Positive Illusions of Preference Consistency: When Remaining Eluded by One's Preferences Yields Greater Subjective Well-Being and Decision Outcomes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

protecting decision makers from self-defacing knowledge, may facilitate effective coping strategies for handling a complex and stressful consequential decision-making process. Building on this prior research, we hypothesize that illusions of preference consistency will increase subjective well-being by reducing negative affect and enhancing satisfaction with the decision outcome.

Moreover, the reduction in decision makers' experience of negative affect through the illusion of preference consistency may provide tangible benefits as well. Positive illusions have been shown to improve immune system functioning (Segerstrom et al., 1998), lower heart attack rates (Helgeson, 2003), increase the longevity of romantic relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b), and enhance scholastic achievement (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999). Accordingly, we expect that the particular illusion of preference consistency will serve as a protective mechanism that facilitates enhanced decision outcomes. Specifically, by maintaining illusions of preference consistency, decision makers may curb the typical anxiety and self-deprecation associated with indecision and actual preference fluctuation. Because the expression of negative emotions can lead others to ascribe such undesirable traits as weakness and incompetence to the individual (Tiedens, 2001), the reduction of negative affect produced by an illusion of preference consistency can presumably manage others' impressions of one's competence, which in turn yields concrete benefits, such as greater access to opportunities (Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). Therefore, we predict that decision makers' lowered negative affect will mediate the relationship between the presence of the illusion of preference consistency and positive appraisals of competence bestowed by others.

Thus, the current investigation tests the following four hypotheses: (a) Decision makers will exhibit a lack of awareness about the incongruities comprising their preferences throughout the decision-making process and instead harbor an illusion of preference consistency measured by a self-perception of preference stability; (b) decision makers harboring the illusion of preference consistency will experience less negative affect and greater outcome satisfaction than their more self-aware counterparts; (c) harboring the illusion of preference consistency will enable decision makers to experience enhanced performance outcomes, particularly those involving external appraisals of competence; and (d) decreased negative affect will mediate the effect of the illusion of preference consistency on performance outcomes.

We chose to test these hypotheses among graduating students searching for employment, as this naturalistic context involves a desire for preference consistency as well as a high degree of revealed *in*consistency in expressed preferences. Although most students are relative novices in the job-search process, and have not yet established well-defined preferences (Johnson, 2001a, 2001b; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979), the process of identifying characteristics of preferable jobs is consequential in that it has significant repercussions for their self-identity, their financial well-being, and how they will spend a large portion of their time (Galinsky & Fast, 1966; Super, 1951, 1953, 1984; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). In this decision context, therefore, while positive self-views should hinge upon self-perceptions of preference consistency, displays of preference inconsistency are quite likely. By comparing job seekers' beliefs of preference stability with actual malleability in revealed preferences and then relating unrealistic beliefs of stability to their affective experiences, we were able to assess the impact of upholding positive illusions on external appraisals of competence (i.e., as indicated through the number of job offers received) through the measure of affective experience.

Study 1

Method

Overview

On three occasions (T1, T2, and T3), we measured job seekers' preferences regarding prospective job attributes and compared these against their perceptions of how consistent these reported attributes were across the duration of the decision process. We then analyzed the effects of perceived and revealed preference consistency on choosers' affective experiences related to the search, as well as job search performance.

Participants

Graduating students (predominantly undergraduate seniors) were recruited from 11 colleges and universities, representing a range of geographical regions, school sizes, and academic quality levels. Women comprised 69.7% of the sample, a proportion that remained constant across the three survey periods (in T2, 69.4% and in T3, 69.6%). The median age of participants was 21 (range: 20–57). Sixty-four percent of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 26% Asian, and 10% other ethnicities. Twenty-six different academic majors were represented in our participant sample, including the social sciences (19%), arts/humanities (12%), engineering (12%), and business (10%). Five hundred and forty-eight job seekers completed the first survey; at T2 and T3 response rates were 69.5 and 56% of the original sample, respectively.[1] To incentivize higher response rates, par-

[1] Attrition analyses revealed that females ($\beta = -0.503$, $p = .040$), science majors ($\beta = -1.26$, $p = .001$), and children of non-American parents ($\beta = -0.607$, $p = .003$) were less likely than their counterparts to complete the second survey. Negative affect expressed during T2 was significantly related to attrition at T3 ($\beta = -0.142$, $p = .037$).

ticipants who completed all three surveys were entered into a raffle for a chance to win one of five study-end prizes of US$ 200 each.

Procedures

The career services offices of the 11 participating colleges and universities directed students to our survey website in fall 2001 as the students began their job searches (T1). Next, e-mails with links to the T2 and T3 online surveys were sent to T1 participants in February 2002, as they were completing applications, interviewing, and getting offers (T2), and then in May 2002, as they were accepting job offers (T3). To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were not requested. Instead, we used e-mail addresses to match participants' responses across the three surveys, since participants were required to provide their e-mail addresses in order to log in to each survey.

Measures

Revealed preference consistency. At all three time periods, participants were prompted to provide a list of the job-related attributes most important to them. Specifically, participants were instructed to "Please list up to 10 characteristics/attributes that describe the job you ideally would like to get out of this search process." To assess revealed preference consistency between T1 and T3, we calculated the following ratio for each participant:

$$\text{Revealed preference consistency between T1 and T3} = \frac{\#\text{of attributes reported in both T1 and T3}}{\text{Total \# of distinct attributes reported across the pool of T1 and T3 responses}}$$

We then repeated this formula to calculate revealed preference consistency ratios between T1:T2 and T2:T3.[2] Since the three revealed preference consistency measures were correlated with one another (see Table 1), in regression models of our T3 outcome variables, we included the predictor that captured revealed preference consistency across the full time period (T1:T3).

Perceived preference consistency. Participants' beliefs regarding the stability of their desired job attributes were assessed through a one-item measure gathered at both T2 and T3: "My preferences about the job that I ideally want/-ed to get out of this search process have remained unchanged throughout the past few months." Job seekers provided ratings from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). In regression analyses of T3 outcome variables, we used the perceived preference consistency measure (T3), which best corresponded with the included T1–T3 revealed preference consistency measure.

Negative affect. Participants' negative affect was measured at both T2 and T3. At T2, they were asked: "To what extent does each of the following describe how you are generally feeling about the job search process?" and then rated each of the following seven emotions from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely) ($\alpha = 0.89$): "pessimistic," "stressed," "tired," "anxious," "worried," "overwhelmed," and "depressed." At T3, they were asked the same question again; however, for those who had accepted job offers, the question was modified to read: "To what extent does each of the following describe how you are feeling about the offer you accepted and your upcoming new job?" Here, three more emotions were added to this measure ($\alpha = 0.92$): "regretful," "disappointed," and "frustrated."

Outcome satisfaction. For those participants who had accepted job offers by the T3 survey, we assessed outcome satisfaction via three items: (a) "How satisfied are you with the offer you have accepted?"; (b) "How confident are you that you made the right choice about where to work next year?"; and (c) "I wish I had pursued more options in my job search process." All responses were rated from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very satisfied), (very confident), and (very much), respectively, with the third item reverse scored. Intercorrelations were $\alpha = 0.75$, allowing us to create one composite measure. As such questions did not apply to participants who had not yet accepted job offers by the T3 survey, these participants were not included in analyses of this dependent measure.

Job search performance. Consistent with prior research (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001), we used number of job offers as our measure of employment outcome. At T3, participants listed the employer name and position title of each job offer received, allowing us to tabulate offer totals for each respondent. According to our analysis, then, this data serves as a proxy for how positively evaluated the subject was by others in positions to bestow desired opportunities. By T3, 47.4% of the respondents had zero offers, 33.6% had one offer, 13.5% had two offers, 3.5% had three offers, and 2.1% had four offers.

