

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Are humans rational?

Print this research activity out and answer the following questions.

Question 1. Think about someone you know, see a lot and like or admire. Rate your feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = completely dislike, 10 = completely like) and enter this number here:

Next, list ten reasons (if you can) why you like them:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Question 2. Think of a type of food that you DO NOT like. Rate your feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = completely dislike, 10 = completely like) and enter this number here:

Next, list ten reasons (if you can) why you do not like this type of food:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Question 3. Think of something that you strongly believe in (such as, “We should pay more taxes to fund a better health service”, or “The war in Iraq was a big mistake”) and write it down as a statement below:

Rate your feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = completely disagree with this statement, 10 = completely agree with this statement) and enter this number here:

Next, list ten reasons why you support this view:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Question 4. Think of a type of food that you like. Rate your feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = completely dislike, 10 = completely like) and enter this number here:

Next, list ten reasons why you like that type of food:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Question 5. Think about someone you know whom you dislike a lot. Rate your feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = completely dislike, 10 = completely like) and enter this number here:

Next, list ten reasons (if you can) why you don't like them:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Results

You may have found it difficult to provide ten reasons for some (or all) of these questions. Enter the number of distinct reasons you gave for each question in the table below.

Question	Issue	Number of reasons you gave
1.	Someone you like	
2.	Food you dislike	
3.	Strong belief	
4.	Food you like	
5.	Someone you dislike	

Next, enter the rating value for each question in the box below, under *Original rating*. Then re-rate the items in each question using the same 1–10 scale, and enter these values in the *New rating* column.

	Original rating	New rating
Question 1: Someone you like		
Question 2: Food you dislike		
Question 3: Strong belief		
Question 4: Food you like		
Question 5: Someone you dislike		

Predictions and analysis

Prediction 1: According to Wilson et al. (1989), people are not as rational as they suppose. For example, people can find it easier to verbally support weakly held beliefs, such as saying why they like a particular brand of chocolate, than strongly held beliefs, such as government policy. If so, then Wilson et al. (1989) would predict that you should have identified more reasons in either Question 2 or Question 4 (or both) than Question 3.

Prediction 2: Wilson et al. (1989) also found that this process of asking participants to justify or verbalise their beliefs often brought about a change in those beliefs, such as liking someone less as a result of listing reasons why one dislikes them. Examine your original and new ratings. Has any rating changed? If so, is this the result of finding it difficult to justify your original statements or feelings?

Analysis. Ask yourself:

- If either of the above predictions is confirmed by your own data, what does this say about human rationality?
- How is it possible that people can have strong views yet find it easier to justify a less important value such as a chocolate preference?
- What do your data or those of Wilson and his colleagues suggest about human rationality?

Reference

Wilson, T.D., Dunn, D.S., Kraft, D. & Lisle, D.J. (1989). Introspection, attitude change, and attitude-behavior consistency: The disruptive effects of explaining why we feel the way we do. In L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (vol. 19, pp. 123–205). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

WEBLINK: A pre-print of a more recent article by Tim Wilson:
www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Papers/Py104/wilson.intro.html