

Overcoming status quo bias in the human brain

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Humans often accept the status quo when faced with conflicting choice alternatives. However, it is unknown how neural pathways connecting cognition with action modulate this status quo acceptance. Here we developed a visual detection task in which subjects tended to favor the default when making difficult, but not easy, decisions. This bias was suboptimal in that more errors were made when the default was accepted. A selective increase in subthalamic nucleus (STN) activity was found when the status quo was rejected in the face of heightened decision difficulty. Analysis of effective connectivity showed that inferior frontal cortex, a region more active for difficult decisions, exerted an enhanced modulatory influence on the STN during switches away from the status quo. These data suggest that the neural circuits required to initiate controlled, nondefault actions are similar to those previously shown to mediate outright response suppression. We conclude that specific prefrontal-basal ganglia dynamics are involved in rejecting the default, a mechanism that may be important in a range of difficult choice scenarios.

decision making | functional MRI | subthalamic nucleus | action | conflict

When faced with a complex decision, people tend to accept the status quo, as reflected in the old adage, “When in doubt, do nothing.” Indeed, across a range of everyday decisions, such as whether to move house or trade in a car, or even whether to flip the TV channel, there is a considerable tendency to maintain the status quo and refrain from acting (1). One factor driving this status quo bias is the difficulty of the decision process. In supermarkets, for example, there is often an overwhelming choice of different brands for the same product, and consumers may leave the store empty handed because of a difficulty-induced bias toward inaction (2, 3).

Here we shed light on the brain mechanisms involved in making difficult decisions involving a status quo. We operationally define a status quo bias as suboptimal acceptance of a default choice option (Fig. 1*B*). The neural mechanisms involved in overcoming this bias are unknown, but informative parallels can be derived from the effects of treatments for Parkinson’s disease. Akinesia, a core symptom of Parkinson’s, can be alleviated by disruption of the basal ganglia either by neurosurgical lesions or deep-brain stimulation (DBS) (4, 5). Despite these beneficial therapeutic effects, it is known that DBS of the subthalamic nucleus (STN) in Parkinson’s patients can lead to impairments of cognitive control (6–8), suggesting that one of the core functions of the STN is to modulate basal ganglia circuits involved in decision making (9–11). An anatomic “hyperdirect” pathway from medial and lateral prefrontal cortex, previously characterized in primates (12) and humans (13), may mediate cognitive influences on the STN (14–16). Here we tested whether interactions between the frontal cortex and basal ganglia provide candidate mechanisms for how decision difficulty modulates choices involving a status quo.

We asked participants to make sensory judgments in the context of a tennis “line-judgment” game (Fig. 1*A*) while undergoing functional MRI (fMRI). We selected this game on the basis of its natural default option—line judges remain silent to indicate that the ball was “in,” but make an overt response by shouting “out” to reject the default. Further, such a task involves graded perceptual difficulty (17). A status quo bias in this task can be modeled by assuming that a decision criterion is biased depending on whether the default is set to “IN” or “OUT” (Fig. 1*B*). The

qualitative prediction from this model is that when the decision is difficult, a criterion shift has more impact than when the decision is easy (Fig. 1*B*, *Bottom*), leading to a status quo bias on high- but not low-difficulty trials (see Fig. 1 legend for further details of the model). To examine brain mechanisms for overcoming this bias, we implemented a simple factorial design by crossing high and low decision difficulty with rejection or acceptance of the default. Conceptually similar approaches have been used in animal experiments to decouple the neural processing related to response execution from that associated with variables affecting the decision (18).

The status quo bias can be shaped by a number of complex and interacting factors, such as the economic costs involved in making the transition (1, 19), aversion to losing what one presently owns (20, 21), and the potential for regretting a change (22). Here we restrict our investigation to the ubiquitous factor of decision difficulty, minimizing the influence of other, potentially confounding psychological variables. In our simple visual detection task, the choice set size remains constant (two-alternative forced-choice), and outcomes are omitted, allowing examination of the neural integration of decision difficulty with acceptance or rejection of the status quo.

