


When Choice Does Not Equal Freedom: A Sociocultural Analysis of Agency in Working-Class American Contexts

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
000(00) 1-8
© The Author(s) 2010
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1948550610378757
http://spps.sagepub.com


Nicole M. Stephens¹, Stephanie A. Fryberg², and Hazel Rose Markus³

Abstract

A robust finding in the psychological literature is that people prefer to choose for themselves, but this finding represents a largely middle-class perspective. Highlighting the perspectives of working-class Americans, three studies test the hypothesis that in working-class contexts focusing on others is normative and can take precedence over choosing for oneself. Study 1 provided an opportunity to *either* accept a gift from an experimenter or to choose for oneself, and it found that working-class, compared to middle-class, participants more often accepted the gift. Study 2 asked participants to describe choice and found that working-class participants had more negative associations with choice, which may have influenced their tendency to accept the gift. Study 3 examined participants' understandings of others' actions and found that working-class observers preferred a shirt that a confederate accepted from an experimenter to a shirt that a confederate chose for herself, and this preference reflected greater negative affect toward choice.

Keywords

culture and self, agency, norms, interdependence, decision making

² In *Free to Choose* (1990), Milton and Rose Friedman contend that freedom is realized through *choice*. Senator John McCain claims that the government's job is to "make sure that *you* have more choices to make *for yourself*." A wide range of policies and programs, such as school vouchers, health insurance, and retirement plans, reflect the notion that choice maximizes individual freedom and produces positive outcomes (Schwartz, 2004). The assumption that choice is a universally powerful, individually liberating action permeates the ideas, practices, and institutions of mainstream American contexts.

The focus on choice, however, is not without justification. Although choice overload is aversive (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), the empirical picture is clear: People who choose are happier, healthier, persevere longer, and are more productive than people who do not choose (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Langer & Rodin, 1976). While the relationship between "freedom" and choice is cast as universal, we suggest that the choice literature represents a largely middle-class perspective (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Markus & Schwartz, in press). Utilizing two experiments and a survey, we seek to de-center this middle-class perspective by focusing on the experiences and actions of working-class Americans.

Models of Agency

Understanding how social class guides behavior requires analysis of the sociocultural contexts that shape what actions are

possible and how people understand culturally appropriate action. Since social class contexts vary substantially in their material and social conditions, they shape people's implicit understandings of normatively good action, which we term *models of agency* (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). These models guide individuals' own actions and provide a blueprint for understanding others' actions.

Middle-class American contexts provide greater access to economic capital, more geographic mobility, and greater opportunities for choice and control than do working-class contexts (Kohn, 1969; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Socialization practices often involve "concerted cultivation" or careful attention to elaborating children's personal preferences (Lareau, 2003). For example, parents offer children opportunities for choice and self-expression and thereby convey to children a sense of self-importance and entitlement (P. J. Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). These material and social conditions promote a *disjoint* model of agency, which defines "good"

¹ Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

² University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, USA

³ Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA

Corresponding Author:

Nicole M. Stephens, Northwestern University, Kellogg School of Management, Evanston, IL 94305-2310, USA
Email: n-stephens@kellogg.northwestern.edu

actions as those that influence the environment and promote *independence* from others (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005). Individual choice is central to this model because it enables people to influence their environments according to their personal preferences. When guided by a disjoint model, people tend to prefer actions that reflect a focus on the individual self.

Working-class American contexts provide less economic capital, more environmental constraints, and less choice and control than do middle-class contexts (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Socialization practices convey to children that the world is not just about them (P. J. Miller et al., 2005). For example, a growing literature in sociology and anthropology suggests that working-class Americans are encouraged to consider others' preferences and interests before their own (Lareau, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999) and to show respect and deference for authority (Kohn, 1969). Furthermore, in mainstream American contexts (e.g., in education and the workplace), people from working-class contexts often find themselves in positions of relatively low social status compared to people from middle-class contexts (Brown, 2005). We propose that the confluence of these material and social conditions of working-class contexts foster a conjoint model of agency, which defines "good" actions as those that adjust to the environment and promote interdependence with others. When guided by a conjoint model, people tend to prefer actions that reflect a focus on others.

