

# *Difficult Choices: Exploring Basic Reasons of Difficult Choices*

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**Abstract:** Every day, we spend too much time and energy deciding between two or more equally tempting options. Is there any way we can make the choice easily? In this thesis, I examine the underlying causes of the difficulty people have in making choices. By studying the psychological and physiological states of people when making choices, I essentially understand the basic reasons why people make choices, and by understanding the most fundamental reasons, I explore in more depth why people have difficulty making choices. The reason why I first wanted to study how to improve the topic of difficult choices is that I myself, as well as many friends and family members around me, always struggle with which one is the ideal option for me when making some choices, spending a lot of time and eventually getting irritated by it. So, I was initially thinking, is it the norm for people to have difficulty in choosing in daily life? After reading books and consulting materials, I found that the phenomenon of difficult choices is due to many complex reasons. Due to these complex reasons, there is no direct way to solve the problem of choice difficulties, and these methods vary from person to person.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

What is the nature of choice? The extent to which our choices are “free” or “determined” has been the subject of frequent debate in philosophy and psychology. But really, in simple terms, choice is an ability to make a decision when we are faced with two or more options.

Every day we are faced with a variety of choices, from life opportunities to eating and shopping. According to some sources, the average person makes 35,000 choices a day from the moment they open their eyes. Assuming that most people spend about seven hours a day sleeping, that's about 2,000 decisions per hour, or one decision every two seconds.

We often hear the saying that choice is more important than effort. This means that choices determine the future to a certain extent, and the importance can be imagined. Growing up as an adult means that we are forced to make choices. Once we make a choice, we also rule out other

options. We are therefore irrevocably responsible for the decisions we make. In daily life, we cannot remain indecisive, because indecisiveness is also a choice, and missing out on a choice because of indecision or not making a good choice can only end up with consequences. Therefore, these fluttering choices, in turn, can bring us more psychological pressure. Sometimes these pressures can make us unable to think rationally and make choices, and thus begin to be anxious.

A person who is unable to make a choice for a long period of time may also have a serious condition that leads to Decidophobia. People with Decidophobia have an irrational fear of making choices, and often people with this fear may experience a great deal of panic even when they are considering having to make a choice. Panic attacks may also result in physical reactions such as increased heart rate and shortness of breath, increased blood pressure, sweating, muscle tension and tremors and so on.

Most of the time, people don't make choices through logical thinking. Most of our decisions are unconscious. By observing people's brain activity while making decisions, researchers have found that it is possible to predict the choices people make in the 7-10 seconds before they make a decision. This means that even if people think they are making a conscious, rational decision, it is possible that they are not aware that they have made the decision and are doing so unconsciously.

So what is the boundary for rationality in the case of complexity or uncertainty? It has been extensively studied and discussed in many literatures. A decision is a good decision when rational thought is followed by a decision that maximizes utility. Thinking rationally to make a choice requires that a person has the ability to understand and evaluate alternatives, as well as the ability to make relatively unbiased judgments and properly evaluate the outcome of the decision.

When people make decisions, they are also influenced by many external factors. For example, frustrated people have a hard time making decisions, and the choices that frustrated people make are generally not the best ones. So, emotions are one of the factors that influence people to make choices. There are also exceptional factors, including language, religion and social factors, that can influence people's choices.

Why do people have to make choices? The reason for this is simple and clear, because we can't have everything we want, it's a law of nature. All choices have this some chances and opportunities that can give us different things. Only by making choices can we know what is right and what is wrong.

## 1.2 Situation

The social situation of difficult choices.

Current psychological theory and research generally assumes that positive emotions and motivation arise when people have choices to make. These findings have led to the common perception that the more options available, the better. However, at the same time, people overlook the fact that human self-control and the desire for choice are infinite.

As a result, with the advancement of technology and the progress of society, we have more and more choices in doing something and the variety of options has become more and more varied. By definition, people should feel a great deal of freedom of choice.

However, in the Chinese region, for example, through a survey of contemporary college students, more than 90% claim to have trouble making choices, and most of the problems that make them feel unable to make choices are mainly in the areas of shopping and eating. At the same time, more than 30% of students affect their emotions and life as a result, and more than 50% of students think it is normal to have difficulties in making choices in life.

In general, we say that we like to make our own choices because this indicates that we have a certain amount of freedom. Freedom of choice means that we have the right to control our own

decisions, but this can also lead to the pain that comes from our indecision.

