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The Unanticipated Interpersonal and Societal Consequences of Choice: Victim Blaming and Reduced Support for the Public Good

Krishna Savani¹, Nicole M. Stephens², and Hazel Rose Markus³

¹Graduate School of Business, Columbia University; ²Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University; and ³Department of Psychology, Stanford University

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Abstract

Choice makes North Americans feel more in control, free, and independent, and thus has many positive consequences for individuals' motivation and well-being. We report five studies that uncovered novel consequences of choice for public policy and interpersonal judgments. Studies 1 through 3 found that activating the concept of choice decreases support for policies promoting intergroup equality (e.g., affirmative action) and societal benefits (e.g., reducing environmental pollution), but increases support for policies promoting individual rights (e.g., legalizing drugs). Studies 4 and 5 found that activating the concept of choice increases victim blaming and decreases empathy for disadvantaged people. Study 5 found that choice does not decrease Indians' empathy for disadvantaged individuals, indicating that the social and interpersonal consequences of choice are likely culture-specific. This research suggests that the well-known positive effects of choice for individuals can be accompanied by an array of previously unexamined and potentially negative outcomes for other people and for society.

Keywords

choice, political attitudes, public good, victim blaming, empathy, libertarianism, India

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Choice is one of the most psychologically significant categories of action in U.S. society. Many Americans live in a world replete with choice (Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz, 2004), place great value on the choices they have (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and constantly seek to expand the choices available to them (Iyengar, 2010). Although a large number of choices or choices among too many options can be demotivating (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Vohs et al., 2008), a reasonable amount of choice has largely positive consequences for individuals' motivation, health, and psychological well-being in American contexts (for a review, see Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; cf. Morling & Evered, 2006).

Choice has positive consequences in American society because it allows people to experience themselves as independent agents who are in control of and responsible for their own actions and outcomes. Markus and Kitayama (2003) call this implicit understanding of behavior the *disjoint model of agency*, according to which "actions are 'freely' chosen, contingent on one's own preferences, intentions, [and] motives" (p. 7). The disjoint model of agency is a framework for constructing and

explaining actions. This historically and philosophically derived model links choice with independence, control, and freedom from societal constraints. This model exists in individual minds and is also institutionalized in everyday social practices, institutions, and artifacts (Markus, Uchida, Omeregic, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). Previous research has shown that this model is particularly prevalent in U.S. American contexts, but less prevalent in other cultural contexts (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Ji, Peng, & Nisbett, 2000; Na & Kitayama, 2010; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008; Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009).

Building on this conceptual framework, we reasoned that choice, for all its powerful positive consequences, may also have hidden, unanticipated, and potentially negative interpersonal and

Corresponding Author:

Krishna Savani, Management Division, Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, 3022 Broadway, Uris Hall, New York, NY 10027
E-mail: ks2884@columbia.edu

collective consequences (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). We hypothesized that when the concept of choice is activated, Americans will be more likely to assume that, regardless of social contextual circumstances, individuals are responsible for their own actions and life outcomes, and that they have the right to control their own lives free from the constraints of other people and of society.

To test these hypotheses, in three studies we investigated previously unexamined, potentially negative consequences of choice for public policy. Specifically, we examined whether activating the concept of choice influenced Americans' support for public policies in which there is a tension between individuals' freedom and the public good. We hypothesized that if choice focuses Americans on individual responsibility and control (i.e., leading people to assume that individuals' life outcomes are their own personal responsibility, and not the responsibility of the state or other public institutions), then it should decrease their support for policies that benefit other people or society at a cost to individual freedom (e.g., affirmative action, environmental protection) or policies that are focused on increasing the collective good via governmental or institutional intervention, but increase support for policies that limit governmental interference in individual lives (e.g., legalizing drugs). In two subsequent studies, we examined how choice affects Americans' appraisals of other people's life outcomes. Again, if choice focuses Americans on individual responsibility and control, then activating choice should lead Americans to blame disadvantaged individuals for their negative outcomes and to experience less empathy for them. We anticipated, however, that these patterns would not occur among Indian participants, as choice does not have the same meanings and consequences in Indian society as in American society (Miller, 2003; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Savani et al., 2008, 2010).

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis that activating the concept of choice would increase opposition to policies that benefit society at a cost to individual freedom in the context of affirmative action, a policy that aims to provide more educational and occupational opportunities to disadvantaged members of society.

Method

Participants. Fifty European American students (29 women, 21 men; mean age = 19.8 years) participated in this study.

