

# EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CHOICE? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF CHOICE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*The provision of choice is one of the most common vehicles through which managers empower employees in organizations. Although past psychological and organizational research persuasively suggests that choice confers personal agency, and is thus intrinsically motivating, emerging research indicates that there could be potential pitfalls. In this chapter, we examine the various factors that could influence the effects of choice. Specifically, we examine individual-level factors such as the chooser's socioeconomic status and cultural background. We also examine situational factors such as the content of choice and the number of choices offered. We then expand our discussion on the effect of giving employees extensive choice by looking at its influence on creative performance. In the second half of this chapter, we discuss implications for future organizational behavior research and examine how emerging research on choice making can inform specific managerial practices.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Douglas McGregor's (1960) specification of Theory X and Theory Y beliefs about human motivation at the workplace has left a lasting impact in management research and practices. Instead of viewing employees as work-avoiding individuals who dislike responsibilities, McGregor proposed that employees are individuals who can be counted on to make decisions about their work and contribute actively to the organization. Today, concepts such as employee empowerment and participative management are ubiquitous not only in the organizational research literature but also in the day-to-day modus operandi of modern-day managers.

Among the many ways in which employees can be empowered in their work (e.g., participation in decision making, goal setting, and ownership in organizational outcomes), giving employees choice in how they approach their work is probably one of the simplest and yet most powerful tactics. The underlying idea is simple. Choice gives people a sense of personal control and agency, which in turns enhances their intrinsic motivation toward their work. The results include increased employee morale, higher creativity and innovation, better performance, greater organizational commitment, and lower turnover.

Yet empowering employees is not as simple as it seems. For instance, Locke and Schweiger (1979) cautioned that employee participation in decision making does not always lead to positive results. Specifically, the effectiveness of employee participation hinges on numerous contextual factors such as individual differences, organizational characteristics (e.g., organization size), and situational demands (e.g., time pressure). Similarly, empowering employees through the provision of choice is context sensitive. Although most managers generally understand the importance of empowering employees by giving them choice, they may not be equipped with the necessary knowledge on how to administer choice effectively, nor are they aware of the potential pitfalls. Indiscriminately giving employees choice may result in the expected beneficial effects, but it may also have detrimental outcomes.

Considering these potentially detrimental outcomes, managers need to ask several critical questions before empowering employees through the provision of choice. At the broadest level, the question is, of course, whether or not to give employees choice in the first place. Is having choice always motivating to every individual? Under what circumstances is choice de-motivating or counter-effective? At the next level, if a manager should decide that some form of choice is to be given, how much choice should he

or she offer to the employee? Is more always better? Finally, does the choice-making process end after one or more choices have been made? What if people have to do more with the chosen options (e.g., create something out of them) and if so, what consequences do we expect to see?

In this chapter, we attempt to answer these important questions about giving employees choice in the workplace by drawing on past psychological and organizational research on choice making. First, we will contemplate the issue of when to give people choice. Specifically, we will review past research that argues for the provision of choice and then modify this perspective by examining recent studies which explored the boundary conditions of such a prescription. Second, we will look at the effects of giving people extensive choices on motivational and behavioral outcomes. This will help us understand whether giving more choice is always better. Finally, we go beyond the act of choosing and examine how the extent of choice in task materials and initial resources influence creative performance. Specifically, we will revisit the conventional wisdom that the more flexibility employees have at work, the more creative they are likely to be.

In the second half of this chapter, we propose future directions for research by discussing potential factors that could affect the choice-making process but have not yet been systematically studied by organizational scholars. Examples include individual difference variables such as the importance of having the appropriate knowledge to make a choice and personality variables such as one's need for closure. In closing, we will also discuss how the expanded view on choice making can inform specific managerial practices.

## **CHOICE VERSUS NO CHOICE**

The idea that choice confers personal agency and control to the chooser, and is thus intrinsically motivating, can be traced back to early psychological research on choice and self-determination. As the American psychologist Richard deCharms (1968) postulated, "Looking at both sides of the coin, we may hypothesize that when a man perceives his behavior as stemming from his own choice, he will cherish that behavior and its results; when he perceives his behavior as stemming from the dictates of external forces, that behavior and its results, although identical in other respects to behavior of his own choosing, will be devalued" (p. 273). Repeatedly, across many domains of inquiry, other psychologists have also contended that the provision of choice will increase an individual's sense of personal control

(e.g., Lefcourt, 1973; Rotter, 1966; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and feelings of intrinsic motivation (e.g., deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1981; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Drawing in part on earlier work by deCharms (1968), Deci and his colleagues (e.g., Deci, 1981; Deci & Ryan, 1985) have argued that individuals, because of their desire for certainty, are like actors seeking to exercise and validate a sense of control over their external environments. As a result, they are likely to enjoy, prefer, and persist at activities that provide them with opportunities to make choices, to control their own outcomes, and to determine their own fates (Condry, 1977; Condry & Chambers, 1978; Deci, 1971, 1975, 1981; Deci, Driver, Hotchkiss, Robbins & Wilson, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Malone & Lepper, 1987; Nuttin, 1973; Ryan, 1982; Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). Conversely, the absence of choice and control has been hypothesized and shown to produce a variety of detrimental effects on intrinsic motivation, life satisfaction, and health status (e.g., Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kaufman, 1982; Schultz & Hanusa, 1978; Seligman, 1975).

In a classic example, Zuckerman et al. (1978) found that college students who were given choices over which puzzles to solve and how much time to allocate to solving each puzzle were more intrinsically motivated during a subsequent period than those who were not given such choices. In a more organizational context, various psychologists and designers (e.g., Averill, 1973; Gifford, 1987; Barnes, 1981) have found that the provision of choice in the physical work environment (e.g., the ability to choose office lighting or stop environmental noise) can lead to desirable outcomes such as improved mood and job performance.

The beneficial effects of choice have also been of central importance to creativity research. A large number of studies have demonstrated that creativity is enhanced when individuals are given autonomy and freedom in their work (e.g., Amabile, 1983; Smeltz & Cross, 1984; Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; Amabile & Gryskiewicz, 1987, 1989; Witt & Beorkrem, 1989; Shalley, 1991; Greenberg, 1992; Zhou, 1998). For instance, Amabile and Gitomer (1984) found that children who were given choices in which task materials to use when creating a collage produced collages that were assessed to be more creative than those produced by children given no choice. Similarly, work by Greenberg (1992) found that subjects who were given choice in selecting which problems to work on produced more creative outputs. More recent studies by Zhou (1998) and Shalley (1991) that considered multiple situational factors also found high task autonomy to be a necessary condition for creative performance. Common to all of this research is the key idea that choice

confers freedom and agency on the creator and thus enhances his or her intrinsic motivation on the task, a critical antecedent for creative performance (e.g., Amabile, 1979, 1983; Amabile, Hennessey, & Grossman, 1986).

According to this formulation then, managers who want to empower their employees by giving them a greater sense of control over their work should seriously consider offering all employees some form of choice whenever possible. However, recent research has begun to modify this view from a more cautious perspective. In this section, we will discuss three streams of emerging research that take a more contextualized perspective in evaluating the effects of choice. Specifically, we will discuss how (a) socioeconomic status and (b) cultural background can influence the effects of offering choice. Here, the idea is that choice may not be perceived in the same way by everyone. Whereas choice is linked to personal agency and therefore motivating for some people, this may not be so for others. Next, we move on to examine the effects of choosing from undesirable options. This is an important contextual variable because in an organizational context, employees need not always be presented with neutral or attractive options. Oftentimes, because of organizational demands or difficulties, employees may be confronted with unattractive options. In situations like these, giving employees choice may actually be counter-effective.

### *The Effect of Differences in Socioeconomic Status*

One reality of modern organizations is that people from all walks of life come together to help advance a common organizational goal. In such an organization, managers often have to supervise both well-educated professionals as well as employees of lower socioeconomic status (e.g., factory production workers and store helpers). The question then becomes, are findings from the choice research reviewed thus far relevant and applicable to individuals of varied socioeconomic status?

