

Decision-making competence and the difficulty of decisions

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Abstract

- In this paper we argue that if the cognitive difficulties inherent in a decision are a necessary part of the assessment of decision-making competence, then neither of the main approaches to competence assessment (viz. externalism and internalism) are coherent as they stand.
- We suggest that these inherent difficulties are a necessary part of the assessment of competence.
- Externalism is the claim that the more harmful a person's proposed choice the higher the standard of decision-making competence should be set. But this doesn't directly assess inherent difficulty, and the degree of harm is not indirectly related to difficulty either.
- Internalism is the claim that assessment of decision-making competence should be based entirely on internal (cognitive) processes such as understanding. This is not coherent because the difficulties inherent in a decision cannot be assessed by looking at the internal cognitive processes of a person's mind.

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Why difficulties are a necessary part of assessment of d-mc

- Competence to carry out a task
 - Competence to carry out a task consists in having sufficient of the capabilities required to meet the demands of the task
 - To assess competence, then, the demands of the task must be described

Why difficulties are a necessary part of assessment of d-mc

- Decision-making is a task
 - Competence to make a decision consists in having sufficient of the capabilities required to meet the demands of the decision-making
 - To assess competence, then, the demands of the decision-making must be described

Why difficulties are a necessary part of assessment of d-mc

- Difficulty characterises the demands of decision-making
 - We can characterise the demands of decision-making in terms of the standard cognitivist account: this includes ‘understanding’ and ‘reasoning’
 - The primary challenge to understanding and to reasoning are difficulties e.g.
 - Conceptual (e.g. diagnoses, treatments)
 - Relational (e.g. causal, implicative, associative, probabilistic)
 - Logical (e.g. conditionality, consequence, necessity)

What difficulty isn't

- Difficulty choosing
 - A person may find it subjectively hard to choose between alternatives for example because they value/disvalue different things about each option
 - Alternatively, another person may find the same options easy to choose between
- This goes to show that how subjectively easy or hard a person finds it to select an option is not the right basis for establishing decision-making difficulty (and hence, competence)