Social Class and Choice

Sociocultural contexts powerfully shape people's experiences with choice (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). The first experimental studies on social class revealed that choice functions differently in middle-class and working-class contexts. As predicted by dissonance and reactance theory, Snibbe and Markus (2005) demonstrated that middle-class Americans increased liking for what they chose and reacted negatively when their choices were usurped. Among working-class Americans, however, these patterns did not emerge. The results could imply that working-class Americans simply dislike or do not care about choice, but this interpretation only holds if middle-class experiences are considered the norm and working-class experiences as a departure from that norm. If, instead, we begin by characterizing working-class contexts, then we may find that agency takes a different form that goes unrecognized from a middle-class perspective.

The Present Research

In an initial effort to illuminate working-class experiences, Stephens, Markus, and Townsend (2007) required participants to complete a variety of choice tasks. The studies demonstrated that, unlike middle-class participants, working-class participants chose not to be different or unique but instead to be like other people. These findings suggested but did not empirically test the idea that in working-class contexts people are often more focused on others than on themselves. The present studies

seek to more directly examine this hypothesis. Previous studies implicitly assumed that people enact agency through choice and thus required all participants to choose. Our goal is to de-center this middle-class perspective by allowing participants to enact agency in ways that do not involve choice.

We propose that focusing on the needs, preferences, and actions of others is a prominent feature of conjoint agency in working-class contexts. The studies reported here examine the possibility that, given the material and social demands of working-class contexts, a concern for others can be normative and take precedence over individual choice. Study 1 provides participants an alternative to choosing for oneself—accepting a gift from someone else. Study 2 allows participants to describe their thoughts about choice. Study 3 asks participants to observe another person who either chooses for herself or accepts something from someone else.

Study 1

Study 1 allows participants to *either* enact conjoint agency by accepting a "thank you" gift from an experimenter or enact disjoint agency by choosing for oneself. If participants focus more on the experimenter than on themselves, they should accept the gift offered by the experimenter. If, however, participants focus more on themselves than on the experimenter, they should *reject* the gift and ask to choose for themselves. Consistent with conjoint agency, we hypothesize that working-class, compared to middle-class, participants will more frequently accept the gift.

We also examine whether participants' prior experiences with choice—amount of perceived choice in the workplace and daily life—influence their behavior. Given social class differences in occupational opportunities for choice (Kohn & Schooler, 1983), we anticipate that the working-class experience of having limited choice and control (Lachman & Weaver, 1998) will be associated with a decreased likelihood of asking to choose.

Methods

Participants. Using advertisements and word of mouth, we recruited a community sample of 89 White adults. Advertisements described an alleged study about "life experiences" and offered participants \$8. Most participants (79%) participated in a college lab, while the remainder participated in naturalistic settings (e.g., restaurants, hair salons).¹

Following previous research (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009), personal level of educational attainment served as a proxy for social class. Participants were considered middle-class ($n = 42$) if they had at least a 4-year college degree (73.8% female; M age = 49.3) and working-class ($n = 47$) if they had less than a 4-year degree (76.6% female; M age = 46.3). Educational attainment (college degree or not) served as the primary indicator of social class because attaining a bachelor's degree increases the likelihood of finding a high-status job and

