



Short Communication

Motivational and cognitive correlates of avoidance of ambiguity: The role of values and relational complexity



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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on a study examining the association between relational complexity, values (self direction and conformity), and avoidance of ambiguity among German early ($N = 883$, age $M = 11.11$, $SD = 0.79$) and mid-adolescents ($N = 473$, age $M = 15.97$, $SD = 0.75$). While self direction values predicted less avoidance of ambiguity for mid-adolescents, conformity values predicted more avoidance of ambiguity among early and mid-adolescents. Relational complexity, measured using the Latin Square task, was not associated with avoidance of ambiguity, but the variables interacted in early adolescence: self-direction values were significantly and negatively related to avoidance of ambiguity among adolescents with high but not low relational complexity. Thus, motivation seems to have a greater association with avoidance of ambiguity when relational complexity is high and ambiguous information can be processed.

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1. Introduction

Motivation and cognition are basic and intricately related determinants of information processing (Kossowska, Orehek, & Kruglanski, 2010; Kossowska, Jasko, & Brycz, 2014). Using a large sample of German adolescents, this paper reports on the relations between motivational factors (self direction and conformity values) and cognitive factors (relational complexity) and the avoidance of ambiguity. In other words, it asks who aspires to process ambiguous information, and who is capable of doing so?

2. Background

Avoidance of ambiguity is one aspect of a need for cognitive-closure, i.e., the desire for a definite answer on any given topic. Specifically, it is the tendency to view ambiguous situations and stimuli as threatening, with a concomitant desire to avoid contact (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Studies have found individual differences in the need for cognitive-closure in general and in the avoidance of ambiguity specifically. Some individuals may be more motivated than others to experience high closure and low ambiguity, seeking new knowledge when it is consistent with their existing knowledge, engaging in superficial processing, and creating simplified mental representations (Kossowska et al., 2010; Kruglanski, 1989; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). This tendency has far reaching consequences, including prejudiced thinking (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011) or a lack of consideration of alternatives in decision making (Disatnik & Steinhart, 2015).

The antecedents of individual differences in the need for cognitive-closure are not well understood but may include the individual's history of socialization (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2013). Alternatively, they may stem from motivational and cognitive factors, as probed in this study.

2.1. Values

Values are abstract motivations guiding individuals' life decisions toward desirable end states. As such, values provide a standard for the selection and evaluation of behaviors, attitudes and ideas in adulthood (Schwartz, 1992) and adolescence (Vecchione, Döring, Marsicano, Alessandri, & Bardi, 2015).

Two values are particularly relevant to avoidance of ambiguity. Self-direction values motivate independent thought and action, inspiring individuals to make choices, create and explore (Schwartz, 1992). High tolerance of ambiguity may be driven by self-direction values, as they promote exploration of the environment and deep cognitive processing. In contrast, conformity values motivate individuals to follow social expectations and norms; they are willing to restrain their impulses to maintain harmonious social relations (Schwartz, 1992). The need to avoid ambiguity may be driven by this desire to maintain the status quo and preserve certainty. That said, few studies have found evidence of relations between avoidance of ambiguity and self-direction values versus conformity values (Amit & Sagiv, 2013; Calogero, Bardi, & Sutton, 2009).

2.2. Relational complexity

In order to implement many tasks, an individual must grasp the relations between the available variables. The process generates nontrivial

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cognitive demands that increase with the complexity of relations represented in parallel (Birney, Halford, & Andrews, 2006; Halford, Wilson, & Phillips, 2010). Individuals can process increasingly complex relations as they get older, making substantial advances in late childhood and early adolescence (Birney et al., 2006; Dauvier, Bailleux, & Perret, 2014). Relational complexity has a fundamental role in higher cognitive processes (Halford et al., 2010), such as fluid intelligence (Dauvier et al., 2014), social cognition (Halford & Andrews, 2014), and planning (Halford et al., 2010). This role is especially apparent in developmental periods of increases in the ability to process complex relations (Dauvier et al., 2014).

The need for cognitive closure has previously been associated with elementary cognitive processes. Individuals may be inclined to avoid ambiguity when their cognitive resources are too limited to enable efficient managing of numerous environmental stimuli (Kossowska et al., 2010). Thus, the need for cognitive-closure may be a compensatory mechanism making up for deficits in resources by promoting shallow information processing (Kossowska, 2007). In various studies, individuals reporting a high need for cognitive closure have displayed cognitive deficits, including low rates of information processing (Kossowska et al., 2010), low item storage capacity in working memory (Kossowska et al., 2010), and inability to control attention (Kossowska, 2007).

