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## **The Role of Meta-Cognitive Experiences in Reason-Based Choices For the Self Vs. Others**

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The Role of Meta-cognitive Experiences in Reason-based Choices for the Self vs. Others Hyejeung Cho, University of Michigan Christina Brown, University of Michigan Our study extends prior research on the role of meta-cognitive experiences in reason-based choices by exploring the differential role of information content vs. experiential information in the context of choices for the self vs. others. Our preliminary findings indicate that people high in Need for Cognition (NFC) rely on their subjective experiences of generating a few vs. many reasons in making their own choice, but not in making a prediction of others' choices. In contrast, people low in NFC rely on their experiences of reason generation in making a prediction of others' choices, but not in making their own choice.

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## The Role of Meta-cognitive Experiences in Reason-based Choices for the Self vs. Others

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### Extended Abstract

Prior studies have shown that people sometimes base judgments on the subjective meta-cognitive experience, for example, the ease or difficulty with which relevant information comes to mind (referred to as "ease-of-retrieval" by Schwarz et al. 1991). For instance, Wänke et al. (1997) have shown that consumers evaluate a BMW less favorably after generating ten reasons to choose a BMW over a Mercedes than with only one self-generated reason. Our research ultimately intends to look into three possible mechanisms for this "ease-of-reasoning" effect. The first two explanations have been offered by prior studies, but there seem to be mixed findings in the literature (see Haddock 2000 and Wänke & Bless 2000 for reviews).

### Three possible mechanisms for the ease-of-reasoning effect

The first possible mechanism suggested by prior studies is the 'availability heuristic' based processing. This heuristic-based account suggests that people infer a scarcity of good reasons from the experienced difficulty of generating reasons. According to this explanation, people are more likely to rely on this ease effect under low-elaboration conditions than high-elaboration conditions. If this availability heuristic mechanism operates in the reason-based choice contexts, then the experienced difficulty of generating reasons should have a negative impact on the predicted choices of others as well as the choices made for the self only under low elaboration conditions (or at least the ease effects should be more pronounced under low, rather than high, elaboration conditions). The second possible mechanism involves the perceived validity (or quality) of reasons. According to this explanation, people are more likely to rely on the ease effect under high-elaboration conditions, because subjective difficulty of generating reasons undermines the perceived validity or compellingness of the reasons (Wänke & Bless 2000, Tormala et al. 2002). If this 'reason validity' mechanism operates, then the subjective difficulty of generating reasons should have a negative impact on the predicted choices of others as well as the choices for the self only under high elaboration conditions. In the current study, we suggest another possible explanation that the subjective experience of difficulty tells the person something about his/her preferences directly (i.e., "I can't think of many good reasons, so this tells me something about my own preferences" rather than "I can't think of reasons, so this tells me something about the reasons themselves"). In other words, the consumer may believe that it is inconsistency with his/her own preferences, rather than the validity of the reasons themselves, that makes reason-generation difficult. If this 'preference diagnosticity' mechanism operates, then one's subjective difficulty of generating reasons should be limited to decisions made on one's own behalf. We further argue that only under high-elaboration conditions people would be motivated and make a distinction between one's own feelings and the feelings that others might be likely to have. Therefore, under high-elaboration conditions, when a person makes a choice for the self, the target option will more likely be chosen after only a couple of (vs. many) reasons are generated. On the other hand, when the person predicts others' choices, the person would predict that the others will more likely choose the target option after many (vs. a couple of) reasons are generated, supposedly because the subjective difficulty of generating reasons is no longer diagnostic for others' choices.

### Experiment design

Allowing people to generate reasons *then* asking them to make choices on behalf of themselves or predict others' choices will allow us to disentangle these mechanisms. Seventy-nine undergraduate students participated in our experiment with a 2 (reasons: 2 vs. 8 pro reasons) x (NFC: high vs. low) x 2 (choice type: self vs. others) mixed-design where 'reasons' and 'NFC' were treated as between-subjects factors and 'choice type' was treated as a within-subjects factor. Each participant generated either 2 or 8 reasons for choosing New York over Las Vegas as a vacation destination. NFC was measured using the 18-item scale (Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao 1984) and participants were divided into two groups based on a median split for data analysis. After reading a choice scenario and generating reasons, participants were asked which destination they would most likely choose and which destination they thought other students most likely choose (the two choice questions were given in a counter-balanced order). At the end, participants were asked how difficult it was to generate the 2 or 8 reasons (on a 7-point scale) for manipulation check.

