Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 122 (2013) 291–304

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

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

Matching choices to avoid offending stigmatized group members

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 November 2012
Accepted 27 August 2013
Available online 29 September 2013
Accepted by Madan Pillutla

Keywords:
Stigma
Self-other decision making
Social influences

ABSTRACT

People (selectors) sometimes make choices both for themselves and for others (recipients). We propose that selectors worry about offending recipients with their choices when recipients are stigmatized group members and options in a choice set differ along a stigma-relevant dimension. Accordingly, selectors are more likely to make the same choices for themselves and stigmatized group member recipients than non-stigmatized group member recipients. We conducted eight studies to study this hypothesis in different choice contexts (food, music, games, books) and with recipients from different stigmatized groups (the obese, Black-Americans, the elderly, students at lower-status schools). We use three different approaches to show that this effect is driven by people's desire to avoid offending stigmatized group members with their choices. Thus, although prior research shows that people often want to avoid being associated with dissociative groups, such as stigmatized groups, we demonstrate that people make the same choices for self and stigmatized other to minimize offense.

Introduction

People often work and consume alongside and together with others: for instance, when collaborating on a team project, eating with colleagues during lunch, or drinking cocktails with friends at the bar. In these work and consumption situations, people commonly make choices not only for themselves but also for others (e.g., delegating tasks to oneself and team members, picking up take-out for oneself and one's work colleagues). These decisions may seem quite trivial; whether one delegates a memory-heavy or strategy-heavy task or selects a salad or a burger for one's colleague is hardly a matter of life-or-death. However, interpersonal motivations can transform a seemingly simple choice about tasks or food into more meaningful and challenging communication about identities and values (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Ariely & Levav, 2000; Belk, 1979, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989). Such communication can become even more challenging when these others are members of stigmatized groups, as the potential for offending them arises.

Indeed, research has shown that in social interactions, people are concerned about offending stigmatized group members, or people who have "some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in some particular social context" (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Norton, Dunn, Carney, & Ariely, 2012; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979). Indeed, interacting with members of stigmatized groups has been shown to be more depleting than interacting with members of non-stigmatized groups (Johnston, 2002; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005; Richeson et al., 2003), at least in part because people are trying to regulate what they do and say more carefully to avoid offending stigmatized group members, for self-presentational motives, other-serving motives, or a combination of both motives (Devine, 1989; Devine, Evett, & Vasquez-Suson, 1996; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000).

The current research builds on these findings by examining how people handle situations in which they must make choices for themselves and for stigmatized others from choice sets that make stigma relevant. How will people choose when selecting items for themselves and stigmatized others? We predict that selectors will favor choosing "matching" items for themselves and a stigmatized recipient (e.g., the same foods) over doing so for themselves and a non-stigmatized recipient and that this matching effect is driven by selectors' desire to avoid offending the recipient. This prediction is seemingly in contrast to a large body of research on choices, which suggests that people tend to make choices for themselves that are different than the choices made by members of dissociative groups, of which stigmatized groups, such as the obese, are one important example (Berger & Heath, 2008; Berger & Rand, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Johnston, 2002; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010a; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). For instance, Berger and Heath (2008) found that college students stopped wearing certain wristbands when "geeky" members of

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.08.007

the dormitory next door began to wear them. Furthermore, McFerran et al. (2010a) examined the effect of a salient obese versus normal-weight confederate's food portion selection on a subsequent participant's portion selection and found that participants chose a larger portion after seeing a confederate select a large quantity, but that the increase in portion size was smaller when the confederate was obese rather than normal weight, indicating greater divergence from the obese confederate.

However, a critical difference between this large body of research and our research is that we examine situations in which people make choices for both themselves and a member of the stigmatized group in situations when consumption is expected to occur in the presence of the stigmatized group member (Johnston, 2002; McFerran et al., 2010a). We suggest that these circumstances lead people to worry about offending stigmatized group members. These worries will be particularly influential in situations in which the choices are perceived to be relevant to the stigmatized identity (Crocker et al., 1998; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989), such as when choosing status versus utilitarian products for an unemployed other, a romantic comedy versus an action adventure film for a homosexual man, or – as is the case in our studies – healthy versus unhealthy food for an overweight other, a hip-hop versus country music song for a Black-American, a memory versus luck/strategy game for an elderly person, or a book using advanced-level versus basic-level terminology for a student at a lower-status college.

