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PHENOMENOLOGICAL FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY CHOICES

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Abstract

Despite a great scientific interest to the phenomenon of choice during the last decades, its quality is usually understood as an objective rather than a subjective parameter and rarely gets into the spotlight of a special psychological research. This study was organized in order to analyse the specific characteristics of the five types of choices of high subjective quality: so called ‘good’, ‘happy’, ‘successful’, ‘right’, and ‘genuine’ ones. Respondents (N = 455) were asked to give their own definitions of the five types of choices listed above. The results obtained by qualitative content analysis with expert review and quantitative analysis revealed differences in the following phenomenological parameters of these five types of choice: rationale for choice, experience of the choice process, and evaluation of its outcomes and longterm consequences. In particular, the “good” choice is associated with ease, emotional low-cost and risk-free, the “happy” one is associated with intuition and unexpected luck (on the contrary, the outcome of the “successful” choice is described as predictably satisfying). The “right” choice is based on conscience and moral values, while the “genuine” one is based on the deeper desires of a person. The results of the study contribute to current psychology of personality, by showing the limitations of analysing the phenomenon of choice in general, without considering the parameter of its subjective quality.

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1. Introduction

An ability to choose in a timely, quick and efficient manner is a demanded skill of a modern person. Life of most people is characterized by high unpredictability, uncertainty and chronic multitasking, and making choices is an important integral part of our everyday reality.

Nowadays, due both to practice requests and the evolution of psychological science itself, the choice is becoming one of the most actively developing issues of personality psychology. This trend acts as one of natural consequences of the transition to post-non-classical rationality (Stepin, 2004). A growing number of studies in psychology and other humanities are devoted to complex, open and self-developing systems distinguished by synergistic effects (Kuhl, 2000; Prigogine, 1986; Stepin, 2004). In the framework of this paradigm, a personality is considered as a system characterized by autonomy, self-determination and agency (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2016; Kornilova, 2018; Maddi, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The focus of current psychological research is both on types and mechanisms of choice, as well as on its personality prerequisites (see ex.: Boyce et al., 2019; Pleskac et al., 2019). Generally, the number of the articles dedicated to the phenomenon of choice gradually increases year by year, according to Scopus database, showing the raising attention to this field. In 2010, the amount of such articles totaled 1455 and in 2019 it went up to 2263.

2. Problem Statement

Nevertheless, despite the increasing interest in choice issues, the quality of choice rarely gets into focus of an independent psychological research. Most approaches claim that any choice has an objectively measurable result obtained by performing a repeating sequence of cognitive operations (e.g., Fudenberg et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020) and do not consider the complex intrapersonal choice process and aspects of its subjective experience. Among the existing limitations in choice research, there is also a frequent tendency to model a speculative construct, instead of direct investigation of the phenomenon. Thus, choice situations are often modelled in laboratory conditions (e.g., Cetre et al., 2019) or studied by discrete choice experiments (e.g., Byun & Lee, 2017) while real life choices are practically not investigated. In addition, the quality of choice usually appears as a category that can be evaluated by someone besides the chooser himself (e.g., by the experimenter), and the parameters of such evaluation are the following: efficiency, optimality, minimum losses, maximum gain, and speed.

In contrast to that, there is a lesser known but developing branch of studying choice as a complex internal activity of a person (Leontiev et al., 2015), a subjectively construing process, that has phenomenological differences depending on its subjective quality. According to the existential-activity paradigm, based on post-non-classical views on personality, choice is not equated to decision-making, but is considered as an act of self-determination and manifestation of free will. Choice becomes a way of resolving uncertainty and revealing one's personality potential (Leontiev, 2011), being associated with issues of responsibility, meanings, and values. Thus, the criteria of the choice's quality cannot be set by someone external to the chooser. Being an internal process that is determined by the personality and determines it (Leontiev, 2014), qualitative choice-making can be considered as one of the criteria for successful self-regulation (Leontiev, 2016). Within this approach, subjective quality of choice is

considered as a multidimensional rather than a homogeneous construct, that has both cognitive and emotional aspects (Leontiev, 2014; Leontiev et al., 2015). High-quality choices can be achieved through elaboration and mindfulness of choice, its autonomy, emotional acceptance of its process and satisfaction with the outcome (or through various combinations of these variables).

