



Incremental variance in indecisiveness due to cognitive failure compared to fluid intelligence and personality traits

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of fluid intelligence, personality traits and perceived cognitive failure in relation to indecisiveness. The Advanced Progressive Matrices (APM), the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ) and the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ) were administered to 429 Italian high school students. The study revealed that perceived cognitive failure added a significant percentage of incremental variance in indecisiveness compared to variances due to fluid intelligence and personality traits thereby offering new research and intervention possibilities.

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1. Introduction

The indecisiveness construct, which is defined as the inability to make decisions in a timely manner in different situations and domains of life, has been the focus of numerous studies (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995). Several authors have analyzed the definition of the indecisiveness construct in an attempt to clarify the difference between indecisiveness and indecision. Indecisiveness refers to a chronic inability to make decisions in various contexts (Frost & Shows, 1993) whereas indecision is a construct that refers to the emergence of problems during the career decision-making process (Osipow, 1999). The principal definitions are summarized in Table 1.

Many studies have revealed a link between the indecisiveness construct and variables such as lack of self-esteem (Burka & Yuen, 1983; Ferrari, 1991; Ferrari, McCown, & Johnson, 1989), procrastination (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 1992; Ferrari & Emmons, 1994), obsessive compulsive tendencies (Frost & Shows, 1993; Gayton, Clavin, Clavin, & Broida, 1994), perfectionism (Frost & Shows, 1993; Gayton et al., 1994) and distractibility (Harriott, Ferrari, & Dovidio, 1996).

Other studies have found that individuals with high levels of indecisiveness take more time than individuals with lower levels of indecisiveness in choosing between alternatives (Frost & Shows, 1993), that they use less exhaustive strategies in reaching

decisions (Ferrari & Dovidio, 2000, 2001), that they exert greater cognitive effort in decision making (Ferrari & Dovidio, 2001), that they feel more threatened by ambiguous situations (Rassin & Muris, 2005a) and that they are more likely to postpone decision making (Rassin & Muris, 2005b; Veinott, 2002).

Yet other studies have found that indecisive individuals have greater difficulty in choosing specialized college subjects (Gayton et al., 1994) and in making other important life decisions (Frost & Shows, 1993; Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002).

Decision making is a complex process in which different variables play a role: individual variables (Nilsson et al., 2007); situational variables related to decisional problems (Campbell & Cellini, 1981); and contextual variables (Constantine, Wallace, & Kindaichi, 2005). Literature analysis reveals a growing interest in the study of the individual variables in decision-making processes (Nilsson et al., 2007). For example, in the literature, indecisiveness is often traditionally linked to personality traits and, in particular, to Neuroticism (Diab, Gillespie, & Highhouse, 2008; Jackson, Furnham, & Lawty-Jones, 1999). Recent studies (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011) confirm that, among personality traits, Neuroticism is most closely linked to indecisiveness. Another recent study (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, Asulin-Peretz, & Gati, *in press*) suggests that personality traits play a greater role in explaining indecisiveness than do emotional intelligence, perceived social support and career decision-making self-efficacy. However, on the other hand, emotional intelligence plays a greater role in explaining indecision than do personality traits, perceived social support and career decision-making self-efficacy.

The relationship between personality traits and indecisiveness has been studied in detail in the literature, emphasizing the role

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Table 1
Definitions of indecisiveness and indecision constructs.

	Indecisiveness	Indecision
Crites (1969)	Indecisive subjects are individuals who seem to have difficulty in taking any kind of decision, regardless of its importance.	Undecided subjects are individuals who seem to have difficulty in taking decisions particularly in a professional context.
Osipow (1999)	Chronic or generalized indecisiveness as a personal characteristic manifesting in an individual's difficulty in taking decisions in any part of his or her own life.	Developmental indecision as part of a normal developmental stage of life.
Germeijs and de Boeck (2002)	Indecisiveness implies a chronic inability to make decisions in all decisional contexts.	Indecision involves decisional problems only in a specific context.
Savickas (2004)	Indecisive individuals as people characterized by chronic anxiety and a lack of problem-solving skills.	Undecided individuals are people characterized by a temporary inability to choose, but potentially able to take decisions depending on their level of development.

of Neuroticism (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012; Di Fabio et al., in press; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011); yet relatively few studies have investigated the possible role of cognitive factors – and in particular the role of perceived cognitive factors – in indecisiveness, although cognitive factors have traditionally been linked to decision making.

