

Talking Point: Week 4

You might think that many of the ideas presented so far in this course paint people in a bad light. Psychology research often focuses on how irrational and inconsistent people are, but this week we suggested the situation isn't so bad. Given how limited our mental machinery is, and the complexity of the world around us, we actually do amazingly well most of the time.

People make all kinds of mistakes and appear incredibly irrational when you put them in lab experiments - which might suggest we'd be equally hopeless in the real world. You might even expect us to do worse in the real world, since the decisions we have to make are much more complex than simple experimental scenarios.

We suggested that the reason people actually make pretty good decisions in everyday life compared to the lab is that it's exactly the context of everyday life that helps us. Strip away that context, give us abstract decisions in isolation, and we'll be lost. It's the context provided by background information, our past decisions, things people have told us, that allows us to make good decisions.

Alex Kacelnik supported this view from the perspective of evolutionary biology: natural selection creates mechanisms of behaviour that cope well within a specific natural environment, but which will go awry when that environment is changed or stripped away.

We talked about the various ways in which the mind is able to integrate all these different types of context into decision making.

The mind works a bit like solving a crossword puzzle - it's a serial thing that can only focus on one "problem" at once, but as more and more decisions accumulate, the things we've done in the past help us to make sense of decisions we face in the future. If we faced every decision on its own, abstractly, it would be incredibly difficult to get through the day. **It's only by fitting all of our decisions together into a coherent whole that we manage to achieve any stability.**

The way we fit all of our decisions and knowledge together, Nick suggests, is by telling stories. **Stories help us to organise our behaviour over time: to understand why we did what we did in the past, to predict what we'll do in the future.** But the crucial part of this story-telling is that we make it up as we go along. There isn't some deep narrative underlying my whole life which guides me: rather, I create my own narrative based on the various decisions I've made and situations I happen to have been in in the past.

One interesting question, given all of this, is: if I'm simply inventing my own story, **how is it the case that I appear to have a stable personality at all?**

One possibility is that we just aren't as stable as we think: we're actually changing a lot, but we still manage to come up with a story that coheres. Another explanation, though, is that we have stable personalities because we put effort into keeping them stable: once I've started telling myself a story about the kind of person I am, I'm going to go to a lot of effort to act in accordance with that story, to keep it consistent. This is very different from the natural perspective on personality - that personalities are things we just have, fundamentally, that guide our behaviour in certain ways. This perspective suggests that your personality is something that takes considerable cognitive effort to maintain.