

Self-Image Motives and Consumer Behavior: How Sacrosanct Self-Beliefs Sway Preferences in the Marketplace

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This article reviews social cognitive research suggesting that people shape their beliefs and judgments of the social world to maintain sacrosanct beliefs of the self as a capable, lovable, and moral individual. This article then argues that consumer behavior might similarly be designed to bolster positive self-views and then discusses the potential role played by these self-image motives in recently documented consumer behavior phenomena (e.g., *endowment, compensation, affirmation, and licensing* effects). This article then articulates some questions for future research if one presumes that consumer decision making, at least in part, strives to harmonize preferences with bedrock beliefs that the self is an able and principled person.

The beginning business school student walking to the first day of marketing class probably has a firm model in mind about how consumers reach decisions. According to this model, when people decide about some consumer product, they respond by totaling up their beliefs in favor versus against making a purchase, consult a list of their needs, and then blend in some notions about what they want beyond that which they really need. If the net result of this calculation is positive enough to justify the price of the product, they buy. Key to this very reasonable and rational model is the notion that the process is a rather conscious and analytical one, although it has emotional elements, and that the calculation focuses on totaling up the number of relevant beliefs, needs, and desires to see if the sum suggests buying the product.

However, if one looks at the literature in social cognition over the past few years, as well as work in judgment and decision making, one sees an emerging and overarching intellectual project that seems to be to question whether this is the way in which people reach their decisions, including ones about consumer purchases. The literature suggests that consumer decision making is not exclusively a conscious calculation totaling up benefits and beliefs. Instead, it suggests that people often reach their decisions via unthinking impulse (Strack, Werth, & Duetsch, 2006) or through the influence of processes lying outside of conscious awareness

(Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005). It proposes that decisions are influenced by the ambient emotion people just happen to be feeling (Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004), “extra-informational” considerations that (e.g., such as ease of thought) that lie outside the content of their beliefs (Schwarz, 2004), and by social norms that make some decisions mandatory and others too noxious to even consider (Kanbur, 2001; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005).

The material presented in this article, in a sense, represents another manifestation of this underlying project. In this article, I question whether the proper model of consumer decision making is one of calculation—at least the way in which it is normally defined—in which beliefs, wants, and needs are totaled up on the left side of the equation to see what purchase decision, yea or nay, pops out on the right side. Instead, I suggest that the process of consumer decision making is best described as *belief harmonization*. By belief harmonization, I mean that reaching a decision requires arranging and revising one’s beliefs, needs, and preferences into a network of cognitions that produces little, if any, tension or disharmony among its various elements. For example, if one desperately needs a car to get to work, and one has the credit rating to achieve a favorable loan, the decision that causes the least amount of inconsistency and tension is to buy a car. However, if one has too many debts to pay off and one does not want the responsibility for maintaining a car, the decision to forgo buying a car is the one that is harmonious with those beliefs.

Construing consumer decision making as belief harmonization represents a fundamental shift in that it allows for

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two major influences on decision making that are otherwise locked out of consideration under the model held by that fresh, young marketing student. The first shift is that the causal arrow may not only run from input beliefs, needs, or desires to final decision. Instead, the influence can run in the opposite direction. If people hold a bias to favor one decision over the other (e.g., I just really want that car!), that preference can cause them to alter how they perceive the beliefs, needs, and desires that supposedly are inputs to the decision. In this way, a consumer decision would not be a calculation leading to an outcome. Instead, it would be the outcome leading people to realign their beliefs in some way to justify an outcome already preferred.

The second influence permitted by a belief harmonization framework involves underlying beliefs that the individual wants to bolster or maintain, even when those beliefs lurk deep in the background and are not directly relevant to the decision at hand. Those beliefs are set in metaphorical bedrock, and any judgment or decision a person reaches must be sure to leave the stature of those beliefs undisturbed. In this essay, I label those notions as *sacrosanct beliefs* and spend the bulk of the article discussing how one of those beliefs might affect consumer decision making. That sacrosanct belief is the one claiming that the self is a moral, lovable, and capable individual; a person for whom fate has planned a benevolent future stuffed with largely happy events. I argue that many decisions in the consumer realm are influenced by this sacrosanct belief about the self. In short, people's decisions are swayed by *self-image motives* in that whatever decision they reach must honor and affirm a flattering image of self. This influence occurs even when the sacrosanct belief behind self-image motives bears no obvious or logical relevance to the decision at hand.

In the material to follow, I describe evidence suggesting that decision making can be successfully described as a belief harmonization process. I then turn to describing just how much people adhere to bedrock beliefs extolling their competence, character, and status in the world. Next, I describe research from the social cognition literature showing that people do, indeed, bend judgments and beliefs about the social world to maintain those untouchable beliefs. I then describe recent phenomena demonstrating that these self-beliefs influence decision making in the consumer realm. I end by enumerating some questions for future research.

EVIDENCE FOR DECISION MAKING AS BELIEF HARMONIZATION

A growing body of evidence suggests that judgment and decision making, including consumer decision making, is best characterized as an exercise in belief harmonization. In a sense, this development should not be surprising in that this assertion has had a long and venerable history in

psychology. In the late 1940s through the 1960s, several approaches in the attitude and persuasion literature rested on consistency theories, proposing that people prefer having beliefs that did not contradict one another. Balance theory (Heider, 1946) was such an approach, as was cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), which centered first and foremost on the core notion that people found any substantive contradiction to be aversive and worked effortfully to rid their belief systems of those contradictions.

