



Original Article

Spontaneous categorization along competence in partner and leader evaluations[☆]

Alexander Bor

Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, Aarhus C, 8000, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Initial receipt 4 November 2016

Final revision received 27 March 2017

Keywords:

Cooperation
 Reciprocity
 Competence
 Food-sharing
 Partner choice
 Leader preference

ABSTRACT

Successful cooperation requires a partner both willing and capable of contributing to a joint endeavour. Accordingly, partner choice psychology should include mechanisms to distinguish between people with good and bad intentions, and between people who are competent and incompetent. While it is well established that intentions influence partner choice, the literature offers mixed evidence concerning people's ability to gauge competence in social interactions. Theoretical accounts in leadership-followership psychology and food-sharing imply that partner competence can influence the estimated future benefits from cooperation. The available empirical evidence, however, is limited to leadership evaluations in the political science literature. This paper thus investigates if people have dedicated cognitive mechanisms, which have evolved to categorize potential social partners on competence. It looks at competence both in regular social partnerships and leader-follower relations. In a series of four experiments relying on the memory confusion protocol, it demonstrates that people spontaneously distinguish between competent and incompetent social partners. This mental categorization is present equally in partner and leader evaluations. These results have interesting implications for partner choice literature and evolutionary leadership theories.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Maintaining reciprocal relationships is challenging, as there is uncertainty both about our partner's intentions and their competences. When investing in a partner, we are making two bets: that they are motivated to reciprocate *and* that they are able to do so. There is compelling evidence that humans have evolved cognitive mechanisms to inform the first bet. People routinely detect, avoid or even punish cheaters and free-riders in reciprocal relations (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Delton, Cosmides, Guemo, Robertson, & Tooby, 2012). We also take motivations into account when making decisions about who to help (Petersen, 2015). The evidence is less clear when it comes to the second bet regarding abilities and competences.

Research in psychology gives the impression that people are unskilled at distinguishing between competent and incompetent social partners. In a laboratory experiment, Delton and Robertson (2012) described targets who either contributed to the group's food pool or not and found no evidence that this information led to categorization. In a similar experiment, Van Leeuwen, Park, and Penton-Voak (2012) presented targets who varied both in their morality and competence, finding that respondents spontaneously categorized the targets along morality but not competence. Focusing on motivational systems related

to these two dimensions, Petersen and colleagues found that incompetence does not trigger strong emotions, whereas a lack of motivation (intention) to cooperate does (Petersen & Aarøe, 2013; Petersen, Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2012). In sharp contrast to these findings, however, research in political science on the evaluation of political leaders suggests that competence is a key character trait shaping evaluations (Funk, 1996, 1997; Kinder, Peters, Abelson, & Fiske, 1980; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005; Tyler & DeGoey, 1996).

In short, there is a puzzle regarding the role of competence in social evaluations. First, there are discrepancies between theoretical expectations and the empirical evidence in psychology; and second, there are discrepancies between the findings of political science and psychological research. The present paper therefore seeks to answer the following research questions: Do people spontaneously categorize others along competence in social interactions? And under what circumstances, if any, are people particularly likely to categorize by competence?

1.1. The theoretical relevance of competence in leader and partner evaluations

Leadership and followership are designed to solve coordination and collective action problems in many species (King, Johnson, & Van Vugt, 2009). Humans in particular evolved rather sophisticated leader-follower relations, which are not limited to social coordination or information sharing but include intricate reciprocal service-for-prestige

[☆] This work was supported by the Aarhus University Research Foundation.
 E-mail address: alexander.bor@ps.au.dk.

exchanges (Price & Van Vugt, 2014). Importantly, ancestral societies were egalitarian and leadership was distributed, which allowed the most competent person to emerge and lead the group to solve the problem at hand (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). However, the evolutionary theory of leadership depends on the ability of followers to decide who to follow. Accordingly, there is a sizable literature arguing that followership psychology must be sensitive to variations in the competence of potential leaders (Price & Van Vugt, 2014; Van Vugt & Grabo, 2015; Van Vugt & Kurzban, 2007). In fact, there is some empirical evidence that competent leaders receive higher evaluations from citizens (Funk, 1997; Popkin, 1991).

There is no theoretical reason, however, to believe that the relevance of competence is limited to leader evaluations. One clear example of this relates to food-sharing, which constitutes an essential form of cooperation (Gurven, 2005). The logic of food-sharing is as follows: If the diet of a group consists of items of high variability, such as large game, then on any given day only some hunters will provide food for themselves and their relatives. To avoid large fluctuations in calorie intake, group members may decide to pool their resources (Kaplan & Hill, 1985). The benefits of sharing outweigh the costs for most individuals, both due to the diminishing returns of consumption and because starvation can lead to death. Sacrificing the second portion of foraged meat is worthwhile if it increases the likelihood that someone will save us from starvation in return.