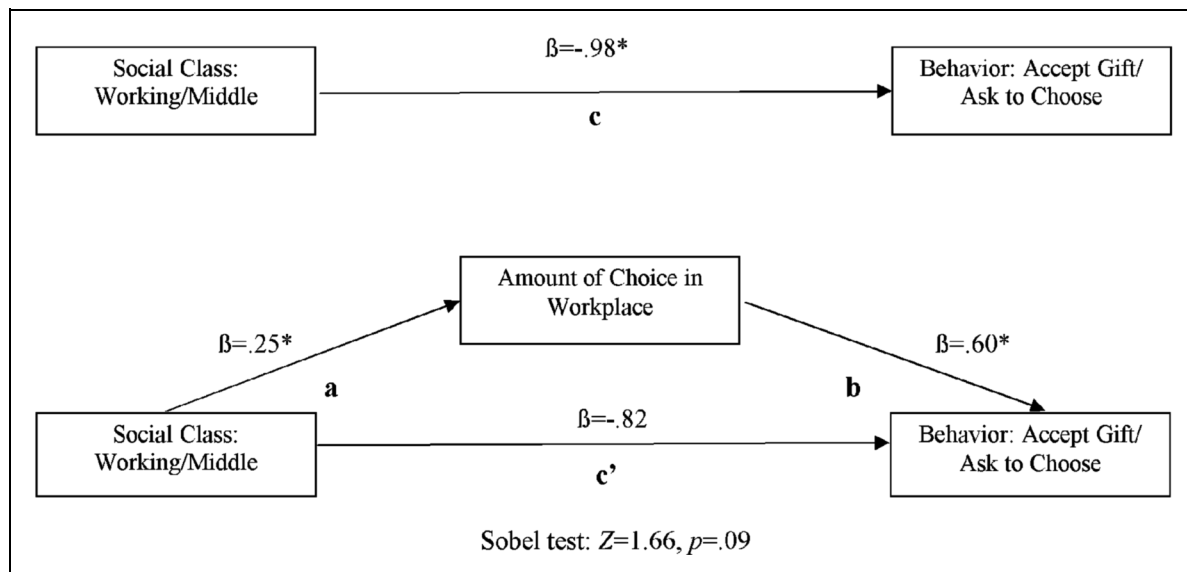


Figure 1. Amount of Work Choice Partially Mediates Effect of Social Class On Behavior
Standardized coefficients are shown. $N = 89$, $*p < .05$.

provides substantial advantages in lifetime earnings (Day & Newburger, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Consistent with this finding, on an 8-point scale, middle-class participants ($M = 4.50$) reported higher incomes than working-class participants ($M = 3.34$), $t(92) = -4.39$, $p = .000$.

Procedure. Participants completed a survey about choice in everyday life (*daily choice*) and choice at work (*work choice*). Specifically, we asked the following: (1) “How many choices do you make in a normal day?” (1 = *none*, 8 = *over 40*) and (2) “How often do you have a choice in deciding how you do your tasks at work?” (1 = *never*, 5 = *all the time*) (Bosma et al., 1997).

After participants completed the survey, a female undergraduate experimenter, blind to the study’s hypotheses and to participants’ social class backgrounds, offered participants a decorative pen as a “thank you” gift. Pens were pre-tested to ensure equal likeability across groups. Specifically, the experimenter extended the pen to the participant and said, “I’d like to offer you a pen as a gift for helping out. You can either have this pen *or* you can see the other options in the drawer.” The dependent variable was whether participants accepted the offered gift *or* rejected it and asked to choose for themselves.

Results

Behavior. We conducted a logistic regression with social class as the predictor and behavior (accept gift/ask to choose) as the dependent measure. As predicted, working-class (75%), compared to middle-class (52%), participants more often accepted the gift than asked to choose ($\beta = -.98$), Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 4.59$, $p = .03$ (see Figure 1, Path C).²

Mediation analyses. Since daily choice and work choice were not correlated ($r = .04$, *ns*), we assessed separately whether

they served as mediators (Baron & Kenny, 1986).³ For daily choice, a linear regression with social class as the predictor and daily choice as the dependent measure indicated that working-class participants reported fewer daily choices than middle-class participants ($\beta = .34$, $p = .001$). Next, controlling for social class, a logistic regression with daily choice as the predictor and behavior (accept gift/ask to choose) as the dependent measure indicated that daily choice did not predict behavior ($\beta = -.01$, *ns*) and thus was not a mediator.

For work choice, we conducted a linear regression with social class as the predictor and work choice as the dependent measure (Figure 1, Path A). Working-class participants reported fewer work choices than middle-class participants ($\beta = .25$, $p = .02$). Second, controlling for social class, we conducted a logistic regression with work choice as the predictor and behavior (accept gift/ask to choose) as the dependent measure (Figure 1, Path B). We found that greater work choice was associated with increased likelihood of asking to choose ($\beta = .60$), Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 4.06$, $p = .04$. Third, controlling for work choice, we conducted a logistic regression with social class as the predictor and behavior as the dependent measure. Including work choice in the model reduced the coefficient for the pathway from social class to behavior from $\beta = -.98$ (Figure 1, Path C) to $\beta = -.82$ (Figure 1, Path C’), indicating that work choice partially mediated the relationship between social class and behavior (Sobel $Z = 1.66$, $p = .09$; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998).