Demographics and other control variables. The questionnaires controlled for the following individual differences: demographic information (age, sex, ethnicity, family income level, university affiliation, and geographic

[2] Our Study 1 measures of revealed preference consistency in reported preferences might have been sensitive to the number of distinct preferences an individual mentioned across each preference pool. These values also varied across individuals; therefore, we tested all models for the predictive value of including the relevant total number(s) of distinct preferences. These variables had no significant main or moderating effects on the dependent measures or moderators of the main effects of the core revealed preference consistency measures, thus we did not include them in the models.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 1 variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1. Revealed preference consistency T1:T2	0.31	0.21	—																				
2. Revealed preference consistency T2:T3	0.31	0.22	.32***	—																			
3. Revealed preference consistency T1:T3	0.26	0.19	.32***	.37***	—																		
4. Perceived preference consistency T2	5.95	2.28	.06	.19**	.08	—																	
5. Perceived preference consistency T3	5.56	2.49	.07	.12++	.07	.40***	—																
6. Negative affect T2	5.12	1.77	.05	−.04	−.05	−.22***	−.27***	—															
7. Negative affect T3	4.22	1.82	−.01	−.02	.02	−.11[a]	−.24***	.52***	—														
8. Outcome satisfaction	6.77	1.63	.08	.11	.19+	.16[a]	.40***	−.43**	−.52***	—													
9. Number of job offers received T3	0.79	0.95	−.00	.04	−.06	.04	.12+	−.17**	−.35***	.02	—												
10. New York city resident	0.19	0.39	.01	−.02	.05	−.06	−.09	.13+	−.03	−.02	.05	—											
11. S had accepted an offer by T2	0.12	0.33	−.05	.06	−.02	.12+	.19**	−.28**	−.26***	.21+	.54***	.00	—										
12. Ivy League Student	0.33	0.47	.03	.02	.09	−.04	−.06	.03	−.14+	.03	.17**	.70***	.09+	—									
13. Number of interviews received at T3	2.47	4.37	−.06	.05	−.04	.02	.00	−.06	−.16**	.07	.39***	.13+	.36***	.19**	—								
14. S had accepted an offer by T3	0.48	0.50	−.01	−.01	−.11[a]	.08	.19**	−.18**	−.54***	—	.69***	.05	.50***	.15+	.32***	—							
15. South Asian/South Asian-American ethnicity	0.06	0.24	−.02	.04	.06	−.07	−.04	−.00	.04	−.14	.01	.09+	.05	.11+	.01	.06	—						
16. Salary (in US-$10K)	4.11	1.39	−.15	.11	.05	.14	.03	−.18+	−.09	.21+	.18+	.38***	.44***	.39***	.19+	—	.20+	—					
17. School × dummy variable	0.04	0.20	−.00	.00	.05	−.05	−.11[a]	−.00	.04	.03	−.11[a]	−.10+	−.05	−.15**	−.05	−.11[a]	−.05	−.10	—				
18. Consulting industry interest	0.07	0.25	−.04	.05	.07	−.06	−.08	.01	−.02	−.02	.20**	.01	.16**	.06	.16**	.10[a]	.12+	.14	.03	—			
19. Arts/entertainment/media industry interest	0.13	0.34	.11+	.03	−.02	−.06	−.07	.09[a]	−.01	−.26**	−.16**	.14**	−.17**	.09[a]	−.11[a]	−.13+	−.02	−.17+	.01	−.10+	—		
20. Age	22.37	3.06	−.09[a]	−.02	.06	.05	−.01	−.06	.06	−.03	−.12+	.14**	−.08[a]	.02	−.08	−.12+	−.04	.02	−.08[a]	−.01	−.04	—	
21. GPA in major	3.45	0.39	.00	.14+	.10	−.02	.02	−.08	−.23***	.21+	.16+	.13+	.19***	.19***	.01	.22***	−.01	.20+	.08	.04	.11+	−.02	—

[a] $p < .10$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.
+ $p < .05$.

location), academic standing (major, overall GPA), and job-related activities, including the number of applications/resumes job seekers anticipated submitting, industry interests, sector affiliation of accepted job offers, and current job search status.

Results

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for variables used in analyses. Initially, regressions were conducted including all demographic variables as controls; however, the analyses reported below controlled for only those demographic and control variables that proved significant.[3]

Perceived versus revealed preference consistency

Throughout the job search process, the average job seekers' perceived preference consistency was above the midpoint of the scale; mean scores were 5.95 at T2 and 5.56 at T3. However, as suggested by prior scholars (e.g., Shafir & LeBoeuf, 2002; Slovic, 1995), decision makers exhibited considerable variation throughout the decision-making process in the job attributes they reported valuing. An examination of revealed preference consistency from T1:T3 showed that only an average of 26% of T1-reported attributes reappeared at T3, while a comparable 31% of expressed attributes reappeared across both T1:T2 and T2:T3. Moreover, consistent with predictions from prior research (e.g., Langer, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Wilson, 2002), perceived and revealed preference consistency proved uncorrelated at both T2 (partial $r(355) = 0.06$, ns) and T3 (partial $r(253) = .11$, ns).[4]

These results indicate that perceptions of preference consistency, trending toward the higher end of the scale, were independent from the low degree of revealed preference consistency that characterized the sample, providing support for a prevalence of an illusion of preference consistency among the studied population. Consequently, for subsequent regression analyses, the main effect of perceived preference consistency represents the illusion's impact on outcomes. In addition to examining main effects of perceived preference consistency, however, we also looked at whether the effects of the illusion of preference consistency depended on relative levels of revealed preference consistency within the sample. Where regression analyses revealed a significant interaction term between perceived and revealed preference consistency, we used the criterion of holding revealed preference consistency at one standard deviation above and below the mean levels reported above to describe results for "low" and "high" revealed preference consistency with respect to this particular sample's central tendency.

Negative affect

Results show that the perception of preference stability was correlated with reduced levels of negative affect at both T2 and T3 (see Tables 2 and 3 for complete model details). Regression analyses of the T3 variable yielded a simple main effect for perceived preference consistency ($\beta = -0.15$, $t(262) = -2.88$, $p < .01$), but not for revealed preference consistency ($\beta = -0.01$, $t(262) = 0.00$, ns). Every one-unit increase in perceived preference consistency (T3) was associated with a 0.11 decrease in negative emotions at T3. The effect of T2 perceived preference consistency on T2 negative affect, however, was conditional on two factors: (a) whether or not a job had been accepted early on in the search process (at T2) and (b) the level of revealed preference consistency. In addition to significant effects for perceived preference consistency at T2 ($\beta = -0.35$, $t(351) = -4.19$, $p < .001$), and revealed preference consistency T1:T2 ($\beta = -0.34$, $t(351) = -2.48$, $p = .01$), the regression model of T2 negative affect revealed an interaction between these two variables ($\beta = 0.53$, $t(351) = 3.32$, $p < .01$), as well as a three-way interaction between perceived preference consistency, revealed preference consistency, and the control variable of whether or not the participant had already accepted a job offer by T2 ($\beta = -0.30$, $t(351) = -3.35$, $p < .01$). As depicted in Fig. 1, among those who accepted a job offer by T2, every one-unit increase in perceived preference consistency and 10% increase in revealed preference consistency were each associated with reductions in T2 negative affect (by 0.27 and 0.28, respectively). Thus, the beneficial effect of perceived preference consistency in this case was present regardless of the level of revealed preference consistency. In contrast, for those who had not accepted a job offer by T2, the effect of perceived preference consistency depended upon the level of revealed preference consistency. Specifically, every one-unit increase in perceived preference consistency was associated with a 0.20 decrease in negative affect at T2 for those with relatively low revealed preference consistency, while

[3] Following previous studies of the job search involving collegiate samples (Caldwell & Burger, 1998; Saks & Ashforth, 1999), all models of the likelihood of receiving job offers controlled for grade point average (GPA).

[4] Fifteen participants were removed from analyses due to their self-removal from the labor market. On account of missing data for at least one item concerning current job preferences, 46 additional records were excluded from the analyses of either T2 or T3 perceived preference consistency. Finally, seven more participants had to be excluded from analyses due to incompatible Internet browser usage. Logistic regressions, conducted to investigate systematic patterns in missing preference report data, revealed that we were less likely to have sufficient data to code T1–T2 revealed preference consistency for males than for females ($\beta = 1.037$, $p = .047$) and for Latin Americans than for other ethnicities ($\beta = -1.829$, $p = .042$). The partial correlations reported between perceived and revealed preference consistency controlled for Latin American ethnicity.

