



Choosing for others and its relation to information search

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ABSTRACT

When people make choices, they both identify their options and research the unique details that comprise their options. Respectively, these two search behaviors are called alternative- and attribute-search. The literature treats these separate information search behaviors as a trade-off: Choosing to examine extant alternatives (alternative-search) means suffering the costs of not analyzing the details of alternatives (attribute-search), and vice versa. Here, we found that in choices people make for others, they search for more alternatives and more attributes than in choices people make for themselves. Moreover, we found that when people face a trade-off between searching for alternatives and attributes, people choosing for others will favor alternatives, whereas people choosing for themselves will favor attributes. Thus, we found that the pursuit of information is different when people choose for others (vs. themselves), suggesting a novel pivot to a range of areas in decision making where the alternative-attribute trade-off is ubiquitous.

A growing stream of research demonstrates that people choose differently when they choose for others than for themselves (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012; Hamilton & Thompson, 2007; Liu, Campbell, Fitzsimons, & Fitzsimons, 2013; Tu, Shaw, & Fishbach, 2016; Tunney & Ziegler, 2015). In some instances, the existing research finds that when deciding for others, people make less biased choices than when they decide for themselves. For example, people who choose for others demonstrate less intertemporal discounting effect, decoy effect, omission bias, betrayal bias, post-decisional distortion, choice overload, ego depletion, and loss aversion (Andersson, Holm, Tyran & Wengström, 2014; Gershoff & Koehler, 2011; Helgadóttir, 2015; Lu & Xie, 2014; Polman & Emich, 2011; Polman & Vohs, 2016; Polman, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Pronin, Olivola, & Kennedy, 2008; Ziegler & Tunney, 2012; Zikmund-Fisher, Sarr, Fagerlin, & Ubel, 2006). That is, holding a decision constant – such as making a choice with the same options – past research has found that in some cases people make less biased choices for others.

Consider one eye-opening study (Mata, Fiedler, Ferreira, & Almeida, 2013) that measured how well participants respond to the classic bat-and-ball problem, which goes: “A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?” (despite the problem seems easy, a little over half of people tend to get it wrong, answering 10 cents when the correct answer is 5 cents; for a review, see Frederick, 2005). In their examination of the problem (and similar others), Mata et al. discovered that some people were more likely to

solve the problem when the problem belonged to someone else. Why? Mata et al. revealed that because people believe they are less biased than others (Pronin, 2008), their confidence in others’ ability for identifying the correct answer is relatively low, hence they subsequently scrutinize others’ choices more. Does this mean that people engage in more information seeking when making choices for others? We believe so. Specifically, we predict that when making choices for others (vs. for themselves), decision makers search for more information: They will search for more options, and search for more details that comprise their options.

Several broad lines of research hint at the idea that people decide more thoroughly on behalf of others. For example, research shows that people sometimes help others more than they help themselves. At the extreme, research has found that people behave more assertively and less forgivingly toward transgressors who offend their friends than transgressors who offend them, personally (Green, Burnette, & Davis, 2008). Termed third-party (non)forgiveness, Kennedy and Ames (2013) found that people are more likely to protest on behalf of others’ misfortunes than on their own. In another example, research has found that people pay more to stop other people’s pain than what they pay to stop their own pain (Crockett, Kurth-Nelson, Siegel, Dayan, & Dolan, 2014). In this vein, it would appear as though people occasionally prioritize others’ well-being over their own, which might extend to prioritizing others’ choices too. In support, research has shown that for

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intertemporal choices, people choose more valuable later-larger rewards when choosing for others than when choosing for themselves (Pronin et al., 2008). Likewise, people also value their close friends' possessions more than their own possessions (Greenstein & Xu, 2015), and, people are happier spending money on others than they are on themselves (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). Finally, as a general rule when it comes to making choices for others (vs. for the self), people are more creative, idealistic, pleasure-seeking, and variety-seeking (Choi, Kim, Choi, & Yi, 2006; Laran, 2010; Lu, Liu, & Fang, 2016; Lu, Xie, & Xu, 2013; Polman & Emich, 2011) – indeed people profess to enjoy making choices more for others than for themselves (Polman & Vohs, 2016), though there are exceptions to this rule, such as when people make life-and-death decisions for others (Botti & Iyengar, 2006).

Admittedly, in these examples and in most real-life situations, the documented effects could be a result of other phenomena besides people searching for more information when choosing for others. Thus, it is unclear whether people who choose for others (vs. themselves) unequivocally seek out more information. Encouragingly, the link between self-other decision making and information search is less opaque in the relatively mature research on resource allocation in economic games (Engel, 2011). Germane to the current research, participants in one study were asked to choose between massage packages and allocate two massages between themselves and a close friend (Tu et al., 2016; Study 4a). Before making their choice, participants could elect to see one piece of information about the massage packages (e.g., their own massage duration or their friend's massage duration). The authors found that 14% of the participants chose to see their own massage details, whereas almost twice as many participants chose to see their friend's massage details. Unfortunately, it is not possible to conduct a statistical analysis on these participants' preferences (these are descriptive statistics in a single sample/condition of participants), but it is encouraging that a higher number of participants sought out information about others' choice-options than they did about their own. Indeed, these findings suggest that when people choose for others (vs. themselves), they may consider more information in the form of more choice-alternatives and choice-attributes. Entirely consistent with this view, making a choice for someone else has been theorized as an instance of accountability (Chang, Chuang, Cheng, & Huang, 2012; Lu, Liang, & Duan, 2017; Tetlock, 1992). And research by Lee, Herr, Kardes, and Kim (1999) showed that under the sway of accountability, people examine more information, employ multiple search criteria, and employ more compensatory choice strategies.

