Research Statement
Benjamin Enke (July 2024)

My research is in behavioral and experimental economics broadly understood. First, I have contributed to studying the cognitive foundations of economic decision-making, in particular cognitive uncertainty, behavioral attenuation and incorrect mental representations. Second, I have contributed work on culture and behavioral political economy, partly by introducing a core aspect of modern moral psychology into political economy. Methodologically, almost all of my work relies on experiments or large-scale surveys, often in ways that are linked to theory. In broad terms, and looking across papers, four main themes have characterized my work:

1. Developing a quantitative measurement of cognitive uncertainty and leveraging it to document the importance of behavioral attenuation across many economic domains.
2. Highlighting the role of incorrect mental representations for the formation of beliefs in social networks.
3. Documenting that heterogeneity in moral values along the universalism-particularism dimension has large effects on voting behavior and the structure of political competition.
4. Collecting large-scale controlled global measurements of variation in universalism and other preferences, and studying the economic origins of cultural variation in moral systems.

I now summarize my work in greater detail.

Area I: Cognitive Information Processing

The success of behavioral economics over the last 40 years partly reflects its ability to empirically identify and model a large collection of behavioral anomalies, many of which have been documented to affect consequential economic decisions. However, this success at identifying ever more instances in which the neoclassical model fails also created a widely-discussed potential problem – a perceived proliferation of concepts and anomalies.

A vibrant recent line of work – that I consider myself a part of – takes the position that one potential way of tackling these problems from an empirical perspective is to study the cognitive foundations of economic decision-making. The main potential hope behind this movement is that an improved understanding of cognitive foundations may bring us closer to a more unified understanding of behavioral phenomena.

Much of this work studies the economics of basic cognitive information processing – of attending to, remembering, aggregating and trading off economic variables. I review this rapidly-growing body of work, its objectives and limitations in '**The Cognitive Turn in Behavioral Economics**' (2024).

1. Tradeoff Complexity, Cognitive Uncertainty and Behavioral Attenuation

One of the central methodological ideas in economics – that is maintained in a large majority of behavioral economics – is that people maximize: when confronted with a decision problem, they know how to map problem fundamentals into an optimal decision. Much of my recent work has focused on the simple intuition that people often do not know how to translate problem fundamentals into optimal decisions. For example, which precise equity share maximizes your expected utility? How many hours of exercise this week maximize your discounted lifetime utility? What exactly is your certainty equivalent for a 70% chance of getting $25? In all these examples (and many more), people have a hard time figuring out the mapping from fundamentals to optimal decisions. A primary reason for this is that most economic decisions require non-trivial information processing, in particular the need to navigate and aggregate tradeoffs across different problem dimensions. For example, choosing between risky assets requires trading off risk and return, choosing between different savings plans requires trading off rewards across different periods, updating beliefs requires trading off prior and signal, and so on.

My work argues that the information-processing demands that are implicated by such tradeoffs and aggregation problems underlie a broad class of behavioral anomalies. The main idea is that when people do not know how to optimally translate fundamentals into decisions, they become *attenuated*, meaning that they are insufficiently responsive to variation in fundamentals, relative to how responsive they would be if they could maximize. Behavioral attenuation is akin to attenuation bias in econometrics, except that it doesn't reflect mismeasured variables but, rather, an imprecise cognitive mapping of variables into decisions. Behavioral attenuation is a useful concept because various well-known behavioral economics constructs (that carry different labels and are traditionally considered distinct or even viewed as reflecting preferences) ultimately reflect a type of attenuation effect.

Because the hypothesis is that attenuation arises when people don't really know how to maximize, it is useful to directly measure people's uncertainty about the ex-ante optimality of their decisions. In '**Cognitive Uncertainty**' (*QJE* 2023, lead article), we measure people's cognitive uncertainty about which decision is best for them, which allows us to bring together various famous behavioral economics anomalies about how people process and update probabilities. For instance, cognitive uncertainty is strongly predictive of the magnitude of attenuation effects in the contexts of the probability weighting function, belief updating and the formation of financial and macroeconomic expectations, hence suggesting that these anomalies share common information-processing origins.

We have since documented that cognitive information-processing imperfections and resulting attenuation effects are also the drivers behind various other well-known anomalies. For instance, it is widely known that in choices between monetary rewards people behave as if they exhibit

hyperbolic discounting, even though many researchers believe that this cannot driven by true time preferences. Indeed, as we show in '**Complexity and Hyperbolic Discounting**' (R&R *JEEA* 2024), such apparent hyperbolicity over money is another example of behavioral attenuation as generated through information-processing imperfections. We have used similar ideas to explain behavioral attenuation effects in in stock market investments ('**The Precision of Subjective Data and the Explanatory Power of Economic Models**', *JoE* 2017) and psychological judgment tasks ('**Confidence and Central Tendency in Perceptual Judgment**', *APP* 2021).

