

Better not ask me why: Effects of providing reasons for political attitudes

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The present study extended earlier findings with respect to the effects of providing reasons for one's attitudes. On the basis of earlier work on reasoning it was expected that participants, asked to explain why they held a specific attitude towards a politician or a political party, would become more inconsistent in their attitudes compared to participants in a control condition. This is because people often do not have access to the reasons underlying their attitudes. To meet some of the objections that can be raised to earlier research, participants in the present study were first asked for their attitudes, immediately followed by the request to explain why they held that attitude. After that, attitudes were measured again. Overall, it was shown that for two out of four targets, attitudes became relatively inconsistent after providing reasons. Further, the moderating effect of involvement in politics was shown. Less involved participants showed reasoning effects for all four targets, whereas more involved participants did not show these effects, and for one target even became more consistent in their attitudes.

Consider for yourself whether you voted at the last parliamentary elections, whom you voted for and why you voted for that particular candidate. The first two questions hopefully will not cause you many problems, but your answer to the third question may be somewhat more difficult to provide. Anyway, if you do give reasons, you may end up with a somewhat different attitude towards the candidate of your choice.

A view that has long been popular among attitude theorists (e.g. Allport, 1935; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Sherif & Cantril, 1947) is that attitudes are more or less stable entities, that hardly change through time. A growing body of research, however, is providing evidence that attitudes may be less stable. In this view it is suggested that attitude reports may be based on temporarily accessible information, used to construe the relevant attitude object and accordingly affecting respondents' answers on questions concerning their attitudes (e.g. Schwarz & Strack, 1985; Tesser, 1978; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). As Tesser (1978, pp. 297–298) stated: 'an attitude at a particular point in time is the result

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of a constructive process . . . there is no single attitude toward an object but, rather, any number of attitudes depending on the number of schemas available for thinking about the objects'.

How people construe the relevant object may depend on many factors, for example, question order (Schwarz & Sudman, 1992) or the saliency of underlying, affective or cognitive, attitude structures (Millar & Tesser, 1986).

Whereas these studies provide evidence that contextual factors, such as preceding questions, may affect construal of the attitude object, one of the most exciting lines of research within this field (cf. Tesser & Shaffer, 1990, p. 492) has shown that respondents may also use the *reasons* they bring to mind for explaining their attitudes in order to construe the attitude object (e.g. Wilson, Dunn, Kraft & Lisle, 1989a; Wilson, Lisle, Schooler, Hodges, Klaaren & LaFleur, 1993). The general argument that is made in this line of research is that thinking about the reasons for one's attitudes, beliefs or behaviours may change people's attitudes towards the object, at least temporarily. This because people do not always have complete access to *why* they feel the way they do about an attitude object (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), for example because of minimal cognitive processing (Wilson *et al.*, 1993) or because the attitude is based on affective instead of cognitive factors (Millar & Tesser, 1986). Still, people may feel compelled to give a 'good story' to explain their attitudes, and they will look for reasons that are plausible, accessible and easily verbalizable (cf. Wilson *et al.*, 1989a). Because people may infer a new attitude from the reasons they brought to mind, for example by a process of self-perception (Bem, 1972), they may adopt an attitude that is implied by the reasons they just had generated but that is inconsistent with their initial attitude. Thus, especially with respect to survey research, problems may occur when respondents are asked for reasons underlying their attitudes, decisions or behaviours.

First, reasons may not be consistent with respondents' attitudes and somewhat untrue, merely because people do not always have access to their true reasons. Second, respondents may adopt a temporary attitude that is implied by the reasons they do bring to mind, which especially may threaten the validity of repeated measures, or panel data. Finally, as was shown by Wilson, Kraft & Dunn (1989b) and Wilson *et al.* (1993), participants may even change their behaviours due to reasoning on their attitudes. In the Wilson *et al.* (1989) study, for example, participants showed no relation between their initial attitudes towards a presidential candidate (measured before the reasoning task) and the number of fliers supportive of this candidate they took home after explaining reasons for their attitudes, whereas a control group did.

