Indecision and the construction of self

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This paper proposes a theoretically grounded definition of indecision and considers one of indecision's potential functions. It argues that, despite a reputation as mere choice pathology, indecision may play an important role in identity formation and maintenance. In particular, the contemplations and conversations characteristic of indecision may help construct, discover, or affirm who one is, even if ostensibly they are intended only to clarify what one should do. In addition to positing an underexplored function of indecision, the possibility that indecision facilitates identity development suggests that concentrated identity work need not be an explicit objective or even a process of which one is cognizant; it can be an unwitting byproduct of frustrated attempts at choice.

Introduction

Given the ubiquity of indecision in everyday life, its modest presence in the decision-making literature is conspicuous. The hesitations, ruminations, and palpitations that often characterize choice have received little scholarly attention, and there is little understanding of what functions, if any, they may serve. Moreover, the limited attention indecision has received has been condemning. When studied, indecision has been deemed a “decision pathology” synonymous with “unproductive decision making” (Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011, p. 226-227), or a scourge “...frequently outweigh the costs of being wrong” (Weick, 1995, p. 153). By and large, when seen at all, indecision has been seen as a “problem” to be “treated” or “remedied” (Germejs & De Boeck, 2002, p. 114); “an inability” to be “reduced” (Guay, Senécal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003, p. 165, 174).

This mix of inattention and disparagement may stem from the nearly unflinching belief that the most significant aspect of a choice opportunity is the decision in which it results. Traditionally, decision-making scholarship has addressed how decisions are (or should be) reached and what decisions are (or should be) reached (e.g., Cyert & March, 1963/1992; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Mas-Colell, Whinston, & Green, 1995; Samuelson, 1947; Simon, 1955; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, 1981, 1986; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947/1953; for reviews of decision-making research focused on affect, see Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008). When other questions have been asked, they have usually been questions that refer to a decision, such as how long an individual takes to reach a decision (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), or how satisfied an individual is with a decision she has reached (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 1993).

This focus on decisions is not surprising. Many view decision as the denouement of choice, so for social scientists studying choice processes not to concern themselves with the decisions in which they result would make little sense. The emphasis on decisions is problematic, however, when it becomes a fixation that obscures other important functions of choice. Sometimes choice processes are more than just the mechanics for reaching a decision. They are rituals and venerations with meanings independent of the decisions that attend them. Apart from leading to decisions, the rites of decision-making can inspire remarkable human insights, delights, and dolors. This province of decision-making is often overlooked.

Though a minority view, the possibility that the most consequential aspect of a choice opportunity is not always its resultant decision has been raised before (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Dember, Galinsky, & Warm, 1992; Schwartz, 2000). For example, Cyert and March wrote that, rather than being a process geared towards the selection of an alternative, decision-making can function primarily as “…an arena for developing and enjoying an interpretation of life and one’s position in it” (1992, p. 236). Similarly, March and Olsen described decision-making “…as a place for discovering, elaborating, and expressing meanings, establishing shared (or opposing) conceptions of experience, values, and the nature of existence. [A place where] individuals develop themselves” (1984, p. 741).
This paper adds to the modest literature on indecision by drawing attention to one of its potentially distinctive values—a value that has little to do with decisions. Though the ostensible aim of an indecisive decision-maker is to illuminate the costs and benefits of decision alternatives in order to reach an optimal or satisfactory choice, indecision may serve as an important mechanism for the development of identity and the social relations that sustain it. While trying to figure out what to do, individuals are spurred to contemplation and conversation that develop who they are. For individuals in the throes of indecision, the unrealizable intention of making a choice can engender the unintended consequence of forming an identity.

Beyond suggesting a constructive role of indecision, this potential dynamic also raises the possibility that identity formation—typically regarded as an explicit objective or at least a process of which one is mindful—could also be the unwitting consequence of seemingly circuitous or tortuosity attempts to reach a decision. During times of indecision, identity formation may not be a goal and even awareness of it may be obscured by preoccupations with problem-solving and alternative selection. Nonetheless, indecision’s apparently fraught and winding route to choice may double as an unseen path to the discovery, construction, and affirmation of self.

Viewed in this light, indecision becomes not only more comprehensible, but also more functional. Grasping the role of indecision as a principal space for identity development highlights a boon of a behavior that, though pervasive, is consistently denigrated and bemoaned as bane. It also furthers our understanding of the mechanics of identity formation by recognizing the possibility that significant identity work may not always be a targeted, determined act; it can be a byproduct of frustrated attempts at choice.

In order to examine indecision and its role in identity formation, this paper is structured as follows: The remainder of this introduction reviews the scholarship connecting decision-making and identity, noting that the relationship between indecision and identity has been largely ignored. The following section builds on our understanding of rational and boundedly rational decision-making to propose a theoretically grounded definition of indecision. Having defined indecision, the subsequent section articulates how indecision may play a unique, substantive role in identity formation, and then illustrates this dynamic through examples. The paper concludes by summarizing its main contributions and discussing their potential ramifications for students of decision-making, students of identity development, and those who experience indecision.

Background: decisions and identity

Though indecision and identity development have seldom been linked (Savickas, 1995), the suggestion of an important relationship between decision-making and identity is not new. In the decision-making literature, scholars have linked identity and choice in two temporal sequences. In the first sequence, identity precedes and steers decision-making and action (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Kramer, Pommerenke, & Newton, 1993; Le Boeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010). Though less prominent than consequentialist or rational models of decision-making (March, 1994, chapt. 1, 2006a), identity-based or appropriateness-based models of decision-making are often of this sort, in which identity comes before—and informs—choice (March, 1994, chapt. 2). In these models, relevant identities are identified and interpreted so that appropriate behaviors can be determined. Before acting, an identity-bound decision maker asks, (a) What kind of a person am I? (b) What kind of a situation is this? and (c) What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this? (March, 1994, p. 58). Identity comes before and serves as the guiding principle for action, as who one is determines what one does.

In the second temporal sequence, it is what one does that determines who one is. Identity follows choice as a post hoc construction arising from decision justification and interpretation. In social psychology, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and self-perception theory (Bem, 1967) highlight the ways in which one’s beliefs and attitudes are post hoc accommodations or interpretations of one’s actions (see also Aronson & Mills, 1959). Throughout his book Sensemaking in Organizations, Karl Weick uses Graham Wallas’s phrase, “How can I know what I think till I see what I say?” as a refrain to emphasize the extent to which sensemaking—which is “grounded in identity construction” (1995, p. 17)—is “postdecision behavior” (1995, p. 12). Whereas in identity-based choice models decisions result from identity, in sense-making models identity results from decisions.

The connection between choice and identity has also been robust in the identity literature. Scholars have noted the extent to which modern identities, particularly in Western cultures, are predicated on choice (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Beck, 1992; Deaux, 1991). In their review of psychological and sociological identity research, Côté and Levine describe modern life as life in which “choice has replaced obligation as the basis of self-definition” (2002, p. 1). Throughout their book, the authors highlight the long-standing importance—dating back to Erik Erikson’s developmental theories in the 1950s and 1960s, and their subsequent elaboration by James Marcia—of choice opportunities and decisions in identity formation and maintenance research. Similarly, Stryker and Serpe write that, “The empirical issues with which identity theory is concerned revolve around choices...” (1982, p. 205).

