

New research reveals how structure increases careful thought about decisions

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What factors contribute to making informed, responsible, thoughtful decisions? New research out of the University of Cincinnati uses a story about trees to examine how environmental structure plays a key role in making thoughtful decisions. The research also points to implications as to why people living in more chaotic environments, such as poverty, are less prone to use careful deliberation in decision making. The study is published online in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In three different experiments, the researchers explored how [structure](#) in one's environment can impact informed, thoughtful decisions.

"The basic idea we were examining is that there are causal relationships in our environment," says lead researcher Ryan Rahinel, an assistant professor of marketing in UC's Carl H. Lindner College of Business. "When we make people aware of this, it makes people think more about their decisions."

In the first study, 94 college students performed a 15-minute sentence completion task. They were given 16 sets of 5 words to make sentences out of each set, using four of the words. In the unstructured group, words included "chaotic, random, chance and haphazard." In the structure group, the words included "systematic, pattern and order." After that, they were asked to choose something they would like to do in the next few minutes, such as check e-mail or do some work. The researchers found that people who were reminded of structure reported thinking more about their decision.

In the second experiment, 92 college student participants read a story about [trees](#) before completing their task. One group's article reported that trees grow in a very patterned and orderly way. The other group read an article suggesting lack of structure that implied that trees grow very randomly, and that there's no underlying pattern or relationship to determine how they grow.

"In both cases, we tell them that this type of growth is very beautiful," adds Rahinel, "so neither presentation was less flattering than the other."

After reading the article in the second exercise, the students were assigned a task of hypothetically choosing among six small gifts, such as an LED keychain with voice recorder, FM tuner pen, quick-release LED keychain, voice recorder pen, super-bright LED chip light or an LED multi-tool kit. After the participants chose their gift, they were asked how much thought they put into their choice. Rahinel says the group that read the story about trees growing in very patterned and systematic ways reported putting more thought into choosing their gift than the students who read the article about trees growing in a haphazard pattern.

"So why does this happen? The idea is that when a world is structured according to relationships, we can exploit these relationships through careful thought to make better decisions, almost in the same way that one tries to strategize in games based on its rules," says Rahinel. "When the world is random, there's no point in thinking about things because random things are going to happen - it's not like what you do is going to make any difference toward better or worse outcomes."

In the third experiment, the researchers created two ads for popcorn. One brand had strong attributes to support the brand but had an unfamiliar endorser, Andrew from Oklahoma. The other ad featured a brand that had weaker attributes but a famous endorser, actor George Clooney.

This exercise also involved reading the tree article. The majority of students who had read the article that trees grow in a random pattern chose the popcorn with weaker attributes but with the famous endorser, while the majority of the group that read the article about trees growing in a structured way chose the ad with the lesser-known endorser, but stronger attributes. "We know from prior research that stronger attributes tend to be more effective than celebrity pitches if the person thinks carefully about their decision," says Rahinel. "And we can leverage that fact to demonstrate that this incidental story about trees leads to different choices."

The researchers add that the findings support previous research on social class and [decision making](#), in that chaotic, unstructured environments may contribute to investing less thought toward making decisions, which ultimately perpetuates individuals' problems. The authors suggest that future research should consider other ways in which structure might enable critical aspects of daily life.

"Overall, these findings point to the importance of structure, and the broader environment more generally, in shaping elaboration and its downstream outcomes" report the researchers.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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