Summarized Attribute Preferences Have Unique Antecedents and Consequences

Y. Andre Wang

Abstract
People have ideas about the qualities they like in others (e.g., “I like intelligence in a romantic partner”), which are called summarized attribute preferences. But where do summarized preferences come from, and what do they predict? In three studies, we examined how people form summarized preferences and whether they predict situation selection. We showed participants a series of photographs of real faces and assessed both their experienced liking for an attribute (or functional attribute preference) as well as their inference about how much they liked the attribute in the abstract (their summarized preference). Our results suggest that (1) summarized preferences can be only weakly grounded in people’s experienced, functional preferences, (2) summarized preferences can be biased by incidental aspects of the context in which people learn about them, and (3) summarized preferences can nevertheless predict important outcomes like situation selection at a distance (e.g., whether to join a new dating website based on a description of it). We discuss theoretical and methodological implications for the science of human evaluation.

Keywords: stated preferences, abstraction, covariation detection, situation selection, attraction