



The experience of freedom in decisions – Questioning philosophical beliefs in favor of psychological determinants

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ABSTRACT

Six experiments tested two competing models of subjective freedom during decision-making. The process model is mainly based on philosophical conceptions of free will and assumes that features of the process of choosing affect subjective feelings of freedom. In contrast, the outcome model predicts that subjective freedom is due to positive outcomes that can be expected or are achieved by a decision. Results heavily favored the outcome model over the process model. For example, participants felt freer when choosing between two equally good than two equally bad options. Process features including number of options, complexity of decision, uncertainty, having the option to defer the decision, conflict among reasons, and investing high effort in choosing generally had no or even negative effects on subjective freedom. In contrast, participants reported high freedom with good outcomes and low freedom with bad outcomes, and ease of deciding increased subjective freedom, consistent with the outcome model.

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1. Introduction

Although philosophers and other experts continue to debate whether truly free willed action is conceptually possible (e.g., Bargh, 2008; Gadene, 2004; Heisenberg, 2009; Hájíček, 2009; Koch, 2009; Lycan, 1995), there is little doubt that belief in free will is partly sustained by subjective experiences of choosing and acting freely. Thus, the study of subjective experience of making a free choice contributes to ongoing concerns with desiring and having freedom, even if that experience is partly or wholly illusory (e.g., Herrmann, 1996; Skinner, 1971; Wegner, 2002).

Much recent work has studied belief in free will by measuring or manipulating it and studying its consequences (e.g., Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Vohs & Schooler, 2008) and, albeit less frequently, its causes (e.g., Clark et al., 2014). However, little or no research has actually assessed differences in how free people feel when making choices. The present investigation explicitly measured self-reports of subjective decision freedom, to test a set of competing hypotheses about what makes people feel they are choosing or acting freely.

Specifically, we investigated two main theories about the experience of freedom in decision-making. The first is based on the process of choosing. This theory derives from strong conceptual foundations as to what actually makes a decision more or less free. The process model assumes that people would feel the highest amount of freedom when it is most apparent that they might face a multiplicity of choices, uncertainty about what to do, conflicting reasons to select an option, and a lack of

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external constraints. The second theory is based on the outcome of choosing. By this view, people feel free when they get what they want, so that a decision that produces a good outcome, with preferably little struggle or anguish, should maximize the sense of freedom.

Is feeling free a matter of the process or the outcome? The very term freedom connotes something about the process—but people likely care more about decision outcomes than the process (e.g., [Baron & Hershey, 1988](#)). Hence we regard both views as plausible and develop two competing models.

Interest in the experience of subjective freedom goes far beyond the abstract debates about free will. People like to have freedom to choose. A long history of research on reactance has shown that people jealously defend their freedom to choose and resent incursions upon it (e.g., [Brehm, 1966](#); [Brehm & Brehm, 1981](#); [Wortman & Brehm, 1975](#)). An even longer tradition of historical struggle has documented that people want to have freedom to choose for themselves, and they will incur substantial costs and risks (including armed revolt and warfare, political protest to the extent of risking persecution, and emigration) to achieve that freedom. We know of no mass movements or political rebellions motivated by a demand for reduced freedom, whereas many have demanded greater freedom. It seems reasonable to propose that the desire for freedom in decision-making is extremely fundamental, possibly even culturally universal ([Baumeister, 2008](#); [Cranach, 1991, 1996](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2006](#); [Westcott, 1988](#)). Yet an understanding of what satisfies the desire for decision freedom based on systematic studies of what it is that increases or decreases the experience of freedom has not yet emerged. The present investigation attempts to fill that gap.

1.1. Process model of experienced freedom

The core of the process model suggests that people should feel the most freedom when they make a choice that clearly and objectively involves the possibility that one has several different options from which to choose. In contrast, people should feel less freedom when faced with relatively few options, especially few that are viable. Put differently, people should feel most free when a choice is obviously underdetermined: no constraints, no pressures, many options, and no clear sense of which option they will choose.

Indeed, one line of work has proposed that free will refers to a particular human capacity for making difficult, complex choices (e.g., [Dennett, 2003](#)). Simple animals may learn to choose actions that have been reinforced, but a more advanced and complex method of choosing is needed for decisions that involve abstract principles, laws and rules, complex sequences of anticipated consequences, and the like. In particular, sometimes people must make a choice despite not having sufficient information to know what will produce the best result, thus humans evolved an inner mechanism for doing just this (see [Cranach, 1991, 1996](#); [Herrmann, 1996](#); [Hájiček, 2009](#)).

Based on the view of free will as a capacity for making complex, difficult choices, one can derive a set of specific predictions regarding which aspects of a decision should lead to a high sense of freedom. Having many options would be one obvious factor. A priori, it seems plausible that a person with many options has greater freedom to choose than someone with very few options. Likewise, having multiple reasons, especially ones that point in conflicting directions among the different options, should increase the sense that the decision is underdetermined and therefore should increase the feeling of freedom. Uncertainty about what to do should be a contributing factor: not knowing what to choose would be a powerful indicator of having multiple options from which one can then make choices. Furthermore, uncertainty would likely lead to pondering and reflection, which could also increase the sense of underdetermination and hence of freedom (see [Baron, 2008](#); [Cranach, 1991](#); [Lipshitz, 1993](#)). In other words, uncertainty would indicate the opportunity to self-determine the course of action. Meanwhile, the opposite circumstances – that is, having few options, seeing in advance what the decision will be with high certainty, and having all reasons favor the same option – should reduce one's sense of freedom.

The complexity of the decision and the resultant amount of effort one puts in should contribute to subjective freedom. A snap decision affords little sense of pondering multiple options, whereas deliberating or even agonizing over the choice should highlight the sense that one is free to select any of the options. Thus, the more time and effort one puts into a decision, the freer it should feel. Meanwhile, external constraints on the process, such as having a time limit, should reduce one's sense of freedom. In fact, we tested the hypothesis that feeling pressure to make an immediate decision on demand would decrease people's sense of freedom, insofar as the requirement to decide is itself a kind of constraint. On the other hand, people who feel permitted to postpone the decision until later or dodge it altogether should report higher levels of freedom, despite feeling the same pressure to decide in that moment.

Last, freedom has often been linked to moral responsibility (e.g., [Baumeister & Brewer, 2012](#); [Monroe & Malle, 2010](#)). Based on the process model, we predicted that higher levels of freedom and higher levels of effort would increase people's sense of responsibility for the decision and for its consequences.

1.2. Outcome model of experienced freedom

Our second theory focused on the outcome of the decision, including anticipated outcome, as the key factor in subjective freedom. Such a model may seem implausible, insofar as its logical (and philosophical) basis is considerably weaker than that of the process model. By analogy, whether an election is deemed free should in principle refer entirely to the processes of obtaining and counting votes. If the process is fair, then the election should be considered free, regardless of which side won. Judging whether an election was free based on who won is inherently problematic and dubious.

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