



Social norms and cooperation in real-life social dilemmas

John Thøgersen *

Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University, Haslegaardsvej 10, DK-8210 Aarhus V, Denmark

Received 11 March 2007; received in revised form 5 November 2007; accepted 17 December 2007

Available online 28 December 2007

Abstract

The hypothesis, that injunctive and descriptive norms interact positively or synergistically to promote cooperation in social dilemmas, is tested in the context of a survey study focusing on environmentally responsible behaviour. Measurement error and strong and positive correlations between the two types of normative beliefs make it difficult to test the interaction hypothesis. By using structural equation modelling with residual centering, these problems are overcome and the interaction hypothesis is confirmed. The result is stable across three replications spanning a two-year period.

© 2008 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

JEL classification: C710; Z130

PsycINFO classification: 3000; 3900; 4070

Keywords: Social norms; Descriptive norms; Injunctive norms; Social dilemma; Survey; Environmental behaviour

1. Introduction

Members of modern human societies frequently encounter situations where acting to the benefit of society conflicts with their own narrow self-interest. For example, it is more convenient to throw litter in the street than to search for a waste bin. It is more convenient

* Tel.: +45 8948 6440.

E-mail address: jbt@asb.dk

to put all one's household waste in the same garbage bin than to source-separate it and bring recyclable fractions to designated collection points. It is usually cheaper and often also more convenient to ignore possible environmental or ethical qualities of consumer products. Hence, although it can be safely assumed that most people prefer a clean environment, that their garbage is recycled, and that the products they buy live up to certain environmental and ethical standards, there is a temptation to litter, to not sort one's garbage, and to ignore possible environmental or ethical problems related to products we buy. In situations such as these, individuals confront a 'social dilemma' (Dawes, 1980; Dawes & Messick, 2000). Irrespective of whether or not other people cooperate, that is, restrain themselves when drawing on common resources, contribute to a clean environment, etc., it pays better off (in a narrow sense) for each individual to defect, that is, not show restraint, not contribute, etc., than to cooperate. Hence, it is individually rational to defect. However, if everybody behaves in this way, the common good will eventually be spoiled, which leaves everybody worse off than if everybody cooperated (and saved the common good).

According to simple theories of rational choice, such as the one expressed in the 'economic man' metaphor, cooperation in social dilemmas is a mystery. However, it is common knowledge that many people show restraint and contribute to the common good in everyday social dilemmas, such as the ones described earlier. Understanding why people cooperate, and why they defect, is important for developing conditions and interventions that maximize cooperation for the common good.

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the role of social norms in social dilemmas (e.g., Bicchieri, 2006; Biel & Thøgersen, 2007; Kerr, 1995; Kopelman, Weber, & Messick, 2002) and there is mounting evidence suggesting that social norms play an important role in fostering cooperation in social dilemmas (e.g., Bicchieri, 2002; Bicchieri, 2006; Biel, 2000; Biel, Borgstede, & Dahlstrand, 1999; Kerr, 1995; Kerr, Garst, Lewandowski, & Harris, 1997; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1997). In this connection, the term "social norm" refers to informal norms as opposed to formal, codified norms such as legal rules (Bicchieri, 2006). Social norms are functional in regulating social life and they especially evolve when individual actions cause negative side-effects for others (Coleman, 1990). In these cases, social norms serve the function of restraining egoistic impulses in favour of collective outcomes (Biel et al., 1999). Social norms imply that (certain) people should perform a prescribed behaviour or not perform a proscribed behaviour. Bicchieri (2006) recently proposed a refinement of the theory of social norms in social dilemmas. It is the objective of the present paper to test a key proposition of Bicchieri's theory.

1.1. Bicchieri's social norm theory

According to Bicchieri (2006), a social norm is a behavioural rule for a situation (or type of situations) that lives up to two criteria: a sufficiently large share of the population (1) knows the rule and knows that it applies to this particular type of situations and (2) conditionally prefers to conform to the rule in this type of situation. The first criterion is uncontroversial. All prevailing definitions of social norms include this criterion. The second one is new. It implies that most people acknowledge the need for cooperation in social dilemmas and that they therefore prefer to cooperate, under certain conditions.

Preferences to conform – and actually conforming – depend on the following two conditions, according to Bicchieri (2006): that the individual believes (a) that a sufficient num-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/885525>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/885525>

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