



The role of competence in the effects of choice on motivation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Four experiments explored the effects of choice and perceived competence.
- People expressed the greatest preference for choosing under high competence conditions.
- Choice enhanced motivation when initial perceptions of task competence were high.
- Choice diminished motivation when initial perceptions of task competence were low.
- Indirect effects of choice on motivation and task performance emerged.

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ABSTRACT

Four experiments explored whether initial perceptions of task competence influence preference for having task choices and the effects of choice provision on motivation and performance. In Study 1, participants read a series of scenarios and expressed the greatest preference for choosing on tasks they would be most competent. Across three additional studies, the provision of choice generally enhanced motivation when initial perceptions of task competence were high, but diminished motivation when perceived competence was low. Results were relatively consistent whether initial perceived competence was measured (Study 2) or manipulated by contextual variables (i.e. task difficulty in Study 3 and competence feedback in Study 4). Results also suggested that the conditional effect of choice on intrinsic motivation was mediated by post-choosing perceptions of competence (Studies 2, 3, and 4), though the relationship between perceived competence and intrinsic motivation also appeared to be reciprocal (Study 4). Further, results suggested that choice may conditionally influence both willingness to engage in the target task in the future (Studies 2, 3, and 4) and task performance indirectly via intrinsic motivation (Studies 3 and 4). The implications of these findings and directions for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

A long history of western philosophy, psychological theory, and conventional wisdom suggests that choosing is a central and powerful aspect of people's lives. Indeed, many North Americans believe that having choice, or the power to make a selection among options, is an essential aspect to leading a happy life. Likewise, decades of psychological theory and research suggest that all kinds of people (e.g. students, workers, the elderly) may feel more competent, more in control, more motivated, perform better, and demonstrate better health when they are able to express their preferences and make choices (e.g. Ames, 1992; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Henry, 1994; Karasek, 1979; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010; Perlmutter & Monty, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tafarodi, Milne, & Smith, 1999; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978).

However, despite the vast literature that exists on the effects of providing and making choices, controversy regarding the benefits and detriments of choosing has yet to be put to rest. A look at the literature on the effects of choice suggests that there are likely both benefits and costs associated with making choices and that not all choices are equal for all people (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006; Patall et al., 2008; Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003).

One factor that has not received adequate attention in explaining when does choice lead to benefits versus when it does not is initial perceptions of task competence. That is, research has yet to fully explore how the feelings of competence that an individual has about a task influence how choice is experienced and affects motivation, and in turn, performance. The current investigation was undertaken to explore the role of task competence perceptions in determining one's preference for choosing and the effects of choice on motivation and performance. In four experimental studies, we sought to explore the role of perceived task competence on the desire for choice and in the effects of choice by either measuring individuals' prior beliefs of competence or manipulating characteristics of the environment. In all cases, we

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expected to find that while choosing would be more desirable and motivating when expectations for success are high, it would be less desired and possibly de-motivating when expectations for success were low.

The benefits and detriments of choice

According to self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are three fundamental needs that underlie people's intrinsic motivation or a motivational state in which an individual is energized to engage in a task because of some inherent satisfaction garnered from the task itself (Deci, 1971). Social contexts that satisfy these needs will enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, motivation is enhanced when contextual conditions allow people to feel that their actions are freely emanating from the self, afford people with the possibility of developing competence, and support a sense of belongingness with others in their environment. In contrast, when the environment is experienced as controlling, psychological needs and intrinsic motivation are thwarted.

Providing choice is one popular strategy scholars have suggested that may support a person's experience of autonomy, perception of control, and sense of competence, and in turn, an assortment of motivation and performance outcomes (e.g. Ames, 1992; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Henry, 1994; Henry & Sniezek, 1993; Jacobs & Eccles, 2000; Langer, 1975; Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2011; Patall et al., 2008, 2010; Perlmutter & Monty, 1979; Rotter, 1966; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tafarodi et al., 1999; Taylor, 1989). Likewise, choice provision is a common motivational strategy within real-world contexts. For example, teachers report that providing opportunities for choosing and decision-making within the classroom or for school tasks is a popular method by which they attempt to enhance their students' motivation and learning (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000).

In fact, much research has supported the proposed positive effects of choosing, demonstrating that the provision of choice leads to enhanced interest, enjoyment, and persistence on a task (e.g. Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Swann & Pittman, 1977; Zuckerman et al., 1978), as well as enhanced effort, task performance, subsequent learning, preference for challenge, and creativity (e.g. Amabile, 1979, 1983; Amabile, Hennessey, & Grossman, 1986; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Patall et al., 2008, 2010). Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that the positive effects of choice remain even for choices that appear trivial (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Swann & Pittman, 1977) or "illusory" (Langer, 1975).

