



The role of epistemic motivation in individuals' response to decision complexity

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ABSTRACT

Integrating findings on the effects of more alternatives with findings on the effects of more attributes, we offer a motivational decision-making model, suggesting that epistemic motivation moderates individuals' responses to complex information. Study 1 empirically investigated the shared essence of four conceptualizations of epistemic motivation, further distinguishing it from the maximizing/satisficing motivation. A series of experiments indicate that epistemic motivation moderates the effect of complex information on one's discomfort with a decision (Studies 2–4) and on the tendency to implement one's choice in action (Study 3). Taken together, our findings indicate that individuals with low epistemic motivation experience more discomfort and are less likely to implement their decision when faced with complex information whereas those high on epistemic motivation portray a weaker or even an opposite effect. The consistent findings across conceptualizations (dispositional Need-for-Cognitive-Closure and manipulated Openness vs. Conservation values) indicate the robustness of the findings and the important role of epistemic motivation in complex decisions.

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Introduction

A growing body of research indicates that a large assortment of alternatives and a large amount of information regarding each alternative (i.e., attributes) may cause people to be less comfortable with their decision and hinder their tendency to act upon it and implement it. But not all people react the same way: Some people are especially vulnerable to complex information, experiencing it as overwhelming. Other people may consider this complexity to be a wealth of welcome knowledge. The current research aims to reveal some of the mechanisms underlying the effects of complex information in the form of many alternatives and many attributes. Taking a motivational perspective, we suggest that the outcomes of a complex decision are moderated by epistemic motivation: the motivation to engage in deep thinking.

We start by reviewing research on information complexity in the form of multiple alternatives and multiple attributes. We then discuss the role of epistemic motivation as a mechanism underlying the documented effects of information complexity. We elaborate on the nature of epistemic motivation and provide empirical evidence to support its theoretical meaning across

specific conceptualizations. We then present a series of experiments providing evidence for the role of epistemic motivation in moderating individuals' responses to complex information. We show that the subjective quality of complex decisions is moderated by epistemic motivation. We further indicate the behavioral consequences of epistemic motivation, showing that it affects the likelihood of implementing one's decision. Finally, we explain how the concept of epistemic motivation helps clarify the differences between complexity due to attributes and due to alternatives.

Complex choices: alternatives

Large assortments of alternatives should be beneficial to decision makers because the chance of finding a perfect match increases with the number of alternatives (Chernev, 2003a; Gourville & Soman, 2005). People are indeed attracted to large assortments, but choosing from a large assortment may lead to worse outcomes than choosing from a small one (Schwartz, 2004a), partially due to the disconfirmation of people's greater expectations with larger assortments (Diehl & Poynor, 2010). The greater the variety of alternatives, the more likely people are to defer choice (Chernev, 2003b; Dhar, 1997), to express less confidence in their choice (Chernev, 2003a) and to experience difficulty in making the decision, dissatisfaction with their choice and regret following the decision (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). This phenomenon has been called "choice overload" (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), "the

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paradox of choice” (Schwartz, 2004a) and “the tyranny of choice” (Schwartz, 2004b).

The behavioral effects of too many alternatives have been documented in several recent studies. For example, only 3% of the people at a jam-tasting booth displaying a variety of 24 flavors actually bought a jar of jam, whereas nearly 30% did so when the booth displayed only six flavors (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). In a laboratory experiment, participants who chose a chocolate from an assortment of 30 experienced the choosing process as more difficult than participants who chose among six. Having tasted the chocolate they chose, those who had been presented with the larger assortment were less satisfied with their choice and were also less likely to choose chocolates as compensation (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000, Study 3).

This phenomenon has also been documented for decisions of great importance. More people participated in pension plans in organizations that offered a limited number of funds than in organizations that offered ten or more fund options (Iyengar, Huberman, & Jiang, 2004). A recent review indicates, however, that this phenomenon is not always evident, and more research is needed to discover possible moderators (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010).

Choosing one of many alternatives is more complex and requires more effort than choosing one of a few alternatives. Along the same lines, choosing from alternatives that have only a few different attributes, such as jams or chocolates, is less complex and requires less effort than choosing from alternatives that have a larger number of different attributes, such as digital cameras (which can have different resolutions, sizes, zooms, and other properties). Thus, the effect of having more alternatives could be seen as an example of a more general effect of greater informational complexity (e.g., Greifeneder, Scheibehenne, & Kleber, 2010; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). Moreover, discomfort with one's choice is affected not only by the number of alternatives, but also by the amount of information provided, as defined by the number of attributes of each alternative.

