What Two Wrongs Make Alright: Examining the Psychological Factors Underlying the Tendency to Temper Judgments of Intoxicated People

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We reveal that the negative signal from a deviant behavior is seen as less diagnostic of underlying individual traits under a condition that is itself often considered deviant—intoxication. Further, we reveal that when the behavior is psychologically distant, intoxication attenuates negative judgments through a shift in dispositional attributions.

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Illusions of Diagnosticity
Chair: Aner Sela, University of Florida, USA

Paper #1: Seeing the Self in Choices: How Intuition Creates Attitude Certainty
Sam Maglio, University of Toronto, Canada
Taly Reich, Yale University, USA

Paper #2: How Self-Control Shapes Inferences from Choice
Aner Sela, University of Florida, USA
Jonah Berger, University of Pennsylvania, USA
Joshua Kim, University of Florida, USA

Paper #3: Not All Bad Apples Spoil the Bunch: Order Effects on the Evaluation of Groups
Janina Steinmetz, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
Maferima Toure-Tillery, Northwestern University, USA
Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago, USA

Paper #4: What Two Wrongs Make Alright: Examining the Psychological Factors Underlying the Tendency to Temper Judgments of Intoxicated People
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SESSION OVERVIEW
When forming impressions or drawing inferences about people and objects, individuals assign greater weight to information seen as diagnostic while ignoring or discounting less diagnostic information. Indeed, diagnosticity, or the extent to which information is seen as indicative of a certain trait or state, is a key construct in theories of judgment, decision-making, and impression-formation (Schwarz et al. 1991; Trope and Liberman 1996).

But while it is clear that perceived diagnosticity plays an important role, less is known about what determines whether a cue is seen as diagnostic in a particular context. What cognitive, affective, and motivational factors determine the extent to which choice, for example, is seen as indicative of individual preference? What situational cues determine whether exemplars are perceived as diagnostic of group traits? And might two consistent behaviors sometimes be seen as less diagnostic of individual traits than each behavior in isolation? The current session provides novel insights into these and related questions as it examines the elusive nature of diagnosticity perceptions.

The first two papers examine conditions under which choice is seen as more vs. less diagnostic of individual preferences. Maglio and Reich show that whether people believe their decisions are based on affect vs. cognitive deliberation influences the extent to which they perceive those decisions as reflective of their true self. Decisions based on affect are seen as more diagnostic of the true self, which in turn increases decision certainty and makes those decisions more resilient to change. Sela, Berger, and Kim show that self-control leads people to see their choices as less diagnostic of their true individual preferences. Further, self-control salience undermined the perceived choice-preference link more generally, which may decrease the tendency to view choice as indicative of preference even in unrelated downstream contexts.

The second two papers examine factors that impact perceived diagnosticity more generally, beyond the context of one’s choices. Steinmetz, Touré-Tillery, and Fishbach find that diagnosticity may depend on an item’s arbitrary location within a sequence: compared with other items (e.g., middle, last, or random), people perceive the first item as more diagnostic of the entire group. As a result, they over-weight the traits or the performance of the first item when making inferences, predictions, and decisions about the group.

Lastly, Goldsmith, Hershfield, and Galoni examine conditions under which two consistent unethical behaviors are, counterintuitively, seen as less diagnostic of individual traits than each unethical behavior in isolation. This, in turn, attenuates negative judgments. Thus, two wrongs can be more permissible than one. The findings have important implications for understanding how certain behaviors, such as sexual violence, may be excused in part due to observers’ tendency to rely on the perpetrator’s intoxication – another unethical behavior – as a discounting cue.

Taken together, these papers provide novel and potentially provocative insights into when and why certain cues are seen as (non)diagnostic. The session would interest scholars who study attribution, impression-formation, choice, and judgment and decision-making more broadly.

