

Researchers study decision-making

Faculty analyze the reasons behind students' choices

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Daily Titan

Blackman is currently conducting research on how the way interviews are conducted can affect the hiring process and the role of personality in personnel selection. Her research into counterproductive workplace behavior makes her qualified to discuss procrastination and its effect on students.

Since procrastination is not seen in a negative light, students find it easier to wait to do something rather than completing a task right away. Blackman also pointed out that many CSUF students are balancing school with commuting, working and even being a parent. These busy students find themselves united by procrastination rather than disdaining it.

"Students tend to brag that they procrastinate and are still able to pull a good grade out of the paper or test at the last minute," Blackman said. However, it is possible to overcome procrastination by making the first step toward completing a task. The choice to put off an assignment, or to finally stop putting off an assignment, is fairly simple. College students are also faced with moral decisions about what is right and wrong, and these decisions are much more complicated.

"When deciding whether to do something, we are more sensitive to prospective

punishment, the costs, than to prospective rewards, the benefits and the difference increases the closer we get to making a decision," Navarick said in an email interview.

Navarick and his team are currently studying the feelings people experience when faced with morally complex situations. Moral compasses come into play when it's time to make decisions, and not just for students.

Navarick said his research focuses largely on the concept of moral ambivalence.

"It's essentially a state of tension and conflict where the action we are judging both repels and attracts us, with the result that we may vacillate between judgments of right and wrong and prefer to just stop thinking about it and make no judgment at all," Navarick said.

The decision not to decide is something that many college students are familiar with when it comes to the world of politics, considering young adults, including millennials, have been historically less likely to vote than older adults.

"I believe that in this election, the key decision people will make is whether or not to vote," Navarick said.

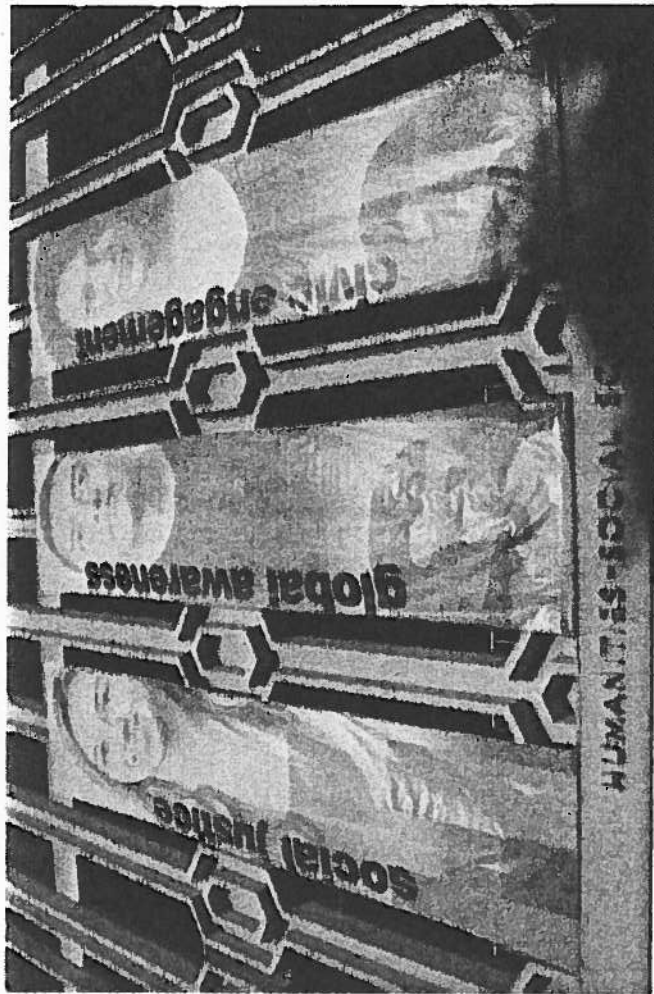
The upcoming U.S. presidential election is a broader issue that involves a decision that may take months to make. Each candidate undergoes

numerous debates to state his or her stance on a particular policy, and campaigns in strategic areas to connect with and appeal to voters. However, the statements and actions of presidential candidates aren't the only thing that dictate voters' decisions.

"I think fundamentally, for most voters, it's about feeling drawn to or repelled by a candidate rather than about reasoning and analysis of the candidate's policies," Navarick said. "These feelings may result more from incidental things like body language, facial expressions, tone of

voice, and mannerisms, than from well-reasoned policy positions." Feelings about a candidate or an issue can be influenced by home environments, extracurricular activities or social connections. "If the student is part of a sorority or fraternity or a tight-knit group, this could definitely influence their voting direction," Blackman said. "There is a strong tendency for conformity."

Whether making decisions about when to do homework or which candidate to vote for, research indicates that most people's decisions are influenced by more factors than they think. "Many of our judgements are based upon an interaction of our past experiences, personality tendencies and socio-cultural norms," Blackman said. Whether it be external or internal factors, the decision-making process is complex and powerful. The research being done at CSUF can give students better insight as to how and why they make the choices they do, as well as give them the opportunity to practice their decision-making skills.



GRETCHEN DAVEY / DAILY TITAN
The Humanities building on campus is home to the psychology department, where some faculty members are researching the process of decision making.

FULL INTERVIEW (CONDUCTED BY EMAIL)

The Experience of Moral Ambivalence

1. "...I noticed that you are researching how we choose between right and wrong. I was wondering if you could emphasize more about your research and what you have learned so far."

