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What Counts as a Choice? U.S. Americans Are More Likely Than Indians to Construe Actions as Choices

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Abstract

People everywhere select among multiple alternatives, but are they always making choices? In five studies, we found that people in U.S. American contexts, where the disjoint model of agency is prevalent, are more likely than those in Indian contexts to construe their own and other individuals' behaviors as choices, to construe ongoing behaviors and behaviors recalled from memory as choices, to construe naturally occurring and experimentally controlled behaviors as choices, to construe mundane and important actions as choices, and to construe personal and interpersonal actions as choices. Indians showed a greater tendency to construe actions as choices when these actions involved responding to other people than when they did not. These findings show that whether people construe actions as choices is significantly shaped by sociocultural systems of meanings and practices. Together, they suggest that the positive consequences associated with maximizing the availability of personal choice may not be universal and instead may be limited to North American contexts.

Keywords

choice, construal, action identification, culture, India

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In San Francisco, Jennifer takes the train to work one day instead of driving. Is she "choosing to reduce her environmental footprint," or is she "commuting to work"? In Bangalore, Veena purchases one of three models of an LCD TV for her home. Is she "choosing the TV she prefers," or is she "buying a TV for her home"? Although many subdisciplines in economics, psychology, and decision making have developed theories about how people make choices in different situations (e.g., Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944), the question of whether and when an action can be considered a choice remains unanswered. In experimental studies, researchers direct participants to engage in a particular stream of behavior (e.g., picking one of two music CDs) and define their behavior as a choice, but in everyday life, people have to define for themselves whether their actions constitute a choice. From an American observer's perspective, people everywhere seem to be selecting among multiple alternatives—toast or muffin, white shirt or blue, music or news on the headphones—but do the actors themselves perceive these actions as choices?

We suggest that the categories of action that are meaningful and important to an actor depend on the models of agency that are prevalent in the actor's sociocultural contexts. Models of agency are implicit frameworks of meanings and practices that define what counts as good action and what should be the sources and consequences of good action (Kitayama & Uchida, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001).

According to one particular model that is pervasive in middle-class European American contexts, the *disjoint model of agency*, agency derives from within the individual; normatively good actions are those that stem from one's personal preferences, beliefs, and goals and those that exert influence over the environment (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). From the perspective of the disjoint model, choice is likely to be an important and accessible category of action because construing actions as choices serves a number of sociocultural imperatives—it allows people to express their preferences and to influence the environment. As Jennifer takes the train in San Francisco, she can construe her

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action as a choice that expresses her eco-friendly attitudes and that influences the world by saving energy.

Actions, however, can be construed in multiple ways. According to another model, the *conjoint model of agency*, normatively good actions are those that are responsive to the situation, to social roles, and to expectations of other individuals (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). The conjoint model is often associated with Indian contexts (Miller, 2003; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008). From the perspective of the conjoint model, personal choice might be a less important and less accessible category of action because in most circumstances, choice does not serve the sociocultural imperative of being responsive to social roles and situations. As Veena selects a TV in Bangalore, she might see her action not as a choice based on her personal preferences, but as fulfilling the role of a smart shopper who purchases the best available TV within her budget.

In previous studies, researchers have inferred models of agency from people's interpretation of other's behaviors and from people's own behaviors. Middle-class Americans construe the actions of others, even the actions of others operating under severe situational constraints (e.g., Katrina survivors who did not have the resources to leave New Orleans before the hurricane), as choices that reflect personal preferences (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). Moreover, in American but not in Japanese or Indian contexts, people prefer the objects that they have chosen, show reactance when their choices are usurped, perform well after making a choice, and make choices that are consistent with their personal preferences (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Savani et al., 2008).

We hypothesize that if the construal of actions as choices is an element of the disjoint model of agency, then people engaging in U.S. American contexts will be more likely than those engaging in Indian contexts to construe actions as choices. We tested this hypothesis with reference to participants' construal of (a) their own and others' behaviors, (b) experimentally controlled and naturally occurring streams of behavior, (c) ongoing behavior and behavior recalled from memory, (d) mundane and important actions, and (e) personal and interpersonal actions.

Study 1

In our first study, we asked U.S. American and Indian students to either list all the choices that they had made the day before (choice-listing condition) or list all the things that they had done the day before without any choice (control condition). We hypothesized that American participants would list more actions than Indian participants in the choice-listing condition but not in the control condition.