To study the general scope of attenuation effects, in '**Behavioral Attenuation**' (2024) we implement a large-scale study in which we implement 30 different experiments that were crowd-sourced from experts in the discipline. We emailed a set of behavioral economists, explained the behavioral attenuation hypothesis to them, and committed to running an experiment for any decision domain for which the expert would like to know whether behavioral attenuation exists. Given the diversity of the experts, we received submissions involving a broad spectrum of decisions: effort supply as a function of the wage, product demand as a function of the price, prosocial giving as a function of social efficiency, forecasting as a function of the persistence of the process, and so on. Again leveraging the measurement of cognitive uncertainty, we document significant behavioral attenuation in a large majority of decision domains.

One takeaway from this set of papers is that there appears to be scope for reducing the number of distinct explanations behavioral economists entertain, by directly studying the ways in which people reduce information-processing demands. An immediate implication of this information-processing view is that we should expect behavioral anomalies to vary with the decision problem's degree of complexity. This raises the question how we can quantify the complexity of choice problems based on objective choice set features. In '**Quantifying Lottery Choice Complexity**' (R&R *Ecma* 2024), we propose one such avenue by developing an index that quantifies the overall complexity of choosing between different financial assets. We do so by (machine) learning those choice set features that are most predictive of making a mistake in identifying which asset has the highest expected value, and combining those features into an index. We identify as the most important driver of complexity the strength of tradeoffs across different payout states – choosing between different assets or lotteries is cognitively difficult when they have highly dissimilar payout profiles because this makes comparing the options more cognitively challenging. Our complexity index strongly predicts behavioral attenuation in choices between risky assets out-of-sample, and produces large increases in model fit. The complexity index can be computed for any standard dataset and (we hope) will contribute to making an analysis of the complexity of choices among financial assets more common. In '**Capturing the Complexity of Human Strategic Decision-Making with Machine Learning**' (*Working Paper* 2024), I collaborate with psychologists and computer scientists to extend these ideas to classify the complexity of strategic matrix games. Analyzing a large dataset involving more than 2,400 unique games, we find that the strength of

tradeoffs across strategies again emerges as a main predictor of game complexity and behavioral attenuation.

Overall, this line of work can be summarized as saying (i) that the principle of behavioral attenuation – as driven by information-processing imperfections – appears to be widespread and underlies various behavioral anomalies; (ii) that measuring cognitive uncertainty is an effective way to identify these patterns; and (iii) that the magnitude of behavioral attenuation and cognitive uncertainty can both be predicted based on objective features of decision problems.

The vast majority of work on the 'cognitive turn' in behavioral economics focuses on individual decision-making, raising the question whether insights on cognitive foundations can also be leveraged to study quantities of more traditional economic interest. Here, my work has focused on the idea that people's awareness of which problems are complex or difficult may be relevant for understanding how behavioral anomalies aggregate up in markets and organizations. A famous assertion by Gary Becker is that behavioral economics cannot possibly be very important due to scope for self-selection – for example, people who are bad at valuing assets don't aggressively bid in financial markets. This assertion rests on the implicit assumption that selection is positive – that the more competent are also more confident. In '**Confidence, Self-Selection and Bias in the Aggregate**' (*AER* 2023), we study this question through experiments on a large number of canonical cognitive biases from the literature. Again, as in the research on behavioral attenuation summarized above, a key component of the analysis is to measure people's awareness of their mistakes. We document that there is large heterogeneity across contexts – some biases are severely reduced through self-selection (because confidence and performance are positively correlated), while in other contexts confidence and performance are entirely uncorrelated. For instance, we implement experiments on market interactions, auctions and voting with strong scope for self-selection, and show that for many cognitive biases the less competent are actually not more likely to select out of markets and voting. The techniques we develop in this paper offer a blueprint for how the effects of self-selection on the aggregation of biases can be studied in the lab.

2. Complexity and Incorrect Mental Representations in Belief Formation

The work summarized above concerns contexts in which people's general understanding of the economic environment is correct, yet they noisily approximate rather than compute precise evaluations. In other contexts, however, people's problem representation is fundamentally mistaken in the first place. My research has documented how the interaction between problem complexity and basic processes like selective attention and selective memory produces such incorrect mental representations and biased beliefs.

