

DR SEUSS AND THE SURPRISING PARADOX OF CHOICE

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Earlier this year, a Dr Seuss story was posthumously published after it was found among some of his notes with a folder titled 'noble failures'. It's thought to have been written roughly fifty years ago. The story presents an emblematic tale of two children in a pet store trying to make up their minds. On each new page, the children are introduced to a pet more lovable and enticing than the one before. Kitten or puppy? Gold fish or canary? There are no limits to the possibilities in Dr Seuss' store. The delighted children soon meet tall things that fly, walruses with hats, even a 'yent', whatever that is. As they flit between options, the reader is left wondering how the children could possibly choose only one out of the growing menagerie of unusual beasts bidding for their favour. As the pressure to make a decision mounts, their excitement sours and a now bewildered young brother cries out: *'Oh boy! It is something to make a mind up'*.

This story rings resoundingly true today, as much like children in a pet store, we routinely face a dizzying array of complex choices (Popova, 2015). There are simply more opportunities for decision making than ever before: more breakfast cereals, Instagram posts, formal dresses, university courses, career options and viral YouTube videos, from which to choose. The almost fantastical advancement of technology has allowed for us to be involved in decision making at any minute of the day and from anywhere we please. There is also more flexibility and choice in the task of identity formation. Owing to the merger and malleability of gender roles and cultural boundaries young people are left with a veritable *carte blanche* to invent (or reinvent) themselves (Markus & Schwartz, 2010, Morris, 2015).

This abundance of individual choice brings many benefits. In present day Western individualistic societies, autonomy and self-determination are highly valued and form part of the fabric of all moral, political, educational and caretaking practices (Markus & Schwartz, 2010). Choice is seen as 'both the engine of independence and the mark of independence' (Markus & Schwartz, 2010, p334). Psychologists, too, have long recognised the importance of choice in predicting wellbeing, performance, motivation and health, and in 2000, named it a 'basic psychological need' (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Langer and Roding, 1977, as cited in Grant & Schwartz, 2004). It follows, then, that more choice produces greater freedom and wellbeing by allowing each person to pursue his or her own specific brand of happiness.

However, the documented rise of 'choice affluence' has unfortunately not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in self-reported happiness (Eckersley, 2002; Rosnhan & Seligman 1995, as cited in Schwartz & Ward, 2004). Instead, there is growing concern about the consequences of this constant barrage of choice to cognition, development and resources (Schwartz & Ward, 2004). As a society, we have become so familiar with the sense of unease, confusion and 'fear of

missing out' that the catchy, shorthand 'FOMO' has already entered the Oxford dictionary. My own anecdotal experience certainly confirms that many students continue to trust and assume that more and more choices equal better outcomes, even when decision making is a baffling, agonising ordeal.

It is theorised that when the extent and complexity of choice increase beyond a certain threshold, it brings little benefit to the decision maker, and only serves to complicate the task (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Hye-young et al., 2014). As with so many good things, too much can serve to debilitate rather than liberate (Roets et al., 2011). The French expression *'Trop de choix tue le choix'* sums this up - too many choices kills choice (*The Economist*, 16 December 2010).

This phenomenon has variously been described as the 'paradox of choice', 'choice overload', the "overchoice effect", 'consumer hyperchoice' and 'the tyranny of small choices' (Schwartz, 2000, Diehl and Pyno, 2007, Micke et al., 2004, Gourville & Soman, 2005). The idea of choice overload is not new. The writings of Jean Buridan (1300-1358) warn of the danger of indecisiveness and paralysis when presented with two equally attractive options, like a donkey who starves while deciding between two identical piles of hay (*The New Yorker*, 1 August 2014; Scheibenhenné et al., 2010).

Modern research has suggested that relinquishing one option to choose another leads to indecision and 'choice conflict', which increase in intensity as options become more alike (Miller, 1944 as cited in Scheibenhenné et al., 2010; Lewing & Festinger, 1957 as cited in Scheibenhenné et al., 2010). Lipowski extended the theory to suggest that the abundance of attractive options presented in affluent, post-industrial societies led to greater choice conflict, indecision, confusion and anxiety (1970, as cited in Scheibenhenné et al., 2010). In 2000, the infamous 'jam-study' reported that people found a large selection of jams more intimidating than a small selection, and were less likely to come to a decision as the number of options grew (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Similar examples in research abound - subjects are less satisfied with their choice of chocolates when selecting from a large rather than a small assortment; essay quality decreases as the number of potential topics increases (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000); and employees are less likely to participate in pension plans when the number of plans to choose from increase (Iyengare et al., 2004 as cited in Scheibenhenné et al., 2010).

