The Interindividual-Intergroup Discontinuity Effect

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Introduction

The interindividual-intergroup discontinuity effect refers to the psychological phenomenon where in circumstances of social interaction, groups have a tendency to be more competitive and less cooperative with other groups than individuals are in their interactions. In most of the previous experiments performed on the discontinuity effect, it was shown that groups are significantly more prone to competition and self-interest, and that they are more prone to exploit cooperation from other groups (Wildschut, Pinter, Insko, Vevea & Schoepfl, 2003; Wildschut, Insko & Pinter, 2007). This is why this phenomenon is an area of interest in social psychology; because exploiting cooperation is a violation of the norms of fairness and reciprocity. So why would groups be so much more accepting of the idea of violating these moral norms in order to promote their own self-interested goals than individuals?

In most of the research studies that are attempting to explore the interindividual-intergroup discontinuity effect the experimenters use a prisoner’s dilemma game (PDG) matrix in order to compare the cooperation and competitiveness of groups and individuals. In this type of matrix the participants are given two choices that correspond to cooperation and competition where they receive monetary endowments, the values of which depend upon the choices of the participants combined with the choices of another group. In this PDG matrix the participants can choose either the cooperative choice X or the competitive choice Y.

In the PDG matrix the best possible outcome for a group comes when the group chooses the competitive Y choice and the other group chooses the cooperative choice X. If both groups choose the cooperative X choice, then each group will receive the same monetary value, but it is slightly less than the values received by a competitive group’s exploitation of a cooperative group. If both groups choose to be competitive, then both groups receive an equal monetary value, but it is half of the amount received by the competitive group’s exploitation of the cooperative group. The worst possible outcome for a group comes when they choose the cooperative X choice, but the other group chooses the competitive Y choice (see Figure 1). This matrix is taken from Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult & Van Lange, (2003).

Figure 1: PDG Matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
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Literature Review

Scott T. Wolf, Chester A. Insko, Jeffrey L. Kirchner, and Tim Wildshut in their 2008 experiment used four different types of matrices to test the groups or individuals on competitiveness. These matrices
were a prisoner’s dilemma game, a leader, a chicken, and a battle of the sexes. The leader, the chicken, and the battle of the sexes matrices were similar to the PDG matrix in that they were 2x2 matrices; the only difference being that the outcomes were slightly different. Each matrix had a clear choice for cooperation and a clear choice for exploitation/competition. They found that the PDG and the chicken matrices were the two that showed a statistically significant tendency for groups to be more exploitative/competitive than individuals. Also, they eliminated the discontinuity effect of the Chicken matrix when mutual competition was associated with low outcomes.

In Pinter, Wildschut, Insko, et. al’s 2007 experiment on the role of leader accountability showed that being a leader had an affect on discontinuity. In their 2007 experiment Pinter et. al would run experimental sessions similar to previous experiments where the participants were given different types of matrices, such as the ones previously mentioned, but one of the group members was selected to be either the accountable decision maker (where the group members knew that they were responsible for the choice) or the unaccountable decision maker (where the decision maker was not accountable to the other group members for the decision). They showed that leaders who were accountable were more competitive because of normative pressures to benefit the in-group. They also showed that “when guilt proneness was high, unaccountable leaders were less competitive than leaders who were accountable and did not differ significantly from individuals” (Pinter et. al, 2007).

Kosuke Takemura, and Masaki Yuki performed a study in 2007 that attempted to determine whether the discontinuity effect was still significant in interdependent cultures such as Japan as it is in the independent cultures of the West. They found that the discontinuity effect was still significant in interdependent cultures as well.

Relationship to Other Topics

Many of the studies that fall into the realm of behavioral decision theory are researching situations where frequently people will deviate from what is considered to be the normative standard for that situation. Many of the examples from Baron’s book describe situations where peoples’ tendencies or responses will change as a result of the addition, subtraction, change, etc. of an aspect of that situation that should not influence their tendencies or responses. The interindividual-intergroup discontinuity effect is a phenomenon that definitely falls within this type of social phenomenon. The fact that a person is either in a group with two other people, or by themselves in a situation of social interaction should not cause them to tend to be more exploitative/competitive. The discontinuity effect can also be placed within the category of social dilemmas such as cooperation versus defection which Baron discusses in chapter 18 of his book. In the situations that Baron provides there is a choice of cooperating and doing what is best for the whole or defecting and doing what is in the decision maker’s self-interest. The experiments done on the discontinuity effect present this choice of self-interest versus what is in the best interest of all, but the all is another individual or group instead of society as a whole. Fairness and reciprocity are not put at odds with self-interest, but the parties involved must forgo the best possible outcome for everyone to benefit the most equally. As most of the studies on the discontinuity effect show groups are less willing to make this sacrifice than individuals are.

References


