

BROWN: Chant shows perils of poor decision-making

September 20, 2013 - 5:48pm BY JASON I. BROWN

Term has started again, and I am back to teaching.

One of the courses I am instructing this fall is called optimization, where mathematics is used to find the optimal solutions to problems. The entire course is devoted to providing procedures to maximize what you want, which for those in business is money, money, money.

But my mind drifts, as it often does, and I can't help but see how the bigger picture of optimization can influence better decision-making in general as all decisions do not necessarily involve money.

In general, we want to maximize our utility, that is, the value of what we desire. That may mean money, but it can also be other things such as happiness, confidence and self-esteem.

This last month was depressing and infuriating. I was nauseated watching the Saint Mary's University students' misogynistic chant. What hit me was the big role that decision making played in the fiasco.

One of the things I stress in the optimization course is: what we are after in each problem is the true global maximum — what is truly the best overall solution.

The implication is that you don't settle for a local maximum, which only seems to be the best choice compared to the other immediate ones at hand.

Moreover, it may seem obvious that you should always move in the direction of increasing your utility, what you value. But that approach can often take you far, far away from the best thing for you.

When you want to reach the highest mountaintop, you shouldn't necessarily climb to the top of the nearest hill and stay there.

I think the Saint Mary's students must have thought that going along with the chant improved their utility, perhaps fitting in better socially with their peers. To do the right thing and stand up against the chant would, in the short term, have left them on the outside.

But their choice to improve their utility marginally by singing their offensive song ultimately led to a sharper decrease in their overall utility. Had they only set their sights higher and made a better choice for long-term gain!

Life is full of choices to marginally improve your utility (or more often, not decreasing your utility) in the short term versus intentionally making choices that might seem to counterintuitively direct us toward immediate decreasing benefits.

Alcohol and drug consumption among adolescents is a case in point. Studies have shown that teens don't underestimate risks of dangerous lifestyle choices, they overestimate the value of partaking of these choices.

Peer pressure and the desire to fit in direct adolescents toward usage, but the increased perceived utility is only momentary.

Whether it is pushing back against peer pressure or putting in the long effort required in mastering a skill, choosing to decrease our utility over the short term is indeed a necessary part of reaching a global optimum in our children's lives.

So encourage your children to talk with you about their utilities and decision-making. So much for them, and all of us, rides on making the smart choices.

Jason I. Brown is a professor of Mathematics at Dalhousie University in Halifax. His research that used mathematics to

uncover how the Beatles played the opening chord of A Hard Day's Night has garnered worldwide attention. He is also the author "Our Days Are Numbered: How Mathematics Orders Our Lives."

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