In a recent series of studies, Snibbe and Markus (2005) found evidence that college graduates (i.e., those with a college degree or higher) have different models of agency than high school graduates (i.e., those without a college degree). Specifically, these researchers argue that the model of agency for college graduates tends to emphasize the expression of uniqueness and the exertion of environmental control, whereas the model for high school graduates tends to emphasize the maintenance of personal integrity (e.g., honesty, loyalty, etc.) and the exertion of self-control. Choice is therefore especially relevant to the model of agency held by college graduates, as choosing is an

expression of unique preferences and an exercise of personal control over one's environment. Conversely, the absence of choice may threaten one's sense of agency and incur negative psychological effects. For high school graduates however, choice is less critical to the model of agency, because these students are less concerned about expressing uniqueness and control. Due to these differences in models of agency, college graduates and high school graduates are expected to respond differently to the provision of choice.

To illustrate these ideas, Snibbe and Markus (2005) recruited high school and college graduates to participate in a marketing research study. The high school graduates worked as firefighters, construction workers, and maintenance workers whereas the college graduates included post baccalaureate or post-doctoral students and employees. All subjects were first presented with a list of 10 popular, recently released music CDs and asked to rank the CDs according to how much they thought they would like them. Subjects were specifically told that their ranking of the CDs would determine which CD they would eventually get to keep. Moments later, the experimenter told the subjects that they had run out of some CDs and offered each subject a choice of his or her fifth or sixth ranked CD instead. After subjects chose their desired CD, they were given a filler survey and then asked to re-rank the list of CDs. As expected, subjects who held college degrees improved the ranking of the chosen CD, exhibiting the classic dissonance effect of evaluating the chosen object more positively and the rejected objects less positively. This effect, however, was not found among those subjects who were high school graduates; for these subjects, their ranking of the chosen CD remained unchanged.

In a second study, subjects were approached outside of discount shopping centers and airports. They were invited to take part in a school project involving writing instruments in exchange for \$2 and a pen. Subjects in the free-choice condition chose a pen that they liked from among five types of pens. They then tested out the pen and completed a pen evaluation survey. The same procedure was followed for subjects in the no-choice condition, however in this condition, the experimenter interrupted subjects before they could complete the pen evaluation survey. The experimenter told the subject that because the chosen pen was the last of its kind, it could not be given to him or her. The subject was then offered a different pen and subsequently tested out this pen and proceeded to complete the pen evaluation survey. The results indicate that college graduate subjects in the no-choice condition evaluated their pens less favorably than those in the free-choice condition. Conversely, high school graduate subjects evaluated their pens equally favorably irrespective of the experimental condition.

These two studies illustrate the differences in perceptions of choice held by individuals from different socioeconomic status. Specifically, because choosing is central to the agency model held by high socioeconomic status individuals, these individuals revised their attitudes toward the chosen object to make it appear as though they had made good decisions. Because choice does not take on a similar meaning for those with lower socioeconomic status, such attitude changes were not found. Thus, managers seeking to empower employees through the provision of choice may want to consider how choice is perceived by employees of different socioeconomic status; whereas choice is likely to be welcomed, or even sought after, by well-educated white collar employees, this may not be so for the less-educated blue collar employees. More importantly, the absence of choice could prove to be especially de-motivating for well-educated employees, while this may not hold for less-educated employees.

### *The Effect of Cultural Differences*

Organizations today are often staffed by employees with diverse cultural backgrounds. As organizations become more globalized and multicultural, another important contextual factor that warrants our attention is that of cultural differences. For example, does providing choice to a Chinese employee elicit as strong a feeling of personal agency and intrinsic motivation as it does for an American employee?

The seminal cultural analysis provided by Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggests that because Western cultures are characterized as independent and individualistic (Triandis, 1990, 1995), the provision and perception of choice may be of particular intrinsic value to members of these cultures. Westerners, Markus and Kitayama (1991) theorized, possess a model of the self as fundamentally independent. Such individuals strive for independence, desire a sense of autonomy, and seek to express their internal attributes in order to establish their uniqueness from others within their environments. Thus, the perception that one has chosen is integrally linked to one's intrinsic motivation. This is because choice allows for the expression of personal preferences, control, and internal attributes, in turn allowing one to establish oneself as a volitional agent and to fulfill the goal of being independent (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999).

In contrast, members of non-Western cultures are theorized to possess an interdependent model of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Specifically, for these individuals, the super-ordinate goal is a sense of interconnectedness

and belongingness with one's social ingroup, rather than direct personal control over social situations. The mechanism through which this goal is fulfilled involves acting in accordance with one's social obligations to others, which also allows for the intermediate goal of maintaining social harmony (De Vos, 1985; Hsu, 1985; Miller, 1988; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1990, 1995). Thus, for members of non-Western cultures, the perception of having chosen may be of little intrinsic value. This is because choice-making contexts may be conceived of, not as searches for personal preference matches and agency, but rather as a search for options which conform to the socially sanctioned standards of one's reference group, in turn allowing for the fulfillment of one's responsibilities.

These cultural differences regarding the value of choice are echoed by cross-cultural research examining the concept of agency. For instance, Menon, Morris, Chiu, and Hong (1999) found that Singapore students, compared to American students, were less likely to believe in the autonomy of individual persons. Similarly, Ames and Fu (2000) found that Americans believe a wider range of individual acts are intentional than do Chinese. Rather than believing that agency lies largely within the individual, members of interdependent cultures tend to believe in groups as having more agency and power. Thus, personal choice may not hold as much importance for individuals from interdependent cultures as it does for those from independent cultures.

In fact, in some situations, the exercise of personal choice might even pose a threat to interdependent individuals whose personal preferences are at odds with those of their reference group. Interdependent-selves, therefore, might actually prefer to have their choices made for them. This is especially true if it enables these individuals to be both relieved of the "burden" associated with identifying the socially sanctioned option and, at the same time, fulfills the superordinate cultural goal of belongingness. For instance, it is observed that Japanese workers are often proud in pointing out their bosses' role in the decision-making process. For members of interdependent cultures then, it is not the exercise of choice per se that is necessary for intrinsic motivation. Rather, motivation is derived from the perception of themselves as responsible members acting to fulfill their duties and obligations toward their reference groups. This leads to the hypothesis that for members of independent cultures (e.g., Americans), the traditional choice condition should be more intrinsically motivating than the traditional no-choice condition, whereas for members of interdependent cultures (e.g., East Asians), other-choice contexts should be more intrinsically motivating, especially if the choosers are identified as members of their reference group.

To examine the hypothesis that personal versus other-made choices would be perceived differently by members of contrasting cultural groups, Iyengar and Lepper (1999) first conducted an ethnographic study with Japanese and American students. These students were asked to catalog the choices they made during one normal workday and to rate how important each choice was to them. The results indicated that American students perceived themselves as having nearly 50% more choices than their Japanese counterparts. Furthermore, the American students rated their choices as significantly more important than the Japanese students did. The students were also asked to list the occasions in which they would wish not to have a choice. The results were striking. Nearly 30% of the American students said they wished to have choices *all* of the time. More than 50% of the American students said that they could not imagine a circumstance in which they would prefer not to have a choice. In contrast, none of the Japanese students expressed these sentiments at all.

Two further experimental studies conducted by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) provided more direct empirical evidence. In the traditional choice paradigm, first employed by Zuckerman et al. (1978), the chooser in the no-choice condition was typically an unknown experimenter. Iyengar and Lepper (1999) extended this paradigm to include choosers in the no-choice condition who were members and non-members of the participants' reference groups. As members of interdependent cultures were theorized to make distinctions between social ingroup and outgroup members, varying the identity of the chooser to reflect this distinction was hypothesized to significantly influence interdependent participants' responses to others' choices (Iyengar, Ross, & Lepper, 1999; Triandis, 1988, 1989, 1990; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Furthermore, it was predicted that the preference for relinquishing choice would be exhibited by interdependent-selves when the chooser was identified as a member of a relevant social ingroup.

