Does Choice Mean Freedom and Well-Being?

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Americans live in a political, social, and historical context that values personal freedom and choice above all else, an emphasis that has been amplified by contemporary psychology. However, this article reviews research that shows that in non-Western cultures and among working-class Westerners, freedom and choice do not have the meaning or importance they do for the university-educated people who have been the subjects of almost all research on this topic. We cannot assume that choice, as understood by educated, affluent Westerners, is a universal aspiration. The meaning and significance of choice are cultural constructions. Moreover, even when choice *can* foster freedom, empowerment, and independence, it is not an unalloyed good. Too much choice can produce a paralyzing uncertainty, depression, and selfishness. In the United States, the path to well-being may require that we strike a balance between the positive and negative consequences of proliferating choice in every domain of life.

A merican society is guided by a set of assumptions about well-being that are so deeply embedded in most of us that we do not realize either that we make those assumptions or that there is an alternative. The assumptions can be stated in the form of a rough syllogism:

> The more freedom and autonomy people have, the greater their well-being.
> The more choice people have, the greater their freedom and autonomy.
> Therefore, the more choice people have, the greater their well-being.

On first thought, it would seem hard to quarrel—either logically or psychologically—with this syllogism. The moral importance of freedom and autonomy is built into this nation's founding documents, and the psychological importance of freedom and autonomy is now amply documented (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000, 2002; Ryan and Deci 2000; Seligman 1975). Instrumentally, there is no denying that choice improves the quality of people's lives. It enables people to control their destinies and to come close to getting exactly what they want out of any situation. Whereas many basic needs are universal (food, shelter, medical care, social support, education, and so on), much of what we need to flourish is highly individualized. Choice is what enables each person to pursue precisely those objects and activities that best satisfy his or her own preferences within the limits of his or her resources. Any time choice is restricted in some way, there is bound to be someone, somewhere, who is deprived of the opportunity to pursue something of personal value. Increased choice in any domain seems to be what economists call a "Pareto improvement," in that new options will make someone better off without making anyone worse off.

Moreover, choice is viewed as essential to autonomy, which is absolutely fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives. In modern America, choice defines the self because choice is both the engine of independence and the mark of independence. The pursuit of independence organizes the flow of much of everyday middle-class life; it shapes how we raise and educate our children, the way we relate to one another at work, what we do on the weekends, and when and how we retire. American parents love and care for their dependent newborn babies, but they do so with the anticipation that their babies will grow up, leave home, make their own way, pursue their dreams, and develop and express their own unique potential (Bellah et al. 1985; Markus and Kitayama 1994). To encourage and foster independence, parents (especially in middle-class contexts) put infants in their own cribs, and sometimes even in their own rooms. Very often, the events recorded in their child's baby book are milestones on the child's path toward self-determination: rolling over, sitting and standing up, and walking by himself or herself. Either directly or indirectly, these messages are echoed by teachers

who encourage autonomy in the classroom, by employers searching for self-starters and risk-takers, and by every form of media.

A key feature of these messages of independence is an emphatic stress on the right and necessity to make one's own choices. Choices serve to define, express, and reify the distinct individual. Parents organize meals and family activities around children's imputed preferences. Providing children with a choice is believed to be an effective way to encourage compliance with parental directives: "Do you want to go to bed now or take a bath and then go to bed?" By providing frequent opportunities to choose, caretakers signal to children the importance of the capacity for independent choice while encouraging them to develop preferences so they can make these choices (Fiske et al. 1998).

The central themes in many domains of North American life revolve around the availability of a wide variety of styles, flavors, and colors that permit people to pick their favorite and "have it your way." When ordering coffee, one is confronted with many choices: Caffeinated or decaf? Large, medium, or small? Organic or regular? Half and half or whole, 2%, or nonfat milk? Brown sugar, refined sugar, aspartame, or saccharin? For here or to go? Cash, debit, or credit? Answering these questions results in a desirable cup of coffee, yet it is also an exercise in knowing, communicating, and realizing one's preferences (Kim and Markus 1999).

Choice is a dominant theme of Internet ads and television commercials for every product and cause: "Choose anything but ordinary" (Camel cigarettes); "Choice—no woman should be without one" (Kenneth Cole shoes); "Our members don't make compromises, they make choices" (American Association for Retired People). Choice appears to make one a cooler and better person. Even behavior that seems to an observer to be conformist and imitative—like the choices teenagers make about their clothes, food, or music—can be experienced as an expression of individuality, as a stand of the self against society. For example, one's choice of shirt is identity expressive; it is *my* preference, *my* choice (Markus and Kitayama 2003). In North American lives, choice seems to be the Swiss-army knife of actions. It has multiple important and varied functions and consequences. It allows people to separate and individuate themselves, to express themselves, and to experience themselves as active agents who control their destinies and influence their worlds. Perhaps most important, a choice is a sign of freedom.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously declared there are four essential freedoms: freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of worship, and freedom to express oneself. But in the past few decades, freedom has come to mean, almost exclusively, freedom of choice. It is this association that connects the two statements in the opening syllogism. Other historically important meanings of freedom have receded in popular cultural imagination. Currently, pairing "freedom and choice" in a Google search results in 121 million hits; pairing "freedom and independence" results in 60 million hits. Searches for "freedom and speech," "freedom and the press," and "freedom and oppression" produce many fewer entries. Given the depth and breadth of positive associations around choice in North America, the surest way to raise suspicion about a product or program is to suggest it might limit choice. The recent campaign against a government-sponsored health-care plan has been focused squarely on choice. For example, in full-page ads in the *New York Times*, the Cato Institute on Health Care Reform asked, "Should government bureaucrats make your health care choices for you?"

