



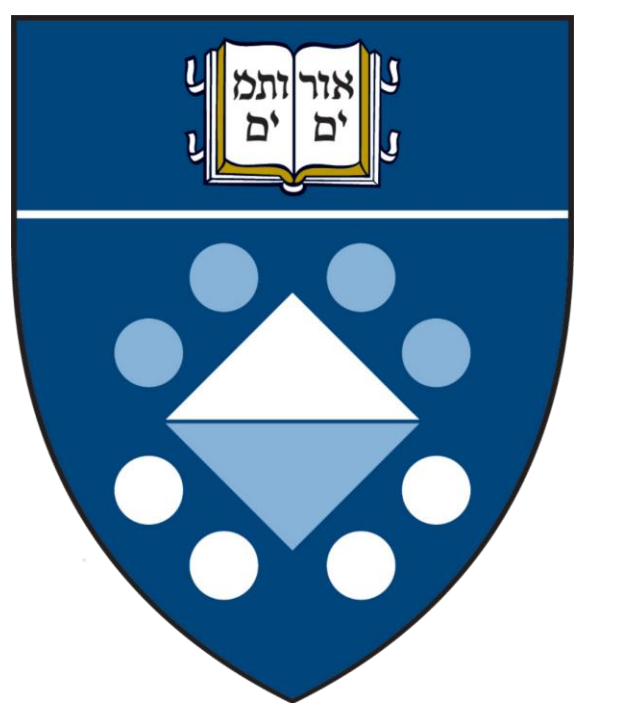
Attributional ambiguity as moral wiggle room

Fiona tho Pesch¹ & Jason Dana²

¹Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods

²Yale University

thopesch@coll.mpg.de



Literature

Moral wiggle room

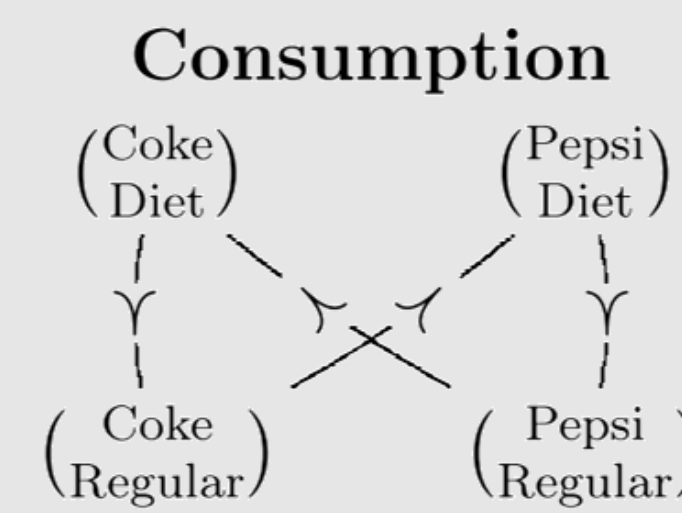
= situational characteristics that obfuscate the signal which the outcome of an own-payoff-maximizing (i.e., potentially selfish) behavior sends to others about one's intention to be selfish.

- People generally show prosociality both in everyday life, as well as in the lab (e.g. ?)
- However, a lot of them do so reluctantly: they would rather behave selfish, but they do not want to be seen as selfish → those people start behaving selfishly under moral wiggle room

Attributional ambiguity

= decision-makers can conceal their true motives when options vary on more than one attribute (Snyder et al., 1979).

- Based on Correspondent Inference Theory (Jones & Davis, 1965)



Mechanisms

Manipulating one's own evaluation (self-image)

- Making oneself believe to actually have a preference for the charity attached to the selfish option

Social norms (social image)

- Change in appropriateness of selfish behavior

People often behave prosocially, but do so reluctantly.

