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Preference for Consistency: The Development of a Valid Measure and the Discovery of Surprising Behavioral Implications

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A measure of preference for consistency (the PFC Scale) was developed. In three construct validation experiments, scores on the PFC successfully predicted individuals who would and would not be susceptible to a set of standard consistency-based effects: cognitive balance, foot in the door, and dissonance. The pattern of results in each of the experiments suggested the type of consistency that the PFC measures: a tendency to base one's responses to incoming stimuli on the implications of existing (prior entry) variables, such as previous expectancies, commitments, and choices. A surprisingly large percentage (at least half) of our participants showed no strong inherent preference for consistency—a finding that may explain the frequent failure to detect or replicate (a) traditional consistency effects and (b) a wide variety of other experimental phenomena.

It is quite remarkable how many of the great, early theorists of social psychology developed or played an important role in developing consistency theories of human motivation (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946, 1958; McGuire, 1960; Newcomb, 1953; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Rokeach, 1960; Rosenberg & Abelson, 1960; Zajonc, 1960). It seems equally remarkable, then, that despite the counsel of so respected an array of minds and despite a decade-long cornucopia of supportive work (from the late 1950s to the late 1960s), consistency-based explanations are rarely invoked in present-day social psychological accounts of human functioning (Aronson, 1992; Berkowitz & Devine, 1989), even though several of the faithful have continued through the years to try to draw attention to the applicability of consistency motives to a wide array of behavior (Aronson, 1992; Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989; McGuire, 1990; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976; Insko, 1984).

To what are we to attribute this rather dramatic shift by social psychologists away from the explanatory utility of the consistency principle—that people are motivated toward cognitive consistency and will change their beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and actions to achieve it? On a general level, one could point to the often decried "trendiness" of scientific investigation and to the reward structure of the scientific enterprise, which make well-researched issues less attractive than fresh topics (Aronson, 1989; Berkowitz & Devine, 1989; Davis, 1971; Jones, 1985). One could also argue, as did Markus and Zajonc (1985) and Berkowitz and Devine (1989), that the dominant information processing paradigm of recent social psychological thinking de-emphasizes the motivational properties of cognition that are central to traditional consistency theories. Finally, and more specific to the domain of consistency formulations, one might argue that researchers eventually became frustrated by certain fundamental ambiguities that were never adequately resolved (e.g., What are the circumstances under which a person can be expected to choose one method of inconsistency reduction over another? How are we best to define consistency and inconsistency?). Persisting ambiguities surrounding definitional issues were especially discouraging because they allowed critics to argue, fairly, that without a properly articulated meaning for consistency, it is not really possible to test predictions derived from the concept. See Abelson et al. (1968) and Insko (1967) for extended discussions of such difficulties.

Our view is that each of these possibilities supplies a valid partial answer to the question. However, it is our contention that an additional factor applies. It is the little-discussed, inside secret of consistency researchers: Except in their most fundamental forms, consistency effects are not easily obtained or replicated. Even in its heyday, research on dissonance theory produced a notable manifestation of this problem (Jones, 1985; Reich, 1981; Sears & Ables, 1969). Despite the large number of studies that supported dissonance predictions, certain investigators complained privately of the difficulty of building coherent, dissonance-based research programs because of a vexing inability to produce or reproduce predicted effects with sufficient power or frequency. Occasionally, researchers managed to get into print with reports of a series of highly similar studies that inexplicably sometimes did, but more often did not, support or replicate dissonance predictions (Brock, Edelman, Edwards, & Schuck, 1965; Collins, Ashmore, Hornbeck, & Whitney, 1970). Such puzzling accounts were difficult to publish,

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however, because of the well-established character of dissonance phenomena, "which made it almost impossible to publish failures to replicate" (Collins et al., 1970, p. 22)—which, in turn, provided another reason for researchers to abandon the field.

If it is the case that an unsatisfying level of predictability within interesting consistency phenomena has led to a retreat by social psychologists from the investigation of consistency effects, an important related question remains to be answered: What could account for the discomforting degree of unreliability? After all, some of the most profound thinkers and some of the most striking experimental findings in the discipline's history attest to the power of consistency motives in directing human action. Although various reasons could be offered (see Jones, 1985, for a thoughtful discussion of several), it is our purpose to test the soundness of one little-considered possibility: that a dispositional preference for or against consistent responding importantly moderates the extent to which individuals will behave in accord with consistency theory predictions; consequently, in tests of consistency effects, this (unmeasured) individual difference will create substantial error variance that is likely to lead to precisely the problems we have chronicled—puzzling difficulties in obtaining and replicating predicted data patterns.

