Special Session Summary    When What I Think Feel and Do Depends on Who I Am: Identity Effects on Judgment, Choice and Self-Reinforcement

Americus Reed II, University of Pennsylvania

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8911/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
SESSION OVERVIEW

Every consumer has the potential to socially identify with others on a multitude of variables including shared traits, matching avocations, common political affiliations, similar religious beliefs, and common ethnic heritage (cf. Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Ethier 1995). In fact, throughout the life course, socialization within a culture causes a person to become aware of the infinite number of social identities that may be potential bases for self-definition. Some are more permanent (e.g., mother, daughter, friend, African-American, etc.) while others may be more transitory (e.g., Republican, athlete, graduate student etc.). These identities can influence judgment, behavior and performance. For example, black females for whom ethnic (female) identity was salient had more favorable (unfavorable) perceptions of OJ Simpson’s innocence (Newman, Duff, Schnopp-Wyatt, Brock & Hoffman, 1997). Similarly, Asian-American women’s math test scores improved when their ethnic identity was activated, but worsened when their gender identity was activated (Shih, Pittinsky & Ambady, 1999).

Social identity may be the basis by which consumers think about various actions or judgments (Reed II 2002). Past research suggests that identity effects on judgment appear to depend upon the salience of the identity, its self-importance (or strength of identification), and its relevance to the judgment object. Although more and more research on identity is continuing to emerge, the implications of identity for consumer judgment and decision-making are only beginning to attract conceptual and empirical investigation (cf. Flemming & Petty, 1999). Several important questions remain. For example, what are the implications of forming a consumer judgment based on identity in terms of belief perseverance and attitude change? How and when do potentially differentially salient identities impact consumer choice? Finally, how does a judgment based on a consumer’s identity bi-directionally reinforce the structure of the person’s social self-schema? These three questions are directly addressed in the three papers in this special session.

The first paper (Bolton and Reed) examines the fundamental proposition that identity judgments can create sticky priors by analytic thinking; i.e., a procedural bias in favor of the initial identity judgment. Moreover, the authors investigate the effectiveness of various techniques to undo identity-driven judgment effects, including counter-reasoning, counter-identification and social influence. Their findings attest to the power of identity in judgment. The second project (LeBoeuf & Shafir) examines the effects of identity salience on choice. The current results paint a picture of malleable preferences that is quite inconsistent with the normative requirement that preferences be globally-consistent and unaffected by irrelevant particulars of a given consumer decision situation. These findings extend prior work by demonstrating that even when the choice description, method of elicitation, and number of alternatives are held constant, preferences remain malleable in part to peoples’ malleable self-concepts. The final paper (Forehand, Reed & Perkins) uses the implicit association test in an identity context to capture identity accessibility as a function of the social context and to test how the extent to which expressing a particular identity-driven consumer judgment reinforces or diffuses the strength of association between evaluative traits linked to the identity and the consumer’s implicit sense of self.

“Sticky Priors: Identity Effects on Judgment”

Lisa Bolton, The Wharton School
Americus Reed, II, The Wharton School

Extended Abstract

Social cognition research suggests that the self and its multiple identities represent a complex and highly elaborate knowledge structure in memory (cf. Kihlstrom & Kleine, 1995). The assumption is that identity activates an elaborate and integrated schema that is relevant to the self, frames the target of judgment and drives thinking that incorporates aspects of the self that are linked to the social category. Because people gain subjective validity that their judgments are “correct” to the extent that similar others agree with them, identity-driven processing is likely to lead to judgments in which people are more confident in predictions about future self-relevant attitudes and behavior (Markus, Smith & Moreland, 1985). Hence, identity-driven judgments may be resistant to change (Markus, 1977). The aforementioned arguments suggest that identity-driven processing may reflect one-sided reasoning driven by the perspective linked to a single identity—in contrast to more analytic judgments that apply reasoning in a relatively evenhanded manner. We examine whether identity-driven thinking and subsequent identity-based judgments are a source of sticky priors. Once an elaborate and self-integrated schema triggers an initial identity-based judgment, it may be difficult to “undo” by reasoning from an alternative perspective.

We examine this question in four experiments. In all experiments, people are asked to reason about a judgment object or an issue from the perspective of a salient social identity. We employ various kinds of identities (e.g., parent, teenager; businessperson, environmentalist) linked to different objects and issues (e.g., Internet censorship; pollution credits, electronic books). We examine the persistence of identity-based judgments after engaging in subsequent analytic thinking intended to counter the initial identity-driven judgment. In experiment 1, we investigate “inoculation” and test whether identity effects are reduced if preceded by analytic thinking. In experiment 2, we examine the extent to which self-generated analytic reasoning can counteract an initial identity-based judgment. In experiment 3, we explore the use of “dueling identities” in judgment of diagnostic and non-diagnostic targets. Finally, in experiment 4, the perseverance of identity-based judgments in the face of social influence from others is investigated.