But it has only been recently that theorists have extended notions of consistency theories to include complex webs of belief and inference that entail numerous connections, in approaches referred to as *connectionist modeling* (Smith & DeCoster, 1998) or *parallel-constraint satisfaction* (Shultz & Lepper, 1996). In doing so, these theorists have devised rigorous and intricate algorithms aimed at producing coherence among sets of numerous beliefs and have successfully applied their algorithms to explaining a wide range of social phenomena, from stereotyping (Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Smith & DeCoster, 1998), to cognitive dissonance (Shultz & Lepper, 1996), to legal decision making (Holyoak & Simon, 1999), just to name a few areas.

Such an approach is easily illustrated in consumer decision making. Suppose, for example, that a young woman, Sherry, just out of college, is considering buying her first car. She is now standing in front of a car in the showroom, salesperson hovering over her, as she deliberates whether to say she will buy it. Figure 1 depicts a number of notions she might likely be mulling over. She is thinking of reasons why she should buy the car (e.g., this car gets a great consumer rating) as well as those suggesting she should not (e.g., I'm in so much debt already.) All these notions are linked to a final decision to buy a car, either in a negative or positive direction: Reasons for buying the car make the decision to buy more plausible; reasons against make the decision to buy less plausible.

The constellation contained in Figure 1 contains some beliefs that definitely cohere. However, there are some contradictions, both direct and indirect, that pull for harmonization. For example, Sherry believes that she is a frugal person, yet finds herself in some debt—two beliefs that are inconsistent. In addition, although Sherry's frugality is consistent with the fact that she is considering a car with a good resale value, both these beliefs suggest a contradictory decision—with her frugality suggesting that she should skip buying the car, whereas the resale value suggests that she should.

Faced with these direct and indirect contradictions, what people do is revise their beliefs to make the connections between them more consonant with one another. One way to make beliefs more consonant is to change some of them, deciding that some beliefs are much less (or more) plausible than initially thought (e.g., Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Shultz & Lepper, 1996). For example, if Sherry does not mind taking the bus, she may decide that having a car to go to the

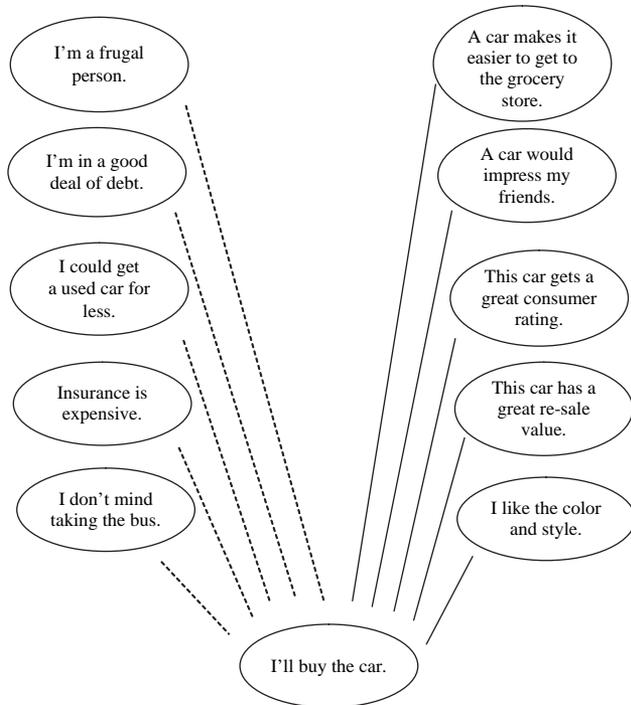


FIGURE 1 A hypothetical web of cognitions relevant to buying a car. Note: Solid lines indicate a positive influence that promotes buying the car; dashed lines indicate a negative influence.

grocery store would not be that much more convenient. She can also make her beliefs more consistent in another way. If she cannot deny the plausibility of a belief, she can then deny its importance (L. Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). For example, if Sherry cannot deny that she is in debt, then instead she can merely decide that this consideration is trivial.

At first blush, the notion that decision making follows a belief harmonization path would seem neither surprising nor provocative. Indeed, one could go even farther and assert that belief harmonization is an appropriate, and perhaps even wise, way to reach decisions. One should, after all, reach the decision that links up most harmoniously with all the input beliefs and desires that went into the decision. If the greatest and strongest number of links between input and decision suggests buying the car, that is what Sherry should do. If instead the links suggest not buying the car, that is the decision most appropriate for Sherry.

In a sense, this conclusion about the appropriateness of belief harmonization in decision making is often a reasonable one. The best decisions should be those that are most harmonious with other beliefs the person possesses, and there are clearly times in which the best indicator that a decision is a rational one is the fact that it possesses the best rationale. However, the problem with belief harmonization is the potential extreme to which people apply it. At some point, providing a rationale for a decision crosses a boundary

to become instead justifying a prejudice or bias that may be held with too much “faith beyond reason.”

This issue under belief harmonization arises, in part, because no belief has causal priority over any another belief in the web brought to bear on the decision. Instead, beliefs are, for the most part, equally able to influence endorsement of other beliefs and to be influenced, in turn, by the nature of other beliefs. Taken together, people revise and re-revise their evaluations of all the beliefs simultaneously in the constellation until they hold a set of beliefs that cohere and bolster each other, at least as much as possible.

The Influence of Decision Outcomes on Perceptions of “Input” Variables

Thus, under this framework, the influence of “input” beliefs and final conclusion is bidirectional. Input beliefs can influence the ultimate decision to buy a car, but a preference about buying a car—whether reasonable or not—can equally influence endorsement of input beliefs. In short, if Sherry really just wants to buy the car, then she will revise input beliefs until they are consonant with that preference. She may decide that she really likes the style of the car, appreciates the resale value, that used cars are really not that available, and that she is really not that much in debt. In this way, the decision to buy the car moves from a fair and unbiased search for the best rationale for a decision. Instead, the decision is already made and the person merely looking for ways to justify that decision by revising perceptions of input variables.

