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The psychology of appraisal: Specific emotions and decision-making

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Abstract

A growing stream of research has examined emotions and decision-making based on the appraisal tendencies associated with emotions. This paper outlines two general approaches that can lead to further our understanding of the variety of ways emotions affect decision-making and information processing. Specifically, future research can examine the nature of emotional appraisals or investigate the nature of decision contexts and underlying psychological processes influenced by emotions. To understand the nature of emotional appraisals, scholars could examine the interaction of two appraisal dimensions or identify novel appraisal tendencies. To understand the decision-making contexts and psychological processes influenced by emotions, scholars could examine how emotions interact with contextual influences to shape judgments through a variety of processes such as providing information, priming goals, or activating mindsets. These approaches to the study of emotions and decision-making will contribute to more nuanced theory development around emotions, nurture new empirical work, and encourage interest in exploring a broader set of emotions.
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Introduction

A growing body of research has begun documenting how specific emotions, even when they are incidental to the decision at hand, can systematically affect individuals' perceptions, judgments, and behavior (Agrawal, Han, & Duhachek, 2013; Agrawal, Menon, & Aaker, 2007; De Hooge, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008; Garg, Inman, & Mittal, 2005; Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007; Keltner & Lerner, 2010; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001; Lewis, 2000; Maheswaran & Chen, 2006; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). The range of the effects of emotions on decision-making is wide and diverse. Some can be predicted by valence, others by distinct appraisal dimensions associated with those emotions, such as the certainty or coping potential underlying the experience of the emotion itself. The theories of appraisal effects and their associated processes are numerous and have produced varying perspectives on the basic underlying characteristics of emotions.

Research on specific emotions has documented a range of interesting effects and psychological processes revealing that

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emotions conceptualized as similar in many appraisal theories and phenomenological experiences can have unique effects on decisions. This suggests that studying how emotions affect decision-making can help us understand decision-making as well as identify important differences among closely related emotions. By reviewing theory development in emotion-related decision-making and information processing, this paper articulates some novel directions for theory building that may illuminate new research opportunities and perspectives beyond extant findings. This review uses the prevailing theories of emotional appraisal (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and the appraisal-tendency framework (Han et al., 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001) as a starting point for the inquiry of emotions, and explores additional frameworks to suggest how some limitations of appraisal theories can be overcome and how new predictions can be made from adopting a nuanced view of emotional appraisals. Our goal is to provide stimulus for new research in the area of emotion effects in consumer behavior.

In what follows, we first review theories of emotional appraisal (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and the appraisal-tendency framework (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001). Next, we propose a framework that identifies potential research directions regarding how emotions affect decision-making and information processing. Specifically, we propose that future research could enrich the current emotion literature by approaching it from two angles: a) by understanding the nature of emotional appraisals and how such appraisals affect decision-making (e.g., examining the interaction of emotional appraisals and identifying novel appraisal dimensions) and b) by understanding the nature of decision contexts impacted by emotions and the underlying psychological processes (see Fig. 1).

Emotions shape decision-making and information processing through appraisals

Emotions are complex multi-dimensional judgments that reflect a great deal of information about one's relationship to social and physical surroundings as well as one's own internal thoughts regarding these relationships (Lambie & Marcel, 2002; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Each specific emotion can be further deconstructed as a function of several information-rich associations underlying the global emotional experience termed 'emotional appraisals'. Some scholars have relied on theories of emotional appraisals to identify the key associations that define a certain emotion and guide one's thinking under the influence of that emotion. In one such theory of emotional appraisal, Smith and Ellsworth (1985) showed how fifteen different emotions could be varied and defined by six core dimensions. This research suggested that each of these specific emotions is associated with a core set of appraisals including pleasantness (i.e., valence of the emotion-eliciting event), certainty (i.e., the extent of certainty about the event), perceived controllability (i.e., the extent to which individuals feel that the event is in their own or others' or the situation's control), attentional activity (i.e., the extent to which individuals are motivated to devote their attention to the emotion-eliciting event), anticipated effort (i.e., the extent to which individuals feel that they need to exert themselves in the emotion-eliciting situation), and agency (i.e., the extent to which individuals feel that the event was brought about by others or themselves).

Each emotion can be uniquely defined by its distinct profile with respect to each of the six appraisal dimensions. An emotion may share some common appraisals with another emotion but is unique because it differs on other appraisal dimensions. For example, pride and happiness are similar because both emotions are experienced when individuals appraise an event as high in pleasantness, high in certainty, and high in perceived situational controllability. However, these emotions differ in appraisals of perceived responsibility because pride is experienced due to a sense of personal achievement whereas happiness is not associated with personal achievement.

Similarly, surprise is experienced when an event is deemed high in pleasantness, but is distinct from pride - which is also deemed high in pleasantness - because surprise is experienced when individuals attribute the surprising event to others whereas pride is experienced when individuals attribute the event to the self. Disgust is similar to shame or guilt because these three emotions are negative in valence but disgust is experienced when individuals feel that others are responsible

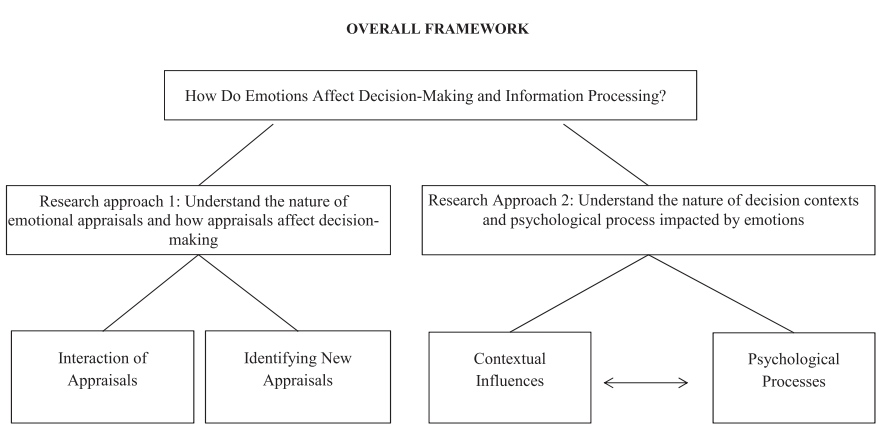

Fig. 1. Overall framework.

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