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The Choice Explosion

David Brooks MAY 3, 2016

Lansing, W.Va. — A few years ago, the social psychologist Sheena Iyengar asked 100 American and Japanese college students to take a piece of paper. On one side, she had them write down the decisions in life they would like to make for themselves. On the other, they wrote the decisions they would like to pass on to others.

The Americans filled up the side for decisions they want to decide for themselves. Where to live. What job to take. The other side was almost blank. The only “decision” they commonly wanted to hand off to others was, “When I die.”

The Japanese filled up the back side of the sheet with things they wanted others to decide: what they wore; what time they woke up; what they did at their job. The Americans desired choice in four times more domains than the Japanese.

Americans have always put great emphasis on individual choice. But even by our own standards we’ve had a choice explosion over the past 30 years.

Americans now have more choices over more things than any other culture in human history. We can choose between a broader array of foods, media sources, lifestyles and identities. We have more freedom to live out our own sexual identities and more religious and nonreligious options to express our spiritual natures.

This opening has produced much that is wonderful. But making decisions well is incredibly difficult, even for highly educated professional decision makers. As Chip Heath and Dan Heath point out in their book “Decisive,” 83 percent of corporate mergers and acquisitions do not increase shareholder value, 40 percent of senior hires do not last 18 months in their new position, 44 percent of lawyers would recommend that a young person not follow them into the law.

It’s becoming incredibly important to learn to decide well, to develop the techniques of self-distancing to counteract the flaws in our own mental machinery. The Heath book is a very good compilation of those techniques.

For example, they mention the maxim, assume positive intent. When in the midst of some conflict, start with the belief that others are well intentioned. It makes it easier to absorb information from people you’d rather not listen to.

They highlight Suzy Welch’s 10-10-10 rule. When you’re about to make a decision, ask yourself how you will feel about it 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now and 10 years from now. People are overly biased by the immediate pain of some choice, but they can put the short-term pain in long-term perspective by asking these questions.

The Heaths recommend making deliberate mistakes. A survey of new brides found that 20 percent were not initially attracted to the man they ended up marrying. Sometimes it’s useful to make a deliberate “mistake” — agreeing to dinner with a guy who is not your normal type. Sometimes you don’t really know what you want and the filters you apply are hurting you.

They mention our tendency to narrow-frame, to see every decision as a binary “whether or not” alternative. Whenever you find yourself asking “whether or not,” it’s best to step back and ask, “How can I widen my options?” In other words, before you ask, “Should I fire this person?” Ask, “Is there any way I can shift this employee’s role to take advantage of his strengths and avoid his weaknesses?”

The explosion of choice means we all need more help understanding the anatomy of decision-making. It makes you think that we should have explicit decision-making curriculums in all schools. Maybe there should be a common course publicizing the work of Daniel Kahneman, Cass Sunstein, Dan Ariely and others who study the way we mess up and the techniques we can adopt to prevent error.

This is probably especially important for schools that serve the less fortunate. The explosion of choice places extra burdens on the individual. Poorer Americans have fewer resources to master decision-making techniques, less social support to guide their decision-making and less of a safety net to catch them when they err.

As the researchers Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir have shown, the stress of scarcity itself can distort decision-making. Those who experienced stress as children often perceive threat more acutely and live more defensively. A school principal I met in Pittsburgh observed that living in an area of concentrated poverty can close down your perceived options, and comfortably “relieve you of the burden of choosing life.” It’s hard to maintain a feeling of agency when you see no chance of opportunity.

In this way the choice explosion has contributed to widening inequality.

It’s important to offer opportunity and incentives. But we also need lessons in self-awareness — on exactly how our decision-making tool is fundamentally flawed, and on mental frameworks we can adopt to avoid messing up even more than we do.

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