

Passing the buck: Delegating choices to others to avoid responsibility and blame[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although people prize the ability to choose when making choices for themselves, this right may become a burden when tasked with choosing for others. We show that people are more likely to delegate choices for others than for themselves, especially choices with potentially negative consequences. This is driven by a desire to avoid feeling responsible or being blamed for such decisions rather than a desire to avoid making difficult choices or a lack of concern for others' outcomes, and is unique to delegation and does not extend to other methods of choice avoidance, like delaying decisions or flipping a coin, that do not absolve decision makers of responsibility and blame. Moreover, people only delegate to others who can assume responsibility, regardless of their expertise, consistent with the notion that people delegate primarily to cede responsibility and blame, not put choices in the hands of more capable decision makers.

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1. Introduction

Choice is among the most challenging (Schwartz, 2004) and most prized (Ryan & Deci, 2000) responsibilities a person can have. Choosing is effortful and depleting (Vohs et al., 2008), and if the choice outcomes turn out to be unappealing, choosing can leave people feeling more dissatisfied and regretful with the outcomes than if they never had the option to choose at all (Botti & Iyengar, 2004; Botti & McGill, 2006; Botti, Orfali, & Iyengar, 2009; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Yet, when given the option to relinquish their right to choose, people often refuse. People prefer to maintain responsibility for choosing even when they would be better off letting others choose on their behalf (Botti & Iyengar, 2004; Botti & McGill, 2006; Botti et al., 2009).

But this preference for choice may only go so far. When the burden becomes too great, people may wish to cede decisions to others, preferring to do without the burden of affecting someone else with the outcome of a choice that they themselves have made. Choices for others may often be more daunting than personal

decisions because people expect to bear the responsibility for others' outcomes and carry the blame if those outcomes are dissatisfying. We propose that the calculus of whether and how to make a choice changes when the choice determines not just one's own fate, but the fates of others. We show that people are more likely to delegate when they face decisions that will affect other people rather than themselves alone, that people delegate choices for others even in situations in which they would opt to retain responsibility if those choices were for themselves, and that people uniquely seek out delegation over other forms of choice avoidance as a means of absolving themselves of this responsibility.

2. Choice avoidance

As much as people may generally prefer to maintain active control over their own decisions, they are also well-known to avoid choices when they become too difficult by deferring a decision or by choosing by default or omission (see Anderson, 2003, for a review), and even at times by delegating their choices to others (Steffel & Williams, in preparation-a). The present research looks beyond decision difficulty to the personal and interpersonal antecedents of delegation. Although much is known about the antecedents of other forms of choice avoidance, there is at present little empirical work examining what prompts people to delegate choices to others and what differentiates delegation from other forms of choice avoidance. Research on delegation in organizations

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has largely focused on when managers delegate business decisions or other tasks to subordinate employees, who tend to be less expert, and has tended to be descriptive in nature, rather than empirically testing the causes and consequences of delegation (e.g., Leana, 1986; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Most work on delegation in other fields has looked at very specific domains in which people pass personal decision making on to paid experts, like personal shoppers (e.g., Solomon, 1987) or doctors (e.g., Degner & Sloan, 1992). These research streams have shown that people do sometimes delegate choices for both themselves and for others, but thus far, this past work has not considered the possibility that people's propensity to delegate may differ depending on who will bear the consequences of the decision. We intend to add to the empirical literature by showing that delegation is a uniquely appealing choice avoidance method when other people will be affected by a decision.

The choices that people make on behalf of others—their spouses, children, employees, and friends—come with challenges beyond those that accompany personal choices. We propose that choices for others carry additional burdens because the people who make them expect to feel responsible for the outcomes they bring about and thus bear the weight of others' blame if those outcomes turn out poorly. Of course, people making personal choices do at times worry about feeling responsible for a poor choice and thus regretting their decision (e.g., Zeelenberg, 1999; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000), and this in turn can lead them to delegate that choice to someone else (Steffél & Williams, in preparation-b). However, people tend to feel worse about decisions that inflict negative consequences onto others than decisions that inflict those same consequences onto themselves (Morey et al., 2012), and anticipate greater regret when choosing on behalf of others (Beattie, Baron, Hershey, & Spranca, 1994), making delegation to be an especially appealing method of choosing when the decision is on behalf of someone else. People feel bad about the prospect of their decision being the cause of someone else's discomfort or displeasure, and requesting that instead a third party be that cause may provide some relief.

A choice that one makes on behalf of someone else could either go well or it could go poorly, and it is anticipating the possibility of the latter outcome that is especially likely to prompt delegation. Concern about being blamed by others is likely to compound the concern people have about feeling personally responsible for bringing about unappealing consequences for someone else, and this concern may not be unwarranted. Decision makers are evaluated negatively for making a “poor” choice even when the choice set is composed entirely of negative options (Kruger, Burrus, & Kressel, 2009). Furthermore, it is those poor choices that are likely to get noticed. Blame avoidance is a popular political tactic because people are more sensitive to losses and negative outcomes than to gains and positive outcomes (Weaver, 1986). When a decision maker chooses for someone else in a scenario with only positive anticipated outcomes, the individual may not mind having or may even prefer to maintain decision control, as they could potentially reap any rewards associated with making a good decision (Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012). However, when faced with choosing on behalf of another person in a situation with only negative potential outcomes or with the possibility of a negative outcome, decision makers may prefer to delegate to someone else in fear of receiving the punishment or blame associated with making a bad decision. Decision makers may expect that delegation will help them avoid blame from both themselves and from others.

H1. People are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves, especially when it seems likely that those choices might have unappealing outcomes.

H2. Anticipated responsibility and blame both drive the tendency for people to delegate choices for others more than choices for themselves.

3. Escaping responsibility and blame

Is delegation one of many possible effective routes to handling the burden of choosing on someone else's behalf, or is delegation uniquely suited to relieve this burden? When choosing for themselves, people have many ways other than delegation with which to avoid making a decision (Anderson, 2003). For instance, a person might opt to simply delay the choice, to think about it longer, or to just buy themselves time, and this is especially likely when facing a decision where all outcomes are negative (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999). However, while delaying a choice puts off the determination of the eventual outcome, it does not avert it altogether. The decision maker will still have to make a choice and bear responsibility and blame for the outcome, just at a later date. Delegation might therefore have an advantage over delay in that a choice gets made faster, and the responsibility can be passed to another party. Alternatively, rather than grapple with the decision at all, a person might escape the effort of choosing by resolving the decision using a chance process, like *eeny-meeny-miney-mo*, a random number generator, or a coin flip. Importantly, although an inanimate object, like a computer or a coin, can determine a choice outcome, that object is ultimately not responsible for that outcome. The person who flipped the coin rather than the coin itself is likely to be held responsible for the coin's “choice,” whatever it may be. Thus, while a chance process might enable a person to avoid the burden of choosing, only delegation can enable a person to avoid the responsibility and blame associated with that choice. In sum, the appeal of delegating choices for others goes beyond that of putting off or avoiding the effort associated with choosing. Instead, the appeal of delegating choices for others is in its ability to relieve decision makers of the burdens associated with being responsible for making a choice that might turn out poorly. Thus, people who face choices for others versus choices for themselves may uniquely seek out delegation over other forms of choice avoidance as a means of absolving themselves of this responsibility.

