When the Two of Us Care Too Much For Each Other: 
Subversive Effects of Altruism in Joint Dyadic Decisions

Hristina Nikolova, Boston College, USA
Sara Dommer, Georgia Tech, USA
Chadwick Miller, Washington State University, USA
Michael Lowe, Georgia Tech, USA

We examine how the interplay of partners’ interpersonal orientations in a decision-making dyad impacts the joint decision quality. Using both subjective (satisfaction) and objective (deviation of joint decision from partners’ individual preferences) measures of decision quality, we show that altruistic/altruistic dyads make worse joint decisions than altruistic/selfish dyads.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024742/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
When the Two of Us Care Too Much for Each Other: 
Subversive Effects of Altruism in Joint Dyadic Decisions

Hristina Nikolova, Boston College, USA
Sara Dommer, Georgia Tech, USA
Chadwick Miller, Washington State University, USA
Michael Lowe, Georgia Tech, USA

ABSTRACT

We examine how the interplay of partners’ interpersonal orientations in a decision-making dyad impacts the quality of their joint decision. In this study, we used (1) post-consumption satisfaction as a measure of perceived decision quality and (2) gender as a proxy for participants’ interpersonal orientation. Past research robustly demonstrates gender differences in interpersonal orientations, such that women are more communal and are thus more likely to exhibit an altruistic orientation and incorporate others’ preferences in their decision-making. However, men’s agentic nature leads them to typically embrace a more selfish orientation, placing greater importance on the self and one’s own preferences and goals (e.g., Balkan 1966; Eckel and Grossman 1998).

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine how the interplay of decision-making partners’ interpersonal orientations impact the quality of their joint decision. In this study, we used (1) post-consumption satisfaction as a measure of perceived decision quality and (2) gender as a proxy for participants’ interpersonal orientation. Past research robustly demonstrates gender differences in interpersonal orientations, such that women are more communal and are thus more likely to exhibit an altruistic orientation and incorporate others’ preferences in their decision-making. However, men’s agentic nature leads them to typically embrace a more selfish orientation, placing greater importance on the self and one’s own preferences and goals (e.g., Balkan 1966; Eckel and Grossman 1998).

Method

We recruited 168 undergraduate students from a large southeastern university to participate in Study 1 in exchange for course credit. We paired each participant with a partner, making an effort to ensure we had approximately equal sample sizes across the three dyad types - male/female dyads, male/male dyads, and female/female dyads, which, according to previous literature should serve as a simple but robust proxy for selfish/altruistic, selfish/selfish, and altruistic/altruistic-oriented dyads, respectively.

To ensure ecological validity of the decision-making process, we first asked participants to complete the relationship closeness induction task (RCIT) together in order to familiarize themselves with each other and establish relationship closeness (Sedikides et al. 1999). Next, we presented the dyads with the focal joint decision. Specifically, we gave each dyad 10 movie posters and descriptions from IMDB.com of upcoming unreleased films. We asked the dyads to jointly choose which movie trailer they would like to watch together later in the study session.

Once participants made their decision, we asked them to answer several questions about their decision process individually on the paper questionnaire. Specifically, we asked participants to rate how “happy,” “satisfied,” and “disappointed” they were with the decision-making process on a nine-point scale (1=Not at All, 9=Very). We averaged these items to create an index measure of decision process satisfaction (α = .68). Participants also individually rated their agreement on nine-point Likert scales with three statements intended to capture decision regret: “I think there is a better movie trailer on that list that we should have picked,” “I feel sorry that we made this movie trailer choice,” and “I regret the movie trailer choice we made” (α=.71).

Next, participants watched their selected movie trailer together on the iPad. Then they responded to the same three satisfaction items and feelings of regret that followed the decision task. However, we adapted these items to measure their satisfaction with the consumption experience (α=.95) and feelings of regret with the consumption experience (α=.84). We refer to these measures as post-consumption satisfaction and regret and their represent our focal measures of joint decision optimality in this study. Additionally, we asked participants to individually respond to items regarding the “ownership” of the decision making process. Specifically, we asked participants which partner in the dyad was most “responsible” for the movie decision, who “contributed” more to the decision, and whose “preferences” were more reflected in the movie choice using nine-point scales (1=definitely my partner, 9=definitely myself; α = .85). The study concluded with demographic questions.

