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Consolidating Mistakes of the Heart and Mind:
Toward a Dual Process Theory of Regret

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University,
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ABSTRACT
Abstract

There are many idiosyncrasies in the emotion of regret that we do not fully comprehend and our traditional reliance on economic theories of human decision-making, which view regret as stemming from illogical and explicit decision-making processes, may be the cause. This thesis explores the development and testing of the Dual Process Theory of Regret (DPTR) which claims that individuals use both implicit ‘orientation’ and explicit ‘justification’ systems of thought to guide their daily decision-making and the differential use of these systems should be reflected in the intensity of regret felt for a poor outcome. To assess its utility in predicting variation in regret intensity the DPTR was tested in conjunction with two popular theories of regret; one focussing on the distinction between actions and inaction, and the other focussing on decision justification.

Three thousand adults were randomly selected from the New Zealand electoral roll and invited to participate in a postal survey of short and long-term life regrets. Of this initial sample 653 participants returned questionnaires with usable data, a response rate of approximately 23% which, while a relatively low response rate, was expected given the sensitive topic and provided more than enough respondents for the present analysis.

Results showed that the DPTR had greater utility in predicting trends in short and long-term regret intensity than either of the current regret theories. Results also illustrated that changes in justification strength had little effect on regret intensity and that explicit justifications only influenced regret in the long-term. In contrast results supported the conceptualisation of the implicit orientation and showed that it was a key source of influence on regret intensity in both the short and long-term.

This research concludes that the DPTR’s focus on both implicit and explicit cognitive systems provides greater insight into the nature of regret than the reliance on explicit cognitive analysis alone. Implicit feelings of right and wrong are a better indicator of eventual regret than our ability to justify our decision. These results help resolve past anomalies in regret research, clarify conflicting trends in regret highlighted in the current media, and have application for understanding criminal recidivism.
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*Andy Towers, August 2009*
TABLE OF CONTENTS
Table of Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................... ix
Table of Contents........................................................................................................... xiii
List of Tables................................................................................................................ xix
List of Figures................................................................................................................ xxiii
List of Appendices......................................................................................................... xxvii

Chapter 1: Definitions of Regret................................................................................... 1
  Current Definitions of Regret....................................................................................... 5
  Pathway to a Solution.................................................................................................. 9

Chapter 2: The Components of Regret........................................................................ 11
  What are the Characteristic Components of Regret?............................................... 13
  A Definition of Emotion............................................................................................. 13
  The Components of a Regrettable Episode............................................................... 14
  Toward a Formal Definition of Regret...................................................................... 25
  Summary and Steps Forward.................................................................................... 27

Chapter 3: Varying the Shade of Regret..................................................................... 29
  Contextual Influences on the Shade of Our Regret............................................... 31
  Applying Economic Theories to Real-Life Regrets................................................... 35
  Problems of Cross Application.................................................................................. 38
Beyond Classical Decision Theory................................................................. 40
What is a Dual-Process Theory?................................................................. 41
Towards a Dual-Process Model of Regret.................................................. 42
Summary.................................................................................................. 46

Chapter 4: The Dual Process Theory of Regret (DPTR)............................. 49
  System 1: Decision-Orientation............................................................. 51
  System 2: Decision-Justification........................................................... 56
  A Dual-Process Theory of Regret Intensity.......................................... 60
  Comparing DPTR to DJT..................................................................... 64
  Addressing Potential Criticism of the DPTR....................................... 66
  Chapter 4. Summary.......................................................................... 72

Chapter 5: Hypotheses............................................................................ 75
  Evaluating Previous Theories of Regret............................................... 77
  Evaluating the DPTR......................................................................... 80

Chapter 6: Method.................................................................................. 87
  Proposed Questionnaire Content....................................................... 87
    Regret ........................................................................................... 87
    Measures of Regret Intensity......................................................... 88
    Measures of Regret Related Emotions.......................................... 88
    Time Since Regrettable Decision.................................................. 89
    Responsibility................................................................................ 89
    Decision-Justification................................................................... 89
    Decision-Orientation.................................................................... 90
    Additional Measures................................................................. 92
# Request for a Summary of the Results

*Ethical Concerns Addressed*

The Pilot Study

*Participants*

*Procedure*

*Pilot Study Results and Subsequent Changes to the Questionnaire*

The Main Study

*Participants*

*Method and Procedure*

## Chapter 7: Results – Short-Term Regrets

Assessing Regret Frequency and Intensity

A Summary of the Results for Short-Term Action and Inaction Regrets

Defining the Concept of Regret Intensity

Testing the Decision-Orientation Concept

Testing the Justification Trichotomy

Testing the Relationship between Orientation and Justification Types

Testing the DPTR Model

Testing the DPTR: Action and Inaction Regrets

A Summary of Results for Short-Term Regrets

## Chapter 8: Results – Long-Term Regrets

Assessing Regret Frequency and Intensity

A Summary of the Results for Long-Term Action and Inaction Regrets

Defining the Concept of Regret Intensity

Testing the Decision-Orientation Concept

Testing the Justification Trichotomy
Table of Contents

Testing the Relationship between Orientation and Justification Types.............. 135
Testing the DPTR Model.................................................................................. 137
Testing the DPTR: Action and Inaction Regrets.............................................. 139
A Summary of Results for Short-Term Regrets.............................................. 141

