



Research note: Behavioural Economics and the Financial Services Consumer: A Review

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The Financial Services Research Forum is widely acknowledged as the UK's most inclusive body for advancing the understanding of financial behaviour and promoting the interests of consumers. The Forum is also interested in any developments in the sector and in the global economy that are likely to have profound implications for financial services consumers and their interactions with financial services markets.

In brief

This paper provides an introduction to, and explanation of, some of the main aspects of behavioural economics that will be of interest to commercial practitioners and policymakers in financial services. Behavioural economics is a relatively recent addition to the study of economics which tries to explain consistent and persistent deviations from the rational, self-interested behaviour predicted by traditional economic theory. Behavioural perspectives encompass various biases, heuristics and other psychological perspectives that may help arrive at a more nuanced understanding of consumer choice processes. In this paper, we consider in particular loss aversion and prospect theory, status quo bias and defaults, framing and anchoring effects, hyperbolic discounting, availability effect and salience, over-confidence and the trust heuristic. In doing so, we provide a number of examples from the financial services context which we hope will provide insightful and informative for both commercial practitioners and policymakers.

1. An Introduction to Behavioural Economics

Behavioural economics is an umbrella term for a range of approaches that seek to understand and explain observed consumer behaviour more accurately than predictions associated with traditional economic theory. Traditional economics is based on the assumption that people act in a completely rational and instrumental, or self-interested, manner. People are assumed to take full account of all information available to them and to act according to this information and their preferences. In doing so, their goal is assumed to be maximisation of their utility. Standard economic models incorporate such assumptions, as by implication do any policies based upon such models. Recent approaches to consumer policy in the UK are effectively predicated on the notion of the rational consumer. The working hypothesis has been that provided consumers are supplied with as much information as possible and efforts are made to improve financial capability, then consumers should make more informed and suitable choices in financial services markets.

However, it is increasingly apparent that rational, information-processing models do not accurately explain actual or observed consumer behaviour. An increasing body of evidence points towards persistent and consistent violations of rationality. These violations occur for various reasons, including the mental effort required to make informed decision, faulty reasoning on the part of consumers and the complexity of the decision making process. Traditional economists would regard such observed behaviour as irrational and would characterise such actions as anomalies. However, as such behaviour is observed consistently and the evidence is relatively robust, departures from what economists consider to be rational need to be recognised and explained, rather than ignored or discounted as mere aberrations. Such alternative models of consumer behaviour also need to be accounted for by financial services policymakers and by firms seeking to influence consumer choice in financial services markets.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that there has been growing interest in the subject of behavioural economics, a relatively recent addition to the study of economics^B which tries to explain such anomalies with reference to psychological insights. Increasingly economists recognise that we cannot study human behaviour as a "black-box" (i.e. not concerned with the process of behaviour merely the outcomes as predicted by economic models), we need to open the box and look into the cognitive processes that drive human behaviour. The objective of behavioural economics is to bring psychological insights into economics in a systematic manner, in order to improve economic theory, so that it can better explain human behaviour. In doing so, the impact of the typical mental short-cuts, or heuristics, that consumers employ in their decision making are taken into account, as are other systematic biases, anomalies and framing effects that impact on consumer choice and behaviour.

This paper considers some main insights from behavioural economics which may be of interest and useful to policymakers and firms in the financial services sector. We investigate loss aversion, status quo bias, framing effects, hyperbolic discounting and mental accounting, all of which deal with biases in the judgment of alternative outcomes that arise due to the way these outcomes

