Re-Inquiries

Variety-Seeking Tendency in Choice for Others: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Causes

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Ratner and Kahn demonstrated that individuals believed that others would seek more variety than they themselves would seek. Building on this finding, we expected the variety-seeking tendency to be greater when people made choices for others, and we examined the mechanisms of this phenomenon. Study 1 explored an interpersonal mechanism and demonstrated that variety seeking for others became stronger when individuals were held accountable for their choices. Studies 2 and 3 explored an intrapersonal mechanism and showed that because of "focusing," people expected satiation with repeated consumption to occur more quickly for others than for self. Implications and future research are discussed.

Most everyday decisions involve predictions of future feelings. Decisions such as choosing a restaurant for lunch or renting a video for Friday night all involve calculating which alternative will bring maximum happiness. Therefore, the subjective utility from one's decision critically depends on the accuracy of a person's predictions about his or her own future affective states and satisfaction. Do people fare well in such affective forecasting? The literature on intertemporal choice (Loewenstein and Elster 1992; Loewenstein, Read, and Baumeister 2002) and affective forecasting (Gilbert and Wilson 2000) concludes that affective predictions are in general well off the mark.

One particularly interesting case of forecasting failures of one's future satisfaction can be found in the variety-seeking tendency in consumer behavior. As Ratner and Kahn (2002) put it, "consumers often choose considerable amounts of variety when allowed to choose more than one item from a choice set, even when they are given an option of repeating consumption of favored items" (246). Individuals opt to alternate between their favorite choice and less preferred ones, even though they may get stronger satisfaction from repeated consumption of their favorite selection (Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999). Simonson (1990) demonstrated that when people make multiple choices for their future consumption, they seek more variety than when they make each choice individually. Read and Loewenstein (1995) found that this variety-seeking tendency occurs largely because people mispredict their satisfaction level with repeated consumption of the same item. Specifically, people subjectively shrink the interconsumption interval and thus exaggerate the impact of satiation on their preferences (see also Kahneman and Snell 1992).

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Variety-Seeking Tendency in Choice for Others

Although there has been a lot of research on the variety-seeking tendency in choice for self, it has been little addressed whether the variety-seeking tendency also occurs in choice for others. People are commonly faced with everyday

situations in which they have to predict whether others, not they, would be more satisfied with repeated consumption of their favorite item or with a variety of items containing both their favorite and their less preferred ones. Then the question arises whether people choose more or less variety for others than for themselves.

Ratner and Kahn (2002) provide a suggestive answer for this question. They showed that people expect others to prefer variety to a greater extent than they themselves do. Specifically, they asked participants to select appetizers for themselves and also to predict "a typical person's choice." They found that participants expected a typical person to choose more variety than the participants themselves chose. Although predicting what others would choose does not necessarily correspond to what people would choose for others, this finding suggests that the variety-seeking tendency may be stronger when making choices for others than for oneself (see also Ariely and Levav 2000).

Building on the findings of Ratner and Kahn (2002), our research aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms for the self-other difference in the variety-seeking tendency. Specifically, we will examine two broad categories of mechanisms, one interpersonal (i.e., accountability) and the other intrapersonal (i.e., focalism).

Interpersonal Explanation: Accountability

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between choices for self and others is that one is more accountable for his/her choice in the latter than in the former. When people make choices for other people, they are implicitly or explicitly expected to justify their choices to others (Tetlock 1992). In situations of high accountability, people usually tend to exert more effort in generating and evaluating "objectively compelling" reasons that should appear "socially acceptable" or "normatively correct." Such a shift from searching for subjectively justifiable reasons to socially justifiable ones has significant effects in many choice situations (see Tetlock and Lerner [1999] for a review). In particular, cultural norms loom larger and play a greater role in consumer choice under accountability than under no-accountability situations (Briley, Morris, and Simonson 2000). According to Ratner and Kahn (2002), people have the naive expectation that others prefer more variety than they themselves do. If such a norm of variety for others exists, we can expect that people will choose more variety for others than for themselves and that this tendency will be even larger when they have to justify their choices to others because social norms and expectations play an even more potent role in judgments under accountability than under no accountability.

H1: Variety-seeking tendency for others will be more pronounced when one is explicitly accountable than when not.

Intrapersonal Explanation: Misprediction of Future Satiation and Focalism

Another contributor to the greater variety-seeking tendency for others than for self is a cognitive one. The literature on the variety-seeking tendency suggests that one may mispredict the rate of one's own satiation in the future (McAlister and Pessemier 1982; Read and Loewenstein 1995). For example, those planning for future consumption of familiar products (e.g., snacks, groceries) may mispredict the rate of satiation that occurs with repeated consumption of the same item. In the case when choosing for others, we hypothesize that focalism may make the misprediction of satiation more problematic.

