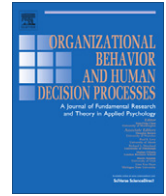




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Commitment to a developing preference and predecisional distortion of information

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ABSTRACT

People tend to distort their evaluation of decision-relevant information in favor of the currently preferred alternative. We test whether this predecisional distortion of information is amplified by increased commitment to that current preference. We manipulated commitment, without changing the preferred option's content, by requiring participants to indicate their preference either by circling or by darkening a sizable box (cf. feature-positive effect). Experiment 1 revealed that the effort to darken substantially increased predecisional distortion. Experiment 2 ruled out elaboration as an explanation for the effect of darkening. Experiment 3 showed that, among participants who attributed the darkening effort to an external source, predecisional distortion decreased when the source was believed to summon effort. These findings suggest that the developing commitment to a tentatively preferred alternative is one driver of predecisional distortion.

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Introduction

For many decades and in several settings psychologists have found that people tend to systematically favor information that is consistent with their preferred beliefs (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). In decision making, which is the focus of the present work, biased information processing to support a current preference has taken three forms: (a) seeking information that favors the currently preferred alternative, exemplified by the confirmation bias (Klayman & Ha, 1987); (b) ignoring, dismissing or refuting contrary information (Edwards & Smith, 1996); and (c) biasing the interpretation of ineluctable information toward supporting the current preference (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Russo, Medvec, & Meloy 1996). It is this last phenomenon, the biased evaluation of information, that is our focus.

The most familiar examples of this bias occur when the preferred belief is strong. During a sports contest fans of one team may cry foul while the opposing team's supporters observe fair play (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954), or after a Presidential debate Democrats believe that the Democratic candidate won yet Republicans see their candidate as the victor (Munro et al., 2002). In contrast to the common case of a long-standing, deeply held belief whose defense via biased information processing might be expected, we investigate a situation in which the current belief is an emerging preference for one alternative over another during a decision. Our focus is on the effect of increasing the commitment to that developing preference on the distorted evaluation of new

information, and whether that predecisional distortion of information can occur automatically.

Information distortion during a decision

Predecisional information distortion is the biased evaluation of new information to support an emerging preference (for a review, see Brownstein, 2003). For example, in a choice between two equally attractive jobs, decision makers who develop a preference for one job when they learn that it is located in a better area subsequently inflate the importance associated with its positive features, such as a nice office or short commute (Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004). This kind of biased information processing is widespread—it has been observed in domains as varied as gambling at a racetrack (Brownstein, Read, & Simon, 2004), prospective jurors' verdicts (Carlson & Russo, 2001), choosing between wines (Carlson & Pearo, 2004) and among professionals in auditing and sales (Russo, Meloy, & Wilks, 2000).

One possible contributor to predecisional distortion is the strength of the commitment to the current preference. Both Bond, Carlson, Meloy, Russo, and Tanner (2007) and Russo, Meloy, and Medvec (1998) suggest that requiring participants to explicitly state an initial preference for one option may initiate or augment psychological commitment (Cialdini, 2001) that then drives predecisional distortion. Bond et al. state that responding to the "questions themselves might have increased participants' commitment to their initial evaluative disposition" (p. 249).

A construct closely related to commitment, for which we have empirical evidence, is the decision maker's current confidence that the leading option will be the eventual choice. Several studies have

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found that confidence in the currently preferred alternative predicts the magnitude of distortion of new information (e.g., Carlson & Pearo, 2004; Russo et al., 1998). That is, the greater is the confidence in the leading alternative, and presumably the current commitment to that option, the greater is the subsequent predecisional distortion. There is also considerable evidence of the role of commitment in related tasks. Janis and Mann (1977) demonstrated that commitment distorts (i.e., inflates) decision makers' subjective probability of a decision alternative's success. Staw (1981) also found that commitment induces decision makers to re-evaluate negative feedback as less negative. In spite of the above noted claims and evidence, no study has directly manipulated commitment and measured the consequent predecisional distortion. The main goal of the present work is to increase commitment to the currently preferred alternative in the expectation that it will increase predecisional distortion.

Manipulation of commitment

Among the possible ways of enhancing commitment to the leading alternative in a binary choice, we sought one that did not change the value of either alternative. There is little doubt that increasing the relative preference for one alternative will cause a corresponding jump in the commitment to choosing that alternative. Instead, we wanted a value-independent manipulation so that the resulting increase in commitment to the current preference was not confounded with a change in the value of either alternative.

