

MAKING FATE

To be more satisfied at work, start believing in your free will

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Personal propaganda that could make you happier. (public domain)

Believing in personal freedom isn't just a philosophical balm; it seems to have practical psychological benefits. According to a new study, feeling a sense of free will provides a greater sense of satisfaction at work—regardless of what type of work you do, or where you do it.

“Although the concept of free will may seem theoretical and philosophical in nature, a growing number of studies have shown that the belief in free will is associated with a wide array of cognitive and behavioral outcomes,” explains [the paper](#), accepted on July 18 for the [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#).

The researchers who wrote the paper, from Maastricht University in the Netherlands and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, set out to see whether this apparent tie between a sense of agency and sense of job satisfaction was limited by time, culture, or type of work. To find out, they

tested hundreds of Hong Kong real estate agents and American freelancers on two occasions each, and also looked at data collected over 18 years from 14,000 participants in 16 countries, compiled in the 2008 World Values Survey, a series of nationally representative surveys conducted in 100 countries around the world by social scientists investigating human beliefs.

Feeling free in Hong Kong

The first study measured the role of free will belief among 250 Hong Kong real estate agents by asking eight questions from a “[Free Will and Determinism](#)” scale developed in 2008. On two occasions, participants rated their agreement with statements about agency—like “I am in charge of my actions even when my life’s circumstances are difficult.” They also rated their agreement with a [three statements](#) about job satisfaction:

1. Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my job;
2. I am generally satisfied with the feeling of worthwhile accomplishment I get from doing this job;
3. I am satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job.

The real estate agents took the test once, and then again three months later. On both occasions, there was a strong correlation between feeling free and feeling satisfied at work, indicating that a relationship between a sense of agency and sense of employment contentment were linked over time and persistent.

Gigging online in the US

To ensure that the results weren’t skewed culturally or professionally, the researchers next looked at different types

of work in an altogether distinct context. In a second study, they enlisted people taking gigs on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online job marketplace in the US. Participants were paid \$1 to answer a first survey about free will and job satisfaction and \$2 for a follow-up survey six months later.

About 135 people responded to both surveys. Respondents rated their agreement with a five-item task-satisfaction test. Because the workers here were freelancers, and unlike the Hong Kong real estate office workers, not attached to a single job, the researchers wanted to also account for the freelancers' sense of autonomy. In other words, they wanted to understand the extent to which not being tied down to a single boss or job and being in charge of their own work influenced their feeling of choice. Feeling "autonomous" and feeling "free" are two distinct concepts in this context.

Still, even discounting the added sense of freedom that autonomy gave gig workers (as opposed to employees), belief in personal free will was strongly correlated to higher job satisfaction, as with the Hong Kong real estate agents. And, again, it seemed to persist over time.

Working around the world

The third and most expansive study examined data from around the world to see if the results found in Hong Kong and the US applied more widely.

Data on personal belief in fate and freedom from over 14,000 participants in a wide range of professions, collected between 1990 and 2008 for the World Values Survey, was compared on both an individual and country level. By aggregating individual data from participants based on their nationality, the researchers could establish country-wide beliefs in free will to reach a more general conclusion.

They found that belief in free will generally was correlated with higher job satisfaction across the board, but that in countries where agency is widely valued, the correlation between a sense of freedom and on-the-job satisfaction was higher. So, for example, in Mexico free will was seen to be widely valued nationally and strongly correlated with personal work satisfaction, whereas in Japan, where choice appeared to be less prized culturally, the tie between a sense of freedom and satisfaction—while still existent—was not as strong.

Moral of the story

Many studies have found that belief in free will improves people's emotional state and makes them behave better. Belief in personal agency has been associated with [more honesty](#), increased [social responsibility](#), and an increased ability to learn from mistakes and make [better decisions](#). It's not yet clear to researchers why this is.

Peter Tse, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at Dartmouth College, argues in his book *The Neural Basis for Free Will* that free will acts at the neurological level. In scientific studies, tests of brain activity during decision-making show that acts of will (actions involving decisions and choice) are preceded by a buildup of neural activity that can occur seconds before a person is consciously aware of exercising volition—some scientists say that's proof the brain itself is unaware of will. Tse disagrees with this short-term perspective, however. He says that belief in free will works on the brain's programming long-term, not necessarily in the moments of decision-making themselves. The belief in free will, he argues, builds up synaptic connections between neurons when they are not firing, forming strong synapses that will inform how they will fire in the future.

“Mental causation is not about changing the physical basis of mental events in the present... [it] is about changing the physical basis of possible future mental events,” he says. In other words, belief in free will might be part of the brain’s information processing architecture.

Though free will’s role in cognition and psychology is still a mystery, the evidence to suggest it’s beneficial to [cultivate a feeling](#) of personal freedom is piling up. There’s scientific proof that if you think there’s nothing you can do about what happens, you will feel helpless and stressed. If you believe you’re in the driver’s seat, steering your life, you’ll have a deeper sense of satisfaction because what you choose to do—or, importantly, not do—seems to matter.

So how can you make yourself believe in your freedom? If Tse is right, and belief in free will rewrites our cognition in between decisions, then presumably practice will perfect this sense. Decide to be free, which is an act of free will in itself. Experiment with your decisions, break or disturb certain habits, and test your will. Act like someone who has choices and whose acts matter, rather than a person whose destiny was written in advance. With added responsibility, comes added satisfaction.