

# Elastic Justification: How Unjustifiable Factors Influence Judgments

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When making judgments, one may encounter not only justifiable factors, i.e., attributes which the judge thinks that he/she should take into consideration, but also unjustifiable factors, i.e., attributes which the judge wants to take into consideration but knows he/she should not. It is proposed that the influence of an unjustifiable factor on one's judgment depends on the presence of elasticity (ambiguity) in justifiable factors; the influence will be greater if there is elasticity than if there is not. Two studies involving different contexts demonstrated the proposed elasticity effect and suggested that the effect could be a result of a self-oriented justification process. Implications of this research for decisions involving a should-vs-want conflict are discussed. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

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Imagine the following scenario: A judge is scoring two finalists in an international piano competition. One player represents the country the judge is from and the other player represents a different country. During the competition, one player played more difficult music but the other made fewer errors. In this case, the judge would most likely know that he should take music difficulty and number of errors into consideration when making his scoring decision, but should not take the nationality of a player into consideration, even though he may want to give his compatriot the higher score. Consider another example: An engineer is interviewing two job candidates for a computer programmer position and finds that one candidate is better looking than the other. The two candidates have different computer programming skills, each good at one computer language. Here, the engineer would probably know that she should take computer-related skills into consideration

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when making the hiring decision, but should not take the appearance of a candidate into consideration, even though she may want to hire the better-looking candidate. In this article, we distinguish between two types of factors: (a) factors that the judge in a given judgment task believes that he or she should take into consideration, and (b) factors that the judge *wants* to take into consideration but knows that he or she *should not*. The former type of factors will be referred to as *justifiable factors* and the latter type as *unjustifiable factors*.

The present research examines how unjustifiable factors influence judgments when there is *elasticity* in justifiable factors. "Elasticity in justifiable factors" refers to the possibility of interpreting those factors in multiple ways. In this article, it refers more specifically to the condition where different justifiable factors have different values and the relative weights among those factors are ambiguous so that one can interpret the aggregate effect of those factors in multiple ways.<sup>1</sup> For most judgment tasks, there is elasticity in justifiable factors. For example, in the piano competition example, it is typically ambiguous how to weigh music difficulty against number of errors. Consequently, it will be elastic in judging which player deserves the higher score.

One approach to the question of how unjustifiable factors influence judgments can be found in normative decision theories. These theories do not distinguish attributes that are unjustifiable from those that are justifiable. They implicitly assume that an unjustifiable factor behaves just like another attribute and that its influence on one's judgment, if any, is independent of justifiable factors, regardless of whether there is elasticity in the justifiable factors or not.

Based on social psychological research, which will be reviewed below, I propose that the unjustifiable factor does not behave like a justifiable factor and is not independent of other attributes. It influences one's judgment through elasticity in justifiable factors. The unjustifiable factor will have a greater influence on one's

<sup>1</sup> The concept "elasticity" is similar to ambiguity, but I avoid using the term "ambiguity" because in decision research its meaning is too specific (i.e., lack of knowledge of probability) and in common usage its meaning is too general.

judgment if there is elasticity in the justifiable factors than if there is not. The above proposition will be referred to as the *elasticity hypothesis*.

The reasoning behind this hypothesis is as follows: When there is no elasticity in justifiable factors, the judge has no excuse for taking the unjustifiable factor into consideration. When there is elasticity, the judge can distort his or her evaluation of the elastic justifiable factors in the direction of the unjustifiable factor and then make a judgment that appears to be based solely on the justifiable factors but is in effect influenced by the unjustifiable factor. The above process can be termed elastic justification. As will be discussed later, this process can occur even if there is no third party to check on one's judgment. In other words, the elastic justification can be purely self-oriented, rather than toward others.

The elasticity hypothesis is based on several lines of research in the existing literature. First, people do not arbitrarily make decisions simply because they are tempted to do so; instead, they attempt to maintain a sense of accountability and seek justifications for their decisions (e.g., Bies and Shapiro, 1988; Reis, 1987; Tetlock & Boettger, 1989; Tetlock & Kim, 1987). This implies that most people will not knowingly allow unjustifiable factors to influence their judgments. Second, many studies have shown that implicit or suppressed motivations can influence people's perception and judgment in a way that satisfies those motivations (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Greenberg *et al.*, 1993; Gilovich, 1983; Hastorf & Cantril, 1954, Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Kunda, 1987; Lord, Ross & Lepper, 1979; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Showers & Cantor, 1985). These findings suggest that an unjustifiable factor can veer people's evaluation of justifiable factors in the direction of the unjustifiable factor.