H3. People avoid choosing for others by delegating but not by using other choice avoidance tactics like delaying or deciding by chance because only delegation allows them to absolve themselves of responsibility and blame.

4. Passing the buck

To whom can one delegate a decision? One possible benefit of delegation is that one can put choices in the hands of a more capable decision maker. Delegation may at times result in a better decision, because someone more knowledgeable ends up determining the outcome. Nonetheless, we suspect that the surrogate's ability to shoulder responsibility for the decision is more important than expertise when it comes to deciding for others, especially when a negative outcome seems possible. Delegating to someone without special expertise into the decision will be adequate so long as that person can assume responsibility and blame for the choice outcome. However, delegating to someone without the ability to assume responsibility will not suffice, as some people are not capable of being held responsible for a choice. Children, for instance, legally cannot be held responsible for their actions. Instead, their parents often are (Siegel, 2014). Similarly, other kinds of power hierarchies can determine who is fundamentally responsible for a decision. The phrase, “the buck stops here,” expresses the idea that

the person who is ultimately responsible for an organization's actions is the person at the top of the heap. The person at the end of the line has no one else to whom they can pass the buck. People are likely to feel that those for whom choosing is outside their purview will make poor surrogates (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006; Jungermann & Fischer, 2005), in that they may not be able to assume responsibility for the decision. People are unlikely to cede decision control when they risk having their surrogate make a choice that turns out badly but having to maintain responsibility for the outcome themselves. Thus, the parties to whom one can delegate a choice for other people are likely to be limited to those with the authority to assume responsibility and blame.

H4. People delegate choices for others only to surrogates who can assume responsibility and blame for the choices they make, regardless of their expertise in the decision domain.

5. Research overview

The present research investigates whether people are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves to avoid bearing the responsibility for others' outcomes and carrying the blame if those outcomes disappoint. Experiment 1 examines, in a choice with real consequences, whether people are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves. Experiment 2 shows that this is especially likely when the consequences of the decision are potentially negative, and that this is driven by decision makers' desire to avoid feeling responsible or being blamed for such decisions more so than a desire to avoid making choices that feel difficult or a lack of concern for the decisions' consequences. Experiment 3 demonstrates that both anticipated responsibility and blame contribute to the tendency for people to delegate potentially costly choices for others and that people care more about avoiding blame for bad outcomes than getting credit for good outcomes. Experiments 4 and 5 show that this tendency is unique to delegation and does not extend to other forms of choice avoidance, such as delaying decisions or flipping a coin, showing that people care about avoiding responsibility and blame and are not just more choice averse for others than for themselves or prone to seeking an easy way out of making a decision. Experiments 6 and 7 further examine the boundaries of passing the buck, by showing to whom a decision maker can delegate. We find that delegation is not predicated on expertise but is predicated on authority, consistent with the notion that people delegate, not to put choices in the hands of a more capable decision maker, but to cede responsibility. In all experiments, we set target sample sizes before data collection, and we have reported all measures, conditions, and data exclusions.

6. Experiment 1: Choices for self or others

In an initial exploration of whether people are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves, we invited undergraduates to choose which of two surveys they or another participant would complete in order to fulfill a research participation requirement. Participants had the option of choosing themselves or delegating the decision to an experimenter. We predicted that participants would be more likely to delegate when the choice would affect another person than when it would affect themselves.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

Undergraduates ($N = 207$) at a large Midwestern university participated in exchange for course credit.

6.1.2. Procedure

Participants were paired with another participant and completed a get-to-know-you task. Next, participants were assigned to either the *self* or the *other* condition, and then picked a survey for themselves or their partner to complete. One survey was about attention to detail and involved reading a 1000-word passage and circling the letter "t" each time it appeared as the third letter of a word. The other survey was about multi-tasking and involved completing simple multiplication problems while counting backwards from 100 by 3's. Participants were given the option to choose a survey themselves or delegate the choice to the experimenter.

6.2. Results and discussion

This experiment demonstrates that, when faced with choices with real consequences, people are more likely to delegate choices for others than for themselves. Undergraduates who were asked to choose which of two surveys they or another student would complete were more likely to delegate to the experimenter when the choice was for another student (26%) than when it was for themselves (7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 207) = 13.39, p < 0.001, \phi = 0.25$.

In this experiment, both of the possible surveys were somewhat tedious and unappealing. We expect that it is choices like these—those in which decision makers must make a choice between unattractive alternatives on behalf of another person, or at least those where the possibility of a bad outcome seems likely—that people are most prone to delegate. The next experiment explores how the attractiveness of the choice alternatives affects people's likelihood to delegate choices for themselves or for others, and begins to delve into why people delegate such decisions.

7. Experiment 2: Choices between attractive or unattractive options

It is rare to encounter choices in which choosing any option ensures a positive outcome. Instead, most choices entail some risk of an unappealing outcome or at least some level of disappointment. In H1 and H2, we predicted that people are more likely to delegate decisions for others—especially those between unattractive alternatives—because they wish to avoid shouldering the responsibility and assuming the blame for a possible bad outcome. Experiment 2 investigated these predictions by varying whether the choice options were all attractive or all unattractive and whether the decision at hand was for oneself or for one's boss, and then measured whether participants opted to choose themselves or delegate the decision to an office manager, as well as the extent to which participants wanted to be responsible for the decision, and the extent to which they wanted to receive the credit or blame for the decision. We predict that people will be more likely to delegate a choice for another person than a choice for themselves, especially when the potential alternatives are unattractive and the likely consequences are unappealing.

But one might wonder whether choices for others are more also difficult than personal decisions. Further, this difficulty may be intensified when the alternatives are unattractive, and people may delegate as an easy way out of having to make such difficult decisions. Another possibility is that people just care less about decisions that affect others than ones in which their own outcomes are at stake, especially when the alternatives are not especially appealing or exciting. This seems unlikely—past research shows that people take the responsibility of determining others' outcomes just as seriously, if not more seriously, as determining their own outcomes (Beattie et al., 1994; Morey et al., 2012)—but we examined this counterexplanation here. We also measured the extent to which they cared about the outcome of the decision

and the extent to which they anticipated that choosing would be difficult. We predict that the tendency for people to be more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves will be driven by the desire to avoid feeling responsible or being blamed for choice outcomes rather than anticipated choice difficulty or a lack of caring about the other person's outcome.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 433$; 53% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 34$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk platform. Only participants who had an approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were invited to participate. Participants received \$0.25 Amazon.com credit for completing the survey.

7.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they were choosing a hotel for a conference that either they themselves (in the *self* conditions) or their boss (in the *other* conditions) was required to attend. They were told that their company had either budgeted for the attendee to stay in a five-star hotel (*attractive* conditions) or a two-star hotel (*unattractive* conditions), and they were presented with a description of three hotels that were either highly appealing or unappealing (see Appendix for the full hotel descriptions used in Experiments 2, 3, 5, and 6). In our measure of interest, participants indicated whether they would like to make the hotel reservation themselves or have the office manager do it instead.

