

The Paradoxical Consequences of Choice: Often Good for the Individual, Perhaps Less So for Society?

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Abstract

The proliferation of products and services, together with the rise of social media, affords people the opportunity to make more choices than ever before. However, the requirement to think in terms of choice, or to use a choice mind-set, may have powerful but unexamined consequences for judgment and decision making, both for the chooser and for others. A choice mind-set leads people to engage in cognitive processes of discrimination and separation, to emphasize personal freedom and independent agency, and to focus on themselves rather than others. Reviewing research from social psychology, legal studies, health and nutrition, and consumer behavior, we found evidence that although a choice mind-set may have positive consequences for the individual, the accumulated outcome of thinking in terms of individual choice may have detrimental outcomes for society. Given the prevalence of choice in all domains of life, more research examining the full range of the consequences of choice is urgently needed.

Keywords

choice, mind-set, individual, society, agency

Choice is a defining feature of contemporary societies. The opportunity for choice is a prominent marker of economic development across the world. Social media prods us to make choices every minute—to “like” a post, to retweet, to accept a friend request, and so on. Given the ubiquity of choice (Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz & Cheek, 2017), it is imperative to understand the consequences of making choices and of construing behavior in terms of choice. The first wave of research on choice in psychology primarily defined *choice* in terms of the number of options—the more options available, the more choices people have. Although too many options can have negative consequences (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010), the opportunity to choose improves people’s persistence, performance, intrinsic motivation, and subjective well-being (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

In this review, we will focus on the second wave of research on choice, which centers on the salience of the concept of choice. The repeated opportunity and requirement for choice can give people a *choice mind-set*—a tendency to think about or interpret behavior as

a matter of choice. Consider the following scenario. You arrive at the airport. You check your watch, and notice you have some time to get lunch. The security line at the gate is long, but you purchased the priority boarding option. Just as you take out your phone to listen to a podcast, an announcement requests that all electronics be switched off. You instead browse the in-flight entertainment console. Shortly after, a flight attendant walks through the aisle offering drinks. In this scenario, how many choices are involved in completing this trip? 103? 72? 5? If many people engaged in this identical sequence of actions, there would likely be variation in how many choices they perceived themselves making.

Consistent with this idea, research has found that even when all participants were induced to engage in an identical series of actions in the lab, some perceived

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that they made more choices than did others; and even when all participants were presented with a single option, some perceived that they had a choice, but others did not (Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010). Thus, the mind-set component is a key psychological element in the act of making a choice. A choice mind-set, we theorize, is the result of this sustained practice of making choices. Once people have an accessible choice mind-set, even without multiple options available, they tend to construe actions or interpret their own and others' actions through a lens of choice.

Activating a Choice Mind-Set

The first wave of research on choice focused on manipulating actual choices: Some participants were asked to choose from a number of options, whereas others were not (Cordova & Lepper, 1996). In such studies, participants in the no-choice condition were often yoked to those in the choice condition such that participants with no choice received the item selected by the previous participant in the choice condition (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). In this method, choice was confounded with whether participants received a more preferred or a less preferred item. Alternatively, researchers have manipulated whether participants are asked to choose from a small or a large number of options (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). This method suffers from two potential confounds: Choosing from more options can be more cognitively taxing because participants need to consider and evaluate more options (Vohs et al., 2008), and the option sets that participants are presented with are not identical across conditions.

In the second wave of research on the choice mind-set, four different manipulations have been used that do not suffer from the aforementioned confounds. Researchers asked participants to recall choices that they made the previous day as opposed to things (actions) they engaged in the previous day (Savani & Rattan, 2012).

In another set of studies, participants watched a video showing an actor spending an evening at home and were asked to press a button whenever they thought the actor made a choice or instead touched an object (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011). A third manipulation required participants to read either an article that argued that no matter what, people always have a choice or an article that argued that choice is an illusion because people are always constrained by their circumstances (Briley, Danziger, & Li, 2018; Kricheli-Katz, 2012). Finally, behavioral economists have developed a nominal choice manipulation in which either the participant or the computer makes an inconsequential choice (e.g., whether a green ball or a

blue ball indicates more money; Cappelen, Fest, Sørensen, & Tungodden, 2013). All four manipulations encourage people to construe actions as choices or outcomes as consequences of choices without having them make a consequential choice. Researchers would benefit from comparing the effects of the various manipulations of choice mind-set on the same set of outcomes and comparing whether the effects of certain manipulations are more culture general than others.

Consequences of a Choice Mind-Set for the Individual

A recent wave of studies has identified some consequences of a choice mind-set (see Fig. 1 for an overview). First, a choice mind-set nudges people to construe newly encountered stimuli in terms of choice. For example, negotiators who recalled their past choices were more likely to believe that their counterparts have a choice even if their counterparts said that they have reached their limit; this enhanced perception of choice led negotiators to ignore ultimatums and persist longer in the negotiation, thereby obtaining better outcomes (Ma, Yang, & Savani, 2019).

