



On incidental catalysts of elaboration: Reminders of environmental structure promote effortful thought



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reminding people of structure in their environment leads to greater elaboration on decisions
- Structure therefore leads people to be more certain of their choice and choose options dominant on argument strength
- Results imply that elaboration can be shaped by environmental features that bear no relationship to the evaluative task
- The results suggest that structure may be functional in part because it leads to more thorough, considered decisions

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ABSTRACT

Life is filled with situations in which cognitive elaboration can powerfully sway outcomes, and yet our understanding of the contextual factors that impact elaboration are greatly limited to those entwined with the focal evaluation, judgment, or decision. In response, this research tests whether a more fundamental, incidental feature of the environment—structure—might influence the extent to which individuals engage in elaboration. Three studies demonstrate that incidental reminders of structure increase elaboration (Experiment 1), which in turn impacts individuals' confidence in their choice (Experiment 2) as well as the choice itself (Experiment 3). Collectively, the findings offer novel insight into the role of structure in promoting elaboration, and suggest that structure-seeking may be functional in part because it leads to more thoughtful, considered judgments and decisions.

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1. Introduction

Cognitive elaboration is the objective or subjective degree to which people process issue-relevant stimuli in an evaluation, judgment, or decision (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1999; see Barden & Tormala, 2014). Researchers have long been interested in elaboration, as it can both sway evaluative outcomes (e.g., policies to endorse, impressions to form, brands to purchase) and make such outcomes more persistent and resistant (Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). Given these powerful implications, it is important to understand how not only the evaluative stimuli in a task but also the contextual factors surrounding the task determine individuals' investments in elaboration.

Accordingly, prior work has identified several contextual factors that influence elaboration. Some exert a direct influence on one's motivation to elaborate (e.g., personal relevance; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Petty &

Cacioppo, 1990; Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992), whereas others exert a direct influence on one's ability to elaborate, as in the case of external distractions (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976; Petty, Wells, Heesacker, Brock, & Cacioppo, 1983) or fast presentations (Smith & Shaffer, 1995). Regardless of this distinction, the means by which these factors operate are united in that their influence is enabled by clear, proximal relationships to the evaluative task. In this research, we forward the general notion that elaboration is also shaped by fundamental characteristics of the environment that bear no clear relationship to the evaluative task. Specifically, this research considers the novel proposition that elaboration can be affected by reminding one of *structure* present in one's environment.

1.1. The importance of structure

Across a variety of domains, humans display a marked preference for structure, whether that structure manifests in the form of symmetry (Etcoff, 1999; Garner, 1974), patterns (Koffka, 1935), or causal relationships (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Lerner, 1980). Indeed,

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though people vary in their chronic needs for predictability, clear answers, and order (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), people across the spectrum of these dispositional needs tend to perceive and endorse evidence of structure in situations where personal control feels lost. For instance, those in a state of low control perceive structure in randomness (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and show greater endorsement of external systems with capacity to restore structure (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Whitson, Galinsky, & Kay, 2015).

Despite extensive work on the contexts that give rise to structure-seeking, the dispositional differences in structure-seeking across people, and the ways in which structure-seeking can manifest in everyday behavior, there has been a recent surge of interest in understanding the functions and consequences of imbuing the world with structure (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). For instance, research has found that reminders of structure reduce anxiety, which is typically produced in response to random outcomes (Tullett, Kay, & Inzlicht, 2014; cf., Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). Likewise, structure communicates contingencies between actions and outcomes, and therefore evidence of structure encourages behavior in the service of goal pursuit (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). In the current work, we move beyond the consequences of structure for affect and behavior, and instead study its function in the realm of cognition. Specifically, we posit that structure's role in assuring non-random outcomes also shapes one of the basic cognitive processes underlying attitude formation and decision making: cognitive elaboration.

1.2. Structure as a catalyst to elaboration

There are competing perspectives on the potential relationship between structure and elaboration. Past work describes the dispositional need for structure (and closely related need for closure) as a preference for an answer vs. ambiguity on a given topic, which is facilitated by abstracted mental procedures (i.e., “cognitive structuring” Neuberg & Newsom, 1993) and/or truncated processing (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Consistent with this notion, correlational studies have found that personal needs for both structure and closure correlate negatively with need for cognition (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), and individuals high in need for structure (and closure) are more likely to use less effortful, stereotypical, trait-based processing when making social judgments (Dijksterhuis, van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, & Schaper, 1996; Moskowitz, 1993). Directly applying this line of reasoning to our context suggests that the presence of structure should lead to less elaboration.

