Snap decisions aren't such a good idea

By Steve Connor

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Snap decisions are likely to be worse than ones based on clear thinking, say psychologists who have criticised the publicity surrounding books suggesting that unconscious deliberation leads to a better choice than conscious consideration.

Researchers from the University of New South Wales in Australia revisited a study by Dutch psychologists which concluded that rather than making a big decision based on serious homework, it is better to leave it to your gut instinct. The Dutch team, led by Ap Dijksterhuis of Amsterdam University, said that once one had the information, deciding was "best done with conscious thought for simple decisions, but left to unconscious thought – to 'sleep on it' – when the decision is complex".

The findings were widely publicised in the media and formed the basis of the arguments in the book Blink by Malcolm Gladwell, who claimed that decision-makers could do better if they made snap decisions rather than one based on a conscious effort to look at the facts dispassionately. The Australian scientists came to the opposite conclusion. They found that in experiments where people were given the choice of making decisions based on snap decisions or conscious deliberation, it was the conscious deliberation that more often resulted in the best choice, even from complex decisions.

Ben Newell, the leader of latest study published in the Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, said there was a belief that unconscious thought involved in a snap decision could be better at making choices than those based on conscious effort, but this did not appear to be the case.

"Claims that we make superior 'snap' decisions by trusting intuition or through the power of unconscious thought have received a great deal of attention in the media, Dr Newell said. "At best these sort of headlines are misleading. At worst, they're outright dangerous."

"We found little evidence of the superiority of unconscious thought for complex decisions. Our research suggests that unconscious thought is more susceptible to irrelevant factors, such as how recently information has been seen rather than how important it is."