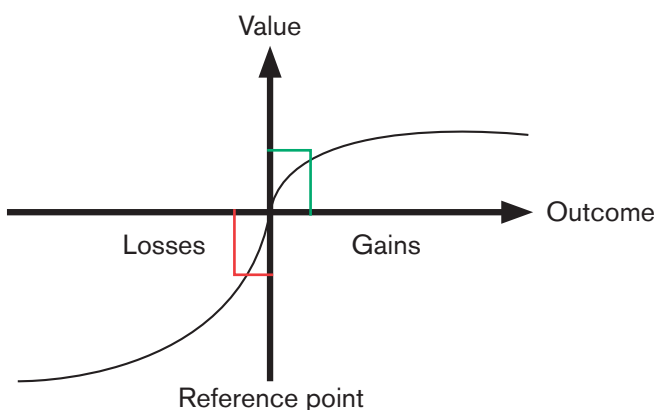
are presented, appraised and compared. We also detail the availability effect which is an example of how biased information collection and processing results in erroneous beliefs. Finally, we look at overconfidence and trust, which are factors besides utility maximisation that may influence the selection between alternatives, giving rise to actions which would be considered erroneous from the standpoint of traditional economic theory. We have chosen these particular facets of behavioural economics as we feel that they provide particularly important and salient insights in the context of financial services. In this paper we focus on implications for interactions with financial consumers, rather than dealing with wholesale markets and macro-economic matters. In the main section of the report, the various phenomena introduced above are introduced and explained briefly, before examples from a financial services context are provided.¹

2. Behavioural Economics: explanations and applications to financial services

2.1 Loss Aversion, Prospect Theory, the Disposition Effect and the Endowment Effect

Explanation

People have been shown to be loss averse, generally appearing to dislike losing something roughly twice as much as they like gaining it². Such a phenomenon has been shown in a number of experimental studies in a broad range of contexts³. Loss aversion can be explained by prospect theory, which states that an individual's value function (whether for money or otherwise) is *concave* for gains but *convex* for losses. In other words, people are more sensitive to losses compared to gains of similar magnitude. This is illustrated in Figure 1. The reference point in the diagram is the current position of the individual concerned. Gains and losses are evaluated with reference to this neutral reference point. The value function takes an asymmetric S-shape because marginal value (or sensitivity) declines as absolute gains and losses increase in size.



Loss aversion and Prospect Theory are also related to the Disposition Effect, which refers to the tendency of investors to continue holding assets that have dropped in value and to sell assets that have increased in value.⁵ Also closely related is the Endowment Effect, which is the tendency of individuals to place a higher price or value on an object if they own it than if they do not. Put simply, according to standard economic theory, what we are willing to pay for a good should be equal to what we are willing to accept to be deprived of it. However, experimental studies have shown that we generally demand more money to part with something once we own it than we would be willing to pay for it in the first place.⁶

Applications

The loss aversion witnessed on the part of consumers helps explain why there is a marked reluctance on the part of many to invest in assets that involve a risk to capital, such as stock market based investments. Many individuals have portfolios that are under-diversified and where risky assets are generally under-represented. Mandatory product warnings which highlight the prospect of losses on collective investments such as unit trusts and OEICS may exacerbate such issues. It is accepted that individuals should not be encouraged to take on risks which do not accord with their risk preferences. However, in the long run, underexposure to risky assets may involve detrimental outcomes for investors as such assets tend to offer the prospect of greater returns and increased protection from the erosion of capital from inflation. For such reasons, particularly for long-term term investments such as pensions policies, for most people an element of exposure to stock market investments is generally considered desirable. Therefore, investment choices offered to investors, whilst warning them about attendant risks, should also point out the potential rewards and risks associated with not incorporating some stock market exposure into an investment plan. One method of achieving this would be to present appropriate default options, as discussed in more detail below. The most obvious application of the disposition effect in financial services relates to the tendency of individuals to continue to hold stock market investments for far too long in the hope that they will recover in value rather than cut losses, sell up and invest in something with greater potential. The endowment effect has also been shown to hold for financial markets, where private client sellers have a tendency to place orders demanding a price that is further away from current market prices than buyers.⁷ The endowment effect may also help explain investors' tendency to continue to hold large amounts of shares that they have acquired through employee share ownership schemes, rather than diversify as would generally be considered prudent.