Despite a great deal of theory and research suggesting that choice is a powerful motivator of behavior, not all studies have found choice to be ubiquitously beneficial. A number of studies find that choice may have no effect, or even a negative effect on adaptive motivation and performance outcomes (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Flowerday & Schraw, 2003; Flowerday, Schraw, & Stevens, 2004; Overskeid & Svartdal, 1996; Parker & Lepper, 1992; Reeve et al., 2003). This complex pattern of previous findings beg the question, under what conditions does choosing lead to motivational benefits or detriments?

Reconciling contradictory findings: the role of competence

Given the diversity of results that have been found in past research on the effects of choice, there seems to be little doubt that the effects of providing choices are complex. It would seem that choice has the potential to promote, protect, and diminish motivation depending on a variety of circumstances. In fact, past research has suggested a number of choice, person, and task characteristics that are important in understanding these complex effects. The effects of choice may vary depending on the extent to which choices allow the freedom to express one's preferences, initiate, and regulate one's own behavior (Katz & Assor, 2007; Reeve et al., 2003), the extent to which choices are administered in an autonomy supportive versus controlling manner (Moller et al., 2006;

Patall et al., 2008), the number and complexity of options available and choices required (e.g. Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Katz & Assor, 2007; Patall et al., 2008), and the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of individuals (e.g. Bao & Lam, 2008; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Katz & Assor, 2007; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). However, whether task-related choice is equally desirable and influences motivation and performance outcomes similarly when individuals feel more or less competent on the task to begin with has been an underexplored question. That is, is the preference for having task choices equal under high and low task competence conditions? Further, does the provision of choice support motivation equally well under high and low task competence conditions?

This issue has been addressed in part by prior theory and research. In particular, research coming from the decision-making literature has suggested that expertise may influence the process and outcomes of decision-making, making it potentially more desirable and effective for experts (e.g. Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). In line with this notion, several studies have demonstrated that individuals with more expertise or who feel most efficacious desire more options when making a choice, are more likely to look for pre-choice information that would help to make a decision, and benefit from having more options in terms of post-decision satisfaction (Chernev, 2003; Reed, Mikels, & Lockhoff, 2012; Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010). Likewise, decision-making research showing that making choices is more stressful and can diminish self-confidence among choosers who were either insufficiently informed or overly rushed (Paterson & Neufeld, 1995; Rodin, Rennert, & Solomon, 1980) suggests that choosing may be detrimental among those who feel least competent in their ability to make effective decisions. Going further, perceived competence seems to influence the effects of having more or less options on performance such that those with high competence perceptions perform better when given extensive compared limited options, while those with low competence perceptions perform better when given limited options (Chua & Iyengar, 2005). Taken together, this evidence suggests that having the opportunity to make choices compared to not may enhance motivation among those who feel most competent but not for those who feel incompetent, although this hypothesis has never been put to a direct test.

Perhaps more directly related, self-determination theorists have long suggested that needs for competence and autonomy may jointly influence motivation such that people may need to feel both autonomous and competent for adaptive motivation to result (e.g. Deci, 1980; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theoretical proposition has obvious relevance to the current study, as it corroborates our suspicion that support for autonomy, in this case in the form of choice provision, may not be equally beneficial across all levels of competence. That said, the evidence testing competence–autonomy interactions has been mixed. While some studies have found that support for (i.e. positive feedback) and perceptions of competence yield greater motivational and performance benefits when the experience of autonomy is also high (e.g. Fisher, 1978; Zhou, 1998), others find that perceived competence yields greater positive effects when perceived autonomy is low (e.g. Markland, 1999). Still other theory and research suggest that the effects of competence and autonomy factors do not interact. Vallerand's (1997) hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation posits that autonomy and competence only have independent rather than interactive effects on intrinsic motivation. In line with this assertion, some research has failed to find any interaction between autonomy and competence factors (e.g. Sansone, 1989; Guay, Boggiano, & Vallerand, 2001).

Clearly, the prior research has produced conflicting findings regarding how perceived competence and autonomy interact to influence decision-making, motivation, and performance outcomes. However, thus far, there has been no direct test of either the effect of task competence factors on the desirability for having task choices or the moderating role of perceived competence in the effects of the provision of choice versus no choice. The existing decision-making research has

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