Results

Behavior. In line with theoretical predictions (Fig. 1*B*), there was a greater tendency to accept the default on high- compared with low-difficulty trials [$t(15) = 2.51, P < 0.05$; Fig. 2*A*]. This bias toward default acceptance was seen in 13 of 16 subjects and importantly resulted in suboptimal choice behavior. There was an increase in errors when accepting (compared with rejecting) the default on high- but not low-difficulty trials, leading to an interaction of difficulty and response type [$F_{(1,15)} = 6.09, P < 0.05$]. Post hoc paired t tests confirmed that this interaction was driven by a significant increase in error rates when the default was accepted on high-difficulty trials relative to when it was rejected [$t(15) = 2.45, P < 0.05$], with no differences in low-difficulty default acceptance and rejection errors [$t(15) = 0.58, P = 0.57$]. These behavioral effects were replicated in a separate experiment ($n = 18$) outside the scanner (Fig. S1).

Judgement accuracy on low-difficulty trials was $95.1\% \pm 1.0\%$ (SEM). By design, accuracy on high-difficulty trials was reliably lower [$t(15) = 24.3, P < 0.0001$] but remained significantly above chance [$58.0\% \pm 1.3\%$ SEM, one-sample t test against 50%, $t(15) = 5.71, P < 0.001$]. As expected, rejection reaction times (RTs) were greater on high- compared with low-difficulty trials [$t(15) = 5.28, P < 0.001$]. The distribution of RTs in the two difficulty conditions is shown in Fig. 2*B*.

We next computed signal detection theory (SDT) measures from our data by classifying trials according to the model pre-

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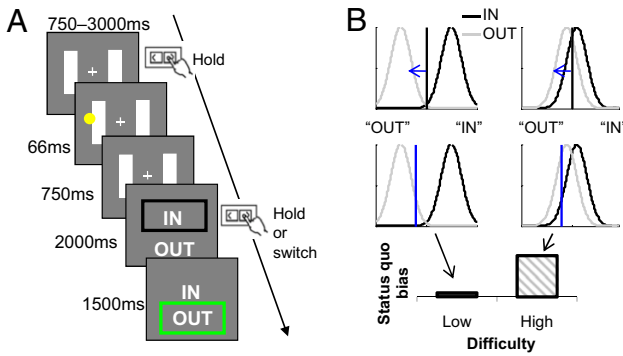


Fig. 1. Task design. (A) Participants played a “tennis line-judgment” game in which the default was systematically manipulated in a balanced factorial design. At the beginning of each trial, participants were asked to depress the “default” key and fixate on the cross between the two tramlines. They then saw a ball land on the court, before being asked to make a decision on whether it was “IN” (overlapping the line) or “OUT.” This decision was indicated by continuing to depress the key to accept the default, or releasing it and switching to the opposite key to reject. Easy and difficult (low and high difficulty) trials were randomly interleaved within a block and balanced across whether the correct response was to accept or reject the default. (B) A possible theoretical account of the status quo bias in our task. We assume that the appearance of the ball gives rise to an internal state along an arbitrary decision axis sampled from separate IN (black) and OUT (gray) probability distributions. These probability distributions are nonoverlapping for low-difficulty decisions (Left) but overlap considerably for high-difficulty decisions (Right). The vertical line in each case represents the decision criterion—how the observer splices up this decision axis to report IN or OUT. The upper row shows an ideal observer’s neutral criterion (black line), the lower row a criterion biased toward the accepting the default (blue line; here, reporting “IN”). A shifted criterion has more impact on stimuli drawn from overlapping probability distributions, leading to a greater status quo bias on high-difficulty trials.

sented in Fig. 1B (Methods). This analysis confirmed shifts in criteria (c) as a function of default position (in/out) on high-difficulty trials ($c_{in} = 0.31$, $c_{out} = -0.48$) but not low-difficulty trials ($c_{in} = 0.049$, $c_{out} = 0.0052$), leading to a significant interaction of default

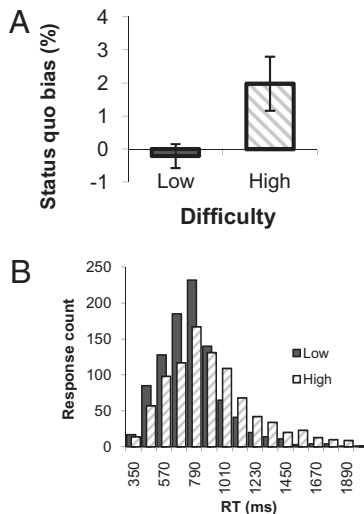


Fig. 2. Behavioral results. (A) Status quo bias was calculated as the percentage of default acceptance greater than 50% on both high- and low-difficulty trials. A bias toward accepting the default was seen on high- but not low-difficulty trials, resulting in suboptimal choice behavior. This pattern of results was replicated in an independent sample outside of the scanner (Fig. S1). Error bars reflect \pm SEM. (B) Histogram of RT counts across subjects for high- and low-difficulty rejection responses, showing slower (more negatively skewed) RTs on high-difficulty trials.

