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Research Dialogue

Bridging the gap between joint and individual decisions: Deconstructing preferences in relationships

Margarita Gorlin, Ravi Dhar *

Yale University, USA

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Abstract

Most choice research has studied how people make decisions within a narrowly defined choice context and has not paid sufficient attention to the role of social context. We commend Simpson, Griskevicius, and Rothman for directing the attention of choice researchers to the study of joint decision making and current theories on relationships. Building on SGR, we propose that a relationship partner's influence varies with the type of decision at hand and with situational factors. We propose four possible types of decision episodes, defined by whether the decision stage and the consumption stage each occur singly or jointly, and explore how the decision type impacts the extent to which a decision maker will take a partner's preferences into account. We further discuss how situational factors, such as the environment in which the decision is made, as well as the mindset and cognitive resources of the decision maker, are likely to influence decision outcomes.

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Introduction

Most research on choice has focused on the process and the outcome of a decision made by an individual. A fundamental finding in this literature is that preferences are often constructed: a decision maker may place different weights on the same attributes depending on the choice context, defined as the set of options under consideration (Simonson, 2008). A limitation of the research on preference construction has been an overly narrow focus on the choice context, rather than the consideration of the broader social context in which many choices are made. Simpson, Griskevicius, and Rothman (henceforth SGR) broaden the focus by incorporating an important dimension of the social context: the influence of a relationship partner's preferences on a target individual's decision making. Our objective in this commentary is to build on SGR by considering how a partner's influence varies with the type of decision as well as with situational factors relevant to the decision.

We commend SGR for drawing attention to the topic of joint decision making. We agree with the authors that considering a

relationship partner's preferences, and not only the target individual's preferences, is an important addition to the study of decision-making that has previously been underappreciated in the literature. SGR propose a dyadic model of decision making to outline *how* a relationship partner's attitudes and preferences can influence the target decision maker's private attitudes, his or her expressed preferences, and the final choice outcome. Additionally, the authors consider how recent relationship theories, such as closeness, power dynamics, interdependence, and attachment style, may impact the *amount* of influence that each partner exerts over the other partner's attitudes, preferences, and the joint decision outcome.

While most of the examples that SGR consider involve two partners jointly deciding and then jointly consuming the chosen product, in their opening scenario, the authors examine an interesting case in which a relationship partner's preferences may also influence those of a target individual who is deciding alone. This vignette suggests that there may be two different stages for any choice: the decision stage and the consumption stage. We propose that the type of influence and the degree of influence that a partner's preferences exert on a target decision maker's choice may vary systematically depending on whether only the decision stage, only the consumption stage, or both, occur jointly.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ravi.dhar@yale.edu (R. Dhar).

Additionally, we build on the relationship style moderators proposed by SGR and identify different situational factors, such as the environment in which the decision is made, as well as the cognitive resources and the mindset of the decision maker, that might affect the extent to which a decision maker would take a partner's preferences into account.

Exploring partner influences on joint decisions in the decision and consumption stage

While SGR consider a relationship partner's influence on a decision, they do not break down the influence based on the stages of the decision. Many choices vary in whether the decision stage occurs jointly or singly and whether the consumption stage occurs jointly or singly. Based on these two factors, there are three different kinds of joint decisions. The partners may i) both make the decision jointly and consume the good jointly, ii) make the decision jointly but consume the good singly, or iii) make the decision singly but consume the good jointly. Finally, one of the partners may both decide and consume singly, and this final case corresponds to the individual decision making case that has been typically considered in the literature.