Meanwhile, both inside and beyond this approach there are currently no studies somehow differentiating high-quality choices and focusing on their phenomenology and parameters of subjective construing.

3. Research Questions

Thus, our attention was caught by the following questions: what are phenomenological features of high-quality choices? Is the “subjectively high quality of choice” a homogenous phenomenon? Or, contrarily, various types of high-quality choices may have some fundamental differences, which can be conceptualised in their verbal descriptions (definitions)?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research was to study phenomenology of various choices of subjective high quality. Namely, we aimed to identify the specifics of construing so called “good”, “happy”, “successful”, “right”, and “genuine” choices (hereinafter “types of choice”). The use of precisely these types of choice for research purposes is explained by the fact that they all are clearly ranked to the positive pole of choice and are encoded by fixed expressions in Russian language (according to thesauri used for searching associations, synonyms, contextual relationships and examples of sentences to the word “choice”)¹.

5. Research Methods

The respondents (N = 455, male = 124, M = 21.8, SD = 7.2) were asked to give their own free definitions (descriptions) of these five types of high-quality choices in the online format on the Ika.si platform.

The data obtained were processed using content analysis with the participation of three experts (certified psychologists, specialists in qualitative data analysis). To highlight the subjective criteria for the quality of choice, there was developed a coding table with the following 4 categories and 14 subcategories:

1. **Rationale for choice.** The subcategories were: (a) reliance on conscience, moral ideas, values (“A choice based on my own idea of “correctness”, which does not always coincide with my desires, sometimes going against them. Association with strong taboo and parenting”²), (b) reliance on one's own desires, issues of self-expression, feeling like an “author” of the choice, independence, freedom (“An honest answer to the question – ‘What do I really

¹ The research was organized in Russian, all respondents were Russian native speakers.

² Hereinafter in parentheses there are some excerpts from the protocols, used as examples of the content of (sub)categories. They were translated from Russian into English (without preserving author spelling and punctuation).

want?"; "In accordance with desires, subjective reasons"; "The moment in which I reveal myself as a person"), (c) considering other people ("A good choice in favor of my loved ones"; "Often the right choice is not always a pleasant choice for me, and it implies the rejection of something personal in favor of something useful or pleasant for someone else (who is close to me)"), (d) reasonableness, mindfulness, reliance on logics and calculation ("In this case, there is less luck and more logic"; "A choice that requires a long time to go"; "Conscious choice "by calculation", while not necessarily good in terms of emotions") and (e) reliance on intuition, emotions, chance, issues of luck and risk ("... based more on emotion"; "Not knowing all the variables, all the pitfalls, being forced to rely to some extent on your intuition and to get a good result in the end").

2. **Experience of the choice process**, which consisted of two subcategories: (a) ease and emotional low-cost, no risk, i.e. minimum negative consequences, optimal ratio of contribution and result ("Preservation of peace of mind"), and (b) complexity, torment, ethical ambiguity, emotional ambivalence, "sacrifice" ("A painful choice that carries more benefits than harm"; "A choice that did not require me to abandon anything meaningful in favor of making it"; "... to which you have to go a long time, painfully thinking, stepping over second pleasures for the sake of something big").
3. Evaluation of the choice outcomes, including (a) moral/emotional satisfaction with the outcome ("Choosing the best possible"; "The choice after which you feel that you did everything right. Even if external circumstances show the opposite, but it is good and calm for you from this choice inside, this choice is right"), (b) outcome beyond expectations, having surprise and good luck ("A choice made with risk, but turned to the better for me; 'Which brought unexpected (unpredictable) bonuses"; "The result exceeds expectations"), (c) "social desirability", or satisfactory evaluation by others/society ("A choice estimated as socially approved, prestigious, successful by a social group / majority for me"; "A choice that is not condemned by society").
4. **Influence on life, consequences of choice**. This category consisted of four subcategories: (a) improvement of emotional state ("... makes me happier"; "... bringing joy"), (b) personal changes and self-development ("... which served as my improvement"; "... that helps in self-development and self-realization"), (c) getting social and material bonuses ("The choice after which you received tangible benefits, or an increase in status"; "Associated with career growth"), and (d) benefits for life in general, personal well-being ("Basically, this choice brings a lot of positive things in life"; "Carrying more positive consequences than negative ones").