Additionally, to test the degree to which responsibility, blame, decision difficulty, and concern for the decision determined their interest in delegating the decision, participants rated, "To what extent would you like to be responsible for this decision, whatever the outcome?" on a scale from $1 = I$ would definitely NOT like to be responsible for this decision to $7 = I$ would definitely like to be responsible for this decision (responsibility), "To what extent would you like to receive the credit or blame for this decision, whatever the outcome?" on a scale from $1 = I$ would definitely NOT like to receive the credit or blame for this decision to $7 = I$ would definitely like to receive the credit or blame for this decision (blame), "To what extent do you care whether you have [your boss has] a good or bad experience?" on a scale from $1 = I$ do not care at all to $7 = I$ care a lot (concern), and "If you were to make this decision yourself, how difficult would this decision feel?" on a scale from $1 = \text{very easy}$ to $7 = \text{very difficult}$ (choice difficulty). To verify that our attractiveness manipulation had the intended effect, participants also rated, "How attractive were these hotels?" on a scale from $1 = \text{very unattractive}$ to $7 = \text{very attractive}$. Finally, to ensure that participants understood for whom the reservation was being made, on a separate page, participants indicated whether the reservation was for themselves or their boss.

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Attention check

Out of 433 total participants, 35 were excluded because they incorrectly identified for whom the reservation was being made. The same pattern is obtained if we include all participants.

7.2.2. Manipulation check

As expected, participants thought that the hotels were more attractive in the attractive conditions ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 0.94$) than in the unattractive conditions ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1, 394) = 1739.40$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.82$. Hotel ratings did not differ based on whether the hotel was for themselves or their boss, $F(1, 394) = 1.17$, $p = 0.28$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.003$, or based the interaction between attractiveness and target, $F(1, 394) = 1.61$, $p = 0.21$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$.

7.2.3. Delegation

A logistic regression with target (self or other) and attractiveness of options (attractive or unattractive) as predictors of preferences for choosing oneself or having the office manager choose indicated that participants were more likely to delegate a decision when the decision was for someone else rather than themselves, Wald's $\chi^2 = 34.24$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 4.56. Participants were also more likely to delegate when the options were unattractive versus attractive, Wald's $\chi^2 = 24.66$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 3.47. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between target and attractiveness of options, Wald's $\chi^2 = 7.44$, $p = 0.006$, Odds Ratio = 4.09. When the options were unattractive, participants were more likely to delegate when the decision was for their boss (61%) than when the decision was for themselves (17%), $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 40.92$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.45$. However, when the options were all attractive, participants were just marginally more likely to delegate if the decision was for their boss (22%) versus themselves (13%), $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 2.86$, $p = 0.09$, $\phi = 0.12$.

7.2.4. Responsibility

Participants wanted less responsibility for the decision when they were faced with a choice for their boss ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 2.16$) than a personal choice ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 394) = 74.94$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$. They also wanted less responsibility when the available options were unattractive ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 2.25$) than when they were attractive ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 394) = 61.12$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$. Further, there was an interaction, $F(1, 394) = 21.03$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, such that the difference was greater when the options were unattractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 3.12$, $SD = 2.12$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 5.39$, $SD = 1.75$; $t(193.11) = 8.27$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.17$, equal variances not assumed) than when they were attractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 5.25$, $SD = 1.60$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 5.95$, $SD = 1.22$; $t(192.19) = 3.48$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 0.49$, equal variances not assumed).

7.2.5. Blame

Participants were also most concerned about getting blamed for the outcome when the decision was between unappealing options and when it was for their boss. They wanted less credit or blame for the decision when they were faced with a choice for their boss ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 2.19$) than a choice for themselves ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.84$), $F(1, 394) = 26.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, and when the available options were unattractive ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 2.11$) versus when they were attractive ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.71$), $F(1, 394) = 72.11$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$. Importantly, there was also an interaction, $F(1, 394) = 12.59$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, such that there was a significant self-other difference when the available options were unattractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 2.96$, $SD = 1.97$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 4.57$, $SD = 1.95$), $t(197) = 5.78$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.82$, but not when they were attractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 5.18$, $SD = 1.81$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 5.48$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(197) = 1.23$, $p = 0.22$, $d = 0.18$.

7.2.6. Difficulty

Participants anticipated that choosing would be more difficult when they were faced with a choice for their boss ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 2.00$) than a choice for themselves ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.82$), $F(1, 394) = 9.25$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and when the available options were unattractive ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.70$) compared to when they were attractive ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.79$), $F(1, 394) = 90.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$. Furthermore, there was an interaction between the two factors, $F(1, 394) = 9.91$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, such that there was a significant self-other difference when the available options were unattractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 5.42$, $SD = 1.48$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 4.36$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(187.87) = -4.60$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.65$, but not when they were attractive ($M_{\text{boss}} = 3.25$, $SD = 1.85$, vs. $M_{\text{self}} = 3.27$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(197) = 0.07$, $p = 0.94$, $d = 0.01$.

7.2.7. Concern

The party who would ultimately be affected by the decision had no effect on how concerned participants were with the outcome. Although participants cared more about whether they or their boss had a good or bad experience when the available options were attractive ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.33$) rather than unattractive ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 394) = 8.46$, $p = 0.004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, there was no self-other difference, $F(1, 394) = 0.002$, $p = 0.96$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$, nor an interaction between attractiveness and target, $F(1, 394) = 0.002$, $p = 0.97$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

7.2.8. Moderated mediation

We predicted that participants would want to be less responsible and assume less credit or blame for decisions for another person than themselves, and this would make them more likely to delegate choices for others. We predicted that this would especially be the case the more unattractive the choice options were. We also predicted that, although choice difficulty might contribute to the tendency to delegate, it would not be the primary factor underlying self-other differences in delegation. We tested these predictions using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2013) with 1000 bootstrapped resamples, so that responsibility, blame, and difficulty were parallel mediators, and found significant moderated mediation for responsibility (95% CI = 0.77 to 2.52) and blame (95% CI = 0.19 to 1.45), but not choice difficulty (95% CI = −0.004 to 0.67). The indirect path from the target of the decision (boss or self) through responsibility to delegation was stronger when the options were all unattractive (95% CI = −3.22 to −1.37) than when they were all attractive (95% CI = −1.28 to −0.26), and the indirect path through blame was significant when the options were unattractive (95% CI = −1.57 to −0.29) but nonsignificant when they were attractive (95% CI = −0.48 to 0.08). However, the indirect path through choice difficulty was nonsignificant both when the options were unattractive (95% CI = −0.57 to 0.01) and when they were attractive (95% CI = −0.12 to 0.15). See Fig. 1.

7.3. Discussion

In support of H1 and H2, this experiment shows that people are more likely to delegate when choosing for others than when choosing for themselves, especially when the potential consequences are unattractive. That is, people seem most prone to passing the buck when they risk being responsible and possibly blamed for a bad decision, or at least the bad outcome of a good decision. Indeed,

concerns about being responsible and assuming credit or blame for such decisions mediated the relationship between delegation and whether a choice was for the self or another person. This was moderated by the attractiveness of the choice options such that the desire to avoid responsibility and blame for choices was greater when the available options were unattractive, which in turn led to a greater likelihood of delegation.

