

The interactive effect of mood and social value orientation on intergroup conflicts

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Abstract

This study tested whether mood interacts with group members' social value orientation (*proself* vs. *prosocial*) to influence their subsequent decisions to cooperate with other groups, and if this process is mediated by greed and fear. Specifically, mood was predicted to affect *prosocials* but not *proselfs*. Predictions were partially supported.

Introduction

Social value orientations (SVOs) are often studied as individual difference traits (McClintock, 1972).

- **Proselfs** typically maximize their own gains in a competitive and individualistic manner
- **Prosocials** are concerned with others' gains and losses, thereby exhibiting cooperativeness

While the stability of SVOs has been amply demonstrated, less is known about how cooperative tendencies change.

Two major theories suggest that **people are more likely to switch from being cooperative to non-cooperative than vice versa:**

- **Reciprocal altruism:** People tend to approach iterated zero-sum games cooperatively first, but switch to non-cooperation if counterparts are non-cooperative, and then remain non-cooperative (Trivers, 1971).
- **Discontinuity effect:** In a group, individual orientations favoring cooperation tend to be overshadowed by competitive orientations of the group (Insko & Schopler, 1998).

Research on the discontinuity effect has identified two **affective causes** (Schopler et al., 1993):

- **Greed:** Individuals in a group become greedier as group members provide support for egoistic behaviors, individual decisions become less identifiable, and intergroup situations involve in-group favoritism norms.
- **Fear:** Individuals in intergroup situations may be more fearful as groups are often perceived as aggressive toward opponents.

Mood states may therefore play a role in altering people's cooperative tendencies.

- **Positive affect (PA) and greed:** While moral philosophers often deplore greed as immoral and a path towards eventual unhappiness (Wang & Murnighan, 2011), the immediate temptation as well as satisfaction of greedy impulses however induces hedonic pleasure and intense PA (Wang & Murnighan, 2009; 2011).
- **Negative affect (NA) and fear:** Fear is an aversive emotion induced by a perceived threatening stimulus which compels entities to behave in a manner so as to eliminate the threat, such as fleeing or fighting. Thus, the association between fear and NA is well established (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

Hypotheses

- H_1 : On average, *prosocials* will be more likely to cooperate than *proselfs*.
- H_2 : When experiencing PA, *prosocials*, but not *proselfs*, will experience a decline in cooperativeness due to increased greed.
- H_3 : When experiencing NA, *prosocials*, but not *proselfs*, will experience a decline in cooperativeness due to increased fear.

Method

Both individual and team cooperation research is typically conducted using one of many social dilemma tasks, such as the **prisoner's dilemma game** (PDG) where each party simultaneously chooses either to be cooperative or competitive with the other party on one or more trials. In a PDG, the outcomes of the two parties are negatively related – the choice that maximizes one's outcome minimizes the opponent's outcome.

Participants

270 undergraduates from a large management university participated in this study (61% female). All participants were volunteers who received course credits for participation.

Measures

Social Value Orientation. The nine-item Decomposed Games measure by Van Lange et al. (1997) was used to measure participants' SVO. Each item contained three alternative outcome distributions with points for oneself and an (anonymous) other. Each outcome distribution represented a particular orientation. Participants were classified as *prosocial*, *individualistic*, or *competitive* when at least six choices (out of nine) were consistent with one of the three orientations (Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994). The individualists and competitors were combined to form one group of *proselfs*.

Mood. The 18-item Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson et al., 1988) assessed participants' state mood ($\alpha = .93$ for PA; $\alpha = .81$ for NA).

Greed and Fear. Experience of greed and fear was measured by asking participants to rate their agreement, on a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), their agreement with greed or fear items. Greed items asked how much they wanted to earn more than the opponent. Fear items asked how much they wanted to defend themselves against the actions of the opponent ($\alpha = .74$ for greed; $\alpha = .72$ for fear).

Decisions to Cooperate or to Compete. Participants marked whether or not they decided to cooperate (Option 1) or compete (Option 2) with the opponent group.

Procedure

Participants' SVO was measured one week before the experiment. On the experimental session day, participants arrived at the laboratory in groups of six. Participants completed the mood measure to determine their current affective state. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two three-person-groups (Group A or Group B), and the two groups were seated in separate rooms. Each group was then told that they would play an unknown number of PDG rounds against the group in the next room. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with the PDG matrix and asked to determine their individual decisions within one minute without talking to each other. They were also told that after they made their individual decisions, they would have time to discuss as a group and make their group decisions. Subsequently, all participants went through only one round of PDG. Finally, participants' experience of greed and fear were assessed.

Results

Out of 270 individuals, 115 were classified as *prosocials* and 130 as *proselfs*. Due to the failure to reach a significant tendency to endorse prosocial or proself responses, 25 participants were unclassified (cf. Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994). The data obtained from the unclassified participants were excluded from the analyses.