Despite the extensive work of these two scholarly traditions, some of the contours of the relationship between choice processes and identity remain unknown. Most notably, neither the decision-making literature nor the identity literature has considered whether indecision may be conducive to self-discovery, self-construction, and self-affirmation in ways that other instances of decision-making are not. The bleak view of indecisive behaviors as anxiety-riddled, repetitious, drawn-out, and fruitless may stem from the mistaken belief that the only task at hand for an indecisive decision-maker is clarifying decision alternatives so that a “good” decision can be made. It is by this metric that progress appears stalled and efforts appear wasted. But if indecisive behaviors seem to serve poorly the ostensive aim of decision-making, perhaps they serve better a different purpose—a purpose unproffered. It may be that the unique reflections and dialogues of indecision, avowedly employed in the service of choice, furtively and functionally advance the development of self.

This paper’s proposition that indecision may be an arena for identity development suggests two further implications. Within the decision-making literature, the possibility that identity development can occur during indecision posits an understudied temporal relationship between choice processes and identities, which have typically been thought to interact primarily in sequence. In addition to a pre-existing, static identity guiding decision-making and a previously made decision informing identity, it may be that choice opportunities (at least those met with indecision) trigger identity formation and serve as the contexts in which identities are discovered, constructed, modified, and affirmed. Currently, the dynamics of identity formation during choice processes are poorly understood.

Within the identity literature, usually only explicit, conscious identity choices are assumed to be central to identity development. For example, Ottilia Obodaru describes the “... old research tradition dating back to William James (1890) and Erik Erikson (1963, 1968, 1975), that places choice at the core of developing a mature
self-concept” as a research tradition that “...extols the benefits of choosing a certain identity, committing oneself to that particular niche of the adult world, and suppressing the foregone alternatives (Marcia, 1966; 1980)” (2012, p. 5). Similarly, Kay Deaux writes that, “...individuals often make conscious choices and design specific strategies for reconfiguring their identity structure...” (Deaux, 1991, p. 89). Even when identity scholars have not emphasized choice, they have focused on major role transitions or other times of significant personal change whose identity relevance is treated as obvious and focal (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 1999). The possibility that significant identity development could be an inadvertent byproduct of decision-making processes (at least when those processes constitute indecision), rather than an explicit objective or an undertaking of which one is conscious, has received little attention.

Decisions and indecision

Before discussing its potential functions, what, exactly, is indecision? In order to derive a definition of indecision, this section presents prevailing theory of how intendedly rational decision-makers behave, followed by the most commonly recognized barriers to rational choice. These challenges to rational choice lay the foundation for a theoretically grounded definition of indecision.

Decision-making and its discontents

The majority of conceptions of human decision-making see choice as an intendedly rational, consequentialist process (March, 1994, chapt. 1). In traditional neoclassical economics, decision-making proceeds according to a rational choice model in which agents seeking to maximize their utility rely on alternatives, expected outcomes, and preferences to determine their behavior (Mas-Colell et al., 1995, Part I). In this model, a decision-maker knows all possible choice alternatives, the outcome that would result from each of those alternatives (or at least the probability distribution of the possible outcomes that could result from each alternative), and the value (in terms of the decision-maker’s utility) of each of those outcomes. A decision-maker’s preferences in this model are assumed to be complete, transitive, consistent (as implied by the weak axiom of revealed preferences), independent of irrelevant alternatives, and exogenous to choice. A classically rational decision-maker evaluates all of her alternatives and selects the one with the highest expected utility.

Behavioral decision-making scholars have questioned each of these assumptions. First, the tenets of bounded rationality argue that agents often lack the information, time, or cognitive ability required to consider all possible decision alternatives (March, 1994, chapt. 1; March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1955). Second, the consequence of a given alternative, or even the probabilities of the various consequences that could arise from a given alternative, may not be completely or precisely known (Simon, 1955). Third, decision-makers may not maximize their utility. Instead, they may satisﬁce, searching for alternatives sequentially until they ﬁnd one “good enough” to meet a pre-determined aspiration threshold (Cyert & March, 1963/1992; March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1955). Finally, experimental research on choice has demonstrated the frequency with which revealed preferences violate assumptions of rationality by exhibiting sensitivity to arbitrary anchors (Ariely, Loewenstein, & Prelec, 2003), hyperbolic discounting (Loewenstein & Prelec, 1992; Read & Van Leeuwen, 1998; Thaler & Benartzi, 2004), intransitivity (Tversky, 1969), frame dependence (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Thaler, 1985; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986), and menu or context dependence (Tversky & Simonson, 1993).

Through this work, the field of behavioral decision-making has continually refined its understanding of how decisions happen. For the most part, these refinements have been variations on the theme that the decisions people make and the ways people make them cannot easily be reconciled with the precepts of rational choice. As a result, the field has long believed that incomplete knowledge of alternatives, incomplete knowledge of outcomes, and preferences that are often unclear, shifting, contradictory, or endogenous to choice make the catechism of expected utility theory and rational preference relations easier to recite than to believe (March, 1978; Simon, 1955). But while these observations have been taken as evidence of decision irrationality, few have considered their implications for decision facility. Why wouldn’t incomplete information, limited cognitive ability, and poorly behaved preferences render decision-making not only less rational, but also more difficult? Why wouldn’t the inability to meet the demands of rational choice give intendedly rational decision-makers discomfiting pause and impede their ability to choose at all? Herbert Simon considered these questions in Administrative Behavior:

If rationality is to be achieved, a period of hesitation must precede choice, during which the behavior alternatives, knowledge bearing on environmental conditions and consequences, and the anticipated values must be brought into the focus of attention.

...Considering the limitations, just described, in human capacity to meet the demands of rationality, the hesitation preceding choice could conceivably lengthen into inaction. The individual, realizing his inability to take into consideration all the factors relevant to his choice, and despairing of rationality, might vacillate among the available alternatives until the time for action was past. In fact, choice and action usually take place long before attention has been given even to those elements in the situation that are within grasp. A stimulus, external or internal, directs attention to selected aspects of the situation to the exclusion of competing aspects that might turn choice in another direction (Simon, 1947/1997, p. 101).

Simon spied the specter of indecision just long enough to dismiss it. He suggests that for an aspirant to rational choice the world may be paralyzingly complicated, but that usually aspirants to rational choice do not notice the complications. Their attention is focused enough, and their considerations are few enough, that they find the coherence required to act. This is consistent with most of the scholarship on cognitive biases and heuristics, which are thought to make decision-making less classically rational, but easier and faster (and, in some instances, better) (Gigerenzer & Brighton, 2009). While this is certainly often the case, the exceptions are notable. Furthermore, “despairing of rationality” can meaningfully affect or impede choice without necessarily resulting in inaction. That a vacillating patron at a restaurant manages to order before starving to death, or that a conflicted high school senior manages to pick a college before the deadline to go to college has passed, does not trivialize the ambivalence of either.

