

Notes on Decision Making

Neal Miller was a social psychologist at Yale, who conducted a series of experiments still relevant. I list from memory.

1. Drawn by desire one approaches, with the pull of desire increasing as we get nearer and nearer. This is called the 'gradient of approach.'
2. Likewise the power of obstacles tends to increase as we get nearer. This is the gradient of avoidance.
3. Where there are no obstacles there is no problem deciding when the competition is between desirables. As one moves closer to one goal it's drawing power increases, while the pull of the other desirable recedes.
4. However, when desirables are in short supply, the gain of one may involve the loss of the other. The prospect of that pain becomes a deterrent limiting choice.
5. When one faces undesirables, our pace forward toward one alternative slows, and we may turn around to face the other instead.
6. No. 3 above is an approach-approach dilemma, relatively painless. But No. 5 can be very difficult.
7. Probably the most frequent or memorable conflicts involve Approach/Avoidance. The gradient of Avoidance is steeper than the gradient of Approach, but emerges after the gradient of Approach has already been in operation. When the gradients cross, the decision maker may stop in his tracks.
8. Beyond Neal Miller's generalizations, our interest is in the factors operating from within a subject. These are not as readily observable, but they may be decisive, and the chances are they vary considerably from one person to another.
9. A person's self-confidence, based upon his history, increases his willingness to risk and to sacrifice himself. He moves forward faster, and braves consequences. He will persist longer in the face of threat.
10. Unless he is daredevil counterphobic, who hides his fears from himself, proving his bravery to himself and others, and is likely to be dangerously impulsive.
11. Others live lives of quiet desperation, rooted to the spot, which they rationalize in various plausible ways, especially when they discover gains in doing so. We call this secondary gain.
12. Habits may tip the scale one way or the other. Some are active, inclined to take charge. Others are passive, accepting whatever happens. Some depend completely on themselves, while other look for allies or for help. Depressed persons have had a large share of losses early and late, become less and less active till they can handle their misery no longer, and seek destructive options.
13. The more mature one is, the more likely to take responsible for getting into the blocking situation. The less grown up finds fault with others, not oneself. A few accept the situation as inevitable, no one's fault. They may refer to fate, destiny, and (maybe too readily) as the "will of God." A few join protest marches, or fight!

Don Miller, 2012