Procedure. A pilot study indicated that participants were suspicious when an African American experimenter ran the study, so we used an Asian American experimenter. Participants were first asked to watch a 6-min video, ostensibly for a study on action perception. The video featured a male actor playing a college student in a studio apartment (adapted from the video used in Savani et al., 2010, Study 3). The actor engaged in a series of mundane actions, such as opening mail, playing a CD, reading

magazines, and eating chocolate. We activated the concept of choice by instructing participants in the choice condition, "Whenever you see the student making a choice, press the Spacebar." In the control condition, participants were instructed, "Whenever you see the student touching an object with his hands for the first time, press the Spacebar." The two conditions were comparable in that they both directed participants' attention to the actor's interactions with objects in the environment.

After watching the video, participants were asked to respond to four items about affirmative action (adapted from Bobo, 1998), ostensibly for a different study on political attitudes. Specifically, they rated their agreement with statements indicating that affirmative action for one group is unfair to the other groups, affirmative action in education may lead to the admission of underqualified students, affirmative action may force employers to hire unqualified people, and affirmative action makes the American economy uncompetitive. The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Results

We averaged participants' responses to the four affirmative-action items, $\alpha = .86$. A *t* test revealed that participants in the choice condition ($M = 3.40$) were less supportive of affirmative action than those in the control condition ($M = 3.96$), $t(48) = 1.97$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.57$ (see Fig. 1). Condition did not interact either with participants' gender, $p > .97$, or with participants' parents' education, $p > .16$.¹

Although support for affirmative action is thought to be a relatively stable, ideologically driven attitude (Kravitz et al., 2000), we found that merely thinking of another person's mundane actions as choices reduced support for affirmative action. This finding suggests that activating the concept of choice might lead Americans to assign less importance to societal or collective interests.

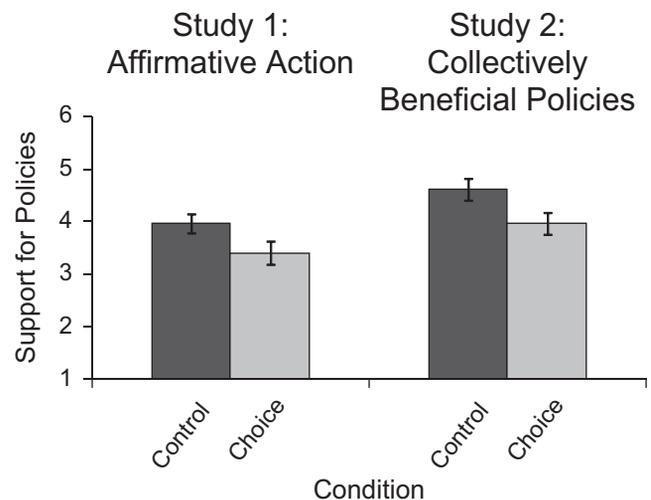


Fig. 1. Mean support for affirmative action (Study 1) and collectively beneficial policies (Study 2) as a function of condition. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Study 2

Study 2 tested whether activating the concept of choice influences people's support for a wide range of public policies that address important societal problems (i.e., global warming, environmental pollution, obesity, and aggression) and typically involve some tension between maximizing individual liberty and contributing to the public good. Given the relationships among choice, individual responsibility, and control in American settings, when Americans think in terms of choice, they may give consideration of individual rights and personal control precedence over consideration of collective benefits. Therefore, we predicted that activating the concept of choice would increase opposition to collectively beneficial policies that restrict individual rights.

Method

Participants. Thirty-five European American students (21 women, 14 men; mean age = 19.6 years) participated in this study.

Procedure. Using the same video and instructions as in Study 1, we induced some participants, but not others, to construe other people's actions as choices. Next, ostensibly for a study on public policies, participants were asked to read descriptions of four policies: two about public welfare and two about environmental protection. All the policies were based on scientific research and described as such. One policy proposed a ban on violent video games given the link between such video games and aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2001); thus, this policy restricted individuals' right to play whichever games they please. The second policy proposed a ban on vending machines near schools given the link between the availability of unhealthy food and childhood obesity (Weicha, Finkelstein, Troped, Fragala, & Peterson, 2006); thus, this policy restricted individuals' right to eat whatever they want. The third policy proposed a 15% environment tax on fuel-inefficient cars given the link between fuel consumption and global warming (Greene, Patterson, Singh, & Lee, 2005); thus, this policy restricted individuals' right to buy whichever cars they want. The fourth policy proposed a ban on the intensive breeding of animals in factories given the link between factory farming and environmental pollution (Braunig, 2005); thus, this policy restricted individuals' ability to buy inexpensive meat. (The policies presented in this study are included in the Supplemental Material available online.) Participants rated their agreement with each policy on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 6 (*strongly support*).