Emerging evidence demonstrates just how easily the causality in decision making can run in reverse, with decision outcomes influencing how they perceive what would appear to be input beliefs. Holyoak, Simon, and colleagues, for example, asked college students to mull over legal cases that presented novel questions and circumstances, such as whether a person who posts negative and inflammatory comments on the Internet can be sued for libel. When participants indicate which conclusion they favored tentatively after first viewing the evidence, these tentative conclusions subsequently influenced how they weighed the arguments and evidence put in front of them, such as whether society benefits from unfettered speech over the Internet (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; D. Simon, Snow, & Read, 2004; for similar findings, see Carlson & Russo, 2001). If participants tentatively thought that people can be sued for comments they make on the Internet, they shifted input beliefs to line up with that outcome (e.g., they think that unfettered speech is not important). If they tentatively thought a person should not be sued, they shifted their input beliefs in an opposite direction (i.e., thinking that unfettered speech is important).

In short, a preliminary opinion leaning toward one conclusion tends to alter how people subsequently evaluate the evidence and arguments they could be using to reach their decision. It is important to note that these processes arise

well before people commit themselves to a decision, and as a consequence cannot be thought of as mere cognitive dissonance reduction (Holyoak & Simon, 1999). Indeed, people's tentative preferences influence their perception of input beliefs even when no ultimate decision is called for (D. Simon, Pham, Le, & Holyoak, 2001). Once people have a favorite in a horse race toward a decision, the human tendency is to begin to nudge one's beliefs to line up with that horse.

The same processes can be found in consumer choice. When participants are induced to favor one choice of a product over another, such as a one particular restaurant, inn, or backpack over a competitor, their evaluations of input attributes are influenced by which alternative is tentatively ahead in the horse race toward a decision (Russo, Medvec, & Meloy, 1996; Russo, Meloy, & Medvec, 1998; Russo, Meloy, & Wilks, 2000). The attributes of the favored alternative are evaluated more favorably than the one disfavored, even if no final decision has been made, or even when no explicit decision between the options is called for (Russo et al., 1998). This distortion in evaluation can even lead people to choose an inferior alternative if the first piece of information people encounter favors it over a superior option—that is, once that inferior option gets ahead in the horse race, people evaluate its attributes more leniently, making it more likely to stay ahead until the final decision is reached (Russo, Carlson, & Meloy, 2006). Doing so allows people to maintain a set of harmonious cognitions about the products they encounter.

The Influence of Logically Irrelevant “Outside Beliefs”

Furthermore, if one looks at recent studies in the belief harmonization framework, one sees that people appear to pursue harmonizing justifications beyond anything that appears logically reasonable or normatively appropriate. Any number of beliefs can bias people to initially favor one alternative over others, and often those beliefs are logically irrelevant to the decision being made or inappropriate to consider. These beliefs are “outside” beliefs, in that they would not be viewed in the abstract as directly relevant to or legitimately tied to the decision at hand. If asked explicitly, people would reject them as appropriate considerations. People, however, may want to honor those outside beliefs, and so they distort their perceptions of input variables to reach a decision in line with those crucial beliefs.

One example of this comes from the work on juror decision making. Consider once again the issue of whether someone can be sued for posting negative comments on the Internet (Holyoak & Simon, 1999). In one condition of a telling study, participants were told that the defendant, accused of posting inflammatory comments on the Web, had a history of thoughtful analysis and constructive criticism—an observation that made participants wish to favor his side of the case. In the other condition, participations were told that the defendant had a history of malicious

manipulation, which made participants disinclined to be favorable.

This piece of information not only influenced participants' verdicts, but also their evaluation of legal evidence and argument that, on the face of it, had absolutely nothing to do with whether the defendant was a nice guy. For example, after hearing that the defendant was a fair and decent fellow, participants were more likely to agree with the rather technical legal argument that posting information on the Internet is like having a conversation (which is not subject to libel law) rather than like distributing a publication (which is subject to libel). Participants, hearing the defendant was a malevolent person, tended to favor the opposite legal theory.

In a sense, this is a direct illustration that belief harmonization can work to shape conclusions in ways that are logically inappropriate. Ask a legal scholar whether a general, abstract legal principle should be based on the personality of the specific defendant at hand, and he or she would blanch. General legal rules should not bend to extra-legal considerations of the defendant's likeability, yet participants in the Holyoake and Simon (1999) studies let that consideration influence their thinking about the fundamental legal questions surrounding the case.

Work in the consumer realm has found a similar bias due to logically irrelevant outside beliefs. When college students, for example, are trying to choose between two backpacks to buy as a gift, their opinions of the backpacks change once they are told a company owned by an alumnus of their university manufactured one of the choices. Students begin to tentatively favor that backpack over its competitors and evaluate its attributes more positively, although the university pedigree of a company's Chief Executive Officer really should have no direct relevance, for example, over how roomy a backpack seems (Russo et al., 1998).

EVIDENCE FOR SACROSANCT BELIEFS ABOUT THE SELF

What I wish to argue here is that positive beliefs about the self are ubiquitous outside beliefs that have a pervasive impact on the judgments and decisions people reach about their external world, triggering self-image motives that influence decision making. People commonly approach every decision with bedrock beliefs that they are effective and honorable individuals, and although the decisions they face are not explicitly about this proposition, people act as though their decisions are, indeed, about it. That is, as people engage in belief harmonization, they strive to ensure that the beliefs they consider remain harmonious with their positive self-image, even when their self-images are logically irrelevant to the decision at hand.

