



Why and when justice sensitivity leads to pro- and antisocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

People differ in how injustice-sensitive they are either as victims or as observers. Whereas observer sensitivity is positively related to cooperative behavior, victim sensitivity promotes antisocial and egoistic behavior. The present article investigates the dynamics underlying these effects. Participants played an online-based public goods game and were informed about the number of people who violated a fairness rule in previous rounds of the game (no, some, or many violators). High victim-sensitive participants contributed less to the public good even in the “some violators” condition. High observer-sensitive participants contributed more to the public good even in the “many violators” condition. The findings correspond with the sensitivity to mean intentions model and cannot be explained by individual differences in general trust.

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1. Introduction

People differ with regard to how they react towards injustice. Some people are deeply concerned about injustice, they are more likely to interpret social situations in terms of justice, they experience strong negative emotions in the face of injustice, and they tend to ruminate longer about alleged injustice. Others are relatively insensitive towards injustice: Justice is not a frequent issue in their social lives, injustice is not emotionally disturbing or cognitively absorbing; those people are also less motivated to act against injustices. Justice Sensitivity has been shown to be a relatively stable and consistent personality variable that predicts how and when people react towards experienced or witnessed injustice (Mohiyeddini & Schmitt, 1997; Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005; Schmitt & Mohiyeddini, 1996; Schmitt et al., 2009).

People can experience justice-related situations from different perspectives (Mikula, 1994): They can be victims, beneficiaries, or observers of injustice. Accordingly, people can be justice sensitive from the victim's perspective, the beneficiary's perspective, and the observer's perspective. Recent research has shown that these three justice sensitivity perspectives are positively intercorrelated, and that they all correlate positively with justice-related traits and attitudes, such as belief in a just world, belief in immanent and ultimate justice, and sense of injustice (Schmitt et al., 2005). On the other hand, the three perspectives correlate differently with other personality constructs and behavioral outcomes. More specifically, observer sensitivity and beneficiary sensitivity

correlate positively with prosocial dispositions and other-related concerns such as empathy, social responsibility, modesty, or agreeableness, whereas victim sensitivity correlates positively with self-related concerns such as jealousy, neuroticism, vengeance, and paranoia (Schmitt et al., 2005). Furthermore, both vignette and experimental studies have shown that observer and beneficiary sensitivity correlate positively with prosocial behaviors such as solidarity with the disadvantaged and equal split offers in a dictator game, whereas victim sensitivity correlates positively with antisocial behaviors such as immoral choices in enticing situations and delinquent behavior in real life (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005).

The present study aims to clarify these asymmetries among justice sensitivity perspectives with regard to pro- and antisocial behavior. Specifically, we will investigate under which conditions victim sensitivity and observer sensitivity lead to pro- and antisocial behavior in a social dilemma situation. The theoretical framework underlying this research is the “sensitivity to mean intentions” (SeMI) model (Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009). A high sensitivity to mean intentions is defined as a particular readiness to respond to contextual cues suggesting that there is a danger of being exploited by others. The model posits that contextual meanness cues can evoke a state of suspiciousness and that people who are sensitive to mean intentions have a lower threshold for the activation of a suspicious mindset. In other words: For people who are sensitive to mean intentions, even slight cues of “meanness” can evoke a state of suspiciousness. In the present research, we assume that victim sensitivity is an indicator of sensitivity to mean intentions.

In terms of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; Higgins & Spiegel, 2004), suspiciousness involves a prevention focus, which

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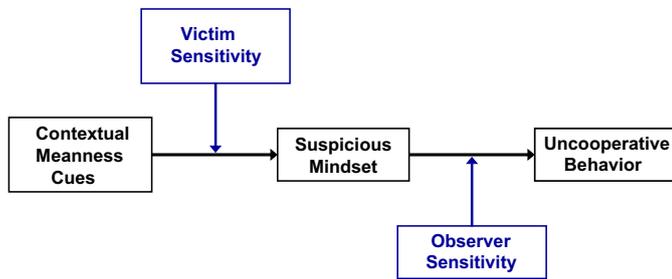


Fig. 1. Moderator effects of victim and observer sensitivity according to the SeMI model.

is a regulatory state concerned with protection and safety (more generally, the absence or presence of negative outcomes). A suspicious mindset should have all social-cognitive features that are typical for a prevention focus, such as subtractive counterfactual thinking, a higher prevalence of more stable, universal, and personal attributions, a more conservative response bias, and a quicker, but also more tenacious goal-pursuit (Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). Most importantly, when a suspicious mindset is activated, people are more likely to behave uncooperatively and antisocially in order to prevent being exploited (Deutsch, 1958; Vohs, Baumeister, & Chin, 2007; Yamagishi & Sato, 1986). Since only slight contextual cues of meanness or untrustworthiness can evoke a suspicious mindset among people high in victim sensitivity, these people should be particularly likely to behave uncooperatively and antisocially when confronted with such cues.

