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Sidestepping the Home Buying Process

Ashley S. Otto, PhD, Joshua J. Clarkson, PhD, and Frank R. Kardes, PhD



Decision making is all too often an aversive experience. In fact, work in cognitive neuroscience shows that decision making is often interpreted in similar ways as actual pain—evident by the finding that the area of the brain activated when people make decisions is often the same area activated when people experience physical pain (Kitayama, Chua, Tompson, & Han 2013). Yet despite the aversion associated with decision making,

individuals are all too often confronted with decisions where they have to make a choice. Cars break down, birthdays present must be purchased, dinners need to be planned—and, in each situation, decisions must be made. These situations present an interesting paradox to decision makers, as they must somehow balance the aversive process of decision making with the *need* to make a decision. In our work, we focused on one means by which individuals strategically resolve this decision aversion by engaging in *decision sidestepping*—a reliance on decision strategies that allow individuals to bypass (i.e., streamline) the decision-making process.

Decision Sidestepping

Central to this research is the proposition that a variety of different decision-making strategies allow individuals to streamline the aversive nature of the decision-making process. Specifically, we argue that by relying on a default option, delegating a choice, maintaining an established status quo, or sticking with a prior decision, an individual has the opportunity to essentially bypass the decision-making process while still making a choice. That is, by electing to allow another individual to make the decision on one's behalf (i.e., choice delegation) or by continuing to select the same alternative when presented with new options (i.e., repeat decision making), individuals are able to bypass the typical grappling associated with the decision-making process, all while arriving at a decision.

Sidestepping to Reduce Decision Aversion

Yet, which individuals are most likely to engage in sidestepping? In other words, which individuals are most likely to view the decision-making process as aversive? In response, we hypothesized that this inherent aversion toward decision making was driven by an individual's

motivation to achieve cognitive closure. The *need for cognitive closure* is defined as *the fundamental desire to achieve resolution on a decision* (Kruglanski 1989). This motivation encompasses the desire for a definite answer and, as such, individuals motivated to achieve closure favor order and predictability, are decisive and close-minded, and find discomfort with openness (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). Given that those motivated to achieve closure are fundamentally aversive to openness, we hypothesized that the innate openness of decision making would be particularly bothersome to these individuals. Consequently, we predicted that those seeking closure would engage in decision sidestepping to reduce the bothersome nature of decision making to arrive at a decision.

Key Findings from our Research

We conducted five experiments to test our proposition that individuals seeking closure engage in decision sidestepping to reduce the aversive nature of decision making. All studies followed a similar design where participants were presented with a decision-making context and asked whether they would like to make their own decision or whether they would like to resolve the decision with the sidestepping option presented (e.g., a default option, a prior decision). Importantly, in each study we either measured or manipulated the motivation to achieve closure.

To illustrate, in one experiment participants were told that they would be receiving candy for their participation in the study. Importantly, participants were given the option to select something of their own liking from the “variety bag” or go with the default option that would be given to them (if they chose to not make the decision). The findings of this study revealed that participants who scored higher on the need for closure scale were *more* likely to go with the default option than were those low in need for closure. Interestingly, it did not matter if the participants knew what was in the variety bag or not (i.e., it was left ambiguous)—those seeking closure persisted in sidestepping the decision by relying on the default option. Further studies revealed that those seeking closure were more likely to go with a sales associate’s recommendation (i.e., choice deferral), a restaurant “favorite” (i.e., status quo option), or a previously made decision (i.e., repeat decision making).

Furthermore, we tested a critical assumption of this research—that those seeking closure are averse to decision making. Consistent with expectations, those seeking closure did in fact rate decision making as more bothersome, prompting them to engage in sidestepping. Interestingly, when the bothersome nature of the decision was reduced, so too did the desire to sidestep the decision by those seeking closure. Finally, we tested the ubiquity of the effect in the context of suboptimal choice. That is, would those seeking closure sidestep decisions even if sidestepping led to sub-optimal choices? The findings revealed that, indeed, individuals sidestep decisions even at the expense of more optimal options.