We are certainly not the first to conceive of the existence of a disposition toward or away from consistent responding. Indeed, from the outset Festinger (1957) speculated about such a personality trait and, along with Aronson, tried to cull items from existing scales in hopes of creating a reliable and valid "tolerance for dissonance" scale. The attempt (Aronson & Festinger, 1958) did not succeed. Other researchers have sought a personality-based moderator of consistency tendencies in such traits as self-esteem, manifest anxiety, repression–sensitization, concrete versus abstract thinking, anal retentiveness, cognitive complexity, and in a constellation of traits surrounding the concept of cognitive rigidity (i.e., dogmatism, authoritarianism, and tolerance of ambiguity). Although support for two of these moderators has been more substantial than for the others—repression–sensitization (Olson & Zanna, 1979, 1982; Zanna & Aziza, 1976) and the forms of cognitive rigidity (Feather, 1967, 1969; Miller & Rokeach, 1968)—reviewers of this work have argued that, on the whole, individual-differences approaches to understanding cognitive consistency have not proven more than marginally successful or productive (Abelson, 1968; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

Nonetheless, for a pair of reasons, we felt that the prospects for developing a viable preference-for-consistency measure were sufficiently positive to undertake the effort. First, in all prior attempts we could uncover, researchers seeking a personality-based moderator of consistency tendencies had tried to adapt scales (or scale items) previously designed to measure some other trait. We expected that, by targeting the core concept directly rather than by borrowing putatively related scales or items, we would be able to construct an instrument that more faithfully captured that core concept. Second, we conceived of a preference for consistency in a broadened sense that we hoped more accurately represented the ways that individuals could show such an inclination. That is, existing work implicated three related but conceptually separate domains in which a preference for consistency could assert itself: in the desire to be consistent within one's own responses (internal consistency), in the desire to appear consistent to others (public consistency), and in the desire that others be consistent (others' consistency).

Scale Development

To begin the process of scale development, we created a pool of 72 items designed to measure preference for consistency. Most of the items were written by the present authors, but the pool was augmented with items written for the purpose by a group of 20 faculty members and graduate students in social psychology at Arizona State University. After eliminating items on the basis of redundancy or poor face validity, we retained a set of 60 items. At this point, the 60 items were submitted to a sample of 567 Introductory Psychology students at Arizona State University and were assessed for their item-total correlations and distribution characteristics. We retained the 18 items for the scale that possessed good distribution properties (e.g., lack of skewness) and the highest item-total correlations within the data of the undergraduate sample. These items formed the Preference for Consistency (PFC) Scale. The set of selected items (see Appendix) was then submitted to independent groups of 230, 452, and 224 Introductory Psychology students at Arizona State University in three separate semesters in order to assess the characteristics of the PFC.[1]

Overall Scale Characteristics

The data patterns of the three participant samples were highly similar. When averaging over the three samples, the following scale characteristics emerged: For the PFC scale, M = 5.43, Mdn = 5.50, Mode = 5.44, SD = 1.19, Cronbach's α = .89, skew = −.483, and kurtosis = .421. Also, for the two administrations for which gender data were taken, we recorded no significant gender differences among our participants. Overall, then, the PFC appears to have excellent distribution properties. That is, the mean, median, and mode are almost identical and close to the scale midpoint; the standard deviation is close to 1; the skew and kurtosis values are small, providing for a close to normal distribution shape; the internal coherence of the scale is high; and men and women respond similarly to the scale items.

A Brief Form

We recognized that, because of practical constraints, it can be difficult to administer the full version of a personality mea-

[1] We also conducted confirmatory factor analyses in each instance to determine the extent to which three dimensions of consistency were represented in the PFC. In each case, a three-factor model of preference for (internal, public, and others') consistency was supported by the confirmatory factor analyses. The results of those analyses are available from Robert B. Cialdini; however, they are not treated further here, as the various subscales are not directly relevant to the scale validation studies described in this article, which were designed to validate the overall PFC rather than the individual dimensions that compose it. Furthermore, the correlations among the subscales were very high—ranging from .73 to .87—suggesting that (despite evidence for three distinguishable factors within the PFC), in general, the same individuals who prefer to keep consistent within themselves also prefer to be seen as consistent by others and to observe consistency in others.

sure in many settings. Consequently, we sought to develop a brief form of the PFC that would correlate highly with the total scale but would consist of substantially fewer items. To this end, we selected the 9 items that had the highest item-total correlations with the 18-item scale. That set of items, labeled the Preference for Consistency–Brief Scale (PFC-B), is identified in the Appendix. Averaged over the three administrations of the PFC, the correlation of the two scales was quite high (.95). Furthermore, the PFC-B had scale characteristics nearly identical to the total scale: For the PFC-B, $M = 5.36$, $Mdn = 5.39$, Mode = 5.17, $SD = 1.31$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$, skew = 1.31, and kurtosis = .098. And, as with the total scale, male and female participants responded similarly to the PFC-B.

Construct Validation

Relationships With Other Scales

We sought to establish the construct validity of the PFC by (a) determining its degree of overlap with other known trait scales and (b) conducting experimental tests of the extent to which high versus low PFC scorers were susceptible to traditional consistency-based phenomena. First, to assess its relationship to other established personality measures, we administered the PFC and certain of these established measures to groups of undergraduate psychology students at two large southwestern universities. We selected these measures to cover two domains: a) general measures that we had no a priori reason to expect would be strongly related to preference for consistency but that we chose for exploratory purposes and b) measures that we had theoretical reasons to believe should be associated with the PFC.

