

Choice

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By Alfie Kohn

Here are two ways to abuse an idea: You can invoke it to pursue your own objectives, shamelessly exploiting the favorable associations it has accumulated over many years. Or you can create a caricature of the idea and then pretend you've shown it to be flawed.

This pair of strategies has been used in various contexts – for example, to disparage progressive education[1] – but here I'd like to explore its application to the idea of choice. You may already have noticed that this word provides cover to bigots – those intent on discrimination or segregation. Racism is recast as freedom (from federal regulation). Likewise, Tea Partyers march behind the banner of “liberty.”

*In the field of education, efforts to privatize schools represent the most conspicuous example of how choice can be used to promote a very different agenda. Vouchers, having been decisively rejected by voters in several states, were **rebranded as “school choice”** to make the notion sound more palatable. Conservatives have been doing this for so long, in fact, that the primary association many of us now have with the word choice (in the context of schooling) is not, say, giving kids a chance to make decisions about what they do in their classrooms. Rather, it refers to turning schools into commodities, pitting them against one another in an education marketplace.[2]*

Surprisingly, the same bait-and-switch strategy is sometimes on display within classrooms. Some teachers have appropriated the idea

of choice to justify the use of punitive discipline. In one variant of what might be called “pseudochoice,” a student is asked something like this: “Would you like to finish your worksheet now, or would you prefer to do it during recess? It’s up to you.” (Since few kids want to miss out on recess, this is actually just a threat disguised as a choice: The teacher is saying, “Do what I tell you, or I’ll take away something you enjoy.”) In another version, students who act in a way the teacher doesn’t like are accused of having “chosen” to break a rule. (The operative word emphasizes the supposedly deliberate nature of whatever they did, the idea being to rationalize the teacher’s punitive response.) Even more egregiously, the adult may announce that such a student has, for example, “chosen a time-out” – the implication being that, by doing something defined as inappropriate, he or she has asked to be punished. (A truthful teacher would say, “I’ve chosen to punish you.”)

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Most people think choice is a good thing, so it’s not surprising that this word would become the linguistic lipstick applied to pigs like privatization and punishment. But it’s also possible to call the value of choice itself into question, to cast aspersions on the concept by giving it a different and less wholesome meaning. The latter strategy shows up in connection with the work of psychologists who argue that having more options is actually worse than having fewer.

Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper published an influential paper in 2000 – based on Iyengar’s dissertation at Stanford, before she went on to teach at a business school – demonstrating that people were less satisfied when they had two dozen or more types of jam (or chocolate) from which to choose as compared to when they were offered only six varieties. The same basic idea, that lots of choice can be counterproductive, also features prominently in the work of psychologist Barry Schwartz.

Of course, the fact that some people are overwhelmed by having too many options doesn’t mean that choice, per se, is a bad thing. But

problems with this line of research – and the attendant warnings that choice isn't always desirable – aren't limited to that obvious reminder. A few other questions are also worth asking.

1. How meaningful are the choices? Iyengar's study is about shopping. The array of options among products for sale is often due to trivial variations: how much pulp is in the orange juice, how much RAM is in the laptop. In fact, the choices offered to consumers may be even more of a charade in light of the fact that, to cite just one example, you can pick Tide, Gain, or Cheer laundry detergent but your money goes to the same company in all three cases. When we're faced with distinctions without a difference (in commodities or, for that matter, in political candidates), Iyengar may have a point. But the idea that we'd do better with less choice is far less persuasive when our options differ in more substantive ways.

2. Are we talking only about individual choosers? The neoclassical economic model of rationality is based on solitary actors. It would be misleading to generalize from this to a discussion of choice in classrooms, workplaces, families, or political forums where democratic decision making can occur: the give-and-take of a community whose members must listen to one another's reasons and consider one another's perspectives, devise compromises and struggle to reach consensus. Perhaps what's really problematic isn't choice but individualism.

