



Passing the buck: Delegating choices to others to avoid responsibility and blame[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Revised 20 April 2016

Accepted 29 April 2016

Available online 13 June 2016

Keywords:

Choice delegation

Social decision making

Responsibility

Blame

ABSTRACT

Although people prize the ability to choose when making choices for themselves, this right may become a burden when tasked with choosing for others. We show that people are more likely to delegate choices for others than for themselves, especially choices with potentially negative consequences. This is driven by a desire to avoid feeling responsible or being blamed for such decisions rather than a desire to avoid making difficult choices or a lack of concern for others' outcomes, and is unique to delegation and does not extend to other methods of choice avoidance, like delaying decisions or flipping a coin, that do not absolve decision makers of responsibility and blame. Moreover, people only delegate to others who can assume responsibility, regardless of their expertise, consistent with the notion that people delegate primarily to cede responsibility and blame, not put choices in the hands of more capable decision makers.

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1. Introduction

Choice is among the most challenging (Schwartz, 2004) and most prized (Ryan & Deci, 2000) responsibilities a person can have. Choosing is effortful and depleting (Vohs et al., 2008), and if the choice outcomes turn out to be unappealing, choosing can leave people feeling more dissatisfied and regretful with the outcomes than if they never had the option to choose at all (Botti & Iyengar, 2004; Botti & McGill, 2006; Botti, Orfali, & Iyengar, 2009; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Yet, when given the option to relinquish their right to choose, people often refuse. People prefer to maintain responsibility for choosing even when they would be better off letting others choose on their behalf (Botti & Iyengar, 2004; Botti & McGill, 2006; Botti et al., 2009).

But this preference for choice may only go so far. When the burden becomes too great, people may wish to cede decisions to others, preferring to do without the burden of affecting someone else with the outcome of a choice that they themselves have made. Choices for others may often be more daunting than personal

decisions because people expect to bear the responsibility for others' outcomes and carry the blame if those outcomes are dissatisfying. We propose that the calculus of whether and how to make a choice changes when the choice determines not just one's own fate, but the fates of others. We show that people are more likely to delegate when they face decisions that will affect other people rather than themselves alone, that people delegate choices for others even in situations in which they would opt to retain responsibility if those choices were for themselves, and that people uniquely seek out delegation over other forms of choice avoidance as a means of absolving themselves of this responsibility.

2. Choice avoidance

As much as people may generally prefer to maintain active control over their own decisions, they are also well-known to avoid choices when they become too difficult by deferring a decision or by choosing by default or omission (see Anderson, 2003, for a review), and even at times by delegating their choices to others (Steffel & Williams, in preparation-a). The present research looks beyond decision difficulty to the personal and interpersonal antecedents of delegation. Although much is known about the antecedents of other forms of choice avoidance, there is at present little empirical work examining what prompts people to delegate choices to others and what differentiates delegation from other forms of choice avoidance. Research on delegation in organizations

[☆] The authors wish to thank Kruti Gandhi for assistance with stimuli creation and data collection, and Esta Denton Shah and Gia Nardini for assistance with data collection.

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has largely focused on when managers delegate business decisions or other tasks to subordinate employees, who tend to be less expert, and has tended to be descriptive in nature, rather than empirically testing the causes and consequences of delegation (e.g., Leana, 1986; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Most work on delegation in other fields has looked at very specific domains in which people pass personal decision making on to paid experts, like personal shoppers (e.g., Solomon, 1987) or doctors (e.g., Degner & Sloan, 1992). These research streams have shown that people do sometimes delegate choices for both themselves and for others, but thus far, this past work has not considered the possibility that people's propensity to delegate may differ depending on who will bear the consequences of the decision. We intend to add to the empirical literature by showing that delegation is a uniquely appealing choice avoidance method when other people will be affected by a decision.

The choices that people make on behalf of others—their spouses, children, employees, and friends—come with challenges beyond those that accompany personal choices. We propose that choices for others carry additional burdens because the people who make them expect to feel responsible for the outcomes they bring about and thus bear the weight of others' blame if those outcomes turn out poorly. Of course, people making personal choices do at times worry about feeling responsible for a poor choice and thus regretting their decision (e.g., Zeelenberg, 1999; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000), and this in turn can lead them to delegate that choice to someone else (Steffél & Williams, in preparation-b). However, people tend to feel worse about decisions that inflict negative consequences onto others than decisions that inflict those same consequences onto themselves (Morey et al., 2012), and anticipate greater regret when choosing on behalf of others (Beattie, Baron, Hershey, & Spranca, 1994), making delegation to be an especially appealing method of choosing when the decision is on behalf of someone else. People feel bad about the prospect of their decision being the cause of someone else's discomfort or displeasure, and requesting that instead a third party be that cause may provide some relief.