and difficulty level [$F_{(1,15)} = 9.84$, $P < 0.01$]. Changes in sensitivity (d') due to difficulty level did not interact with default position [in/out; $F_{(1,15)} < 1$, $P = 0.69$].

fMRI Analysis. Our behavioral findings of a status quo bias for high-but not low-difficulty trials motivated us to explore the neural basis of this interaction. Crucially, we were interested in regions showing differential activity for rejection of the status quo under high but not low difficulty. To isolate such regions, we computed an interaction contrast [$reject_{high} - accept_{high}$] - [$reject_{low} - accept_{low}$]. In this interaction we found activation in right STN region that survived correction for the whole brain [$P < 0.05$, family-wise error (FWE) corrected; Fig. 3A; see SI Text and Fig. S2 for anatomic localization). Similar activation was found in left STN region [$P < 0.05$, small-volume corrected (SVC); Fig. 3A]. No other brain regions survived whole-brain correction, and the reverse contrast did not reveal any other significant interaction effects. To further explore the observed interaction, we computed percentage signal change for each trial type, averaging over all voxels within anatomically defined STN regions of interest (ROIs) (11) and entered these values into a repeated-measures ANOVA [factors STN_side (left/right) \times $decision$ (accept/reject) \times $difficulty$ (high/low)]. We confirmed a significant interaction between decision difficulty and default rejection [$F_{(1,15)} = 17.70$, $P < 0.001$] that was consistent across both left and right STN [no three-way interaction with STN_side ; $F_{(1,15)} < 1$, $P = 0.80$]. A main effect of $decision$ was also present [greater activity on reject trials; $F_{(1,15)} = 18.04$, $P < 0.001$].

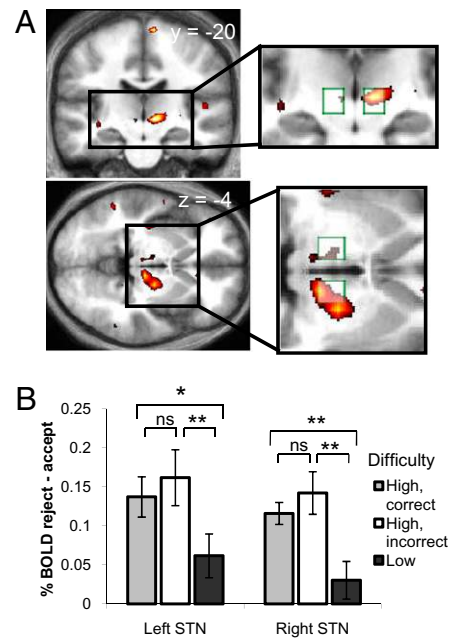


Fig. 3. Interaction of decision difficulty and default rejection. (A) T-map for the interaction contrast [$reject_{high} - accept_{high}$] - [$reject_{low} - accept_{low}$], shown in coronal and axial sections (Right: $P < 0.05$, whole-brain corrected; Left: $P < 0.05$, SVC; shown at $P < 0.005$, uncorrected). Activity is seen bilaterally in the region of the STN (peak voxels; Left: -6 , -24 , -3 ; Right: 12 , -18 , 0). Insets: Overlap between the active clusters and STN ROIs ($10 \times 10 \times 10$ -mm boxes centered on ± 10 , -15 , -5). (B) Average difference in percentage signal change ($reject - accept$) calculated from an unbiased average of all voxels within each STN box ROI. Events are split as a function of difficulty level. High-difficulty trials were further split into correct and incorrect (the relative rarity of an incorrect, low-difficulty response precluded the same split on low-difficulty trials). The interaction effect was driven by a greater STN response for rejecting the default on high- compared with low-difficulty trials. Post hoc paired t tests: * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.005$. Error bars reflect \pm SEM.