One may raise, however, a number of objections to Wilson's research, specifically to materials and procedures. The first concern of the present study, pertaining to the field of political attitudes, is to meet some of these objections by making adaptations in these materials and procedures.

First, the focus of the studies by Wilson and associates is mainly on the relationship between attitudes measured after participants gave their reasons and their actual behaviours whereas in the present study we focus on the relationship between attitudes measured before and after the reasoning task. Although Wilson *et al.* (1989b, Study 2) used a pre-measure of participants' attitudes, the time lag between indicating that attitude and explaining reasons for that attitude varied from three to 11 weeks. In the present study we aim to show that reasoning may affect attitude consistency within a very

short time period, therefore attitudes will be measured immediately before and after explaining reasons.

Second, the studies of political perceptions were conducted in a laboratory setting (see Wilson *et al.*, 1989, Studies 1 and 2), and participants in these studies were students. In the present study we chose a more applied survey context in which participants were randomly chosen Dutch citizens, approached by telephone.

Finally, a major adjustment concerns the fact that in the present study participants are asked about their attitudes *before* they are asked to give reasons for that attitude. In Wilson *et al.*'s studies, participants are asked to explain why they 'like or dislike' a political candidate without asking them for an initial evaluation. A first advantage of the present task is that it represents more validly the logic of a question–answer sequence. In general, we first ask people what they think of a certain object, and then ask them why they hold that position. Wilson's task ('Why do you like or dislike X?') may lack this ecological validity. A second argument holds that Wilson's task may bolster the disrupting effects of reasoning. This is because, as was shown by Sadler & Tesser (1973; see also Millar & Tesser, 1986), merely thinking about an attitude object may polarize people's evaluation of that object. Thus, a task in which participants are asked to think about the attitude object ('What do you think of X?'; 'How do you feel about X?') may lead them to become more polarized in their judgments (see Wilson & Hodges, 1992, note 1, for a discussion of the differences between the effects of Tesser's mere thought task and Wilson's reasoning task). Consequently, a reasoning task that lacks this first question may possibly result in more attitude inconsistency than when this task is preceded by participants' evaluation of the relevant target.

A second concern of the present study is the moderation of the effects of reasoning. To study this moderation we introduce attitude involvement, having participants indicate their level of involvement in politics. This factor may be of special interest because it is supposed to be associated with more strongly linked cognitions about the attitude object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Schuman & Presser, 1981). Similarly, as shown by Petty & Cacioppo (1979), issue involvement increases people's motivation to engage in message- and issue-relevant thinking, again suggesting that involvement may relate to a more consistent set of cognitions about the attitude object. These suggestions are also in line with results of Wilson *et al.* (1989b) on the moderator variable knowledge about political candidates. Thus, also in line with the results of Wilson *et al.* (1989b) on knowledge about the attitude object, it is argued here that politically involved participants may have a better idea of why they feel the way they do, and accordingly show more limited effects of reasoning on their attitudes.

In sum, the present study aims at replicating and extending earlier results with respect to reasoning about one's attitudes. It is expected that when participants are asked to explain the reasons for their attitudes, they may give reasons that are to a certain extent inconsistent with their initial attitudes. It is also expected that participants may use these reasons in reporting their new attitude. As a consequence, it is expected that consistency between attitudes measured before and after the reasoning task decreases compared to consistency between attitudes measured in a control condition. It is further expected that involvement with respect to politics may moderate this effect. Participants involved in politics may have based their initial attitudes on a more consistent set of reasons than low involved participants, as a consequence of which the reasoning task may affect their new attitudes to a lesser extent.

