

# CHOICE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

## Challenges for the New Millennium

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*"Freedom is the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternatives of choice. Without the possibility of choice, and the exercise of choice, a man is not a man but a member, an instrument, a thing."*

—Attributed to Thomas Jefferson, circa 1795



It is becoming vital for business leaders to have a more comprehensive understanding of what really motivates people both at home and in other parts of the world.

From the beginning of U.S. history, the concept of choice has been glorified. Liberty, after all, is enshrined, subordinate only to life itself in the Declaration of Independence. Even today, the glorification of choice permeates many aspects of American life, from the plethora of options available in local grocery stores, where there are often aisles devoted solely to different types of potato chips or soft drinks, to the use of choice, or more specifically “pro-choice,” as a persuasive device in current political debate. In our day-to-day lives, the choices we make may range from the trivial, such as what to eat and what to wear, to the consequential, such as what career to undertake and whom to marry. Inherent in all of these practices is the belief that choice is both desirable and powerful.

Indeed, the glorification of choice is self-evident, even in the disciplines of economics, political science, psychology, management and marketing, to name just a few. In general, academic research and theory have supported American beliefs about choice by repeatedly demonstrating across many domains of inquiry that the provision of choice

enhances human motivation, which in turn can be linked to numerous beneficial consequences. In particular, for many decades American psychologists have shown the provision of choice to produce numerous psychological benefits, theorized to occur as a result of increased levels of perceived control and intrinsic motivation. According to this research, when individuals are given a choice, their feelings of self-determination, their experience of intrinsic motivation and often their actual task performance are significantly increased. Conversely, the absence or removal of a choice has been shown to have detrimental effects on human motivation, performance and even health status.

In Western cultures, educational research has shown that the mere provision of trivial choices, such as what color pen to use when completing homework assignments and in what order to do math problems, can have powerful beneficial consequences on both children's interest in their schoolwork and their learning of their school material. Similarly, health officials discovered that if elderly patients in a nursing home were given a choice about when to watch a movie, such perceptions of choice and personal control actually improved their health and increased their life span by approximately 18 months.

The belief that choice is inherently motivating has also been the basis for myriad organizational theories and practices. The widely regarded theories of participative management and individual goal setting, for example, assume that the provision of choice enhances

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employee job satisfaction, motivation and performance. Common managerial wisdom in the West, then, encourages the promotion of employee autonomy and the provision of work-related choices as ways to enhance employee satisfaction and productivity.

Similarly, the mechanisms presumed to underlie the postulated benefits of choice do not appear to be mysterious. Clearly, we assume, different individuals will have different personal preferences, and certainly the more choices that are available, the more likely it is that everybody will be able to find and select alternatives that best match their personal preferences. In addition, we believe that people who have been offered a choice should feel a sense of autonomy, control and empowerment.

But are these principles truly as self-evident, or as universal, as they might first appear? Researchers have rarely examined the possibility that choice may not always be rewarding and that the absence of choice may not always be dysfunctional. As the new millennium approaches, and as organizations become increasingly globalized and competitive, it is becoming vital for business leaders to have a more comprehensive understanding of what really motivates people both at home and in other parts of the world. In my research with global and U.S. organizations, my research associates and I have been investigating circumstances in which we find that people actually prefer to have their choices restricted or entirely removed.

#### CHOICE AND CULTURE

One recent and highly influential analysis by Hazel Markus of Stanford University, Shinabu Kitayama of Kyoto University and Harry Triandis of the University of Illinois, experts in the field of cultural psychology, implies that preferences for, and benefits of, choice might well vary across different cultural contexts. In particular, these authors have suggested that whereas personal agency is an essential element of the self-identities of American individualists, it may be considerably less relevant to the self-worth of members of more collectivistic cultures, characteristic of Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, for example. If so, then the links between the provision of choice and job satisfaction, motivation and performance may prove less universal and more particularly relevant for North Americans and western Europeans.

Westerners, suggest Markus, Kitayama and Triandes, possess a self-identity as fundamentally independent. Such individuals will strive for independence, seek a sense of individual autonomy and desire to express their personal preferences in order to establish their uniqueness within their environments.

The strength of this link between the expression of choice and the concept of self for many Americans can be easily illustrated with a familiar example. John goes out to dinner with friends. As he looks over the menu, he spots a favorite dish that sounds tempting—perhaps the grilled prawns. To his dismay, however, he listens as the two companions sitting across from him order this same item. Suddenly, John faces what we might call a “dilemma of individuality” and must decide whether to go ahead and order the same dish, despite the fact that others at the table have already done so. Even if he resists the temptation to change his planned order, he may still find himself feeling obliged to offer some prefatory apology or explanation for his decision in order to show that he is not merely a conformist (for example, “Gosh, I hate to be such a copycat” or “You know, I was planning to order that dish all along”).

By contrast, consider a different cultural context in which the members possess a more interdependent model of the self. As opposed to American individualists, Markus, Kitayama and Triandes theorize, members of more interdependent cultures strive for interconnectedness and belongingness with their social in-groups by seeking to maintain harmony.

