

Doing the right thing: individual differences in decision making

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When people engage in social interactions, it is believed that they adopt one of four possible mental models of the social relationship (communal sharing, authority ranking, reciprocity among equals, or rational market-based). The model adopted serves to define the “rules” for proper conduct of the people involved and appropriate ways of making decisions in those relationships, and what constitutes fairness. Some types of relationship emphasise equal status and commonalities among members, others emphasise differences. Although there are cultural norms for which model to apply to particular relationships (e.g. friendship relations typically invoke a reciprocity and equal status, not authority ranking), these can change with the situation and often people have a choice of legitimate models. In this study, we investigated whether people’s tendency to apply particular social relational models was predictable from their personality and the values they held.

One hundred and fifty-five adults were recruited from the general community of Perth to take part in the study (18 years to 75+, 53% female). Participants completed questionnaires to assess: their preference for each of the four social relational models in different hypothetical relationships to achieve fair outcomes, their personal values (e.g. universalism, power, achievement, benevolence), their personality traits, and the kinds of relational model that they tend to apply to their own real-life relationships. They also completed some memory tasks.

We found that preference for communal sharing was predicted by personal values of universalism and not power, and the personality trait of openness to experience. Preference for authority ranking was associated with low levels of openness to experience and relatively greater difficulty with the memory tasks. Those favouring a rational, market-based model for relationships also rated power as an important personal value, universalism as unimportant, and they tended to do well at memory tasks. Interestingly, the relational models that people actually applied to their own personal relationships had no influence on relational model preferences in hypothetical scenarios.

These findings indicate that individuals vary in which social relational model they consider to be fairest and most appropriate within a given scenario. Preferences were related to the individual’s personal values, indicating that more equitable models are chosen by people who value universalism over power and achievement. Ability to remember complex information predicted greater preference for the relatively complex, market-based model. However, most aspects of personality and one’s own profile of personal relationships were irrelevant to one’s perception of the fairness and appropriateness of different models.