

WHEN WORDS HURT: THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS OF
VERBALLY ANALYZING ATTITUDES

Jonathan W. Schooler, University of Pittsburgh
Timothy D. Wilson, University of Virginia

It is typically assumed that analyzing the reasons for a decision is helpful. However, recent research indicates that verbally explaining the reasons for an attitude can reduce the quality of preferences and decisions. In this research, subjects were asked to evaluate attitude objects (e.g., jams, posters). In the analyzing reasons condition subjects are further instructed to write the reasons upon which they based their opinion. Control subjects are given no further instructions. The quality of the resulting judgments are then assessed using various different metrics. In a recently published paper we determined the quality of attitude judgments by examining the correspondence between subjects' judgments and those of experts (Wilson & Schooler, 1991). This research suggested that analyzing reasons can cause subjects to adopt attitudes that are less consistent with expert opinion than are those of controls. In one study, the judgments of subjects who analyzed their reasons for liking or disliking different strawberry jams were less consistent with those of Consumer's Report expert judges, than were those of control subjects. In a second study, compared to control subjects, subjects who analyzed their reasons for preferring different psychology courses, selected courses that were in less agreement with two different sources of expert opinion: psychology faculty members and students who had previously taken the classes.

It might be argued that even though subjects in the analyzing reasons condition formed preferences that were at variance with the experts, there was not necessarily any cost in doing so. However, currently unpublished research (Wilson, Lisle & Schooler, 1991) suggests that there are other negative consequences to analyzing judgments. Specifically, we observed that compared to control subjects, subjects who analyzed the reasons for their preferences were, at least in some situations, more likely to later regret the choices that they made. In one study, subjects who analyzed their reasons for selecting art posters indicated after three weeks, that they were less satisfied with their selections and less likely to have hung the posters than were control subjects. In a second study, compared to control subjects, subjects who analyzed their reasons for preferring pens were more likely to select pens that were later judged to be less appealing. These findings suggest that analyzing reasons not only causes subjects to make less "expert" judgments but may also cause people to be less happy with their decisions.

Given that analyzing reasons both reduces subjects' agreement with experts and reduces their post-choice satisfaction, it seems

likely that these two findings may be related to one another. In fact, a recent study suggests that the post-choice dissatisfaction following analyzing reasons may be associated with the selection of items that are less well rated by experts. This study used the reasons analysis procedure with peanut butter brands that had been rated by Consumer's Report. Following the initial tasting, reasons analysis, and attitude judgments, subjects were invited to take one of two brands home: the top rated brand or the lowest rated brand. Although the findings were complicated by the involvement of a few mediating variables (e.g., the order of presentation, and the expertise of the subjects), evidence was found indicating that: 1) subjects who analyzed reasons were more likely than controls to select the low rated product; and 2) reasons analysis subjects who selected the low rated product subsequently ate less of it than controls. These findings suggest that people who analyze reasons are sometimes less happy with their choices because they select inferior products.