that increased drive from rIFC to the STN under conditions of high difficulty is causal in tempering this bias (making decision criteria more “neutral” under high-difficulty conditions; Fig. 1*B*). This context-dependence of STN activity is consistent with findings from DBS studies that report a role for the STN under conditions of high but not low difficulty (6–8). An alternative account might suggest that the activation we observe is epiphenomenal, rather than being causal in the amelioration of a status quo bias. We consider this possibility as less likely, for a number of reasons. First, the activity increase observed is specific to rejecting a difficult default, rather than rejection of the default per se, and is not easily explained through simple correlation with motor output or decision accuracy. Second, the effects we observe are consistent across bilateral STN, a region proposed as a key node for control of decision making (9, 10). Finally, and perhaps most persuasively, DBS in Parkinson’s disease reveals a causal role for the STN in the modulation of decision making (6–8, 27, 28), and lesions to the STN in rodents produce impaired response selection under situations of high conflict (29, 30).

The pattern of activity in the STN region can be further examined in the context of two influential models that address the broader role of the basal ganglia in decision making (9, 10). In brief, it is proposed that activation of striatal neural populations by salient sensory stimuli drives selection of an appropriate response, releasing the pallidal inhibition of the thalamus. A “hyperdirect” pathway from frontal cortex to the STN (12) leads to modulation of pallidal–thalamic responses as a result of decision difficulty (9), adjusting basal ganglia output. In support of a hyperdirect modulation of STN activity, we find that an inferior frontal region sensitive to task difficulty drives the STN in our DCM. Within our task and model constraints default-related modulation of the STN was best explained by a pathway from rIFC, consistent with a direct white matter tract linking these regions (12, 13). However, we anticipate a contribution of the MFC to STN modulation in other scenarios, such as outright response inhibition (see below) and note data suggesting influences of midline EEG potentials on STN responses (31, 32). In addition, both IFC and MFC activity may affect default rejection in our task via pathways that bypass the basal ganglia, consistent with short-latency modulation of primary motor responses after stimulation of these structures (33, 34).

Studies of the stop-signal RT task using fMRI have isolated both the rIFC and STN as critical nodes in stopping of responses (11, 35, 36). Disrupting rIFC with transcranial magnetic stimulation leads to failure of response inhibition (37), and individual differences in rIFC volume predict successful stopping (38). Similarly, DBS of the STN in patients with Parkinson’s disease directly modulates stop-signal RTs (27, 28). In our task, a simple inhibitory account of STN function would suggest greater activity when a difficult default is accepted (lack of action), whereas an account that emphasizes a role for the STN in controlled responding would predict greater activity when the default is rejected. Our data favor the latter view, and together with related evidence (13, 16) implicate the STN in both outright response suppression and controlled slowing or switching. Indeed, the acceptance or rejection of a prepotent response may be orthogonal to the action-inhibition distinction. In some situations the default is to respond and the controlled response is to inhibit, whereas in others (such as when judging the line in tennis), the default is to remain silent, and the controlled response is to initiate an overt action (39). This hypothetical dissociation raises intriguing and testable hypotheses for further interventional research: if the dominant function of the STN is to inhibit action, then lesions or electrical disruption in a task such as ours should result in a tendency to respond, and a decreased status quo bias. However, if its dominant function is to initiate a controlled mode of responding, STN dysfunction would lead to an increased status quo bias.

In summary, we describe a neural mechanism for overcoming a difficulty-induced status quo bias centered on IFC/STN. We show that difficult choice scenarios lead to greater acceptance of the

status quo (see also refs. 2 and 3), resulting in suboptimal decision making. Using a model of effective connectivity inspired by computational models of action selection (9, 10), we provide evidence that IFC increases its influence on the STN when a difficult default is rejected. Our task was intended to elucidate the mechanisms involved in overcoming a status quo bias for simple perceptual decisions requiring overt actions, and we are cautious in extrapolating the mechanisms underlying a similar bias for more complex cognitive or value-based decisions. However, taken together, our results suggest that rejection of the status quo during difficult decisions invokes specific neural dynamics within prefrontal–basal ganglia circuitry. At a broader level such mechanisms may contribute to rejecting the default in scenarios ranging from retirement fund decisions to consumer choice.

Methods

Participants. Seventeen healthy right-handed subjects who provided informed consent took part in the study. All had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and no history of psychological or neurologic illness. One participant was excluded because of poor behavioral performance (33% errors on low-difficulty trials). Sixteen subjects’ data were analyzed (5 male; 19–34 years of age; mean age, 25.3 years). The study was approved by the Institute of Neurology (University College London) Research Ethics Committee. Participants received a fixed reimbursement plus a small bonus payment calculated from their best-scoring block of trials.