For example, consider once again the decision confronting Sherry as she struggles over whether to buy a car. If she

has a sacrosanct belief that she is a frugal individual, that belief will hold a strong influence over all the other beliefs in the constellation. It may cause her to deny that she is in debt, to emphasize that the car has a favorable resale value, and that she is sure to swing a deal when she goes shopping for car insurance—that is, her belief in her frugality might bias her toward buying a car.

Evidence for Positive Self-Beliefs

I can stipulate, with evidence, that people hold favorable impressions of their expertise, skill, morality, and place in the world. Indeed, several researchers over the last quarter century have devoted much effort toward showing not only that people have upbeat self-images but that those self-images are upbeat to an unrealistic degree in that no evidence or statistical analysis can justify the flattering opinions that people tend to hold about themselves (for recent reviews, see Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004), at least in North America and Western Europe (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). People are overconfident in their judgments (Dunning, 2007; Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1977) and think of themselves as better than their peers (Alicke, 1985; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Weinstein, 1980). They provide overly optimistic estimates about how quickly they can complete projects (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). They also overpredict the likelihood that they will engage in generous and altruistic acts such as giving money to charity, volunteering for an arduous experiment to spare another person, and cooperating with other participants in an economic game; although they are largely accurate in their predictions of their peers (Epley & Dunning, 2000, 2006). They also overestimate how assertively they will act in social situations (Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).

To be sure, not everyone holds such flattering opinions of themselves; but, in the main, people hold impressions that are positive despite ample evidence from a lifetime of experience that they are not necessarily such positive forces of nature (Dunning, 2005). One psychological process that might help discount such experience, and leave people with such flattering views of themselves, is a constant engagement in belief harmonization anchored on a self-belief that one is a lovable and capable individual. If people continually work to ensure that their beliefs about the outside world directly or indirectly affirm a sense of positive self-worth, then they would be quite likely to have unrealistically positive self-impressions—ones that continue on to influence further beliefs about the social world.

Research on self-evaluation has also demonstrated the “moves” that people have at their disposal to create harmonious beliefs honoring a positive sense of self (for reviews, see Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Dunning, 2002; Kunda, 1990). Recent work has shown that people react to ideas

consistent with their positive self-impressions by acquiescing to them in a passive way. However, people react to disquieting ideas by closely scrutinizing them for any sign of implausibility. For example, people who take a medical test merely accept the results of that test, without much thought, if it shows they are healthy. However, if it suggests that they are at high risk for illness, they look over the test longer, seek out ways to discount it, and are more energized to ask for a retest (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998). In a similar vein, people accept evidence that they will be successful in their future with acquiescence, even if that evidence is logically flawed. However, if the evidence suggests an unhappy future, they correctly spot the logical flaws in the evidence and seek out more information that actually leads to a more correct conclusion (Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002).

Research in consumer psychology reveals a similar asymmetry in the ways that preference-consistent information versus preference-inconsistent information is scrutinized. Information that is harmonious with agreeable preconceived notions provokes little harmonization activity. Discordant, unpleasant notions, however, are subject to much more critique until those notions are dismissed or rendered more palatable. For example, Jain and Maheswaran (2000) nudged participants to prefer one brand of telephone answering machine over another equally priced answering machine, and then gave them a consumer survey showing either that their preferred brand performed better than the alternative option or that it performed worse. When their preferred brand performed better, participants did not engage in that much cognitive activity upon learning the news. However, when it performed worse, participants thought through their responses to the survey with more effort. Relative to the other condition, they were more likely to elaborate on the message of the survey as well as to question it. Participants in a second study were given preference-consistent versus preference-inconsistent information that contained strong versus weak arguments. Strength of arguments did not sway decisions that much when the information was congenially preference consistent, indicating that participants were not thinking all that much. However, when the information was preference inconsistent, the strength of the arguments presented mattered much more, suggesting that participants had more thoughtfully processed the information given to them.

EVIDENCE FOR BELIEF HARMONIZATION WITH POSITIVE SELF-BELIEFS

Further evidence from my lab provides more direct evidence that beliefs about the social world are harmonized with flattering self-views, showing how rather positive self-views serve as sacrosanct beliefs that other judgments must navigate around. When people judge other people, they do

so in ways that affirm their rather positive impressions of self—even when the self's competence and character is nowhere near in explicit question (for reviews, see Balcetis & Dunning, 2005; Dunning, 1999, 2002).

Definitions of Social Traits and Judgment

Consider, for example, what it takes to be intelligent. What behaviors or skills count as diagnostic indicators of “smarts?” Ask 20 people this question and one will get 20 different answers, usually ones that put the person giving the answer in a favorable light. In their definition of social traits, people tend to emphasize specific attributes and talents that they have and de-emphasize those they do not (Dunning & McElwee, 1995; Dunning et al., 1989; Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991; Wentura & Greve, 2005). Those who have a big vocabulary or are good at math tend to think of those skills as more central to a definition of *intelligence* than those who do not have these characteristics (Dunning et al., 1991).

These beliefs also show up and guide in people's judgments about others. Consider leadership. People who consider themselves “task oriented” (e.g., persistent, ambitious) rather than “people oriented” (e.g., diplomatic, friendly) consider other task-oriented people to have more leadership potential than people-oriented types. People-oriented individuals tend to hold the opposite view (Dunning et al., 1991). People asked to describe their impressions of iconic leaders, such as George Washington and Mahatma Gandhi, tend to believe that those leaders share the same leadership qualities as themselves. Task-oriented individuals emphasize task skills more than do people-oriented peers; people-oriented individuals emphasize people skills more than their task-oriented counterparts (McElwee, Dunning, Tan, & Hollmann, 2001).

