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What kinds of alternative possibilities are required of the folk concept(s) of choice?

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Our concept of choice is integral to the way we understand others and ourselves, especially when considering ourselves as free and responsible agents. Despite the importance of this concept, there has been little empirical work on it. In this paper we report four experiments that provide evidence for two concepts of choice—namely, a concept of choice that is operative in the phrase *having a choice* and another that is operative in the phrase *making a choice*. The experiments indicate that the two concepts of choice can be differentiated from each other on the basis of the kind of alternatives to which each is sensitive. The results indicate that the folk concept of choice is more nuanced than has been assumed. This new, empirically informed understanding of the folk concept of choice has important implications for debates concerning free will, responsibility, and other debates spanning psychology and philosophy.

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1. Introduction

Our concept of choice is integral to the way we understand others and ourselves, especially when considering ourselves as free and responsible agents. For example, in research conducted by Ogletree, Archer, and Hill (2016), participants were presented with scenarios in which a negative outcome occurred (e.g., receiving bad grades) as a result of a current situation (e.g., living in a dorm in which late-night partying is frequent). In the vignettes the degree of choice the protagonist had over their current situation was manipulated to reflect the presence of choice (e.g., "Taylor is a 19-year-old college student who chose to live in a dorm . . ."), the absence of choice (e.g., "Taylor is a 19-year-old student who had no choice but to live in a dorm . . ."), or was neutral with respect to choice (e.g., "Taylor is a 19-year-old student who is living in a dorm . . ."). Participants blamed the protagonist for the negative outcome (e.g., receiving bad grades) to a greater degree in the choice condition than in the neutral and the no-choice condition. In other work, Savani and colleagues (Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011) manipulated people's concept of choice (e.g., through a task in which participants were to press a spacebar every time a character in an animation made a choice versus a control condition where participants were to press a spacebar for some types of actions). They found that by simply activating a person's concept of choice increases acceptance and maintenance of wealth inequality (Savani & Rattan, 2012), increases victim blaming, and decreases empathy for disadvantaged persons (Savani et al., 2011). The perception of choice does not just impact third-party judgments of responsibility and

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blame, but also first-person judgments. People tend to blame themselves more for unexpected negative outcomes when they think they had a choice than when they think they did not have a choice (Arkin, Gleason, & Johnston, 1976).

Choice also plays a central role in the folk concept of free will (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Coyne, 2012; Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014; Monroe & Malle, 2010; Nahmias, 2009; Ogletree & Oberle, 2008; Shepard & Reuter, 2012; Turri, 2016), as well as in philosophical analyses of free will (Biehl, 2008; Brown, 2006; Donagan, 1987; Freeman, 2000; Ginet, 1966; Holton, 2006; Kane, 1996; Murray & Nahmias, 2014; Unger, 2002; van Inwagen, 1983). The connection between choice and free will is so strong that simply recalling choices in one task leads to stronger endorsement of beliefs in free will in an ostensibly unrelated task (Feldman, Baumeister, & Wong, 2014). The link between choice, freedom, and responsibility appears across cultures (Chernyak, Kushnir, Sullivan, & Wang, 2013; Sarkissian et al., 2010; cf., Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlie, 2010), and the basis of these connections can be found early in development (Chernyak & Kushnir, 2014; Chernyak et al., 2013; Nichols, 2004).

While many researchers agree that choice plays a central role in free will and responsibility (cf., Biehl, 2008), it's not clear that all parties have the same idea in mind when they talk about choice. Specifically, it is not clear whether all parties agree on whether choice requires an agent to have *genuinely open alternatives*, or *the ability to do otherwise.* An understanding of choice that requires genuinely open alternatives appears to be the view of choice (often implicitly) assumed by many incompatibilists (i.e., people who hold the view that that free will is not compatible with determinism) (e.g., Coyne, 2012; Ginet, 1966; Greene & Cohen, 2004; Kane, 1996; Miles, 2013; van Inwagen, 1983).

