



Art Markman Ph.D.
Ulterior Motives

When Do You Regret Actions and Inactions?

Social norms affect your regret.

Posted Dec 30, 2016



Source: CCO Public Domain via Pixabay

There is a tendency for people to regret the actions they have taken for bad outcomes rather than the actions they have not taken. If you have money invested in a company, and you switch that investment to another company and lose money, then you feel bad about your choice. Suppose, though, that you have money invested in a company, and you contemplate switching your investment to another company and then decide not to. If you then lose money, because you chose to stick with your initial investment, you feel less bad about the loss than if you had switched into a poor investment.

As with almost any aspect of psychology, though, the tendency to regret actions that lead to bad outcomes more than inactions that lead to bad outcomes does not happen all the time. A paper in the January, 2017 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* by Gilad Feldman and Dolores Albarracín demonstrates that existing social norms play a role in the regret of actions and inactions.

In particular, social groups may differ in their tendency to be bold and take actions, even though those actions might go wrong, or to be cautious and to avoid taking actions that might go wrong. The authors suggest that people may often regret actions, because many social groups are cautious and so inaction is actually the norm. Doing something that violates the social norm leads to the regret of actions.

They demonstrate this idea in several studies that have a similar structure. For example, in one study, participants read about two employees of an investment firm. One employee takes an action to invest in a company and finds out his portfolio would have been worth \$1 million more if had not taken that action. A second employee considers an action to invest in a company and decides not to invest. This employee finds out his portfolio would have been worth \$1 million more if he had taken the action.

The social norm of the financial firm that the employees work for is also described. Some participants read that the firm wants bold investment and that employees are rewarded for taking actions. Other participants read that the firm is cautious and encourages its employees to hold on to investments.

When the social norm is to avoid taking actions, then people judge that the employee who makes an investment that lose money regrets his choice more than the employee who opts not to make an investment and loses money. However, when the social norm is to be told and take action, then people judge that both employees regret their choices about equally.

There are several studies in this paper that manipulate the kinds of norms used. Another study suggests that the norm toward taking action or avoiding action is true of the society in general. A third study looks at norms established by the family a person grows up in. In each case, when the norm is to be cautious, people regret actions that go bad rather than inactions that go bad. When the norm is to be bold and active, there is generally no difference in regret between action and inaction (though two of the studies show a slight tendency to regret the inaction more than the action).

Overall, these studies suggest that people try to find explanations for what has gone wrong in their world. These explanations are valuable to learn how to avoid bad outcomes in the future.

The most obvious explanations for things that go wrong are deviations from a typical routine. When a driver takes a new route to get home and gets in an accident, it is natural to blame the route for the accident. If a driver gets in an accident when taking her usual route home, then it would seem strange to blame the route for the accident, because she has traveled that route so many times in the past without incident.

Social norms are often assumed to be the best action in a situation. That is, the social norm reflects a culture's way of approaching situations. Norms survive when they generally lead to good outcomes. So, when someone takes an action that deviates from the norm, that becomes a good explanation for what went wrong. And the decision that leads to a bad outcome is a source of regret. It is useful to regret the source of a bad outcome in order to avoid that same problem in the future.

Follow me on [Twitter](#).

And on [Facebook](#) and on [Google+](#).

Check out the Two Guys on Your Head book [*Brain Briefs*](#).

And my books [*Smart Thinking*](#), [*Smart Change*](#) and [*Habits of Leadership*](#)

Listen to my radio show on KUT radio in Austin *Two Guys on Your Head* and follow 2GoYH on Twitter and on Facebook. The show is available on iTunes and Stitcher.

References

Feldman, G., & Albarracin, D. (2017). Norm theory and the action effect: The role of social norms in regret following action and inaction. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 69*, 111-120.