2.2 Status Quo Bias and the Default Option

Explanation

The term *status quo bias* was advanced by Samuelson and Zeckhauser to explain the tendency to stick with current choices/patterns of behaviour, in other words to have an exaggerated preference for the status quo.⁸ Sticking with the status quo involves less mental effort than considering more pro-active courses of action. An example of the status quo bias is as follows; when a University added some new options to its employment-based healthcare plan, faculty joining after this point understandably

took advantage of most of the options. However, faculty previously employed (who of course had the right to take advantage of the new options) chose to participate in the new options to a far lesser degree.⁹ They exhibited a strong preference for sticking with the status quo. In situations where there is not an existing pattern of behaviour, or status quo, then the default option is very important in guiding choice. For example, if a certain feature is offered with a financial policy unless individuals state that it is not wanted, then take up of that feature tends to be far higher than if individuals have to pro-actively opt into the feature.¹⁰

Applications

The status quo bias and the notion of defaults are brilliantly simple in conception, intuitively obvious and, arguably, second nature to many a marketing manager who has used “opt-outs” to sell additional product features such as payment protection insurance in the past. Another common way in which firms exploit the status quo bias is to offer a “free subscription” for a fixed period, which then reverts automatically to a full payment contract unless the customer actively cancels the subscription. At least one of the authors has learned through experience that, despite the best of intentions, such subscriptions rarely get cancelled and has hence decided not to subscribe to such offers!

However, despite their apparent obviousness and common currency in the commercial world, financial services policymakers are arguably only now realising the full potential of exploiting the status quo bias and defaults. One obvious example is automatic enrolment into personal pension plans. Note that this is not the same as compulsion, as an individual retains the right to opt-out. However, as long as opting-out becomes a conscious choice and requires some effort on the part of the individual, most tend not to. Automatic enrolment has proved to be successful in increasing contributions to such schemes in the US.¹¹ In the UK, an automatic enrolment pension will be phased in for employees who do not currently have a pension and will be known as the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST).¹² It is hoped that the introduction of NEST will help reduce the savings gap in the UK and increase personal provision for retirement. However, with respect to NEST, much detail is still to be finally decided and ultimately, the success or otherwise of the scheme will be at least partially dependent on such details.

As discussed above, closely related to the status quo bias is the tendency of individuals to stick with the default option offered, rather than make a conscious decision. The default option is an important part of what has been termed “choice architecture”,¹³ which encapsulates how choices are framed, or presented, to individuals. Effective choice architecture helps steer individuals towards what would generally be considered the most appropriate choice (in as much as experts are able to agree what that might be!).¹⁴ The authors of “Nudge”, a highly accessible introduction to the area of behavioural economics, provide a number of examples of how defaults may be important in a financial services context.¹⁵ They include one from their own employer, the University of Chicago. Each year, during an “open enrolment period” employees of that institution can change decisions they have made about benefits and pension contributions. This must be done online. As the authors point out, Professors may be sufficiently busy, absent

minded or (surely not) generally disorganised that they somehow do not get round to logging on. Therefore, a default must be decided upon. If the default is to continue the rate of contribution previously stipulated, then this will lead to a far higher level of pension provision than if contributions are reset to zero for the considerable proportion of staff who do not get round to doing anything in the time available.

In the case of pension contributions, the preferred default from a public policy perspective is reasonably clear-cut, as most would agree that regular and consistent payments into schemes should be maintained if at all possible. Indeed, there may be an argument that the default should be to set a steadily increasing contribution year-on-year, up to a maximum percentage of salary. Such “save more tomorrow” schemes have proved successful in the US, where opt out rates have been shown to be as low as 6%¹⁶ and the many that don't opt out will have far healthier retirement funds as a result of steadily increasing contributions. However, for certain other types of benefits the most suitable default option may be less clear cut. Some organisations offer shorter term regular savings schemes or flexible spending accounts. It is less obvious in this case whether it should be assumed that an individual wishes to continue saving as before, as such saving may have been for a specific short term objective which has been achieved (for instance to purchase a new car). A related issue is whether annual car insurance policies should automatically renew in the absence of any correspondence from policyholders. Traditionally cover has lapsed unless a policyholder indicates to the existing provider that he/she wants to renew. However, increasingly, companies are moving to the default being automatic renewal, which at least ensures that drivers are not left without cover due to an administrative oversight!

