Ceding and Succeeding: How the Altruistic Can Benefit from the Selfish in Joint Decisions

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We examine how the interplay of two partners’ interpersonal orientations (selfish vs. altruistic) in a decision-making dyad impacts the extent to which the joint decision matches each partner’s individual a priori preferences. Two experiments, in which we manipulate and measure interpersonal orientations, as well as examine real consumption decisions, demonstrate the benefit of mismatching interpersonal orientations (selfish-altruistic) in dyadic decisions. Specifically, altruistic and selfish consumers reach joint decisions that better reflect their individual preferences when working with a partner who has the opposite interpersonal orientation (heterogeneous dyad) versus a matching one (homogeneous dyad). Initial evidence suggests that this effect occurs because homogeneous dyads are more prone to engage in negotiation (communication that involves departure from one’s initial position to a mutually serving position) than heterogeneous dyads. This leads homogeneous dyads to focus more on equally preferred options than on their own most preferred options, which pushes them further down both partners’ preferences lists. This research contributes to the literature on joint decision making and has important implications for consumer well-being.

**Keywords**  
Joint decisions; Interpersonal orientations; Selfish; Altruistic; Negotiation

Consumers regularly make joint decisions with others (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012). For example, pairs of friends or romantic couples often choose restaurants, movies, or vacation rentals together, though their preferences may not always neatly align. In such instances, consumers may feel a tension between prioritizing their own preferences and satisfying their partner’s preferences. How they resolve this tension between what they prefer personally and what their partner prefers largely depends on their interpersonal orientation, or the tendency to act selfishly or altruistically in such social dilemmas. This research examines how the interpersonal orientations (selfish or altruistic) of two individuals in a decision-making dyad interact to impact the extent to which the joint decision matches each partner’s individual a priori preferences (referred to as choice preference hereafter).

Previous joint decision-making research has examined relatively specific contexts (marriage; Filiatrault & Ritchie, 1980) or consumption instances (indulgence, ethical decisions; Dzhogleva & Lamberton, 2014; Lowe & Haws, 2014; Nikolova & Lamberton, 2016; Nikolova, Lamberton, & Coleman, 2018), rather than the basic dynamics that make dyadic decisions different from solitary ones. We focus on one core aspect of joint decisions—the interpersonal orientations adopted by decision-making partners. While prior research has underscored the beneficial influence of similarity on social relationships (Gaunt, 2006; Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2010), we demonstrate the benefit of mismatching interpersonal orientations (selfish-altruistic) in dyadic decisions. Specifically, we find that altruistic and selfish consumers reach joint decisions that better reflect their individual preferences when they work with a partner who has the opposite interpersonal orientation (heterogeneous dyads) rather than the matching one (homogeneous...
The goal of this research is to understand how the interpersonal orientations of dyadic partners interact to impact the extent to which the joint decision matches each partner's a priori preferences.

**Dyads with Heterogeneous Interpersonal Orientations**

In the decision making of heterogeneous dyads, the selfish partner should willingly express her desired preference (Barry & Friedman, 1998), while the altruistic partner will likely accept these suggestions (De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995). Since consumers' preferences are more similar than they recognize (Davis, Hoch, & Ragsdale, 1986; Sanders & Mullen, 1983; Suls & Wan, 1987), an altruistic individual will likely get an option that she somewhat prefers even when a selfish partner drives the decision. Thus, regardless of who drives the decision, both partners are likely to reach a joint decision that is relatively preferred by both of them.

**Dyads with Homogeneous Interpersonal Orientations**

In homogeneous dyads, there are opposing forces during the joint decision, with both partners either pushing to satisfy the other's preference (altruistic–altruistic dyads), or pulling for their own preferences (selfish–selfish dyads). Thus, some negotiation is required to reach a joint decision (Fry, Firestone, & Williams, 1983; Smith, Pruitt, & Carnevale, 1982; Yukl, 1974; Zartman, 1977). Negotiation is defined as an interactive decision-making process, or back-and-forth dialogue between the two partners, during which each partner decides whether to accept or reject a particular offer (Greenhalgh & Chapman, 1995). Such negotiation ultimately leads both partners to depart from their most preferred options and select an option that only partially serves both parties' interests (Ganesan, 1993; Greenhalgh & Chapman, 1995). In other words, this back-and-forth dialogue between the two decision-making partners leads homogeneous dyads to focus more on equally preferred options than on their most preferred options, resulting in a less preferred choice for both of them.

