POST-DECISION SELECTIVITY IN EXPOSURE TO INFORMATION

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POST-DECISION SELECTIVITY IN EXPOSURE TO INFORMATION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Psychology is often defined as the study of behavior. A great portion of the research in this field is based upon the behavior of animals, with the ultimate aim of explaining human behavior. The use of animals has been of immeasurable aid in the pursuit of knowledge about human behavior but is limited in its scope of explanation. Animal studies provide little explanation in the area which is often used to distinguish man from all other forms of life - namely cognition or the ability to think.

If man indeed does have an ability or a capacity for thought not shared by other life forms, what effect does this singular capacity have on his behavior? A common explanation is that a man's thoughts are translated into his actions. As man thinks, so does he act. According to this explanation then, a man's behavior is guided by his thoughts and beliefs.

If one wished to change a man's behavior he might approach the task by attempting to alter or modify the man's thoughts or beliefs. This is a task that many individuals, organizations, and businesses are committed to. A common example is the company trying to sell its product in a competitive market. Its business is to alter the buying behavior
of the consumer by persuading him that all competing brands are inferior to its own product. The company spends a great deal of time and money exposing the consumer to advertising propaganda in the hope that his beliefs about their product will undergo a favorable change and be translated into the new behavior of buying their product. Such attempts to change a person's beliefs and consequent behavior are sometimes successful and sometimes not. A man does not always hear what he is told. He does not always believe what he hears. He does not always act upon his beliefs. He is apparently selective in what he hears, believes, and does.

Assuming that people act upon or according to their beliefs it would seem that information contrary to those beliefs would result in their modification and in the modification of subsequent behavior. For such a change to take place it would be necessary to expose a person to relevant information, have him give it serious consideration, and have him act upon the basis of the resultant change in his beliefs. This is the basic logic behind advertising, political campaigning, and in general those endeavors which make use of propaganda type information. This is also the basis of much that transpires in the general area of human relations in everyday affairs. Obviously the effectiveness of such information in changing beliefs is contingent upon whether or not a person is exposed to the information, whether or not he perceives the information to which he is exposed, and if he perceives
the information, to what extent he perceives and understands its substance. Many people are not aware of the substance, import, or meaning of information when it is presented to them. However, it is futile to discuss whether or not a person has understood a piece of information when he has never been exposed to it. An example is the well written and logical argument of a political candidate supporting his platform, presented in the form of a magazine article. If the magazine article is not read, it is futile to discuss whether or not it has been understood, much less had any effect on the political beliefs of the voter. Some people might read such an article while others might not. An explanation for this might be that different people have different interests and consequently will read different things. However, even people with similar or identical interests or preferences will read different things. What is the basis of this type of selectivity? Why do people selectively expose themselves to certain types of information and not to other types? What are the factors that generate this selectivity and how is it increased or decreased? Is there in fact any justification for the idea that people are selective in exposing themselves to different types of information?

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the present study was to determine if persons who had made a recent decision would be selective in
seeking information related to their decisions. Also under consideration were the explanation for any selectivity exhibited, and the explanation for any variance in the degree of selectivity manifested.

Related Literature

Studies concerning selectivity in exposure to information have dealt primarily with the questions of whether or not people show a preference for supportive information, whether or not they avoid non-supportive information, and to what degree they exhibit selectivity in relation to the amount of cognitive dissonance they experience.

The results of such studies have been reviewed by Freedman and Sears (8) and categorized into those studies indicating a preference for supportive information, those indicating no preference, and those indicating a preference for non-supportive information. Due to the variety of conditions and circumstances under which the studies reviewed were conducted, and the ambiguity of the dependent variables measured, the meanings of the varied results are in most cases questionable or vague.

Among the studies cited by Freedman and Sears (8) indicating a preference for supportive information are those by Ehrlich et al.; Adams; and Freedman and Sears (2, 1, 7).