In 2018, a survey conducted by China Youth News Agency on 2007 respondents showed that 84.7% of respondents reported having difficulty in choosing. To overcome the difficulty of choice, 50.5% of respondents believe that they should deepen their self-understanding. At the same time, the survey data showed that respondents were most likely to have difficulty in choosing products when shopping (54.0%), followed by choosing restaurants and dishes when eating (53.4%). Others include planning a trip (42.5%) and choosing between multiple job opportunities (30.9%). After making a choice, 17.4% of respondents often regret it, 66.3% say they occasionally do, and 10.1% think they never regret it. Just as many of my friends around me, when asked what to eat for lunch today, the most common answer is “whatever”.

In this survey, 44.7% of the respondents felt that choosiness wastes their time and energy, 43.7% of the respondents admitted that choosiness makes them irritable, and 41.2% of the respondents pointed out that choosiness makes people lack control over their own lives. At the same time, the survey shows that in order to overcome the difficulty of choice, 50.5% of respondents suggest deepening self-understanding, 48.1% of respondents suggest setting reasonable expectations and goals, 45.2% of respondents suggest making plans in advance to avoid “temporary choices”, 38.7% of respondents suggest not pursuing perfection too much. 30.8% of respondents suggested trusting intuition and first impressions.

So what is it that causes us to fail to make choices in things that are clearly not very important?

This thesis will present arguments around choice, exploring what choice is, what influences us to make a choice, and if we can avoid some factors, will we be able to make a choice easily?

## 2. Development

### 2.1 Principle Of Choices

Thinking system of decision-making

The conscious level of human decision making contains two different thinking systems: a conscious rational thinking system (the calm rational brain) and an unconscious fast emotional thinking system (the emotional brain). If we want to make a good decision, the key point is that we must know when to rely on which system.

What parts of the brain are used when we make a decision?

It is well known that the process of decision making is generated by the communication between the prefrontal cortex (working memory) and the hippocampus (long-term memory). The Brain's Decision-Making Spot is in the frontal lobe of the brain. Researches have shown that damage to the frontal lobe of the brain can impair a person's ability to think and make choices. And, now scientists say they have identified this part of the brain (the frontal lobe) as dominating reasoning, self-control and decision-making. However, other areas of the brain also play a critical role in decision-making, although the exact mechanisms by which they work remain unknown.

Decision making is a process of cognition carried out by the human brain, which behaves as a complex system. Each decision consists of a number of stages, each of which can be interpreted as a cognitive criterion. The brain can control the behavioral path by predicting the outcome of an action. Making choices is a recurring and universal cognitive process that is an inevitable part of human behavior.

The more a decision activates our brain's reward system, the more likely we are to make that decision again. Recent imaging studies in humans have shown that the activity of dopamine neurons (i.e., specific types of functional cells in the nervous system that release the neurotransmitter dopamine) in the frontal and posterior cingulate cortex of the brain depends heavily on the reward expected after making a decision.

## 2.2 Difficult to Choose

According to statistics, each of us has to make decisions every day and the number of choices we have to make is up to 35,000 per day. It could be something as small as what kind of socks or shoes I should wear today, or it could be making those big decisions like buying a house, renting a car, changing jobs, saving a company from a major strategic decision or taking a risk .....

Making the right decision, no matter how big or small, is what we all want. While there are 35,000 decisions to be made every day, for us all processes come naturally. However, if people find it extremely difficult to make a satisfactory choice when faced with the trivialities of daily life, and when they have to decide between several options, they show panic and even sweat until they finally cannot choose, which leads to a certain level of fear of choice. If this situation persists, it can lead to Decidophobia.

Decidophobia was originally coined by Princeton philosopher Walter Kaufmann and is also known as choice-phobia. Fear of choice, obviously, is a lack of self-confidence and avoidance of responsibility, a lack of self-reliance and a fear of failure. People who suffer from this disorder have an extremely difficult time making choices, are unable to make their own satisfying choices properly. When they have to choose between multiple choices, they panic, even sweat, and ultimately cannot choose, which leads to The degree of fear of choice.

Decidophobia has been defined as “an irrational fear of making choices”. In its most extreme form, phobic symptoms typically include: anxiety; panic attacks; muscle tension and excessive sweating; and increased dependence on others to make choices.

