Experiential Versus Rational Regret:
Need for Intuition Determines Regret Intensity Following Switching and Sticking Decisions

Stephanie M. Smith & Keith D. Markman

Introduction

Most people believe that switching their initial answer on a multiple choice test is a bad idea, even though a plethora of research indicates that this is the better strategy to take. The first instinct fallacy (Kruger, Wirtz & Miller, 2005) states that this happens because switching intensifies regret, which in turn makes such instances more memorable.

We propose that intuitive and rational thinkers will differ with regard to the intensity of regret they experience following switching from versus sticking with decisions that lead to a wrong answer. For intuitive thinkers, switching from the right to the wrong answer is a consistency violation: they went against their initial, first instinct response, and were wrong. For rational thinkers, on the other hand, any type of error should elicit thoughts of "I should have known better," and thus should not elicit differential levels of regret.

This proposal was tested using a hypothetical scenario about a multiple choice test situation where the participants imagined either sticking with a wrong answer or switching to a wrong answer. All participants completed the Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI; Pacini & Epstein, 1999)

It was predicted that intuitive thinkers would anticipate feeling more regret in the action (switching) condition than in the inaction (sticking) condition, whereas rational thinkers would not experience differential regret as a function of action/inaction.

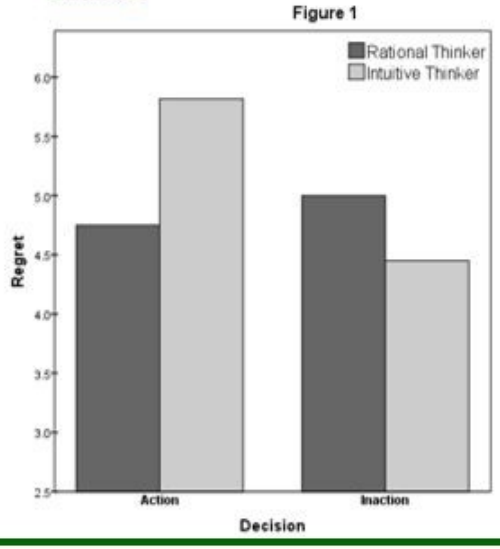
Methods

1) **Multiple choice test scenario**
   - Action condition: switched from a right answer to a wrong answer
   - Inaction condition: stuck with a wrong answer
2) **Regret assessed on 7 point likert-type scale** (1= No Regret, 7 = A Lot of Regret)
   - How much regret do you think you would feel about the outcome of your decision?
3) **Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI; Pacini & Epstein, 1999)**
   - Composed of two subscales:
     - Need for Intuition (NI: example: "I believe in trusting my hunches")
     - Need for Cognition (NC: example:" I prefer complex to simple problems"
     - A median split performed on the NI-NC difference scores was used to categorize participants as either "Intuitive" or "Rational" thinkers.

Results

- Analyses revealed a significant Thinking Style (Intuitive vs. Rational) X Action Type (Switching vs. Sticking) interaction, $F(1, 81) = 7.45$, $p = .008$.
- As predicted, intuitive thinkers felt more regret after imagining switching than imagining sticking ($p = .002$)
- As predicted, rational thinkers did not experience differential regret after imagining sticking versus imagining switching ($p = .57$).

Figure 1



Discussion

The results of this study suggest that experiential versus rational processing style affects the amount of regret felt from failed actions and inactions. Intuitive thinkers felt more regret over action than inaction, quite possibly because switching from the correct to the wrong answer is construed by individuals who tend to rely on their gut feelings as a consistency violation. Rational thinkers, on the other hand, experienced no differences in regret as a function of the type of error they made, possibly because all types of errors elicit thoughts of how they should have known better.

Future research should expand on this finding in multiple ways. For instance, it is possible that intuitive processing is perceived as more representative of the self than is rational processing. Thus, when an individual's intuition is shown to be wrong, it may be experienced as a direct threat to one's core self.

References

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