

The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less by Barry Schwartz

Review by NICOLE-ANNE BOYER

Are people *really* less happy than before? Apparently so according to happiness researchers. A compelling new book, [The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less](#), by Dr. Barry Schwartz, has added another dimension to this discussion. It turns out the leading culprit stealing our happiness is the abundance of choice, and the relentlessness of consumer society in general.

To quote the summary:

We've never had more choices, more selection, or more trouble dealing with the multitude of options that modern society presents us with. And, according to Dr. Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, it's making us miserable. In his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, he argues against the conventional wisdom that more choice brings greater contentment. His studies show that as options multiply, various factors lead us to choose less well, and to enjoy the fruits of our decisions less. He thinks this paradox has implications for medicine, marketing and social policy.

The logic explaining why we are unhappy and uneasy in world of choices seems counter-intuitive, because choice is good, right? Well, not so fast. The argument goes something like this: The more options we have, the more information and effort we have to go into evaluating them, the more likely we are to be dissatisfied with the outcome. So far so good, but why this dissatisfaction?

1) Most people hate making trade-offs and will often avoid making choices until they absolutely have to, so having an abundance of choices reminds us of this dilemma: that life is about making choices, yet we must make them within the vacuum of uncertainty and an unknown future.

2) Most people are bad at dealing with uncertainty, estimating odds and often don't calculate probabilities properly because we have incomplete information. So trump this up to certain cognitive flaws in our human decision-making apparatus.

3) Our expectations get raised after spending time weighting the tradeoffs and understanding the choices, so we get disappointed when the outcome is not as perfect as we expect. The irony is that the outcome is almost always better, i.e. a better fitting pair of jeans, but our perceptions don't see this rationally or objectively. As we know from countless studies, not to mention certain wisdoms found in traditions like Buddhism, our satisfaction is often function of when expectations match our perceived reality. In economist language, dissatisfaction occurs when the transaction costs of making the decision exceed the actual benefit.

4) What is called *adaptation*? In a nutshell, we adapt to our circumstances. This happens within our hedonic system as well, i.e. our internal system that modulates things that feel good and bad. So things that feel good, feel less and less good over time. Just as things that feel bad, like the grating sound of construction work outside my window, feel less bad over time (although that's debatable.) So the more we have, the more we get used to this stuff, the less special it feels.

The author makes clear that providing more choice is **not** a bad thing and often an important social goal. The trouble is that we, in the rich West, are spending too much time going through this cycle making **trivial** choices. That we have too much of a good thing. He cites research which tracks the relationship between well-being and choice. These two factors are highly correlated and rise together over time, but after a certain point, they become decoupled— the law of diminishing returns kicks it. More becomes less. In fact, most research tells us that happiness, across most cultures, is largely unrelated to material well-being after people pass the subsistence level of existence. Of course, we have billions of people who are still at this dismal level. Still too many people without many choices. And I believe on a larger ecological scale we are collectively eroding future choices and options for sustainable living.

Interestingly, the author links the explosion of depression over the last few decades as related to the vertigo of choice, that this may be contributing to extra stress, anxiety and uncertainty in people's lives.

I'm thinking relevance now to the commercial sphere; I think this is already impacting businesses. Indeed, this research is strongly connected to the trend of commoditization and why brands are struggling.

From a social policy perspective, there are important implications as well. Governments invest a great deal in helping people have more choice. But perhaps this is a waste of money, Schwartz suggests, if in fact more choice is reducing people's well-being? This is especially so given that opportunities are not equally distributed. In effect, we have an imbalance between the people who have too few choices (the rich) and the people who have too many (the poor). Perhaps this the role of tax policy and government to manage this imbalance? He is a utilitarian, in essence, and I can see lots of things wrong with his argument—namely, that younger generations will likely adapt new cognitive strategies for dealing with excess choice, that the marketplace will respond and self-correct this problem— but the research might be worth looking at in closer detail. He's on to something, without question.