

Doing Better but Feeling Worse: The Paradox of Choice

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In the United States, we live in a time and a place in which freedom and autonomy are valued above all else and in which expanded opportunities for “self-determination” are regarded as a sign of the psychological well-being of individuals and the moral well-being of the culture. And we take choice as the critical sign that we have freedom and autonomy. It is axiomatic that choice is good, and that more choice is better. This chapter argues that choice, and with it freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, can become excessive, and that when that happens, freedom can be experienced as a kind of misery-inducing tyranny. Unconstrained freedom leads to paralysis. It is self-determination within significant constraints—within “rules” of some sort—that leads to well-being, to optimal functioning. And the task for a future psychology of optimal functioning is to identify which constraints on self-determination are the crucial ones.

There is no denying that choice improves the quality of our lives. It enables us to control our destinies, and to come close to getting exactly what we want out of any situation. Choice is essential to autonomy, which is absolutely fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives. Whereas many needs are universal (food, shelter, medical care, social support, education, and so on), much of what we need to flourish is highly individualized. Choice is what enables each person to pursue precisely those objects and activities that best satisfy his or her own preferences within the limits of his or her resources. Any time choice is restricted in some way, there

is bound to be someone, somewhere, who is deprived of the opportunity to pursue something of personal value.

As important as the instrumental value of choice may be, choice reflects another value that might be even more important. Freedom to choose has expressive value. Choice is what enables us to tell the world who we are and what we care about. Every choice we make is a testament to our autonomy. Almost every social, moral, or political philosopher in the Western tradition since Plato has placed a premium on such autonomy. And each new expansion of choice gives us another opportunity to assert our autonomy, and thus display our character. It is difficult to imagine a single aspect of our collective social life that would be recognizable if we abandoned our commitment to autonomy.

When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings is powerful and seemingly positive. But the fact that some choice is good doesn't necessarily mean that more choice is better. As we will demonstrate, there is a cost to having an overabundance of choice. As the number of choices people face keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until, ultimately, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates.

In this chapter we will examine some of the ways in which increased opportunities for choice, coupled with the goal of getting the "best" out of any situation can reduce well-being. We will also offer some suggestions about how people can mitigate the negative psychological effects of the proliferation of options that the modern world provides.

The Explosion of Choice

Modernity has provided an explosion of choice in two different respects. First, in areas of life in which people have always had choice, the number of options available to them has increased dramatically. And second, in areas of life in which there was little or no choice, genuine options have now appeared.

To illustrate the first expansion of choice, consider the results of a recent trip to a local supermarket:

- 85 different varieties and brands of crackers.
- 285 varieties of cookies.
- 165 varieties of “juice drinks”
- 75 iced teas
- 95 varieties of snacks (chips, pretzels, etc.)
- 61 varieties of sun tan oil and sunblock
- 80 different pain relievers
- 40 options for toothpaste
- 360 types of shampoo, conditioner, gel, and mousse.
- 90 different cold remedies and decongestants.
- 230 soups, including 29 different chicken soups
- 120 different pasta sauces
- 175 different salad dressings and if none of them suited, 15 extra-virgin olive oils and 42 vinegars and make one’s own.
- 275 varieties of cereal

A typical American supermarket carries more than 30,000 items. That's a lot to choose from. And more than 20,000 new products hit the shelves every year (see Cross, 2000).

In a consumer electronics store:

- 45 different car stereo systems, with 50 different speaker sets to go with them.
- 42 different computers, most of which can be customized in various ways.
- 110 different televisions, offering high definition, flat screen, varying screen sizes and features, and various levels of sound quality.
- 30 different VCRs and 50 different DVD players.
- 74 different stereo tuners, and 55 CD players, and 32 tape players, and 50 sets of speakers. Given that these components can be mixed and matched in every possible way, that provides the opportunity to create 6,512,000 different stereo systems.

New Domains for Choice

Here are some illustrations of how choice has grown in new domains in the U.S.: Telephone Service. A generation ago, telephone service was a regulated monopoly. There were no choices to be made. With the break-up of the telephone monopoly came a set of options that has grown, over time, into a dizzying array—many different possible long distance providers, many different possible plans, and still different local service providers. And the advent of cell phones has given us the choice of a new phone service

provision, multiplying options yet again. Suddenly, phone service has become a decision to weigh and contemplate.

Retirement Pensions. The variety of pension plans offered to employees reflects the same change. Over the years, more and more employers have adopted “defined contribution” pension plans, in which employee and employer each contribute to some investment instrument. What the employee gets at retirement depends on the performance of the investment instrument. And what began as choice among a few alternative investment instruments has turned into choice among many. For example, a relative of one of the authors is a partner in a mid-sized accounting firm. The firm had previously offered its employees fourteen different pension options that could be combined in any way employees wanted. Just last year, several partners decided that this set of choices was inadequate, so they developed a retirement plan that has 156 options. Option Number 156 is that employees who don’t like the other 155 can design their own.