Task and Procedure. Each trial began with a central fixation cross flanked by two longitudinal white tram lines presented in peripheral vision. Participants were asked to maintain fixation and were instructed that not doing so would compromise their performance on the line judgment task. The target ball was presented at either tramline either overlapping the line (in) or outside the line (out). The difficulty of the decision was manipulated by altering the distance of the stimulus from the outside edge of the tramline. Responses were made using an optical keypad and consisted of a go/no-go decision to reject or accept the default, respectively. See Fig. 1 legend and *SI Text* for further details.

Behavioral Analysis. Behavioral responses were classified according to whether the trial led to a rejection or acceptance of the default, and whether the trial was high or low difficulty. A status quo bias was assessed by comparing the proportion of trials leading to an acceptance response on high- and low-difficulty trials, using a two-tailed paired *t* test. Each participant’s decision criteria (*c*) and sensitivity (*d'*) were estimated from the data using signal detection theory (SDT; see Fig. 1*B*), whereby the hit rate (*H*) was defined as $p(\text{“in”|ball} = \text{in})$ and false alarm rate (*F*) as $p(\text{“in”|ball} = \text{out})$. Decision criteria and *d'* for each difficulty level (high/low, indexed by *i*) and default position (in/out, indexed by *j*) can then be calculated as follows (40), where *z* is the inverse of the normal distribution function:

$$c_{ij} = -0.5 [z(H) + z(F)]$$

$$d'_{ij} = z(H) - z(F)$$

SDT parameters and error rates were analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA.

fMRI Analysis. We acquired brain data using a 3T Allegra scanner (Siemens). See *SI Text* for details of image acquisition and preprocessing. Functional data were analyzed using SPM5 (www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm). Stimulus onsets were separated into two regressors depending on the perceptual difficulty on each trial (high/low). Choice screen onsets were separated into six regressors dependent on whether the trial was high/low difficulty, whether it led to an accept/reject response, and, on high-difficulty trials, whether this response was correct or incorrect (*reject_high_correct*, *reject_high_incorrect*, *reject_low*, *accept_high_correct*, *accept_high_incorrect*, *accept_low*). Response accuracy (correct/incorrect) was not modeled as a separate factor on low-difficulty trials, given the relative rarity of incorrect responses ($4.9\% \pm 1.0\%$, SEM). The *reject* stick functions were parametrically modulated by the reaction time on each trial, and the cumulative feedback stick function was modulated by the amount of money won on the previous 10 trials. Our critical contrast of interest (the interaction of default rejection and difficulty, collapsing across correct/incorrect) was computed as follows: [*reject_high_correct* = +0.5; *reject_high_incorrect* = +0.5; *reject_low* = -1; *accept_high_correct* = -0.5; *accept_high_incorrect* = -0.5; *accept_low* = +1].

Cluster-based statistics were used to define significant activations both on their intensity and spatial extent (41). Clusters were defined using a threshold of $P < 0.005$ and corrected for multiple comparisons within a given search volume using FWE correction and a threshold of $P < 0.05$. SVC was applied to a priori ROIs in the STN and MFC. See *SI Text* for further details.

Connectivity Analysis. We conducted DCM analysis using SPM8 (www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm). DCM models neural dynamics in a system of interacting brain regions by representing the population activity at the neural level with a single state variable for each region (25); see *SI Text* for further details. We constructed nine DCMs covering the three combinations of default rejection affecting the flow of information from frontal cortex to STN, crossed with three possible architectures for how decision difficulty affects the network. Specifically, *difficulty* either drove rIFC, MFC, or both; *reject* either modulated rIFC to STN, MFC to STN, or both. In all

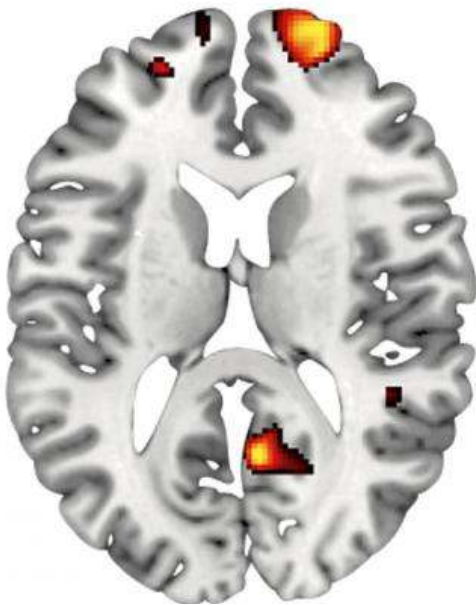
nine models each of the three areas was reciprocally connected, according to known anatomic connectivity in humans and macaques (12, 13). See *SI Text* for details of time series selection. These models were compared at the group level using a random-effects procedure implemented in SPM8 (42). Once the best model was established, we determined which set of connections was consistently affected by default rejection across subjects. This was realized by applying classical statistics at the second level to the maximum a posteriori estimates of the parameters from individual subject DCMs, using a two-tailed t test against zero.

