

The Tyranny of Choice

Logic suggests that having options allows people to select precisely what makes them happiest. But as, studies show, abundant choice often makes for misery

By Barry Schwartz

Americans today choose among more options in more parts of life than has ever been possible before. To an extent, the opportunity to choose enhances our lives. It is only logical to think that if some choice is good, more is better; people who care about having infinite options will benefit from them, and those who do not can always just ignore the 273 versions of cereal they have never tried. Yet recent research strongly suggests that, *psychologically*, this assumption is wrong. Although some choice is undoubtedly better than none, more is not always better than less.

This evidence is consistent with large-scale social trends. Assessments of well-being by various social scientists—among them, David G. Myers of Hope College and Robert E. Lane of Yale University—reveal that increased choice and increased affluence have, in fact, been accompanied by *decreased* well-being in the U.S. and most other affluent societies. As the gross domestic product more than doubled in the past 30 years, the proportion of the population describing itself as “very happy” declined by about 5 percent, or by some 14 million people. In addition, more of us than ever are clinically depressed. Of course, no one believes that a single factor explains decreased well-being, but a number of findings indicate that the explosion of choice plays an important role.

Thus, it seems that as society grows wealthier and people become freer to do whatever they want, they get less happy. In an era of ever greater personal autonomy, choice and control, what could account for this degree of misery?

Along with several colleagues, I have recently conducted research that offers insight into why many people end up unhappy rather than pleased when their options expand. We began by making a distinction between “maximizers” (those who always aim to make the best possible choice) and “satisficers” (those who aim for “good enough,” whether or not better selections might be out there). We borrowed the term “satisficers” from the late Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and economist Herbert A. Simon of Carnegie Mellon University.

In particular, we composed a set of statements—the Maximization Scale—to diagnose people’s propensity to maximize. Then we had several thousand people rate themselves from 1 to 7 (from “completely disagree”



THE MAXIMIZATION SCALE

THE STATEMENTS BELOW distinguish maximizers from satisficers. Subjects rate themselves from 1 to 7, from “completely disagree” to “completely agree,” on each statement. We generally consider people whose average rating is higher than 4 to be maximizers. When we looked at averages from thousands of subjects, we found that about a third scored higher than 4.75 and a third lower than 3.25. Roughly 10 percent of subjects were extreme maximizers (averaging greater than 5.5), and 10 percent were extreme satisficers (averaging lower than 2.5.) —B.S.

- 1** Whenever I'm faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment.
- 2** No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it's only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities.
- 3** When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I am relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to.
- 4** When I watch TV, I channel surf, often scanning through the available options even while attempting to watch one program.
- 5** I treat relationships like clothing: I expect to try a lot on before finding the perfect fit.
- 6** I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend.
- 7** Renting videos is really difficult. I'm always struggling to pick the best one.
- 8** When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I really love.
- 9** I'm a big fan of lists that attempt to rank things (the best movies, the best singers, the best athletes, the best novels, etc.).
- 10** I find that writing is very difficult, even if it's just writing a letter to a friend, because it's so hard to word things just right. I often do several drafts of even simple things.
- 11** No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself.
- 12** I never settle for second best.
- 13** I often fantasize about living in ways that are quite different from my actual life.

to “completely agree”) on such statements as “I never settle for second best.” We also evaluated their sense of satisfaction with their decisions.

We did not define a sharp cutoff to separate maximizers from satisficers, but in general, we think of individuals whose average scores are higher than 4 (the scale's midpoint) as maximizers and those whose scores are lower than the midpoint as satisficers. People who score highest on the test—the greatest maximizers—engage in more product comparisons than the lowest scorers, both before and after they make purchasing decisions, and they take longer to decide what to buy. When satisficers find an item that meets their standards, they stop looking. But maximizers exert enormous effort reading labels, checking out consumer magazines and trying new products. They also spend more time comparing their purchasing decisions with those of others.

Naturally, no one can check out every option, but maximizers strive toward that goal, and so making a decision becomes increasingly daunting as the number of choices rises. Worse, after making a selection, they are nagged by the alternatives they have not had time to investigate. In the end, they are more likely to make better objective choices than satisficers but get less satisfaction from them. When reality requires maximizers to compromise—to end a search and decide on something—apprehension about what might have been takes over.

We found as well that the greatest maximizers are the least happy with the fruits of their efforts. When they compare themselves with others, they get little pleasure from finding out that they did better and substantial dissatisfaction from finding out that they did worse. They are more prone to experiencing regret after a purchase, and if their acquisition disappoints them, their sense of well-being takes longer to recover. They also tend to brood or ruminate more than satisficers do.