Defaults may also have an important role to play in an individual's portfolio allocation decisions. Fund investment decisions will have a highly significant impact on returns enjoyed, particularly over a longer term time frame. Traditionally, in many cases, investors have been presented with a list of funds in which they may invest along with copious amounts of information on each fund detailing investment strategy, main holdings, fees, past performance and so on. Investors undoubtedly have all of the information necessary to make a rational, informed choice consistent with their investment objectives, risk preferences and other factors. However, in practice, investors often opt for the default option provided. Related to this, they may employ simple rules of thumb, or heuristics, to simplify the process of choice. Again, excellent examples have been provided in the financial context, from which the following discussion draws.¹⁷ For a period academics in the US could choose between two funds as part of their defined contribution pension plans. One invested exclusively in fixed interest securities and bonds. The other invested mainly in company shares, or equity. Well over half of investors in the plan chose to allocate their contributions 50:50 between the two choices. Over the long term, given historical precedents, such an investment allocation is likely to bring a significantly lower rate of return than an allocation which favours shares to a greater degree. Therefore, the heuristic or rule of thumb of splitting allocations equally between alternatives may not be the most appropriate strategy, although it does at least guarantee some diversification. Generally, research has shown that investors have a tendency to follow what has been termed the 1/n rule and the main insight is

that the set of funds offered to consumers and the manner in which the choice is presented is likely to have a profound impact on investment decisions.¹⁸

Armed with this information, policymakers can use it to their advantage, particularly when considering default options for automatic enrolment, defined contribution plans, such as the soon to be introduced NEST scheme in the UK, the introduction of which is being overseen by the Personal Account Delivery Authority (PADA). PADA carried out a wide-ranging consultation exercise in summer 2009 with the objective of eliciting views on how an investment approach can be implemented which achieves the best results for investors and a primary concern highlighted was what the default investment strategy should be.¹⁹ Numerous responses were received and these have subsequently been summarised, however, little consensus emerged.²⁰ The PADA aims to issue a statement of investment practice before spring 2011 and in formulating such a strategy they would do well to heed the insights available from behavioural economics.

Of course, many millions of pounds continue to be invested through private defined contribution schemes with private companies. In the main, consumers are left to their own devices when making investment decisions for private funds, although of course a number will take advice. It is a moot point whether policymakers should concern themselves with such investment choices and introduce regulatory requirements regarding default options to ensure that investors are pursuing strategies that are suitable to their needs. Indeed, given the regulatory imperative to "Treat Customers Fairly" (TCF)²¹ and that outcome two of the TCF regime highlights the imperative to design products that meet the needs of identified customer groups; it could be argued that companies themselves have an obligation to incorporate default options into products that provide investors with the greatest chance to achieve their objectives.

2.3 Framing Effects and Anchoring Effects

Explanation

The appraisal of alternative options can also depend on the way the choice is presented, or "framed". People have a preference for positive rather than negative frames, an effect which follows on from loss aversion. For instance, in choosing cancer treatment, 82% of patients preferred surgery over radio therapy when surgery was described as having a 90% survival rate. However, only 56% preferred surgery over radio therapy when it was described as having a 10% mortality rate. These two pieces of information are factually equivalent; however, there exists a strong bias in favour of the positive frame²². Although framing is often discussed with reference to positively versus negatively presented information, it applies to the presentation of information more generally. For instance, a fee or rate of return expressed as a percentage may provoke a significantly different behavioural response to the same factual information expressed in absolute monetary terms. The anchoring effect is a type of framing effect where the appraisal of options is affected by an original starting value (or anchor). This is despite the anchor being arbitrarily chosen. For example, when asked to value the same property after being given different anchor values, real estate agents gave valuations that were significantly

correlated with the arbitrary anchors provided (although 90% of them denied being influenced!)²³.

Applications

The crucial lesson from the framing literature is that consumer choice is highly dependent on how information is presented, or framed, and that factually equivalent information can provoke a very different response when framed in a different manner. One example relates to the framing of pricing, an example of attribute framing. It is likely that the typical customer would take a very different view of being told that he/she is paying a 3% up-front charge as opposed to £3000 when deciding whether or not to invest £100,000 into an investment product, not least as many in the population struggle to understand percentages fully. With this in mind, it is perhaps surprising that expressing fees as a percentage of funds invested is being proposed as acceptable under the ongoing Retail Distribution Review²⁴, which aims to make charging transparent at the point of sale.

