Prototype Matching: A Strategy for Social Decision Making

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College students responded to a series of questionnaires while they were in the process of selecting housing from a choice of seven available options for the coming fall. Questionnaires concerned their self-concepts, their housing prototypes, their preferences in housing, and their goals in housing selection. Overall analyses of the self-to-prototype matching strategy suggest that most students indeed prefer the type of housing for which their prototype of the "representative" resident most closely matches their self-perceptions. More important, we obtained individual differences in attention to self-fit in situations. Of individuals who reported that they had interpersonal goals in the housing selection task, those who reported that many personality characteristics (both positive and negative) were untrue of self were more systematic in their use of the self-to-prototype matching rule, this was also true of low self-monitors. Neither pattern of individual differences obtained for students with practical goals in the housing decision.

As many have noted, the source of much motivated behavior resides in one's thoughts about oneself (Burke, 1980; McGuire, in press; Nuttin, 1984; Schlenker, 1982; see Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, in press, for an overview). Knowledge of one's own characteristics, attributes, and habits (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984), and one's beliefs about those of "types" of people in social situations (Cantor & Mischel, 1979) together can provide the basis for numerous important life choices. This specification of the connection between self-concept and choice behavior is supported by the results of several recent studies. Burke and Reitzes (1981), for example, measured the overlap between an individual's self-concept and a consensually defined prototype of a graduate student, or the

type of person who enjoys certain types of social activities. The overlap measurement was reliably predictive of individuals' present academic status or preferences in entertainment activities. Similarly, Chassin, Presson, Sherman, Corty, and Olshavsky (1981) demonstrated that the more similar an adolescent's perception of self is to the prototype of an adolescent smoker, the more likely it is that he or she will in the future report the intention to smoke. It seems, then, that self-to-prototype matching may be a cognitive strategy of choice in many domains of social life (Cantor, 1980; Snyder, 1981).

Guiding much of this work is the assumption that, overall, individuals are motivated to work hard to reinforce aspects of their current perception of self (Backman & Secord, 1968; Epstein, 1973; Rogers, 1951; see Dipboye, 1977; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Shrauger, 1975; Tesser & Campbell, 1984, for reviews). If one assumes that the implicit goal in some choice problems is the maintenance of self-consistency, the cognitive comparison of self to prototype is quite serviceable, because most common social situations or lifestyle options have come to be associated with shared images of the type of person best suited for that choice (Cohen, 1981; Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982; Lord, 1982; Price & Bouffard, 1974). The consensual nature of

informal social knowledge also helps to ensure one's continued suitability for a situation, after it has been entered, for part of the maintenance of a current view of self is the elicitation of responses from others that reinforce that perception (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970; Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981). Hence the "young urban professional" will do well to buy clothes at Bloomingdales, cook with a food processor, and visit a "fat farm" once a year. Not only will he or she now know how to make decisions, but he or she will be confident of what to expect from others and what they will expect of him or her, given his or her choices.

Self-Prototype Matching: A Decision Strategy

The studies of Burke and Reitzes (1981) and Chassin et al. (1981) provided insight into a global link between suitability of self for social situations and decisions to enter particular situations. This is accommodated well by the generally accepted notion that individuals tend to work hard to reinforce self-consistency in their selection of daily contexts to enter. No doubt, however, the extent to which self-consistency becomes an issue at all varies across situations and individuals. Some people have to work harder than others to achieve a comfortable fit in some situations or domains of life. This potential for individual differences suggests that a finer level analysis of who might be especially motivated to attend to self-prototype similarity to determine suitability in particular social contexts is warranted. In general, the self-to-prototype matching strategy may aid us in behavior prediction for some of the people some of the time (Bem & Allen, 1974); because the self is so heavily implicated in this strategy, individual differences in knowledge about the self could well mediate its use (Kihlstrom & Nasby, 1981; Markus, 1983). The specification of the mediating self factors may, therefore, improve predictions of the self-behavior connection.