First, consider how this process might play out in a dyad with two altruistic members. In such a dyad, each individual seeks to satisfy their partner's preferences, both intending to concede to the other. This deferral can result in premature concessions intended to please one's partner (De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995; Fry et al., 1983). Therefore, to avoid being selfish and stay true to their altruistic nature, both partners concede their way down their
preference list to an option that is perhaps equally preferred by both of them. In other words, even though motivated by genuine prosocial concerns, such proactive negotiation can unintentionally lead to less preferable joint choices (Schenitzki, 1963), as consumers generally overestimate the uniqueness of their preferences (Davis et al., 1986; Sanders & Mullen, 1983; Suls & Wan, 1987).

Next, consider the case of selfish–selfish dyads. In this type of dyad, both partners are likely to be rigidly self-oriented when negotiating with others (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). As conceding is contrary to their selfish nature, selfish individuals are likely to meet suggestions with counteroffers even when these suggestions somewhat coincide with their own preferences (Tversky & Shafir, 1992). This propensity to counteroffer rather than concede inadvertently leads to negotiation (Fry et al., 1983). The two selfish partners trade rejected offers until they land on an option that is further down both of their preference lists but is deemed acceptable by both partners. Thus, selfish–selfish dyads ultimately select an option that deviates from both partners’ choice preferences (Huber & Puto, 1983) due to the negotiations they undertake.

In sum, homogeneous dyads are prone to engage in negotiation as a means of arriving at a decision. This negotiation leads them to focus more on acceptable options than on their most preferred options. In both altruistic–altruistic and selfish–selfish dyads, to stay true to their selfish or altruistic nature, partners negotiate their way down their preference lists to reach an option that is equally preferred by both of them. While negotiation can aid the likelihood of reaching a decision (Yu, 1973), it also results in a joint decision that departs from both partners’ choice preferences. By contrast, in heterogeneous dyads, where one partner allows the other to drive the decision, less negotiation is necessary, and the choice should better reflect both partners’ preferences compared to when greater negotiation occurs (in homogeneous dyads).

To shed light on our theory, we provide a hypothetical decision context and a summary of our predictions and the rationale behind them in Table 1. Panel A displays the hypothetical individual preferences of two decision-making partners (A and B) in a context in which they jointly select a movie. Panel B summarizes the expected outcomes and the rationale behind them depending on the partners’ interpersonal orientations. We sincerely thank the Associate Editor for graciously providing this example during the review process to help us elucidate our theory.

We note that our theory does not apply to zero-sum joint choices, in which one party’s loss (gain) is exactly balanced by the other party’s gain (loss). Instead, our theory applies to non-zero-sum joint choices in which it is possible to reach an outcome that at least partially satisfies both partners’ preferences (in other words, it is possible for two friends to choose a restaurant that is somewhat liked by both of them; Binmore, 2007; Bowles, 2004).

Summary of Predictions

We predict that when making joint decisions with an altruistic (selfish) partner, selfish (altruistic) consumers will reach joint decisions that better match their individual preferences than altruistic (selfish) consumers (hypothesis 1). We also predict that the effect in hypothesis 1 will be mediated by the amount of negotiation occurring in the joint decision-making process (hypothesis 2). We test these hypotheses in two studies.

Study 1

Study 1 tests hypothesis 1 by measuring interpersonal orientations.

Method

Participants were 151 (53.6% female) undergraduate students. We have an odd number of participants because one participant did not provide their a priori preferences. Since the data were analyzed at the individual level, we used their partner’s data.

Two weeks prior to data collection, participants completed a 20-item interpersonal orientation measure (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981; e.g.: “I have helped push a stranger’s car out of the snow,” 1 = “Never” to 5 = “Very often”; α = .85; reversed-scored such that high scores indicate greater selfishness; all measures and materials are available in the online Appendix S1). Participants also rated how much they liked fifteen Saturday Night Live videos (1 = “Dislike a great deal” to 9 = “Like a great deal”) and ranked them in the order of their preference. We used the rankings and ratings to narrow down the list to a set of seven videos that participants liked to a similar degree and used this reduced seven-item choice set in the main study (see online Appendix S1).

During the main study, participants were randomly paired with another participant. We gave each pair the list of seven videos and asked them to
choose one video to watch together. After watching their selected video, participants responded to three items capturing the strength of their preferences for SNL videos (e.g., “I have strong preferences about SNL skits;” α = .75) and provided their gender.

Results and Discussion

In all studies, some participants provided partial data; where data are available, we include them in the analyses. We did not exclude outliers and did not prematurely stop data collection in any of the studies.