In the category of general measures, we included measures of the Big Five personality dimensions (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), intelligence (Wonderlic, 1983), internal–external locus of control (Rotter, 1966), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), social desirability (Crown & Marlowe, 1964), self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), and self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974). In the category of conceptually related measures, we included a pair of scales that, theoretically, should overlap to a degree with the PFC because, like it, they were designed to assess orientations toward ordered responding: Rigidity (Gough & Sanford, 1952) and the Personal Need for Structure scale (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Thompson, Naccarato, & Parker, 1992).

In the case of the general measures, we expected to find weak relationships at best with the PFC (i.e., correlations below .3). We anticipated stronger relationships with measures of the concepts expected on theoretical grounds to overlap partially with preference for consistency. Our expectancies were confirmed for the most part, as can be seen in Table 1. The general measures correlated rather weakly with the PFC—none were above the .3 level, except for the Openness scale of the Big Five personality dimensions, about which we say more later. Especially important was the negligible relationship obtained between the PFC and our measure of intelligence, suggesting that a preference for consistency does not separate individuals on intellectual ability. We found stronger relationships, however, between the PFC and the conceptually related measures of rigidity and need for structure. As would be expected if indeed the PFC is a valid measure of preference for consistency, it appears to share variance with other measures designed to assess an orientation toward order in responding.

Table 1
Correlations of the PFC With Other Scales

Scale	*r*	*n*
Big Five Inventory		
Extraversion	−.22*	91
Agreeableness	.04	91
Conscientiousness	.20	91
Neuroticism	.12	91
Openness	−.38**	91
Locus of control	.11	57
Self-esteem	−.18	57
Social desirability	.20	57
Intelligence	−.06	57
Self-consciousness	.25**	253
Self-monitoring		
18-item, true–false	−.05	244
25-item, Likert scale	−.08	242
Rigidity	.48**	248
Personal Need for Structure	.47**	241

Note. PFC = Preference for Consistency Scale.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Experimental Tests

A second way in which we attempted to establish the construct validity of the PFC was through a series of experiments. These experiments were designed to examine the extent to which scores on the PFC predict consistent responding within three types of effects that are typically thought to be consistency based: balance effects, the foot-in-the-door effect, and cognitive dissonance effects. If it were determined that balance, foot-in-the-door, and dissonance effects were evidenced only by individuals scoring (relatively) high on our measure, the construct validity of the measure would be supported.

Experiment 1: Balance

The earliest and most basic of consistency motive theories within social psychology is *balance theory,* as formulated by Fritz Heider (1946, 1958), who identified a drive for harmony (or balance) within one's cognitive system as a central motivator of responding. Although reviewers of the literature have found support for balance theory predictions, they report a considerable lack of support as well (Insko, 1984; von Hecker, 1993).

A frequently investigated implication of balance theory is that individuals will tend to see as alike entities that are connected in some positive way, even if the connection is nothing more than arbitrary or accidental. One especially interesting way in which this implication has been tested is in the *anticipated-interaction paradigm,* first developed by Darley and Berscheid (1967) but used by numerous other researchers as well (Arkin & Burger, 1980; Knight & Vallacher, 1981; Lassiter & Briggs, 1990; Sutherland & Insko, 1973; Tyler & Sears,

1977). Although a variety of moderating variables have been identified by these researchers, the basic finding in this paradigm is that college students rate a fellow student more favorably as a consequence of expecting to interact with that individual in the future. This finding is congruent with balance theory in that the expectation of interaction creates a perceived connection between participants and the other individual—a "unit" connection, in balance terminology. Because the majority of college students view themselves favorably (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989), the strain toward cognitive balance should push them to view the now-connected other more favorably, as indeed they do.

Our intent was to determine the degree to which the anticipated-interaction-leads-to-liking effect is limited to those who have a preference for consistency, as measured by the PFC. To this end, we administered the PFC to a group of participants and then recorded their responses in a standard anticipated-interaction experiment. In that experiment, participants were exposed to a pair of personality profiles said to describe two fellow participants in the study. Participants were informed that one of the fellow participants had been randomly selected to be their discussion partner for the remainder of the experimental session; they expected no further contact with the other participant. At this point, participants rated the two fellow participants on a series of attraction and trait scales.

Method

Participants. Fifty students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large southwestern university received extra credit for volunteering to participate in the study.

Procedure. Early in the semester, as part of a course requirement, participants completed a large questionnaire comprised of attitude, opinion, and personality measures, including the brief form of the PFC. Later in the semester, participants were scheduled to attend experimental sessions in small groups of 2 to 4 persons.

After a brief introduction, participants were randomly assigned to condition and to separate experimental rooms, where they were told that the experimenters were studying social perception—how people perceive, evaluate, and make snap judgments about others. Their task was to form impressions of two students, whose profiles were presented in two folders on the desk in front of them. The experimenter also informed them that one of these two students had been randomly selected to be their discussion partner and that they would meet their partner later in the experimental session for a short discussion of current social issues. They did not expect to interact further with the nonpartner.

