Same Destination, Different Paths: the Effect of Observing Others’ Divergent Reasoning on Choice Confidence

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We demonstrate across two studies that observed choices do not tell the whole story of social influence. Rather, we show that confidence in our own decisions can be diminished if others make the same choice we do but justify the choice using a different rank ordering of relevant reasons.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

After Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 presidential election, strategists convened to analyze John McCain’s loss. Pundits generally grouped McCain’s supporters into two camps: Moderates, who appreciated McCain’s centrist libertarianism, and Conservatives, who valued his social and fiscal conservatism. Both groups together made up the American center (Kass 2008). The fact that these groups supported McCain could have bolstered the confidence of individuals in either group that they had chosen the correct candidate, thus enhancing McCain’s chances of victory. Interestingly, however, this failed to occur. Rather, divergence in perceptions of the importance of various issues among Conservatives may have led to fragmentation within the Republican party (Rodgers 2008), increasing McCain’s vulnerability among what should have been his base. Could observing others’ divergent perceptions of importance of reasons for a convergent choice have undermined the confidence of McCain’s supporters in their choice of candidate? More generally, can the observation of divergent assessments of the relative importance of potential reasons for making a convergent choice have such a strong influence on individuals’ choice confidence? Certainly, social influence research shows that observing others’ behavior can have a strong influence on our own (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Park and Lessig 1977). We contend, however, that convergence or divergence of choice does not fully explain the influence that observing others can have on one’s own choice confidence.

Rather, our results suggest that when an observed other’s justification for making the same choice as our own does not correspond with our justification, choice confidence can be undermined. In other words, when individuals disagree on how important different reasons should be in justifying a choice, their reasoning is divergent even if their choice is convergent. We argue that in such cases the importance prescribed by observed others to possible reasons for making a given decision is seen as highly diagnostic in determining the validity of our own choice. When others rely on reasons we consider relatively trivial, it throws into question the validity of our decision process and decreases confidence in our choice. By contrast, reasoning related to divergent choices is not perceived to be as directly diagnostic in evaluating our own choice. In these cases, we propose that the applicability of others’ behaviors will be discounted and our choice confidence will not be adversely affected.

We therefore propose a framework which recognizes that both observed choice and reasoning may either converge or diverge with an observer’s own. Reasoning is a key element in evaluating the validity of a thought process (Simonson and Nowlis 2000). As such, models of reason-based choice assume that individuals choose by considering the reasons for choosing one alternative versus the other (Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993). That is, consumers believe that good choices are based on good reasons and that good reasons will lead to good choices (Barber, Heath, and Odean 2003). Seeing someone choose what we do based on the same reasoning that drove us to choose it (i.e., perfect choice and reasoning convergence) should be doubly affirming—we have convergent support for our choice and know that we made it well. However, we propose that knowing that someone else has different justifications for a choice can be quite damaging to our choice confidence, particularly if the choices are convergent. We propose that an individual consumer who observes another making the same choice s/he does will see the underlying reasoning of the observed other as highly diagnostic in determining the validity of his/her own choice. Therefore, the consumer will question his/her choice if the reasoning of the observed other for making the same choice diverges from his/her own.

We also predict that observing divergent reasoning for the same choice may shake confidence more so than does observing another consumer making a completely different choice. Unexpected reasoning attracts more attention and elaboration than does expected reasoning (Greenwald and Sakumura 1967; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). Divergent reasoning for a shared choice is likely to be less expected than is any reasoning related to divergent choice—while shared choices promote tendencies to anchor on one’s own thought processes as the norm, divergent choices may cue consumers to recognize heterogeneity among those around them (Gilovich, Savitsky, and Mevec 2000) and, therefore, to be less surprised if they report divergent reasoning. The direct applicability of divergent reasoning to convergent choice behavior will also make it more persuasive than reasoning related to a different option (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). Thus, we anticipate that individuals will question the validity of their decision processes more when faced with reasoning relevant to their own choice versus reasoning irrelevant to that choice.

Results from two studies demonstrate the circumstances under which an observed other’s choice and reasoning for choice will impact one’s own choice confidence. Specifically, in study 1, we use the context of political decision making to demonstrate that while observing convergent choice and reason ranking evokes the greatest confidence in our own choice, observing someone make a convergent choice based on divergent reason ranking actually undermines confidence such that confidence in choice is decreased compared to when the observed other chooses a different alternative. This effect, however, only exists when choices are framed in terms of selection rather than rejection, highlighting the difference in the diagnosticity of reasons for liking versus disliking an alternative (Gershoff, Mukherjee, and Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Study 2 suggests that the effects we predict and demonstrate on choice confidence are most likely to emerge when individuals anticipate having to defend the validity of their decisions (e.g., in a public setting), and that these effects are attenuated when no public revelation or discussion is anticipated.