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For such persons, the exercise of personal choice may have considerably less value. Indeed, in some situations the exercise of personal choice might even pose a threat. Interdependent selves, therefore, might actually prefer to accept choices expressed by others—if doing so enables them to fulfill the superordinate cultural goal of group harmony and belongingness.

Thus, in the more interdependent cultures that make up most of the non-Western world, the apparent dilemma facing our hypothetical diner in the scenario above is likely to seem puzzling. In most Eastern countries, sharing a common menu would be standard procedure when dining out, and it would instead be the assertion of some distinctive individual preference that would require some explanation or apology. If Yuko disliked the shellfish that was being served, her “dilemma of belongingness” would be whether to just pick politely at a dinner she could not enjoy or to express her distinctiveness and potentially threaten the harmony of the group around the table.

When I initially began my research on choice and motivation, I compared the attitudes of Chinese and Japanese factory workers to

those of Anglo-Americans in the United States. To begin with, we found that whereas it was very difficult to have a conversation about choice with Asians, it was very difficult to have a conversation about the need for harmony with Americans. There were dramatic cultural differences in the emphasis on and reverence toward these terms.

Both American and Japanese factory employees were asked to catalogue the choices they had made during a normal workday and rate how important each choice was to them. American employees reported having made nearly 50 percent more choices than their Asian counterparts. In addition, the Americans gave significantly higher ratings of importance to their choices than did the Asians. Moreover, these employees were also asked to list occasions on which they would wish not to have a choice. Unlike the Asians, 30 percent of the Americans said that they could not imagine a single circumstance in which they would prefer not to have a choice.

Currently, my research with Citigroup is examining the role of choice and such other motivating factors as money and job security on employee satisfaction and motivation in 12 different countries, including employees from Asia, Latin America, Europe, Australia and the Middle East. Thus far, our findings reveal that even among employees in consumer branches in the United States, we can observe considerable differences in what motivates employees. While having the ability to choose when to take work breaks and

how to complete one's work is predictive of employee satisfaction and performance among Anglo-Americans and African-Americans, it has no relevance to the job satisfaction and performance of Asian-American and Hispanic employees. By contrast, we find that for Asian-Americans it is the amount of responsibility they have that predicts their job satisfaction and performance.

More specific comparisons of Asians and Americans indicate that while Americans perform better at and are more satisfied with work activities that they have chosen to do, Asians tend to be more satisfied with and perform better at tasks that trusted others (for example, well-regarded managers) have chosen for them. We also find that Asians are motivated by tasks that their entire group of colleagues have decided upon collectively—a work situation that does not appear to be motivating to Americans.

#### CHOICE AND ITS LIMITS

Just as we have assumed the provision of choice to be more desirable than a lack of choice, so too have we assumed that, in general, more choice is better than less—that the human ability to desire and manage choice is unlimited. Although prior research makes a compelling case regarding the psychological benefits of choice in America, these studies have only focused on the specific question of whether some relatively limited choice among alternatives is more beneficial than no choice at all. Common, everyday situations that we regularly encounter as consumers of choice, however, are

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often not constrained by a limited selection. What happens when the range of alternatives becomes much larger, when the number of options becomes overwhelming and the differences between options become relatively small?

To explore consumer responses to extensive options, we conducted a field investigation in an upscale grocery store, Draeger's, in Menlo Park, Calif. On two consecutive Saturdays, a tasting booth for Wilkin & Sons exotic jams was arranged. As consumers passed the tasting booth, they encountered a display with either six or 24 different jams. We observed and calculated the number of people who stopped at the tasting booth as well as the number of people who chose to purchase the jam in question.

The results are striking. They demonstrate that although extensive choice is initially more enticing than limited choice, limited choice is ultimately more motivating. In fact, 60 percent of the passersby approached the table in the extensive-choice condition, as compared to only 40 percent in the limited-choice condition. However, 30 percent of the consumers who encountered the limited selection actually purchased a

jam, whereas only 3 percent of those exposed to the extensive selection made a purchase.

In subsequent studies we found that people are actually less satisfied with the choices they make if selected from a larger set of options. For instance, the same Godiva chocolate chosen from a set of 30 chocolates is considered to be less delicious than if it is chosen from a set of six. Moreover, we found that the negative consequences of too much choice extend beyond consumer contexts to work contexts. An examination of individuals completing a task chosen from a larger range of options as compared to a smaller set of options revealed that people performed better at their chosen activities if they have chosen the activity from a smaller range of options.

Thus, even Americans may not always find the provision of choice to be motivating. Even Americans may not have an infinite capacity to desire and manage the consumption of choices. Currently, we are investigating the implications of these findings for investment decisions.

From Locke to Mill, from Rousseau to Jefferson, choice has been hailed as an inalienable human right, an essential human need. But one of the questions we face in the 21st century is, What of choice and its discontents?

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