We used participants’ a priori ratings of the jointly chosen video as our measure of choice preference because conceptually we wanted to capture liking of the chosen option (not liking relative to what else is in the choice set). Thus, the ranking measure does not conceptually match our construct of interest. Furthermore, we note while participants ranked 15 options initially, their choice set in the main study included only seven of these options; this might raise concerns regarding the applicability of the initial rankings to the reduced choice set. Also, 25% of participants in this study and 11% in study 2 left the ranking question blank.

We ran a multiple regression on participants’ choice predicted by their interpersonal orientation, their partner’s interpersonal orientation, and the interaction of the two variables. Results revealed significant main effects of participant’s (β = 4.87; F(1, 147) = 7.33, p = .008) and partner’s (β = 4.88; F(1, 147) = 7.40, p = .007) orientations. More importantly, we also found a significant interaction of participant’s × partner’s interpersonal orientations (β = −1.75, F(1, 147) = 7.88, p = .006; see Figure 1). A Johnson–Neyman floodlight analysis (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013) revealed two regions of significance. When one’s partner had a high selfishness score (>3.80 or +1.01 SD), the higher the participants’ own selfishness score, the less likely they were to reach a joint decision that matched their choice preference (β_{PN} = −1.01, p = .05). When one’s partner had a low selfishness score (<2.75 or −.98 SD; altruistic orientation), the higher the participant’s own selfishness score, the more likely they were to reach a joint decision that matched their choice preference (β_{PN} = .82, p = .05).

Finally, we note that the correlation between participants’ interpersonal orientation score and their preference strength was r = −.07 (p = .43), thus

Table 1

Proposed Outcomes and Processes in Each Dyad Type in a Hypothetical Decision Context

Panel A: Hypothetical decision context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Partner A’s liking score</th>
<th>Partner B’s liking score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Panel B: Outcomes and processes in each dyad type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner A’s interpersonal orientation</th>
<th>Partner B’s interpersonal orientation</th>
<th>Dyad type</th>
<th>Joint choice</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Heterogeneous</td>
<td>Option X</td>
<td>A defers to B whose top choice is Option X, but this happens to be A’s second choice due to preference similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Heterogeneous</td>
<td>Option W</td>
<td>B defers to A whose top choice is Option W, but this happens to be B’s second choice due to preference similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Homogeneous</td>
<td>Option Y</td>
<td>To avoid being selfish, both parties concede their way down the list to an option that is equally preferred by both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Homogeneous</td>
<td>Option Y</td>
<td>Because they are selfish, both parties trade rejected offers until they land on an option that is further down both their lists, but equally preferred by both.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The liking scores range from 1 = “Dislike a great deal” to 9 = “Like a great deal.”
indicating that their interpersonal orientation was not determined by their preference strength.

In sum, study 1 provides evidence for hypothesis 1 using a trait measure of participants’ interpersonal orientations. We replicated this effect using a different decision context (restaurants) and manipulating interpersonal orientations (see online Appendix S1 Study 1). In study 2, we manipulate interpersonal orientations (as a state) and provide evidence of the underlying mechanism (hypothesis 2) using video data of the dyadic interaction coded for negotiation.

Study 2

Method

We recruited 316 undergraduate students (46.6% female). Several weeks prior to the study, participants indicated their preferences for 15 music videos by ranking the videos and rating each video (1 = “Dislike a great deal” to 9 = “Like a great deal”). As in study 1, we narrowed down the list to a set of seven music videos that participants liked (see online Appendix S1).

In the main study, we used a 2 (participant’s orientation: selfish, altruistic) × 2 (partner’s orientation: selfish, altruistic) between-subjects design and randomly paired participants in a pullout room. We gave each participant an iPad where the interpersonal orientation manipulation took place and where they responded to individual measures. Each room was also equipped with a desktop computer for participants to complete the joint decision-making task together and a camera which recorded each dyad’s interaction during the study.

To manipulate interpersonal orientation, participants in the selfish (altruistic) condition read a news article suggesting that people who make a decision with their own (partner’s) interests in mind are happier (see online Appendix S1).

Next, each dyad jointly chose a music video to watch together from the choice set of seven. After watching the video, participants responded to a 2-item manipulation check measure of interpersonal orientation (e.g., “In the joint music video decision that you made, whose preferences did you look out for/whose interests did you care most about?” 1 = my preferences/interests, 9 = my partner’s preferences/interests; r = .78) and provided demographic information.

Results and Discussion

We could not match the responses of seven participants with their prestudy ratings due to identification number errors. Furthermore, we excluded one individual whose rating and ranking scores were inverted (i.e., the highest ranked option was the lowest rated). As a result, our final sample size was 308.