Medical Care. Responsibility for medical care has landed on the shoulders of patients with a resounding thud. The tenor of medical practice has shifted from one in which the all-knowing, paternalistic doctor tells the patient what must be done—or just does it—to one in which the doctor arrays the possibilities before the patient, along with the likely plusses and minuses of each, and the patient makes a choice. There is no doubt that giving patients more responsibility for what their doctors do has greatly improved the quality of medical care they receive. But at least one physician (Gawande, 1999) suggests that the shift in responsibility has gone too far. Gawande reports that research has shown that patients commonly prefer to have others make their decisions for them. Although as many as 65% of people surveyed say that if they were to get cancer, they

would want to choose their own treatment, in fact, among people who do get cancer, only 12% actually want to do so.

Choosing Beauty . What do you want to look like? Thanks to the options modern surgery provides, we can now transform our bodies and our facial features. In 1999, over one million cosmetic surgical procedures were performed on Americans—230,000 liposuctions, 165,000 breast augmentations, 140,000 eyelid surgeries, 73,000 face lifts, and 55,000 tummy tucks (Cottle, 2002; Kaminer, 2001). In other words, cosmetic surgery is slowly shifting from being a procedure that people gossip about to being a commonplace tool for self-improvement.

Choosing How to Work. The telecommunications revolution has created enormous flexibility about when and where many people can work. Companies are slowly, if reluctantly, accepting the idea that people can do their jobs productively from home. And once people are in the position to be able to work at any time from any place, they face decisions every minute of every day about whether or not to be working. Email is just a modem away. And who do people work for? Here, too, it seems that every day people face a choice. The average American 32-year-old has already worked for nine different companies. In an article a few years ago about the increasingly peripatetic American work force, U.S. News and World Report estimated that 17 million Americans would voluntarily leave their jobs in 1999 to take other employment (Clark, 1999).

Choosing How to Love. A range of life choices has been available to Americans for quite some time. But in the past, the “default” options were so powerful and dominant that few perceived themselves to be making choices. Whom we married was a matter of choice, but we knew that we would do it as soon as we could, and have children, because

that was something all people did. The anomalous few who departed from this pattern were seen as social renegades, subjects of gossip and speculation. These days, it's hard to figure out what kind of romantic choice would warrant such attention. Wherever we look, we see almost every imaginable arrangement of intimate relations. Though unorthodox romantic choices are still greeted with opprobrium, or much worse, in many parts of the world and in some parts of the U.S., it seems clear that the general trend is toward ever greater tolerance of romantic diversity.

Choosing Who To Be. We have another kind of freedom of choice in modern society that is surely unprecedented. We can choose our identities. Each person comes into the world with baggage from his or her ancestral past—race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, social and economic class. All this baggage tells the world a lot about who we are. Or, at least, it used to. It needn't any more. Now, greater possibilities exist for transcending inherited social and economic class. Furthermore, because most of us possess multiple identities, we can highlight different ones in different contexts. The young New York immigrant woman from Mexico sitting in a college class in contemporary literature can ask herself, as class discussion of a novel begins, whether she's going to express her identity as the Latina, the Mexican, the woman, the immigrant, or the teenager as the class discussion unfolds. Identity is much less a thing people "inherit" than it used to be (Sen, 2000).

Choice and Well-Being

Thus we have more choice, and presumably more freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, than ever before. It seems a simple matter of logic that increased choice

improves well-being. And this, indeed, is the standard line among social scientists who study choice. If we're rational, they tell us, added options can only make us better off as a society. Those of us who care will benefit, and those of us who don't care can always ignore the added options. This view seems logically compelling; but empirically, it isn't true. As various assessments of well-being tell us, increased choice, and increased affluence have been accompanied by decreased well-being (see Diener, 2000; Diener, Diener, and Diener, 1995; Diener and Suh, 2001; Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999, Inglehart, 1997; Lane, 2000, and Myers, 2000). And not only do fewer people judge themselves to be happy than in previous generations, but the incidence of clinical depression and of attempted suicide have increased dramatically in this same period (Eckersley, 2002; Eckersley and Dear 2002, Lane, 2000, Myers 2000, Rosenhan and Seligman, 1995).

What assessments of well-being suggest is that the most important factor in providing happiness is close social relations. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. In the context of a discussion of choice and autonomy, it is important to note that, in many ways, social ties actually decrease freedom, choice, and autonomy. Marriage, for example, is a commitment to a particular other person that curtails freedom of choice of sexual, and even emotional partners. And to be someone's friend is to undertake weighty responsibilities and obligations that at times may limit your own freedom. So, counterintuitive as it may appear, what seems to contribute most to happiness binds people rather than liberating them.