I have focused on studying the formation of beliefs and expectations in contexts in which the data-generating process is complex. Here, 'complex' means that there is a need to aggregate multiple

messages that do not directly reflect the underlying information signals, as is the case in information structures that involve correlated or selected signals. A theme that has emerged from my work is that a considerable fraction of people mentally simplify data-generating processes by entirely ignoring 'hidden' structural features of the process and treating all messages as if they reflected the underlying information signals. In a nutshell, the idea is that the `quirks' in the data-generating process do not even come to mind because people are excessively focused on processing and aggregating the immediately-visible messages.

These themes emerged in '**Correlation Neglect in Belief Formation**' (*REStud* 2019) and '**What You See Is All There Is**' (*QJE* 2020). In the former paper, we analyze how people form beliefs in the presence of correlated information. This is motivated by many real-world contexts in which the information people receive is partially redundant due to interlinkages in the communication network. For example, the news reports of two different newspapers may both rely on a report from the Associated Press, the restaurant evaluations of two of my friends may partly be shaped by the experience of a common friend, and so on.

In the latter paper, I study the role of incorrect mental representations even more directly, in the context of selected data. For example, news outlets routinely introduce selection problems because they condition their reporting on the match between the signal and the audience's prior. In some cases, only those news are shared that deviate from the audience's prior (surprising research findings), while in other situations, mostly news that confirm the audience's prior are reported (Facebook's newsfeed).

The two papers each make two contributions. First, they document that many people have a pronounced tendency to exhibit correlation neglect and selection neglect, respectively. Second, the papers document that these mistakes essentially have the same cognitive origin – when the data-generating process is sufficiently complex, the correlation or selection problem is simply not top of mind, and can be corrected by drawing people's attention to the relevant feature of the information structure.

Our other work in this area has highlighted that systematically wrong beliefs also result from associative recall ('**Associative Memory, Beliefs and Market Interactions**', *JFE* 2024*).* In this paper, the main idea is that news is typically reported in conjunction with memorable cues, such as images or narratives. Our paper experimentally documents that these intrinsically uninformative cues lead people to systematically overreact to recent information because they trigger associative memory, and that this has predictable effects on financial trading patterns.

Finally, in '**Cognitive Biases: Mistakes or Missing Stakes**' (*REStat* 2023), we contribute to the question of whether financial incentives reduce the magnitude of belief updating errors and logical fallacies. We implement high-stakes experiments in Nairobi, Kenya, by paying experimental participants up to a full monthly income. We document that while cognitive effort increases

substantially, performance is more-or-less entirely flat in the size of the incentive. This suggests that incorrect problem representations are not easily addressed by high incentives because people think about some decision problems in a fundamentally incorrect way.

In summary, my work on the cognitive foundations of economic decision making has emphasized how complexity shapes information-processing imperfections, and the behavioral attenuation and incorrect representations that result from this.

Area II: Moral Universalism and Culture

My second line of work studies the political consequences and economic determinants of variation in moral universalism and other cultural traits. I review the literature on universalism for an economics audience in '**Moral Boundaries'** (*AnnuRevEcon* 2024). Given the strong interdisciplinary focus of this work, I was also invited to build a bridge between my research and moral and cultural psychology by writing the perspective piece `**Morality and Political Economy from the Vantage Point of Economics**' for *PNAS Nexus* (2024).

My work on universalism can be understood as being a part of the broader literature on culture in economics. We are currently editing the first '**Handbook of Culture and Economic Behavior**', to appear in 2025 in the *Elsevier Handbooks in Economics* series.

3. Political Consequences of Heterogeneity in Universalism

Both introspection and anecdotal evidence suggest that politics is becoming more and more moralized. Traditional economic variables such as income are less predictive of voting than they used to be, 'culture wars' feature saliently in the public discourse, and partisans appear to often despise each other, partly because they so fundamentally disagree with what the other side views as 'right' or 'wrong'.

Motivated by these developments, a set of papers of mine studies the role of heterogeneity in moral values for political decisions and election outcomes. I have specifically focused on introducing a core aspect of modern moral psychology in political economy: people's moral values regarding the relative importance of different members of their network or community. Some people think it is morally right for them to treat everyone equally (universalism), while others believe they ought to confer some special treatment and loyalty to people who are socially close to them (particularism, or a communal morality). My work has highlighted that measuring heterogeneity along this universalism-particularism cleavage (both in the general population and across politicians) is strongly predictive of voting behavior, political campaigning and the internal structure of policy views. Universalism is an attractive candidate mechanism for explaining some

of the moralized disagreements in contemporary political debates because many hot-button topics – immigration, affirmative action, treatment of minorities, large-scale impersonal redistributive systems such as in the EU, or 'America first' – ultimately boil down to people's views on their moral boundaries.