To illustrate how imperfect human rationality can meaningfully hinder decision-making, consider three examples from the literary world. First, when Proust observes that, “impelled by a state of mind which is destined not to last...we make our irrevocable decisions,” he is not only aware of inconsistent preferences, he is also troubled and fettered by them (Proust, 2002, p. 177). Second, when novelist Zadie Smith writes, “By forcing myself to reread ‘Crime and Punishment’... I now admire and appreciate Dostoyevsky, a writer...” (Addison, 2002, p. 216).
though, well into my late twenties, I was certain I disliked;” she understands that decisions sometimes determine preferences rather than result from them, and that this endogeneity of preferences to choice can complicate choosing (Smith, 2012, p. 32). Finally, consider Parapine, the old doctor in Céline’s Journey to the End of the Night. We are told that, “...[I]n twenty years, he had learned so many, so diverse, and so often contradictory things about typhoid that... he was just about unable to formulate any clear and definite opinion concerning that most commonplace ailment and its treatment” (Céline, 1934, p. 243). When the novel’s protagonist (also a doctor) asks Parapine for advice on how to treat his own typhoid patient, Parapine responds, “Among so many shaky theories and questionable experiments, reason, in the last analysis, forbids us to choose. Just do your best, colleague! Since you have to do something, do your best!” (p. 245). This is an acknowledgment of the well-known facts that information is often incomplete and the consequences of one’s behavior often cannot be anticipated reliably. It is also an acknowledgment of the less-researched facts that (a) increased information can lead to increased awareness of information incompleteness (i.e., the more we learn, the more we realize we do not know), and (b) awareness of incomplete information and unpredictable consequences can make action very difficult.

In life, as in novels, limitations to rationality sometimes do not operate surreptitiously, unbeknownst to the decision-maker, as much of the behavioral decision-making literature would suggest. Sometimes these limitations are noticed and, being noticed, make choosing thorny. We cannot always answer the questions we believe we need to answer in order to choose. We cannot always take the steps we believe we need to take.

**Defining indecision**

These complications to rational choice suggest a theoretical basis for understanding indecision, in part, as what happens when the needs or assumptions of the decision-making process go unmet. However, scholarly definitions of indecision have largely failed to reflect these known impediments to rational choice or to ground themselves in decision-making theory more broadly (an exception, based on normative, neoclassical models of decision-making, is Germeij & De Boeck, 2003). They have also failed to reach much consensus (Potworowski, 2010, chapt. 2). Like friendship, intelligence, love, and good taste, indecision has often seemed easier to recognize than to measure or define. Empirically, indecision has been operationalized as strength of preference for one option over another (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, & Wehrung, 1988), time to judgment (Yates, Lee, Shinotsuka, Patalano, & Sieck, 1998; Yates et al., 2010), procrastination and buck-passing (Mann et al., 1998), rating on the Frost-Shows Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993; Yates et al., 2010), and confidence in one’s choice (Yates et al., 2010). In Potworowski’s review of the implicit and explicit definitions of indecision from multiple disciplines over four decades, he found “no conceptual or operational thread that ties them together” (2010, p. 12). Instead, he found 10 distinct ideas, including: procrastination, difficulty deciding, an inability to decide, negative affect surrounding decisions, and unstable or changing commitments. Yates et al., acknowledging this conceptual heterogeneity, define indecision as “a state in which a person remains uncommitted to any particular course of action despite having acknowledged the need for some such commitment” (2010, p. 429).

Though this definition succinctly synthesizes prior work, it allows that nearly every decision is preceded by a period of indecision. From the time a decision-maker acknowledges her need to make a decision until the time she makes a decision—however quick or straightforward her process—this definition would classify her as engaged in indecision. Defining indecision this way, such that it is part of every decision-making process, merely takes the question “What is indecision?” and rephrases it as “What is too much indecision?”.

The problem of distinguishing between non-indecisive decision-making and indecision is vexing. To demarcate where decision-making ends and indecision begins, and to ground indecision in decision-making theory, indecision is defined here as follows:

*A state in which a decision-maker is attempting to make a decision without at least one element (typically information or alternatives) that he or she believes is necessary to do so, while also lacking confidence that the missing element(s) will be acquired before the decision deadline.*

Each part of this definition is examined in turn.

- **A state in which a decision-maker is attempting to make a decision.**
  Indecision is viewed here as an active state fueled by a desire to make a choice. This criterion excludes behaviors such as decision procrastination or avoidance (attempting not to make a decision) (Anderson, 2003; Mann, Burnett, Radford, & Ford, 1997), efforts to abdicate responsibility for a decision (attempting to get someone else to make a decision) (Mann et al., 1997, 1998), or strategic delay (having already made a decision to do nothing) (Adami & Perry, 1987). A decision-maker in a state of indecision is actively trying to decide.

- **Without at least one element (typically information or alternatives) that he or she believes is necessary to do so.**
  Theoretical and behavioral models of decision-making specify elements that are required if a decision is to be reached. Thus far, this paper has focused on neoclassical models of rational choice, in which these requirements tend to be informational and relatively extreme: knowledge of all decision alternatives, knowledge of the outcome that results from the selection of each alternative (or the likelihood of each possible outcome that could result from each alternative), a known value (in terms of a decision-maker’s utility) for each potential outcome, and clear and stable preferences (Mas-Colell et al., 1995, Part I). But even boundedly rational models of choice have requirements that, though less heroic than those of neoclassical models, are nonetheless substantial: a known aspiration level (you must know how good is good enough), a searchable set of decision alternatives including at least one that meets or exceeds one’s aspiration level (a good enough alternative must exist and you must be able to find it), the ability to appraise whether an alternative meets one’s aspiration level (when you come across an alternative, you must be able to know if it is good enough), and an aspiration level that can adapt downward until it is met or exceeded by a known alternative in the searchable choice set (if you cannot find an alternative that is good enough, you must be able to lower your standards for “good enough” until you can) (Cyert & March, 1963/1992; Simon, 1955).

Though these elements have been stated here in formal terms that most decision-makers are unlikely to employ, these formal specifications approximate answers that most decision-makers are likely to want before making a choice. These are answers to questions such as, What are my options? What do I want? What is likely to happen if I choose this option versus that one? How will I feel if that happens? Is this option the best I can do? Is this option good enough? Are my expectations unrealistic? Which of these questions are most pressing will depend,

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1 Alternatively, one may read the word “remains” in Yates et al.’s definition as suggesting that a lack of commitment to a course of action amounts to indecision only when that lack of commitment has gone on too long. But this interpretation raises the analogous question, “How long is too long?”
in part, on where a decision-maker falls on the spectrum from neoclassically rational maximizer to boundedly rational satisficer. But regardless of whether a particular decision-maker is more maximizer or satisficer (or coin-flipper, for that matter), what matters is whether a decision-maker believes he has what he requires to make a decision. If an intendedly rational decision-maker is satisfied with his answers to the questions that are relevant for him, a decision-maker actively trying to make a choice can proceed with relatively little hindrance and indecision is avoided. But as long as a decision-maker believes that these questions have not been answered satisfactorily, the choice process is stalled. And the decades of decision-making research discussed earlier in this section suggest that, at least sometimes, complete, accurate, and certain answers to all of these questions may be hard to come by.

