

MARKETING COLLOQUIA

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COMPUTATIONAL INSIGHTS INTO SACRED VALUES, TEMPTATION, AND SELF-CONTROL

ABSTRACT: How do people resist moral temptation, and when and why do they fail? Many economic models assume that choices are made using a weighted sum of costs and benefits, implying that people might generally be willing to compromise even important moral values given sufficient incentive. Yet choices involving “sacred values” often appear to violate this assumption: decision makers act as if these values cannot be weighed against more secular benefits (e.g., “You can’t put a price on human life”). The psychology underlying rejection of such “taboo tradeoffs” remains poorly understood. Are sacred values a special class that essentially render people immune to temptation? Or is consistent rejection of taboo tradeoffs simply evidence of insufficient benefit? Here, I will show how recently-developed computational approaches, applied to a novel task involving real, consequential moral choices, may shed light on the dynamics of choice when considering taboo tradeoffs. Our results suggest that even those individuals who consistently reject moral tradeoffs may be tempted by benefits, and that such temptation emerges after automatic rejection of the taboo tradeoff. We identify several individual differences that moderate the degree of temptation, as well as experimental manipulations that can increase temptation even among those who appear most resistant. Finally, results from a parallel analysis of non-taboo choice suggests that our measures of temptation may be able to predict the break-point at which an individual will ultimately accept an outcome that they otherwise have consistently rejected. These findings raise a number of important questions, and point to new methods for exploring the dynamics of temptation and self-control during moral decision making.