In this article, we will argue that however reasonable the syllogism that opened this article is, however consistent it is with past psychological research and theory, and however well it conforms to modern, lay understanding, it is false. It is false for two reasons. First, research comparing people from different parts of the globe or from different social classes within the United States shows us that the relationship between choice, freedom, autonomy, and well-being is complex. The picture presented by a half century of research may present an accurate picture of the psychological importance of choice, freedom, and autonomy among middle-class, college-educated Americans, but this is a picture that leaves about 95% of the world's population outside its frame (Arnett 2008; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, forthcoming; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Moreover, it is a picture without perspective; it has yet to include the consequences, many of them unforeseen, of a society that privileges personal choice and individual freedom and autonomy above all other moral goods. Second, even among those for whom choice is essential, the relationship between choice and well-being is also complex. There can be too much freedom and too much choice, especially with respect to characteristics of the self (Schwartz 2009).

WHY IS CHOICE SO SIGNIFICANT? THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND CLASS

Understanding why choice is viewed so positively requires a wide-angle lens that puts North America in global as well as historical perspective. North American society is fundamentally individualist in character, and choice fuels this individualism (Bellah et al. 1985; Markus and Kitayama 1991). In core values and beliefs—in legal and political systems, in educational and caretaking practices, and even in interpersonal relationships—Americans in the United States reveal a particular commonsense understanding of what it means to be a person. Born in revolution, America and Americans are famous for their independence—doing their own thing, having it their way, being captains of their ships and their fates. The idea that they are in control of and responsible for their own actions is pervasive and very highly valued. People are understood to be independent individuals who are or at least should try to be free from the constraints of history, other people, and society. According to this way of thinking, each individual has her own private set of preferences, motives, attitudes, abilities, and goals.

And this unique set of attributes guides and motivates thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The idea of the independent and self-determining individual is central not just to Americans' sense of self but also to our systems of government, law, finance, and health care. The most treasured U.S. ideals—freedom, equality, self-governance, and the pursuit of happiness—are based on the idea of the "free" individual who has the right to govern himself or herself and to pursue the achievement of his or her full potential. The idea of the autonomous individual is an idea that underlies the "reasonable man" of the law, the "rational self-interested actor" of economics, and the "authentic self" of counseling and clinical psychology (Schwartz 1986).

Another Way to Be a Good Self?

The model of the self as independent and freely choosing is so deeply ingrained in the North American way of life that it is hard to see it as a historical and philosophical product that came into being over the course of several centuries or to imagine that there could be other models of how to be a self. Models of the self, like water to fish or the air that we breathe, are difficult to see. Yet outside middle-class North American contexts, there *are* other models for how to be a person (Fiske et al. 1998; Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 1997; Miller 2003). In many societies and communities, for example, people are not viewed as independent entities separate from others. Rather, they are viewed as fundamentally *inter*dependent or in relationship with other people. Given this basic interdependence, a person's actions should take these important others into account and should be responsive to the expectations and requirements of these others. According to this model, the self is not a separate whole but rather a part made whole in relationship with others and their actions.

In an interdependent model of the self, the individual is not alone responsible for her own well-being or behavior; instead, people who are interdependent bear some responsibility for each other (Doi 1973; Geertz 1973; Heine 2007; Kitayama et al. 2009; Markus and Kitayama 1991, 2003; Triandis 1995). An interdependent model of self has long been prevalent in many places in East and South Asia. And recent studies reveal that a version of this model can be found in many subcultures of the United States as well (Stephens et al. 2009; Vandello and Cohen 1999). This model emphasizes that the person is inherently and fundamentally connected to others, stressing empathy, reciprocity, belongingness, kinship, hierarchy, loyalty, respect, politeness, and social obligations. The person is expected to adjust herself to meet others' expectations and to work for the good of the relationship. Well-being comes from being part of normatively good relationships.

From the perspective of an interdependent model of self, social relationships, roles, norms, and obligations are often more valued than self-expression, and this understanding is fostered in the practices and institutions of everyday life. When evaluating an experience, people are less likely to think about what they expected or might have hoped for and are more likely to think about what others, particularly significant others, might expect or prefer. From a Japanese perspective, one's own experience is always contingent on others. For example, a Japanese mother does not typically ask for a child's preference for food or toys or clothes but instead tries to determine what is best for the child and to arrange it. Many Japanese schooling practices place a great emphasis on learning to live with others in society, and teachers emphasize the importance of discerning how others are feeling. Punishing or reprimanding Japanese children often involves a threat to the relationship rather than a withholding of privileges and the rights to exercise choice (Lewis 1995).