A coding table also included the category "Other" for possible new categories that could be detected during the analysis. Besides, it included the category "Not available" for statements that are not amenable to encoding (i.e. any specific, incomprehensible definitions, statements not related to the task, refusal of choice description or descriptions of concrete life situations of choice-making instead of giving a characteristic of the choice of a certain type as a whole).

In addition, experts also evaluated the degree of conformity of the category and the statement on a 2-point scale (“2” – fully consistent, “1” – partially consistent).

Expert evaluations were tested for consistency using Krippendorff’s Alpha for nominative variables. Then the evaluations were summed up, each category was assigned a weight, being proportional to the assigned points (“1” or “2”). Then, using the Friedman’s criterion, there were found the subcategories by which at least two types of choice showed significant differences. To clarify these differences, a post hoc test was performed using the Wilcoxon’s criterion.

6. Findings

The results showed a consecutive increase in the consistency of expert evaluations from the description of the first type to the fifth, except the “good” choice (see Table 1).

Table 1. The consistency of expert evaluations

Type of choice ³	Krippendorff’s α
Good	.59
Happy	.58
Successful	.64
Right	.67
Genuine	.77

The Friedman’s test ($p < 05$) showed significant differences between at least two types of choices for each category, and a post hoc test using the Wilcoxon’s criterion ($p < 05$) made it possible to clarify these differences (see Table 2).

Table 2. Subcategory differences between different types of choices

Sub-categories	Group 1	Group 2	F	F, significance	Group 1, mid. rank	Group 2, mid. rank	W, significance				
11	Genuine	Right	529.40	.00	.10	.90	.00				
		Happy				.00	.00				
		Successful				.00	.00				
		Good				.11	.31				
Right	Happy	Successful	Good	.90	.00	.00	.00				
								Happy	Successful	.00	.00
Happy	Successful	Good	.00	.00	1.00						
						Successful	Good	.00	.11	.00	
12	Genuine	Right	662.16	.00	1.39						.26
		Happy				.03	.00				
		Successful				.05	.00				
		Good				.23	.00				

³ Here and everywhere where applicable: we quote the choice types’ names in the text to emphasize their nominative meaning, but we do not use quotation marks in tables for better convenience of working with them.

	Right	Happy			.26	.03	.00
		Successful				.05	.00
		Good				.23	.30
	Happy	Successful			.03	.05	.49
		Good				.23	.00
	Successful	Good			.05	.23	.00
13	Genuine	Right	131.36	.00	.02	.20	.00
		Happy				.03	1.00
		Successful				.04	.53
		Good				.21	.00
	Right	Happy			.20	.03	.00
		Successful				.04	.00
		Good				.21	1.00
	Happy	Successful			.03	.04	1.00
		Good				.21	.00
	Successful	Good			.04	.21	.00
14	Genuine	Right	6.57	.00	.18	.29	.17
		Happy				.03	.00
		Successful				.24	.98
		Good				.27	.17
	Right	Happy			.29	.03	.00
		Successful				.24	.98
		Good				.27	.98
	Happy	Successful			.03	.24	.00
		Good				.27	.00
	Successful	Good			.24	.27	.98
15	Genuine	Right	46.06	.00	.24	.03	.00
		Happy				.62	.00
		Successful				.04	.00
		Good				.02	.00
	Right	Happy			.03	.62	.00
		Successful				.04	.44
		Good				.02	.82
	Happy	Successful			.62	.04	.00
		Good				.02	.00
	Successful	Good			.04	.02	.43
21	Genuine	Right	62.40	.00	.05	.08	.39
		Happy				.10	.39
		Successful				.04	1.00
		Good				.18	.00
	Right	Happy			.08	.10	1.00
		Successful				.04	.22
		Good				.18	.00
	Happy	Successful			.10	.04	.22
		Good				.18	.00
	Successful	Good			.04	.18	.00
22	Genuine	Right	19.76	.00	.07	.07	1.00

