



A behavioral economic assessment of individualizing versus binding moral foundations☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 August 2016

Received in revised form 20 February 2017

Accepted 22 February 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Moral Foundations Theory

Behavioral economics

Prisoner's Dilemma

Trust Game

Progressivism

ABSTRACT

The goal of the study was to determine if people's endorsement of different moral foundations influences their degree of prosocial behavior in a set of economic exchange games. Moral Foundations Theory has proven to be a useful means of categorizing ideas about morality and predicting opinions on aspects of social justice, political orientation, and other constructs related to prosocial behavior. This study sought to determine if Progressivism, the degree to which individuals endorse the individualizing moral foundations (i.e., Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity) over the binding moral foundations (i.e., In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity), would lead to more frequent cooperation in the Prisoner's Dilemma, a higher level of investment in the Trust Game, a higher level of return of one's partner's investment in the Trust Game, and fewer points stolen in the Thieves' Game. The results indicated no relationship between Progressivism and performance in the Thieves' Game. In three separate linear regressions controlling for age, gender, race, and Big-5 personality traits Progressivism was associated with more frequent cooperation in the Prisoner's Dilemma, a higher level of investment in the Trust Game, and a higher level of return of one's partner's investment in the Trust Game. Therefore it does appear that moral foundations do predict performance in economic exchange games and that a greater endorsement of Progressivism is associated with more prosocial behavior.

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1. Introduction

The one-shot Prisoner's Dilemma is a single-round behavioral economic game played by two individuals who both have the option of either cooperating with one another or not cooperating with one another (i.e., "defecting"). The traditional payoff schedule specifies one point apiece for mutual defection, three points apiece for mutual cooperation, and if one player defects while the other cooperates, the defector receives five points whereas the cooperator receives zero. Regardless of the choice made by one's partner, defection both minimizes risk and maximizes the potential for profit, making defection the rational choice. However, people do not always rely on rational strategies when making decisions. This is true of real life, as well as economic exchange games and regardless of whether the game being played is the one-shot Prisoner's Dilemma or another economic exchange game, behavioral economic research has consistently revealed that across nations and

cultures, only small subsets of people appear to rely completely on rational strategies (Greene, 2014; Kurzban & Houser, 2005; Yamagishi, Li, Takagishi, Matsumoto, & Kiyonari, 2014). As a result of these empirical findings several researchers have concluded that social/economic decisions are likely guided by an affect or other non-rational heuristic (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002; Sunstein, 2002). Investigations into the nature of possible heuristics is underway and a greater understanding of the non-rational factors contributing to decision making would cut to the heart of the disagreements and conflicts these games were designed to study.

Performance in these games varies and appears to reflect social customs, conventions, and norms (Chudek & Henrich, 2011; Henrich et al., 2001, 2010a). As a general rule, in industrialized societies people tend to play more prosocially (e.g., more cooperative, trusting, and forgiving) than rationality alone would predict (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Fehr & Schmidt, 2006; Wilson, 2012). The social nature of these games may be one reason why people do not rely on completely rational strategies. These games pose social dilemmas and are intended to be analogous to real world conflicts that can only be solved through group action. It is therefore likely that preconceived beliefs about fairness, justice, harm,

☆ The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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and other moral concerns regarding right and wrong influence participants' decisions. Research on possible influences of decision making in these games is extensive and candidate mechanisms such as local traditions about fairness and reciprocity (Henrich et al., 2001), faith in the rule of law (Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008), and group cultural norms (Chudek & Henrich, 2011), have all been shown to influence behavioral economic game play in prosocial ways. The role of religion and religiosity has also been suggested as a potential influence on social decision making. Specifically, belief in a moralizing God has been argued to be an influence based on interpretations of non-behavioral economic data (Johnson, 2005; Norenzayan et al., 2014), and the priming of religious concepts has directly increased prosociality in behavioral economic decision making (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Nevertheless, one construct that has not been measured in direct relation to the decisions made in economic exchange game play is moral beliefs, and the goal of this study was to assess the degree to which people's moral foundations influenced their social decision making in a set of economic exchange games.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) is a popular means of delineating the various aspects of moral cognition. The theory divides beliefs about morality into five dimensions or foundations: Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity. Furthermore, these five foundations can be collapsed into two distinct categories. The first, comprising Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity, is labeled the "individualizing" foundations as they focus on protecting the rights and liberties of all individuals. The second, comprising In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity, is labeled the "binding" foundations because they serve to bind in-groups into as a cohesive unit. The proportion by which an individual endorses one of these sets of moral foundations over another is called Progressivism. Progressivism can be calculated by subtracting the average level of endorsement of the binding foundations from the average level of endorsement of the individualizing foundations. This ratio is of specific interest to the study of economic exchange games and social decision making. Endorsement of the individualizing over the binding foundations seems to occur at its greatest frequency in the industrialized portions of society where greater prosociality in game play also occurs (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Fehr & Schmidt, 2006; Talhelm et al., 2015). Thus, while MFT is composed of five foundations, the ratio represented by Progressivism may be of particular interest to understanding social cognition as it may represent a change in broader social values.

