Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 52 (2014) 25–31

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Preferences for expressing preferences: People prefer finer evaluative distinctions for liked than disliked objects

Rachel Smallman [a,*], Brittney Becker [a], Neal J. Roese [b]

[a] Texas A&M University, USA
[b] Northwestern University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines whether preference influences evaluative categorization (rating scales)
- Participants used more evaluative distinctions for liked vs. disliked objects.
- Finely differentiated scales received higher efficacy ratings only for liked objects.
- The effect was moderated by need for cognition, indicating the role of elaboration.
- These findings suggest the potential usefulness of unbalanced rating scales.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 January 2013
Revised 4 December 2013
Available online 14 December 2013

Keywords:
Preference
Categorization
Evaluation
Rating
Attitude

ABSTRACT

Past research showed that people draw finer categorical distinctions for liked than disliked objects, such that a wine lover, for example, sees greater detail and nuance among types of wine than does a non-lover. In the present research, a similar pattern was found in evaluative categorization (i.e., distinguishing between "somewhat liked" vs. "liked" vs. "greatly liked" etc.). Across 5 experiments, respondents used finer evaluative distinctions (operationalized as more versus fewer response options in a rating scale) when conveying attitudes about liked versus disliked items. This effect extended to the level of mental representation and was moderated by need for cognition, indicating the key role of elaboration (people elaborate more on liked vs. disliked objects). These findings imply the potential usefulness of unbalanced rating scales (i.e., containing more scale points on the positive than negative side) so that respondents may better express the nuances of their attitudes.

Introduction

Categorization is a basic component of cognition. From infants sorting blocks into piles to biologists subdividing animals into phyla and species, categorization is an essential aspect of human thought. However, with so many ways to divide things, how many categories are typically used? Although many factors influence categorization, an important one involves preference, such that liked objects demand finer distinctions than disliked objects (Smallman & Roese, 2008, 2009). For example, when people who dislike science-fiction categorize television shows, the broad category of "sci-fi" will suffice. To a science-fiction fanatic, however, *Star Wars*, *Stargate*, and *Star Trek* are so utterly distinctive as to demand their own unique categories. The current research extended this preference-categorization link into the evaluation domain, and in particular focuses on the way in which people see shades of difference in their attitudes toward various objects. For example, some people may find two evaluative categories sufficient to express their attitude toward sci-fi shows (e.g., "somewhat favorable"; "extremely favorable") whereas others might demand additional evaluative categories (e.g., "barely favorable"; "somewhat favorable"; "favorable"; "extremely favorable"). The results of five experiments suggest that when assessing liked (vs. disliked) objects, people prefer a greater range of distinctions among degrees of liking.

The ideas behind this research converge from traditions within social and cognitive psychology. We begin with the supposition that people have a general tendency to think about, ponder, and reflect upon that which they love. They spend time discovering and appreciating the subtleties among objects related to their preference, as in the case of the wine lover drawn to discover innumerable details about vineyards and vintages. In keeping with previous attitude research, we use the term elaboration to denote information processing in which attitude-relevant ideas are compared, connected, and synthesized (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Elaboration involves relatively effortful consideration of detail and nuance. Elaboration can vary moment by

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, 4235 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4235, USA.
E-mail address: rsmallman@tamu.edu (R. Smallman).

0022-1031/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.12.004

moment, but the tendency to engage in elaboration also varies across individuals, as captured by the need for cognition scale (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

The role of elaboration in the link from preference to categorization may derive at least in part from the *Law of Effect* (Thorndike, 1898), which states that rewarded behaviors tend to be repeated. Contemporary interpretations of the Law of Effect position positive affect as the rewarding feeling that evokes approach behavior (Carver, 2003; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008), which in many cases involves repeated approach toward similar enjoyable objects. Accordingly, people find pleasure in engaging in their preferences, which invites repeated interaction (Hoch & Deighton, 1989), and repeated opportunity to learn new details about the preferred object. In essence, people enjoy elaborating on activities, objects, and people that bring them pleasure.

Previous research demonstrated the preference-categorization effect via associative conditioning (Smallman & Roese, 2008). By repeatedly pairing novel symbols with positive or negative IAPS images (see Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens & Crombez, 2010), new preferences were created in the laboratory. Symbols included hieroglyphics and hobo symbols, and thus were novel but also (initially) affectively neutral. Participants conditioned to like the symbols subsequently divided them into more categories than participants conditioned to dislike the symbols. Notably, participants mainly used evaluative terms to describe their categories. That is, 87% of the time participants used valenced adjectives (e.g., "inspiring" or "ominous") to label their groupings. This observation suggests a new but unexplored aspect of the preference-categorization effect: Might people prefer a larger arsenal of evaluative distinctions when expressing their attitudes about liked versus disliked objects?