In the first experiment, a yoked design was employed in which both European and Asian American children (seven to nine years old) were either asked to choose for themselves or were told that someone else had chosen for them. In the personal choice condition, participants were allowed to select one of six activities they wished to undertake, whereas in two no-choice conditions, participants were assigned this same activity. For half of the students in the assigned-choice conditions, the person making the choice for them was a previously never encountered before adult (i.e., the experimenter), while for the other half of the students in the assigned-choice condition, the person making the choice was one with whom participants

shared a close and interdependent relationship (i.e., their mothers). Subsequently, the students' performance at the activity and their intrinsic motivation to engage in the same activity during a later free-play period, were measured. As earlier research would predict, the findings suggest that European Americans were most highly motivated and performed best when given a personal choice, as compared to when choices were made for them either by the experimenter or by their own mothers. Asian Americans, by contrast, were most motivated and performed the best when their mothers had made the selection, and did significantly worse when they had made the choice themselves. Like their European American counterparts, however, Asian Americans performed least well when an unfamiliar experimenter made choices for them.

The second experimental study by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) provides evidence of comparable and even more powerful cultural differences under circumstances in which the actual choices involved are quite trivial, and choices were made for students by peers rather than parents. This second experiment employs a paradigm adapted from Cordova and Lepper (1996). Here, both Asian and European American fifth graders engage in a computer math game under one of three conditions. In the personal choice condition, participants are given half a dozen instructionally irrelevant and seemingly trivial options (e.g., "Which icon would you like to have be your game piece?"). In two yoked no-choice conditions, students were told that they were being assigned to these choices on the basis of a vote taken amongst either their own classmates (ingroup condition) or amongst slightly younger children at a rival school (outgroup condition).

As in the first study, the findings were striking. European American children preferred more challenging math problems, showed increased task engagement, and actually learned more when they had been allowed to make their own choices, as compared to either of the other conditions in which choices had been made for them. In contrast, Asian American children were more intrinsically motivated and learned better when these choices were made by their classmates than when they made their own choices, and performed worst when the choices were made for them by unfamiliar and lower status others. One explanation for the observed differences in intrinsic motivation exhibited by Asian American children across ingroup and outgroup contexts may be that the ingroup's choice elicited greater perceptions of responsibility than the outgroup's choice, suggesting that perceptions of responsibility may be the mediating mechanism underlying the relationship between no-choice and intrinsic motivation among interdependent cultural members.

To test whether the above findings observed among children from contrasting cultural backgrounds can be generalized to adults from a variety of independent and interdependent cultures, a field study was conducted. Specifically, an extensive questionnaire study was conducted with Citigroup employees to examine whether variations in perceived choice versus perceived responsibility could actually predict significant factors such as job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and job performance. Citigroup bank tellers and sales representatives were selected from nine different countries whose cultures varied in their individualism scores (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1995). A total of 2,399 Citigroup employees from Taiwan ( $n = 183$ ), Singapore ( $n = 89$ ), the Philippines ( $n = 96$ ), Japan ( $n = 100$ ), Australia ( $n = 62$ ), Argentina ( $n = 150$ ), Brazil ( $n = 200$ ), Mexico ( $n = 150$ ), and the United States (including New York ( $n = 880$ ), Los Angeles ( $n = 150$ ), and Chicago ( $n = 339$ )) participated in this questionnaire study. Specifically, this survey instrument included measures of (a) perceived choice, in which employees rated the prevalence of choice in various aspects of their jobs; (b) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (adapted from prior research, e.g., Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Harter, 1981); (c) job satisfaction; (d) perceptions of fairness of treatment on the job (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tylor, 1989; Tyler & Smith, 1999); and (e) perceptions of duty and responsibility at work. In addition to employee questionnaire responses, performance data for each participant was obtained from their managers and subsequently matched with participants' individual responses.

The findings were consistent with those observed from the investigations with European and Asian American children. The results suggest that, first, perceptions of choice predict job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, perceptions of fair treatment at work, and job performance significantly better for employees in the United States as compared to employees in Asian countries. Second, comparisons among various ethnic groups in the United States indicate that the perception of choice was a stronger predictor of these dependent measures for European, African, and Hispanic Americans as compared to Asian Americans. Third, the results suggest that among Asian participants – from both Asia and the United States – perceptions of duty and responsibility were more positively correlated with perceptions of choice, intrinsic motivation, and job satisfaction and performance, suggesting that perceptions of choice may be integrally linked to perceptions of responsibility for Asians (Iyengar, Lepper, Hernandez, DeVoe, & Alpert, 2001).

Taken together, the findings from these studies are of theoretical significance in that they starkly challenge one of our most fundamental assumptions regarding human motivation and personal agency. They suggest that

among cultures fostering social interdependence, individuals seeking to fulfill their social responsibilities and obligations may be more intrinsically motivated by having their choices made for them – particularly when the chooser is someone from their social ingroup (e.g., a family member or an ingroup peer) – as compared to contexts in which they make their own choices. The previously assumed link between choice and perceptions of individual agency and control should thus be restricted to cultures that emphasize self-independence.

Examining the effects of culture from a different perspective, Kim and Drolet (2003) studied cultural differences in variety-seeking tendency during choice making. Instead of focusing on choices among items, these researchers extended choice research to the choosing of “choice rules” (Drolet, 2002). When faced with a choice problem, it is believed that people rely on various rules to help them make a decision. For example, when choosing which electronic product to buy, people may either choose price over quality or quality over price. These heuristics are referred to as choice rules. The choice rule that people select from their repertoire of rules depends on various characteristics of the choice problem they encounter (e.g., framing).

Research by Drolet (2002) found that people tend to vary their use of choice rules independent of their choice problem characteristics. In other words, the use of a particular choice rule on one occasion decreases the probability of use of the same rule on a subsequent occasion. Interestingly, recent work by Kim and Drolet (2003) suggests that such variety-seeking tendencies in employing different choice rules across multiple occasions appears to be culturally bound. In a study involving a series of choices of consumer products, Korean subjects varied their use of choice rules significantly less than American subjects did. Specifically, American subjects who chose the “compromise” rule (e.g., a compromise between price and quality) in earlier decisions tended not to choose the same rule in a subsequent choice-making exercise. However, there was no such effect for Koreans. The results suggest that Americans see choice as an act of self-expression and agency; by not adhering to a set of fixed rules, they are signaling their individual freedom to follow their own minds. By contrast, individuals from East Asian cultures are not encouraged to express individual uniqueness to such a large extent (Kim & Markus, 1999), and as a result, exhibit lower tendencies to vary their patterns of decision-making behavior as a means of expressing individuality and personal agency.

Drawing on this cross-cultural body of choice research, we advocate that managers be mindful of the cultural background of the employees to whom they are giving choices. Whereas choice is a reflection of agency and

self-expression for individuals from independent cultures such as the U.S., this does not appear to be true for individuals from interdependent cultures. For such interdependent employees, choice may not have its purported desirable effects.

*The Effects of Choosing among Undesirable Options*

Organizational life is not always a bed of roses. In times of organizational difficulties or when faced with unexpected business demands, painful decisions often have to be made. Should managers give employees choices in these decisions as well? Traditional choice research does not have much to contribute to answering this question. Most research on the observed benefits of personally made choices as compared to externally dictated choices has been limited to contexts in which the choice sets included are either attractive or neutral options. But what if choosers are required to make a selection from a variety of options – all of which are associated with unwanted outcomes? For example, during an organizational downsizing operation, some employees must be laid off. Does it make sense to offer these employees a choice of compensation packages? Would choosers still welcome such agency and experience more satisfaction than non-choosers even if they expected the outcomes to be negative?

At the outset, one might expect choosers to necessarily be happier than non-choosers, regardless of whether the options included in the choice set have a positive or a negative valence. The obvious rationale behind such an assumption is that choosing for oneself ought to allow for utility maximization across contexts in which choice sets include either attractive or unattractive alternatives. Hence, when choice sets have positive valence, choosers can select “the best of the best,” and when choice sets have negative valence, choosers can select “the least worst.” However, this analysis assumes that the benefits from choosing stem solely from one’s ability to engage in preference matching, and the analysis ignores the affective experiences associated with the act of choosing. Can the pleasure of exercising personal control be instead replaced with anxiety or pain when the choice is to be made among unwanted outcomes? For example, are laid off employees necessarily able to cope better if they can choose for themselves which severance package to accept? Or will the mere acting of choosing accentuate the pain of being laid off?