Research on focalism indicates that people focus too much on the current occurrence in question (i.e., the focal event) and fail to consider the consequences of other events (Wilson et al. 2000). By failing to consider the occurrence of other future events, people overestimate how much the focal event (e.g., consumption) will occupy their lives. In the context of planning future consumption, people focus too much on consumptions per se without fully considering other life events they might experience during the interconsumption period (e.g., go to the grocery store, meet friends, watch TV, do laundry, etc.). Consequently, they view the interconsumption interval as so brief (i.e., they experience time contraction) that it is as though they believe future consumptions will occur simultaneously. Hence, people become afraid of rapid satiation, avoid consuming the same item again, and instead switch to a different, sometimes less preferred, alternative in order to maximize their satisfaction.

Interestingly, research on the actor-observer bias (Jones and Nisbett 1972) suggests that focalism may be more pronounced when understanding others than understanding self. According to Jones and Nisbett (1972), an observer does not have sufficient information about the situations an actor is faced with. In the context of consumer choice, an observer may not have enough information about events that may influence an actor between interconsumption intervals, but an actor himself/herself has a better understanding of those events. An actor knows that he/she has to do many things during a given interconsumption period, but an observer does not know what these intervening events might be. Consequently, an observer will focus more on the consumption per se than an actor will. This suggests that time contraction would be greater for an observer than an actor and that an observer would predict satiation to occur faster for an actor than for himself/herself; hence an observer would seek more variety for an actor than for himself/herself. If so, when an observer is induced to think about the intervening events that might occur to an actor between consumptions (i.e., defocalization), the variety-seeking tendency by an observer for an actor will be reduced.

H2: Individuals will expect others to become satiated faster than themselves with repeated consumption of the same item.

H3: Defocusing will attenuate the variety-seeking tendency in choice for others.

STUDY 1

Study 1 was designed to test the effect of accountability on the variety-seeking tendency in choice for others. We asked participants to make choices for another person under an accountable and a nonaccountable situation. We predicted participants would seek more variety for others when they were held accountable for their choices than when they were not.

Method

One hundred fifteen undergraduate students enrolled in a marketing course at a large university participated in the study. Students were told that a snack company was conducting a marketing survey on various snacks as gifts. The experimenter displayed nine snacks, all of which were familiar to the students, and asked the participants to choose five snacks for another student. Participants were explicitly informed that they did not have to choose five different snacks and that they could choose five snacks of any combination (e.g., five of the same snack).

Students were randomly assigned to either the accountability or the no accountability condition. In the accountability condition, participants were instructed that they would be paired with another participant and were asked to choose five snacks for their partners. They were then asked to write down the reasons why they chose the particular snacks for their partners, and they were subsequently told that each pair of partners would exchange their response sheets with each other. Accordingly, the participants expected both their choices and reasons to be evaluated by their partners. However, those participants in the no accountability condition performed the same task without the justification procedure so that they did not expect that their partners would evaluate their choices. In neither condition were participants provided with any information about their partners' preferences. To make the situation realistic and engaging, all participants were assured that they would actually receive the snacks that their partners chose for them at the end of the study.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis confirmed our prediction that subjects who were asked to justify their choices would choose more variety for their partners than those who were not ($t(112) = 2.68$, $p < .01$). Namely, the average number of different snacks chosen for others was higher in the accountability condition ($M = 4.82$) than in the no accountability condition ($M = 4.48$). The finding of study 1 supports the hypothesis that the need to justify choices to others (e.g., accountability) causes more variety-seeking tendency in choices for others. However, one may point out that the accountability effect on the variety-seeking tendency may not be limited to choices for others, such that people would seek more variety even for themselves under accountability. We will address this issue in the conclusion of this article.

STUDY 2

Study 2 addressed the intrapersonal mechanism of the variety-seeking tendency for others, which was not addressed by Ratner and Kahn (2002). Specifically, we examined whether people would expect satiation with repeated consumption of an item to occur more quickly for others than for themselves. Participants were asked to predict either their own or another's satisfaction with repeated consumption of their favorite snack over 5 days. We predicted that participants' estimates of satisfaction would drop faster for others than for self.