Method

Overview

The materials relevant for the present study were embedded within a larger set of questions about political candidates and political parties. The questionnaire was administered by telephone in the last four days before the Dutch parliamentary elections on 3 May 1994. Participants were informed that the questionnaire concerned their opinions about politicians and political parties. Participants were asked for their evaluation using a scale, ranging from 0 (negative) to 100 (positive). In the reasoning conditions, participants then were asked why they gave that specific rating, in the control conditions they were asked whether or not they had ever participated in this type of interview. Hereafter, participants again were asked for their evaluation, now on a seven-point scale. Next, the same procedure was followed for a second target. Targets were varied in two conditions. In one condition questions related to a party with a religious conviction (CDA; i.e. the Christian Democratic Party) and their political leader. In the other condition questions related to a liberal party and their political leader. The order in which targets were presented was varied in each of these two conditions. The four essential combinations constituted a 2(reasoning vs. control) \times 2(Christian Democratic vs. liberal target) design with two target replications. Finally, participants were asked questions with respect to their own political preferences and some demographic information.

Participants

Participants were Dutch citizens, randomly approached by telephone. A total of 619 people were approached of which 260 agreed to participate. The responses of 21 participants were incomplete or otherwise unusable, leaving us with 239 subjects. Of these, 139 (58.2 per cent) were male and 100 (41.8 per cent) were female. Mean age was 43.5.

Political targets

Four targets were selected, two political parties (one liberal: D66, and one Christian Democratic: CDA) and their two leaders (liberal: Van Mierlo and Christian Democratic: Brinkman).

Rating of targets

For the first rating the 'feeling thermometer' (Abelson, Kinder, Peters & Fiske, 1982) was used, which was framed as follows: 'I now want to ask you to rate X on a scale from 0 to 100, in which 0 is very negative and 100 is very positive. If you think X is not negative and not positive, you can give the rating of 50. Will you now give your rating between 0 and 100'. This first rating will be referred to hereafter as 'att1'.

The second rating was formulated as follows: 'We would ask you to rate X again, now on a scale from 1 to 7, in which 1 is very negative and 7 is very positive'. This rating scale was used because again providing participants with a scale from 0 to 100 would easily lead them to make the second evaluation consistent with the first. We argued that it would be difficult for participants to rescale the second measure to the first, and thus that it would be difficult to make the second rating consistent with the first. This second rating will be referred to hereafter as 'att2'.

Reasons manipulation

In the reasons manipulation respondents were asked, immediately after their first rating, 'Can you say why you think so?' This procedure was used for both targets. In the control condition participants were asked two different questions. When answering questions with respect to the first target, they were asked: 'Do you think the questions asked so far were easy to answer?' For the second target they were asked 'Have you ever participated in interviews in which you were asked to answer this kind of questions?'

Coding of reasons

The reasons participants mentioned were written down by interviewers. The number of reasons positive and negative with regard to a target were counted by a research assistant. Part of the reasons was also coded by

one of the authors, resulting in a 97 per cent agreement between coders. A combined measure was calculated by subtracting the number of negative reasons from the number of positive reasons.

Involvement

In order to measure involvement in politics participants were asked: 'To what extent do you feel involved in Dutch politics?' Answers were given on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all involved) to 7 (very much involved).

Finally, participants were asked for their age and their highest level of education. Interviewers made a note of participants' gender.

Results

In a first analysis, it was checked whether there were any differences of gender, education and age in the attitudes towards politicians and political parties. A marginally significant main effect of age was found in attitudes towards the Christian Democratic leader, Brinkman ($p < .10$, using analysis of variance, ANOVA): elderly people holding somewhat more positive attitudes towards this politician than younger people. Also, an interaction between education and gender was found in ratings for the liberal leader, Van Mierlo: more educated men rating this politician higher than less educated men; for women no significant differences of this factor were found. No further effects of these three factors were found in attitudes towards political targets. Since these factors did not interact with the experimental conditions, analyses were performed across gender, age and education. Because order effects occurred in only one condition ($F(1,113) = 5.7, p < .05$), attitudes towards Brinkman, using ANOVA), data were collapsed across order conditions. Further, it was shown that both liberal targets were rated significantly more positive than both Christian Democratic targets ($ps < .05$), whereas no differences were found in ratings of politicians compared to ratings of their parties.