Does it follow that maximizers are less happy in general than satisficers? We tested this by having people fill out a variety of questionnaires known to be reliable indicators of well-being. As might be expected, individuals with high maximization scores experienced less satisfaction with life and were less happy, less optimistic and more depressed than people with low maximization scores. Indeed, those with extreme maximization ratings had depression scores that placed them in the borderline clinical range.

Recipe for Unhappiness

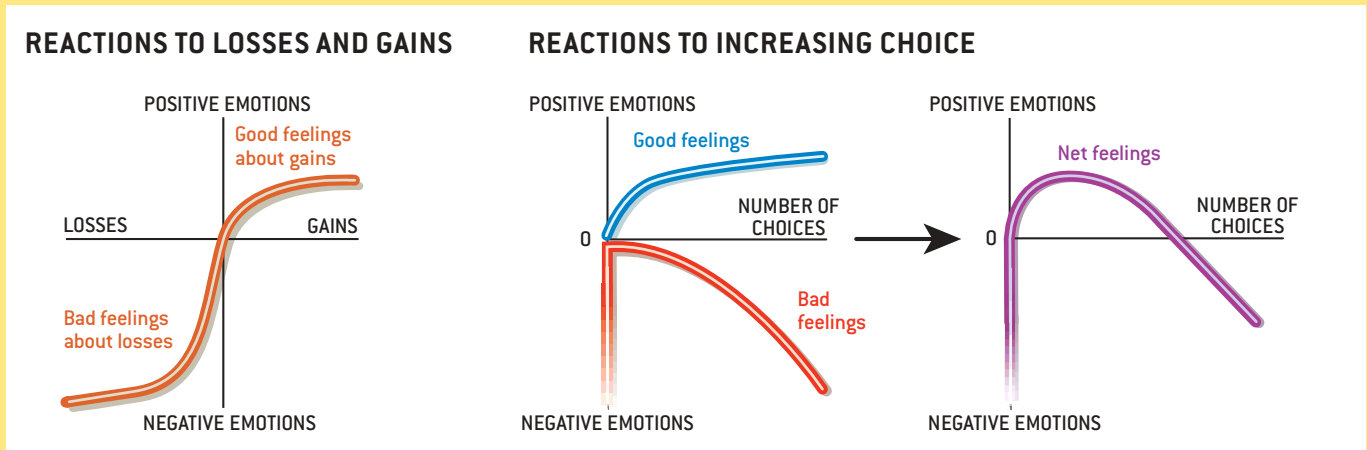
SEVERAL FACTORS EXPLAIN why more choice is not always better than less, especially for maximizers. High among these are “opportunity costs.” The quality of any given option cannot be assessed in isolation from its alternatives. One of the “costs” of making a selection is losing the opportunities that a different option would have afforded. Thus, an opportunity cost of vacationing on the beach in Cape Cod might be missing the fabulous restaurants in the Napa Valley. If we assume that opportunity costs reduce the overall desirability of the most preferred choice, then the more alternatives there are, the deeper our sense of loss will be and the less satisfaction we will derive from our ultimate decision.

Lyle Brenner of the University of Florida and his collabora-

FEELINGS EVOKED BY INCREASING CHOICE

EARLY DECISION-MAKING RESEARCH by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed that people respond much more strongly to losses than gains (depicted schematically in left graph). Similarly, my co-workers and I believe that feelings of well-being initially rise as choice increases (blue line in schematic plot, center graph) but

then level off quickly (good feelings satiate). Meanwhile, although zero choice (at the y axis) evokes virtually infinite unhappiness, bad feelings escalate (red line) as we go from having few choices to many. The net result (purple line in right graph) is that, at some point, added choice only decreases happiness. —B.S.



tors demonstrated the effects of opportunity costs when they had subjects put a dollar value on subscriptions to magazines or flights from San Francisco to attractive locations. Some attached prices to a single magazine subscription or a single destination. Others attached prices to the same magazine or destination when it was part of a group containing three others. Prices were consistently lower when a given alternative was evaluated as part of a group than when it was evaluated in isolation.

Why might this be so? When you assign a value to, say, *Newsweek*, as part of a group that also contains *People*, the *New Republic* and *Us*, your tendency will be to compare the various magazines. Perhaps you judge *Newsweek* to be more informative than *People* but less entertaining. Each comparison that *Newsweek* wins will be a gain, but each comparison that it loses will be a loss, an opportunity cost. Any particular magazine will both benefit and suffer from comparison with others. But we know from the research of Nobelist psychologist Daniel Kahneman of Princeton University and his late colleague Amos Tversky of Stanford that losses (in this case, opportunity costs) have a much greater psychological impact than gains. Losses make us hurt more than gains make us feel good.

