Different approaches to consumer decision making paint markedly different pictures of how consumers arrive at a choice. From the perspective of microeconomics, consumers know what they like and want and reveal their preferences in the choices they make. Decision problems arise mostly because consumers cannot satisfy all preferences simultaneously and face trade-offs and market constraints. As Daniel McFadden (1999, p. 75), a Nobel laureate in economics, put it, “The standard model in economics is that consumers behave as if (…) preferences are primitive, consistent and immutable (preference-rationality), and the cognitive process is simply preference maximization, given market constraints (process-rationality).” Behavioral decision research, guided by Kahneman and Tversky’s heuristics-and-biases program, challenged this perspective and documented numerous contextual influences on choice that violate rationality criteria of the economic model (see the contributions in Lichtenstein & Slovic, 2006). Based on such findings, consumer researchers now commonly assume that consumers’ preferences are constructed on the spot.

In this issue’s target article, Itamar Simonson (2008a), who himself contributed some of the best known examples of context driven preference reversals to the decision literature, takes issue with the notion of constructed preferences. He suggests that much of the evidence supporting the constructed preferences view merely reflects that relative evaluations of choice alternatives are easier to make than absolute ones. From his perspective, the findings do not warrant the sweeping conclusions drawn and he reintroduces the notion of stable inherent preferences that are not determined by context.

A set of spirited commentaries responds to Simonson’s review. Bettman, Luce, and Payne (2008), leading proponents of the constructed preferences view, take issue with Simonson’s notion of inherent preferences and note that stability is not incompatible with construal processes, which can result in preference stability as well instability, depending on the specifics of the underlying process and the contextual conditions. Dhar and Novemsky (2008) and Kivetz, Netzer, and Shrift (2008) agree with Simonson’s conclusion that many discussions of constructed preferences went far beyond the available evidence, but differ in their response to his concept of inherent preferences. Extending the theoretical perspective, Smith (2008) discusses the conceptual issues in the context of recent psychological research into situated and embodied cognition and highlights the role of embodied constraints in the construal process. Simonson’s (2008b) response to these commentaries completes this set, which touches on many issues addressed in previous Research Dialogues (e.g., Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, Wigboldus, 2005; Schwarz, 2004; Strack, Werth, & Deutsch, 2006; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

As many readers will notice, the present discussion of the nature of preferences parallels recent discussions of the nature of attitudes in social psychology (see the contributions in Gawronski, 2007). In both cases, the essentialist question of whether people “have” stable, inherent attitudes or preferences is likely to resist empirical answers. Much as construal models can handle evidence commonly cited in support of dispositional models by specifying appropriate construal conditions (e.g., Schwarz, 2007, and the commentaries in the present issue), dispositional models can handle findings commonly cited in support of construal processes by treating them as temporary noise in the expression of an underlying latent attitude or preference (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). The outcome of these debates will most likely depend on issues of (perceived) parsimony and compatibility with other bodies of knowledge, which favors dispositional models for decision researchers steeped in economics and construal models for those who look to psychology with its increasing emphasis on the situated nature of cognition, emotion, and behavior (for a review see Smith & Semin, 2004).

References


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