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Background

Higgins (2012) identified two chronic motivation orientations. A **promotion orientation** focuses on the attainment of goals, changing from the current situation to a more satisfactory one. In contrast, individuals of a **prevention orientation** view the fulfillment of a goal as a means of gaining security or avoiding danger. Given this distinction, we investigated its relevance to the context of ethical decision making.

Triune Ethics Theory (TET, Narvaez, 2008) postulates multiple ethical orientations based on formative experiences. They include:

ETHIC OF SAFETY: Self-protective morality. Emerges from stress reactivity.

ETHIC OF ENGAGEMENT: Relational presence based in relational hormones. Involves emotional systems that drive intimacy and compassion;

ETHIC OF IMAGINATION: Reflective abstraction. Source of deliberative reasoning based in recently evolved parts of brain (e.g, prefrontal cortex);

We examined self-reported past moral action history for Safety and Engagement.

Hypotheses

1. We hypothesized that a prevention motivation would correlate with Safety action (bunker and wallflower combined) and a promotion motivation orientation would correlate with Engagement Calm action.
2. Second, we expected that Engagement action would predict prosocial and benevolent moral decisions.
3. We investigated the effects of priming on two types of moral decision, a benevolent act and a measure of pro-sociality.
 - a. We hypothesized that priming effects on benevolence would be larger between subjects of different **motivation** orientations (promotion or prevention),
 - b. We expected that priming effects for **prosocial** action would be stronger between subjects of different moral action histories (Engagement, Safety).

Method

Participants: 129 undergraduates

Measures:

- **Chronic Regulatory Focus:** Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001), measuring Promotion and Prevention motivation.
- **Moral Action History Measure** (new), see below.
- **Benevolence:** Action for the Less Fortunate (ALF; Narvaez, Brooks & Mattan, 2011), see below
- **Prosociality:** Social Value Orientation (SVO, van Lange 1997), see below.

Procedure:

Participants were assigned randomly to one of three rooms (1) provoking fear (promoting Safety ethic), (2) instilling comfort and tranquility (promoting Engagement ethic) (3) neutral room (standard university office) as control condition. Participants completed the RFQ as first task, i.e. before priming took place.

Method (cont.)

We developed a Moral Action History Measure on 80 items factor analyzed to 14 items. It uses a 9-point response scale (1=never, 9=several times a day) for the question "how often in the past year did you...". We used the items categorized as **Safety Action** (n=4; e.g., "exploded with anger") and **Engagement Action** (n=4; "Really connected with others").

The **benevolence task (ALF)** was used to assess the subject's willingness to participate in certain acts to aid the less fortunate. The measure consists of 9 items asking if the individual would be willing to volunteer, donate money, advocate, vote, etc. to help the interests of the less fortunate.

In the **prosocial task (SVO)**, the subject makes a choice between three different distributions of points (representing **prosocial**, **individualistic**, and **competitive** choices) that are allocated between the subject and a unknown person. If a subject makes at least 6 out of 9 choices of one kind, the subject is categorized that way.

We examined correlations using linear regression. For statistical comparison, we used the t-test or the Kolmogorov-Smirnov-Test in cases the data was not normally distributed (significance level: 0.05 in both cases). The data was analyzed in *Mathematica* 8.0.

Results

Hypothesis 1. As expected, we found a negative correlation between safety and promotion ($r = -0.41$, $p = 0.015$); subjects with higher Safety action histories were less promotion oriented. Contrary to the hypothesis, we did not find a significant effect for Engagement.

When analyzing the data only for subjects that scored high in either orientation (i.e., are above the median value) and comparing these group results, no significant difference was found between high Safety and high Engagement with respect to their motivation orientations nor for high Promotion and high Prevention on Safety or Engagement.

Hypothesis 2. With respect to the moral decisions, only one significant correlation was found between Engagement action history and benevolence ($r = 0.6$, $p < 0.001$). **Those with higher Engagement action history scores were more benevolent.** The group analysis confirmed this result, those scoring high in Engagement donated 4.4 more ($p = 0.004$) than those high in Safety. There were no differences for the prosocial value orientation.

Results (cont.)

Hypothesis 3. The effects of priming were more complex than we hypothesized. **Overall, benevolence showed no significant priming.** The **SVO showed priming by room** (1) for individualistic choices (relative distribution. among rooms: 1: 41.2%; 2: 29.4%; 3: 29.4%). When broken down by orientation, SVO revealed a more complex priming pattern: **Both promotion and Safety increase cooperative choices in room (1) as well as individualistic choices in rooms (1) and (2).** Also, Engagement subjects and those scoring high in prevention made more individualistic choices in room (1) compared to the benchmark (54.5% vs. 41.2% in latter case), and the latter also made more cooperative choices in room (2).

Conclusions and Implications

With the exception of a negative correlation between Safety and Promotion, our results revealed that motivation orientations and TET action histories are largely independent constructs. Engagement action history supported benevolence choice. Priming fear had a seemingly paradoxical effect in increasing cooperative choices, at least in the case of a Safety history. Further research needs to tease out these effects.

References

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