Forgotten Rejections and the Rebuilding of Personal Preferences

Leif D. Nelson, New York University
Gulden Ulkumen, New York University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - All decisions are the result of a complex interplay between approach and avoidance motives. The relative emphasis that is placed on these two motives depends on the decision context. Sometimes, consumers must decide between two aversive options, and final selections are simply the result of rejecting the worst alternatives. In spite of this, people tend to interpret actions as choices, rather than rejections. Previous research has shown that observers tend to perceive approach motives in the decisions of others, even when their own decisions are guided by avoidance motives (Miller & Nelson, 2002). This notion is consistent with the work on the positivity bias, which shows that people initially default to a liking response when evaluating stimuli, and only subsequently adjust to a disliking response (Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1999; Diener and Diener 1996; Boucher and Osgood 1969; Herr and Page 2004). Although the robustness of this inferential bias has been demonstrated, the underlying processes and the consequences for subsequent decisions has not been studied.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

All decisions are the result of a complex interplay between approach and avoidance motives. The relative emphasis that is placed on these two motives depends on the decision context. Sometimes, consumers must decide between two aversive options, and final selections are simply the result of rejecting the worst alternatives. In spite of this, people tend to interpret actions as choices, rather than rejections. Previous research has shown that observers tend to perceive approach motives in the decisions of others, even when their own decisions are guided by avoidance motives (Miller & Nelson, 2002). This notion is consistent with the work on the positivity bias, which shows that people initially default to a liking response when evaluating stimuli, and only subsequently adjust to a disliking response (Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1999; Diener and Diener 1996; Boucher and Osgood 1969; Herr and Page 2004). Although the robustness of this inferential bias has been demonstrated, the underlying processes and the consequences for subsequent decisions has not been studied.

In Study 1 we investigated the memory construction processes underlying this inferential bias. If observers focus on what is chosen, rather than what is rejected, then the features of the chosen option should be over-represented in memory. Participants read about a job hiring decision and were told that an executive made a decision between two possible candidates. After a time delay, observers remembered decision makers’ choices better than their rejections. This effect emerged regardless of whether the decision was described as a rejection or as a choice, indicating that it reflects a fundamental way of how people interpret decisions. If people tend to better recall the choices of others, how do they think of their own decisions in retrospect?

Study 2 investigated the role of perspective. After examining the attributes of two graduate programs, participants either made a decision between them, or were told about someone else’s decision. Both groups initially reported which features they thought were most influential on the decision, and after a time-delay, attempted to recall the attributes of each school. Consistent with the prediction that people judge themselves to be less approach motivated than others, participants listed more chosen attributes when analyzing someone else’s decision than when analyzing their own. When observing the decision of someone else, participants showed impaired recall for information about the rejected option. Although the asymmetry in memory for chosen and rejected options was not totally eliminated, there was still a tendency for participants to remember more information about the option that they chose than they rejected.

If people interpret their own past decisions as choices rather than rejections, and infer corresponding approach motives, than over time, they should develop a skewed understanding of the preferences underlying their original decision. Studies 3 and 4 investigated the hypothesized asymmetries in how past decisions influence subsequent decisions.

In Study 3, participants evaluated two letters from the English alphabet and reported their preference. Participants in the Positive Frame condition compared a positive letter (A) with a neutral letter (O), while participants in the Negative Frame condition compared the same neutral letter to a negative letter (F). In the first phase of the experiment participants indicated the letter they preferred, and then reported their liking for each letter. After a delay, they were asked to recall their original decision, and to provide a new rating for the letter O. Despite a lifetime of familiarity with both letters, people who had chosen O over F in the initial phase of the study showed an increase in their liking for O relative to participants who had chosen A over O. These findings provide further confirmation that people can interpret own past decisions as implying a liking for the selected option. More importantly, this bias leads to an increase in current liking for the previously chosen option, where the decision context is discounted.

Study 4 examined whether the observed bias in liking judgments carry over to subsequent choices. In the first phase of the experiment participants evaluated the attractiveness of female faces. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Some participants compared a highly attractive face to a face of average attractiveness (Positive Frame), while others compared an unattractive face to the same neutral face (Negative Frame). Remaining participants evaluated the neutral face in isolation (No Frame). In each of the choice conditions participants identified which face they preferred, and subsequently, participants in all three conditions provided attractiveness ratings for each face. After a time delay, participants recalled the neutral face from the first phase and compared it to a new, slightly more attractive neutral face. All participants identified their preference between the two neutral faces, and rated the attractiveness of each. Consistent with our predictions, when the neutral face was compared to the unattractive face, she was found to be much more attractive than when she was compared to an attractive face or when she was evaluated in isolation. Accordingly, participants in the Negative Frame condition chose the original neutral face more often than participants in either of the other conditions.

Taken together, findings from the four studies show that the memory gap between chosen and rejected options that was previously documented for observers persist for self-choice. The possible outcomes of a decision have asymmetric influence on successive ratings such that liking for the chosen option increases in the subsequent choice occasion, whereas liking for the rejected option does not decrease. This finding illustrates the emphasis that decision makers put on choices as opposed to rejections. Most importantly, we find that the inferential positivity bias affects consequent choices. The fact that an option is chosen, even over a truly unattractive option, still renders it more desirable in memory. As a result people make subsequent decisions that reflect an initial liking for the chosen option, violating preference transitivity and leading to preference reversals in a subsequent choice occasion.

REFERENCES


