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Choice and Suffering in San Francisco

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We write from a small republic on the west coast of North America. You might have heard of it. It's called the San Francisco Bay Area. The Bay Area is crisscrossed by people from different cultural worlds: mainstream, middle-class European-Americans, members of the American intelligentsia, working-class locals, and immigrants from points farther afield.

Our republic is likewise crisscrossed by sundry ideas about the relationship between choice and suffering. Listen to mainstream middle-class European-Americans and you will hear that not enough choice causes suffering. Attend to the rumblings among our educated élite and you'll find a new idea: too much choice causes suffering. Ask our working-class residents and many of our immigrants from East Asia and India and they will say: choice has little to do with suffering.

Who's right? We propose that they all are. This isn't a postmodern punt or a social science dodge. Instead, we suggest that the relationship between choice and suffering varies according to cultural context. Below we first describe the research showing this to be the case, and then explain why people in different cultures have reached such different conclusions about the role of choice in suffering.

Not enough choice causes suffering

The executives of the London-based sandwich shop Pret A Manger learned the hard way just how tightly middle-class European-Americans bind choice with happiness, and not enough choice with suffering. Pret A Manger makes and packages fresh sandwiches, which customers then buy off the rack, as-is, without customization. When Pret A Manger decided to break into the lucrative midtown Manhattan lunch market, American investors warned that New Yorkers would demand at least a condiment station to individualize their ready-made sandwiches. The British sandwich shop managers demurred, arguing that even though people think they know the right way to make a sandwich, actually, they don't. That's Pret A Manger's area of expertise, they said. American managers countered that Americans' desire to choose how their sandwich is made "is a link to a powerful childhood satisfaction" (Parker 71-72). The Americans prevailed: The New York shops now feature self-serve stations at which patrons can customize their sandwiches and drinks.

Thousands of social psychological studies back up the American managers' observation that middle-class European-Americans – whom we call "mainstream" Americans – need choice, and suffer without it. These studies – the overwhelming majority of which are conducted by mainstream American social psychologists on mainstream American college students – repeatedly demonstrate that when people do not exercise choice, they are sadder, are sicker, perform worse and produce less than when they do get to choose (e.g., Cordova and Lepper; Deci and Ryan; Langer and Rodin). In

turn, many psychological theories – like mainstream American culture itself – equate choice with agency, freedom and free will.

Mainstream American life is bursting with choice. When middle-class European-Americans rise in the morning, they get to choose from hundreds of possible combinations of coffee, milk and cup from Starbucks (or from dozens of other coffee purveyors). And when they go to bed at night, they flit through hundreds of evening television broadcasts, interrupted by commercials beseeching them to choose – “Choose Comcast”; “Choose MSNBC”; “AARP members don’t make compromises, they make choices”; “Choose anything but ordinary” (an advert for that most rarefied of consumer products, Camel cigarettes).

Choosing not only starts early in the day; it also starts early in life. Mainstream American parents encourage their children to choose for themselves – “Would you like an apple or a pear?” “Would you rather go to baseball camp or soccer camp?” (Murray and Fortinberry). When these young choosers grow up to be adults, they get to choose from among thousands of careers with hundreds of retirement plans and dozens of “flexible” schedules (you can work any 60-80 hours you want!). They are increasingly granted choice in domains that communities used to handle, such as schools and electricity providers. Even at the close of life, mainstream Americans can exercise choice, stipulating which “heroic measures” doctors can use, what they want done with their bodies – or particular organs of their bodies – and where they want their remains to reside.

Too much choice causes suffering

But like Americans themselves – so friendly, so talkative, and so earnest that they would be wonderful companions on trans-Atlantic flights, were they not (on average) so corpulent – choice has become too much of a good thing, at least among the better-heeled (see Barry Schwartz’s article in this issue). Grocery stores vend dozens of breads, jams, and olives, and hundreds of cheeses and wines, so that shopping for a picnic requires linear algebra. Many American workplaces offer several insurance plans with thousands of doctors, so that just getting a doctor’s appointment requires a personal assistant and a PhD. And when mainstream Americans go courting, their first obstacle is deciding which of the dozens of Internet dating services to employ, before scrolling through the thousands of people who, although claiming to be fantastically unique creatures, all quickly start to blur together.

