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Freedom and Quality of Life



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Synonyms

Choice; Inner control

Definition

Freedom is the possibility to choose, in other words, absence of limitations to choose.

Description

Concept of Freedom

Freedom can be defined as the *possibility to choose*. The “possibility” to choose requires first of all that there be an “opportunity” to choose, which is an attribute of the environment. The possibility to choose requires also “capability” to choose, which is an individual attribute.

Variants of Freedom

Opportunity to choose involves two requirements: one that there be something to choose and two that the choice is not blocked by others. The latter variant is called “negative freedom” by Berlin (1969) and “social freedom” by Bay (1965).

Capability to choose also involves two requirements: first that one is aware of opportunities to choose and second that one has the guts to choose. Bay (1965) refers to these variants as respectively “potential freedom” and “psychological freedom.”

Link with Perceived Freedom

Actual freedom is not always paralleled by *perceived* freedom. One may think one is free when one is unaware of restrictions and manipulation, as is the case in the movie *The Matrix*. One may also be unaware of opportunities, as in the case of the prisoner who does not know that the door is unlocked. In both cases the concept of potential freedom applies. Still another possibility is that lack of guts to choose gives rise to ego-defensive denial of opportunities to choose, which is a case of psychological unfreedom.

Measurement

Opportunity to choose is typically not measured by availability of options, since that is difficult to grasp and overlaps with notions of societal development. Therefore, the focus is rather on *restrictions* to choice, such as in rules and dependencies. Restrictions are assessed in social contexts, such

as families, organizations, and societies. In these contexts one can then focus on particular kinds of restrictions, such as restrictions on choice of mates in families, restrictions to work hours in organizations, and restrictions on free speech in nations.

Capability to choose is less easily measured. It is difficult to assess awareness of restrictions (potential freedom), since there are many possible restrictions and one cannot ask people about things they are not aware of. Hence, we have to resort to proxies, such as level of education and media attendance. It is also difficult to assess to what extent people are able to face choice (psychological freedom), and in this case more general psychological traits are used as a proxy, such as ego strength, inner control orientation, and conformism.

Below I present some measures of opportunity to choose in nations, which focus on restrictions to choice in economic, political, and private life.

Economic Freedom

This is measured by absence of restrictions on free trade, such as price control, excessive taxing, or closed-shop practices. This is measured by the Heritage Foundation (2008), reputed to be a think tank of the New Right. This index is based on national ratings of (1) limitations to trade, (2) fiscal burden, (3) government intervention, (4) monetary policy, (5) limitations to foreign investment, (6) limitations to banking, (7) control of wages and prices, (8) limitations to property rights, (9) regulation, and (10) limitations in access to international markets.

Political Freedom

This is measured by absence of restrictions on (1) political liberties and (2) civil liberties. The political liberties involved in this measure are as follows: (a) state leader elected through free and fair elections; (b) legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections; (c) fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, fair polling, and honest tabulation of ballots; (d) freely elected representatives that have real power; (e) right to organize in political parties, system open to rise and fall of competing groups;

(f) realistic possibility for opposition, de facto opposition power, and national independence; (g) influence of minority groups; and (h) political power decentralized.

The civil liberties involved in this measure are as follows: (a) free and independent media; (b) open public discussion, free private discussion; (c) freedom of assembly and demonstration; (d) freedom of political organization; (e) equal law, nondiscriminatory judiciary; (f) protection from political terror; (g) free trade unions, effective collective bargaining; (h) free professional and other private organizations; (i) free business; (j) free religion; and (k) personal freedoms such as gender equality, property rights, freedom of movement, choice of residence, and choice of marriage and size of family.

The degree of restriction to these liberties in nations is assessed using expert ratings and partly based on surveys among foreign journalists.