Results

We averaged participants' support for the four policies, $\alpha = .65$. A *t* test found that participants in the choice condition ($M = 4.00$) supported the policies less than those in the control

condition ($M = 4.61$), $t(33) = 2.21$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.74$ (see Fig. 1). Condition did not interact with either participants' gender, $p > .19$, or participants' parents' education, $p > .28$.

The results indicated that merely identifying the trivial choices made by an actor in a video decreased participants' support for public policies that limit individual freedom but have potential benefits for society (reducing aggression, childhood obesity, global warming, and environmental pollution). This finding suggests that the widespread use of the concept of choice might hinder efforts to address important social and environmental problems through institutional regulation.

Study 3

Study 3 expanded the scope of Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, we examined whether choice makes people more opposed to public policies in general, or whether it makes them more opposed to such policies to the extent that they constrain individual rights. We hypothesized that activating the concept of choice would increase the difference between people's support for policies enhancing collective benefits and those enhancing individual freedom. We predicted that in the control condition, participants would be equally supportive of policies restricting and enhancing individual rights, but that in the choice condition, participants would be significantly more likely to support policies expanding individual rights compared with those restricting them.

Method

Participants. Ninety-eight undergraduate students participated in this study (54 women, 42 men, 2 whose gender was unreported; mean age = 19.7 years; 30 European American, 9 African American, 9 Latin American, 25 Asian American, 19 multiethnic, and 6 belonging to other ethnicities).

Procedure. Participants underwent the same choice and control manipulations as in Studies 1 and 2. Next, they read descriptions of four public policies. Two policies restricted individual rights: One proposed banning the factory farming of animals, and the other proposed requiring homeowners, renters, and housing corporations to use high-quality insulation to reduce energy waste. The other two policies expanded individual rights: One proposed legalizing the sale of marijuana in small quantities, and one proposed allowing single individuals—not just married couples—to adopt children.² (The policies presented this study are included in the Supplemental Material.) Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they supported each policy on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*).

Results

We averaged participants' responses regarding the two policies restricting individual rights and the two policies promoting

individual rights and submitted these measures to a 2 (type of policy) \times 2 (condition) repeated measures ANOVA. We found a significant main effect of type of policy, $F(1, 95) = 10.06$, $p < .005$, which was qualified by a Type of Policy \times Condition interaction, $F(1, 95) = 7.58$, $p < .05$. As predicted, independent-samples t tests confirmed that although participants in the control condition reported comparable support for policies expanding ($M = 4.48$) and restricting ($M = 4.34$) individual rights, $t(50) = 0.52$, $p > .60$, $d = 0.30$, participants in the choice condition reported greater support for policies expanding individual rights ($M = 4.94$) than for policies restricting them ($M = 4.08$), $t(46) = 3.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$ (see Fig. 2). The Type of Policy \times Condition interaction was moderated by neither participants' gender, $p > .79$, nor participants' parents' education, $p > .40$.

The results of Study 3 were consistent with our prediction that choice would heighten people's concern for individual rights and responsibilities. We found that activating the concept of choice makes people more supportive of policies enhancing individual rights than of those aimed at enhancing the collective good. Thus, the discourse of choice can have broad implications for public policy.

Study 4

If choice focuses people on individual rights and responsibilities, as indicated by Studies 1 through 3, then it may also lead people to blame other people and to show reduced empathy for those who encounter negative life outcomes. To test this hypothesis, in Studies 4 and 5 we examined how choice affects people's appraisals of others. Specifically, we focused on victim blaming, the tendency to hold people responsible for their plight and to underestimate the social and contextual forces

that contributed to their negative outcomes (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Victim blaming is a tendency that helps people maintain their belief in a just world and justify existing social systems (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978). We predicted that victim blaming would be strengthened by the concept of choice—the idea that individuals' life outcomes are a product of their own personal preferences and choices.

Method

Participants. Fifty-four undergraduates participated in this study (35 women, 18 men, 1 whose gender was unreported; mean age = 19.2 years; 34 European American, 7 Latin American, 11 Asian American, and 2 with unreported ethnicity).