Table 2
Summary of regression models predicting study 1 T2 negative affect ($N = 358$)

Variable	Model 1: main effects			Model 2: interaction terms included		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables						
NYC resident	0.67	0.24	0.14**	0.69	0.23	0.15**
S had accepted an offer by T2	−1.21	0.23	−0.26**	−0.08	0.40	−0.02
2. Consistency variables						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T2	0.37	0.42	0.04	−2.91	1.17	−0.34*
Perceived consistency T2	−0.12	0.04	−0.15**	−0.27	0.07	−0.35**
3. Interaction terms						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T2* perceived consistency T2				0.62	0.19	0.53**
S had already accepted an offer at T2*revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T2*perceived consistency T2				−0.59	0.17	−0.30**
Model R^2		0.124			0.170	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.024			0.07	
ΔR^2 vs. previous model of same DV		—			0.046	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
+ $p < .10$.

Table 3
Summary of regression model predicting study 1 T3 negative affect ($N = 271$)

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables			
Ivy League School	−0.41	0.20	−0.10**
S had accepted an offer by T3	−1.77	0.31	−0.48**
Number of interviews by T3	0.34	0.09	0.83**
Number of offers by T3	−0.48	0.29	−0.25+
S had accepted an offer by T3*# of interviews received by T3	−0.36	0.09	−0.90**
S had accepted an offer by T3*# of offers received by T3	0.71	0.33	0.38*
2. Consistency variables			
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	−0.05	0.49	−0.01
Perceived consistency T3	−0.11	0.04	−0.15**
Model R^2		0.339	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.021	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
+ $p < .10$.

increases in perceived preference consistency were not correlated with reduced negative affect for those with relatively high revealed preference consistency. These latter individuals experienced levels of T2 negative affect approximately equivalent to those with both low revealed and perceived preference consistency.

Outcome satisfaction

Perceived preference consistency was also positively correlated with increased outcome satisfaction, independent of the level of revealed preference consistency. The regression model on T3 outcome satisfaction revealed significant effects for perceived preference consistency (T3) ($\beta = 0.36$, $t(114) = 4.31$, $p < .01$), and revealed preference consistency (T1:T3) ($\beta = 0.17$, $t(114) = 2.07$, $p < .05$). Specifically, at T3, every one-unit increase in perceived preference consistency was associated with a 0.23 increase in satisfaction with the accepted job offer, while between T1:T3, every 10% increase in revealed preference consistency was associated with a 0.15 increase in satisfaction (see Table 4). No significant interaction between perceived and revealed preference consistency was observed.

Job search performance

In order to examine the relationship between perceived and revealed preference consistency and the number of job offers attained, we employed a poisson regression rather than an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Since the distribution of job offers lay primarily between 0 and 3, the poisson regression was preferable as this regression model allows for skewed, non-negative integer count data (Allison, 1999; Cameron & Trivedi, 1998). Consistent with the assumptions of the poisson model, our data showed values for both the Pearson χ^2 and deviance divided by the degrees of freedom (242) as extremely close to one (a value of 1.01 for both).

Once again, we observed that job seekers benefited from perceptions of stable preferences even as their expressed preferences varied over time. Poisson regression analyses yielded a significant main effect for perceived preference consistency (T3) ($B = 0.15$, $\chi^2 = 9.4$, $p < .01$), a marginally significant effect for revealed pref-

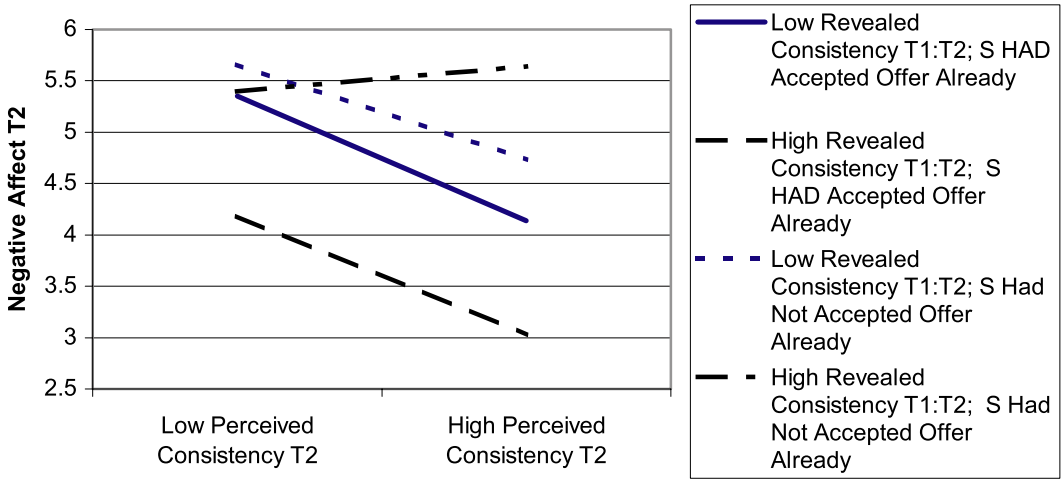

Fig. 1. Study 1. Interactive effects of revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T2, perceived preference consistency T2, and whether or not the S had accepted an offer by T2 on reported negative affect at T2.

Table 4
Summary of regression model predicting study 1 outcome satisfaction ($N = 119$)

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables			
South Asian ethnicity	−0.96	0.47	−0.17*
Salary (in US-$10K)	0.22	0.09	0.20*
2. Consistency variables			
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	1.51	0.73	0.17*
Perceived consistency T3	0.23	0.05	0.36**
Model R^2		0.23	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.15	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
+ $p < .10$.

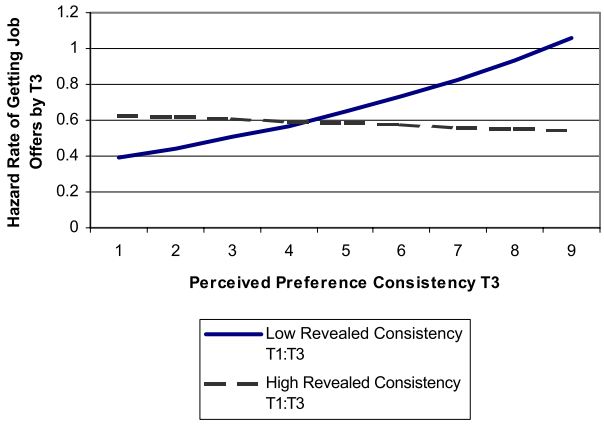

Fig. 2. Study 1. Interactive effects of revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3 and perceived preference consistency T3 on the rate of getting job offers at T3.

erence consistency T1:T3 ($B = 1.60$, $\chi^2 = 3.4$, $p = .08$), and a significant interaction between the two preference consistency measures ($B = -0.37$, $\chi^2 = 5.91$, $p = .01$). Under conditions of low revealed preference consistency T1:T3, higher perceived preference consistency in T3 was associated with a higher probability of getting a job. For example, given low revealed preference consistency, a perceived preference consistency score of one was associated with a 0.39 hazard rate of getting job offers, while a score of eight was associated with a 0.94 hazard rate. For those with relatively high revealed preference consistency, though, perceived preference consistency did not seem to appreciably affect the rate of getting job offers; a perceived preference consistency score of one was associated with a 0.63 hazard rate of getting job offers and a score of eight was associated with a 0.55 hazard rate (see Fig. 2).