People also align their attributions for success and failure to affirm their bedrock beliefs about the self. When they are asked why some other person has succeeded in having a long and happy marriage, they tend to cite characteristics that they have themselves and de-emphasize the ones they do not. Suppose the other person's mother was employed while that person was growing up. People whose mother held a job during their childhood tend to state that this fact is more of a central reason why that person had a happy marriage, relative to a person whose mother was a homemaker. What if that other person had a serious romantic relationship early in life? People who had a similar experience in their own life think this is a better explanation for why that person had a happy marriage relative to those who did not have such an experience (Kunda, 1987).

People can also be caught realigning their definitions of competence to maintain bedrock beliefs of expertise after they meet up with successes and failures in their everyday life. Greve and Wentura (2003) asked college students to compete on trivia contests, and the students found that they

beat another student in some trivia domains (e.g., politics) but were themselves beaten in others (e.g., fine arts). When asked later on which of these particular domains predicted who had good “general knowledge,” participants tended to emphasize the specific domains where they had beaten their competitor over the ones where they had been beaten. In a follow-up study, Greve and Wentura followed students as they took a mandatory class on communication skills. As the class progressed, students revised their beliefs about the specific skills (e.g., using facial expressions) that were essential to communicate effectively, with those revisions tending to shift in a self-serving direction that helped students maintain a belief that they were competent.

Self-Serving Performance Standards

People shape their judgments of the social world in other ways to maintain sacrosanct beliefs about the self. At times, a behavior is clearly diagnostic of an underlying trait. For example, the number of hours students spend in their schoolbooks per week is clearly indicative of how *studious* a person is. However, even with this unambiguous indicator, there still is some unclarity about what it takes to be studious. Specifically, how many hours per week must a student study to qualify as studious? What standard of performance should he or she be held to? Is a student who studies 19 hr a week studious?; how about 5 hr?; or 36 hr?

People tend to adopt performance standards that place their own competence and character in a good light. For example, students who study quite a bit relative to their peers (e.g., 40 hr a week outside of class) tend to see others as rather unstudious unless those others come close to matching their own behavior. However, students who study much less (e.g., 5 hr a week outside of class) adhere to a much lower standard, stating that anyone else is studious regardless of how much time those others spend on coursework (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). In this way, students who hardly study can maintain their bedrock belief that they are competent and successful students.

The Motivational Nature of This Belief Harmonization

It is my contention that people shape their judgments of others to maintain sacrosanct beliefs about their competence and character—that positive self-views are immovable beliefs that other opinions and attitudes must align with harmoniously. In a word, people *regulate* their views of the world to affirm an image they want to have about themselves. Key to this contention is how people respond when those bedrock beliefs are shaken. When people's positive self-views are called into question, belief harmonization kicks into somewhat of an overdrive to recapture a positive self-impression.

For example, when people's positive self-views are called into question by having them fail a test they believe is

important, the opinions they express about marital success—a rather unrelated domain—become significantly more self-serving. They perceive whatever characteristic they possess (e.g., being the first born in their family) as more predictive of success in marriage than those characteristics they do not have. However, after success, people cease to show any self-serving inclination in their attributions for marital success (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995). Presumably, after success, people have ample evidence of their terrific nature and so need not engage in belief harmonization work.

Similarly, people change their performance standards depending on whether their self-esteem is under pressure or not. After failure, people continue to adopt self-serving performance standards. For example, those who score high on the Scholastic Assessment Test before coming to college do not consider others to be intelligent unless they, too, score high. Students who score low think of anyone as intelligent regardless of how that other person scored. However, after a success, this difference between high and low performers evaporates, with both groups adopting a more lenient criterion, thinking that anyone is intelligent regardless of their score (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998).

EVIDENCE FOR BELIEF HARMONIZATION IN CHOICE

Thus, the social cognitive literature on person perception suggests that people commonly engage in belief harmonization in which positive self-views serve as anchor beliefs. Recent developments in the consumer psychology literature provide strong hints that self-image motives may also influence decisions in the marketplace. Several recently documented phenomena illustrate the potentially important role played by self-image in decision making.

Self-Signaling

The notion that people reach their decisions with an eye toward bolstering their self-images is similar to another idea emerging from work in decision making and choice. That idea is the notion of *self-signaling*; that people make choices, in part, to signal the type of person they are. More important, self-signaling is not about the impression one leaves with other people. Rather, it is the self that is the critical audience, not the world at large (Bodner & Prelec, 2002). Cast in economic terms, the notion is that self-signals contain some utility for the individual, termed *diagnostic utility*, beyond the utility provided by the consumption of the thing that is chosen. Other economists have articulated similar notions, suggesting that people derive utility directly from having a self-image they favor (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Brekke, Kverndokk, & Nyborg, 2003).

