



Do people reason when they accept tricky offers? A case of approach and avoidance motivated reasoning

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 June 2015

Received in revised form 17 May 2016

Accepted 25 August 2016

Available online 21 September 2016

Keywords:

Cheating

Reasoning

Approach/avoidance

Confirmation bias

Motivation

ABSTRACT

Tricky or deceptive sales offers are often accepted by people. But how do we explain the acceptance of such disadvantageous offers? We propose that buyers represent offers in terms of costs and benefits in a conditional goal-related mental rule along the lines of “if a cost is paid, a benefit is obtained”. This representation would be influenced by BAS (approach) and BIS (avoidance) motivational systems. Behavioural approach system (BAS) would trigger seeking evidence confirming the offer and would lead us to accept it. Behavioural inhibition system (BIS), on the contrary, seeks disconfirming evidence, leading to rejection of the offer. Activation of approach and avoidance motivation would be influenced by internal variables and the context. We carried out three experiments where participants were told to check if a deceptive conditional offer was a cheat in a thematic Wason Selection Task. Experiment 1 showed that participants preferred confirmatory selection when the benefit was linked to a human need. In Experiment 2, warning information indicating cheating was introduced, while in Experiment 3 information about product alternatives was added to the instructions. We found a weakening of confirmatory card selection in Experiment 2, and a clear preference towards falsifying selection in Experiment 3. These results support the role of approach and avoidance motivated reasoning in buying/selling exchanges. Implications of these results are discussed in comparison with cheater detection algorithm and confirmation bias predictions.

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1. Introduction

One type of buying conduct that seems to challenge utility assumptions in human decision-making is the ease with which people accept tricky/deceptive sales offers. In particular, it challenges the assumption that consumers are rational when evaluating information at the moment of taking economic behavioural decisions. Acceptation of tricky offers is difficult to explain using the expected utility theory (Grant & Van Zandt, 2007; Mongin, 1997), where evaluation of outcome probability plays a central role. Deceptive offers usually involve a statement about having desirable things for a buyer (with a high utility), but the reality of the offer is often very improbable. So the expected utility of paying the cost of the product would be very low, and a rational buyer would reject this type of offer.

Economic psychology research is interested in social and cognitive mechanisms that explain human economic decisions. In this research field, human reasoning does not adhere to normative laws of logic and Bayesian probability, but is flexible,

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adaptive, ecological and practical in the economic behavioural ambit (Hands, 2009; Hertwig & Ortmann, 2001; Lunt, 1996; Ortmann & Gigerenzer, 1997). In this paper, we examine the ease with which people accept tricky, deceptive sales offers from this perspective.

Buying and selling offers can be considered as a type of private social contract (Cosmides, 1989). As such, people could interpret them in terms of rules such as “if someone obtains a benefit, he/she has to pay a cost”, activating the cheater detection algorithm to look for evidence that the seller benefits (i.e., takes the buyer’s money) without paying a cost (the product does not work). In accordance with the Social Contract Theory (henceforth, SCT), this is an evolutionary mechanism that has evolved to guarantee reciprocity in social exchanges. Several studies using thematic versions of the Wason Selection Task (henceforth WST, Wason, 1966) as the experimental paradigm have supported that this algorithm regulates reasoning and decision taking in the ambit of social contracts (Cosmides, 1989; Cosmides, Barrett, & Tooby, 2010; Cosmides & Tooby, 2005, 2013; Fiddick, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2000; Fiddick, Spampinato, & Grafman, 2005; Ortmann & Gigerenzer, 1997).

The WST is a paper and pencil problem that tests the use of the logically correct strategy for examining conditional rules. Subjects are invited to see whether a conditional rule of the type “if *p* then *q*” has been broken by any one of four instances about which the subject has incomplete information. The cards have “*p*” or “not-*p*” on one side and “*q*” or “not-*q*” on the other, but only one side is visible (see Fig. 1A). Participants are asked to decide which cards should be turned over in order to test a hypothesis.

