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Do maximizers maximize for others? Self-other decision-making differences in maximizing and satisficing

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ABSTRACT

The current research provides initial evidence of self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers by focusing on how they make the tradeoff between the value and the effort an option requires when deciding for themselves and for others. Study 1 demonstrates that maximizers prefer a high-value but effort-consuming option both for themselves and for others, whereas satisficers prefer that option for others but not for themselves. Study 2 further shows that to attain high value with a choice, maximizers not only are willing to expend more effort themselves but also advise others to expend more effort; however, satisficers choose to expend less effort themselves but do not advise others to do so. In conclusion, the current research contributes to the relevant literature by demonstrating that maximizers maximize for both themselves and others, whereas satisficers satisfice for themselves but maximize for others.

1. Introduction

In choice situations, people vary in the extent to which they aspire for the best. Schwartz et al. (2002) proposed that individuals who expend substantial effort for the best option are maximizers, and those who expend less effort for a good-enough option are satisficers. Following Schwartz et al.' (2002) groundbreaking work, a large amount of theoretical (e.g., Bruine de Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff, 2007; Dalal, Diab, Zhu, & Hwang, 2015) and experimental (e.g., Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009; Luan & Li, 2017b; Ma & Roese, 2014; Mao, 2016; Shiner, 2015; Weaver, Daniloski, Schwarz, & Cottone, 2015) work has continued to investigate maximizing. These cumulative studies have greatly enriched our understanding of maximizing; however, nearly all of them focus on situations in which maximizers and satisficers make decisions for themselves and ignore situations in which the decision target is somebody else. The question remains concerning how maximizers and satisficers make decisions for others. In this article, we investigate the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers to address this important gap in the relevant literature.

Making decisions for others is very common in daily life. Studies on self-other decision-making show that making decisions for others is not always the same as making decisions for oneself. For example, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) found that choosing from a large set of options leaves individuals less satisfied than choosing from a small set of options, but Polman (2012) later observed the reverse of this choice-overload phenomenon among individuals making decisions for others: Individuals were more satisfied with a large assortment size in a situation where they decided on another's behalf. Similarly, the self-other decision-making asymmetry appears in many other decision-making phenomena, such as desirability-feasibility preferences (Baskin, Wakslak, Trope, & Novemsky, 2014; Lu, Xie, & Xu, 2013), omission bias (Zikmund-Fisher, Sarr, Fagerlin, & Ubel, 2006), confirmatory bias (Jonas, & Frey, 2003), the compromise effect (Chang, Chuang, Cheng, & Huang, 2012), and predecisional distortion (Polman, 2010). Thus, because self-other differences are common in decision-making, does self-other decision-making differ between maximizers and satisficers?

To answer this question, we investigate the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers by focusing on their desire to maximize the value of a choice and the effort they spend to attain this value. In contrast to satisficers, maximizers expend substantial effort to obtain the best possible results when they make decisions for themselves (Cheek & Schwartz, 2016; Luan & Li, 2017a). For example, past research has found that maximizers include a greater number of alternatives in their consideration set (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009; Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006; Nenkov, Morrin, Schwartz, Ward, & Hulland, 2008), make more comparisons among options (Schwartz et al., 2002), conduct more background research prior to making choices (Iyengar et al., 2006; Nenkov et al., 2008), and take more time when making decisions (Chowdhury et al., 2009; Misuraca, & Teuscher, 2013; Nenkov et al., 2008; Schwartz et al.,

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2002). Previous research has described various distinctions between maximizers and satisficers; however, we choose two characteristics—the desire for the best and the effort expended to attain the best—to distinguish between them in this initial exploration, for these are the two most salient characters of maximizers (see Schwartz et al., 2002). Focusing on these two characteristics, we pose our research question as follows: When deciding for others, do maximizers aim for the best regardless of the effort required (as they do for themselves), and do satisficers prefer a less valued but effortless option (as they do for themselves)?

Although related research is scarce, a few past studies have provided indirect support for the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers. Three main perspectives in the findings (on which we will elaborate in the following paragraphs) are as follows: (1) Randomly chosen decision makers focus on the value of an option rather than the effort required to attain value when making decisions for others but not for themselves (Baskin et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2013). (2) In contrast to satisficers, maximizers expend substantial effort to maximize the value of an option when making decisions for themselves (Cheek & Schwartz, 2016; Luan & Li, 2017a). (3) Even if the decision targets are themselves, maximizers still regard others' opinions as more important than their counterparts do (i.e., satisficers; Iyengar et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2002; Weaver et al., 2015).