Causes of difficult to choose

We can simply divide the causes of choice difficulties into two areas, internal causes and external causes.

1). Internal reasons can be basically divided into: 1. the “insatiable” nature of the brain; 2). insufficient decision-making ability; 3). the pursuit of perfection; 4. lack of responsibility. While the external causes are relatively more complex.

Back in the day, Patrick McGinnis, a student at Harvard Business School, coined the acronym FOMO, which means fear of missing out. We've probably all experienced it: the fear of missing out on a social situation, a new job offer, an attractive sales opportunity, the opportunity to say or do something at the right time, or the chance to meet someone special. Too much information for us to miss.

Mr. McGinnis also coined the term FOBO, fear of better options, which is also enlivened by endless opportunities and choices, but takes us in a different direction from FOMO. When fearing better options, we may experience what is called “analysis paralysis,” which causes us to endlessly hesitate rather than act.

This phenomenon, also known as “maximization,” is the relentless pursuit of all possible options for fear that you will miss out on the “best” choice, leading to indecision, frustration, stress, regret, and unhappiness. When we are faced with too many attractive choices, we become anxious about missing out. Many people are afraid of missing out on anything that seems exciting which is paradoxical.

Too many options to choose from is a major external cause of difficult to choose.

American venture capitalist and author Patrick McGinnis, who coined FOBO (The Fear Of Better Options) and FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) as a student at Harvard Business School in 2003, describes this cycle of indecision as part of our process.

As the term overchoice or choice overload was introduced by Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book “Future Shock”, if a person has too many choices, he or she is less likely to actually choose, and this phenomenon can also lead to cognitive overload. And this phenomenon can also lead to

cognitive impairment, making it difficult to make decisions when faced with many choices.

There is a very famous experiment that validates this phenomenon. In 2000, psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper from Columbia University and Stanford University published a study on jams. On one day at a local food market, people would find a display with 24 different jams on it. Then on another day, at the same food market, people were offered a choice of only six different types of jam. Iyengar and Lepper found that while the larger display (with 24 types of jam) generated more interest, people were far less likely to buy a jar of jam (about ten times more likely) than in the case of the smaller display.

In our common perception, choice equals control, and they believe that more choice is better, but the truth is that too much choice equals no choice.

### **2.3 Psychological Stress in Making Choices**

Life is full of decisions, which are both a privilege and a source of stress. Decision fatigue is a psychological phenomenon surrounding a person's ability or capacity to make decisions. It is also known as ego depletion.

A person's ability to make additional decisions becomes worse after a long period of time when the quality of the decisions made continues to decline. The psychological effects of decision fatigue can vary and can lead to difficulty making good decisions, impulse buying or other avoidance behaviors.

There is a paradox: "People who lack choices seem to want them and often fight for them," but at the same time, "people find that making many choices can be psychologically distasteful." So the most effective way to avoid choice fatigue is to try to avoid the opportunity to make choices in daily life, as former U.S. President Barack Obama, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, and other major politicians and businessmen have done by reducing their daily outfits to one or two to limit the number of decisions they make in a day.

### **2.4 Causes of Choice Fatigue**

Decision fatigue is caused by being forced to make too many decisions in a fixed amount of time. People begin the decision making process by carefully weighing their options. Over a period of time, the energy they spend weighing all the various trade-offs and asking people to use willpower rather than the energy of the default system is expended.

Once our mental energy is depleted, due to the cognitive effort the human brain must exert we become reluctant to engage in the thinking that requires us to make these trade-offs. People who are aware of this often construct to-do lists to include important decisions that require maximum energy early in the day to ensure that we have enough energy to devote to those choices first.

Decision fatigued users become "cognitively impaired" because their self-control is exhausted and they effectively shut down their abilities, thus building up energy. They end up choosing the path of least resistance, which is sometimes completely shut down, resulting in no or poor choices.

Decision fatigue is related to the "choice paradox," as a Columbia University research project on jam samples called it, which showed that more choices do not lead to higher conversion rates. In fact, people who are overwhelmed end up with no choice at all.

### **2.5 Effects of Emotional Anxiety On Making Choices**

Emotional anxiety can prevent the brain from making rational decisions after thinking by reducing the brain's ability to screen out distractions in a state of confusion. Anxiety interrupts the brain's ability to ignore these distractions by paralyzing a group of neurons in the prefrontal cortex

that are specifically involved in making choices.