Seeing the Self in Choices: How Intuition Creates Attitude Certainty

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Feeling-based choice – by which people consult their intuitive, gut feelings in processing information in order to make a decision – has witnessed a surge in empirical attention and prescriptive benefits. Evidence continues to mount in favor of feeling-based approaches in the interest of helping consumers arrive at better choices (Mikels, Maglio, Reed, & Kaplowitz, 2011; Pham, Lee, & Stephen, 2012; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007; Donald G.).

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prone to defer choice upon choosing via feelings (versus deliberation). Participants evaluated four (non-alignable) attributes defining two DVD players using either their “deliberative, rational analysis” or their “intuitive, gut feeling” and then selected the one that they preferred before indicating whether they would, in that situation, make that purchase or defer it to a later date. When participants relied on feelings to guide their choice, 90% opted to purchase; when they relied on deliberation, 73% opted to purchase, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 80) = 4.02, p = .045 \). This suggests that feeling-based choice makes people more likely to take action in a manner reflective of holding a strong attitude toward their preferred product relative to their deliberating counterparts.

Study 2 was designed to target both a more direct measure of attitude strength as well as the mechanism by which a focus on feelings might bolster them. Participants evaluated four (non-alignable) attributes defining three smartphones using either their “deliberative, rational analysis” or their “intuitive, gut feeling” and then chose the one that they preferred. Subsequently, to assess whether the choice was diagnostic of their true self, participants reported the extent to which they thought that their chosen smartphone reflected their true self; to assess attitude certainty, participants reported how certain they felt with regard to their choice. Participants who had chosen based on feelings both felt more certain regarding their choice, \( F(1, 108) = 8.35, p = .005 \), and appraised their chosen smartphone as more evidential of their true self, \( F(1, 108) = 4.36, p = .039 \), with the latter statistically accounting for the former \( \beta = .49 \) (95% CI: .05; 1.07).

Having documented a relationship between feeling-focused choice and strong attitudes, as well as pinpointing the diagnosticity of the true self in accounting for this relationship, our next two studies consider how such feeling-derived attitudes might prove resilient when confronted with negative feedback.

In Study 3, participants evaluated four (non-alignable) attributes defining three digital cameras using, as before, deliberation or gut feelings before choosing the one that they preferred. Next, participants were randomly assigned to a feedback condition, asked to envision buying the chosen camera and then see a consumer report on it the following day. The positive feedback condition presented a favorable review of the chosen camera; the negative feedback condition presented an unfavorable review. Thereafter, participants reported how much regret they would feel in this scenario. A significant interaction, \( F(1, 124) = 6.146, p = .015 \), indicated that, when receiving positive feedback, both deliberative and feeling-focused decision-makers felt very little regret, \( F < 1 \). But, when receiving negative feedback, feeling-focused decision makers felt less regret than their deliberating counterparts, \( p < .001 \).

Study 4 precludes the alternative account that choosing on the basis of feelings simply elevates mood in the first place, providing a buffer against negative feedback. Accordingly, participants were randomly assigned to evaluate the same set of smartphones from Study 2 on the basis of either deliberation or their gut feelings, then chose the one that they preferred. To assess their feeling state immediately following the making of their choice, participants indicated how they felt (ranging from very bad to very good). Thereafter, they were randomly assigned to a condition in which they received either positive or negative feedback (in a manner identical to Study 3), then again rated their feelings on the same scale as the initial assessment. Prior to receiving the feedback, all participants reported a similarly positive mood, \( F < 1 \); after receiving the feedback, the patterns of mood ratings diverged. For those who received positive feedback, choosing on the basis of deliberation or feelings witnessed a nearly identical boost in response to the good news, \( p = .65 \). Upon receiving negative feedback, though, those who had chosen on the basis of deliberation felt worse than those who had chosen on the basis of feelings, \( p = .023 \). Thus, there is nothing inherently positive in choosing based on feelings; instead, feeling-focused choice generates a strongly favorable and resilient attitude that is capable of withstanding external rebuke.