Analysis and Results

We excluded two dyads who failed to indicate their gender, and one dyad which included an individual who was a clear outlier in age (42 years old, M=20.5). Thus, the final usable sample consisted of 81 dyads, or 162 individuals.

Manipulation check

First, we note that in line with prior research, gender was a statistically significant proxy for selfish/altruistic orientation, as males reported significantly higher ownership of the decision (M_males =5.38) than females (M_females =4.85; F(1, 158)=6.53, p=.012). Partner’s gender was also a significant predictor of ownership, such that having a male partner reduced one’s ownership of the decision (M_male partner =4.88 vs. M_female partner =5.35; F(1, 158)=5.00, p=.027). The interaction, however, was not significant (F(1, 161) = .091, p=.76). Given the success of this manipulation we refer to dyads by their interpersonal orientation - selfish/selfish, selfish/altruistic, altruistic/altruistic.

Joint decision optimality

In this study, we measured decision optimality using post-consumption satisfaction and regret. Using a one-way ANOVA we found a significant effect of dyad type on post-consumption satisfaction (F(2, 161)=4.94, p=.008). This effect is primarily driven by the fact that altruistic/altruistic dyads had significantly lower post-consumption satisfaction (M_altruistic/altruistic = 6.80) compared to both selfish/altruistic dyads (M_selfish/altruistic =7.79; p<.005) and selfish/selfish dyads (M_selfish/selfish =7.71; p=.01). There was no difference between selfish/altruistic and selfish/selfish dyads (p = .83). Importantly, there was no difference in the satisfaction of the altruistic and selfish partners in a mixed-orientation dyad (M_altruistic =7.77, M_selfish =7.81; F(1,55)=.016, p=.90).

Similarly, the effect of dyad type on post-consumption regret was also significant (F(2, 161)=5.00, p=.008) and also driven by significantly higher regret among altruistic/altruistic dyads (M_altruistic/altruistic =2.76) relative to selfish/altruistic dyads (M_selfish/altruistic =2.12; p=.030) and selfish/selfish dyads (M_selfish/selfish = 1.85; p=.002).

Additional analysis

We first found that there was no effect of dyad composition on decision process satisfaction (F(2, 161)=1.32, p=.27) and only a marginal difference in regret prior to consumption (F(2, 161)=2.55,
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 45) / 459

Participants felt relatively positive about their decisions prior to consumption, regardless of dyad type ($M_{\text{altruistic/altruistic}} = 7.50$, $M_{\text{selfish/altruistic}} = 7.29$, $M_{\text{selfish/selfish}} = 7.83$), suggesting that the joint consumption experience (rather than the decision-making process) drives the differences among the three types of dyads on post-consumption satisfaction and regret.

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that the interpersonal orientations composition of dyads alters the quality of the joint dyadic decision (captured by post-consumption satisfaction and regret in this study). When deciding together altruistic/altruistic dyads were less satisfied and reported higher regret post-consumption than either selfish/altruistic dyads or selfish/selfish dyads.

While our manipulation check results are in line with prior research that suggests that women are generally more altruistic than men (Eckel and Grossman 1998), a limitation of this study is that the indirect assessments of consumers’ selfish or altruistic motivations leaves open the possibility of a variety of alternative explanations based on gender. To account for these alternative explanations, we manipulate participants’ interpersonal orientations in study 2.

Another limitation of study 1 is that our measure of decision quality—post-consumption satisfaction and regret—was subjective. Therefore, in study 2, we objectively measure the quality of the joint decision by collecting individual preferences information prior the study and comparing the deviation of the final joint decision to the individual preferences of the two decision-making partners.

STUDY 2

Method

Pre-study preferences

We recruited 384 participants at a large northwestern university to participate in study 2. Several weeks prior to the study we asked participants to rank and rate seven music videos. This allowed us to establish participants’ true, independent preferences prior to any manipulations or meeting their partner.

Procedure

When participants arrived for the study, we randomly paired them with a partner in a small room. Each participant had their own iPad—where the manipulation took place and where they responded to individual measures—and in each room there was a computer for participants to make a joint decision and watch the music video together.