However, neither of these lines of research is concerned with the focus of the present research—the role of ambiguity or elasticity in judgments. There are a number of studies that have addressed this issue, directly or indirectly. These studies are scattered in disparate areas, ranging from discrimination (e.g., Darley & Gross, 1983; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Snyder Kleck, Strenta & Mentzer, 1979), to task decisions (e.g., Hsee, 1995) and interpersonal conflict (e.g., Messick & Sentis, 1983; Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992), to impression management (e.g., Fandt & Ferris, 1990) and self-evaluation (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz & Holzberg, 1988).

Below, I examine three studies which I find most relevant to the present research. One was on discrimination (Snyder, *et al.*, 1979). Subjects entering a wait-

ing room were given a choice of sitting either with a handicapped or with a nonhandicapped confederate; more subjects chose to sit with the nonhandicapped person if the two confederates were watching different video programs than if they were watching the same program. Those authors claimed that subjects were motivated to avoid the handicapped person and that in the different-video condition they could avoid sitting with the handicapped person and pretend that they were choosing between video programs.

The second study was about task choice (Hsee, 1995). Subjects were recruited ostensibly to proofread materials. They were given a choice of two files to proofread: One contained boring furniture ads but was described as urgently needed and would allow subjects to make relatively more money if they chose to proofread it. The other contained more interesting personal ads but was described as less urgently needed and would not allow subjects to make as much money as the furniture ads file. More subjects chose to proofread the personal ads if the expected payments were expressed in ranges than if they were expressed as fixed values. Hsee (1995) assumed that subjects wanted to read the personal ads but found it unjustifiable to do so when that option was clearly less urgent and less well-paying, and that the ambiguity in payments gave subjects an excuse for choosing the personal ads.

Although the findings of these studies are consistent with the elasticity hypothesis, they are open to other interpretations. First, it is not clear whether the assumptions held by the authors were true. For example, it is not clear whether subjects in Hsee's (1995) study considered reading the personal ads unjustifiable. Second, it is not clear whether the elasticity/ambiguity effects in those studies occurred because the subjects in the elastic/ambiguous condition engaged in a *self* justification process or because they thought they could take advantage of the ambiguity and justify their choice to *others*. Third, both of those studies were concerned with choice; it is not clear whether the finding can be generalized to a judgment task.

Let us consider a third study, conducted by Van Avermaet (1974, reported in Messick & Sentis, 1983). Subjects who had completed a task allocated a \$7.00 payment between themselves and another subject; they gave themselves more than half the amount, regardless of whether they were led to believe that their task involved more work but took less time than the other subject's or to believe the reverse. This study convincingly demonstrated what Messick and Sentis (1983) refer to as the egocentric bias, but its support for the elasticity hypothesis was rather indirect. It is not clear whether the quantity/time tradeoff—which can be re-

garded as a form of elasticity—was necessary for the observed bias. Theoretically it is possible that the subjects would have given themselves more money even if there had not been such a tradeoff. In this paper, I report two studies that provided more direct tests of the elasticity hypothesis.

## STUDY 1

Subjects served as hypothetical real estate appraisers and assessed one condominium relative to another (comparison) condominium. The two condos were described in terms of (a) specific features and (b) the role of the appraiser's fiancé(e) in the situation. It was assumed that subjects would consider condo features as justifiable factors, and would consider the fiancé(e) factor as an unjustifiable factor. This assumption was verified in a separate pretest.<sup>2</sup>

The study employed a 2 Elasticity  $\times$  3 Fiancé(e) factorial design. Elasticity included two between-subject conditions, inelastic and elastic. In the inelastic condition, the focal condo was described as identical to the comparison condo in all of the features; hence, there was no elasticity as to which condo was better. In the elastic condition, the focal condo was described as better than the comparison condo in some features and worse in others. Because the relative weights among these features were uncertain, it was elastic as to whether and by how much the focal condo was better or worse than the comparison condo overall.