In East Asian contexts, ideas of interdependence, like ideas of independence in the United States, are reflected and distributed by a variety of institutional practices and polices. For example, a study comparing magazine advertising in East Asia and the United States (Kim and Markus 1999) and analyzing thousands of ads in news, home, fashion, youth, and business magazines corroborates this consensual emphasis on fitting in and being part of a larger, interdependent whole. While East Asian ads most commonly invoked themes of respect for group values, following a trend, and harmony with others, the American ads relied most heavily on themes of choice, freedom, uniqueness, and rebelling against norms.

From the perspective of an interdependent self, an autonomous person who insists on expressing his or her preferences is immature. If flexible adaptation to the requirements of important others or the demands of the situation is the goal, the habit and expectation of personal choices can be counterproductive. A more valuable practice is the one that encourages attending to and adjusting to others. What is obvious from the perspective of an interdependent model of self is that the opportunity to make a choice and express one's own individual preferences may not be, as it often is in the United States, the gold standard for well-being for individuals or for societies.

Choice as an Act of Meaning

Choice, then, is not a natural unit of behavior that has the same significance for everyone. The meaning and significance of choice varies with the cultural context and with what it means to be a normatively good actor in that context (Markus and Kitayama 2003; Snibbe and Markus 2005; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007). This idea has been assessed in a number of different types of comparative studies. One of the first studies to directly test the idea that choices serve different cultural purposes and carry different meanings was conducted by Kim and Markus (1999). The participants in their studies were adults at an international airport. As a gift for completing the survey, participants were presented with five pens and were asked to choose the pen they liked. The pens were always presented in groups of five. When the pens were presented in a set of four of one color and one of another color, 78% of European Americans

picked the unique pen. In contrast, 31% of East Asians picked the unique pen. Similar results were obtained when the pens were presented in a set of three of one color and two of another—72% of European Americans chose the relatively unique pen, whereas 15% of the East Asians chose it. The fact that the two groups chose so differently indicates that the act of choosing a pen had a different significance for each group. From the perspective of an independent model of self, choosing the pen that is different from the others may communicate a preference for uniqueness, while from the perspective of an interdependent model of self, choosing the common or majority pen may communicate a preference for being like others. Studies like this one carried out in a number of settings confirm that North Americans are highly distinctive in their default preferences for choosing the unique pen. Participants in Hong Kong, Singapore, and India showed a preference for the majority pen or showed no preference (Kim and Sherman 2008; Markus and Savani 2009).

Studies like these, of simple choices in various contexts, are of course open to multiple interpretations. They indicate, however, that a choice is an action, a chunk of behavior that does not carry its own inherent meaning. Instead, a choice derives meaning from the context in which it is made. A study of 7–9-year-old children living in the San Francisco Bay Area carried out by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) underscores this powerful difference in how people think about choice. In this study, all of the children were native English speakers, but some had parents who were born in East Asia, while others had parents who were born in the United States. Because all of the children were growing up in the United States, they all interacted with the United States' independent culture and had considerable experience with the independent model of self. But the children whose parents had grown up in East Asia—in Japan or China or Korea—also interacted with the interdependent practices of their parents and thus also had experience with the interdependent model of the self.

The experiment used a laboratory task that required all of the children to solve word puzzles in one of three experimental conditions. In the control condition, Iyengar and Lepper told one-third of the children which type of puzzle to work on. They told another third—the choice condition—to choose which kind of puzzle they wanted to work on. And for the last third—the "your mom" condition—they gave children puzzles that their moms had chosen for them. As virtually all choice researchers would predict, the children of European American parents solved the most puzzles in the choice condition—and the fewest in the "your mom" condition. But the outcomes were different for children of East Asian parents. These children solved the most puzzles when they believed they were working on the ones their moms had chosen for them. They solved more puzzles and worked longer than did children with European American parents who got to choose the puzzles they wanted to solve, and they also solved more puzzles than did children who just did the ones they were assigned. In fact, many European

American children, well on their way to creating an independent self, balked at the very suggestion that their moms would know what kind of puzzle they should do or would like to do.

In contexts in which an interdependent model of self is prevalent, choice (or what may appear as "choice" to a European American observer) may necessarily involve referencing others and adjusting to the preferences and expectations of others. Choosing the common pen or working diligently on the puzzle your mom has chosen need not imply (as it might from an American independent perspective) conformity or a lack of personal preference or agency but instead an active commitment to interdependence, to fitting in and doing what is expected of you by a person with whom you are in relationship and who knows you best.

