RESEARCH TEAM

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LEARNING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

An important mission of the Aresty Research Center is to generate interest among undergraduates in the process of and participation in research and to foster their research experiences. Accordingly, the specific learning objectives of your participation in this research project are:

1. Learn to formulate and/or to derive research questions.
2. Acquire effective tools and strategies for searching, retrieving, and reviewing relevant scientific literature on a topic of interest.
3. Conduct systematic review of scientific literature and effectively integrate research findings into conclusions.
4. Understand the concept of causality from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.
5. Gain experience with designing experiments to test specific hypotheses.
6. Participate in data collection activities.
7. Prepare and present research reports.
8. Discover the many benefits of doing research (and have a lot of fun!).

In addition, you should expect to learn a great deal about emotions and their relationship to decision-making processes. People make many decisions each day and understanding how emotions influence their decision-making process is not simply an interesting topic but also one that has far reaching implications in terms of helping people make better decisions in everyday life. In fact, by participating in the planned research activities, you will be directly generating additional knowledge about this relationship from which others will learn.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Background and Research Objectives

Decision-making is inherently a cognitive process that people use to choose among alternatives. Much of the research in this area has focused on logical or rational decision-making, a process that includes steps like specifying aims, developing alternatives and appraising solutions. However, most models of decision-making neglect the role that emotions have to play in decision-making processes, despite the mounting evidence that there is a whole range of decision-making that uses emotions. For example, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio studied people who had brain injuries that damaged that part of the brain where emotions are generated (that is, they lost the ability to feel emotions). The interesting thing he found was that their ability to make decisions was seriously impaired. They could logically describe what they should be doing but found it very difficult to make decisions in the absence of feelings. So at the point of decision, emotions are very important for choosing. In fact even with what we believe are logical decisions, the very point of choice is arguably always based on emotion.

The available scientific literature discerns several possible roles that emotions play in decision-making. First, one’s current emotions can interfere with logical decision-making. For example, when one is in a bad mood, one is more likely to recall negative events and overestimate the likelihood of unfortunate occurrences. When one is in a good mood, we are more likely to remember positive events and be more optimistic about their future occurrence. Second, people may rely exclusively on emotional decision-making such as in the course of a heated argument or when faced with immediate danger. A totally emotional decision is typically very fast. This is because it takes
time (at least 0.1 seconds) for the rational cortex to get going. Third, and more commonly, people combine logic and emotions. At times, such as when a person is angry and seeking revenge, emotions are the main driving force and logic is used to support emotional choices. At other times, the decision-making process starts with logic but emotions are used to make the final choice. Lastly, there is evidence that our choice of options is influenced by the anticipated emotion we think we would feel if we chose each option. For example, if I find an item I want at a very good price, should I buy it? I might not if I think that I might find it a better price later today. If I buy it now and see it at a better price later, my regret may be so troubling that I would prefer not to have made the initial purchase.

This research project now enters its second phase. The first phase (completed last year) focused on uncovering the different ways in which emotions can and are used in persuasion efforts. The role of emotions in decision-making was explored from an information-processing perspective (e.g., how emotions aid or interfere with people’s processing of persuasive information) which centers on the individual. The second phase of this research project will expend the scope of inquiry regarding the role of emotions in decision-making to include emotions that arise in interpersonal and/or social settings. By its nature, this line of research ought to be sensitive to the role of others or that of the environment in instigating emotional reactions, the adaptive functions of emotional reactions, and their effect on social judgments. Three specific research questions will be addressed in this phase:

1. How and to what extent are emotional reactions a function of our social environment? – if members of the same social group tend to have similar emotional reactions to objects or situations, then we have a reason to suspect that groups, their structure, and social norms, shape people’s emotional reactions. Daphna Barzillai will be responsible for developing this component of the project by reviewing the literature on the sociology of emotions.

2. How and to what extent may emotions facilitate or impede people’s ability to cope with life-threatening conditions and manage their relationships with others under such circumstances? - Research typically focus on the emotional toll that diseases have on the patient, largely ignoring the emotional toll on caregivers and others who are close to that person. No doubt, emotions play an important role in managing one’s relationship with others during times of illness or personal stress, and given the importance of a strong support system for the prospects of healing, it is important to try and offer people in these situation some guidance about managing their emotions so not to undermine their relationships with significant others. Talene Boodaghians will be responsible for developing this part of the project.

3. How and to what extent do people use emotions in managing their relationships with a romantic partner?; are they more or less likely to try and control their emotions in this context? What functions so different emotions play in romantic relationships? - Naiana Miranda will be responsible for developing answers for these and other related questions.

Students’ Responsibilities (5 hours per week)

- Complete all assigned readings by September 18, 2007 and be ready to discuss them with Dr. Yanovitzky.

- Attend individual Bi-weekly meetings with Dr. Yanovitzky (see dates below), each lasting about 30 minutes.

- Search, retrieve, archive, and summarize relevant literature on the topic of choice

- Prepare short summaries of 4-5 relevant journal articles or a book chapter on the topic of choice for each bi-weekly meeting (these should be emailed to Dr. Yanovitzky the night before each scheduled meeting)
• Assist Dr. Yanovitzky in developing or executing relevant research activities (planned for the Spring semester) including designing questionnaires and coding audio-visual materials.

Required Readings (copies can be found on the project’s Sakai site)


Meeting Schedule (Fall 2007)

- September 19 (at individually scheduled times)
- October 3 (at individually scheduled times)
- October 17 (at individually scheduled times)
- October 31 (at individually scheduled times)
- November 14 (at individually scheduled times)
- November 28 (at individually scheduled times)
- December 12 (at individually scheduled times)