		Happy				.02	.10
		Successful				.06	1.00
		Good				.01	.10
	Right	Happy			.07	.02	.01
		Successful				.06	.84
		Good				.01	.01
	Happy	Successful			.02	.06	.25
		Good				.01	1.00
	Successful	Good			.06	.01	.25
31	Genuine	Right	1148.19	.00	.06	.24	.00
		Happy				.37	.00
		Successful				.55	.00
		Good				.79	.00
	Right	Happy			.24	.37	.00
		Successful				.55	.00
		Good				.79	.00
	Happy	Successful			.37	.55	.00
		Good				.79	.00
	Successful	Good			.55	.79	.00
311	Genuine	Right	764.71	.00	.00	.00	1.00
		Happy				.93	.00
		Successful				.15	.00
		Good				.00	1.00
	Right	Happy			.00	.93	.00
		Successful				.15	.00
		Good				.00	1.00
	Happy	Successful			.93	.15	.00
		Good				.00	.00
	Successful	Good			.15	.00	.00
32	Genuine	Right	73.91	.00	.01	.14	.00
		Happy				.00	1.00
		Successful				.05	.47
		Good				.02	1.00
	Right	Happy			.14	.00	.00
		Successful				.05	.00
		Good				.02	.00
	Happy	Successful			.00	.05	.10
		Good				.02	.34
	Successful	Good			.05	.02	1.00
41	Genuine	Right	97.83	.00	.02	.08	.00
		Happy				.12	.00
		Successful				.07	.03
		Good				.20	.00
	Right	Happy			.08	.12	.69
		Successful				.07	.18
		Good				.20	.00
	Happy	Successful			.12	.07	.10

		Good				.20	.00
	Successful	Good			.07	.20	.00
42	Genuine	Right	39.00	.00	.03	.05	1.00
		Happy				.03	1.00
		Successful				.13	.00
		Good				.04	1.00
	Right	Happy			.05	.03	.70
		Successful				.13	.01
		Good				.04	1.00
	Happy	Successful			.03	.13	.00
		Good				.04	.61
	Successful	Good			.13	.04	.02
43	Genuine	Right	354.43	.00	.00	.05	.00
		Happy				.20	.00
		Successful				.68	.00
		Good				.13	.00
	Right	Happy			.05	.20	.00
		Successful				.68	.00
		Good				.13	.00
	Happy	Successful			.20	.68	.00
		Good				.13	.59
	Successful	Good			.68	.13	.00
44	Genuine	Right	246.33	.00	.04	.19	.00
		Happy				.26	.00
		Successful				.47	.00
		Good				.52	.00
	Right	Happy			.19	.26	.04
		Successful				.47	.00
		Good				.52	.00
	Happy	Successful			.26	.47	.00
		Good				.52	.00
	Successful	Good			.47	.52	.04
Other	Genuine	Right	51.58	.00	.26	.10	.00
		Happy				.05	.00
		Successful				.07	.00
		Good				.06	.00
	Right	Happy			.10	.05	.59
		Successful				.07	1.00
		Good				.06	.84
	Happy	Successful			.05	.07	1.00
		Good				.06	1.00
	Successful	Good			.07	.06	1.00
Not available	Genuine	Right	84.26	.00	.46	.23	.00
		Happy				.12	.00
		Successful				.28	.15
		Good				.13	.00
	Right	Happy			.23	.12	.03