In the study conducted by Ehrlich et al. (2), two groups of people were interviewed. In one group each person had
bought a new automobile four to six weeks earlier, while in the other group each person owned a car at least three years old. Each person was shown eight large envelopes bearing the names of eight popular makes of automobiles. Each envelope contained advertising material about the make named on the envelope. Each person was asked to choose two envelopes in order to read and comment on the enclosed material. The results showed that 80.7 per cent of the respondents selected an envelope bearing the name of their own auto as one of the two they wished to read. In the same study data were collected on the automobile advertisements the respondents had read in recent issues of magazines and newspapers. Of the ads they had noticed, both new and old car owners read more about their own cars than about other makes.

In the study by Adams (1), mothers of young children were asked whether they believed in hereditary or environmental theories of child development. They were then offered the opportunity to hear one of two speeches upholding these alternatives. The results showed that 75.4 per cent of the mothers selected the speech supporting their own opinions.

Freedman and Sears (7) asked voters to indicate their preferences among five pamphlets on a 1962 gubernatorial campaign between two candidates. Of those respondents who expressed candidate preferences, 58.4 per cent selected as their first choice a pamphlet endorsing the election of the candidate they favored.
Among studies cited by Freedman and Sears (8) indicating no preference for either supportive or non-supportive information are those by Feather, Mills and Ross, and Jecker (4, 11, 9).

Feather (4) had a number of people rank a list of thirteen article titles. In the list was an article title suggesting that smoking causes cancer, and another title which suggested that smoking does not cause cancer. The ranks assigned to these two titles by smokers and non-smokers were not significantly different.

Mills and Ross (11) had college men state their position on whether or not college courses should be taught by television, and then asked them to indicate their degree of interest in reading articles for and against their position. There were an equal number of articles offered on both sides of the issue. The results showed no preference for articles based on the positions taken by the subjects.

Jecker (9) arranged two-man teams to play a competitive game, and then measured the time each subject spent exposing himself to supportive or non-supportive information about his teammate. Regardless of whether or not the subject had already selected his teammate, there was no significant difference in exposure time between supportive and non-supportive information.

Among the studies cited by Freedman and Sears (8) indicating a preference for non-supportive information are those by Feather, and Freedman (3, 6).
In Feather's study (3), subjects were divided into two groups. One group consisted of persons who believed that there was no convincing evidence of a relationship between smoking and lung cancer, while the other group was composed of persons who believed that there was convincing evidence of such a relationship. Smokers in each group showed a preference for an article which contradicted their beliefs, while non-smokers showed no particular preference. This indicated a tendency toward preference for non-supportive information among subjects who were presumably highly ego-involved.

In Freedman's study (6), subjects were told that they were taking part in an investigation of social perceptiveness, an important ability. Each subject heard one of two interviews between, supposedly, a candidate for an overseas conference and the person in charge of the conference. In one interview the candidate sounded quite promising, and in the other interview quite unpromising. The subject was then asked to evaluate the candidate. Later the subject was asked to choose between two evaluations by people who knew the candidate well. One evaluation was favorable and the other unfavorable. Of eighteen subjects tested, seventeen chose the evaluation that disagreed with their own evaluation. This indicated a strong preference for non-supportive information.

On the whole there is no clear cut evidence as to whether people generally seek out supportive information, display a preference for non-supportive information, or demonstrate
no selectivity at all in exposing themselves to information related to their beliefs.

If selective exposure is a valid phenomenon, there exists a question as to what degree the selectivity is affected by the strength or importance of pre-existing beliefs. Mills, Aronson, and Robinson (10) investigated selective exposure and the effects of varying the magnitude of dissonance in a post-decision situation. They offered students a choice between an essay examination and a multiple-choice examination. Some students were told that the test would be their final test, worth a major part of their course grade; while others were told that it would only be a quiz, worth a minor part of their course grade. The decision made by the students who believed the test was to be their final was assumed to be more important and dissonance arousing than the decision made by the students who believed the test was only to be a quiz. Although a check on the manipulation of dissonance indicated it was successful, the high and low dissonance groups did not differ significantly with regard to relative preference for articles supporting or opposing their decision.

