

# Opting Out or Denying Discrimination? How the Framework of Free Choice in American Society Influences Perceptions of Gender Inequality

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## Abstract

American women still confront workplace barriers (e.g., bias against mothers, inflexible policies) that hinder their advancement at the upper levels of organizations. However, most Americans fail to recognize that such gender barriers still exist. Focusing on mothers who have left the workforce, we propose that the prevalent American assumption that actions are a product of choice conceals workplace barriers by communicating that opportunities are equal and that behavior is free from contextual influence. Study 1 reveals that stay-at-home mothers who view their own workplace departure as an individual choice experience greater well-being but less often recognize workplace barriers and discrimination as a source of inequality than do mothers who do not view their workplace departure as an individual choice. Study 2 shows that merely exposing participants to a message that frames actions in terms of individual choice increases participants' belief that society provides equal opportunities and that gender discrimination no longer exists. By concealing the barriers that women still face in the workplace, this choice framework may hinder women's long-term advancement in society.

## Keywords

gender, choice, culture, prejudice, discrimination, sociocultural factors

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Although women's positions in society have advanced rapidly in the last half century, progress has recently stalled (Ridgeway, 2011). Full-time working women still make only 77 cents for every dollar full-time working men make (Bennett, Ellison, & Ball, 2010), and women remain underrepresented at senior levels of fields such as law, business, and politics (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women with children face additional challenges, often encountering inflexible workplace environments in which rigid policies and expectations make it difficult for employees to balance work and family responsibilities; such workplaces are structured around the idea of workers as "male" and as unconstrained by family responsibilities (Acker, 1990). In response to these types of structural barriers that restrict women's options (Stone, 2007), approximately 8% of professional women with advanced degrees leave the workplace during their childbearing years (Percheski, 2008).

Despite the reality of a workplace that often pushes women out (Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006), for the first time in history, most Americans believe that women's job opportunities are equal to men's (Jones, 2005). Why do Americans fail to recognize that gender barriers persist? This denial may occur because explicit discrimination has been largely replaced

by subtle biases, such as employers' male-centered assumptions about the ideal characteristics of a manager or a professional (Brescoll & Okimoto, 2010; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005) and negative stereotypes about mothers' competence (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004). Barriers at a structural level are similarly subtle: To take just one example, women often lack access to professional networks, influential mentors, and flexible schedules (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In this article, we illuminate a common cultural assumption in American society that conceals these gender barriers—that people's actions are a product of individual choice. We propose that this *choice framework* constitutes a powerful, yet largely unrecognized, mechanism that bolsters the belief that equality exists and conceals the structural sources of gender inequality.

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This choice framework pervades the popular debate about the sources of gender inequality (Williams et al., 2006). One widely discussed example is Belkin's (2003) "The Opt-Out Revolution," a *New York Times Magazine* cover story profiling highly educated women who left the workforce. "Why don't women get to the top?" the article's headline asked, before offering its response: "Because they choose not to." Similarly, in his now infamous address on women in science, Summers (2005) posited that women are underrepresented because they "make a decision that they don't want to have a job that they think about [for] eighty hours a week." These explanations of gender inequality rested on particular culture-specific assumptions: that individual choices (e.g., to raise children) rather than structural barriers (e.g., inflexible policies in the workplace) have guided women's actions.

Ubiquitous in American cultural contexts (Schwartz, 2004), the assumption that individual choice is the primary force that guides action is one key tenet of the *disjoint model of agency* (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Like all cultural models, the disjoint model of agency both guides individuals' behavior and serves as a blueprint for how people understand their own and others' behavior. The disjoint model assumes that actions are freely chosen, independent of the social contexts in which they occur, and contingent on individuals' personal preferences, intentions, or goals. Although people commonly use the disjoint model to make sense of individuals' behavior and life outcomes in American contexts, the disjoint model is much less prevalent in other cultural contexts (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009).