Implications for Making Home Buying Decisions

We believe that this research sheds important light onto how individuals make decisions, despite being averse to the decision-making process. Importantly, in the context of the home buying process, a real estate agent can serve as a critical catalyst by which to facilitate sidestepping.

Indeed, there are many ways by which buyers might be inclined to sidestep the home buying process when motivated to achieve closure. For instance, buyers could resolve the decision by relying on the recommendation of another such as a real estate agent or a family member.

Alternatively, those motivated to achieve closure might sidestep the process by purchasing a home in a neighborhood they already live in—

engaging in repeat decision making. Conversely, these individuals might also look for simple cues to indicate the status quo such as the prestige of a neighborhood, where friends live, or the ratings of local school districts. We believe that being aware of the different means by which buyers sidestep decisions gives the agent an opportunity to facilitate decision sidestepping, when sidestepping is the goal.



Finally, given that individuals are most likely to sidestep when averse to decision making, we anticipate that sidestepping is most likely to occur in situations that are particularly averse. For instance, the decision-making experience should be especially bothersome in an unfamiliar (e.g., buying in a new city) or unstructured (e.g., too many options) purchasing contexts. Again, the role of the agent is particularly important in providing avenues to allow for decision sidestepping.

How to Tell if a Person is Averse to Decision Making?

A critical issue to effectively using this research is identifying those who are motivated to achieve closure. In response, there are two means by which one can assess an individual's motivation to achieve closure. First is the *need for cognitive closure* scale which assesses closure as an individual difference variable (see sample questions). Agents could have clients fill out a brief survey during the initial information gathering phase of the home buying process. Second, there are situational factors that have been shown to temporarily increase one's motivation to achieve closure. For instance, time pressure (e.g., being under a time crunch), changes (e.g., downsizing) and distractions (e.g., viewing homes with children in tow) are all likely to increase

one's motivation to achieve closure. Being aware of these factors is critical to understanding when individuals are likely to (temporarily) be motivated to achieve closure.

Conclusion

Decision making can all too often be an aversive experience. This research highlights how individuals averse to decision making—namely, those seeking closure—make decisions by sidestepping the decision-making process. In particular, a variety of distinct decision-making strategies—the default bias, status quo bias, choice delegation, and repeat decision making—all allow individuals to arrive at a decision, while streamlining the decision-making process.

Recommended Reading

Otto, Ashley S., Joshua J. Clarkson, and Frank R. Kardes (2016), "Decision Sidestepping: How the Motivation for Closure Prompts Individuals to Bypass Decision Making," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111, 1-16.

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Kruglanski, Arie W. (1989), *Lay Epistemics and Human Knowledge: Cognitive and Motivational Bases*, New York: Plenum Press.

Roets, Arne and Alain Van Hiel (2011), "Item Selection and Validation of a Brief, 15-Item Version of the Need for Closure Scale," *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50, 90-94.

Webster, Donna M. and Arie W. Kruglanski (1994), "Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 1049-1062.

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Frank Kardes is a Professor of Marketing at the University of Cincinnati. Dr. Kardes is a recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Achievement Award of the Society for Consumer Psychology and is a Fellow of five professional societies. He has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Marketing Letters*, *Behavioral Marketing Abstracts*, and *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. His research has been published in numerous outlets and focuses on consumer persuasion, judgment, inference, and decision making.

Subset of 10 Items for the Need for Closure scale

I don't like situations that are uncertain.

I dislike questions which could be answered in many different ways.

I find that a well-ordered life with regular hours suits my temperament.

I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life.

I don't like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.

When I have made a decision, I feel relieved.

When I am confronted with a problem, I'm dying to reach a solution very quickly.

I would quickly become impatient and irritated if I would not find a solution to a problem immediately.

In most social conflicts, I can easily see which side is right and which is wrong.

I almost always feel hurried to reach a decision, even when there is no reason to do so.

Never

Sometimes

Always

From: Roets and Van Hiel (2011).

Full 15-item version of the Need for Closure Scale. Available from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224961598_Item_selection_and_validation_of_a_brief_15-item_version_of_the_Need_for_Closure_Scale [accessed Dec 14, 2016].

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