

Trading in search of structure:
Boundary conditions for using market relationships as a compensatory control tool

Agata Gasiorowska, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Associate

Professor

Tomasz Zaleskiewicz, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Full Professor

The contemporary world we are part of has two clear characteristics: the growing level of uncertainty and ambiguity (Ahir, Bloom, Furceri, 2018; Taleb, 2007) and the increasing commonness of market-like practices (Bauman, 2007; Kasser, 2016; Kasser et al., 2007; Sandel, 2012; Stanfield & Stanfield, 1997). We argue that these two characteristics are not independent, and their proximity may be explained by the fact that both of them are associated with the way people experience personal control and mastery. Rooting our model in the compensatory control theory, we propose that one reason behind the prevalence of market relationships is that the fundamental need for orderliness makes them psychologically appealing because of the structure they provide. In other words, engaging in and interpreting the world through the lenses of market exchange relationships might serve as a compensatory control tool because such relationships provide structure and orderliness.

In our previous work we demonstrated that threats to personal control stimulate the tendency to search for and prefer market relationships over communal relationships, and to interpret ambiguous social interactions as market rather than communal, and that the salience of market relationships triggers the sense of personal control and evokes internal explanations of various positive and negative events. We also showed that the link between exposure to market relations and finding personal control is mediated by perceiving structure in such relations. In this project, we tested the boundary conditions of these effects. Firstly, we predict that turning to market relationships under a threat to personal control would be easier to observe when people interact with strangers rather than close others, because when people have communal relationships with strangers, these relations are weaker than communal relations with close ones. Hence, there is more space for forming exchange relationships and people may more easily replace a communal norm with a market norm. Secondly, we predicted that the tendency to engage in market relationships in order to restore the feeling of control will be especially pronounced among people with high levels of insecure attachment style. While security-enhancing interactions with good attachment figures strengthen people's sense that problems are solvable, obstacles can be overcome, and goals can be reached even without complete control over the course of events, this is not the case for insecurely attached individuals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Murray, Holmes, and Collins (2006) also suggested that some people, when threatened by interpersonal rejection, which might be considered as an experience of losing control over the situation, may employ protective efforts such as devaluing the partner or the relationship, or turning to alternative relationships or sources of support—which in turn might mean that they want to seek different *types* of relationships or different rules that regulate them.

In Study 1 ($N = 628$), we predicted that it is easier to either form an exchange-type relationship or replace a communal norm with a market norm when being involved in a

relationship with a stranger (compared to being involved in a relationship with a close other). We asked participants to imagine they had already decided to help a person whom they knew, and after that, this person offered them a monetary compensation. We again assumed that accepting payment in such a social situation would be a sign of preference for market rather than communal relationships, and hypothesized that after experiencing the threat to personal control, participants would be more willing to accept the monetary payment for the favor they provided. Furthermore, we predicted that this effect would be moderated by the relationship type. We found that the effect of the control threat on the willingness to accept payment is stronger when the person offering a payment was a stranger, but weaker when the offer came from a friend.

In Study 2 ($N = 507$), we tested potential moderators of the compensatory control function of market relationships. We reminded our participants about market vs communal vs neutral relationships and asked them to evaluate their sense of control. Two weeks before experiment, we measured their attachment style, income and subjective socio-economic status. We demonstrated that reminding people about market relationships—but not reminding them about close relations—increased their personal sense of control. However, this effect was significant only for people who had an average or above-average insecure attachment score, while it was insignificant for people with secure attachment style. We did not find any support for our prediction that for people with a secure attachment pattern, exposure to communal reminders would heighten the sense of control. Most probably, this is due to the fact that securely attached people also revealed a strong sense of personal control, so that manipulation was not effective due to the ceiling effect in this group. Moreover, the results of this study demonstrate that the effect of market relationships on the feeling of control is not the function of participants' income or subjective socioeconomic status.