



THE EFFECTS OF NORMS AND DEFAULT BEHAVIORS ON EATING BEHAVIOR IN A GROUP SITUATION

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Introduction

- Eating behavior in social contexts has the potential to be influenced by a number of factors including the social norm set by the group and perceptions of “default behaviors” (i.e., behaviors that are pre-specified to occur unless the individual makes a decision to do something else).
- Choosing to eat can be presented as a default behavior or not; if a food item, such as a dessert, is placed in front of someone, it would suggest that eating is the default, and so the individual would have to “opt-out” to not eat. However, if the individual must order a dessert to have one, it suggests that not eating is the default, and so the individual must “opt-in” to eat.
- Choosing to opt-out is perceived as more effortful than is choosing to opt-in (Davidai, Gilovich, & Ross, 2012).
- The goal of the present study was to examine how social norms and default behaviors influence choice in an eating behavior context, particularly whether the influence of the social norm set by the group is stronger when eating is presented as the default behavior.

Method

Participants.

- 125 undergraduates (n = 90 females)
- Participants were an average of 19.95 years old ($SD = 2.69$) with an average body mass index (BMI) of 22.60 kg/m² ($SD = 2.76$).

Procedure.

- Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of four videos depicting a discussion among five strangers who were offered a cupcake at the end of the discussion.
- In the video, group norm (everyone v. no one in the video takes a cupcake) and whether eating is the default behavior (no; taking a cupcake requires *opting-in* v. yes; not taking a cupcake requires *opting-out*) were manipulated.
- Participants were asked to predict the behavior and situational perceptions (i.e., perceived difficulty, pressure, stress, and self-consciousness) of a target individual in the video and to predict how they would have behaved if they had been in the position of the target individual.

Table 1

Number of participants randomly assigned to each of the four conditions.

	Opt-In to Take a Cupcake (i.e., eating is not the default behavior)	Opt-Out to Not Take a Cupcake (i.e., eating is the default behavior)
Everyone in the Video Takes a Cupcake	N = 27	N = 35
No One in the Video Takes a Cupcake	N = 32	N = 31



Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Participants in the opt-out condition (v. the opt-in condition), will be more likely to state that the target person would choose the cupcake, that they themselves would take the cupcake, and that the situation seemed to be more difficult, more stressful, that there was more pressure, and that the target would feel more self-conscious.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in the group norm in support of eating condition (v. the group norm not in support of eating condition), will be more likely to state that the target person would choose the cupcake, that they themselves would take the cupcake, and that the situation seemed to be more difficult, more stressful, that there was more pressure, and that the target would feel more self-conscious.

Hypothesis 3: There will be an interaction, such that people in the opt-out/group norm in support of eating condition will be *most* likely to state that the target person would choose the cupcake, that they themselves would take the cupcake, and that the situation seemed to be more difficult, more stressful, that there was more pressure, and that the target would feel more self-conscious.

Results

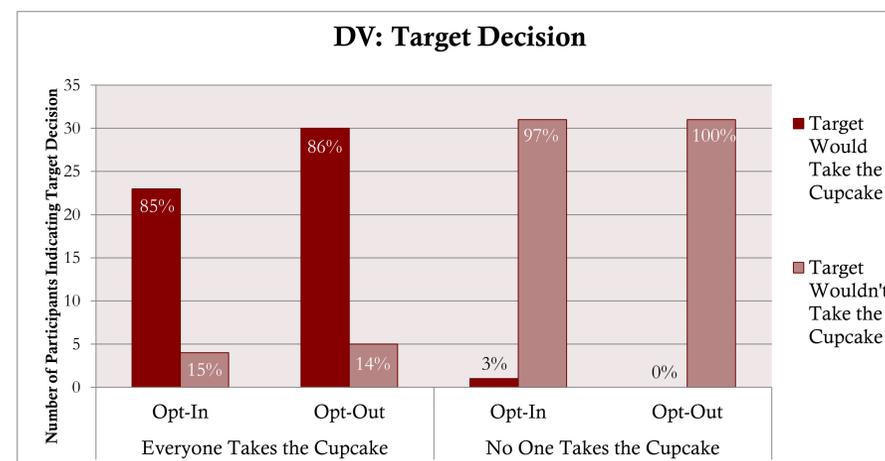


Figure 1. Number of participants indicating whether the target individual would or would not take a cupcake.