Case 1: Joint decision and joint consumption

First, consider the case in which John and Mary decide together on a restaurant and then consume the meal together. This case is the major focus of SGR, and the authors outline three ways in which one relationship partner's attitudes and beliefs will influence the decision outcome. A relationship partner's attitudes may influence the other partner's stated preferences, private attitudes and beliefs, or the final decision outcome directly. A partner's influence on joint decisions is most interesting when John and Mary have preferences that conflict on the same dimensions as the ones on which the restaurants vary. We speculate that findings from the literature on how individuals resolve intrapersonal preference conflict may also inform the conflict resolution processes that occur when two partners decide jointly. For example, two strategies used by individuals to resolve conflict in a one-shot choice are to either choose an option that has intermediate values, known as the compromise option, or to defer purchase (Dhar, 1997; Simonson, 1989; Simonson and Tversky, 1992). A couple may use similar strategies to resolve interpersonal conflict when making a joint decision. For example, when John and Mary's preferences conflict for a one-shot choice (e.g., buying a new car or a time share), they may engage in a compromise strategy and choose an option that is halfway between their preferences, or they may decide to defer purchase and keep looking for other alternatives.

Individual choice research has also identified strategies for resolving choice difficulty in repeated choices when the decision maker has multiple conflicting goals, namely the balancing and highlighting strategies (Dhar and Simonson, 1999). When faced with a repeated decision, an individual may choose either to balance within a consumption episode such as a meal, by pairing the less tasty, healthy entrée with an indulgent dessert on one occasion and pairing the tasty but unhealthy entrée with a healthy

fruit salad for dessert on another occasion, or to highlight within a meal, by consuming the tasty entrée and dessert together on one occasion and the healthy entrée and dessert on another occasion (Dhar and Simonson, 1999). When compromising, a couple might employ a strategy that balances between the goals of the two relationship partners for each choice occasion (e.g., eat at John's favorite place but order Mary's favorite foods). Alternatively, the couple may employ a highlighting strategy, in which Mary and John choose to weight one partner's goal more heavily in a single consumption episode. This latter strategy is consistent with evidence of couples reporting using a "turn-taking" rule reviewed in SGR. An interesting question is which conflict resolution strategy may be pursued in each kind of relationship and which results in more satisfaction.

Case 2: Single decision and joint consumption

Second, consider the case in which John is deciding on a surprise weekend getaway for him and Mary. Similar to Case 1, John will attempt to take Mary's preferences into account, but unlike that case, John must infer Mary's preferences based on his knowledge about her, because Mary is not present to express them. Although John's intent may be to fully consider Mary's preferences (perhaps even place more weight on Mary's preferences than his own), John, like all people, is susceptible to the false consensus bias (Mullen et al., 1985; Ross, Greene, and House, 1977), and might overestimate the extent to which Mary's beliefs and preferences are similar to his. In addition to the cognitive bias involved in the false consensus effect, John may also be motivated to construe Mary's preferences as closer to his own. (Lerouge and Warlop, 2006; Simpson, Griskevicius, and Rothman, in press). John's motivation to arrive at his desired outcome may increase the use of strategies and recruitment of justifications that are most likely to lead to that outcome (Kunda, 1990). As a result, in planning a surprise getaway, John may choose to take Mary skiing, which is his favorite winter sport, because he overestimates the extent to which Mary also likes skiing, whereas Mary actually prefers hiking and antiquing to skiing. Note that the choice outcome in the single-decision, joint-consumption case can differ greatly from the joint-decision, joint-consumption case, despite the fact that in both cases the actor, John, may think that he is incorporating his partner's preferences to the same extent.

Case 3: Joint decision and single consumption

Next consider the case where Mary and John are shopping together for John's packed lunches for the upcoming week. In this case, John may still take Mary's preferences into account, even though he will consume the lunches alone. We propose that the type of preferences that John might take into account will shift towards Mary's higher order goals and away from her specific means to pursue those goals. In general, people's goals and preferences have multiple layers and include both higher-order goals and aspirations (Shah and Kruglanski, 2003), as well as lower-order means to accomplish those goals. This distinction becomes important when we compare the impact of a partner's

preferences in this single consumption scenario versus a joint consumption scenario. Suppose that Mary strongly holds the goal of eating healthier for both herself and for John and that she pursues this goal by eating leafy greens. Whereas John would consider both Mary's goals for herself and the specific means for accomplishing those goals when the two are deciding on dinner to be consumed jointly (he would choose a restaurant that serves fresh salads), he would be more likely to consider only Mary's goals for himself (e.g., eat healthy) but not her specific means for achieving those goals (e.g., eating leafy greens) when consuming alone. In other words, the extent to which a decision maker will consider a partner's higher level and lower level goals in a joint decision may depend upon whether the consumption is also joint.