		Successful				.28	.13
		Good				.13	.03
	Happy	Successful			.12	.28	.00
		Good				.13	.95
	Successful	Good			.28	.13	.00

Note: F is Friedman's criterion; W is Wilcoxon's criterion; the numbers in the first column indicate different subcategories: 11 – Reliance on conscience, moral ideas, values; 12 – Reliance on one's own desires; self-expression, feeling like an “author” of the choice, independence, freedom; 13 – Considering other people; 14 – Reliance on logics, calculation; reasonableness, mindfulness; 15 – Reliance on intuition, emotions, chance, luck; risk; 21 – Lightness, emotional low-cost, no risk; 22 – Complexity, torment, ethical ambiguity, emotional ambivalence, “sacrifice”; 31 – Moral/emotional satisfaction with the outcome; 311 – Outcome beyond expectations; surprise, good luck; 32 – “Social desirability”; 41 – Improvement of emotional state; 42 – Personal changes, self-development; 43 – Getting social and material bonuses; 44 – Benefits for life in general, personal well-being.

Comparing to other types, the “good” choice is most associated with ease, emotional low-cost and risk-free ($X^2_F(4) = 62.40$; mid.rank (W) = 0.18), satisfaction with the outcome ($X^2_F(4) = 1148.19$; mid.rank (W) = 0.79) and improvement of the emotional state ($X^2_F(4) = 97.83$; mid.rank (W) = 0.20), as well as receiving certain financial and social benefits ($X^2_F(4) = 39.00$; mid.rank (W) = 0.68). The “happy” choice is most associated with intuition ($X^2_F(4) = 460.06$; mid.rank (W) = 0.62), unexpectedness and luck ($X^2_F(4) = 764.71$; mid.rank (W) = 0.93), personal changes and self-development ($X^2_F(4) = 39.00$; mid.rank (W) = 0.13). Comparing to other types, the “right” choice is most based on conscience and moral values ($X^2_F(4) = 529.40$; mid.rank (W) = 0.90), while the “genuine” one is based on the deeper desires of a person ($X^2_F(4) = 662.16$; mid.rank (W) = 1.39). Interestingly, the “genuine” choice is most correlated with the parameter “Not available” ($X^2_F(4) = 84.26$; mid.rank (W) = 0.46), excepting its comparison with the “successful” choice which turned out to be nonsignificant (mid.rank (W) = 0.28, $p = 0.07$). In addition, the “right” and “good” choices are most closely associated with reliance on other people ($X^2_F(4) = 131.36$; mid.rank (W) = 0.20 and 0.21, respectively).

No significant differences between types of choice were found in “social desirability”, reliance on logics and mindfulness, complexity, ambiguity, emotional ambivalence of choice and parameters from the “Other” category.

On the one hand, a monotonously increasing measure of consistency in expert evaluations (whereas the sequence of presented choice types was not randomized) may indicate the learning effect manifested by respondents and/or experts. The further, the simpler the descriptions given by the respondents are and the more unambiguous evaluations given by specialists are. On the other hand, this pattern can be directly related to the ambiguity/unambiguity in understanding these types of choices: a “good” choice that comes first can have a broader interpretation than a “genuine” one that comes fifth in this sequence. The relatively low consistency (.7 is desired for an expert evaluation) can be explained by the objectives of the study. The introduced assessment of the measure of intensity of a subcategory made it possible to more fully consider their quantity and quality, but served to reduce consistency if the measure of intensity of the same subcategory was made by one expert rated at "1" and the other at "2".

7. Conclusion

The study suggests that the subjective quality of choice is not homogeneous, but a changing and multifaceted phenomenon constructed from various combinations and poles of categories built around mindfulness, autonomy, positive emotions during the process of choice, and satisfaction with its outcome. The results of this work allow us to expand understanding of the role of personality in the choice construing, to enrich the knowledge about the structure and phenomenology of high-quality choices, and to conclude that the study a phenomenon of choice “in general” is rather narrow, whereas considering the features of its subjective construing and quality is a prospective branch of psychological study.

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