In '**Moral Values and Voting**' (*JPE* 2020, lead article), I quantify heterogeneity in moral values both in the electorate (using a large moral psychology dataset that allows me to quantify values across counties) and across politicians, using text analyses. I document that universalism is strongly predictive of Democratic vote shares. Universalism is a substantially more important predictor of voting outcomes than economic variables such as income or education. By directly linking politicians' moral language to county-level vote shares, I document that, even comparing candidates from the same party, politicians generally fare better in those counties in which their moral values are closer to the values of the electorate.

In '**Moral Universalism and the Structure of Ideology**' (*REStud* 2023), we extend this logic both geographically and thematically, by studying the structure of economic and social policy views in each of five countries using original large-scale surveys. We document that measures of universalism predict an entire vector of policy views, in a way that sheds light on why the inter-correlation structure of policy views is very similar across countries (even when these have very different electoral and party systems). The basic idea is that a voter's level of universalism likely shapes their views on many different policy dimensions, hence generating the clusters of policy views that we tend to observe in many countries today. In '**Moral Universalism: Measurement and Economic Relevance**' (*ManSci* 2022), we validate a simple tool to measure heterogeneity in universalism in surveys.

The papers summarized above rely on survey or experimental data. To document the relevance of heterogeneity in universalism also in ecological field data, we quantify each U.S. Congressional District's level of universalism using large-scale donations data ('**Universalism and Political Representation: Evidence from the Field**', *AER:I* 2024). We leverage data from the popular educational charity platform DonorsChoose, through which individual donors give to classroom projects across the country. We measure each district's universalism as the slope of giving with respect to distance – districts are more universalist when they give equally to relatively close and relatively distant schools, and more particularist when they predominantly give to relatively close schools. We document that districts exhibit very large heterogeneity in this measure of universalism. Again, this measure is very strongly correlated with Democratic vote shares, considerably stronger than with traditional economic variables such as median income, education, unemployment, and so on.

In '**Values as Luxury Goods and Political Behavior**' (R&R *JEEA* 2024), we investigate through a simple model how heterogeneity in values translates into voting behavior. We study the idea that

values (in particular along the universalism-particularism continuum) are a luxury good. This means that the relative weight voters place on their values rather than material considerations increases in their income. We show how this simple idea ties together a considerable number of previously-unconnected stylized facts in political economy. For example, we show that the model implies – contrary to common wisdom – that people who are rich and morally liberal are more likely to 'vote against their economic interests' (to vote Democrat) than poor and morally conservative people are to vote Republican. We provide evidence for the luxury goods idea both through a survey in which voters directly report their issue weights, and by testing many of the model's predictions in existing datasets.

In summary, my research in this area has drawn on recent work in moral psychology to document robust links between universalism and political behaviors. A main conclusion from this line of work is that understanding heterogeneity in (moral) values related to universalism is crucial for understanding the structure of modern political competition.

4. Cultural Variation and Economic Determinants of Moral Systems

Where does variation in universalism come? My research has suggested that the relationship between values and politico-economic outcomes is a two-way street: heterogeneity in universalism appears to matter for outcomes, yet politico-economic systems and incentives also shape the structure of people's values in the first place. In a nutshell, variation in universalism appears to have partly economic origins.

Social scientists with an interest in culture have long written about heterogeneity in universalism, yet a high-quality globally-representative dataset on universalism was not available. In '**Universalism: Global Evidence**' (cond. acc. *AER* 2024), we use the infrastructure of the Gallup World Poll to construct the Global Universalism Survey, a survey dataset on heterogeneity in universalism across 66,000 respondents from 60 countries. Each of these respondents completes multiple hypothetical money allocation tasks, such as dividing $1,000 between a friend and a stranger, or between a compatriot and a foreigner. We use these data to study the distribution, potential determinants and potential consequences of variation in universalism. First, we again find a strong link between universalism and left-wing policy views, though with strong cultural variability. Second, we study various potential economic and institutional determinants of universalism. We document that cohort-country variation in experience with democracy is significantly predictive of variation in universalism, in line with a long literature in cultural psychology and philosophy that has speculated about the potential effects of democracy on people's in-group versus out-group attitudes.