Thus, while research is suggestive that decision makers have a larger appetite for information when choosing for others, this relation has not been directly tested. By examining this possible link, the present research resembles though differs from existing research on the difference between choices people make for themselves and the advice they give for others' choices (e.g., Blunden & Gino, 2018; Dana & Cain, 2015). In particular, it has been found that people tend to give advice with less indifference (most fervor; Danziger, Montal, & Barkan, 2012) on account of strongly weighting some information-attributes over others. This type of lexicographic weighting leads to polarizing options in a choice-set, thereby establishing a clearly favored option that an advice-giving individual will correspondingly recommend – which stands in contrast to a more balanced set of preferences that is thought to underscore choices that people make for the self (Kray & Gonzalez, 1999; Kray, 2000). To be sure, our focus here is not on advice-giving nor on information-weighting, but on decisions people make for others and if the amount of information sought is higher by people making these decisions, compared to people making decisions for themselves.

We therefore tested whether choosing for others increases the extent to which decision makers search for more information. In addition, in our research, we examine not only the amount of overall information that people search for, but also the type of information that people search for, in the form of alternative-information (the extent that people search for options; i.e., *alternative-search*) and attribute-

information (the extent that people search for information about options; i.e., *attribute-search*). In this manner, we also focused on a theoretically-derived mediator, regulatory focus – which brings to bear a new prediction concerning alternative- and attribute-search. Research has shown that alternative- and attribute-search are thought of as a trade-off, where favoring one strategy means shying away from the other strategy (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). And one of the fundamental questions since the beginning of research on decision making has been when and why people search for more (new) options or search for more (new) information about their options, before making a final choice (Simon, 1959). For example, before deciding what home to buy, people will search for many homes (*seek out options*) and they will research and pursue information about each home (*seek out information about their options*).

Past research has identified some of the factors that affect people's preferences for attributes and/or alternatives. For example, people focus more on attributes as task complexity or time pressure increases (Payne, 1976; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1988) and people focus more on alternative-options as their expertise increases (Bettman & Park, 1980). In the midst of making a choice, people's preferences for alternatives and attributes change as well, from one to the other: In the early stages, decision makers prefer to focus on attributes, whereas in the later stages, they prefer to focus on alternative-options (Bettman & Park, 1980). While a great deal of research has been dedicated to the determinants of information search strategies, little attention has been devoted to the processes underlying why decision makers will favor alternatives over attributes, and vice versa, why decision makers will favor attributes over alternatives.

In this paper, we examine a self-other decision making account of behavior in alternative- and attribute-search decisions, and focus on how information search is higher overall when people make choices for others. Furthermore, we test why decision makers would favor one kind of information over another. In this vein, Polman (2012a, 2012b), Kuhn (2015), and Liu, Wang, Yao, Yang, and Wang (2017) have established that choosing for others puts people into a more promotion (vs. prevention) focused state, whereas choosing for the self puts people into a more prevention (vs. promotion) focused state. In specific terms, a promotion focus is related to seeking growth and development, and motivates decision makers to achieve positive outcomes; in contrast, a prevention focus is related to seeking safety and security, and motivates decision makers to avoid negative outcomes (Higgins, 1998). For instance, with respect to goal pursuit, the different motivations of promotion and prevention focus (along with their respective sensitivities to gains and losses) result in systematically different preferences for the types of strategies people use to complete tasks or make decisions. Preferring eagerness-related strategies, promotion focused individuals are concerned with achieving “hits” and avoiding “misses” (errors of omission); in contrast, prevention focused individuals prefer vigilance-related strategies and are concerned with achieving “correct rejections” and avoiding “false hits” (errors of commission; Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

It is in the service of these different goals that we believe distinct information search strategies would emerge. Specifically, we predict that a promotion focus is related to favoring alternative-options over attributes, and that a prevention focus is related to favoring attributes over alternative-options. In support of this prediction, it is well-established that a prevention focus directs attention toward more local, concrete, and detailed forms of information, whereas a promotion focus directs attention toward more global, abstract, and generalized forms of information (Forster & Higgins, 2005; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005; Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2007). By dint of regulatory focus, this difference is thought to stem from the efficacy of local processing for avoiding an error of commission and, likewise, of global processing for avoiding an error of omission (Lieberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Pham & Higgins, 2005). To illustrate, imagine you are hungry and looking in the fridge for something to eat:

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