Another area in which framing has a crucial role to play in financial services is in relation to the presentation of past performance statistics. This is another example of attribute framing. In one sense, it is surprising that potential investors pay any attention at all to such statistics as they are warned that past performance is no guide to likely future returns and the weight of evidence shows little relationship between past and prospective returns²⁵. However, as such data is readily available and one of the few search attributes (i.e. available prior to purchase and use) that consumers can use, it is not surprising that many investors rely on such data when making fund choices.²⁶ Research has shown that the timescale used in past performance presentation can influence investment decisions²⁷, as can whether identical data on past performance is presented in a line graph or as a bar chart representing annual yields.²⁸

Framing may also be influential in determining the degree of risk exposure that investors choose. Consider the following example of how an individual's choice can be manipulated depending on how that choice is framed.²⁹ Firstly, assume that potential investors are presented with three alternative funds labelled *conservative*, *moderate* and *aggressive* from which they have to choose one for their investment. The investors are told that the proportion invested in risky assets is 0%, 40% and 80% respectively in one case and 40%, 70% and 100% respectively in an alternative scenario. Given the tendency to choose the middle option when forced to select one fund, investors will end up with a significantly different exposure to risk depending on how the choice is framed relative to the underlying risk associated with the investment. Presentation of the level of risk associated with investment choices and other associated information is a key consideration for those responsible for ensuring the successful introduction of NEST pensions and is related to the discussion of presentation of default investment options discussed above.

Framing effects may also help account for the rising popularity of valued-added bank accounts of the type offered by all major banks. The promotional material for such accounts often frames the benefit associated with such accounts with reference to the overall cost of individual elements of the package. However, in practice it

is unlikely that all associated services are of use/interest to many account holders, so actual savings will be much smaller.

2.4. Hyperbolic Discounting and Procrastination

Explanation

Intertemporal decisions are those in which the decision maker makes value comparisons between immediate and delayed consequences and an individual's decision in such circumstances will be influenced by his/her time preference. Traditionally, economists have attempted to make sense of time preferences using the concept of an individual discounting rate (IDR) - the rate at which the individual is willing to trade immediate for delayed outcomes. The IDR reflects what an individual wants as compensation for the delay. The IDR will be higher the more an individual is orientated towards the present. Early discounting models have generally assumed that the individual should be consistent in their intertemporal choices, so that their IDR is constant over time and across situations. However, IDR is observed to decline with time horizon, showing a hyperbolic rather than exponential function. In other words, the longer the delay, the larger the factor by which people discount the value of the future outcome.³⁰ IDR also declines with the size of the outcome.³¹ Moreover, consistent with Prospect Theory, IDR for gains has been found to be much higher than for losses of similar magnitude.³² To put all of this into a simple phrase; people have a tendency to prefer short-term gratification over longer term returns. The effects of hyperbolic discounting may be exacerbated by our tendency to procrastinate. When a consumer is aware that prompt action would be in his/her interests but nevertheless delays taking action then procrastination is said to occur.³³

Applications

When people are deciding whether or not to invest for the long term, into investment vehicles such as pension plans, one of the key trade-offs they are making is between present consumption and the ability to fund consumption in the distant future. They are also deciding whether to start investing now, or shortly. The Pension Commission summed up the challenge posed by individuals' tendency to engage in hyperbolic discounting very neatly when they explained that an investor would be willing to forgo some current expenditure now for the prospect of enjoying a more comfortable retirement in 20 years, however that same individual would be less willing to sacrifice current consumption in the short term and is therefore likely to defer starting to save for a pension until "next year".³⁴ Of course, next year, like tomorrow, never comes, so many may never start saving of their own volition. This corollary of hyperbolic discounting helps explain the need for an automatic enrolment pension scheme which takes advantage of the status quo bias and also gives some backing to the old adage that products such as pensions are not bought, but instead have to be sold. The implications of hyperbolic discounting also have some implications for the types of marketing messages that may be effective in encouraging individuals to enrol immediately. In this respect, it is important to emphasise the highly undesirable consequences of delaying entry into a scheme. Money invested relatively early has the most time to grow and provides the opportunity for greatly enhanced fund size. Even a delay of a few years can damage potential returns significantly and companies

should continue to emphasise this crucial point in the clearest terms wherever possible.