Overall, our findings support the perseverance of identity effects on judgment. Strong identities lead to identity-driven thinking and judgment that resists subsequent corrective analytic techniques. Our findings are consistent with several aspects of the literature. For example, van Knippenberg and Wilke (1992) suggested that people are more interested in information expressing in-group attitudes than information not about their group (Flemming & Petty, 1999). This research suggests that people should perceive self-generated identity-based arguments as stronger and more valid and thus more persuasive than non-identity-based arguments—when identification is strong. For example, in the attitude literature, Terry and Hogg (1996) found that perceived norms linked to a behaviorally relevant reference group (“regular exercisers”) influenced intentions to engage in exercise, but only for subjects who identified with the group (Terry and Hogg 1996, experiment one;
When What I Think Feel And Do Depends on Who I Am: Identity Effects on Judgment, Choice and Self-Reinforcement

Markus, Hazel, Jeanne Smith and Richard L. Moreland (1985), “The self as a schematic are more resistant to information that contradicts their self-concepts (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Our results confirm the perseverance of judgments driven by a social identity strongly linked to the self and the relative ineffectiveness of subsequent efforts to counteract the stickiness of identity judgments.

References


“Preference Reversals from Identity-Salience Shifts”
Robyn A. LeBoeuf, University of Florida
Eldar Shafir, Princeton University

Extended Abstract
People hold numerous social identities that stem from a variety of sources, including group memberships, societal roles, and demographic characteristics. For example, a working woman may be a lawyer, but may also be a mother, a daughter, an American, a Christian, and so on. The salience of these identities is thought to fluctuate, with certain cues having the ability to alter the salience of a person’s identities at any given time. Theories of the self-concept, particularly self-categorization theory (e.g., Turner, 1987), predict that attitudes and values will align with the momentarily salient identity. Thus, a person may adopt “motherhood” values when her “mother” identity is salient, but her work environment, for example, may provoke a shift in salience, leading values to align instead with a professional identity. In line with such theories, we predict that people’s expressed preferences will fluctuate as identity salience fluctuates; this is in contrast to standard assumptions that a person carries around a unique, and fairly consistent and stable, preference ordering.

An initial demonstration took advantage of two conflicting identities held by our participants, undergraduate college students. On the one hand, these students are novice academics who wish to engage in intellectual pursuits; on the other hand, they form part of social groups devoted to leisure and fun. Participants completed a variety of unrelated tasks over the course of an hour; among these were an identity-salience manipulation and a preference assessment task (these were structured to look quite different from each other to prevent any suspicion of connection between the tasks). A series of open-ended questions was designed to highlight for students either their scholar or their socialite identities. In a seemingly unrelated task, participants were then invited to make several choices among newspapers, magazines, and movies. Across four different choices, preferences assimilated to the salient identity; that is, preferences were reliably more scholarly and serious when a scholar, as opposed to a socialite, identity had been made salient.

A follow-up study replicated this effect using a different identity-salience manipulation and slightly different dependent measures.

We then expanded on the initial findings by investigating whether cultural identities could be manipulated to effect preference change. The participants, who had been born in China but had lived approximately half of their lives in the US, responded to questions designed to trigger either their American or their Chinese identities. They then completed several choice tasks, including a Prisoner’s Dilemma game, that assessed preferences for individualism versus collectivism. Overall, those for whom the American identity had been made salient expressed preferences congruent with an American stereotype (e.g., preferences for individualism), whereas those for whom the Chinese identity had been evoked expressed preferences congruent with a Chinese stereotype (e.g., preferences for conformity and collectivism).

Two other experiments explored whether identity plays a privileged role in these identity-salience effects. To the extent that identity plays a pivotal role, the pattern of effects should depend upon participants’ levels of identification with the evoked identities. To investigate this, we manipulated the salience of undergraduates’ scholar and socialite identities and separately measured these students’ levels of identification with those identities. Preferences for consumer goods only assimilated to the salient identity for those who identified with at least one of the two target identities. For those low in identification with both identities, there was a reliable contrast effect, with preferences being more stereotypically social after the scholar, as opposed to the socialite, identity was made salient. Level of identification therefore moderated the incidence of identity-congruent preference reversals.

