

# The Price of Friendship: When, Why, and How Relational Norms Guide Social Exchange Behavior

Gita Venkataramani Johar

*Columbia University*

This article critically examines McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) notion of relational framing and offers directions for future development of the conceptual model. I begin by discussing the inherent limitations of scenario studies and show how the emergence of attribution analysis in real interpersonal interactions may qualify the results obtained in these studies. I then discuss the norm consistency and social identity maintenance mechanisms proposed in the article and advance several alternative mediators of the phenomenon, including affect and anticipated interaction. I recommend experimental designs that could be used to isolate the role of the different mediators and suggest the incorporation of process measures. I end with a discussion of conditions under which relational framing may not matter and propose a research agenda for consumer researchers interested in building on the solid foundation laid by McGraw and Tetlock.

McGraw and Tetlock (2005) offered an interesting perspective on how consumers are likely to respond to social exchanges that they consider unacceptable from a relational standpoint. By drawing our attention to the manner in which norms activated by relational schemas govern our choices and reactions, they have added to the rich tradition of work on behavioral decision making. Once again we find that predictions derived from neoclassical economics theory do not always hold—people do not always maximize economic utility, but they also consider social norms when determining value. Not only do people abide by relational norms in their own behavior, but they also feel distressed if relational norms are violated by others. The preliminary results reported in this article lay the ground for additional research that extends the theory and builds a nomological network of constructs that moderate and mediate these effects.

In this commentary, I highlight opportunities that arise from McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) theoretical framework and the results of the experiments reported there. I begin with a critique of the article and then propose ways in which the conceptual model can be enriched and expanded.

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Gita V. Johar, Columbia University, Graduate School of Business, 519 Uris Hall, New York, NY 10027. E-mail: gvj1@columbia.edu

## CRITIQUE

### Scenario-Based Studies

The experimental support for the theoretical model in McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) article comes from four scenario-based studies in which participants are presented with a scenario and asked how they (or the protagonists in the scenarios) are likely to respond. These studies are likely to mask the effects obtained in real interpersonal interactions in two ways: (a) by obscuring important aspects of interpersonal interactions such as attribution analysis and (b) by being prone to experimental demand. I discuss these limitations and the biased results that may obtain as a consequence next.

Research in social psychology suggests that people continuously question why another person is acting in a particular way in real-world interactions (Heider, 1944; see also Ross & Fletcher, 1985, for a review). Such attributional analysis is especially likely when the behavior is unexpected (Hastie, 1984), as is the case when firmly established relational norms are violated. The results reported here are therefore likely to be moderated by the results of such an attribution analysis, which may sometimes be spontaneous (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). A search for motives is also likely to be more important in the case of relational partners

than in the case of strangers. In fact, Fiske and Taylor (1991) noted that “receiving a surprising rebuff from a friend produces more analysis...than does receiving the warm greeting one expected” (p. 22).

Attributional analysis is therefore likely in the types of situations studied here, and the outcome of this analysis will moderate the results obtained in the reported studies. For example, McGraw and Tetlock (2005) found in Study 2 that consumers are likely to charge less and expect to pay less when the transaction is with a close family friend. In a similar real-world situation, the buyer may first make attributions for the yard sale. If the attribution is to financial need, then the price the consumer is willing to pay a close friend may be higher (rather than lower) than the price that he or she is willing to pay a stranger. The perceived motive for the transaction may therefore influence the outcome. Similarly, one is likely to contribute more when a solicitation for a charity arrives from a relationship partner versus from a stranger, even if the relationship is established merely by remembering another’s name (Howard, Gengler, & Jain, 1995). McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel (2003, Experiment 2) also reported such reversals when the highest bid in an estate auction occurs when the possessions belong to a close relative (communal-sharing relationship) and the lowest bid occurs when the possessions belong to a stranger (market-pricing relationship). The explanation given is the desire to obtain a memento of a special relationship. In that scenario of an estate auction, an alternative explanation might well be the attribution that the seller is in financial need and should thus be helped as much as possible, especially when a relationship with the seller exists.

A different type of attribution—that the seller is a responsible person—could also result in the inference that the object must be in good shape and, hence, increase the price offered to a close other (vs. a stranger). One can easily picture this scenario in a secondhand car transaction. In this case, relationships add value to an object; thus, one is willing to pay more for objects purchased from a close other because of trust in the condition of the object. An in-depth examination of the types of taboo trade-offs studied by McGraw and Tetlock (2005), using real rather than scenario-based exchanges, may reveal that the outcome depends on the attribution made in each situation rather than on the relationship alone.