Discussion

This study allowed participants to *either* enact conjoint agency by accepting a gift from someone else or to enact disjoint agency by choosing for oneself. We found that working-class, compared to middle-class, participants more frequently

Table 1. Mean Proportion of Working-class (WK) and Middle-Class (MD) Responses by Category

Coding Categories	Examples	WK	MD
Positive codes			
Freedom*	free, liberated, unrestrained	.13	.18
Significant	valuable, crucial, powerful	.13	.12
Smart	smart, intelligent, wise	.04	.05
Positive affect	happiness, excitement, hopeful	.04	.05
Independent	independence, autonomy, self-reliant	.02	.04
Negative codes			
Difficult*	tough, complicated, stressful	.09	.06
Negative affect**	fear, nervous, anxiety	.06	.03
Neutral codes			
Process	select, options, preference	.19	.20
Results	conclusion, finality, determine	.06	.06

Note. Mann Whitney tests, $N = 787$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

accepted the gift than asked to choose, in part because they had fewer choices at work. We speculate that work choice, but not daily choice, explained participants' behavior because work choice had important material and psychological consequences (Kohn & Schooler, 1983).⁴ This is the first study to demonstrate how social class differences in life experience can affect choice behavior.

Study 1's results are consistent with our theory that the material and social conditions of working-class contexts (e.g., low social status, less economic capital, limited choice and control) foster a greater focus on others than the on individual self. Other potential reasons why working-class participants may have accepted the gift, rather than asked to choose, is that they may dislike choice or they may be less willing to make the effort to choose. Studies 2 and 3 represent an initial effort to consider these alternative explanations.

Study 2

To directly examine whether working-class participants dislike choice, Study 2 asked participants to describe their thoughts about choice. Given that all participants inhabit mainstream American sociocultural contexts (e.g., the media), which generally equate choice with individual freedom, we expect that overall working-class and middle-class participants will view choice positively. Yet given that working-class contexts offer fewer choices (Study 1) and present more negative consequences for bad choices (Kohn, 1969), we also expect working-class participants to describe choice more negatively than middle-class participants.

Methods

Participants. Participants included 787 White undergraduates. Following previous research (Stephens et al., 2007), participants were considered middle-class ($n = 610$) if at least one parent had a 4-year college degree (59.8% female; M age = 18.65) and working-class ($n = 177$) if neither parent had a 4-year degree (63.8% female; M age = 19.03). Middle-class

($M = 6.43$) reported higher family incomes than working-class participants ($M = 5.47$), $t(232) = -6.50$, $p = .000$.

Procedure. As Part 1 of a larger study, participants wrote up to three words they associated with "choice." We created a simple coding scheme reflecting the common themes in participants' responses (see Table 1 for categories).

Two research assistants, blind to hypotheses and to participants' social class backgrounds, coded for valence (positive, negative, and neutral) and thematic content. We calculated the proportion of total words (up to three) for each participant that were positive, negative, or neutral (valence) and the proportion of words included in each coding category (thematic content). For example, the response "liberated," "happy," and "fear" was coded as two positive words (.66) and one negative word (.33) and as *freedom*, *positive affect*, and *negative affect* (M kappa = .97).

Results

Valence. As predicted, a Wilcoxon matched-pairs test revealed that both working-class ($z = 7.1$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.1$) and middle-class ($z = -15.8$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.5$) participants reported a greater proportion of positive relative to negative associations. A Mann-Whitney test revealed that working-class participants reported a marginally lower proportion of positive associations than middle-class participants ($M = .56$ vs. $.61$; $z = 1.7$, $p = .09$, $d = .13$) and a higher proportion of negative associations than middle-class participants ($M = .19$ vs. $.14$; $z = 2.4$, $p = .02$, $d = .19$).⁵

Thematic content. As predicted, participants overlapped substantially but also diverged in the content of their associations (see Table 1). A Mann-Whitney test revealed that a greater proportion of working-class responses were coded as *difficulty* ($z = 2.6$, $p = .01$, $d = .17$) and *negative affect* ($z = 2.7$, $p = .008$, $d = .19$), whereas a greater proportion of middle-class responses were coded as *freedom* ($z = 2.0$, $p = .05$, $d = .18$).