Early research on decision making was dominated by normative models and probabilistic studies strongly influenced by economic theory (Luce & Raiffa, 1957) where the emphasis was on the cognitive aspects of decision making. Regarding the specific role of fluid intelligence in decision-making processes, a study by Rigas, Carling, and Brehmer (2002) revealed that greater fluid intelligence was linked to better performance in dynamic decision-making tasks. A recent study by Di Fabio and Palazzeschi (2012) revealed an inverse relationship between indecisiveness and fluid intelligence, but, at the same time, it also revealed inverse relationships between indecisiveness and personality traits and, in particular, between indecisiveness and the core self-evaluation construct.

The literature has pointed to a relationship between perceived cognitive failure and decision-making weakness as manifested in the procrastination decisional style (Di Fabio, 2006). The major aim or contribution of the present study was to determine empirically if perceived cognitive failure could also play a greater role in indecisiveness than that played by personality traits (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012; Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, in press; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011). Cognitive failure includes neglectfulness, loss of memorized information, distractibility and lack of ideas (Broadbent, Cooper, Fitzgerald, & Parkes, 1982). Regarding decisional procrastination, the analysis of implicit cognitive processes offers interesting prospects for in-depth study (Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 2000). Some researchers see decisional procrastination as an expression of cognitive failure and, therefore, as a manifestation of a delay in evaluating information about alternative choices due to poor acquisition, retention and processing of complex information (Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 2000). Studies carried out with Italian high school students (Di Fabio, 2006; Di Fabio & Busoni, 2006) have shown that decisional procrastination can be explained largely in terms of perceived cognitive failure. Given the relationship between decisional procrastination and indecisiveness (Beswick et al., 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 1992; Ferrari & Emmons, 1994), it could be argued that perceived cognitive failure also plays a role in indecisiveness – an argument warranting further empirical study.

1.1. Aim and hypotheses

Based on the findings of previous studies, particularly those that indicated a link between indecisiveness and personality traits, especially Neuroticism (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011), and between indecisiveness and procrastination (Beswick et al., 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 1992; Ferrari & Emmons, 1994), which can be explained largely in terms

of perceived cognitive failure (Di Fabio, 2006; Di Fabio & Busoni, 2006), the present study sought to examine the relationship between fluid intelligence, personality traits, perceived cognitive failure and indecisiveness among students in the last year of high school. The aim was to determine whether perceived cognitive failure could explain a percentage of incremental variance in indecisiveness beyond the variance accounted for by fluid intelligence and personality traits. School students were chosen as research subjects because of the perceived need to study this topic in a scholastic context, specifically among students having to contend with significant choices and transition at the end of high school.

The following hypotheses were accordingly made.

(H1) Personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability – low Neuroticism, and Openness) according to the Big Five Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992) will account for significant incremental variance in indecisiveness beyond the variance accounted for by fluid intelligence (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2012; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011).

(H2) Perceived cognitive failure will account for significant incremental variance in indecisiveness beyond the variance accounted for by fluid intelligence and personality traits (Beswick et al., 1988; Effert & Ferrari, 1989; Ferrari, 1992; Ferrari & Emmons, 1994) and will show a positive relationship with indecisiveness.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Four hundred and twenty-nine students attending the last two years of high school in the Tuscan school system participated in the study. All the students enrolled in the last year of high school in the school system were invited to participate. With regard to gender, 202 (47.09%) of the participants were boys and 227 (52.91%) were girls. With regard to the type of school attended, 196 (45.69%) of the students attended a technical school and 233 (54.31%) attended a college preparatory high school. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years ($M = 18.41$, $SD = .81$).

The instruments were administered collectively in each classroom in the school by specially trained staff at a time agreed upon with the school and with due adherence to the requirements of privacy and informed consent.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Advanced Progressive Matrices (APM)

The Advanced Progressive Matrices (APM) (Raven, 1962) in the Italian version by Di Fabio and Clarotti (2007) was used to evaluate fluid intelligence. The test is subdivided into two series of items consisting respectively of 12 (Series I) items and 36 (Series II) items from which the participants had to choose one response from among eight possible alternatives. The first series was used for

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