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Positive illusions of preference consistency: When remaining eluded by one's preferences yields greater subjective well-being and decision outcomes

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Abstract

Psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated two seemingly irreconcilable human tendencies. People are motivated towards internal consistency, or acting in accordance with stable, self-generated preferences. Simultaneously though, people demonstrate considerable variation in the content of their preferences, often induced by subtle external influences. The current studies test the hypothesis that decision makers resolve this tension by sustaining illusions of preference consistency, which, in turn, confer psychological benefits. Two year-long longitudinal studies were conducted with graduating students seeking full-time employment. Results show that job seekers perceived themselves to have manifested greater preference consistency than actually exhibited in expressed preferences. Additionally, those harboring illusions of preference consistency experienced less negative affect throughout the decision process, greater outcome satisfaction, and subsequently, received more job offers.

Keywords: Preference consistency; Cognitive dissonance; Subjective well-being; Self-awareness; Job search

We expect our heroes to exhibit decisiveness, steadfastness, and resolve. In our society, idealized figures are those principled individuals who unwaveringly uphold their beliefs and resist external and social pressures to change (e.g., Maslow, 1954, 1968), while those who are perceived to vacillate are often punished with such negative trait ascriptions as immaturity, passivity, and even stagnation. In order to preserve a positive self-image, then, individuals within our culture are motivated to perceive themselves and to be perceived by others as exhibiting choices consistent with their stable preferences (Aronson, 1968; Tesser, 2000). Yet, as even mundane decision opportunities in contemporary American life become increasingly complex, the likelihood that preferences will fluctuate and that decision makers will hesitate or even avoid making decisions altogether increases accordingly (Iyengar & Jiang, 2004; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). How do Americans reconcile their desire for steadfast conviction, all the while navigating a constantly evolving environment in which their preferences may be ever changing?

We address this conflict between our ideals and the reality of preference consistency by harkening back to William James (1890/1950), who proposed that at the very heart of one's conception of self is a sense of constancy over time, rather than flux. The classic theories of cognitive consistency and dissonance (Abelson, 1983; Abelson et al., 1968; Festinger, 1957; for a recent set of reviews see Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Heider, 1958) rely on the assumption that humans are motivated by the pursuit of internal consistency. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that when people engage in behaviors counter to previously stated attitudes, they

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tend to alter their attitudes so as to maintain congruence with their current behavior rather than admit to contradicting their initial views. Furthermore, research on the escalation of commitment indicates that once choosers publicly commit to a position, they are less likely to change that position even if their decision outcomes prove suboptimal or inconsistent with their previously stated goals and desires (for reviews see Brockner, 1992; Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Staw & Ross, 1987).

Meanwhile, despite the motivation for maintaining stable preferences, empirical studies have shown the malleability of individuals' preferences, even in consequential decision contexts (e.g., McNeil, Pauker, Sox, & Tversky, 1982; Redelmeier & Shafir, 1995). Examinations of individuals' choices suggest that not only do their revealed preferences fluctuate, but they are also susceptible to numerous external influences, such as the way in which choices are framed (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986), the timing of the preference elicitation relative to the course of the decision process (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003), the simultaneity of options under evaluation (Hsee, 1996, 1999), and the decision maker's emotional state at the time of choice (Isen, 1993; Nygren, Isen, Taylor, & Dulin, 1996; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002). The influence of these external factors is so powerful that it may even lead choosers to reverse their initially stated preferences (Hsee, 1996, 1999; Lichtenstein & Slovic, 1973; for a review see Shafir & LeBoeuf, 2002; Slovic, 1995; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Individuals' choices, then, are less a function of preconceived preferences than of an evolving state in which preferences are constructed during the choice-making process (Payne et al., 1993; Payne, Bettman, & Schkade, 1999; Slovic, 1995).

How, though, do decision makers reconcile their desire for internal consistency with the practice of preference malleability? One possibility is that decision makers are aware of shifts in their preferences and consciously alter them in order to maintain congruency between preferences and behaviors. Alternatively, decision makers may harbor an illusion of preference consistency in which their beliefs in the stability of their preferences are sustained despite actual malleability in their revealed preferences.

A priori, we might expect psychologically healthy decision makers to be adept at detecting contradictions in their thoughts and actions. Certainly, embedded in the practices of psychoanalysts (e.g., Eagle, 2003; Freud, 1957a, 1957b), humanists (e.g., Rogers, 1951, 1961), and cognitive–behavioral therapists (e.g., Beck, 1995) is the goal of training clinical populations to deepen self-insight so that such individuals may discern the congruity between their attitudes and behaviors. However, much research has suggested that non-clinical populations may be limited in their ability to acquire self-knowledge (Silvia & Gendolla, 2001; Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Rather, people are likely to recite standard personal and cultural theories for their behaviors, highlight information that confirms existing beliefs, draw upon accessible thoughts, and prioritize that which is conducive to self-enhancement (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Sedikides, 1993; Wilson, Hodges, & Lafleur, 1995). Consequently, the act of introspection serves not as a tool to increase self-awareness, but instead induces individuals to exhibit systematic biases toward upholding unrealistically *positive* self-perceptions (for reviews of positive illusions see Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994). These self-serving illusions are particularly prevalent when they concern highly valued dimensions of self-evaluation (Burger & Cooper, 1979; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), such as desired attributes (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), favored behaviors (e.g., S. T. Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange, 1991), close relationships (e.g., Buunk & vanderEijnden, 1997; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000), agency in events (for a review see Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Greenwald, 1980; Langer, 1975), and predictions about one's future (e.g., Fontaine & Smith, 1995; Taylor et al., 1992; Weinstein, 1980).

Given the documented proclivity toward positive illusions and the desirability for preference consistency, we propose that decision makers will distort their perceptions of their own preference stability, thereby engaging in illusions of preference consistency. Such illusions would serve as a defense mechanism, shielding people from an awareness of preference variability which might otherwise taint their self-images. Accordingly, we would operationalize this illusion as belonging to those individuals who maintain the self-perception that their preferences remain stable, irrespective of actual fluctuations in the expression and content of their preferences.

We predict that, like positive illusions more generally (e.g., Erez, Johnson, & Judge, 1995; Fournier, de Ridder, & Bensing, 2002; Helgeson, 2003; Kleinke & Miller, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; Segerstrom, Taylor, Kemeny, & Fahey, 1998; Taylor et al., 1992; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003; Taylor, Wayment, & Collins, 1993), an illusion of preference consistency will be linked to the psychological benefit of increasing decision makers' subjective well-being. The positive self-image to which self-serving illusions contribute, in turn, bestows affective benefits (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Research has also demonstrated an association between illusions and the use of effective coping strategies in the face of threat (Brown, 1993; Fournier et al., 2002; Segerstrom et al., 1998; Taylor & Armor, 1996; Taylor et al., 1993), as well as lowered rates of clinical depression (Alloy & Abramson, 1979, 1988; Alloy, Albright, Abramson, & Dykman, 1990; Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, & Barton, 1980). Unacknowledged preference inconsistency, therefore, in