Next we conducted additional regression analyses prescribed by Baron and Kenny (1986) to examine the extent to which the positive correlational relationship between perceptions of preference consistency and the number of job offers obtained was mediated by job seekers' experiences of negative affect. Earlier analyses reported significant correlations between perceptions of preference consistency and the number of job offers, as well as between perceptions of preference consistency and the expression of negative affect. If negative affect mediates the relationship between perceived preference consistency and number of job offers received, then we would expect to see a decrease in the significance of the effect of perceived preference consistency with the addition of negative affect in the model. Including negative affect at T3 as an additional explanatory variable, the poisson regression model of the likelihood of receiving job offers produces a significant main effect for negative affect at T3 ($B = -0.19$, $\chi^2 = 16.47$, $p < .0001$), while in turn reducing the significance of both the main

Table 5
Summary of regression models predicting study 1 number of offers received by T3 ($N = 250$)

Variable	Model 1: main effects		Model 2: interaction terms included		Model 3: proposed mediator included	
	B	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
1. Control variables						
School × dummy variable	−1.10*	0.51	−1.13*	0.51	−1.02*	0.51
Consulting industry interest	0.66**	0.19	0.64**	0.20	0.61**	0.20
Arts/entertainment/media industry interest	−1.26**	0.39	−1.23**	0.39	−1.22**	0.39
Age	−0.11*	0.04	−0.11*	0.05	−0.10*	0.05
GPA in major	0.59**	0.20	0.57**	0.19	0.38+	0.20
2. Consistency variables						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	−0.50	0.40	1.60+	0.92	1.06	0.88
Perceived consistency T3	0.06+	0.03	0.15**	0.05	0.09+	0.05
3. Interaction terms						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3*perceived consistency T3			−0.37*	0.15	−0.28+	0.15
4. Proposed mediator						
Negative affect T3					−0.19**	0.05

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
+ $p < .10$.

effect of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($B = 0.09$, $\chi^2 = 3.4$, $p = .06$) and the interaction between perceived preference consistency and revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($B = -0.28$, $\chi^2 = 3.49$, $p = .06$) to only marginally significant. Likewise, the marginal significance of the effect of revealed preference consistency T1:T3 becomes non-significant ($B = 1.06$, $\chi^2 = 1.44$, ns). The ratios of Pearson χ^2 and deviance to degrees of freedom (240) were again near one (0.94 and 0.95, respectively), indicating that the fit of the poisson model was adequate. Therefore, the evidence suggests that the experience of negative affect mediates the relationship between perceptions of preference consistency and the number of job offers received. Table 5 reports a summary of the poisson regression model results including the mediation analysis.

Discussion

Findings from Study 1 show that decision makers are inclined toward constructing an illusion of preference consistency, which in turn yields both psychological and tangible benefits. Although decision makers reported that their valued job attributes remained relatively stable throughout the job search process, actual examinations of their stated preferences revealed that only 30% of the attributes reported as being highly valued were consistent between any two time periods. In fact, their perceived preference stability proved entirely uncorrelated with the actual stability in their expressed preferences, suggesting a lack of awareness regarding the change in the content of their preferences. Moreover, this lack of awareness of preference inconsistency yielded more favorable outcomes; that is, those who harbored an illusion of preference consistency were observed to experience reduced negative affect, which was correlated with greater outcome satisfaction and increased job offers. Subsequent analyses suggest that the experience of reduced negative affect during the job search process mediates the relationship between illusions of preference consistency and the likelihood of obtaining job offers.

Is it possible that those who acquired a greater number of job offers experienced less negative affect, which in turn was associated with an illusion of preference consistency? Although this explanation is plausible, there is little evidence to support such a proposition. As observed in Study 1, the significant correlational relationship between the illusion of preference consistency and the experience of negative affect occurs even when controlling for the number of job offers received.

Unlike prior demonstrations of preference malleability, the methodology employed in this study accesses the preferences most salient to the decision maker through the use of free-form item responses. Although this process enables us to examine the extent to which stated preferences reemerge without externally provided reminders, it does not offer precision concerning the magnitude of difference between perceived versus revealed preference consistency, as these were not commensurate measures. Study 2 addresses this limitation by employing close-ended preference ranking exercises that provide commensurate measures of perceived and revealed preference consistency. Through direct formal

comparison of these measures, Study 2 allows us to retest the hypotheses that decision makers will harbor an illusion of preference consistency and that this illusion will be correlated with enhanced subjective well-being and positive appraisals by evaluators.

Study 2

Method

Overview

Expanding upon Study 1, Study 2 contrasts decision makers' perceived versus revealed preference consistency by drawing on decision makers' responses to commensurate measures of these constructs. Again, as in Study 1, we examined the effects of illusions of preference consistency on decision makers' affect, experienced outcome satisfaction, and decision maker performance appraisal.

Participants

Graduating students (predominantly undergraduate seniors) were drawn from five colleges and universities. Women comprised 67.9% of the participants, a proportion that remained stable throughout all three survey periods. The median age of participants was 22 (range: 20–52). Sixty-one percent of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 23% as Asian, and 11% as other ethnicities. Majors represented included engineering (29%), science/math (19%), business (11%), and the social sciences (9%). Six hundred and nine job seekers completed the first survey, and the response rates for the second and third surveys were 57 and 52% of the original sample, respectively.[5] To incentivize response rates, five prizes of US$ 100 and three prizes of US$ 50 were raffled among survey participants upon completion of the study.

Procedures

In Study 2, we partnered with the career service offices from five of the 11 participating universities from Study 1. These offices directed students to our survey website in Fall 2002 (T1) when they completed the first survey. T1 participants were invited back by e-mail for the second survey in February 2003 (T2) and the third survey in May 2003 (T3). To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were not requested. Instead, they were each given a unique identifier (e.g., apple1) which they used to log in to the survey website, allowing us to match up participants' responses across the three surveys.

Measures

Revealed preference consistency. The 13 most frequently occurring responses from Study 1 were extracted and presented to Study 2 participants who were asked to rank these attributes at T1, T2, and T3 (i.e., "How important are each of the following job characteristics to you, relative to the others? In the first answer column below, please rank the following characteristics in order of importance from 1 to 13, so that 1 reflects that characteristic that is most important to your choice and 13 is that which is least important to your choice. Please use each rank number only ONCE.") The 13 characteristics included: (a) "preferred field/type of work"; (b) "co-workers with whom you enjoy working and/or can learn from"; (c) "challenging/intellectually stimulating work"; (d) "freedom to make decisions (autonomy/responsibility)"; (e) "high income/compensation (including salary, benefits, and/or bonus)"; (f) "job security"; (g) "opportunity for advancement/promotion"; (h) "opportunity for creativity"; (i) "preferable geographic location"; (j) "quality of supervision/training"; (k) "prestige of job and/or company"; (l) "work/life balance (reasonable work hours)"; and (m) "work environment (including working conditions and organizational culture)."[6] To measure revealed preference consistency in each individual's patterns of rankings over time, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were computed, comparing the rankings of T1:T3, T1:T2, and T2:T3. As in Study 1, our regression models of T3 outcome variables employed the T1:T3 measure of revealed preference consistency.

Perceived preference consistency. In addition to the explicit measure used in Study 1 to assess participants' perceived preference consistency, in Study 2 we included an implicit measure as well, created to be commensurate with the measure of revealed preference consistency. At T2 and T3, after completing current rankings, participants were asked to recall their previous rank-orderings of 13 job-related attributes (i.e., "try to recall your preferences the last time you took this survey"). In order to derive this implicit measure of perceived preference consistency, using a value of $n = 13$ for the 13 rankings, we

[5] Attrition analyses indicated that participants of Asian or Asian-American ethnicity as well as those participants with lower positive emotion scores in the first survey were less likely to be retained for the second survey ($\beta = -0.545$, $p = .01$, and $\beta = -0.116$, $p = .03$, respectively) while science majors were significantly less likely to return to complete the T3 survey ($\beta = -0.78$, $p = .001$).

[6] To ensure that this forced choice ranking measure of revealed preference consistency was not missing any major areas of job preferences important to Study 2 participants, in the second survey we asked participants: "Are there any characteristics of jobs that are really important to your job search that we have not asked you about in our questions about your preferences and ratings of the positions you're considering?" Thirty six participants offered characteristics that they felt were not adequately included in the ranking item. These 36 participants remain in the analyzed sample as their exclusion from the analyses made no difference to model results.

calculated two Spearman's rank correlation coefficients for each subject. These Spearman ρs compared each participant's recall of his/her past set of rankings to his/her current rankings for the given time period (T2 and T3). Implicitly tapping choosers' desires to perceive themselves as consistently maintaining the same preferences over time, this measure allowed us to examine the extent to which their memories of previous preferences were influenced by current preferences. The design of this variable resembles methods previously used to examine the hindsight bias (e.g., Hoffrage, Hertwig, & Gigerenzer, 2000), cognitive dissonance (Bem & McConnell, 1970; Goethals & Reckman, 1973), and the construction of personal histories (McFarland & Ross, 1987).

We also measured participants' more general explicit beliefs regarding the stability of their preferences over time, using the same measure as in Study 1. At T3, we asked participants "How much do you think your preferences about the job you ideally wanted to get out of this search process changed over the course of the academic year?" Responses were provided from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much) and then reverse-coded. Once again, regressions of T3 outcome variables included T3 measures of perceived preference consistency to correspond to the T1:T3 measure of revealed preference consistency in the models.

