



## Construction and retrieval of evaluative judgments: The attitude strength moderation model<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Disagreement exists as to the psychological processes underlying reports of evaluative judgments, with some theorists suggesting that attitudes can be retrieved and used to guide evaluative judgments, and others suggesting that such judgments are the result of construction, wherein evaluative judgments are constructed on the spot, and as needed. We propose the *attitude strength moderation model*, which predicts that evaluative judgments of an object associated with strong attitudes are often the result of retrieval processes, whereas the evaluative judgments associated with weak attitudes are often the result of construction processes. We examine these hypotheses in three experiments. The first and second experiments compare response latencies to sequential evaluative and attribute judgments. The third experiment uses eye-tracking. All three experiments provide support for the attitude strength moderation model.

“People do not ‘have’ attitudes: they form judgments.”

(Schwarz, 2007, p. 651)

“By viewing attitudes as associations in memory, the model obviously is positing that attitudes can ‘exist.’”

(Fazio, 2007, p. 609)

### 1. Introduction

When asked whether one likes or dislikes a person, place, or brand, does one *retrieve* a stored attitude to guide evaluative judgment, or instead *construct* the judgment from salient information available at the moment of judgment? Such a question would seem fundamental to understanding evaluative judgments. And yet, as the quotes above illustrate, there are two strikingly different answers. One perspective holds that individuals form (construct) judgments based upon information salient when such judgment is needed. The other perspective holds that individuals rely, at least in part, on attitudes stored in

memory. In essence, the question comes down to whether or not preformed attitudes are ever retrieved to guide evaluative judgments.

In this research, we provide evidence that preformed attitudes are retrieved and used to guide evaluative judgments, albeit under specific conditions. We advance, and find support for, the notion that evaluative judgments of an object associated with strong attitudes are often based upon retrieved attitudes, whereas evaluative judgments associated with weak attitudes are often based upon construction processes.

#### 1.1. Construction perspective

The quote appearing to the left above portrays the position taken by advocates of the construction perspective: people's evaluative judgments are constructed based upon what feelings and/or thoughts are most salient at the time of questioning, absent any retrieval of a stored attitude. Upon consideration, the question naturally arises: Isn't such a position hyperbole – theoretically extreme, but not meant to be taken literally?

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Inspection of the literature would suggest otherwise. Ferguson and Bargh (2003) write that “an evaluation...represents a combination of numerous evaluations of various features of the object, rather than a solitary tag associated with the object representation” (p. 170). Wilson and Hodges (1992) conceptualize evaluative judgments as being the result of reaching into a file drawer: The judgment depends upon what files happen to be retrieved. In fact, the notion that evaluative judgments are invariably the result of construction processes is either explicitly or implicitly embedded in many contemporary conceptualizations of judgment and decision making (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz, 2004; Schwarz & Bless, 1992, 2007; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001; Slovic, 1995; Strack & Martin, 1987; Tesser, 1978; Tourangeau, 1992; Tversky, Sattath, & Slovic, 1988; Wilson & Hodges, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992).

The construction perspective is especially attractive given the robust finding that evaluative judgments are sometimes highly sensitive to context (i.e., unstable). And the evidence that context can influence evaluative judgments is vast. Subtle variations in how questions are worded, as well as the order in which questions are posed, have been found to have strong influences on evaluative judgments (e.g., Hippler, Schwarz, & Sudman, 1987; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Schuman, Presser, & Ludwig, 1981; Schwarz, 1999; Schwarz & Sudman, 1996; Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz, 1996; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). Similarly, a person's transient mood at the time of providing evaluative judgments has been found to influence such judgments (e.g., Isen, Shalke, Clark, & Karp, 1978; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Schwarz, Strack, Kommer, & Wagner, 1987). Further, one's phenomenological experience can influence evaluative judgments, such that the experienced ease or difficulty in retrieval of information influences evaluative judgments (Schwarz, 1998, 2004, 2007; Schwarz et al., 1991; Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

The construction perspective also provides an explanation for when evaluative judgments are not sensitive to context (i.e., stable). Such an explanation is based on the notion that information associated with an object can become chronically accessible. Specifically, it is argued that repeated encounters with an object create strong associations between the object and related information. Consequently, upon the mere mention or presentation of that object, the information that has become chronically associated with that object comes to mind. As such, stability in evaluative judgments merely reflects stability of construction based upon chronically accessible information, with no retrieval of stored attitudes being necessary (e.g., Schwarz, 1998, 2004, 2007; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). To use the Ferguson and Bargh (2003) metaphor, such chronically accessible information is at the top of the file drawer, and as such is more readily used in judgments that are constructed on the spot. The construction perspective adopts the position that regardless of whether the evaluative judgment is influenced or not by context, such evaluative judgments are constructed *absent the retrieval of stored attitudes*.