The Fiancé(e) variable involved three between-subject conditions: buyer, seller, and control. In the buyer condition, the appraiser's fiancé(e) was a prospective buyer of the focal condo; in the seller condition, the fiancé(e) was the seller of the focal condo; and in the control condition, there was no mention of a fiancé(e). Because it was in the fiancé(e)'s interest to underappraise the focal condo in the buyer condition, overappraise it in the seller condition, and neither overap-

<sup>2</sup> As discussed earlier, a factor is considered unjustifiable if the judge wants to take it into consideration but knows that he or she should not, that is, there is a discrepancy between what the judge *wants* to do and what the judge thinks he/she *should* do. To verify that subjects indeed considered the fiancé(e) factor an unjustifiable factor, 24 University of Chicago students read vignettes similar to the buyer/inelastic and the seller/inelastic versions of the questionnaire and indicated what appraisals they *wanted* to give and what they thought they *should* give. In the "buyer" condition, the "want" appraisals were significantly lower than the "should" appraisals ( $M_s = \$83K$  and  $\$100K$ , respectively;  $t = 4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the "seller" condition, the "want" appraisals were significantly higher than the "should" appraisals ( $M_s = \$114K$  and  $\$100K$ , respectively;  $t = 2.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, the fiancé(e) factor met the definition of an unjustifiable factor.

praise nor underappraise it in the control condition, the influence of the fiancé(e) factor would be negative (i.e., pull the appraisal down) in the buyer condition, positive (i.e., push the appraisal up) in the seller condition, and zero in the control condition.

## Method

**Material and design.** The questionnaire used in the study had six versions, each representing one of the 2 Elasticity  $\times$  3 Fiancé(e) conditions. The buyer/inelastic and the buyer/elastic versions opened with the following instructions:

Your fiancé(e) is interested in buying a particular 2-bedroom condo. You are a real estate appraiser. It so happens that the owner of that condo, who is unaware of your relationship with your fiancé(e), hires you to appraise his unit. Your appraisal will determine for how much the owner is willing to sell the unit to your fiancé(e).

In each scenario the focal condo was compared with a condo the appraiser had assessed at \$100,000. In the inelastic condition the two condos were described identical:

. . . the two units [are] identical even in the most subtle aspects: For example, the living rooms in both units include a separate dining area; the owners of both units recently replaced all the original appliances with new ones and the appliances in the two units are worth the same; both units have carpeted floors, and the floors in the two units are made of the same kind of wood.

In the elastic condition the focal condo was said to be better than the \$100,000 condo in certain features and worse in others:

. . . the present unit has a larger living room but does not have a separate dining area, as the \$100,000 unit does. The owner of the present unit recently replaced all the original appliances with new ones. These new appliances are worth more than \$9,000, but because the owner bought them from a store which was going out of business, he paid only \$3,000. The present unit has carpeted floor and the quality of the wood underneath the carpet is uncertain.

The questionnaires for the seller and for the control conditions were identical to those for the seller condition except that in the seller condition the focal condo was said to be what the appraiser's fiancé(e) was trying to sell and in the control version nothing was mentioned about a fiancé(e).

In each version, subjects were asked how much they would tell the client the focal condo was worth.

**Subjects and procedure.** Respondents were 185 undergraduate and graduate students solicited in dining halls at the University of Chicago. Each participant received one of the six versions of the questionnaire and completed it individually. In exchange for their

TABLE 1  
Mean Appraisals in the 3 Fiancé(e)  $\times$  2 Elasticity  
Conditions of Study 1

Fiancé(e)	Elasticity	
	Inelastic	Elastic
Buyer	\$99.24K	\$95.00K
Control	\$100.00K	\$101.76K
Seller	\$102.32K	\$104.73K

participation, respondents either received a candy bar or participated in a lottery drawing for \$100.

### Prediction

If, as normative decision theories would suggest, unjustifiable factors behave just like other justifiable factors, then the fiancé(e) factor would have a constant effect on appraisals regardless of whether there was elasticity in condo features or not; in other words, there would be no interaction between Fiancé(e) and Elasticity. Alternatively, if the elasticity hypothesis was true, then the fiancé(e) factor would have a greater effect in the elastic condition than in the inelastic condition, because in the elastic condition subjects in the buyer condition could emphasize the negative features of the condo and those in the seller condition positive features of the condo. Thus, there would be a Fiancé(e)  $\times$  Elasticity interaction effect.