A large body of research has shown that when confronted with a set of undesirable or stressful choices, people tend to delay choosing, resort to the default, shift the responsibility of making the decision onto others, and often

opt not to choose at all (Beattie, Baron, Hershey, & Spranca, 1994; Burger, 1989; Dhar, 1997; Janis & Mann, 1977; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Lewin, 1951; Luce, 1998; Miller, 1959; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Simonson, 1992). For instance, Luce (1998) demonstrated that the process of making trade-offs between choice attributes linked to highly valued goals (e.g., safety features versus the purchase price of a car) increases the level of conflict experienced by the decision maker, and gives rise to avoidant responses such as maintaining the status quo, choosing a dominant alternative, and prolonging the search. These findings suggest that, although the presence of choice confers personal agency over a situation, such agency is not necessarily welcomed. Specifically, to the extent that personal agency generates conflict, stress, and anxiety, people may actually prefer to avoid it.

More recent research by Botti and Iyengar (2004) provides convincing evidence that, whereas choosers are more satisfied than non-choosers when selecting from among attractive alternatives, non-choosers are more satisfied with the decision outcome than choosers when selecting from among unattractive alternatives. In one laboratory study involving the selection of yogurt flavors, participants were assigned the role of either choosers or non-choosers, and were then exposed to either appealing yogurt flavors (e.g., mint, cocoa, cinnamon, and brown sugar) or unappealing yogurt flavors (e.g., sage, chili powder, tarragon, and celery seed). After participants selected the yogurt of their choice, they completed a pre-survey concerning their expected satisfaction with the selected yogurt. Participants were then given the opportunity to eat as much as they wanted of the selected yogurt. The amount of yogurt consumed served as a behavioral measure of satisfaction. Finally, a second questionnaire (post-survey) was administered to measure participants' preferences for choosing and their experienced satisfaction with the sampled yogurt.

The results were telling. Although all of the subjects preferred to choose for themselves as opposed to relinquishing choice-making control to external forces (an indication of preference for personal control), choosers reported greater satisfaction than non-choosers only when the yogurt options were appealing. When the yogurt options were unappealing, choosers were less satisfied than non-choosers. Furthermore, when sampling appealing yogurt flavors, choosers and non-choosers consumed similar quantities of yogurt, but when the yogurt flavors were unappealing, choosers ate less yogurt than non-choosers. In addition, measurements of satisfaction taken before and after the yogurt tasting were highly correlated, suggesting that the effect of choice on outcome satisfaction may have depended on psychological mechanisms that took place during the very act of choosing,

even before the actual decision outcome has been experienced (i.e., tasting the yogurt).

The research described above demonstrates that when they are confronted by unattractive alternatives, choosers experience “choice-outcome aversion.” In other words, the very act of choosing detrimentally affects choosers’ anticipated and experienced satisfaction as compared to non-choosers. Ethnographic studies conducted in naturalistic settings suggest that the potency of the observed “choice-outcome aversion” phenomenon can be extended to more consequential real-life events. For instance, recent interviews with French and American parents of chronically ill infants, conducted at the MacLean Center for Clinical Medical Ethics, have shown that French parents were better able to cope with the death of their newborn infants than American parents (Orfali & Gordon, 2004). In France, current medical practices put physicians in charge of deciding which treatments are in a patient’s best interest, while medical practices in the United States leave patients, or their families, with the responsibility of deciding which treatments to undergo. Follow-up interviews with parents up to six months later revealed better coping abilities in the French parents, who were served by a paternalistic medical system, as compared to the American parents, who were served by an autonomous medical system.

Drawing on this body of research, it seems that the positive effects of choice are limited to choosing from among positive or at least neutral alternatives. Although choice confers agency on the chooser, such agency may not always be welcomed and, more importantly, not in the best interest of the chooser. Perhaps in situations in which the available options are undesirable, managers should consider simply making the decision for their employees and not offering any choice at all.

## **CHOICE: IS MORE ALWAYS BETTER?**

Now, suppose a manager has considered the various factors discussed so far (specifically, the socioeconomic status of the employee, cultural influences, and choice content) and decided that he or she would still like to give the employee some form of choice in a given situation. A natural question, then, is how much choice to give. Is more always better? In this section, we will discuss research that examines the effects of providing people with extensive choice sets. In addition, we will consider a related topic on the choice-making strategies that people use, and the effect of these strategies on people’s preference for more or fewer options.

*The Effects of Extensive Choice*

We first consider the effects of providing people with extensive choice. Recall that research on intrinsic motivation suggests that, at least among North Americans, the provision of choice allows for self-determination and intrinsic motivation, regardless of the challenges that the choice-making process imposes (e.g., deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Zuckerman et al., 1978). On the other hand, research examining the behavior of choosers confronted by equally attractive and risky options finds that choosers exhibit a greater tendency to choose sub-optimally. Choosers also tend to delay making a choice and demonstrate lower levels of intrinsic motivation (Higgins, Trope, & Kwon, 1999; Mischel & Ebbesen, 1970; Shafir et al., 1993; Seligman, 1975; Shafir & Tversky, 1992; Yates & Mischel, 1979; see also Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). As the attractiveness of these alternatives rises, individuals experience added conflict as to which is the best option. As a result, they tend to defer decisions, search for new alternatives, choose the default option, or simply opt not to choose. In addition, consumer research suggests that as the number of options and the information about options increases, people tend to consider fewer choices and process smaller percentages of the overall information regarding their choices (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990).

How does one reconcile these two opposing sets of findings? The answer could lie in the number of choices offered. Drawing upon both research traditions, recent findings have shown that while members of independent cultures are intrinsically motivated by the provision of extensive choices, the act of making a selection from an excessive number of options might result in "choice overload." This in turn lessens both their motivation to choose and their subsequent motivation to commit to a choice. In a series of studies, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) extended the traditional choice paradigm by adding a choice condition in which the choice set was extensive. Field and laboratory experiments were conducted to compare the intrinsic motivation of participants encountering limited as opposed to extensive choice sets. In one field experiment, a tasting booth for exotic jams was arranged at a neighborhood grocery store. As consumers passed the tasting booth, they encountered a display with either 6 (limited choice condition) or 24 (extensive choice condition) different flavored jams. The number of passersby who approached the tasting booth and the number of purchases made in these two conditions served as dependent variables. The results suggested that although extensive choice proved initially more enticing than limited choice, limited choice was ultimately more motivating. Thus, 60% of the passersby

approached the table in the extensive-choice condition, as compared to only 40% in the limited-choice condition. However, 30% of the consumers who encountered the limited selection actually purchased a jam, whereas only 3% of those exposed to the extensive selection made a purchase. Another field study revealed that students in an introductory college level course were more likely to write an essay for extra credit when they were provided a list of only 6, rather than 30, potential essay topics. Moreover, even after having chosen to write an essay, students wrote higher quality essays if their essay topic had been picked from a smaller choice set.

Laboratory experiments provide further evidence for the “choice overload” phenomenon and lend us some insight into the potential mediators of this phenomenon. In another study by Iyengar and Lepper (2000), participants were exposed to a choice (choice versus no-choice) by options (limited versus extensive) experimental design. Participants either sampled a chosen Godiva chocolate from a selection of 6 or 30, or were given a chocolate to sample from a selection of six or 30. At the time of choice, participants reported enjoying the process of choosing a chocolate more from a display of 30 than from a display of 6. Subsequently, however, participants in the extensive choice condition proved least satisfied and most regretful with their sampled chocolates, whereas participants in the limited choice condition proved most satisfied and least regretful about the chocolates they sampled. Satisfaction and regret ratings for no-choice participants fell in the middle. Parallel findings on a behavioral measure of intrinsic motivation were reflected in participants’ subsequent preference for chocolate or money as compensation for their participation in the study.

Collectively, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that American independent-selves desire and value the provision of choice, as such contexts ideally allow for the fulfillment of personal preferences and the exercise of personal control. Yet, at the same time, choosing from an extensive choice context may thwart choosers’ satisfaction when the complexity of such choice-making situations elicits uncertainty regarding one’s personal preferences. Thus, although the provision of extensive choices may initially be perceived as desirable, the actual exercise of choice in such decision-making contexts could attenuate rather than enhance choosers’ intrinsic motivation; instead of having a sense of agency or control over the choice scenario, a chooser may actually feel confused and overwhelmed by the large number of options.