Besides the suppression of attribution analysis, a second problem with pursuing this research agenda using scenario-based studies is methodological in nature. Scenarios by their very nature extract only certain aspects of a real-world situation and highlight the factors of interest in the study. In the studies reported by McGraw and Tetlock (2005), relational norms may have been more salient than they are likely to be in the real world where various other characteristics of the situation intrude. This heightened salience of norms increases the likelihood that subjects will abide by the highlighted norm. Thus, participant responses

may emerge from an ought self rather than an actual self (Higgins, 1987). This is especially the case in Study 1 where participants are asked to judge statements about what John should do. The relational norm is the only norm that participants have access to, and they use it in response to the normative question. A participant in this study is asked to play the role of an intuitive moral philosopher. A substantial proportion of respondents in Study 1 felt that John should not sell the pen at any price when the offer crosses relational boundaries. But a quick look at eBay reveals frequent sales of memorabilia and other items of sentimental value. Perhaps the intuitive economist emerges when people actually trade in objects imbued with relational meaning.

### Extent of Norm Violation

Another limitation of the current program of research is that all violations are treated the same way so that either the norm is adhered to or not. It is likely, however, that the extent of deviation from the relational norm matters and that small deviations are treated differently from larger violations. The perceiver may ask: Is this a severe transgression or a simple stepping over the line? In the first and third studies reported by McGraw and Tetlock (2005), violations are not severe yet they invoke intense affective reactions. It is possible that more severe violations have further downstream consequences such as influencing impressions of the exchange partner and, hence, the future of the relationship itself. The impression-formation literature is a rich source from which one can derive predictions about the spontaneity of these trait attributions, the manner in which the relationship-violating behaviors are likely to be interpreted, and how interpreters’ chronic tendencies are likely to interact with the observed behaviors and relational norms to influence impressions (Higgins & Bargh, 1987).

### Process Measures

In addition to moving away from scenario-based studies and more finely calibrating the independent variable of norm violation, measures of process would also be desirable in future research. For example, in Study 4, Clinton haters are not convinced by the equality-matching rationale given for the violation of the social norm. Results show that their levels of outrage and punitive intent are not mitigated by this rationale, but the mechanism underlying this effect is not clear. Is it because anti-Clinton participants do not process the rationale, do not believe the rationale, or do not accept the rationale as sufficient justification for the violation of the norm? Incorporating process measures such as cognitive responses evoked by the scenario would help to illuminate the underlying mechanism.

This critique is not meant to suggest that the basic phenomenon does not exist. In fact, how could it not be so?

McGraw and Tetlock made a valuable contribution by empirically documenting the phenomenon. The important remaining questions concern why and when these effects are likely to occur.

### WHY DO RELATIONAL FRAMES AFFECT VALUE?

The assumption underlying McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) research is that relational frames affect value as a result of the activation of norms associated with relationships (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). These norms can affect exchanges because of the social identities that people would like to convey; people want to appear to be norm conforming. Normative social influence can operate via three processes—identification, compliance, and internalization (Kelman, 1961). According to Kelman (1961), identification occurs when “an individual adopts behavior derived from another person or a group because this behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to this person or group” (p. 63). The compliance mechanism posits that an individual conforms to another's expectations in order to receive a reward or avoid a punishment mediated by the other. Internalization refers to the desire to enact internalized values; a person accepts influence because the content of the induced behavior is perceived as being “inherently conducive to the maximization of his values” (Kelman 1961, p. 61). It would be useful to examine the relative influence of these three mechanisms in producing the relational framing effects observed.

Another interesting question concerns whether these norms are automatically activated upon exposure to an other, just as the goals associated with relationships are activated upon exposure to the relationship partner (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). Attitudes toward the other person could also be automatically activated in such circumstances (Bargh, Chaiken, Govender, & Pratto, 1992), and response competition between norms and attitudes could determine the outcome of an exchange. For example, one might consider exchanges between people who have a negative relationship (e.g., ex-spouses). The norm of equitable exchange may conflict with one's own negative attitude toward the other and the temptation to punish the other person in the relationship. The strength of belief in the norm relative to the strength of the attitude toward the other person is likely to determine the outcome of such an exchange. In Study 4 reported by McGraw and Tetlock, participants' attitudes toward Clinton were activated before the norm violation and the rationale for it were disclosed. This may have been the reason why prior attitudes dominated even in the face of an equity-matching rationale.