Another possible view is that choice doesn't require genuinely open alternatives; rather choice requires *psychologically open alternatives.*[1] In other words, choice may simply require an *ability to consider alternate possibilities*, rather than an ability to actually do otherwise. This psychological conception of choice appears to be the view of choice implicit in Monroe and Malle (2010) explication of the folk concept of free will. Contrary to viewing a choice-centered view of free will as implying a requirement for genuinely open alternatives, Monroe and Malle argued that the folk concept of free will is tied to a "psychological" notion of choice that does not have such requirements.

This distinction in how choice is construed is not only important for theoretical reasons, but also for practical reasons. While humans have the ability to construct and consider alternate possibilities, it is a question of physical fact whether we have genuinely open possibilities. Some have argued that the world as a matter of physical fact does not afford genuine open alternatives, and thus, at best, we only have an illusion of choice (Coyne, 2012; Freeman, 2000; cf., Unger, 2002). If this is right and if free will and moral responsibility require choice, then our practices of holding each other morally responsible, including in everyday contexts and in legal contexts, would be built upon flawed assumptions and need to be revised (Coyne, 2012; Greene & Cohen, 2004; Miles, 2013).

While many of these theorists tend to treat choice as a unitary concept, work by Porter (2013) provided evidence that the English word 'choice' is often used to express two distinct, though closely related, concepts. Porter (2013) conducted semi-structured interviews on issues related to childhood obesity. Interested in the role that perceptions of choice played in childhood obesity, she analyzed these interviews focusing on how people expressed notions of choice. She found evidence for a meaningful distinction between the ways people talk about *making choices* vs. *having choices.*[2]

If Porter is right, then treating choice as a unitary construct that either requires genuinely open possibilities or psychologically open possibilities may be misguided. It's possible that one of these notions of choice requires genuinely open possibilities, while the other only requires psychologically open possibilities. Such a possibility may also help explain the disagreement on the nature of choice. Some researchers may implicitly assume a notion of choice that requires genuinely open possibilities, while others may implicitly assume a notion of choice that only requires psychologically open possibilities. These implicit assumptions may well be a source of apparent disagreement in the literature. There is some anecdotal evidence that this may be the case: Those who have the view that choice requires genuinely open possibilities often use the language of *having* choices (e.g., Coyne, 2012; Ginet, 1966; van Inwagen, 1983), while those who have the view that choice only requires psychologically open possibilities often use the language of *making* choices (e.g., Monroe & Malle, 2010).

In other research on the concept of choice, Turri (2016) found evidence that our concept of choice is sensitive the goodness or badness of an outcome, finding that when an outcome is bad or neutral, our concept of choice appears to be incompatibilist (i.e., choice is not compatible with determinism), but when an outcome is good, our concept of choice appears to be compatibilist (i.e., choice is compatible with determinism). While Turri's research is one of the few projects that has empirically investigated the folk concept of choice, his research does not address whether choice is sensitive to psychologically open alternatives nor the possibility that there are two distinct concepts of choice expressed in the phrase 'made a choice' and 'had a choice'. Woolfolk et al. (2006) and May (2014) found evidence that our concept of choice is sensitive to constraints on possible options, providing evidence that our concept of choice may be sensitive to the extent in which an agent has open possibilities. However, in both Woolfork et al.'s and May's research they used the phrasing of 'had a choice'. The question still remains whether there is a distinction between 'made a choice' and 'had a choice', and if

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[1] Another way to think about the distinction between genuinely open alternatives and psychologically open alternatives is in terms of whether alternatives are *objectively available* (i.e., as a matter of fact about the world, the alternatives are available) or *subjectively available* (i.e., from the point of view of the decision maker, the alternatives are available), respectively. The distinction between the ability to do otherwise and the ability to consider alternate possibilities is also similar to the distinction made by Monroe and colleagues (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Monroe et al., 2014; see also Nahmias, Shepard, & Reuter, 2014) when they discuss whether free will is "metaphysical" or "psychological."

[2] This distinction was also recognized as important distinction by the philosopher Biehl (2008).