Other measures. As in Study 1, Study 2 included measures of negative affect (T2 $\alpha = 0.90$; T3 $\alpha = 0.92$), outcome satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.75$), job search performance, and control variables (demographic information, academic standing, and job-related activities). In Study 2, the measures of negative affect at T2 and T3 were revised; that is, we added the emotion "miserable" in both surveys, while removing the emotion "frustrated" in T3. The measure of outcome satisfaction remained identical to that from the previous study, and again, only participants who had accepted a job offer by T3 could complete this measure. As in Study 1, at T3 participants in Study 2 were instructed to identify job offers received (employer, job title). The majority of participants (50.2%) had zero offers, 34.5% had one, 9.4% had two, 4.3% had three, and 1.6% had four.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 6 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables used in analyses. Per Cohen and Cohen (1983), when conducting correlational and regression analyses, we used Fisher z' transformations of all variables expressed in terms of Spearman's rank order coefficients instead of the pure Spearman's ρ values themselves. Initially, regression analyses were conducted including all potential control variables; however, the analyses reported below controlled for only those variables that proved significant in each individual model.

Consistent with prior research (Barber et al., 1994; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003), we observed predictable fluctuation in subjects' preferences as the job search process progressed. When comparing T1 rankings with T3 rankings through paired t-tests, we found that the following features (three in total) were given greater weight initially and subsequently declined in importance over time. These were: "preferred field/type of work" (T1 $M = 3.33$, $SD = 3.31$; T3 $M = 5.06$, $SD = 4.05$; $t(257) = -5.06$, $p < .001$), "freedom to make decisions (autonomy/responsibility)" (T1 $M = 7.22$, $SD = 3.05$; T3 $M = 8.08$, $SD = 3.21$; $t(257) = -3.37$, $p < .01$), and "high income/compensation" (T1 $M = 6.10$, $SD = 3.65$; T3 $M = 6.89$, $SD = 3.89$; $t(257) = -2.26$, $p < .05$). Simultaneously, the five job search attributes that were found to increase in importance over time were: "work/life balance (reasonable work hours)" (T1 $M = 7.68$, $SD = 3.52$; T3 $M = 6.09$, $SD = 3.37$; $t(257) = 5.35$, $p < .001$); "preferable geographic location" (T1 $M = 6.26$, $SD = 3.69$; T3 $M = 5.29$, $SD = 3.58$; $t(257) = 3.15$, $p < .01$); "work environment (including working conditions and organizational culture)": (T1 $M = 7.94$, $SD = 3.19$; T3 $M = 7.03$, $SD = 3.51$; $t(257) = 3.02$, $p < .01$); "quality of supervision/training" (T1 $M = 8.78$, $SD = 3.30$; T3 $M = 8.20$, $SD = 3.29$; $t(257) = 2.00$, $p < .05$); and "prestige of job and/or company" (T1 $M = 9.65$, $SD = 3.52$; T3 $M = 8.66$, $SD = 3.66$; $t(257) = 3.23$, $p = .001$). These time-dependent changes in preference weighting may serve as an illustration of Trope and Liberman's (2003) distinction between de-contextualized attributes that carry greater importance initially, and contextualized attributes that increase in importance over time. Since the observed pattern of preference content changes over time did not interact with any of our hypothesized variables, it was excluded from the following analyses.

Perceived versus revealed preference consistency

The inclusion of commensurate measures of preference consistency in Study 2 allowed us to compare participants' perceived preference consistency against their revealed preference consistency. Results show that perceived preference consistency (measured implicitly) was higher ($M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.31$ at T2 and $M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.37$ at T3) than revealed preference consistency (T1:T2 $M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.31$, T2:T3 $M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.39$, and T1:T3 $M = 0.13$, $SD = 0.30$) and t-tests comparing the T1:T2 and T2:T3 measures yield respective significant t-values of –17.636 ($df = 296$, $p < .001$)[7]

[7] Note that six participants in the second survey and four more in the third survey were removed from these analyses due to reported decisions to attend graduate school or take themselves out of the labor pool for other reasons. Additional reduction in sample size for these analyses is due to missing data.

Table 6
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study 2 variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1. Revealed preference consistency T1:T2	0.15	0.31	—																						
2. Revealed preference consistency T2:T3	0.47	0.39	.11^{+}	—																					
3. Revealed preference consistency T1:T3	0.13	0.30	.38***	.10	—																				
4. Perceived preference consistency T2 (implicit measure)	0.58	0.31	.09	.34***	.05	—																			
5. Perceived preference consistency T3 (implicit measure)	0.53	0.37	−.00	.36***	.06	.47***	—																		
6. Perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)	5.23	2.16	−.09	.06	.02	.19 **	.12^{+}	—																	
7. Negative affect T2	4.79	1.79	−.06	−.03	−.05	−.17**	−.09	−.29***	—																
8. Negative affect T3	3.95	1.82	−.06	−.06	−.02	.02	−.01	−.19***	.56***	—															
9. Outcome satisfaction	7.02	1.61	−.05	.17^{+}	−.13	.09	.09	.12	−.16^{+}	−.49***	—														
10. Number of job offers received T3	0.72	0.91	−.02	−.06	−.07	−.07	.14*	−.02	−.19**	−.36***	.12	—													
11. Number of applications/ resumes sent T2	17.39	36.60	−.10^{+}	.04	−.16*	−.04	−.00	−.21**	.21**	.12^{+}	−.06	.09	—												
12. S had accepted an offer by T2	0.22	0.41	−.01	.07	.02	.01	.02	−.02	−.25*	−.23**	−.03	.38***	.08	—											
13. Female	0.69	0.46	−.02	.10	.04	.06	.06	−.01	.10^{+}	−.01	.03	−.06	−.09	−.06	—										
14. Asian or Asian-American ethnicity	0.23	0.42	−.08	−.02	−.12*	−.08	−.04	−.00	.15*	.10^{+}	−.23*	.07	.17**	.10^{+}	−.14**	—									
15. S had accepted an offer by T3	0.44	0.50	−.02	.00	−.11^{+}	−.09	.07	−.06	−.17**	−.42***	–	.72***	.13*	.51*	.01	.08	—								
16. Hispanic or Hispanic-American	0.03	0.18	.16**	−.09	−.02	−.02	−.02	.01	−.02	.05	−.15	.03	−.03	−.07	.08^{+}	−.10*	.00	—							
17. Computer hardware industry interest	0.04	0.19	.08	−.13*	−.02	−.17**	−.12^{+}	−.17**	.03	.11^{+}	−.24*	−.06	.04	.06	−.19***	.15***	.00	−.04	—						
18. Engineering major	0.28	0.45	.05	−.03	.00	−.06	−.13*	.10	.01	.09	.02	−.24***	−.09	−.18**	−.02	−.24***	−.25***	−.03	−.10*	—					
19. Graduate student	0.21	0.41	−.00	−.02	−.04	.07	.11^{+}	−.02	−.04	.03	.01	.01	.07	−.06	.02	.10*	−.04	.05	.02	−.32***	—				
20. Cumulative GPA	3.42	0.46	.04	.05	.00	.19**	.10	−.06	−.08	−.10	−.02	.15*	−.01	.09	.12*	−.11^{+}	.09	−.10^{+}	−.14*	−.23***	.31***	—			
21. Computer software industry interest	0.06	0.24	.01	−.11^{+}	−.08	−.10	−.02	−.09	−.01	.07	−.13	.11^{+}	−.01	.07	−.17***	.10*	.08	−.01	.44***	−.08^{+}	.00	−.08	—		
22. Information technology industry Interest	0.05	0.22	−.03	−.09	−.08	−.11^{+}	−.08	−.01	−.06	.01	−.05	−.02	.10	−.05	−.15**	.12**	−.02	.00	.27***	−.07	.05	−.10^{+}	.44***	—	
23. Internet/E-commerce industry interest	0.04	0.19	.02	−.02	−.11^{+}	−.05	−.16*	−.03	.03	−.02	−.11	.05	.19**	−.01	−.16***	.14**	.10	−.04	.31***	−.06	.01	−.15*	.43***	.66***	—

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.
$^{+}$ $p < .10$.

and –2.767 ($df = 235$, $p < .01$). Additionally, we observed no correlation at T1:T2 between participants' implicit perceived preference consistency and their revealed preference consistency (partial $r(286) = 0.06$, ns),[8] nor did we observe a correlation between job seekers' explicit beliefs of preference stability at T3 and their revealed preference consistency at T2:T3 (partial $r(232) = .06$, ns), or T1:T3 (partial $r(251) = .003$, ns),[9] as we found that participants explicitly perceived themselves as having held moderately stable preferences throughout the decision-making process ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 2.16$). The incongruity between perceived and revealed preference consistency lessened as the decision-making process drew to a close, such that the partial correlation between revealed preference consistency at T2:T3 and the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 was 0.36 ($df = 232$, $p < .001$)[10] (see Table 6).