Method

Participants. Participants were 79 students (53 women, 26 men), of various ethnic backgrounds, at Stanford University and 100 students (57 women, 43 men) at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai, India.

Procedure. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions. In the *choice-listing condition*, they were instructed: "In the space given below, please list all the choices that you made yesterday. Feel free to list any type of choice that you made." In the *control condition*, participants were instructed: "In the space given below, please list all the things that you had to do yesterday without any choice. Feel free to list any type of thing that you had to do." Participants were given 10 min to list as many actions as they could recall. All materials were in English.

Results

Upon submitting the number of actions listed to a 2 (cultural context) × 2 (condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA), we found a significant main effect of cultural context, $F(1, 175) = 7.42$, $p_{rep} > .95$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.40$; a main effect of condition, $F(1, 175) = 11.40$, $p_{rep} > .95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$, and a Cultural Context × Condition interaction, $F(1, 175) = 5.56$, $p_{rep} = .93$, $p < .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .031$. Supporting our hypothesis, simple-effects t tests revealed that American participants identified significantly more choices in the stream of behavior that they engaged in the day before than did Indian participants, $t(86) = 3.72$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$. Notably, the two groups did not differ in the number of actions listed in the control condition, $t < 1$ (see Fig. 1), which indicates that Indian participants are unlikely to have a general tendency to produce fewer responses than U.S. American participants.

Study 2

Whereas Study 1 found that American and Indian participants differ in their construal of choice within diverse naturally occurring streams of their own behavior, Study 2 tested whether the two groups also differ in their construal of choice within an *identical* stream of their own behavior. In a carefully

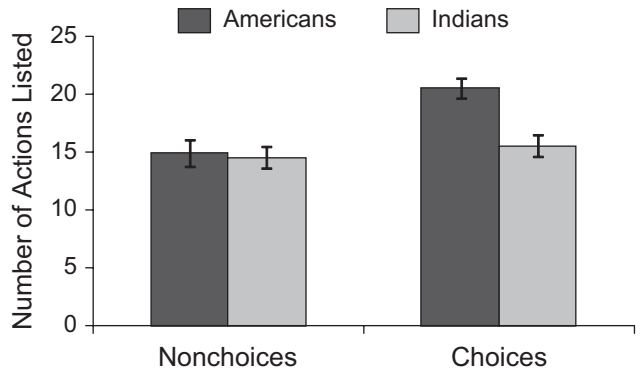

Fig. 1. Mean number of actions listed by American and Indian participants in the choice-listing and control (nonchoices) conditions of Study 1. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

controlled lab study, all participants were subtly induced to engage in the same stream of behavior and, in a subsequent free-response task, were asked to identify all the choices that they had made. In an additional forced-choice task, participants saw a list of the target actions that they had engaged in and indicated whether each action constituted a choice. We also tested whether greater engagement with American contexts increases Indians' likelihood of construing their actions as choices.

Method

Participants. Participants were 36 European Americans (18 women, 18 men) and 34 students from India (16 women, 18 men) at Stanford University. Three of the Indian participants had spent 3 months in the United States, 12 had spent 8 months, and 17 had spent 20 months or more; 2 participants did not provide this information.

Procedure. Participants were induced to engage in a stream of behavior containing 12 target actions. An experimenter greeted participants and instructed them as follows: "To ensure your anonymity, we want participants to have random ID numbers, so please pick an ID number from this bowl" (*ID-number choice*). After participants picked a sticker with their ID number, they were instructed to attach it to either a green or an orange index card (*index-card choice*). Participants were then ushered into a room with two empty cubicles and asked to take a seat (*cubicle choice*). Once seated, participants were asked to sign one of two colored consent forms (*consent-form choice*) using one of two colored pens (*pen choice*); they were then asked to put the signed consent form in one of two colored folders (*folder choice*).

The experimenter then said,

> Please complete this [filler] task on the computer to begin with. I will be back in about 10 minutes, so in case you finish before that, maybe can you fill out this brief optional survey for another grad student if you want to. She would really appreciate your help.