We continued the exploration of the role played by identity by investigating the impact of an identity-salience manipulation for people who do not actually hold the evoked identity. We recruited businesspeople, all of whom had an occupational identity, but only half of whom had a nuclear family (i.e., were married or had
children). We attempted to make salient either family or occupational identities, and we then assessed preferences for spending time at work or with family. Preferences were indeed more family-oriented following the family-identity elicitation than the occupational-identity elicitation, but this was true only for those who had nuclear families, and thus, family identities. This suggests that a person actually needs to hold the evoked identity before preferences can assimilate to it; this is in contrast to certain behavioral priming effects in which behaviors (e.g., walking speed, Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996) assimilate to all manner of non-held identities. These last two experiments suggest that identity plays a key role in the observed preference assimilation patterns, as the pattern of effects will depend upon a person’s relationship to the evoked identity.

Taken together, these studies show that preferences are affected by identity-salience manipulations; in particular, when an identity that a person holds and identifies with is evoked, preferences will assimilate to that identity. While these findings are clearly relevant to self-categorization theory, they also inform research on preference inconsistency, as they paint a picture of malleable preferences that contrasts with standard assumptions of preference stability. The findings extend prior work in the area of behavioral decision making by demonstrating that even when choice description, method of elicitation, and number of alternatives are held constant, preferences remain malleable due in part to peoples’ malleable self-concepts.

References:


“Identity Reinforcement: The Dynamic Effects of Evaluation on Implicit Self-Concept”
Mark Forehand, University of Washington
Andrew Perkins, University of Washington
Americus Reed II, The Wharton School

Abstract
A great deal of research demonstrates that accessible and self-important social identities affect judgments in predictable ways, but relatively less research has investigated the processes that underlie the accessibility of one’s identity and the likelihood that an identity will be utilized in the formation of consumer preferences. Recent research has identified three main classes of variables that may influence identity accessibility: enduring traits such as strength of identification with a specific identity, aspects of the social context in which a consumer resides, and contextual primes that can activate or prompt identity-based processing (Forehand & Deshpande 1999). The present research attempts to expand our understanding of the interactive nature of these disparate sources of identity accessibility. Moreover, it proposes that the use of accessible identities in the evaluation of consumer products and services can create a feedback loop that reinforces the core identity itself. The interactive nature of these sources of identity accessibility and the process by which identity-based attitude expression reinforces identity are demonstrated in three experiments using both explicit measures of identity accessibility and the Implicit Association Test or IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwarz 1998).

In the first two experiments, consumer sensitivity to situational manipulations of distinctiveness (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka 1978) was assessed using standard explicit self-report measures and using IATs. The IATs measured the degree to which each participant associated the self with identity-related concepts and thereby provided implicit measures of identity accessibility. Specifically, both experiments conducted two sets of IATs, one to assess the accessibility of gender as a component of the individual’s self-concept and one to assess the accessibility of ethnicity as a component of the individual’s self-concept. In these first two experiments, participants initially completed a battery of demographic items, personality scale items, and self-identity IATs to provide baseline measures of their prevailing identity accessibility. Several weeks after this initial measurement, the respondents participated in an ostensibly unrelated experiment in which the composition of the participant’s immediate social environment was either measured (Experiment 1) or manipulated (Experiment 2). It was hypothesized that participant identity accessibility during this second session would be influenced not only by the respondent’s distinctiveness within their immediate social context, but also by their general sensitivity to such social information (as measured using Snyder’s self-monitoring scale). The results confirmed that the social distinctiveness did influence both explicit and implicit identity accessibility, and that the influence of distinctiveness on identity accessibility was moderated by the respondent’s predisposition toward self-monitoring. Specifically, high self-monitors were influenced by social cues to a greater extent than were low-self monitors. This pattern of results was observed on both explicit and implicit measures of identity accessibility.

In the third experiment, we assessed the degree to which the expression of an identity-based preference reinforces identity accessibility. It is hypothesized that the use of one’s identity as an informational cue in attitude expression reinforces the accessibility of that identity and thereby increases the likelihood that the identity will be used in subsequent judgments. To test this hypothesis, an experiment was conducted in which participants evaluated identity-relevant stimuli (an advertisement for vitamins intended for either children, young adults, or seniors) and then completed an Implicit Association Test that measured the participant’s self-association with youth. Compared to participants who evaluated the young adult version of the ad (the control condition), participants who evaluated either the children-focused ad or the senior-focused ad demonstrated stronger associations between the self and youth. This finding suggests that the use of an identity in an evaluation activates pre-existing identity associations. Since the majority of consumers possess pre-existing strong associations between the self and youth (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald 2002), this identity activation increased the observed association between self and youth.

References