Identity Integration Predicts Indecisiveness in Identity-Relevant Decision-Making Tasks: Management of Multiple Identities Matters

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Three studies demonstrate that people with low identity integration (II)—or those who perceive their identities to be in conflict—are more indecisive than those with high II—who perceive their identities as compatible. II directly affects identity-relevant, but not identity-irrelevant, indecisiveness, suggesting that identity management processes underlie this relationship.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Identity is an important motivator of our choices (Levy, 1959; Oyserman, 2009; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012; Shavitt & Nelson, 1999; Sirgy, 1982). Not only are people motivated to express themselves through their choices, but to the extent that we all have multiple social identities—or social groups (such as our gender, occupation, ethnicity, etc.) to which we belong (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986)—making one identity salient has been shown to drive identity-consistent choice. For instance, after increasing the importance of people’s family identity, participants reported greater intention to purchase a personal communication device advertised as a way to stay in touch with family (Reed, 2004).

Beyond choice, the question of whether multiple social identities can affect how people make decisions has been relatively unexplored. Yet these decision processes capture important outcomes such as decision difficulty or post-choice regret. We approach this question in a novel way to examine the role multiple social identities can play in decision processes. Specifically, we focus on individual differences in the management of multiple social identities—a here-tofore underexplored variable in the context of decision-making—as a moderator in the relationship between multiple social identities and indecisiveness—a broad concept of conflict in decision-making, which taps into processes like decision difficulty, time to make a decision, and post-choice regret.

We propose that people with low identity integration (II; Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002)—or those who perceive greater conflict between their various social identities—will be more indecisive than people with high II—or those who perceive less conflict between their various social identities (Hypothesis 1). To the extent indecisiveness is driven by how people manage the relationship between their various social identities, the relationship between II and indecisiveness should be confined to tasks that are relevant to those specific identities. We hypothesize that the relationship between II and indecisiveness will be apparent only in decision-making tasks that are identity-relevant (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, if identity management strategies drive indecisiveness, II should have a direct effect on indecisiveness (Hypothesis 3).

Using self-report, behavioral, and affective measures of indecisiveness, Study 1 tested Hypothesis 1 across two decision-making tasks. After generating a list of either creative modes of transportation (Hirt, Devers, & McCrae, 2008) or creative uses for a brick (Chermahini, Hickendorff, & Hommel, 2012), participants were asked to rank order their top five ideas. Adapted from choice justification paradigms where participants have to choose between two similarly preferred alternatives (e.g., Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004), participants were asked to make a choice between their third- and fourth-ranked idea. Indecisiveness was assessed via Frost and Shows’ (1993) 15-item Indecisiveness Scale, the time it took for participants to make a choice (decision latency), and self-reported feelings of post-choice regret. Supporting Hypothesis 1, low IIs, compared to high IIs, scored significantly higher on the Indecisiveness Scale, took longer to make a decision, and reported higher post-choice regret regardless of task.

Study 2 tested Hypothesis 2 in a sample of self-identified working professionals with families. Focusing on the perceived relationship between two specific identities—work and family—we expected an association between low II and indecisiveness only in an identity-relevant decision task. Participants were randomly assigned to either a work-family (identity-relevant) or non-work-family (identity-irrelevant) decision-making task. In the former, they were asked to list creative things to do on vacation (a time spent with family and connected to the office); in the latter, they listed creative uses for a brick. As in Study 1, participants ranked their top five ideas and were asked to pick either their third- or fourth-ranked ideas as their best idea. As a measure of indecisiveness, they indicated their post-choice regret using the same measure as in Study 1. Results indicated that low IIs reported significantly greater regret than high IIs, but only in the work-family task, supporting Hypothesis 2.

To examine the proposition that low II would lead to indecisiveness in identity-relevant domains (Hypothesis 3), Study 3 experimentally manipulated II. Focusing on work-family identities as in Study 2, we predicted that those who recalled negative experiences about their work-family identities would exhibit higher levels of indecisiveness only in work-family decision-making tasks than those who recalled positive experiences about their work-family identities. The procedure was similar to Study 2 except that II was manipulated before the decision-making task. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three identity recall conditions. In the negative and positive recall conditions, participants were asked to “recall 10 negative [positive] experiences you’ve had managing being both a working professional and family person”. In the control condition, participants were not asked to recall any personal experiences. Next, participants were randomly assigned to complete the vacation (work-family/identity-relevant) or the brick (non-work-family/identity-irrelevant) decision-making task. Following the decision, all participants rated their post-choice regret using the same measure. As predicted, post-choice regret was highest in the negative recall condition, suggesting that lowering Work-Family II led to higher levels of indecisiveness in work-family decision-making tasks. The same effect was not evident in the non-work-family decision-making task. In the work-family task, participants in the negative recall condition were more likely to experience regret compared to the positive recall and control conditions. In the non-work-family task, regret in the negative recall condition was not significantly different from the positive recall or control conditions. This pattern of results supported Hypothesis 3.

This paper takes a novel approach to studying the role of multiple social identities in decision-making. By focusing on individual differences in identity management strategies and the decision-making process—specifically, indecisiveness—we show that how people manage their multiple selves matters for how they make decisions, particularly those relevant to the identities. The current findings thus may shed light on why some people are more or less indecisive than others and offer identity-based implications for reducing indecisiveness and improving decision experiences.