Overall, however, the non-significant correlations between perceived and revealed preference consistency provide support for the pervasiveness of a positive illusion of preference consistency. As in Study 1, then, in the following regression analyses, the main effect of perceived preference consistency represents the relationship between illusion and outcome. We also examined whether effects of this illusion varied based on relative levels of revealed preference consistency. Just as in the previous study, where the interaction between perceived and revealed preference consistency was significant, we used the criterion of one standard deviation above and below the sample's mean levels reported above to delineate results for "low" versus "high" revealed preference consistency.

Negative affect

Job seekers who believed themselves to have held stable preferences throughout the job search process experienced less negative affect than did others. In the regression model of Study 2 T2 negative affect, the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency (T2) was a statistically significant predictor of reduced negative affect ($\beta = -0.15$, $t(289) = -2.76$, $p < .01$), while the revealed preference consistency measure (T1:T2) ($\beta = -0.01$, $t(289) = -0.17$, ns) was not. Results suggested that every 0.10 increase in the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency was associated with a 0.05 decrease in negative affect in the second survey (see Table 7).

Table 7
Summary of regression model predicting study 2 T2 negative affect ($N = 296$)

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables			
Number of applications/resumes sent (T2)	0.01	0.00	0.22**
S had accepted an offer by T2	−1.20	0.23	−0.28**
Asian or Asian-American ethnicity	0.64	0.25	0.14*
Female sex (0–M; 1–F)	0.52	0.21	0.13*
2. Consistency variables			
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T2	−0.05	0.27	−0.01
Perceived preference consistency T2 (implicit measure)	−0.50	0.18	−0.15**
Model R^2		0.177	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.022	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
+ $p < .10$.

Moreover, the perception of preference consistency was correlated with reduced T3 negative affect even as the content of decision makers' preferences greatly fluctuated. Regression analyses revealed a significant interaction between revealed preference consistency T1:T3 and the explicit measure of perceived preference consistency ($\beta = 0.43$, $t(227) = 2.68$, $p < .01$), in addition to significant main effects for revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($\beta = -0.42$, $t(227) = -2.67$, $p < .01$) and the explicit measure of perceived preference consistency ($\beta = -0.28$, $t(227) = -4.25$, $p < .001$). No significant effect for the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($\beta = 0.08$, $t(227) = 1.36$, ns) was observed (see Table 8). For those with low revealed preference consistency, the model suggests that every one-unit increase in explicit perceived preference consistency was associated with a 0.31 decrease in T3 expressed negative affect. Among relatively high revealed preference consistency participants, however, there was no effect of perceived preference consistency on negative affect at T3 (see Fig. 3).

Outcome satisfaction

Perceptions of preference consistency were positively correlated with greater outcome satisfaction, even while expressed preferences were found to greatly oscillate. The regression model of outcome satisfaction revealed

[8] This partial correlation controlled for grade point average.
[9] These partial correlations controlled for age.
[10] This partial correlation controlled for science and engineering major status. There are at least two potential explanations for the more significant partial correlation between perceived and revealed preference consistency between T2 and T3. First, it is possible that, regardless of any effects of our surveys, job seekers' preferences may begin to stabilize later in the search process. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that experience in a decision domain leads to less preference construction and more preference consistency (Hoeffler & Ariely, 1999). Second, the correlation may be a methodological artifact resulting from the recognition exercises that constituted the study. After taking the second survey and ranking characteristics for the second time, then, participants may have been anticipating the ranking exercise in the third survey period and subsequently became more consistent in the subsequent reports of their preferences. Our data do not allow us to disentangle these two possibilities.

Table 8
Summary of regression models predicting study 2 T3 negative affect ($N = 235$)

Variable	Model 1: main effects			Model 2: interaction term included		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables						
Number of applications/resumes sent (T2)	0.01	0.00	0.11^{+}	0.01	0.00	0.10^{+}
S had accepted an offer by T3	−1.64	0.21	−0.45**	−1.66	0.21	−0.46**
Asian or Asian-American ethnicity	0.58	0.28	0.12*	0.55	0.27	0.12*
2. Consistency variables						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	−0.15	0.31	−0.03	−2.26	0.84	−0.42**
Perceived preference consistency T3 (implicit measure)	0.24	0.17	0.08	0.24	0.17	0.08
Perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)	−0.16	0.05	−0.20**	−0.23	0.05	−0.28**
3. Interaction terms						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3*perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)				0.41	0.15	0.43**
Model R^2		0.251			0.274	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.039			0.062	
ΔR^2 vs. previous model of same DV		—			0.023	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
$^{+}$ $p < .10$.

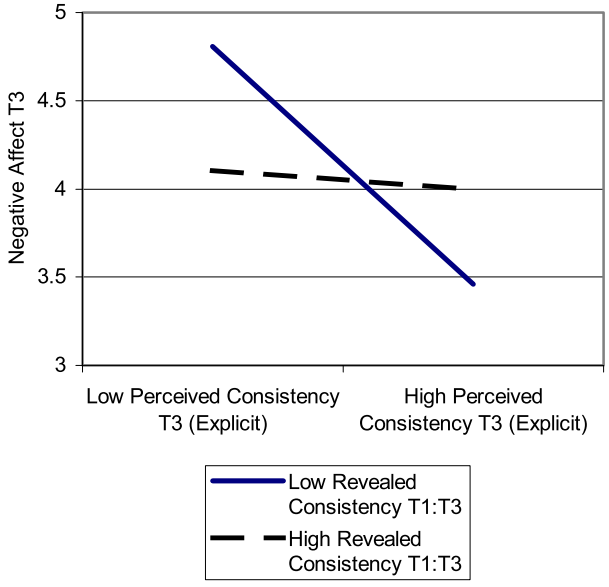

Fig. 3. Study 2. Interactive effects of revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3 and explicit perceived consistency T3 on reported negative affect at T3.

significant effects for the explicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($\beta = 0.23$, $t(103) = 2.20$, $p = .03$), and the interaction between that measure and revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($\beta = -0.71$, $t(103) = -2.68$, $p < .01$), as well as a marginally significant effect for revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($\beta = 0.50$, $t(103) = 1.94$, $p = .05$). No significant effect of the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($\beta = 0.06$, $t(103) = 0.69$, ns) was observed (see Table 9). As illustrated in Fig. 4, the interaction suggests that when revealed preference consistency was held low, every one-unit increase in explicit perceived preference consistency was associated with a 0.31 increase in outcome satisfaction. In contrast, when revealed preference consistency was held high, relative to the sample's central tendency, the model indicated the reverse pattern. Unexpectedly, for every one-unit increase in explicit preference consistency, the model suggests a 0.1 decrease in outcome satisfaction. Given that this reverse pattern of results appears only in this single instance, it is difficult to draw any broad inferences.

