

The Decision Appraisal Model of Regret

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Introduction

In agreement with recent research on regret, we believe that unjustified decisions will result in greater regret than justified decisions. However, we feel that justification use is asymmetrically employed in many instances. Specifically, justification will be easier when decisions are consistent with an individual's decision-making orientation (i.e., a general propensity toward action or inaction) rather than inconsistent.

Example

An inaction-oriented person (i.e., someone who is very rational or normally hesitates to act without deliberation) will find it easier to justify a decision not to act, because this is consistent with their decision-making orientation. The opposite would be true for an action-oriented person (i.e., a spontaneous decision-maker), as they would be able to justify action better than they would inaction. Ultimately, decisions that are *inconsistent* with one's orientation should have less justification, and therefore produce greater negative affect, than consistent decisions. This notion forms the basis of a model we call the Decision Appraisal Model of Regret (DAM).

The Present Study

We sought to test the basic assumptions of the DAM. Specifically, we explored whether, in the case of life regrets, justification use would be differentially spread depending on people's decision-making orientation. Secondly, we investigated whether this difference in decision-making orientation would result in differential patterns of negative affect as a factor of decision type (i.e., action or inaction).

Participants

645 people were randomly selected from the New Zealand electoral role to participate in a questionnaire survey of regrets. There were 421 women and 224 men, with a mean age of 48.

What We Measured

Action and inaction decision-orientations were measured using levels of two specific General Decision Making Styles:

- . Rational
- . Spontaneous

Negative affect measures were:

- . Regret intensity
- . Hot/Wistful/Despair emotion levels (emotion sets linked to the experience of regret)

Justification measures were:

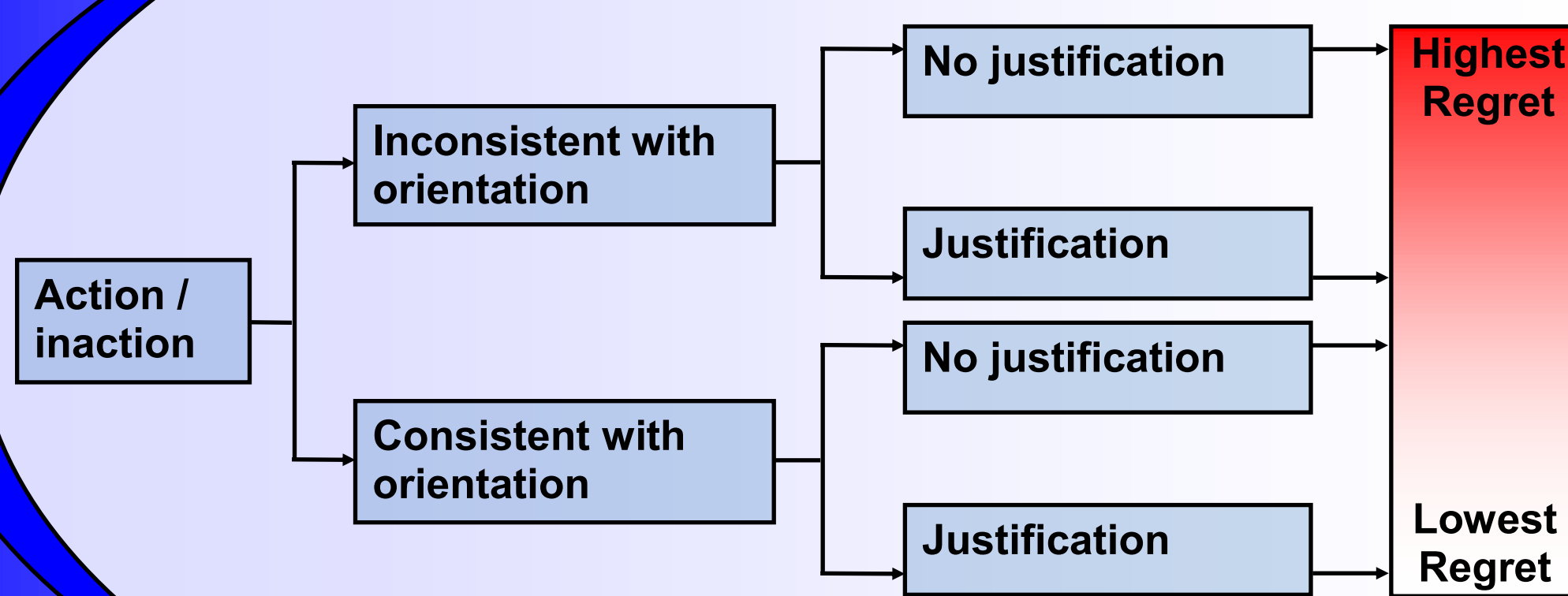
- . Level of justification for the decision
- . Perceived strength of the justification

