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What the hell was I thinking?
Understanding the precursors to real-life regret

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Regret is VERY common

What signals regret?

- Turned out worse than it could have
- We were responsible for the decision
- Involved something we care about
What do we regret?

Educational choices are our greatest regret*

Past theories of regret

Differences in Life Domains
- High opportunity to change (e.g., education) = high regret
- Low opportunity to change (e.g., family) = low regret

Temporal Pattern to Life Regret
- Short-term: We regret actions more than inactions
- Long-term: We regret inactions more than actions

But...
- Where is the humanity?
- Where is the intensity?
Everyday decision-making

- Implicit - Fast and requires little cognitive effort (e.g., heuristics)
- Explicit - Slow and requires a lot of cognitive effort (e.g., analysis)

A dual processes approach

1. Implicit orientation
   - Semi-hard-wired responses (e.g., driving)
   - Based on situational consistency

2. Justification
   - Recognised as important
   - Underdeveloped – what about levels of justification? Basis?
The Dual Process Theory of Regret

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>Implicit Process</th>
<th>Explicit Process</th>
<th>Level of Regret</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regrettable decision</td>
<td>Feels ‘Wrong’</td>
<td>No justification</td>
<td>HIGHEST</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Weak justification</td>
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<td>Strong justification</td>
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<td>Strong justification</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Method

Participants

- 653 respondents (23% response rate)
- Aged 18-87 (mean = 48)
- Mainly NZ European (82%)
- Broad range of educational levels & work status

Postal Survey

- Greatest single short and long-term regret
- Regret intensity
- Whether regret contradicted personal life rules (i.e., self-consistency)
- How the decision was justified (i.e., strong, weak or none)
Results: Life domain

Short-term regrets
- No difference in intensity

Long-term regrets
- No difference in intensity
Results: Action vs. inaction

Conclusion:
- Theory of Life Domains does not work
- The Temporal Theory of Regret does not work

Intensity
- Actions more intense in long-term
What influences short-term regret intensity?

- Implicit Orientation (unconscious feeling)
- Decision Justification (conscious thought)
DPTR: Long-term regrets

Regret across DPTR groups

What influences long-term regret intensity?

- Implicit Orientation (unconscious feeling)
- Decision Justification (conscious thought)
What influences the intensity of regret?

Previous theories
• Do not work

An explicit justification
• Only influences long-term regret intensity

Our feelings of right and wrong
• Central to short and long-term regret
• If it feels wrong then don’t do it!
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Towers, AJ

2009