Social motivations in choice: insights from decision neuroscience

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Abstract:
Our lives consist of a constant stream of decisions and choices, from the mundane to the highly consequential. The standard approach to experimentally examining decision-making has been to examine choices with clearly defined probabilities and outcomes, however it is an open question as to whether decision models describing these situations can be extended to choices that must be made by assessing the intentions and preferences of both oneself and of another social partner. This class of social decision-making offers a useful approach to examine more complex forms of decisions, which may in fact better approximate many of our real-life choices. In particular, these social interactive scenarios reveal motivations other than economic gain that appear to guide our decisions in a systematic fashion, with these motivations typically demonstrating strong normative components. Here, we focus on the social motivation of reciprocity, and explore the conditions under which we either reciprocate or punish the actions of another. Data will be presented from several experiments where we use novel variants of economic games in conjunction with functional neuroimaging and computational modelling to observe how players decide in real, consequential, social contexts. I will also discuss how we can use these brain insights to build better models of human social norms, incorporating both psychological and neurobiological constructs.

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