This glut of choices begets bad decision-making (Iyengar, Jiang and Huberman). Researchers show that giving people more 401(k) investment options [the 401(k) plan is an employer-sponsored retirement plan named after a section of the US Internal Revenue Code – Static Editor.] makes them

less likely to choose one at all, even though by not choosing they forgo their employers' matching funds. Likewise, a recent study from the Rand Corporation finds that people fail to insure themselves not because they cannot afford to, but because they cannot make head or tail of all their options (Marquis, Buntin, Escarce, Kapur, Louis and Yegian).

Choice has little to do with suffering

Not all Americans have too many choices, however. At the needier end of the American socioeconomic spectrum, the flood of choices slows to a trickle of the Hobson variety – between bad and worse alternatives. For these less educated, less wealthy, less prestigiously employed Americans, whom for the sake of brevity we call the “working class,” choices do not reflect or effect their uniqueness or mastery of the universe. Indeed, among working-class Americans, choice seems to bear little relationship to any thoughts or feelings, including suffering.

To illustrate this rift between choice and the thoughts and feelings of working-class Americans, we borrowed an experimental method from the sacred cow of social psychology: cognitive dissonance theory (Snibbe and Markus). Cognitive dissonance theory says that people want their thoughts, feelings, and actions to be consistent with each other, and so will adjust their thoughts and feelings to reflect their actions. For example, if a woman likes two compact discs (CDs) equally, but can purchase only one, she will wind up liking the one she buys more than the one that she leaves on the shelf. In other words, she will adjust her attitudes towards the CDs to reflect her choice.

We asked construction workers and postdoctoral scholars first to rank 10 CDs for an alleged marketing survey, and then to choose between two of their middle-ranked CDs as a gift for themselves. We then asked our participants to re-rank the CDs. The mere act of choosing a CD caused the postdoctoral scholars – all with PhDs, all angling for high-end jobs – to rank their gift CD higher after choosing it than they had before. On the other hand, construction workers – all without college degrees, all intending to stay in their relatively less prestigious occupations – did not like their gift CDs more as a result of choosing them. This study not only shows that choice does not affect working-class participants' thoughts and feelings; it also suggests that the validity of cognitive dissonance theory may be limited to the middle-class people among whom it was developed.

To explore further whether choosing has less of an effect on the thoughts and feelings of working-class Americans, we cribbed methods from two other psychological theories: reactance theory (Pennebaker and Sanders) and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci). These theories assume that all people, everywhere, associate choice with happiness and do not associate choosing with suffering.

In one of our studies, a researcher invited shoppers at malls to complete a survey about pens. When people agreed to participate, the researcher asked them to choose one of five different black pens as payment for their efforts. Half of the time, the participants were allowed to keep their chosen pen. But the other half of the time, the researcher explained, "I'm sorry, but I can't let you have that pen – here, take this one," and gave participants a different pen. All participants then completed a survey, which included questions about how much they liked their new pen. We found that college-educated participants liked their pen more when they chose it for themselves than when the experimenter chose it for them. In contrast, participants with no college education – an indicator of working-class status – liked their pen equally well, regardless of whether they or the experimenter had chosen it.

Working-class European-Americans are not the only people who do not feel more satisfied as a result of choosing, or less satisfied as a result of not choosing. Ours and others' research shows that people of East Asian and Indian heritages likewise do not change their thoughts and feelings after making choices. For example, middle-class Japanese students who took part in the CD study did not rank chosen CDs more favourably just because they chose them (Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus and Suzuki; see also Heine and Lehman; Hoshino-Browne, Zanna, Spencer and Zanna). And Indian students did not like chosen pens more or unchosen pens less in the pen study (Savani, Markus and Snibbe).

Everyone is right

Our Japanese and Indian participants are hardly suffering from a lack of material resources and opportunities for choice. Like their American counterparts, these students spend their time studying, shopping for clothes and CDs and going to cafés and movies. Why should they act like relatively deprived working-class Americans, whose choices likewise did not affect their thoughts and feelings?