Participants were given 3 min to read the first profile and an additional 3 min to read the second profile. Following Darley and Berscheid (1967), we developed short, moderately positive personality profiles for two fictitious female students. Participants were told that the two students were classmates and that the information in the profiles came from responses to surveys they had completed in class earlier in the semester. The profiles described two women who were average to above average in adjustment, scholastic ability, and personality. A boxed statement at the top of each profile indicated whether this person was or was not the participant's discussion partner for later in the session. The name of the partner versus nonpartner was counterbalanced, as was the order in which participants received the two profiles.

Immediately after reading the profiles, participants were asked to rate the discussion partner and nonpartner on a series of scales. The first five items, modeled after Lassiter and Briggs (1990) and Darley and Berscheid (1967), assessed the participant's liking for the person on 9-point Likert scales, including: how likable the target person was; how friendly; how much they wanted to meet her; how much they would like to have her for a close friend; and how likely it was that she would be sensible and reasonable in discussing issues. As in Lassiter and Briggs (1990), participants then rated each profile on 9-point bipolar trait scales. Three items measured sociability (sociable–unsociable, good-natured–irritable, humorous–humorless); two items measured intellectance (intelligent–unintelligent, foolish–scientific); and three items measured a general evaluative dimension (honest–dishonest, finicky–tolerant, artistic–unimaginative). Following the completion of several unrelated tasks, participants completed a suspicion probe and were dismissed from the study. A general debriefing was provided during class at the end of the semester.

Results

Participants' liking, sociability, intellectance, and general evaluative responses to each rated individual were combined, as an initial analysis showed no differences among these types of ratings, and were submitted to a 2×2 mixed model analysis of variance. That analysis contained one within-subjects variable (type of individual rated: anticipated partner vs. nonpartner), and one between-subjects variable (preference for consistency: low vs. high, as determined by a split at the median PFC score, 5.33, among experimental participants). The analysis produced two significant effects: a main effect for type of individual rated, indicating that the partner was more positively evaluated than the nonpartner, $F(1, 48) = 9.97, p < .001$, and a qualifying interaction between type of individual rated and preference for consistency, $F(1, 48) = 4.02, p = .05$. A test of simple effects within the interaction showed that, as predicted, the ratings of the anticipated partner were more favorable than of the nonpartner among participants with a relatively high preference for consistency, $F(1, 48) = 15.14, p < .001$, but that this was not the case among participants with a relatively low preference for consistency ($F < 1$). The means relative to this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

In addition to confirming our basic prediction—that the anticipated-interaction-leads-to-liking effect would appear only among relatively high-PFC individuals—the data of this study are instructive in other ways. First, as might be expected from our evidence that prior participants' scores on the PFC were normally distributed around the scale midpoint, the median score among participants in Study 1 was near the scale midpoint. It appears, then, that contrary to the presumptions of the

Table 2
Ratings of Anticipated Discussion Partner and Nonpartner

Preference for consistency	Partner	Nonpartner
Low	6.39 (22)	6.24 (22)
High	6.47 (28)	5.80 (28)

Note. The *n* per condition is indicated in parentheses. Ratings represent averaged scores on eight 9-point scales, with endpoints of 1 and 9. Higher scores indicate more favorable ratings.

early consistency theorists, most individuals (or college students, at least) do not report a strong spontaneous preference for consistency.[2] Second, even though the predicted interaction did prove significant, the form of the interaction was somewhat different from what we had envisioned. We had expected that the participants who showed the highest liking in the study would be those with a high PFC score who rated an anticipated discussion partner. Instead, their liking scores were no higher than those of either group of our low-PFC participants. After some initial puzzlement, we attributed this pattern of findings to the likelihood that low-PFC individuals simply like people more to start with than do high-PFC individuals, as we had evidence of the relatively greater extraversion of low-PFC participants (see Table 2). Temporarily satisfied with this account, we moved on to the next construct validation experiment in our planned sequence.

Experiment 2: The Foot-in-the-Door Effect

It is a well-researched fact that a public commitment frequently leads to responding that is consistent with the commitment (see Cialdini, 1993, for a review). Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstrated how this tendency could be used in a tactic designed to increase compliance with a request. The tactic, labeled the *foot-in-the-door technique,* proceeds as follows: A requester induces a target person to make an initial commitment to some idea or cause (e.g., driver safety) by gaining compliance with a small request (e.g., to sign a petition favoring safe driving). Later, the target is asked to perform a larger, related favor (e.g., to display a large sign supporting driver safety) that is consistent with the implications of the earlier commitment. The desire for consistency is expected to motivate compliance with the larger request.

Although several reviewers of research on the foot-in-the-door technique have documented its effectiveness, each has noted a sizable number of instances in which the basic effect appeared only marginally or not at all (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Steblay, 1983; DeJong, 1979; Dillard, 1991). Perhaps the difficulty that researchers have had in obtaining the foot-in-the-door effect powerfully and reliably can be traced to the difficulty that we have suggested applies to all consistency-based phenomena: Because not all individuals possess a strong preference for consistency, many research participants fail to show the foot-in-the-door effect, leading to substantial amounts of error variance and to frequent weak or nonsignificant results. To examine this possibility experimentally, we exposed low- and high-PFC individuals to a standard foot-in-the-door procedure. We predicted that only high-PFC participants would be vulnerable to the technique's influence.