Despite the simplicity of the underlying evolutionary logic, maintaining a social exchange relationship on the grounds of reciprocity is cognitively very demanding. First, there is the issue of monitoring cheaters; those who do not intend on reciprocating. Second, and more importantly for the present case, it also requires cognitive mechanisms that “estimate the costs and benefits of various actions, entities, or states of affairs to oneself... [and] to others” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, p. 177). There are at least three factors that render estimating potential benefits challenging: 1) the need to account for potential future exchanges, 2) the need to account for multiple currencies and 3) the need to account for supply and demand in an intricate biological market of cooperative relationship.

The first challenge is that calculations must extend beyond the current exchange, especially because, ancestrally, most interactions were delayed due to the absence of a universal medium of exchange, such as money. In other words, humans require an idea of what benefit another person is likely to grant them in the future. Staying with the example of food sharing, helping a highly competent hunter could be extremely beneficial, even if it means incurring relatively large costs, as his future actions could potentially yield us large benefits. In environments in which future gains from a social exchange partner are largely a function of their competences, paying attention to competence benefits the individual.

The second challenge is to make estimations involving multiple currencies. Food could be honoured with information, protection, sexual access or a large number of other benefits (Gurven & Jaeggi, 2015). Given the existence of individual differences in competences and social roles, the algorithm estimating expected benefits is both important and complicated. In particular, this places a premium on gauging the unique and specific competences of others (see also Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). If one is not a great hunter, for example, it becomes particularly important to maintain a cooperative relationship with a competent hunter to secure a regular food supply and reciprocate via some other medium. Consistent with this, there is anthropological evidence that more competent hunters enjoy higher status and get more respect in the group (Von Rueden, Gurven, & Kaplan, 2008). In fact, the competence–status relationship goes beyond hunter–gatherer societies and is also observed in group stereotypes in modern societies (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Gauging competence across multiple domains could thus increase chances of survival even for individuals with poor skills in some essential domain.

Finally, anthropological evidence suggests that competences in valuable domains can function as insurance. Studying two hunter–gatherer

tribes (Yora and Shiwiari) in Peru, Sugiyama and Chacon (2000) found that if the best hunter gets ill or injured, several members of the group are willing to provide care – including food – for a prolonged period. This is remarkable inasmuch as individuals in such a scenario incur a very large cost even though the risk of the partner's death makes potential benefits highly uncertain. In an analysis of the underlying adaptive logic, this phenomenon is referred to as the Banker's Paradox: “When an ancestral hunter–gatherer is in most dire need of assistance, she becomes a bad ‘credit risk’ and, for this reason, is less attractive as a potential recipient of assistance” (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996, p. 131). Solving this paradox requires cognitive adaptations for identifying irreplaceable individuals. An individual becomes irreplaceable if they are able to provide benefits that other group members cannot or are unwilling to provide. Being irreplaceable need not be based on objective criteria. The best hunter is probably irreplaceable for several people in the group, but even a mediocre hunter may be irreplaceable from someone's perspective if they are the only person who shares food with them. Individuals can form deep friendships in which they become irreplaceable for each other (Sugiyama & Sugiyama, 2003). Needless to say, the resulting niche specialization requires an accurate representation of competence. This is the third and final challenge for cognitive estimations; they must be sensitive to the skills demanded and supplied in a biological market of cooperative relationships (Barclay, 2013). Individuals who could identify which skills were sought and by whom were more likely to choose, attract and maintain good partners.

These arguments suggest that the intricate social relationships we can observe in both leadership–followership and food-sharing predict the existence of sophisticated cognitive mechanisms for gauging the competence of social partners. To examine the existence of these mechanisms, four experiments using memory confusion protocol were conducted. The memory confusion protocol is an established experimental tool designed to tap into how people are categorized in social perception (Pietraszewski, 2016; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). In these experiments, participants first receive information about the actions of eight targets. Following a brief distractor, they are asked to recall who performed each action. As information about the targets is manipulated in such a way that four of them appear as competent and four as incompetent, errors made in the surprise recall phase reveal whether participants are more likely to confuse people with the same traits (i.e., same category). Evidence for such categorization effects implies that people make spontaneous distinctions relying on competence.

In the experiments, competence was operationalized as foraging skills. Delton and colleagues (Delton & Robertson, 2012; Delton et al., 2012) have conducted valuable research on social categorization related to foraging. Their experiments rely on the memory confusion protocol and describe a fictitious scenario in which the targets engage in social foraging after finding themselves on a deserted island. These studies highlight the importance of intentions and making an effort, but they provide no clear evidence that foraging competence is used to spontaneously categorize partners.¹ In the present experiments, this research is extended to demonstrate that reliable cues of competence are indeed categorized when properly operationalized. The experiments also rule out key alternative explanations for the observed findings.

2. Study 1: variation in contribution to the common pool

Study 1 is a pilot replicating Delton and Robertson's (2012) Study 4. Studying social foraging, the authors convincingly argue that partners

¹ Delton et al. (2012) find categorization between targets who contributed to a common food pool and targets who did not because they lost the food they found. This provides limited evidence for categorization along competence, as all of the targets were described as finding food (a cue of competence), and all targets were described as losing something (a cue of incompetence). The real difference between the groups, whether their incompetence affected the group or not, was due to undetermined reasons.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5044812>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5044812>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)