Second, to make a choice, the decision maker must determine the dimensions on which the options differ from each other—if all options are the same, one might as well pick at random. For example, when choosing applicants to admit, a college admissions officer might recognize that all candidates have high grade point averages and excellent letters of recommendation. However, to choose one or more candidates, the admissions officer needs to focus on the dimensions on which the candidates differ, such as the diversity of their interests or the creativity of their essay responses. Thus, being in a choice mind-set likely activates cognitive processes associated with separation and discrimination more than those associated with connection and integration (Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009). Consistent with this idea, past research found that a choice mind-set increased analytic thinking (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2017), which is defined as greater attention to focal objects rather than background objects (e.g., when shown an image of fish swimming in an aquarium, analytic thinkers focus primarily on the fish, whereas holistic thinkers focus also on the plants, rocks, and other background items; Miyamoto, 2013).

Third, construing actions as choices puts the spotlight on the decision maker. Whereas people may engage in actions automatically, a choice is typically a more deliberative behavior that reflects an independent or disjoint model of agency, according to which “actions are ‘freely’ chosen contingent on one’s own preferences, goals, intentions, [and] motives” (Markus &

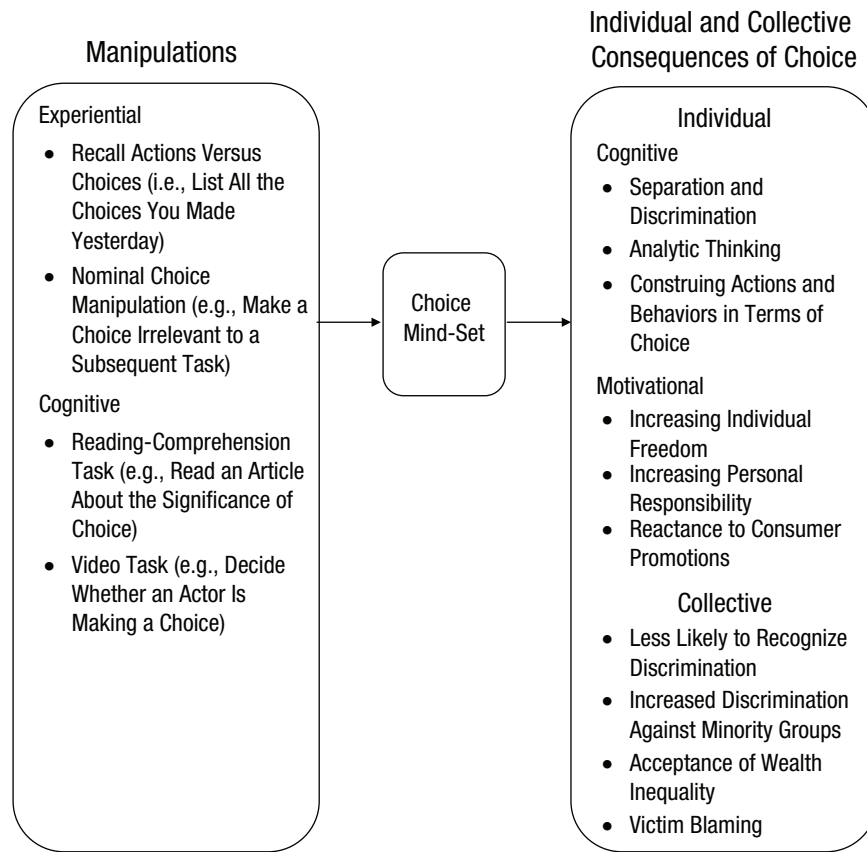


Fig. 1. Overview of research on choice mind-sets. In such research, experiential and cognitive manipulations are used to influence people's choice mind-sets. In turn, the change in mind-sets affects people's perceptions of their own and others' choices, both at the individual and collective level.

Kitayama, 2003, p. 7). Consistent with this idea, research has found that people with stronger belief in free will are more likely to enjoy making choices (Feldman, Baumeister, & Wong, 2014), and construing actions as choices increases people's support for social policies that increase individuals' freedom, such as legalizing drugs (Savani et al., 2011). Further, when the idea of choice was made salient, consumers rejected game-based promotions (e.g., "answer this question correctly to unlock a discount") because they construed such promotions as a threat to their personal freedom (Briley et al., 2018).

Consequences of a Choice Mind-Set for the Collective

If the salience of choice highlights individual agency, a choice mind-set is likely to lead people to attribute greater personal responsibility for outcomes. Stay-at-home mothers who perceived their workplace departure as a choice were less likely to recognize workplace discrimination as a source of gender inequality (Stephens

& Levine, 2011). People were more likely to hold others accountable for choosing unhealthy options over healthy ones when they themselves were presented with a choice between the two (Porter, 2013). Further, a heightened belief in choice increased people's support for discrimination against minority groups such as gay men and working mothers (Kricheli-Katz, 2012, 2013).