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Refleksjonens plass er påvist i hjernen

Forsker har funnet stedene i hjernen der evnen til å reflektere sitter.



teve Fleming/UCL

To områder i hjernen bidrar til å bestemme om man er et reflekterende menneske.

16.02.2011

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Vår evne til å vende tankene innover og reflektere over stort og smått er viktig for vår oppfatning av oss selv og verden omkring oss.

Stephen M. Fleming og kollegene ved University College London har nå lokalisert **hjerneområdene som styrer refleksjonsevnen**.

Det ene området, som befinner seg fremst i pannelappens grå substans, viser seg å være velutviklet hos reflekterende personer, men mindre hos dem som ikke tenker så mye over saker og ting. Et annet område som er plassert midt i hjernens bakerste del, er til gjengjeld mindre jo mer grublende man er.

Områdene har trolig innvirkning på dømmekraften og dermed tilliten vi kan tillegges som vitner, for uten refleksjonens selvkritikk blir vi nemlig skråsikre og kanskje mindre pålitelige.

Man fant områdene ved å gi forsøkspersoner en test der de skulle vurdere hvor sikre de var på avgitte svar. Imens ble hjerneaktiviteten MRI-skannet.

Relaterte artikler:

- **Hvorfor renner nesen når vi er forkjølet?**
- **Ny frosk formerer seg i vannhull lagd av et blad**
- **Ny nakensnegl med oransje pigger funnet utenfor California**
- **Har havdyrenes farger noen nytteverdi?**
- **Vitenskapens merkeligste arbeidsplasser**
- **Genmanipulert mygg**

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Published on *Psychology Today* (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

Why Habits Are Hard to Change (And Printers Hard to Buy)

By Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

Created Mar 17 2010 - 11:02pm

A new study from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences confirms what many confused shoppers, dieters, and investors know first-hand: **when a decision is difficult, we go with the status quo or choose to do nothing.**

(The last time I tried to buy a new printer online should have been proof enough for me; after hours of analyzing features, prices, and customer reviews, I gave up. It's a miracle I'm not still using a dot-matrix printer with the hole-threaded, rip-off margins.)

Ahem. Back to the science: Researchers from the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging at University College London created a computerized decision-making task. Participants viewed a series of visual tests that asked them to play a referee making a sports call (e.g., whether a tennis ball bounced in or out of bounds).

Before each test, participants were told that one of the responses (in or out) was the "default" for this round. They were asked to hold down a key while they watched. If they continued to hold down the key, they were choosing the default. If they lifted their finger, they were choosing the non-default. Importantly, the default response (in or out) switched randomly between rounds, so that a participant's response bias (to make a call in or out) would not be confused with their tendency to stick with the status quo.

The researchers were interested in two questions:

- 1) Does the difficulty of the decision influence the participants' likelihood of choosing the default?
- 2) Is there a neural signature for choosing the default vs. overriding the status quo?

As my shopping habits (and the researchers) predicted, participants were more likely to stick with the default when the decision was difficult. It didn't matter whether the default was in or out. If they couldn't make a confident choice, they essentially chose to do nothing. And as the researchers point out, this tendency led to more errors.

What was happening in the participants' brains as they chose? The researchers observed an interesting pattern when participants went against the default in a difficult decision. There was increased activity in, and increased connectivity between, two regions: the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and an area of the midbrain called the subthalamic nucleus (STN). The PFC is well-known to be involved in decision-making and self-control. The STN is thought to be important for motivating action.

The researcher's analyses couldn't determine for sure what the relationship between the PFC and STN was, but the observations were consistent with the idea that the PFC was driving, or

boosting, activity in the STN.

