



Why we don't know why we do what we do? What neuroscience tell us about our decisions.

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We are all surrounded by many things competing for our attention. We believe we want freedom of choice and that the more of it the better.

But it is not so simple. We like the idea of broad consumer choice as much as we like the idea of personal freedom, but it doesn't always makes us happy. It is attractive only until we actually start trying to decide what to buy. Our happiness is entirely conceptual. When it comes to deciding which jeans, shoes, bag or car to buy and the accompanying pressure of wanting to make the optimal choice (in terms of choosing the best available option) our emotional state suffers. Many people are overwhelmed by the multitude of possibilities and feel frustrated and unable to make a decision as quickly and easy as they would like. What does this mean for us as consumers? Isn't this contrary to what we thought we believed? Should we avoid too much choice? The simple answer would be "yes." We are much better off emotionally when there are fewer items to choose from than when there is an overwhelmingly huge selection. It is easier to make a regret-free decision from a limited range of choices and avoid the feeling that we have to rule out so many other attractive options. The algorithm for a happy choice is this: figure out what you want and just buy it without looking at too many alternatives. Too much choice is the way to an emotional headache.

This is just one conclusion from 20 years of research into our decision-making behaviour. We tend to think that most of our decisions are rational and well thought out, but this is far from true. Even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary, we find this very hard to accept. Emotions govern most of our behaviour. As Canadian neurologist Donald Calne says: "The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions". The key difference here lies in what plays the most important role before, during and after a decision is made. We may think about our choice before we make it, but we also test our choice emotionally and our emotional satisfaction carries more weight than our rational analysis. When a decision is actually made the rational mind is almost inactive. After a choice is made, however, rationality plays the role of intellectual alibi provider. The decision has already been made, but we need to rationalise it to ourselves. We look for a good explanation of why we made the decision that we did. Sometimes we need those reasons for others, but mostly we need them for ourselves. We need to convince ourselves that we made the right decision. Being right all the time seems to be of critical importance to people. Even in the face of clear evidence that our decision is wrong, we still think that we were somehow right in making it.

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Neuroscientists researching brains and their reactions to various stimuli have fascinating things to tell us about how we make decisions. Many of their conclusions are surprising, if not shocking. We are not as rational as we like to think – we make stupid decisions all the time. We are highly influenced by the external world and context critically affects our opinions. We overestimate the consistency of our behaviour and are overconfident. Education is not what we think it is and knowing what to do and actually doing it are two different things governed by two different systems in the brain. Despite what we think, we cannot really explain our decisions. Most of our opinions are formed quickly, superficially and intuitively. Our perception of reality is tricky and our memories do not reflect our exact experiences. We are hardwired to repeat the same decisions and behaviours over and over again. That is why change is so hard.

One of the trickiest areas is visual perception. Perception is very important for decision making, because we make decisions based on what we see. So what do we see? The first mechanism that affects our perception is called priming. Priming is about making us susceptible to suggestions and directions. If I describe something to you from my point of view, there is a high probability that you will look at it in a very similar way and pay attention to the details that are important to me. It takes a special effort to notice things I do not mention. The second mechanism concerns adding information that is not there and subtracting information that is there. We all have such experiences. We recolor things in our minds, change their shapes and locations and even change the time when events happened. We recreate our experiences in our minds after they happen and we definitely recreate our opinions about them. Actual experiences exist only as they happen – after that they are nothing but stories that can be told in many different ways. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to agree on one interpretation of an event? Individual recreations can differ to such a degree that you may wonder if the other person was actually there. As a fun experiment, ask two people who have seen a movie together to summarize it.

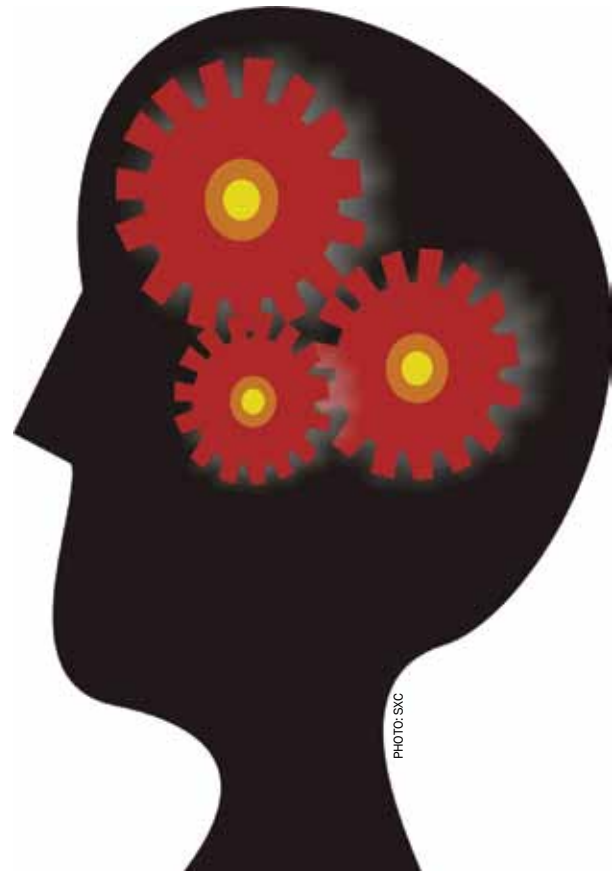


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We often act based on our idea of things rather than how things actually are. Simplifying slightly, you could say that we see what we want to see or, to be more precise, what we expect to see. One of the most stunning discoveries of neuroscience is that visual perception involves our brain anticipating what we are going to see. The brain is efficient and doesn't like to carry out unnecessary tasks. It collects past experiences and predicts what will we see next on that basis. Our visual perception can be described as the most probable explanation of the world in light of our past experiences. We tend to notice new, different, strange things because they are not expected. The better we know something, the less attention we pay to the details and this is one of the traps of expertise. On a positive note, experts can draw better conclusions from the same facts than less experienced people in a much shorter time.

If you want to make an impression on a stranger, guess that his or her favourite colour is blue and that they prefer the number seven. We have an irrational preference for these things. If you want to judge a wine, don't look at its price tag and don't compare it with other wines. If you want your kids to appreciate diverse food in their adult life, avoid subjecting them to mono-diets in their childhood. Don't trust your first instincts, because a lot of research shows that our first impressions are often wrong. Multitasking is a myth-focusing on one thing will make you more effective. Don't fall into the trap of believing that you are significantly above average in everything, because we all think we are above average in everything. When you hear slow, relaxing music in the restaurant, remember it's there because the management want you to stay longer and order a dessert. It is truly amazing what neurosciences can tell us about ourselves. ■