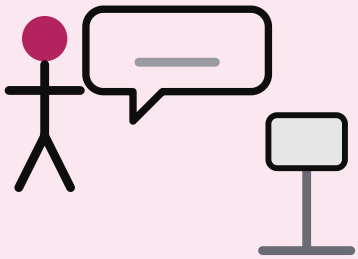
Concept

Say vs. do

The gap between what people say about their behavior and motives, and what they actually do.



In Spanish

Lo que dicen y lo que hacen

Origin

Nisbett and Wilson (1977); in design, Sanders (2002)

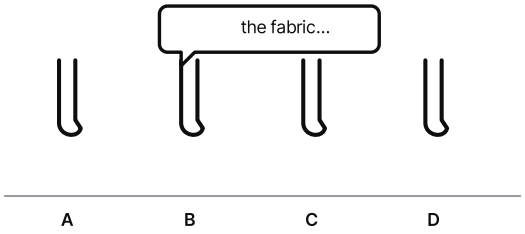
What problem it addresses

Explains why asking is not enough and people need to be observed in their context.

An example

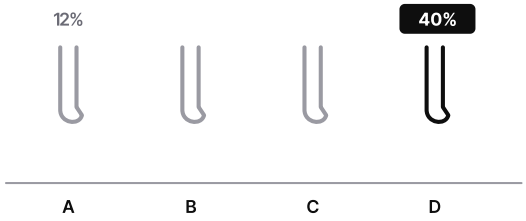
Nisbett and Wilson laid out four identical pairs of stockings on a table and asked people to choose the best quality one.

What they said



That they had chosen by the fabric, the sheerness or the elasticity. **Quality reasons.**

What happened



The pair on the right was chosen far more than the one on the left. Almost no one mentioned position. **Placement decided.**

People gave convincing reasons for a choice that actually depended on where each pair was.

Why it happens

1 

We don't see everything that influences our decisions.

2 

When asked, we give an explanation that sounds reasonable.

3 

That is why you have to observe, as well as ask.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Combine interviews with observation: ask people to show you how they do it and, for what is hard to put into words, to make it (a collage, a map, a model).

Avoid

Taking literally what people say they would do with a product that does not exist yet.

Don't fall for it

When what they say and what they do don't match, there is usually an insight there.

40% vs. 12%

What the research says

The pair of stockings on the right was chosen 40% of the time, versus 12% for the one on the left, even though they were all the same (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977).

●●● **Solid evidence.** The study is a psychology classic on the limits of introspection, widely cited and debated.

Connections

Used in

- Survey
- In-depth interview
- System Usability Scale (SUS)
- Focus group
- Generative tools
- Contextual inquiry
- Shadowing
- Usability testing

Related to

- Insight
- Triangulation

Authors and works

1977	**Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson**	Showed that we often cannot explain why we do what we do.
2002	**Elizabeth Sanders**	Proposed combining what people say, what they do and what they make.

Sources

Original sources

- Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. Psychological Review, 84(3), 231–259. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.3.231)
- Sanders, E. B.-N. (2002). From user-centered to participatory design approaches. In J. Frascara (Ed.), Design and the social sciences: Making connections (pp. 1–8). Taylor & Francis.

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

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