



Counteracting the focusing illusion: Effects of defocusing on car users' predicted satisfaction with public transport[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Car users underestimate their potential satisfaction with public transport due to a focusing illusion (i.e., focusing on a too narrow range of aspects related to the focal event). To investigate whether a defocusing technique would increase car users' predicted satisfaction with public transport, the effects of defocusing techniques, generic (Study 1) and self-relevant (Study 2), were investigated. In Study 1 (estimate daily time spent on ten pre-selected activities), the generic defocusing technique did not generate higher predicted satisfaction with public transport. In Study 2, the self-relevant defocusing technique generated higher predicted satisfaction on quality attributes, namely satisfaction with the number of departures, the number of available seats and the condition of the vehicles, in comparison with controls. It is concluded that the self-relevant defocusing technique applied in Study 2 (state your various everyday activities and describe how much time you engage in them) was successful in making car users take into account activities in life that will remain unchanged if they were to use public transport for their daily travel. Additionally, in Studies 1 and 2, it was found that car-use habit, regardless of the experimental condition, influenced the magnitude of predicted satisfaction, that is, the higher the car-use habit, the lower the predicted satisfaction with public transport.

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The use of private cars has increased considerably over the last decades (Gärling & Steg, 2007; OECD, 2001). There are no signs that the rate of increase in private car use will slow down (Sperling & Gordon, 2009). On the contrary, people use their private cars more often than they intend to do at the time of planning their daily activities (Jakobsson, 2004). The effects of sustained private car use have serious consequences for the environment (Van Wee, 2007).

There is the potential to attract more people to public transport since more than half of European citizens state that their infrequent use of public transport is due to a lack of connections, inconvenient and unreliable services (Eurobarometer, 2011). However, although some car users state that they are willing to consider a travel mode switch toward more public transport use, provided that the quality of public transport services is improved (Curtis & Headicar, 1997; Eriksson, Friman, & Gärling, 2008; Kingham, Dickinson, & Copesey, 2001), research suggests that a majority of car users nevertheless

are reluctant to change their current travel behavior (Shannon et al., 2006; Sperling & Gordon, 2009).

Therefore, it has become important to explore why car users are slow in adopting public transport. Previous research suggests several factors that explain this reluctance: car use gives freedom of choice (Steg, Vlek, & Slotegraaf, 2001), car users' resistance to changing a habit (Verplanken, Aarts, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 1994), affective attachment to the car (Mann & Abraham, 2006), and the pleasure of driving (Gatersleben, 2007; Steg, 2005). A misprediction of future satisfaction with a more sustainable travel mode than the car is an additional important factor. In fact, car users underestimate their potential satisfaction with the existing public transport services in their residential areas (Pedersen, Friman, & Kristensson, 2011a). Additionally, they remember being less satisfied with public transport than they were at the time of actually using the services (Pedersen, Friman, & Kristensson, 2011b). This misprediction and inaccurate recall result in a persistent negative attitude toward public transport use and a positive attitude toward car use (Fujii & Gärling, 2003; Fujii, Gärling, & Kitamura, 2001). From the viewpoint of sustainable development, these established behaviors are undesirable.

With regard to the psychological phenomena responsible for the car users' inaccurate predictions about future satisfaction

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with public transport, a phenomenon labeled the focusing illusion, which is well-known from other domains, such as research on happiness and quality of life (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Ubel, Loewenstein, & Jepson, 2005), is one promising explanatory candidate. The focusing illusion (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axson, 2000) is a phenomenon that causes people to focus too much on a limited range of salient features related to the focal event while disregarding the broader context in which the focal event takes place. As a result of this disproportionate focus, people inaccurately predict the future satisfaction of the event by not acknowledging or by underestimating aspects of an event that will remain unchanged even if the focal event does in fact come into play (Ubel et al., 2005).

As a consequence of the focusing illusion, people exhibit an intensity bias (Wilson et al., 2000) in their evaluations that makes them exaggerate the emotional impact of the focal event. For example, having previously experienced a negative critical incident (Friman, 2004), such as when the bus was not on time, a car user is likely to focus his or her future attention too much on the negative aspects of public transport when, in fact, contextual features will distract his or her attention away from the negative aspects and dampen the emotional impact of the focal event in the future. Thus, because car users exhibit the focusing illusion (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003; Wilson et al., 2000), that is, focusing only on focal events without regard to other aspects of life that will remain unchanged, they tend to underestimate their future satisfaction with public transport.