Method

Participants. As part of an Introductory Psychology course requirement, 357 students at a large southwestern university completed the brief form of the PFC (along with several other personality measures) during the second week of the semester. We performed a tercile split on their PFC scores and retained participants in the top and bottom thirds of the distribution for the study and randomly assigned them to either the foot-in-the-door condition or to the control condition. Those whose PFC scores fell in the middle third of the distribution were not included in the study.

Procedure. We fashioned our procedures after those of Patch (1986), in that participants were contacted by phone by an undergraduate experimenter who was unaware of participants' PFC scores and who identified him- or herself as from "Multimedia Programming Associates, a consulting group for television interests."

For participants in the foot-in-the-door condition, the experimenter continued by making a small request: "Would you be willing to take 60 seconds to answer 3 brief questions concerning your TV viewing habits?" Virtually all participants agreed and were asked three yes–no questions concerning TV watching. After a participant's final answer, the experimenter made a request for a larger, related favor:

> OK, fine. That completes our survey for today. However, I wonder if you would be willing to give us some additional help by completing a more detailed survey by mail. May we send you a 50-item questionnaire concerning your television viewing habits? We will include a pre-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return your questionnaire. We'd need to have it back within 2 weeks. Can we count on your cooperation?

For participants in the control condition, the experimenter made only the larger request. In all cases, after recording a participant's willingness to comply with the larger request, the experimenter debriefed the participant fully.

Results

Loglinear analysis of the 2 × 2 design produced only one effect that approached conventional levels of significance, the predicted interaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 239) = 2.11, p < .15$. Tests of simple effects with that interaction also offered support for the hypothesis in that the foot-in-the-door tactic generated more

[2] Of course, such a claim relies on the presumption that the midpoint of the PFC measure—5 on a scale ranging from 1 to 9—represents psychological temperateness regarding the concept of consistency. However, it is possible that the particular items of the PFC were written in such a way that discouraged use of the high end of the 9-point scale. If this were the case, then a midpoint score of 5 might well reflect a sizable desire for consistency. Although a visual examination of the PFC items revealed no apparent evidence of this kind of bias in the item wordings, a less subjective investigation of the possibility seemed in order. In this regard, we followed a suggestion offered by Elliot Aronson (personal communication, December 2, 1993): If scale scores on the PFC underestimate the percentage of participants with a genuine preference for consistency, then splitting the distribution of scores at the 25%–75% point would better represent the true distribution than would a median split; thus, a reanalysis of the data of Study 1 using such a split should produce better results than the median split analysis that was performed. However, when we analyzed those data with 75% of the sample classified in the high preference for consistency category, the previously significant interaction disappeared ($F < 1$), as did the mean differences between the theoretically relevant conditions: Among the high-PFC participants, the liking scores for the partner and nonpartner were 6.33 and 5.97, respectively; among the low-PFC participants, these scores were 6.47 and 6.09. Thus, the traditional anticipated-interaction-leads-to-liking effect was reinstated, $F(1, 48) = 5.75, p < .05$, with no differences due to consistency level—precisely the opposite of what would be expected if scores on the PFC were underestimating the percentage of participants with a strong preference for consistency.

compliance among high-PFC participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 2.73, p < .10$, but not among low-PFC participants, ($\chi^2 < 1$). Notably, the pattern of the data (see Table 3) closely resembled the 3 versus 1 pattern of our first study, in which responding was elevated in three of the conditions relative to that of the high-PFC/control conditions. Indeed, a contrast testing the 3 versus 1 difference in the present study proved significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 239) = 5.99, p < .02$.

Discussion

As in our first study, a consistency-based effect (in this case, the foot-in-the-door effect) emerged only in the responding of participants with relatively high PFC scores. This gave us more confidence in the applicability of the PFC to a range of consistency-relevant phenomena. At the same time, we were intrigued by one feature of the data pattern. Not only were the compliance levels of low-PFC participants unaffected by a related, earlier commitment, but those compliance levels were also puzzlingly high. That is, we thought we understood why the compliance percentage of high-PFC/foot-in-the-door condition participants was elevated: By agreeing to perform the large favor, they were being consistent, as is their preference, with an earlier commitment. But what was causing the low-PFC participants to be so compliant?

One possibility was similar to the explanation we had constructed to account for the data pattern of Experiment 1—that low-PFC individuals may like people, especially strangers, more than high-PFC individuals and that this congeniality leads them to evaluate these unknown others more positively (as in Experiment 1) and to comply with their wishes to a greater extent (as in Experiment 2). A second possible explanation occurred to us, however: Perhaps it isn't a special receptivity toward novel others that motivates the responding of low-PFC individuals as much as it is a special receptivity toward anything novel that they encounter. Perhaps their orientation is characterized by a general openness to new stimuli that is not qualified by the extent to which the stimuli are consistent with earlier expectations, commitments, or choices. High-PFC individuals, on the other hand, may reserve their favorable responses for stimuli that are consistent with these previously established factors.