3. Why is the scenario limited to a list of "options"? Even if fewer possibilities can seem simpler and more appealing, the ultimate in extensive choice – and perhaps the ideal arrangement – is one that's open-ended. Do students' heads spin when you tell them to "pick one of these 30 topics to write about"? Maybe, but that doesn't entitle us to give them only five possible topics (or to conclude that choice backfires). What if, instead, we invited them to write about whatever topic they find interesting? That would offer more freedom than a long list and would also likely be received more favorably. Educationally speaking, it's more important for kids to have the chance to engage in construction (of possibilities) than in

selection (of items from a menu prepared by someone else).

4. Might it be worthwhile to grapple with possibilities even if it's also challenging? We may feel overwhelmed by the number of possible outcomes. In some cases, we may eventually regret the decision we made. But that doesn't mean there was no value in the process of deciding, at least when doing something more important than buying stuff. "The choice may have been mistaken," as Stephen Sondheim has one of his characters sing, but "the choosing was not." In a broader sense, Kierkegaard and Sartre reminded us, we ought to embrace our capacity to make decisions despite the burden it entails. You want to artificially limit the number of jams or detergents? Fine. But don't draw sweeping conclusions about "excessive choice." To try to escape our freedom (in Erich Fromm's phrase) by ceding it to authority figures, or by attributing moral precepts to supernatural forces in an effort to deny we have that freedom in the first place, is to live an inauthentic life.

5. Have we confused autonomy with selection? From a psychological perspective, the sort of choice that's most beneficial – indeed, the sort whose absence causes real problems – is an experience of autonomy or volition: the capacity to steer your life and have a meaningful impact on what happens to you. The possibility of suffering cognitive overload when presented with too many options isn't really an argument against choice in that more meaningful sense. Conversely, the provision of superficial choices can't redeem an activity that fails to support, and may even dilute, real autonomy.[3]

Anyone who warns about the dangers of too much choice may be using the term in a truncated, trivial sense – rather like condemning progressive education after defining it as "letting children play all day in school." Likewise, a questionable definition may explain why some researchers – including Iyengar and Lepper in **another paper** – argue that choice may be advantageous only in individualistic cultures. Sure, it's always worth checking our assumptions for unexamined cultural biases. But in this case, if choice is understood as autonomy, researchers have shown that it doesn't seem

to matter whether we live in the West or the East. The benefits of autonomy – and the harms of being controlled – prove robust even in collectivist cultures.[4]

As long as we're talking about choice in the most meaningful sense of the term, warnings about its undesired effects generally prove misconceived. And once we've rescued the idea, we have an obligation to make sure the word isn't co-opted by people promoting entirely different practices.

NOTES

1. The first is employed by schools that are really quite conventional but find it advantageous to present themselves as progressive. The second is on display when, as I once described it, people “paint progressive education as a touchy-feely, loosey-goosey, fluffy, fuzzy, undemanding exercise in leftover hippie idealism – or Rousseauvian Romanticism.” That exercise makes a proud, research-backed tradition appear ridiculous in order that an unprogressive approach to education will appear to be the only sensible option.

2. “Choice” has also been used to frame a defense of teaching creationism alongside evolution, even in public schools. As one religious proponent put it, “Why not let people choose what they want their children to learn” regarding the history and diversity of life on earth? Moreover, these two examples appear to be related rather than simply parallel: The use of vouchers (“school choice”) seems to have facilitated efforts to teach theology posing as science.

3. Consider attempts to justify “gamification” – offering work or learning tasks in video game-like formats, complete with points, prizes, and contests – by claiming that players have control over which strategies to use or which levels of difficulty to attempt. In reality, this extremely circumscribed sort of choice mostly serves as a distraction from the reliance on extrinsic inducements and competition, which decades' worth of research has shown to actively undermine meaningful autonomy (along with interest in the tasks themselves).

*4. For a list of relevant studies, see my book *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*, p. 208n25.*

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