

Supersonic passenger aircraft, the Oedipus Trap and the reluctance to reverse a decision

ESSAY

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Why is it so difficult to reconsider a decision? At the very least, mountain-savvy Norwegians should remember: 'Turn back before it's too late, there's no shame in turning back!' Economic, psychological, historical and evolutionary biology factors help to explain the reluctance to reverse a decision.



Plane spotters watch Concorde take off for the last time from Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris on 30 May 2003. Illustrative photo: Christine Grunnet/NTB

Historically, there are several examples of extensive projects that have come to a dead end that could have been avoided. In economic literature, this phenomenon is referred to as the 'sunk cost fallacy' [\(1\)](#). The term describes behaviour characterised by an unwillingness to reverse loss-making courses of action because of the commitment felt to the resources already invested in it. The pattern of behaviour is irrational because the facts indicate that the action should be abandoned. A well-known example was the development of the supersonic passenger aircraft Concorde.

The aircraft, which made its first transatlantic flight on 26 September 1973, was the result of an eleven-year prestigious collaboration between France and the UK. The aircraft was a technical challenge of epic proportions, and consequently very costly. It had already become clear early in the planning process that the aircraft would never be financially viable, but the parties involved in the project continued to invest enormous sums – loosely described as the 'Concorde fallacy' [\(2\)](#).

Patient records system and Ullevål hospital

Psychological studies have shown that the greater the initial investment in a project, the more willingness there is to continue investing in it regardless of the outcome [\(3\)](#). Even in academia, where, based on the principle of falsification and the ideal of challenging the null hypothesis, a pro-active attitude to changing course should be expected when observations and data so dictate, the opposite is sometimes experienced. In the words of Max Planck (1858–1947), the originator of quantum theory: 'Science advances one funeral at a time.' In other words, our irrationality blinds us to new knowledge.

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These same mechanisms can be seen in hospitals. Whether *Helseplattformen* (the new platform for patient records system in Norway) and the introduction of new IT technology in Central Norway Regional Health Authority are investment failures is difficult to know for certain, but the current bill for the IT system is more than NOK 5 billion (the original budget for the platform was NOK 3.7 billion) [\(4\)](#). In Finland, where the IT system has been named Apotti, the project has cost NOK 8 billion to date, and the solution has still not been implemented [\(5\)](#).

«The implementation of the Gaustad project seems to be so driven by prestige that local democracy in Oslo local authority has been sidelined»

The controversial decision to sell the Ullevål hospital site to part-finance a new hospital in Gaustad may end up being another loss-making project. The existing Rikshospitalet building would be demolished, and one of the authors of this essay has described the Gaustad project as a dead end [\(6\)](#). The implementation of the project seems to be so driven by prestige that local democracy in Oslo local authority has been sidelined [\(7\)](#). Protests from employee representatives throughout the pre-planning phase have been disregarded. The chair of the Urban Development Committee in Oslo local authority, Haakon Riekes, (confirmed in personal communication) stated at a debate meeting arranged by one of the authors (Paal H.H. Lindenskov) for

Frogner Venstre in June 2022, that the building application is so poorly formulated that it would never have been approved by Oslo local authority. Riekeles added that public sector projects of this scale typically end up being two to three times over budget, in this case with a cost estimate of up to NOK 150 billion.

Evolutionary explanations

Is there a phylogenetic explanation for this mechanism where, in our frailty, we are blinded and fail to see the writing on the wall? The sand digger wasp (*Ammophila campestris*), which belongs to a family of solitary wasps, can serve as an example. The wasps build nests in the form of tunnels in sand or soil, where the wasps systematically place their larvae according to size (depending on age). The larvae are fed with insects paralysed by a sting from the wasp's venomous sting, and these are distributed proportionally, whereby the larger larvae receive a larger share of the prey. Gerard Baerends' groundbreaking studies on digger wasps demonstrated a biological variant of the Concorde fallacy [\(8, 9\)](#). While the digger wasp was out hunting for insects, Baerends switched the placement of the larvae. When the digger wasp returned with prey to the nests, it distributed the number of insects based on the initial assessment of the size of the larvae, without considering that the larvae had now changed place. The decision on the distribution of insects had already been made, and it was not changed despite the swap.