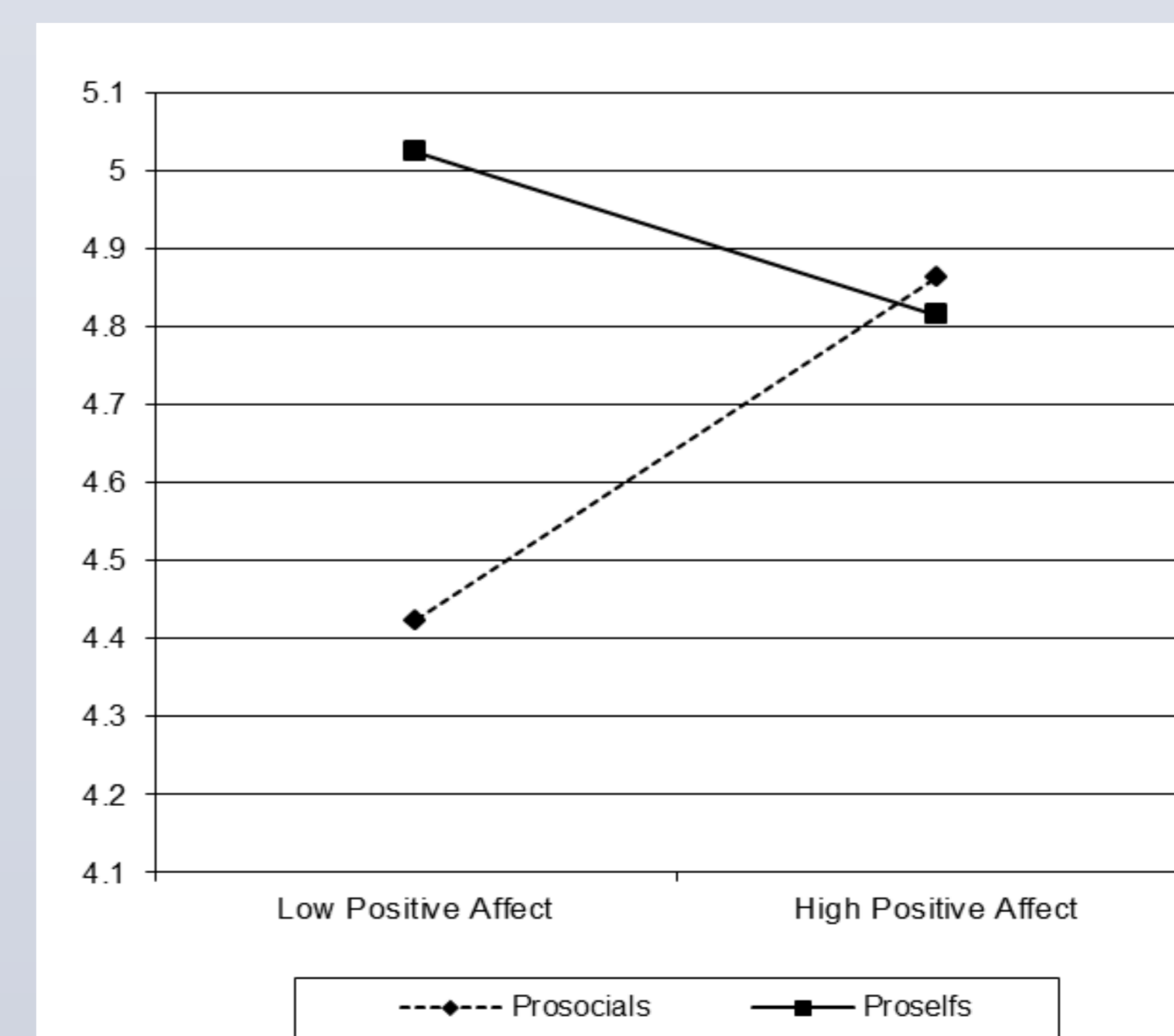
To test H_1 , a *t*-test was conducted to compare the cooperation rates of *prosocials* versus *proselfs*

H_1 was supported: *Prosocials* ($M = 64\%$ cooperation rate) cooperated more than *proselfs* ($M = 30\%$ cooperation rate), $t(242) = 5.43, p < .01$.

To test H_2 and H_3 – the prediction that participants' SVO would interact with their mood to predict their experience of greed and fear – a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted.

H_2 was supported: *Proselfs* experienced higher levels of greed than *prosocials*, $\beta = .163, p = .037$. The SVO \times PA interaction was significant, $\beta = -.465, p = .027$. While *prosocials* showed a lower level of greed compared to *proselfs* overall, as *prosocials* experienced higher PA, their greed significantly increased.

H_3 was not supported: *Proselfs* experienced overall higher levels of fear than *prosocials*, $\beta = .169, p = .030$. Contrary to expectations, the SVO \times NA interaction was not significant, $F(4, 169) = 1.488, p = .185$, as higher NA did not increase *prosocials'* fear.



Interaction effect of SVO and positive affect on greed.

Conclusions

Research has largely overlooked the examination of how SVOs can change. This study is an attempt to address this knowledge gap by providing preliminary evidence showing that, despite the stability of SVOs, mood can alter expected cooperative tendencies.

Findings from the current study showed that SVO predicts the likelihood of cooperation. In addition, while *prosocials* were on average more cooperative than *proselfs*, being in a state of PA increased their greed and reduced their desire to cooperate.

The more inconsistent behavior of *prosocials*, compared to *proselfs*, may be worth further scrutiny, and this gives palpable weight to the saying,

“I admit I’m a liar, therefore you can trust me.”

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