

# Choice doesn't always mean well-being for everyone

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American culture venerates choice, but choice may not be the key to happiness and health, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Americans live in a political, social, and historical context that advances personal freedom, [choice](#), and self-determination above all else," write authors Hazel Rose Markus (Stanford University) and Barry Schwartz (Swarthmore College). "Contemporary psychology has proliferated this emphasis on choice and self-determination as the key to healthy psychological functioning."

The authors point out that this emphasis on choice and freedom is not universal. "The picture presented by a half-century of research may present an accurate picture of the psychological importance of choice, freedom, and [autonomy](#) among middle-class, college-educated Americans, but this is a picture that leaves about 95 percent of the world's population outside its frame," the authors write.

The authors reviewed a body of research surrounding the cultural ideas surrounding choice. They found that among non-Western cultures and among working-class Westerners, freedom and choice are less important or mean something different than they do for the university-educated people who have participated in psychological research on choice.

"And even what counts as a 'choice' may be different for non-Westerners than it is for Westerners," the authors write. "Moreover, the

enormous opportunity for growth and self-advancement that flows from unlimited freedom of choice may diminish rather than enhance subjective well-being."

People can become paralyzed by unlimited choice, and find less satisfaction with their decisions. Choice can also foster a lack of empathy, the authors found, because it can focus people on their own preferences and on themselves at the expense of the preferences of others and of society as a whole.

"We cannot assume that choice, as understood by educated, affluent Westerners, is a universal [aspiration](#), and that the provision of choice will necessarily foster freedom and well-being," the authors write. "Even in contexts where choice can foster [freedom](#), empowerment, and independence, it is not an unalloyed good. Choice can also produce a numbing uncertainty, depression, and selfishness."

**More information:** Hazel Rose Markus and Barry Schwartz. "Does Choice Mean Freedom and Well Being?" Journal of Consumer Research: August 2010.

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