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Recent research has documented numerous, apparently irrational influences on consumer judgment and choice, from the influence of temporary moods and metacognitive experiences to the role of “feeling right” about a decision strategy. From the metatheoretical perspective of situated cognition, such findings reflect the pragmatic, situated, and embodied nature of human cognition, which usually serves people well. Avnet and Higgins’s (2006) target article extends the understanding of these processes by identifying the metacognitive experience of feeling right and by emphasizing the role of self-regulatory focus in judgment and decision making.

Feelings, Fit, and Funny Effects: A Situated Cognition Perspective

A marketing colleague who models consumer choice recently asked me, “Whatever happened to Fishbein and Ajzen’s theory of rational behavior and other such models? All we hear about from psychologists these days is how funny little things make people feel one way or another, influencing what they like and do.” His list was long and included numerous, apparently haphazard influences, from familiar mood effects (Schwarz and Clore 1996) to the more recent observations that arm flexion can influence product evaluation (Förster 2004), that people buy more French wine when French music is played in the supermarket (North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick 1997), and that people like ketchup more after they pass the shelves with mayonnaise jars (Lee and Labroo 2004). He rightly observed that some of the feelings that figure prominently in recent research, such as accessibility and fluency experiences (Schwarz 2004) or bodily approach and avoidance feedback (Förster 2004), cannot even be found in the emotion lexicon. Avnet and Higgins (2006) add yet another feeling that is not part of the emotion lexicon: “feeling right” about cognitive or affective reactions. What can be made of this proliferation of contextual influences that are apparently at odds with theories of rational choice and other models of “thoughtful” consumer judgment? Are they mostly noise in a system of thoughtful behavior? Is there any common thread to these seemingly unrelated haphazard influences?

In this comment, I place these developments in the metatheoretical framework of situated cognition, identify

some underlying principles and commonalities, and discuss how basic psychological processes that produce “funny effects” in experimental demonstrations may have adaptive value in daily behavior.

SITUATED COGNITION

More than a century ago, William James (1890, p. 333) observed, “My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing.” From this perspective, human cognition stands in the service of action. To serve action, people’s cognition needs to be responsive to their goals and to the immediate social and physical environment in which they pursue them. This pragmatic and situated nature of cognition is reflected in a multitude of contextual influences on the accessibility and use of information at the automatic and deliberate level (e.g., Hassin, Uleman, and Bargh 2005). Moreover, people’s interactions with the world involve their bodies, and cognition is supported and constrained by the architecture of bodies and brains (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Reflecting this embodied nature of cognition, bodily movements can influence evaluative judgment (e.g., Neumann and Strack 2000), memory (e.g., Frick-Horbury 2002), and processing style (e.g., Friedman and Förster 2000), and hills in the distance seem steeper to people when they are tired or loaded down with a heavy backpack (Proffitt, Creem, and Zosh 2001). Finally, much of people’s action in the world involves tools, artifacts, and a division of labor, all of which can extend action beyond the limits imposed by knowledge and cognitive capacities. Acknowledging these aspects of cognition in daily life, the emerging metatheoretical perspective of situated cognition assumes that human cognition is pragmatic, situated, embodied, and distributed (for a comprehensive review, see Smith and Semin 2004).

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ADAPTIVE PROCESSES AND FUNNY EFFECTS

The situated cognition perspective emphasizes the potentially adaptive functions of context-sensitive cognition, in sharp contrast to a long tradition of research that acknowledged contextual influences with some despair. For example, the context dependency of attitudes and preferences (e.g., Schwarz and Bohner 2001) is disappointing for observers who hope to predict the actor's future thoughts and behaviors from presumably stable dispositions (thus exhibiting the well-known fundamental attribution error; Ross 1977), but it is probably advantageous for the actor (Schwarz 2006; Smith and DeCoster 2000). Only context-sensitive evaluation can guide behavior in adaptive ways by alerting people to problems and opportunities when they exist, by interrupting ongoing processes when needed (but not otherwise), and by rendering information that is relevant now and in this context highly accessible. Thus, evaluative judgment should privilege information that is relevant to the present context, overweight recent experience and experience from similar situations, and take current goals and concerns into account. A large body of diverse findings indicates that human cognition meets these needs, from the context-sensitive accessibility of relevant information (Higgins 1996) to the context-sensitive activation and enactment of goals (Gollwitzer 1999) and the motivational influences that Avnet and Higgins (2006) address.

