Did You Bring Enough For Everybody? How Differences in Anticipated and Actual Reciprocity Lead to Over- Contribution in Sharing Contexts

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This paper examines sharing contexts in which group members contribute to, and draw from, a pool of resources. Three studies on food choices indicate that consumers tend to over-contribute in such contexts due to a failure to consider the amount they will take from others at the time of consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Broadly speaking, sharing is the partitioning of a resource among members of a group. The current work focused on the partitioning and allocation of resources (hereafter, PA-sharing contexts), and specifically on the amount consumers contribute to a collective pool of resources from which they and other members of the group will ultimately draw.

Three studies examined the impact of PA- (vs. non-) sharing contexts on the amount of food consumers order (i.e., contribute) and consume. The results suggest that consumers treat PA-sharing contexts that are inherently reciprocal at the time of allocation (e.g., potluck dinners) as non-reciprocal when they are making their contribution decisions. Thus, consumers tend to underestimate or completely ignore the amount they will take from others at the time of contribution, focusing instead on the amount they expect to consume and the amount they should contribute for (give to) others. By failing to account for the amount they will take, consumers inadequately adjust their total contribution downwards. Consequently, consumers tend to over-contribute in PA-sharing contexts, which leads to over-consumption and waste.

**Study 1.** Participants were asked to imagine that they would dine at a Buffalo wings restaurant and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (group size: 3 vs. 10) x 2 (sharing context: PA vs. non) between-subjects design. After the participants read the scenario, they indicated which flavor and number of wings they would order (0-40), the number they expected others to order (0-40), and the number they expected to eat (0-40).

Significant main effects were qualified by the expected interaction ($F(1, 147) = 4.58, p < .04$). Group size did not influence the amount ordered in the non-sharing conditions, while participants in the PA-sharing conditions ordered significantly more wings when the group had ten, versus three, members ($F(1, 147) = 7.94, p < .006$). Intended consumption was not influenced by the interaction of these factors. However, the amount participants intended to give was a significant mediator (95% CI, lower = .2551, upper = 3.9442) of the interactive effects of group size and sharing context on the number of wings ordered.

**Study 2.** Participants were asked to imagine they would have lunch with 10 coworkers on the upcoming Friday and that it had been decided that the group would order food from a local wings restaurant. In the non-sharing and PA-sharing conditions, participants were told that they were ordering only for themselves or that the group would share all ordered food, respectively, and then indicated (i) how many wings of each available flavor they would order; (ii) the number they expected others to order; (iii) the number they expected others to take from others; and (iv) the number they expected others to order and eat, on average.

Participants in the taking-salient condition (the second PA-sharing condition) estimated the amount their coworkers would order, on average, and the total number of wings they would give others. Considering the amount one will take from others prior to ordering should result in this information being integrated into the decision, thereby significantly reducing the amount of food participants order to levels no different than those in the non-sharing condition.

We focus on the amount of food participants ordered, but briefly discuss other results here. First, neither the amount participants planned to eat, nor the amount they expected others to order or eat, was affected by the sharing (choice) context. Second, the amount participants expected to give and take was only measured in the PA-sharing conditions—unlike study 1 where participants in the non-sharing condition indicated the amount they would give to others—and neither measure was found to be a significant predictor (or mediator) of the amount of food participants ordered in the PA-sharing contexts.

Replicating the results of study 1, participants ordered significantly more wings in the PA-sharing, versus non-sharing, condition ($F(1, 315) = 26.25, p < .001$). This effect was eliminated in the taking-salient condition in which the number of wings ordered was significantly less than in the PA-sharing condition ($F(1, 315) = 26.96, p < .001$) and identical to the number in the non-sharing condition ($F = .00$). The opposite held in the giving-salient condition: the number of wings ordered was significantly more than in the non-sharing condition ($F(1, 315) = 12.13, p < .001$) and not significantly less than in the PA-sharing condition ($F(1, 315) = 3.07, p > .08$). Thus, focusing participants on the amount they would take from others did not eliminate the effects of PA-sharing contexts on the amount of food ordered. Additionally, these results rule out alternative accounts related to expected costs, social norms, and expectations of others’ contributions and consumption.

**Study 3.** Study 3 was a field study completed by two executive MBA classes in a South American country. The students were each given a budget roughly equivalent to five U.S. dollars that they could use to purchase their lunch from a set menu of empanadas. Any portion of their budget not spent on food would be given to them in cash (i.e., the study was incentive-compatible). Participants were told either (i) to order whatever they wanted for lunch with no mention of sharing the (non-sharing condition) or (ii) to order what they wanted for lunch but that the class would be sharing all of the food when it was delivered (the PA-sharing condition).

Those in the PA- (vs. non-) sharing condition ordered significantly more empanadas ($F(1, 104) = 15.78, p < .001$) and ate significantly more empanadas ($F(1, 104) = 5.17, p < .025$). Further, the number of empanadas left-over (waste) was also significantly greater in the PA-sharing condition than in the non-sharing condition ($F(1, 104) = 5.17, p < .025$) Thus, it appears that the over-ordering induced by PA-sharing contexts may result in both over-consumption and waste.