A recent study by Cantor, Mackie, and Lord (1984) provided hints at the sorts of mediating self-knowledge that might further illuminate the process of social behavior selection. Those researchers sought to specify differences in individuals' sensitivity to the suitability of another person for particular collaborative activities. To test for such differences, subjects were asked to read about three tasks: a "model legislature" task, an artistic task of creating a collage, and a sorting task in which balls had to be numbered and grouped as they came down an assembly line. Descriptions of the three activities were paired with descriptions of the personality characteristics of each six potential "partners." Of those six, one was described as similar in personality to the prototype of the person best suited, and one as equally likable but poorly suited, to perform each of the three tasks. Subjects rated all 18 possible activity partner pairs according to how much they preferred each combination. Overall, subjects were very attentive to the relative prototypicality of each partner for a given task. They preferred to enter a situation when it was paired with a prototypical partner and to avoid it if their partner was described as unsuitable. This sensitivity was, however, mediated by differences in subjects' average ratings on a self-report measure of comfortableness in 25 familiar social situations. Individuals who reported feeling relatively uncomfortable across situations differentiated prototypical from unprototypical partners more than did individuals who described themselves as quite comfortable in many social contexts. It seems that the knowledge that one is generally uncomfortable in social situations increased motivation to find an activity partner who was similar to one's prototype of an individual well suited to engage in that activity.

Individual Differences in Self-Prototype Matching

As Cantor et al. (1984) pointed out, rigorous attention to person-in-situation fit varies across individuals (see also Greenwald, 1982; Greenwald & Breckler, in press). It seems reasonable to assume that sensitivity to self-in-situation fit also varies across individuals, depending on one's motivation to preserve self-consistency. We provide an analysis of individual differences in self-knowledge as mediators of the attention to self-to-prototype matching in a naturalistic decision task.

The problem selected for consideration

was the choice of on- and off-campus housing on the part of freshman dormitory residents at a large midwestern university. It seemed likely that some college students use a self-to-prototype matching strategy to make their housing choice and to serve an implicit goal of self-consistency.

We considered differences in two aspects of self-knowledge as potential predictors of the motivation to maximize self-consistency in the housing domain. We chose, first, to look at the number of personality characteristics with which students describe themselves. We then classified individuals as high in distinctiveness if they indicated that a large number of common personality characteristics were not descriptive or true of themselves. Burke (1980) proposed that individuals vary in the number of social images that characterize their current perceptions of self. In Burke's terms, individuals differ with respect to their "range of distribution" of self-images. The variation in number of available self-images suggests that variation also exists in the flexibility among individuals to feel suitable to enter many different social situations. Individuals who are high in distinctiveness are similar to individuals who have a narrow range of self-images that they can potentially match to a collection of person-in-situation prototypes. In the present context these individuals may think they have a poor chance of matching any housing prototype closely, especially if, as Tversky (1977) noted, similarity judgments focus on common rather than distinctive attributes. By contrast, individuals who are low in distinctiveness (describe self as characterized by many personality characteristics) see themselves as having a good chance of matching at least several person-in-situation prototypes quite well. For these people, self-to-prototype matching would be a relatively nondiscriminating cognitive strategy for housing selection. Therefore, the motivation to systematically and rigorously compare a current perception of self to person-in-housing prototypes in domains such as housing could be quite minimal. After all, consistency could be gained by entrance into most any one of the available situations.

A second group of individuals who might be especially motivated to find a place where they could be themselves has been described via the self-report measure of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974). Low self-monitors are characterized by a self-focus of attention (Carver & Scheier, 1981). They appear to enjoy existing in a world of friends and social settings that are relatively homogeneous. Members of the social networks of low self-monitors seem to be selected because they have similar personality characteristics and they are generally liked by these people (Snyder, Gangestad, & Simpson, 1983). Compared with high self-monitoring individuals who are skilled in discerning and adapting to behavioral demands of many social domains, low self-monitors are especially interested in manifesting their "true self" consistently, across situations (Snyder, 1979). The existing research on the preferences and goals of low self-monitors supports the hypothesis that these individuals are most inclined to expend effort sorting through available housing options to find the nearest self-to-prototype match. High self-monitors, on the other hand, should be less likely to systematically use this strategy. Codes of behavior are usually quite explicit in the various forms of housing; high self-monitors probably believe that they could fit in most anywhere.