- While also lacking confidence that the missing element(s) will be acquired before the decision deadline. Decision-making is a process. Given that theoretical and behavioral choice models require certain elements, one might reasonably assume that part of the decision-making process is obtaining those necessary elements through activities like information gathering, information processing, and alternative search. When a classically rational decision-maker faces a choice, there is no expectation that he should instantaneously know his preferences, his alternatives, the likely outcomes associated with each of those alternatives, or how he values each of those outcomes (Simon, 1947/1978, 1947/1997). When a boundedly rational decision-maker faces a choice, there is no expectation that he should instantaneously know his aspiration level or of an alternative that meets it (Cyert & March, 1963/1992). Most decision-makers understand that some information acquisition and analysis, or alternative identification, may be needed before an informed or acceptable decision can be reached. Doing that work may simply be part of making a decision (Simon, 1978). Consequently, a decision-maker actively trying to make a decision who lacks critical decision-making elements will not necessarily experience indecision; he may just believe he needs more time to complete a straightforward, or at least navigable, decision-making process. What differentiates the case of indecision is that confidence in one’s ability to acquire the necessary information or to discover a satisfactory decision alternative that will allow a decision to be made is low. One feels ill-equipped to choose and one believes this will not change before the decision deadline. Often this will be because a decision-maker has already made what he or she considers a reasonable attempt to gather the necessary information, to adapt his or her aspiration level, or to search for a satisfactory alternative, and this attempt proved unsuccessful. Alternatively, the decision-maker may be pessimistic from the start, seeing no particularly promising path to reaching a tolerable decision. In either case, the decision-making process has been flagged not just as difficult, but as problematic. The decision-maker feels stuck. The prospect of carrying out a sound and satisfying decision-making process seems dubious. Something critical is missing and is likely to remain missing, even after a (or another) good-faith try to find it.

It bears noting that doubt and hope are not mutually exclusive. During indecision the scales are tipped toward skepticism, but the decision-maker has retained enough optimism to continue the attempt to choose. Efforts in times of indecision persist in the shadows of doubt, but they persist. What an indecisive decision-maker does not possess, however, is confidence—confidence that after a bit of Googling or reflection, or after sleeping on it, or after a talk with the right person, he or she will be able to reach an acceptable decision.

This definition of indecision allows for the possibility that indecision will extend indefinitely into inaction or, alternatively, that it will be resolved. Resolution may occur in at least three ways: First, indecision may be resolved if the decision-maker stops attempting to make a decision. Second, indecision may be resolved if the decision-maker comes to believe that he or she has all necessary decision elements. For example, a decision-maker may acquire new information or discover a new alternative that provides what had been missing. Or, in the case of boundedly rational decision-makers, a satisficer may manage to budge a previously unshakable aspiration threshold such that a known alternative now meets or exceeds it. Finally, indecision may be resolved if a decision-maker becomes confident that the missing element will be acquired. This newfound optimism may be reasonable or delusional, but either way, indecision abates.

Indecision and the construction of self

Having defined indecision, we turn to one of its potential functions. In particular, we examine the possibility that indecision is an underexplored arena for identity formation. Moreover, we consider whether identity development in the context of indecision may lack the explicitness and consciousness that is typically thought to accompany this process.

Identity and its formation

Identities are complex and multi-layered, resulting from intrapsychic and interpersonal processes (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968). They include personal, relational, and collective levels of definition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), and they consist of meanings attached to the self by oneself and by others (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Individuals seek identities that are coherent over time (McAdams, 1996), and that strike an optimal balance of differentiation from others and connection to others (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; McAdams, 1996). The development of identity requires the accumulation, coordination, and integration of disparate information that originates within and without oneself. It requires the clarification of one’s own beliefs and values, as well as those of others. It requires work.

Alvesson and Willmott define “identity work” as, “...forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2002, p. 9). Consistent with other identity scholars (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987), Alvesson and Willmott suggest that
meaningful periods of identity work are often conscious and brought about by the perception that one’s identity is problematic or in flux. As they put it, “When a familiar feeling tone, associated with the sensation of ‘being myself’, becomes unsettled, feelings of tension, anxiety, shame or guilt arise. Occasionally a sense of contradiction, disruption, and confusion may become pervasive and sustained. Intensive remedial ‘identity work’ is then called for…” (2002, p. 9).

This paper argues that (a) indecision may present an alternative catalyst for identity work and that (b) identity work in the context of indecision may take a less conscious form. Indecisive decision-makers’ effortful reflections and dialogues about what they should do can naturally—yet obliquely—implicate questions of who they are or who they should be. As a result, indecision may be a propitious occasion for unwitting identity work.

Indecision as an arena for identity formation

This paper proposes three characteristics of indecision that make it a promising domain for inadvertent identity work.

(1) The quantity of deliberation and/or discourse during indecision is likely to be commensurate with meaningful identity work.

A decision-maker in a state of indecision is trying to make a decision while missing at least one decision element critical for doing so. Furthermore, the likelihood of acquiring the missing element(s) before the decision deadline appears low. It is unclear what a decision-maker in this situation is to do. This raises the question: What do people do when they don’t know what to do? This paper argues that they think and they talk to others about what they might do (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Omarzu, 2000; Yaniv, 2004). Contemplation and conversation about impending choice are the behavioral pillars of indecision. They are also fundamental to identity development (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Côté & Levine, 2002). Of course, contemplation and conversation about a decision are not behaviors exclusive to indecision (e.g., Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Feldman & March, 1981; Heath & Gonzalez, 1995; Kahneman, 2003). All but the most automatized actions are preceded by at least some thought, and one can talk about a decision without questioning whether one will ultimately be able to make it. However, the amount of cogitation and consultation is likely to be higher the more problematic a decision seems. There are at least three reasons for this. The first is necessity. Quandaries call for greater care than cakewalks, so the more a decision resembles a dilemma, the more deliberation or discourse its resolution is likely to demand. Second, indecision is typically accompanied by negative affect, such as feelings of anxiety, frustration, worry, distress, and fear (Elaydi, 2006; Frost & Shows, 1993). This emotional difficulty surrounding choice can be interpreted by decision-makers as a signal of a decision’s importance (Luce, Bettman, & Payne, 1997), which, in turn, may prompt more extensive and effortful decision processing (Schwarz, 1990). In other words, there may be a focus, attentiveness, and significance during times of indecision that are not necessarily present during other, less emotionally trying choice processes (Louis & Sutton, 1991). Because of their emotional state, indecisive decision-makers are motivated to invest more time, effort, and care in the choice at hand than they would be if they were less concerned. As a result, decision-makers are unusually disposed toward deliberation and discourse. Finally, during times of indecision, the actual and perceived social costs to cogitation and consultation may be reduced. Intractable decisions are socially sanctioned occasions to reflect and to approach others for guidance. Western culture is committed to the pursuit of right decisions; being thoughtful and consulting others when faced with a choice that one does not know how to make is an integral part of trying to make—and signaling that one is trying to make—the right choice (Feldman & March, 1981; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Though some may fear being perceived (by themselves or by others) as too contemplative, contemplation can seem more justified when the decision one faces has proved difficult. Similarly, though some cannot brook the thought of asking that another’s time be spent on their own decision (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), the request may be more palatable when it is a request borne of hardship. When decisions are more troublesome, they tend to encourage and excuse more chatter.