On the basis of Wilson *et al.* (1989b) we predicted that the consistency between att1 and att2 would be lower in the condition in which participants mentioned reasons for their attitudes. As shown in Table 1, our data support this prediction for two out of four targets. Correlations (Pearson correlation coefficients) in the reasoning condition between the two attitude measures for Van Mierlo and D66 differed significantly from those in the control condition. Explaining their attitudes led participants to become less consistent in their ratings compared to those in the control condition. For the other two targets no significant differences were detected.

Before analysing these patterns in more detail the effects of involvement as a moderator of reasoning effects were tested. It was expected that reasoning would especially affect

Table 1. Effects of providing reasons on attitude consistency for four targets

	Brinkman	CDA	Van Mierlo	D66
Reasoning	.82	.82	.65	.26
Control	.88	.82	.87*	.60*

* $p < .01$.

Correlation coefficients (reasoning versus control) were compared within each column using r to z transformation (Hays, 1981).

attitude consistency for low involved participants, this because involvement may be associated with a more consistent set of cognitions about the political targets. First, it was checked whether there were any associations between involvement and att1 ratings for each of the four targets. In one case this correlation was significant, albeit weakly (Van Mierlo, $r = .20$, $p < .05$). For the other three targets correlations were .06 (D66); $-.04$ (Brinkman) and $-.11$ (CDA). Since these correlations thus showed only one (small) relationship of involvement with attitudes, indicating that involvement generally did not confound att1 ratings, two groups were created on the basis of a median split on the involvement measure. One group ($N = 117$) consisted of participants with scores ranging from 1 to 4 (low involvement); a second group ($N = 121$) consisted of participants with scores ranging from 5 to 7 (high involvement). The effects of reasoning were tested within both involvement groups.

As can be seen in Table 2 the effect of reasoning indeed was far more pronounced for respondents who were less involved in politics. For the involved group the reasoning task resulted in a decrease in attitude consistency for only one of the four targets and even an increase in attitude consistency in one condition, whereas providing reasons led to significantly weaker correlations between att1 and att2 ratings in all cases for the low involved group. Also, as shown in Table 2, reasoning effects for low involved participants were especially pronounced for the two liberal targets, explaining why the overall effect of the reasoning task was restricted to these targets.

Thus, it may be concluded that involvement is an important moderator of the effects of reasoning. As argued in the introduction, this moderating effect of involvement may have been caused by the fact that reasons mentioned by these low involved participants were relatively inconsistent with their initial attitudes. In order to test this, reasons mentioned by participants were brought into the analyses. The average number of reasons mentioned by participants was 1.20, whereas in Hodges & Wilson (1993) an average number of 2.60 was mentioned in a telephone survey. This difference may be explained by the fact that in Hodges & Wilson's study participants were prompted for more than one reason.

As can be seen in Table 3, for the two Christian Democratic targets, and even more for the two liberal targets, reasons mentioned by low involved participants were less consistent with their initial attitudes, compared to high involved participants.

Table 2. Effects of providing reasons on attitude consistency for four targets among high and low involved participants

		Brinkman	CDA	Van Mierlo	D66
Involvement					
Low	Reasoning	.69	.77	.59	-.10
	Control	.90**	.89*	.87**	.46**
High	Reasoning	.90	.89	.68	.82
	Control	.86	.73*	.85*	.79

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$.

Correlation coefficients (reasoning versus control) were compared within each column for both high and low involved participants, using r to z transformation (Hays, 1981).