Support for the validity of MFT has been generated by correlating the foundations with a variety of personality characteristics and values. The most popular of these studies are those showing a link with political orientation. Typically, individuals who identify as politically liberal endorse higher levels of the individualizing foundations while individuals who identify as conservative endorse higher levels of the binding foundations. This association between moral foundations and political orientation has been demonstrated not only in the United States (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012), but in China (Talhelm et al., 2015), the United Kingdom (Graham et al., 2009), and South Korea (Kim, Kang, & Yun, 2012). While moral foundations have been correlated with political orientation there is reason to believe that changes in one's moral foundations do not predict changes in one's political allegiance (Smith, Alford, Hibbing, Martin, & Hatemi, 2016). While the link between moral foundations and political orientation is not crucial to the existence of the theory, there exist more fundamental concerns about its validity (Gray & Keeney, 2015a; Kugler, Jost, & Noorbaloochi, 2014; Schein & Gray, 2015; Schein, Ritter, & Gray, 2016). Most particular are criticisms that the existence of the Purity/Sanctity domain may be an artifact of exaggerated scenarios posed by MFT (Gray & Keeney, 2015b). While the validity of MFT will likely be debated for some time to come, it currently represents a practical way of assessing the moral ideas associated with social decision making and the ratio of endorsing the

individualizing over the binding foundations (i.e., Progressivism) appears to be particularly relevant.

We postulate that a person's endorsement of Progressivism represents a heuristic that acts on their social decision making, and that evidence of these social decisions can be measured with economic exchange games. We hypothesize that higher levels of Progressivism (endorsing the individualizing moral foundations over the binding moral foundations) will be linked to more prosocial patterns of decision making in economic exchange games played with strangers. Interaction and trust of strangers is a characteristic typical of industrialized societies. There exists a host of research to suggest this conclusion. First, higher endorsement of the individualizing foundations has been linked to urban and more modernized areas (Talhelm et al., 2015), these are the same areas that demonstrate higher levels of prosocial decision making in economic exchange games. Second, the individualizing foundations have been linked to the use of more analytical versus holistic categorization (Haidt, 2008), and analytic categorization is a hallmark of the style of thinking in industrialized societies where prosocial patterns of decision making are most frequently observed. Third, greater endorsement of the binding foundations has been linked to a more pessimistic outlook on society (Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009), which theoretically should lead to lower levels of trust in interactions with anonymous members of society (a characteristic typical of economic exchange games). Fourth, the individualizing foundations have been linked to Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Graham et al., 2012). These are the same societies that demonstrate high levels of prosocial cooperation (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010b). Fifth, while the evidence is mixed on both accounts, the individualizing foundations have been linked to the Big-Five personality traits of Openness and Agreeableness (see Graham et al., 2012 for a review) and Openness and Agreeableness have been linked to prosocial game play (Hilbig, Thielmann, Hepp, Klein, & Zettler, 2015; Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, & Walkowitz, 2011; Stavrova & Schlosser, 2015). Therefore, while there are many reasons to believe that the prosocial gameplay typically seen in industrialized societies will be linked to an endorsement of Progressivism, this hypothesis is only implied by the fact that the individualizing foundations and prosocial gameplay seem to both be correlated with the same demographic characteristics, cognitive styles, and personality constructs. No research has ever empirically assessed whether Progressivism and prosocial decision making are in fact directly related to one another. This study seeks to be the first to do so. To test our hypothesis, we administered a set of economic exchange games (the Prisoner's Dilemma, the Trust Game, and the Thieves' Game) to measure social decision making and a questionnaire assessing Progressivism (the Moral Foundations Questionnaire). Our specific hypotheses were that Progressivism would be positively associated with 1) more frequent cooperation in the Prisoner's Dilemma, 2) a higher level of investment in the Trust Game, 3) a higher level of return of one's partner's investment in the Trust Game, and 4) fewer points stolen in the Thieves' Game.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The participants for this study were a community sample ($N = 214$) from a mid-sized city in the southern United States. The sample was made up of 100 (46.7%) men and 114 (53.3%) women with an average age of 39.95 ($SD = 12.0$) years. There were 120 (56.1%) Black, 81 (37.9%) White, 2 (0.9%) Hispanic, 6 (2.8%) Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5 (2.3%) Bi-racial participants. The participants were recruited from the community through the use of flyers placed in elevators, on bulletin boards, and near busy walkways on the campus where the study took place. Exclusion criteria included an age of < 19 years old, the inability to use a computer, the inability to read English, and an inability to arrive at the assessment session without financial or other aid.

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