Discussion

Study 2 examined whether working-class participants disliked choice. Reflecting shared experiences with mainstream American sociocultural contexts, we found that overall working-class, like middle-class, participants viewed choice positively. At the same time, perhaps reflecting fewer choices and worse consequences for bad choices, working-class participants reported more negative associations than middle-class participants. This finding suggests that negative associations with choice may be one reason why, in Study 1, working-class participants' accepted the gift rather than asked to choose for themselves.

Study 3

Building on Study 2, Study 3 examines more directly whether negative affect toward choice is one reason why working-class participants prefer to focus more on others (i.e., conjoint model) than on themselves (i.e., disjoint model). If a conjoint model is normative in working-class contexts, then this model should shape not only individuals' own actions (i.e., accepting the gift in Study 1) but also their more general understandings of others' actions. To establish whether focusing on others is, in fact, normative in working-class contexts, Study 3 asks participants not to act but to observe another person's actions. One key advantage of removing participants from the central interaction of the study and allowing them to observe from afar is that it should alleviate participants' potential concerns about directly interacting with the experimenter or about being evaluated by others.

Specifically, Study 3 examines whether participants prefer a shirt that a confederate accepts from someone else *or* a shirt that a confederate chooses for herself. We assume that the condition in which the confederate accepts the shirt from the experimenter involves a greater focus on the other person (conjoint agency) than the condition in which the confederate *independently* chooses for herself (disjoint agency). Since models of agency guide not only individuals' behavior but also their interpretations and responses to others' behavior, we hypothesize that working-class observers will prefer the shirt in the condition that highlights conjoint agency (i.e., when the confederate accepts the shirt from the experimenter). Furthermore, given the greater negative affect toward choice among working-class participants in Study 2, we expect that greater negative affect toward choice will help to explain why participants prefer the condition that highlights conjoint rather than disjoint agency.

Methods

Participants. Participants included 65 White females from a state university. We focused on females because pilot-tests revealed that males felt uncomfortable evaluating others' clothing. Using the same classification procedure described in Study 2, 37 participants were considered middle-class (M age = 21.9) and 28 as working-class (M age = 23.2).

Procedure. A White female participant and White female confederate entered the lab to participate in an alleged "marketing study" on clothing preferences. Three pre-tested pull-over shirts (differing by color) were used as stimuli. The experimenters and confederates, who were blind to participants' social class backgrounds, were both White female undergraduate research assistants.

Once the participant and confederate had entered the lab, the experimenter provided the study overview:

I am working on market research to predict the success of new clothes as they are introduced into the store. In most cases, shirts like these are simply viewed on a shelf. Researchers have ignored that, before buying a shirt, people try it on and often show it to another person. This study seeks to simulate the buying process to better evaluate people's preferences. I need one of you to try on a shirt and show it to the other.

Afterward, the experimenter allegedly "randomly" assigned the observer role to the participant and the shirt-wearer role to the confederate. In the lab, participants, who were always observers, watched the confederate enact one of the two conditions. In the *disjoint* condition, which highlights disjoint agency, the participant observed the experimenter ask the confederate to "choose the shirt that she liked best to try on." The confederate then *independently* chose a shirt for herself. In the *conjoint* condition, which highlights conjoint agency, the participant observed the experimenter select a shirt for the confederate, hand it to the confederate, and said, "Here is the shirt for you to try on." The confederate then accepted the shirt from the experimenter. In both conditions, the confederate tried on the shirt and showed it to the participant.

After observing one of the interactions, participants completed a survey. They rated their liking for the shirt (1 = *dislike a lot*, 10 = *like very much*) and the extent to which they felt irritated, upset, and nervous (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). To disguise the hypothesis about negative affect, positive affect items were also included (e.g., happy, enthusiastic).

Results

Shirt-liking. A 2×2 ANOVA with shirt-liking as the dependent variable revealed a significant social class by condition interaction, $F(1, 61) = 10.08, p = .002$ (see Figure 2). As predicted, planned contrasts revealed that working-class participants in the *conjoint* condition liked the shirt more than working-class participants in the *disjoint* condition, $t(61) = -2.68, p = .009, d = 1.0$, but not more than middle-class participants in the *conjoint* condition, although this pattern was in the expected direction, $t(61) = 1.60, p = .12, d = .5$. In contrast, middle-class participants in the *disjoint* condition liked the shirt marginally more than middle-class participants in the *conjoint* condition, $t(61) = 1.75, p = .086, d = .6$, and more than working-class participants in the *disjoint* condition, $t(61) = -2.83, p = .006, d = 1.1$.