Private Freedom

Restriction of choice in private life is most manifested in legal constraints. Legal restraints can be assessed by inspection of legislation and law enforcement. Comparative data on these matters are reported in several sources, for example, data on restrictions to birth control in the statistics of the IPPF. Many restrictions in private life are often informal, however, especially restrictions on sexuality. The degree of informal social control in nations can be estimated on the basis of attitudes in nations as assessed in surveys. Such data is available in the World Values Survey, the 2000 wave of which covered 90 nations. On the basis of these sources (Veenhoven 2008), constructed an index of absence of restrictions to (1) travel, (2) religion, (3) marriage, (4) divorce, (5) euthanasia, (6) suicide, (7) homosexuality, and (8) prostitution. Using the measures, he found considerable differences in freedom across nations. Some illustrative cases are discussed below.

Level of Freedom in Nations

The above measures of opportunity to choose have been applied on most nations of the present-day world, with the following results:

- *Economic freedom*: The theoretical variation on this index is from 0 to 100. The actual range in this data set is between 3 (North Korea) and 89 (Hong Kong). Iran is in the middle with a score of 43 (Fraser Institute).
- *Political freedom*: The index of political freedom ranges from 2 to 14. Countries that score the minimum of 2 on this index are Cuba and Saudi Arabia; all the western nations score the maximum of 14 on this index. Countries that score in the middle are Nigeria and Colombia (Freedom 2005).
- *Private freedom*: Private freedom is expressed in z-scores that vary from -1.92 (Indonesia) to 1.48 (the Netherlands). Romania is in the middle with a z-score of $+0.07$ (Veenhoven 2008).

Relation with Happiness

Freedom is seen as a quality of life in itself and also as something that affects to other qualities of life. Below I will consider the relationship of freedom with subjective enjoyment of life.

Assumed Effects on Happiness

Opinion about the impact of freedom on happiness is mixed. Different philosophies stress different effects and suggest different net outcomes.

Individualistic social philosophy stresses the possible positive effects. It is typically assumed that people know best what will make them happy and hence they will enjoy life more if they can follow their own preferences. Conflicts of interest are seen to be solved by the invisible hand of the market, which is believed to yield more optimal solutions than prescription by king or custom. Though this intellectual tradition is not blind to the perils of free choice, it expects that the positive effects will prevail.

Conservative thought tends to emphasize the negative consequences of freedom. Conservatives doubt that people really know what is best for them. The wisdom of tradition and the benefits of solidarity are seen to bring a better life than short-sighted egoism. Through the ages, proponents of this view have complained that individual freedom has gone too far that it is about to destroy vital institutions. There are also claims that freedom imposes stress on individuals and that we

live better with less choice (e.g., Schwartz 2004). Again, the other side of the coin is also acknowledged but deemed to be less relevant.

Some schools see different effects of different variants of freedom. Currently the New Right is quite positive about economic freedom, but at the same time it is critical about freedom in the private sphere of life. Free sex and the legalization of soft drugs are seen to lead to unhappiness. Likewise the leading view in Southeast Asia is that economic freedom will improve the human lot, but not political freedom.

Another theme in the discussion is that freedom will add to happiness only in specific conditions. The most commonly mentioned condition is that people are sufficiently “mature.” If people are incapable of making a choice, they will “fear freedom” and seek refuge under authoritarian leaders and strict rules for life (e.g., Fromm 1941). In this line it is also argued that freedom adds to happiness only in rich nations, since material needs predominate in poor nations.

Observed Relationship with Happiness

Data on both freedom and happiness are available for 126 nations around 2006. Correlations between the three kinds of freedom and happiness are quite strong: r is respectively $+0.63$, $+0.55$, and $+0.57$ (Veenhoven 2008, Table 1). This suggests that the positive effects of freedom on happiness outweigh possible negative effects. The correlations are stronger in countries where the level of education is high than in countries where the level of education is low, which suggests that the opportunity to choose adds more to happiness when accompanied by capability to choose. Research findings on the relationship between freedom and happiness are gathered on a continuous bases in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2021).

Cross-References

[Perceived Freedom](#)

References

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