Manipulation check. Participants in the selfish condition (M = 4.47, SD = 1.60) reported looking out for their own preferences significantly more than those in the altruistic condition (M = 4.99, SD = 1.79; F(1, 304) = 6.00, p = .015). The main effect of partner’s interpersonal orientation and the interaction were not significant (p’s > .40).

Choice preference. We again used participants’ a priori ratings of the jointly chosen video as a measure of choice preference. A 2 (participant’s orientation) × 2 (partner’s orientation) ANOVA on choice preference revealed a significant interaction (F(1, 304) = 10.08, p = .002; see Figure 2). Participants with an altruistic partner reached a joint decision that better matched their personal preferences when they had a selfish (M = 7.36, SD = 1.80) versus an altruistic orientation (M = 6.60, SD = 2.27; F(1, 304) = 6.49, p = .011). When paired with a selfish partner, behaving altruistically (M = 7.14, SD = 1.66) led to a joint decision that better matched participants’ preferences than behaving selfishly (M = 6.46, SD = 1.96; F(1, 304) = 3.96, p = .048).

Including the individual with reverse coded ratings and rankings does not affect the significance of

Note. The vertical lines represent Johnson–Neyman regions at −.98 SD and +1.01 SD.

Figure 1. Study 1: Interaction of participant’s interpersonal orientation and partner’s interpersonal orientation on participant’s choice preference.
the focal interaction \((F(1, 305) = 9.18, p = .003)\), or the contrast for selfish/altruistic individuals with an altruistic partner \((F(1, 305) = 6.36, p = .012)\). The contrast for selfish/altruistic individuals with a selfish partner is marginally significant \((F(1, 305) = 3.30, p = .070)\).

**Negotiation.** We had a research assistant blind to our hypotheses code video recordings of each dyad’s interaction. To ensure accurate coding, only video data that were unobstructed and captured both participants for the duration of the discussion (82.1% of cases) were used. We expected negotiation to be marked by (a) a decision-making process involving more communication between both partners, and (b) neither partner ultimately dominating the decision. Thus, the research assistants coded for the amount of communication involved in the decision (verbal and visual) and whether or not one participant dominated the decision (reverse coded; see online Appendix S1). We averaged these three variables (standardized) to create a measure of observed negotiation \((\alpha = .71)\). The negotiation measure was at the dyad level and higher scores indicate greater negotiation.

A two-way ANOVA on the amount of negotiation revealed a significant interaction of participant’s orientation \(\times\) partner’s orientation \((F(1, 218) = 11.70, p = .001)\). With an altruistic partner, there was marginally more negotiation when the participant was similarly altruistic \((M = .14, SD = .98)\) than selfish \((M = -.11, SD = .58; F(1, 218) = 2.73, p = .10)\). With a selfish partner, there was more negotiation when the participant acted selfishly \((M = .41, SD = .56)\) than altruistically \((M = -.15, SD = 1.36; F(1, 218) = 9.41, p = .002)\). Importantly, the amount of observed negotiation mediated the relationship between participant’s interpersonal orientation and choice preference (Hayes, 2012), Model 8; \(a_1 \times b_1 = -.29, CI_{95} = [-.78, -.01]\); see Figure 3). In a separate study, we found a similar indirect effect of negotiation using a direct measure of participant’s self-reported negotiation (see online Appendix S1 Study 2).

Study 2 provides additional support of hypothesis 1 using an interpersonal orientation manipulation. Additionally, this study provides process evidence from video data of the dyadic interactions, illuminating the role of negotiation in driving these effects, thereby supporting hypothesis 2.

**General Discussion**

In two studies with real consumption choices, we find that both altruistic and selfish consumers reach joint decisions that better reflect their individual preferences when they work with a partner who has the opposite interpersonal orientation rather than a matching orientation. We provide initial evidence that homogeneous dyads negotiate more than heterogeneous dyads, which ultimately pushes partners further down their preference lists to an option that is less preferred by both parties.

Our work is the first to examine how interpersonal orientations impact dyadic partners’ individual outcomes of joint decisions. Thus, we expand the limited dyadic decision-making research that has focused on married couples (Filiatrault & Ritchie, 1980) or specific aspects of consumption (Lowe & Haws, 2014; Nikolova & Lamberton, 2016). We also extend dyadic research that has examined subjective outcomes of joint decision making, such as satisfaction (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Fisher, Grégoire, & Murray, 2011), by examining the objective outcomes of joint decisions made by dyads. Finally, our work extends previous research showing that consumers’ satisfaction with a joint decision is dependent on their decision-making power and their competitive/cooperative orientation (Fisher et al., 2011). We demonstrate that the outcomes of dyadic decision making for the self are dependent not only on one’s own behavior, but also on the behavior of the decision-making partner.

