Special Session Summary    Money, Time, Or Blood: How and Why the Salience of Conflicting Identities Affects Consumer Choice

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Recent studies on the effects of identity on human behavior have important application to the field of marketing and consumer decision-making. For example, Claude Steele and colleagues have shown that reminding African-American students of their race prior to taking a standardized test undermines their test scores (Steele and Aronson 1995). Margaret Shih and colleagues (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady 1999) have suggested that people actually have multiple identities that vary in salience over time; which identity is top-of-mind has a powerful effect on behavior. For example, Asian women prompted to think about their gender score poorly on a math test but the same students prompted to consider their race score very well. Recently, LeBoeuf and Shafir (2003, working paper) have extended the notion of conflicting identity salience to consumer choice, by showing (for example) that Princeton students prompted to think about their identity as academic achievers are more likely to choose ‘serious’ magazines such as Newsweek, while those prompted to think about their social lives chose more frivolous titles (e.g. Cosmopolitan).

In this session, we extended the notion of identity salience further into the field of consumer decision-making. We presented three papers that have in common their interest in the contextual effects of identity salience, but differ in terms of the types of ‘identities’ involved, the dependent variables of interest, as well as in terms of the cognitive mechanisms they presume to underlie the overall phenomenon. Rohit Deshpande (Harvard University) acted as discussant, ably summarizing the session.

REFERENCES

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Why Tip the Waitress?: How Identity Moderates the Conflict Between Economic and Social Norms”
Christina L. Brown, University of Michigan
Jessica Goldberg, University of Michigan
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Behavioral decision researchers are perennially interested in the question of why people fail to behave in an economically normative fashion. One possibility is that people are unfamiliar with these norms, but another possibility is that people find these norms less compelling than others that conflict. A classic example is what we might call the “why tip the waitress” problem. From one perspective, it is not economically “rational” to tip a waitress in an out-of-town restaurant, because the customer cannot benefit from improved service in the future. Yet most of us leave money on the table, because social norms encourage us to tip serving staff.

When decision norms conflict, which norm is adhered to will depend on which is most salient. In particular, we propose that for some people (business students, for example), economic rationality is a highly salient decision norm, whereas for others (psychology students) it may be present but less salient. However, even when economic standards for decision-making are made prominent in people’s minds, they may be rejected as unimportant. Thus, if one does not see economic rationality as critical to one’s self-concept, one should not be strongly affected by economic primes. In contrast, if one does not see social relationships are critical to one’s self-concept, one should not be strongly affected by social primes.

We have investigated these hypotheses in an experiment involving 250 students evenly divided between the psychology and business/marketing departments at the University of Michigan. We first primed economic or social norms in a seemingly unrelated task, for example by asking subjects for examples of memorable social experiences, or asking subjects for what budgeting advice they might offer new students. Subjects then responded to a series of questions about allocating funds between an alternative with a personal economic benefit and one with a benefit to one’s friends or relations (for example, how much to tip a waitress, or what price to set a rare penny found in your pocket to a friend who collects them). Finally, subjects were asked scale questions assessing the extent to which their social and economic identities were critical to their self-concept (derived from LeBoeuf and Shafir 2003). We found that priming affected monetary allocations; as predicted, the effect was strong for those for whom the prime was important to their self-concept (i.e., psychology students high on “economic identity”) but not those for whom it was chronically accessible (business students).

In addition to our theoretical motivation, we confess to a somewhat morbid curiosity as to the main effects of the study: do business students tip more or less than psychology students? We find that business students, as expected, rate their “economic” identity as more critical to their self-concept than do psychology students. However, business students did not tip differently than did psych students over the course of the entire experiment. In the first replication, business students tipped less than psychology students when primed economically, but more than psych students when primed socially. In all subsequent problems, however, business students primed socially appeared to compensate for their earlier generosity by reducing their contributions to others. We anticipate an interesting discussion about whether this represents a lack of moral compass or whether it should be interpreted more optimistically.

“From Ideal to Real: How Prior Contemplation of the Ideal Can Undo Self-Favoritism”
Kurt Carlson, Duke University
Robin Tanner, Duke University

Theorists claim that individuals have many versions of themselves, which can be activated to accommodate the demands of a given. One such self is the ideal self, which represents the aspirations of the individual. We propose that the ideal self wants to be heard and so intervenes to influence a broad range of self reports. If biased self-reports occur because the ideal self wants to be heard, then it may be possible to debias self reports by providing the ideal...
self with a voice before the actual self is queried. We investigate this possibility in a series of studies by comparing the responses of those whose ideal self was not given a voice (standard condition) with those who were first allowed to express their ideal self (voiced condition). For example, if the standard condition question was “How likely are you to donate blood?” participants in the voiced condition would answer the question “In an ideal world, how likely would you be to donate blood?” before responding to the question “How likely are you to donate blood?”