Relevance of Social Self-Knowledge: Goals of the Decision Maker

Throughout the discussion of individual differences in motivation to match self to prototype to make a housing choice, we have assumed that all students view this problem as a challenge to their current perception of a social self. In other words, make one wrong choice, and the personal and social implications will necessitate some redefinition of self in interpersonal domains. Although the housing choice problem can be construed in that way, the social implications may not always be the salient concerns. For example, a student could see the decision task as one in which the optimal outcome is the cheapest, most efficient housing available. Given that construal, the student would probably be less influenced by the distinctiveness and flexibility of his or her social self than by the state of his or her finances. The opposite would likely be true if the student had framed the housing choice (the way we have treated it thus far)

as an interpersonal concern with multiple social meanings.

In light of this argument, we expected that individual differences in self-knowledge would only mediate the self-to-prototype decision strategy if such knowledge was made relevant by the global goals of the decision maker. Framing a decision task sensitizes the social perceiver to different sources of information and different strategies with which to work with that information. For example, in this decision, we expected that the highly available price, location, and efficiency data used in a cost comparison strategy would be most preferable to students with practical goals. A cost comparison strategy is the easiest and most obvious decision rule even for students who might be seeking to reinforce a practical image of self. Of greatest interest with respect to the individual differences analyses discussed here, therefore, were students with interpersonal goals. We assumed that it would be for these students, those who were most concerned with being comfortable and happy in their living situation, that relevant knowledge of their present social self would mediate attention to self-to-prototype matching.

In summary, this study was designed to demonstrate individual differences in motivation to base housing choice on similarity between self and social concepts of the prototypical person-in-housing. We hypothesized that these individual differences stem from differences in knowledge about the self: either one's flexibility of self-definition (as measured by distinctiveness) or desire to adjust to the requirements of diverse social contexts (as measured by the self-monitoring scale). In addition, we expected these variations to interact with the global goals of the social perceiver, that is, we predicted that self-knowledge would only mediate sensitivity to self-to-prototype matching if these decision makers had framed this particular problem as an interpersonal one. Only in these cases should the aspects of self knowledge considered here mediate motivation to rigorously match self-to-prototype so as to ensure self-in-housing fit.

Method

Subjects

A total of 116 undergraduates (58 female and 58 male), enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, served as subjects. Experimental participation was voluntary and it entitled students to extra-credit points. Subjects were required to be freshpersons currently residing in campus dormitories. The data from an additional 6 subjects who did not complete the entire battery of questionnaires were not included in the analyses.

Each subject completed a brief questionnaire, entitled *Background Information Form* and distributed as an addendum to the subject consent form. Analyses of these data indicated that 92.3% of all subjects were between the ages of 18 and 19. The population of the subjects' hometowns ranged from less than 1,000 to more than 500,000; all sizes of cities were nearly equally represented. Ninety-three percent of the subjects reported that their families lived in a house; the remainder reported that their permanent home was either an apartment or a farm.

Procedure

Subjects were run in groups of 5 to 22 participants. At the outset of the experiment subjects were informed that the experimental procedure involved their filling out a series of four questionnaires. Subjects were asked to work as quickly as possible and to refrain from conferring on answers. Questionnaires were distributed one at a time. Each questionnaire had an instruction cover sheet. Subjects were informed that every questionnaire would be timed separately; included in the instructions was the specific time allotted for completion of each questionnaire. (A time limit was imposed to control for the attention given to each questionnaire and to ensure completion of all tasks.) Experimental groups were randomly assigned to one of six orders of questionnaire distribution, constructed to eliminate possible effects that were due to experimental demand characteristics. In addition, the self-concept and housing prototype questionnaires, to be described, were separated in all orders by a questionnaire of a different format in order to minimize attention to self and prototype comparisons. As expected, no order effects were obtained. Approximately equal numbers of male and female subjects received each order of questionnaire distribution.

At the conclusion of the experiment, subjects were given a full explanation of the purpose of the study and of the hypotheses to be tested.