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the mean appraisals in Study 1.<sup>3</sup> A 3 Fiancé(e)  $\times$  2 Elasticity analysis of variance was performed. In support of the elasticity hypothesis, there was a significant Fiancé(e)  $\times$  Elasticity interaction effect ( $F(2, 173) = 6.71, p < .01$ ), indicating that the fiancé(e) factor had a greater impact on appraisals when there was elasticity in condo features than when there was not. When the focal condo was identical to the comparison condo, the appraisals in the three Fiancé(e) conditions were relatively close; when the focal condo was different from the comparison condo—even though the differences were held constant across the three Fiancé(e) conditions—appraisals diverged in different directions in the different Fiancé(e) conditions.

The ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect for Fiancé(e) ( $F(2, 173) = 21.11, p < .001$ ), indicating that the appraisals differed among the three Fiancé(e)

conditions. There was no significant overall effect for Elasticity ( $F < 1$ ); this result was expected, because the elasticity effects in the buyer and in the seller conditions were in opposite directions and should cancel each other.<sup>4</sup>

Although the findings of Study 1 were supportive of the elasticity hypothesis, there were still questions to pursue. First, the context of the study was purely hypothetical, and it is not clear whether the results reflected only subjects' theories of what they would do or revealed what they would actually do. Second, subjects in the study may have thought that the appraisals would be checked by a third party, and it is not clear whether the Fiancé(e)  $\times$  Elasticity interaction occurred because subjects in the elastic condition engaged in a self-justification process and believed in the appraisals they made or because they thought they could use the elasticity to dupe the third party and knowingly submitted biased appraisals.

### STUDY 2

Study 2 tested the elasticity hypothesis in a context very different from that of Study 1. It involved a real judgment task and entailed real financial consequences. In addition, subjects were assured, both through instructions and through the actual procedures of the study, that their judgments were confidential and could not possibly be checked by a third party.

Subjects took an ostensible language intuition test in which they guessed the meanings of Chinese symbols. After the test subjects calculated and submitted their scores. The scores determined the amount of money they could receive if they won a lottery. Every effort was made to ensure subjects that no one could possibly check their scores against their tests. Two factors would have affected what scores subjects submitted: their actual performance on the test and their desire

<sup>3</sup> To avoid their undue influences, extreme responses (defined here as those at least three standard deviations from the mean) were excluded prior to analyses.

<sup>4</sup> If their appraisals were not \$100K, subjects were also asked to write down the most important reason why not. In the inelastic condition, only 6% of the subjects gave any reasons; the reasons were too few to be meaningfully classified. In the elastic condition, 62% of the subjects gave reasons, and the reasons given by subjects in different Fiancé(e) conditions were very different. In the buyer condition, most (68%) of the reasons were about negative features of the focal condo (e.g., lack of a separate dining area). In the seller condition, most (87%) of the reasons were about positive features of the condo (e.g., a larger living room). In the control condition, 71% of the reasons were about positive features and 28% about negative features. These data suggest that subjects in the three Fiancé(e) conditions did perceive the same condo features differently, and those differences were in line with the differences in appraisals between the three Fiancé(e) conditions.

to score high. It was assumed that subjects would consider the former as a justifiable factor and the latter as an unjustifiable factor. This assumption was verified in a separate pretest.<sup>5</sup> The study involved two Elasticity conditions: inelastic and elastic. In the inelastic condition, there was no elasticity in deciding which questions should count in their scoring and in the elastic condition there was elasticity. It was predicted that subjects in the elastic condition would submit higher scores than those in the inelastic condition.

### Method

*Material and design.* The study utilized a booklet that contained three pages. On the first page were general instructions, on the second page the language test, and on the third page scoring instructions. According to the general instructions on the first (cover) page, subjects would first take the test and then calculate their own scores. After that, they would write the score on the cover page, detach it from the rest of the booklet, and leave the cover page in one box, labeled "lottery," and leave the rest of the booklet in a separate box, labeled "completed tests." This procedure made it impossible for others to check their scores against their tests once the cover page was detached from the test.

Subjects were then told that, after the experiment, one cover page (with the score on it) would be drawn at random from the lottery box and that the winner would be contacted and receive a cash prize. The amount of the prize would depend on the winner's score: \$0 if the score was 0, \$10 if the score was 10, . . . , \$100 if the score was 100.

Subjects were then directed to the second page to take the language test. The test consisted of 20 questions like the following:

1. 绿 means (A) green or (B) blue
2. 右 means (A) right or (B) left
- . . .

To answer a question, subjects would guess whether the Chinese symbol meant the concept labeled "A" or the one labeled "B" and circle their choice.