However, the same processes result in surprising and funny effects when experimental procedures engage them in the absence of conditions under which they can plausibly serve adaptive functions. The apparent haphazardness of the influence is often derived from the need for experimental control, which is met by engaging the process in a context that would otherwise not give rise to it. In combination with psychologists' preference for counterintuitive illustrations, this research strategy results in the proliferation of funny effects that my marketing colleague found disturbing. From a more benevolent perspective, however, it is amazing how well human cognition is tuned to meet the requirements of current concerns and situations (Schwarz 2002; Smith and Semin 2004).

THE ROLE OF FEELINGS

Feelings and subjective experiences play a key role in this tuning process by informing people about their current situation and concerns. Avnet and Higgins's (2006) review extends the understanding of these processes.

Feelings and Processing Style

Not surprisingly, people are more likely to rely on preexisting knowledge structures and behavioral and cognitive routines when facing no hurdles in the pursuit of goals than when things go wrong. In the latter case, people engage in more systematic, bottom-up processing that focuses on the specifics at hand to determine what went wrong and what can be done about it. Because people usually feel bad when things go wrong and fine when they go well, feelings provide information about the nature of the current situation that influences which processing strategy is likely to be adopted (Schwarz 1990). Whereas early research explored the role of global positive and negative moods in this tuning process (for a recent review, see Pham 2004), recent

research indicates that any variable that can signal a problematic situation can elicit corresponding shifts in processing strategy (for a review, see Schwarz 2002). Moreover, specific emotions entail an appraisal of the current situation that provides more specific information than the global benign versus problematic signal provided by positive and negative moods, allowing for a more targeted tailoring of processing strategies (Lerner and Keltner 2000).

Extending this work, Higgins and colleagues (for reviews, see Higgins 1997, 2000, 2005) demonstrate that a chronic or temporary focus on hopes, aspirations, advancement, and accomplishments (promotion concerns) elicits a different style of thinking than does a chronic or temporary focus on duties, responsibilities, and safety (prevention concerns). In a promotion orientation, people want to make sure that they do not miss an opportunity, resulting in an "eager" processing style that ensures hits and guards against errors of omission; in a prevention orientation, people want to guard against risks, which fosters a "vigilant" processing style that reduces errors of commission and false alarms (for reviews, see Avnet and Higgins 2006; Higgins 2000). On some tasks, promotion orientation parallels the influence of happy moods and other benign signals, whereas prevention orientation parallels the influence of sad moods and other problem signals (e.g., Friedman and Förster 2000, 2002; Pham and Avnet 2004). However, such self-regulatory orientations are also associated with unique influences that have not been observed for other variables, such as a focus on the presence and absence of positive outcomes under promotion orientation and negative outcomes under prevention orientation (Higgins 2000). The identification of common and unique effects on processing strategy provides a fruitful avenue for further research.

The adaptive value of different processing strategies is apparent when promotion or prevention concerns, or different affective states, are induced by actual characteristics of a person's present situation, thus increasing the likelihood that the procedures are relevant to the situation at hand. However, an ingenious experimenter can engage these styles through unrelated manipulations, resulting in apparently funny effects. Taking advantage of the embodied nature of cognition, for example, Friedman and Förster (2000, 2002) asked participants to flex or extend their arms by pressing one hand upward against the bottom of the table (flexion) or downward against the top of the table (extension). These arm movements provide the motor feedback that is usually involved in pulling something closer (approach) versus pushing something away (avoidance) and are sufficient to elicit a temporary promotion versus prevention orientation. Friedman and Förster observed that the bodily approach feedback improved performance on creativity tasks, whereas the bodily avoidance feedback improved performance on analytic reasoning tasks taken from the Graduate Record Examinations. Similarly, Soldat, Sinclair, and Mark (1997) observed improved performance on analytic reasoning tasks when the tasks were printed on paper of a "sad" blue rather than an "upbeat" red hue, paralleling the influence of sad versus happy affective states. Findings of this type indicate that people are highly sensitive to the information provided by feelings but much less sensitive to where feelings come from. Research into the role of feelings in evaluative judgment reiterates this theme.