Recent literature has focussed on the particular conditions which give rise to choice overload. It is unlikely to occur, for instance, if people are very familiar with, or have prior preferences within, the options available to them (Scheibenhenné et al., 2010). The complexity of decision making, such as the number of features which differentiate options, the number of options which a person subjectively deems worthy of consideration, and the similarity and value of options, have all been found to increase choice complexity (Greifeneder, 2010; Hye-young et al., 2014; Shenav & Buckner, 2014).

Choice overload does not appear to affect everyone equally. Intra-group differences have been found according to cultural and class background, in that people from communities where choice is abundant and highly valued report more regret and dissatisfaction with their choices (Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Roets et al., 2012). Another distinguishing feature is that of choice-making orientation; that is, the strategy employed when approaching a decision (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009; Roets et al., 2012). People tend to fall into two broad camps: those who are intent on maximising and making the very best of their options (known as 'maximisers') and those who are content with what is 'good enough'. Maximisers are more attracted to large assortments, more willing to forage for additional options, and to invest time and effort into carefully examining all options before committing to one. By contrast, 'satisficers' are less attracted to large assortments of options, and are less likely to invest time and effort in order to glean more options or investigate them in minute detail.

A 2006 study tracked students from across eleven American universities over the course of their final year of study (Iyengar, et.al., 2006). Maximisers exhibited more fixation and deliberation in their job search and tended to secure objectively better outcomes, in the form of higher starting salaries. Despite their success, maximisers reported more stress, tiredness, anxiety and depression throughout the year and less satisfaction with their (objectively better) job outcomes than student 'satisficers'. This effect stood even when the researchers accounted for academic performance and baseline happiness, which led researchers to question why maximising tendencies led students to do better, but feel worse.

The answer may lie in the closely related construct of regret, which maximisers report experiencing more frequently than 'satisficers' (Zeelenberg & Pieters 2007). Regret is a bitter emotion directed solely at oneself and as a consequence of one's own actions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has been rated as the most aversive and intolerable emotion (more so than sadness, anxiety, boredom, disappointment, fear, guilt, jealousy), and one which most people will go to great lengths to avoid (Saffrey & Roes, 2006, as cited in Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Since maximisers reported more frequently experiencing regret, they may be motivated to engage in more frenetic attempts to avoid future experiences of this unpleasant emotion. A range of behaviours appears to be targeted at mitigating this choice-regret. Avoiding choices through delay or procrastination is one such behaviour, as is outsourcing responsibility, and therefore culpability, for our choices. The strategy most often relied upon by maximisers is attempting to ensure that their decision making is beyond reproach. Time and effort are devoted to sourcing more and more options and diligently comparing each possibility.

What maximisers may be unaware of is that the likelihood of experiencing regret increases in parallel with the number of options being considered. These are the mechanisms that are thought to underlie choice overload. With each choice made, there is a cost associated with forgoing one option, and its many attractive features, for another option. The opportunity cost detracts from the desirability of the chosen option, which in itself may cause regret and dissatisfaction (Griefeneder, et al., 2010).

When more and more options are considered, people come to expect perfection, and measure their outcomes against these unrealistic expectations. When few options are on offer, expectations remain low and therefore the decision maker has the opportunity to be pleasantly surprised. However, with boundless options on offer, the decision maker may come to expect an outcome which cannot be realised (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). With social media giving us glimpses of selectively edited highlights of other people's lives, the expectations that we have of ourselves and of the outcomes of our choices are inflated like never before. With so many options available, people may hold themselves to blame if the outcome of their choice does not meet their now raised expectations. Lead researcher, Professor Sheena Iyengar from Columbia University, thus concluded that maximisers, in their quest for perfection, dedicated more time and effort to source and investigate options, thereby increasing the potential for regret, higher opportunity costs, unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction (2006).

Instead of focussing on avoiding regret at any cost, lessons can be learnt from the choice-making strategies commonly employed by 'satisficers'. Adopting the goal of obtaining a 'good-enough' rather than an ideal outcome can simplify the process and increase satisfaction (Iyengar, et.al., 2006). Another strategy is to cut the number of decisions that need to be made. Barack Obama explained to *Vanity Fair* in 2012 the reason that he almost exclusively wears blue or grey suits: 'I'm trying to pare down decisions. I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing because I have too many other decisions to make' (*Vanity Fair*, October 2012). In this way, people are able to simply nullify choices that don't matter, and instead, use the time and mental energy saved on other, more meaningful tasks, such as investing in social connections, which are much more likely to improve wellbeing than the outcome of any particular choice. The cultivated practice of joyfulness, thankfulness and gratitude has also been found to provide perspective and increase satisfaction with the outcomes of our decisions, even when those choices might objectively appear to be less than ideal (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). The trouble with attempts to simplify our decision making is that the very act requires many choices. Perhaps Dr Seuss was aware of this when he wrote: '*Oh boy! It is something to make a mind up.*'

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