

Human nature: Behavioral economists create model of our desire to make sense of it all

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Researchers have identified a powerful human motive that has not been adequately appreciated by social and behavioral scientists: the drive to make sense of our lives and the world around us.

Published in the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Carnegie Mellon University's George Loewenstein and Warwick Business School's Nick Chater developed a theoretical model of the drive for [sense](#)-making and how it is traded off against other goals.

They show that the drive for sense-making can help to make sense of a wide range of disparate phenomena, including curiosity, boredom, confirmation bias and information avoidance, esthetics (in both art and science), caring about other's beliefs, the importance of narrative and the role of "the good life" in decision-making.

"The mind is a sense-making machine; we are informavores as much as we are omnivores," said Loewenstein, the Herbert A. Simon University Professor of Economics and Psychology in the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Most drives are extensions of autonomous internal processes. For example, when our body temperature drops, without any conscious planning our bodies work to keep us warm: we shiver, get goose bumps, and blood flow to our extremities is reduced.

But autonomous processes are not always sufficient; sometimes our

conscious mind needs to take control. The conscious experience of feeling cold, and the conscious "drive" to warm ourselves, prompt us to put on a sweater, or turn up the thermostat.

In the same way that it regulates our internal temperature, our brain is constantly, and autonomously, engaged in sense-making and simplification, distilling sensory inputs to make it possible for us to make sense of our environment and our lives.

In some situations, however, internal processes are not up to the task; our conscious mind needs to be recruited to help us make sense of the world around us. We feel conscious drives, such as curiosity that can motivate us to seek out more information (whether by scrutinizing an old photo, searching the Internet or conducting a scientific experiment). Our drive for sense-making, like our drives to avoid cold and hunger, can intrude on, and direct, our conscious attention.

The sense-making drive also helps to explain the appeal of religion as well as conspiracy theories, although these two forms of explanation satisfy the drive in different ways. Religion provides simple answers, like "God decides everything," to daunting questions, but simple answers fail to predict specific facts, experiences or events. Conspiracy theories, by contrast, aim to explain a plethora of specific facts by using explanations that are generally complicated and convoluted.

"We make a particular sense of our lives and of our world that allows us to process and retain information and to decide what to do," said Chater, professor of behavioural science at Warwick Business School. "Our drive for sense-making can make us hostile to alternative points of view that might suggest that our world, and even our lives, makes less sense than we thought,"

The model has novel implications both for when people choose to obtain

or avoid information, and it sheds light on phenomena, such as political polarization and emotionally charged beliefs relating to topics like the cause of autism and the reality of climate change.

"There is an irony to the paper," Loewenstein added. "It is an attempt to make sense of our desire to make sense of the world."

More information: Nick Chater et al. The under-appreciated drive for sense-making, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2016).

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