Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 122 (2013) 232–243

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Cognitive control and socially desirable behavior: The role of interpersonal impact

Marko Pitesa [a,*], Stefan Thau [b], Madan M. Pillutla [c]

[a] Department of People, Organizations and Society, Grenoble Ecole de Management, 12 Rue Pierre Sémard, 38000 Grenoble, France
[b] Organisational Behaviour Department, INSEAD, 1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, 138676 Singapore, Singapore
[c] Organisational Behaviour Subject Area, London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 May 2012
Accepted 21 August 2013
Available online 19 September 2013

Accepted by Xiao-Ping Chen

Keywords:
Socially desirable behavior
Cognitive control
Impulses
Cheating
Resource distributions

ABSTRACT

The current research reconciles two contradicting sets of findings on the role of cognitive control in socially desirable behaviors. One set of findings suggests that people are tempted by self-serving impulses and have to rely on cognitive control overriding such impulses to act in socially desirable ways. Another set of findings suggests people are guided by other-regarding impulses and cognitive control is not necessary to motivate socially desirable behaviors. We theorize that the dominant impulse is to behave in a socially desirable manner when the interpersonal impact of an action is salient, and that the dominant impulse is to behave in a self-serving manner when the interpersonal impact of an action is not salient. Studies 1–3 found that impairing participants' cognitive control led to less socially desirable behavior when interpersonal impact was not salient, but more socially desirable behavior when interpersonal impact was salient. Study 4 demonstrates that behaving in a socially desirable manner causes cognitive control impairment when interpersonal impact is not salient. But, when interpersonal impact is salient, behaving in a self-serving manner impairs cognitive control. We discuss the implications of our findings for understanding and managing socially desirable behaviors.

Introduction

A commonly accepted truth about human nature is that people are inherently self-serving (Dawkins, 1976; Wright, 1994). At the same time, humans required an ability to suppress self-serving impulses and to behave in a socially desirable manner for their evolutionary success. Humans and their hominin ancestors lacked many physical adaptations that other species have but probably overcame these challenges through living in cooperative groups (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Buss, 2008). Cooperation enabled humans to achieve better outcomes (e.g., hunting large game, defending themselves against predators, looking after their young) than they could have achieved through individual action. Living in cooperative groups led to norms of socially desirable behavior (Coleman, 1990; Ullmann-Margalit, 1977) that require individuals to suppress their self-serving impulses and act in an other-regarding manner instead (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Krebs, 2008). Many commentators, ranging from philosophers (e.g., Hobbes, 1651/1960; Rousseau, 1754/1984) to psychologists (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Carver & Scheier, 1981), have written about the question of how individuals suppress their self-interest and act in a socially desirable manner.

An emerging body of research focuses on the role of cognitive control, the "ability to guide and adjust cognitive processes and behavior flexibly in accordance with one's intentions and goals" (Cho, Konecky, & Carter, 2006, p. 19878) in socially desirable behaviors, reaching seemingly contradictory conclusions. One set of findings suggests that although people experience impulses to engage in self-serving behaviors, they use cognitive control to override impulses, enabling socially desirable ways (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Exline, 1999, 2000). For example, studies find that impairing participants' cognitive control leads to less socially desirable behaviors, such as cheating (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Another set of findings suggests that socially desirable behavior is motivated by other-regarding impulses rather than cognitive control (de Waal, 2006; Greene & Paxton, 2009; Zhong, 2011). Some of this research finds that cognitive control may actually override other-regarding impulses (Cornelissen, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2011; Zhong, 2011). For instance, Zhong (2011) found that promoting intuitive (rather than controlled) decision making leads to more socially desirable behavior (less deception and larger donations to a charity).

In this paper, we seek to integrate these two diverging sets of empirical findings on the role of cognitive control in socially desirable behavior. We do so by investigating how the *salience of interpersonal impact* determines the effect of cognitive control on

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: marko.pitesa@grenoble-em.com (M. Pitesa).

0749-5978/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.08.003

socially desirable behaviors. We define the salience of interpersonal impact as a situational feature that signals to individuals that their actions might have negative effects on others (cf. Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2009; Jones, 1991). We draw on evolutionary research to suggest that the impulse to behave in a socially desirable manner likely evolved to regulate behavior in relatively personal situations (e.g., stealing someone's food), in which individuals' actions clearly had detrimental effects on another person (de Waal, 2006; Dunbar, 2010; Tooby & DeVore, 1987). If this is the case, other-regarding impulses should be activated in situations in which interpersonal impact is salient. Cognitive control might not be necessary to motivate socially desirable behavior in such situations. In contrast, in relatively impersonal situations (e.g., lying on one's tax report), in which the negative impact on another person is less salient, other-regarding impulses might not be activated and people will be tempted to behave self-servingly. In relatively impersonal situations, people may need cognitive control to override their self-serving impulses for socially desirable behavior to occur. We elaborate on this theory in subsequent sections and then describe four experiments that test our hypotheses.