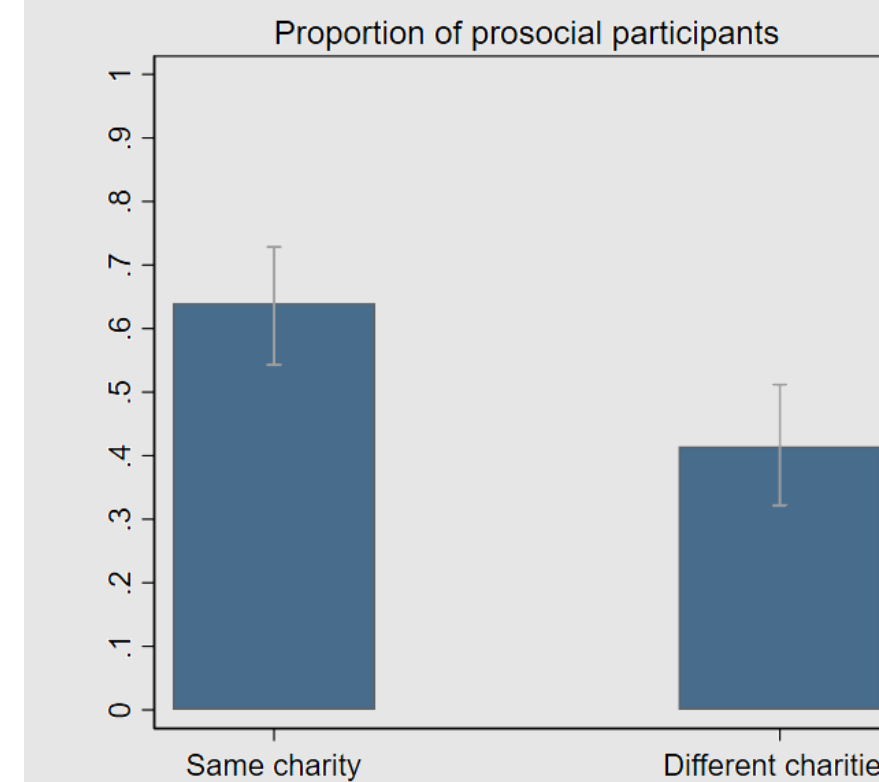
Do people exploit attributional ambiguity in social decisions? What are the mechanisms driving this effect?

Study 1

Design

- N = 222 mTurkers
- Binary dictator game with charities
- Manipulation receiving charity

	Same charity condition (Baseline)	Different charities condition (Manipulation)
A	You: \$0.50 Charity A: \$0.20	You: \$0.50 Charity A: \$0.20
B	You: \$0.40 Charity A: \$0.40	You: \$0.40 Charity B: \$0.40



Results

	Same charity	Different charities	
selfish	40 (36.0%)	65 (58.6%)	105
prosocial	71 (64.0%)	46 (41.4%)	117
	111	111	222