To test these ideas in a more organizational context, Iyengar, Jiang, and Huberman (2004) conducted a field study using data from 647 company retirement plans run by the Vanguard Group. The key independent variable

in this study was the extensiveness of choice in retirement plan options given to employees, whereas the outcome measure was the rate of participation by employees in the available plans. The results showed that, when employers increased the number of investment options available to employees for voluntary 401(k) investments, the rate of participation actually went down; for every 10 funds offered, participation rates declined by 2 percent. And this was true even when employers matched employee contributions to the plans. More specifically, these researchers found that 401(k) participation peaked at 75 percent when a retirement plan offered only two investment options, while participation dropped dramatically to 60 percent when investors had 60 choices. This study provides further field evidence that too much choice can have an unanticipated negative impact.

All in all, the combined results from this series of studies provide some important theoretical implications. First, the provision of choice may not be valued to the same extent as was previously theorized when the number of options to be considered becomes extensive. Second, even when people demonstrate a desire for the provision of choice, they paradoxically do not experience higher intrinsic motivation and satisfaction after exercising their choice. Third, and worse still, people may even avoid choosing altogether because the large number of options simply confuses or overwhelms them.

### *The Effects of Individuals' Choice-making Strategies*

Closely related to the question of how much choice to offer employees is the type of choice-making strategy to be employed by these individuals. By considering individuals' choice-making strategies, we hope to provide a more nuanced perspective on the effects of having extensive choice. Specifically, we extend our earlier discussion that extensive choice can lead to cognitive overload and confusion by surveying another stream of research, which argues that there are certain individuals who actively seek out extensive options. Interestingly, these individuals actually do well by pursuing such an approach.

According to Simon (1955, 1956, 1957), one important distinction between people's choice-making strategies is that of "maximizing" versus "satisficing." For a maximizer, the strategy is to seek out the best, a strategy that requires an exhaustive search of all possibilities. For a satisficer, the strategy is to seek "good enough," searching until an option is encountered that crosses the threshold of acceptability. One distinctive behavioral tendency of the maximizer is to engage in an exhaustive search of all available options (Schwartz

et al., 2002). Maximizers are likely to focus on increasing their choice sets by exploring multiple options, presumably because expanded choice sets allow for greater possibilities to seek out and find the “best” option.

In a recent study by Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz (2006), it was found that maximizers actually performed better in the job search process than satisficers. Graduating university students were first administered a scale that measured maximizing tendencies, and then followed over the course of the year as they searched for jobs. The maximizing scale was drawn from Schwartz et al. (2002) and included items such as “When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I am relatively satisfied with what I’m listening to,” and “When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothes that I really love.”

The results indicated that graduating college students who scored high on the maximizing scale (Schwartz et al., 2002) earned starting salaries that were 20% higher than those who scored low on the scale. This is likely to be the result of maximizers applying to more jobs, pursuing both realized and unrealized options to a greater degree, and relying on more external sources of information than satisficers. In an organizational context, this suggests that managers may want to give employees with maximizing tendencies greater flexibility in exploring large number of options and alternatives in getting their work done, as this could result in better job performance. Yet, this approach should be taken with care. Consistent with the earlier described research which shows that too much choice can be overwhelming, Iyengar et al. (2006) also found that despite their relative success, maximizers were less satisfied with the outcomes of their job searches. Specifically, they were reportedly more “pessimistic,” “stressed,” “tired,” “anxious,” “worried,” “overwhelmed,” and “depressed” throughout the entire process. Maximizers’ decreased satisfaction and increased negative affect with their resulting jobs are thought to result from their pursuit of the elusive “best,” a strategy which induces them to consider a large number of possibilities, and creates unrealistically high expectations which cannot be easily fulfilled, thus increasing their potential for regret and/or anticipated regret.

Taken together, these two streams of research on extensive choice sets and choice-making strategies have significant managerial implications. First, giving employees extensive choice does not always empower them. Instead of feeling a heightened sense of personal control and agency, most people become confused and avoid choosing. Second, even if certain individuals with maximizing choice-making strategies welcome extensive options and can actually deliver enhanced performances, they may suffer associated psychological costs, such as lower satisfaction, regret, and even depression.

Thus, managers need to be cognizant of this trade-off when giving employees extensive choice or autonomy in their work. Managers must decide which to prioritize – the subjective well-being of the employee, or the improved organizational performance that could result from giving maximizing employees free reign in pursuing extensive alternatives in their work.

### **BEYOND CHOOSING: THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE CHOICE ON CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING**

In this section, we further expand our discussion on the effects of giving employees extensive choice by looking at its effect on creative performance. Although there has been some prior research on the effects of giving people choice and flexibility on creative performance during a problem-solving task (e.g., Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; Greenberg, 1992), no research has yet examined the effect of the number of initial resources on intrinsic motivation and creativity during problem-solving tasks. The following discussion moves beyond a consideration of the mere act of choosing, and examines situations in which individuals actually have to make choices from among a given set of options and create something out of these choices. Does giving employees more choice in terms of task materials and initial resources necessarily beget more creative performance?

This question is especially relevant to organizations that require their employees to engage in creative endeavors. For instance, when asking a chef to create a new dish, should a restaurant manager provide him with an extensive or a limited set of ingredients to begin with? Similarly, should a fashion designer be given greater or fewer choices of fabrics to work with when designing a new dress? One can easily think of other examples in real-life organizations in which the set of initial resources given to problem solvers to generate potential solutions can be either expansive or limited. In such a paradigm, task autonomy and freedom are a function of the problem solver's flexibility in combining the given resources to generate potential solutions. The larger the initial choice set of elements one has to work from, the more combinatorial flexibility there is in generating potential solutions. Hence, one would expect that the problem solver would be more intrinsically motivated and produce more creative products given greater flexibility. On the other hand, could the increased combinatorial flexibility and larger number of possibilities also lead to disorientation and cognitive overload? If so, giving a problem solver an extensive choice of initial resources may actually be de-motivating and hence detrimental to creativity.

In studying this issue, Chua and Iyengar (2005a) theorized that the larger the choice set of initial resources given to people during problem-solving tasks, the more likely they are to experience information overload due to the increased number of possible option combinations, which in turn, renders the creativity process de-motivating. As a result, people are unlikely to consider unconventional alternatives in addition to the given options, as doing so will further increase the search space and accentuate the information overload effect. In addition, a large choice set of initial resources may give the problem solver a false illusion that the solution he or she is seeking can be formulated using the given resources. This limits the problem solver's mode of creative thought, in that he or she will focus on generating combinations using the given resources, ignoring the wider possibilities that exist outside of the choice set.

In contrast, when individuals are given limited options, combinatorial flexibility may be more restricted but the search space for a creative solution is more manageable. In addition, problem solvers are less likely to think that the given resources are sufficient for the formulation of a solution. As a result, they may be more motivated to search for ideas outside of the given options. In other words, when the parameters of the problem are fewer, people may begin to think more expansively as opposed to more restrictively.

To test this idea, Chua and Iyengar (2005a) conducted a laboratory experiment in which undergraduate students from Columbia University were recruited to participate in a gift-wrapping study. Subjects were assigned to either a high-choice condition, in which they were given six types of ribbon and four types of wrapping paper, or a low-choice condition in which they were given only two types of ribbon and two types of wrapping paper. A set of five other unusual materials typically unrelated to gift-wrapping (i.e., newspaper, kitchen aluminum foil, metal wire, sponge, and cotton twine) were also provided to all subjects in equal amounts. The task was to wrap a square gift box. Participants were told that they could use as much or as little of the materials as they wished. There was also no restriction on how the gift was wrapped. For each of the choice conditions, half of the subjects were told that the objective of the task was to come up with as creative a gift wrap as possible (creativity goal) while the other half of the subjects were simply told to do their "best" in the gift-wrapping task (non-creativity goal). In addition, a creative self-efficacy questionnaire (Tierney & Farmer, 2002) was administered to all subjects at the beginning of the experiment. This questionnaire taps the belief that one has the ability to produce creative outputs. The key dependent variable in this study was the subject's level of divergent thinking, which was measured by counting the number of unusual

gift-wrapping materials (e.g., newspaper, sponge, and cotton twine) used in each gift wrap.