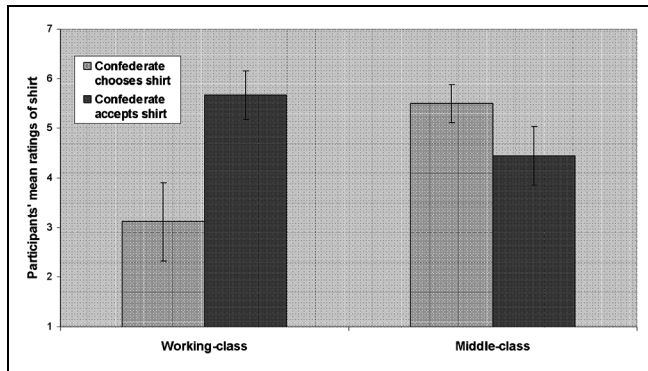


Figure 2. Mean Shirt-Liking by Social Class and Condition

Negative affect. To examine whether the three items (nervous, upset, and irritable) used to assess negative affect served as a mediator, we first separately examined the three items. The nervous item showed no differences across group or condition and thus did not function as a mediator. The irritable and upset items, however, consistent with our predictions, showed significant differences across group and condition. Given that these two items were highly correlated ($r = .56$), and in an effort to simplify the analyses, we collapsed the irritable and upset items into a single measure, which we term *negative affect*.

With respect to this negative affect measure, a 2×2 ANOVA revealed a significant social class by condition interaction, $F(1, 61) = 4.88, p = .03$. As predicted, planned contrasts revealed that working-class participants in the *disjoint* condition ($M = 1.45$) reported marginally more negative affect than working-class participants in the *conjoint* condition ($M = 1.17$), $t(61) = 1.86, p = .07$, and significantly more negative affect than middle-class participants in the *disjoint* condition ($M = 1.00$), $t(61) = -3.04, p = .004$.

Mediated moderation. We hypothesized that the social class by condition interaction on shirt-liking would be mediated by negative affect (see Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005). First, we conducted the basic regression, replicating our ANOVA above, with social class, condition, and the social class by condition interaction as predictors and shirt-liking as the dependent measure. As hypothesized, main effects for social class and condition as well as a significant social class by condition interaction were found (see Table 2 for coefficients). We ran a second regression with the same independent variables but with negative affect as the dependent measure. Again, main effects for social class and condition as well as a significant social class by condition interaction were found. Next, we conducted a regression with shirt-liking as the dependent variable and social class, condition, social class by condition, negative affect, and negative affect by condition as predictors. The negative affect by condition interaction was significant, and after controlling for negative affect, the social class by condition interaction was reduced in magnitude (from $\beta = -.67$ to $\beta = -.49$). These results meet criteria for mediated moderation (see

Muller et al., 2005) and indicate that negative affect mediates the social class by condition interaction on shirt-liking.

Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that conjoint agency guides working-class participants' general understandings of others' actions. As predicted, working-class participants preferred the shirt when the confederate accepted it from another person, rather than when she chose it for herself. In contrast, middle-class participants preferred the shirt when the confederate chose it for herself, rather than when she accepted it from another person. Moreover, consistent with Study 2, working-class participants experienced relatively more negative affect after observing the confederate choose for herself.

We theorize that working-class participants preferred the shirt when the confederate received it from the experimenter rather than when the confederate chose it for herself, because the conjoint interaction reflected their prevalent models of agency and thus felt relatively natural, normal, or "right." In contrast, working-class participants may have disliked the shirt and experienced more negative affect when the confederate chose it for herself rather than accepted it from the experimenter, because this disjoint interaction was non-normative and in tension with their prevalent models of agency. Notably, these results suggest that in working-class contexts people may prefer to focus on others (conjoint agency), in part because choosing for oneself (disjoint agency) is relatively unfamiliar and thus uncomfortable.

