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Motivated dissimilarity construal and self-serving behavior: How we distance ourselves from those we harm

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ABSTRACT

It is well established that people are more likely to act in a self-serving manner towards those dissimilar to themselves. Less well understood is how people actively shape perceptions of dissimilarity towards victims in order to minimize their own discomfort. In this paper, we introduce the concept of Motivated Dissimilarity Construal (MDC) – the act of purposely and proactively distancing oneself psychologically from the victim of one's own self-serving behavior. In doing so, we challenge the notion that potential victims of self-serving acts are perceived objectively and independently of a decision maker's motivation, as traditional rationalist models of decision making might suggest. Across three experiments, we demonstrate how, why and when MDC is likely to occur, and discuss implications of these findings for theory and research on behavioral ethics and interpersonal similarity.

1. Introduction

It has long been known that people are more likely to behave self-servingly when the "victims" of their actions are psychologically distant from them. The prevailing research tradition has followed an "if-then" logic: if someone is of a different race, ethnicity, class or national culture, then it is less distressing to cause harm – directly or indirectly – to that person because they are more dissimilar (and thus psychologically more distant) to the self (e.g., Barnett, 2001; Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckey, & Birch, 1981; Carlson, Kacmar & Wadsworth, 2002; Ghorbani, Liao, Cayköylü, & Chand, 2013; Hornstein, 1976; Houston, 1990; Jones, 1991; Krebs, 1975; Liviatan, Trope & Liberman, 2008; Mathur, Harada, Lipke & Chiao, 2010; Mencl & May, 2009; Moore & Gino, 2013; Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006; Watley & May, 2004). Though the results of this work have convincingly demonstrated a contingent relationship between psychological distance and a minimized level of distress about harming others, less clear is the role of the actor him or herself in contributing to this contingent effect. Based on motivated reasoning, we depart from the assumption that dissimilarity perceptions are based only on objective target characteristics and explore whether (dis)similarity can also be construed to justify self-serving behavior.

In this paper, we demonstrate that decision makers who seek to profit from the rewards of a self-serving distribution of resources, but anticipate feelings of discomfort (e.g., dissonance and/or guilt) about doing so, can engage in what we call "Motivated Dissimilarity Construal" (MDC). This means that decision makers can proactively distance themselves psychologically from the victims of their self-serving behavior by construing that victim as dissimilar to themselves. We argue that, by doing so, decision makers can reduce their own discomfort and make it easier, and more likely, to engage in the self-serving behavior. This finding thus challenges the notion that potential victims of self-serving acts are perceived objectively and independently of a decision maker's motivation, as traditional rationalist models of decision-making might suggest (e.g., Barnett, 2001; Carlson et al., 2002; Jones, 1991; Mencl & May, 2009; Watley & May, 2004). In line with the sense-making intuitionist model of ethical behavior (Sonenshein, 2007), our studies demonstrate that the motivation of the perpetrator plays a central role in how victims are perceived, and that these motivated perceptions have a key influence on the decision to engage in self-serving and harmful behavior. In this vein, we integrate literature from behavioral ethics and interpersonal (dis)similarity indicating that target characteristics influence self-serving decisions (e.g., Ghorbani et al., 2013; Mencl & May, 2009; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010) with literature on motivated reasoning, which highlights the malleability of our perceptions of the world (Kunda, 1990). Importantly, our findings indicate that merely reducing psychological distance towards others (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Ghorbani et al., 2013;

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Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Levine, Prosser, Evans & Reicher, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Watley & May, 2004) will have limited impact on behavior unless motivational factors, such as the financial incentives of the decision maker, are also considered.

1.1. Interpersonal (Dis)similarity and self-serving behavior

The idea that people show more concern toward those with a higher degree of social kinship has existed for a long time in social sciences (Allport, 1954; Davis, 1994; Krebs, 1975; Sahlins, 1972 Ch. 5; Stotland, 1969), characterized by various terms such as the "circle of inclusion" (Allport, 1954) and the "circle of moral regard" (Opotow, 1990; Reed & Aquino, 2003). The more we can see ourselves in the other, the more the other's welfare is of relevance to us (Batson, Lishner, Cook & Sawyer, 2005; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Hornstein, 1976; Maner et al., 2002; Stürmer, et al., 2006). Moreover, the tendency to feel a stronger moral obligation towards those psychologically close to oneself is shared across cultures (Sahlins, 1972 Ch. 5). Supporting the universality of this phenomenon, scholars in the fields of social neuroscience and social and evolutionary psychology have demonstrated that empathy (i.e., a cognitive and affective concern for others' welfare; Batson et al., 1981) is automatically and more often aroused in the presence of similar targets, in both primate and human populations of different ages (e.g., Batson et al., 1995; Davis, 1994; Dovidio, 1984; Hoffman, 1982; Houston, 1990; Krebs, 1975; Mathur et al., 2010; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Sole, Marton, & Hornstein, 1975). Moreover, in line with these effects, and given that empathy is correlated with the experience of guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Hoffman, 1982; Tangney, 1991; Zahn-Wexler & Kochanska, 1990), perceptions of similarity tend to also increase people's guilt about harming similar others (Baumeister et al., 1994; Ghorbani et al., 2013; Hoffman, 1982).