(2) The content and function of deliberation and discourse in the context of indecision will likely digress from rational decision-making toward identity work.

Like anyone with a problem, indecisive decision-makers have two primary ways of dealing with theirs: solve it or reduce the need to solve it. Luce et al. (1997) classify these alternatives as problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping and, in cases of indecision, both may lead to identity work.

Problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping entails traditional efforts to make a good decision. Given that the majority of decision-makers are thought (and encouraged) by the majority of decision-making scholars to aspire to some form of rationality (Bell, Raiffa, & Tversky, 1988; Hastie & Dawes, 2008; March, 1994; Simon, 1947/1997), this typically means focusing contemplation and conversation on tasks like gathering and processing information about existing decision alternatives, and searching for new decision alternatives. When a decision-maker possesses all necessary decision elements, or at least is optimistic about acquiring them, problem-focused coping is reasonably likely to end in choice. It is also unlikely to implicate identity. Once decisions have been made, post hoc interpretations and rationalizations may lead to identity work (Bem, 1967; Festinger, 1957; Weick, 1995), but during the unencumbered decision-making process itself, the focus is on alternatives, preferences, and expected outcomes.

In cases of indecision, however, the chances are low that an indecisive decision-maker will be able to use these problem-focused coping strategies to reach a rational decision. Force, finesse, or finagle all one wants, indecision is about being stuck. By definition, indecisive decision-makers are trying to make a decision while missing at least one critical decision element that they are skeptical they will be able to acquire before the decision deadline. They feel ill-equipped to decide and they expect they will remain ill-equipped to decide, often after having already put considerable effort into trying to decide. The sample of decisions is biased toward the irresolvable. And though in some cases continued contemplation or conversation will lead to an unforeseen breakthrough, this will likely be rare.

Though few scholars have addressed the consequences of being stuck in a rational choice process, March and Olsen have suggested that when decision-makers find classically rational or boundedly rational decision-making unmanageable, they may turn to their identities as part of a shift toward a more identity- or appropriate-ness-based approach to choice (2006). Finding the lever of rational decision-making jammed, a decision-maker sees if the lever of identity-based choice moves more freely. This is consistent with research showing that when individuals are in the kind of deliberative mindset typical of indecision, they are more receptive to a greater variety of information (both central and peripheral) than they are when they have the kind of implemental mindset
Much of a rational decision—taking, which are supported by minimal cultural and institutional bal-
to hold significantly less sway than the imperatives of rationality
and action, but also how they talk about them. Though alternative
influences (and reflects) not only how people think about decisions
1994, chapt. 1). Moreover, society’s devotion to rational choice
in Luce et al., 1997, p. 388). As long as a decision-maker remains
inward looks. This self-examination, aimed at resolving an intrac-
table decision, leads to self-development.

Emotion-focused coping. Along with problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping can also serve as a conduit to identity
work during times of indecision. Emotion-focused coping is an attempt to “change[ ] the subjective meaning of a situation” (Luce et al., 1997, p. 388) or “escape from the unpleasant state of conflict
induced by the decision problem itself” (Shepard, 1964, as quoted in
Luce et al., 1997, p. 388). As long as a decision-maker remains
in a state of indecision and does not respond to his negative affect
by avoiding his decision, several ways of coping with the stress,
conflict, and uncertainty induced by a refractory choice may result
in identity work (Carver & Scheier, 1999; Carver et al., 1989;
Omarzu, 2000; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000).
For example, attempts to change the subjective meaning of a situation
by learning from it (Carver et al., 1989), growing as a person
during a difficult situation (Carver et al., 1989), and figuring out
what one is really feeling (Stanton et al., 2000) can all be forms of
identity work. So, too, can discussing one’s feelings with friends
or relatives in an attempt to solicit emotional support (Carver et al.,
1989; Omarzu, 2000; Stanton et al., 2000). Absent indecision,
these emotion-focused coping mechanisms are unlikely to arise in
most choice situations. However, the distress of indecision can bring about these coping mechanisms, which in turn promote
identity formation.

(3) Though indecision may facilitate identity work, identity work
in the context of indecision will likely be implicit or subconscious.

Though indecision may channel both problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies toward concentrated identity work, it is
likely that identity work in the context of indecision will be inadvertent and unnoticed. In Western cultures, notions of intelligent
decision-making are closely linked to notions of rationality and consequentialist models of thought and action (March, 1971,
1994, chapt. 1). Moreover, society’s devotion to rational choice
influences (and reflects) not only how people think about decisions
and action, but also how they talk about them. Though alternative
modes for determining and justifying behavior exist, the impera-
tives of things like faith, intuition, tradition, duty, and rules tend
to hold significantly less sway than the imperatives of rationality
(March, 2006a). This is especially true of the imperatives of iden-
tity, which are supported by minimal cultural and institutional bal-
last. As James March wrote,

By far the most common portrayal of decision making is one
that interprets action as rational choice. The idea is as old as
thought about human behavior, and its durability attests not
only to its usefulness but also to its consistency with human
aspirations. Theories of rational choice, although often elabo-
rated in formal and mathematical ways, draw on everyday lan-
guage used in understanding and communicating about choices

In the case of an indecisive decision-maker, the initial and
ostensible motivation for her cogitations and consultations is a
choice. As a result, whatever thoughts and discourse indecision
brings forth—however identity-relevant—will likely be framed
and constrained by the structures of cognition and communication
that are imposed when an action is identified as “making a deci-
sion” (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Even if questions of self arise;
and even if decision-making behaviors veer toward an identity-
based logic, a decision-maker will probably think and speak as if
she is attempting to make a rational decision. This means that talk
of things like “alternatives,” “options,” “goals,” “objectives,”
“wants,” “preferences,” “outcomes,” “results,” and “consequences”
will be widespread. The scripts, schemata, and sacraments of
rational choice must be honored (Abelson, 1976; House, 1995;
Howard, 1995; McLeod & Lively, 2006), and genuflection at the
altar of consequentialist thought comes naturally.