It is also likely that different norms can be activated under different conditions. One type of relational norm may

be that one should help close others. If so, then the activated norm may not be that one should get a good or fair deal from friends but that one should help friends. Under these conditions the pattern of results obtained in McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) Studies 2 and 3 should reverse. Similarly, the frame of reference (e.g., seller vs. buyer) may also activate different norms. In Study 2, the prices that respondents are willing to pay and willing to accept follow the same pattern, suggesting that they are governed by the same norms. However, if an attribution analysis is set off, it may result in different outcomes for the buyer versus the seller. The seller may follow the social norm and charge a lower price to a close friend than to a stranger, whereas the buyer may attribute the sale to financial need and hence be willing to pay more when the seller is a close friend rather than a stranger.

Could there be other reasons for this effect, or is it driven solely by the pressure to conform to social-relational norms? If identification and compliance are the sole underlying mechanisms, the effects should not have emerged in laboratory experiments where participants presumably believed that their data were anonymous. It appears that other mechanisms must be operating. One possibility is that people feel badly about violating norms and use norm-consistent behavior (and judgments) as a way to regulate their mood. Alternatively, perhaps norm-consistent behavior helps people feel good and increases their self-esteem. The underlying reason for relational frames affecting value may be affect regulation rather than maintenance of social identity.

Relational norms may also affect judgments because of the expectation of future interactions. This expectation could operate in two ways—(a) violating norms could directly reduce anticipated future benefits from the relationship (including future interactions wherein roles such as seller vs. buyer may be reversed), and (b) the exchange is no longer a one-shot transaction and utility is maximized over the long run. If this is the case, the appropriate “strawman” would be a multiperiod economic analysis rather than a single-period one. Deriving normative predictions from single-period and multiperiod analytical models and comparing them to participants' actual behavior can provide rich insights into the role of anticipated future interactions.

Most likely, the observed effect is multiply determined. Additional research that examines the conditions under which these different mediators operate, along with the relative strength of these mechanisms, would help to expand the scope of the theory.

### TESTING THE PROPOSED MECHANISMS

The first step in building support for the theory would be to establish that the norms associated with relationships guide responses to social exchange. One design approach would

be to keep relationships constant but change the norms associated with the relationship. This could be done via experimental manipulations or by conducting cross-cultural studies exploiting the fact that relational norms differ by culture. Another way to tackle this question is to catalog the norms in different situations. For example, is the norm activated by a relationship the same when the exchange offer is a pen valued at \$50.00 versus a house valued at \$1 million? For high-ticket items it may well be that the relational norm does not come into play. If this is empirically established in a pretest, and additional experiments show the lack of a relational effect for high value items, we can increase our confidence in the proposition that activated relational norms guide transactions. On the other hand, if the norm is the same for low- and high-value items but the effect does not obtain for high-value items, it suggests that relational norms are overridden by other factors, including economic ones. Such a finding also points to the dissociation between explicit attitudes (e.g., norms) and implicit attitudes (e.g., value for money).

Research testing the social identity maintenance explanation could vary the presence versus absence of others (or the relevant other in the exchange) at the time of the transaction. Social identity theory predicts that social identity motivations should be enhanced when the social category is salient (Tajfel, 1981). Hence, if social identity maintenance drives the relational framing effect, the effect of activated relational norms should be higher when the exchange is public versus private (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975, Richins, 1994). This mechanism also suggests that the effect should be enhanced for high self-monitors (Snyder & Cantor, 1980), who tend to be particularly sensitive to social norms and interpersonal cues regarding how they should behave. If the effect of relational norms is observed even in private exchanges and by low self-monitors, it suggests that the phenomenon is driven by a more general motivation than just the need to appear to be consistent with the social norm. It is also possible that the internalization mechanism associated with social identity underlies the observed effect rather than the identification or compliance mechanisms (Kelman, 1958). In this case, social identity management plays to a private audience—the self.

As an example of such an experiment, imagine a situation in which the seller knows who the buyer is but the buyer does not know who the seller is. For example, the scenario in McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) Study 2 could be set up so that the respondent is asked to imagine that he adds his or her watch to a neighbor's yard sale and offers to help out by running the sale. The buyer does not know who the owner of the watch is. If, in this scenario, the owner is not willing to accept a lower price from a friend than a stranger, then it suggests that the relational framing effect stems from the identity mechanism of social identity (the desire to fulfill a role relationship) rather than the internal-

ization mechanism (the desire to enact internal values, e.g., to be a good friend).