The results were consistent with Chua and Iyengar's (2005a) hypothesis that larger choice sets result in lower levels of divergent thinking; however, creative self-efficacy and gift-wrapping goal were found to moderate these hypothesized effects. Specifically, there was a choice by creative self-efficacy interaction effect such that subjects with low creative self-efficacy were more likely to think divergently (i.e., use more unusual materials in gift wrapping) when given low choice as opposed to high choice. In contrast, subjects with high creative self-efficacy were not significantly affected by the complexities associated with a large choice set. More interestingly, subsequent analyses revealed that for subjects with low creative self-efficacy, lower choice actually led to more divergent thinking, regardless of the goal they were given. However, for subjects with high creative self-efficacy, there was an interaction effect between choice and goal, such that low choice led to more divergent thinking given a performance goal, but high choice led to more divergent thinking given a creativity goal. These results suggest that extensive choice enhances divergent thinking only under limited circumstances, i.e., for individuals with high creative self-efficacy given a creativity goal. Given a non-creativity goal, even an individual with high creative self-efficacy might not see the need to expend the additional effort necessary to engage in divergent thinking, as this type of thinking involves a conscious effort to explore options which deviate from convention and thus requires extra cognition.

This study directly challenges both conventional wisdom and past research which suggest that task flexibility, as defined by an increased number of choices during problem-solving tasks, is necessarily conducive to human creativity. Results from the gift-wrapping study demonstrate that the simplistic idea that more choice confers more combinatorial flexibility and thus leads to higher creativity is a limited one. For the most part, it appears that too much choice is actually detrimental to creativity.

To better understand the mechanism underlying the relationship between choice and creativity, Chua and Iyengar conducted a second study (Chua & Iyengar, 2005b) involving the creation of print advertisements. As in the previous study, the key experimental conditions were degree of choice and type of goal (creativity versus performance goal). In the high-choice condition, college student subjects were given 10 themes as starting points from which to generate ideas for a print advertisement. Examples of themes included broad categories such as "school," "music," and "romance." In the low-choice condition, subjects were randomly given two of the 10 possible

themes. Subjects were asked to generate as many ideas as possible using the given themes but were not restricted to them. For each choice condition, half of the subjects were asked to be as creative as possible when generating ideas (creativity goal), while the other half were asked to be as persuasive as possible when generating ideas (non-creativity goal). Unlike the previous study, subjects' perceptions of the idea generation process was also measured at the end of the experiment. Specifically, subjects were asked the extent to which they felt frustrated during the idea generation process and how interested they would be in participating in a similar study in the future. The main dependent variable in this study was the number of ideas generated that did not conform to the given themes.<sup>1</sup>

The results indicated that when subjects were given an extensive choice of initial themes from which to generate ideas, they were less inclined to think outside of the box and explore divergent ideas not suggested by these themes, as compared to those who were given fewer themes. More importantly, it was found that subjects given the creativity goal reported more frustration when given an extensive choice of themes than when given a limited choice of themes. This finding is consistent with the idea that extensive choice sets of initial resources during creative problem-solving tasks can lead to information overload, due to the large number of possible alternative solutions. In order to avoid adding to the current complexity, people are therefore less inclined to explore additional ideas.<sup>2</sup> This is especially so when a large choice set could give people the perception that a creative solution can be formulated within the given resources.

Perhaps the most striking and counter-intuitive results come from the measure of how interested subjects would be in participating in a similar study in the future. There was a clear main effect of choice such that subjects in the low-choice condition reported more interest in participating in similar future studies than those in the high-choice condition, an effect that was especially salient when subjects were given a creativity goal. This result again challenges the idea that choice and flexibility during problem-solving tasks necessarily increase enjoyment and intrinsic motivation.

Taken together, these recent studies suggest that the effects of providing extensive choice in creative problem-solving tasks, and the resulting autonomy and flexibility that such choice sets allow, may not be as straightforward as one would otherwise imagine. While traditional creativity research suggested that giving people choice and flexibility in choosing which problems to solve would serve to enhance their intrinsic motivation, it has since been found that giving people too many choices in the initial resources needed to solve a problem may actually be detrimental to creativity.

## **PUSHING THE FRONTIER OF CHOICE RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS**

In the second half of this chapter, we will switch our focus from reviewing extant research to theorizing about the potential implications of yet unexamined contextual factors on organizational behavior research. Although we have discussed several streams of emerging research that have taken a more nuanced and critical look at the effects and consequences of empowering people through the provision of choice, this is, in our view, hardly comprehensive or exhaustive. We believe that there is room for more research that probes the boundary conditions under which choice may or may not have its purported beneficial effects. Furthermore, scholars may want to revisit some key organizational theories that advocate the benefits of choice and autonomy, and examine how emerging choice research could inform these theories. In this section, we will discuss four areas which, in our view, warrant more attention: (a) individual differences that could influence the effects of choice, (b) the effect of choice on job design theories, (c) the consequences of giving people choice on procedural justice, and (d) how ideas explored in choice research could be extended to the area of power and leadership. Such research, if conducted, could further enhance managers' abilities to effectively administer choice to their employees.

### *Individual Differences*

One area that is clearly lacking in the choice research discussed so far is the impact of individual differences. Earlier in this chapter, we saw that individuals' socioeconomic status can influence how choice is perceived. Do other individual differences also influence the effects of choice? As Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations and 2001 Nobel peace prize winner, once said, "To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there." All too often, choice research tends to assume that people have (a) accurate self-knowledge (i.e., they know what they want) and (b) sufficient knowledge to evaluate the options they are choosing from. This is consistent with the idea that choice confers personal agency; to the extent that one knows what he or she wants and is knowledgeable about making a choice, having the ability to choose can indeed make one feel more empowered.

However, do people really know what they want in a world that offers a large and sometimes unfathomable number of options? Although it is

possible that some people do indeed have a clear idea of what they are looking for, much research has shown that people may actually be limited in their ability to acquire self-knowledge (e.g., Silvia & Gendella, 2001; Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). It is likely that as the number of options increases, people who do not have a good sense of what they are looking for are going to feel much more confused and frustrated than those who do. Thus, it is plausible that the documented detrimental effects of having too much choice are exacerbated in individuals who do not have clear ideas about their own preferences. In a job search context for instance, to the extent that a job seeker is not sure about his or her employment preferences, the more job opportunities there are to choose from, the more frustrating and overwhelming the choice-making process becomes. For any given chosen option, there are likely to be other plausible and attractive options that must be given up, thus leading to much post-decision dissonance. Hence, the job seeker without clear preferences is more likely to face the question “what if I had chosen job B or C instead of job A?” On the other hand, if the job seeker is clear about his or her career directions and preferences, the seemingly large choice set can be more easily trimmed down to a manageable size from which a decision can then be made.

Another related dimension of individual differences involves having the knowledge and expertise to evaluate one’s options. Consider the earlier 401(k) retirement plan study by Iyengar et al. (2004). If the chooser is unfamiliar with the various investment plans, he or she is unlikely to be able to evaluate the plans effectively. As the number of investment plans increases, the non-savvy employee is probably going to have a more difficult time making a decision. This may lead the individual to avoid making a decision, or make a wrong investment decision, which can be costly. The same logic can be applied to choosing which company stock or securities to buy. An uninformed investor is likely to be so overwhelmed by the large number of stocks that, rather than feeling empowered, he or she may decide not to enter the market at all. In contrast, an experienced investor is likely to be less overwhelmed by the large number of choices. Thus, we posit that the lack of knowledge (both self-knowledge about one’s preferences and knowledge about evaluating the available options) can exacerbate the negative effects brought about by an extensive choice set. This effect of knowledge on choice is consistent with Locke and Schweiger’s (1979) discussion on the importance of having relevant knowledge before one can successfully participate in decision-making tasks.