**How Self-Control Shapes Inferences from Choice**

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Self-control is an important driver of consumer behavior, helping people regulate their choices, attain their goals, and control their emotions. But why does it control choice? The extended hypothesis proposes that self-control is relevant because it is diagnostic of preferences. In turn, choice is typically seen as an indication of those same inner states, leading people to infer their preferences and valuations by observing their own choice experiences (Baron 1997; Chaiken and Baldwin 1981; Festinger 1957). Picking a Toyota over a Honda, for example, may lead people to infer that they like Toyota, and thus increase subsequent evaluation of the brand.

In contrast, we suggest that when the concept of high self-control is salient, people are less likely to draw inferences about their preferences from their choices. We suggest this possibility based on work suggesting that self-control may override, interrupt, and otherwise alter the link between preference and choice (Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice 2019; Festinger 1957). Picking a Toyota over a Honda, for example, may lead people to infer that they like Toyota, and thus increase subsequent evaluation of the brand.

We argue that this inhibitory control has important implications for the perceived relationship between choice and preference more generally. Specifically, it weakens the notion that choice is driven by preferences, which once activated, may spill over to affect inferences even in unrelated domains. Five experiments test this possibility, examining whether making self-control salient decreases people’s tendency to use their choices as diagnostic of their preferences.

In Experiment 1, participants saw five mainstream sedans and chose their preferred option. Then, we manipulated self-control salience using a sentence unscrambling task containing either high self-control words (e.g., discipline, willpower) or low self-control words (e.g., impulse, spontaneous). In this, and all subsequent studies, the self-control manipulation had no effect on which item participants preferred. Finally, we measured the dependent variable: participants’ perception that their car choice reflected their personal preferences and taste.

As predicted, making self-control salient reduced participants’ belief that the car they chose reflected their preferences.

Experiment 2 differs a different operationalization of self-control salience and examines the downstream consequences for brand attitudes. After selecting their preferred car among the same five options used in Experiment 1, participants made unrelated choices, either: (a) self-control dilemmas (e.g., rich vs. lean entrée), (b) choice unrelated to self-control (e.g., apple vs. pear), or (c) neither (the two latter conditions both served as control groups). Finally, we measured how
much participants felt their car choice reflected their preferences, as well as their attitudes toward the brand more generally.

As predicted, making self-control salient through choice dilemmas reduced participants’ perception that their chosen car was diagnostic of their preferences, compared with the two control conditions (F(2,155) = 7.34, p < .001). This carried over to influence brand attitudes (.35, [-.67, -.13]).

Experiment 3 and 4 test the underlying process. If our theory is correct, these effects should be most pronounced among people who generally associate self-control with preference suppression (i.e., going against the self). Experiment 3 tests this possibility. First, participants chose one of several paintings. Second, we manipulated self-control salience by asking participants to describe a past experience where they used self-control vs. chose impulsively. Third, we measured the extent to which participants felt their chosen painting reflected their personal preferences and taste in art. Finally, we measured our moderator, the extent to which participants believed they used self-control primarily to resist their desires (i.e., going against the self) or to resist external persuasion and stick to their true goals (i.e., going with the self). This measure of individual lay-beliefs was unaffected by condition.

In addition to a main-effect of self-control condition (B = -.42, SE = .18, p < .02), results revealed the predicted interaction (B = -.26, SE = .10, p < .01): among participants who believed self-control meant suppressing desires, recalling self-control made the chosen painting seem less diagnostic of preference (B = -.83, SE = .24, p < .001). Among participants who believed self-control meant sticking to one’s goals, the effect disappeared (B = .007, SE = .23, p > .97).

Experiment 4 tests the mediating role of choice-preference correspondence perceptions. Participants completed the artwork choice, self-control salience manipulation, and preference measures from Experiment 3. Finally, participants rated the extent to which their choice in the priming task reflected their preference at that time.

Results indicate that making self-control salient through a self-control recall task decreased perceptions that the chosen painting reflected personal preferences (F(1,188) = 4.84, p < .029). This effect was mediated by the extent to which the decision recalled in the self-control priming task seemed diagnostic of preference (B = -.83, SE = .24, p < .001). Among participants who believed self-control meant sticking to one’s goals, the effect disappeared (B = .007, SE = .23, p > .97).