## WHEN DO RELATIONSHIP NORMS MATTER?

### Subjective Value

Norms governing relationships are more likely to be evoked during exchange when value is subjective. If the true value were known, then exchanges may occur at this true value with relational partners but at a higher value with strangers. To illustrate, imagine you just bought a watch at a 1-day sale for \$50.00 and the next day received the same watch as a present. You may sell the one you purchased to a friend at \$50.00 (the sale price you obtained) but at the higher regular market price to others. More generally, this scenario points to an interesting research question: Is the price one is willing to accept from related others a discounted price or the true price? On the flip side, will the compensation to a friend-in-need exceed the true value of the object to the buyer?

The notion of subjective value is related to that of attitudinal ambiguity or ambivalence, which I have found can play a crucial role in determining whether interpersonal expectations are evoked (Zemboiran & Johar, 2004). McGraw and Tetlock studied situations in which people ask themselves “how should I behave in this exchange situation, given my relationship with the exchange partner?” In contrast, we study situations in which people ask the question “how should I think about this issue, given how relevant others think about it?” From balance theory and ideas of cognitive dissonance we know that there are pressures to hold beliefs and attitudes that are consistent with those of liked others. Hence, we predicted that if the salience of relevant others is enhanced via priming, participants' attitudes should reflect those of the person primed. However, participants who were ambivalent about their own attitudes spontaneously invoked relevant others' attitudes in reporting their own even in the absence of priming. When attitudes are strongly held, it is unlikely that people will be influenced by others' opinions during the process of impression formation or impression testing. Similarly, relational frames are likely to influence judgments and behavior only if the situation is ambiguous. Prices are more likely to reflect true value even for friends if such a true value is known.

### Attitudes Versus Behavior

Relational norms may influence explicit attitudes more than behavior. The finding that participants in McGraw and Tetlock's (2005) Study 2 agree with the statement that they want to maximize profits from the sale of the watch more in the market-pricing relationship condition than in the other

conditions suggests that people are conscious of the norm and appear to act on it (i.e., propose the highest willing to accept and willing to pay prices in the market-pricing condition). However, evidence from Study 3 suggests a dissociation such that pressures to conform to relational norms are greater for explicit attitudinal judgments than for behavior. Participants in this study are confused by the market-pricing transaction more than the equality-matching or disguised market-pricing transactions. Yet, they are as willing to accept the norm-violating market price offer as the equality-matching offer; only the disguised market-pricing offer is deemed more acceptable.

### Framing Relational Violations

Violations of relational norms may not matter as long as the violations are couched in a relationally acceptable way (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005, Studies 3 and 4). An unaddressed issue concerns the conditions under which such reframing is done spontaneously. Small violations in close relationships may be wished away and tolerated as long as the norm is not violated beyond a critical point. This possibility suggests an interaction between the closeness of the relationship and the extent of the violation on judgments and choices. For example, in McGraw and Tetlock's Study 3, what if the roommate was a close friend? The norms would be the same, but the process by which the request is processed could be very different so that no "rhetorical cloak" is necessary in the case of close friends requesting norm-violating favors.

### Relational Versus Other Norms

Finally, the power of relational norms is most likely to be relative rather than absolute. In many situations, multiple social norms may be activated and they may conflict (e.g., the norm to not profit from friends vs. the norm to utilize relationships in fundraising). Under what conditions are relational norms more likely to prevail, and when might other social norms or even economic norms dominate? Expectations about appropriate behavior can derive from many sources, and experiments that pit expectations from multiple sources against each other are needed to tease apart the relative influence of different types of norms.

## RESEARCH AGENDA FOR CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

McGraw and Tetlock (2005) provided a rich tapestry of ideas from which consumer researchers can draw. Issues that are unique to marketing or consumption highlight other important ways in which the research can be extended.

### Source of Brand Meaning

The meaning of an object to the owner can derive from the source of the object, as Study 1 shows. Other sources of brand meaning may be the length of time one has owned the object or the special status of the object in one's life (e.g., a lucky object). If relational norms are special, then judgments and reactions should be different when the meaning of an object is derived from the source of the object versus some other form of intrinsic meaning.

Consumer research suggests that people value their relationships with brands because brands act as markers of self-identity (Fournier, 1998). Are brand transgressions treated the same way as relational transgressions? Is there a norm attached to brand behavior? One could argue that violations of expected behavior are not likely to provoke as much distress in the case of brands because consumers could more easily update or revise their relationships with brands than with people. This type of updating has been shown in research on service failures wherein consumers have been found to punish brands that violate expectations (e.g., service failures) by revising their brand evaluations downward (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Tsiros, 2004). A related direction for consumer research concerns the type of compensation that can best mitigate this negative evaluation. Failure severity and attributions have been found to moderate the effectiveness of compensation as a service recovery effort (Grewal et al., 2004). Research could extend this work to examine cases in which a suitably framed apology derived from the company-consumer relationship may suffice (cf. Ratner & Kubowicz, 2004).

