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Theoretically Framing Relational Framing

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Our research program on relational framing leaves many process and normative–prescriptive issues unresolved. We agree with the three commentators on the usefulness of (a) experimental work that probes the cognitive and affective processes underlying relational-framing effects, (b) ethnographic work that probes the cultural and historical processes that can shift the boundaries of acceptable commercial transactions, and (c) philosophical analyses that probe the views of rationality that guide whether the research community sees human judgments as biased and in need of correction.

We are exceptionally fortunate in this exchange to have three thoughtful critics who bring such diverse expertise to bear on our research program on relational framing and taboo trade-offs (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; McGraw, Tetlock, & Kristel, 2003). Belk's (2005) analysis places our work in a macrocontext, underscoring that what constitutes acceptable commercial transactions can shift dramatically across time and place. Johar's (2005) and Kahn's (2005) analyses ground our work in a more solid microfoundation, reminding us of how much remains to be done if we seek a deeper causal understanding of exactly when, how, and why relational norms influence judgment. Finally, Kahn's (2005) analysis raises challenging questions about the rationality of succumbing to relational framing—and the propriety of protecting people from themselves.

MACROCONTEXT

We could not agree more with Belk's (2005) endorsement of a research agenda that integrates psychological and anthropological insights. The advantages of purely experimental approaches are familiar ones, especially the heightened ability to rule out alternative causal explanations. The advantages of purely ethnographic approaches are also familiar, especially the heightened ability to trace the webs of significance that we humans weave around the objects and activities that fill our lives (Geertz, 1973).

We also agree with Belk's observation that the most theoretically interesting cases will prove to be the most ambiguous cases—those that teeter on the boundaries of normative acceptability (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). There is indeed a fine line—legal and moral—between bribes and gifts (a point underscored by our Lincoln bedroom experiment). And there is a fine line between corrupt, crony capitalism and dynamic, cooperative business networks (a point underscored by the controversy surrounding *keiretsu* business networks in Japan; Lincoln & Gerlach, 2004).

Ambiguity about normative boundaries will be most pronounced in periods of social change—when technological, demographic, and market forces create temptations to mix the secular and the sacred. Interesting times such as these create the richest opportunities for documenting how citizens balance two clashing goals: (a) to maintain their self-concepts as kinfolk and citizens for whom some things are sacred and above pricing; and (b) to survive in a world of scarce resources that punishes those who refuse to acknowledge that everything—even life itself—must ultimately have a price.

For instance, in the early 21st century, demographic trends (the increasing number of aging baby boomers) and advancing medical technology (the increasing ability to cope with organ rejection in transplants) have created a burgeoning demand for body organs. Currently, this demand can apparently only be satisfied by paying for people to part with vital body parts (Thorne, 1998). What will give in this situa-

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tion—our self-images as people who do not countenance money for organs or our reluctance to watch elderly, affluent people die unnecessarily? By the end of the 21st century we may move into an even more unsettling world. Our reluctance to allow parents to buy genetic advantages for their children will be severely tested by competitive forces both inside our society (our desire to keep up with the Joneses) and outside our society (our desire to keep up with societies that implement technologies to raise their average IQs to 180). The relevant thought experiment is unbearably dissonant for many today: Are Americans so determined to draw a line in the sand on genome modification that they are prepared to watch a rival power, say, China, dominate science, technology, finance, and—by implication—the world? (Kass, 2003; Silver, 1997).

We know that normative boundaries have shifted many times in the past, sometimes becoming more restrictive, sometimes less. It used to be acceptable to pay others to take over one's military service obligations, but this ceased to be acceptable by World War I. Political pressure to block such exchanges, and to stigmatize them as taboo, became irresistible because such exchanges so explicitly attached a dollar value to a sacred obligation of citizenship. Conversely, it was once unacceptable for feudal lords to consider selling their land—their sacred patrimonial trusts—but capitalism ultimately overcame such resistance. Researchers—be they of the experimental or ethnographic persuasion—need to be alert to the tectonic realignments of normative boundaries that periodically transform our social world.

MICROCONTEXT

Johar (2005) and Kahn (2005) raised tough questions about both mediators and moderators of relational-framing effects. Which way the evidence breaks on some of their questions will have implications far beyond our framework. If, for instance, relational-framing effects gradually disappear as market competition intensifies, we will have gained new insights into the boundary conditions for applying competing disciplinary portraits of human nature: *homo economicus* stressing the primacy of market forces versus *homo sociologicus* stressing the primacy of social norms. If, as is likely, the interactive effects prove more complex than this simple first-order conditionality, we will need to rewrite those boundary conditions many times. We may discover, for instance, that people look especially hard for ways to neutralize inconvenient relational frames when real out-of-pocket costs, as opposed to mere opportunity costs, are at stake. And we may discover that some people—high scorers on the Machiavellianism scale, for example (Christie & Geis, 1970)—start looking for ways to neutralize the inconvenient relational frames much sooner than do others.

