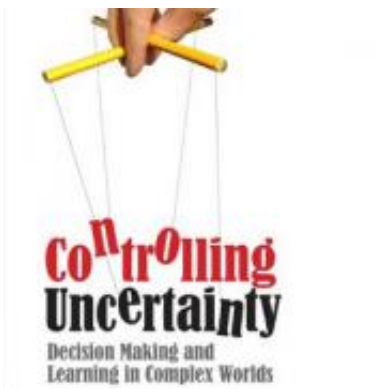


Controlling uncertainty: Decision making and learning in complex worlds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In her latest book *Controlling Uncertainty: Decision Making and Learning in Complex Worlds* Dr Magda Osman (University College London Psychology & Language Sciences) discusses current research about how we can control the uncertain world around us.

Here she asks: If automation is increasing, how much control are we giving up to make our lives easier?

“The charted increase in automation such as phones, computers and automated driving systems – combined with the increasingly sophisticated options available – can make us uncertain about the level of control we have over our lives.

Uncertainty in our ability to control our lives can also come from other sources. We often face situations in which the effects of our actions are not one hundred percent likely – such as profit from real estate investments. The environment itself is also dynamic. It can change irrespective of any action we decide to take in a relatively stable or unstable way, transforming from a steady economic growth to a sudden boom in market growth.

Across all these different types of uncertain situations, the problem of control concerns learning to isolate the effects that are generated directly by our actions – such as investing in real estate – from those that occur independently of them, such as a poor market in the first quarter.

If automation is increasing, how much control are we giving up to make our lives easier? If we still need to make high level decisions that affect all aspects of our lives, how can we still differentiate between the times we have control over what happens, from the times when we don't have control?

We need to have some idea of our decision-making skills before we enter into situations that may raise doubts in our ability to exercise control.

We are awash with ideas currently promoted in popular science in which we are told that we should go with our gut feelings and intuition. While this is a popular idea, there is no evidence for this in research on control. In fact, our intuition can set us back rather than help us to better control the world around us.

Having a strong sense of agency is the key to being able to improving our [decision-making](#), because without it our understanding of the world breaks down. This means we need to monitor what we are doing as well as the world around us.”

Dr Magda Osman is an Honorary Research Fellow of Psychology in Cognitive, Perceptual and Brain Sciences at UCL and a Lecturer in Cognitive Experimental Psychology at the Group of Biological and Experimental Psychology at Queen Mary University.

More information: *Controlling Uncertainty: Decision Making and Learning in Complex Worlds* is published by Wiley–Blackwell, September 2010

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