One challenge for the constructivist view is that even if the presentation of an attitude object leads to the spontaneous retrieval of associated information, a mechanism for evaluating that information is needed. For example, if the presentation of “ice-cream” leads to the retrieval of the information that ice-cream is high in calories, one needs to assess if being high in calories is good or bad. If no attitude towards calories is stored, then information about calories would need to be retrieved. For example, the retrieval of “high calories” might lead to the thought of gaining weight. But then, one needs to assess if gaining weight is good or bad. If evaluation always requires retrieval of some new information to be evaluated, it is not clear when the process would end and we would appear to be on the edge of an infinite regress. Thus, we next consider the attitude retrieval perspective.

### 1.2. Attitude retrieval perspective

The quote appearing to the right above portrays the position taken

by advocates of the attitude retrieval perspective: People's evaluative judgments can be guided by the retrieval of stored attitudes. The notion that evaluative judgments are the result of retrieval and use of stored attitudes has a long tradition that is embraced by contemporary researchers (e.g., Allport, 1935; Campbell, 1963; Chein, 1948; Doob, 1947; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Thurstone, 1928). For example, Eagly and Chaiken (2007) write that “Our definition, like most definitions of attitude, places attitudes inside the mind of the individual” (p. 584).

In essence, the attitude perspective argues that we can come to store an attitude in memory. These attitudes serve as a ready guide to action and expectations regarding the attitude object should that object be encountered (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Fazio, 1995, 2007). Rather than having to construct an evaluative judgment each time anew, repeated encounters with an object or piece of information lead to a stored attitude towards the object (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Fazio, 1995). And this stored attitude can be retrieved to guide evaluative judgments and behavior. This perspective embraces the notion that attitudes are stored for the functional reasons of knowing what to expect from attitude objects (e.g., good people are expected to do good things), and guiding behavior (e.g., a positive attitude towards an object leads to positive behaviors). As such, fast, preferential access is the *raison d'être* for attitudes.

Proponents of the attitude perspective allow that evaluative judgments can be influenced by context. Specifically, such a position posits that after attitude retrieval, some modification can occur before the report of an evaluative judgment (e.g., Shavitt & Fazio, 1991). And several attitude proponents specifically hypothesize that there are instances in which attitudes do not exist (e.g., Converse, 1970, 1979) or are not retrieved to guide behavior (Fazio, 2007). What is integral to this perspective is that *internally stored attitudes sometimes can be retrieved*.

### 1.3. Attitude strength resolution

We propose that evaluative judgments of an object are often based upon retrieval and use of attitudes when these objects are associated with strong attitudes, whereas evaluative judgments are often constructed when the objects are associated with weak attitudes. What is attitude strength? Strong attitudes resist, persist and predict (i.e., fight counter-persuasion, are stable over time and guide behavior) better than those that are considered weak (see Krosnick & Petty, 1995). The importance of attitude strength research is that it provides a conceptual framework by which to understand when and why some attitudes are more consequential than others. Of most importance to the current framework is that prior research has identified several antecedents of strong attitudes (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Petty, Briñol, & DeMarree, 2007). Three of the most studied determinants of strength are the extent to which people have thought about the attitude (elaboration; e.g., Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995), how quickly it comes to mind (accessibility; e.g., Fazio, 1995), and how sure people are of its validity (confidence; e.g., Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002).

Strong attitudes have been shown to result from relatively effortful cognitive elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b; Petty & Wegener, 1999). Elaboration occurs when individuals possess the motivation and ability to scrutinize information and is the relatively effortful process whereby an attitude is formed as a result of the thoughts that an individual has in response to information about an attitude object. When individuals lack the ability or the motivation to elaborate, it is still possible for them to form attitudes in response to information. However, attitudes formed under these conditions tend to be the result of relatively non-thoughtful associative and inference processes and are weaker than attitudes formed with high thought (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b).

To be clear, attitudes and attitude strength can differ independently of each other. The extent to which one likes or dislikes an attitude

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