The Denial of Choice

To further explore variation in the meaning and consequences of choice, researchers have used a paradigm that offers choice and then denies it. In one study comparing European Americans with South Asian Indians, shoppers were approached and were asked to evaluate one of five nice pens (Savani, Markus, and Conner 2008). In a "free choice" condition, participants were promised a free pen if they would choose one pen, write with it, and then evaluate it on a number of dimensions. In a second, "usurped choice" condition, just as participants chose a particular pen, the experimenter said, "I'm sorry, you can't have that one, it is my last," and then gave the participant another pen to write with and evaluate. The European American participants were seemingly upset in this condition and gave a lower rating to the pen in this condition than in the free choice condition. The Indian respondents gave equally good ratings to both pens. When queried about their responses, the European Americans seemed to experience a threat to their independent self. Many felt that something—their right to express their personal preference—had been taken from them. The Indians, in contrast, did not accord the opportunity to choose with the same significance. They seemed to think the experimenter must have needed the pen for some reason and did not experience the denial of choice as a threat to the self.

The Construal of Choice

When choice is so significant in defining and expressing the self, as appears to be the case for European Americans, people are likely to be on the lookout for choice and to perceive their worlds in terms of the opportunities for choice. A recent study (Savani et al. 2010) required participants to complete a series of 12 actions to complete an experiment (e.g., sit down in a cubicle, select a pen or pencil, fill out one of several forms). Each action required selecting among alternatives (e.g., there were four empty cubicles, and participants had to select one in which to sit down and begin the study). At the end of the study, all participants had completed the exact same series of actions. They were then

asked how many choices they had made during the study. The European Americans believed they had made eight choices, while the Indians claimed they had made fewer than four choices. Americans are more likely than Indians to construe a particular action as a choice.

Construing an action as a choice may be one mechanism by which Americans realize their sense of independence and freedom. In these studies, participants who have the opportunity to choose or to focus on choice, compared with those who do not, describe themselves as feeling more free and also more happy. By construing an action as a choice, people are likely to feel that they have freely acted out of their own volition. In contrast, in Indian contexts in which good actions are those that are responsive to others, the construal of choice in noninterpersonal contexts does not hold this special meaning. Notably, these studies also reveal that as Indian respondents spend more time in U.S. settings, they look more like European Americans, construing more actions as choices.

An extension of these studies required participants to make a choice or to watch a film of another person making routine choices (among drinks, CDs, and articles of clothing) and then asked them to evaluate how responsible people were for a series of bad outcomes that befell another person (e.g., injury, illness, divorce, or loss of money, employment, or status). Among European American participants, but not among Indian participants, merely observing another person making choices significantly increased the belief that people were responsible for their own bad outcomes. Moreover, watching the same film and noting how many times the actor touched an object did not produce this effect. These results suggest that for European Americans, a focus on choice highlights the independent model of self and the importance of self-expression and control through choice. This focus on choice enhances the importance of the individual's contribution to a given outcome.

Other similar studies found that after observing another person make a choice, European American participants were less likely to support actions that might improve the fate of others than European American participants who did not observe another person make a choice (Savani, Markus, and Stephens 2009). In particular, they were less willing to endorse affirmative action or to support policies that might expand the social safety net. A focus on choice, then, can heighten a sense of being in control and of personal responsibility for one's actions, but it can also distract people from the consideration of other factors that are likely to have contributed to a given outcome. Such findings could have a variety of powerful societal consequences. Most broadly, the view that life outcomes are primarily a result of personal choice can motivate people to work hard, persist longer, and produce more while fueling a sense of self-efficacy and control. At the same time, however, this view may blind people to the many contextual and structural sources of inequality in health, wealth, and well-being. This in turn can foster self-blame and depression when one's own outcomes do not meet one's expectations, and racism, class-

ism, and other forms of discrimination when the outcomes of others do not meet expectations (see Stephens et al. [2009] and also Gladwell [2009] for a discussion of how American attitudes about achievement are permeated by assumptions of individual responsibility).

Choice and Others

Traditionally, social scientists have focused almost exclusively on choices made in the absence of any relational concerns and have assumed choices to be a "pure" or direct expression of one's preferences. Yet in these circumstances, researchers do know that people in North American contexts often worry over the adequacy of their choices. They worry, for example, that they may not have made a good choice and, thus, that they may not be seen as smart, competent, or rational choosers. When a choice is self-defining or expressive of one's preferences, revealing oneself to be a good chooser really matters. This concern or anxiety is at the heart of what social psychologists call cognitive dissonance (Aronson 1992; Cooper and Fazio 1989; Festinger 1962; Steele 1988). This dissonance, or worry over whether one has made a good choice, motivates people to justify the choices they have made so that their preferences will be better aligned with their choices. Typically what happens is that one's preferences for chosen items increase, while one's preferences for unchosen items decrease.