Research in the self-other decision-making literature provides evidence that when making decisions for others, randomly chosen decision makers tend to focus on the value of their choices rather than the effort spent to obtain value. For example, Lu et al. (2013, Experiment 1a) found that when having to choose between a delicious (i.e., the attribute that represents the value) but far away (i.e., the attribute that represents the means to obtain the value) restaurant and an okay but near restaurant, participants were more likely to choose the former for others but the latter for themselves. Baskin et al. (2014) also found that as a gift giver, individuals preferred a high-value gift, although it might require substantial effort to attain value (e.g., a high-quality video game that needs many hours to learn how to play). As a gift receiver, individuals actually preferred the gift whose value was “good enough” and easy to attain (e.g., a middle-quality video game that is easy to play).

However, this pattern observed among average decision makers may not apply to maximizers. As previously discussed, the preferences for a high-value but effort-consuming choice also apply to maximizers when they make decisions for themselves—they expend substantial effort to maximize the value of their choice. In sum, it appears that maximizers making decisions for themselves are somewhat similar to average decision makers making decisions for others: They both focus on the value of their choices rather than the effort spent to attain value.

Essentially, the reason that people vary in making decisions for themselves and for others is because they hold different perspectives when making decisions for themselves and for somebody else. However, according to the literature on maximization, maximizers may not be the same as average decision makers. Maximizers are the type of decision makers who are good at viewing decisions from others' perspective, even when the decision targets are themselves. Maximizers rely more on external criteria to make their decisions (Iyengar et al., 2006; Parker, Bruine de Bruin, & Fischhoff, 2007), are more sensitive to social comparisons (Schwartz et al., 2002), and use other individuals as the criteria to make their own decisions (Weaver et al., 2015). In sum, when making decisions for themselves, maximizers adopt the perspective of others to view themselves, just as average decision makers do when making decisions for others.

In this research, we assume that maximizing tendency moderates the pattern of self-other decision-making differences. Specifically, satisficers follow the pattern found in studies on randomly chosen decision makers: They focus on the value regardless of the effort required when they make decisions for others, and they settle for a good but less effort-requiring option for themselves. In contrast, as can be inferred from previous paragraphs, maximizers focus on the value of a choice, regardless of the effort the choice requires, when deciding for both themselves and others.

2. Overview of the present studies

We conducted two studies to explore the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers. In study 1, we presented maximizers and satisficers a decision-making scenario in which they had to make a tradeoff between the value of products and the effort expended to attain value both for themselves and for others. We hypothesize that maximizers prefer high-value but effort-consuming products for both themselves and others, but satisficers prefer these types of products more for others than for themselves. In Study 2, maximizers and satisficers were asked to decide for themselves or advise an anonymous student regarding the amount of effort to expend on a course presentation. Similar to Study 1, we hypothesize that maximizers not only are willing to expend more effort themselves but also advise others to expend more effort. However, satisficers choose to expend less effort themselves but do not advise others to do so.

3. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to explore whether maximizers and satisficers vary in making decisions for themselves and others. In this experiment, the participants were instructed to indicate their relative preference between two movie tickets both for themselves and for somebody else. The two tickets were designed as a high-value but effort-consuming option and a middle-value but effortless one. The hypothesis to be tested is that maximizers prefer the high-value but effort-consuming option for both themselves and others, but satisficers prefer that option more for others than for themselves.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and design

A total of 79 students[1] (37 females, 42 males, M_{age} = 20.39, SD = 1.95) participated in this experiment in exchange for extra course credit. This experiment adopted a mixed design, with the decision target (self versus other) as the categorical within-subjects factor and maximizing tendency as the continuous between-subjects factor. The relative preference for the high-value option served as the dependent variable.

4.2. Procedure and materials

The participants were asked to imagine that they were choosing between a high-value but effort-consuming movie ticket (“Option A. Movie tickets to a brand-new movie that is premiering in your city. These tickets are only for the premier of the movie in a theater far from the school campus. Critics have called this a very exciting, well-done movie.”) and a middle-value but effortless one (“Option B. Movie tickets to a movie released several days ago in your city. These tickets can be redeemed for any theatre in the city, so you can choose the nearest theatre. Critics have said that the movie is good but might at times be somewhat boring.”). The decision scenario was based on a previous study conducted by Baskin et al. (2014). A pretest was conducted (see supplementary material) to examine whether the descriptions of the two options sufficiently represented a high-value (but

[1] Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), we determined that we required a sample of least 77 individuals to have sufficient power ($1 - \beta > 0.80$) to detect a medium-sized effect ($f^2 = 0.15$). Data collection ended on the day the minimum sample was obtained.

effort-consuming) one and a middle-value (but effortless) one. After reading the descriptions, all participants indicated their relative preferences when choosing for themselves (If you are choosing the tickets for yourself, which one do you prefer?) and for others (If you are choosing the ticket for a student from your college, which one do you prefer to choose for him/her?) on a nine-point scale anchored with the preferences for ticket A (= 9, *the high-value option*) and ticket B (= 1, *the effortless option*).