Chi² (1) = 11.29, p = 0.001

→ More selfish behavior under attributional ambiguity

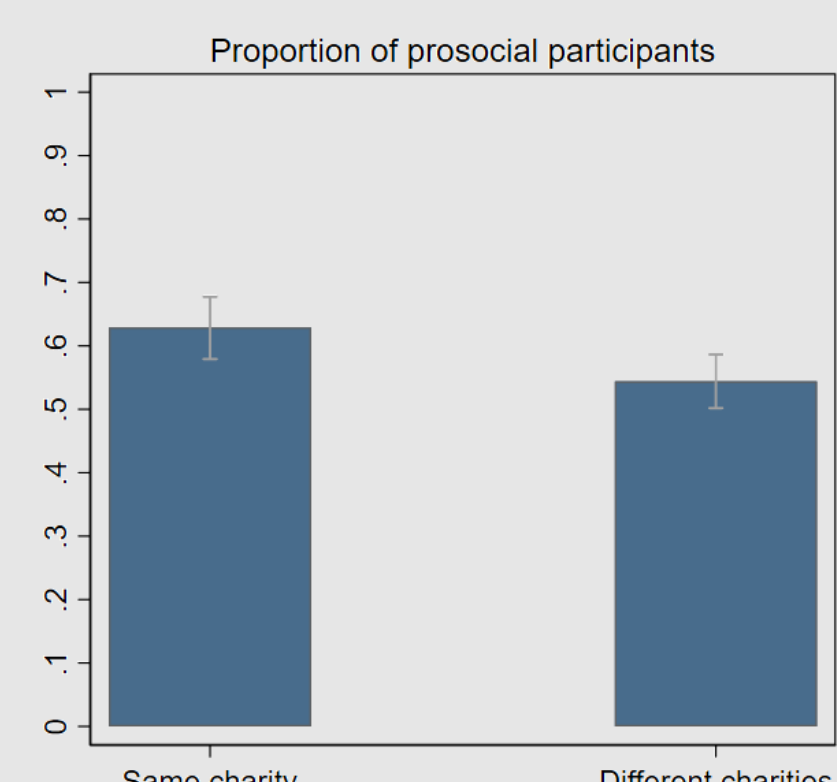
Study 2

Design

- Replication of study 1
- N = 781 mTurkers

Investigated mechanisms

- Self-image:
 - Self-reported evaluations of the charities
 - Incentivized "voting" for a charity
- Social image:
 - Incentivized social norm elicitation (Krupka & Weber, 2013)



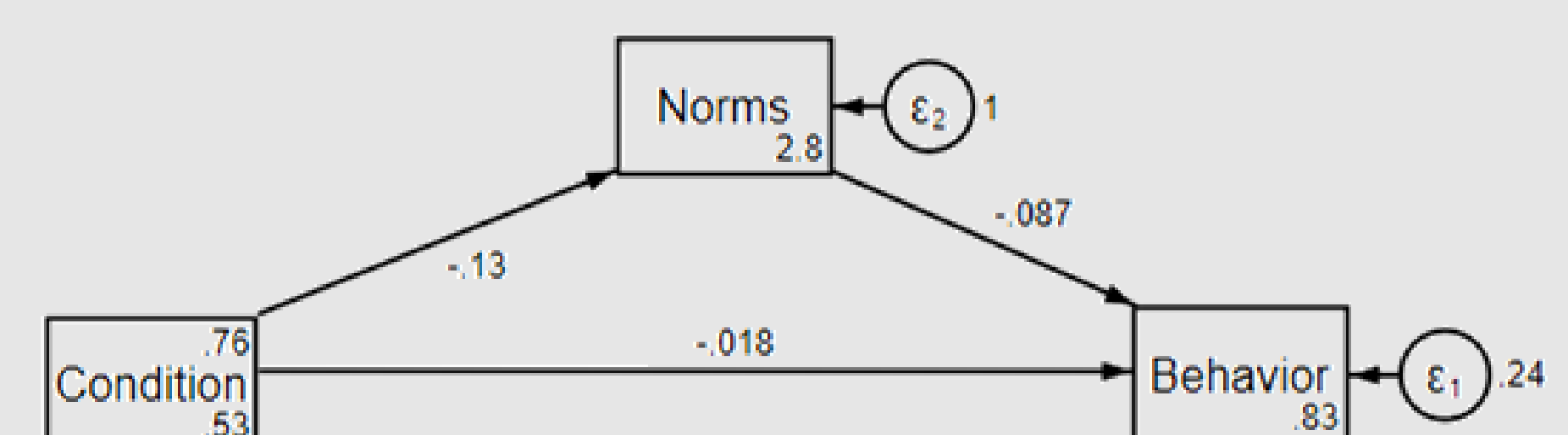
→ More selfish behavior under attributional ambiguity (replication study 1)

Chi² (1) = 3.988, p = .046

	Same Charity	Different Charities	
selfish	145 (37.1%)	172 (44.1%)	317
prosocial	246 (62.9%)	218 (55.9%)	464
	391	390	781