The greater difficulty of making choices for others may at times exacerbate the inclination to delegate choices on behalf of others, but in Experiment 2, neither anticipated choice difficulty nor a lack of caring accounted for people's tendency to delegate choices for others more than choices for themselves. Although people thought that choices for others would be more difficult to make than choices for the self, that it would be harder to choose between unattractive than attractive options, and that making a choice for another person between unattractive options would be especially difficult, choice difficulty was not a meaningful mediator of self-other differences in delegation either when the options were attractive or when they were unattractive. And, although people cared more about the expected outcome of their decisions when the options were especially attractive than when they were unattractive, people cared equally how they themselves or another person would be affected by their choices, and this was not moderated by the attractiveness of the choice options.

Thus, the desire to avoid the responsibility and blame associated with making a choice with a possible bad outcome seems to be the primary reasons why people delegate choices for others more than choices for themselves. In the next study, we seek to disentangle whether responsibility and blame independently contribute to people's preference to delegate decisions for others more than decisions for themselves.

8. Experiment 3: Choices with or without anonymity

One simple way to avoid being blamed for a bad outcome is to not let the person who is affected by a decision know who made it. However, this only relieves the decision maker of the possibility of blame, not of their own knowledge that they inflicted the outcome on the other person. Most decision makers are not heartless, and even if they do not expect to get blamed for making a no-win decision, it is possible that they may still feel bad that they are at fault for inflicting negative consequences onto others, and thus will delegate in order to reduce how responsible they feel for that outcome. In Experiment 3, to isolate the independent contributing

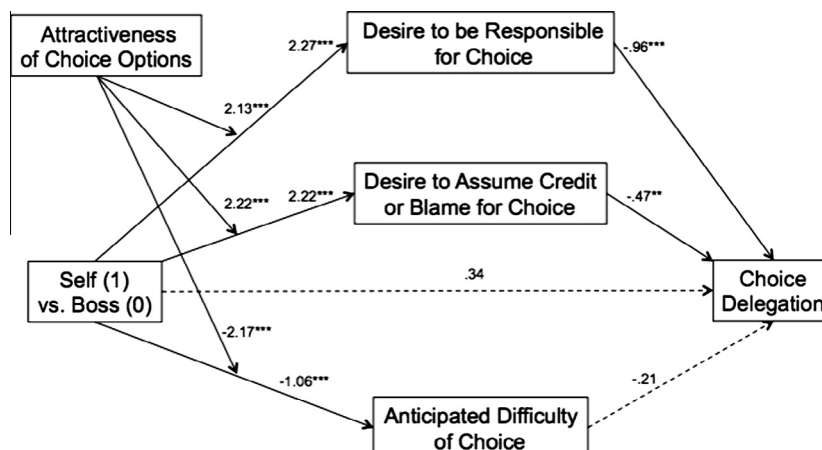


Fig. 1. Relationship between party for whom the decision is being made and choice delegation of choice, as mediated by desire to be responsible for choice, desire to assume credit or blame for choice, and anticipated difficulty of choice, moderated by the attractiveness of the choice options (Experiment 2). Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. Index of moderated mediation: 95% CI = 0.02 to 1.69.

roles of anticipated responsibility and blame, we manipulated whether or not the target of a decision would know the identity of the person who chose on their behalf. Namely, participants in this study made a choice for themselves, for another person who would know that the participant chose on their behalf, or for another person who would not know who chose on their behalf. This design allows us to test two other possible explanations for our effect. One is accountability concerns. Past research shows that people are more likely to avoid decisions when they anticipate being accountable to others and having to explain the rationale for those choices (Tetlock & Boettger, 1994). We expect that, to the extent that delegation is motivated at least in part by felt responsibility, people will delegate choices even if they are unlikely to anticipate needing to justify the decisions in the anonymous conditions. Anonymity also allows us to examine whether people are as interested in seeking credit for good outcomes as they are in avoiding blame for bad ones. Research suggests that choosing for others intensifies concerns about negative outcomes more than possible positive outcomes to a greater degree than when choosing for oneself (Beattie et al., 1994), and that people are more concerned about blame avoidance than credit seeking in public decisions (Weaver, 1986). To explore this, we also manipulated whether the choice was between all attractive or all unattractive options.

If delegation is being driven solely by anticipated blame or accountability concerns, then we should expect people to be more likely to delegate choices between unattractive options for others than for themselves only when their identities would be known and not when they would be anonymous. However, if felt responsibility independently contributes to this tendency, then people should be more likely to delegate when choosing for others than when choosing for themselves, even when those affected would not know who chose on their behalf. If some of the story can be explained by credit seeking as opposed to merely blame avoidance, then we would expect people to be less likely to delegate choices between attractive options when choosing for others who would know their identities than when choosing for themselves or for others who would not know who chose on their behalf.

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 964$; 51% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 33$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were invited to participate. Participants were compensated with \$0.20 Amazon.com credit.

8.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they were responsible for choosing a hotel for a conference, as in Experiment 2. They were randomly assigned to imagine that they were booking the hotel for themselves (*self* conditions), that they were booking the hotel for their boss and that their boss would know who made the reservation (*other identifiable* conditions), or that they were booking a hotel for their boss and that their boss would not know who made the reservation (*other anonymous* conditions). Participants were told that their company had budgeted for the attendee to stay in a five-star hotel (*attractive* conditions) or in a two-star hotel (*unattractive* conditions). In our measure of interest, participants indicated whether they preferred to make the decision themselves or whether they would like to delegate the decision to the office manager. Finally, to ensure that participants understood for whom the reservation was being made, they indicated on a separate page whether the reservation was for themselves or their boss.

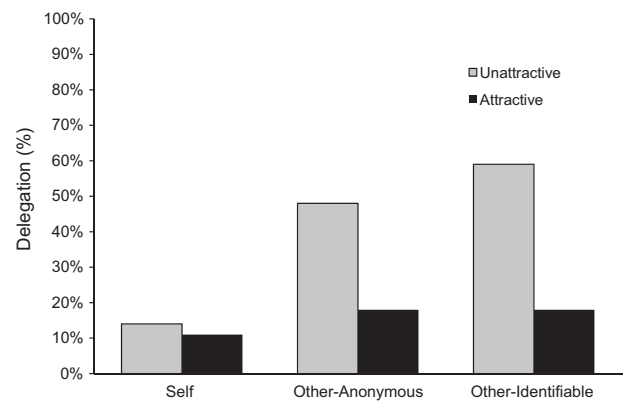


Fig. 2. Delegation due to credit seeking (attractive options) or blame avoidance (unattractive options) in decisions with or without anonymity (Experiment 3).

8.2. Results

8.2.1. Attention check

Out of 964 total participants, 100 were excluded because they incorrectly identified for whom the reservation was being made. The pattern is the same and slightly stronger if we include all participants.