Because choice is linked to independence, control, freedom, personal responsibility and other central values of the disjoint model, it has mostly positive consequences for individuals in American contexts (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011). For example, when people have a choice or perceive themselves as choosing, their motivation increases (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008), their health and psychological well-being improves (Wagener & Taylor, 1986), and they are better able to cope with adversity and life challenges (Janoff-Bulman, 1982). Although choice confers individual-level benefits, research has not examined its larger societal consequences. We propose that the choice framework carries with it a set of potentially negative societal consequences. Specifically, in the case of mothers who leave the workforce, it may signal that women are in control, unconstrained by social contexts, and unaffected by structural barriers. Choice may therefore perpetuate and maintain the belief that discrimination has given way to equal opportunity.

We examined the consequences of the choice framework in a survey of stay-at-home mothers (Study 1) and in an experiment that exposed participants to a message framing women's departure from the workplace as an individual choice (Study 2). We hypothesized that choice would be central to women's explanations of their own workplace departure and that this framework would be a double-edged sword: It would be

associated with increased individual well-being but decreased recognition of structural barriers and discrimination. Further, we hypothesized that experimental exposure to the choice framework would promote the belief that American society provides equal opportunities and that structural barriers and discrimination no longer exist.

## Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether stay-at-home mothers considered their workplace departure to be a choice, and then we investigated the consequences of using this choice framework. Reflecting the disjoint model of agency, our hypothesis was that most women would frame their departure as a choice and that this choice framework would be associated with increased individual well-being but decreased recognition of the structural barriers and discrimination that limit women's professional advancement in American society.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred seventeen stay-at-home mothers who were U.S. residents (mean age = 39.5 years; 76.1% White, 6.0% Asian American, 1.7% Latino, 0.9% African American, 15.4% other) were recruited (a) from an event to help mothers relaunch their careers and (b) via e-mails sent by two parenting groups' to their subscribers. Women were included in our sample if they left their jobs after having children and were currently stay-at-home mothers. Reflecting the economic reality of who can afford to leave the workforce (Williams et al., 2006), most of the sample consisted of highly educated professional women.

**Procedure.** Participants completed either an online or a paper survey about "their experiences out of the workforce." The survey included questions about participants' workplace departure, their individual well-being, and their perceptions of gender inequality. To measure reliance on the choice framework, we asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statements on scales from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*): "I made the choice to take time off from my career" and "I did not have a choice about whether to take time off from my career" (the latter item was reverse coded). Using items adapted from the Purpose in Life ( $\alpha = .63$ ) and Environmental Mastery subscales ( $\alpha = .84$ ) of Ryff's (1989) index of psychological well-being, participants also rated their perceived empowerment to make life plans and to control their environments (see Table S1 in the Supplemental Material available online for the items on each subscale).

Next, to measure recognition of discrimination and recognition of structural barriers, we gave participants real statistics about gender inequality in four fields—business, politics, law, and science/engineering—and asked them why this gender inequality occurred. For example, in law, they read that half of all law students are women, as opposed to only 30% of

lawyers and 19% of firm partners. For each field, using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), they then rated the extent to which the following factors played a role in generating this inequality: “Factors in society or the workplace that make it difficult for women to hold these positions” and “Discrimination or bias against women.” We averaged the mean of the first item across all four fields to create a composite measure of recognition of structural barriers ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and averaged the mean of the second item across all four fields to create a measure of recognition of discrimination ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

## Results

As hypothesized, women strongly endorsed the choice framework to explain their workplace departure: The mean rating of choice ( $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) differed significantly from the scale’s midpoint,  $t(117) = 10.3$ ,  $p < .001$ . Next, we examined whether endorsement of the choice framework was related to six attitudinal and experiential factors (i.e., liberalism, conservatism, experiencing discrimination, income, number of children, and years spent at home). Among these factors, only years at home significantly related to the choice framework ( $r = .19$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Therefore, in subsequent analyses, we controlled for years at home to test whether endorsement of the choice framework predicted well-being and recognition of discrimination even after taking this variable into account. We conducted separate regressions for each of the four dependent measures: purpose in life, environmental mastery, recognition of structural barriers, and recognition of discrimination. Supporting the hypotheses, the analyses showed that the choice framework predicted increased purpose in life,  $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $t(103) = 2.2$ ,  $p = .03$ , and environmental mastery,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $t(103) = 2.0$ ,  $p = .05$ , but decreased recognition of structural barriers,  $\beta = -0.23$ ,  $t(103) = -2.4$ ,  $p = .02$ , and discrimination,  $\beta = -0.23$ ,  $t(103) = -2.4$ ,  $p = .02$ .<sup>1</sup>