A choice that one makes on behalf of someone else could either go well or it could go poorly, and it is anticipating the possibility of the latter outcome that is especially likely to prompt delegation. Concern about being blamed by others is likely to compound the concern people have about feeling personally responsible for bringing about unappealing consequences for someone else, and this concern may not be unwarranted. Decision makers are evaluated negatively for making a “poor” choice even when the choice set is composed entirely of negative options (Kruger, Burrus, & Kressel, 2009). Furthermore, it is those poor choices that are likely to get noticed. Blame avoidance is a popular political tactic because people are more sensitive to losses and negative outcomes than to gains and positive outcomes (Weaver, 1986). When a decision maker chooses for someone else in a scenario with only positive anticipated outcomes, the individual may not mind having or may even prefer to maintain decision control, as they could potentially reap any rewards associated with making a good decision (Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012). However, when faced with choosing on behalf of another person in a situation with only negative potential outcomes or with the possibility of a negative outcome, decision makers may prefer to delegate to someone else in fear of receiving the punishment or blame associated with making a bad decision. Decision makers may expect that delegation will help them avoid blame from both themselves and from others.

H1. People are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves, especially when it seems likely that those choices might have unappealing outcomes.

H2. Anticipated responsibility and blame both drive the tendency for people to delegate choices for others more than choices for themselves.

3. Escaping responsibility and blame

Is delegation one of many possible effective routes to handling the burden of choosing on someone else's behalf, or is delegation uniquely suited to relieve this burden? When choosing for themselves, people have many ways other than delegation with which to avoid making a decision (Anderson, 2003). For instance, a person might opt to simply delay the choice, to think about it longer, or to just buy themselves time, and this is especially likely when facing a decision where all outcomes are negative (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999). However, while delaying a choice puts off the determination of the eventual outcome, it does not avert it altogether. The decision maker will still have to make a choice and bear responsibility and blame for the outcome, just at a later date. Delegation might therefore have an advantage over delay in that a choice gets made faster, and the responsibility can be passed to another party. Alternatively, rather than grapple with the decision at all, a person might escape the effort of choosing by resolving the decision using a chance process, like *eeny-meeny-miney-mo*, a random number generator, or a coin flip. Importantly, although an inanimate object, like a computer or a coin, can determine a choice outcome, that object is ultimately not responsible for that outcome. The person who flipped the coin rather than the coin itself is likely to be held responsible for the coin's “choice,” whatever it may be. Thus, while a chance process might enable a person to avoid the burden of choosing, only delegation can enable a person to avoid the responsibility and blame associated with that choice. In sum, the appeal of delegating choices for others goes beyond that of putting off or avoiding the effort associated with choosing. Instead, the appeal of delegating choices for others is in its ability to relieve decision makers of the burdens associated with being responsible for making a choice that might turn out poorly. Thus, people who face choices for others versus choices for themselves may uniquely seek out delegation over other forms of choice avoidance as a means of absolving themselves of this responsibility.

H3. People avoid choosing for others by delegating but not by using other choice avoidance tactics like delaying or deciding by chance because only delegation allows them to absolve themselves of responsibility and blame.

4. Passing the buck

To whom can one delegate a decision? One possible benefit of delegation is that one can put choices in the hands of a more capable decision maker. Delegation may at times result in a better decision, because someone more knowledgeable ends up determining the outcome. Nonetheless, we suspect that the surrogate's ability to shoulder responsibility for the decision is more important than expertise when it comes to deciding for others, especially when a negative outcome seems possible. Delegating to someone without special expertise into the decision will be adequate so long as that person can assume responsibility and blame for the choice outcome. However, delegating to someone without the ability to assume responsibility will not suffice, as some people are not capable of being held responsible for a choice. Children, for instance, legally cannot be held responsible for their actions. Instead, their parents often are (Siegel, 2014). Similarly, other kinds of power hierarchies can determine who is fundamentally responsible for a decision. The phrase, “the buck stops here,” expresses the idea that

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