

# The Effects of Outcome versus Process-Oriented Thinking on Decision Difficulty

Debora Thompson, Georgetown University, USA

Rebecca Hamilton, University of Maryland, USA

Petia Petrova, Dartmouth College, USA

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine that you are looking for an apartment to rent and are deciding between two options that entail an attribute trade-off. One apartment is spacious but far from your workplace; the other is closer but much less spacious. Construal level theory (Liberman and Trope 1998) suggests that when deciding between these two alternatives, consumers who engage in process-oriented thinking will prefer the smaller and closer apartment because they tend to focus on the feasibility of the alternatives, while consumers who engage in outcome-oriented thinking will prefer the larger and less convenient apartment because they tend to focus on the desirability of the alternatives. However, although earlier research has tried to predict which alternatives will be chosen in a situation like this one, research has not addressed the subjective experience of the decision process for outcome- and process-oriented consumers. In this paper, we examine the impact of process and outcome-oriented thinking on perceived decision difficulty.

Previous studies have recommended process-oriented thinking over outcome-oriented thinking because it tends to be more effective in helping consumers achieve their goals (Taylor et al. 1998), increasing the consistency of their preferences (Hamilton and Thompson 2007; Zhao, Hoeffler and Zauberan 2007), and making them more discerning in their use of ad information (Escalas and Luce 2003). Although these findings tend to favor process-oriented thinking, they are based on scenarios in which consumers are evaluating a single goal or product, rather than choosing among two or more alternatives. In this research, we investigate the effect of process and outcome-oriented thinking on decision-making difficulty. In a series of three studies, we present participants with trade-offs between two alternatives, involving desirability and feasibility attributes. Our central prediction is that when consumers are faced with these trade-offs, inducing process-oriented thinking will significantly increase decision difficulty relative to outcome-oriented thinking, affecting their likelihood to postpone choice and likelihood to select a compromise option at a later point.

Because outcome-oriented thinking triggers elaboration primarily on the benefits associated with attaining one's goals, the desirability of the goals is expected to be more salient than the feasibility of the goals when individuals are evaluating alternatives. In contrast, process-oriented thinking should activate action-outcome linkages, making both feasibility and desirability considerations salient to process-oriented individuals. Thus, for decisions that require tradeoffs between desirability and feasibility, the decision should be more difficult for those who engage in process-oriented thinking than for those who engage in outcome-oriented thinking. In turn, this increased difficulty may affect subsequent judgments such as satisfaction with the decision process, willingness to postpone choice, and likelihood to switch to a compromise option.

In a series of three studies using two product categories (apartments and dietary supplements), we present participants with choice sets involving desirability vs. feasibility trade-offs (e.g., presence of vitamins vs. number of required tablets per day) and give them instructions to adopt either outcome-oriented or process-oriented thinking. In study 1, we find that process-oriented participants indicated significantly greater choice difficulty and lower

satisfaction with their decisions than outcome-oriented participants. Supporting our proposed mechanism, process-oriented thinking seems to increase the difficulty of making attribute trade-offs by encouraging consumers to focus on both the feasibility and desirability of the alternatives. Study 2 shows that participants instructed to use process-oriented thinking reported significantly more choice difficulty and more willingness to postpone choice than participants instructed to use outcome-oriented thinking, regardless of the vividness of the alternatives. Moreover, process-oriented participants were more inclined to select a compromise option than outcome-oriented participants. Finally, study 3 demonstrates that process-oriented thinking decreases the spreading of the alternatives. We find that the tendency to perceive the alternatives as more similar in attractiveness (lower spreading) mediates the negative effect of process-oriented thinking on decision difficulty. Supporting our prediction, analyses of participants' thought protocols suggest that process-oriented thinking makes decisions more difficult by encouraging consumers to focus on the process of using a target product as well as the outcomes. Process-oriented participants feel more conflicted when choosing between a desirable option and a feasible option because they tend to elaborate equally on both dimensions (forming action-outcome links), compared to outcome-oriented participants who focus primarily on desirability information (end benefits).

Our research adds to the literature on consumer decision making by exploring a factor independent of the choice set or attributes of the alternatives that affects preference fluency: the subjective feeling that choosing is easy or difficult. In addition, our results extend the literature on process- and outcome-oriented thinking by showing a negative effect of encouraging participants to engage in process-oriented thinking during decision making. Although process-oriented thinking can aid goal implementation, our findings suggest that it may hinder decision making, especially when consumers must make trade-offs between desirability and feasibility attributes.

## REFERENCES

- Escalas, Jennifer Edson and Mary Frances Luce (2003), "Process Versus Outcome Thought Focus and Advertising," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 13 (3), 246-254.
- Hamilton, Rebecca W. and Debora Viana Thompson (2007), "Is There a Substitute for Direct Experience? Comparing Consumers' Preferences After Direct and Indirect Product Experiences," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34 (4), 546-555.
- Liberman, Nira and Yaacov Trope (1998), "The Role of Feasibility and Desirability Considerations in Near and Distant Future Decisions: A Test of Temporal Construal Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75 (1), 5-18.
- Taylor, Shelley et al (1998), "Harnessing the Imagination: Mental Simulation, Self-Regulation, and Coping," *American Psychologist*, April, 53 (4), 429-439.
- Zhao, Min, Steve Hoeffler and Gal Zauberan (2007), "Mental Simulation and Preference Consistency Over Time: The Role of Process-Versus Outcome-Focused Thoughts," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 44 (3), 379-388.