## Discussion

The mothers in our study—although personally implicated in the alleged “opt-out revolution” (Belkin, 2003)—strongly endorsed the choice framework to explain their own workplace departure. This understanding of behavior as a product of individual choice is consistent with the disjoint model of agency that pervades American contexts and has important consequences for women’s experiences in the workforce. As hypothesized, women who relied on the choice framework reported greater individual well-being, but less recognition of the structural barriers and discrimination that still hinder American women’s workplace advancement, compared with women who did not rely on the choice framework.

This finding suggests that the choice framework confers short-term benefits for individuals (e.g., psychological well-being), but long-term detriments for the collective (e.g., women’s advancement in American society). Specifically, we theorize that the choice framework conceals discrimination by

communicating that American society provides equal opportunities and that gender barriers no longer exist. For example, the very idea of opting out of the workplace may reinforce the belief that women are personally responsible for leaving, and conversely, that the structure of the workplace itself plays no role in constraining women’s options. Although the findings supported our hypotheses, these data were correlational. Study 2 therefore experimentally tested the hypothesis that choice promotes the belief that structural barriers and discrimination no longer exist.

## Study 2

To test our hypothesis, we manipulated exposure to a common cultural representation of the choice framework (i.e., mothers opting out of the workplace) and examined the consequences for Americans’ beliefs about equality of opportunity and the existence of structural barriers and discrimination in today’s workplace.

## Method

**Participants.** Forty-six U.S.-born undergraduates (74% female, 26% male; mean age = 19.5 years; 43.5% White, 32.6% Asian American, 10.9% African American, 2.2% Latino, 10.8% other) participated in Study 2.

**Procedure.** Participants were recruited for a study about “social issues.” When they arrived, an experimenter led them to a cubicle. On the wall of the cubicle was one of two posters advertising a lecture based on a book about mothers who had left the workforce. The poster was printed on a standard 8.5 in.  $\times$  11 in. piece of paper and was positioned at eye level directly in front of the chair in which participants sat while completing the study. To manipulate exposure to the choice framework, we varied the book’s title. In the choice condition, the title was “Choosing to Leave: Women’s Experiences Away from the Workforce” (see Fig. 1), and in the control condition, it was “Women at Home: Experiences Away from the Workforce” (see Fig. 2).

After participants were seated, the experimenter provided a consent form, left for 3 min to expose participants to the poster, returned, and asked participants to complete a survey. To reduce suspicion about the study’s purpose, we included filler items about general social issues on the survey.

Embedded within these filler questions were five items that served as our primary dependent measures (see Table 1;  $\alpha = .71$ ). These items, which we adapted from the Modern Sexism scale (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), assessed the belief that society provides equal opportunities for women and men and that gender discrimination is nonexistent. Participants also rated their identification with feminism by rating their agreement with the statement “I consider myself a feminist.” During debriefing, no participants reported suspicions about the poster or guessed the study’s hypothesis.