Chapter 9: Discussion...................................................................................... 143
Regret for Things We Do and Things We Don’t Do........................................ 145
Regret as a Consequence of Thought and Feeling........................................... 148
Broader Application of the DPTR................................................................. 153
Results that Alter Our Understanding of the DPTR........................................ 157
Limitations of the Study............................................................................... 159
Future Research.............................................................................................. 161
Conclusion.................................................................................................... 165

References..................................................................................................... 169

Appendices..................................................................................................... 199
Table 1. Russell’s (2003) Components of an Emotional Episode................................. 15

Table 2. Key features of a dual process model of thought........................................... 41

Table 3. Descriptions of the life domains used to categorise regrets......................... 100

Table 4. Frequency and three measures of intensity for short-term action and inaction regrets overall, by gender and by age group.................................................. 105

Table 5. Means, standard deviations and t-tests for significant differences in the levels of short-term regret intensity, regret-related emotions and responsibility by decision-orientation................................................................. 111

Table 6. Regression analysis for the effect of preference for consistency, decision-orientation and a preference/orientation interaction on short-term regret intensity........................................................................................................... 112

Table 7. Means and standard deviations for short-term regret intensity and regret-related emotions by decision-justification......................................................... 113

Table 8. Factorial ANOVA for the effect of decision-orientation and decision-justification on short-term regret intensity................................................................. 114

Table 9. The formulation of the six DPTR groups based on orientation and justification responses, with illustration of the five planned comparisons and associated contrast weights......................................................... 116

Table 10. Frequency and three measures of intensity for long-term action and inaction regrets overall, by gender and by age group.................................................. 126

Table 11. Means, standard deviations and t-tests for significant differences in the levels of long-term regret intensity, regret-related emotions and responsibility by decision-orientation................................................................. 133
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12.</th>
<th>Regression analysis for the effect of preference for consistency, decision-orientation and a preference/orientation interaction on long-term regret intensity</th>
<th>134</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 13.</td>
<td>Means and standard deviations for long-term regret intensity and regret-related emotions by decision-justification</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 14.</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA for the effect of decision-orientation, decision-justification, and an orientation/justification interaction on long-term regret intensity</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 15.</td>
<td>The formulation of the six DPTR groups based on orientation and justification responses, with illustration of the five planned comparisons and associated contrast weights</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES
Figure 1. A model depicting the components of a regrettable episode.................... 26
Figure 2. The components of a regrettable episode and subsequent range of affect.................................................................................................................. 32
Figure 3. A basic dual-process model of regret showing the constituent components of regret and the basic dual-process process determining regret intensity........................................................................................................... 47
Figure 4. A complete model of the Dual Process Theory of Regret......................... 61
Figure 5. Graph showing the frequency of short-term action and inaction regrets across life domains................................................................................................. 106
Figure 6. Graph showing the intensity of short-term regrets across life domains... 107
Figure 7. Graph showing the proportion of short-term action and inaction regrets that stem from Intimate and Non-Intimate life domain categories........... 108
Figure 8. Graph showing the mean intensity of short-term action and inaction regrets stemming from Intimate and Non-Intimate life domains............. 109
Figure 9. Graph showing the mean short-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals for each of the six DPTR groups................................. 117
Figure 10a. Graphs showing the mean short-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals across DPTR groups for action regrets ..................... 119
Figure 10b. Graphs showing the mean short-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals across DPTR groups for inaction regrets................. 119
Figure 11. Graph showing the frequency of long-term regrets across life domains..... 128
Figure 12. Graph showing the intensity of long-term regrets across life domains....... 129
Figure 13. Graph showing the proportion of long-term action and inaction regrets that stem from Intimate and Non-Intimate life domain categories........... 130

Figure 14. Graph showing the mean intensity of long-term action and inaction regrets stemming from Intimate and Non-Intimate life domains............ 131

Figure 15. A graph showing the proportion of orientation-consistent and inconsistent decisions as a factor of decision-justification.......................... 136

Figure 16. Graph showing the mean long-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals for each of the six DPTR groups.............................. 139

Figure 17a. Graph showing the mean long-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals across DPTR groups for action regrets....................... 140

Figure 17b. Graph showing the mean long-term regret intensity and 95% confidence intervals across DPTR groups for inaction regrets............... 140
LIST OF APPENDICES
List of Appendices

Appendix A. Primary Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study................. 201
Appendix B. Secondary Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study............... 205
Appendix C. Main Questionnaire................................................................. 209
Appendix D. Mental Health Advisory Note.................................................... 227
Appendix E. Follow-Up Postcard................................................................. 231