Questionnaires and Classifications

Characteristics of other people. Designed to generate descriptions of person-in-situation prototypes, the questionnaire contained seven separate pages. Each page was headed by the phrase "Please rate the typical person who would be happy and comfortable living in. . . ." The statement was followed by one of the seven housing options: an apartment, a single-sex dormitory, a fraternity or sorority, a room in a private residence, a rented house (or flat) shared with other people, a coed dormitory, or a cooperative. The order in which the options appeared in the questionnaire was completely randomized across subjects. Listed on each of the seven pages, in alphabetical order, were 100 trait adjectives. Subjects were asked to judge how well each adjective described the type of person indicated at the top of the page and to rate that

adjective on a scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 8 (*very true*). The use of personality trait adjectives to obtain individuals' impressions of types of people was based on literature suggesting that individuals frequently describe the person who is best suited for a situation in terms of their characteristic personality attributes (Cantor et al., 1982). The 100 trait adjectives used in our study covered a thorough array of personality dimensions. Subjects were given 40 min to complete this questionnaire.

Self-concept questionnaire. In the questionnaire, included to elicit subjects' descriptions of themselves, we asked students to "Please rate yourself." The heading was succeeded by the same 100 trait adjectives that were used to generate descriptions of the person-in-situation prototypes. Once again subjects used an 8-point scale in which 1 = *not at all true* and 8 = *very true.* Past research on the self-concept has confirmed that individuals feel confident about describing themselves along personality dimensions (e.g., see Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Markus, 1977). Moreover, by using the same 100 adjectives, we could arrive at a precise, quantitative measure of self-to-prototype similarity. Subjects were allowed 10 min to complete the task.

Distinctiveness scores were derived from this questionnaire. We computed one score for each subject by summing the number of adjectives he or she rated as not at all true of self (i.e., rated 1 or 2). Subjects were then grouped into high- and low-distinctiveness samples on the basis of a median split. The mean score for the high-distinctiveness sample was 13.69, with a range from 7.0 to 28.0. For the low-distinctiveness sample, the mean score was 3.37, with a range from 0 to 7.0.

Personal attitudes and experiences. This questionnaire was Snyder's (1974) 25-item Self-Monitoring Scale. Subjects responded "true" or "false" to items that concern their perceptions of their typical thoughts and social behaviors. Prior research (see Snyder, 1979) has demonstrated that people who obtain low scores on this scale (i.e., low self-monitors) tend to attend closely to the fit of their self-concepts with the behavioral demands of different social situations. Subjects were given 5 min to indicate their responses.

Subjects were split into three approximately equal groups on the basis of their score on the Self-Monitoring Scale (high, medium, and low self-monitors). For high self-monitors, $M = 16.87$, with a range from 15.0 to 23.0; for medium self-monitors, $M = 13.17$, with a range from 12.0 to 14.0; for low self-monitors, $M = 9.08$, with a range from 5.0 to 11.0.[1]

Housing preference questionnaire. To elicit students' preferences in living arrangements, we presented the seven housing options on the questionnaire and asked subjects to rank order them from 1 (*most preferred*) to 7 (*least preferred*). Subjects also ranked the options as to the likelihood that they would live in each after taking realistic constraints into account. In several open-ended questions we asked students to freely list the reasons for their preferences, and the information that the subjects felt was the most vital to their decision making. (In the questionnaire we also requested subjects' rankings of the living arrangements that they thought other students preferred and the number of people they knew who lived in each housing option. These data reveal that students knew residents of all of the housing options and that the number of people known did not strictly dictate the

decision maker's choice.) Subjects were given 10 min in which to finish the questionnaire.

As expected, in response to the question of factors influencing their decision, subjects spontaneously mentioned greater concern with either the interpersonal (e.g., compatibility with roommates or neighbors, opportunities for social life) or practical (e.g., price of rent and utilities, distance to campus) aspects of the housing choice. On the basis of their answers to this item, subjects were divided into samples of students with interpersonal or practical goals. Their responses were classified by the first author as primarily indicative of interpersonal or practical concerns on the basis of order and emphasis in the protocol. As a check on the coding, a naive rater performed the same task; there was exact agreement for 94 of the 116 protocols (81%). According to this classification, the sample divided into two equal subsamples ($ns = 58$).