The notion of self-signaling has been invoked to explain behavior that remains curious, given traditional economic

analyses. It has been offered as an explanation for people's behavior in the Newcomb problem. In this problem, the experimenter shows the participant two closed boxes. Box A contains a small but significant amount of money, say \$1,000. Box B contains either nothing or \$1 million. The participant is asked whether he or she chooses to take the contents of both boxes or only of Box B. The participant is further told that an all-knowing deity has already made the decision about what Box B contains. If the deity thinks that the participant is a nice person, the deity has placed \$1 million in Box B. If the deity instead has judged the participant to be a greedy person, the deity has put nothing in the box. People usually presented with this scenario tend to take only Box B, a finding confirmed by Shafir and Tversky (1992) in an experiment in which a smart computer program served as the all-knowing being. However, to an economist, this decision is irrational. The deity has already made the decision about whether to place money in Box B. There is nothing now that the participant's decision can do to change that fact. Given this, the participant should choose both boxes to ensure a payoff of at least \$1,000.

A self-signaling account can explain this behavior. People choose the putatively economically inferior option, Box B only, because it is superior in one respect. Choosing it is diagnostic that the participant is a nice individual, and people wish to "consume" this diagnosis and the self-signaling utility it provides. Other situations provide other chances for self-signals. People choose mountaineering as a hobby, despite its expense, danger, and discomfort, because it communicates to the mountaineer that he or she is a brave, effective, and fit human being (Loewenstein, 1999).

A self-signaling account also explains other behavior. In a telling experiment, Quattrone and Tversky (1984) asked participants to hold their arm in ice water, an exercise that grows to a painful experience within seconds. Some participants were told that one indicator of a healthy heart is a high pain tolerance. Those told this kept their arm underwater longer than when they had been told no such thing. Other participants were told that healthy people had relatively little pain tolerance. These individuals held their arm underwater for a significantly briefer time than they had before they were told this. Quattrone and Tversky took these behaviors as an indication of self-signaling in that holding one's arm in ice water for a long versus a short time was really of no consequence to the participants. Their behavior could not *cause* them to have a healthy heart; that circumstance had been already chosen by fate. However, their behavior could buy them a diagnosis, a signal, that they were among the healthy.

Endowment Effects

It is a well-established finding that people place more value on an object once they own it, a phenomenon known as the endowment effect. Indeed, handing a coffee mug to a

college student causes them to more than double the price they think it is worth (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991). The usual explanation for the endowment effects rests on notions of loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) in that it is more painful to give something up when one owns it than it is pleasurable to gain it in the first place. Thus, losing an object requires a higher price than acquiring it.

Sacrosanct beliefs about the self, however, may serve as an additional psychological mechanism underlying the endowment effect. Once people own something, it is associated with them; thus, it becomes something that must affirm the positive impressions they hold about themselves. There is some evidence for this self-worth explanation for the endowment effect. When people acquire an object, they view its attributes more positively (Nesselrode, Beggan, & Allison, 1999). However, more than that, threaten their self-esteem with failure and they are even more likely to view an object they own in favorable terms relative to one they do not (Beggan, 1992).

In addition, the way in which people react to brand extensions of products they own tends to follow a self-esteem bolstering pattern. When people own a less prestigious product (such as a Honda), they tend to like brand extensions of the product, relative to nonowners, regardless of whether the extension is in a more or less prestigious direction (i.e., the maker of the brand decides to sell a more or less expensive model). Owners of high prestige objects (such as a BMW) are choosier. Relative to non-owners, they favor brand extensions that are high in prestige (i.e., to a higher priced luxury car), but not extensions in a low prestige direction (e.g., a BMW priced at \$11,000). Such low prestige extensions threaten the status of what they own, commenting negatively on the self and violating any bedrock belief about the self's worth (Kirmani, Sood, & Bridges, 1999).

Work on the name-letter effect also suggests that things associated with the self are viewed more favorably. The name-letter effect refers to the tendency for people to rate a letter of the alphabet more favorably if it is in their own name (Nuttin, 1985, 1987), an effect that also extends to numbers contained in the date of one's birthday (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002). Indeed, people tend to like product brands to the extent that the names of those brands contain one's initials (Hodson & Olson, 2005), and they disproportionately move to states and cities whose names share letters with their own names, as well as numbers in their birthdays (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002).

Evidence suggests that this name-letter effect, at least in part, has self-image roots. How people rate the letters in their own name, as well as the numbers contained in their birthday, is correlated with more conscious measures of self-esteem, at least when people fill out those self-esteem measures quickly (Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). When people face psychic threats, those with high self-esteem (but not those with low self-esteem) exaggerate how much they prefer the letters in their own name, presumably to repair a positive sense of self (Jones et al., 2002).

Compensation Effects

It has long been noted in consumer behavior, as well as popular culture, that people buy to compensate for perceived deficits. Men buy toupees, for example, to make up for hair loss, as well as lost youth. One common take on this observation, however, is that people buy with an eye toward obscuring their shortcomings in the eyes of others—that is, they are worried about how others perceive their shortcomings. I would suggest, however, that people often buy products instead to impress themselves, to cover shortcomings that they privately perceive within themselves, regardless of what others think.

Consider, for example, how consumer behavior changes when people's beliefs about themselves are called into question. Willer (2006) brought male and female college students into the laboratory and threw their beliefs about their own masculinity and femininity into question. One half of the male participants, for example, were told that they scored like a typical man on a personality test, but the other half were told they scored like a typical woman. Those in the latter group, their masculinity made more uncertain, subsequently expressed hyper-male attitudes relative to those in the former group. They expressed more opposition to same-sex marriage; more support for the Iraq war; and, most important for consumer behavior, more of a desire to buy a sports utility vehicle relative to other automobiles. Women showed no such bias based on the feedback they received.

Affirmation Effects

Concerns for self-signals may also induce other types of behavior that cost rather than benefit the individual. People often express the idea that they are invulnerable to risk (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Weinstein, 1980), and the net effect of this sacrosanct belief may be to place people in risky circumstances. People, for example, may refuse to test for sexually transmitted diseases because taking the test would mean that they are the type of person who might be at risk. People might refuse to save money because they do not wish to admit that they are financially overextended.