Were the cognitive and behavioral demands of rational choice
less pervasive, than identity work in the context of indecision
may be more perceptible. Currently, we do not know enough about
how identity-driven decision-makers think and speak about their
decisions to know how likely they are to approach their decision
process with the same self-awareness as consequence-driven deci-
sion-makers. If they knowingly embraced an identity-based deci-
sion logic, then any identity work, though still decision-focused,
would perhaps be more conscious. Moreover, were the shift from
consequence-driven decision behavior to identity-driven decision
behavior an explicit one, indecision could very well subside. Once
the decision-making model changes, the elements required to
make a decision change; being mindful of switching to an iden-
tity-based model might be enough to make a decision workable,
or at least to give a decision-maker confidence that it will be.

Despite these speculations, there is little reason to think that a
decision-maker would knowingly abdicate his position as a
rational chooser—the habits, pressures, and predominance of
rational choice would seem too great. But social scripts and self-
conceptions aside, when the path to rational choice is blocked,
one would expect a shift toward identity. In the context of indeci-
sion, this sets the stage for an intricate dance whose semblance is
rational decision-making but whose substance is identity work.

Examples of identity formation during indecision

The remainder of this section illustrates identity development in
the context of indecision by presenting seven socio-cognitive tasks
that may arise during indecision and that facilitate identity work.
Consistent with process models of identity work, these tasks have
been categorized according to whether they primarily constitute
identity exploration or identity commitment (Grotevant, 1987; Luyckx,
Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). Identity exploration
tasks focus on gathering and evaluating information about one’s
current identity or one’s potential identities. Identity commitment
tasks focus on investing in or enacting an identity alternative.

Identity exploration

Exploring and discovering one’s self. Much of a rational decision-
maker’s conscious behavior is focused on identifying action
alternatives and assessing their relative merits. But by the time a
decision-maker is in a state of indecision, relevant new alterna-
tives, useful new information about existing alternatives, and
new information about preferences will likely be rare. This can
seemingly result in attempts to understand decision alternatives
that are already understood, or in the redundant gathering and analyzing of information. But these apparently futile and repetitive efforts can lead to valuable identity exploration. When questions about what one prefers or what will happen if one selects a particular alternative or whether an expected outcome is good enough are unanswerable, decision-makers invariably—if unwittingly—begin to ask proximal questions about what they feel, believe, might want, fear, hope for, have done before, and value. As such, the process of attempting to understand nebulous action alternatives and preferences gives way to one of the “key processes involved in identity formation” (Grotevant, 1987, p. 204; see also Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001; Luyckx et al., 2006; Marcia, 1966, 1988), namely, “problem solving behavior aimed at eliciting information about oneself…” (Grotevant, 1987, p. 204; see also Berzonsky, 1989, 2006). This behavior may be intrapsychic, through introspection. It may also be interpersonal. The friends, relatives, and mentors we consult can function as mirrors that help us better see ourselves (Omarzu, 2000). Alternatively, those who know us well may draw on their experience to propose their own conceptions of who we are (Tice & Wallace, 2003). Regardless of whether we then accept, alter, or vehemently reject these conceptions, they are clarifying.

Indecisive individuals are sometimes accused of cycling endlessly through alternatives, trying repeatedly to evaluate the attractiveness of each in the unlikely hope that a single alternative will suddenly emerge choice-worthy. They contemplate and discuss their decisions repeatedly, even though each bout of reflection and dialogue often appears to provide little new, decision-relevant information. As a result, the thoughts and conversations that characterize indecision are often seen as superfluous, ineffectual wastes of time. However, this seemingly repetitious, foolhardy behavior may be a guise for tacit processes of self-discovery and value-clarification. During these times, it is not the traditional decision-making process that develops, but rather the decision-makers themselves.

Learning the beliefs, values, and behaviors of others. Just as indecision can prompt identity construction through self-exploration and self-discovery, it can also be an impetus toward a more shared construction of one's identity. Much has been written about the role of others in the creation of one’s self (in psychology, see Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Berzonsky, 1989; Berzonsky, 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Erikson, 1959; Grotevant, 1987; Marcia, 1966; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; for examples from sociology’s social interactionists and identity theorists, see Baldwin, 1897; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Dunn, 1997 (for a review); Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; Mead, 1934; Strauss, 1959/1997; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1982; see also Coté & Levine, 2002 for a synthesis across disciplines). Interactions with others can contribute to identity construction not only by helping to clarify a decision-maker’s own beliefs about his or her self, but also by providing external attitudes, values, behaviors, and stories that may then be internalized (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In their paper including others in the self, Aron et al. discuss the extent to which “people include in their self the resources, perspectives, and identities of close others” (2004). Other social psychologists have demonstrated how individuals adopt the goals and attitudes of people who are important to them (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

When a decision is relatively straightforward, a decision-maker is less likely to discuss it with friends, relatives, and counselors. And in the event that he or she does, the conversations are likely to remain on task, in large part because the decision-relevant questions being asked can be addressed. In the case of indecision, however, a decision-maker is asking those who care about him to answer questions they most likely cannot answer. When mentors, loved ones, priests, rabbis, therapists, and bartenders are asked for help they cannot give, they tend to give what help they can. In the case of indecision, this often means advice and stories that transmit attitudes, values, and behaviors that are integral to a socially constructed identity. Though the subject at hand is purportedly, “What should I do?” the difficulty of answering that question squarely makes it more likely that information about “Who should I be?” will arise—albeit tangentially, haphazardly, or inconspicuously. From the perspective of decision-making, these conversations may appear fruitless or static, but they are nonetheless fundamental to building one’s self.

Assessing (and influencing) identity appropriateness and durability. Having a poorly defined or constantly shifting identity is stressful (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Holland & Holland, 1977; Kroger, 2006). In times of identity work, part of what one seeks is an identity that will endure and feel positive for the foreseeable future. Since an identity’s desirability depends, in part, on how it is received by those we care about (Berzonsky, 1989, 2008; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), understanding how others would react to our possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is fundamental to identity development. Indecision encourages decision-makers to apprise others of, and involve others in, their decision-making process to an extent that less problematic decision-making does not. This appraisal and involvement then carries certain implications for how one is to be treated after a decision is made. When a wedding officiant asks guests for objections, the deal is clear: speak now or forever hold your peace. An indecisive decision-maker who asks, “What if I did this?” or who says, “I’m considering doing that for this reason” is submitting potential actions and decision rationales for examination and appraisal. Though repeatedly and inconclusively speculating about answers to the questions that a rational chooser is supposed to be able to answer may seem in vain, each round of speculation provides an opportunity to discern and secure how a decision-maker will be judged should a given choice be carried out or a given rationale adopted. Moreover, beyond assessing how one will be viewed, this process can also influence that view positively. By offering textured, detailed information that communicates their thoughtfulness, thoroughness, hopes, insecurities, and concerns, decision-makers increase the likelihood that they will be treated more favorably once they act (Baumeister, 1982; Omarzu, 2000).