The case that increased choice leads to decreased well-being is highly inferential. However, there is now some more specific evidence that people do not always find increased choice options attractive. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) reported a series of studies that showed how choice can be “demotivating.” One study was set in a gourmet food store in which the researchers set up a display featuring a line of exotic, high-quality jams. Customers who came by could taste samples, and then were given a coupon for a dollar off if they bought a jar. In one condition of the study, six varieties of the jam were available for tasting. In another, 24 varieties were available. In either case, the entire set of 24 varieties was available for purchase. The large array of jams attracted more people to the table than the small array, though in both cases people tasted about the same number of jams on average. When it came to buying, however, 30% of people exposed to the small array of jams actually bought a jar; only 3% of those exposed to the large array of jams did so.

In a second study, this time in the laboratory, college students were asked to evaluate a variety of gourmet chocolates. The students were then asked which chocolate—based on description and appearance—they would choose for themselves. Then they tasted and rated that chocolate. Finally, in a different room, the students were offered a small box of the chocolates in lieu of cash as payment for their participation. For one group of students, the initial array of chocolates numbered six, and for the other, it numbered 30. The key results of this study were that the students faced with the small array were more satisfied with their tasting than those faced with the large array. In addition, they were four times as likely to choose chocolate rather than cash as compensation for their participation.

This set of results is counterintuitive. Surely, you are more likely to find something you like from a set of 24 or 30 options than from a set of six. At worst, the extra options add nothing, but in that case, they should also take away nothing. And surely you are free to ignore as many of the options before you as you would like. But apparently, people find it difficult to do so.

The Goals of Choice: Maximizing and Satisficing

Half a century ago, Simon (1955, 1956, 1957) argued that in choice situations individuals will often “satisfice,” that is, choose the first option that surpasses some absolute threshold of acceptability, rather than attempt to “optimize” and find the best possible choice. Such a satisficing strategy was thought to make manageable the otherwise overwhelming task of evaluating options in terms of every possible piece of information that could potentially be known about them. Rather than attempt to engage in an exhaustive and ultimately limitless search for perfect information regarding a particular choice, satisficers would simply end their search as soon as an option was found that exceeded some criterion.

Such a strategy makes good sense in a world of ever-increasing freedom and choice. However, many would argue that attendant with increased choice has been a pressure to “maximize,” that is, to seek the very best option available in a wide range of choice domains. And it may well be the case that, for certain individuals, adding more choices to an existing domain simply makes their lives more difficult, as they feel pressure to choose the “best” possible option from an overwhelming array of choices

rather than simply settle for “good enough.” After all, as the number of choices in a domain increases, so too does the cognitive work required to compare various options, along with the possibility of making a “wrong” or suboptimal choice. Thus, if one follows such a maximizing strategy, the more choices one faces, the greater the potential to experience regret at having chosen suboptimally.

Recently, we undertook an investigation to determine whether in fact some individuals are more likely to be these maximizers and, if so, if they are more unhappy than their satisficing peers (Schwartz et al., 2002). We designed a survey instrument, the Maximization Scale, to identify both maximizers and satisficers, and then examined the potential relation between various scores on the scale and a range of psychological correlates, including happiness, depression, optimism, self-esteem, perfectionism, neuroticism, and subjective well-being. We also explored whether these putative relationships might be mediated by a tendency for maximizers to experience more regret with regard to their choices than satisficers. Finally, we examined maximizers’ versus satisficers’ tendency to engage in social comparison. We reasoned that if maximizers are always on the lookout for the best possible option, one way to do so is to examine the choices of others, especially in domains in which no clear objective standard exists for what constitutes “the best” (cf. Festinger, 1954).

The Maximization Scale includes 13 items that assess a range of attitudes and behaviors that together comprise a tendency to maximize rather than satisfice. Thus, respondents are asked to endorse statements reflecting (1) the adoption of high standards (e.g., “No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself”); (2) actions that are consistent with maximizing tendencies (“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'm relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to"); and (3) choice behaviors aimed at seeking out the "best" option ("Renting videos is really difficult. I'm always struggling to pick the best one"). We administered the survey to over 1700 participants in the United States and Canada who ranged in age from 16 to 81 and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Different subsamples of our respondents also completed a number of other standard personality measures. Among these were the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; $n = 1627$); the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck & Beck, 1972; $n = 1006$); a measure of dispositional optimism (Life Orientation Test; Scheier & Carver, 1985; $n = 182$); a neuroticism scale (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991; $n = 100$); a survey assessing subjective well-being (Satisfaction with Life Scale; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; $n = 100$); a self-esteem measure (Rosenberg, 1965; $n = 266$); and a subscale of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1990, 1991; $n = 220$). Finally, we created a 5-item scale designed to assess a tendency to experience regret (e.g., "When I think about how I'm doing in life, I often assess opportunities I have passed up") and administered it to all of our participants.