If people take these health and financial risks because they are concerned about the messages being sent about the self, then affirming the self should lessen concern over these messages—that is, serving the beast of self-esteem first may prompt people later to make choices with less concern over stigma. Such was the logic behind a recent demonstration in self-affirmation in which people mull over some aspect of themselves that makes them proud before they are asked to make esteem-threatening choices (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation appears to short circuit the jealousy by which people protect sacrosanct beliefs about themselves. For example, Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000) showed college students a short AIDS awareness video.

Those who first went through a self-affirmation exercise, writing an essay about an aspect of themselves about which they were particularly proud, were more willing to accede that they were at risk for AIDS than those who did not undergo such an exercise (for similar findings, see Reed & Aspinwall, 1998). More important, as they left the experiment, they also bought more condoms than their non-affirmed peers (Sherman et al., 2000).

Licensing Effects

The logic of self-affirmation extends to phenomena known as *licensing effects*—that is, once people have gained solid evidence that they possess some sacrosanct trait, they gain license to act in a way that could potentially violate the notion that they have the trait. For example, if people give to a charity on Tuesday, they can turn down a charitable solicitation on Friday with much reduced concern about what that refusal means about their self-image. They already have demonstrated a generous nature earlier in the week, and thus do not need to do so again.

Consider an illustrative experiment conducted by Monin and Miller (2001) in which participants were asked to choose a police chief between one candidate who was African American and another who was European American. Not wanting to self-signal that they were prejudiced, participants in the control condition tended to choose the African American candidate. However, if participants had just completed a questionnaire allowing them to express how anti-prejudiced they were, they felt licensed to choose the European American candidate at a greater rate. More important, this effect was due to self-signaling and not signaling to others in that this licensing effect occurred even when there was no other person who could know whether the participant had previously renounced prejudice. In short, an opportunity to renounce prejudice obscured any self-signal inherent in the choice between the candidates of African versus European descent. That signal now obscured, participants felt freer to choose the European candidate.

Licensing effects also arise in consumer choice. If people are given a chance to express their better natures, they feel more licensed to be self-indulgent later on. For example, people given a choice to donate to a charity later on feel freer to buy an expensive pair of jeans rather than a useful but dull vacuum cleaner or an expensive pair of sunglasses over a cheap pair (Khan & Dhar, 2006). Indeed, even a mere intention to act virtuously in the future licenses people to act with self-indulgence in the present. In a series of experiments, Khan and Dhar (2007) asked participants, for example, whether they wanted to eat a cookie versus some fat-free yogurt. When participants knew that they would be presented with the same exact choice again at some point in the future, they were more likely to opt for the cookie, relative to when they thought they were making a one-off, isolated choice never to be revisited. Presumably, knowing they

could resolve to be virtuous in the future was enough to license indulgent behavior in the present—although, truth be told, a good number of participants scrapped their resolve and chose the cookie again when that later choice arrived (Khan & Dhar, 2007).

FUTURE QUESTIONS

The impact of sacrosanct beliefs on judgment and behavior suggests several questions for future study.

Other Sacrosanct Beliefs

In this essay, I have focused on one specific sacrosanct belief—that the self is a lovable and capable person—but could other beliefs exist that have just as a pervasive and profound influence on thought and action? For example, people not only esteem themselves but they often esteem the groups they are members of—that is, people not only possess personal self-esteem aimed at themselves, they also possess *collective self-esteem* aimed at groups they belong to (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Could this collective self-esteem influence people's decisions in the marketplace, causing them to value objects or possessions that are associated with their groups and de-value objects associated with other groups? It might be profitable for future research to explore this possibility.

General Versus Specific Self-Views

Another profitable avenue might focus on whether the sacrosanct beliefs people seek to bolster involve specific ones or rather a more overall general one about the self as a whole. For example, the Willer (2006) studies on masculinity suggested that people bolster specific self-views. If their masculinity is called into question, people act to re-establish a specific view of their masculinity. However, many experiments from the self-affirmation tradition (for reviews, see Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) suggest that people are not as concerned with specific self-views as they are worried over a general sense of their self-worth. If a specific and important self-view is damaged, bolstering any other important self-view will do to regain a sense of self-worth, regardless of whether the bolstered self-view is related to the one that was threatened.

For example, in his classic experiment, Steele (1975) called people over the phone and insulted them, saying that they were the type of person unlikely to give to charity. Several weeks later, those insulted were significantly more likely to give to a charity when called by an independent group. However, more important, people were also much more willing to give to a charity if instead their driving skills had been insulted, although driving skill has nothing to do, on the face of it, with charitable acts. In addition, a

bevy of research in self-affirmation has shown that bolstering a person's self-view along one dimension prevents them from being defensive on another unrelated dimension (Sherman & Cohen, 2006)—such as asking people to discuss their artistic or scientific values prompts them to be more willing to accept a vulnerability to AIDS (Sherman et al., 2000).

Given this, one might wonder whether throwing a person's masculinity into uncertainty might not only prompt them to act in a hyper-masculine matter (Willer, 2006) but in a manner designed to bolster any important self-view. Would questioning masculinity prompt someone to buy products associated with health, or intelligence, or charity, as well as products associated with *manliness*?

Automatic Versus Deliberative Nature of Self-Image Motives

Another outstanding issue is whether the impact of self-based sacrosanct beliefs is deliberative or automatic in nature. By deliberative, I mean that the concerns about the self prompt people to consciously, deliberately, and effortfully arrange their preferences to honor a positive sense of self—that is, people are aware of their endeavors to make their choices reflect well on the self and thus can report on these efforts, can monitor their impact, and can correct for these influences if need be.