Research published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* explains how anxiety acts to disengage a part of the brain that is critical to making good decisions. This area is the prefrontal cortex (PFC), located in the front of the brain, which is the area that brings flexibility to decision-making.

The PFC is the part of the brain involved in weighing consequences, planning and processing thoughts in a logical, rational manner. It helps remove emotional steam from decision making by calming the amygdala, the part of the brain that runs on instincts, impulses and raw emotions (such as fear).

## 2.6 Self-Awareness

Even though most people think they have self-awareness, true self-awareness is a rare quality. Data studies show that only 10 to 15 percent of people actually meet the criteria. Some people see it as the ability to monitor our inner world, while others mark it as a temporary state of self-awareness.

The first is called internal self-awareness and represents how clearly we see our values, passions, ideals, fit with our environment, reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths and weaknesses) and impact on others. We found that internal self-awareness was associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness. It was negatively associated with anxiety, stress, and depression.

The second, external self-awareness, implies understanding how others perceive us based on the same factors mentioned above.

The human mind rarely operates in a rational manner, and our judgments are rarely free of bias. We tend to pounce on any “insights” we find without questioning their validity or value, we ignore conflicting evidence, and we force our thoughts to conform to our initial interpretations.

Self-awareness involves being aware of different aspects of the self, including traits, behaviors, and feelings. Essentially, it is a state of mind that makes oneself the focus of attention.

Self-awareness is one of the first components of the emergent self-concept. Self-awareness is essential to your nature, but it is not the focus of every moment of every day. Instead, self-awareness is integrated into who you are and emerges in different places depending on the situation and your personality.

People are not born with a sense of self. However, research has also found that infants do have a basic sense of self.

Research suggests that a more complex sense of self-awareness begins to emerge at about 1 year of age and becomes more developed at about 18 months of age. Researchers Lewis and Brooks-Gunn conducted a study on how self-awareness develops. 2 researchers painted a red dot on an infant's nose and then held the child over a mirror. The children who recognized themselves in the mirror would stick out their nose rather than the reflection in the mirror, suggesting that they had at least some degree of self-awareness. Lewis and Brooks-Gunn found that children under one year of age would barely reach for their noses without looking at the reflection on the mirror.

About 25% of infants between the ages of 15 and 18 months reach for their noses, while about 70% of infants between the ages of 21 and 24 months reach for their noses.

Public self-awareness refers to knowing oneself from the imagined perspective of others, whereas private self-awareness refers to knowing oneself from a personal perspective (when seeing oneself in a mirror). Attention to the private self has been found to lead to behaviors that reflect personal attitudes, whereas attention to the public self may lead to behaviors that become more in line with social expectations.

For the benefits of having self-awareness, it allows us to be more proactive, increases our

acceptance, and encourages positive self-development. Self-awareness allows us to see things from the perspective of others, exercise self-control, work creatively and productively, and take pride in ourselves and our work, as well as general self-esteem. It leads to better decision making, and at the same time, it allows us to do our jobs better, communicate better in the workplace, and enhance our self-confidence and work-related well-being.

It is important to note that the Lewis and Brooks-Gunn study only showed visual self-awareness in infants. Even at this early stage of life, children may actually possess other forms of self-awareness. For example, researchers Lewis, Sullivan, Stanger, and Weiss suggest that expressing emotions requires both self-awareness and the ability to think about oneself in relation to others.

The researchers suggest that children experience a series of developments in self-awareness between birth and approximately 4 or 5 years of age, and that self-awareness is observed through the child's response to his or her own reflection in the mirror. Psychologists often classify self-awareness into two different types, public or private.

#### Public Self-Awareness

This type occurs when people are aware of their appearance to others. Public self-consciousness usually occurs in situations where people are the center of attention, such as when giving a presentation or talking with a group of friends.

This sense of self often compels people to conform to social norms. When we are aware that we are being monitored and evaluated, we usually try to behave in socially acceptable and expected ways. Public self-consciousness can also lead to assessment anxiety, causing people to feel depressed, anxious or worried about what others think of them.

#### Private Self-Awareness

This happens when people become aware of certain aspects of themselves (in a private way only). For example, looking at your face in the mirror is a form of private self-awareness.

Self-awareness plays a critical role in how we understand ourselves and our relationships with others and the world. Having self-awareness allows you to assess yourself in relation to others.