In terms of self-reported happiness, there was a clear tendency for maximizers to report being significantly less happy and optimistic than satisficers. They were also less likely to report high subjective well-being scores and were more likely to be depressed. Indeed, in one subsample, of the individuals whose BDI scores met the diagnostic criterion for mild depression, 44% also scored in the top quartile for maximization whereas only 16% scored in the bottom quartile. Maximizers also reported lower self-esteem scores and higher neuroticism scores than satisficers, although the latter

relationship did not reach statistical significance in our sample, suggesting discriminant validity between the constructs of maximization and neuroticism. In addition, although we observed mildly significant correlations between maximizing and the related construct of perfectionism, the latter correlated positively with happiness in our sample, suggesting that, unlike maximizing, perfectionist tendencies are not necessarily associated with unhappiness. Finally, those who scored high on the Maximization Scale were also much more likely to report experiencing regret.

Statistical analyses showed that individuals' endorsement of the regret items appeared to at least partially mediate many of the relationships between maximizing and the other personality measures, including maximizers' tendency to be less happy and more depressed. It would seem that maximization constitutes a recipe for unhappiness, in that those individuals who search for the best possible option are more likely to regret a choice once made.

In a subsequent study (Schwartz et al., 2002, Study 4), the hypothesized tendency of maximizers to experience greater sensitivity to regret was investigated in a behavioral paradigm that made use of a version of the "ultimatum game" (Zeelenberg & Beattie, 1997). In the study, individuals had the opportunity to propose a division of funds to a second player (simulated by a computer) who could choose to accept or reject the offer. If the offer was accepted, the funds would be divided up as proposed. If the second player rejected the offer, however, neither player would receive any money. Participants played both a standard version of the game and a modified version, in which, after offering a division of funds, they got to learn the other player's "reservation price," that is, the minimal acceptable offer that the other player would have accepted. In short, this

modified version created a greater potential for regret of one's offer, for it carried the possibility of learning that one would not have had to have been so generous in dividing up the provided funds.

As predicted, in the modified version (i.e., when participants expected to learn the other player's reservation price) maximizers made much more modest offers to their opponents than in the condition in which a participant never had to face the knowledge that a more meager offer would have been accepted. Satisficers did not show this pattern. It would seem that maximizers' greater tendency to experience regret extends to situations involving anticipated regret as well, as their behavior in this study appeared to be aimed at minimizing the possibility of later regret.

Maximizers were also hypothesized to engage in more social comparison than satisficers—especially upward comparison, in which an individual compares him or herself to someone who is better off, as such a person would presumably provide the best “evidence” that a maximizer has not yet achieved an optimal outcome. Such a tendency was investigated in two studies. In the first (Schwartz et al., 2002, Study 2), maximizers reported on a questionnaire measure that they were more likely to engage in social comparison—both upward and downward—than satisficers, and their greater frequency of upward comparison was associated with increased unhappiness (though their greater frequency of downward comparison did not predict enhanced happiness). The same study also probed respondents' experiences with consumer decisions and found that maximizers reported seeking more social comparison information in making purchases than did satisficers. They also reported engaging in more product comparisons and

counterfactual thinking (thinking about alternatives not chosen) regarding buying decisions, along with heightened regret and diminished happiness with their purchases.

A second study (Schwartz et al., 2002, Study 3) examined social comparison tendencies in maximizers versus satisficers using a procedure developed by Lyubomirsky and Ross (1997). In the study, participants performed an anagram-solving task either much slower or much faster than a confederate posing as a fellow undergraduate. Maximizers were heavily affected by their peer's performance, especially when they were outperformed by the peer. They provided higher assessments of their ability to perform the task after working alongside a slower peer than a faster peer, and in the latter condition, their self-assessment declined and their negative affect increased significantly. Satisficers, by contrast, were barely affected by the performance of the other participant, and regardless of whether the situation provided an opportunity for downward comparison (i.e., outperforming a peer) or upward comparison (i.e., being outperformed by a peer), their assessment of their own ability and their affect level remained largely unaffected. In short, maximizers were sensitive to social comparison information and were made less happy when outperformed by a peer; satisficers showed little response to the social comparison information provided by the experimental situation, and their mood remained relatively stable throughout the study.

In sum, in both survey and experimental procedures, maximizers showed themselves to be less happy and more depressed than satisficers. They were more prone to regret, both experienced and anticipated, and they engaged in more social comparison, especially upward comparison, than satisficers. In their quest for the best option, they increased their own unhappiness and regretted their choices more than individuals who

reported a willingness to settle for “good enough.” For maximizers, “good enough” evidently was not, but, at least in terms of their own psychological well-being, “the best” was far from ideal.

Choice and Well-Being: Why People Suffer

We believe that several factors conspire to undermine the objective benefits that ought to come with increased choice. We will review them, and in each case, we’ll show why the choice problem is exacerbated for maximizers (see Schwartz, 2004, for more detailed discussion).

Regret

As we indicated, our research showed that regret mediated the relation between maximizing and various measures of life satisfaction. People with high regret scores are less happy, less satisfied with life, less optimistic, and more depressed than those with low regret scores. We also found that people with high regret scores tend to be maximizers. Indeed, we think that concern about regret is a major reason why individuals are maximizers. The only way to be sure that you won’t regret a decision is by making the best possible decision. And the more options you have, the more likely it is that you will experience regret.