Results

Self-to-Prototype Comparisons and Housing Preferences: The Matching Strategy

We began our test of similarity of self to prototype as a predictor of preference with the view that preferences of any given student would most likely be based on that individual's own unique notions (e.g., individual prototypes) of the residents of the seven housing options. All analyses presented, therefore, are based on ideographic self-to-individual-prototype comparisons. First, we compared subjects' ratings of all 100 trait adjectives for each prototype with ratings of self across the same adjectives. Specifically, the rating of every adjective on the self-concept checklist was subtracted from the rating of the same adjective in that individual's prototype checklist for each housing option. We summed the absolute value of the differences and divided the result by 100 to obtain a single "distance" score for each self-prototype combination. The larger the score was, the greater was the average disparity between the ratings of the self and the person-in-situation prototype on the adjective checklist.

We were thus able to compare the distance scores to the subjects' corresponding housing

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[1] A normal distribution of scores on the Self-Monitoring Scale was obtained. Therefore, we split the sample into thirds to allow comparisons of extremes of the distribution. By contrast, the range of distinctiveness scores was highly skewed to the upper end of the scale. Consequently, we performed a median split to classify subjects on the distinctiveness variable.

Table 1
Mean Self-to-Prototype Distance for Housing Choices According to Preference

Preference	Mean distance[a]
1	1.37106
2	1.40271
3	1.37091
4	1.46024
5	1.47714
6	1.52401
7	1.67701

[a] Small distances indicate higher self-to-prototype overlap.

preference ratings. In Table 1 we present the mean distance scores for the seven choices, ideographically ranked in order of decreasing preference. We performed a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) in which the distance score of self to the prototype of the subject's own first-choice (most preferred) housing option was compared with their distance score corresponding to the remaining options in order of descending preference. Results of this analysis showed that the self-to-prototype distances increased with decreasing preference, $F(6, 678) = 14.5$, $p < .001$. A planned comparison of the combined mean distances between students' descriptions of self and of the prototypes of their first and second housing choices ($M = 1.387$) against the combined mean distances between self and the prototypes of their sixth and seventh housing choices ($M = 1.605$) indicated that students described themselves as more like the prototypical occupant of their most preferred housing than the prototypical occupant of their least preferred options, $F(1, 678) = 55.90$, $p < .001$).

In a more thorough test of the rule, we ranked for each subject the seven housing situations on self-to-prototype distance (from most to least similar) and on reported preference (from most to least preferred) to obtain a rank order correlation between distance to prototype and housing preference. Again, there was a significant pattern of preference suggesting that, on the average, preferences correspond to self-to-prototype consonance (average $r = .37$, $p < .001$, range $= -.89$ to .96, $SD = .40$).[2] The rank order analysis is a highly stringent test of the rule because this correlation statistic is sensitive to correspon-

dences across all seven positions of the rank ordered lists. Yet, across the entire sample of 116 subjects, the self-to-prototype matching rule was a robust, though not perfect, predictor of housing preference.

Individual Differences: Maximal Strategy Users

The imperfect relation between self-to-prototype similarity and housing preferences was a reminder of the focal intent of this study: to establish a more fine-tuned approach to predicting the self-behavior connection. Clearly, some students were attending rigorously to their suitability to many or all living situations currently available. Other individuals seemed to make their choices differently. Our guiding hypothesis was that certain attitudes about the self would mediate attention to self-fit across the available options. We expected these individual difference factors to exert influence, however, only when a student had defined this choice problem as an interpersonal one.

In particular, we assumed that individuals with narrowly defined self-concepts would have a more difficult time finding a housing option whose prototype they felt they were compatible with. This view was supported by the finding that students high in distinctiveness were less similar to their individual prototypes ($M = 1.59$) than were students low in distinctiveness ($M = 1.34$, $p < .001$). The former sample was also less similar to their first-choice housing option ($M = 1.53$) than was the latter sample ($M = 1.21$, $p < .001$). We expected distinctiveness, in combination with a goal to reinforce this self-view, to motivate rigorous and complex prototype matching. In the test of self-to-prototype matching, we applied an ANOVA with two between-subjects factors, distinctiveness and goals, to the average rank order correlation coefficients. We obtained a significant Goals × Distinctiveness interaction, $F(1, 112) = 5.10$, $p < .03$. As illustrated in Table 2, high-distinctiveness students with interpersonal goals showed a more systematic use of

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[2] All analyses were performed on standardized rank-order correlations. Reported average rank-order correlations have been converted to unstandardized form.

