How Choosing For Others Affects Consumption For the Self: the Negative Consequences of Preference Imposition

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We explore how imposing versus accommodating when choosing for another person impacts one’s own consumption preferences and present a theoretical account for the underlying psychological process. We extend the growing literature on self-other decision making by investigating an overlooked aspect of consumption; the personal effects of choosing for others.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers make choices not only for themselves but for others. For example, parents make a variety of food choices each day for themselves as well as for their children. Prior research has examined the effects of a healthy or unhealthy personal choice on one’s own subsequent choices (e.g., Vohs et al. 2008; Vohs and Faber 2007). It has also examined how making a choice for others differs from choices made for the self (Zaleska and Kogan 1971; Beisswanger et al. 2003; Laran 2010; Polman 2012). Our work extends research in this area by examining a novel question: i.e., how do choices made for others affect a decision maker’s subsequent choice for the self?

When choosing for others, individuals can accommodate in order to maintain one’s bonds with others or to avoid conflict (Schwartz 1967). Yet, decision makers often seek to impose their preferences on others to force them to make a virtuous or “correct” choice. We propose that individuals’ personal choices after choosing for others can be affected by whether the preferences of the target are accommodated or the preferences of the decision maker are imposed on the target. We hypothesize that when a choice outcome is controlled by and attributed to the self but not to others, the individual gains a sense of control. A heightened sense of control increases the tendency to approach rewards and gratification (De Charms 1968). Thus, we predict that imposing one’s preferences on others makes individuals susceptible to self-indulgent choices. Further, feelings of power are expected to mediate the relationship between imposing one’s preferences on another person and subsequent personal choices. Power is essentially related to one’s capacity for voluntary movement and controlling the movement of others (Winter 2010). Therefore, an individual is expected to feel more powerful while imposing a choice on another person than simply going along with the other party’s preferences. We hypothesize that when individuals impose a choice on others (vs. accommodate) they feel more powerful and consequently seek immediate gratification because power activates an approach orientation toward rewards (Galinsky, Gruenfeld and Magee 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003). Three experiments test our novel hypotheses.

Study 1

The first study examines how imposing a choice on a target versus accommodating the target’s preferences impacts an individual’s subsequent personal choices in the food domain. This lab study used a mixed 2 (choice for the other party: imposing vs. accommodating) x 2 (type of food: healthy vs. indulgent) design. The first factor was manipulated between subjects and the second factor was within subjects. 74 participants were assigned to a managerial role, asked to make a training location choice for their employees and write an e-mail explaining their choice. The choice was either in line with or against the employees’ preference. Two bowls including healthy (dried prunes, apricots) and indulgent (Kisses, gummy bears) snacks were left in the cubicles. The number of snacks participants consumed during the study was the dependent variable.

Participants’ e-mail responses to their subordinates (coded by two independent judges) in the imposition condition revealed greater imposition, whereas the responses in the accommodation condition were more accommodating (p < .001). Importantly, as we hypothesized participants in the imposition condition consumed a higher number of indulgent snacks compared to those in the accommodation condition (p < .05).

Study 2

The aim of this study was to test the role of power as a process mechanism. The study design is a 2 (snack the child requests: healthy vs. indulgent) x 2 (parent’s snack choice for the child: healthy vs. indulgent). One hundred and fourteen students completed the study. Participants were asked to imagine themselves babysitting a relative’s child, and choosing either a healthy (fruit salad) or indulgent (chocolate cake) snack for the child after the child has indicated his or her snack preference. Next, they were asked to rate how appealing they found the same snack options for their own consumption. Finally, they were asked to indicate how powerful (Rucker et al. 2011) they would feel after making the snack choice for the child. A moderated mediation analysis (Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010) revealed a significant interaction effect of the snack requested and given on power (p < .001), and feeling powerful after imposing a food choice on the child increased the appeal of the unhealthy chocolate cake for the participants (p < .07). Successful mediation was observed as the corresponding bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero (95% CI = -.9122 to -.0147).

Study 3

Using the parenting context, this study further tests the mediating role of power. We used the same experimental design and procedures as in Study 2. Only the scenarios were modified to reflect the parenting situation. 119 parents participated in this online study. As expected, the two-way interaction between the snack given and snack requested had a significant effect on feeling powerful (p < .001). Furthermore, feeling powerful significantly increased the appeal of the chocolate cake (p < .03). The bootstrapping procedure confirmed our hypothesis that when a choice was imposed on the child (e.g. the child requested the chocolate cake but received the fruit salad), parents felt more powerful and consequently they found the chocolate cake more appealing to consume (95% CI = .0023 to .4902).

Conclusion and Contributions: Three studies demonstrate that imposing a choice on another individual not only affects how powerful decision makers feel, but also makes them susceptible to indulgences in a following consumption occasion. These findings make important contributions to the literature. Specifically, we extend the growing literature on sequential choice by investigating an overlooked aspect of consumption: the personal effects of choosing for others. This research contributes to the literature in this domain by being the first to examine this phenomenon in a dyadic decision making context and using the Approach-Inhibition Theory of power (Keltner et al. 2003) as the theoretical framework. Finally, our research has important practical implications for consumers such as parents and for those who make decisions on behalf of others.
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