Overall, delegation varied based on the target (self, other-anonymous, other-known), Wald's $\chi^2 = 55.09$, $p < 0.001$, such that participants were more likely to delegate when choosing a hotel for their boss than for themselves (12%), both when their identity would not be known (33%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 50.83$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 5.00, and when it would be known (39%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 35.16$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 3.87. Comparing the two decisions for the boss, participants were equally likely to delegate when their boss would know their identity as when they would not, Wald's $\chi^2 = 0.26$, $p = 0.16$, Odds Ratio = 0.78, suggesting that people are not delegating choices for others merely to avoid having to justify those decisions. Participants were also more likely to delegate when the outcomes were unattractive (41%) than attractive (16%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 67.49$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 4.09. These main effects were qualified by an interaction between target and attractiveness of options, Wald's $\chi^2 = 13.31$, $p = 0.001$.

Breaking this interaction down, when the options were unattractive, there was a significant effect of target, Wald's $\chi^2 = 57.46$, $p < 0.001$, such that participants were less likely to delegate the choice of hotel to the office manager when they were choosing a hotel for themselves (14%) than when they were choosing a hotel for their boss, both when their boss would not know who made the reservation (48%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 35.56$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 5.78, and when they would know the identity of the decision maker (59%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 55.94$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 8.90, suggesting that blame alone cannot account for self-other differences in delegation of choices between unattractive options. Participants were marginally more likely to delegate when their identities would be known than when they would not, Wald's $\chi^2 = 3.35$, $p = 0.067$, Odds Ratio = 0.65, indicating that blame does to some degree contribute to the tendency to delegate above and beyond felt responsibility. However, when the options were attractive, delegation did not depend on the target (self = 11%, other anonymous = 18%, other identifiable = 18%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 3.04$, $p = 0.22$, suggesting that people are not less likely to delegate choices when the potential consequences are attractive in order to seek credit. See Fig. 2.

8.3. Discussion

Providing additional support for H2, this experiment suggests that the tendency for people to be more likely to delegate choices

for others than for themselves is rooted in the desire to avoid the potential responsibility and blame that decision makers expect to feel, and that each plays an independent role in the decision to delegate. Participants were more likely to delegate a choice between unattractive options for another person than for themselves, both when the person for whom they were choosing would know their identity and when they would not, suggesting that felt responsibility itself is sufficient to motivate people to delegate choices for others, even when they are unlikely to be blamed for the decision. However, our findings indicate that anticipated blame also contributes to the decision to delegate choices for others: participants were more inclined to delegate when the person for whom they were choosing would know their identity than when they would not. These findings also speak against the idea that passing the buck is solely driven by concerns about being held accountable. Decision makers in the anonymous conditions were unlikely to anticipate needing to justify their choices, and yet they were still inclined to delegate.

Our findings also suggest that people delegate decisions for others because they wish to avoid blame for negative outcomes, not because they wish to seek credit for positive outcomes. If credit-seeking were part of the story, then people should be less likely to delegate when choosing for others than for themselves from among attractive options, especially when other people would know their identity, and they may be *more* likely to delegate when they are anonymous, because there would be no credit to receive from the choice. Instead, people were equally likely to delegate choices between attractive alternatives regardless of target and anonymity, suggesting that credit seeking is not a meaningful driver of delegation.

Delegation therefore seems like an effective way to transfer responsibility and blame away from the self to a third party. Nonetheless, it is possible that this transfer is a merely pleasant side effect for participants, and what they truly wish is simply to avoid making a choice for the other person in whatever way they can. Perhaps they would be just as happy to delay choosing, or otherwise take a shortcut. Our next two experiments test H3 and aim to show that delegation is a uniquely desirable option for avoiding making a choice on someone else's behalf, and that people do not use other methods of choice avoidance that do not absolve them of responsibility and blame to a greater extent when choosing for others than for themselves.

9. Experiment 4: Are people just more choice averse when choosing for others?

If a decision maker wants to avoid making a choice, there are other routes besides delegation that can allow that to happen. For one, they might opt to defer or delay the choice until a later time, something that is especially appealing to consider when one is faced with a set of unattractive options (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999). But deferring the choice does not alleviate the responsibility and blame that accompany choosing for others; it merely delays them until later. Experiment 4 tests whether it is more important to decision makers to avoid responsibility and blame from others than to simply avoid choosing, by giving them the option to either delegate or delay a choice for themselves or someone else. We expect to find that people are more interested in transferring responsibility and blame than avoiding the choice, and that people are more likely to delegate but not delay when faced with choices for others versus choices for themselves

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 402$; 58% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 33$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Mechanical Turk. Only participants who

had an approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were invited to participate. Participants received \$0.20 Amazon.com credit.

9.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they were planning a catered business luncheon for their company. They were randomly assigned to imagine that they were choosing the main entrée for themselves (*self* conditions), or that they were choosing the main entrée for the lunch guests (*other* conditions). Participants were presented with a menu with 12 different entrée choices (e.g., Beef Strip Steak, Sea Salt Crusted Salmon, and Eggplant Parmigiana), with a description of the ingredients in each. Participants learned that the event was occurring a few weeks later and that they could either make the decision now themselves or wait until the end of the week to make the decision (*delay* conditions) or that they could either make the decision now themselves or delegate the decision to the caterer (*delegate* conditions).

9.2. Results

A logistic regression with target (self or other) and method of avoidance (delay or delegate) as predictors of choice avoidance indicated that, overall, participants were equally likely to delay (40%) as to delegate (41%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 0.03$, $p = 0.85$, Odds Ratio = 0.96, and they were more likely to avoid a decision when the decision was for someone else (47%) versus themselves (34%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 7.47$, $p = 0.006$, Odds Ratio = 0.57. These main effects were qualified by an interaction between target and method of avoidance, Wald's $\chi^2 = 6.57$, $p = 0.01$, Odds Ratio = 2.89, such that participants were more likely to delegate when the decision was for others (54%) than when the decision was for themselves (28%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 13.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.26$, but participants were equally likely to delay regardless of whether the decision was for others (41%) or themselves (40%), $\chi^2(1, N = 202) = 0.02$, $p = 0.89$, $\phi = 0.01$.

9.3. Discussion

People are more likely to delegate but not delay when faced with choices for others versus choices for themselves, consistent with H3 and the notion that people are more interested in transferring the responsibility and blame associated with choosing for others than avoiding choices more generally. Whereas delaying choices for others merely postpones having to assume responsibility and blame for those decisions, only delegation provides the benefit of absolving people from the personal and interpersonal consequences that make choosing for others so uniquely burdensome. Yet, perhaps it is not this benefit, but rather the benefit of providing an easy way out of having to invest effort into making a decision for someone else that makes delegation distinctly appealing relative to deferral. Experiment 5 dives deeper into the unique benefits of delegation by exploring people's willingness to entrust choices for themselves and others to other people versus chance devices.

