told that the minimum opening bid was either the same as or lower than the retail price ($27.75) and the last bid was $29.50. The results show that the firm’s motive makes a difference. Specifically, participants considered the firm’s practice of operating an auction site to be fair when the proceeds were to go toward charity but unfair when the proceeds were to go to the firm. Further, a low minimum was considered more fair when the proceeds were to go to charity, but not when the proceeds were to go to the firm. However, a fair minimum bid did not lead to higher willingness to pay. Participants’ bid was highest when the minimum bid was high than when it was low, suggesting that being “fair” is not necessarily the dominant strategy.

“The Good, the Bad and the Cheap: The Impact of Cultural Orientation on Inferred Motives Behind Bargaining Offers”  
Ana Valenzuela, Joydeep Srivastava, and Seonsu Lee

The main purpose of this research is to examine the role of cultural orientation on inferences of motives and outcomes in a bargaining context. Specifically, this research examines how, in incomplete information bargaining situations, differences in cultural orientation influence inferences of ulterior motive and therefore the likelihood of accepting a relatively low offer.

Based on recent literature in cultural psychology, the general premise is that many judgments and decisions are the result of culturally imposed cognitive processes (e.g., Chiu et al., 2000). In terms of inferences of motives, the dispositional view of culture recognizes that inferences reflect implicit theories acquired from induction and socialization and thus vary with the perceiver’s cultural orientation. For example, in individualistic cultures, behavior may be based on inferences of competitive (ulterior) motives because individuals are viewed as autonomous entities and are socialized to behave according to personal priorities. In contrast, in collective cultures, behavior may be more likely to be shaped by situational factors (e.g., the possibility that the proposer was just reacting to a small available surplus) because individuals are part of a social collective and socialize according to situational constraints and group norms.

Recent research suggests a more dynamic view of culture. Research shows that both East Asians and Westerners tend to attribute observed behavior to competitive (ulterior) motives rather than external situational constraints. Further, Choi and Nisbett (1998) found that when situational constraints were made salient, Korean subjects were more sensitive to the situational constraints than U.S. subjects. Therefore, we propose that behavioral outcomes will change due to cultural differences in inferred motives only when there is a need to draw upon the implicit theories that differ across cultures or when these theories are activated.

Four ultimatum bargaining experiments examine the dynamic role of cultural orientation in affecting inferences and behavior under incomplete information. The experiments compare bargaining outcomes between subjects from the U.S., a highly individualistic Western culture, and Korea, a highly collectivist East Asian culture. In ultimatum bargaining, rejection of a positive offer has been explained by the intent to punish a proposer with ulterior motives. As such, the more an opponent’s behavior (i.e., a relatively low offer) is attributed to the proposer’s competitive (ulterior) motives (i.e., the opponent’s intention to take advantage of a responder’s disadvantageous position), the higher the probability of rejection. We propose that there will be no difference in attributions for an opponent’s behavior across cultures when no information about an opponent’s situation is available to discount competitive motives. However, when information about an opponent’s situation is accessible, implicit theories that differ across cultures are activated, leading to differences in behavioral outcomes. It is predicted that while Western subjects will continue to focus on motives for behavior based on the proposer’s competitiveness, East Asian subjects will be more sensitive to external constraints, leading to higher acceptance rates of the low offer.

Experiment 1 showed that in an incomplete information setting, ultimatum bargainers from both U.S. and Korea were equally likely to attribute a low offer to opponents’ competitive motives. However, when situational constraints (e.g., the possibility that the proposer was just reacting to a small available surplus) were made salient, Korean bargainers were more likely to accept a low offer relative to U.S. bargainers. Experiment 2 links the inferred motives to the behavioral outcomes and suggests that East Asian cultures are more likely to discount ulterior motives when situational constraints are made salient. These results also suggest that cultures perhaps differ in their implicit theories of the influence of external constraints rather than in their implicit theories of personality dispositions.

Experiment 3 shows that while there was no difference in bargaining outcomes between U.S. and Koreans in an individual decision context, Korean bargainers were more likely to accept low offers when the proposer was supposedly making the decision in a group context. The reason has to do with the interdependent self-construal in collectivist societies. Individuals in collectivist cultures are more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to the proposer and attribute a relatively low offer to the need to comply with group prerogatives, which deserves a less punitive behavior than mere ulterior motives. As a consequence, a relatively low offer of $7.50 is more likely to be accepted by bargainers in Korea than in U.S. in a group decision context.