Table 3. Consistency between att1 ratings and reasons mentioned by high and low involved participants (Pearson correlation coefficients). Between parentheses: zero order correlations between reasons and att2

	Brinkman	CDA	Van Mierlo	D66
Involvement				
Low	.48* (.57**)	.25 (.21)	.08 (.41*)	.16 (.27)
High	.69** (.68**)	.62** (.45*)	.63** (.40*)	.57** (.65**)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Finally, in order to explain the disruptive effect of reasoning on attitude consistency, it is assumed that participants use these (inconsistent) reasons in order to construe their att2 reports. It thus has to be shown that, especially for the low involved participants, reasons were utilized in their att2 ratings. For the sake of completeness, we provide in Table 3 the zero order correlations between reasons and att2 ratings. In this table, it is interesting to note that for the low involved participants the correlations between reasons and att2 are for three of the four targets higher than the correlations between reasons and att1, which is fully consistent with Wilson's explanation for the disruptive effect of reasoning. For the high involved participants this pattern does not appear. Nevertheless, for these participants the correlations between reasons and att2 are all significant, which may on the face of it suggest that also high involved participants widely used their reasons in their att2 ratings. Such a conclusion would be, however, highly misleading, because reasons are correlated with att1 ratings for part of the participants, and because att1 and att2 ratings are correlated for most of the targets. This pattern of correlations indicates that att1 provides on the one hand a number of (consistent) reasons, and on the other hand also determines att2, with no independent contribution of participants' reasons. For example, as shown in Table 3, correlating reasons with att2 ratings for Van Mierlo for high involved participants shows a significant relationship between these factors ($r = .40$). On the other hand, this relationship decreases to a non-significant level when att1 ratings are controlled for (see Table 4), demonstrating that reasons do not make an independent contribution here. In order to establish the independent contribution of reasons for high and low involved

Table 4. Use of att1 and reasons for high and low involved participants in att2 ratings (beta weights)

		Brinkman	CDA	Van M.	D66
Involvement					
Low	att1	.79	.79	.59	.10
	reasons	.26*	.04	.34*	.25*
High	att1	.72	1.00	.85	.79
	reasons	-.05	-.17	.09	.12

* $p < .05$.

participants it is therefore necessary to control for att1 ratings. Regression analyses for the high and low involved participants were performed in which we first entered att1 ratings on att2 ratings. Then, controlling for the attitude factor, reasons were entered. In this way we were able to distinguish between the effect of att1 and the net effect of reasons on att2 ratings. Incidentally, this procedure remedies a possible flaw in analyses by Wilson and others who did not control for att1.

As can be seen in Table 4, in three out of four cases low involved participants based their att2 ratings to a larger extent on the reasons they mentioned than did involved participants. Thus, whereas low involved participants tend to mention reasons that are generally inconsistent with their initial attitudes, they also tend to use these reasons to construe their att2 ratings. For involved participants this picture is reversed. Whereas the reasons these participants generated were generally consistent with their att1 ratings, reasons were not utilized in att2 ratings, a finding that, of course, is most parsimoniously explained by the fact that these reasons were redundant with the att1 ratings.

Discussion

The present study was aimed at replicating and extending the results of earlier studies by Wilson and associates.

Consistent with these studies, participants who provided reasons for their attitudes towards political targets showed more attitude inconsistency than participants in a control group. This effect was demonstrated, even though participants were asked for their attitudes immediately *before*, and immediately *after* they were asked to give these reasons. Thus, the disrupting effect of reasoning does not only occur when the two rating tasks are separated by a longer period of time, as in Wilson's studies, but even within a period of minutes. Reasoning effects thus generalize to a more applied context in which participants first are asked for their evaluation. As shown in the present study these effects do not seem to be blocked by commitment to an initial attitude or by the polarizing effect of expressing this initial attitude.

Overall, the effect of reasoning was restricted to the two liberal targets. An explanation for this finding may be that these targets (and especially the politician, Van Mierlo) may be evaluated less along cognitive lines. Van Mierlo has been referred to as 'charismatic' and 'attractive'. Also, his political views and those of his party have been characterized as rather vague. Because, as noted by Wilson *et al.* (1989a), people in general may focus on cognitions when providing reasons for their attitudes, this evaluation along affective lines, together with the lack of clear cognitive elements, may explain the strong reasoning effects for this target (as well as for the party he represents).

