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

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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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