In study 1, participants were asked about their future engagement in three aspirational behaviors: calling friends, eating vegetables, and exercising. For all three, participants in the voiced condition reported less future engagement in the behavior than those in the standard condition. Study 2 replicated Study 1 using a socially desirable behavior, giving blood. The study was modified to capture estimates of the likelihood of others giving blood, after own behavior predictions. This enabled us to explore an alternative explanation of study 1, which is that the ideal voice question acts as an unattainable anchor which is contrasted away from in subsequent responses. If this were the case, such a contrast should be observed on all estimates. We found instead that invoking the ideal self only had an effect on the prediction of one’s own behavior.

In study 3 we switched from examining future behavior, to traits and abilities. We found that voiced condition participants reported lower estimates of math ability and patience levels, relative to those in the standard condition. Study 4 replicated study 3, using both a more homogeneous subject population (undergraduate students) as well as a new response scale that requested a self evaluation relative to other undergraduate students at the same university. These changes allowed us to examine the accuracy of voiced and standard participants’ responses because the midpoint of the response scale now represented the peer group average. As expected, average ratings for the voiced condition were lower than those of the standard condition and were not reliably above the true peer average. Thus, it appears that self reported estimates of participants in the voiced condition were (on average) objectively unbiased.

In many of our studies the initial ideal responses in the voiced condition were indistinguishable from the actual responses in the standard condition. This result supports the claim that the default response in many situations is an idealized one. We discuss various alternative accounts for the data, such as anchoring and adjustment and contrast effects, and conclude that they cannot explain the observed data pattern. Finally, we discuss possible practical uses of this method and suggest, for example, that this technique has promise for marketing researchers interested in obtaining the best estimates for current and future consumer behavior in settings where ideal and actual selves do not coincide.

“To Thine Own Selves Be True: The Effects of Moral Identity and Organizational Status on the Preference for Moral Actions That Differ in Self-Investment”

Karl Aquino, University of Delaware
Americus Reed II, University of Pennsylvania

Moral action has been defined as showing social responsiveness to the needs of others (Gilligan 1982). This definition implies that a consumer who donates time to a charitable organization and one who gives money to that organization both perform moral acts. But what determines the desirability of these two actions? When given a choice, which of the two actions might a consumer prefer? These questions are the focus of this study.

Answering the question of what determines preferences to give time vs. to give money is difficult because of social and economic costs. Past research has addressed the specific question of what motivates volunteerism per se (cf. Snyder and Omoto 1995; Clary et. al 1998), but there is less research on what might explain preferences for donating time, when there is equal opportunity to simply provide equivalent financial resources instead. The present study examines this question by investigating an individual-level construct called moral identity that we believe can predict preference for donating time vs. making equivalent monetary donations to organizations that provide social goods. We examine the joint effects of moral identity and organizational status on these preferences. In all cases, we test these relationships while controlling for the unique opportunity costs of consumers in different jobs and organizations.

Data from 310 working adults show that even when accounting for unique opportunity costs, moral identity is positively related to the self-reported preference for donating time vs. donating money to community organizations. Although organizational status was negatively related to preferring to give time vs. give money, the effect was weaker for consumers with a stronger moral identity. Donating time requires a greater involvement of the self than donating money. In addition, the social needs satisfied by these two acts are not identical. Some human needs, like affection, affirmation, or love, can be delivered only when the giver forms a relational bond with the receiver. So while the consumer who donates money to an organization like the Salvation Army contributes materially to meeting the needs of others, a qualitatively different set of needs are satisfied if the consumer decides to offer companionship, inspiration, and emotional support to an at-risk teenager by giving time to an organization like Big Brothers/Big Sisters(r) (cf. Clary, et. al 1998).

This study provides an initial glimpse into how the multiple selves that people use to define who they are might influence a specific judgment about giving time versus money. This study also offers two new contributions to the marketing and decision theory literature. First, it introduces the concept of moral identity into the literature as a possible motivational variable that connects consumers to others through self-validating acts like donating time. Second, it examines the effect of a competing role-based organizational identity associated with having high formal status.

References