The experimenter then closed the door and left. The filler task was designed to last about 5 min, so participants had 5 min to themselves before the experimenter returned. In this time, they could complete the optional questionnaire about the types of cars present on campus (*questionnaire choice*), read either or both of two magazines lying on the table (*magazine choices: whether to read* and *which to read*), eat a piece of candy kept on the table (*candy choice*), write down their name to volunteer to participate in a "Humor Study" (*humor-study choice*), and tear off a tab with information about a "Cognitive Maps Study" (*cognitive-study choice*).

After 10 min, participants were asked to "list all choices that you made since coming in the lab." This task was timed to last 3 min. After additional filler tasks, participants were given a list of the 12 target actions; for each action, they were asked to write down which option they had selected (e.g., "What was the color of the index card that you put your ID number on?") and then indicate whether they had made a choice (e.g., "Did you intentionally choose an index card of that color?").

Results

We computed the number of target choices that each participant listed in the free-response task. A Mann-Whitney test revealed that American participants identified more choices than Indian participants (M = 6.23 vs. 3.48), z = 3.67, p_{rep} = .99, $p < .001$, d = 1.04. Even when presented with the forced-choice task listing the 12 target actions, American participants identified more choices than Indians (M = 7.33 vs. 5.82), z = 3.32, p_{rep} = .99, $p < .001$, d = 0.84 (see Fig. 2).

To test whether engagement with middle-class American contexts increased participants' likelihood of construing their actions as choices, we used a median split on the number of months spent in the United States to divide Indian participants into two groups.[1] We found that the two groups differed significantly in the number of choices participants listed, z = 1.93, $p < .05$, p_{rep} = .97, d = 0.73; Indian students who had spent fewer than 10 months in the United States identified 2.60 choices on average, whereas those who had spent 20 months or more identified 4.41 choices. These results suggest an experiential mechanism for the observed cultural differences in construal of choice: engagement with middle-class American contexts that are suffused with ideas promoting choice and practices requiring choice, reflecting a disjoint model.

Study 3

Whereas Studies 1 and 2 examined participants' construal of their own behaviors, Study 3 tested whether the cultural difference generalizes to the construal of other individuals' behaviors. To test this hypothesis, we asked participants to identify all instances in which an actor in a video made a choice (*construal-of-choice condition*) or touched an object (*control condition*).

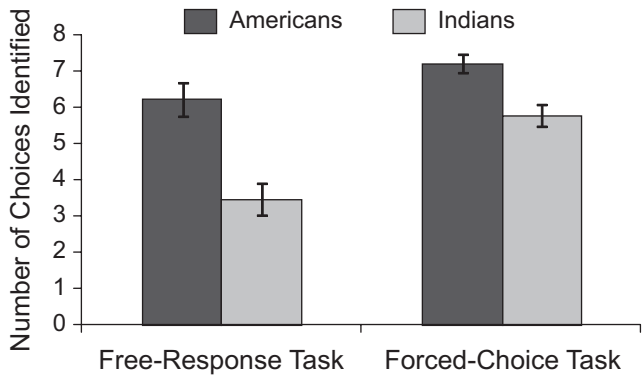

Fig. 2. Mean number of choices identified by American and Indian participants in the free-response and forced-choice tasks in Study 2. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Instead of categorizing behaviors recalled from memory, participants categorized behaviors unfolding in front of their eyes.

Method

Participants. Participants were 60 students (37 women, 22 men, 1 person with unreported gender) at Stanford University and 68 students (24 women, 41 men, 3 people with unreported gender) at the M.S. Ramaiah Institute of Technology, India.

Materials. We created a 6-min video clip in which a 20-year-old male Indian American performed a number of mundane activities in an apartment. For example, the actor walked into the apartment, took juice from the refrigerator, opened his mail, listened to music, and worked on the computer. We carefully selected actions that would have similar meanings and significance for college students in both contexts.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to either the construal-of-choice condition or the control condition. In the choice condition, participants were asked to press a button whenever the actor made a choice, and were told that "any action in which the actor selects among multiple options can be considered a choice." In the control condition, participants were asked to press a button whenever the actor touched an object with his hands. The number of actions that participants identified while watching the video served as the dependent variable.

