

It's all about control

April 26 2011

Having power over others and having choices in your own life share a critical foundation: control, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. The paper finds that people are willing to trade one source of control for the other. For example, if people lack power, they clamor for choice, and if they have an abundance of choice they don't strive as much for power.

"People instinctively prefer high to low power positions," says M. Ena Inesi of London Business School. "Similarly, it feels good when you have [choice](#), and it doesn't feel good when choice is taken away." Inesi and her coauthors suspected that the need for personal control might be the factor these two seemingly independent processes have in common. Power is control over what other people do; choice is control over your own outcomes.

Inesi co-wrote the study with Simona Botti, also of London Business School, David Dubois of HEC Paris, and Derek D. Rucker and Adam D. Galinsky, both of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

To find out if power and choice are two sides of the same coin, the researchers conducted a series of experiments that looked at whether lacking one source of control (e.g., power) would trigger a greater need for the other (e.g., choice).

For instance, in one experiment, participants started out by reading a

description of a boss or an employee and had them think about how they would feel in that role. That meant some people were made to feel powerful and some were made to feel powerless. Then the participants were told they could buy [eyeglasses](#) or ice cream from a store that had three options or a store that had fifteen options. People were willing to go through great lengths (i.e., drive farther or wait longer) to access the store with more options. Lacking power made people thirsty for choice.

In another set of experiments, when people were deprived of choice, they displayed a thirst for power – for instance, by expressing greater desire to occupy a high-power position. Additional experiments found that people can be content with either power or choice—or both—but that having neither makes them distinctly dissatisfied.

Inesi believes this discovery—that power and choice are interchangeable—can be useful in the workplace. "You can imagine a person at an organization who's in a low-level job," she says. "You can make that seemingly powerless person feel better about their job and their duties by giving them some choice, in the way they do the work or what project they work on." This research gets at "the fundamental and basic importance of [control](#) in people's lives."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: It's all about control (2011, April 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-04-it-all-about-control.html>

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