



Differences in the cognitive accessibility of action and inaction regrets [☆]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the temporal pattern of experienced regret and provides insight into the underlying factors leading to differential cognitive accessibility of actions and inactions over time. Across three studies, we find increased cognitive accessibility of inactions in the long term with no difference in the accessibility of actions and inactions in the short term. We find support for the depth of impact, breadth of impact, and frequency of thought as explanations for this differential accessibility.
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Introduction

The literature on regret reveals conflicting results regarding regrets of action versus regrets of inaction. While early findings (Gleicher et al., 1990; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Landman, 1987) indicated that actions (what people *did*) resulted in greater regret than inactions (what people *failed to do*), later research (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, 1995; Hattiangadi, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1995; Savitsky, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1997) found that over time, there appears to be a shift in people's patterns of regret. Thus, while in the short term, people appear to regret their actions more than their inactions; they seem to regret their inactions more than their actions in the long term.

An examination of the literature on temporal patterns of regret shows that researchers have typically adopted

either a forced choice or a free response task to elicit regrets from respondents. In a forced choice task, respondents are asked to choose whether they regret their actions or inactions more (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, Study 1). In a free response task, subjects are either asked to list out all their regrets which are then coded by the researchers as either actions or inactions (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, Study 2) or are asked to list regrets of each specific type (Feldman, Miyamoto, & Loftus, 1999). In each of these instances, the task of the subjects then, is to search their memory for regrettable instances in the past, and report on them. In other words, when subjects list more long-term inactions than actions, one of two things should have occurred. First, there are more inactions than actions in one's memory that are associated with regret which makes people list more inactions. This explanation would imply that there is a larger pool of inactions in memory to draw from than actions. Second, inactions are easier to retrieve than actions even though both have similar regret associated with them. This would mean that the number of action and inaction regrets may be no different in memory, but inactions are

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more accessible. In the present research, we attempt to distinguish between these two explanations and test whether inactions are listed more than actions in the long term due to a larger number of such regrets or due to the greater accessibility of such regrets. We also attempt to understand why these differences in retrieval between actions and inactions emerge. Hence, we consider factors that promote the accessibility of inactions over actions such as the impact of actions and inactions and the frequency of thought of these regrets.

A second issue that we address is the mixed evidence for the pattern of short term regrets in the literature. While studies on long term regrets have consistently found a greater prevalence of inaction regrets than action regrets (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Gilovich, Wang, Regan, & Nishina, 2003; Hattiangadi et al., 1995) evidence for the pattern of short term regrets is mixed. While some studies have found greater regret for actions than inactions in the short term (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982), other research has found no difference between actions and inactions in the short term (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994). For example, in the classic scenario developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1982), Paul and George both would have gained \$1200 had they bought stock in Company B. However, George does not gain the money due to an action (selling Company B shares and purchasing Company A shares) while Paul does not gain the money due to an inaction (retaining stock in Company A). Given the scenario, respondents reported that George would experience greater regret than Paul. The explanation for this “action effect” is that inaction or maintaining the status quo is the default norm for most people and negative outcomes experienced by violating this norm will elicit greater regret than negative outcomes experienced by maintaining the norm. That is, actions are more mutable than inactions and will therefore be regretted more than inactions (Kahneman & Miller, 1986).

But when Gilovich and Medvec (1994, Study 5) asked a sample of adults to fill out a questionnaire that asked them to recall their single most regrettable action and regrettable inaction from both the past week and their entire lives, and then separately for each time period, to indicate which type of event they regretted more, they found no difference in the short term (53% of the respondents chose actions), but a significant difference in the long term (84% of the respondents chose their inactions).

Recent research has yielded some insight into these conflicting findings. N’gbala and Branscombe (1997) find that using scenarios that require respondents to make forced choice comparisons between two protagonists can yield results different from respondents who are exposed to only one protagonist and have to provide absolute ratings for that protagonist. That is, the use of within subject scenarios leads to a comparative judgment process which would render greater regret for

actions than inactions. A person who has acted and faces negative consequences may be viewed as worse off than a person who has not put in any effort and suffers the same negative consequences. Hence, studies which used within subject scenarios found the action effect while in the case of real life experienced regrets where there are no scenarios, no differences were found between actions and inactions.

Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, and Pieters (2002) study regret for a series of decisions rather than an isolated decision and find that outcomes from prior decisions can impact the perceived norm. When a decision maker feels responsible for violating the norm, either through action or inaction, regret is experienced. For example, in one of their scenarios a soccer coach who loses two games in a row, but replaced some of his players after the first loss is rated as experiencing *less* regret than a coach who loses two games and did not take any action after the first loss. This effect is obtained due to the latter being perceived as more responsible for the second loss than the former. Thus, personal responsibility mediates the relationship between regret type and experienced regret.

Based on this reasoning, Zeelenberg et al. (2002) suggest that since prior outcomes are known in real life, there is no reason to expect a sense of responsibility for real life actions and inactions to be different. Hence, there would be no difference between actions and inactions in the short term (as Gilovich & Medvec, 1994 found) for real life regrets. In a scenario context however, when prior outcomes tend to be unknown, then inaction would be the default norm and violating this norm through action would lead to actions being regretted more than inactions (as earlier studies found). Thus knowledge of prior outcomes and the resulting norm could explain the conflicting findings regarding regret in the short term.

The research by N’gbala and Branscombe (1997) and Zeelenberg et al. (2002) attempt to explain the lack of difference between real life actions and inactions in the short term, but do not explain why long term inactions have been found to be regretted more than long term actions. There is no reason to expect the sense of personal responsibility associated with actions and inactions to change over time. Hence, while the above reasoning explains the conflicting findings in the short term, it does not explain the long term patterns to experienced regret.

Some other research by Seta, McElroy, and Seta (2001) finds that desirability and consistency of the decision with the decision maker’s goals mediate the relationship between regret type and degree of experienced regret. However, similar to personal responsibility, this relationship does not explain the consistently found difference between actions and inactions in the long term.

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