My focus is on situations in which it is hard to choose between right and wrong because we have both feelings to some degree. I refer to this experience as "moral ambivalence." It's essentially a state of tension and conflict where the action we are judging both repels and attracts us, with the result that we may vacillate between judgments of right and wrong and prefer just to stop thinking about it and make no judgment at all. I look at both kinds of choices, the choice between right and wrong and the choice to avoid judgment.

You can feel what it's like by considering the following situation, one of many scenarios that I and others in the field of moral psychology have adapted from studies in moral philosophy. You're on a footbridge and see a runaway trolley speeding toward 5 WORKMEN on the tracks who will be killed if the trolley is not stopped. There is a very large man on the bridge and you have a chance to push him off onto the tracks. This will derail the trolley and kill the man but save the lives of the 5 workmen. Would it be wrong to do this?

You may feel some conflict here, but we can ratchet it up. Here is a variation that my research team is looking at: Those 5 people on the tracks are not workmen but your 5 CHILDREN who have wandered onto the tracks from a family gathering. Would it be wrong to kill this man to save your 5 children? If you're thinking, "Yes, but ..." that's what I'm studying, the complex moral feelings you would have that could not adequately be expressed by a simple categorical judgment of wrong or right.

Basically what I do is ask one group of participants to rate BOTH how right AND how wrong they "feel" the action is (this is called a bivariate scale). I then ask other groups "Is it morally right to...?", emphasizing the benefits, or "Is it morally wrong to...?" emphasizing the costs, with response options of Yes, No, and Can't Decide (judgment avoidance). Moral judgments among the deciders are highly correlated with a simple measure, Right - Wrong, but judgment avoidance is virtually uncorrelated with it. It depends on how the question is asked. Significantly more people respond Can't Decide if you ask them if the action is right than if the action is wrong. Moral judgment and judgment avoidance are controlled by different factors and require different models to represent their underlying processes.

How to Control Procrastination

2. "Students procrastinate sometimes when it comes to school...What is going on in their mind that makes them procrastinate?"

From the standpoint of actually changing the students' behavior, I believe it would be more useful to consider what is going in the situation than what is going on in their mind. Specifically, I would suggest applying principles of "behavior analysis" (operant conditioning), which (not coincidentally) is the field where I have my professional roots and is still for me a continuing source of ideas for interpreting research and everyday experience.

In this field the focus is on relationships that exist between a specific behavior and specific events (stimuli) that precede and follow the behavior (antecedents and consequences). The basic principles come from studies of animal learning, especially in pigeons and rats, and there are some direct analogs to procrastination. For example, if the problem is getting started on a task that involves a lot of steps, like writing a paper, you can get some insights from situations in which pigeons are required to repeatedly peck a disc on a wall of a chamber, e.g., 50 times, to get several seconds access to food. It's called a "fixed-ratio schedule of reinforcement". What happens is that they develop a pattern where they pause awhile after reinforcement before starting to work on the next 50 responses. This pause is essentially procrastination. All they're doing is delaying their next reinforcement. But once they peck, they quickly peck again, and again, and they run off all of the remaining responses as fast as they can.

The key is to make the first response, like writing the first sentence of a paper. For the pigeon, the peck makes the situation more similar to the one in which the pigeon has previously received reinforcement and it provides a signal to keep going because reinforcement is on the way. So to students who are procrastinating, what I would suggest is that you set everything up--computer, books, notes, lighting, music--whatever it's like when you have written papers before. Then if you just sit there awhile the context should stimulate some writing and soon, after you have written a few sentences, you may even find that it's hard to stop.

The November 2016 Election

3. "In regards to the upcoming 2016 elections in November, what could influence students and young voters' decisions when it comes to voting?"

In a word: feelings. I think fundamentally, for most voters, it's about feeling drawn to or repelled by a candidate rather than about reasoning and analysis of the candidate's policies. These feelings may result more from incidental things like body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and mannerisms, than from well-reasoned policy positions. Case in point: President Al Gore.

If you watch a lot of TV, then you may be influenced by the increasing number of ads you'll see as the election approaches. Most ads will be designed not to change your mind but to stir up your feelings about a candidate you already support so you will be more likely to vote. I believe that in this election the key decision people will make is whether or not to vote.

How We Choose Between Right and Wrong

4. "In regards to your own research, how do people choose between right and wrong?"

My theory is that feelings of right and wrong are aroused independently of each other by positive and negative aspects of an action and then combine by the rule Right - Wrong to determine the probability of judging the action as right or wrong.

It's the same process that occurs in animal studies of "approach-avoidance conflict": A rat gets both food and a shock in the goal box of a runway. On later trials the rat vacillates, first approaching the goal box then backing off, then when he's far enough away approaching again, etc. The rat goes by whichever tendency is stronger at the moment. These tendencies can be measured separately and they function differently. The avoidance tendency increases faster than the approach tendency as the rat gets closer to the goal box, driving him back. You see this difference in many aspects of human behavior as well. When deciding whether to do something, we are more sensitive to prospective punishment, the costs, than to prospective reward, the benefits, and this difference increases the closer we get to making a decision.

Where my theory needed modification based on an experiment I did was in the assumption that people would be increasingly likely to avoid judgment (e.g., by responding "Can't Decide") as the separation between feelings of Right and Wrong got smaller. The idea was that as R - W approached 0, it would be less likely that people would experience a judgment and they would have to think about the problem more. The tension and discomfort of thinking about conflicting attitudes would be motivate them to just escape the whole problem by not thinking about it.

But that didn't happen. As I discussed in my answer to your first question, when both feelings, Right and Wrong, were present, the chances of responding Can't Decide depended very little on the closeness of these moral feelings and mostly on what I call "external precipitating factors," incidental aspects of the situation, like how you frame the question or whether there are any pressures to be persistent in reaching a decision.