On the other hand, "as the commonality between two people approaches zero, the possibility of guilt should also approach zero" (Baumeister et al., 1994). Research in behavioral ethics is in line with this view and has long suggested and shown that people are more likely to behave unethically and self-servingly when the victims of such behavior are psychologically distant to them (e.g., Barnett, 2001; Jones, 1991; Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010; Ghorbani et al., 2013; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Mencl & May, 2009; Watley & May, 2004; Yam & Reynolds, 2014). Social psychologists have also provided ample evidence that people are more likely to harm (and less likely to help) those dissimilar to themselves (e.g., Batson et al., 1981; Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Hornstein, 1972, 1976; Opotow, 1990; Park & Schaller, 2005; Stürmer et al., 2006).

One explanation for such effects is provided by Construal Level Theory (CLT), which proposes that psychologically distant targets generate higher-level construals and abstract mental representations (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Moreover, consistent with CLT, researchers have found that that the greater the dissimilarity experienced towards a target, the more abstract and simpler the representation of that target becomes (Liviatan, et al., 2008; Preston & de Waal, 2002). Also in line with CLT, scholars find that when victims of a harmful act are perceived to be psychologically distant to a decision-maker, the consequences for those victims become less vivid (Small & Loewenstein, 2003), and it is thus less likely that the harm caused to that victim will generate feelings of discomfort in the decision-maker (e.g., Ghorbani et al., 2013; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001; Loewenstein, Small, & Strnad, 2006; Yam & Reynolds, 2014).

A large body of research, therefore, has convincingly demonstrated that psychological distance, and corresponding perceptions of dissimilarity (Liviatan et al., 2008), impact feelings and behavior towards others. However, this discussion misses the key role that the *motivation* of the decision maker might play in generating this psychological distance. Consequently, in our studies, we focus specifically on the motivation of the decision maker that arises from the combination of (financial) incentives[1] to behave self-servingly, as well as the anticipated discomfort the decision maker experiences in anticipation of executing a given behavior.

1.2. Anticipated feelings of discomfort about self-serving behavior

Self-serving or selfish behavior is behavior that results in benefits for the self and harm to others (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015). For this reason, when decision makers face a potential self-serving decision, they experience an internal conflict between their desire to benefit from the rewards of the self-serving act and their desire to feel like a good and fair person who does not harm others (Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008; Charness & Gneezy, 2008). In order to engage in the self-serving act while minimizing their discomfort about it, people can reshape the meaning of their behavior through motivated reasoning (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). For example, decision makers may convince themselves that they have outperformed and therefore deserve more resources than someone else when tempted to keep resources at the expense of another person (Noval & Hernandez, 2017). We argue that, in a similar manner, people can employ motivated cognitive processes to convince themselves that those harmed by their behavior are dissimilar to themselves, thereby reducing the discomfort they anticipate feeling about the behavior.

Motivated reasoning has often been studied in the reduction of uncomfortable internal states that appear *after* people have engaged in a self-serving or unethical transgression (e.g., Ayal & Gino, 2011; Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012; Chatzidakis, Hibbert, Mittusis, & Smith, 2004; Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2012), but it can be also employed *before* the behavior takes place, that is to say, when people *anticipate* feelings of discomfort about a potential behavior that they are about to engage in (Shalvi et al., 2015). When motivated reasoning takes place due to anticipated feelings of discomfort, it becomes a relevant force in determining whether the transgression is actually committed (Shalvi et al., 2015). We thus focus on how these anticipated feelings increase decision makers' motivation to engage in MDC, and how, in turn, such motivated construal of dissimilarity increases self-serving acts.

It is important to clarify that by anticipated discomfort, we refer to feelings of both dissonance and guilt, both of which can occur in these contexts (e.g., Barkan et al., 2012; Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012; Shalvi et al., 2015; Shu et al., 2012; Yam & Reynolds, 2014). Dissonance and guilt have sometimes been used interchangeably and are considered to be strongly related to each other, particularly in interpersonal contexts where harm is involved (Baumeister et al., 1994; Breslavs, 2013; Chatzidakis et al., 2004; Ghingold, 1981; Jones, Kugler, & Adams, 1995; O'Keefe, 2000; Shalvi et al., 2015; Stice, 1992). Some scholars draw a subtle distinction, however, arguing that guilt is the more intense aspect or affective consequence in the experience of dissonance (Boothroyd, 1986; Breslavs, 2013; Ding et al., 2016; Ghingold, 1981; Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé, 2006; O'Keefe, 2000; Yousaf & Gobet, 2013).[2] Important for our research is that both dissonance and guilt about a given behavior have the following characteristics: they arise from a discrepancy between one's behavior and one's self-image and values (Breslavs, 2013); they involve negative arousal that people are motivated to avoid (Ghingold, 1981; Stice, 1992); they require that a person feels personally responsible about the behavior (Carlsmith & Gross, 1969, Gosling et al., 2006, Stice, 1992, etc.); and they can be relieved by methods that include memory distortion processes (Scheier

[1] We use the term incentives throughout this paper to refer specifically to financial incentives to engage in self-serving behavior.

[2] Other scholars also discuss the possibility that "dissonance is the actual motivating psychological state and guilt is a folk-psychological term applied to certain species of dissonance" (O'Keefe, 2000, p. 87).

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