10. Experiment 5: Do people just want an easy way out?

In informal settings, undesired or challenging choices often get made with the help of chance or luck—via die rolls, coin flips, or rocks, papers, and scissors. But do people believe that randomness can shoulder the responsibility for the outcome it ultimately decides, or do they believe that responsibility stays with the people who use randomness to settle decisions? And does this affect their willingness to use devices to resolve choices for themselves and

others? If individuals delegate to avoid responsibility when making a decision for another person, it seems possible that they could cede decision responsibility to chance as well. After all, it was not them who determined the final outcome, it was “just the luck of the draw.” Though recent studies (see Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012) have shown that people on whose behalf a decision was made will attribute responsibility to luck instead of to the original decision maker, it remains unknown if those original decision makers themselves view passing decision responsibility to chance to be a viable option. Thus, in this study, participants chose on behalf of themselves or another person, and were given the option to delegate or the option to flip a coin as the alternative to choosing themselves. We suspected that, given the role of responsibility and blame in delegation, that people would be more likely to delegate a choice for another person than a choice for themselves but that they would not consider a coin flip to be a viable means of passing the buck.

10.1. Method

10.1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 403$; 55% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 31$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were invited to participate. Participants received \$0.15 Amazon.com credit.

10.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they were choosing a hotel, as in Experiments 2 and 3. This hotel was for themselves (*self* conditions) or for their boss (*other* conditions), and in all cases, participants were told that their company had only budgeted for a two-star hotel, thus ensuring an unappealing outcome. Participants in the *delegation* conditions could either choose a hotel themselves or delegate the choice to the office manager, whereas participants in the *coin flip* conditions were given the option to choose a hotel themselves or flip a coin to determine which hotel to choose.

10.2. Results

Flipping a coin does not have the same appeal as a method of passing the buck as delegation does. A logistic regression with target of decision (*self* or *other*) and method of avoidance (choose versus delegate or choose versus flip a coin) as predictors indicated that, as before, participants were more likely to avoid choosing when the decision was for someone else (33%) than themselves (15%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 18.35$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 1.74. Participants were also more likely to delegate a decision (35%) than flip a coin (13%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 25.94$, $p < 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 1.96. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between target and method of avoidance, Wald's $\chi^2 = 11.11$, $p = 0.001$, Odds Ratio = 0.64. Consistent with our predictions in H3, when the alternative to choosing was to delegate, participants were more likely to avoid choosing when it was for their boss (53%) than when it was for themselves (17%), $\chi^2(1, N = 204) = 29.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.38$. When the alternative to choosing was to flip a coin, however, participants were equally likely to flip a coin, regardless of whether the reservation was for their boss (13%) or themselves (13%), $\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 0.02$, $p = 0.89$, $\phi = 0.01$.

Do participants believe that delegation will indeed relieve them of responsibility and blame? How does this compare to their expectations of a coin flip? In a pair of follow-up studies, participants recruited through Mechanical Turk were presented with this scenario, learned that their boss had a bad experience staying at the hotel, and indicated either how personally responsible they would feel ($N = 102$) or the extent to which they thought their boss

would blame them ($N = 110$) if they had made the decision themselves, if they had made the decision by flipping a coin, and if they had asked the office manager to make the decision. A repeated measures ANOVA indicated that anticipated felt responsibility varied based on condition, $F(2, 202) = 47.03$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.32$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants anticipated feeling less responsible if they delegated the decision to the office manager ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.75$) than if they chose a hotel themselves ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.72$), $p < 0.001$, or if they made the decision by flipping a coin ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.97$), $p < 0.001$. Participants also anticipated feeling less responsible if they made the decision by flipping a coin than if they chose themselves, $p = 0.005$. A repeated measures ANOVA indicated that anticipated blame also varied based on condition, $F(2, 218) = 59.90$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.35$. Participants anticipated being less blameworthy if they delegated the decision to the office manager ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.69$) than if they chose a hotel themselves ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.43$), $p < 0.001$, or if they made the decision by flipping a coin ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.75$), $p < 0.001$. Participants anticipated being equally blameworthy if they made the decision by flipping a coin or if they chose themselves, $p = 0.41$. Thus, participants thought that delegating to another person would more effectively relieve them from responsibility and blame than choosing themselves or flipping a coin. And, even though participants anticipated that flipping a coin would lead them to feel less responsible for their boss' bad experience than choosing themselves, they did not believe that it would absolve them from blame.

10.3. Discussion

People are more likely to delegate but not flip a coin to resolve choices for others versus choices for themselves. These results suggest that the appeal of delegation goes beyond that of providing an easy way out of making an effortful decision on behalf of someone else. Taken together with Experiment 4, these findings support the idea that people use delegation to absolve themselves of the responsibility and blame for making a choice for someone else, and that other forms of choice avoidance cannot substitute for delegation because they do not alleviate the burdens associated with choosing for others versus themselves. These results further imply that people believe that they can only pass the buck to another person, not to an inanimate object or to chance. This is consistent with the idea that delegation is in fact bounded such that people believe that only people and not luck, chance, or fate can be held responsible and blameworthy for a negative outcome. People still believe that they will be culpable because they chose to leave the decision up to an object rather than another person.

But can just any other person assume responsibility and blame? Or are certain people, like the coin, incapable of assuming responsibility and are thus unsuitable surrogates? Having established that delegating to a person is necessary to garner the benefits of passing the buck, our next experiments examine exactly which people are appropriate parties to whom decisions may be delegated. Experiment 6 examines whether people only delegate to people with relevant expertise or whether expertise is an appealing but nonessential attribute of a suitable surrogate, and Experiment 7 examines whether people only delegate to people whose status within an organization gives them the authority to assume responsibility and blame for a decision.

11. Experiment 6: Is expertise necessary?

One benefit of delegating a decision for another person, beyond ceding responsibility for the choice, is that the person to whom one delegates may be better equipped to make the choice. Delegation to a more expert decision maker can improve outcomes for all

parties involved with a choice. However, expertise, while appealing, may not be a necessary prerequisite for delegating choices for others. We suspect that people care more about transferring responsibility for a decision than they do about putting the decision into more capable hands, and that they may be willing to delegate to someone without special expertise into the decision so long as that person is able and willing to assume responsibility and blame for the choice outcome. Thus, to test H4, Experiment 6 examines whether the tendency for people to delegate choices for others more than choices for themselves depends on whether the potential surrogate has expertise relevant to the decision. In this study, participants considered a choice for themselves or for their boss that they could either make themselves or delegate to a coworker who did or did not have expertise into the decision. We predict that, although participants will be more likely to delegate to experts than nonexperts, they will also be more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves regardless of the expertise of the potential surrogate.

11.1. Method

11.1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 389$; 56% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 33$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk platform. Only participants who had an approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were invited to participate. Participants received \$0.20 Amazon.com credit for completing the survey.