Such associations between structure and elaboration should certainly hold when structure is studied as a dispositional, preference-laden, cognitive trait, since cognitive structuring inherently allows people to arrive at desired answers through less elaboration. However, the question we ask here is whether such relationships might hold when structure (or the lack thereof) is instead given as a basic feature of the task environment. We propose that this form of structure instead signals that reliable relationships exist between the potential objects of elaboration (e.g., concepts, objects, actions, and outcomes), as implied in recent work (Kay et al., 2014; Landau et al., 2015). This signaling is important insofar as axioms of information processing dictate that reasoning processes (e.g., induction, deduction, association) have value only when reliable relationships exist (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Evans, Newstead, & Byrne, 1993), since elaboration offers a means of both revealing such relationships, and in our context, capitalizing upon them. This line of reasoning suggests that in our context, the negative relationship between structure and elaboration implied by previous correlational studies may in fact be in the opposite direction. We sided with this contextualized reasoning, and therefore hypothesized that structure would lead to greater elaboration.

To illustrate this rationale more concretely, consider two well-known games that reflect environments of varying intrinsic structure – bingo and chess – and the value that elaboration affords a player within each game. Note first that these games both involve judgments containing inherent uncertainty (e.g., making a chess move or choosing a bingo card). In bingo, the outcome of each trial is random (i.e., there is no structure) and, as such, there is no rational value to elaborating on any systematic means by which to increase one's favorable outcomes, as they do not exist. Conversely, in chess, the outcome of the game is not random but rather a function of a series of relationships between the pieces in both their current locations and possible movements. Thus, there is considerable value in elaborating upon the system of relationships between the pieces to uncover which move or moves would yield the best outcomes. Consequently, chess moves tend to be made with greater elaboration than the selection of bingo cards. Of course, these examples are not exact; some bingo players may erroneously believe that relationships actually exist (based on superstition or illusory correlations), and conversely, chess masters may have well-developed heuristics that allow them to forego elaboration on every move. However, the point is to merely illustrate the value of elaboration (and therefore prevailing tendencies to elaborate) within contexts associated with different levels of structure. Moreover, our research capitalizes on this conceptual insight and tests the novel proposition that structure stimulates elaboration even when the source of structure (e.g., the structured or random growth pattern of trees) occurs in a context separate from that of the potential elaboration (e.g., product choice). That is, the structure is incidental to the task context.

1.3. Overview of experiments

We test our hypothesis in preference formation and decision making contexts where incidental structure could signal that greater elaboration is helpful in obtaining more desirable outcomes (e.g., a more accurate preference or a choice better matched to one's preferences). Importantly, to isolate the effect of incidental structure, we not only activate reminders of structure in a context separate from that of the focal response (see also Kay et al., 2014), but also control for dispositional variation in individuals' need to reflect upon and consider information via the rational subscale of the REI-40 (Pacini & Epstein, 1999). In our experiments, we explore the direct effect of incidental structure on elaboration (Experiment 1), as well as the downstream consequences of this relationship for both individuals' confidence in their choices (Experiment 2) and individuals' likelihood to base their choices on argument quality (Experiment 3).

The results provide converging evidence that incidental reminders of structure stimulate elaboration, and as a result, produce elaboration's associated outcomes. Such findings not only point to the important role of the broader environment in determining elaboration, but also illustrate an important function of structure. That is, in addition to the ability of structure to stimulate long-term goal pursuit (Kay et al., 2014), structure also helps people make more thorough, considered judgments and decisions.

2. Experiment 1

This experiment tests the core prediction that reminders of structure lead to greater elaboration on a decision in an unrelated context. Specifically, participants completed a sentence-descrambling task including words that conveyed either structure or no-structure, and then completed an ostensibly unrelated choice task. Participants' decisions in this task were consequential in that their choices represented activities they would subsequently engage in.

It is important to note that although participants' decisions were consequential, the specific options in the choice set were not differentiated in ways that made any option objectively better than another. Therefore, the “best” option for any given person was simply the one

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