Method

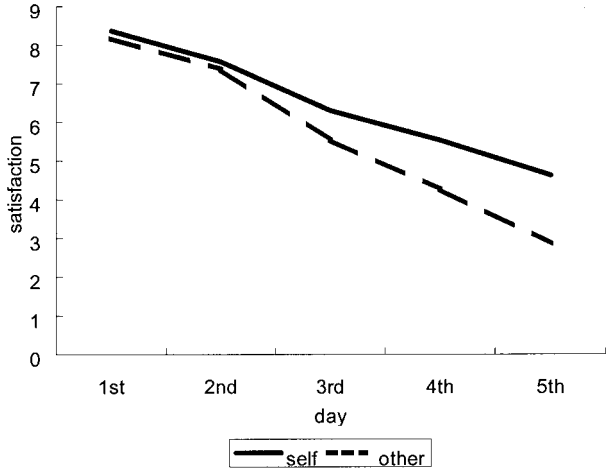
Seventy college students participated in the study to fulfill a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to either the self or the other condition. Participants in the self condition first chose their favorite snack from the list of nine snacks. They were then asked to imagine that they had eaten their favorite snack in the list once a day for 5 consecutive days and to rate what their satisfaction would be after eating the snack each day on an 11-point scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). The same procedure was employed in the other condition, except that participants were asked to imagine that one of their friends had eaten his or her own favorite snack in the list once a day for five consecutive days and to predict the satisfaction level of their friend each day on the same scale.

Results and Discussion

The predicted level of satisfaction over five days is shown in figure 1. The data pattern in figure 1 seems to support our hypothesis. Namely, the decrease in the predicted level of satisfaction with repeated consumption of the favorite snack seems steeper for others than for self. To test statistically whether this was indeed the case, we conducted a 2 (target: self vs. other) × 5 (time: 5 days) ANOVA with target as a between-subjects factor and time as a within-subjects factor. The main effect of time was significant ($F(4, 65) = 67.61$, $p < .001$), such that participants expected that satisfaction from eating one's favorite snack would decrease with repeated consumption of it, which was not unexpected. However, more importantly, there was a significant interaction effect between target and time ($F(4, 65) = 2.67$, $p < .05$), indicating that the decrease in the predicted level of satisfaction with time (i.e., satiation) was different for the self and the other conditions. A detailed analysis of the interaction effect reveals that at time 1 (day 1 to day 2), the difference in the degree of expected satiation between self and other was not significant ($F < 1$). However, the difference was either significant or marginally significant at all subsequent time intervals (time 2

FIGURE 1

SATISFACTION WITH REPEATED CONSUMPTION OF SAME SNACK OVER TIME FOR BOTH SELF AND OTHER (STUDY 2)



[day 2 to day 3]: $F(1, 68) = 4.88$, $p < .05$; time 3 [day 3 to day 4]: $F(1, 68) = 5.90$, $p < .05$; time 4 [day 4 to day 5]: $F(1, 68) = 2.95$, $p < .09$). Although participants predicted equal satiation between self and other for the first 2 consecutive days, they expected higher rates of satiation in their friends from the third day on.

The result of study 2 indicates that people expect others to become satiated with repeated consumption of an item more quickly than they themselves would. We believe that such a differential expectation of satiation for self versus others would in part contribute to the tendency to seek more variety for others than for self.

STUDY 3

Why do people expect satiation to occur more rapidly for others than for self? We hypothesized earlier that when choosing items for others, one may focus too much on the consumptions at hand, with little consideration of the intervening events that may occur during an interconsumption period. However, one is relatively more aware of the intervening events that will occur for oneself than for others during the same time span. In essence, one considers one's own consumptions in the context of many other events (i.e., defocusing), but fails to consider such contexts for others. It then follows that a "defocusing" manipulation should weaken the tendency toward greater variety in choice for others.

Method

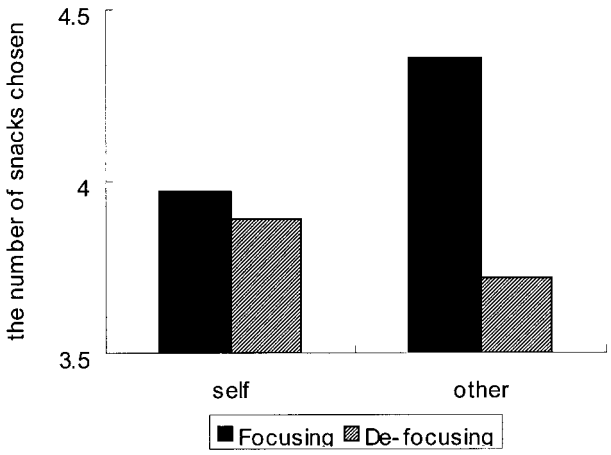
One hundred fifty-five college students participated in the study for course credit. We assigned participants to two conditions, focusing and defocusing. Orthogonal to the focusing manipulation, participants were assigned to either the self or other condition. Participants in the focusing condition were asked to choose five snacks in the list of the same nine snacks used in studies 1 and 2, which they or their friends would consume on each day for 5 consecutive days. However, the participants in the defocusing condition made such choices after generating a list of all the activities that they or their friends might do in each of the 5 days. Specifically, the participants in the defocusing condition were provided with a response sheet on which they could write down their (or their friends') daily schedules for 5 days. After completing the activity-listing procedure, they made choices for five snacks they (or their friends) would consume for 5 consecutive days, as did participants in the focusing condition. We expected that the defocusing manipulation would move participants' attention away from consumptions per se and eventually make them choose less variety, especially when choosing for their friends.