Research in domains related to happiness, well-being and quality of life has revealed that mispredictions caused by the focusing illusion can be counteracted by means of using a defocusing technique (Ayton, Pott, & Elwakili, 2007; Ubel et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2000). This technique works by making people become more aware of other aspects of life (i.e., other than the focal event) and the broader context in which the focal event takes place, thereby reducing the presumed emotional impact from the focal event. This more objective perspective helps people in making more accurate predictions about future happiness and quality of life.

With regard to car users' inaccurate predictions about potential satisfaction with public transport, a defocusing technique may aid the car users in becoming more aware of the broader context of life, and consequently of things in life that will remain unchanged even if they were to travel by public transport instead of using their private cars, thereby reducing the adverse effect of the focusing illusion. As a consequence, a defocusing technique may reduce the intensity bias, thereby generating higher and more accurate predicted satisfaction with public transport.

The value of the defocusing technique in predicting future satisfaction is shown in a study by Ayton et al. (2007), who asked people to rate the happiness of a person winning a lottery and a person diagnosed with a severe disease. By making participants aware of the broader context in which the focal event (i.e., winning the lottery or being diagnosed with a severe disease) takes place (i.e., the broader aspects of life of the person in question), the defocusing technique helped participants make more accurate evaluations about the happiness of the person in question.

Another instance is presented by Wilson et al. (2000), who asked students to predict what their level of happiness would be during each day of the week following a specific Sunday when their favorite Football team would either win or lose an important game. As a result of the defocusing technique, the students made less extreme and consequently more accurate predictions about the duration of the initial affect that they experienced immediately after knowing the results from the game.

In order to encourage car users to undertake a travel mode shift toward more frequent public transport use, much is dependent upon the accurate prediction of future satisfaction with the services. In the domain of habitual car users' predictions of future satisfaction with public transport, we assume that a defocusing technique (e.g., as employed by Wilson et al., 2000) will most likely draw habitual car users' attention away from the presumed negative features of public transport and introduce broader aspects of the travel experience that will remain unchanged even if one switches travel modes. Thus, the main aim of the present study is to investigate the effects of the defocusing technique on car users' predictions about satisfaction with public transport. If a defocusing technique is to be utilized by practitioners in the public transport domain, it is important that it is easy to use in marketing and informational campaigns. Therefore, it is of interest to establish a valid defocusing technique that is as brief and practical to use as possible.

By asking participants to either estimate how much time they spend on a daily basis on 10 pre-selected, generic activities (in Study 1), or to first list their own daily activities and then indicate how much time they spend on each activity (in Study 2), it is likely that, in accordance with previous studies, the car users' focus will shift away from the negative aspects of using public transport to also take into account aspects of life that will remain unchanged even if the travel mode is switched. In the studies presented above, the first hypothesis (H1) is that participants subjected to a defocusing technique will predict higher future satisfaction with public transport, in comparison with a control group.

Pedersen et al. (2011a) show that a strong car use habit is an additional explanation for the inaccurate and negative predictions found in previous studies. Habits are defined as, "learned sequences of acts that have become automatic responses to specific cues, and are functional in obtaining certain goals or end-states" (Verplanken & Aarts, 1999; p. 104). Why does habit have such a strong effect? One explanation is that car-use habit develops over time and becomes a part of our daily travel script (Gärling, Fujii, & Boe, 2001), and therefore is hard to counteract. Consequently, when employing a specific travel mode, one is less likely to utilize information about alternative travel modes (Verplanken, Aarts, & van Knippenberg, 1997). When applying a defocusing technique on car users that have a strong car-use habit, the technique may not necessarily be effective enough to correct for misperceptions of all of the aspects or attributes of public transport. It is therefore of additional interest to investigate the effects of car-use habit per se, apart from the effect that the experimental manipulation may have on the car users' predicted satisfaction with public transport. A second hypothesis (hypothesis H2) is that car-use habit influences predicted satisfaction, that is, the stronger the car-use habit, the lower the car users' predicted satisfaction with public transport, over and above the effects of defocusing.

We employ one generic and one self-relevant defocusing technique. In Study 1, we employ a generic defocusing technique, in which participants estimate the time spent on 10 daily, pre-selected activities (i.e., activities that they do not themselves select from their own lives). In Study 2, we employ a self-relevant defocusing technique, in which participants list up to 10 of their own daily activities, and then estimate the time spent on their self-selected activities.

1. Study 1 – generic defocusing

The aim of Study 1 was to investigate the effects of a generic defocusing technique on car users' predicted satisfaction with public transport. Additionally, the effects of car-use habit on predicted satisfaction are investigated.

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