**Future Work: Potential Moderators of our Effect**

**Decision contexts.** We examined only low-risk decisions with short-term consequences, yet many dyadic decisions are highly involved and risky (e.g., purchasing a home). Greater risk could
potentially moderate our findings, as consumers may express stronger opinions or be even more hesitant to express an opinion to maintain the social equilibrium. In these circumstances, it may be more important for dyad members to understand their partner’s interpersonal orientation. Additionally, while our studies involved a single decision, repeated decisions in real relationships may introduce other interesting complexities to this basic effect on joint decisions.

Types of decision dyads. While we have focused on altruism and selfishness as an initial exploration into the effects of interpersonal orientation on dyadic decisions, future research could examine the effects of other orientations. For example, the proself orientation is sometimes divided into individualist (maximization of one’s own outcomes) and competitive orientations (maximization of one’s own outcomes relative to those of others; Bogaert et al., 2008). Although both orientations are selfish, they could have varying impacts on how one approaches a dyadic decision. Similarly, prior research has suggested that prosocial orientations could be subdivided into altruistic (maximizing the outcome for one’s partner) or equality (minimizing the difference between one’s own outcomes and the partner’s outcomes; Bogaert et al., 2008). Outside of the proself and prosocial interpersonal framework, there are other interesting interpersonal variables or individual differences to potentially examine as well (e.g., communal or exchange orientations). In sum, there is more depth to interpersonal orientations than we address which makes this area ripe for future research.

We recognize that our hypotheses rest on previous research suggesting that dyadic partners’ preferences are fairly similar (we confirmed that this was the case in all studies; see online Appendix S1 for further details). However, there are likely to be product domains or choice sets in which dyadic partners might have more diverging preferences; therefore, future research might examine how the demonstrated effects would change in such contexts. For example, in such situations, the use of negotiation may significantly aid dyads in arriving at suitable agreements.

Future Work: Other Outcomes to Explore

We have examined how the interplay of two partners’ interpersonal orientations (selfish vs. altruistic) in a decision-making dyad impacts the extent to which the joint decision matches each partners’ individual a priori preferences. Future research could move beyond preference alone to examine the effect of interpersonal orientations on other decision-related dependent variables. For instance, it would be interesting to examine how our effects would be impacted by a “no choice” option. That is, how would dyads respond if given the option to defer choice? Would homogeneous dyads continue to engage in negotiation or would they opt-out of the decision all together? One could also examine the effect of interpersonal orientations on choice satisfaction, as well as evaluations of the jointly chosen product or service.

While we observed the decision outcome made by dyads, we did not examine how dyads went about making the decision itself. It would be interesting to examine how interpersonal orientations affect decision processes. Particularly, do selfish-selfish and altruistic-altruistic use the same type of decision tactics in their negotiation? Additionally, future research could explore whether

Figure 3. Study 2: Indirect effect of negotiation on participant’s choice preference.
homogeneous dyads put greater emphasis on the decision-making process (i.e., not conceding during the negotiation for selfish–selfish dyads; ensuring that the partner’s preferences are satisfied for altruistic–altruistic dyads) than on the decision outcome (i.e., choosing an option that they personally like). Indeed, some consumers may get more utility from how the decision is made than they get from the chosen option itself.

Future research may also address whether dyadic interactions in any way impact the partners’ preference structures. Consumers’ preferences are often malleable and constructed in different contexts (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998). Thus, preferences may be updated during the decision-making process as information is shared. For instance, altruistic partners who make a joint decision that satisfies their partner’s preferences might in fact like the chosen option more than they did initially, or may gain greater utility from choosing a less-preferred option that their partner likes. Examining changes in preference structures and different types of utility resulting from dyadic interactions might offer interesting opportunities for future research.

Finally, future work could distinguish between individual outcomes and dyadic outcomes, similar to the work of Hamilton, Puntoni, and Tavassoli (2010). Specifically, future research could investigate whether homogeneous dyads’ ability to negotiate improves dyadic level outcomes, such as relationship harmony. In sum, there are many important and interesting future questions stemming from this work.

References


Interpersonal Orientations and Joint Decisions


**Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website:

**Appendix S1.** Study Materials and Additional Analyses.