

Predicting what we will like: Asking a stranger can be as good as asking a friend



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ABSTRACT

When predicting how much they will like something they have not encountered before, people use three commonsense theories: It is better to have a description of the attitude object than to know how someone else felt about it (“I know better than others”), better to know how a friend felt about it than how a stranger felt (“birds of a feather”), and better to get advice from friends—how much they think we will like it—than to know how *they* felt about it (“my friends know me”). We present evidence that people endorse these lay theories but also that they overuse them. Sometimes people make better predictions by knowing how a stranger felt than by getting a description of the object, sometimes a stranger is as good as a friend, and sometimes advice is not any better than knowing how someone else felt.

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Introduction

“Fools need advice most, but wise men only are the better for it.”
Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1734/1914, p. 21)

To make good decisions, people need to make accurate forecasts about how they will feel in the future. For example, when deciding whom to date, where to spend the night, or what to read, people need to predict how much they will enjoy a particular dating partner, hotel, or book. What kinds of information do people use to make forecasts about future preferences? Do they, as Benjamin Franklin suggested, ignore advice from others, and are they worse off by doing so? We propose that people use three lay theories about what kinds of information will lead to accurate affective forecasts, but that these theories are not entirely correct.

To illustrate these theories, suppose that your local ice cream parlor has invented a new flavor of ice cream and you are deciding whether to give it a try. Suppose further that you could read a description of the flavor or find out how much someone else liked it. Research shows that people would rather have the description. After all, if we learned that the new flavor was vanilla mixed with bacon bits, why would we need to know how appealing this flavor is to someone else or that person's opinion of how much we would

like it? “I don't care what my friend thinks,” we would likely reason. “Ice cream mixed with pork products sounds awful.” We will refer to this as the “I know better than others” lay theory.

Often, of course, people do know what they will like, but overconfidence in personal knowledge often leads people to underutilize advice from others (Yaniv, 2004). And research suggests that at least under some circumstances, finding out how much a complete stranger enjoyed an experience (called “surrogation” information, because forecasters can use the stranger as a surrogate in place of themselves) produces more accurate forecasts about one's own enjoyment than receiving a description of that experience (called “simulation” information, because the description allows people to run a mental simulation of how much they would like it). In one study, for example, female college students were asked to predict how much they would enjoy a “speed date” with a male student. Some were given a profile and photograph of the potential dating partner (simulation information), whereas others were told only how much another woman had enjoyed a speed date with him (surrogation information). Although people believed that simulation would be much more useful, those given the surrogation information made more accurate forecasts about how much they would enjoy the date (Gilbert, Killingsworth, Eyre, & Wilson, 2009; see also Walsh & Ayton, 2009). In short, people's affective forecasts were more accurate when they knew nothing about the event other than how one person felt about it. And yet, people did not believe that surrogation information would be very useful, perhaps because they overestimated how much variation there was between individuals or because they

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overestimated how accurately they could simulate their future experiences based on descriptive information. Thus, people sometimes use the “I know better than others” theory at their peril.

But what happens when people do not have any information about an attitude object and thus cannot run a mental simulation of how much they will like it? Under these circumstances most people are willing to consider others’ opinions, by, for example, reading book reviews or consulting on-line travel sites to see what others have thought of hotels and restaurants. Little research has addressed the question, however, of which kinds of information people prefer to get from others when making affective forecasts and how useful this information is. We suggest that in the absence of information about an attitude object, people rely on two additional lay theories that are not always correct. The first is the “birds of a feather” theory, which asserts that people’s preferences are more aligned with their friends than with strangers. If people want to predict how much they will like a new book or hotel, better to find out how much a friend liked it rather than how much a single stranger liked it.

The “birds of a feather” theory has some basis in fact, in that friends do share more attitudes and values than strangers do (Huston & Levinger, 1978; Lee et al., 2009; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Newcomb, 1961). Most research on this topic, however, has focused on the similarity of core values and attitudes such as religious beliefs and political views, and less on the similarity of preferences for such things as food, books, and movies. Just because two people are both Jewish Democrats or Baptist Republicans does not necessarily mean that they like the same flavors of ice cream. Even if people do share preferences with their friends, research shows that they overestimate the degree of that similarity (Jussim & Osgood, 1989; Locke, Craig, Baik, & Gohil, 2012).