Interestingly, the leading theory of the evolution of morality outside of economics (in psychology, anthropology and evolutionary biology) is profoundly economic in nature. It asserts that morality

is ultimately economically functional – that it evolved to support cooperation in economic production and social exchange. According to this body of theories, societies evolved entire packages of functional psychological and biological adaptations that regulate economic behavior. An immediate implication of this hypothesis (if true) is that moral systems should vary across societies as a function of local economic incentives and institutions. My work has studied this idea in two ways, by looking at heterogeneity in the historical strength of kinship ties and by investigating the effects of market exposure.

In '**Kinship, Cooperation and the Evolution of Moral Systems**' (*QJE* 2019), I leverage theories from evolutionary biology and anthropology to study the link between historical kinship systems and the evolution of morality. Based on a simple model, the main idea is that when societies organize social and economic cooperation around strong extended families (such as in clans or lineages), economic incentives are more conducive to the development of a particularist morality than when kinship ties are more loose and economic life is characterized by a higher frequency of one-shot interactions and cooperation. I test this hypothesis by linking anthropological data on the tightness of historical kinship systems across 1,000 ethnolinguistic groups to both historical and contemporary data on the structure of morality. The results show that loose and tight kinship societies develop highly distinct – but internally consistent – moral systems that differ in their degree of universalism. These results suggest that, in line with several theories outside of economics, societies may enforce cooperation through entire packages of functional psychological and biological adaptations that regulate economic behavior.

The idea that economic incentives explain much of the cross-cultural variation in morality is also the motivation behind the paper `**Market Exposure and Human Morality**' (*NHB* 2023), which I wrote for an interdisciplinary social science audience. A popular idea is that exposure to anonymous markets fosters a universalist morality because people may learn over time that universalism 'pays off' in cooperating and trading with strangers. To study whether this is true historically, I extract from a corpus of cross-cultural folklore textual measures of morality and market exposure for about 1,000 pre-industrial ethnic groups. In these textual data, universalism and proxies for market exposure (such as mentions of money and trade) are strongly positively correlated across societies. Instrumental variables estimates that leverage the distance to historical trade routes and the degree of ecological diversity as instruments for market exposure deliver very similar results.

In summary, these results suggest that morality responds to economic incentives as implied by social organization, systems of exchange and political institutions.

5. Cultural Variation in Patience, Risk Aversion, Revenge-Seeking and Conflict

A final set of papers studies cultural variation in other core economic preferences, including patience, risk aversion and willingness to take revenge. In '**Global Evidence on Economic Preferences**' (*QJE* 2018, lead article), we present the Global Preferences Survey (GPS), a global dataset on experimentally-validated, controlled measures of economic preferences, collected through the Gallup World Poll. For example, to measure risk aversion, respondents were asked a series of hypothetical binary choice questions in which they decided between receiving a certain lottery and a safe payment. One of the main correlational patterns in this dataset – analyzed in detail in '**Patience and Comparative Development**' (*REStud* 2022) – is that the survey measure of patience (derived from intertemporal tradeoffs) is strongly correlated with per capita income. This is true across countries, across subnational regions within countries, and across individuals within subnational regions. The other preference measures are likewise systematically linked to outcomes such as self-employment and prosocial behavior.

In '**Ancient Origins of the Global Variation in Economics Preferences**' (*AEA P&P* 2020) and '**Herding, Warfare and a Culture of Honor: Global Evidence**' (R&R *AER* 2024), we study the origins of some of the global variation in preferences, and link it to the global prevalence of conflict. In particular, in the second paper, we study the relevance of the culture of honor theory from psychology for the global distribution of conflict and willingness to take revenge. This theory posits that societies that relied on herding large animals in pre-industrial times are more prone to violence and revenge taking today. The idea is that their economic incentives were such that building up a reputation for violence was an effective way to protect the herders' mobile property. We study to what degree this idea helps us to understand contemporary conflict events. We document that those populations that descended from traditional herding societies are substantially more likely to experience conflict today, in particular conflict that suggests a revenge-taking motive. In line with this, the descendants of herding societies are also significantly more likely to report a high willingness to take a revenge and punish unfair behavior in our Global Preferences Survey data.

In summary, this line of work measures the global distribution of economic preferences and studies the potential origins and consequences of this variation. A common thread that emerges from this research and my work on universalism is that moral and social views exhibit a rich interplay with economic outcomes. On the one hand, heterogeneity in these traits appears to be functional in that it partly reflects incentives resulting from economic and political systems. On the other hand, social and moral views also shape politico-economic decision making.

Joint Authorship Statement. As outlined above, I have several single-authored papers, but also multiple series of coauthored papers. In the latter category, to a first approximation, all coauthors contributed equally to the work.

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