11.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they and one of their classmates, Jane, were interning at a company for the semester. The team that they and Jane worked for would be traveling to Boston for a conference, and they had been tasked with choosing a hotel for either themselves (in the *self* conditions) or their team (in the *other* conditions). They were told that their company had budgeted for them and their team to stay in a two-star hotel, and they were presented with a description of two hotels that were highly unappealing. In our measure of interest, participants indicated whether they would like to make the hotel reservation themselves or have Jane do it instead. To manipulate Jane's expertise relevant to the decision, participants in the *nonexpert* conditions were told, "As you discuss the decision with Jane, she says, 'I have never been to this part of Boston, but I'd be glad to pick a hotel for you if you would like me to,'" and those in the *expert* conditions were told, "As you discuss the decision with Jane, she says, 'I was just in this part of Boston for a conference, and I'd be glad to pick a hotel for you if you would like me to.'" Finally, as a manipulation check for expertise, participants indicated on a separate page the extent to which they thought that Jane had expertise relevant to the decision.

11.2. Results

11.2.1. Manipulation check

As intended, participants thought that Jane had more expertise relevant to the decision in the expert conditions ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.15$) than in the nonexpert conditions ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(366.74) = 10.61$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.08$ (equal variances not assumed).

11.2.2. Choice method

Although expertise made delegation more likely, it was not necessary for delegation. Regardless of their coworker's expertise, participants were more likely to delegate to their coworker when the choice was for their team (52%) than when it was for themselves (36%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 6.19$, $p = 0.01$, Odds Ratio = 2.08. And, they were more likely to delegate when their coworker had expertise (58%)

than when they did not (29%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 6.19$, $p = 0.01$, Odds Ratio = 2.08, regardless of whether the choice was for themselves or others. Most importantly, however, the tendency for people to be more likely to delegate the choice when it was for their team than when it was for themselves was not predicated on their coworker's expertise, Wald's $\chi^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.91$, Odds Ratio = 0.95: when their coworker had expertise, 67% delegated when the choice was for their team and 49% delegated when the choice was for themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 6.26$, $p = 0.01$, $\phi = 0.18$, and when their coworker did not have expertise, 36% delegated when the choice was for their team and 22% delegated when the choice was for themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 193) = 4.55$, $p = 0.03$, $\phi = 0.15$. This is consistent with the notion that people pass the buck to avoid responsibility and blame rather than to put the decision in more capable hands.

11.3. Discussion

Although people are overall more likely to delegate choices to an expert, they are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves regardless of the potential surrogate's expertise. Delegating choices for others does not seem to be intended to get a more informed person's decision, but instead simply *another* person's decision. In this experiment, however, the nonexpert was a peer, and thus of equal status to the original decision maker, and by offering to make the choice, appeared willing to shoulder responsibility for the decision. What happens when the potential surrogate is of lower status, or will not be officially held responsible for the choice? Does delegation depend upon whether an organization's rules and a surrogate's relative status give them the authority to assume responsibility and blame for the choice?

12. Experiment 7: Is authority necessary?

In an organizational setting, there may be multiple people to whom one might opt to delegate a decision, some at higher levels of status, some peers, and some of lower status. There may also be rules governing how responsibility may be allocated, shared, or transferred. Experiment 7 further tests H4 by examining the bounds of delegating decisions for others by exploring if delegation depends on whether an organization's rules and a potential surrogate's status give them the authority to assume responsibility and blame for the decision. In this study, participants imagined that they worked at a small brokerage firm and that they had been tasked with choosing a stock in which to place an important client's first investment. They were told that, should they opt to delegate, either they themselves or the person to whom they delegated would be held entirely responsible for the outcome of an investment, good or bad. Additionally, we manipulated whether the person to whom they could delegate was their boss or one of their supervisees. The hierarchical relationship between a person and the potential surrogate may influence whether a person feels that they can truly avoid responsibility for a decision by delegating to that person. Specifically, a person may feel responsible for a decision made by an employee whom they oversee, regardless of who will be held officially responsible for the decision outcome. Thus, the only case in which a person may feel that they can truly be absolved of responsibility for this decision is when they delegate to someone of equal or higher status who will officially assume responsibility for the decision. We predicted that participants would be more likely to delegate when they were told that the person to whom they delegated would assume responsibility for the success or failure of the investment than when they were told that they themselves would remain responsible. We further

predicted that participants would be most likely to delegate when the potential surrogate was a superior who would assume responsibility for the decision, the one case in which they could truly feel absolved of responsibility.

12.1. Method

12.1.1. Participants

Undergraduates ($N = 181$) at a large Southeastern university participated in exchange for extra course credit.

12.1.2. Procedure

Participants imagined that they were an assistant manager at a small brokerage firm. Participants were told that they had worked their way up so that they supervised several junior brokers, although they still reported to the owner and founder of the firm. They were told that the firm was tasked with choosing a stock in which to place an important client's first \$1 million investment, and that the client would decide whether or not to invest more money with the firm based on the stock's performance over the next six months. Participants were told that there were three stocks that the client would like their firm to choose between. The stocks were fictional and balanced for positive and negative attributes:

Opus. This is a new computer software firm; their stock just went public. Not much is known about them, but some analysts think their stock may double in price over the next two years. Others are much less sure of its prospects.

HTS Services. This wireless communications company has posted reliable stock price increases for the last two years; it has historically made investors a respectable amount of money off their investment. However, there is a good chance that a new competitor in the market could have an impact on their performance.

Huron Medical. This pharmaceutical company's stock price has taken a dip over the last few months, but there are occasional rumors that they are about to release a new cholesterol medication that could earn them billions of dollars.

Participants were told that they could either choose a stock themselves (and indicate which stock they chose) or delegate the choice. They were told that either they (in the *self-responsible* conditions) or the person to whom they delegated (in the *other-responsible* conditions) would be entirely responsible for the success or failure of the investment. They were also told that the person to whom they could delegate was either their boss (*superior-surrogate* conditions) or one of the brokers they supervised (*subordinate-surrogate* conditions).

12.2. Results

Participants were more likely to delegate when they were told that the person to whom they delegated would be responsible for the decision outcome (30%) than when they were told that they themselves would be responsible (16%), Wald's $\chi^2 = 4.97$, $p < 0.05$, Odds Ratio = 2.42. The main effect of surrogate status on delegation was not significant, Wald's $\chi^2 = 0.40$, $p = 0.84$, Odds Ratio = 1.08, because, as predicted, there was a significant interaction between surrogate status and responsibility, Wald's $\chi^2 = 7.36$, $p < 0.005$, Odds Ratio = 2.94, such that participants were more likely to delegate to their boss when they were told that the boss would be responsible for the decision outcome (40%) than when they were told that they themselves would be responsible (9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 12.57$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi = 1.30$, but they were equally likely to delegate to one of the brokers whom they supervised regardless

of whether they were told that they (23%) or their employee (20%) would be responsible, $\chi^2(1, N = 88) = 0.14$, $p = 0.71$, $\phi = 0.01$. A contrast analysis (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) indicated that participants were more likely to delegate if their boss would be responsible, the one case in which they could be absolved of all responsibility, than in any of the other three conditions ($z = 2.88$, $p < 0.005$).