Table 2

Self-to-Prototype Match and Housing Preference: Relation Between Distinctiveness and Goals

Distinc-tiveness	Goals			
	Interpersonal		Practical	
	Mean rank order	n	Mean rank order	n
High	.52	28	.25	30
Low	.29	30	.40	28

the matching rule (average r = .52) than did low-distinctiveness students with similar goals (average r = .29), $F(1, 56)$ = 3.83, p = .05.[3] A similar difference was not observed within the sample of students with practical goals for their housing choice, $F(1, 56)$ = 1.25, *ns*.

A second mediating factor was level of reported self-monitoring, which we hypothesized to facilitate the predictability of use of a self-to-prototype matching strategy. Self-monitoring scores provide a measure of each student's relative attunement and responsiveness to internal versus external demands delineated by the current social context. Low self-monitors tend to pay much attention to internal cues to behavior; this allows them to structure a homogeneous social environment in which they can maintain a consistent presentation and view of self. As discussed earlier, within the interpersonal goals sample, we expected low self-monitors to maximize their self-to-prototype fit in establishing their housing preferences. In a planned comparison, as expected, low self-monitors with interpersonal goals in this task did prefer the living arrangement whose prototype they matched (average r = .54) significantly more often than did the high self-monitors with similar goals (average r = .19), $F(1, 55)$ = 4.90, p < .04. Once again, we did not find ᵗhis pattern of individual differences in use . . the matching rule among students with ᵗctical goals in this choice domain, $F(1, 55)$ = .102, *ns*. Mean rank order correlations for the four cells are presented in Table 3.

Consideration of Possible Alternative Processes

We performed a final analysis to rule out the possibility that our measures of correlation between self-prototype similarity and preference reflected an example of dissonance reduction by the students. Though the data were collected before most students made final decisions (signed leases and supplied security deposits), possibly students had privately made their selections and were simply motivated to adjust their self-images to overlap more with the prototypical occupant of their housing choice. If this were the case, one would expect that students whose housing preferences were rated identically to the likelihood of living in those options would be most actively engaged in dissonance reduction (and would show what would appear to be rigorous self-to-prototype matching). On the other hand, students whose preference rankings did not correspond to their likelihood ratings would show a reduced correlation between housing preference and self-to-prototype similarity. To address this issue, we obtained rank order correlations between students' rankings of preference and of likelihood of living in each housing choice. We then divided the students into groups of high, medium, and low (ostensible) users of the matching strategy. Results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that students who reported a strong correspondence between preference and likelihood of occupying each housing option were not more likely to be the same students who demonstrated rigorous use of a self-to-prototype matching strategy in making their selection (F < 1). This was also the case

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[3] The differences found in use of the matching strategy on the part of individuals distinguished as reporting high versus low levels of self-monitoring or personal distinctiveness are compelling findings only if these individuals possess similar knowledge about consensual housing prototypes. To validate this assumption, we computed the ratio of the number of attributes rated by each individual as *very true* or *not at all true* of each prototype that was also contained in lists we created of consensual prototypes to the actual number of attributes contained in the consensual prototype. This measure reflected the similarity of each individual's housing prototype to the consensual prototypes we had compiled. We performed ANOVAs on arcsin transformations of these ratios. At different levels of self-monitoring and distinctiveness in our sample, there were no differences between the degree to which the individual prototypes of the subjects in these groups matched the consensual prototypes (all Fs < 2). Thus no one group disproportionately contributed to the information contained in the consensual prototypes.

Table 3
Self-to-Prototype Match and Housing Preference: The Relation Between Self-Monitoring and Goals

	Goals				
	Interpersonal			Practical	
Self-monitoring	Mean rank order correlations	n		Mean rank order correlations	n
Low	.54	17		.35	19
Medium	.45	23		.23	18
High	.19	18		.40	21

when the students' goals were considered ($Fs < 1$).

