Attitudes and Behaviors Assessment: the Impact of the Hypothetical Bias

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Environmentally conscious consumers tend to express recurrent equivocal commitment to the environment. Why so? This paper provides an explanation for this lack of “true” reporting from the hypothetical bias literature, by showing that people express stronger attitudes and behavioral intentions in a hypothetical context than in a real one.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16202/volumes/v38/NA-38

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Background

The hypothetical bias is an overestimation of willingness to pay in hypothetical or contingent markets, when compared to actual payments in otherwise identical real cash markets (Ajzen, Brown, and Carvajal 2004). This bias also applies to contingent valuation in the context of a referendum, where individuals that are confronted with a real referendum about contributing money to a worthy cause will respond with more favor than individuals who are confronted with a hypothetical referendum (Ajzen, Brown, and Carvajal 2004). This suggests that hypothetical and real contexts are construed in very different ways, that they are qualitatively different, and that questions posed in such contexts can elicit very different responses (Ajzen, Brown, and Carvajal 2004). Moreover, according to Ajzen, Brown and Carvajal (2004), statements of willingness to pay in a hypothetical situation can be equated to behavioral intentions and the hypothetical bias to a discrepancy between intentions and behavior. We thus hypothesize that people should express different levels of attitudes in different contexts:

H1: People express stronger attitudes and behavioral intentions in a hypothetical context than in a real one.

Different ways to adjust for the bias have been demonstrated, but they mainly apply to contingent valuation studies (e.g., asking participants to respond as if they were really spending their money; Ajzen, Brown, and Carvajal 2004). However, it seems that for contingent valuation survey to elicit useful information about willingness-to-pay, respondents must understand exactly what they are being asked to value (Johnston 2006). Hence, familiarity may lead to closer correspondence between intentions and behavior, and thus reduce or even eliminate the hypothetical bias (Johnston 2006). We thus hypothesize that familiarity could moderate the effect:

H2: People express similar attributes and behavioral intentions in both concrete and hypothetical conditions when surveyed about familiar behaviors.

Furthermore, when people are asked to report an attitude, they often infer this attitude from the implications of a past behavior that happens to be salient to them at the time of the reporting (Albarracin and Wyer 2000). In fact, subjective judgments of attitude certainty, intensity, and importance are affected by the subjective ease of retrieval of experiences that accompany the recollection of attitude-relevant information (Haddock et al. 1999). In addition, construal level theory states that people represent hypothetical tasks in a more...
abstract, high-level terms, and real tasks in a more concrete, low-level terms (Armor and Sackett 2006; Trope, Liberman, and Waksal 2007). Consequently, we hypothesize that reporting behavioral intentions could have the same effect as making salient past behavior on people’s attitude assessment, and that the hypothetical bias should moderate the informational value of behavioral intentions:

H3: Behavioral intentions are used as more abstract information in a hypothetical context and as more concrete information in a real context in further assessments.

Study
These propositions were tested within the realm of environmental protection. Respondents (114 undergraduate students) pledged to perform behaviors from statements (Roberts 1996) that were formulated either in a hypothetical or a concrete way. Results from the study provided support for our hypotheses.

When asked to pledge to perform hypothetical behaviors (e.g., I pledge that I would buy), participants expressed greater behavioral intentions than when asked to pledge to perform actual behaviors (e.g., I pledge to buy; 4.26 vs. 3.31, p<0.001), which supports H1. Moreover, familiarity seems to moderate this effect, since there is no significant difference between the hypothetical and the concrete conditions (4.15 vs. 3.98, p>0.1) for what appears to be more familiar behaviors (i.e., behaviors that are performed inside the home—e.g., recycle, save energy and water), while there is a significant effect (4.03 vs. 3.54, p<0.05) on less familiar, and maybe less concrete behaviors (i.e., behaviors that are performed outside the home or related to social activities in support of the cause—e.g., buying fair-trade or organic products, convincing friends to be more eco-friendly), thus supporting H2.

Furthermore, when in a hypothetical condition, participants expressed stronger attitudinal self-relevance with the environment than in the concrete condition (3.97 vs. 3.76). On the other hand, when in a concrete condition, participants stated that they perform more actual behaviors that in the hypothetical condition (3.48 vs. 3.81). The interaction effect is significant (p=0.05). People thus seem to be inferring their attitudes from the actions that they are willing to do and their level of hypotheticality, since there is a match between “would-behavior” and self-relevance and between “do-behavior” and reported behaviors, providing support for H3.

Discussion
Our study shows that there is a hypothetical bias in the pro-environmental domain, that this bias affects how people assess their attitudes and behaviors, and that it is moderated by familiarity. Moreover, making people think more abstractly or more concretely about their behaviors affects their self-relevance perception or their retrieval memory of past behaviors, respectively.

The next step is to try to better understand the process underlying the hypothetical bias, and to establish a link with actual behavior, in order to determine whether the hypothetical bias results in more or less actual behavioral consistency.

References
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The Abstractness of Luxury
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Almost everyday, consumers buy and use commodities such as food, clothing, or other necessities. Sometimes, however, they may indulge in luxurious goods (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002). Yet, luxury purchases are exceptions to the rule as they occur rather seldom and often are merely hypothetical.

Moreover, luxury cannot be purchased everywhere; it is usually limited and for most people difficult to attain (Miyazaki, Grewal, and Goodstein, 2005; Nuemo and Quelch, 1998; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003). As such, luxury is something that only a few people can