Procedure. Participants underwent the same choice or control manipulation as in Studies 1 through 3. Next, ostensibly for a study on interpersonal judgments, they read six vignettes that described people encountering negative outcomes (i.e., having a heart attack, dropping out of high school, being physically abused, failing a high-school-diploma test, losing one's home because of a building collapse, and getting into a car accident). Each vignette was designed to allow participants to attribute the negative outcome either to the individual or to external circumstances.³ (The vignettes used in this study are included in the Supplemental Material.)

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which each victim was to blame for his or her outcome on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Next, we measured participants' political orientation on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely conservative*) to 7 (*extremely liberal*), given that political orientation is associated with victim blaming (Lambert & Raichle, 2000).

Results

We averaged the extent to which participants blamed the victim across the six vignettes, $\alpha = .68$, and ran a regression with condition (control = 0, choice = 1), political orientation, and their interaction as predictors. We found a main effect of condition, $\beta = -2.03$, $t(50) = 2.12$, $p < .05$, indicating that participants in the choice condition ($M = 4.45$) were more likely to blame victims than were participants in the control condition ($M = 3.96$), $d = 0.54$. We also found a main effect of political orientation, $\beta = -0.56$, $t(50) = 4.20$, $p < .001$, indicating that more liberal participants were less likely to blame victims than were more conservative participants. Finally, we found a significant Condition \times Political Orientation interaction, $\beta = 0.49$, $t(50) = 2.63$, $p < .05$. The relationship between political orientation and victim blaming was present in the control condition, $r = -.63$, $p < .001$, but not in the choice condition, $r = -.13$, $p > .50$ (see Fig. 3). This finding indicates that the choice manipulation led participants to blame victims regardless of their political orientation. Condition did not interact with either participants' gender, $p > .54$, or participants' parents' education, $p > .22$.

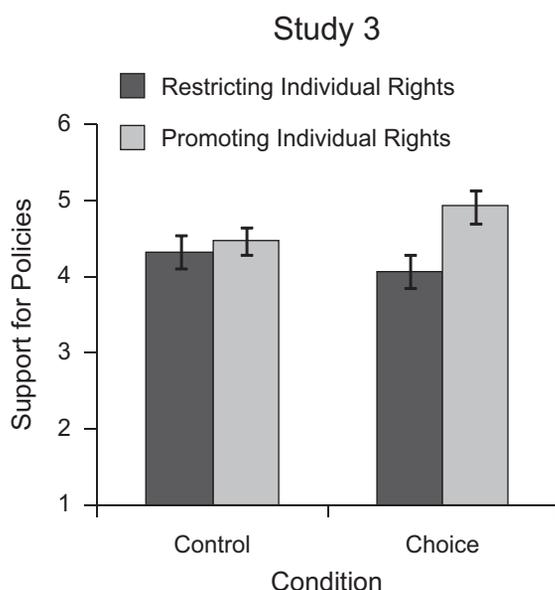


Fig. 2. Mean support for public policies (Study 3) as a function of type of policy and condition. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

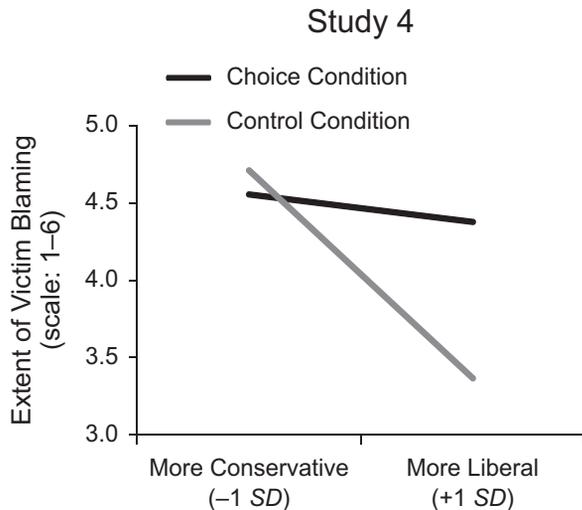


Fig. 3. Mean victim blaming (Study 4) as a function of condition and political orientation (1 SD above the mean and 1 SD below the mean).

After merely identifying instances in which an actor made mundane choices (e.g., opening mail, reading magazines, and eating chocolate), participants were more likely to blame other people for highly consequential negative life outcomes (e.g., heart attacks and car accidents). Activating the concept of choice also eliminated the relationship between participants' political orientation and their tendency to blame victims. The concept of choice appears to have heightened participants' assumption that individuals' life outcomes are a product of their choices.