In a private social contract version of the task (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992), the goal is to detect a potential cheater among Kaluames, an imaginary Polynesian culture. Participants are told to put themselves in the place of an anthropologist studying how Kaluame “big men” (chieftains) wield power. The social contract establishes a deal between Big Kiku, a headman of a Kaluame tribe, and four men from different bands that stumble into Big Kiku’s village desperate and starving, as they have been kicked out of their respective villages for committing misdeeds. In the deal, Big Kiku agrees to proportion sustaining food (cassava root) to them in exchange for them getting a tattoo on their faces (a face tattoo distinguishes Big Kiku tribe from other Kaluame tribes). The Big Kiku tribe has enemies, and the tattoos help with identification. The conditional social contract rule is worded as “if you get a tattoo on your face, then I’ll give you cassava root”. In addition, the following information is given “you learn that Big Kiku hates some of these men for betraying him to his enemies. You suspect he will cheat and betray some of them. Thus, this is the perfect opportunity for you to see first hand how Big Kiku wields his power” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, p. 196).

Four cards are presented, each one representing a man (see Fig. 1B). One side of the cards shows whether the man received the food, or did not, and the other side indicates whether the man got, or did not get, a tattoo on his face. Then the goal-task is introduced “did Big Kiku get away with cheating any of these four men? Indicate only those card(s) you definitely need to turn over to see if Big Kiku has broken his word to any of these four men” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, p. 196).

The usual selection in the standard abstract version of the task is that of cards “A” (the “*p*” card) and “4” (the “*q*” card) together about 45% of the time (see Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). This selection is not correct because it does not consider the logical need to falsify the rule by turning over card “A” (the “*p*” card to see if it has a 7 on the other side) with card “7” (the “not-*q*” card to see if it has an A on the other side). The usual selection of the “*p*” and “*q*” cards has been explained as the result of a confirmatory bias (Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). However, subsequent research has demonstrated that certain thematic versions of this task can lead the subjects to make the logically correct (falsifying) selection (see Gilovich & Griffin, 2010). In the case of the social contract version in the example, falsifying selection of “*p*” (“got the tattoo”) and “not-*q*” (“Big Kiku gave him nothing”) cards is the preferred option around 70% of times.

However, the ease with which people tend to accept deceptive offers challenges the role of the cheater detection algorithm in decision taking in the ambit of buying and selling. Cheater detection involves detecting the seller as someone who takes a benefit (the cost, usually money, from the buyer) without paying his/her cost (the benefit of the product he/she has promised to the buyer). This contrasts with real life inasmuch that people usually pay the cost of unbelievable offers without detecting the seller as a cheater (or perhaps ignoring evidence pointing to this); the case of miraculous products for hair growth is a clear example of this.

1.1. A Confirmation bias explanation

One plausible explanation for this failure to detect the cheat in buying conduct could be a confirmation bias (Gilovich & Griffin, 2010; Nickerson, 1998; Oswald & Grosjean, 2004). As Nickerson (1998) stated “the continuing susceptibility of people to too-good-to-be-true promises of quick wealth is but one illustration of the fact that people sometimes demand very little in the way of compelling evidence to drive them to a conclusion that they would like to accept” (p. 197). There is now a great deal of evidence that people draw conclusions and search for evidence that would lead to positive outcomes for themselves: they give support to pre-existing opinions, and wish to confirm their success, status and well-being (Kunda, 1987, 1990). In a similar vein, Schwartz (1982) has posited that reasoning would be more aimed at attaining desirable outcomes than at determining the truth or falsity of a certain hypothesis. For people, it would be sufficient to identify a condition that could lead to a desirable outcome, without being compelled to check if this condition is also necessary (to falsify the hypothesis). In accepting deceptive conditional sales offers of the type “if a person acquires a product, then they will obtain a benefit”, people would search for evidence, usually from other people who have acquired the product, which confirms the desirable outcome involved in the offer. The offer would be good if a benefit is obtained from the product.

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