



Free will is about choosing: The link between choice and the belief in free will[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Laypersons cognitively associate free will with the concept of choice
- Free will beliefs linked to positive choice attitudes and ability, perceiving actions as choices
- Free will beliefs linked to cognitively associating choice with freedom
- Choice activation strengthens free will beliefs and weakens determinism beliefs
- More choice leads to a stronger activation of the belief in free will in self

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ABSTRACT

Expert opinions have yielded a wide and controversial assortment of conceptions of free will, but laypersons seem to associate free will more simply with making choices. We found that the more strongly people believed in free will, the more they liked making choices, the higher they rated their ability to make decisions (Study 1), the less difficult they perceived making decisions, and the more satisfied they were with their decisions (Study 2). High free will belief was also associated with more spontaneous associating of choice with freedom, and with the perception of actions as choices. Recalling choices (Study 3) and making choices (Study 4) led to a stronger endorsement of the belief in free will, with an additional effect for the level of choice involved. These findings suggest that the everyday social reality of beliefs about free will is a matter of how people think and feel about choice.

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Whether human beings have free will has been discussed and debated for centuries. Free will has been challenged on conceptual grounds from multiple arguments that supposedly render it impossible because the future is fixed and inevitable and therefore impervious to human choice (Kane, 2011). These arguments include theological assertions of divine omniscience that entails foreknowledge of all future events (Calvin, 1559), as well as the relentless ineluctability of scientific causation (Laplace, 1902). Meanwhile, thinkers have objected to assorted concepts of free will on various grounds, such as believing that free will constitutes an exemption from causation (Bargh, 2008), that free will postulates causation by nonphysical entities such as souls

(Montague, 2008), that free will is a psychological illusion (Wegner, 2003), or that it is a logically impossible construct used to rationalize behavior (Miles, 2011).

In recent years, however, attention has turned to layperson concepts of free will and to how that understanding operates in human social life (Baumeister, 2008; Knobe et al., 2012; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005; Nichols, 2006, 2011). Variations in beliefs about free will have been shown to cause a variety of changes in interpersonal and moral behavior (e.g., Vohs & Schooler, 2008). This has raised the question of how ordinary people understand the concept. Monroe and Malle (2010) found that people spoke about free will as making choices unconstrained by external factors (or even going against external pressures) and doing what one wants, possibly aided by planning and forethought. Stillman, Baumeister, and Mele (2011) found that people's notions of free will were linked to morally responsible behavior, self-control, achieving goals, and high levels of conscious thought and deliberation. Implicit in many of these conceptions is the notion of acting on the basis of deliberate choice (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs,

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2008). The present investigation was designed to test the hypothesis that beliefs about free will are vitally linked in ordinary understanding to making deliberate, uncoerced choices.

In contrast to the metaphysical conundrums mentioned above, the idea that people associate free will with making choices seems simple and straightforward. However, the present investigation intended to go beyond mere definitional issues. We examined associations between the beliefs about free will and choice to show that there is a positive relationship between people's belief in free will and the extent to which they like and enjoy making choices, their perceived ability to successfully make decisions, their perception of making choices as being less difficult and finally their satisfaction with decisions they have made. Furthermore, we predicted that the more people believe in free will, the more likely they would be to associate the concept of choice with freedom and to perceive their own actions as choices. Last, we sought to show that activating the concept of choice by means of autobiographical memories of choosing or an action task that involves choice would increase people's reported endorsement of the belief in free will. Taken together, we aimed to demonstrate that lay beliefs about free will are cognitively linked to choosing, both within and between persons, and that the associative links likely operate in both directions.

Study 1 - Choice perceptions and attitudes

Study 1 measured individual differences in belief in free will and, much later, assessed perceived ability of choosing, preference for choice, and cognitive associations about choice. We predicted that people who held a stronger belief in free will would express more liking for choice, higher perceived ability to choose, and would display more associations of freedom with choosing.