Rikshospitalet, 2017. Photo: Torstein Bøe/NTB

Are we humans (decision-makers) also bound by such primary assumptions, which we are unable to correct despite new information indicating that circumstances have changed? Evolutionarily, it seems reasonable to resist changing a decision as it requires both time and effort. Moreover, a lack of willingness to change and re-evaluate a decision in light of new data can weaken the outcome and, in the worst case, lead to permanent damage. The

phenomenon also occurs in the medical world. For example, a tentative diagnosis can be directly misleading, becoming a scotoma for an additional diagnosis, and sometimes delaying a necessary rediagnosis (10). Other classic examples we have experienced include surgeons who refuse to acknowledge bleeding in a vascular anastomosis or leaking in an intestinal anastomosis, or an anaesthesiologist who does not accept the suboptimal effect of a nerve block. Or even worse: an anaesthesiologist with a delayed response to incorrectly intubating the oesophagus instead of the trachea, despite not detecting end-tidal carbon dioxide in the exhaled air.

The Oedipus Trap

King Oedipus ended up marrying his mother and killing his father, but he could not be blamed for this as he was unaware of their respective identities. The tragedy ended with the mother taking her own life and Oedipus blinding himself in sheer despair (11). Even though he was innocent, the burden of knowing the truth became unbearable for a mortal. This is the essence of the Oedipus Trap. If failure is inevitable, it is better not to know about the factors that could have prevented the failure (12).

«If failure is inevitable, it is better not to know about the factors that could have prevented the failure»

There are several modern-day examples of people who have made serious mistakes stubbornly defending their actions despite extensive damning evidence. This is an example of what is called confirmation bias (13). In pure self-deception, information is interpreted in favour of the decision that has been made. Key decision-makers can easily fall into the confirmation bias trap and preserve their own erroneous decision in the blind spot for a better alternative. The peculiar thing about confirmation bias is that the irreversibility is often proportional to the personal effort involved in making the primary decision (13). The cognitive dissonance that arises in such a situation can further consolidate our self-deception (14).

Our aversion to giving up

Norwegian cross-country skier Petter Northug described the runner up in a competition as the first loser. Our culture cultivates people who do not give up and eventually succeed in their endeavours. Countless books have been written praising people who have succeeded in the face of adversity. However, many publications conclude that we should instead cultivate the ability to give up, since giving up a loss-making project would be a gain both for us as individuals and for society (15). Annie Duke, one of the most successful female poker players of all time, has written about the benefits of quitting (16). According to her, the main difference between an amateur and a professional poker player is

that the professional folds their hand more often and earlier than the amateur. Even if you have invested in your hand, a sober analysis indicating that the gain is not worth the effort should take precedence over continuing to play, thus avoiding the sunk cost fallacy. Economic literature points out the benefit of giving up in time and accepting the loss in order to avoid incurring even greater losses (16).

«Many key actors have invested heavily in terms of money and political prestige in ensuring that these projects are carried out, despite increasing costs signalling a need to reverse decisions»

In recent years, several large projects and numerous reforms of various kinds can, in our view, be interpreted as examples of the sunk cost fallacy. Many key actors have invested heavily in terms of money and political prestige in ensuring that these projects are carried out, despite increasing costs signalling a need to reverse decisions. We as authors cannot fully judge whether these projects are economically viable for society or not, but it is intriguing to consider whether insight into the reluctance to reverse a decision during the construction of a supersonic aircraft, the home economics of a wasp and the tragic fate of a legendary Greek king could have influenced the decisions.

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