To manipulate the selfish vs. altruistic interpersonal orientation, participants were randomly assigned to read a news article about new research which suggested either (1) that people who make a decision with their own interests in mind are happier (selfish motivation) or (2) that people who make a decision with a partner’s best interests in mind are happier (altruistic motivation). Thus, there were three possible dyad combinations: selfish/selfish, selfish/altruistic, altruistic/altruistic.

Next the dyads jointly choose a music video to watch later in the session. They were presented with the seven options they had rated and ranked individually several weeks prior. After making their joint choice, participants watched the music video together.

Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check measure of interpersonal orientation (“In the joint music video decision that you made, whose preferences did you look out for?”) to which participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = My preferences, 9 = My partner’s preferences) and demographic questions.

Analysis and Results

Manipulation check

Participants in the selfish condition reported looking out for their own preferences during the decision significantly more than those in the altruistic condition ($M_{\text{selfish}} = 4.57$ vs. $M_{\text{altruistic}} = 5.07$; $F(1, 377) = 7.41$, $p = .007$). The partner’s interpersonal orientation and the interaction of the two conditions did not significantly predict the selfishness of the participant, providing further evidence that our manipulation was successful. Gender had no main effect on the manipulation check and did not interact with the manipulation.

Joint decision optimality

First, we examine pre-study rankings of the music video chosen by the dyad as an objective measure of decision quality. Thus, lower numbers indicated greater pre-study preference and an objectively more optimal joint decision. In a one-way ANOVA, we found a significant effect of dyad type on the quality of the dyad’s decision ($F(2, 383) = 3.02$, $p = .05$). Specifically, altruistic/altruistic dyads ended up with lower-ranked (worse) options ($M_{\text{altruistic/altruistic}} = 3.76$) compared to a mixed-orientation dyad ($M_{\text{altruistic/selfish}} = 3.15$; $p = .02$). There was no difference in the decision quality between selfish/selfish dyads and mixed dyads ($M_{\text{selfish/selfish}} = 3.53$; $p = .19$) nor any difference between altruistic/altruistic dyads and selfish/selfish dyads ($p = .51$).

Next, we examined participant’s pre-study ratings of the jointly chosen music video as another objective measure of decision quality. Higher numbers indicate greater pre-study preference and hence a better decision. Using a similar one-way ANOVA, the effect of dyad type was marginal ($F(1, 381) = 2.71$, $p = .07$). The contrast between the altruistic/altruistic dyad ($M_{\text{altruistic/altruistic}} = 4.28$) and mixed dyad ($M_{\text{altruistic/selfish}} = 4.86$) was significant ($p = .03$), however, the contrasts between the selfish/selfish and the altruistic/altruistic dyads ($M_{\text{selfish/selfish}} = 4.45$, $p = .63$) and the selfish/selfish and mixed dyads were not significant ($p = .17$).

Discussion

Study 2 replicates the findings of Study 1 and demonstrates that when both members of a dyad are altruistic, worse decisions are made, measured objectively, compared to when one member is selfish and one member is altruistic.

CONCLUSION

The results of our studies suggest that dyads in which both partners have an altruistic orientation and seek to make decisions that benefit their partner make less optimal decisions than dyads in which one partner has an altruistic orientation while the other one has a selfish orientation. Decision optimality was captured by both subjective and objective measures, that is post-consumption satisfaction (Study 1) and deviation of the joint decision from the partners’ personal preferences (Study 2). In other words, in a dyad there needs to be a “driver” of a decision and a “passenger” to get the most optimal outcome. Two “passengers” and two “drivers” leads to less optimal decisions.

Our work makes important theoretical contributions to the joint decision-making literature by being the first to examine how the interplay of interpersonal orientations (altruistic vs. selfish) within a decision-making dyad impacts the quality of the joint decision. Importantly, our research also provides clear recommendations for joint consumer decisions. First, partners in a decision-making dyad should attempt to sense the interpersonal orientation of their partner. If both partners are looking out for each other’s interests (i.e., both partners are being altruistic), one partner should take the lead and state their individual preferences since this will lead to a more optimal decision.
for both partners. Second, our research implies that partners within a couple should find different areas of expertise where they can lead and their partner can follow. This would result in a natural altruistic/selfish orientation within the couple which should lead to better joint decisions.

REFERENCES