Matrix of Maybe

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Matrix of Maybe

Definition:
The matrix of maybe can be defined as a way of conceptualizing the future, either imminent or distant, as a set of options, only some of which will come true. The "maybe" is meant to invoke not only the options readily available but also the uncertain nature of their consequences. For example, people may choose a job or a spouse from among several options, but making the decision brings a new set of possibilities (*maybe*s). The selected job or spouse could in turn lead in various different directions.

Synonyms:
Multi-maybe matrix

Introduction

The notion of a "matrix of maybe" (or multi-maybe matrix) emerged from research and theory regarding how people think about the future. It encapsulates a view of the future as containing multiple alternative possibilities, indeed multiple *sets* of alternative possibilities.

There are two main competing theories about the future. The tension between them can be seen both in the everyday actions, thoughts, and feelings of ordinary people and in high-level theoretical disputes among experts. One of them views the future as a single path, and what happens is largely or even strictly inevitable. The alternative is the matrix of maybe, in which the pathways into the future have many forks at which things could go in different directions.

Although the indeterminate nature of the future may seem intuitively obvious, it has been disputed throughout history by various assertions of the single-path view. Fortunetellers and prophets from ancient times asserted that the future could be known in advance. Religious views of predestination invoked divine omniscience to deduce that the future is already determined. Even scientists and philosophers have argued that the laws of nature leave nothing to chance, and so everything that happens is inevitable (see Determinism entry).

Meanwhile, the multi-maybe view of the future also has distinguished intellectual precedent. Decision-making theory and classical probability theory assume that the same present is compatible with multiple possible future outcomes. Existential philosophy developed the concept of an "ontological horizon," which means all the future outcomes that can be reached from one's present point in space and time (e.g., Heidegger, 1927). Social psychology, a field that studies situational influences on human behavior, has often studied aspects of situations that are defined by multiple possibilities, such as threat, opportunity, having an escape option, varying amounts of freedom and choice, competition, cooperation, contingencies, responsibility, and power relations. That is, both social psychology and decision research typically presume that humans are capable of making choices among competing alternatives.

The ability to imagine the future as containing multiple alternative possibilities is a recent evolutionary innovation and may be unique to humans. An experiment by Redshaw and Suddendorf (2016) offered a convincing test of this idea by using a vertical tube that had two openings at the bottom, left and right. Treats were dropped into the top and came out the

bottom whereupon they fell into a hole and were lost unless caught by hand. To be sure of catching the treat (rather than just getting it half the time, based on guessing) one had to use both hands, one for each opening. Human two-year-old children could not master this, but the 3- and 4-year-olds quickly mastered the task and got the treat every time. In contrast, adult chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans never figured it out. They continued to guess with one hand instead of using both. The implication is that our smartest and closest animal relatives are unable to think of even the very near future as containing multiple alternative possibilities in such a way as to enable them to prepare for both — unlike human children (past the age of 3), who succeeded where the apes failed.

The matrix of maybe is specifically understood as pertaining to the future and not the past. To be sure, there are instances of uncertainty about the past, such as when a trial seeks to ascertain whether the defendant had indeed committed a particular crime. Yet the assumption is that there is an objective, unchangeable fact (either the person really did or really did not commit the crime), and the uncertainty lies solely in present knowledge about it. The multi-maybe future, in contrast, is assumed to genuinely contain alternative possibilities.

Evidence for the multi-maybe matrix in ordinary people's thinking was reviewed by Baumeister, Maranges, and Sjåstad (2018). People act as if the future is more changeable and more controllable than the past, even when subjective knowledge is equal. For example, people will bet more on a sports event that has not happened yet than on one that is over, even though they are fully unaware of the outcome in either case (e.g., Brun & Teigen, 1990). People also seem to believe that they will have more free will in the future than they had in the past (Helzer & Gilovich, 2021), which may clarify the importance of present action. Indeed, planning is based on knowing that multiple futures are possible, so that it is helpful to make plans that will produce the desired outcome. Pre-commitment devices, such as a savings plan that automatically takes money from a paycheck and deposits it into a savings account, deliberately restrict the matrix of maybe so as to improve long-range benefits (having money for future purposes) by eliminating some tempting options in the near present (such as to spend one's entire paycheck on current activities). On average, people who use pre-commitment strategies tend to reach their goals more often than those who do not (Duckworth et al., 2018).

An implication of the pre-commitment benefits is that having more possibilities is not always or necessarily better. By and large, people do prefer to have more options and greater freedom. But there can be too many choices or options in general, and there can be particular options that cause trouble (and hence would best be eliminated).

Furthermore, traits such as optimism rest on a matrix of maybe. Optimism applies in situations where both good and bad outcomes are possible (and subjectively boosts the probability of a good outcome). Recent work suggests that future optimism is intuitive, as the first expectation that comes to mind is anchored on what the person *wants* to happen (Sjåstad & Baumeister, 2021). When engaging in a slower process of conscious reflection, second-guessing the future so to speak, humans can simulate a broader set of alternative possibilities which also include undesirable scenarios and what can go wrong (see also: Bear et al., 2020).

Morality is of particular relevance for the matrix of maybe. Moral judgments essentially ask whether the person should have done something different, and so they mainly apply in situations with multiple possibilities. If the person did not have alternatives, moral responsibility and condemnation are much reduced. Likewise, the most discussed and

researched moral dilemmas also rest on a matrix of maybe, as in multiple alternatives among which the person much choose. As two classic examples, people debate whether a poor man should steal medicine to save his sick wife's life, and whether a person should flip the switch to divert a runaway trolley to an alternate track, where it would kill one person rather than the five who are in its current path. Without a future of multiple possibilities there would be no meaningful "dilemma" or real choices to be made, and in consequence, little room for personal responsibility. In contrast to that view, it is a widespread assumption that people *do* have an element of choice, which explains why the average person is inclined to moralize these actions by prescribing appropriate rewards and punishments. Indeed, people view others as less moral and less trustworthy to the extent that they even look like they have failed to exercise volitional will rationally (i.e., are obese and assumed to have failed to use self-control; Maranges, Ainsworth, & March, 2021).

Human beings are not only able to imagine various alternate future scenarios that could ensue from their current actions. They are also able to evaluate these. Damasio (1994) reported cases of people with brain damage that prevented emotional responses. These patients were still able to mentally imagine the full variety of possible future actions and consequences — but they had considerable difficulty making up their minds as to which was the best choice. This has led to the theory that an important function of human emotion involves imagining the future and anticipating how one will feel. For example, people may avoid actions that they deem likely to bring feelings of guilt or regret, whereas they may choose to act in certain ways based on anticipating that these will bring joy and satisfaction (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Having multiple options is widely seen as desirable. Already in the 1960s, social psychologists had shown that people dislike having their options restricted and will resist, sometimes aggressively (Brehm, 1966). Studies of decision-making show that people like to preserve their options, even to the point of being willing to pay something to keep options available — even though they think it is unlikely they will use those options and in fact do not take them later in the experiment (Shin & Ariely, 2004). Even a false belief that one has an escape option and could terminate a bad situation reduces the amount of stress people feel (Glass et al., 1969). Although some of these findings may appear irrational or self-defeating when considered in isolation, they are part of a larger pattern of mentally preserving the future as a set of alternative possibilities. In short, humans are able to construct the future as a *matrix of maybe,* and thinking this way is generally helpful in planning, decision-making, and social life.

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