Results

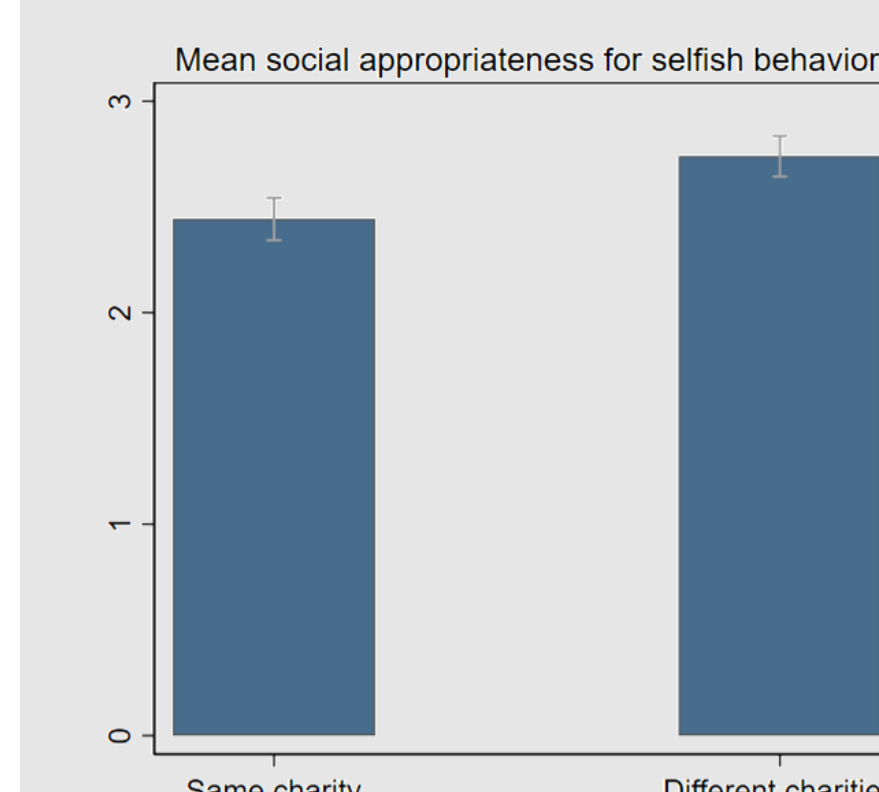
- No support for self-image:
 - No difference in evaluation of charity (self-report)
 - No difference in which charity is more popular (incentivized)
- Support for social image:
 - Selfish image is perceived as more socially appropriate under attributional ambiguity, $t(779) = 8.26$, $p < .001$
 - Full mediation (see below)



Study 3

Design

- N = 614 mTurkers
- Between-subject: Same vs. different charity condition
- Instructions identical to Study 1 & 2
- Instead of incentivized choice (Krupka & Weber, 2013):
 - Appropriateness ratings for choosing A or B
- Correct choices incentivized with a bonus of \$0.50



Results

- Selfish behavior is rated as more socially permissible in the Different Charities condition, $t(612) = 4.20$, $p < .0001$ (see figure left).
- Prosocial behavior is perceived as slightly but significantly less socially permissible in Different Charities condition, $t(612) = -2.77$; $p = .0029$.

General discussion

Main findings

- Attributional ambiguity is a form of moral wiggle room: People behave more selfishly when options vary on more than one attribute
- No support for the mechanism of changing one's charity preferences (self-image)
- Support for social norm mechanism (social image)

Relation to literature

- Reveals hidden preference for selfishness, similar to other forms of moral wiggle room (Dana et al., 2007; Exley, 2016)
- Supports a social image account (Andreoni & Bernheim, 2009), instead of a self-image account (Grossman & van der Weele, 2017; Matthey & Regner, 2014)

Implications

- For research: Future research should further investigate how exactly social norms impact prosocial behavior in moral wiggle room settings.
- For real-life application: Decision settings should try to eliminate any attributional ambiguity to foster prosocial behavior.