Identity commitment

Affirming and building relationships. An indecisive decision-maker’s disquiet, combined with indecision’s inherent intransigence, mean that an indecisive decision-maker’s conversations about his choice will tend to reveal insecurity and struggle in ways that conversations about more manageable decisions may not. This confession of doubt and strain lends conversations about indecision a component of self-disclosure that conversations about other decisions tend to lack. As a result, the very act of consulting others in times of indecision can form one’s identity by developing the relationships that define who one is (Omarzu, 2000). Involving a person in one’s difficult decisions is a sign of closeness. Divulging vulnerability, uncertainty, or difficulty can facilitate intimacy, build or affirm connection, and increase mutual liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Omarzu, 2000). By approaching friends, family, and mentors, an indecisive decision-maker confirms their importance in his or her life. By spending time on the indecisive person’s dilemma, friends, family, and mentors confirm the importance of the decision-maker in their lives. Even if decision-makers were to leave these conversations seemingly no closer to making a decision, they may leave with a clearer understanding of who they are by having affirmed and strengthened their defining relationships.
Constructing a personal narrative. Scholars have emphasized the importance of stories and narratives for creating identities of unity, purpose, and meaning (McAdams, 1996). Of those stories, the most “mature and psychologically valuable... display coherence, openness, credibility, differentiation, reconciliation, and generative integration” (McAdams, 1993, p. 166). Typically, researchers have assumed that the most profound episodes of narrative construction in the service of identity occur consciously, during times of significant personal change or transition (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). As McAdams put it, “During times of significant transition, identity work may move to the front burner of everyday consciousness... During other periods of marked stability in the life course, however, the person may do no more than occasionally tweak and edit the story. During these quiescent times, little of identity significance may occur” (McAdams, 1999, p. 486).

Though more stable times may lack explicit identity struggles, they may nonetheless contain periods of indecision that result in the significant advancement of personal narratives. In Acts of Meaning, Jerome Bruner emphasizes the importance of studying not only “what people actually do, but what they say they do and what they say caused them to do what they did” (1990, p. 16). Stories and narratives are critical to justifying and understanding decisions (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Czarniawska, 1997; Fisher, 1987; O'Connor, 2002; Pennington & Hastie, 1988). People seek to make decisions in the context of coherent stories that are complete, consistent, and plausible. The reasons for a decision and the meaning of a decision can be at least as fundamental to a decision-maker as the substance of the decision itself. Articulating storied decision frames and justifications are an integral part of choice, and these decision-narratives are inextricably linked with personal narratives.

The importance of narrative is redoubled during periods of indecision, when one’s cognitive mode is deliberative (Louis & Sutton, 1991) and a justification for choosing one alternative over the others is not obvious. During periods of indecision, individuals may appear to shuffle through the same alternatives again and again, discovering nothing new about their pros or cons that would be relevant for a rational chooser, but each cycle develops that much further the potential narrative that would accompany or justify a given alternative. Through time, research, conversation, and imagination, some stories are edited and elaborated while others are discarded. As decision-makers contemplate alternatives, they develop a narrative of their behavior; as they develop a narrative of their behavior, they develop their identity.

Preparing a part. In addition to developing a narrative, a viable identity also requires enacting one’s narrative with reasonable fidelity. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman describes the performative, dramaturgical aspects of identity (1959). According to Goffman, one’s character is staged, and if it is to be staged successfully, then one’s activities, facts, motives, and gestures must appear coherent and credible (1959, chapters. 1 and 6). Goffman’s comparison of self-presentation to dramatic performance is compelling, but the analogy can be taken further. Actors do more than just perform; actors rehearse.

Hermina Ibarra notes the importance of rehearsal for identity development by describing how possible selves become actualized selves by first passing through a period as provisional selves. During the provisional stage, selves are “rehearsed and refined with experience” (Ibarra, 1999, p. 767). Repeatedly contemplating and discussing possible decision alternatives is a form of identity rehearsal that is better served by indecision than by more orderly instances of decision-making. During indecision, people consider potential actions and rationales through reiteration with variation, thinking about them and describing them in different ways at different times to different people. These various decision alternatives and justifications function like lines in a play, and with each revisiting people increasingly come to understand what the lines say, what kind of person says these lines, and how to say these lines more fluently. They practice different actions and motivations that they understand to be consistent with a given character, while at the same time focusing their understanding of that character by observing the practice of those actions and motivations.

Life, of course, does not offer the same opportunities for rehearsal that a play does, but nonetheless, indecision offers a chance to experiment a bit in relative safety before meeting the scrutiny of the stage—running lines and blocking moves in the mirror or with friends before facing a less forgiving audience (Ashforth, 2001, p. 47; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010); imagining, talking through, and trying out language and behaviors to assess their compatibility with, and implications for, one’s character. Under the pretense of rational decision-making, indecision provides a lower-stakes opportunity to practice a role so that it may ultimately be assumed more fully and authentically (Ashforth, 2001, p. 42–49). What from the perspective of decision-making may look redundant is no more redundant than following a read through with a dry run with a dress rehearsal with a preview performance with opening night. Getting comfortable enough with an identity to play it convincingly takes time and practice.

Saying goodbye to our selves. There is a French proverb that says, “To choose is to die a little.” This proverb speaks to our unfortunate inability to hedge actions and identities like we hedge investments, diversifying ourselves into all the lives that allure us and might pay off. As the confines of geography, religion, gender, family, and even physical reality bend less and less, all the different actions and selves that could be ours become more salient (Arnett, 2002; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Beck, 1992; Hammad, 2008). Esther Greenwood, the narrator in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, describes the predicament:

> From the tip of every branch, like a far purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them but choosing one meant losing all the rest... (Plath, 1971, p. 77).

Though some choices allow us to assume multiple identities concurrently, others require that at least some identities be let go. The prospect of relinquishing or diminishing possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) can fuel indecision’s duration and psychological strain (Holland & Holland, 1977; Plath, 1971, p. 93–94, 101). Some individuals struggle to forego one appealing self, even if it is the only way to sustain an even more appealing self. For others, assuming one positive identity can be less attractive than envisioning five. Choice can be a precipice past which a single possible self will emerge actualized, while all other possible selves must fall to the ground below, landing in a heap of what might have been. When this is the case, repeatedly regarding or discussing an action alternative may be part of burying and mourning an identity that will forever lie in the graveyard of counterfactuals. Given the

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5 “Choisir, c’est mourir un peu.”
frequency and fervor with which ghosts from this graveyard haunt one’s life (Obodaru, 2012), a slowness to inter alternatives should come as no surprise.

Conclusion

Indecision has never received much praise or championing. In the 17th century, Descartes described the importance of acting “without delay” and avoiding the tendencies of “weak and vacillating minds,” even when one is not at all confident what course of action is best (Descartes, 1633/2006, p. 22–23). He likened not knowing what to do to being a traveler lost in a forest. Such travelers ... must not wander in circles first to one side then to the other, and still less stop in one place, but have to walk as straight as possible in one direction, and not alter course for weak reasons, even if it might only have been chance which had led them to settle on the direction they had chosen; for by this means, even if they do not end up precisely where they want to be, they will eventually reach somewhere where they will most likely be better off than the middle of a forest (Descartes, p. 22).

