



Do as I say, not as I do: Choice–advice differences in decisions to learn information



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ABSTRACT

We find that people choose to learn interesting but useless information, yet advise others to resist this temptation. By contrast, when the information is boring but important people recommend others to learn it, but are less likely to learn it themselves. In five experiments participants were randomly assigned the role of chooser or adviser. Experiment 1a showed choosers paid real money for useless information, whereas advisers recommended others to resist the temptation. Experiment 1b showed this choice–advice difference persisted when participants introspected on their decisions in a hypothetical setting. Using an introspection task, experiment 2 demonstrated choosers' decisions relied more heavily on curiosity, whereas advisers' recommendations relied on the value of the information. Next, we examined the case where information is boring but important. In a hypothetical setting, experiment 3a revealed the vast majority of advisers recommended to learn the important information, whereas choosers were less enthusiastic about the boring information. Finally, experiment 3b demonstrated the majority of choosers chose not to pay actual money to learn the important information, whereas the majority of advisers recommended paying to learn it. We conclude by offering ways to utilize curiosity to encourage people to learn important information.

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1. Introduction

Imagine you moved to an ocean-side city. After renting an apartment for a year, you decided to buy a house. You found a private beach house you really liked. Unfortunately, this dream house was out of your price range. Being practical, you settled for a nice house in a well-located, quiet area. You made friends, joined a carpool for your daughter's ballet class, and you are close to some very nice beaches. Today, while waiting to pick your daughter up from school, you hear someone mention that the prices of beach houses outside the city have plummeted. Your heart skips a beat. Will you call a realtor to find out the current selling price of your dream house even though the information is no longer relevant to you? Now, consider a friend in the same situation. Would you recommend they satisfy their curiosity?

Introspection leads many people to admit they would want to know the price of the beach house to relieve the tension of curiosity. Introspection also leads many people to acknowledge they would probably advise their friend against this course of action because the information is no longer relevant and may cause more harm than good. Why do we succumb to curiosity

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and choose to learn useless information, when we realize this is a utility reducing action that will make us feel bad, and that we will recommend others against it? In this paper we aim to understand this discrepancy.

A ‘real-experience’ explanation of the discrepancy roots the difference in the simple fact that, as choosers, people experience their problems and bear the consequences of their decisions. By contrast, as advisers, people may imagine the situation and empathize with their friend, but try as they may, they do not experience the problem nor do they typically bear the consequences of the decisions. Research has demonstrated self-other empathy gaps in a range of domains including thirst, hunger, physical disgust, and fear of social rejection (Beisswanger et al., 2003; Pronin et al., 2008; Wray and Stone, 2005). Furthermore, research has shown that when people are in a cold (hypothetical) state, they underestimate the intensity of their own experience in a hot (actual) state, and miss-predict their own behavior (Ariely and Loewenstein, 2006; Kang and Camerer, 2013; Loewenstein and Adler, 1995; Van Boven et al., 2012; Read and van Leeuwen, 1998). Curiosity operates along similar lines. Thus, like a hungry person looking for food, a curious person may feel compelled to find an answer. In a hypothetical situation however, the same person is likely to underestimate the intensity of curiosity and the effect it has on behavior (e.g., Loewenstein, 1994, 1996; Loewenstein et al., 1998; Read and van Leeuwen, 1998).

Note however, that our opening beach-house example did not require a contrast between actual experience (of choosers) and hypothetical consideration (of advisers). Rather, a simple introspection exercise seemed enough to elicit a choice–advice difference. Construal level theory (Lieberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003, 2010) offers a more interesting explanation maintaining that the mere roles of chooser and adviser lead people to different decisions even when the problem is strictly hypothetical.

The ‘construal-level’ explanation suggests that because the roles of chooser and adviser signal different psychological distance, they make people perceive the decision problem in different ways (Danziger et al., 2012; Kray and Gonzalez, 1999; Lu et al., 2012). The role of a chooser signals proximity, and determines low level construal. Accordingly, as choosers, people pay more attention to concrete aspects of the problem, specific details, and short-term solutions. The role of an adviser signals distance that is associated with a high level construal. Accordingly, as advisers, people pay more attention to the abstracted structure of the problem, general goals and long-term outcomes. In the opening example, the curiosity about the new price of the beach-house is concrete and immediate and thus a part of the low-level construal of the decision problem. As a result, choosers focus on a concrete question: “How can I solve the specific problem of curiosity?” that leads to a concrete answer to reveal the information. By contrast, the value of the information is part of the high-level construal of the decision problem, because it is more abstract and its effect endures for a long(er) term. Thus, advisers focus on a more general question: “What is the desirable outcome in the long-run?” Answering this question leads advisers to focus more on the value of the information and recommend not to reveal the information.

The choice–advice discrepancy is not necessarily limited to information that is high on curiosity and low on value (as in the opening beach-house example). One can easily think of opposite choice–advice discrepancy where choosers do not attend boring information even though they realize its importance and usefulness. Common examples include skipping the fine print of agreements and contracts, or failing to read about risks and medical treatment side-effects, conditions and restrictions of warranties, health policies and so on and so forth. Clearly, people realize the critical value of the information in these cases, and most (if not all) would advise others to learn this information. Thus, introspection points once again at a choice–advice discrepancy, albeit in the opposite direction. Proponents of the ‘real-experience’ explanation may argue that – in contrast to curiosity – the experience of boredom operates like pain, pushing choosers to avoid the information (and hypothetical considerations lead advisers to underestimate the pain of boredom and its effect). The ‘construal-level’ explanation predicts once again that mere introspection is enough to elicit a choice–advice discrepancy. As choosers, people pay more attention to (and base their decision on) the fact that the information is not interesting. As advisers, people pay more attention to (and base their decision on) the fact that the information is valuable.

1.1. Overview of experiments

We report five experiments in which participants were randomly assigned the role of chooser or adviser. First, we examine the case of interesting but useless information. Experiment 1a shows that in a real setting choosers yield to curiosity and pay for useless information, yet their advisers recommend they should resist the temptation. Importantly, experiment 1b shows that the difference between choice and advice persists in a strictly hypothetical setting. Based on mere introspection, choosers state they would pay for the useless information whereas advisers recommend against it. In experiment 2 we further demonstrate that when participants introspect, their decision relies more heavily on curiosity in the role of choosers, but as advisers their recommendation relies on the value of the information. We then turn to examine the opposite case of information that is boring but useful. In experiment 3a we first test choice and advice in a strictly hypothetical setting. In the role of advisers a vast majority of the participants recommend their friends should learn the important information. In the role of choosers participants are less enthusiastic about the boring information (yet, still a majority state they would learn the information). In experiment 3b we test choice and advice in a real setting to see if choosers put their money where their mouth is. The findings show that now, the majority of choosers waive the opportunity to learn the important information. Advisers stick by their recommendation stating that their friends should learn the important information (however, the majority is attenuated).

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