Following each question, participants' involvement was assessed ("I indicated my preferences as if I were choosing a ticket for myself (or for a student from my college)") using a nine-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). Involvement was used as the control variable. The two questions (choose for oneself or for somebody else) were presented in random order. The two ticket options were also presented in random order, and the preference scores were unified for further analyses; the higher the score, the higher the preference for the high-value option.

After that, participants performed a brief filler task and completed the short form of the Maximization Scale (Nenkov et al., 2008) to measure their maximizing tendency. The scale contains six items (e.g., "No matter what I do, I have the highest standard for myself." and "No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it is only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities."). Each item was rated on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The individual items were averaged to create a composite maximizing score ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.91$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.6$). Higher scores signaled more likely maximizers, whereas lower scores signaled more likely satisficers.

5. Results

5.1. Preliminary analyses

None of the participants guessed the hypothesis of the study correctly. Participants' levels of involvements were neither significantly influenced by decision target manipulation (t (78) = 1.07, $p = 0.29$) nor correlated with maximizing tendency (self: $r = 0.12$, $p = 0.28$; other: $r = 0.08$, $p = 0.47$). Relative preferences were not correlated with involvements ($r_{self} = -0.09, p = 0.42$; $r_{other} = -0.16, p = 0.17$), gender ($r_{self} = -0.20$, $p = 0.08$; $r_{other} = -0.01$, $p = 0.94$) and age ($r_{self} = -0.09$, $p = 0.45$; $r_{other} = -0.06$, $p = 0.60$). Descriptive statistics assessed in Study 1 are presented in Table 1.

5.2. Relative preference

We conducted a hierarchical linear regression (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2004) on relative preference, with a dummy variable for the decision target (0 = self, 1 = other), maximizing tendency, and their interaction as the independent variables. The main effect of the decision target on relative preference was significant, $\beta = 3.32$, t (77) = 2.41, $p = 0.018$, showing that individuals prefer to choose the high-value (but effort-consuming) option more for others than for themselves. The main effect of maximizing tendency on relative preference was also significant, $\beta = -0.67$, t (77) = 2.40, $p = 0.019$, indicating that overall, maximizers prefer the high-value option more than satisficers. More importantly, there was a significant decision target × maximization tendency interaction effect, $\beta = -0.66$, t (77) = −2.13, $p = 0.037$. As depicted in Fig. 1, satisficers (− 1 SD) preferred the high-value options more for others than for themselves, $\beta = 1.35$, t (77) = 2.70, $p = 0.008$, but maximizers' choice did not differ between choosing for themselves and choosing for others, $\beta = -0.09$, t (77) = −0.16, $p = 0.87$.

Table 1
Relative preferences for maximizers and satisficers when choosing for oneself or another.

	Self			Other		
	M	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*
Maximizers	5.50	2.58	36	5.44	2.23	36
Satisficers	4.28	2.43	43	5.49	2.10	43

Note: Maximizers and satisficers were divided by a median split of the results of the Maximization Scale.

Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: Predicted means of the relative preference for maximizers (+ 1 SD) and satisficers (− 1 SD). The higher the score, the higher the preference for the high-value but effort-consuming option.

6. Discussion

The findings of Study 1 supported our hypothesis. While maximizers prefer the high-value but effort-consuming options for both themselves and others, satisficers prefer that option more for others than for themselves.

One may wonder whether the same effects would appear if participants were asked to give advice to others rather than make decisions on behalf of others. According to past research on self-other decision-making, the question of whether there are differences between deciding for others and advising others remains controversial. Some studies revealed the similar effects between deciding for others and advising others (e.g., Lu et al., 2013), whereas others found that self-other decision-making differences appeared only when people decided for others and not when they advised others (e.g., Jonas & Frey, 2003). Thus, Study 2 was carried out to address this issue.