### Major findings

First of all, our manipulation check on the experienced difficulty of generating reasons revealed only a main effect of the number of reasons as expected: participants in the 8-reason condition reported that it was more difficult to generate the reasons than those in the 2-reason condition. Our analysis of the main data revealed a significant three-way within subjects interaction among 'the number of

reasons,' 'NFC,' and 'choice type' showing that depending on the choice perspective (self or others), the ease effect on the choice outcome differs. This three-way interaction was the only significant effect. In specific, when people made a choice for themselves, those with high NFC relied primarily on their subjective ease experience. They were more likely to choose N.Y. over L.V. after generating 2 (vs. 8) reasons to go to N.Y. However, when they predicted similar others' choices, they relied more on the number of reasons they generated. They were more likely to choose N.Y. over L.V. after generating 8, rather than 2, reasons. On the other hand, those with low NFC, when making a choice for themselves, were more likely to choose N.Y. after generating 8 reasons than 2, suggesting that they did not make use of subjective difficulty in making their decision and simply relied on the number heuristic (i.e., "more reasons are better"). However, when predicting others' choices, they were more likely to choose N.Y. after generating 2 reasons than 8, consistent with the possibility that taking others' perspective generated more cognitive effort. For high NFC people, our results replicate the previous finding that people sometimes use the ease or difficulty of generating reasons as a guide to their choices; however, according to our data, what their subjective difficulty of generating reasons informs may be neither about the scarcity of good reasons nor about the validity of the reasons themselves. It seems to be rather about their diagnosticity for the person's own preferences. Our future study will look more closely into the mechanisms for low NFC people.

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## When Behaving Bad is Good: Self-Regulatory Enhancement by Strategic Goal Deviation in Consumption

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### Extended Abstract

Most important goals cannot be attained without considerable self-regulation and effort (Cantor and Blanton, 1996). During the process to attain the desirable end state that the personal goal focuses on, consumers need to choose between multiple goals (Kruglanski, Shah, Fishbach, Friedman, Chun and Sleeth-Keppler, 2002), to restrain "irresistible" impulses (Baumeister, 2002), and need commitment to persistently pursue the current goals (Brunstein, 1993; Locke and Latham, 2002). Altogether, the process of goal striving can be quite exhausting leading many times to interruptions of current goal-pursuit (Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice, 1994).

A common assumption in the literature is that in order to reach a specific goal, consumers need to progress through some sequence of steps when making a choice (Bettman, 1979), consistently regulating their activities in alignment with their focal goals (Hacker, 1985). For example, Bettman (1979) proposed that in order to reach goals, a set of sub-goals must be defined, defining a plan to reach the specific goal. Analogously, Kruglanski and colleagues (2002) proposed that each goal can be depicted as a goal-system, where the super-ordinate goal is cognitively connected to its various sub-goals or way-stations en route to that goal. Hacker (1985) considered that any activity that is not organized towards the goal should typically be characterized as trial and error.

Clearly, the systematic pursuit of goals over time can be quite exhausting since cognitive and other resources are spent over time to keep commitment and focus on the current long-term goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus, controlling self-behavior requires the expenditure of resources that become depleted during the self-regulation process, resembling a muscle's ability (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000; Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004). And, if the muscle metaphor of willpower generalizes, then because the muscle needs periods of rest and relaxation to recuperate and to strengthen, willpower will also require its moments in the sun. This is the thesis that we examine in the present research.

Many goals that consumers pursue, such as dieting, saving, and exercising, entail inhibitory behaviors that need to be executed over extended periods of time, involving effort and need for high self-regulation. Such inhibitory activity strains willpower, and it does so progressively when the inhibition needs to be maintained over extended periods of time. Long-term projects on which consumers work repeatedly, sometimes with little optimism for a quick or easy finish, strain the limits of self-regulation for practically everyone (Mischel, Cantor and Feldman, 1996). Thus, it is likely that consumers, when pursuing goals that involve inhibitory behaviors for extended periods of time, may need periods of rest and relaxation to recuperate and to strengthen self-regulatory resources.

The issue then is if we always need to perform the behaviors that bring the desired end-state closer, in order to eventually attain it? Or, if there are conditions that is good to temporarily deviate strategically from direct goal pursuit, in order to eventually attain the goal?