Affective Judgments, Common Sense, and Zajonc's Thesis of Independence

James A. Russell and Lisa Woudzia
University of British Columbia

Zajonc (1980) argued that, contrary to what is commonly believed, an affective judgment about a stimulus may be independent of the cognitive processes through which we know what that stimulus is. The evidence Zajonc offered (the exposure effect in the absence of recognition) does not entail this claim. An example of the sort of experiment that could do so is offered. When carried out, however, this study indicated the opposite: An affective judgment about a stimulus depended on how it was cognitively interpreted. We argue that what is commonly believed in this area is presumptively correct: Affective judgments about a stimulus depend on whatever information is possessed about that stimulus.

According to common sense, how much you value something depends on what you think it is, and how much you like someone depends on what you know about him. But then, common sense can be wrong. R. B. Zajonc (1980), in a provoking, much-discussed (e.g., Baars, 1981; Birnbaum, 1981; Holyoak & Gordon, 1984; Lazarus, 1981, 1984; Mandler, 1984; Mellers, 1981; Seamon, Brody, & Kauff, 1983; Slife, 1981), and thoroughly interesting article, challenged such seemingly self-evident truths. Instead, Zajonc argued, "affective judgments may be fairly independent of, and precede in time, the sorts of perceptual and cognitive operations commonly assumed to be the
basis of these affective judgments. Affective reactions to stimuli are often the very first reactions of the organism" (Zajonc, 1980, p. 151).

Zajonc's (1980) challenge raises a fundamental question for any theory of affective judgments. If the common assumption is correct, then a theory of affective judgments can be built on what is known about perceptual and cognitive operations. If Zajonc is correct, however, a theory of a different kind would be called for. Zajonc has begun work on this conceptual task by postulating that affective judgments stem from an affect system at least partially separate from perceptual and cognitive operations. Indeed, Zajonc speculates that even the stimulus features that influence the affect system differ from the features that influence perceptual and cognitive operations.

In this article, we reexamine Zajonc's thesis of independence. We critically discuss the logic of his argument and the evidence he offered. We also report the results of a study designed to uncover an instance of independence, and offer a statement on what now seems to us reasonable to believe about the relationship of affective judgments to cognition.

**AFFECTIVE JUDGMENTS**

The words *emotional* or *affective* apply, to varying degrees, to an ill-defined, broad, and heterogeneous aggregate of phenomena (Fehr & Russell, 1984). To which affective phenomena did Zajonc claim his thesis applies? Specifically excluded were such reactions as surprise, anger, or guilt. To characterize what were included, Zajonc used such phrases as "feeling," "preference," "affective judgment," "affective reaction," "liking," "evaluation," and "hot cognition." But in defining his terms, he confined his article "to those aspects of affect and feeling that are generally involved in preferences" (p. 152). The evidence he cited as most directly supportive of his thesis had examined subjects' ratings of how much they liked various stimuli. Here we shall take Zajonc's thesis to be about *affective judgments*, which we define as the class of reactions whereby a person finds something likable, valuable, attractive, preferable, and so on. Put in other words, an affective judgment is a mental event whereby a particular object (person, place, thing, or event) seems to have an affective property.

There is no name commonly agreed upon for the class of phenomena we are here calling *affective judgments*. Elsewhere, this class has been called *affective appraisal* (Russell & Snodgrass, in press) and distinguished in some detail from such other affective phenomena as moods, physiological states, and behavioral signs and components of emotion. In using this name, we do not want to prejudge what sort of process is involved in producing affective judgments. Nor do we want to deny that affective judgments are felt