The answer to this question is the solution to the broader puzzle: Why do people from different cultural contexts – people who rub shoulders in the San Francisco Bay Area – so radically disagree about how choice relates to suffering? We contend that it is because people in different cultures have radically different notions about what the self is, what it can do, and what it should do. These different notions are not just swimming around in individual minds. Rather, they are also woven into the fabric of their cultural surroundings – their artefacts, practices, and shared ideas.

Middle-class European-Americans think of the self as an independent, autonomous entity that is made up of unique values, traits and preferences (Markus and Kitayama). The act of choosing allows mainstream European-

Americans not only to express their unique selves, but also to leave their selves' stamp on their environments. Self-expression and environmental control, in turn, are two of mainstream Americans' core values. For middle-class European-Americans, choice is therefore more than just a random shot of behaviour into an unwatching world. Instead, it is the primary action through which they experience agency and realize their cultural ideals. By the same token, a lack of choice cramps mainstream Americans' style of self.

Supporting this notion of the self is a cultural world that gives mainstream Americans many opportunities to choose – from coffees to newscasts, from cradles to graves. This world also encourages mainstream Americans to view their behaviours as choices. Consider two Stanford University students who, as part of a psychological study, listed all of the choices they made in a day. One of the students, hailing from India, wrote the following: “clothes to wear today, what to have for lunch.” The other student, an American from the San Francisco Bay Area, wrote this much longer list: “when to get up, to brush my teeth, what to wear, whether to go to the gym, whether to work on my painting, how long to work on my painting, what to eat for breakfast, what to eat for lunch, to go to class, to get a break from class and get coffee, what kind of coffee to have, to pick up friends from the airport, to e-mail my parents, to go to the post-office, to do my reading for class tomorrow, to have a cookie this afternoon, to come to the experiment” (Savani, Markus and Snibbe).

Of course it is possible that the Indian student actually had fewer choices available to her. And so in a second study, we created a situation where American and Indian participants had to make the same four choices: which cubicle to sit in, whether to fill out a consent form, which pen to use, and whether to eat a candy lying on the desk. Although all of the participants in fact had to make four choices, only the American students routinely perceived themselves as doing so. In contrast, the Indian students reported making only one or two choices.

This mainstream American habit of considering almost all actions – no matter how mundane – as choices echoes, and is echoed in, mainstream American theories, institutions and discourse. The Calvinist theology that inspires both religious and civic life in middle-class European America insists that most actions are freely chosen, and that actions therefore reveal the nature of the individual's spiritual condition. Economics' dominant framework, Rational Choice Theory, assumes that all actions are chosen and based on personal preferences. Many American policies reflect this belief, assuming that people are poor because they make poor choices, and are wealthy because they make good choices (Alesina and Angeletos). These policies provide few safety nets for the less well-off, while providing ample rewards to wealthier citizens who presumably got that way because of their clever decisions. Many European economic policies, in contrast, acknowledge that poverty is often the result of factors other than bad decision-making, and so fortify their welfare states, sometimes at the

expense of their entrepreneurs. More prosaically, mainstream American advertisers routinely suggest that all the picnics eaten, airlines flown, cars driven, doctors seen and colleges attended are the results of choices made, and, by extension, are expressions of the type of people who make them.

Different worlds make different choosers

Although working-class Americans are exposed to the mainstream American rhetoric of choice, their everyday lives are marked by a lack of options. After listening to earnest public service announcements beseeching them to “choose” a healthier lifestyle, lower class Americans walk out into neighbourhoods where liquor stores vastly outnumber supermarkets, and dangerous streets preclude a morning constitutional (see Macintyre, Maciver and Sooman). After reading self-help books about the value of choosing better careers, partners and friends, working-class Americans must still rely on their tried-and-true networks for material and social sustenance, because changing jobs or moving to more desirable neighbourhoods is seldom an option (see Willmott). And after their high schools teach them that education is the key to success, they have neither the money nor the time to get the training they need to get to achieve that success.

The material realities of working-class life have symbolic repercussions: working-class Americans’ notion of the self is more modestly independent than that of mainstream Americans. Instead of getting in touch with their inner fabulousness, working-class Americans are keener to preserve their inner integrity. And instead of being masters of the universe, working-class Americans focus on being masters of their own hearts and hearths (Kusserow).