We found a suitable manipulation in the work on the feature-positive effect (Fazio, Sherman, & Herr, 1982). Decision makers who indicate their position actively (e.g., by pressing a button) are assumed to become more committed and subsequently more extreme than decision makers who respond passively (e.g., by not pressing a button). Allison and Messick (1988) used the simple tactic of instructing their student participants to indicate whether or not they favored a tuition increase by darkening a box (an active response) or doing nothing (a passive response). Not only did the former group report a greater preference for increasing tuition; but when the instructions were reversed so that opposing a tuition increase was indicated by darkening a box, participants reported greater opposition to a tuition increase. Cioffi and Garner (1996) went a step further and showed that an active response, such as copying a statement that indicates a willingness to volunteer, elicits greater commitment to volunteer (e.g., serving on a committee) than does a passive response.

How might commitment to an alternative in a decision differentially affect distortion of new information? We propose that decision makers attend to behaviors that are active but overlook information of behaviors that are passive. This is akin to Ross' (1977) work on the difference between decision makers' processing of occurrences and non-occurrences, namely the greater ease in recognizing, interpreting and retrieving information of occurrences (for a review, see Ritov & Baron, 1992). We suggest that the more active a response—and by extension, the more felt commitment (Cialdini, 2001; Cioffi & Garner, 1998), the more likely new information can be distorted. Thus, as a consequence of harboring commitment to an alternative, decision makers appear to process information in a self-serving manner, and applied to the present case, in a manner that promotes their developing preferences. Empirical support for this hypothesis is provided by Comer and Laird (1975) who showed that participants who had committed themselves to eating a worm rated the worm eating task as less unpleasant, despite not (yet) having eaten the worm. In a similar vein, Cioffi and Garner (1996) found that individuals who actively indicated their commitment (to volunteer or not to volunteer) generated more positive assessments (by citing more

reasons to volunteer or not to volunteer) than individuals who indicated no commitment. Finally, research on the foot-in-the-door technique (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978; Freedman & Fraser, 1966) demonstrates that people who commit to a small request (e.g., signing a petition) favorably assess and comply with a related and larger request (e.g., posting a yard sign). To summarize, we propose that decision makers who harbor commitment to an alternative course of action (e.g., eating a worm, not volunteering, signing a petition) distort new information in favor of the action.

We propose to enhance commitment by having one group of participants darken a box to indicate which alternative is leading instead of simply circling the leading alternative. The latter, circling the leading option, is a common response and can serve as a natural standard against which to compare the action of darkening a box. Thus, the difference between indicating the current leader by darkening (commitment condition) and circling (control condition) should enable an answer to our first research question, whether increasing commitment drives greater predecisional distortion.

Effect on choice

Can an increase in commitment have a material impact on which alternative is chosen? Carlson, Meloy, and Russo (2006) showed that if the first unit of information can install a preselected option (the "target") as the initial leader, then the subsequent distortion of information to support the leading alternative can work to preserve at least some of that early leadership. The result is an elevated probability of eventually choosing the targeted option. As information in a consumer choice, Carlson et al. used six product attributes that were net neutral. That is, cumulatively they favored neither alternative. However, these researchers manipulated the initial preference (i.e., the alternative leading after the first attribute) by writing two of the six attributes to favor one or the other option. By placing either of these "diagnostic" attributes in the first serial position, they installed its favored alternative as the initial leader for a majority of participants.

We propose to follow the same logic, but to add the potential power of commitment. Greater commitment to the leading alternative should induce decision makers to stay with their initial (manipulated) preference and result in an eventual choice proportion that is even more biased toward the targeted option. If the process just described obtains, then an observable consequence of greater commitment should be less switching of the current preference away from the leader. Indeed, there should be a higher proportion of choices with no switching whatsoever from the initial preference. Thus, we pose a second research question, whether increasing commitment in combination with an initial targeting of one alternative can enhance an adversary's power to influence the choice of a targeted option.

Automaticity and predecisional distortion

Predecisional distortion may occur in either of two processing modes. First, it may be manifest as a conscious, strategic trade-off among the arguments pro and con for each alternative. However, our focus is the alternative process, a less conscious "balancing" of one alternative against the other. These two modes of reconciliation, conscious deliberation and less conscious balancing, parallel the familiar distinction between System 2 and System 1 processes (for reviews, see Evans, 2007; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Keren & Schul, 2009). Although we focus on the less deliberate of these modes of reconciling competing alternatives and on the role of commitment to a developing preference in determining

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