

When faced with a hard decision, people tend to blame fate

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Life is full of decisions. Some, like what to eat for breakfast, are relatively easy. Others, like whether to move cities for a new job, are quite a bit more difficult. Difficult decisions tend to make us feel stressed and uncomfortable – we don't want to feel responsible if the outcome is less than desirable. New research suggests that we deal with such difficult decisions by shifting responsibility for the decision to fate.

The findings are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

"Fate is a ubiquitous supernatural belief, spanning time and place," write researchers Aaron Kay, Simone Tang, and Steven Shepherd of Duke University. "It exerts a range of positive and negative effects on health, coping, and both action and inaction."

Kay, Tang, and Shepherd hypothesized that people may invoke [fate](#) as a way of assuaging their own stress and fears – a way of saying "It's out of my hands now, there's nothing I can do."

"Belief in fate, defined as the belief that whatever happens was supposed to happen and that outcomes are ultimately predetermined, may be especially useful when one is facing these types of [difficult decisions](#)," they explain.

To test their hypothesis, the researchers capitalized on a current event of considerable significance: the 2012 U.S. presidential election.

They conducted an [online survey](#) with 189 participants and found that the greater difficulty participants reported in choosing between Obama and Romney (e.g., "both [candidates](#) seem equally good," "I am not sure how to compare the candidates' plans"), the more likely they were to believe in fate (e.g., "Fate will make sure that the candidate that eventually gets elected is the right one").

In a second online survey, the researchers actually manipulated participants' decision difficulty by making it harder to distinguish between the candidates.

Participants read real policy statements from the two [presidential candidates](#) – some read quotes from the candidates that emphasized the similarities in their policy positions, others read quotes that emphasized the differences.

As predicted, participants who read statements that highlighted similarities viewed the decision between the candidates as more difficult and reported greater belief in fate than the participants that read statements focused on differences.

"The two studies presented here provide consistent and converging evidence that decision difficulty can motivate increased belief in fate," write Kay and colleagues.

The researchers note that these findings raise additional questions that still need to be answered.

For example, do people invoke fate when they have to make decisions that are personally but not societally significant, such as where to invest money? And are we just as likely to invoke luck or other supernatural worldviews when faced with a difficult decision?

"Belief in fate may ease the psychological burden of a difficult decision, but whether that comes at the cost of short-circuiting an effective decision-making process is an important question for future research," the researchers conclude.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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