Sometimes opportunity costs may create enough conflict to produce paralysis. For example, participants in one study were offered \$1.50 for filling out some questionnaires. After they finished, they were offered a fancy metal pen instead of the \$1.50 and told that the pen usually costs about \$2. Seventy-five percent chose the pen. In a second condition, subjects were offered the \$1.50 or a choice between that same metal pen and a pair of less expensive felt-tipped pens (also worth about \$2 together). Now fewer than 50 percent chose any pen.

The problem of opportunity costs will be worse for a max-

imizer than for a satisficer. The latter's "good enough" philosophy can survive thoughts about opportunity costs. In addition, the "good enough" standard leads to much less searching and inspection of alternatives than the maximizer's "best" standard. With fewer choices under consideration, a person will have fewer opportunity costs to subtract.

Regret Adds to Costs

JUST AS PEOPLE FEEL sorrow about the opportunities they have forgone, they may also suffer regret about the option they settle on. My colleagues and I devised a scale to measure proneness to feeling regret, and we found that people with high sensitivity to regret are less happy, less satisfied with life, less optimistic and more depressed than those with low sensitivity. Not surprisingly, we also found that people with high regret sensitivity tend to be maximizers. Indeed, we think that worry over future regret is a major reason that individuals become maximizers. The only way to be sure you will not regret a decision is by making the best possible one. Unfortunately, the more options you have and the more opportunity costs you incur, the more likely you are to experience regret.

Regret may be one reason for our aversion to losses. Have you ever bought an expensive pair of shoes only to discover that they are so uncomfortable that you cannot wear them for more than 10 minutes without hobbling? Did you toss them out, or are they still sitting in the back of your closet? Chances are you had a hard time throwing them away. Having bought the shoes, you incurred an actual, or "sunk," cost, and you are going to keep them around in the hope that eventually you will get your money's worth out of them. To give the shoes away or throw them out would force you to acknowledge a mistake—a loss.

In a classic demonstration of the power of sunk costs, people were offered season subscriptions to a local theater company. Some were offered the tickets at full price and others at a discount. Then the researchers simply kept track of how often the ticket purchasers actually attended the plays over the course of the season. Full-price payers were more likely to show up at performances than discount payers. The reason for this, the investigators argued, was that the full-price payers would experience more regret if they did not use the tickets because not using the more costly tickets would constitute a bigger loss.

Several studies have shown that two of the factors affecting regret are how much one feels personal responsibility for the result and how easy it is to imagine a better alternative. The availability of choice obviously exacerbates both these factors. When you have no options, what can you do? You will feel disappointment, maybe; regret, no. With no options, you just do the best you can. But with many options, the chances increase that a really good one is out there, and you may well feel that you ought to have been able to find it.

Adaptation Dulls Joy

A PHENOMENON called adaptation also contributes to the fallout we face from too many choices. Simply put, we get used to things, and as a result, very little in life turns out quite as good as we expect it to be. After much anguish, you might decide to buy a Lexus and then try to put all the attractions of other models out of your mind. But once you are driving your new car, adaptation begins, and the experience falls just a little bit flat. You are hit with a double whammy—regret about what you did not choose and disappointment with what you did, even if your final decision was not bad.

Because of adaptation, enthusiasm about positive experi-


ences does not sustain itself. Daniel T. Gilbert of Harvard University and Timothy D. Wilson of the University of Virginia and their collaborators have shown that people consistently mispredict how long good experiences will make them feel good and how long bad experiences will make them feel bad. The waning of pleasure or enjoyment over time always seems to come as an unpleasant surprise.

And it may cause more disappointment in a world of many options than in a world of few. The opportunity costs associated with a decision and the time and effort that go into making it are “fixed costs” that we “pay” up front, and those costs then get “amortized” over the life of the decision. The more we invest in a decision, the more satisfaction we expect to realize from our investment. If the decision provides substantial satisfaction for a long time after it is made, the costs of making it recede into insignificance. But if the decision provides pleasure for only a short time, those costs loom large. Spending four months deciding what stereo to buy is not so bad if you really enjoy that stereo for 15 years. But if you end up being excited by it for six months and then adapting, you may feel like a fool for having put in all that effort.