Post-decision regret, sometimes referred to as “buyer’s remorse,” induces second thoughts that rejected alternatives were actually better than the one we chose, or that there are better alternatives out there that haven’t been explored. The bitter taste of regret detracts from satisfaction, whether or not the regret is justified. Anticipated regret may

be even worse, because it will produce not just dissatisfaction but paralysis. If someone asks herself how it would feel to buy this house only to discover a better one next week, she probably won't buy this house. Both types of regret—anticipated and post-decision—will raise the emotional stakes of decisions. Anticipated regret will make decisions harder to make and post-decision regret will make them harder to enjoy (see Gilovich and Medvec, 1995; Landman, 1993 for thoughtful discussions of the determinants and consequences of regret.)

And what makes the problem of regret much worse is that thinking is not restricted to objective reality. People can also think about states of affairs that don't exist. Studies of such counterfactual thinking have found that most individuals do not often engage in this process spontaneously. Instead, counterfactual thinking is usually triggered by the occurrence of something that itself produces a negative emotion. Counterfactual thoughts are generated in response to poor exam grades, to trouble in romantic relationships, and to the illness or death of loved ones. And when the counterfactual thoughts begin to occur, they trigger more negative emotions, like regret, which in turn trigger more counterfactual thinking, which in turn triggers more negative emotion. When they examine the actual content of counterfactual thinking, researchers find that individuals tend to focus on aspects of a situation that are under their control. The fact that counterfactual thinking seems to home in on the controllable aspects of a situation only increases the chances that the emotion a person experiences when engaging in counterfactual thinking will be regret (see Roese, 1997).

Regret, Maximizing, and Choice Possibilities

We have seen that two of the factors affecting regret are personal responsibility for the result and how easily an individual can imagine a counterfactual, better alternative. The availability of choice exacerbates both of these factors. When there are no options, what can you experience? Disappointment, maybe; regret, no. When you have only a few options, you do the best you can, but the world may simply not allow you to do as well as you would like. When there are many options, the chances increase that there is a really good one out there, and you feel that you ought to be able to find it. When the option you actually settle on proves disappointing, you regret not having chosen more wisely. And as the number of options continues to proliferate, making an exhaustive investigation of the possibilities impossible, concern that there may be a better option out there may induce you to anticipate the regret you will feel later on, when that option is discovered, and thus prevent you from making a decision at all. Landman (1993, p. 184) sums it up this way: “[R]egret may threaten decisions with multiple attractive alternatives more than decisions offering only one or a more limited set of alternatives...Ironically, then, the greater the number of appealing choices, the greater the opportunity for regret.”

As we have argued, it should also be clear that the problem of regret will loom larger for maximizers than for satisficers. No matter how good something is, if a maximizer discovers something better, she’ll regret having failed to choose it in the first place. Perfection is the only weapon against regret, and endless, exhaustive, paralyzing consideration of the alternatives is the only way to achieve perfection. For a satisficer, the stakes are lower. The possibility of regret doesn’t loom as large, and perfection is unnecessary.

Opportunity Costs

Economists point out that the quality of any given option can not be assessed in isolation from its alternatives. One of the “costs” of any option involves passing up the opportunities that a different option would have afforded. This is referred to as an opportunity cost. Every choice we make has opportunity costs associated with it.

According to standard economic assumptions, the only opportunity costs that should figure into a decision are the ones associated with the next best alternative, because you wouldn't have chosen the third, fourth, or nth best alternative in any event. This advice, however, is extremely difficult to follow. The options under consideration usually have multiple features. If people think about options in terms of their features rather than as a whole, different options may rank as second best (or even best) with respect to each individual feature. Even though there may be a single, second best option overall, each of the options may have some very desirable feature on which it beats its competition.

If we assume that opportunity costs take away from the overall desirability of the most preferred option, and that we will feel the opportunity costs associated with many of the options we reject, then the more alternatives there are from which to choose, the greater our experience of the opportunity costs will be. And the greater our experience of the opportunity costs, the less satisfaction we will derive from our chosen alternative.

This form of dissatisfaction was confirmed by a study in which people were asked how much they would be willing to pay for subscriptions to popular magazines, or to purchase videotapes of popular movies (Brenner, Rottenstreich, & Sood, 1999). Some

were asked about individual magazines or videos. Others were asked about these same magazines or videos as part of a group with other magazines or videos. In almost every case, respondents placed a higher value on the magazine or the video when they were evaluating it in isolation than when they were evaluating it as part of a cluster. When magazines are evaluated as part of a group, opportunity costs associated with the other options reduce the value of each of them.

Effects of Adaptation

As Kahneman and various collaborators have shown (e.g., Kahneman, 1999), we appear to possess hedonic “thermometers” that run from negative (unpleasant), through neutral, to pleasant. When we experience something good, our pleasure “temperature” goes up, and when we experience something bad, it goes down. However, our responses to hedonic stimuli are not constant; repeated exposure results in adaptation (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999).