Discussion

Results of the present study join those of Burke and Reitzes (1981) and Chassin et al. (1981) in building a case for a self-to-prototype matching choice strategy in complex lifestyle decisions. Moreover, we go beyond the earlier analyses by considering individual differences in both the content of the prototypes and in the use of a prototype matching strategy. Analyses of students' preferences for college housing revealed considerable correspondence between a measure of self-prototype overlap and their rank ordering of housing choices. Additional support for the utility of this strategy, when self-consistency motives are salient, comes from the consensual nature of these students' images of the person best suited for each housing option. Given that students tend to agree on person-in-housing prototypes, the choice of housing for which one feels most prototypical would quite likely ensure that an individual could live with others possessing similar interpersonal tastes and desires and thus feel at ease in the situation.

These global analyses provide insight into the process or strategy by which one might maximize self-consistency in a difficult social decision task; that is, the analyses go some distance in providing an answer to the *how* question in the housing decision. But what about questions of *who* (who uses the decision) and *when* (under what conditions)? In order to better specify the self-concept and choice behavior link, a more fine-tuned analysis of individual differences proved helpful in the present decision domain. Specifically, aspects

of the students' self-knowledge and characteristic attitudes about the self mediated the rigor with which they aligned housing preferences across the seven options according to degree of self-prototype similarity. The mediation of self-knowledge was particularly clear in the case of self-concept distinctiveness, a factor similar in spirit to Burke's (1980) concept of "self-image distribution" and not too distant from Sherif and Hovland's (1961) theory of "latitude of acceptance" in attitude judgments. Students with quite distinctive images of self (i.e., for whom relatively many personality attributes are not self-descriptive) seemed especially vigilant in matching housing preference to their current view of self when they had framed the choice as one with clear social implications. These data from a naturalistic and complex decision task, and those provided by the similar pattern of self-monitoring effects, complement the findings of Cantor et al. (1984) in their analyses of decisions about activity partners and task situations. Individuals do indeed differ in their attentiveness to person- or self-in-situation fit. Consequently, the measurement of self–prototype overlap will be informative about the choices of more of the people in more contexts when such differences are considered.

The present data also tell us something about the nature of the situations in which self-concept distinctiveness and self-monitoring attitudes will mediate adherence to the self-prototype matching strategy. Complex decisions like housing choices pose different problems for different individuals; the task at hand can be read in many ways. For the students interviewed in the present study, distinctiveness and self-monitoring attitudes

were associated with more or less rigorous attention to self-prototype overlap only when the housing choice was seen primarily as a decision with interpersonal consequences. Those student who construed the choice in more practical terms also mentioned a preference for concrete information about rent, location, and price of utilities, information that they found easily available in this particular instance. They were presumably able to satisfy their practical needs without worrying excessively about self-concept fit in the social domains under consideration. This is not to say that such students ignore self-prototype overlap altogether; we know that this was not the case. Rather, one would not expect self-concept distinctiveness or self-monitoring attitudes to mediate the use of the matching rule when the problem was framed so as to deemphasize the implications for the individual's social self. By contrast, such mediation would be expected for students with primarily interpersonal goals in this choice and, therefore, a heightened commitment to a current sense of self. In other words, interpersonal goals provide a frame for the problem that makes knowledge of personality characteristics and flexibility in social domains especially relevant.

As a final note, it is interesting to consider the many ways in which the self-concept might serve the individual in narrowing a field of lifestyle choices or social situations to enter. In our work we place special emphasis on the motivation to preserve and remain true to a current view of self. But what about those times when individuals need change in a social life domain? In that case, an "elimination by match" strategy, in which a person chooses to enter a desirable situation for which he or she presently feels unsuited, may be preferred. In fact, the college housing choice provides just such an arena of challenge for some students. The students in our sample with interpersonal goals and a sense of flexibility about their self (the high self-monitors, for example) may have looked at this choice as an opportunity to reinforce a not-yet-attained social self, by entering a housing situation in which the norm for behavior resembled their ideal more than their actual personal attributes (Chassin et al., 1981). Further specification of the multifaceted con-

nection between self-concept and choice behavior must await a fuller understanding of the many ways to match the self (in its actual or ideal, its positive or negative, its past or future forms) to social prototypes (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, in press; Markus, 1983). In that regard, our results are encouraging; it should be possible to delineate these different choice strategies for complex and personally involving decisions.

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584   P. NIEDENTHAL, N. CANTOR, AND J. KIHLSTROM

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