Study 5

Study 5 built on the previous studies in two important ways. First, we extended Study 4 by examining whether activating the concept of choice influences people's affective reactions toward other people who do not have much control over their life outcomes. Specifically, we tested whether choice reduced people's empathy for a poor child in an impoverished region of the world. Second, by sampling both U.S. and Indian participants, we sought to provide an initial test of the cultural generalizability of the potentially negative consequences of choice. Given that choice is less often associated with freedom and the expression of personal preferences in India than in the United States, and given that the disjoint model of agency is less prevalent in India than in the United States (Savani et al., 2008, 2010; Savani, Morris, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2011), we hypothesized that activating the concept of choice would not influence Indians' empathy for a poor child.

Method

Participants. Twenty-six European American undergraduates (14 women, 11 men, 1 whose gender was unreported; mean age = 20.1 years) at Stanford University and 47 Indian undergraduates (22 women, 24 men, 1 whose gender was unreported;

mean age = 20.7 years) at the prestigious M. S. Ramaiah Institute of Technology participated in the study.

Procedure. We used a different manipulation of choice in this study than in Studies 1 through 4. Ostensibly for a marketing study, participants were taken to a cubicle where five decorative pens, five chocolate bars, five key chains, and five birthday cards were displayed on a table. In the choice condition, participants were asked to indicate which item they would choose from each category (e.g., "Suppose you could have one of the 5 pens on the table. Which of these 5 pens would you choose? Please describe this pen below so that another person could distinguish it from the others."). Participants in the control condition were yoked to those in the choice condition. Instead of choosing an item from each category, however, they were simply asked to describe the items that the previous participant in the choice condition chose (e.g., "Please look at the 5 pens on the table. The experimenter will ask you to describe one of the 5 pens. Please describe this pen below so that another person could distinguish it from the others.").

Next, participants were taken to a different room and seated at a computer terminal. Purportedly for a study on interpersonal judgments, they were shown a photograph of a poor child accompanied by a description. The description was adapted from a study by Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007):

Roke is a 7-year-old boy from Mali, Africa. Roke is desperately poor, and faces a threat of severe hunger or even starvation. His life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift. With your support, and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Roke's family and other members of the community to help feed him, provide for his education, as well as basic medical care and hygiene education.

(The complete vignette used in this study is included in the Supplemental Material.) After reading the story, participants answered five questions, also adapted from Small et al. (2007):

- Question 1: "Would you be willing to donate some money to Roke right now?" (Response options for American participants: \$0, \$1, \$2, \$3, \$4, \$5, more than \$5; response options for Indian participants: Rs.0, Rs.10, Rs.20, Rs.30, Rs.40, Rs.50, more than Rs.50)
- Question 2: "How upsetting is this situation to you?"
- Question 3: "How sympathetic did you feel while reading the description of the cause?"
- Question 4: "How much do you feel it is your moral responsibility to help out with this cause?"
- Question 5: "How touched were you by the situation described?"

Participants responded to Questions 2 through 5 on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). We also

measured American participants' political orientation (on the same 7-point scale as in Study 4).

Results

We averaged participants' responses to the five questions, coding the response options of Question 1 to range from 1 (\$0) to 7 (more than \$5), $\alpha = .77$. A 2 (culture) \times 2 (condition) ANOVA found a marginally significant main effect of culture, $F(1, 69) = 3.49, p < .07$, indicating that Indians were more empathetic than Americans. We also found a significant Culture \times Condition interaction, $F(1, 69) = 3.83, p = .05$ (see Fig. 4). Whereas Americans in the choice condition ($M = 3.37$) had less empathy for the poor child than did those in the control condition ($M = 4.12$), $t(24) = 2.25, p = .03, d = -0.88$, Indians' empathy did not differ by condition (choice: $M = 4.37$; control: $M = 4.10$), $t(45) = 0.78, p = .44, d = 0.23$. A separate regression showed that neither political orientation, $p > .90$, nor the Condition \times Political Orientation interaction, $p > .50$, was a significant predictor of empathy among the American participants. The Culture \times Condition interaction was moderated by neither participants' gender, $p > .55$, nor participants' parents' education, $p > .67$.

Study 5 found that indicating which of several consumer items they would choose reduced American participants' empathy for a poor child who had little, if any, control over his situation. Among Americans, choice appears to have heightened the assumption that other people have personal responsibility and control over their outcomes, even when there are extenuating circumstances. However, Indian participants' empathy for the poor child did not vary by condition. This finding suggests that at least some of the potentially negative consequences of choice are culture-specific.