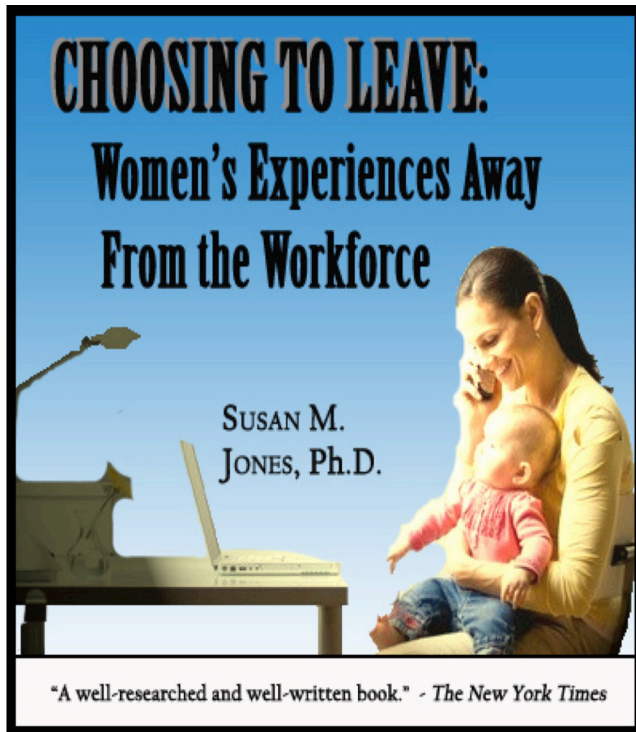


Fig. 1. Book cover displayed on the poster in the choice condition of Study 2.

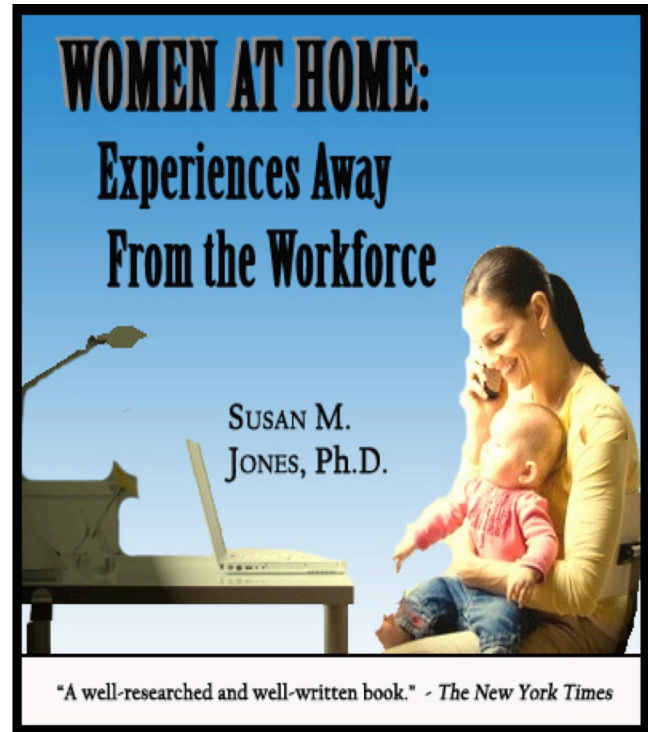


Fig. 2. Book cover displayed on the poster in the control condition of Study 2.

## Results

We tested the hypothesis that mere exposure to the choice framework increases the belief that American society provides equal opportunity and that gender discrimination no longer exists. Because feminism is associated with awareness of gender discrimination (Rowland, 1986), it was included as a covariate. As expected, analyses of covariance revealed that greater endorsement of feminism predicted greater recognition of discrimination,  $F(1, 43) = 21.7, p < .001$ . Supporting our primary hypothesis, participants in the choice condition ( $M = 3.9, SD = 1.2$ ) more strongly endorsed the belief that opportunities are equal and that gender discrimination is nonexistent compared with participants in the control condition ( $M = 3.6, SD = 0.9$ ),  $d = 0.3, F(1, 43) = 6.2, p = .02$ .