Results

We submitted the dependent variable to a 2 (culture) × 2 (condition) ANOVA. We found a main effect of culture, $F(1, 120) = 14.79$, $p < .005$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $d = 0.55$; a main effect of condition, $F(1, 120) = 11.56$, $p = .01$, $p_{rep} = .96$, $d = 0.47$; and a Culture × Condition interaction, $F(1, 120) = 5.69$, $p < .02$, $p_{rep} = .96$. Simple-effects t tests revealed that although Indians and Americans identified a similar number of actions in the control condition, $t < 1$, Indian participants identified substantially fewer actions in the construal-of-choice condition, $t(32) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $d = 1.03$ (see Fig. 3). Therefore, Study 3 replicated the cultural difference in construal of choice even in the case of the construal of other people's ongoing behaviors.

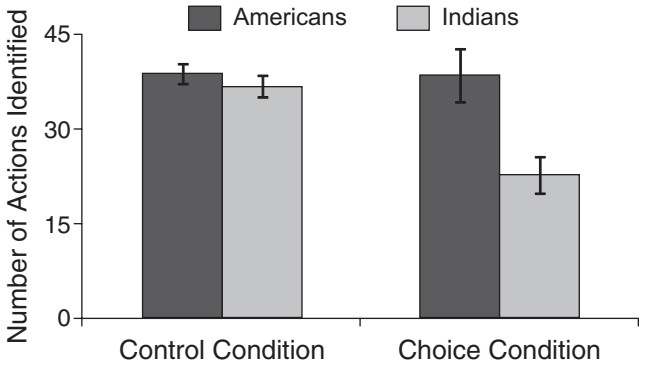

Fig. 3. Mean number of actions identified by American and Indian participants in the construal-of-choice and control conditions of Study 3. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Study 4a

Whereas Studies 1 through 3 show that Americans are more likely than Indians to construe even the most mundane actions as choices, Study 4a tested whether this cultural difference generalizes to the construal of more significant actions. We asked participants to recall a large number of real-life decisions, ranging from the less important (e.g., selection of clothes, movies, breakfast) to the more important (e.g., selection of college, major, career), and asked them to indicate whether each action constituted a choice. We hypothesized that cultural differences in the construal of choice would generalize from mundane actions to more important decisions.

Method

Participants. Participants were 39 students (30 women, 9 men) at Stanford University and 84 students (31 women, 53 men) at St. Joseph's College in Bangalore, India

Procedure. Participants were presented with a list of 19 different actions. They were asked to recall the most recent instance of each action in their own life (e.g., "Think about which political party you support") and to write down what option they picked ("Which political party do you support?"). They were then asked to indicate which of two options better characterized their action; one option described the action as a choice ("It was my *choice* which party to support—I could have chosen to support either this party or some other party"), and one described it as a nonchoice ("I *had to* support this party—I could not have chosen to support a different party"). Participants then rated the importance of the action for their life on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all important* to *extremely important*.

Results

We ran a logistic hierarchical linear model (HLM) treating actions as nested within participants, with construal of the action as the dependent variable (choice = 1), importance of the action as a trial-level predictor (centered within participants), and culture as a participant-level predictor. The results replicated our previous findings: Overall, Indians were less likely than Americans to construe actions as choices, $\beta = -0.35$, odds ratio (OR) = 0.70, $t(121) = 1.96$, $p_{rep} = .91$, $p = .05$. We also found a main effect of importance indicating that increase in the importance of an action increased the likelihood that American participants would construe the action as

a choice, β = 0.098, *OR* = 1.10, $t(2186) = 2.41$, $p_{rep} = .96$, $p < .02$. However, increase in the importance of an action decreased the likelihood that Indian participants would construe the action as a choice, as reflected in a significant Culture × Importance interaction, β = –0.24, *OR* = 0.78, $t(2186) = 3.23$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $p < .005$; the composite slope for Indian participants was negative, β = –0.14. Study 4a not only replicated cultural differences in the construal of choice, but also demonstrated that these differences are magnified as the importance of the action increases.

Study 4b

Unlike mundane actions, many of the more important actions sampled in Study 4a are difficult to replicate in the lab with proper controls. Therefore, by asking participants to recall their past behaviors, the study confounded participants' subjective construal of choice with the objective number of options that were available to participants when they engaged in the behaviors. For example, one might claim that the results of Study 4a are due to Indian students having less disposable income than American students and thus having fewer options to choose from. Study 4b addressed this concern by assessing and controlling for the number of options that were available to participants in the case of each decision.

Method

Participants. Participants were 45 students (30 women, 15 men) at Stanford University and 58 students (18 women, 40 men) at Apeejay College of Engineering, Haryana, India.