General Discussion

The research reported here investigated unanticipated interpersonal and societal consequences of choice. We found that

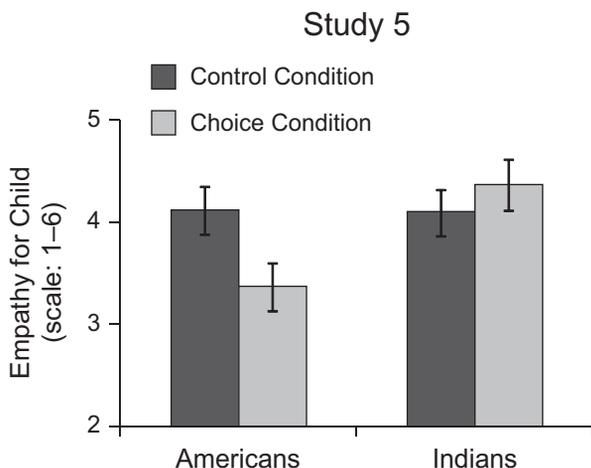


Fig. 4. Mean empathy for a poor child (Study 5) as a function of culture and condition. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

merely activating the concept of choice led to reduced support for affirmative action (Study 1), reduced support for public policies aimed at benefiting society (Study 2), increased support for policies aimed at expanding individual rights (Study 3), higher levels of victim blaming (Study 4), and reduced empathy for a disadvantaged individual (Study 5). Although we found these effects among American participants, Study 5 provided initial evidence that these effects of choice are likely culture-specific: Whereas choice reduced Americans' empathy for a disadvantaged child, it had no influence on Indians' empathy. It is possible that choice has these potentially negative effects in American society because the disjoint model of agency, which holds that normatively appropriate actions should be freely chosen and based on people's personal preferences (Markus & Kitayama, 2003), is prevalent in American contexts and provides a foundation for associations among choice, victim blaming, and reduced support for the public good.⁴

The recent proliferation of the discourse and practice of choice in U.S. American society (Iyengar, 2010; Schwartz, 2004) may be one reason why formerly popular policies concerning collectively beneficial programs (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance) are currently threatened, and why the campaign for universal health care has been so charged (Frank, 2004). Choice, of course, need not have these negative consequences for the collective. It should be possible to harness the motivational consequences of choice and the related concepts of independence, personal responsibility, and control to motivate prosocial behavior. For example, the United States ranked 5th out of 153 countries in the world giving index (Charities Aid Foundation, 2010). Further, if Americans believe that they are choosing to help other people out of their free will, or if they can affirm their selves through making choices for other people, they may be even more charitable (Gneezy, Gneezy, Nelson, & Brown, 2010; Kimmelmeier, Jambor, & Letner, 2006; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

The disjoint model of agency theory helps integrate recent findings about the effects of primes that promote attention to the self at the expense of other people. Vohs, Meade, and Goode (2006), for example, found that priming money, which is associated with individual influence and control, makes people engage in more self-interested behaviors. Likewise, Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, and Gruenfeld (2006) found that priming power (i.e., the capacity to influence other people) reduces willingness to adopt other people's perspectives. We suggest that these primes lead to individual-focused behavior because they activate similar underlying concepts (e.g., independence, influence, control).

Our findings raise a number of theoretical and practical questions. How might the increasing provision of choice influence the balance between individual freedom and the public good? Solving many of today's most urgent social problems (e.g., global warming, educational inequality, and health disparities) will require recognition of interdependence with other people and some concern for the public good. Will

choice for choice's sake—as occurs increasingly frequently in the consumer marketplace, education, and health care—work against the recognition of this interdependence? Or can choice facilitate interdependence? As Americans make more and more choices in their everyday lives, perceive more and more actions as choices, and build more choice into their worlds, these questions merit further research.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

Notes

1. We measured parental education continuously (1 = elementary school, 2 = high school, 3 = incomplete college education, 4 = associate's degree, 5 = bachelor's degree, 6 = master's degree, and 7 = doctoral degree). We averaged the education of participants' mother and father.
2. This policy is already in practice in the United States.
3. We included an additional manipulation in which we varied the socioeconomic status of the victim. However, this manipulation did not interact with the choice manipulation, $p > .40$, so we do not discuss it.
4. Given that working-class Americans are more likely than middle-class Americans to use choice to establish social connections with other people (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007), one might predict that choice would be less likely to have these potentially negative outcomes among working-class Americans. However, we did not find evidence that the effects of choice varied by participants' parents' education. This nonfinding might be the result of low statistical power given that there were a limited number of working-class participants in our samples.

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