Feelings and Evaluation

Not surprisingly, people like things that make them feel good and dislike things that make them feel bad. As long as feelings are, indeed, elicited by the object of judgment, relying on feelings as a source of information is an efficient strategy of evaluation (Pham 1998; Pham et al. 2001). People have only one window on their experience and may misread feelings that are due to other sources as their response to the object of judgment. Thus, people arrive at more positive (negative) judgments when they are in a happy (sad) mood due to the current weather (Schwarz and Clore 1983) or the outcome of sports events (Schwarz et al. 1987) and may even be more likely to invest in the stock market under such conditions (Saunders 1993). People presumably rely on incidental feelings as a source of information because they do not recognize their incidental nature. As Higgins (1998) notes, people assume that any feelings or thoughts they have are “about” what is in the focus of their attention—or why else would they have them now? However, when attention is drawn to an irrelevant source of feelings, thus undermining the feeling’s informational value for the task at hand, the influence of feelings on evaluation (Schwarz and Clore 1983) and processing style (Sinclair, Mark, and Clore 1994) is eliminated.

Whereas the early research focused on global moods, more recent work addresses feelings that arise from the dynamics of information processing itself. For example, Winkielman and Cacioppo (2001) observe that the ease with which new information can be processed is itself hedonically marked: Fluent processing is experienced as positive and elicits positive affective reactions, which can be captured with psychophysiological measures. In turn, these affective reactions feed into evaluative judgments, resulting in more positive evaluations under conditions of high processing fluency (for a review, see Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). This fluency–evaluation link underlies numerous phenomena that are of interest to consumer researchers, from Zajonc’s (1968) mere exposure effect to determinants of aesthetic appeal (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004) and Lee and Labroo’s (2004) observation of the beneficial effects of exposure to one product (e.g., mayonnaise) on the subsequent evaluation of a related one (e.g., ketchup). Again, the influence of fluency on evaluation is attenuated or eliminated when the informational value of the affective reaction is called into question (for a review, see Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004).

Feeling Right

Avnet and Higgins’s (2006) theorizing highlights novel links among the previously discussed themes and extends the understanding of the role of affective and metacognitive experiences in judgment and decision making in important ways. First, their experimental data indicate that people are more likely to rely on their affective responses to the target of judgment as a source of information under a promotion orientation than under a prevention one, consistent with the different information-processing strategies elicited by different self-regulatory foci (see also Pham and Avnet 2004). This parallels other observations of decreased reliance on subjective experiences under conditions that foster more systematic processing (for reviews, see Schwarz 2004; Schwarz and Clore 1996). Second, and more important,

Avnet and Higgins document a metacognitive experience that results from the fit between people’s processing strategy and their regulatory focus: When people’s processing strategy matches their current prevention or promotion focus, they “feel right” about how they tackle their task. In turn, feeling right increases their confidence in and reliance on their own cognitive or affective reactions, resulting in more extreme judgments. Avnet and Higgins further suggest that feeling right increases the intensity of a person’s positive or negative responses. In my reading, this assumption is plausible but not necessary to account for the reviewed data, which do not include measures of the intensity of experienced affect. Instead, feeling right may merely influence how much a person relies on his or her current responses at the expense of other information, essentially resulting in more extreme judgments through reliance on a more limited set of inputs. This possibility awaits further research. Finally, as is the case for the influence of other feelings, drawing people’s attention to the source of feeling right can attenuate or eliminate its influence (e.g., Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004).

From a situated cognition perspective, feeling right reflects a metacognitive assessment of how well a person’s current strategy matches the perceived requirements of his or her goal pursuit. Although the perceived requirements are, in part, a function of regulatory focus, they also vary with task characteristics and numerous other variables that influence the perceived importance and difficulty of what people are doing, including metacognitive experiences of ease and fluency (Schwarz 2004) and affective signals that inform people about the benign or problematic nature of the current situation (Schwarz 2002). Thus, the importance of feeling right is likely to extend far beyond the conditions of regulatory fit, as Avnet and Higgins (2006) note, opening promising avenues for further research at the interface of feeling and thinking.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So what should be concluded about the rationality of consumer judgment in light of the proliferation of funny effects? On the one hand, Avnet and Higgins’s (2006) findings can be treated as another illustration of irrelevant influences on consumer choice: Consumers’ willingness to pay money for a product varies with the manner in which they make their decisions, even when their decision strategy does not provide new factual information about the product. On the other hand, suppose that Jim carefully investigates a product and checks out its competitors, whereas John only reads a single review. Both end up with the same factual product information, but Jim is willing to pay more than John, confident that he arrived at his choice in the right way and did not miss any important aspects, whereas John wonders if he has all the information he may need. Can either one be blamed for being irrational?

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