Method

Participants and procedure

Ninety eight university students ($M_{age} = 19.09$, $SD_{age} = .54$, 51 females) participated for partial course credit. At a mass testing session at the start of the semester, they filled out the belief in free will scale. Two months later, participants took part in another session and completed the choice cognitive association task and answered items regarding perceived ability to choose and preference for having choice.

Measures

Belief in free will. The belief in free will was measured using the eight item belief in self free will subscale of the Free Will and Determinism Scale (FWD scale, Rakos, Laurene, Skala, & Slane, 2008). The items refer to oneself having free will, such as "I am in charge of my actions even when my life's circumstances are difficult" and "I have free will".

Choice cognitive association. Adjusting the method developed by Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus (2011) for studying associations, we asked participants to write three words they thought of when faced with the word "choice." The responses were automatically coded according to whether they referred to being free (e.g., free, freedom).

Perceived ability to choose. Two items assessed perceived ability for choice: "It's very hard for me to choose between many alternatives" (reversed) and "When faced with an important decision, I prefer that someone else chooses for me" (reversed) on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Preference for choice. Two items measured liking for choice: "The more choices I have in life, the better" and "In each decision I face, I prefer to have as many options as possible to choose from" on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Correlations between belief in free will, choice cognitive association with freedom, perceived ability to choose and preference for choice are summarized in Table 1. The belief in free will was associated with a higher preference for choice ($r = .26$, $p < .01$) and higher perceived ability to choose ($r = .38$, $p < .001$). Also, those with stronger endorsement of the belief in free will were more likely to associate choice with freedom ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). The correlations between choice association with freedom, preference for choice and perceived ability to choose were weak ($r = .00$ to $.17$, $p = n.s.$).

Semantic analysis

Logistic regression tested the link between scores on the free will belief scale and whether the participant associated choice with freedom. Participants with higher belief in free will were more likely than others to respond with "free" or related words as a spontaneous association to "choice" ($\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 6.46$, $p = 0.011$; $\beta = 1.63$, $w = 5.76$, $p = 0.016$). Thus, belief in free will was linked to whether people spontaneously think of choosing as something related to being free or having freedom.

Perceived ability to choose

We ran a multi-step regression examining the relationship between the belief in free will and the perceived ability to choose, controlling for age and gender. A stronger endorsement of the belief in free will beliefs was positively related to having perceived ability to choose ($F(3, 94) = 8.28$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{FW} = .36$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .18$; $\Delta R^2 = .13$). The relationship held even without the inclusion of controls.

Liking for choice

A multi-step regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the belief in free will and liking for choice, controlling for age and gender. The belief in free will was found to predict a stronger preference for having choice ($F(3, 94) = 2.94$, $p = .037$; $\beta_{FW} = .27$, $p = .008$; $R^2 = .09$; $\Delta R^2 = .07$). The controls did not affect the relationship.

Discussion

As predicted, belief in free will had multiple positive links to making choices. People who expressed higher belief in free will reported enjoying making choices more than other people. They also had a greater sense that they were capable of making choices effectively. The two-months delay between the measures rendered it highly unlikely that filling out the free will scale had any direct (e.g., priming) effect on responses regarding choice. More likely, believing in free will is cognitively associated with a preference for choice and the feeling of being a capable as a decision maker.

The semantic analysis data provided further evidence that free will and choice are linked, even in people's spontaneous responses and thought patterns. The more strongly people believed in free will, the more likely they were to associate choosing with freedom.

Table 1
Study 1 correlations table.

	1	2	3	4
1 - Belief in self free will	(.72)			
2 - Choice associated with freedom	.25*	-		
3 - Preference for choice	.26**	.00	(.60)	
4 - Perceived ability to choose	.38***	.11	.17	(.54)
Age	-.02	.03	.12	-.24*
Gender ^a	-.08	.01	.01	-.13

Note. ^a Gender is dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Alpha coefficients are presented on the diagonal.

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