In Study 1, participants read that the first (vs. middle vs. last) runner of a relay race performed well or poorly depending on the condition, and predicted how well the rest of the team performed. We found participants expected the rest of the team to have performed better when the first (vs. middle/last) performed well, whereas they expected the rest of the team to have performed worse when the first (vs. middle/last) performed poorly. Thus, information about the first (vs. middle/last) runner influenced predictions more, suggesting that the first runner was deemed more diagnostic.

In the next two studies, participants read that the first (vs. middle vs. last) contestant of a cooking competition performed poorly—as a member of a group of five guys collaborating to compete against other teams (Study 2), or competing against each other (Study 3). Participants then indicated how well they expected the other contestants to have performed. Results show participants predicted the other contestants to be worse after reading about the first (vs. middle/last) contestant’s lackluster performance. These results indicate that the first (vs. middle/last) contestant was perceived as more diagnos-
tic of the rest of the group, regardless of whether other contestants would lose (Study 2) or gain (Study 3) from his poor performance. Although we made it clear that all sequences were random, in Studies 1, 2 and 3, people might have assumed the other group members could observe one another’s performances. Thus, the first (vs. middle/last) member of the sequence would have more influence on the rest of the group, which might account for the observed assimilation to the first member.

We designed Studies 4 and 5 to rule out this alternative explanation. Participants read about a group of five students whose answers to a multiple-choice test were graded in random order by a computer. Using this paradigm, we eliminated the possibility that grading the first group member influenced the grader’s perception of the next group member, since people view machines as unsusceptible to such biases. Participants also learned that the first (vs. middle vs. last) student received an unimpressive grade, and indicated their predictions for the other students’ performances. In both studies, we replicated the first-as-more-diagnostic effect. In Study 4, participant expected the other students to have received worse grades when the first (vs. middle/last) student performed poorly. In Study 5, in addition to judgments about the other group members, we also assessed behavioral intentions toward the group. Specifically, we asked participants if they would be willing to bet on the group’s future performance in an academic competition. We found that when the first (vs. middle/last) student performed poorly, participants not only expected other members of the group to do worse, but also were less willing to bet on the group’s future success. Furthermore, expectations about group members’ performances fully mediated the relationship between the focal group member’s position in the sequence and participants’ willingness to bet on the group.

Taken together, these studies show the important role of random position in a sequence in judgments and behaviors related to groups. These findings have important implications for social judgments, including stereotyping and discrimination, judgment of service personnel and the brands they represent. Although we explored our hypotheses in the social context, we expect our findings to extend to evaluations of numbered objects or products presented in bundles or groups (e.g., numbered combo meals at fast food restaurants). Thus, when assigning numbers to groups of employees or product, companies might benefit from assigning the number one to the highest-performing employee or the highest-quality product.

What Two Wrongs Make Alright: Examining the Psychological Factors Underlying the Tendency to Temper Judgments of Intoxicated People

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The belief that certain crimes are more likely to be committed when one is intoxicated has been supported by academic research and the popular media. However, the direct role that intoxication plays in the personal costs (i.e., criminal sentencing and social judgment) inherent to deviant behavior has yet to become a central part of academic discussion. The current research sheds light on this by offering a theoretical framework to predict conditions under which observers’ tendency to view an actor’s behavior as diagnostic of his disposition will be attenuated if the actor is described as intoxicated (vs. sober). Specifically, we posit that when the behavior is psychologically distant, intoxication will reduce dispositional attributions, which will consequently temper how the actor is judged. We base this prediction on prior work revealing that psychological distance broadens observers’ scope of consideration (Liberman & Trope, 1998), which should allow intoxication to be incorporated as a discounting cue for dispositional attributions.