Yet another individual difference variable that could potentially influence the choice-making experience is one’s need for closure (Kruglanski &

Webster, 1996). As a dispositional construct, the need for cognitive closure is conceptualized as a latent variable manifested in several ways, including one's desire for predictability, one's preference for order and structure, one's discomfort with ambiguity, one's level of decisiveness, and one's closed-mindedness. Thus, a person with a high need for closure desires to be able to make a decision quickly (seizing) and then stick with it (freezing). When confronted with an extensive choice set, such an individual is likely to experience more frustration than one who has a relatively lower need for closure. A large option set renders making a final decision more difficult, and may thus lead an individual with a high need for closure to either avoid the act of choosing altogether or to employ some form of heuristic to quickly reach a decision. Conversely, for individuals with a low need for closure, an extensive choice set may cause even more deliberation over the various options, and lead this individual to take even longer to reach a decision than he or she would otherwise. Furthermore, because an individual with low need for closure is less likely to "freeze" a given decision, the large number of options will accentuate the perception that a better option is out there and thus lower his or her commitment to the chosen option.

It is important to note that these differential effects of choice on individuals with different levels of need for closure are not necessarily always detrimental or beneficial to organizational outcomes. For instance, during an early stage of business idea brainstorming, not freezing a decision too early could be a good thing as it allows for an exploration of more potential alternatives. Conversely, during business implementation with tight deadlines, not being able to make a choice and stick with it could hurt the entire execution of the business operation. Future research could examine the effects of choice and need for closure under different situational demands.

Finally, an individual's regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998) may also influence how choice is perceived. According to the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), all goal-directed behaviors are regulated by two distinct motivational systems: promotion and prevention focus. Briefly, promotion-focused individuals are driven by nurturance needs and are concerned with accomplishment and advancement. They tend to focus on ideals, aspirations, and hopes, and use an "approach" strategy to decision making. In other words, such individuals tend to ensure hits and ensure against error of omissions. Thus, they are especially sensitive to gain versus non-gain situations. Conversely, prevention-focused individuals are driven more by security needs and are concerned with safety and fulfillment of responsibilities. They tend to focus on "oughts," duties, and obligations and use an "avoidance" strategy toward decision making. In other words, such individuals

tend to ensure correct rejections and ensure against errors of commission. Thus, they are especially sensitive to non-loss versus loss situations.

Drawing on the prevention–promotion regulatory distinction, we hypothesize that individuals with a promotion-focus motivational orientation are more likely to relish having a large number of options to choose from, and are more energized by this choice set than those with a prevention-focus motivational orientation. For the former, having more choice means more opportunities to fulfill their hopes and dreams. Having more choices also satisfies their tendency to insure hits and guard against possible omissions. In addition, the increased freedom to choose gives them a heightened sense of control and agency, which is consistent with their “approach” strategy toward decision making. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals may not welcome an extensive choice set to the same degree; they are more concerned with security and taking care not to make mistakes or incur losses, and too many choices simply increases the probability that a wrong decision is made.

### *Job Design*

In an organizational context, job design is often used as a means to increase the intrinsic motivation of employees. According to the Job Characteristics Model, two of the ways to achieve this objective are by increasing task variety and giving people autonomy in the work that they do (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Implicit in this formulation is that variety in the dimensions of one’s job and having the freedom and personal control to choose how to do one’s work would have an energizing effect on people. Not only would work be less boring given more variety, the associated flexibility and autonomy could also increase one’s sense of responsibility toward the assigned task. As a consequence, employees in such conditions would likely become more intrinsically motivated in their work.

While the Job Characteristics Model makes the broad prescription of increasing task variety and autonomy, it is relatively uninformative about boundary conditions (other than the growth strength needs of the individuals involved). For example, will giving people autonomy in their work increase intrinsic motivation in East Asia as much as it does in the U.S.? To address this question, we turn to our earlier discussion regarding the effect of culture on the perception of choice. Recall that in an experiment by Iyengar and Lepper (1999), European Americans were most highly motivated and performed best when given a personal choice in deciding which activity to engage in, whereas Asians were more motivated when choices

were made for them by their own mothers. Drawing on this body of research, we argue that giving employees autonomy in terms of deciding how to go about doing their work could have similar effects. For instance, various scholars have written about the relatively paternalistic management style used in Chinese companies (e.g., Farh & Cheng, 2000). Here, management often retains tight control over how lower-level subordinates do their work. While such a lack of autonomy and personal agency could easily be perceived as a lack of trust in the West, and lead to low levels of employee intrinsic motivation, it would likely have an opposite effect in China. Tight management control could be perceived by Chinese employees as offering clear direction and support for their work. Such a management style could also signal a high degree of top-level involvement and interest. Seen in this light, lack of choice can actually be motivating.

Consider next the suggestion of giving employees more variety in their work as a way of enhancing intrinsic motivation. Here, we believe that the research on choice overload could be relevant. While we agree with Hackman and Oldham (1976) that giving employees some variety in their work tasks could render the job more interesting and meaningful, we argue that care must be taken to determine the degree of task variety that should be given to employees. Drawing on the extensive choice research reviewed earlier, we propose that by giving employees more variety in their work, managers could easily risk overloading them. Specifically, as the number of diverse tasks a person has on his or her work portfolio increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to juggle them. This increase in difficulty need not come from a large increase in task variety. Rather, increasing one's work portfolio by just one task could have an overwhelming effect; even when the overall workload is kept constant, an additional new task means that more cognitive switching from task to task is required. When the number of diverse tasks is small, such switching can provide relief from the boredom associated with managing only one task. However, as the number of diverse tasks increases, the cognitive shifting of attention and mental frameworks among different tasks can become confusing and/or de-motivating.

### *Procedural Justice*

Over the past three decades, scholars in organizational research have identified three key conceptualizations of justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Of notable relevance to our current discussion is that of procedural justice, which focuses on the process

by which decisions are made. One way to increase procedural justice is to give people some form of process control or voice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Another way to increase procedural justice is to give people some form of decision control through participation via the selection or veto of procedural options (e.g., offering a choice of procedures to accomplish a task). For instance, Earley and Lind (1987) showed that giving people choice in terms of which tasks to work on and which procedures to employ enhances their judgments of procedural justice.

However, research that examines choice as a means of increasing perceived procedural justice has not considered the potential downsides to such an approach. Can giving people choice in decision processes actually lead to lower perceptions of procedural justice? Consider the scenario in which a company is experiencing financial difficulties and needs to implement cost-cutting measures. To reduce human resources expenditure, it offers employees the options of either receiving a substantial pay cut or being laid off with a severance package. Although justice research would suggest that such a gesture should improve perceived procedural fairness, as the affected employees are being given choice and the opportunity to participate in the process, we would argue that research on the “choice-outcome aversion” effect (e.g., Botti & Iyengar, 2004) might suggest otherwise. Specifically, we hypothesize that the act of having to choose between two very painful options could actually lead the employees to reminisce and deliberate over their unfortunate fate and cause even greater resentment toward the company. Rather than feeling that the cost-cutting process is a fair one because they were involved in it, employees may even reject such a process as a poor and futile attempt to cushion the unfavorable outcome. Hence, the pleasure of choosing is supplanted by pain and resentment.

### *Power and Leadership*

Although having choice has been linked to an increased sense of personal control and agency (e.g., Lefcourt, 1973; Rotter, 1966; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988), the role of choice in the context of power and leadership has not yet been researched. Does having more choices in a specific domain give people the perception of being more powerful in that domain? We posit that, to the extent that choice increases one’s perception of control, the more choices one has, the more powerful they are likely to feel. This feeling, in turn, could translate into behaviors characterized by more automatic information processing, approach-related tendencies, and reduced inhibition (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). However, if

prior research regarding the increased complexity of extensive choice sets is to be considered, it seems likely that having too many choices may cease to elevate one's perception of power. Rather, the overwhelming nature of too many choices may lead those given extensive options to actually feel less powerful, since they are less able to make a decision and be satisfied with this decision. In short, we argue that there could be a curvilinear relationship between the number of choices one has and one's perception of power. In other words, an individual given a moderate number of options is likely to feel more powerful than another who is given a greater number of options.