Hypotheses

To test the basic premise of the DAM we proposed two specific hypotheses:

- (1) Rational decision makers will show greater justification for inaction rather than action decisions. Spontaneous decision makers will show greater justification for action rather than inaction decisions.
- (2) Rational decision makers will show greater negative affect (e.g., regret, hot, wistful and despair emotions) for actions rather than inactions. Spontaneous decision makers will show the opposite effect.

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Results: Hypothesis 1

All regrets were classified according to whether the decisions made were for action or inaction. Two separate correlation analyses were then conducted to test whether level of justification and strength of justification would be differentially related to orientation as a consequence of decision type. The first correlation analysis involved action decisions and the second involved inaction decisions.

	Action Decisions			Inaction Decisions		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. GDMS Spontaneous	-			-		
2. GDMS Rational	-.541**	-		-.594**	-	
3. Level of Justification	.016	-.005	-	-.032	.144*	-
4. Strength of Justification	-.090	.139	.541**	-.090	.261**	.354**

Note: * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 (all p values are 2 tailed), GDMS = General Decision Making Style

The first hypothesis was partially supported in that the levels and strength of justification were significantly higher for rational decision makers when the decision was for inaction. However, the hypothesised pattern for spontaneous decision-makers was not found, indicating that spontaneous decision-makers may not rely on justification of their decisions to the extent that rational decision-makers do.

Results: Hypothesis 2

We performed a median split on both rationality and spontaneity scores in order to target high scorers only on both scales. Independent T-tests were then performed to explore whether mean regret intensity, and mean levels of hot, wistful and despair emotions would differ depending on whether the decision was for action or inaction. Separate T-tests were performed for high-rational participants and high-spontaneous participants.

	Spontaneous Decision Makers		Rational Decision Makers	
	Action	Inaction	Action	Inaction
Regret intensity	5.5	5.1	5.5	5.3
Hot emotion levels	12.6	11.7	12.6 ^A	11.0 ^A
Wistful emotion levels	10.4	11.5	9.6	10.4
Despair emotion levels	12.2	12.9	11.6	12.2

Note: ^A denotes mean pairs which differ significantly from one another at p < 0.05.

No significant difference in affect intensity was found between action and inaction decisions for spontaneous decision-makers. However, for rational decision-makers, while regret intensity, wistful and despair emotions did not significantly differ between action or inaction decisions, levels of hot emotions did. In line with the DAM, rational decision-makers felt greater hot emotions for inconsistent decisions (i.e., actions) than for consistent decisions (i.e., inaction).

Conclusion

In line with the DAM's predictions, we found that inaction-oriented decision-makers showed greater levels of justification for their inaction decisions, but not their action decisions. This indicates that, at least for inaction-oriented decision-makers, decisions which incur the greatest level of justification are those consistent with our orientation. However, the present study only partially supported the hypothesis as no such pattern existed for spontaneous decision-makers. The failure to find any such pattern for spontaneous decision-makers may indicate that a desire for decision consistency is not evident for spontaneous individuals.

We also found that rational decision-makers felt greater hot emotions for action decisions than inaction decisions. However, there were no other differences in negative affect between decision types for either rational or spontaneous decision-makers. This may indicate decision-orientation has little bearing on negative affect. It may also be the case that hot emotions are associated with regrettable decisions (i.e., anger, guilt or embarrassment) as they reflect an orientation mismatch. Regret intensity and wistful and despair emotions may reflect more global concerns about the negative outcome and its impact rather than the pathway to regret.