

## Psychology and Sociology of Decision-Making for Editors

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Journal editors continually make decisions: which peer reviewers to assign, whether to accept a submission, where in an issue to place which paper, and more. What can research on the psychology of decision-making tell us that might improve the process? Arthur B Markman, professor of psychology at the University of Texas and editor of the journal *Cognitive Science*, provided some answers. Among his main points were the following.

Because exhaustive evaluations of most things are too time-consuming to be feasible, people develop strategies to reach acceptable decisions more simply and quickly. For example, most journal editors cannot thoroughly assess all manuscripts they receive. Therefore, like others, they use strategies that maximize accuracy while minimizing effort, for example, culling papers that seem poor rather than sending all papers for peer review.

The magnitude of resources expended can influence decisions. For example, when

people have invested considerable time in a project, they tend not to abandon the project even if it is going poorly. When editors have worked hard to improve a paper, they may feel obliged to publish it even if it still is not very good.

In making decisions, people draw largely on the information that comes to mind most easily. Thus, in choosing reviewers, editors tend to select repeatedly experts of whom they are most immediately aware. Use of a database of potential reviewers can help to overcome this tendency.

When making judgments about items, people consider their similarity to other items in the same class. Papers that deviate from norms are often poorly received by editors and reviewers; this tendency can lead to bias against papers that are from other countries and therefore do not conform to usual modes of presentation.

Even when successive events are random, people perceive patterns. For example, if a journal happens to receive several excellent papers in a row and so has a string of acceptances, the editors may feel that they need to become more stringent.

People want to be able to justify their choices, so they tend to make the decisions that are easiest to justify. However, sometimes the reasons that are easiest to articulate are not the most important. For example, it often is easier to identify flaws in a paper than to specify which aspects of a paper make it especially good.

The wish to avoid regret tends to weigh heavily in decision-making. In editing as in other realms, that wish can bias decisions. For instance, when editors are disappointed in a paper solicited from a prominent

expert, they may publish it nevertheless for fear of regretting the consequences of deciding to do otherwise.

Initial inclinations often become reinforced as the decision-making process progresses. For instance, if the initial evaluation of a manuscript is negative, editors may tend to seek further flaws; if it is positive, they may tend to seek strengths. Thus, reading the reviews before the manuscript can bias an editor's decision.

Mood can influence decisions. If an editor's mood is negative, some exercise, such as a walk, can improve it and so permit decisions that are more objective.

Most journals are oriented toward rejecting papers because they receive more than they can publish. Therefore, editors and reviewers focus largely on weaknesses rather than strengths; they worry more that they will publish seriously flawed work than that they will reject work that is worthy. That tendency can result in failure to publish innovative work. To help to overcome the tendency, editors can give reviewers instructions that elicit information on the significance and strengths of the work being reviewed.

During the discussion period, attendees asked Markman to recommend readings on the psychology of decision-making. Among those he identified as providing overviews of the topic were a chapter by him and Douglas L Medin in the *Stevens' Handbook of Experimental Psychology*, 3rd edition. That chapter and other publications by Markman can be accessed at [www.psy.utexas.edu/psy/FACULTY/Markman/index.html](http://www.psy.utexas.edu/psy/FACULTY/Markman/index.html). 