In what is perhaps the most famous example of hedonic adaptation, respondents were asked to rate their happiness on a 5-point scale (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Some of them had won between \$50,000 and \$1 million in state lotteries within the last year. Others had become paraplegic or quadriplegic as a result of accidents. Not surprisingly, the lottery winners were happier than those who had become paralyzed. What is surprising, though, is that the lottery winners were no happier than people in general. And what is even more surprising is that the accident victims, while somewhat less happy than people in general, still judged themselves to be happy.

Though hedonic adaptation is almost ubiquitous, people don't expect it (Loewenstein and Schkade, 1999). Thus, the ultimate result of adaptation to positive experiences appears to be disappointment. And faced with this inevitable disappointment, people will be driven to pursue novelty, to seek out new commodities and experiences whose pleasure potential has not been dissipated by repeated exposure. In time, these new commodities also will lose their intensity, but people still get caught up in the chase, a process that Brickman and Campbell (1971) labeled the "hedonic treadmill." Perhaps even more insidious than the hedonic treadmill is something that Kahneman (1999) calls the "satisfaction treadmill," which refers to the possibility that in addition to adapting to particular objects or experiences, people also adapt to particular levels of satisfaction.

The relevance of adaptation to the proliferation of choice is this: imagine the search costs involved in a decision as being "amortized" over the life of a decision. They may be very high in a world of overwhelming choice (especially for a maximizer), but if the results of the choice produce a long and sustained period of substantial satisfaction, their cumulative effects will be minimized. (The costs, in money and inconvenience, of painting your house may be substantial, but if you stay there for ten years, enjoying the benefits, those costs will dissolve into insignificance.) If, however, the satisfaction with a decision is short-lived, because of adaptation (you get a job transfer and have to move two months after having painted your house), then the "amortization schedule" will be very much abbreviated and the initial costs will subtract much more from the total satisfaction.

High Expectations

When people evaluate an experience, they are performing one or more of the following comparisons (see Michalos, 1980; 1986):

1. Comparing the experience to what they hoped it would be
2. Comparing the experience to what they expected it to be
3. Comparing the experience to other experiences they have had in the recent past
4. Comparing the experience to experiences that others have had

As material and social circumstances improve, standards of comparison go up.

As people have contact with items of high quality, they begin to suffer from “the curse of discernment.” The lower quality items that used to be perfectly acceptable are no longer good enough. The hedonic zero point keeps rising, and expectations and aspirations rise with it. As a result, the rising quality of experience is met with rising expectations, and people are just running in place. As long as expectations keep pace with realizations, people may live better, but they won’t feel better about how they live.

Social Comparison

Of all the sources we rely on when we evaluate experiences, perhaps nothing is more important than comparisons to other people. In many ways, social comparison parallels the counterfactual thinking process, but there is one very important difference. In principle, people have a great deal of control both over when they will engage in counterfactual thinking and what its content will be. People have less control over social comparison. There is always information available about how others are doing.

Though social comparison information is seemingly all-pervasive, it appears that not everyone pays attention to it, or at least, not everyone is affected by it. Lyubomirsky and her colleagues (eg., Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997, 1999; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, and Kasri, 2001) have conducted a series of studies that looked for differences among individuals in their responses to social comparison information, and what they found is that social comparison information has relatively little impact on dispositionally happy people. Happy people were only minimally affected by whether the person working next to them was better or worse at an anagram task than they were. In contrast, unhappy people showed increases in assessed ability and positive feelings after working beside a slower peer, and decreases in assessed ability and positive feelings if they'd been working beside a faster peer.

Such results nicely parallel the findings we reported regarding maximizers, who seem more sensitive than satisficers to the behavior of others as a gauge of their own progress in obtaining “the best.” Maximizers want the best, but how do you know that you have the best, except by comparison? And to the extent that we have more options, determining the “best” can become overwhelmingly difficult. The maximizer becomes a slave in her judgments to the experiences of other people. Satisficers don't have this problem. Satisficers can rely on their own internal assessments to develop those standards.

Learned Helplessness, Control, Depression, and Self-Blame

About thirty-five years ago, Seligman proposed that clinical depression may be the result of lack of control, or learned helplessness (see Overmeir and Seligman, 1967;

Maier and Seligman, 1976; Seligman, 1975; Seligman and Maier, 1967). The theory was subsequently modified by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978), who suggested that important psychological steps intervene between the experience of helplessness and depression. According to the new theory, when people experience a lack of control, they look for causes and display a variety of predispositions to accept certain types of causes, quite apart from what the actual cause of the failure might be. There are three key dimensions to these predispositions, based on whether people view causes as being global or specific, chronic or transient (or what was labeled “stable vs. unstable”), personal or universal (or “internal vs. external”). The revised theory of helplessness and depression argued that helplessness induced by failure or lack of control leads to depression if a person’s causal explanations for that failure are global, chronic, and personal. It is only then that people will have good reason to expect one failure to be followed by others. Tests of this revised theory have yielded impressive results (eg., Peterson and Seligman, 1994). People do differ in the types of predispositions they display. People who find chronic causes for failure expect failures to persist. People who find global causes for failure expect failure to follow them into every area of life. And people who find personal causes for failure suffer large losses in self-esteem.