After they completed the test, subjects were directed to the third page, containing the scoring instructions. Subjects were told that the right answers for all of the

<sup>5</sup> To verify that the desire to score high was an unjustifiable factor, 18 University of Chicago students read a scenario similar to the inelastic condition of the present study and indicated the score they *wanted* to submit and that they thought they *should* submit. Responses to the "want" question were significantly higher than those to the "should" question ( $M = 6.94$  and  $5.28$ , respectively,  $t = 3.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating the desire to score high met the definition of an unjustifiable factor.

questions were A's and asked to go back to the second page to check which questions they had answered correctly. The next step was to calculate the score.

The scoring instructions had two versions, representing the inelastic and the elastic conditions, respectively. In both versions, subjects were told that only 10 of the 20 questions would count. In the inelastic condition, the 10 questions were those which were odd-numbered. Subjects read:

Your score for the test does *not* depend on all of the 20 questions. It depends only on *the 10 odd-numbered questions* (i.e., Nos. 1, 3, 5 . . .). Of those 10 questions, you get 10 points for every one you answered right. (There are no penalties for wrong answers.)

In the elastic condition, the 10 questions that would count were those in which the Chinese symbols looked most yang (as opposed to yin). Subjects were told that some Chinese symbols looked yin and some looked yang, that different people had different perceptions, and that:

Your score for the test does *not* depend on all of the 20 questions. It depends *only* on *the 10 questions in which the symbols look most yang to you*. Of those 10 questions, you get 10 points for every one you answered right. (There are no penalties for wrong answers.) . . .

Because it was not elastic as to which questions were odd-numbered, but elastic as to which Chinese symbols looked most yang, it was not elastic as to which questions should count in the inelastic condition, but elastic as to which questions should count in the elastic condition.

After scoring their tests and writing the score on the cover page, subjects dropped the cover page into the "lottery" box and the rest of the booklet into the "completed tests" box, as instructed.

*Subjects and procedure.* The experiment was conducted in dining halls of the University of Chicago; 82 students participated. Each participant randomly received one of the two versions of the booklet and completed it individually. After the experiment, a cover page was randomly drawn and the winner, whose test score was 70, was contacted and received \$70 cash.

As subjects were promised, the detached cover pages indeed could not be matched up with the rest of the booklets. However, there was a slight difference between the inelastic and the elastic conditions in the way a line was printed on the cover page; that enabled me to separate responses in one condition from those in the other.

### Prediction

Had subjects in the elastic condition assessed the yin/yang nature of the Chinese symbols without biases,

their scores would be about the same as those of subjects in the inelastic condition. The reason is simple: Which questions one answered correctly should have nothing to do with which questions contained yang-looking symbols, just as which questions one answered correctly should have nothing to do with which questions were odd-numbered. In contrast, according to the elasticity hypothesis, subjects in the elastic condition would perceive the yin/yang natures of the symbols in a direction favoring their desire to score high on the test, namely, perceive the symbols in the correctly answered questions as more yang than those in the incorrectly answered questions. Consequently, subjects in the elastic condition would count more correctly answered questions than incorrectly answered questions and thereby give themselves a higher score than those in the inelastic condition.

### *Results and Discussion*

The result confirmed the elasticity hypothesis: Subjects in the inelastic condition submitted a mean score of 58.75 and those in the elastic condition a mean score of 69.05, and the difference was significant ( $t = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Another way to analyze the results was to compare subjects' reported scores with their actual answers. Based on their responses in the detached booklets, subjects in the inelastic condition on average answered 5.829 of the 10 odd-numbered correctly; thus, their mean score should have been  $10 \times 5.829$ , or 58.29. The scores actually reported by subjects in the inelastic condition ( $M = 58.75$ ) were extremely close to that mean score. In the elastic condition, subjects on average answered 11.21 of the 20 questions correctly, and if they had assessed the yin/yang natures of the Chinese symbols without biases, they should have excluded half of those questions and the resulting score should have been half of  $10 \times 11.21$ , i.e., 56.05. However, the scores actually reported by subjects in the elastic condition ( $M = 69.05$ ) were significantly higher ( $t = 4.53$ ,  $p < .001$  using a one-group  $t$ -test). These results indicate that in the inelastic condition the desire to score high had virtually no influence on scoring, but in the elastic condition it had a significant effect.