The structure and function of attitudes have been studied since the beginning of psychological research (Bohner & Nickel, 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), with self-report rating scales most typically used in assessing explicit attitudes. Earlier research examined the number of response options within such scales primarily in terms of optimizing internal reliability (Garner, 1960; Komorita & Graham, 1965; Weng, 2004): Too many or too few response options decrease reliability, but 5 to 7 response options are generally ideal. Yet across decades of research, an unquestioned assumption has been that bipolar attitude scales should be balanced, i.e., an equal number of response options should be placed to the left and right of the neutral middle option (Himmelfarb, 1993; Krosnick, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2005). The current research was prompted, however, by our noticing web-based attitude scales created by laypersons that were unbalanced, and always unbalanced such that they favored a greater number of response options on the positive side. For example, a typical four-point scale might include "poor," "so-so," "good," and "great" (i.e., 1 negative option, 1 neutral option, and 2 positive options). These lay-created scales might perhaps capture a general tendency of people to use finer evaluative distinctions to capture attitudinal variation among liked versus disliked objects. The present research examined this possibility.

Elaboration can help explain a relation between preference and evaluative categorization. Liked objects invite elaboration, for the simple reason that it is pleasurable to do so: baseball fans love to talk baseball and fashion mavens love to talk fashion. For things cherished, people relish the details, revel in nuance, and linger over memories, stimulating categorical differentiation. Variation across individuals who are higher versus lower in NFC would provide evidence for the role of elaboration. High NFC individuals seek out, acquire, and reflect back upon information from their environment to a greater extent than low NFC individuals (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996). They welcome and are intrinsically motivated to engage in cognitively effortful activities. In contrast, low NFC individuals are cognitive misers (Taylor, 1981) who avoid engaging in effortful cognitive activity unless extrinsically motivated (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994; Thompson, Chaiken, & Hazlewood, 1993).

Accordingly, we expected that high NFC individuals should be more likely to engage in elaboration regardless of preference; in essence, their high intrinsic motivation for effortful cognitive processing should weaken the preference-categorization effect. By contrast, low NFC individuals should be less likely to engage in elaboration, but will be stimulated to elaborate when there is high external motivation to do so, specifically, when thinking about preferred objects. As a result, we expected that lower NFC individuals would be more likely to show the pattern of using finer evaluative distinctions for liked versus disliked items.

Five experiments tested these ideas. Experiments 1a and 1b documented the basic effect that preference influences how many evaluative distinctions participants felt were necessary to convey their attitudes about liked versus disliked objects. Experiment 2 used a different paradigm to confirm this basic pattern. Experiment 3 clarified the pattern further by showing that the effect of preference on evaluative categorization is not merely due to a style of verbal presentation, but rather extends to basic differences in mental representation. Finally, Experiment 4 revealed that NFC moderated the effect of preference on evaluative categorization, thus providing evidence for the role of elaboration.

Experiments 1a and 1b

Experiments 1a and 1b examined how many evaluative distinctions participants picked to communicate their opinions of liked versus disliked objects. Just as the number of "stars" is sometimes used by critics to convey movie quality, participants were asked to become amateur critics and decide how many "stars" were required to communicate meaningful distinctions to a wider audience. Preference was manipulated on a within-subject basis; participants made separate judgments for liked versus disliked objects. The dependent variable focused on how many distinctions participants required to review each object adequately. In Experiment 1a, participants created their own scales and provided category labels for each scale point. To bypass the confounding role of vocabulary size or accessibility, Experiment 1b presented to participants pre-constructed scales of varying lengths, from which they made a selection.

An alternative explanation is that the preference for finer distinctions could simply be a function of whichever valence is more characteristic of the majority of objects in the category. That is, when people believe that a category contains more liked objects (e.g., most food is good) or disliked objects (e.g., most music is bad), they might demand more evaluative distinctions simply to better accommodate the increased volume of valenced objects (e.g., more positive distinctions for food and more negative distinctions for music). We tested this possibility by having participants estimate the proportion of each category that contained liked (vs. disliked) items.

Method

Undergraduate students (Experiment 1a, $N = 35$; Experiment 1b, $N = 80$) participated for course credit. They judged how many categories were needed for 8 liked and 8 disliked objects from the following domains: movies, clothing, music, food, concerts, university courses, television shows, and sports. Instructions were: "On the next page, you'll see a list of classes of things (e.g., categories such as music, movies, and clothes). Your job is to assume that you are going to be a CRITIC. If you were a critic (let's say for movies), how many different scale points would you need in order to communicate effectively to others (i.e., to make USEFUL recommendations to other people)?"

The last sentence contained the preference manipulation. In the liked condition, participants read: "Focus on things you like. For example, the music, clothes, and foods that you enjoy." In the disliked condition, participants read: "Focus on things you don't like. For example, the music, clothes, and food that you dislike."

Experiments 1a versus 1b employed different measures of evaluative categorization. Experiment 1a used an open-ended measure, in