In general, those studies reviewed by Freedman and Sears (8) failed to provide significant support for the hypothesis that greater dissonance leads to greater selective exposure.

Rationale for the Hypotheses
The hypotheses tested in this study were those formulated by Mills, Aronson, and Robinson (10), based on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (5). The idea of post-decision selectivity in exposure to information based on cognitive dissonance implies that persons who have recently made an important decision will tend to expose themselves to information that concerns their choice, and avoid information that concerns rejected alternatives. Additionally implied is that selectivity in exposure to information is affected by the degree of importance of the decision made and the nature of the available information. By the nature of the available information is here meant whether the information is positive, supporting either the choice or the rejected alternatives; or negative, discrepant with or not supporting the choice or the rejected alternatives. On the basis of this theory the following hypotheses were investigated in the present study:

(1) Following a decision, a person would tend to seek out information that favored the chosen alternative, and to avoid information that favored the rejected alternative. That is, he would prefer positive information about the chosen alternative to positive information about the rejected alternative, and prefer negative information about the rejected alternative to negative information about the one chosen.

(2) The more important the decision made, the greater would be the subsequent selectivity of information.
Procedure

In order to test the hypotheses, the experiment was conducted under four different conditions, with one class of students randomly assigned, by means of a table of random numbers, to each condition. The four conditions defined were

1. High importance, positive information condition.
2. Low importance, positive information condition.
3. High importance, negative information condition.
4. Low importance, negative information condition.

Classes in the high importance conditions were told that they were being given their choice between an essay, short-answer type, examination, and an objective, multiple-choice type, examination; and that the examination was to be their final test, worth approximately 40 per cent of their course grade. Students in the low importance conditions were given the same choice but were told that the examination would be worth no more than a regular quiz in the determination of their course grade.

Classes in the positive information conditions were, following their decision as to choice of examination preferred, presented with a list of six fictitious journal articles. Three of the article titles were about essay examinations, and the remaining three were about objective examinations. Each journal article was preceded by a one-sentence description which favored the type of test the article was about.
Classes in the negative information conditions were, following their decision, likewise presented with the same list of articles. However, key words in the descriptive sentences preceding the articles had been changed to make them appear unfavorable to the types of tests mentioned.

In all conditions the individual students made their choice as to the type of tests they were going to take. It was understood that the choice was for the individual and not for the class as a whole.

After having made their decision and being presented with a list of journal articles, the students were asked to rank in order of preference the articles they wished to read. It was stipulated that they were required to read one article from the list, but due to the limited supply of articles they might not get the article of their choice; and hence the necessity of having them rank the articles. They were told that by ranking the articles their preferences could be given consideration should their first choice not be available.

The ranks of the articles by the students in each of the four conditions were later analyzed to test the hypotheses of the investigation.

A check on the effectiveness of the manipulation of importance level was made. Additionally, a check was made on the credibility of the experiment in the eyes of the students, since it was believed that this might be an important factor affecting selectivity.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


One hundred and six subjects participated in this study. They consisted of students in four separate classes at North Texas State University. Of the four classes, two were in senior level psychology courses, one was a sophomore level psychology course, and one was a graduate class in education. The number of students in each of the respective classes was twenty, twenty, thirty-two, and thirty-four.

The investigator collecting data was the same in all classes. The collection of data was accomplished in two phases, and was effected over a period of four days.

In all classes the investigator was introduced as a graduate student working on his thesis while collecting data for a larger investigation being conducted by the psychology department. The introduction implied that the psychology department was in the process of evaluating different testing procedures at North Texas State University.

Following the introduction, the investigator explained that it had been suggested that students might do better if they were given their choice of the kind of examinations they were to take. It was further explained that to test this idea the students were actually going to be given their
choice on one examination. The choice offered was between a short-answer type essay test and a multiple-choice type objective test. It was stressed that each person would receive the examination of his choice, that it would be constructed by the class professor, and that it would cover the material in his course.