We found this second interpretation attractive because it accounted for the data patterns of Experiments 1 and 2 in a way that flowed directly from the central concept of preference for consistency rather than from a tangentially related concept such as congeniality. One test of the two interpretations would be to give high- and low-PFC participants exposure to *nonsocial* stimuli that were either consistent or inconsistent with an earlier choice the participants had made. If high-PFC participants showed favorability to the stimuli only when they were congruent with the earlier choice, but the low-PFC participants showed a more unqualified receptivity to these (nonsocial) stimuli, then our favored interpretation would be supported over the one based on the presumption that high- and low-PFC individuals differ in their congeniality toward others. We conducted such a test in the context of yet another consistency-based phenomenon—cognitive dissonance.

Table 3
Percentage of Compliance With the Large Request in Experiment 2

Preference for consistency	Foot-in-the-door	Control
Low	68 (45/66)	71 (49/69)
High	66 (33/50)	50 (27/54)

Note. The *n* per cell is in parentheses.

Experiment 3: Cognitive Dissonance

Easily the most renowned of the consistency approaches to human behavior is that of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Over the years, there has been much controversy as to the factors required for dissonance arousal (Aronson, 1969; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Steele, 1988; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992; Zanna & Cooper, 1974). One factor on which there has never been disagreement, however, is that of choice (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Linder, Cooper, & Jones, 1967). There is general consensus that a person who believes one way but acts another way will experience dissonance only if he or she perceives that the action was freely chosen.

One standard dissonance paradigm in which this free-choice variable has been manipulated is that of counterattitudinal advocacy, wherein participants take action (usually by writing an essay) that is inconsistent with their existing attitudes. Typically, these participants reduce the inconsistency by changing their attitudes in the direction of their essays, but only when they have been given a choice to write the counterattitudinal essay (Holmes & Strickland, 1970; Linder et al., 1967; Sherman, 1970).

To examine the role that an individual's preference for consistency would play in this effect, we exposed low- and high-PFC scorers to traditional counterattitudinal advocacy procedures: After being given high or low choice in the matter, participants wrote essays advocating a tuition increase at their university. In keeping with the results of previous research, we expected that only participants who were given free choice to write this counterattitudinal essay would move their opinions in the direction of a tuition increase; however, in extending beyond the previous research, we expected that this effect would occur only among high-PFC participants. Finally, on the basis of the findings of our first two construct validation experiments, we anticipated a 3 versus 1 pattern of results such that favorability toward the tuition increase would be inhibited in the high-PFC/low-choice condition relative to the other three.

Method

Participants. On the basis of their scores on the brief form of the PFC, which had been administered earlier in the semester, we selected 47 participants in introductory psychology and communication classes at a large southwestern university for participation; participants whose scores placed them in either the upper or lower third of the PFC distribution were considered eligible and were solicited by means of the telephone for a study on "campus issues." All received extra course credit for volunteering their time. Participants who were either high or low in preference for consistency were randomly assigned to either the high- or

low-choice condition. The data of 8 participants were not included in the analyses: Three favored a tuition increase before writing an essay, 3 refused to write an essay favoring a tuition increase, and 2 expressed suspicion about the experimental procedures.

Procedure. On arrival, participants were greeted by an experimenter, ushered into an experimental room, and seated at a desk. All were told that the university was considering a tuition increase for the next year and that the administration wanted feedback from a variety of sources, including students, as to the advantages and disadvantages of such an increase. They were also told that students were being asked to write an essay either for or against the idea of a tuition increase and that those essays would be forwarded to a faculty committee for review. The experimenter also indicated that

> Because researchers say that the best way to get good arguments on both sides of an issue is to ask people to write essays favoring only one side, I'm going to ask you to write an essay that either favors a tuition increase or that opposes a tuition increase.

Cognitive dissonance was aroused by giving participants the perception of freedom in choosing to write the favorable essay. Participants in the high-choice condition were told

> Now, which kind of essay you write is totally up to you, and it won't affect your experimental credit either way. As it turns out, though, I've already got enough essays that oppose the increase, so you could help, if you wanted to, by writing an essay that *favors* a tuition increase. As I say, it's totally up to you, but, if you're willing, do you think you could write an essay listing what you feel are good reasons for a tuition increase?

Participants in the low-choice condition were told

> Now, I've already got enough essays that oppose a tuition increase, but I need more essays that *favor* a tuition increase, so I need to have you write an essay that describes why a tuition increase would be good.