Job search performance

Once again, poisson regression models were used to examine job search performance, as the number of job offers attained was skewed to predominantly between 0 and 3 (Allison, 1999; Cameron & Trivedi, 1998). In this model, ratios of the Pearson χ^2 and deviance to degrees of freedom (211) were 1.05 and 1.01, respectively, suggesting adequate fit. Findings revealed a significant interaction between the explicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 and revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($B = -0.24$, $\chi^2 = 3.91$, $p < .04$) with no significant main effects for the implicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($B = 0.05$, $\chi^2 = 0.13$, ns), the explicit measure of perceived preference consistency at T3 ($B = 0.06$, $\chi^2 = 1.96$, ns), or revealed preference consistency T1:T3 ($B = 0.95$, $\chi^2 = 2.1$, ns). As depicted in Fig. 5, when revealed preference consistency T1:T3 was held low, higher perceived preference consistency at T3 was associated with a higher probability of obtaining employment. For example, an explicit perceived preference consistency score of one at T3 was associated with a 0.40 hazard rate of getting job offers, while a score of eight was associated with

Table 9
Summary of regression models predicting study 2 outcome satisfaction ($N = 111$)

Variable	Model 1: main effects			Model 2: interaction term included		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
1. Control variables						
Asian or Asian-American ethnicity	−0.91	0.36	−0.23*	−0.85	0.35	−0.22*
Latin American ethnicity	−1.80	0.78	−0.21*	−1.95	0.76	−0.23*
Computer hardware industry interest	−1.61	0.78	−0.19*	−1.35	0.77	−0.16+
2. Consistency variables						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	−0.67	0.41	−0.15	2.26	1.16	0.50+
Perceived preference consistency T3 (implicit measure)	0.30	0.25	0.11	0.17	0.25	0.06
Perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.19	0.08	0.23*
3. Interaction terms						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3*perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)				−0.59	0.22	−0.71**
Model R^2		0.171			0.225	
ΔR^2 vs. control model		0.036			0.09	
ΔR^2 vs. previous model of same DV		—			0.054	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
\+ $p < .10$.

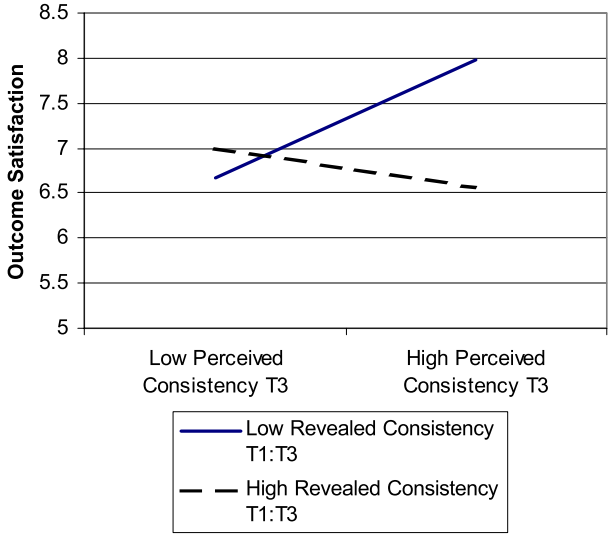

Fig. 4. Study 2. Interactive effects of revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3 and explicit perceived consistency T3 on outcome satisfaction at T3.

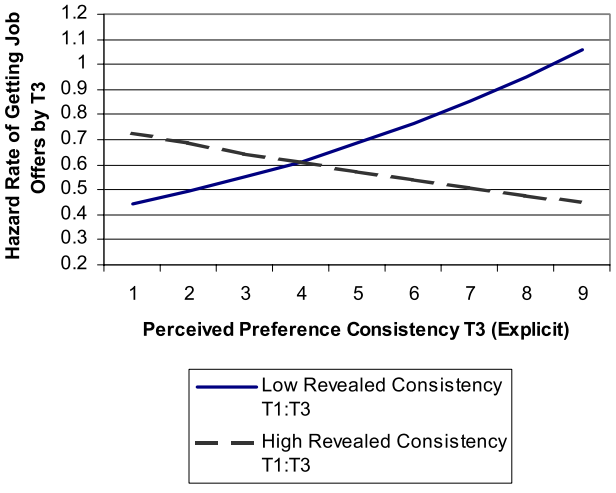

Fig. 5. Study 2. Interactive effects of revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3 and explicit perceived consistency T3 on the rate of getting job offers at T3.

a 0.99 hazard rate. Among those exhibiting relatively high revealed preference consistency, however, increases in perceived preference consistency were associated with decreases in the rate of obtaining job offers (see Fig. 5).

Additional regression analyses were subsequently conducted, as prescribed by Baron and Kenny (1986), to examine the role of T3 negative affect in mediating the correlational relationship between perceptions of preference consistency and the likelihood of obtaining job offers. Note that the values of the Pearson χ^2 and deviance divided by the degrees of freedom were again close to one (0.91 and 0.96, respectively), signaling adequate fit. After adding T3 negative affect to the poisson regression model, we found that this variable proved to be a full mediator, significantly predicting the likelihood of obtaining job offers ($B = -0.29$, $\chi^2 = 27.41$, $p < .0001$), and rendering the interaction variable representing the effects of perceptions of preference consistency non-significant ($B = -0.11$, $\chi^2 = 0.79$, ns) (see Table 10 for a summary of the poisson regression model results including this mediation analysis). One ostensible possibility is that it was the number of job offers attained that reduced negative affect and, in turn, increased the perception of preference consistency. However, recall that in earlier analyses we found perceptions of preference consistency (conditional on the level of

Table 10
Summary of regression models predicting study 2 number of offers received by T3 ($N = 225$)

Variable	Model 1: main effects		Model 2: w/interaction terms		Model 3: w/proposed mediator	
	B	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
1. Control variables						
Number of applications/resumes sent (T2)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Engineering major	−1.09**	0.23	−1.12**	0.23	−0.90**	0.23
Graduate student (as opposed to undergraduate student)	−0.38+	0.29	−0.39+	0.20	−0.20	0.20
Cumulative GPA	0.38+	0.22	0.42+	0.22	0.31	0.22
Female sex (0–M; 1–F)	−0.43**	0.17	−0.46**	0.17	−0.43*	0.17
Computer hardware industry interest	−1.62**	0.62	−1.64**	0.62	−1.19+	0.65
Computer software industry interest	1.06*	0.42	1.15**	0.41	0.89*	0.43
Information technology industry interest	−1.58**	0.59	−1.86**	0.62	−1.99**	0.65
Internet/E-commerce industry interest	1.08*	0.44	1.21**	0.46	1.17*	0.51
2. Consistency variables						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3	−0.26	0.25	0.95	0.66	0.32	0.67
Perceived preference consistency T3 (implicit measure)	0.09	0.14	0.05	0.14	0.10	0.14
Perceived preference consistency T3 (explicit measure)	0.02	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.01	0.04
3. Interaction terms						
Revealed consistency in reported preferences T1–T3*perceived consistency T3 (explicit measure)			−0.24*	0.12	−0.11	0.13
4. Proposed mediator						
Negative affect T3					−0.28**	0.05

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
\+ $p < .10$.

revealed preference consistency) to significantly predict T3 negative affect, even while controlling for the number of job offers obtained.

Discussion

Study 2 directly compared measures of perceived and revealed preference consistency and empirically demonstrated that people perceive their preferences to be significantly more consistent than is actually reflected in their expressed preferences. Subsequent analyses provide further corroborating evidence to suggest that illusions of preference consistency, at least when revealed preference consistency is especially low, are correlated with beneficial outcomes, such as reduced negative affect experienced during the job search process, a greater number of job offers received, and increased satisfaction with the selected job. According to the mediation analysis, reduced negative affect may have enabled those harboring illusions of preference consistency to achieve more favorable appraisals by evaluators, which was reflected in the increased number of job offers obtained. Furthermore, Study 2 suggests that the benefits accrued from the illusion of preference consistency may stem more from decision makers' explicit beliefs regarding the stability of their preferences than from their implicit assumptions of preference stability.

There was only a marginally significant correlation between our implicit and explicit measures of preference consistency ($r = .12$, $p < .10$). This result is consistent with recent findings regarding the relationship between explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem and subjective well-being (Schimmack & Diener, 2003). Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) have suggested that people often maintain dual attitudes which remain distinct from one another: one implicit and the other explicit.

Alternatively, it is possible that the implicit measure had less predictive ability than the explicit measure due to its repetitive, memory-based quality. Considering the implicit measure's ability to predict negative affect at T2, its decreased predictive ability at T3 may reflect the influence of more conscious, effortful processing on the part of participants.[11] In fact, a *t*-test comparing two

[11] Regarding the validity of the implicit measures of perceived preference consistency, it is possible that when participants could not remember their past preferences, they may have utilized a rational heuristic, whereby they anchored on their current preferences and adjusted from there. Although prior research has assessed this argument as insufficient for explaining hindsight bias effects found with similar methodology (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990), we nonetheless examined the plausibility of this possibility. Specifically, using Spearman's rank-order correlations for each individual, we compared his/her recalled rankings to his/her actual rankings at the time period targeted for recall as a way to represent how accurate each individual's recall of his/her past rankings at T2 and T3 were. Analyses of the correlations between these accuracy measures and implicitly perceived preference consistency at T2 (0.04, $n = 297$, ns) and T3 (0.49, $n = 236$, $p < .001$) provided no evidence supporting this possibility. Actually, the T3 measure indicated that those participants with greater accuracy in their preference recall had higher levels of implicitly perceived preference consistency than did those who were less accurate.