At the end of the 19th century, William James said that, “There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision” (James, 1890/1981, p. 126). Four hundred years after Descartes and 125 years after James, views of indecision are scarcely more positive (Denis et al., 2011; Frost & Shows, 1993; Savickas, 1995; Weick, 1995, p. 153). But while one hand exorcises the blight of indecision, the other exults the blessings of identity. A well-defined and legitimate identity has been shown to be beneficial for (among other things) meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996), developing intimate relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010), and ontological and existential security (Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall, 2004). As individuals, it is important to know who we are.

This paper has argued that sometimes while we look uneasily for what to do, we end up forming who we are. The contemplations and conversations characteristic of indecision can contribute to identity construction. That said, cognitive and cultural preoccupations with rational decision-making mean that individuals may not recognize, let alone appreciate, these periods of identity development for what they are.

The relationship between indecision and identity proposed in this paper suggests several potential implications for students of decision-making and identity formation. Within the field of decision-making, scholars may want to consider paying more attention to indecision. This paper has introduced a definition of indecision that builds on decision research and underscores the known obstructions to rational choice. Moving forward, it would be helpful to broaden our understanding of what causes indecision. For example, research on the primary individual determinants of indecision (e.g., Leong & Chervinko, 1996; Slaney, 1988) could be expanded. Moreover, the cultural and decision-related determinants of indecision could be explored. It is also important to understand when the reputational costs to indecision are so high that it must be avoided, repressed, or at least concealed. This concern may be particularly salient in managerial contexts, where, “The rhetoric ... is a rhetoric of decisiveness, certainty, and clarity. Managers are usually expected to represent confusions as clarified, contradictions as resolved, estimates as certain, and doubts as driven out” (March, 2006b). Can managers occupy a state of indecision long or meaningfully enough to reap its potential benefits? The subject of managerial indecision also raises the question of level of analysis. This paper has focused on individual indecision and individual identity formation. How might these constructs interact at the group or organizational level?

Further examination of the relationship between indecision and identity will be particularly relevant for understanding the process of identity work, which could influence the identity development process. Similarly, Alvesson and Willmott identify five “over-identities” that might influence the identity development process: (a) owner, (b) employee, (c) consumer, (d) stakeholder, and (e) citizen. These identities may influence the way in which individuals perceive their roles within organizations and the decisions they make. Moreover, the relationship between how indecisive decision-makers translate questions of identity into the language of rational decision-making (and vice versa) is critical to understanding the connection between indecision and self. One place to begin exploring this translation may be the idea of preferences. In the economics literature, preferences are often treated as akin to wants, tastes, and even values. What is the relationship between what one prefers, wants, and values and who one is? What are the mechanisms through which ostensible attempts to ascertain the former may clarify the latter?

Lastly, this paper conforms to a deviant tradition of decision-making scholarship that considers questions beyond (a) Which decision alternative was selected? and (b) How was the decision alternative selected? Though these customary questions no doubt deserve their place of prominence, to see decisions as the point of decision-making is to see orgasms as the point of love-making. Decisions should probably happen eventually and we should note when and how they do, but we may live better if they are not our sole focus, if we do not put too high a premium on reaching them quickly, and if we value the sometimes sinuous roads we travel to get to them for virtues immaterial to where those roads lead. A scholarship that neglects decision-making’s more nuanced plentitude will necessarily be diminished.

Within the field of identity research, the suggestion that indecision can lead to meaningful yet unwitting identity work calls for further examination of identity formation processes of which people may not be particularly aware. Rather than assuming that concentrated identity work must be mindful and mindless identity work must be minimal (McAdams, 1999), scholars may want to consider what and how situations may trigger identity development that is intensive yet potentially unrecognized. Furthermore, how might the results of identity work differ depending on whether the work was explicit or inadvertent? Perhaps when identity development is tacit it is less enduring simply because it is more difficult to be committed to an outcome when one is not aware of it and when it resulted from a process one did not knowingly undergo. On the other hand, if identity development is conscious, it is more likely that its outcome can be articulated to oneself and to others, which can serve as a powerful commitment mechanism (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

Additionally, it remains to be clarified how different characteristics of indecision could lead to different forms of identity construction. For example, beyond individual variance in how inclined people are to contemplate versus converse, it may be that the more embarrassing or sensitive a decision, the more inclined a decision-maker is to deliberate rather than discuss it. Deliberation is more conducive to acts of self-exploration and narrative construction than to acts of relationship affirmation or interpersonal identity work, which could influence the identity development process. Similarly, Alvesson and Willmott identify five “overlapping and interrelated ways of constructing and exploring identity: central life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, and social values” (2002, p. 8). Which of these forms of identity construction is emphasized during a period of indecision may...
depend on a combination of the decision being faced, the extent to which an indecisive decision-maker engages in contemplation versus discourse, and the socio-cognitive tasks on which a decision-maker spends the most time.

Apart from any potential ramifications for decision and identity research, developing a greater awareness of indecision’s possible role in identity formation may offer potential benefits outside the academic realm. One such benefit is a reduction in negativity surrounding indecision. By understanding that indecision can be about identity work and that identity work is crucial and time-intensive, individuals may become more understanding of a process often critiqued as long, halting, and profitless. There may also be a reduction in anxiety, frustration, and pain when the focus shifts from alternatives that refuse to sort themselves by desirability, to identity development, in which a person can see possibility and progress. A second potential benefit is that by better understanding what we are doing, we may begin to do it better. The considerations that are most relevant for identity development and the considerations that are most relevant for identifying and evaluating decision alternatives may not be the same.

In addition to becoming more bearable and productive, it is not unfathomable that indecision could also be a source of pleasure. Difficult decisions provide a socially sanctioned excuse to reflect and converse with mentors, friends, colleagues, and loved ones. Ostensibly, the topic is the decision at hand and the aim is to make a “better” decision or the “right” decision. But deliberation does not always improve decisions (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & Van Baaren, 2006; Wilson & Schooler, 1981; Wilson et al., 1993) and advice that is sought is often ignored (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Feldman & March, 1981; Heath & Gonzalez, 1995). On the other hand, thinking and talking about difficult decisions can be instrumental to constructing identity. The more intransigent the decision at hand, the broader the scope of relevance becomes, and the more likely fundamental questions of identity and existence are to arise. Contemplating fundamental questions and discussing them with the important people in our lives can be a joy; one that pairs well with wine or walks.

Indecision can also be an opportunity to exercise imagination in the service of self-invention. The human soul, restive with dreams, finds the vague promise of self-creation a consistent and powerful lure. Indecision is an invitation to get to know and be seduced by possible selves; a chance to ask not only, Who am I?, but also, Who could I be? and Who do I want to be? In a 2004 interview with The Paris Review, author Haruki Murakami said, “I always hope to position myself away from so-called conclusions. I would like to leave everything wide open to all the possibilities in the world.” (2009). It may be unwise to inhabit such an expansive world. (2009). It may be unwise to inhabit such an expansive world.

References