After agreeing to write an essay, participants were handed a blank essay form that included room for the participant's name, major, sex, and signature. The experimenter left the room for 12 min to allow participants time to write. On returning, the experimenter handed participants a short questionnaire asking for their perceptions about tuition increases at the university. Three opinion items measured participants' perceptions of: (a) the extent to which a tuition increase was justifiable, (b) the extent to which an increase would enhance students' education, and (c) the extent to which an increase would be beneficial for students. For each item, participants were asked to check a blank along a continuum of 31 spaces that best described their opinion. Following the administration of the dependent measure, participants completed a suspicion probe, were thoroughly debriefed, and then dismissed.

Results

To assure that low- and high-PFC scorers were not different in their opinions about a tuition increase before the experimental manipulations occurred, a group of 457 students comparable to our experimental participants were given the PFC as well as an item inquiring into the perceived desirability of holding tuition at its current level. These students answered this item on a 9-point scale, ranging from *strongly oppose* (1) to *strongly favor* (9). The average responses of the low- (7.95) and high-PFC (8.11) individuals were nearly identical ($F < 1$) and clearly unfavorable to a tuition increase. This finding offers an interpretational advantage that was not present in either of our first two studies—evidence that high- and low-PFC scorers began the experiment with similar baseline attitudes toward the topic of interest.

The major dependent variable was the average of the three items measuring favorability toward a tuition increase, which were completed after participants wrote their essays. As can be seen in Table 4, the pattern of results replicated those of our prior construct validation experiments. We analyzed the data with a set of planned comparisons showing that: (a) the perception of high choice produced enhanced favorability toward a tuition increase among high-PFC participants, $F(1, 35) = 10.10$, $p < .01$; (b) but not among low-PFC participants, $F(1, 35) = 2.13$, ns; and (c) these effects appeared in the form of a 3 versus 1 interaction, with the high-PFC/low-choice participants generating the least positivity toward an increase, $F(1, 35) = 12.25$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The outcomes of Experiment 3 provided still further evidence of the applicability of the PFC to consistency-based phenomena, offering the third demonstration—this time in the domain of cognitive dissonance—that individuals without a preference for consistency did not manifest an established consistency effect. Free choice in writing a counterattitudinal essay (advocating increased tuition) resulted in more positive attitudes toward increased tuition only among participants with a relatively strong preference for consistency, as measured by the PFC. Choice had little impact, however, on our low-PFC participants, who developed a positive attitude toward a tuition increase after writing a favorable essay whether required to write it or not.

Aside from providing construct validation for the PFC, the results of Experiment 3 offer insights into the nature of the consistency construct that the PFC measures. The 3 versus 1 pattern of means (obtained in all three of our studies) is noteworthy in suggesting that high preference for consistency individuals decide how to respond to incoming information by taking into account its relationship with already established information and factors; thus, they are likely to be receptive and responsive to the new information to the degree that it fits with the implications of existing (prior entry) variables. Low preference for consistency individuals, on the other hand, appear relatively

Table 4
Favorability Toward a Tuition Increase

Preference for consistency	Choice	
	High	Low
Low	20.26 (9)	16.09 (11)
High	19.00 (11)	9.46 (8)

Note. Higher numbers indicate greater favorability toward a tuition increase. The n per cell is in parentheses.

unconstrained by the implications of prior entry variables; thus, they are likely to be responsive and receptive to new information for its own sake. Indeed, in our work they seemed especially inclined toward the new and unfamiliar—liking strangers in Experiment 1, volunteering for an unseen survey in Experiment 2, and accepting counterattitudinal arguments in Experiment 3. The outcome of Experiment 3 suggests that this apparent attraction to the new extends beyond the realm of social stimuli (e.g., unknown others) to such cognitive entities as arguments and beliefs—a finding that aligns well with the positive correlation (see Table 1) between low preference for consistency and the personality trait of openness, which is characterized by a general receptivity to novel or unusual stimuli (John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987).

General Discussion

In overview, several insights emerge from the present research. First, preference for consistency exists as a measurable personality trait, and the Preference for Consistency Scale is a valid instrument for assessing it. In three separate demonstrations, the PFC was able to identify individuals who would and would not be susceptible to a set of traditional consistency effects—cognitive balance, foot-in-the-door, and dissonance.

Second, the pattern of the findings in those demonstrations suggests the particular form of consistency that the PFC measures. It is the tendency to respond to incoming stimuli in a way that integrates those stimuli with existing variables. High-PFC individuals weight these prior entry variables (e.g., previous expectations, commitments, choices) to a considerable degree, adjusting their subsequent responding accordingly. Low-PFC individuals, on the other hand, do not weight the implications of such variables so heavily in their response decisions. In fact, they seem open and oriented to the new, in ways that are relatively unconstrained by the established.

It is important to note in this regard that a low preference for consistency is not indicative of some general form of irrational or random responding. For instance, the low-PFC participants in our dissonance study were quite consistent in their opinion responses—consistent with the implications of the counterattitudinal arguments they had just been able to construct. What is clear from this example is that the PFC measures a tendency to be consistent with *existing* information, not information of any sort. We do not feel that this limits the value of the PFC, however, as it appears to measure what consistency theorists have typically meant by the concept—witness the outcomes of our three construct validation experiments. Moreover, it may well measure what people in general, or our college student participants at least, mean by the term *consistency.* That is, many of the PFC items that correlated highest with the total score (e.g., those we selected for the brief form of the PFC) refer to general notions of consistency, predictability, and stability (e.g., "I make an effort to appear consistent to others." "It doesn't bother me much if my actions are inconsistent." "I want my close friends to be predictable."). Yet, these items appear to have ordered participants according to a tendency for consistency *with the implications of prior entry variables,* suggesting that this is the meaning of consistency that people commonly use when they identify themselves as high or low on the general concept of consistency.

