

Book Reviews

The construction of social judgments: A constructive perspective for behavioral decision research?

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL JUDGMENTS, Leonard L. Martin and Abraham Tesser (eds), Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992. 358 pp., ISBN 0 8058 1149 4.

Review by Diederik A. Stapel, University of Amsterdam

The ‘constructive’ nature of preferences is, according to Payne *et al.* (1992), the underlying theme of the most recent developments in behavioral decision research. Preferences and choices do not seem to be derived by consulting a master list of likes and dislikes, which is later integrated in some kind of overall judgment. Often such judgments are constructed ‘on the spot’. Consequently, the following research questions become salient: Are preferences based on conscious processes? Do choices follow rationally from values? Are the preferences that guide choices stable and consistent? How do people assess their likes and dislikes? How do people integrate old judgments and new sensations when constructing their preferences?

Work which addresses these questions has recently begun to accumulate in both ‘behavioral decision making’ and ‘social cognition’ research. Unfortunately, however, there has been very little interchange between these different research perspectives.

Collections on constructive judgment processes overlap considerably and share many authors (e.g. Martin and Tesser) but decision theorists who emphasize the importance of a ‘constructive’ perspective hardly ever refer to this work (e.g. Payne *et al.*, 1992).

The present book on recent developments in investigations of the constructive nature of (social) judgment, edited by Martin and Tesser, may be useful in changing this state of affairs. The book gives a nice overview of the state of the art of research emphasizing the constructive nature of (social) judgment in general. Thus, it might be useful in showing the similarities and differences between theories of contingent decision making and theories of context-effects in social judgment.

Martin and Tesser state that they hope their book not only shows the pitfalls of traditional models of comparative and/or social judgment, but also points to

more complete models. They write that ‘the research reported in the book suggests that perceivers are more sophisticated than they have often been depicted by previous models of social judgment. People appear to have a number of different types of information available to them (e.g. feelings, concepts, procedures, episodic memories) and they combine and integrate these different types of knowledge in different ways to create or construct their judgments’ (p. viii). The authors divide the book into three sections. In the first section some emerging problems and assumptions within the field of social judgement research are addressed. The second section includes chapters that directly challenge existing theories by presenting data supporting new assumptions and, in the third section, some more complete and comprehensive models of how people construct judgments and make choices are discussed. Many of the chapters in the book seem to have interesting implications for behavioral decision-making research.

The first chapter by Wyer, Lambert, Budesheim, and Gruenfield shows, convincingly, that when trying to extend person memory research — which is often done in artificial laboratory settings — to real person interactions and judgments, then one important extra factor becomes the normative expectations people have in conversations. Translated to a decision-making research perspective, this research suggests that when people have to communicate their preferences to others, they do more than just externalize particular evaluations or choices. In the process of group decision making, people will try to provide such information by following the logic of conversational implicature, i.e. they will attempt to provide their decision-making partners with relevant, informative, and cooperative information (cf. Grice, 1975).

The chapter by Wilson and Hodges challenges the prevailing notion (e.g. Janis and Mann, 1977) that reflecting on decisions will improve the quality of decision making. Wilson and Hodges report research which demonstrates that conscious reflection on one’s preferences often leads to objectively poorer and less satisfying decisions. Their results suggest that people do not *always* have stable preferences. Often values are

constructed in particular contexts and can be influenced by these contexts — leading to changes in preferences. The chapter by Millar and Tesser makes a similar point. Millar and Tesser point out that preference-choice consistency ('Do I choose what I said I preferred or do I choose something else?') is often a function of the match–mismatch of the attitude (or preference) component salient at the time somebody is asked to give his opinion and the attitude component that drives the final choice. At least on a superficial level, the kind of tasks that are discussed in the Wilson and Hodges and the Millar and Tesser chapters are related to the kind of research done on response mode effects, preference reversals, and compatibility effects in behavioral decision-making research (see Payne *et al.*, 1992; Slovic *et al.*, 1990).

In one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Higgins and Bargh question an assumption underlying much recent social judgment and decision-making research, namely that conscious processing is 'good', whereas unconscious processing is 'bad'. It seems common sense to assume that important and involving decisions should be based on a conscious and mindful analysis of the costs and benefits involved. Tversky and Kahneman's research on heuristics and biases, however, has demonstrated that often people make judgments and decisions in a way that is quick and automatic (e.g. Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Furthermore, Tversky and Kahneman have argued that the employment of heuristics will in most cases lead to accurate and functional decision making. Higgins and Bargh take this functionality argument one step further and argue that, while under some conditions a *heuristic* way of constructing judgments is functional; sometimes *unconscious* processing of information is *more* functional than when such information is processed in a conscious manner. Higgins and Bargh argue that neither conscious nor unconscious processing is inherently good or bad and either can lead to better or worse decisions. They provide a balanced presentation of situations where conscious and unconscious processing can be adaptive or maladaptive. Thus, the Higgins and Bargh chapter calls for a greater appreciation of the costs and benefits associated with both forms of processing and decision-making outcomes that follow them.