Procedure. We asked participants to recall and describe the most recent instance in which they engaged in each of six actions (e.g., picking a topic for a class project, purchasing a computer, watching a TV show), to indicate whether the action constituted a choice, to indicate the number of options that they chose from, and to rate the importance of the action on a 7-point scale.

Results

In a logistic HLM model, construal of choice was the dependent variable, the number of options available (centered across participants) and the importance of the action (centered within participants) were trial-level predictors, and culture was a participant-level predictor. We replicated the finding that Indians are less likely than Americans to construe actions as choices, β = –0.44, *OR* = 0.65, $t(101) = 2.20$, $p_{rep} = .94$, $p = .03$. Further, the cultural difference was magnified for more important actions, as revealed by a significant Culture × Importance interaction, β = –0.32, *OR* = 0.73, $t(101) = 2.92$, $p_{rep} = .98$, $p = .005$. The number of options available predicted construal of choice, β = 0.01, *OR* = 1.01, $t(101) = 2.78$, $p_{rep} = .97$, $p < .01$, but to a similar extent across both cultures, $t < 1$. Thus, after controlling for the number of options available, Study 4b replicated the finding that cultural variation in the construal of choice is magnified for more important actions.

Study 5

Previous research by Miller and her colleagues found that Indians are more likely than Americans to view helping others and meeting interpersonal expectations as moral obligations (Miller & Bersoff, 1992; Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). Miller (2003) posited, however, that Indians construe themselves as freely choosing to meet these moral obligations rather than as being compelled to do so. Studies 1 through 4 demonstrate that Indians are less likely than Americans to construe a wide range of personal actions as choices, but the research of Miller and her colleagues suggests that Indians might be more likely to construe interpersonal actions, those that involve responding to others, as choices.

To test this prediction, we randomly assigned participants to recall either personal actions or matched interpersonal actions and to indicate whether each action constituted a choice. We hypothesized that Americans would be equally likely to construe the two types of actions as choices (a pattern consistent with the disjoint model of agency), but that Indians would show a greater tendency to construe interpersonal actions as choices than to construe personal actions as choices (a pattern consistent with the conjoint model of agency). Further, a sense of psychological freedom is widely regarded to be a signature of autonomous agency, so we also tested whether the association between personal choice and autonomous agency claimed by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) generalizes to Indian contexts.

Method

Participants. Participants were 90 European American students (54 women, 36 men) at Stanford University and 128 students (47 women, 81 men) at Apeejay College of Engineering, Haryana, India.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to either the personal-choice or the interpersonal-choice condition. Those in the personal-choice condition were asked to recall eight actions that did not involve responding to other people (e.g., the last time they bought something for themselves, the last time they had to decide whether or not to take a course), whereas those in the interpersonal-choice condition were asked to recall eight matched actions that involved responding to other people (e.g., the last time they bought something for another person, the last time they advised someone about whether or not to take a course). For each action, participants indicated whether it constituted a choice and rated its importance. At the end of the task, participants rated how free they felt at that moment on a 7-point scale.

Results

In a logistic HLM model with construal of choice as the dependent measure, culture and condition as participant-level predictors, and importance as a trial-level covariate, we found that, overall, Indians were less likely than Americans to construe actions as choices, β = –1.07, *OR* = 0.34, $t(101) = 5.70$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $p < .001$. We did not find a main effect of condition, β = –0.13, *OR* = 0.88, $t(101) = 0.71$, $p_{rep} = .69$, $p = .48$, but we found a significant Culture × Condition interaction, β = 0.53, *OR* = 1.70, $t(101) = 1.98$, $p_{rep} = .92$, $p < .05$. As depicted in Figure 4, Americans were equally likely to construe personal and interpersonal actions as choices, but Indians were more likely to construe interpersonal actions than personal actions as choices

We next submitted participants' ratings of freedom to a 2 (culture) × 2 (condition) × 1 (percentage of actions construed as choices) analysis of covariance and found a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 210) = 7.2$, $p_{rep} = .97$, $p = .008$. For Americans, greater construal of choice was positively correlated with freedom in the personal-choice condition ($r = .21$) but negatively correlated with freedom in the interpersonal-choice condition ($r = –.29$); Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformation indicated that the difference in the correlations was significant, $z = 2.35$, $p_{rep} = .95$, $p < .02$. For Indians, greater construal of choice was negatively correlated with freedom in the personal-choice condition ($r = –.23$) but positively correlated with freedom in the interpersonal-choice condition ($r = .11$); the correlations were marginally significantly different from each other, $z = 1.90$, $p_{rep} = .91$, $p < .06$.