Study 3 also provides an initial effort to rule out other reasons why working-class participants in Study 1 accepted the gift rather than seeking individual choice. As noted earlier, this could have occurred because working-class participants were unwilling to make the effort to choose. The observer paradigm employed in Study 3, however, rendered this explanation irrelevant because participants were not directly involved in the interaction and thus did not need to make an effort to choose. Overall, across studies the results follow a consistent pattern. In Study 1, working-class participants preferred to accept a gift from someone else rather than choose a gift for themselves, and in Study 3, they preferred a situation that highlighted the act of accepting a shirt from someone else rather than individually choosing a shirt. Supporting our theory, these results suggest that working-class participants were guided by a model of agency in which focusing on others takes precedence over focusing on the individual self.

General Discussion

Summary

The current research examined whether working-class Americans respond differently to choice because their actions are guided by a conjoint model of agency that goes unrecognized from a middle-class perspective, which equates individual choice with agency. Utilizing diverse samples of adults and students, our studies reveal that although working-class Americans view choice positively overall, they view individual choice

Table 2. Regression Results for Mediated Moderation in Study 3

Predictor	Regression 1 Criterion: Evaluation of Shirt		Regression 2 Criterion: Negative Affect		Regression 3 Criterion: Evaluation of Shirt	
	β	T	β	T	β	T
Social class	.51	2.83**	-.55	-3.04**	.31	1.54
Condition	.50	2.68**	-.35	-1.86	-.43	-.97
Social Class \times Condition	-.67	-3.17**	.47	2.21*	-.49	-2.22*
Negative affect					-.37	-2.16*
Negative Affect \times Condition					.87	2.24*

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

more negatively than middle-class Americans, and they prefer actions guided by a conjoint, rather than disjoint, model of agency. More generally, these studies demonstrate that agency in working-class contexts is more likely to involve a focus on others than a focus on the individual self. Given this focus on others, the opportunity to choose for oneself may not be the key to agency in working-class contexts and thus may not equal freedom.

Theoretical Contributions

These studies address some important limitations of past research. First, by providing the opportunity to focus on someone else, rather than choose for oneself, our approach illuminates forms of agency that are often overlooked in the literature. Second, these studies are the first to demonstrate that prior experiences with choice can contribute to social class differences in choice behavior and to suggest why this occurs. Specifically, we found that working-class participants, who had less experience with choice at work, preferred to accept a gift from someone else than to seek choice, and they experienced more negative affect after observing a confederate choose a shirt for herself rather than accept it from someone else. Notably, this preference for attending to others is not the same as a lack of agency but rather reflects a different style of agency. Given the material and social conditions of working-class contexts (e.g., low status, limited choice and control), normatively appropriate actions require attention to and interdependence with others.

Limitations

While our studies provide initial evidence that in working-class contexts focusing on others (conjoint agency) is normative and takes precedence over individual choice (disjoint agency), they do not pinpoint which specific elements of conjoint agency are responsible for participants' preferences. Working-class participants in Study 1, for example, could have focused on others to show an understanding of the experimenter's perspective, to show deference or respect to the experimenter as a high-status authority figure, or to avoid being a burden to the experimenter. Future research is needed to specify the underlying sources and purposes of focusing on others in working-class contexts.

Implications and Conclusion

The American popular discourse represents choice as a natural or basic unit of behavior. In fact, professionals and laypeople alike commonly assume that choosing for oneself is an essential feature of being a good, healthy, or normal person. Our studies, however, suggest that the desire to choose and the tendency to perceive actions as choices are not universal. Instead, these tendencies reflect particular cultural patterns associated with a disjoint model of agency that is fostered by the conditions of middle-class contexts.

The prevalence of the disjoint model has notable social costs (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007). By guiding people to focus on individual self-expression through choice, this model directs people's attention inward and can thereby diminish attention to other people. Moreover, by promoting the idea that actions are a product of individual choices, this model fosters the misperception that the individual actor is the source of all actions and that the larger context is irrelevant. These assumptions can promote individual-focused biases such as the correspondence bias or victim blaming.

Future research is needed to examine how social class shapes choice in consequential domains. Initial studies on school voucher programs and prescription drug and retirement plans suggest that working-class Americans do not always take advantage of the opportunity to choose and often make "bad" choices (Hastings, Van Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007). The present research suggests that these important policies may fail for working-class Americans because they reflect largely middle-class perspectives. As a result, these policies often do not recognize that in working-class contexts, which require a greater focus on others, individual choice is less likely to equal freedom and to be the hallmark of a successful program.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

9

Funding

The authors declared that they received no financial support for their research and/or authorship of this article.