Many people in East Asian and Indian communities, in contrast, have a wholly different notion of the self. Rather than being independent, the self is interdependent – that is, made up of and driven by relationships with others and by situational demands. Behaviour unfolds not as choices that express the self and exert control but as active adjustments to relationships, duties and expectations (Miller, Bersoff and Harwood). Indeed, when East Asian dissonance study participants think about other people’s needs and desires before making a choice, their choices do affect their subsequent liking of the chosen object – they like their chosen option better as a function of having chosen it (Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus and Suzuki; Hoshino-Browne, Zanna, Spencer, Zanna, Kitayama and Lackenbauer). Otherwise, when merely considering objects in a social vacuum, choosing does not affect their thoughts and feelings.

Of course, Asians and Indians have their own unique thoughts and feelings. They just do not always need to act on them. In fact, the capacity to inhibit one’s own thoughts and feelings and appreciate the perspective of others is seen as a sign of maturity in these contexts. A recent study shows

that this is true even when Indians make weighty decisions, such as whom to marry. Nearly 50 % of the Indian students surveyed said that they would marry a person who had qualities that others admired, but whom they did not love, while less than 5% of American students felt this way (Levine, Soto, Hashimoto and Verma).

Asian and Indian people's sense of themselves as fully interdependent with others is not just an abstract philosophy. Instead, their everyday lives both mirror and give rise to this idea. A social psychological study in India randomly beeped people on their cell phones throughout the day. When participants heard the beep, they recorded what they were doing at that moment. American students reported that they were alone 54% of the time, while Indian students were alone only 18% of the time (Oishi, Diener, Scollon and Biswas-Diener). Indian students are also less likely to choose which clothes to buy or whom to marry without consulting friends and family.

As is the case in the United States, East Asian and Indian people's ideas about the self, choice and suffering are grounded in and reinforce these cultures' larger philosophical and religious ideas. A central teaching of both Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, is that being attached to objects, people and ideas – let alone making choices based on those attachments – is a source of suffering. These religions offer many practices that teach their followers to detach themselves from the world around them and to make their choices based on others' needs rather than on their own desires. And so although cosmopolitan Indians worry more and more about keeping up with the Guptas, they still view choosing and consuming as necessary evils – not legitimate ways to build a self (van Wessel).

The philosophies of karma and reincarnation similarly complicate the link between choice and suffering. In the grand karmic scheme of things, a person's current misfortunes are the consequences of his or her bad behaviour in the past. But that bad past behaviour usually took place several lifetimes ago. The person has little choice or control over the suffering he or she now endures. And so the correlation between choice and suffering in any given lifetime is often zero. India's latest affirmative action plans, which will fill about half of the country's state-funded professional college places with students from the so-called backward classes, recognize that life fortunes often do not reflect individual choices.

Good help is hard to give

From our perch on the left edge of the United States, we see that people the world over make choices and suffer. But what they choose, why they suffer, and whether the two are related vary widely by cultural community, even within the 7x7 mile square that makes up the city of San Francisco proper. We suggest that cultural differences in ideas about what a

self is, what it does, and what it is in relation to other people underlie many of the different ideas about choice and suffering. These ideas do not just live within individual minds; they also reside in the institutions, practices, and artefacts with which those minds are in constant transaction.

The Bay Area is known not only for its multiculturalism, but also for its social activism. When the mainstream Americans who still make up the bulk of the Bay Area are moved to relieve the suffering of others, they often default to the mainstream assumption that giving people more choices is the cure for what ails them. Yet the provision of choice (and nothing else) is a knee-jerk solution that works well for Americans living middle-class lives who have already constructed independent, choosy selves. For other people – not only those with fewer opportunities for choosing, but also those with more – choice quickly loses its magical redemptive power.

To alleviate suffering more effectively, we must understand other people's ideas about who they are and what they need, as well as how these ideas are made real in public and at home; at work and at school; in the media and in the arts; and in the church and in the state. Helping people like us is difficult. Helping people unlike us is even more so. That is the bad news. The good news is that because suffering is multiply caused, so too can it be multiply alleviated. A first step to giving good help is therefore to replace cookie-cutter solutions based on middle-class western assumptions with curiosity, creativity and empathy. Happily, most cultures both feed and welcome these qualities.

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