Owing to the explosion of choice we outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the American middle class now experiences control and personal autonomy to a degree that people living in other times and places would find unimaginable. This fact, coupled with the helplessness theory of depression, might suggest that clinical depression in the United States should be disappearing. Instead, we see explosive growth in the disorder. Furthermore, depression seems to attack its victims at a younger age now than in earlier

eras. Current estimates are that as many as 7.5% of Americans have an episode of clinical depression before they are 14. This is twice the rate seen in young people born only ten years earlier (Angst, 1995; Klerman et al, 1985; Klerman and Weissman, 1989; Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000; Rosenhan and Seligman, 1995). And the most extreme manifestation of depression—suicide—is also on the rise, and it, too, is happening younger. Suicide is the second leading cause of death (after accidents) among American high school and college students. In the past 35 years, the suicide rate among American college students has tripled. Throughout the developed world suicide among adolescents and young adults is increasing dramatically (Eckersley, 2002; Eckersley and Dear, 2002). In an era of ever greater personal autonomy and control, what could account for this degree of personal misery?

We think there are several answers to this question. First, we believe that increases in experienced control over the years have been accompanied, stride-for-stride, by increases in expectations about control. The more we are allowed to be the masters of our fates, the more we expect to be. Emphasis on freedom of choice, together with the proliferation of possibilities that modern life affords, have contributed to these unrealistic expectations. Along with the pervasive rise in expectations, American culture also has become more individualistic than it was, perhaps as a byproduct of the desire to have control over every aspect of life. Heightened individualism means that, not only do people expect perfection in all things, but they expect to produce this perfection themselves. When they (inevitably) fail, the culture of individualism biases people toward causal explanations that focus on personal rather than universal factors. That is,

the culture has established a kind of officially acceptable style of causal explanation, and it is one that encourages the individual to blame himself for failure (see Weiner, 1985).

Unrealistically high expectations coupled with a tendency to take intense personal responsibility for failure make a lethal combination. And this problem is especially acute for maximizers. As they do with missed opportunities, regret, adaptation, and social comparison, maximizers will suffer more from high expectations and self-blame than will satisficers. Maximizers will put the most work into their decisions, and have the highest expectations about the results of those decisions, and thus will be the most disappointed.

Our research suggests that maximizers are prime candidates for depression. With group after group of people, varying in age, gender, educational level, geographical location, race, and socioeconomic status, we have found a strong positive relation between maximizing and measures of depression. Among people who score highest on our Maximization Scale, scores on the standard measure of depression are in the borderline clinical range. We find the same relation between maximizing and depression among young adolescents (Gillham, Ward, & Schwartz, in preparation). High expectations, and personal attributions for failing to meet them, can apply to educational decisions, career decisions, and marital decisions just as they apply to decisions about where to eat. And even the trivial decisions add up. 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 can't do anything right becomes devastating.

Future Research

We have only begun to investigate in a systematic fashion the behavior of so-called maximizers versus satisficers. Future research will help determine the domain specificity of maximizing behaviors. Clearly no one pursues “the best” in every arena of life, and what distinguishes maximizers from satisficers may ultimately be the number of domains in which an individual attempts to obtain something that is optimal as opposed to merely acceptable. In addition, future studies will determine whether maximizers sometimes engage in behavior that looks similar to that of satisficers but reflects different motives. For example, if a maximizer is aware of his or her tendency to engage in an exhaustive, time-consuming, and ultimately disappointing search for the most attractive option, he or she may on occasion opt to restrict a choice set by simply selecting the first option available (a strategy pursued by the more maximizing of the two authors when he purchased his last car). In other words, there may be occasions in which maximizers “choose not to choose” rather than endure the misery and paralysis that can often follow their attempts to maximize. Such speculation, of course, implies that maximizers are aware of the negative psychological consequences that typically accompany their behavior, and that in and of itself (i.e., whether maximizers know that there is a psychological cost to be paid for their habitual “quest for the best”) is worthy of further study.

Finally, additional research should investigate the origins of a maximizing versus satisficing style of choice behavior. We have speculated on the cultural pressures in a post-industrial capitalist society that might lead to the development of maximizing tendencies, especially in times of plenty (see Schwartz, 1994; and Wiczorkowska &

Burnstein, 1999, for further discussion). And although at times maximizing may produce superior material outcomes (a question worth pursuing in its own right), we believe that such a strategy leads individuals to inferior psychological outcomes. We should acknowledge, though, that the causal arrow may point in the opposite direction; that is, unhappy or depressed individuals may resort to a maximizing strategy in an attempt to improve their current psychological state. Regardless of the causal direction, however, a strategy of continually searching for the best option and then regretting one's choices once made does not appear to be a recipe for long-term happiness.