For people with high levels of self-consciousness, this can lead to excessive self-consciousness. If you feel you are struggling with a sense of self that is negatively impacting your life, discuss your symptoms with your doctor to learn more about how to cope with these feelings.

## 2.7 Cognitive Bias

Cognitive bias is a systematic thinking error that occurs when people process and interpret information from the world around them, which affects their decision making and judgment. When people perceive themselves, others or the external environment, the results are often distorted due to themselves or the situation. Typical manifestations include salience bias, vividness bias, etc. Stereotypes and the halo effect, which are common in social perception, are some forms of perceptual bias. They are the result of the selective nature of individual perception.

We often encounter situations in our lives when we need to make decisions with imperfect information and we unknowingly rely on bias or prejudice. The reasons we make bad decisions can be the result of trial-and-error methods and biases.

A conundrum based on the American game show "Deal or No Deal" is a good illustration of how bias can influence our decisions.

Suppose there are three doors. Behind one door is an amazing prize: a car. Behind the other two doors is a mediocre prize: \$1,000.

You initially select door 1. Before showing what is behind the door you selected, the presenter will open another door, door 2, to show the mediocre prize. The presenter can then choose whether

to keep what is behind the initially selected door or to know what is behind the second door to change the selection. What should you do now? Should you keep the initial choice of door 1, or switch to door 3?

The correct answer is that if you change your choice, then you have the best chance of winning the race. This is called the Monty Hall problem.

#### A. Cognitive biases can influence people to make choices

Cognitive bias is an umbrella term for the systematic ways in which the context and framing of information affects an individual's judgments and decisions. There are many types of cognitive biases that affect individuals differently, but they share the common characteristic that, like human personality, they lead to judgments and decisions that deviate from rational objectivity.

In some cases, cognitive biases make our thinking and decision making faster and more efficient. The reason for this is that we don't stop to consider all the information available to us because our thoughts follow some channels and not others. However, in other cases, cognitive biases can lead to errors for the same reason. One example is confirmation bias, in which we tend to select information that reinforces or confirms what we already believe. For example, if we believe that airplanes are dangerous, then a few stories about plane crashes tend to be more memorable than millions of stories about safe, successful flights. Thus, for someone who tends to think in this way, the prospect of air travel equates to an avoidable risk of doom, regardless of how much time has passed without news of an aviation disaster.

#### B. Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is a type of cognitive bias that involves a bias toward information that confirms your preexisting beliefs or biases. Confirmation bias is the human tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information that confirms pre-existing beliefs.

Confirmation bias can also affect how you process otherwise neutral information, it tends to support your beliefs. Even your memory can be affected by confirmation bias.

It is insidious. It affects every choice you make. The brain's primary goal is self-preservation, and this applies to both the body and the mind. When opposing facts challenge your identity, your brain perceives the psychological threat and protects you just as if it were an actual physical threat.

#### C. Intuition bias

For many well-documented reasons, people have a tendency to overemphasize their intuition and follow it, even when they shouldn't. This "gut bias" leads to several specific intuitive biases in judgment and decision making. Previous research has shown that features of the decision process have a tendency to "leak" into the experience of choice outcomes. We explore whether the effect of intuitive choices on the experience of choice outcomes differs from "non-intuitive", analytical choices. Because intuition is sensory-based, research suggests that intuitive choices have stronger affective consequences than non-intuitive choices.

#### D. Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is an unconscious association, belief or attitude toward any social group. As a result of implicit bias, people tend to attribute certain qualities or characteristics to all members of a particular group, a phenomenon known as stereotyping.

The main reasons for implicit bias are: we tend to look for patterns; we like to take shortcuts; and our experience and social conditioning play a role.

Ways to address implicit bias focus on seeing people as individuals; work to consciously change your stereotypes; take time to stop and reflect; adjust your perspective; increase your exposure; practice mindfulness.

### 3. Conclusion



This thesis examines the theoretical foundations related to choice, such as principles about choice, causes of choice difficulties, and factors affecting choice. Various studies have found that people's choices are influenced by many factors. Many factors contribute to people's difficulty in making choices, the main ones being emotions and self-awareness. Difficulty in choosing is a waste of time and can cause people who have difficulty in choosing to suffer from great psychological stress, which can cause “Decidophobia” and symptoms such as panic and dizziness in serious cases. Therefore, the difficulty in choosing is not a trivial matter, people should learn how to make a choice by the right way, not to avoid the choice.

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