

The Choices We Make May Be Random

January 12, 2022

Humans sometimes justify their choices after the fact. The line of reasoning goes something like this: “I chose this, so I must like it. I didn’t choose this other thing, so it must not be so good.” In fact, [decades of cognitive science research](#) and [centuries of philosophical and scientific postulations](#) suggest that humans unconsciously decide to like (or dislike) something based on previously made choices.

But Lisa Feigenson, a co-director of the Johns Hopkins University Laboratory for Child Development, wanted to understand the *roots* of this tendency. She and her team gathered up some young subjects — non-verbal 1-year-olds — to determine if this shaping of preferences begins in early life. Because babies get so few choices and come pretty close to being a blank slate, Feigenson says, they make for the perfect subjects.

What they found is that the preferences we have as adults may be based on random decisions we made when we were very young. The results of this research were published in [Psychological Science](#) in 2020. “It’s actually the choice that comes first, and in a sort of random way,” Feigenson says. “And, actually, our preferences get built up based on our choices.”

...