Yet when people are organizing their actions and their worlds with an interdependent model of self, this worry or dissonance about their choices happens only when they are explicitly thinking about other people or when they are choosing for others. For example, one study (Kitayama et al. 2002) asked participants to rate how much they liked 10 popular CDs they did not own and then offered them a choice between their fifth- and sixth-ranked CDs. European American participants increased their rating for the CD they chose and decreased the rating of the CD they did not choose. There was no such effect, however, for the Japanese participants in their studies. Yet when participants were required explicitly to think about others and to estimate the preferences of the average student of their own university before making their choice, the Japanese participants showed a very strong dissonance effect. They increased how much they liked the chosen CD. Another study invited both European Canadian and Asian Canadian participants to come to the lab with a best friend. Participants were offered a coupon for a Chinese dish in a campus cafeteria as a reward (Hoshino-Browne et al. 2005). Participants were asked to indicate their preferences among dishes, to choose one of the dishes for a friend, and then to indicate their preferences once again. Given the task of choosing for a friend, Asian Canadians but not European Americans boosted their rating of the dish they choose.

What the research discussed above tells us is that to understand choices, one must understand their meaning (notwithstanding the assumptions of the theory of revealed preference). Choices are full of meaning, but often not the same meanings. They may not, for example, express one's per-

sonal preferences. Instead, they may signal the nature of one's relationships with others and a concern with social approval or accountability. Independent selves are centrally defined by their internal attributes, such as their personal preferences, and a choice that puts these internal preferences on the line and highlights one's freedom or autonomy is likely to be a psychologically significant one; it will motivate behavior and require justifying. Interdependent selves are centrally defined by their relationships with others. Choices that highlight one's autonomy are less psychologically significant than are choices that highlight one's relationships (one's duty, connection, and obligation) to others. These are the choices that jump-start action and provoke people to worry about and to strive to explain.

The types of cross-national comparisons reported here have many implications for what will count as a good choice and for whether preferences can be reliably inferred from choices. They demonstrate that what makes a choice meaningful and when and why a choice needs justifying varies significantly with cultural context. Choice is likely to be a meaningful action everywhere, but it need not imply or result in greater autonomy or individual freedom or well-being. Most important for our argument, these comparative studies matter because they reveal that whereas choice, freedom, autonomy, and well-being may be connected, as in the opening syllogism, it is less a matter of logic than a matter of culture. The opening syllogism is self-evident only if we assume an independent model of self. The connections among these concepts are not necessary, invariant, or universal.

Choice and Educational Attainment

Studies comparing European Americans and South and East Asians demonstrate that choice is significant because it activates and promotes an independent model of the self. But is this independent model of self uniformly available in American settings? Are all Americans equally likely to construct themselves and their actions with this model? Recent studies suggest, in fact, that the desire for choice, as well as the benefits that are sometimes associated with choice, may be confined to a particular group of Americans—middle-class North Americans. Social class, like nation or origin, is a label for a set of social experiences. A growing literature in psychology, anthropology, and sociology reveals that this set of experiences can have a powerful impact on individuals, affecting not only how they think, feel, and act but also how healthy they are and how long they live (e.g., Adler et al. 1994; Johnson and Krueger 2005; Kusserow 1999; Lareau 2003). With respect to choice, for example, one's social class sets up how often and among what kinds of options one gets to choose: working-class Americans have fewer opportunities to choose as well as lower-quality options among which to choose than do middle-class Americans.

Social class is notoriously difficult to define, especially in the United States, where there is little everyday conversation about social class differences and where the majority of people define themselves as middle class. Educational attainment, income, and occupation all contribute to social class. Educational attainment is often used as a indicator of social class because it is relatively easy to measure. Moreover, attaining a college degree is increasingly important for securing many of the types of professional jobs that provide a substantial advantage in lifetime earnings (Day and Newburger 2002; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Finally, education is the best predictor of a wide range of beliefs and lifestyle practices (Davis 1994). Despite the fact that Americans live within a common ideological, political, legal, and media framework and share many ideas and practices, level of education can create a powerful division between people with a high school education (here called working class) and people with a college education (here called middle class). Although the figure varies by age group, overall, 29% of Americans have completed a four-year college degree. Why might social class make such a difference for behavior and for choice in particular?

Middle-class American contexts (contexts in which most people have a college education or are in a position to go to college) offer access to economic capital, geographic mobility, and opportunities for choice and control (Kohn 1969; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Stephens et al. 2007). Moreover, socialization practices in these middle-class settings often involve "concerted cultivation" or careful attention to elaborating children's personal preferences and interests (Lareau 2003). For example, parents offer children opportunities for choice and self-expression and thereby convey to them a sense of entitlement and of their own importance (Miller, Cho, and Bracey 2005).

Working-class American contexts (contexts in which most people have a high school education and are not in a position to go to college), by contrast, offer less economic capital, more environmental constraints, and workplaces and communities with less choice and control than middle-class contexts (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Lachman and Weaver 1998). Moreover, socialization practices in these working-class settings are often less child-centered and convey to children that the world is not just about them. While middle-class parents emphasize self-direction, many working-class parents teach children to know their place and to consider others' preferences and interests before their own (Miller et al. 2005; Stephens et al. 2009). Because fitting in with others and following socially accepted rules and standards for behavior is often an important route to upward mobility, working-class environments are relatively likely to stress conformity to standards and the importance of showing respect for and deference to authority (Kohn 1969; Miller et al. 2005).