2.5 Mental Accounting

Explanation

Mental accounting occurs when sums of money are treated and valued differently depending on where they came from and/or where they are kept.³⁵ Mental accounting violates the standard economic assumption that money is "fungible", meaning that all money is treated equally regardless of its source or destination and doesn't come with labels on. The following provides an example of how the law of fungibility may be breached: We suggest that most people coming to a store to buy a lamp for £50 would travel to a different branch 5 minutes away if told that they could buy the same lamp at the other location for a special sale price of £25, thereby saving £25. However, most people coming to a store to buy a dinner table set for £1500 would not travel to a different branch 5 minutes away if told they could buy the same set at another store for £1475. In both cases, the trade-off is a gain of £25 for 5 minutes of time. However, in the former case, the £25 is compared to £50, whereas in the latter case, it is compared to £1500. According to standard economic theory, £25 should be equally valued regardless of source and if it is worth 5 minutes of an individual's time, then it should be in all cases.

People also have separate mental accounts for different categories of spending and are reluctant to transfer spending from one account to another.³⁶ The most famous illustration of this is the behaviour of New York taxi drivers. A study revealed that these taxi drivers work shorter hours on good days (when there is much custom) and longer hours on bad days. This contradicts traditional economic theory, which says that they should work longer hours on good days so as to maximise their monthly income. The explanation is that these drivers have a separate mental account for each day and set daily earning targets. Each day, they stop working once their target is met, which happens quicker on good days and vice versa.³⁷

Applications

The fact that people tend to engage in mental accounting can have both positive and negative consequences for financial services consumers. Many households have different accounts (in many cases literally but sometimes metaphorically) for everyday expenditure, saving for holidays, saving to fund education of children and so on. In one sense, this may help individuals and families to budget, as they can ensure that they do not over-commit in terms of expenditure in any one area and can control overall expenditure more effectively as a result. However, there are also potentially negative consequences. It is not uncommon for a financial services consumer to have large outstanding balances on store and credit cards that are carried over month by month and sufficient funds to settle the balances in one or more savings accounts simultaneously.³⁸ From a financial perspective this is unlikely to make sense, as the rate of interest charged on outstanding balances on store and credit cards is likely to be significantly higher than the rate of return on savings. Also, it has been argued that in periods where investors are enjoying significant stock market returns, they have a tendency to take far more, and

perhaps excessive, risk with their gains, which they treat in a slightly different manner to the funds initially invested.³⁹ Mental accounting may also help explain why many investors appear to be willing to pay perhaps thousands of pounds in commission, rather than a few hundred pounds in the form of a fee when taking investment advice. Commission isn't paid explicitly by the investor, but is normally deducted from funds prior to investment. This is in stark contrast to a fee, which has to be paid directly from the investor to the advisor. Of course, post-RDR implementation fees will be the norm, but it may well be that investors remain reluctant to pay them.

2.6 Availability Effect and Salience

Explanation

People judge the likelihood of an outcome occurring by how easily the outcome can be brought to mind or imagined. They are said to rely primarily on evidence which is most easily available to them and/or evidence that has particular salience. As such, they usually overestimate the likelihood of outcomes that are particularly memorable, highly emotional or have happened recently.⁴⁰ For instance, due to the popularity of the movie *Jaws* and the large amount of hype associated with the reporting of shark attacks, people tend to assume that they are more likely to be killed by sharks than by falling aeroplane parts, although in truth, the latter is 30 times more likely.⁴¹ Another example is the high level of insurance purchases made immediately after disasters such as floods and earthquakes, which gradually decline when memories fade.⁴² The availability effect is also used as a heuristic when people make inferences about what is likely to happen based primarily on events of which they have direct experience. An example of this is when people resort to the old adage "Well, granddad chain-smoked all his life but was never ill and lived to the age of 90" when deciding whether or not to quit smoking. This is a classic example of ignoring the overwhelming weight of evidence in the public domain in favour of a case-study based on an unrepresentative sample of one person.