3. Current study

This study goes beyond existing studies by investigating the associations between motivational and cognitive factors and the avoidance of ambiguity. Motivationally, we hypothesize self-direction and conformity values will be associated with avoidance of ambiguity (Amit & Sagiv, 2013). Cognitively, we hypothesize relational complexity will be negatively associated with avoidance of ambiguity, specifically among early adolescents who are gradually mastering complex relational tasks (Dauvier et al., 2014).

4. Method

4.1. Procedure

Data collection took place in Germany between 2007 and 2009. All schools in the state of Bremen and adjacent regions of Lower Saxony were approached; 35% agreed to invite their students in grades 6, 7, 10 and 11 to participate. Consent forms were sent to parents of students younger than 16 years of age. The questionnaires were anonymous, participation was voluntary, and no reward was offered to participants. Trained researchers explained the instructions and answered questions. The study was approved by the ethical review board.

4.2. Participants

The report included 1361 German adolescents, from two age-groups: early adolescents $N = 883$, age $mean = 11.11$, $SD = 0.79$, 49% females; mid-adolescents $N = 473$, age $mean = 15.97$, $SD = 0.75$, 46% females. Participants were all majority members (parents born in Germany). Mothers and fathers completed a ten-year high school (50.5%, 48.3%), a 12-year high school (24%, 26.5%), or higher education (23.2%, 19.4%, respectively). The sample was similar to the population in terms of religion, 61.6% Christians (63.2% in the population; Terwey & Baumann, 2009).

4.3. Measures

4.3.1. Avoidance of ambiguity

To avoid fatiguing the young participants with a long survey, three items measuring avoidance of ambiguity were taken from the Need for Closure Scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994): “I don't like situations that are uncertain”; “I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life”; “I feel uncomfortable when someone's meaning or intention is unclear to me”. Items were rated using a six-point scale, ranging from “highly disagree” to “highly agree,” Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.64$.

4.3.2. Relational complexity

The Latin Square Task (Birney et al., 2006), used to measure relational complexity, included 12 items, chosen to represent increasing relational complexity. Each item was an incomplete 4×4 Latin square. Participants determined which of four possible elements should fill a target cell, so that the matrix satisfied the defining principle, according to which each shape appeared only once in every row or column. Sample items of varying demands are presented in Fig. 1.

4.3.3. Value importance

Respondents completed a short 25-item version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ25, Schiefer, Möllering, Daniel, Benish-Weisman, & Boehnke, 2010). The PVQ includes verbal portraits of individuals. Each portrait describes the goals, aspirations or wishes of an individual, constructed to implicitly tap the importance of one of ten values. This study used two values, each measured by three items. For example, “Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to her. She likes to do things in her own original way” is an item measuring self-direction values. In contrast, “She believes that people should do what they're told. She thinks people should follow rules at all times, even when no-one is watching” measures conformity values. The participants answered the question, “How much like you is this person?” on a scale of 1–6, ranging from 1 “not at all

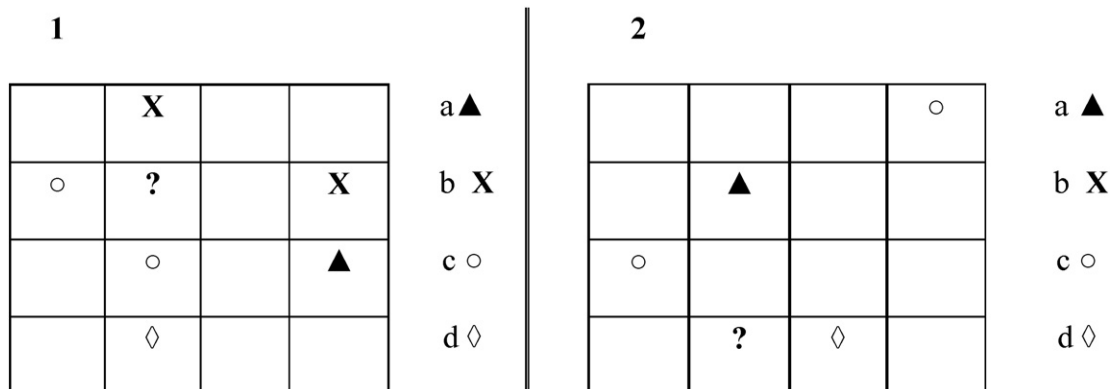


Fig. 1. Sample items for relational complexity scale. Item 1 = low complexity; item 2 = high complexity.

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