Studies of occupations reveal that opportunities for choice and control are not, in fact, uniformly distributed. They are decidedly more likely in jobs and careers associated with middle-class standing (e.g., Kohn and Schooler 1983; Markus et al. 2004; Ryff and Marshall 1999). Lamont (2000), in an in-depth comparative study of working-class and middle-class employees in both the United States and France,

reports that working-class respondents are less focused on themselves and are relatively more aware of their interdependence with others and the importance of responsibility to others.

Notably, interdependence is common in both East Asian and American working-class contexts, but it has different sources and functions. Interdependence in East Asian contexts is part of the dominant discourse and is fostered by mainstream practices and institutions of the larger society (e.g., Stephens et al. 2007, 2009), whereas the interdependence in American working-class contexts seems to be primarily a function of holding a lower status within the larger social hierarchy (Lorenzi-Cioldi 1998).

In short, independence is the dominant narrative in mainstream American life, and all Americans are exposed to the idea of the independent model of the self. Yet the material and social conditions that provide the supports and opportunities for people to construct themselves and their actions as independent are more common in middle-class contexts than in working-class contexts. Middle-class contexts are arranged so as to repeatedly promote choice and the expression of the independent self through choice. In contrast, the specific social and material conditions of working-class contexts tend to promote interdependence by fostering a greater adjustment to, reliance on, and attention to others (cf. Miller 1976).

Since working-class contexts are arranged differently and require responsiveness and interdependence with others, choice based on one's own preferences may not carry the same associations with freedom, autonomy, and well-being as it does in middle-class contexts. In an initial look at this hypothesis, one study asked college students from working-class families and college students from middle-class families to generate three words associated with "choice." Notably, both groups of students responded with a greater percentage of positive than negative associations. Yet a higher percentage of working-class students responded with "fear," "doubt," and "difficulty," while more of the middle-class respondents said "freedom" and "independence" (Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2010). This study is consistent with the idea that working-class and middle-class participants both value choice. They are likely to differ in their responses to choice situations, however, because their immediate social contexts differ in their opportunities for choice among good alternatives and also in the consequences that follow from the wrong choice or a bad choice.

To explore the notion that the links among choice, freedom, and well-being may vary with social class, many of the studies carried out in the East-West comparisons reported above have also been carried out in U.S. settings and have contrasted the responses of middle-class Americans with working-class Americans. In a replication of the pen choice study, working-class Americans were much less likely than middle-class Americans to choose the unique pen and showed no preference for choosing their own pen versus accepting a previously chosen pen (Stephens et al. 2007). In other studies, they showed no tendency to justify or ex-

plain their choices. When given a opportunity to choose between their fifth- and sixth-ranked CDs in the dissonance paradigm described earlier, they did not evaluate the CD they chose more positively than the one they did not choose (Snibbe and Markus 2005). When presented with the opportunity to accept a thank-you gift selected by an experimenter or to choose one for themselves, working-class respondents, unlike middle-class respondents, preferred to accept the gift from the experimenter (Stephens et al. 2010).

Just as it does in East Asian contexts, in working-class American contexts a choice based on one's own preference seems to have a different meaning than it does in middle-class American contexts. A series of studies show that while middle-class participants often use choice to express their individuality—their independent self—working-class participants are likely to use choice to signal what they have in common with others, their interdependent self (Stephens et al. 2007). In one study, middle-class participants and working-class participants were asked to describe how they would feel if a friend purchased the same car as they did. Middle-class participants responded negatively to this scenario. One said, "I'd be disappointed because my car is no longer unique." In contrast, working-class participants responded positively to a friend's choice of the same car. One replied, "Cool. Let's start a car club!" An accompanying study showed how these different norms of expressing uniqueness versus expressing solidarity are apparent in the different cultural products that working-class and middle-class Americans consume. Magazine ads targeting middle-class consumers more often encourage people to make unique choices (e.g., an Audi ad says, "Never follow"), whereas ads targeting working-class consumers mention other people (e.g., a Toyota ad says, "Dropping the kid off at college").

To examine whether working-class respondents are less likely to construe their actions in terms of choice, a team of researchers interviewed survivors of Hurricane Katrina and asked them to describe what happened to them before, during, and after the hurricane (Stephens et al. 2009). Compared with working-class black survivors, middle-class white survivors (who often had the material resources to evacuate) more often described their actions as choices and themselves as influencing the environment through independence and control. In contrast, working-class black survivors (who often lacked the material resources to evacuate) more often described themselves as adjusting to the environment by remaining strong in the face of hardship, caring for others, and maintaining their faith in God. These findings point to an additional consequence of the widespread American independent model of self—the assumption that choice is equally available and beneficial to all. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, for example, well-resourced, far-removed observers drawing on their own independent model of self readily concluded that survivors who did not evacuate in the face of the storm "chose" to stay. But, in fact, for many impoverished New Orleans residents, nothing about the events of Katrina was a matter of choice.

