Reducing variance or helping the worst-off? Behavioral and neurocognitive bases for distributive norms

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Distributive justice concerns the moral principles by which we seek to allocate resources fairly among diverse members of a society. Although the concept of fair allocation is one of the fundamental building blocks of societies, the lack of clear consensus on how to achieve "socially just" allocations often yields bitter and fruitless disputes and divides among various social sectors. Here, I examine behavioral and neurocognitive bases for people's distributive judgments. I argue that, although often conflated, people's robust "inequality-averse" preferences are separable into two elements: (1) egalitarian concern about the variance and (2) maximin concern about the poorest (maximizing the minimum), and that the latter is more central to our allocation decisions than the former. I support this argument with a series of behavioral and neurocognitive experiments combined with computational modeling. The results of these experiments provide convergent evidence that:

(1) People commonly exhibit spontaneous perspective taking of the worst-off position in allocation choices, irrespective of their distributive ideologies (utilitarian, egalitarian, or Rawlsian);

(2) The dominance of this perspective emerges at a very early stage of decision making (around 500 ms after stimulus onset), suggesting that the maximin concern operates as a strong cognitive anchor almost instantaneously;

(3) Such focus is further facilitated by group deliberation, yielding more coherent and long-lasting attitude changes.

These results suggest that the Rawlsian maximin concern (as distinguished from the egalitarian concern for the smallest variance) may serve as a possible common ground for making distributive policies in our societies.

References

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