Choice, Maximizing, and Misery: What Can Be Done

We have provided an outline of an account of why increased opportunities to choose can result in decreased well-being, and suggested that this inverse relation between choice and well-being is especially acute for people who are after the “best” in any choice situation. We offer now some suggestions about what people can do to mitigate this problem (see Schwartz, 2004, for further discussion). None of them are easy to follow and all of them are speculative—that is, they are based on the arguments above rather than on evidence.

1. Choose when to choose. As we have seen, having the opportunity to choose is essential for well-being, but choice has negative features, and the negative features escalate as the number of choices increases. The benefits of having options are apparent with each particular decision people face, but the costs are subtle and cumulative. To

manage the problem of excessive choice, people should decide where in life choice really matters and focus their time and energy there, letting many other opportunities pass them by.

2. Satisfice more and maximize less. It is maximizers who suffer most in a culture that provides too many choices. It is maximizers who have expectations that can't be met. It is maximizers who worry most about regret, about missed opportunities, and about social comparisons, and it is maximizers who are most disappointed when the results of decisions are not as good as they expect. Learning to accept "good enough" will simplify decision making and increase satisfaction. Though satisficers may do less well than maximizers according to certain objective standards, nonetheless, by settling for "good enough" even when the "best" may be just around the corner, satisficers will usually feel better about the decisions they make.

3. Think about the opportunity costs of opportunity costs. When making a decision, it's usually a good idea to think about the alternatives we will pass up when choosing our most preferred option. Ignoring these "opportunity costs" can lead us to overestimate how good the best option is. On the other hand, the more we think about opportunity costs, the less satisfaction we'll derive from whatever we choose. So we should make an effort to limit how much we think about the attractive features of options we reject. Being a satisficer can help here. Because satisficers have their own standards for what is "good enough," they are less dependent than maximizers on comparison among alternatives. A "good investment" for a satisficer may be one that returns more than inflation. Will the satisficer earn less from investments than the maximizer? Perhaps.

Will she be less satisfied with the results? Probably not. Will she have more time available to devote to other decisions that matter to her? Absolutely.

4. Practice gratitude. Our evaluation of our choices is profoundly affected by what we compare them with, including comparisons with alternatives that exist only in our imaginations. The same experience can have both delightful and disappointing aspects. Which of these we focus on may determine whether we judge the experience to be satisfactory or not. We can vastly improve our subjective experience by consciously striving to be grateful more often for what is good about a choice or an experience, and to be disappointed less by what is bad about it. The research literature suggests that gratitude does not come naturally to most of us most of the time (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Usually, thinking about possible alternatives is triggered by dissatisfaction with what was chosen. When life is not too good, we think a lot about how it could be better. When life is going well, we tend not to think much about how it could be worse. But with practice, we can learn to reflect on how much better things are than they might be, which will in turn make the good things in life feel even better.

5. Regret less. The sting of regret (either actual or potential) colors many decisions, and sometimes influences people to avoid making decisions at all. Whereas regret is often appropriate and instructive, when it becomes so pronounced that it poisons or even prevents decisions, people should make an effort to minimize it. We can mitigate regret by adopting the standards of a satisficer rather than a maximizer, reducing the number of

options we consider before making a decision, and practicing gratitude for what is good in a decision rather than focusing on our disappointments with what is bad.

6. Control expectations . Our evaluation of experience is substantially influenced by how it compares with expectations. So what may be the easiest route to increasing satisfaction with the results of decisions is to remove excessively high expectations about them. We can make the task of lowering expectations easier by reducing the number of options we consider, and, once again, by being satisficers rather than maximizers.

7. Curtail social comparison. We evaluate the quality of our experiences by comparing ourselves to others. Though social comparison can provide useful information, it often reduces our satisfaction. So by comparing ourselves to others less, we will be satisfied more.

8. Learn to love constraints. As the number of choices we face increases, freedom of choice eventually becomes a tyranny of choice. Routine decisions take so much time and attention that it becomes difficult to get through the day. In circumstances like this, we should learn to view limits on the possibilities we face as liberating, not constraining. Society provides rules, standards, and norms for making choices, and individual experience creates habits. By deciding to follow a rule (e.g., always wear a seat belt; never drink more than two glasses of wine in one evening), we avoid having to make a deliberate decision again and again. This kind of rule-following frees up time and attention that can be devoted to thinking about choices and decisions to which rules don't apply.

We probably would be deeply resentful if someone tried to take our freedom of choice away in any part of life that we really cared about and really knew something

about. If it were up to us to choose whether or not to have choice, we would opt for choice almost every time. But it is the cumulative effect of these added choices that is causing substantial distress. We are trapped in what Hirsch (1976) called “the tyranny of small decisions.” In any given domain, we say a resounding “yes” to choice, but we never cast a vote on the whole package of choices. Nonetheless, by voting yes in every particular situation, we are in effect voting yes on the package. And the result, as we have suggested in this chapter, can be tyranny and misery rather than liberation and satisfaction.

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