In the high importance conditions the students were told that their test was to be the final test. In the low importance conditions the students were told that the test would only be worth a quiz in the determination of their course grade. Following this explanation the students were asked to indicate on an index card their choice of test. The students were instructed to place their social security number on the card rather than their name. The explanation given for this procedure was that the psychology department could more easily process data from the many classes supposedly involved by using numbers rather than names. The actual reason for the use of social security numbers was to protect the anonymity of the students and allow them a greater latitude of candidness at a later stage in the experiment. The decisions of the students were then collected.

Following the collection of the decisions, the students were told that people who familiarized themselves with the subject of academic testing seemed to perform better on examinations, and to test this phenomenon they were going to be asked to read a journal article on the subject of
testing before they took their examination. They were then presented with a list of six fictitious journal articles from which they were to choose one article they would like to read. It was explained, however, that the number of available articles was limited, and that they might not be able to get their first choice. Consequently, they were asked to indicate their reading preferences by ranking the articles, placing a figure 1 next to the article they would like most to read, a figure 2 next to the article they would like next most to read, and so on. Three of the articles on the list were about essay examinations, and the other three were about objective examinations. Each article was preceded by a one-sentence description. In all classes the article titles, authors, dates, et cetera were identical. The same was true of the descriptive sentences preceding the articles, with one exception. In the positive information conditions the articles were described as presenting arguments in favor of the kind of test the article was about. In the negative information conditions key words in the descriptive sentences had been changed to make the article appear unfavorable to the type of exam discussed.

The procedures and materials discussed above resulted in the definition of four distinct conditions, with one class in each condition. The four conditions thus defined were

(1) High importance, positive information condition.
(2) Low importance, positive information condition.
(3) High importance, negative information condition.
(4) Low importance, negative information condition.

After the students had ranked the articles as instructed, the lists were collected. They were told that the lists would be processed, and in a period of days the articles would be distributed among them. This completed the initial phase of data collection.

The design creating the four conditions mentioned was based on the design of a similar investigation conducted by Mills, Aronson, and Robinson (1).

The second phase of data collection began when the investigator returned to the respective classes, and disclosed the true nature of the experiment. The students were asked to indicate, on a six-point scale, the degree of difficulty they had encountered in deciding between the two types of examinations offered. The purpose of this procedure was to get an index of the effectiveness of manipulating the importance level of the decision among the classes.

The students were then asked to respond to an inquiry concerning the credibility of the experiment. They were asked to indicate whether they had believed all that the investigator had told them, whether they had been undecided about it, or whether they had not believed it. The use of social security numbers instead of names on these check sheets provided the students with the anonymity mentioned previously and the consequent freedom to be candid in response.
Data Analysis Procedure

The degree to which a student preferred to read articles about one kind of test more than articles about the other kind was reflected in the ranks assigned to the two kinds of articles, the type of articles preferred receiving the smallest ranks. Thus the sum of the ranks assigned to the three articles concerning the chosen examination provided a measure of selectivity in exposure to information. This measure had a possible range from six to fifteen. Since the sum of the ranks for all six articles was equal to twenty-one, the average for this measure would have equaled 10.5 when the articles about the two types of tests were equally preferred.

According to the hypotheses of the experiment, it was expected that the articles would not be equally preferred. The average of the sum of the ranks of the three articles concerning the chosen examination should have been less than 10.5 in the positive information conditions, and smaller in the high importance positive information condition than in the low importance positive information condition.

In the negative information conditions, the average of the sum of the ranks of the three articles concerning the chosen examination should have been greater than 10.5, and greater in the high importance negative information condition than in the low importance negative information condition.
Given these expectations, an hypothesis was formed stating that all articles would be equally preferred, and consequently the average selectivity measure would be equal to 10.5. For each of the classes a t test was applied to the obtained selectivity measures against the theoretical value of 10.5. The values obtained were checked for significant difference from the hypothesized value, and were inspected to determine if the differences were in the directions predicted for each of the four experimental conditions.