A choice mind-set also has problematic consequences for the collective. After recalling a few choices, people were less disturbed by the inequality between the average pay of a CEO and that of the average worker, probably because they construed inequality as a consequence of people's choices (Savani & Rattan, 2012). People in a choice mind-set were more likely to blame victims for their plight, presumably because they thought that the victims were personally responsible for their situations (Savani et al., 2011). This effect of choice has important societal and policy implications. If people perceive that their own and others' outcomes are a consequence of personal choices, they may ignore collective factors that are also responsible for people's outcomes, such as government agencies, private foundations, and universities,

which formulate practices and policies that create or solve various societal problems (Hook & Markus, 2019).

Fourth, choice allows people to express their own preferences, beliefs, values, and goals, which can diminish people's focus on others. Consistent with this idea, past research found that participants who made trivial choices felt less empathy for a poor child in need (Savani et al., 2011) who had little to no control over his situation. This research indicates that choice leads to a reduced focus on other people even when targets cannot be reasonably held responsible for their circumstances. This study also showed that the idea of choice played a smaller role in India, a more interdependent cultural context. Although choice is increasingly available in many Indian contexts, it is not yet widely culturally supported and inscribed. Given that the meaning of choice varies across cultures (Markus & Schwartz, 2010), it would not be surprising that the effects of choice may also vary across cultures. For example, whereas people in individualistic contexts tend to view choice as a means for exercising independent agency, people in other contexts can view choice as a means to foster relationships, to meet expectations, and to achieve interdependent agency (Markus, 2016; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007), indicating that some of the mechanisms of a choice mind-set may operate somewhat differently in more collectivistic cultures. However, little research has directly compared the effects of choice mind-set across cultures.

Future Directions

The research reviewed above suggests that choice is not an unalloyed good; it is a double-edged sword. The objective of this brief review is to suggest the wide range of research questions that arise when choice is considered in the context of both individual and collective consequences.

Given the predominantly negative consequences of a choice mind-set on societal well-being, how may we counteract these effects? Choosing for other people may make others' needs, wants, and desires more salient than one's own, potentially increasing people's focus on others' welfare.

Further, with reference to the cognitive consequences of choice (i.e., increased analytic thinking), could asking people to think about how the options are similar to each other when they are making a choice help reduce the processes of discrimination and separation associated with a choice mind-set? One possibility is that the increased salience of similarities would offset the decision maker's focus on differences—a focus typically associated with making a choice. Alternatively, focusing on similarities might not have such an effect

because when options are similar on one attribute, people perceive the differences on other attributes as larger in magnitude (Mellers & Biagini, 1994) and seek more information about how the options differ from each other (Brockenholtz, Albert, Aschenbrenner, & Schmalhofer, 1991).

Highlighting personal agency clearly has the potential to improve individual well-being. For example, full-time working women still earn only 79¢ for each dollar that men earn in the United States (PayScale, 2019). Women are also often subject to harassment and unacceptable working conditions (Chatterjee, 2018). A sense of agency and empowerment activated by choice could aid women and other minority populations to counteract harassment and negotiate better salaries and work conditions. With increasing demands on time, people can find their behavior (e.g., spending hours responding to e-mails) patterned in ways that can sometimes reduce their life satisfaction (Kong, Wang, & Zhao, 2014). Activating a choice mind-set, with its emphasis on personal agency, may lead people to actively choose how to spend their time to maximize their subjective well-being (e.g., choosing to respond by phone rather than e-mail).

However, the emphasis on personal freedom associated with choice can also lead people to oppose interventions aimed at improving their physical and financial well-being because such interventions can be construed as reducing one's right to choose. Public health campaigns to reduce the consumption of sugary drinks or sodas often meet fierce resistance (Hook & Markus, 2019). Similarly, the increased focus on one's own preferences, which accompanies choice, may reduce people's concern for victims of climate change and pollution, thereby reducing their contribution to societal goods. Potentially, resistance to such policies could be reduced by framing them as choices, for example, "*choose* to create a more sustainable Earth." This language of choice might persuade individuals to commit to more sustainable behaviors, although its effectiveness would require systemic assistance to create compatible choice architectures (Sunstein, 2019).

It is also possible that the emphasis on personal agency associated with a choice mind-set and its range of consequences could make individuals less susceptible to both manipulation and persuasion. This could have some good outcomes if individuals resist manipulation by advertisers coaxing them to buy junk food (Bryan, Yeager, & Hinojosa, 2019) or by paid influencers urging them to buy anything and everything. Yet it could also have detrimental consequences if individuals react negatively to policies aimed at increasing individual or societal welfare. In this sense, mindfulness about the sources of one's choices and how they are

shaped can have both positive and negative outcomes for individuals and society. Specifying these consequences for a diverse array of sociocultural contexts is a promising future research agenda.

Recommended Reading

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- Savani, K., Stephens, N. M., & Markus, H. R. (2011). (See References). A series of studies on how choice mind-set reduces focus on other people.
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- Schwartz, B., & Cheek, N. N. (2017). (See References). An overview of the relationship among choice, freedom, and well-being and implications for policy.

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