I would suggest that the observed elasticity effect was more likely a result of self-justification than a result of justification to others. In other words, the reason subjects in the elastic condition submitted higher scores was that those subjects, by distorting their evaluation of yin/yang, convinced themselves that they deserved those scores, not that they thought they could dupe other people and knowingly misreported their scores. As discussed earlier, it was conveyed to subjects

both through the instructions and through the procedure of the study that no one could possibly check how they scored their tests. Had the subjects simply wanted to misreport their scores, they could have done so even in the inelastic condition, and there should have been no significant differences between the elastic and the inelastic conditions.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

When making judgments, we are often confronted not only with factors that we believe that we should take into consideration but also with factors that we wish to take into consideration but know we should not. According to the elasticity hypothesis proposed in this article, the influence of the unjustifiable factor depends on whether there is elasticity in justifiable factors: One's judgment will veer more in the direction of the unjustifiable factor if there is elasticity in the justifiable factors than if there is not. The studies reported in this article secured support for this hypothesis and suggested that the elasticity effect occurs probably because the elasticity enables one to justify an otherwise unjustifiable judgment to oneself, and not just because the elasticity enables one to dupe a third party.

Several comments about the studies are in order here. First, as in Study 1, the elasticity manipulated in Study 2 was also rooted in the weights of the justifiable factors. Note that subjects' responses to the 20 questions can be viewed as 20 separate factors and determining which questions counted can be viewed as determining whether to assign a weight of 1 or a weight of 0 to each factor. In the inelastic condition, there was no elasticity in determining which response deserved what weight and therefore no elasticity in the aggregate value of those responses. In the elastic condition, there was elasticity in determining which response deserved what weight and hence elasticity in the aggregate value of those responses.

Second, for ease of exposition, the present research has treated factors as if they were either purely justifiable or purely unjustifiable. Actually, whether a factor is justifiable or unjustifiable is relative and context-specific. Suppose, for example, that someone wants to buy a used car and has seen two options: an attractive-looking sports car that is not very reliable and a mundane-looking station wagon that is reliable. Here, the buyer may either perceive the style of a car as a justifiable factor or as an unjustifiable factor. If the buyer's purpose of having the car is to show off and impress others, then she will most likely consider style as a justifiable factor. If the buyer has limited means and needs the car only for basic transportation, she will more likely perceive it as an unjustifiable factor.

Finally, one may argue that even in Study 2 subjects might still suspect that some third party could check on what they did and therefore the observed elasticity effect was a result of whether one could justify one's decision to others and not a result of whether one could justify one's decision to oneself. This, I think, is a quite unfalsifiable argument. Strictly speaking, there exists no pure vacuum that is 100% free from the scrutiny of a third party. Even if there is not a real third party, there might be an imagined third party, a supernatural being, or one's other self (Schelling, 1960). It seems that justification to self and justification to others, which have been discussed as if they were mutually exclusive, may represent two ends of one continuum.

Let me conclude this article by discussing two implications of this research. One is for decision analysis and modeling. In decision analysis and modeling, one typically simplifies or decomposes the situation by focusing on one attribute at a time while keeping other attributes constant. This simplification may work reasonably well if all of the attributes are justifiable, but it will be problematic if the situation involves an unjustifiable factor. People may not be willing to admit the influence of an unjustifiable factor, and even if they do admit it, the influence of the unjustifiable factor as assessed in a simplified condition may be very different from that in an original, real-world condition. A simplified situation is often like the inelastic condition in the studies reported here, where attributes that are not being tested are well controlled and hence involve little elasticity. Real decisions, on the other hand, often resemble the elastic condition in our research; they are open to multiple interpretations. Just as the influence of an unjustifiable factor is greater in the elastic condition than in the inelastic condition, so will the influence of an unjustifiable factor be greater in reality than in a simplified or decomposed situation.

Another implication of the present research is that it suggests the potential for a more general model of how elasticity influences judgments and decisions. Although the elasticity hypothesis discussed in this article focused only on judgment tasks that involve an unjustifiable factor, it may be generalized to any decision tasks where there is a conflict between what one "wants" to do and what one believes one "should" do. Such "should-want" conflicts may occur not only in situations involving a self-serving motivation or involving a discriminatory bias, but also in cases involving a conflict between what Thaler and Shefrin (1981) call the planner and what they call the doer, or between what Loewenstein (1995) refers to as volition and what he refers to as visceral factors, or, even more generally, between what Freud (1958) calls id and what he calls

superego. According to the generalized elasticity hypothesis, as long as there is a conflict between the "should" and the "want," elasticity in the situation will shift one's final decision toward the "want" side.

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