Case 4: Single decision and single consumption

The final case is the one that has been typically examined in the decision-making literature: a single consumer both choosing and consuming a product alone. SGR make an important point that even in this case, a relationship partner's preferences may come into play. Environmental cues, such as seeing another couple shopping for food together or seeing an advertisement at the grocery store that shows a couple, can also prime the goals that a significant other holds for a target consumer, motivating the consumer to nonconsciously act in line with those goals (Fitzsimons and Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003). Similarly, shopping for groceries with Mary on multiple occasions may create a habit for John (Wood, 2009; Wood and Dhar, 2012), leading him to choose in line with Mary's goals even when shopping alone. This is because if John repeatedly takes Mary's goals into account when buying groceries, Mary's goals may become automatically activated even when John is shopping and consuming alone, and environmental cues may trigger those goals (Wood, 2009).

Identifying moderators and situational factors

In their article, SGR also identify moderators and describe how different theories of relationships, such as attachment style, relationship dependence, closeness, and social power, determine the amount of influence that each partner exerts over the other partner's attitudes, preferences, and the final choice outcome. For example, SGR posit that the extent to which John takes Mary's goals into account will depend on how close and interdependent their relationship is, on the nature of their attachment styles, the power dynamics in the relationship, as well as other factors pertaining to the relationship. While SGR do not focus on how the beta weights used to indicate each partner's influence may vary with a particular decision, we propose that the degree of partner influence will fluctuate with situational factors, such as the decision environment as well as the decision maker's mindset and available cognitive resources at the time of the decision.

First, when making a decision jointly, both partners may be more willing to concede to the other's preferences when the decision is more important to the partner. The importance of a decision may vary with the situation itself. Suppose for example, that today is Mary's birthday or that she just got promoted at work. Even if this decision is similar to other joint decisions

(e.g., where to eat out), John would weight Mary's preferences more heavily than his own when that decision is linked to an important situation for Mary.

Second, the weight that each partner assigns to the other's preferences might also vary with the mindset of the decision maker (Trope and Liberman, 2010). For example, John may take Mary's preferences into account more when he is in an abstract mindset and focused on the desirability of a certain decision than a concrete mindset and focused on the details of that decision. A more abstract or more concrete mindset can also be triggered by elements inherent to the decision such as proximity: John may be in a more abstract mindset and may consider Mary's desires and preferences more when deciding during the summer on a location for their vacation for next Christmas than for their vacation next weekend.

Finally, the consideration given to a partner's preferences may also depend on the availability of cognitive resources. In situations where considering a partner's preferences is effortful and requires conscious attention, the amount of cognitive resources available to a decision maker may influence the extent to which he or she takes into account a partner's preferences. If John has plenty of time to decide what to have for lunch or is not multitasking, he will be more likely to take Mary's goals for him into account and choose a healthy option. However, if John is making the decision while under time pressure or under cognitive load, he may not have the mental resources to consider what Mary would like him to do. Note that, to the extent that considering Mary's preferences for him has become habitual, resource depletion should have a much smaller effect. Future research could further explore in which situations taking others' preferences into account would require fewer or more mental resources.

Conclusion

SGR make an important contribution by highlighting that decision makers often consider not only their own, but also their relationship partners' preferences when making choices. We agree that it is useful to integrate dyadic decision making methodology and the knowledge of relationship theories into the choice literature to generate new insights. We build on the preference construction findings in individual decision making to propose that the weights assigned to a partner's preferences vary as a function of several structural factors of the decision: the nature of the decision episode (whether the decision stage and the consumption stage are joint or separate) and situational factors, including the decision environment, available resources, and the mindset of the decision maker. We hope that future research can investigate the different forms of partner influence that SGR consider and test how the influence changes with the factors that they and we identify.

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