One potential limitation of Study 1 was that although it is a widely used paradigm to ask participants to choose between two given options with fixed value and effort (e.g. Baskin et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2013), contrasting high value and high effort with middle value and low effort somewhat limited the generalizations that can be drawn. In real life, people often have more than two options. In addition, according to the literature on maximization, maximizers compare alternatives more and are willing to expend much more effort for high-value options than satisficers (Iyengar et al., 2006; Luan & Li, 2017b). Therefore, in Study 2, instead of making a tradeoff between two given options, participants were given a high-value option and were asked to indicate how much effort they were willing to (or would advise others to) expend to attain this value.

7. Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1 but extended Study 1 in several aspects. First, Study 2 explored whether the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers still occurred when individuals were asked to advise others rather than to decide on behalf of others. Second, because the reliability of the short form of the Maximization Scale was not high (Cronbach's α = 0.6), we used the Maximization Scale (Schwartz et al., 2002) instead in Study 2,

Table 2
Time willing to spend by maximizers and satisficers when deciding for oneself or advising another.

	Self			Other		
	M	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*
Maximizers	8.65	6.40	31	7.74	6.04	33
Satisficers	6.45	5.79	39	9.55	7.48	22

Note: Maximizers and satisficers were divided by median split of the Maximization Scale results.

which is more widely used and has superior psychometric properties (Cheek & Schwartz, 2016). Third, the dependent variable was also measured in a different way. In Study 2, participants were given a fixed high-value option to determine how much effort maximizers and satisficers are willing to sacrifice (or advise others to sacrifice) to attain value. The hypothesis to be tested is that maximizers not only are willing to expend more effort themselves but also advise others to do so. However, satisficers choose to expend less effort themselves, but they are willing to advise others to expend more effort.

8. Method

8.1. Participants and design

A total of 128 students[2] participated in this experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. Three participants were removed from the analyses because they failed to complete the Maximization Scale. The final sample size for this study was 125 (58 females, 67 males, M_{age} = 21.30, *SD* = 2.62). This experiment adopted a between-subjects design, with the decision target (self versus others) as the categorical between-subjects factor and maximizing tendency as the continuous between-subjects factor. The time participants were willing to spend served as the dependent variable.

8.2. Procedure and materials

The participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of deciding for themselves or advising others. All participants were first shown this description: “Imagine now is the first class of a 4-credit professional course. The professor is asking for volunteers to give presentations in the following weeks. Students can get 3-point bonus (3/100) if they take the initiative to give presentation. In the meantime, they will get a chance for the professor to learn more about them.” The participants in the self-decision group were then asked to complete the sentence “I would take the initiative to give the presentation if it required __ hours to prepare”. The participants in the other-decision group were instructed that it was not they but rather another student who had selected the course. He/she was asking them for advice. They were then asked to complete the sentence “I would suggest to him/her to take the initiative to give the presentation if it required__hours to prepare.” The results of pretest (see supplementary material) showed that the “3-point bonus” and “the chance for the professor to learn more about them” represented the value attribute of the presentation, while the time spent to prepare for the presentation represented the effort attribute.

After a brief filler task, the participants completed the 13-item Maximization Scale (Schwartz et al., 2002) to measure their maximizing tendency. Similar to Study 1, each item was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The individual items were averaged to create a composite maximizing score (*M* = 4.16, *SD* = 0.73, Cronbach's α = 0.7). Finally, participants' involvement was assessed and served as the control variable.

9. Results

9.1. Preliminary analyses

None of the participants guessed the hypothesis of the study correctly. Participants' level of involvement was neither influenced by the decision target manipulation (t (123) = 0.40, p = 0.69) nor associated with maximizing tendency (r = 0.12, p = 0.19) or the dependent variable (r = −0.10, p = 0.25). However, the time spent to prepare for the presentation was correlated with participants' gender (r = 0.20, p = 0.024; female or male) and grade (r = 0.24, p = 0.006; freshman, sophomore, junior, senior or graduate). Therefore, they were considered as covariates in the subsequent analysis. The descriptive statistics assessed in Study 2 are presented in Table 2.

9.2. Time willing to spend

Similar to Study 1, a hierarchical linear regression (Raudenbush et al., 2004) was performed on the time participants were willing to spend on the presentation, with decision target, maximizing tendency, and their interaction as the independent variables and participants' gender and grade as the covariates. As predicted, the results revealed a significant interaction between decision target and maximizing tendency, β = −3.92, t (119) = −2.30, p = 0.023. Satisficers (−1 SD) advised others to spend more time on the presentation than they would spend themselves, β = 3.53, t (119) = 2.22, p = 0.028, but maximizers' choices did not differ between choosing for themselves and advising others, β = −2.20, t (119) = −1.20, p = 0.23 (see Fig. 2). Main effects were not significant (Maximization Tendency: β = 0.92, t (119) = 1.10, p = 0.28; Decision Target: β = 0.67, t (119) = 0.57, p = 0.57).