Finally, experiment 4 unambiguously shows that differences in inferred motives mediate the influence of cultural orientation on bargaining outcomes when the group context is salient. Together, these results indicate the influence of culture on inferences of
motives behind behavior. Penalization of apparent competitive (ulterior) intent seems to be a universal phenomenon. However, Korean bargainers are more likely to recognize and acknowledge alternative motives for observed behavior, which results in potentially more efficient outcomes.

“Twist My Arm: It’s Not So Bad If the Agent Has an Ulterior Motive”

Rebecca Hamilton and Amna Kirmani

In Campbell and Kirmani (2000), a salesperson’s use of “negative” tactics such as flattery led consumers to draw inferences that a salesperson had an ulterior motive; in turn, inferences of ulterior motives resulted in negative evaluations of the salesperson. In this paper, we examine conditions under which consumers may react less negatively to agents perceived as having an ulterior motive. Specifically, we investigate the effects of goals and resolving ambiguity about the agent’s motives on observers’ reactions to an interpersonal influence agent who engages in deceptive behavior.

An observer’s goals may direct their attention to different dimensions of the agent’s behavior (Huffman, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2000), potentially changing their reactions to the same behavior. For example, we predict that if the observer’s goal is to find a competent agent, successful persuasion by using a deceptive tactic may be viewed more positively than if the observer’s goal is to find an honest agent. If the goal is to find an honest agent, the agent’s use of a deceptive tactic is less compatible with this goal and more harmful to attitudes toward the agent. Moreover, dwelling on the use of this tactic while reading the scenario may be particularly detrimental to evaluations of the agent. Thus, we predict that when the goal is to find an honest agent, attitudes toward the agent will be more favorable when the agent is “disarmed,” i.e., when ambiguity about the agent’s motive is resolved at the beginning of the scenario rather than at the end. In contrast, if the observer’s goal is to find a competent agent, the timing of ambiguity resolution should matter less.

In two studies, respondents read a scenario in which an influence agent, a financial planner, rigs a lottery to win the business of a potential client, the target. The target wins a lottery for a free consultation with the agent and subsequently hires the agent. Study 1 was a 2 (Motive ambiguity: high vs. low) X 2 (Need for closure: high vs. low) between subjects design. The agent’s rigging of the lottery was either low in ambiguity (at the end of the scenario, an observer comments that the agent rigged the lottery to get a customer) or high in ambiguity (no comment at the end of the scenario, requiring the respondent to make his or her own inferences from the agent’s behavior). ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on attitude toward the agent. Respondents with low NFC had more favorable attitudes toward the agent when the motive was more ambiguous rather than less ambiguous; this is consistent with the notion that persuasion knowledge was activated more when the motive was less ambiguous. More interestingly, respondents with high NFC reacted less negatively to the agent when the motive was less ambiguous. Thus, making the agent’s ulterior motive salient led to more positive perceptions of the agent! Consistent with our theorizing, making the ulterior motive less ambiguous shifted high NFC respondents’ focus from suspicion to thoughts about the agent’s competence. Because the deceptive tactic was successful in getting the client, the agent was perceived as competent.

In Study 2, we examined whether the respondent’s goals (i.e., searching for a competent vs. honest agent) and the timing of the ambiguity resolution (i.e., before or after they were told that the agent may have engaged in deceptive behavior) affected agent evaluations. According to the foreground literature (Petty and Cacioppo 1977), resistance to persuasion may be decreased under low involvement when the persuader’s intent is revealed prior to hearing a persuasive message. Therefore, we hypothesized that when the agent’s motive was revealed prior to the agent’s behavior, respondents would be less suspicious and dwell on the positive aspects of the agent. This would be more likely when the respondent’s goal was to search for an honest agent than when it was to search for a competent agent. In a 2 (Goal: competence vs. honesty) X 2 (Ambiguity: resolved before or after behavior) between subjects design, ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on attitude toward the agent. As expected, when participants sought an honest agent, attitudes toward the agent were more favorable when they were “disarmed,” i.e., when ambiguity was resolved at the beginning of the scenario. In contrast, when participants sought a competent agent, the timing of ambiguity resolution did not affect attitudes toward the agent. Consistent with this explanation, the degree to which persuasion knowledge was activated mediated the effect of timing on attitudes toward the agent.

Together, these studies demonstrate that negative evaluations based on inferences of ulterior motives of a marketing agent may be mitigated. Consistent with the other two papers in the session, we show that inferences of ulterior motives do not always lead to negative outcomes.

REFERENCES