With respect to leadership, it would be interesting to explore how subordinates' perceptions of a leader are shaped by the number of options offered to them by the leader. When a leader routinely gives his or her subordinates some form of choice in various aspects of their work, such a leader is likely to be perceived as having a consultative or participative leadership style and less likely to be seen as an authoritarian figure. Thus, subordinates' positive perceptions of the leader should increase as the leader gives them more choices in their work. However, when a leader starts giving subordinates a sizable number of choices (e.g., five different projects to choose from instead of just two), he or she could actually be perceived as indecisive or weak. While some choice is welcomed, giving subordinates choices beyond a certain level may cause the subordinates to think that a leader does not have a clearly thought-out agenda. In this case, we believe that the number of choices offered need not even reach an extensive level for the negative impact to occur. For instance, if the norm is to have no options or very few options, offering subordinates any additional options beyond this norm may elicit the above-mentioned negative effect. Further research should examine how choices offered by leaders affect subordinates' perception of both leadership qualities as well as overall impressions of character.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

Next, we briefly discuss a few examples to illustrate how managers can draw upon the emerging choice research reviewed in this chapter to make better decisions and more effectively motivate employees in practice.

Imagine that the human resources department of a company has decided to implement a flexible benefits scheme for its employees. Instead of giving all employees the same set of benefits, management wants to give them choices over the benefits they receive. In a typical flexible benefits program, employees are given a fixed number of points every year. They can then

exchange these points for their desired benefits from a larger set of benefits provided by the company. By giving employees choice, it is often hoped that they will be more satisfied with the benefits package since it can now be customized to suit an individual's personal needs. Conventional wisdom therefore suggests that the more benefit options employees have, the more satisfied they will be. However, research that highlights the flip side of extensive choice (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) suggests that this proposition may have to be more carefully evaluated. When the number of available benefits becomes large, employees are more likely to experience conflict over how to choose their desired benefits. For every benefit chosen, there is another equally attractive one forgone. Thus, although employees may have more flexibility in customizing their benefits packages, they are not necessarily more satisfied. Worse, they may even feel that the company is not giving them enough benefit points so that they can obtain all of the benefits that they think they need.

In the area of personnel selection and recruitment, ideas from emerging choice research are also applicable. Whenever a job position is advertised or a search for a job opening is conducted, it is often considered desirable to have as many available applicants as possible. Not only does this signal a huge demand for the available position, the company also has the advantage of a large number of potential candidates to choose from. So intuitive is this idea that oftentimes, recruitment or head-hunting strategies are formulated to attract as many applicants as possible. Is this necessarily a good strategy? Drawing again on "choice overload" research, we argue that having too many applicants has at least one major drawback – it is difficult to effectively screen through the large number of applicants to select the right one(s). Unless the company can invest extra resources to facilitate the search process, the typical solution is to use some form of heuristics as a screening mechanism. For instance, MBA admissions often use standardized test scores such as the GMAT to sift through large numbers of applications. Only those applications that meet the cutoff are given a more serious read. Yet this is hardly the best strategy, as otherwise good candidates may be eliminated as a result of the crude heuristics used. A better strategy may be to formulate a more targeted recruitment pitch so that only a manageable number of well-qualified applicants need to be evaluated. In this way, not only does the recruiting company save precious resources and time, a more effective selection process can be employed to choose the most suitable candidate(s).

Finally, in a knowledge-based economy, harnessing employee creativity has increasingly become an important concern for managers. The studies by

Chua and Iyengar (2005a, 2005b) highlight the potential pitfalls that managers may encounter when giving employees increased choices on tasks requiring creativity. Specifically, managers need to pay attention to whom they give extensive options on jobs requiring creativity. If extensive options are given to employees with high creative self-efficacy and a goal of creativity, one could potentially see the desired results. However, a potentially dangerous situation arises when a manager gives an employee with low creative self-efficacy extensive choices when solving a creativity-related problem. Not only will the employee probably not deliver a creative output, he or she might be de-motivated and discouraged by the complexity involved in the problem-solving process. Hence, not only would we lose out on the expected positive results, there could also be potential negative repercussions from such a strategy.

## CONCLUSION

In organizational life, managers often struggle with the question of how to empower employees. In this chapter, we considered one of the most common vehicles through which individuals could be empowered – the provision of choice. Although past psychological and organizational research persuasively suggests that choice confers personal agency and is thus intrinsically motivating, emerging research suggests that things are not quite as straightforward.

The research we have reviewed suggests to managers that they have to pay careful attention to individual and cultural differences when administering choices to employees. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic status may not perceive the provision of choice as critical to their sense of personal agency because their focus is not on expressing uniqueness and control. Thus, whereas high socioeconomic status employees may react negatively when denied the opportunity to choose, those from lower socioeconomic status may not care whether or not they get to choose. With regard to cultural differences, first, it appears that individuals from interdependent cultures tend not to place as much emphasis on the provision of choice as individuals from independent cultures. In fact, when choices were made by significant authority figures (e.g., mothers or well-respected bosses), the effect was often more positive than when it was made personally.

Second, even for individuals from independent cultures who perceive having choice as an important form of personal control, the content of the options offered needs to be considered. When the alternatives are undesirable,

the pleasure of choosing could be replaced by pain and anxiety. Thus, instead of embracing the agency and control that choice confers, people may actually avoid it. People who have choice over undesirable alternatives are also likely to be less satisfied with the options they choose compared to those who do not have choice.

Third, in the event that choice is to be offered, managers must be aware of the misconception that more is necessarily better. It is easy to think that if choice gives people a sense of control and autonomy, then more is always welcomed. In fact, the research we examined suggests that too much choice can lead to experiences of choice overload. Instead of feeling empowered, employees may become confused, avoid choosing, and experience less satisfaction than they otherwise would have, given fewer options.

Finally, although conventional wisdom suggests that in order to unleash employee creativity, people should be given as much flexibility and autonomy as possible, recent research indicates that managers may want to take a more cautious stance. When given extensive choices in terms of task materials and initial resources, individuals can become frustrated and overwhelmed because the combinatorial possibility of using the large number of options can be daunting. This may result, not only in less divergent thinking during the problem-solving process, but also in reduced intrinsic motivation during the task.

Taken together, this body of new research highlights to managers the limits of choice. Under many circumstances, choice not only fails to provide the expected benefits, it can also be detrimental to job performance and the psychological well-being of the individuals involved. Thus, rather than overromanticizing the notion that choice empowers people, managers should carefully consider various situational factors before deciding whether to empower employees through the provision of choice.

In closing, we return to McGregor's (1960) challenge to managers to think of organizations, not as machines driven by authority figures at the top with employees as interchangeable cogs in a large wheel, but rather as human enterprises. This vision has had an influential legacy in management thinking today, with hundreds of companies now practicing different forms of employee involvement and empowerment. Top management control is increasingly decentralized and employees are given more choice and autonomy in their work because they are being recognized as individuals with very different values, needs, and goals.

This approach to management is consistent with various theories propounded by other influential management scholars of the human relations tradition such as Herzberg (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959),

Maslow (1954), and Mayo (1933). Specifically, Herzberg and Maslow emphasized that people are not motivated merely by economic and security needs, but also by the need to grow and achieve various personal and social goals. Furthermore, Mayo highlighted the importance of socio-psychological factors in human behavior. According to Mayo, people's psychological states and behaviors are, to a large extent, shaped by their social context and interpersonal relations. In this chapter, we have brought together these key ideas in understanding the effects of choice in organizations. In the same spirit of these early scholars' visions of building more humanistic organizations, we argue that even when empowering employees through the provision of choice, managers should resist any attempts to use an overly simplistic one-size-fits-all approach. It is important to consider both individual differences as well as socio-cultural factors.

## NOTES

1. An alternative dependent variable is the number of ideas that were not within the 10 themes used in the study. Separate analysis using this variable yielded similar results.

2. An alternative response to the increased frustration could be to abandon the creativity goal (as opposed to seeking it) so that one does not have to search expansively for a novel solution. However, doing so would mean directly undermining the creativity of any output produced. This is not likely to be the dominant strategy as it contradicts the given goal.

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