10. Discussion

By instructing participants to give advice to another student, Study 2 provides further evidence for the self-other decision-making differences between maximizers and satisficers. Specifically, maximizers are willing to expend more effort and advise other students to expend more effort, while satisficers advise others to expend more effort to attain value but would not do so themselves.

11. General discussion

This article explores the self-other decision-making differences between maximizing and satisficing by focusing on how maximizers and satisficers make the tradeoff between value and effort when deciding for themselves and for others. Study 1 demonstrates that maximizers prefer the high-value but effort-consuming option both for themselves and for others, whereas satisficers prefer that option for others but not for themselves. Study 2 further shows that a similar effect occurs when individuals are asked to give advice to somebody else rather than to make decisions for others. The results of Study 2 reveal that maximizers not only are willing to expend more effort for themselves but also advise others to expend more effort. However, satisficers choose to expend less effort for themselves, but they do not advise others to do so.

Taken together, using different measures, designs, manipulations and scenarios, Studies 1 and 2 support the hypothesis that maximizers focus on the value of a choice regardless of the effort it requires when making decisions both for themselves and for others; in contrast, satisficers focus on the value regardless of the effort required for others, and they prefer the “good but less effort-expending” option for themselves. Unlike past research that examined maximizing and satisficing

[2] This study was conducted after an unrelated study, so the sample size was based the number of participants involved in the previous study. Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007), we determined that the current sample size was sufficient to obtain adequate power $1-\beta > 0.8$ to detect a medium-sized effect $f^2 = 0.15$.

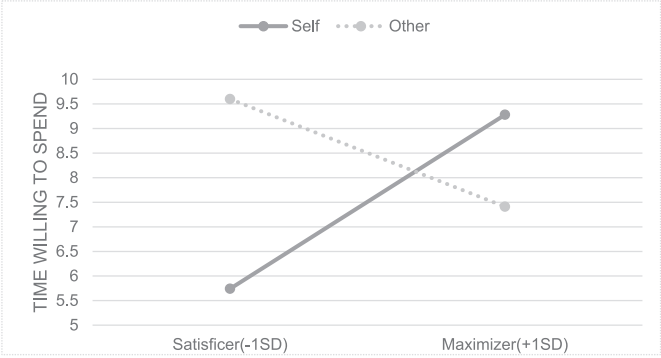

Fig. 2. Results from Study 2: Predicted means of the relative preference for maximizers (+ 1 SD) and satisficers (− 1 SD). The higher the score, the higher the preference for the high-value but effort-consuming option. Time is displayed in hours.

when the decision targets are the decision makers themselves, the current research provides initial evidence of the self-other decision-making differences between maximizing and satisficing.

11.1. Limitations

The limitations of the current research should also be acknowledged. First, the participants from both experiments were college students, which may narrow the implications of the results for the wider community. In addition, the decision scenarios used in this study were common and relatively unimportant. Whether the results can be applied to some important decisions are unclear. Another limitation is the scale measuring maximization. As the most widely used scale in the literature on maximization (Cheek & Schwartz, 2016), the Maximization Scale and its short form have unsatisfactory internal consistency. The creation of a better scale in the future is necessary.

11.2. Future directions

The current research also presents several avenues for future research. First, it is interesting that satisficers "know" what it takes to make a maximizing decision. They advise others to make such decisions but are not willing to do so for themselves. What aspect of "satisficing" is most relevant to them in making their decision to satisfice? At what point would "satisficing" not be their preferred alternative? These are interesting questions for future research to address.

In addition, according to our findings, maximizers make similar decisions for themselves and for others. That is, they maximize not only for themselves but also for others. This result indicates that maximizers may share the same psychological processes when deciding for themselves and for somebody else. Past research has shown that maximizers are good at viewing their own decisions from an external perspective, or others' perspectives. They rely more on external and social comparison information (Iyengar et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2002). Accordingly, viewing oneself from an external perspective may be the fundamental reason underlying the phenomenon observed among maximizers. More research is needed to further clarify this issue.

12. Conclusion

In sum, Maximizers focus on the value of the choice regardless of the effort the choice requires when deciding for themselves, deciding for somebody else, or giving advice to somebody else. However, satisficers focus on the value regardless of the effort required when they make decisions for others, but they would rather not expend extensive effort for the high-value option when the decision targets are themselves. The current research contributes to the relevant literature by demonstrating that maximizers maximize for both themselves and others, whereas satisficers satisfice for themselves but maximize for others.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.09.009.

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