Having second thoughts: Consequences of decision reversibility

Bullens, L.

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Many of the decisions we make during our lives are irreversible. From everyday choices such as deciding whether or not to put sugar in our coffee to more consequential dilemmas such as deciding whether or not to abort one’s unborn child. Other decisions leave more room for second-guessing our initial preferences. These reversible decisions provide us with the opportunity to change our minds at a later point in time. People generally prefer reversible to irreversible decisions (see Gilbert & Ebert, 2002). We, for instance, tend to provide temporary (rather than permanent) contracts to new employees, live together with our romantic partners for a while before getting married, and buy products at full price that we can return to the store rather than products that are on sale but cannot be returned.

While individuals seem to initially prefer reversible decisions over irreversible ones, previous research shows that the opportunity to revise actually leads to lower levels of post-choice satisfaction. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that people often do not revise their initial choice. Hence, we do not seem very good at predicting our reactions subsequent to reversible decisions. Up until now, very few studies investigated the consequences of reversible versus irreversible decision-making, and many questions concerning the topic are yet unanswered. It is, for instance, unclear why people are less satisfied with reversible decisions. This dissertation aimed to fill this void in the literature by investigating more extensively the cognitive (Chapters 2 and 3), motivational (Chapter 4) and behavioral (Chapter 5) processes that are affected by the reversibility versus irreversibility of decisions.

In Chapter 2 and 3 I tried to gain more insight into the cognitive processes underlying decision reversibility. In the first part of Chapter 2, I examined the relation between decision reversibility and strength of decisional engagement. I expected and found that individuals cognitively remain relatively more occupied with reversible rather than irreversible decisions, at least as long as they can change their minds. In the second part of Chapter 2, I investigated whether reversible decision-making (possibly due to stronger decisional engagement) impacts upon people’s working memory capacity, and (subsequently) their levels of regret (a concept related to choice satisfaction). As predicted, results revealed lower working memory capacity after reversible compared to irreversible decision-making. Furthermore, in line with findings from previous research (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002), the findings showed that those assigned
to the reversible decision condition experienced more regret as opposed to their counterparts in the irreversible decision condition. Finally, this effect of decision reversibility on regret was carried indirectly through working memory capacity. In other words, the reversibility of a decision (reversible versus irreversible) impacts upon one’s working memory capacity, which, in turn, has an influence on the level of decisional regret. From these findings, I concluded that the decision-related thoughts people are occupied with after having made a reversible decision are related to the experience of post-decisional regret.

In Chapter 3, I examined the underlying processes driving the counterintuitive relation between decision reversibility and choice satisfaction. More specifically, I aimed to establish what aspects of the decision people focus on after having made a reversible or irreversible choice, and to see whether these possible differences in focus are related to post-choice satisfaction. Results revealed that irreversible decision-making directs one’s focus to those aspects of the decision that potentially increase choice satisfaction (i.e., to the positive aspects of the chosen alternative and to the negative aspects of the rejected alternative), whereas reversible decision-making directs one’s focus to those aspects of the decision that potentially decrease choice satisfaction (i.e., to the negative aspects of the chosen and to the positive aspects of the rejected alternatives). Subsequent results revealed that these differences in focus mediated the relation between decision reversibility and choice satisfaction. In other words, the reversibility of a decision impacts upon one’s focus on the attractive or non-attractive aspects of the decisional alternatives, which, in turn, determines whether or not one is satisfied with the chosen alternative.

In Chapter 4, I investigated the motivational effects of decision reversibility. More specifically, I studied how reversible and irreversible decision-making affects regulatory motivation. Regulatory motivation (Higgins, 2002) refers to a motivational orientation in which a person can focus more on ideals and the presence or absence of a positive outcome (promotion motivation) or on obligations and the presence or absence of a negative outcome (prevention motivation). On the basis of my findings in Chapter 3, I expected and found individuals who were about to make a reversible decision to become relatively more prevention than promotion motivated as compared to individuals who were about to make an irreversible choice. Apparently, the mere awareness that one has
to make a reversible decision immediately leads to a tendency to be more cautious, even before engaging in the decision-making process itself.

Chapter 5 followed up on these findings by showing that the motivational effects of decision reversibility also carry-over to the post-decisional phase, and influence the decision-maker’s performance on a subsequent, unrelated task. Specifically, on the basis of previous research (see for instance, Förster and Denzler, 2012; Friedman and Förster, 2001), I found reversible decision-making to facilitate analytical ability, but impair creative performance. For irreversible decision-making, I found the reverse to be true.

Altogether, while earlier research specifically related decision reversibility to post-choice satisfaction, the current research moved beyond that, and, in doing so, provided four key insights into this topic. First, the relative amount of decision-related thoughts people are occupied with (strength of decisional engagement) differs depending on the reversibility of the choice: people remain relatively more occupied with reversible decisions. Second, reversible and irreversible decision-makers focus their attention to different aspects of the decision, which, in turn, influences their post-choice satisfaction: reversible decision-makers focus their attention on the non-attractive aspects of the decision which makes them less satisfied. Third, decision reversibility has an impact on regulatory motivation in the pre-decisional phase: the anticipation of a reversible decision makes one relatively more prevention oriented and thereby more careful. Finally, this regulatory motivation carries over to the post-decisional phase – to tasks unrelated to the decision at hand: reversible decision-making positively influences one’s analytical ability, but negatively influences one’s creativity. This dissertation, thus, has aimed to shed more light onto the important cognitive, motivational and behavioral consequences of an increasingly prevalent kind of decision-making.