Other questions raised by Johar and Kahn will have implications for how relational framing links up to basic process work on social cognition and for the underlying mechanisms that determine how receptive people are to framing manipulations. For example, Johar asked about the Lincoln bedroom study: Did anti-Clinton respondents simply tune out the equality-matching excuse, process it but refuse to believe it, or believe it but deem it inadequately exculpatory? Our guess is mostly the second option but follow-up work should test all three possible mediators. Johar also pointed to the need to disentangle the causal influence of impression management (in which the goal is to create a desired social identity vis-à-vis the specific person with whom one is interacting at the moment) from broader self-presentational concerns (in which the goal is to create desired identities vis-à-vis both real and imagined constituencies, including the self). Our guess is mostly the latter, but Johar offered valuable specific suggestions for how to clarify these process issues (see also Tetlock & Manstead, 1985, for a more general discussion).

Finally, and most methodologically threatening, Johar and Kahn raised questions that imply certain effects are demand characteristic artifacts of our scenario designs and methods of assessing dependent variables. We disagree. Relational theory is a normative theory so in our view *should* rather than *would* questions are the more natural ones to pose. It is unclear how much confidence we should lose in our theory if *would* questions elicit different responses. Should–would gaps may tell us more about how cynical people are about human nature, or about how determined people are to find loopholes for escaping norms themselves, than about the validity of relational theory. Fundamentally, however, we agree that just as the early scenario demonstrations of judgmental heuristics and prospect theory needed to be extended into more realistic and demanding natural settings (Kahneman & Tverksy, 2000), the same can be said for our preliminary demonstrations of relational framing.

RATIONALITY ISSUES

We agree with Kahn (2005) that our analysis is compatible with the overarching notion that preferences are constructed and not merely revealed in decision making—and the corollary that decisions are often highly context dependent. But we are in less than complete agreement when Kahn placed our framework in her four-tier hierarchy of metagoals that guide decision making.

We see no compelling psychological reason for raising utility maximization to the status of first-order goal or for demoting concerns with social identity to the fourth tier. Indeed, if we were aggressive, relational-framing reductionists in the spirit of Fiske (1991)—and we are not—we could plausibly argue the reverse: All motives, even the pursuit of wealth (Veblen, 1899), are reducible to social identity goals that people pursue vis-à-vis key constituencies in their lives. When Kahn or Johar wondered to what extent our experimental results are driven by demand characteristics, relational-framing reductionists could reply that demand characteristics direct and drive most of social life, providing people the normative cues they need to figure out how to shift from role to role as they move from situation to situation. And, if they wanted to be ironic, relational-framing reductionists could note that, when Kahn endorsed a policy posture of "libertarian paternalism," she herself is imposing a mixed communal-sharing/authority-ranking relational framing on her favored political orientation. In effect, she implied that we should place more trust in the ability of benevolent authority figures to help us make wise choices than we should in a purely libertarian orientation that relies solely on market mechanisms. And this is all done in the name of protecting people from relational-framing effects.

There is, in the strong form of our position, no escaping relational framing. We suspect though that the strong form is too strong for its own good. Relational reductionism becomes as nonfalsifiable as the microeconomic reductionism it was advanced to correct. Kahn was right to point out that our research has thus far failed to shed much light on boundary conditions for the activation of metagoals or on how people resolve conflicts among them. We are sympathetic to the specific experimental interventions that Kahn proposed to protect consumers from ruthless economic predators with no qualms about capitalizing on their relational-framing vulnerabilities—thereby saving consumers from paying steep premiums for the pseudosecurity of family ties to mutual funds, airlines, or fast food companies. To leave consumers to their own devices on the postmodern grounds that there are many forms of social rationality strikes us as indefensible.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Relational framing can be approached from diverse levels of analysis: from the microcognitive to the macrosociological. As such, relational framing provides a natural set of linkage constructs for tying together the inherently multidisciplinary enterprise of consumer behavior. The positions one takes on the robustness of relational-framing effects reveal a good deal about how enthusiastic one is toward the reductionist project of fitting consumers into the ideal type template of homo economicus. And the relative priority one places on the alternative avenues of follow-up work proposed here—rigorous experimental clarification of cause–effect or more open-ended hermeneutic studies of reactions to sacred values—tells a lot about how enthusiastic one is about efforts to define the discipline as a positive science.

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