Results and Discussion

The number of different snacks chosen in each condition is displayed in figure 2. We conducted a 2 (target: self vs. other) × 2 (focusing: focusing vs. defocusing) ANOVA. The main effect of focusing was significant ($F(1, 151) = 4.92$, $p < .03$), indicating that the variety-seeking tendency was significantly weakened in the defocusing condition compared to the focusing condition (3.80 vs. 4.17). More importantly and as we expected, the interaction effect of target and focusing was significant ($F(3, 151) = 2.92$, $p < .05$). As predicted, although the variety-seeking tendency was greater in choice for others than for self in the focusing conditions (4.36 vs. 3.97; $t(81) = 3.02$, $p < .01$), it became almost identical for self and others in the defocusing conditions (3.89 vs. 3.72; $t < 1$). Further analysis reveals that this attenuation of the self-other difference in the variety-

FIGURE 2

NUMBER OF SNACKS CHOSEN FOR BOTH SELF AND OTHERS IN DAILY CHOICE (STUDY 3)



seeking tendency occurred largely because the defocusing manipulation significantly weakened the variety-seeking tendency in choosing snacks for others (4.36 vs. 3.72; $t(81) = 3.02$, $p < .01$) but not for self (3.97 vs. 3.89; $t < 1$).

Taken together, studies 2 and 3 suggest that participants focus exclusively on consumption per se with little consideration of other activities, experience greater time contraction, expect greater satiation, and consequently choose more variety when choosing for others than for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Our research demonstrated that the variety-seeking tendency that commonly occurs in choice for self is even greater in choices for others, and it explored the underlying mechanisms for this phenomenon. In agreement with Ratner and Kahn (2002), we found that the variety-seeking tendency increased when choosers were held accountable for their choices for others compared to when they were not. We also investigated the intrapersonal mechanism behind the greater variety-seeking tendency in choices for others. Study 2 showed that people expect satiation with repeated consumption of the same item to occur more quickly for others than for self. Study 3 demonstrated that the result of study 2 stems from the fact that focusing is more problematic in making choices for others than for self and that defocusing can weaken the tendency toward variety in choices for others.

As we pointed out earlier, one might argue that accountability will increase the variety-seeking tendency in choices not just for others but also for self. To examine this possibility, we asked a separate group of marketing students ($n = 74$) to make choices for themselves under either accountability or no accountability. The procedure was virtually identical to that of study 1. However, there was no difference in variety-seeking tendency between the accountability and no accountability conditions when participants made choices for self (4.24 vs. 4.03; $t(72) = .84$, $p > .40$). Hence, accountability appears to make individuals seek more variety for others but not for self.

Although we examined accountability and focusing as major mechanisms of the variety-seeking tendency in choice for others, we do not mean to argue that we covered a complete list of both intra- and interpersonal mechanisms of the variety-seeking tendency. Some other important mechanisms might have been missing in our research. For example, we did not examine one's uncertainty about others' preferences. Participants in our research might have chosen more variety for others because they did not know what others liked and disliked. Choosing a variety of items for others seems natural and even reasonable when one lacks information about others' preferences. Nonetheless, there are reasons to believe that the preference uncertainty cannot solely account for our findings. In a recent study of ours, participants were asked to imagine that the others had the same preferences as they themselves, but they still displayed a greater variety-seeking tendency in choice for others than for self (Choi et al. 2005).

Moreover, the situation will become more complicated when one deals with gift-giving behavior, which is one of the most common cases of choosing for others in real life. Gift-giving behavior should be distinguished from simple choice behavior for others because other factors, such as a desire to maintain a good relationship or to deliver a good impression, can intervene in the situation. Gifts function as an important means to build or enhance relationships. Satisfaction with a gift in terms of pure utility maximization is not the only thing that comes to mind in such situations. In particular, gifts should bring a feeling of thoughtfulness to recipients. Variety may work in this process of inference of thoughtfulness. One may believe that a gift recipient will infer thoughtfulness from a variety of items. Therefore, one's belief about the relationship between thoughtfulness and variety may also affect one's variety-seeking tendency in choice for others.

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