Complex choices: attributes

The burdening effect of choice involving multiple attributes was demonstrated in a study in which students expressed greater preference for potential roommates when their description included fewer traits (Ganzach & Schul, 1995).¹ Early studies simultaneously investigated the effects of the number of alternatives and the number of attributes, with inconsistent results. Whereas Malhotra (1982) found that alternatives and attributes each had an independent effect on choice difficulty, others (Jacoby, Speller, & Kohn, 1974) found an interaction pattern, suggesting that the effect of attributes depends on whether there are many or few alternatives (see the dispute between Jacoby, 1984; Malhotra, 1984).

In a recent series of studies Dijksterhuis and colleagues (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & Van Baaren, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) found that describing a product (i.e., a car) with more (vs. fewer) attributes (e.g., 12 vs. 4) resulted in poorer decision outcomes when participants were instructed to deliberate about the decision (the “conscious” condition). Compared to the fewer-attributes condition, participants in the more-attributes condition chose the presumably objectively best option less often² and were also less satisfied with their decision. Interestingly, when participants made the decision while distracted (i.e., the “unconscious” condition),

the pattern was reversed. The manipulation in the distraction condition (solving anagrams while deliberating) tempered people's *ability* as well as *motivation* to process information. To tease apart these effects, the current research focuses on the effect of motivation under conscious conditions.

The subjective quality of a decision

Research on decision-making frequently explores the objective quality of the decision, looking at when and how people identify the objectively best choice. Often, however, there is no such objectively best choice. There is no “right” career choice – different people prefer different occupations. Similarly, there is no “best” digital camera or cellphone – people have different preferences for a camera or phone. For example, some people care about the color of their cellphone, whereas others care more about its weight or the quality of its camera feature. Thus, the same phone could be the “right”, most appropriate, choice for one person, but a less appropriate choice for another. The present research joins recent studies (e.g., Greifeneder et al., 2010; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006) that have focused on decisions in which the assortment is composed of various alternatives, with no objectively “right” or “wrong” choice – decisions in which people choose the alternative that is most appealing to them.

The quality of the decision is often viewed as the level of consistency between the chosen alternatives and the individual's values (Payne et al., 1993). However, measuring the level of consistency between people's preferences and their choices requires taking into account not only the consistency of the preferred attributes, but also the consistency of the preferred processing scheme and the satisfaction of motivations (Higgins, 2000). We reason that self-reported subjective quality is a good proxy for such overall consistency.

Various attempts have been made to capture the subjective quality of people's decisions, looking at good/bad post-decision feelings (Carmon, Wertenbroch, & Zeelenberg, 2003), considering a combination of regret and satisfaction (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) or distinguishing regret from satisfaction (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000). Studying both subjective and objective manifestations of the quality of decisions, the current research focuses on two outcomes. First, we studied the subjective sense of *discomfort* in making a complex decision, operationalized as a sense of difficulty in making the decision and low confidence in the chosen alternative (Studies 2–4). Second, we investigated the *implementation* of the decision as reflected in overt behavior (Study 3).

Epistemic motivation

All people are vulnerable to inferior outcomes due to overwhelming information complexity. Yet people differ in their susceptibility to it. For example, individuals with consolidated preferences (i.e., those with an ideal-point available), manage complex information better than individuals who do not have an ideal-point available (Chernev, 2003b); and greater levels of involvement encourage the adoption of better information processing strategies (Mantel & Kardes, 1999). As Chernev, Bockenholt, and Goodman (2010) pointed, it is important to investigate *when* information complexity has adverse effects. In the current research we ask *who* finds information complexity more aversive. We offer epistemic motivation as a core moderator of the effect of complex information.

Pioneering attempts to study the *motivational mechanisms* of too much choice have focused on a motivation specifically related to the *variety of alternatives*: the desire to maximize versus the willingness to satisfice (Iyengar et al., 2004, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2002). Taking an *information complexity* perspective, we

¹ These findings were only found with negative framing; information quantity had no effect with positive framing.

² Payne, Samper, Bettman, and Luce (2008) questioned Dijksterhuis and colleagues' definition of the quality of the decision because this definition assumes an equal weighting of all attributes by all participants.

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