Together these studies suggest how both attitudes toward

choice and opportunities to choose diverge across social classes. Middle-class Americans have more opportunities to choose and view choices more positively and therefore create worlds that offer them more choices and more positive representations of choice. In sum, this research reveals that choice has different meanings and consequences for people who have and who lack the resources to choose. The proliferation of choice may provide positive consequences for the more affluent members of American society. Yet it is unlikely to hold even these potentially positive consequences for the many working-class Americans with relatively fewer opportunities and resources. And to make matters worse, the continual proliferation of choice has a set of far-ranging, unforeseen societal consequences. For example, as mentioned above, it appears to strengthen the belief among Americans in middle-class contexts that all people are alike in their opportunity to choose. This belief in turn fuels the idea that people are responsible for their circumstances, and it can reduce a sense of connection with or empathy for those whose circumstances provide many fewer opportunities to choose among good options.

In sum, these studies comparing people living in different social class contexts are a further demonstration that choice, freedom, autonomy, and well-being are not inevitably linked. They need not imply one another or follow logically one from the other. The opening syllogism may indeed hold, but only in well-resourced contexts, like those of the North American middle class, that support an independent model of the self.

TOO MUCH CHOICE, EVEN FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

One could read the evidence reviewed above, acknowledge that the relationship between choice, freedom, and well-being depends on culture and class, and nonetheless conclude that all people should be aspiring to live lives like those of the European American middle class. That is, one could assume an Enlightenment-inspired, individualistic stance toward human nature and human possibility, see it most clearly embodied in the American middle class, and then work to give others the same opportunities. Such a stance might make sense if the empirical evidence suggested that freedom of choice provides people with unalloyed psychological benefits. But research in the past decade makes that suggestion implausible. There is evidence that whereas choice is good, *more* choice is not better, at least under some circumstances. Choice overload can produce paralysis, poor decisions, and dissatisfaction with even good decisions. The relevant literature on consumer choice overload and its limits is no doubt familiar to readers of this journal and will not be discussed here (for demonstrations and discussion of choice overload, see Botti and Iyengar [2004], Botti, Orfali, and Iyengar [2009], Hanoch et al. [2009], Iyengar and DeVoe [2003], Iyengar, Jiang, and Huberman [2004], Iyengar and Lepper [1999, 2002], Rice and Hanoch [2008], and Schwartz [2004]; for a discussion of its limits, see Chernev

[2003] and Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd [2009]). We will focus instead on potential consequences of choice overload for conceptions and construals of the self. "What should I buy?" is of less significance than "What should I do with my life?" or "Who should I be?" Moreover, it is in connection with these identity-shaping decisions that the benefits of freedom and autonomy (i.e., choice) loom largest.

There is little doubt (Schwartz 2000, 2004) that freedom of choice in these self-defining domains has expanded along with freedom of choice in the world of goods. Young people, at least middle-class young people, find themselves with relatively unconstrained choices when it comes to where they live, what they study, what kind of work they do, what religion they practice and how they practice it, what kind of intimate relations they will enter into, what kind of family commitments they will make, and even what kind of person they will be. And having made decisions like these, people are also free to change them. No longer are people "stuck" with the identities and life paths that accidents of birth or the views of others have imposed on them. Self-invention and reinvention is now a real option. And occasional paralysis in the cereal aisle of the supermarket seems a small price to pay for this kind of liberation.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 1992a, 1992b) points out that over the past five hundred years, self-understanding (at least in the West) has been moving in a more or less straight line from "outside-in," through participation in larger entities (the divine order, the "great chain of being," nation, community, family, etc.), to "inside-out," with purpose discovered from within each individual and the notion of "authentic" self-expression as the supreme aspiration. We in the West have seen this evolution as progress, each step enhancing freedom, and we have occasionally been quick to essentialize this view and to assume it must be true for humans everywhere, even those whose history and whose cultural ideas and practices are very different from our own North American ones. We find it hard to imagine thinking about our lives in any other way.

But the work we reviewed above on cultural differences in notions of freedom and choice, along with earlier work (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1994) contrasting East Asian and Western cultures, has shown that this movement from "outside-in" to "inside-out" is not universal: in East Asian contexts, people define themselves in terms of their relations to others. This research does not challenge the notion that within Western culture, more freedom—more "inside-out"—is better. However, it is possible that East Asians may know something that Westerners, in their pursuit of independence and their emphasis on individual choice, have forgotten.

Consistent with this possibility, there is evidence that the most significant determinant of our well-being is our network of close relations to other people (e.g., Diener 2000; Diener and Biswas-Diener 2008; Diener, Diener, and Diener 1995; Diener et al. 1985; Diener and Suh 2001; Diener et al. 1999; Lane 2000; Myers 2000). The more connected we are, the better off we are. The thing to notice about close

relationships, in connection with freedom, choice, and autonomy, is that close relationships constrain; they do not liberate. When people have responsibilities and concerns about other people, they cannot just do anything they want. Until now, the thought has been that this constraint is perhaps just a price worth paying for rich social ties. But it is possible that with the overwhelming choice now characteristic of every aspect of life, the constraints of close relationships with others may actually be part of the *benefit* of those relationships rather than a cost. And like close relationships with others, "outside-in" definitions of the self provide significant constraints on what is possible, constraints that, in modern Western societies, may be desperately needed (see Markus and Nurius [1986] and Schlenker [1985] for a discussion of social and cultural constraints on self-definition found at other times and in other cultures).