Applications

Insurance companies may well be able to exploit the knowledge that an individual is far more likely to purchase insurance that covers the consequences of natural disasters by using promotional activities that stress the availability and salience of such events. Many may be of an age which means that they remember the Commercial Union advertising campaign from the early 1980s with the strap-line "We won't make a drama out of a crisis". These factors may also help explain the tendency for investors to invest too much money in the stock market when it has enjoyed a period of strong growth and too little when it has been falling and prices generally represent a bargain. From a policymaking perspective, the important lesson is to ensure that availability and salience are used where possible to re-enforce the positive outcomes associated with desired behaviours.

2.7 Overconfidence

Explanation

People have a natural tendency to be overconfident. It is a well-documented psychological bias. People's confidence systematically exceeds the accuracy of their choices. For example,

when given market reports of twenty stocks and asked to predict stock price changes, people rated their own accuracy in prediction at 68% while the actual accuracy was only 47%⁴³ (which is consistent with the random walk hypothesis). Most people also think they are above average drivers, that they are more likely to live longer than others and are more likely to outperform the class average when studying.⁴⁴ However, only laypeople making decisions display significant overconfidence. Experts are usually more realistic in their expectations.

Applications

The fact that individuals display overconfidence in many facets of their life may well help explain why large numbers of consumers opt to forgo the opportunity to insure themselves against unforeseen circumstances, as they have a misplaced confidence that such occurrences are less to happen than is actually the case. Hence the old adage that insurance isn't bought, but needs to be sold. It may also explain why most investors choose actively managed funds rather than passive index trackers, when evidence suggests that there is a greater chance that their managed fund will underperform the relevant index (and tracker fund) rather than outperform it. The investor in question may be overconfident in his/her ability to pick a fund that is likely to outperform.

2.8. Trust

Explanation

Recent literature in economics has highlighted the role of intangible, 'soft' influences such as culture, social capital and other-regarding preferences on commercial interactions. Among these, trust has recently enjoyed particular attention. Faced with incomplete information and the potential for the opportunism of others, people rely on trust regarding the behaviour of their trading partners.⁴⁵ The more an individual trusts another individual or organisation, the less it is necessary to check information and impose controls. As a result, trust acts as a lubricant with the potential to reduce the cost of transacting significantly. Hence, trust is an important heuristic that people use when taking trusted others' word for something without having to check for themselves.⁴⁶

Applications

It has been suggested that the so called third sector of voluntary and community organisations may be better placed to deliver advice and services to the socially and financially excluded than the private or public sector as they are generally more trusted by such segments of the marketplace.⁴⁷ However, studies of trust in financial services by the Financial Services Research Forum have repeatedly shown that levels of trust in financial services organisations are higher than is normally assumed and compares favourably with other commercial and public sector organisations.

3. Conclusions

The insights afforded by behavioural economics are of great interest to policymakers and practitioners in financial services. An understanding of the implications of behavioural economics for elements of consumer behaviour may help in fashioning a choice architecture that is more likely to bring the desired consumer responses. From a commercial perspective, the objective is to use the lessons provided by behavioural perspectives to enable companies to present choices in a manner that maximises take-up of products and services, encourages or engineers ongoing behavioural loyalty and thereby helps to cement relationships between firms and customers. From the policymakers' perspective, insights from behavioural economics may be used to encourage consumers to engage with financial services to a greater degree and to make increased levels of provision in areas such as pensions and other saving and, whilst doing so, to make ongoing investment decisions which are in the consumer's long term interests. This paper has provided an explanation of a number of aspects of behavioural economics and has supplied numerous examples of how these heuristics, biases and mental shortcuts may impact on financial services products and markets. In particular, the importance of loss aversion, the status quo bias and defaults and framing effects have been highlighted. However, at present it could be argued that Government and policymakers are, to all intents and purposes, placing practically all of their hope and emphasis on behavioural economics as the one approach that will cure the myriad problems associated with consumer behaviour in financial services markets. In what is an undoubtedly complex and pluralistic age, whilst behavioural economics may be the source of many important insights, it is unlikely to provide all of the answers required.

References and End Notes

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