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What Am I Supposed to Say?: Anticipating Group Discussion Promotes Cognitive Consistency in Distributive Choices for Others

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Abstract

Recent research using attention-monitoring techniques and fMRI has revealed that a shared neurocognitive mechanism underlies both social decision making concerning the welfare of others and purely economic decision making for oneself. Such commonalities have been demonstrated mainly in isolated contexts, and it remains to be seen whether they extend to settings involving interactions with fellow decision makers. Using a behavioral study of distributive choices for others and gambling decisions for self, we investigated how self-censorship in social contexts may mitigate the cognitive commonalities demonstrated in isolated contexts. Results showed that, in both tasks, individual participants took more time to respond when they expected subsequent discussion with another participant about reaching a consensus. In addition, we found a cognitive pattern unique to distributive choices for others only: participants expecting social interaction made their distributive choices in a more cognitively consistent manner, aligning with a rationale that they thought would be defensible in subsequent discussion. No such systematic pattern was observed in gambling choices for self. These results indicate that anticipation of subsequent social interaction triggers self-censoring processes for some (but not all) tasks, whereby participants pre-edit their individual decisions systematically to prepare for social interaction.