### Designing Persuasive Strategies

A related application of the social-relational framework explicated by McGraw and Tetlock is in the design of apologies by firms that violate marketplace norms and face a public outcry (e.g., the Firestone tires safety scandal). Framing the transgression in terms of a relational norm may help to reduce public anger and disgrace, especially when the norm that is violated is a relational one. For example, Saturn drivers or Harley riders may have a communal-sharing type relationship with the brand. What happens when the norms associated with this relationship are violated? Should the apology invoke the relationship, or should the apology invoke a different social norm as a defense? What happens when a company violates the norm of not damaging the environment but invokes the norm of protecting community employment in their defense? Results from Study 4 suggest that consumers with a prior negative attitude toward the company are unlikely to be convinced by the apology invoking a relational norm. It would be worthwhile to examine what other types of apologies would work in this case.

In conclusion, McGraw and Tetlock (2005) started a thought-provoking dialogue that illuminates our understanding of consumer psychology and paves the way for additional work concerned with building the theory. I look forward to future research building on the strong foundations that have been laid.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank Anirban Mukhopadhyay and Martin Zemborain for their thoughtful comments on this article.

#### REFERENCES

- Bargh, J. A., Chaiken, S., Govender, R., & Pratto, R. (1992). The generality of the automatic activation effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62*, 893–912.
- Burnkrant, R. E., & Cousineau, A. (1975). Information and normative social influence in buyer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research, 2*, 206–215.
- Fiske, S., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Fitzsimons, G. M., & Bargh, J. A. (2003). Thinking of you: Nonconscious pursuit of interpersonal goals associated with relationship partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 148–164.
- Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 24*, 343–373.
- Gilbert, D. T., Pelham, B. W., & Krull, D. S. (1988). On cognitive busyness: When person perceivers meet persons perceived. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 733–739.
- Grewal, D., Roggeveen, A., & Tsiros, M. (2004). *The effect of compensation on consumer evaluations after a service failure: The moderating effect of responsibility, stability, and severity of the failure*. Manuscript in preparation, Babson College, Boston.
- Hastie, R. (1984). Causes and effects of causal attribution. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*, 44–56.
- Heider, F. (1944). Social perception and phenomenal causality. *Psychological Review, 51*, 358–374.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review, 94*, 319–340.
- Higgins, E. T., & Bargh, J. A. (1987). Social cognition and social perception. In M. R. Rosenweig & L. W. Porter (Eds.), *Annual review of psychology* (Vol. 38, pp. 369–425). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.
- Howard, D. J., Gengler, C., & Jain, A. (1995). What's in a name? A complementary means of persuasion. *Journal of Consumer Research, 22*, 200–211.
- Kahneman, D., & Miller, D. T. (1986). Norm theory: Comparing reality to its alternatives. *Psychological Review, 93*, 136–153.
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2*, 51–60.
- Kelman, H. C. (1961). Processes of opinion change. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 25*, 57–78.
- McGraw, A. P., & Tetlock, P. E. (2005). Taboo trade-offs, relational framing, and the acceptability of exchanges. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 15*, 2–15.
- McGraw, A. P., Tetlock, P. E., & Kristel, O. V. (2003). The limits of fungibility: Relational schemata and the value of things. *Journal of Consumer Research, 30*, 219–229.
- Ratner, R. K., & Kubowicz, C. (2003, October). *Apologies and coupons to resolve consumer complaints: How appealing is each to you versus to others?* Paper presented at the Association for Consumer Research Conference, Toronto, Canada.
- Richins, M. (1994). Valuing things: The public and private meanings of possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*, 504–521.
- Ross, M., & Fletcher, G. J. O. (1985). Attribution and social perception. In G. Lindzey & A. Aronson (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (3rd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 73–122). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Snyder, M., & Cantor, N. (1980). Thinking about ourselves and others: Self-monitoring and social knowledge. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39*, 222–234.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Zemborain, M. R., & Johar, G. V. (2004). *When do others opinions matter? Implicit interpersonal influence on attitudes*. Manuscript in preparation, Columbia University, New York.

Received: June 14, 2004

Copyright of Journal of Consumer Psychology is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.