Mental Simulation and Preference Stability Over Time

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Prior research on intertemporal choice has demonstrated that people’s preferences can be impacted by the temporal distance. Specifically, Trope and Liberman (2003) shows that when we make a choice for the future, we tend to think much more about how desirable a certain option is. However, when making a decision with near future consequences, we often put much more weight on whether a certain option is feasible. As a result of this shift in considerations, people have inconsistent preference over time.

Suppose that counter to the natural consideration pattern, people are encouraged to think about the step-by-step feasibility aspects of the options when they make a choice for the distant future or think about the desirability aspects of the options when they think about the immediate future, could this type of mental elaboration help stabilize people’s intertemporal preference? The mental simulation literature shows mixed findings regarding the effect of process- and outcome-focused simulation in terms of goal attainment (Taylor et al. 1998; Taylor & Pham, 1999). In the current research, we seek to examine the temporal mechanism underlying different effects of process versus outcome simulation, and explore under what condition each type of mental simulation would be more effective in stabilizing intertemporal preferences.

Level of Mental Representation

Construal Level Theory (CLT) proposes that temporal distance changes people’s responses to future events by altering their mental representations of those events. For events in the distant future, the events are more likely to be represented in terms of abstract and central features (high-level construals) which pertain to the desirability consideration of an event. However, for events in the near future, the events are more likely to be represented in terms of concrete and peripheral features (low-level construals) which concern the feasibility consideration of an event. CLT predicts that temporal distance increases the desirability related mental representation at the high level whereas temporal immediacy increases the feasibility related mental representation at the low level (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). As a result, people prefer higher desirability option for the distant future and higher feasibility option for the near future which leads to preference inconsistency over time.

Process- vs. Outcome-Focused Mental Simulation

Recent research in mental simulation distinguishes between process simulation which encourages people to imagine the step-by-step process of reaching a certain goal, and outcome simulation which encourages people to think about the desirable outcome of fulfilling the goal. Major studies show that by practicing process simulation instead of outcome simulation, people’s performance will be superior (Taylor et al., 1998; Pham & Taylor, 1999). In the consumer domain, Escalas and Luce (2003; 2004) show that process-focused advertisements increase behavioral intentions. However, some other studies find that outcome simulation benefits goal-directed activity more than process simulation (Taylor & Pham, 1999).

We believe that levels of mental representation proposed by the CLT could help explain these contradictory findings: A closer look at the mental simulation literature reveals that studies showing a beneficial role of process simulation are based on activities in relatively distant future. According to CLT, in the distant future situations, people’s default mental representation of the event is desirability aspect at the high level. While outcome simulation is redundant, process simulation activates the low-level feasibility consideration which is naturally ignored. On the contrary, studies indicating the positive role of outcome simulation are based on activities in the immediate future. According to CLT, in the near future situations, people’s default mental representation of the event is feasibility aspect at the low level. While process simulation is redundant, outcome simulation activates the high-level desirability consideration which is naturally ignored. Thus, with process simulation for the distant future event or outcome simulation for the near future event, people have both the desirability and feasibility in their mind and their performance is enhanced.

Hypotheses

Applying this temporal based mechanism in preference over time, we hypothesize:

H1: Process simulation should have a limited impact on the relative choice between options for decisions in the near future. However, process simulation should increase preference for the higher feasibility option for decisions in the distant future, which is close to the natural near future preference.

H2: Outcome simulation should increase preference for the higher desirability option for decisions in the near future, which is close to the natural distant future preference. However, outcome simulation should have a limited impact on the relative choice between options for decisions in the distant future.

Results and Implications

We conducted two studies (assignment choice and desk choice) to test the hypotheses. As predicted, in both studies, we found that process simulation for the near future did not significantly change participants’ relative preference, but it increased people’s preference towards the higher feasibility option for the distant future event to the extent that it was not different from participants’ default preference for the near future. On the contrary, outcome simulation significantly increased people’s preference towards the higher desirability option for the near future to the extent that it was not different from people’s natural preference for the distant future. And outcome simulation did not significantly change people’s preference for the distant future decision.

As a conclusion, our research indicates that preference inconsistency could be overcome by changing levels of mental representation. At the same time, our research sheds light on the theory of mental simulation and explains their contradictory findings by distinguishing different levels of mental representation in terms of different time distance.

References