## Discussion

Supporting our theory, the results from Study 2 reveal that mere exposure to the choice framework increases the belief that American society provides equal opportunities and that structural barriers and discrimination no longer exist. Participants more strongly endorsed these beliefs after subtle exposure to a poster that framed women's workplace departure as a choice, compared with when participants were presented with a poster that was otherwise identical but lacked the choice framework. Although choice can be empowering and contribute to individuals' psychological well-being, our results suggest that Americans' use of the choice framework also influences, more broadly, whether people recognize the persistent structural barriers

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Perceptions of Equal Opportunity and the Existence of Discrimination in Study 2

Item	Control condition	Choice condition
Men and women are equal in American society.	4.3	4.8
American society provides men and women with equal opportunities for achievement.	4.5	4.5
Women often say they are discriminated against when they aren't.	3.4	3.7
It's easy to understand why women's groups are still concerned about social limitations on women's opportunities. (reverse-coded)	5.3	5.1
It's only fair that employees who take time away from their careers to care for children don't have as many opportunities for career advancement or desirable jobs.	2.9	3.3
Overall mean	3.6	3.9

Note: Participants rated all items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

that contribute to gender inequality in American society today.

## General Discussion

The research reported in this article reveals that the choice framework has important consequences for how Americans see—or fail to see—the structural barriers and discrimination that still foster gender inequality in American society. First, a survey revealed that even women who were personally involved in the alleged opt-out revolution relied on the choice framework to explain their own departure from the workplace. Their endorsement of this framework was related to increased individual well-being but reduced recognition of the structural barriers and discrimination that limit the advancement of women in the workplace. Furthermore, an experiment showed that even subtle exposure to the choice framework promotes the belief that opportunities are equal and that discrimination no longer exists.

It is important to note that although the effect of the choice framework was small (in Study 2), it resulted from a single brief encounter with that framework. Given the ubiquity of the choice framework in American society, such effects could intensify over time through repeated encounters. Regular exposure could create a vicious cycle that helps to maintain women's underrepresentation at the top of high-status fields. For example, if choice decreases recognition of the structural barriers in institutions (i.e., inflexible policies that constrain mothers' options), it might also decrease people's motivation to make the workplace more accommodating to working mothers (e.g., by increasing flexibility). Ironically, then, this choice framework might foster and maintain the very barriers that often push mothers out of the workforce by limiting their ability to simultaneously manage a professional career and family responsibilities.

The choice framework also presents a paradox for women as a whole. Though it has short-term benefits for the individual (e.g., well-being), it could produce long-term detriments to women's collective prospects in the workplace. For example, viewing their career trajectories as products of their own individual choices might prevent women from supporting or advocating for each other as they navigate their professional lives. Future research should consider how women's reliance on the choice framework affects their individual well-being, workplace relationships, and professional advancement over time. For example, if women attempt to reenter the workforce and struggle with structural barriers, then seeing their lives as merely products of their own individual choices could undermine their sense of competence or deter them from seeking help.

One limitation of the research presented here is that it is difficult to pinpoint the precise mechanism through which choice exerts its effects. As a key tenet of the disjoint model of agency in American contexts, the choice framework is connected to related American values, such as independence,

autonomy, personal control, and responsibility. Consistent with this suggestion, our results parallel other findings showing that beliefs in individualistic values, such as the Protestant work ethic and meritocracy, can increase individuals' well-being (O'Brien & Major, 2005) while also justifying social inequality (see Major et al., 2002; McCoy & Major, 2007). Future work could further investigate the multiple pathways through which the choice framework affects individuals and society.

The choice framework is rife with contradictions. Until now, the literature has generally overlooked choice's broader societal and collective consequences. The choice framework, which derives from the disjoint model of the freely choosing individual actor, may be intuitively appealing in American contexts, in which individualism is highly prized, but it also hides the structural barriers that restrict women's options and that limit women's representation at the upper echelons of organizations. That is, the very idea of opting out can promote the perception that women are personally responsible for leaving the workforce, and thereby conceal the often unaccommodating and hostile nature of today's workplace for American mothers. The widespread prevalence of the choice framework in American culture may therefore help to explain why Americans readily dismiss gender barriers as a vestige of the past in the face of evidence to the contrary.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

## Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

## Note

1. All findings held after controlling for the six attitudinal and experiential factors, all  $ps < .05$ .

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