BOOK REVIEW

Happiness in Multiple Choice Society


Barry Schwartz is a psychologist, who has written academic textbooks such as the “The psychology of learning and behavior” (2001). He has also become involved in social criticism with “The cost of living: how market freedom erodes the best things in life” (2001). His latest book takes a critical look at modern multiple-choice society. He claims that the amount of choice has become excessive and is detrimental to our psychological wellbeing. This book is a bestseller and it has already been translated into a number of languages, for example Dutch and Spanish.

In part I of the book Schwartz discusses the dramatic explosion in the various forms of choices that we must make in day-to-day life: from mundane choices made in shopping malls, the blue socks or the white? to the profound decisions we all need to take regarding careers, marriage, children, care of elderly parents, etc. In this section Schwartz’s argumentation is partly anecdotal and partly based on survey research.

In part II Schwartz discusses how we make choices and highlights how difficult it is to make wise choices. Schwartz starts with an account of the many steps involved in rational decision-making and next presents evidence that going for the best possible choice does not lead to the best outcomes, since “maximizers” are less happy than “satisficers.”

In part III Schwartz looks at the negative effect of abundant choice and claims that the increased opportunities for choice have actually made us less happy. Schwartz cites several mechanisms for this result: there is the burden of making the choices, having made a choice one may then regret missed opportunities, and one may have raised expectations and feelings of inadequacy when comparing oneself with others. The author suggests “…that the
increased choice may actually contribute to the recent epidemic of clinical depression affecting much of the western world” (p. 5).

Finally in part IV Schwartz offers a series of recommendations for dealing with modern freedom of choice.

The book is well written and clearly makes a point. It is persuasive at first sight but a closer look shows the evidence to be flimsy.

Schwartz’s argumentation in part II draws on laboratory experiments on trivial choices, such as between jams and posters. The results of this research are too easily generalized to major choices that must be made in real life. I will buy that students will enjoy a jam more when they have had the chance to selecting it from a limited amount of options but I doubt that the same will apply when it comes to selecting a spouse.

In part III Schwartz refers to survey research on happiness to support his claim that the increase in choice made life less satisfying. Referring to Lane’s (2000) “The decline of happiness in market democracies” he claims that average happiness has gone down. Yet Lane is wrong, average happiness has gone up in most developed nations over the last 30 years. This is visible in the time-series of average happiness in nations presented the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2004). It is true that happiness has not risen in the USA, but happiness has also not declined in this nation, while the number of ‘happy life years’ has increased steadily in the USA. Ott (2001) has exposed the weaknesses in Lane’s account of declining happiness, however Schwartz does not acknowledge this criticism. Schwartz also ignores my findings that people live happier in individualistic societies and that happiness is strongly correlated with the opportunity to choose and having the capability to choose (Veenhoven, 1999, 2000).

In some cases, Schwartz theoretical argumentation also falls short. The lower happiness of maximizers does not imply that having greater choice will make us less happy (pp. 85/6) nor does the incidence of regret about choices made imply that there will be less regret if one has fewer less options when making a choice. Even worse is Schwartz’ selective use of theories of happiness. Schwartz cites adaptation and comparison theory, which nicely fit his argument, but he neglects need theory that rather suggests the contrary. His statement that we are biologically ill prepared for