



Understanding Consumer Choices Involving Environmental and Utilitarian Attributes: The Role of Dimensional Comparability and Compromisibility



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Introduction

People routinely make choices among options characterized by environmental, utilitarian, and/or hedonic (i.e., enjoyable) dimensions (or attributes). Familiar examples include a choice between paper and plastic (bags), biking versus driving to work, buying a hybrid car or a sports car, buying the chocolate that promises to donate 15% to protect the rain forests or the one that tastes a little better, and going to a recycling center versus conveniently putting in the garbage. Despite the prevalence of such choices, so far such decisions have received only limited attention from decision making researchers, economists, and environment studies researchers. Even in areas that are related to environmental issues, most research has focused, for example, on consumer valuation of public, environmental goods, and in particular, the use and limitations of the contingent valuation method [1].

In this paper I outline preliminary framework and propositions pertaining to choices involving environmental and utilitarian (or hedonic/enjoyable) attributes. A key question regarding choices involving environmental and utilitarian/hedonic dimensions pertains to decision strategies that consumers might employ when making such decisions. Consider the following two decision processes. One possible route is for consumers to trade-off one attribute for another, leading to potential compromises or preferences that may vary across choice occasions and over time. According to this decision rule, which corresponds to the so-called weighted-additive, compensatory rule [2], consumers look for a way to determine how the values of one attribute can be exchanged for the values of the other attribute. For example, when deciding between biking or taking the car to work, the two options can be characterized based on attributes such as benefit to the environment (e.g. pollution) and convenience/time. Thus, depending on the distance and an assessment of the pollution implications of driving, a consumer may choose one option or the

other. And when considering a number of related decisions, such as travel to work and travel to visit a friend, the consumer may compromise by driving the car to work but biking to the friend. In such cases, the consumer is trading off one consideration for the other. Consider next a second strategy that is based on principles rather than specific attribute values and tradeoffs, leading to consistent and stable preferences. For example, a consumer may decide that protecting the environment through recycling is one of her key principles that cannot be violated regardless of cost and inconvenience. In that case, no tradeoffs are made. Instead, whenever faced with a choice involving recycling, the principled choice is invoked and implemented. This strategy can be called decision-by-principle.

The next question that must be addressed is what factor/s drive the selected decision strategy? It should first be noted that the two strategies are extreme ends of a continuum. There are cases where consumers may combine the two, or apply one for the first decision and the other for the next decision (of the same type). For example, given time constraints or the urgency of the task, it may not be feasible to never drive a car; in that case, the principle may dominate in one decision and a tradeoff affects a second decision. But making the reasonable assumption that certain choice types correspond to particular decision strategies, I propose that a key determinant of the selected decision strategy relates to two primary factors: dimension comparability [3] and dimension compromises [4-6]. In general, the more comparable two (or more) dimensions characterizing the options are, the higher the likelihood that a tradeoff strategy will be employed. By contrast, non- or less-comparable dimensions promote the use of principle-based decisions. A related factor is whether a violation of a principle on some occasions but not others can be justified to oneself and to others [5-7].

The “comparability rule” is consistent with the notion that decision strategies are in large part a function of decision effort [8-10]. What makes dimensions comparable and susceptible to compromises? Consider, for example, a decision between driving or biking to work. Driving to work can be described in terms of the following attributes: convenience, time, cost, safety, and environmental impact. Biking can be described in terms of the same attributes. As a result, these alternatives are easily comparable, allowing for relatively easy tradeoffs. In particular, even though each individual decision (e.g., driving or biking over the weekend) is a discrete choice (i.e., one or the other), over time these options can be balanced and compromises can be made [11]. For example, a consumer may decide to drive three days a week and bike to work twice a week. That is an example of decision based on tradeoffs, which is facilitated by the comparability of attributes.

Dimensional compromises are related to the role of values in consumer choice [12]. In some environment-related choices, decisions are driven by non-compromisable values—either-or values—whereby once a principle is adopted, no compromises can be made. For example, being a vegetarian (for environmental or other reasons) is such a principle, and a violation of that principle (e.g., eating a steak during one special occasion dinner) may render the principle void and violated. Thus, some dimensions and related principles must be strictly followed, and any deviation means that the principle no longer applies. Of course, some principles are more sacred or strict than others Tetlock et al. 2000. Thus, for example, a consumer may prefer paper to plastic, and it is unlikely that that consumer would often use plastic bags some days of the week and paper bags on other days. However, although the decision to avoid plastic bags is likely to be generally followed consistently, an occasional, circumstantial violation of that principle, such as because a particular store does not offer paper bags, is unlikely to represent a serious principle, moral violation that touches on a sacred principle; such violation is unlikely to cause a person to change or rethink future choices [13].

In conclusion, we should recognize and pay more attention to common consumer and other personal decisions involving both environmental and utilitarian (or hedonic) considerations. As proposed here, two key factors underlie the willingness to make tradeoffs as opposed to strictly adhering to environmental principles: dimensional comparability and dimensional

compromisibility. Future research should examine more carefully the factors underlying comparability and compromises of attributes, the conditions that promote one decision strategy over the other (i.e., tradeoffs versus principle-based) and individual differences that determine the manner in which consumers construe and resolve such choices involving both environmental and utilitarian dimensions.

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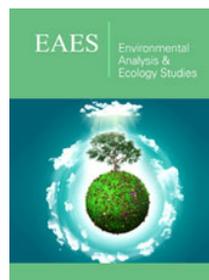
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