To test the hypothesis that selectivity measures obtained in the high importance positive information condition would be lower than those obtained in the low importance positive information condition, a t test was applied to the selectivity measures obtained from the two classes in these conditions. An inspection of the data obviated the need for a similar test of the hypothesis that obtained selectivity measures would be higher in the high importance negative information condition than those obtained in the low importance negative information condition.

To determine whether or not there had been a significant difference in the degree of difficulty encountered in making the choice between the tests offered, a t test was applied to the difficulty ratings obtained from students in the high importance conditions and those obtained from students in the low importance conditions.
Inspection of the credibility categories within each class revealed that the majority of students had indicated belief in the experiment, while a minority had indicated indecision, and a negligible portion of the students had indicated disbelief. Due to this frequency distribution among the three categories, it was decided to combine the undecided category with the disbelief category, and compare the resultant category with the belief category. A t test was applied to the selectivity measures obtained from students in the newly formed second category to determine if credibility had had any significant effect on selectivity. This procedure was carried out for each of the individual classes and also for all classes combined.
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CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistically, the major hypothesis of this study was that the average selectivity measures obtained from the four conditions would be either greater or less than the hypothetical value of 10.5. The direction of the difference from the value of 10.5 was predicted by the condition for each class. To determine the degree of selectivity exhibited in each condition, a t test was applied to the selectivity measures obtained in each of the four classes. The results of this procedure are presented in Table I.

TABLE I

MEANS OBTAINED FOR SELECTIVITY MEASURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Var</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi Pos</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>-5.17</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Pos</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8.12</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>-5.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi Neg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>-0.95</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Neg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inspection of Table I reveals that students in the high importance positive information condition and those in the low importance positive information condition did, as predicted, prefer information favoring the chosen alternative to information favoring the rejected alternative. The differences between the selectivity measures obtained from these conditions and the null value of 10.5 were significant at beyond the .01 level of probability. These differences were in the direction predicted by the hypotheses for these two conditions, that is, less than 10.5.

No such differences were found in the high and low negative information conditions. In these conditions equal preference was exhibited for articles about both the chosen and rejected alternative. Such results were counter to those predicted by the hypothesis that, given negative information, the subjects would show a preference for articles about the rejected alternative. This discrepancy may be based on the interaction of two conflicting tendencies. The tendency to seek out information concerning a chosen alternative would be in conflict with the tendency to avoid negative information about the same alternative. Given nothing but negative information, the interaction of these two tendencies may have neutralized selectivity and resulted in equal preference among articles. The desire to find out more about the chosen alternative may have outweighed the preference for negative information about the rejected alternative, while at the
same time this desire was weakened by the conflicting tendency to avoid negative information about the chosen alternative.

Table II also presents the selectivity measure means obtained in the four conditions.

**TABLE II**

MEANS OBTAINED FOR SELECTIVITY MEASURE: COMPARISON OF CLASSES FOR DIFFERENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Sp2#</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi Pos</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Pos</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi Neg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Neg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.30</td>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* # Pooled estimate of variance
   ** No t test

In this case however, comparison was made, by means of a t test, between the high importance positive information condition and the low importance positive information condition. This was to determine if, as hypothesized, the obtained selectivity measures would be lower in the high importance positive information condition than in the low importance positive information condition. As indicated in Table II, there was no significant difference between the measures obtained.
The need to test the hypothesis that selectivity measures obtained from the low importance negative information condition would be less than those obtained from the high importance negative information condition was obviated by the fact that, with an equal number of subjects in both conditions, the reverse situation had occurred. As indicated in Table II, the mean selectivity measure obtained from the low importance negative information condition was greater than the mean obtained from the high importance negative information condition.

