Why Dissatisfied People Settle for the Status Quo

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Observers often assume that when people are dissatisfied, they will demand changes. But cognitive and behavioral scientists know that frequently is not the case, because a situation called "the default effect" prevails.

Here is an example. Americans have widespread concerns about how software and entertainment companies are collecting and using personal electronic data or manipulating their choices. Yet in most cases companies *do* disclose what data they collect and what they do with it. And they typically allow consumers to adjust their computer settings to exert greater control over what gets disclosed and how it is used – and even provide the ability to "opt out" of features that users find undesirable. Nonetheless, only around five percent of users meaningfully adjust their default settings – and, in fact, most never even read the terms of service agreement.

Most people would have to invest considerable time and effort to effectively navigate the "legalese" of service contracts. They would struggle to understand what their default settings are, identify which ones they would like to change, learn how and why to change those settings. Hence, we arrive in a situation where, despite the fact that most people worry about misuse of their personal data, almost no one attempts to do anything about it. The "default effect" takes hold.

The Power of Defaults in the Political Sphere

The power of defaults is even more pronounced in the political sphere, where people tend to have investments in the established order that would be painful to sacrifice – and also are quite uncertain about what would follow if the status quo were overturned.

I first began noticing the default effect in the context of the Syrian Civil War. From my research, it was clear that most Syrians *did* crave major changes in their government, yet they overwhelmingly rejected the armed uprising against the Assad regime.

Critically, this rejection of armed rebellion did *not* seem to flow from a belief that rebels had no chance to overthrow the regime. Syrians were concerned and cautious because they realized that *no one* knew what would happen if the uprising was successful; none of the optimistic scenarios about what might happen seemed particularly plausible or viable. The most likely alternatives to the regime were themselves also highly unattractive. Consequently, Syrians overwhelmingly aligned themselves with the state, albeit often begrudgingly.

Politics in the United States function in much the same way: the incumbent typically wins. Public dissatisfaction with the direction things are going – and even low approval ratings of the specific politician seeking reelection – only tend to matter when the opposition party *simultaneously* puts forward a particularly credible and compelling challenger. Presented with a choice between the "lesser of two evils" the public tends to stick with the "devil they know."

Implications for Social Research

Understanding the default effect is not only useful for understanding and predicting social phenomena – it can help us understand why social science critiques often do not lead to calls for change.

Social scientists spend a lot of time and effort criticizing, deconstructing and otherwise problematizing various systems, institutions, ideologies and policies. However, it is much less common for researchers to develop

alternative social arrangements that could be plausibly implemented in the "real world." And it is exceedingly rare for social scientists to meaningfully engage with the public and policymakers in order to help translate those possibilities into realities.

However, articulating plausible solutions is arguably crucial for actually mitigating the social problems researchers identify and analyze. Until they see a viable alternative they can rally behind, people tend to stand with established orders – even orders that are highly dysfunctional or especially disliked. Absent options, critiques of the flaws of established orders can be futile.

Researchers Need to Articulate Workable Alternatives, Not Just Critiques

Social science, in short, could become much more effective if researchers utilized their expertise to not only explain what does not work (and why), but also to articulate better alternatives. This means laying out not merely what could logically work in an ideal world, and not just what would have worked in a counterfactual past or could work in an ideal future. Instead, the focus should be on what practical steps can be plausibly taken here and now – in specific ways by actual people – to make headway on social problems.

To be sure, this is a demanding aspiration for researchers. Offering specific and viable proposals requires an intimate level of familiarity with the object of analysis and surrounding milieu. It is far less glamorous to develop such an analysis than to simply level a critique or spin novel concepts or propose sweeping theories. But ultimately, this is the only way for social research to further constructive, social change. To shirk responsibility for articulating grounded solutions to societal ills, is to reinforce most citizens' tendency to simply accommodate an unsatisfactory status quo.

Read more in Musa Al-Gharbi "Trump Will Likely Win Reelection in 2020," *The Conversation* (2017), "Syria Contextualized: A Numbers Game," *Middle East Policy* (2013) and "A Lack of Ideological Diversity is Killing Social Research," *Times Higher Education* (2017).