Our research is related to prior findings that people align their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in the presence of others. Research on implicit social tuning has examined circumstances that prompt people to align their beliefs and attitudes to be the same as those of others (Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Lun, Sinclair, Glenn, & Whitchurch, 2007; Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). For instance, Lowery et al. (2001) found that White participants expressed less automatic prejudice when in the presence of a Black experimenter versus a White experimenter. In other words, participants implicitly changed their beliefs to align with those of the experimenter.

Our research is also related to research demonstrating that people alter their behavior in the presence of stigmatized group members to avoid having other people make negative inferences about their behavior (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Snyder et al., 1979). For instance, when interacting in a photo-identification task that allowed participants to either verbally acknowledge or not acknowledge race when identifying photos, White participants were more likely to mimic the verbal strategy used by a Black partner versus a White partner (Apfelbaum et al., 2008). In addition, when asked to choose a room in which to watch a movie (one room with someone in a regular chair, the other with someone in a wheelchair), participants chose to sit with a handicapped person over a non-handicapped person when the two rooms were showing the same movie (a situation that made participants worry about seeming discriminatory), but not when the rooms were showing different movies (a situation that gave participants an "excuse" for their choice) (Snyder et al., 1979). We build upon these prior findings by also examining social motives in situations in which we predict alignment between self and stigmatized group members. We discuss the differences between our research and this prior research in the general discussion section.

In addition to building upon the literature on choices for self, this research adds to the nascent literature on choices that people make for others (e.g., Laran, 2010; Polman, 2012; Ubel, Angott, & Zikmund-Fisher, 2011; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). For instance, Polman (2012) found that people are less loss averse when they make choices for others, and Laran (2010) found that people are less concerned about balancing self-control and indulgence goals when making choices for others. We build on existing research on choosing for others by examining situations with high social tension, in which people simultaneously choose potentially stigmatizing items for self and stigmatized or non-stigmatized recipient. We note that these common consumption situations can be especially likely to lead recipients to feel hurt because recipients can compare the choices that the selector made for self versus recipient and observe similarities or differences on the potentially stigmatizing dimension.

To illustrate, imagine that someone is responsible for choosing meals for himself and a recipient from a menu with healthy items like salads and unhealthy items like burgers. If the selector chooses a healthy item for himself and an unhealthy item for the recipient, he may worry that an overweight recipient would feel hurt and think: "Why did my friend get me a burger and get himself the salad? It must be because I'm fat." Alternatively, if the selector chose an unhealthy item for himself and a healthy item for the recipient, he might worry that the overweight recipient would feel hurt and think: "Why did my friend get me a salad and himself a burger? It must be because I need to lose weight." We suggest that when the choice options differ on a stigma-relevant dimension, people seek to avoid choosing different options for themselves and stigmatized group members because they worry it may hurt these recipients. Thus, they pursue a "matching" choice strategy, making choices that match on any potentially stigmatizing dimensions (e.g., unhealthy burger for both self and other, or healthy salad for both self and other). That is, we suggest that selectors will favor choosing "matching" items for themselves and a stigmatized recipient and that this matching effect is driven by selectors' desire to avoid hurting the recipient. One could argue that choosing matching items could also hurt the recipient when the choice options differ along a stigma-relevant dimension (e.g., that choosing two unhealthy items could feel patronizing or that choosing two healthy items could imply that the recipient should lose weight and learn a lesson about eating healthy). However, we show empirically in Study 2 that this potential for hurting that could come from choosing matching items does not come to mind as much as the potential for hurting that people think can result from choosing non-matching items.

The present research

The present research tests the novel hypothesis that people will be more likely to engage in a matching strategy—to make the same choice for themselves and another person—when the other person is a member of a stigmatized social group (versus a non-stigmatized social group). We further hypothesize that the use of this matching strategy is driven by people's desire to avoid hurting members of stigmatized groups. In eight studies, we test these hypotheses in the context of choices that people make for themselves and for stigmatized versus non-stigmatized others. In Studies 1a–1e, we conduct a first test of our matching hypothesis, examining whether people are more likely to choose matching products for themselves and a stigmatized (versus non-stigmatized) group member recipient across several different choice domains and stigmatized groups. Study 1a looks at food choices for self and overweight/obese recipient; Study 1b looks at hypothetical food choices for self and overweight/obese recipient; Study 1c looks at music choices for self and Black-American recipient; Study 1d looks at game choices for self and elderly recipient; and Study 1e looks at book choices for self and lower-status college student recipient.

In Studies 2–4, we focus on one choice domain and one stigmatized group (food choices and the overweight/obese) and seek to replicate the matching effect while exploring potential mechanisms underlying this effect. These studies test our second