

February 26, 2006

Is Freedom Just Another Word for Many Things to Buy?

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In today's America, everyone from President Bush to advertising executives to liberal activists appears to agree that freedom is about having choices and that having more choices means having more freedom. Choice, even in mundane matters, embodies the larger ideal of the individual as arbiter not just of what tastes or feels good but also of what is good. This is why we now regard 32 kinds of jam in the supermarket, 50 styles of jeans in the department store and 120 retirement plans in the workplace as signs of both economic progress and moral and political progress. Choice is what enables all of us to live exactly the kind of lives we want to and think we should.

But this "wisdom" is suspect for two reasons. First, most Americans do not think that freedom is about exercising more and more choice. And second, even for those who do equate freedom with choice, having more choice does not seem to make them feel freer. Instead, Americans are increasingly bewildered — not liberated — by the sheer volume of choices they must make in a day.

As behavioral scientists, we have found that the people who frame freedom in terms of choice are usually the ones who get to make a lot of choices — that is, middle- and upper-class white Americans (most of our study participants are white; we can't make any claims about other racial and ethnic groups). The education, income and upbringing of these Americans grant them choices about how to live their lives and also encourage them to express their preferences and personalities through the choices they make. Most Americans, however, are not from the college-educated middle and upper classes. Working-class Americans often have fewer resources and experience greater uncertainty and insecurity. For them, being free is less about making choices that reflect their uniqueness and mastery and more about being left alone, with their personality, integrity and well-being intact.

Social class is difficult to measure — it's a complicated amalgam of education, income and occupational prestige — but in the U.S.'s quasi meritocracy, education has arguably become its most important facet. And so in our research we often identify social class with education.

In a recent study with Nicole Stephens at Stanford University, we asked college students to pick "three adjectives that best capture what the word 'choice' means to you." A higher percentage of those who had parents with a college education said "freedom," "action" and "control," while more of those whose parents had only a high-school education responded with "fear," "doubt" and "difficulty."

We also analyzed how freedom and choice are presented in one of our most pervasive and influential cultural products: popular songs. In every region, Americans with higher education and higher incomes typically prefer rock music over country. We found that rock lyrics had a lot more talk of choice, control and self-expression, as in the Rolling Stones' refrain, "Cause I'm free to do what I want any old time." But when we analyzed country music, preferred over rock by less-educated Americans in every region, we heard more mentions of self-protection and defense, as in Darryl Worley's observation, "We didn't get to keep [our freedom] by backin' down." When choice was mentioned, it was often as a prelude or coda to tragedy, as in George Jones's lament "Now I'm living and dying with the choices I've made."

Several experimental studies also show how these divergent conceptions of freedom and choice shape working- and middle-class Americans' daily lives. One set of studies used an approach common to many social-psychology experiments: an everyday setting and a deliberately mundane task were exploited to reveal significant psychological processes. Our researchers approached shoppers at malls and airports and asked them to take part in a marketing study. The researcher displayed five different black pens and invited the participant to choose one to keep. Half the time, the participant then used the chosen pen to answer a list of questions, including several about how much he or she liked the pen. This was the "choice" condition. The other half of the time, after the participant chose a pen, the researcher took it away, explaining: "I'm sorry, you can't have that pen. It's the last one of its kind that we have. Here, take this one." The participant was then given another pen to answer the list of questions. This was the "no choice" condition. True to our observation that middle-class Americans have primarily positive associations with choice, we found that among participants with at least a college degree, those who got to choose their pen liked it more than those who were given a pen they hadn't chosen. By contrast, participants who had less than a bachelor's degree liked pens chosen by someone else just as much as they liked the pens they chose for themselves.

In another alleged marketing study, we asked construction workers, firefighters and maintenance workers, who had no more than a high-school diploma, and students and employees with at least a bachelor's degree, to rank 10 recently released CD's from least liked to most liked and to choose one of their middle-ranked CD's as a gift for themselves. They then reranked the CD's after making their choice. We found that the mere act of choosing a CD caused the college-educated participants to like their gift CD more after choosing it than they had before. On the other hand, those without a college degree did not like their gift CD's more just because they had chosen them.

Another study that compared people in different occupations showed that those employed in middle-class jobs got upset when a friend or neighbor bought the same car as theirs because they felt that the uniqueness of their choice had been undercut. But those in working-class jobs liked it when others chose the same car because it affirmed that they had made a good choice.

In part because of the higher social status of middle-class Americans, the equation of freedom with choice is the one most loudly broadcast. Every corner of life is now rife with choices, as well as with talk of the control and self-expression that choosing imparts. But is this middle-class

conception of freedom the "right" one? Empirical evidence suggests that we should be careful what we wish for. Americans are increasingly overwhelmed by all these choices. We feel less free now than when we had fewer choices, and we show it in our behavior.

For example, Sheena Iyengar and Wei Jiang at Columbia University found that giving people more 401(k) investment options makes them less likely to choose one at all, even though by not choosing they pass up employers' valuable matching funds. We see this result echoed in the panicked reactions of senior citizens to the drug-plan choices they now face. And when people manage to overcome paralysis and make choices — even sound ones — they are likely to be plagued with doubt, worried that their choice was not the best one. So the assumption that more choice means more freedom is false, at least as a general rule. American society has given the educated elites what they have asked for, and an increase in stress, anxiety and dissatisfaction has been a widespread result.

What conception of freedom should Americans pursue? While the upper and middle classes define freedom as choice, working-class Americans emphasize freedom from instability. These perspectives echo the distinction between freedom to and freedom from made by [Franklin Roosevelt](#) and by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin half a century ago. For all our red-versus-blue rancor, most Americans agree that ours is a free country. But what freedom is, and where it should be nurtured and where constrained, are hotly contested issues.

Similarly, many of the freedoms endorsed and advocated by U.S. foreign policy may not always resemble those desired by the people whom we hope to help. To govern well, both at home and abroad, Americans would be wise to listen to how freedom rings in different cultural contexts. Knowing that "we love our freedom," as President Bush said in his recent State of the Union address, should be the beginning of a national conversation, not the end of it.

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