At that point, it is important to distinguish victim sensitivity from general trust. Trust has been defined as an "... expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon" (Rotter, 1967; p. 651) or, more simply, as a general belief in human benevolence (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). The conceptual difference between general trust and victim sensitivity is that trust merely entails an expectancy regarding others' benevolence, that is, a *cognitive* aspect, whereas victim sensitivity entails both a *cognitive* and a *motivational* aspect: People high in victim sensitivity are more likely to affix mean intentions to other people, but at the same time, they strongly disapprove of such intentions. For people high in victim sensitivity, the possibility that other people harbor mean intentions is highly aversive. This is what makes them more sensitive towards meanness cues. General trust, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply a motivational aspect, and therefore, no particular sensitivity towards cues of other persons' alleged meanness (Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009).

The SeMI model also formulates conditions that mitigate the translation of suspiciousness into uncooperative behavior. These conditions can be features of the particular situation (such as the likelihood of being punished for behaving uncooperatively) or features of the person (such as high moral standards or a strong moral identity; cf. Aquino & Reed, 2002). Recent research suggests that moral identity (as one aspect of a person's moral self-regulation) serves as a buffer against immoral judgments and behavior (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). Observer sensitivity is assumed to be closely connected to one's moral identity (Gollwitzer et al., 2005; Schmitt et al., 2005). Thus, we expect that people high in observer sensitivity should refrain from behaving antisocially even if they have strong reason to believe that other people harbor mean intentions and that they might be exploited by others. The conceptual relations between contextual meanness cues, victim sensitivity, observer sensitivity, and uncooperative behavior are graphically depicted in Fig. 1.

Taken together, the present study aims to test three hypotheses. *First*, we expect that people high in victim sensitivity behave unco-

operatively when they are confronted with only slight cues of meanness. *Second*, we expect that people high in observer sensitivity refrain from behaving uncooperatively even when they are confronted with strong cues of meanness. *Third*, general trust does not imply a heightened sensitivity towards mean intentions; thus, people low in trust should behave uncooperatively even if they are not confronted with any cues of meanness.

These three hypotheses will be tested by means of social dilemma paradigm (Dawes, 1980; Komorita & Parks, 1996; Messick & Brewer, 1983). Each individual involved in a social dilemma can decide to either cooperate or not (i.e., to "defect"). The payoff structure in a social dilemma is constructed such that the individual payoff is highest when a person defects while the others cooperate ("free-rider"), whereas the individual payoff is lowest when a person cooperates while the others defect ("sucker"). Thus, an individual's decision whether to cooperate or to defect in a social dilemma is largely shaped by his or her expectation regarding the intentions and actions of others (Brann & Foddy, 1987; Dawes, 1980; De Cremer, Snyder, & Dewitte, 2001; Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). In the present study, we manipulated to what extent individuals had reason to believe that other players in the social dilemma situation might defect. That is, we provided our participants with alleged information about the rate of "free-riders" in the game. This information was used as cues of meanness or untrustworthiness (see below).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Part 1: personality assessment

The study was conducted online and consisted of two parts. In part 1, several personality variables including justice sensitivity from the victim's and the observer's perspective as well as general trust were measured via self-report items. The two justice sensitivity perspectives were assessed with the 10-item scales developed by Schmitt et al. (2005). An example item for the victim sensitivity scale is "It bothers me when others receive something that ought to be mine". An example item for the observer sensitivity scale is "I am upset when someone is undeservingly worse off than others". As in previous studies, both scales yielded good internal consistencies (victim sensitivity: $\alpha = .83$; observer sensitivity: $\alpha = .85$) with item-total correlations ranging between .46 and .65. The intercorrelation between the two perspectives was positive and significant, $r = .43$; $p < .01$. General trust was measured with a six-item scale by Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994). This measure has been repeatedly and successfully used in the social dilemma literature (e.g., De Cremer et al., 2001; Parks, Henager, & Scamhorn, 1996; Stouten, De Cremer, & Van Dijk, 2006), and it has been attested sufficient reliability and predictive validity (Yamagishi, 1998). An example item is "Most people are trustworthy". The scale yielded good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$). General trust was negatively correlated with victim sensitivity ($r = -.12$; $p = .01$), and uncorrelated with observer sensitivity ($r = .02$; $p = .60$).

2.1.1. Sample

Four-hundred and sixty-six participants completed the online survey and produced exhaustive data. Since the study was advertised in online-forums and students' networks, the sample cannot be regarded representative. Women (82%) and students (62%) were overrepresented. Ages ranged between 18 and 53 years ($M = 24.8$; $SD = 5.8$). Participants received an e-mail that included a 12-digit random code, with which they logged themselves into the online survey. They were informed that those who completed the survey

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