- The proportion of participants who thought the target individual would take a cupcake was not found to significantly differ between the opt-out (46%) and the opt-in conditions (41%), $X^2(1) = 0.29$, $p = 0.59$, but did significantly differ between the group norm condition in which everyone took the cupcake (86%) and the group norm condition in which no one took the cupcake (2%), $X^2(1) = 89.64$, $p < 0.001$.
- A log-linear analysis of group norm condition (everyone takes v. no one takes) and default behavior (opt-in v. opt-out) on *target decision* yielded only a significant main effect of group norm condition on *target decision*, $X^2(1) = 109.33$, $p < 0.01$.
- When difficulty, stress, pressure, and self-consciousness are averaged together into one “situational perceptions” variable, there was not a significant difference between situational perceptions for the opt-out ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.12$) compared to the opt-in condition ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(122) = -0.70$, $p = 0.24$.

- There was a significant difference between situational perceptions for the group norm condition in which no one took the cupcake ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.87$) and the group norm condition in which everyone took the cupcake ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(122) = 1.93$, $p = 0.03$, suggesting that when no one else takes a cupcake, the situation is perceived as more difficult and stressful, there is more situational pressure, and the decision-making target is thought to feel more self-conscious.

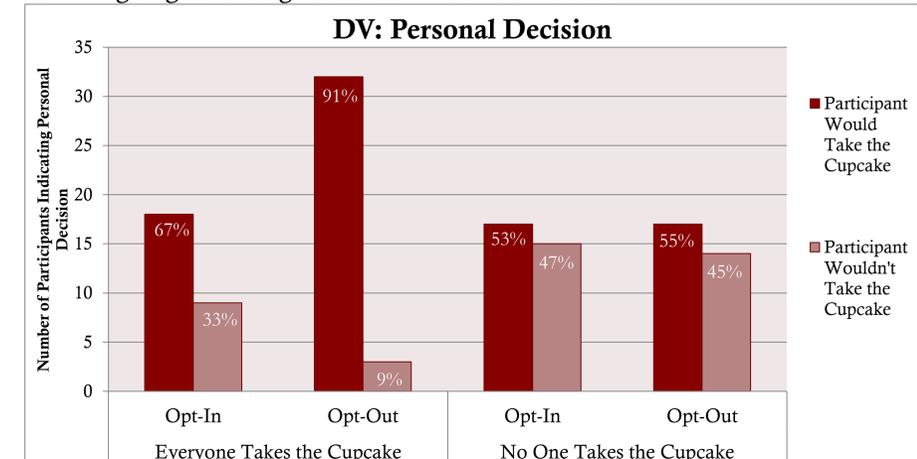


Figure 2. Number of participants indicating whether they themselves would or would not take a cupcake.

- The proportion of participants who indicated that they would take a cupcake marginally differed between the opt-out (74%) and the opt-in conditions (59%), $X^2(1) = 3.15$, $p = 0.08$, and significantly differed between the group norm condition in which everyone took the cupcake (81%) and the group norm condition in which no one took the cupcake (54%), $X^2(1) = 10.09$, $p = 0.001$.
- A log-linear analysis of group norm condition (everyone takes v. no one takes) and default behavior (opt-in v. opt-out) on *personal decision* yielded a marginal 3-way interaction, $X^2(1) = 3.50$, $p = 0.06$. Follow-up analyses revealed that for the opt-in condition, there was not an effect of group norm on *personal decision*, $X^2(1) = 1.11$, $p = 0.29$, but that for the opt-out condition, there was a significant effect of group norm on *personal decision*, $X^2(1) = 11.51$, $p = 0.001$, such that when everyone took a cupcake, participants were more likely to indicate that they too would have taken a cupcake.

Discussion

Results indicate that the group norm is a strong and consistent predictor of both another person's behavior and self-predicted behavior, whereas the default behavior appeared to be less influential on predicted behavior. Interestingly, people are more inclined to say that they themselves would take a cupcake than would a target individual, even in a condition in which no one else in the group takes the cupcake. This may indicate biased thinking in that people think they are less susceptible to social influence than are others. Future research should examine default behavior and group norms in a more high-impact setting in which participants' actual behavior is examined.

References

Davidai, S., Gilovich, T., & Ross, L.D. (2012). The meaning of default options for potential organ donors. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 109, 15201-15205.

Contact

Poster presented at the Social Personality Health (SPH) Network Pre-Conference at the 2016 meeting of the Society for Personality & Social Psychology in San Diego, California. For more information, contact Mary Panos at panos006@umn.edu.