Further, research shows that stranger surrogation information leads to accurate forecasts, at least in some domains, suggesting that there is less variance in judgments than people think. If so, then there might not be much of an advantage to knowing how a friend feels over how a stranger feels. New ice cream flavors become best sellers because most people like them, regardless of whether those people are our friends or enemies. And yet, people show a preference for guidance from similar others (Gino, Shang, & Croson, 2009; Yaniv, Choshen-Hillel, & Milyavsky, 2011) and from close others (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), which suggests that they may exaggerate the usefulness of the “birds of a feather” theory (see Fig. 1).

There is an alternative to finding out how our friends feel, and that is finding out what advice our friends have specifically for

us. That is, regardless of how similar our friends’ preferences are to ours, they might know us well enough to guess how we will feel. Joe may hate spicy food but know that his friend Anthony loves it, and Sofia may love science fiction films but know that Kate prefers romantic comedies. Thus, if we had the choice of finding out how much a friend liked a new movie, or their advice about how much we will like it, we would probably choose the advice, which we will refer to as the “my friends know me” theory (see Fig. 1).

There is reason to believe, however, that advice from friends is not as valid as people think. First, people believe that they express their emotional reactions on their faces more than they do, suggesting that they overestimate the degree to which their friends can detect how they feel (Barr & Kleck, 1995; Ickes, 2003). Second, research on false consensus finds that people overestimate the extent to which others feel the way they do (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), suggesting that our friends overweigh their own preferences when guessing how we feel. Thus, because of misperceptions by the receivers of advice (overestimating how well their friends can detect their preferences) and the givers of advice (overestimating how similar their preferences are to their friends’), advice might not be as useful as people think it is, limiting the efficacy of the “my friends know me” theory. This supposition is supported by evidence that individuals tend to overestimate the accuracy of advice from a close friend (Gershoff & Johar, 2006) and that even romantic partners are not very good at predicting each others’ preferences (Lerouge & Warlop, 2006). Of course, these limitations of advice do not mean that it is useless. In fact, if friends base their advice on how they feel, then giving advice would be the same as surrogation information (knowing how our friend feels), which, as noted, has been found to lead to accurate affective forecasts. Our point is that advice may not be as superior to surrogation as people think it is.

The present studies go beyond the existing literature by examining different types of information from other people—both its source (friends vs. strangers) and its degree of personalization (surrogation vs. advice). We seek to show that, despite people’s theories, knowing how a stranger felt can lead to substantial accuracy in affective forecasts, and that there is sometimes no added benefit to knowing how a friend felt or what that friend’s advice is for us. In Study 1 we tested the hypothesis that people endorse the “I know better than others,” “birds of a feather,” and “my friends know me” theories by asking participants to rank different types of information according to how much the information would help them predict their liking for an unfamiliar stimulus (e.g., a novel food item). In Studies 2 and 3, we examined how

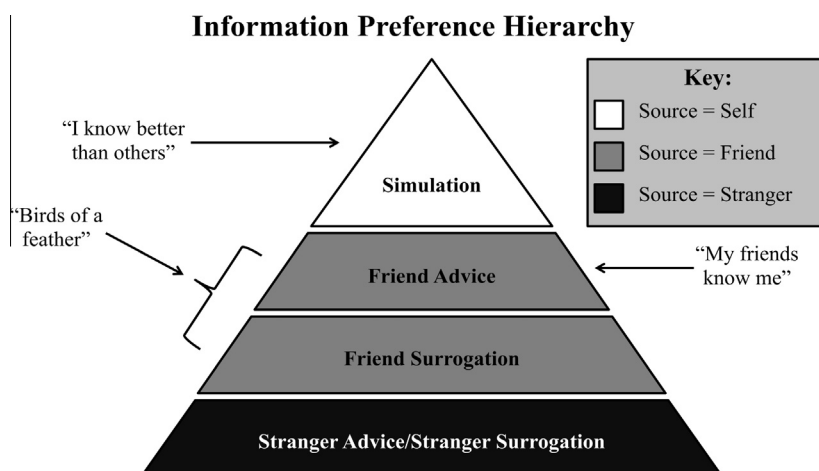


Fig. 1. Hierarchy of preferences for types of information about an unfamiliar attitude object, in descending order of perceived usefulness for predicting liking. Three lay theories that influence the preference hierarchy are indicated with arrows pointing to the relevant preference order.

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