



## Aversive and avoidant indecisiveness: Roles for regret proneness, maximization, and BIS/BAS sensitivities

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### ABSTRACT

Though indecisiveness is associated with several mental disorders and a range of problematic psychological outcomes in normal populations, it is still poorly understood. We distinguish two features of indecisiveness: (a) *aversive*, a generalized aversion for decisions that manifests as threat-oriented cognition and negative affect when making decisions, and (b) *avoidant*, a generalized motivation to avoid decisions and to experience difficulties making decisions. Using exploratory (Study 1) and confirmatory (Study 2) factor analyses, we show that the Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993) possesses factors reflecting these two features. Moreover, we use correlation and regression to test hypotheses regarding the relationships among these components of indecisiveness and regret proneness, maximization, and BIS and BAS sensitivities. Results suggest the utility of distinguishing aversive from avoidant indecisiveness as well as characterizing stable attitudes towards decisions in terms of basic personality processes.

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### 1. Introduction

Indecisiveness is a problematic trait that appears both in clinical populations, where it is associated with depression, dependent personality disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (cf. Rassin, 2007), and in normal populations, where it is associated with depressive and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, trait anxiety, and worry proneness (Frost & Shows, 1993; Rassin & Muris, 2005b; Rassin, Muris, Franken, Smit, & Wong, 2007). Despite its problematic nature, indecisiveness continues to be poorly understood. In the present studies, we show that the Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993) is best represented by two factors, one that manifests as threat-oriented cognition and negative affect in response to decisions, and one that manifests as avoidant preferences and difficulties in response to decisions. We also present evidence suggesting the utility of situating indecisiveness, as well as other decision-related traits, in the revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory of personality variation (Gray & McNaughton, 2000).

#### 1.1. Refining indecisiveness: aversion for vs. avoidance of deciding

Beattie, Baron, Hershey, and Spranca (1994) coined the term *decision attitude* to refer to the desire to make or avoid a decision,

independent of the consequences that making or avoiding the decision would achieve. They defined two decision attitudes: *seeking*, which motivates decision-making, and *aversion*, which motivates decision avoidance, defined by Anderson (2003) as withdrawing from a decision “by postponing it or by seeking an easy way out that involves no action or no change” (139). Avoiding a decision in a specific domain (e.g., career) has also been termed indecision, while indecisiveness has been used to refer to the disposition to prefer avoidance and experience difficulties when making any decision, no matter the domain (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002). Supporting this characterization is research showing that indecisive individuals take longer and report more difficulty when making decisions (Frost & Shows, 1993), experience chronic difficulties deciding on a career (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002), require more information before reaching decisions (Ferrari & Dovidio, 2000) and judgments (Rassin et al., 2007), and exhibit a preference for “do-not-know” answers when making decisions about controversial moral and political issues (Rassin & Muris, 2005b). Taken together, these studies confirm that indecisive individuals tend to experience difficulties and prefer avoidance when making decisions.

Although, Beattie et al. (1994) did not define *decision aversion* as a negative affective response, other research suggests that decisions can produce such responses. Early on, Janis and Mann (1977) showed that decisional conflicts produce a state of psychological distress that can be coped with through decision avoidance. As reported above, trait indecisiveness is associated

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with dispositions to experience anxiety, depression, and worry. In line with this, indecisive individuals making decisions in cognitively demanding situations report more anxiety and less confidence in their choices than decisive individuals (Ferrari & Dovidio, 2001). More recently, Rassin and Muris (2005a) showed that indecisiveness is associated with the tendency to interpret ambiguous situations as threatening. They concluded that indecisive individuals assume the “worse-case scenario” when confronted with uncertainty. Given that most decisions are made under uncertainty (risk and ambiguity), this suggests that indecisive individuals may be biased to interpret decisions as threats. Consequently, we suggest that *aversive* indecisiveness, characterized by negative affect and threat-oriented cognition when making and evaluating decisions, be theoretically distinguished from an *avoidant* indecisiveness, which is characterized by avoidant preferences and difficulties when making decisions.

### 1.2. Dispositional antecedents to aversive and avoidant indecisiveness

A promising framework for identifying the personality processes that predispose individuals to aversion for and avoidance of decisions is the revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (rRST; Gray & McNaughton, 2000). In this theory, personality is determined by the sensitivity of three motivational systems, one that mediates avoidance of punishing stimuli and produces fear (the Fight/Flight/Freeze System; FFFS), one that mediates approach towards rewarding stimuli and produces positive affect (the Behavioral Activation System; BAS), and one that mediates the detection and resolution of conflicts within or between responses mediated by the FFFS and BAS, and which produces anxiety. This Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), so named for its role in inhibiting behavior and resolving conflicting response options, is important for understanding emotional and motivational responses to decisions, which by definition feature such conflicts. Given this, we hypothesize that *aversive* indecisiveness is distally rooted in BIS sensitivity to decisions.

