

Idleness Aversion and the Need for Justifiable Busyness

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Abstract

There are many apparent reasons why people engage in activity, such as to earn money, to become famous, or to advance science. In this report, however, we suggest a potentially deeper reason: People dread idleness, yet they need a reason to be busy. Accordingly, we show in two experiments that without a justification, people choose to be idle; that even a specious justification can motivate people to be busy; and that people who are busy are happier than people who are idle. Curiously, this last effect is true even if people are forced to be busy. Our research suggests that many purported goals that people pursue may be merely justifications to keep themselves busy.

Keywords

idleness aversion, happiness, motivation, justification

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Why do investors trade stocks? Why do scientists make discoveries? Why do gangsters fight each other? Why do nations wage wars? And . . . why do we write papers? There are many apparent reasons for activity. In the case of these examples, possible reasons include the following: to make money, to accrue fame, to protect one's territory, and to advance science. In this research, however, we suggest a potentially deeper reason for these and myriad other activities: People dread idleness, and their professed reasons for activity may be mere justifications for keeping busy. Specifically, we propose that people have two concurrent, yet paradoxical and conflicting, desires: They (a) dread idleness and desire busyness, but (b) need reasons for their busyness and will not voluntarily choose busyness without some justification.

The notion that people dread idleness and desire busyness is consistent with several existing lines of research, including research showing that people dread boredom (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009; Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993; Smith, 1981), that waiting is aversive (e.g., Larson, 1987; Robbins, 1978), that work is perceived as virtuous (e.g., Furham, 1982; Merrens & Garrett, 1975; Neff, 2006), that labor leads to appreciation (Norton, 2009), and that people seek varied experiences (e.g., Zuckerman, 1994).

The idea that people desire justification for busyness is rooted in the general finding that people are rational animals and seek to base their decisions on reasons (e.g., Hsee, 1996; Hsee, Yu, Zhang, & Xi, 2003; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002;


Kivetz & Zheng, 2006; Kunda, 1990; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; see Xu & Schwarz, 2009, for boundaries). Often, people do have some reason for action. They work to earn salaries and exercise to improve health. It is silly to exert effort without purpose.¹

Our proposition—that people desire busyness yet are reluctant to seek busyness without reason—is too general to be tested in a few experiments. The experiments reported here tested two somewhat more specific hypotheses, one about choice and one about experience, that were derived from our initial proposition:

- Hypothesis 1 concerns choice and states that any reason—even a specious justification—can mobilize idle people to seek busyness. In other words, when given a choice between busyness and idleness, more people will choose busyness if there is a justification than if there is not, even if the justification is specious.
- Hypothesis 2 concerns experience. Because people prefer busyness, we hypothesize that those who are busy are happier than those who are idle. We believe that the preference for busyness can be so strong that

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even people who are forced (assigned) to be busy are happier than those who are idle. In other words, busy people are happier than idle people, regardless of whether they choose to be busy or are forced to be busy.

These hypotheses were tested in the following experiments.

Experiment I

Method

Participants (98 college students from a large public university) were told that their task was to fill out multiple confidential surveys about their school and that they could do nothing else during the experiment. After leaving their belongings (e.g., cell phones, books) with the experimenter, participants were given the first survey. Upon finishing, they were told that the second survey would not be ready for another 15 min and that they were to drop their completed first survey at a designated location during the waiting period. There were two such locations, one nearby (right outside the room) and the other far away (a 12- to 15-min round-trip walk). Participants could either deliver the survey to the nearby location and wait out the remaining time (the *idle option*) or deliver the survey to the faraway location, return, and then wait out the remaining time (the *busy option*). In both cases, they would receive a piece of candy when they dropped off the survey, as a token of appreciation.

The experiment consisted of two between-participants conditions: same-candy and different-candy. In the same-candy condition, the candies offered at the two locations were identical: In both locations, participants could choose either a milk chocolate or a dark chocolate.

In the different-candy condition, the candies offered at the two locations were different: At one location, only milk chocolates were offered; at the other location, only dark chocolates were offered. Which type of chocolate was offered at which location was counterbalanced, and pretesting indicated that the two types of candies were equally attractive, $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 0.14$, n.s. Furthermore, to prevent participants from making any inference about the quality of the candy based on the location at which it was offered, we told them that the candy offered at each location was randomly decided.

Note that the same-candy condition offered no justification for walking to the farther location. The walk to the faraway location in this condition would seem foolish, as in either location one could choose either the milk or the dark chocolate. By contrast, the different-candy condition offered a sound justification for walking to the faraway location, because one could say, "I prefer the candy there," even though the two candies were prejudged as equally attractive and counterbalanced.

At the end of the 15-min period, all participants were given a questionnaire that asked, "How good did you feel in the last 15 minutes?" Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*not good at all*) to 5 (*very good*).² Participants were then debriefed and dismissed.