In a chapter that might be especially important to those who are interested in multiattribute models of decision making and models of attribute-based decision making, Smith provides evidence for this theory that people use particular instances (exemplars) and similar, similarity-based rules rather than complex theories or information-integration logic when constructing judgments. Smith challenges the generality of schemata in information processing. He argues that people more often use exemplars than prototypic or schematic categories when deciding whether a

particular object belongs to a particular category (Is x a member of category K ?). Smith's theory of exemplar-based judgment challenges both algebraic models and schematic models of social judgment and he presents convincing evidence in favor of exemplar-based judgment. Together with the chapters by Martin and Achee and Schwarz and Bless, the Smith chapter provides an excellent overview of factors that are important when studying information-use in judgment and decision making. Martin and Achee emphasize the importance of processing goals for the way information is represented in memory and the way in which this information is used. Schwarz and Bless show that assimilation and contrast effects in judgment may result from changes in the perception of the object of judgment (categorization) or in the relative accessibility of scale anchors when the decision maker is constructing judgments of this object (comparison).

The two chapters that might be most familiar to behavioral decision-making researchers are probably the chapters of Strack and Clore. Clore presents his research on the feelings-as-information approach to the study of the relation between affect and judgment as a 'How do I feel about it heuristic?' He argues that people often do not use 'availability' or 'representativeness' but instead use their feelings about the target object as input for their judgments. Strack argues that an assessment of representativeness often plays a critical role in deciding what information is used in judgments.

In summary, Martin and Tesser's book emphasizes the importance of contextual factors for the different stages of the decision making process. Contextual factors can affect (1) the perceived meaning of the judgment task, (2) retrieval or construction of relevant information, (3) the computation of a response, and (4) the externalization of this response onto a particular response mode or judgment scale. The present volume of experiments and theories speaks to the contingent nature of people's judgments and decisions.

The underlying theme of Martin and Tesser's volume is that judgments are often constructed 'on the spot' and thus largely determined by fleeting contextual factors. Unfortunately, however, the book is far from comprehensive and there is substantial overlap in the issues, topics and research discussed in several chapters. Little attention is given to real-world problems or to the social application of the rich knowledge-base the book obviously contains. Furthermore, the book is not written for behavioral decision-making researchers. Its focus is more on how people, in general, make judgments than on how they, in particular, make 'risky' or 'riskless' decisions. Nevertheless, I think that this volume will be of interest to those behavioral decision researchers who want to provide themselves with some provocative insights as to how to advance a 'constructive processing perspective' (see Payne *et al.*, 1992) on behavioral decision making.

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Their risks — and ours

REPORTING AND RISK, Eleanor Singer and Phyllis M. Endreny, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993, 244 pp., ISBN 0-87154-801-1.

Review by Baruch Fischhoff, Carnegie Mellon University

As we know, it is difficult to study simultaneously what people see in a situation and how they derive summary judgments about it. The revealed-preference method of economics makes a sweeping assumption about how information is processed (i.e. rationally), then works backward to figure out what gets processed (i.e. what goals people are trying to achieve by their choices). In experimental psychology, we tend to prefer the other option. That is, we create clear-cut stimuli, then see what people do with them, in order to discern their inferential strategies. Sometimes, we evaluate our success with manipulation checks, seeing whether subjects have interpreted stimuli as we had intended; sometimes, we just trust to our own design skills.

Investigators using this research strategy have, over the past twenty years, produced various theories about how people deal with risks in experimental settings. Applying these theories to the risks of everyday life requires knowing what 'stimuli' life presents. In one noted attempt to characterize life's stimuli, Combs and Slovic (1979) reviewed two newspapers' coverage of potential causes of death. They found that this reporting was not an accurate representation of public health mortality statistics (one measure of 'risk'). Moreover, overreported causes seemed to be ones that the public overestimated. This combination suggested a public that relied on an availability heuristic. That is, people do a good job of noting and remembering what they are told about risk, but not such a good job of detecting and undoing the systematic biases in those reports.

Singer and Endreny vastly extend this kind of analysis, showing what the public has to go on when it makes inferences about risks, looking at a broad range

of hazards to life and limb. They present multi-dimensional content analyses of 1200-plus mass media reports, drawn from 1984 ($n = 952$) and 1960 ($n = 323$). Their work considers not just what hazards are reported but also whether risk or benefit information is included, whether attention is paid to class and gender differences in risk, where events occurred, how blame is assigned, and how accurate the reports are, among other things.

Their results provide a rich description of the world of reported risks to which people's natural inferential processes might be applied. Singer and Endreny make good use of the literature that was available at the time of their data collection, providing summaries and integration that set a high standard for cross-disciplinary borrowing. They even use the psychological literature to reflect on judgmental processes of reporters that might have contributed to the face of the news (e.g. how fundamental attribution processes might have affected how reporters assign blame for accidents). Nonetheless, they remain mindful of the economic and political pressures that shape the news, an issue that psychologists could recognize as citizens, but not describe in any informed detail.

Another noteworthy feature of the volume is that it offers the full coding scheme used for the major content analyses, as well as (the moderately good) reliability statistics for the critical categorization of stories by the type of hazard they describe. Although there is little that a reader can do when a code seems questionable, at least one knows what one is getting with analyses about natural disasters, activities having costs and benefits, energy hazards, material hazards, complex technologies (a subcategory of materials hazard), or illnesses.

Within these constraints, there is most of what one needs (besides the resources) to replicate the study. The authors note several salutary changes in risk reporting in the period between their data collection and write-up. Since that time, there have been various direct attempts to improve the quality of risk reporting, such