It further was demonstrated that the effect of reasoning was restricted to participants who were less involved in politics. It was shown that for these participants reasons showed only marginal consistency with their initial attitudes. Also, these participants utilized the (inconsistent) reasons in forming their second attitude. For involved participants, on the other hand, reasons were fairly consistent with their initial attitudes, and not used in forming and reporting their second attitude. These differential effects of reasoning for the two levels of involvement, may, as argued before, be mainly caused by the inconsistency between reasons and attitudes. Low involved participants seem to report attitudes that to a lesser extent are based on a consistent set of underlying beliefs, i.e. these attitudes may

be less cognitively based. Since reasoning may lead people to focus on cognitions (Wilson *et al.*, 1989a), these participants may have generated reasons that did not reflect the underlying aspects (if any) of their attitudes. Incidentally, as noted before, we demonstrated the use of reasons in the second attitude in a more conclusive way than Wilson did.

On the basis of these results it may be concluded that the effects of involvement on reasoning may be comparable to the effects of knowledge as shown by Wilson and associates. Of course, both factors may be strongly related; people involved in politics may be better informed than less involved people. With respect to this factor it is interesting to note that, although we were able to distinguish between high and low involved participants, in general, participants may still be characterized by a relatively high level of involvement, compared to the large percentage of non-respondents in the total sample approached.

Although our results generally are highly consistent with Wilson's argument, there is one interesting exception. As can be seen in Table 2, for the high involvement group giving reasons for their evaluation of CDA (the Christian Democratic party) results in a significantly higher attitude consistency compared to the control group. This increase in attitude consistency due to reasoning is probably not accidental. It was also found occasionally in another study (Bosveld & Koomen, 1994). An explanation for these relatively high correlations in the reasoning condition may be found in the work by Fazio (1989), considering accessibility an important aspect of attitudes and suggesting that attitudes that are made accessible may be better predictors of behaviour than attitudes not made accessible. Following this line of reasoning it may be argued that when reasons are consistent with initial attitudes, providing these reasons may make that attitude highly accessible. When the attitude is reported after the reasoning task, the initial attitude (measured before the reasoning task) may be easily reproduced, and as a consequence of its being made accessible may even become more stable than when the initial attitude has not been made accessible by asking for reasons.

Our general results can be considered as relevant for the approach in which attitudes are considered to be the result of a construction process (e.g. Tesser, 1978). People often do not seem to have in mind well-articulated and preformed reactions to questions in survey research, but instead seem to construct their attitudes on the basis of contextual factors. Whereas many of these factors have been suggested, the effects of reasoning show that internal sources may in an important way contribute to this construction process.

Further, these results may be highly relevant for models in which behavioural intentions are predicted from participants' beliefs (e.g. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Although participants in general may respond to any question about their beliefs relating to attitude objects (Eagly, Mladinic & Otto, 1994), the present results suggest that reported beliefs may not by definition underlie people's attitudes. Choices or attitudes provided after a reasoning task, and thus based on the set of cognitions or beliefs made salient by that task may predict future behaviours less reliable than overall evaluations not affected by reasoning. This conclusion certainly qualifies those models that predict behaviours from people's beliefs and even suggests that, under circumstances, overall evaluations may be better predictors than ostensibly more refined measures. More generally, the relationships between an attitude and other variables may change and become less valid, when the attitude has been affected by asking for reasons.

In conclusion, the present study replicated and extended earlier findings with respect

to the disruptive effect of providing reasons for one's attitudes. It may be especially important that these effects were shown in a survey context, indicating that the 'attitudes as temporary constructions' view may reach beyond laboratory borders and may be highly relevant for survey researchers in search for true answers.

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