However, the impact of self-beliefs might be more automatic in nature. The term *automatic* can take on many definitions (Bargh, 1994), but two aspects of automaticity may be most important. First, it may be the case that the process of affirming favorable self-beliefs is beyond people's control. They may be aware that they are distorting their preferences in deference to their self-image, but may still be unable to stop this process or correct for its operation. Second, it may be the case that this process occurs below people's awareness—that is, they may lack any insight that their choices are influenced by concerns over the self. To date, in work on the impact of self on social judgment (Dunning, 1999, 2002), it has not been determined whether the impact of self on judgments of others is something that occurs deliberately or automatically; so this question remains quite open.

However, more recent evidence from the lab opens the possibility that people's preferences can impose its influence below a person's awareness. In that work, it has been shown that people's preferences can cause distortion well before any product of that distortion reaches the threshold of conscious awareness. Indeed, the influence of preferences can extend down to perceptual processes, literally altering what people see in the outside world. In these experiments, people wishing to see a number rather than a letter on a computer screen tend to see a "13" instead of a "B" when presented a figure that can be interpreted as either (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006; see also Balcetis & Dunning, 2007). Thus, if preferences can influence what the visual

system presents to conscious awareness, one wonders whether other cognitions, such as the plausibility or importance of a belief, might be influenced similarly below the level of conscious awareness before any product of that distortion reaches conscious awareness.

The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem

The notion of sacrosanct self-beliefs also suggests studying the role of self-esteem in consumer behavior. For sacrosanct beliefs about the self to influence consumer psychology, people must presumably have those sacrosanct beliefs, and people with low self-esteem may not have the positive views to maintain. For example, we have found in my lab that people with low self-esteem are less likely to define traits and social categories in self-serving ways, or to reach judgments of others that reflect favorably on the self (Beauregard & Dunning, 2001). They are also less likely to hold others to performance standards that put the self in a positive light (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Dunning & Beauregard, 2000).

Thus, in the consumer realm, one could ask whether low self-esteem people will work as energetically as their high self-esteem peers harmonize consumer decisions with positive views of self. Will they buy to compensate for perceived self-deficits through their purchases? Will they be as responsive to self-affirmational exercises?

The Moderating Role of Culture

Another boundary condition may prove to be geographic in nature. People in North America and Western Europe work to bolster their self-esteem, but people from other cultures, particularly cultures from the Far East, tend not to be focused so much on self-affirmation (Heine et al., 1999), although this observation is currently subject to some contention (Heine, 2005; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Thus, is one as likely to see endowment, compensation, or self-affirmation effects in Far Eastern cultures to the same extent as one sees them among Westerners?

Perhaps such effects will arise, but the central sacrosanct beliefs that people wish to maintain will shift. In the West, people seem concerned about affirming the worth of their individual self. In the East, the concern seems to be maintaining a secure place in the web of one's social relationships—fitting in the groups to which one belongs (Heine et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). If that is the case, it might be this belief that one works to maintain through consumer behavior.

Implications for Marketing

Self-image concerns may also carry implications for effective marketing. Increasingly, psychological research reveals that the motivations people cite for their own behavior are

different from the motivations they cite for other people's behavior—even when they are talking about the exact same action. For example, people tend to state that they are motivated to do good work in their job for intrinsic reasons, such as personal growth, whereas other people are more extrinsically motivated by money and job security (Heath, 1999). The same holds for product purchases. People tend to state that others are influenced by social status when buying a car. They themselves, however, are influenced more by safety and environmental concerns (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson, 2006). This difference in perception occurs even when respondents are largely talking about the same brand of cars.

This difference in perception, however, is consistent with a belief harmonization view. People wish to view themselves as safety-conscious consumers who are selflessly concerned about the environment, and so naturally they rate these considerations in their choice of products, regardless of the truth. This suggests that marketers should be mindful of the motivations that people are likely to cite as prime considerations for their purchases. These considerations may not, in fact, be important components of people's purchasing decisions, but people may believe (or at least want to believe) that they are. Thus, to the extent that a product can fulfill people's concerns over their self-image—that is, the image they wish to portray to themselves and not the one they portray to other people—that product may prove to be more successful.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The central thesis of this essay is that the act of consumer decision making might profitably be construed as a process of belief harmonization in which people arrange their preferences and beliefs into a harmonious web of cognitions. But, more than that, in this article I suggested that one fundamental underlying belief that any social judgment or consumer decision must harmonize with is the belief that the self is a wonderful human being.

If self-image does underlie a non-trivial amount of consumer decision making, the consequences might be substantial. Sacrosanct beliefs about the self, for example, may prompt people to make unwise and risky health decisions, such as foregoing a medical test or overspending to acquire a set of possessions that is commensurate with one's lofty view of self. However, the consequences may also be positive ones in that people do acknowledge that one of the reasons why they act in a socially desirable way is to maintain a positive view of self. For example, 73% of Norwegian respondents stated that they were motivated to recycle to see themselves as responsible people (Brekke et al., 2003).

As such, there is much to study regarding the impact of self on consumer choice. Many of the processes by which self-image motives influence choice remain unstudied or

underdescribed, and the consequences of decision making in the service of self-interest are, as of yet, not completely described. There is much work to do delineating the role of self-image in the marketplace. If this is the case, then perhaps the proper decision for consumer scientists wishing to think of themselves as good researchers would be to take on the task.

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