

What Choice Do We Have?

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Too much choice can be a bad thing—not just for the individual, but for society. Thinking about choices makes people less sympathetic to others and less likely to support policies that help people, according to a study published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

In the U.S., important policy debates are often framed in terms of choice, such as whether people get to choose their own healthcare plan and a school for their children. “When Hurricane Katrina happened, people asked, why did those people choose to stay?” says Krishna Savani of Columbia University. But many people didn’t have a choice about whether to escape New Orleans, and no one knew how bad the disaster would be. “One could say that these individuals made bad choices, but did they really have a choice?” Americans tend to assume that what people do and what happens to them is under their control, is a consequence of their choices, and is their own personal responsibility.

Along with Nicole Stephens of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and Hazel Rose Markus of Stanford University, Savani looked at how thinking about choice affected people’s feelings on public policies. For example, in some experiments, participants watched a video of a person doing a set of routine daily activities in an apartment. Some people were told to push the space bar every time he made a choice; others were told to do so every time he touched an object for the first time. They were then asked their opinions on social issues.

Simply thinking about ‘choice’ made people less likely to support policies promoting greater equality and benefits for society, such as affirmative action, a tax on fuel-inefficient cars, or banning violent video games. Another experiment found that when people think about choice, they are more likely to blame others for bringing bad events on themselves, like having a heart attack or losing a job.

Savani and his colleagues wondered if this was also true for people outside of the U.S., so they tried an experiment in India. After choosing among consumer objects like pens and chocolate bars, both American students and Indian students were shown a photograph of a poor child and given a description of his life. Thinking about choice led Americans to be less empathetic, but had no effect on Indians. “In America, we make choices all the time—in the cafeteria, in the supermarket, in the shopping mall,” Savani says. He wonders if, in the long run, all those consumer choices might have a cumulative negative impact by making people less sympathetic towards others and less concerned about the collective good.