Understanding when humans are impulsively self-serving and when they are other-regarding is important to organizations and their designers. Assumptions about whether and when humans are impulsively self-serving lead to choices about how to structure and configure institutional arrangements. The image of humans as being self-serving leads to the creation of workplaces where employees are subject to surveillance, excessive rules and tight contracts (Etzioni, 1988; Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Schwartz, 1997). For example, based on their findings that cognitively depleted individuals cheat more, Gino et al. (2011) concluded that "managers and organizations should focus on removing temptations, developing self-control, and monitoring individuals who are likely to be depleted" (p. 200). Our theoretical formulation, if supported, would lead to the suggestion that managers can reduce unethical and other self-serving behavior by making salient the impact that one's actions have on others.

Cognitive control, impulses, and socially desirable behavior

Cognitive control is an evolutionarily recent ability for domain-general, controlled, and effortful thinking that is unique to humans (see Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Evans, 2008; Sherman et al., 2008, for reviews). Cognitive control allows people to override their impulses when impulses conflict with intentions and goals. For example, people often experience impulses to engage in behaviors that have momentary hedonic appeal (e.g., eating high-calorie food), but override these impulses using cognitive control to accomplish their goals (e.g., aesthetic or health-related goals).

Impulses refer to the tendency to act spontaneously and without deliberation (Carver, 2005). They are motivational impetuses belonging to an evolutionarily old, low-effort, and domain-specific psychological apparatus, often constituting an evolutionarily adaptive response to a specific environmental input. For instance, most people experience an impulse to flee when encountering a snake (Öhman & Mineka, 2001). Most impulses exist today because they produced fitness benefits over evolutionary history. Cognitive control, which evolved more recently, allows humans to behave contrary to their impulses. This is useful in situations where impulses cause behavior that is detrimental to one's welfare. In the eating example given above, while it was adaptive for humans to eat high-calorie food indiscriminately throughout much of the evolutionary past, the evolved impulse to eat indiscriminately needs to be controlled in the modern world where meeting one's energy budget is not a constant challenge. Cognitive control can serve to override an impulse that led to a functional response in humans' evolutionary past but leads to negative consequences if acted on in the modern world.

Is socially desirable behavior in humans the result of impulses or cognitive control? Are humans impulsively self-serving, in which case cognitive control is needed for socially desirable behavior? Or are they impulsively other-regarding, in which case cognitive control would not be necessary for socially desirable behavior? As we outline below, extant research leads to opposing conclusions about the role of impulses and cognitive control in socially desirable behaviors.

Cognitive control enables socially desirable behavior

One line of research suggests that cognitive control is essential for people's "capacity to stifle one's own self-serving impulses so as to engage in socially desirable behaviors" and "serves the purpose of maintaining membership in social groups" (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005, p. 598). This view presumes that people are impulsively self-serving and need to exert cognitive control over their impulses to act in socially desirable ways (see also Dawkins, 1976; Wright, 1994). Cognitive control serves as "the moral muscle" (Baumeister & Exline, 1999, p. 1165) that motivates socially desirable behavior despite people's impulses to act in a self-serving manner.

To test this idea, researchers have made participants exert cognitive control (vs. not) on an unrelated task before giving participants an opportunity to engage in socially desirable behavior. The rationale is that participants who exert cognitive control in a prior task have less cognitive control available for the subsequent task (i.e., their cognitive control is impaired) and so are relatively less able to override their impulses (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Behavior in the task that follows cognitive impairment is therefore more strongly guided by the impulse and is seen as evidence for the existence of that particular impulse. Using this paradigm, researchers find that people whose cognitive control is impaired engage in less socially desirable behavior, such as taking more resources by misrepresenting performance (Gino et al., 2011; Mead et al., 2009). The conclusion drawn from these studies is that people have an impulse to behave self-servingly. Cognitive control impairment reduces people's ability to override selfish impulses, leading to less socially desirable behavior.

Impulses enable socially desirable behavior

Another line of research suggests that socially desirable behavior may be motivated by other-regarding impulses rather than by cognitive control. Humans and their hominin ancestors have been living in cooperative groups for several millions of years (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007; Klein, 1989). Sophisticated cognitive capacities, such as cognitive control, are relatively recent developments (Diamond, 1992; Tattersall, 1997). It is unlikely that cognitive control played a major role in motivating socially desirable behavior during much of human history, given its late development in humans. The cause of socially desirable behavior that sustained cooperative groups is more likely to have been primitive mechanisms in the form of impulses (de Waal, 2006; Haidt, 2007).

Indirect evidence for the claim that impulses, rather than cognitive control, play a role in motivating socially desirable behavior can be found in the behavior of non-human primates, the animals phylogenetically closest to humans and their hominin ancestors (Harrison, 2010; Marks, 2003). Non-human primates lack sophisticated cognitive capacities (Povinelli, 2000; Tomasello, 1999), but are nevertheless known to benefit their group members at the expense of self-interest. Rhesus monkeys refuse to pull a chain delivering food if doing so causes another monkey to suffer an electric shock (thus voluntarily starving themselves for