Results and discussion

The experiment included two dependent variables: choice (nearby or faraway location) and experience (feelings during the 15 min).

Choice. Participants' choices confirmed Hypothesis 1: More participants chose the busy (faraway) option in the different-candy condition than in the same-candy condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 7.13$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). Further analyses revealed that in the same-candy condition, less than 50% of the respondents went to the faraway location, $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 12.96$, $p < .001$, yet in the different-candy condition, more than 50% did, $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 3.24$, $p = .07$. It should be noted that the increased choice of the faraway location in the different-candy condition cannot be attributed to the uncertainty of the quality of the candies at the two locations, because this uncertainty cannot explain why more than 50% of the participants chose the faraway location (see the appendix).

Experience. Participants' ratings of their feelings confirmed Hypothesis 2: Busy participants (who walked to the faraway location) reported greater happiness than idle participants (who chose the nearby location and waited afterward), and this was true in both the same-candy condition, $t(49) = 3.23$, $p < .01$, and the different-candy condition, $t(45) = 3.83$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). These results constitute an interesting inconsistency between choice and experience: When given a choice, most individuals in the same-candy condition chose the nearby location, yet those who went farther ended up being happier.

Table 1. Results of Experiment I

Condition	Choice: participants who chose the faraway (busy) option (%)	Happiness	
		Participants who chose the faraway option	Participants who chose the nearby option
Same-candy (no justification)	32	4.07	2.72
Different-candy (justification)	59	3.87	2.81

Note: Happiness was rated on a scale from 1 (*not good at all*) to 5 (*very good*).

Was this inconsistency due to misprediction (i.e., underestimation of the joy of walking or the pain of waiting)? To address this question, we described the experimental procedure to another group of participants ($N = 52$) and asked them to predict whether dropping the survey in the faraway location or in the nearby location would generate greater happiness during the 15-min period. Most (64%) accurately predicted that going to the faraway location would result in greater happiness, $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = 19.07, p < .001$. This result rules out misprediction as an alternative explanation for our finding.

It seems that people know that busyness yields happiness, but if they lack justification for busyness, they will choose idleness. This inconsistency between predicted experience and choice reflects people's desire to base decisions on rules and reasons rather than on feelings; similar inconsistencies have been documented elsewhere (e.g., Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Hsee et al., 2003; Hsee, Yang, Gu, & Chen, 2009).

One may also wonder if the increased happiness among participants who traveled to the faraway location was due to postchoice cognitive dissonance. However, postchoice cognitive dissonance cannot explain why participants in the follow-up prediction condition also expected greater happiness from traveling to the faraway location, nor can it explain the results of Experiment 2—that people who were forced to travel to the faraway location also reported greater happiness.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that people who voluntarily choose busyness are happier than those who voluntarily choose idleness. Experiment 2 was designed to demonstrate that people who are forced into busyness are happier than those who are forced into idleness.

Method

Participants (54 college students from a large public university) were assigned to either a forced-nearby (idle) condition or a forced-faraway (busy) condition. The procedure in both conditions was identical to the procedure in the same-candy condition of Experiment 1, except that participants were instructed as to which of the two locations they should walk to. That is, in the forced-nearby condition, participants were simply instructed to deliver the survey to the nearby location and wait; in the forced-faraway condition, participants were instructed to deliver the survey to the faraway location, return, and wait. Neither group had a choice. At the end of the 15-min period, participants answered the same question about their feelings as in Experiment 1.

Results and discussion

Results confirmed Hypothesis 2: Participants in the forced-faraway (busy) condition reported greater happiness ($M = 4.01$) than those in the forced-nearby (idle) condition ($M = 2.36$),

$t(52) = 5.00, p < .001$. A comparison with the results in the same-candy condition of Experiment 1 revealed an intriguing pattern: In Experiment 1, in which participants could choose between idleness and busyness, most chose idleness, yet in Experiment 2, in which there was no choice, participants forced into busyness reported greater happiness than those who were idle. These findings corroborate accumulating evidence suggesting that people do not always choose what is best for their welfare (e.g., Benartzi & Thaler, 2004; Hsee, Hastie, & Chen, 2008; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

General Discussion

Replication of findings

Across two experiments, we demonstrated that people choose to be idle if they do not have reason to be busy, but that even a specious justification can prompt them to seek busyness. In addition, people are happier when busy than when idle, even if busyness is forced upon them.