Table III presents the mean difficulty ratings obtained from students in the high and low importance conditions.

### Table III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>$Sp^2*$</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi Imp</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Imp</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Pooled estimate of variance

A comparison by $t$ test revealed that students in the high importance conditions had no more difficulty in making their decision than did those in the low importance conditions. The failure to achieve a difference in importance
level of the decision leaves the second hypothesis open to speculation. Since no difference in importance level was effected, there is no way to determine whether or not such a difference would have affected the degree of selectivity in exposure as predicted by the hypothesis. The failure to effectively manipulate the importance level of the decision may have been due to the fact that students feel that one examination is as important as another, whether it is a quiz or the final examination.

The difficulty ratings and the credibility data were collected during the second phase of the study. Due to absences, the number of subjects was smaller than in the initial phase of data collection. However, the distribution of students across classes during the second phase was such that it was felt to be representative of the original sample. The change in the number of subjects is reflected in Tables III and IV.

Table IV presents the results of the credibility inquiry. Inspection of the table reveals that for all classes except one, there was no effect on selectivity attributable to credibility classification. A t test for the low importance negative information condition did indicate an appreciable effect on selectivity attributable to credibility classification. However, this effect was highly questionable due to the imbalance of subjects in the contributing categories for this class. There were only four subjects in the
disbelief category, and all had the maximum selectivity measure value possible, that is, the value of fifteen. This was, in comparison to the rest of the classes, most atypical, and was apparently an example of chance operating. Further substantiation of this belief was provided by the fact that when all classes were combined, there was no apparent effect attributable to credibility classification.

**TABLE IV**

**MEANS FOR SELECTIVITY MEASURE ACCORDING TO CREDIBILITY CLASSIFICATION (B or U)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>$Sp^2$ ***</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi Pos</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Pos</td>
<td>B</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.60</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hi Neg</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo Neg</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>8.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* B category contains students who indicated belief, and U category those who indicated uncertainty or disbelief

** Pooled estimate of variance

*** No t test

Summarily then, Table IV demonstrates that credibility was not a biasing factor in this study.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to test the following hypotheses.

(1) Following a decision, a person would tend to seek out information that favored the chosen alternative, and to avoid information that favored the rejected alternative. That is, he would prefer positive information about the chosen alternative to positive information about the rejected alternative, and prefer negative information about the rejected alternative to negative information about the one chosen.

(2) The more important the decision made, the greater would be the subsequent selectivity of information.

The subjects participating in the investigation were one hundred and six students in four classes at North Texas State University.

The students were offered the choice between an essay examination and an objective examination. Students in the high importance conditions were told that the test would be their final test. Students in the low importance conditions
were told that the test was to be just a quiz. Following their decision as to choice of test, the students were exposed to a list of fictitious journal articles, three of which were about essay examinations and three about objective examinations. Each journal article was preceded by a one-sentence description. In the positive information conditions, the descriptive sentence made it appear that the articles were favorable to the type of test they were about. In the negative information conditions, the descriptive sentences had key words changed to make it appear that the articles were unfavorable to the type of test they were about. The students were asked to rank the articles in the order of their reading preference.

The ranks assigned to the articles concerning the chosen examination provided a measure of selectivity based on information preference, and were the basic measure used to test the hypotheses of the experiment.

A check was made on the effectiveness of manipulating the importance level of the decision, and the results indicated that the attempt was unsuccessful. This left the second hypothesis open to speculation, since its test was dependent upon a significant difference in the levels of importance of the decision.

The first hypothesis was confirmed in the positive information conditions, but failed to receive support in the negative information conditions. The explanation for
the lack of confirmation in the negative information conditions was based on the possibility that conflicting tendencies to seek and avoid the same information may have neutralized selective preference that would have otherwise been exhibited.

A credibility check on the obtained data indicated that there was no bias in the experiment attributable to the degree of belief the subjects had concerning the validity of the stipulations of the experiment.