These brain analyses suggest that going against the default in difficult decisions requires some kind of extra motivation or confidence. Otherwise, the decider in our mind is puzzled, and the doer in our mind is paralyzed.

Knowing this can help explain why changing habits can be so difficult. If you aren't sure why you're changing, don't fully believe you're making the right choice, or question whether what you're doing will work, you're likely to settle back on your automatic behaviors. That's why self-efficacy-the belief that you can make a change and overcome obstacles-is one of the best predictors of successful change. The decider and the doer need a boost of confidence.



It also helps explain why we love formulaic diets, investment strategies, and other decision aids. Formulas feel scientific, tested, and promising. They also give us a new default. We can rely on the rules (no eating after 7 PM, automatically invest X% of your income in mutual funds twice a month) when we're feeling overwhelmed. A new automatic makes change much easier. (For more on this idea, see "The Self-Control Costs of Flexibility.")

So next time you're trying to make a change, figure out what your current default is, and remind yourself exactly why it isn't working. Then look for ways to change your default (clean out your fridge, set up direct deposit) so you don't have to fight the old default as often. And feel free to be your own cheerleader when the going gets rough. Look for the first evidence (a pound lost here, a dwindling credit card statement there) that what you're doing is paying off. The status quo is seductive, and we all need a little encouragement to lift our fingers off the keyboard.

[Printer recommendations may be left in the comments section, along with your own strategies for behavior change and decision-making.]

Study cited:

Fleming, S.M., Thomas, C.L., & Dolan, R.J. Overcoming status quo bias in the human brain. PNAS. Published online before print March 15, 2010. doi:10.1073/pnas.0910380107

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The Biology Of Dithering

by DEBORAH FRANKLIN

01:50 pm

March 16, 2010



iStockphoto.com

Even with 1,001 channels, it can feel like nothing's on TV.

If you've ever felt so conflicted by choice - hundreds of TV channels, pension funds, brands of cereal - that you couldn't decide, you've experienced the well established tendency that psychologists call the "[default bias](#)." That translates to, "When in doubt, do nothing."

A new [study](#) by grad student Stephen Fleming, of University College London, has looked into the biology behind that [thought process](#). His results suggest that the decision to deviate or not from the status quo may hinge on some of the same neural pathways that keep a Parkinson's patient frozen in place.

Fleming's study was built around a simple video game that required volunteers to make the sort of quick judgement calls that a line judge in a tennis match has to make.

With their heads inside an MRI brain scanner and one finger on a computer mouse, the volunteers stared at a virtual tennis court and watched little "balls" land either "in" or "outside" the backcourt lines. After each ball landed, the computer would randomly call the ball "in" or "out." The volunteers then had just a few seconds to either agree or disagree with the computerized judge, and signal that decision with a click.

The results: When the balls landed close to the line, the volunteers deferred much more often to the computer, though they knew its judgements were random. In those cases, the volunteers were often wrong.

When the calls were very tough and the volunteers acted against the computer's decision, Fleming and his colleagues noted that two particular parts of the brain known as the "subthalamic nuclei," located deep within the cortex, were recruited to help make the decision.

"We found that blood flow around this region increased when you had a difficult decision to make and you successfully rejected the default option," Fleming says.

Here's the cool part: It's the same region that some doctors are hitting with "deep brain stimulation," a treatment that's enabling some Parkinson's patients overcome the rigidity and walking problems that are a part of that illness. This might not be a coincidence, Fleming suggests.

"One of the central problems that occurs in Parkinson's is that you can't initiate an action," he says. "So, once you've started moving you're okay; it's the getting going that's the problem. What is interesting is that when you disrupt this particular structure, the subthalamic structure, with [deep brain stimulation](#), you can alleviate that symptom."

Fleming and others theorize that the subthalamic nuclei might act a bit like "your foot on the brake of the car," helping to keep impulsivity and inaction in balance. The cortex and the parts of the brain involved in controlling movement are in constant communication about potential options, he says. In decision making, "the subthalamic nucleus could potentially play the roll of easing in and easing out of the brake on the eventual action we take."

Read the full study [here](#), published this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Of course, in the real world choices of the cereal aisle, factors like shelf placement, coupons, and the cost of your last dental bill can complicate basic decisions even further, Fleming says. Ad folks use some of those factors to [nudge](#) your [decisions](#) in their favor.

The next time you muster the gumption to actively decline the extra insurance option at the car rental counter, think of your subthalamic nuclei, and smile.

disabilities