We replicated these findings in another context. In a bracelet-evaluation experiment, participants were given a premade bracelet and asked to wait 15 min, during which time they could either do nothing (the idle option) or disassemble and reassemble the bracelet (the busy option). Some participants were told that if they disassembled the bracelet, they had to reassemble it into the original design. Others were told that if they disassembled the bracelet they had to reassemble it into a different design; pretests indicated that the second design was just as attractive as the original design, and participants were told that the two designs were equally useful for the experiment. Notice that the same-design condition in this experiment resembled the same-candy condition in Experiment 1 and provided no justification for participants' reassembly of the bracelet, and that the different-design condition resembled the different-candy condition in Experiment 1 and provided a justification for participants' reassembly of the bracelet. Again, results supported Hypothesis 1: Most participants in the same-design condition chose to sit idly, and most in the different-design condition chose to reassemble the bracelet. Results also supported Hypothesis 2: Participants who reassembled the bracelet reported greater happiness. Together, these findings replicated the findings reported earlier and reinforced our proposition that humans concurrently desire both busyness and a justification for busyness.

Speculations

We speculate that the concurrent desires for busyness and for justification are rooted in evolution. In their strife for survival, human ancestors had to conserve energy to compete for scarce resources; expending energy without purpose could have jeopardized survival. With modern means of production, however, most people today no longer expend much energy on basic survival needs, so they have excessive energy, which they like

to release through action. Yet the long-formed tendency to conserve energy lingers, making people wary of expending effort without purpose.

Our research also complements recent research by Ariely, Kamenica, and Prelec (2008) on humans' search for meaning. Whereas the work of Ariely and his colleagues suggests that people work in order to search for meaning (i.e., achievement and recognition), our study suggests that people search for meaning in order to work. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus' punishment, imposed by Zeus, was to eternally roll a rock toward the top of a hill, never to arrive there. The research of Ariely et al. predicts that Sisyphus would have been happier if Zeus had allowed the rock to reach the top of the hill and had then recognized Sisyphus' achievement. Our research suggests that Sisyphus was better off with his punishment than he would have been with a punishment of an eternity of doing nothing, and that he might have chosen rolling a rock over idleness if he had been given a slight reason for doing it.

Implications

Idleness is potentially malignant. If idle people remain idle, they are miserable. If idle people become busy, they will be happier, but the outcome may or may not be desirable, depending on the value of the chosen activity. Busyness can be either constructive or destructive. Ideally, idle people should devote their energy to constructive courses, but it is often difficult to predict which actions are constructive (e.g., are business investments or scientific discoveries always constructive?), and not every idle individual is capable of constructive contributions. Idle people often engage in destructive busyness (from inner-city crimes to cross-border wars); as Hippocrates observed in *Decorum*, "Idleness and lack of occupation tend—nay are dragged—towards evil" (Hippocrates, quoted in Peterson, 1946, p. 88).

We advocate a third kind of busyness: futile busyness, namely, busyness serving no purpose other than to prevent idleness. Such activity is more realistic than constructive busyness and less evil than destructive busyness. However, as we demonstrated in the no-justification (same-candy or same-design) condition of our research, most people will not voluntarily choose futile busyness.

This is where paternalism can play a role (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). For example, homeowners may increase the happiness of their idle housekeepers by letting in some mice and prompting the housekeepers to clean up. Governments may increase the happiness of idle citizens by having them build bridges that are actually useless. Indeed, some such interventions already exist: Airports have tried to increase the happiness (or reduce the unhappiness) of passengers waiting at the baggage carousel by increasing the distance between the gate and the baggage claim area, forcing them to walk far rather than wait idly (Larson, 1987). Similar intentions may be applied at the societal level. Although these strategies may not be ethical, we believe that futile busyness trumps both idleness and destructive busyness.

Appendix

Here, we prove that our findings cannot be explained normatively. Let p ($0 \leq p \leq 1$) denote the proportion of participants who preferred the candy offered at the faraway location, q ($0 \leq q \leq 1$) denote the proportion of participants who preferred to walk far, and w ($0 \leq w \leq 1$) denote the relative importance of candy type over the distance walked. Assume that p , q , and w are mutually independent.

Normatively, the proportion of participants choosing the faraway location should be q in the same-candy condition and $0.5w + q(1 - w)$ in the different-candy condition. The reason is this: In the same-candy condition, choice should depend only on q . In the different-candy condition, choice should be a weighted combination of p and q , namely, $w * p + (1 - w) * q$, but because the candies at the two locations are equally attractive, p should be .5 and $w * p + (1 - w) * q$ becomes $0.5w + q(1 - w)$.

Mathematically, it is impossible that $0.5w + q(1 - w)$ exceeds both q and 50%; that is, it is impossible for the proportion of participants choosing the faraway location in the different-candy condition to exceed both the proportion of such participants in the same-candy condition and 50%. But that is what we found in Experiment 1 and replicated in the bracelet study, described in the General Discussion. Therefore, these findings cannot be explained normatively.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Our research concerns only moderate levels of idleness and busyness. If an idleness option engenders extreme boredom, one needs no justification to escape it; if an option for keeping busy involves extreme toil, one would not seek it.
2. Although retrospective evaluation is sometimes inaccurate (e.g., it may be duration insensitive), there is no reason to suspect that it was systematically biased in the context of this experiment (e.g., duration was held constant in this research).

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