Q & A With Psychological Scientist Barry Schwartz

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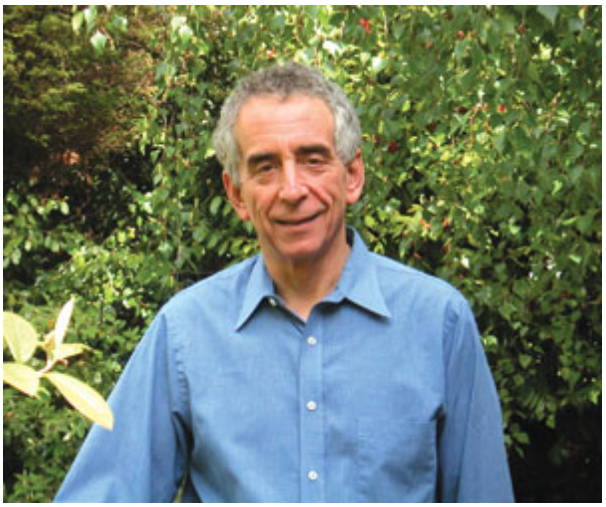

Barry Schwartz is the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College. His research investigates the decision-making processes that underlie our choices and examines how our choices make us feel.

We invited our Facebook and Twitter followers to ask Schwartz questions about his research – here is what he had to say:

Do you have any suggestions for a better college application process that would not only be helpful in stopping the extreme competitiveness in our society but also better match students to the college that best suites them?

Yes I do. There is no college that "best suits" students, any more than there are "best students" that best suit a college. The trick is to stop this relentless chasing after the best. And the way to do that is for colleges to make binary decisions about applicants (good enough or not) and then choose from among the "good enough" at random. This would take a lot of pressure of high school kids and you'd end up with classes that are just as good as what we have now.

You talk about morals and how people need to do what is right and not what is most profitable. However, due to the diverse world we live in, what if someone's "right" is someone else's wrong? What if what I think is right is considered wrong by someone else?

I don't expect there to be universal agreement about what's right. But the book focuses on professional activities (teaching, law, medicine, banking, etc.) and professions develop their own standards of what is right. These standards evolve, and there is room for disagreement about what, say, good doctoring is, but there won't be much disagreement. It's a big mistake to take the moral dimension out of consideration just because there won't be perfect agreement all the time about what "right" is.

How can humans reduce the influence of "choice" without compromising their lifestyles?

One thing they can do is learn that "good enough" is almost always good enough. Another thing they can do is let others (eg., friends) make some choices for them. And another thing they can do is appreciate that unconstrained choice is paralyzing, not liberating. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for people to "compromise their lifestyles" a little bit.

How can we reduce dissatisfaction of our choices?

We can lower our standards, look at fewer options, and teach ourselves to focus more on what's good about a decision and less on what is disappointing. None of these things happen easily or automatically, but they are all possible.

What does your current research examine? What are your future research plans?

I'm currently collaborating with some people at USC on an investigation of whether, and how neuroscientific explanations of behavior change people's inclination to hold others responsible. And I'm starting to work on a book on the dark side of incentives, a theme that has occupied me on and off for 30 years.

Do you have any words of advice for aspiring researchers in the field of Psychology?

This seems trite, I know, but the best advice I can give is to make sure you're really passionate about whatever you study. Research is slow, hard, and demanding, and you have to be in it for the long haul if you expect to make progress. This means you really have to love the problems you study.

Is having low expectations, as mentioned in your talk, really the best way to help with this problem of dissatisfaction?

I don't know if it's the best way, but it's a good way. And let me modify that a little—not low expectations, but modest expectations.

You mentioned that there are both positives and negatives to greater freedom of choice. It seemed that your stance was more in favor of the negatives, however. While there is no doubt that harm could occur as a result of having more choices, is it possible that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? Or, perhaps should more effort go into finding the "happy medium" between the two?

I recently wrote a paper with Adam Grant that's published in Perspectives on Psych Science that is all about "finding the happy medium" in general. It's true of choice, but it's true of lots of other things too. My own focus on what is negative about choice is not because I think it's mostly negative, but because until recently psychology has ignored the negative all together.

One of the pictures shown read, "It all looks so great. I can't wait to be disappointed." I agree with you that part of this type of thinking could be attributed to the surplus of choices available, but couldn't another factor also involve the simple fact that our demands for items are continually

expanding, and with it comes greater expectations. Could it not be that our own internal drives are influencing the increase of choices in the first place?

Yes, and I think this reflects a lack of adequate self-knowledge. But of course much of modern psychology is about how badly people predict how decisions are going to make them feel.

Do you believe that the view of choice can be changed?

Absolutely I do.

Wouldn't you agree that many different factors can also contribute to happiness? For one, not letting anger and frustration get the best of you? After all, anger is a fairly useless emotion if we accept when we are angry and then move on, we can hurry up and move towards happiness…

Yes, of course. I certainly don't have the whole story on happiness. And by the way, I think that anger is quite a useful emotion—or at least that it can be. It's a way of letting people know, with emphasis, that we've been mistreated.

Why is it so hard for people to take a step back and try to do their job for the benefits of others and not for themselves?

I think the main reason that it's hard is that people get so little social support and acknowledgement for doing the right thing. People feel foolish to even talk in that way.

It was mentioned that in the long run rules will undermine moral skills, so what kind of solution should be proposed to fix this problem in the near future?

Give people more discretion to improvise and more permission to make mistakes.

Do you believe that children of today are having a harder time making choices than ever before, especially in comparison to their parents? If so, why do you think this is?

I do, and mostly because there are so many more options available. Anything is possible.

Do you think that the amount of options and choices in people's lives leads to more pessimism and perfectionism in today's society?

I don't know about choice leading to pessimism but I do think it leads to more perfectionism. This is another side to having unrealistically high expectations.

How may we utilize this increased freedom of choice for the better?

We should pay more attention to the choices that matter (ie., how we interact with other human beings—friends, lovers, children, students, clients, patients), and less attention to choices that really don't matter (eg., what kind of cell phone to get).

Don’t miss Barry Schwartz at the “Bring the Family Address” at our 24th Annual Convention in Chicago, IL this May!