As predicted, Americans were more likely than Indians to construe all actions as choices, and were equally likely to construe personal and interpersonal actions as choices. These results are consistent with Miller's (2003) argument in providing an initial suggestion that Indians are more likely to construe conjoint actions (i.e., actions that are responsive to other individuals) as choices than to construe personal actions as choices.

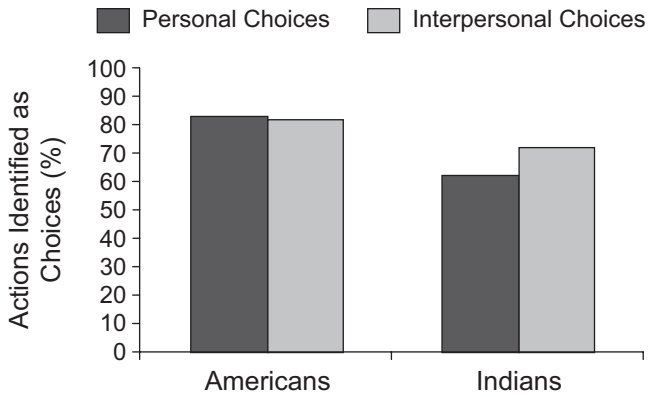

Fig. 4. Mean percentage of actions construed as choices by American and Indian participants in the personal-choice and interpersonal-choice conditions of Study 5.

General Discussion

The five studies reported in this article support the hypothesis that Americans are more likely than Indians to construe actions as choices. This finding held whether participants were construing their own behaviors or other people's behaviors, whether they were categorizing experimentally controlled or naturally occurring streams of behavior, whether they focused on ongoing behavior or behavior recalled from memory, and whether the actions were mundane or important. Indians who had spent more time in the United States were more likely to construe mundane actions as choices, a result suggesting that choice became an important category of action after Indian students engaged with a cultural context where the disjoint model of agency was prevalent.

Many classic social psychological theories, such as theories of cognitive dissonance, forced compliance, reactance, self-determination, self-perception, and choice overload, rest on the assumption that people naturally or automatically construe their actions as choices. When studying choice, researchers simply define participants' actions as choices, but it is possible that in daily life, only some people in some contexts construe those actions as choices. If so, the ecological generalizability of the processes posited by psychological theories of choice is limited. For example, in typical cognitive dissonance experiments, researchers ask people to rate their preferences for various consumer items, to choose between two of those items, and to rate their preferences again, finding that participants increase their liking for the chosen item and decrease their liking for the rejected item (Walster & Festinger, 1962). But if people do not perceive their action of picking one of multiple items as a choice, they may not experience cognitive dissonance (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama et al., 2004; Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

These results also have important policy implications. For example, policymakers cannot assume that providing people with more options will systematically promote positive consequences in all contexts. If people do not construe their behavior as choices, then the provision of more options (e.g., in health care, schools, and retirement plans) may fail to lead to optimal choice (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Although social psychologists have long documented that different people construe the same situation differently (Ross & Nisbett, 1991), the present research extends this conclusion by demonstrating that people's construals of their actions are systematically conditioned by their experience with the ideas and practices—the models of agency—of particular sociocultural contexts. The habitual construal of behavior in terms of culturally significant categories of actions is a subtle but powerful mechanism by which cultural contexts shape people's ongoing psychological experience (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007). The present studies support the theory of mutual constitution of culture and psyche in the domain of choice: Engagement with particular sociocultural worlds highlights choice as an

important category of action, and repeated experience of choice shapes a conception of the self as a chooser. Such choosers then chronically construe their own and other people's behaviors in terms of choice and create environments with many opportunities for construing actions as choices, thereby completing the cycle of mutual constitution of culture and psychological tendencies (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). What counts as a choice, we suggest, lies in the eyes and in the actions of the beholder (Bruner, 1990; Shweder, 1990).

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. We conducted a median split because the frequency distribution was bimodal (De Boeck, Wilson, & Acton, 2005).

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