The Curse of High Expectations

A SURFEIT OF alternatives can cause distress in yet another way: by raising expectations. In the fall of 1999 the *New York Times* and CBS News asked teenagers to compare their experiences with those their parents had growing up. Fifty percent of children from affluent households said their lives were harder. When questioned further, these adolescents talked about high expectations, both their own and their parents'. They talked about “too muchness”: too many activities, too many consumer choices, too much to learn. As one commentator put it, “Children feel the pressure . . . to be sure they don't slide back. Everything's about going forward. . . . Falling back is the American nightmare.” So if your perch is high, you have much further to fall than if your perch is low.

The amount of choice we now have in most aspects of our lives contributes to high expectations. When I was on vacation a few years ago in a tiny seaside town on the Oregon coast, I went into the local grocery store to buy ingredients for dinner.



LESSONS

Choose when to choose.
We can decide to restrict our options when the decision is not crucial. For example, make a rule to visit no more than two stores when shopping for clothing.

Learn to accept “good enough.”
Settle for a choice that meets your core requirements rather than searching for the elusive “best.” Then stop thinking about it.

Don't worry about what you're missing.
Consciously limit how much you ponder the seemingly attractive features of options you reject. Teach yourself to focus on the positive parts of the selection you make.

Control expectations.
“Don't expect too much, and you won't be disappointed” is a cliché. But that advice is sensible if you want to be more satisfied with life. —B.S.

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The store offered about a dozen options for wine. What I got was so-so, but I did not expect to be able to get something very good and, hence, was satisfied with what I had. If instead I had been shopping in a store that offered an abundance of choices, my expectations would have been a good deal higher and that same so-so wine might have left me sorely disappointed.

Alex C. Michalos of the University of Northern British Columbia has pointed out that all our evaluations of the things we do and buy depend on comparison—to past experiences, to what we were hoping for, and to what we expected. When we say that some experience was good, what we mean, in part, is that it was better than we expected it to be. So high expectations almost guarantee that experiences will fall short, especially for maximizers and especially when regret, opportunity costs, and adaptation do not factor into our expectations.

A Link to Depression?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF unlimited choice may go far beyond mild disappointment, to suffering. As I indicated earlier, Americans are showing a decrease in happiness and an increase in clinical depression. One important contributing factor, I think, is that when we make decisions, experience the consequences and find that they do not live up to expectations, we blame ourselves. Disappointing outcomes constitute a personal failure that could and should have been avoided if only we had made a better choice.

The research that my colleagues and I have done suggests that maximizers are prime candidates for depression. With group after group of people, varying in age (including young adolescents), gender, educational level, geographic location, race and socioeconomic status, we have found a strong correlation between maximizing and measures of depression. If the experience of disappointment is relentless, if virtually every choice you make fails to live up to expectations and aspirations, and if you consistently take personal responsibility for the disappointments, then the trivial looms larger and larger, and the conclusion that you cannot do anything right becomes devastating. Although depression has many sources, and the relation among choice, maximizing and depression requires more study, there is good reason to believe that overwhelming choice at least contributes to the epidemic of unhappiness spreading through modern society.

What Can Be Done

THE NEWS I HAVE reported is not good. We get what we say we want, only to discover that what we want does not satisfy us to the degree that we expect. Does all this mean that we would all be better off if our choices were severely restricted, even eliminated? I do not think so. The relation between choice and well-being is complicated. A life without significant choice would be unlivable. Being able to choose has enormous important positive effects on us. But only up to a point. As the number of choices we face increases, the psychological benefits we derive start to level off. At the same time, some of the negative effects of choice that I have discussed begin to appear, and rather than leveling off, they accelerate. A quarter of a century ago the late



Clyde H. Coombs of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and George S. Avrunin of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst noted that good things “sate” and bad things “escalate.” Much the same can be said of feelings. Indeed, a point is reached at which increased choice brings increased misery rather than increased opportunity. It appears that American society has long since passed that point.

Few Americans would favor passing laws to limit choices. But individuals can certainly take steps to mitigate choice-related distress. Such actions require practice, discipline and perhaps a new way of thinking, but each should bring its own rewards [see box on opposite page].

Beyond those individual strategies, I think our society would be well served to rethink its worship of choice. As I write this, public debate continues about privatization of Social Security (so people could select their retirement investments), privatization of Medicare and prescription drug benefits (so people could choose their own health plans), and choice in public education. And in the private sphere, medical ethicists treat the idea of “patient autonomy” as sacrosanct, as if it goes without saying that having patients choose their treatments will make them better off. Software developers design their products so that users can customize them to their own specific needs and tastes, as if the resulting complexity and confusion are always a price worth paying to maximize user flexibility. And manufacturers keep offering new products or new versions of old products, as if we needed more variety. The lesson of my research is that developments in each of these spheres may well rest on assumptions that are deeply mistaken. SA

MORE TO EXPLORE

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