Conclusions

Selective exposure would seem to be a valid phenomenon extant in the behavior of man, when one considers such things as how a man reads only certain portions of a newspaper, attends only certain types of movies, buys only certain magazines, associates only with certain people, et cetera. In a world filled with alternatives, some persons are quite consistent in their preferences for one alternative over another; and this is apparently true in the case of information related to those alternatives. However, not all persons are consistent in this manner, and even those who are consistent are not so all the time.

Apparently the nature of information related to various alternatives is an important factor affecting selective exposure. Also important in this respect is the degree of commitment a person has in his beliefs about various
alternatives. Dissonance theory postulates that the greater the degree of belief, the greater will be the selective exposure exhibited. Dissonance theory also postulates that people will prefer information that supports or is compatible with their beliefs to information that does not support or is in conflict with their beliefs. This from common experience would seem to be a valid and logical assertion. Most people prefer to have their beliefs upheld and seem to experience some discomfort when their beliefs are challenged or destroyed, especially where ego-involvement is high.

In the case of post-decisional selective exposure, with which this study dealt, a complex variety of factors seems to be operating. Among these factors are such things as the nature and content of available information, the amount of ego-involvement, the nature of pre-existing beliefs and degree of commitment to those beliefs, the perception of the available information and the degree of accuracy in objectively evaluating or interpreting the information, and unforeseen and unmeasured personality characteristics which may nullify, minimize, or amplify the mechanisms generally held responsible for the phenomenon of selective exposure. Here implied is that the postulates of selective exposure theory as presented, discussed, and tested in this investigation are in need of refinement and/or qualification.

The basic conclusions drawn from this investigation, however, are not contradictory to selective exposure theory.
Rather, they are in a position of critical evaluation of the adequacy of the theory, in its present state, to explain the more subtle dynamics involved in the phenomenon.

As pointed out previously, the phenomenon seems even from casual observation to be quite pervasive in human behavior. The task at hand is to further investigate the nature of the phenomenon, beginning with the basic postulates of selective exposure theory, and refining to a point of experimental control the component aspects of each of the postulates. The greatest difficulty involved is the isolation and identification of the myriad of possible factors impinging upon the basic mechanisms of selective exposure.

Recommendations

Given the circumstances under which this investigation was conducted, it may be said in retrospect that the hypotheses tested were too broad in scope to be subjected to an investigation of adequate precision. Future such investigations might prove to be more informative and conclusive if prior consideration were given to the possibility of biasing influences arising from a number of factors not controlled in this investigation such as prior exposure to relevant information, indices of perceptive ability, and general temperament and personality characteristics. Were these variables to be controlled by such means as pre-test and subject matching, their suspected biasing influences
might be factored out, leaving a clearer impression of the basic dynamics involved in the selective exposure process.

This of course would be a most difficult procedure to effect. A more tenable alternative might be a more limited investigation which would confine itself to only one aspect of selective exposure. An example would be an investigation providing only one set of information conditions. For instance, all available information might be positive. Having a clearer understanding of selective exposure within this single context would to some extent provide a frame of reference for comparison of data obtained later from a variety of other information conditions.
APPENDIX
A. Students report that their course grades based on essay examinations do not agree with their own estimations of their ability.

B. Analysis indicates that the essay exam is not fair to the student.

C. The grading approach used with essay examinations is not appropriate to determine a student's ability in a course.

D. The objective approach to measuring knowledge does not give the student an adequate opportunity to demonstrate his ability.

E. Research indicates that objective exam grades generally do not agree with students' grade expectations.

F. The objective exam does not appear to accurately sample a student's knowledge of a subject matter.
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C. The grading approach used with essay examinations is appropriate to determine a student's ability in a course.


D. The objective approach to measuring knowledge gives the student an adequate opportunity to demonstrate his ability.


E. Research indicates that objective exam grades generally agree with students' grade expectations.


F. The objective exam appears to accurately sample a student's knowledge of a subject matter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


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