Spearman's rank-order correlations for each individual's recall accuracy at T2 versus. T3 yielded a significant t-value of 9.17 ($df = 235$, $p < .001$), indicating that the mean level of T3 accuracy ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.61$) was significantly greater than that at T2 ($M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.34$). Consequently, although we observe a trend suggesting that explicit beliefs are more powerful motivators of psychological well being and external appraisals of competence than implicit beliefs, our data do not exclude the possibility that implicit measures have the potential to serve as strong predictors had we used a more subtle assessment of implicit preference consistency.

General discussion

Influential promulgators of folk wisdom and psychological theory endorse the pursuit of absolute self-awareness as the fundamental human quest by which happiness is achieved. Such canonized American figures as Emerson and Thoreau romanticized the activity of introspection and the associated end-state of self-knowledge to a spiritual level (see Emerson, 1993; Thoreau, 1981). Likewise, an implicit assumption underlying the practices of psychoanalysts (e.g., Eagle, 2003; Freud, 1957a, 1957b), humanists (e.g., Rogers, 1951; Rogers, 1961), and cognitive–behavioral therapists (e.g., Beck, 1995) has been that self-insight is an essential element of healthy psychological functioning. However, the findings from this investigation contribute to a nascent body of research that challenges the presumed unconditional benefits of self-knowledge, instead illustrating the psychological benefits accrued from inaccurate and unrealistically positive self-perceptions.

Humans are prone toward preserving perceptions of preference consistency, despite documented variation in their preferences and the processes by which they are constructed (Bem & McConnell, 1970; Goethals & Reckman, 1973; McFarland & Ross, 1987). Even the exercise of introspection has been largely unsuccessful in promoting a heightened degree of self-awareness about the content (Wilson & Schooler, 1991) and degree of one's preference changes. The dilemma then becomes, how are fluctuating internal preferences and reported behavioral consistency reconciled within the human mind?

Findings from the current investigation suggest that an integration of one's internal and external states may be achieved through a process of psychological distortion. By unconsciously distorting memories of previously stated preferences to match current preferences, individuals are able to inhibit contradictions that may have otherwise existed within their minds, thereby alleviating the anxiety associated with such disparity and serving as a cognitive coping mechanism. Moreover, the current investigation suggests that illusions of preference consistency are associated with a number of benefits for decision makers, including reduced negative affect, more optimistic appraisals of their own decision outcomes, and a greater number of job offers. Further analyses revealed that the link between illusions of preference consistency and increased numbers of job offers was mediated by the experience of reduced negative affect.

And what of those who, rather than harboring illusions of preference consistency, actually maintained more stable preferences? In fact, results indicate that decision makers from both Study 1 and Study 2 who maintained more consistent preferences were observed to attain fewer numbers of job offers as compared to those who harbored illusions of preference consistency, despite much greater preference fluctuation. One potential explanation for this finding is that those decision makers possessing more consistent preferences may have greater difficulty perceiving available job options to be suitable matches for their preferences. As a result, they may be less successful at convincing recruiters they are good fits for open positions, and, in turn, may evaluate their job searches more negatively.

The above comparison between outcomes for those with more extreme illusions of preference consistency versus those with higher revealed preference consistency highlights the first of two methodological advantages that distinguish this study from prior investigations. First, unlike prior research, the current study measured both perceived and revealed preference consistency to test whether and how self-perceptions are inaccurate (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994; Robins & Beer, 2001). By examining the effects of perceived preference consistency while controlling for revealed preference consistency, we were able to more objectively assess whether decision makers were inclined toward overly optimistic self-perceptions of behavioral consistency and to examine the effects of these positive illusions. Second, this investigation extends beyond laboratory experimentation by examining illusions of preference consistency among decision makers facing the highly consequential decision-making context of job selection.

Limitations

To what extent do the effects of illusions of preference consistency generalize to other populations or multiple decision-making domains? We chose to limit the current investigation to decision makers operating in a domain in which they were relatively inexperienced: the job search market. The novelty of this domain was advantageous in that it allowed us to examine the naturalistic formation of initial preferences, observe how these preferences fluctuated over time, and monitor how decision makers reacted to their own preference mutability. However, one might imagine that the patterns observed

with novel job search applicants might differ among, for example, older job seekers who have already faced the employment decision context multiple times, and who are therefore more likely to have pre-established and more stable preferences (Perry, Kulik, & Bourhis, 1996; Puri, 2003). It's possible, then, that comparing decision makers acting within domains of expertise against novice decision makers may suggest that expertise and well-established preferences are accompanied by fewer illusions of preference consistency.

Even among novice decision makers, it remains questionable as to whether there exist limits to the longevity of the psychological benefits of illusions of preference consistency. The current investigation found psychological benefits to be associated with this illusion throughout the decision maker's search, deliberation, and selection process. However, we cannot yet draw any conclusions about whether the benefits of the illusion of preference consistency persist once decision makers have experienced the consequences of their decision. The benefits of positive illusions during the decision process may diminish over the long run (Robins & Beer, 2001), as preferences revert to initial states (i.e., T1 levels) that are poorly matched with chosen attributes. Yet another possibility is that cognitive dissonance may serve to intensify the illusion of consistent preferences over time (Festinger, 1957; for a recent set of reviews see Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). To better understand the long-term consequences of the illusion of preference consistency, future examinations would benefit from the inclusion of additional time periods of assessment and greater temporal separation between measurements of independent and dependent variables. Such a methodological design would also enable even more precise examinations of causal processes.

Might these psychological benefits of illusions of preference consistency also be specific to cultures that value independence and individuality? While our sample population does not allow for cross-cultural comparisons, prior research suggests that there is less importance placed on internal consistency in cultures that value interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003; Suh, 2002), as illustrated by the fact that members of such cultures are less susceptible to cognitive dissonance (Heine & Lehman, 1997a, 1997b). In fact, some studies suggest that interdependent cultures may not only value consistency less than independent cultures, but they may even actively value internal contradiction (Choi & Nisbett, 2000; Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999, 2000). In sum, such findings suggest that the positive outcomes associated with illusions of preference consistency may be unique to North American cultures that appreciate consistency, while members of cultural contexts that stress malleability of the self may experience negative outcomes associated with harboring such illusions.

Implications related to job search

Why are recruiters more attracted to job applicants harboring illusions of preference consistency? Perhaps illusions of preference consistency promote perceptions of self-efficacy, which in turn heighten feelings of self-control and reduced negative affect (Bandura, 1997). As suggested by previous investigations, (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg, 1997; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999), these positive effects of increased perceived self-efficacy could theoretically impact job offers either by stimulating a more intense job search effort, or by making an applicant appear more confident, and thus more impressive to interviewers.

Job seekers harboring illusions of preference consistency may also benefit if those illusions encourage recruiters to perceive a greater fit between them and the job or organization to which they are applying. Prior research suggests that perceptions of person–job and person–organization fit positively influence recruiters' hiring decisions (Cable & Judge, 1997; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Illusions of preference consistency may also make job seekers themselves more likely to perceive such a fit. Not only might this self-perception make them more attractive to recruiters, but research shows that pre-employment perceptions of person–job fit are linked to longer term and improved quality employment outcomes (Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Future empirical research may benefit from exploring the moderating effects of illusions of preference consistency on the potential link between pre-entry perceptions of fit and long-term consequences such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Conclusion

In contrast to conventional glorifications of self-awareness, our research into the motivational effects of preference inconsistency highlights instead the costs of accurate self-appraisal. We find evidence to suggest that decision makers espouse a shield that protects them from the self-knowledge that their preferences are in fluctuation: an illusion of preference consistency. Indeed, the psychological benefits conferred by such a practice may stem from the inherent human desire for behavioral and internal consistency, an aspiration that drives people to hold perceptions of preference consistency and to assume that others share this view. Thus, the protection afforded by illusions of preference consistency enables individuals actually exhibiting inconsistent preferences to better cope with stressful situations, experience greater subjective well-being, and attain more favorable outcomes.

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