This refined conception of personal consistency may help resolve certain of the early definitional ambiguities that led critics and researchers away from a belief in the usefulness of consistency formulations. There are several possible meanings of consistency; for example, *uniformity,* which implies invariance, and *regularity,* which implies lawfulness. However, the meaning that has been most frequently used by social psychologists is *coherence,* which implies a high degree of agreement or fit between a particular element and other relevant elements. The conventional view of consistency motivation as a tendency to seek agreement or fit has left unaddressed a crucial question, however: agreement or fit with what—with which relevant elements? For example, people can make their attitudes fit with the implications of any of a variety of things: related attitudes, earlier choices, new information, and so on. What our findings suggest is that individuals who identify themselves as consistent choose to make their attitudes fit with the implications of the established rather than of the new. When viewed in this light, our participants may have added an important insight to a proper understanding of psychological consistency: Rather than an inclination toward coherence, a concept whose meaning seems too broad, consistency motivation may be best defined as an inclination toward *adherence*—adherence to the implications of what has gone before. With such a definition in place, consistency-based predictions become sharper and more testable.

A final insight that emerges from our data concerns the surprising percentage of our participants who held no particular natural preference for consistency. In each of the three large administrations of the PFC, more than half of the respondents scored at or below the midpoint of the scale. If, as these data suggest, a large proportion of college students feel no special strain toward consistency, at least two implications can be seen. First, it may be that noncollege populations contain substantial numbers of low preference for consistency individuals as well. Consequently, we might be wise not to predict reliable, powerful consistency effects among college or noncollege research samples unless the researchers have taken specific steps to amplify consistency motives by making them salient or by making consistency seem desirable and inconsistency appear undesirable. For example, Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube (1984) were able to spur noncollege TV watchers to act in accord with their stated values only after confronting them with the discrepancy between their values and their past behavior; similarly, Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, and Fried (1994) were able to induce college students to buy more condoms only after confronting them with the hypocrisy between their advocacy of safe sex and their past failures to use condoms.

Second, if a characteristic of low preference for consistency individuals is to take relatively little account of prior entry variables in deciding how to respond to subsequent stimuli, then their presence in scientific experiments may explain large amounts of error variance in a wide range of studies not designed to investigate traditional consistency-based phenomena. That is, to test a theoretical formulation, researchers often provide participants with initial experiences or perceptions and then make theory-specific predictions about how the participants should respond to subsequently presented material, given these prior experiences or perceptions. Should the predictions

fail to prove out, we typically lose confidence in the theory's predictiveness. It may be, however, that in many instances the culprit is not the adequacy of the particular theory but the presence of a significant percentage of participants who, as a rule, do not prefer to base their responses to new stimuli on existing experiences or perceptions. More than two decades ago, Tversky and Kahneman (1971) warned that, with the amount of error variance typically present in social science experiments, the likelihood of Type II errors (failing to uncover or replicate true effects) is much greater than normally thought. Perhaps one source of a considerable amount of that error variance is the significant number of participants who possess little spontaneous preference for consistency. The examination of this possibility would offer a fruitful direction for future work.

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(Appendix follows on next page)

Appendix

Preference for Consistency Scale

1. I prefer to be around people whose reactions I can anticipate.
2. It is important to me that my actions are consistent with my beliefs.
3. Even if my attitudes and actions seemed consistent with one another to me, it would bother me if they did not seem consistent in the eyes of others.
4. It is important to me that those who know me can predict what I will do.[a]
5. I want to be described by others as a stable, predictable person.[a]
6. Admirable people are consistent and predictable.
7. The appearance of consistency is an important part of the image I present to the world.[a]
8. It bothers me when someone I depend upon is unpredictable.
9. I don't like to appear as if I am inconsistent.
10. I get uncomfortable when I find my behavior contradicts my beliefs.
11. An important requirement for any friend of mine is personal consistency.[a]
12. I typically prefer to do things the same way.[a]
13. I dislike people who are constantly changing their opinions.
14. I want my close friends to be predictable.[a]
15. It is important to me that others view me as a stable person.[a]
16. I make an effort to appear consistent to others.[a]
17. I'm uncomfortable holding two beliefs that are inconsistent.
18. It doesn't bother me much if my actions are inconsistent.[ab]

Note. Items were scored on a scale with the category designations: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), Slightly Disagree (4), Neither Agree nor Disagree (5), Slightly Agree (6), Somewhat Agree (7), Agree (8), and Strongly Agree (9).

[a] Items that appear on the brief form (PFC-B).

[b] Reverse scored.

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