

In fairness to future generations: The role of egocentrism, uncertainty, power, and stewardship in judgments of intergenerational allocations [☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we found that fairness judgments in intergenerational allocation decisions depend on (1) individuals' position in the intergenerational sequence (i.e., whether they are in the preceding or succeeding generation), (2) the amount of uncertainty about the effect of the preceding generation's decisions on the succeeding one, and (3) whether the preceding generation is primed with power. We found that both power priming and greater levels of uncertainty about the future consequences of present decisions can elicit stewardship attitudes, which may temper self-interested behavior on the part of the preceding generation. Our data also indicate that the *nature* of the uncertainty is important; it is not just a matter of how much future generations will be affected, but also whether or not they will be affected at all by the decisions of earlier generations. Our findings help to explain (1) how intergenerational inequities can occur even when people are explicitly focused on achieving fair allocations of resources between generations, and (2) how social responsibility concerns can motivate intergenerational beneficence in the face of intergenerational conflict.

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Introduction

Some of the most important issues in society today affect multiple generations of people. One of the most crucial aspects of intergenerational relations is the fact that the interests of present and future generations are not always aligned. For example, consumers today may enjoy the benefits of ever-increasing economic growth and consumption of non-replenishable resources, and experience minimal

burdens associated with these actions while contributing to long-term environmental degradation. Yet future generations of people may endure much of the burden from major global-scale changes in the environment involving delayed effects (such as ozone depletion, species extinction, and global warming) while gaining minimal benefits from and contributing little (or not at all) to the creation of such problems. In situations where consumption of resources is rewarding to the present generation and harmful to future generations, the present generation is faced with decisions involving tradeoffs between its own interests and those of future generations. In such cases, allocations of resources have the potential for an imbalance between the cost-bearers and the beneficiaries and, thus, considerations of justice and equity become relevant and necessary.

In most societies, there is a presumption of a moral obligation toward future generations. People generally value the outcomes to future generations (Kempton, Boster, &

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Hartley, 1995) and tend to agree that fairness in the distribution of resources across generations should be upheld to some degree if societies are to persist and flourish over time. The goal in our research is to explore some of the psychological barriers to implementing well intended fairness to future generations. We identify factors that can help explain why intergenerational inequities may still occur even when people are explicitly focused on making fair allocations of resources among generations. We also learn how some of these same factors may promote attitudes that can benefit future generations.

We begin our investigation with the proposition that, despite good intentions, individuals' judgments about what is fair for one generation to leave for the next depends on both (1) their position in the intergenerational sequence and (2) the uncertainty about how the behavior of the preceding generation affects the succeeding generation. We suggest that these factors (position and uncertainty) can invoke egocentric biases that influence fairness judgments in intergenerational allocation decisions. Further, we uncover new insights regarding the nature and role of uncertainty in intergenerational decisions, including how it may elicit social responsibility concerns in situations with extreme power asymmetry. Our findings across three experiments lead us to a broader discussion of intergenerational allocation behavior and its implications for both egocentric tendencies and stewardship attitudes.

Egocentric interpretations of fairness

There is a consensus among theorists and a convergence of empirical evidence that fairness judgments are typically biased in a self-serving manner, even though such subjective perceptions can appear objective and unbiased to moral reasoners themselves (e.g., Diekmann, Samuels, Ross, & Bazerman, 1997; Epley & Caruso, 2004; Messick & Sentis, 1979, 1983; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Individuals are motivated by self-interest to obtain benefits for and avoid burdens to themselves. They are also concerned with issues of justice and like to believe that they have contributed their fair share to others and the common good. Self-serving interpretations of fairness provide a convenient reconciliation of these two apparently conflicting goals: Individuals can have what they want *and* believe their actions are fair.

Research has confirmed the role of egocentric biases in resource allocation contexts including negotiations (e.g., Babcock, Loewenstein, Issacharoff, & Camerer, 1995; Bazerman & Neale, 1982; Neale & Bazerman, 1983) and social dilemmas (Wade-Benzoni, Tenbrunsel, & Bazerman, 1996). The bias manifests itself as a strong tendency for people to justify allocating more of a limited resource to themselves relative to others on the basis of fairness. Further, this effect has been found to generalize across different cultures (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002) highlighting the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. In this paper, we propose that self-serving biases in fairness judgments play a strong and

important role in the intergenerational domain. Specifically, we predict that people will believe it is fair for the preceding generation to leave fewer benefits for the succeeding one if they are in the preceding generation.

Pilot study

In order to demonstrate that fairness judgments would indeed differ by perspective in the intergenerational domain, we conducted a short pilot study. One-hundred and eight randomly selected travelers at an international airport read a short vignette based on the real-life crisis in the northeastern fishery (and fisheries around the world) where stocks of many species of fish are near collapse and there is much concern as to how a sustainable level of harvesting can be maintained.

Participants were either in the role of the preceding generation (generation x) ($N = 59$) or the succeeding one (generation $x + 1$) ($N = 49$). They were told that they were in the commercial fishing business, and had been informed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) about a problem of over-exploitation of the fish resource. (The NMFS is an actual organization whose responsibilities may include attempts to persuade fishers to reduce their harvests voluntarily.) The preceding generation had been asked by the NMFS to reduce their harvest by 50% in order to enable the species to sustain its existence into the future for the benefit of future generations of fishers. Participants rated the fairness of the request from the NMFS on a four-point scale, with "1" labeled as "very unfair" and "4" as "very fair."

The results confirmed that people think the request from the NMFS is fairer when they are in the generation that benefits from the request than when they are the ones who would decide whether or not to respond to the request. The difference in the means by condition for the ratings of fairness of the NMFS request was significant in the predicted direction (generation x condition: $M = 2.85$, $SD = .83$; generation $x + 1$ condition: $M = 3.12$, $SD = .53$; $F(1, 106) = 4.06$, $p = .047$).

Uncertainty in intergenerational decisions

A second factor that we posit will fundamentally influence intergenerational fairness judgments is uncertainty about how future generations will be affected by the actions of present generations. Decisions regarding the future inevitably involve uncertainty partly due to the actual number of possible events that can happen over time to prevent the occurrence of expected consequences, and partly due to our limited knowledge about the future (Jungermann & Fleischer, 1988). Future consequences of intergenerationally relevant decisions are often not well-determined and or even knowable. It may be uncertain whether a negative consequence will ever occur, or whether future technology for decreasing or mitigating the impact of the consequences will be available if they really should occur (Svenson,

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