We present data that supports this perspective drawn from over ten controlled experiments in addition to actual criminal sentencing trials involving over 1,500 inmates. For example, in one experiment, participants were asked to evaluate a hypothetical, psychologically distant other who committed a deviant behavior (i.e., gambling and losing money) while either intoxicated or sober. We then examined observers’ tendency to make dispositional attributions about the actor based on his actions in addition to their tendency to negatively judge the actor. Results revealed that when the actor was described as intoxicated observers were less likely to make dispositional attributions based on his behavior, as compared to when he was described as sober ($p<.001$). In addition, participants’ judgments of the actor more tempered (i.e., less negative) if he was described as intoxicated ($p<.001$). The effect of intoxication on negative judgments was mediated by a shift in dispositional attributions.

Another experiment replicated and extended these results by manipulating if the actor was intoxicated (vs. sober) and if the behavior that was committed was deviant (vs. socially acceptable). We then measured dispositional attributions and judgments. We observed convergent results for both deviant and socially acceptable behaviors: when the actor was intoxicated his behavior was seen as less diagnostic as compared to when he was sober ($p<.05$). Further, when the actor was intoxicated, participants judged his behavior less in a more tempered fashion (i.e., less negatively in the deviant behavior condition and less positively in the social acceptable behavior condition) as compared to when he was sober ($p<.01$). In both conditions, shift in dispositional attributions mediated the relationship between intoxication and judgment.

In subsequent experiments, we assessed if the observed effects would be altered under conditions of psychological proximity. For example, in one experiment we assessed how intoxication affected dispositional attributions and negative judgments of the self following a deviant behavior. In line with our theorizing, when the focal actor was psychologically proximal (i.e., the self) intoxication had no effect on dispositional attributions ($F<1$). However, participants still judged themselves less harshly for their behavior if intoxicated (vs. sober; $p<p.005$). Thus, the previously observed effects of intoxication on judgments of a hypothetical other were replicated for judgments of the self. However, a shift in dispositional attributions did not mediate the relationship between intoxication and negative judgment.

If observers are more likely to incorporate intoxication as a discounting cue for dispositional attributions when the action is more psychologically distant, as we have suggested, factors that promote psychological distance (e.g., the activation of an abstract level of construal, Trope & Liberman, 2010) should accentuate this effect. We tested for this by randomly assigning participants in a 2 (construal level: abstract vs. concrete) by 2 (intoxicated vs. sober) between-participants design. Construal level was manipulated using a temporal focus manipulation (Waksak, Trope & Liberman, 2006). All participants then read one of the two vignettes about the self-committing a deviant behavior while either intoxicated or sober.

In line with our prior results, under conditions of psychological proximity (i.e., a concrete construal), the intoxication did not affect dispositional attributions for the self ($F<1$). However, participants judged themselves less harshly for their deviant behavior if intoxicated (vs. sober; $p<.01$). Importantly, however, a shift in dispositional attributions did not mediate the relationship between intoxication and negative judgment.

Under conditions of psychological distance, however, this pattern of results shifted. Here, we observed that when the self was
described as intoxicated the behavior was seen as significantly less diagnostic of the self, as compared to when the self was described as sober ($p<.001$). In addition, when the self was intoxicated, participants judged themselves less harshly for their behavior as compared to when the self was sober ($p<.001$). Finally, a shift in dispositional attributions mediated the relationship between intoxication and negative judgment. Thus, consistent with our predictions, when evaluations were made to feel more psychologically distant (i.e., through the adoption of an abstract level of construal), intoxication was incorporated as a discounting cue for dispositional attributions, and a shift in dispositional attributions explained why intoxication attenuated negative judgments. A test for moderated mediation also supported the notion that a shift in dispositional attributions mediates the relationship between intoxication and judgement among those who construed the behavior as more psychologically distant, and not those who construed the behavior as more psychologically proximal.

The current research provides novel evidence for the role of psychological distance in attribution processes. In doing so, this research provides an important step toward better understanding the factors that inform the costs inherent to committing deviant behaviors, and offers implications for the understanding of attribution theory, self-signaling theory, construal level theory and beyond. In addition, these findings have practical implications for policy makers and others seeking to curtail the incidence of deviant behaviors linked to alcohol consumption.

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