Two other dispositions specific to the domain of decision-making are also likely antecedents to aversive indecisiveness. The first is a proneness to the experience of regret, a negative emotional response that occurs after realizing or imagining that making a decision differently would have resulted in a better outcome (Zeelenberg, 1999). Though defined as a post-decision emotion, regret can affect the decision-maker in the pre-decision period by either being anticipated, or actually felt (in the case of anticipatory regret; cf. Anderson, 2003). Importantly, anticipated regret has been identified as a proximal cause of decision avoidance (Anderson, 2003), and Schwartz and colleagues (2002) present evidence that proneness to regret varies across individuals. Given that regret is a negative affective response to the anticipation or realization of having made a relatively bad decision, we hypothesize that regret proneness is positively associated with *aversive* indecisiveness. Moreover, the BIS is conceived as producing frustration in response to intrinsically rewarding stimuli that are perceived as relatively less rewarding than other stimuli (Gray & McNaughton, 2000), suggesting that regret may be a BIS-mediated emotional response. Thus, we hypothesize that regret proneness may have roots in BIS sensitivity, and that regret proneness at least partially mediates the relationship between BIS sensitivity and aversive indecisiveness.

A second important disposition is the tendency to “maximize” one’s outcomes when making decisions. Maximizers approach decisions with the unrealistically high expectation that they will find the best alternative possible; this expectation, in turn, has the ironic effect of making the individual more prone to anticipating and experiencing regret (Schwartz et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, then, maximization is believed to be a dispositional

antecedent to indecisiveness (Rassin, 2007). As suggested by the link between maximization and regret proneness, we hypothesize that this relationship is specific to *aversive* indecisiveness and that the relationship is mediated by regret proneness.

So far, we have identified increasing BIS sensitivity, regret proneness, and maximization as antecedents to indecisiveness, but specifically to *aversive* indecisiveness. What might uniquely explain *avoidant* indecisiveness, which spans both the avoidance of decisions and the inability to effectively make decisions? Decisions feature alternatives that present opportunities for reward or non-punishment. Any disposition that blunts the individual’s sensitivity to the opportunity-affording features of a decision should make the individual less likely to approach the decision, as well as more likely to favor BIS-mediated conflict resolution in favor of FFFS-avoidance. Thus, we hypothesize that avoidant indecisiveness may be partially rooted in BAS-mediated responses to decisions, such that *decreasing* BAS sensitivity should be associated with *increasing* avoidant indecisiveness.

## 2. Study 1

The first goal of this study was to explore the factor structure of the Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993). Both in its original development and in a recent refinement of the scale (Rassin et al., 2007), a one-factor model has been assumed. The second goal was to test our hypothesized relationships among aversive/avoidant indecisiveness, BIS/BAS sensitivities, regret proneness, and maximization.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and thirty-three psychology undergraduates (22 men, 111 women; Mean Age = 20, SD = 3.14, Range = 17–41) at Erasmus University Rotterdam participated for course credit. The study (and Study 2) was approved by an institutional review board governing the ethical use of human subjects.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

*Indecisiveness Scale* (Frost & Shows, 1993; Rassin et al., 2007): Though this 11-item scale measures general indecisiveness, it includes items that face validly span both aversive and avoidant aspects of the trait (see Table 1 for items).

*Regret Scale* (Schwartz et al., 2002): This 5-item scale measures proneness to regret when making and evaluating decisions (e.g., “Whenever I make a choice, I try to get information about how the other alternatives turned out”), and was translated into Dutch for the present study.

*Maximization Scale* (Schwartz et al., 2002): This 13-item scale measures the disposition to maximize when making decisions (e.g., “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the moment”), and was translated into Dutch for the present study.

*BIS/BAS Scales* (Carver & White, 1994; Franken, Muris, & Rassin, 2005): This 20-item scale has four factors, one reflecting sensitivity of the BIS (e.g., “I worry about making mistakes”), and three reflecting dimensions of sensitivity of the BAS, including Drive (e.g., “If I see a chance for something I want, I move on it right away”), Fun Seeking (e.g., “I often act on the spur of the moment”), and Reward Responsiveness (e.g., “When good things happen to me, it affects me strongly”). Although the conceptual differences among these subscales are important (cf. Smillie, Jackson, & Dalgleish, 2006), they are not the focus of the present investigation. Consequently, we focus our analyses on the average of the 13 BAS items. Moreover, although the Carver and White scales were developed to

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