What is the evidence that modern Westerners are suffering from this lack of constraint? First, there has been a significant rise in the incidence of clinical depression, anxiety disorder, and suicide, all of which are befalling people at younger and younger ages (e.g., Angst 1995; Eckersley 2002; Eckersley and Dear 2002; Klerman et al. 1985; Klerman and Weissman 1989; Lane 2000; Myers 2000; Rosenhan and Seligman 1995; Twenge 2006). Second, there is a substantial increase in the rate at which college students are seeking help in counseling centers (Kadison and DiGeronimo 2004). Third, there is a palpable unease in the reports of young college graduates, who seem to lack a clear idea of what they are meant to do in their lives (Robbins and Wilner 2001; Twenge 2006). And finally, for upper-class adolescents, whose family affluence makes anything possible, there are the same levels of drug abuse, anxiety disorder, and depression as there are for the children of the poor and a higher frequency of drug use for self-medication rather than recreation (Luthar and Latendresse 2005).

CONCLUSION: FREEDOM *FROM* AND FREEDOM *TO*

Philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1958) made a classic distinction in discussing freedom half a century ago. Berlin distinguished between what he called "negative and positive liberty"—freedom *from* and freedom *to*. The primary historical focus of the American embrace of freedom has been "freedom from." The Bill of Rights, the bible of American freedom, is all about freedom from, as it limits the power of the state to intrude in the lives of its citizens. With the meddling of the state kept at bay, "freedom to" is pretty much up to each of us. That is, there are no guarantees that the conditions needed for Americans to live rich, meaningful, and satisfying lives will be present.

Choice is good. It is essential in enabling people to have the opportunity to live the kinds of lives they want. But choice is not always and only good, and it does not mean the same thing to all people in all contexts and all cultures. Further, the relationship between choice and freedom is complex. Though one cannot be free without choice, it is arguable that the choice-induced paralysis that is sometimes observed is a sign of diminished rather than enhanced freedom.

If people can come to see that the meaning of choice and the relationship between choice and freedom are socially constructed, and that sometimes the social construction that educated Westerners take for granted can be debilitating rather than liberating, they may seek and embrace some constraints in their own lives instead of trying to avoid all of them. They may come to understand, as they seek to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, that in the pursuit of happiness, the expression of personal preference and more choice may not always be the only or the right thing to pursue or demand.

If we pay more attention to "freedom to"—to the conditions that enable the living of good lives—it may turn out that there can be too much "freedom from." That is, a good life may require constraints, whether imposed by the self, the state, the family, the school, or religious and cultural institutions. We have shown that whether constraint is perceived as a threat to freedom is itself governed by a cultural and class-based understanding of what freedom means. Greater progress on the part of psychologists and other social scientists in determining what the constituents of a good life are may embolden them to offer suggestions about which kinds of constraints are needed and why. And greater attention to lives as lived by people other than the ones who dominate modern research—both as participants and as researchers—may open up awareness of the possibility that, sometimes, the embrace of constraints enriches lives rather than impoverishing them.

Once we understand that the relationship between choice, freedom, and well-being may depend on culture and class, as well as a variety of other significant social distinctions, and once we acknowledge that the relationship between choice and well-being may be nonmonotonic, even among those for whom choice really is another word for freedom, a variety of important and challenging research questions open up.

1. How much choice is "enough"? Are there individual differences, domain differences, and culture and class differences in the answer to this question?

2. Does the amount of choice available to people in a particular domain of life influence whether decisions in that domain become part of the definition of self and thus grow in importance? For example, it is possible to imagine that when jeans come in only a few styles, one's choice of jeans says little about the self because there is not enough variety to differentiate among the many different possible "selves." However, when jeans come in thousands of styles, brands, and colors, it becomes possible for one's choice of jeans to say something about who one is. This raises the stakes of decisions about jeans and makes mistakes more consequential.

3. Must an abundance of choice make people selfish and uncaring? Will increasing choice, increasing individualism,

and increasing societal inequality always go hand in hand? Do they recruit and foster each other?

4. What takes the place of "choice" as the source of action, motivation, pride, self, and identity in cultural contexts in which choice is not celebrated as it is among the North American middle class? We suggest here that it is meeting or adjusting to the expectations of important others. Are there other important drivers of behavior, and do they rival choice in their robust behavioral consequences?

5. What will be the result of the proliferation of choice in cultural contexts where choice has not been the predominant historical and philosophical focus? Will the increasing abundance of choice contribute to happiness or well-being in contexts that now emphasize interdependence? Does abundance of choice undermine interdependence, or will the existence of interdependent values and practices inoculate consumers against the unhappiness sometimes caused by too much choice?

By tackling questions like these, we can begin to develop a nuanced understanding and assessment of the syllogism with which this article began.

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