10

Notes

1. There were no differences on dependent variables across settings.
2. Neither gender nor age emerged as a significant covariate and thus are not reported in further analyses.
3. We use logistic regression for dichotomous variables and linear regression for continuous variables.
4. Another possibility is that the question about daily choice did not serve as a mediator because it was more abstract than the question about work choice and thus may have introduced more variance.
5. Gender did not predict valence and thus will not be reported in further analyses.

References

- Bosma, H., Marmot, M. G., Hemingway, H., Nicholson, A. C., Brunner, E., & Stansfield, S. A. (1997). Low job control and risk of coronary heart disease in Whitehall ii (prospective cohort study). *British Medical Journal*, *314*, 558-565.
- Cohen, D., Hoshino-Browne, E., & Leung, A. K.-y. (2007). Culture and the structure of personal experience: Insider and outsider phenomenologies of the self and social world. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 39, pp. 1-67). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Cordova, D. I., & Lepper, M. R. (1996). Intrinsic motivation and the process of learning: Beneficial effects of contextualization, personalization, and choice. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *88*, 715-730.
- Day, J. C., & Newburger, E. C. (2002). The big payoff: Educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings (Current Population Report P23-210). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Hastings, J. S., Van Weelden, R., & Weinstein, J. M. (2007). *Preferences, information, and parental choice behavior in public school choice* (NBER Working Paper No. 12995). Retrieved from <http://nber.org/papers/w12995>
- Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2006). Toward a psychological science for a cultural species. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*, 251-269.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Bolger, N. (1998). Data analysis in social psychology. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology*, (4th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 233-265). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Kitayama, S., & Uchida, Y. (2005). Interdependent agency: An alternative system for action. In R. M. Sorrentino & D. Cohen (Eds.), *The Ontario Symposium: Vol 10. Cultural and social behavior* (pp. 137-164). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kohn, M. L., & Schooler, C. (Eds.). (1983). *Work and personality: An inquiry into the impact of social stratification*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Langer, E. J., & Rodin, J. (1976). The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility for the aged: A field experiment in an institutional setting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *34*, 191-198.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Models of agency: Sociocultural diversity in the construction of action. In V. Murphy-Berman & J. J. Berman (Eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Vol. 49. Cross-cultural differences in perspectives on self* (pp. 1-57). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Markus, H. R., & Schwartz, B. (in press). Does choice mean freedom and well-being? *Journal of Consumer Research*.
- Miller, J. G. (2003). Culture and agency: Implications for psychological theories of motivation and social development. In V. Murphy-Berman & J. J. Berman (Eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Vol. 49. Cross-cultural differences in perspectives on self* (pp. 76-116). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Miller, K. A., Kohn, M. L., & Schooler, C. (1986). Educational self-direction and personality. *American Sociological Review*, *51*, 372-390.
- Miller, P. J., Cho, G. E., & Bracey, J. R. (2005). Working-class children's experience through the prism of personal storytelling. *Human Development*, *48*, 115-135.
- Muller, D., Judd, C. M., & Yzerbyt, V. Y. (2005). When moderation is mediated and mediation is moderated. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *89*, 852-863.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patillo-McCoy, M. (1999). *Black picket fences: Privilege and peril among the black middle class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M., & Ball, S. J. (2001). Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, "race," and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*, *35*, 855-874.
- Savani, K., Markus, H. R., & Conner, A. L. (2008). Let your preference be your guide? Preferences and choices are more tightly linked for North Americans than for Indians. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*, 861-876.
- Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Snibbe, A. C., & Markus, H. R. (2005). You can't always get what you want: Educational attainment, agency, and choice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*, 703-720.
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., Markus, H. R., Bergsieker, H. B., & Eloul, L. (2009). Why did they "choose" to stay? Perspectives of Hurricane Katrina observers and survivors. *Psychological Science*, *20*, 878-886.
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Townsend, S. S. M. (2007). Choice as an act of meaning: The case of social class. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *93*, 814-830.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 1063-1070.

Bios