In a follow-up experiment, 130 participants recruited from the same population indicated how responsible they would feel for the outcome of the decision and to what extent they thought they would be blamed for the outcome of the decision in each of the four conditions, supposing that they decided to delegate their decision. A repeated measures ANOVA indicated that participants anticipated feeling more responsible when they themselves would be officially held responsible for the decision (adjusted $M = 5.09$, $SE = 0.10$) rather than the person to whom they delegated (adjusted $M = 3.44$, $SE = 0.12$), $F(1, 129) = 189.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.60$, and when they delegated to one of the brokers they supervised (adjusted $M = 4.78$, $SE = 0.10$) rather than their boss (adjusted $M = 3.75$, $SE = 0.12$), $F(1, 129) = 74.15$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.37$. Most importantly, there was a marginally significant interaction between surrogate status and responsibility, $F(1, 129) = 3.59$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants believed that they would feel less responsible when they delegated to their boss and ceded responsibility ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.76$) than when they delegated to one of the brokers they supervised and retained responsibility ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.20$), $p < 0.001$, when they delegated to one of their brokers and ceded responsibility ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.51$), $p < 0.001$, and when they delegated to their boss and retained responsibility ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.63$), $p < 0.001$.

With regard to anticipated blame, a repeated measures ANOVA indicated that participants believed that they would be blamed more when they themselves would be officially held responsible for the decision (adjusted $M = 5.38$, $SE = 0.10$) rather than the person to whom they delegated (adjusted $M = 3.28$, $SE = 0.11$), $F(1, 129) = 251.87$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.66$, and when they delegated to one of the brokers they supervised (adjusted $M = 4.85$, $SE = 0.09$) rather than their boss (adjusted $M = 3.81$, $SE = 0.12$), $F(1, 129) = 82.12$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.39$. Moreover, there was an interaction between surrogate status and responsibility, $F(1, 129) = 6.43$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that participants believed that they would be blamed less when they delegated to their boss and ceded responsibility ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.61$) than when they delegated to their boss and retained responsibility ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.67$), $p < 0.001$, when they delegated to one of their brokers and ceded responsibility ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.46$), $p < 0.001$, and when they delegated to one of the brokers they supervised and retained responsibility ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.10$), $p < 0.001$. These follow-up results suggest that the reason why delegation was greatest in the condition where participants could delegate to their boss and cede responsibility to him is because it was the only condition in which participants felt that they could actually be rid of felt responsibility and blame for the decision outcome if they delegated.

12.3. Discussion

Experiment 7 paints a more complete picture of where exactly the buck stops. People's willingness to delegate decisions in an organizational setting depend on the hierarchical relationship between them and their potential surrogate as well as the organizational rules governing their ability to transfer responsibility to that surrogate. Again supporting H4, people readily delegate to people of equal or higher status who can officially assume responsibility for those choices, but hesitate to cede decision control to

people who lack the institutional authority to assume responsibility for the decisions. People avoid delegating if the rules of their organization dictate that they themselves will still be held responsible for the choice outcomes. They also avoid delegating if the potential surrogate is of lower status because, regardless of who is deemed officially responsible, they believe that they themselves will still feel responsible for the decision and be blamed for its outcomes should the decision turn out poorly.

13. General discussion

The present research shows that although people are often reluctant to allow others to make decisions that impact them personally, they are more eager to delegate decisions or “pass the buck” when they are faced with decisions that affect other people. People are more likely to delegate choices for others than choices for themselves, especially choices with potentially negative consequences, stemming from a desire to avoid feeling responsible or being blamed for such decisions rather than a desire to avoid difficult choices or a lack of concern for the decisions’ consequences. Although the degree to which decision makers anticipate being blamed by the person for whom they are deciding is predictive of the tendency to delegate, how much they expect to feel responsible for the other person’s outcome, even if they do not expect to be blamed, increases delegation as well. As evidence of this, people were more likely to delegate when choosing for another person than for themselves regardless of whether the person for whom they were choosing knew who chose on their behalf, and people were especially likely to delegate when that person would know their identity. Additionally, people seem to care more about avoiding blame for bad outcomes than getting credit for good outcomes, as evidenced by the fact that people were equally likely to delegate a choice between attractive options regardless of whether it was for themselves, someone who would know their identity as the decision maker, or someone who would not know their identity. Delegation confers benefits that other forms of choice avoidance, like delaying the choice or choosing at random, do not, namely, the ability to transfer responsibility for the outcome of the choice to another party. Consequently, people are more likely to delegate but not delay or flip a coin to resolve decisions for others than decisions for themselves. Nonetheless, delegation of choices for others is constrained—people feel comfortable delegating to someone without expertise relevant to the decision so long as that person will assume responsibility for the choice, but they only feel able to pass the buck to another person who has the authority to truly assume the responsibility for the decision outcome.

13.1. Limitations and future directions

Our studies are designed to examine the decision to pass the buck, and show that the anticipated consequences of the decision determine the likelihood of delegating. One could imagine, however, that what people anticipate happening and what really happens after the decision might be different. An interesting direction for future research would be to examine whether delegation actually allows people to avoid these negative emotional consequences. Does it allow people to avoid feelings of responsibility, or do people still feel responsible despite their best efforts to transfer responsibility to others? Do they feel relief upon ceding responsibility to others? Or do they feel guilt or shame for failing to make a decision themselves, for burdening another person with the decision, or for the consequences of the ultimate decisions? We suspect that delegation might, in fact, free people from feeling responsible for others’ outcomes. At least for personal decisions, even though taking others’ advice does not allow advice takers to feel less

responsible for negative outcomes (Palmeira, Spassova, & Tat Keh, 2015), delegation does seem to allow people to feel less responsible (Steffel & Williams, *in preparation-a*). Although delegation may provide people with some relief, ceding decision control to others and shirking that responsibility may be threatening to people’s self-esteem and therefore depleting (Usta & Häubl, 2011).

Additionally, whereas the present research focused on the perspective of the person opting to choose themselves or delegate, future research might consider the perspective of the person for whom the decision was made. When someone delegates a decision, how might the person who experiences the consequences of that decision assign blame to the person who delegated the decision versus the person who ultimately made the decision? Furthermore, how competent would they perceive someone who delegated a decision to be, and would they be likely to entrust that person with other decisions in the future? There is some evidence in the context of economic games to suggest that those affected by a delegated decision are more likely to blame and therefore punish the person who ultimately made the decision as opposed to the person who delegated (Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012). Future research may explore whether this generalizes beyond the game context, in which the rules of the game may dictate what constitutes fair play, to organizational contexts in which the norms and expectations for appropriate behavior may differ. Finally, although delegators may fear that others may judge them harshly if they were to delegate choices with which they were entrusted, research from the literature on advice-seeking hints that their chosen surrogates may actually be flattered to be sought out and judge delegators to be more competent as a result (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015).

Another route for future research to take might be to examine other factors that restrict or decrease people’s likelihood of passing the buck. Just as people’s relative status and power within an organization may determine whether and to whom they are able to delegate, other social roles may restrict delegation as well. For example, it might be more difficult for someone to pass the buck to an outside party (e.g., a consultant or a member of another organization) than to another insider. Likewise, a parent might not feel able or willing to delegate decisions regarding his or her children, as the expectation that a parent will be the responsible party is too high and the idea of entrusting such decisions to outsiders might be too aversive. In addition to people’s current social roles, people’s aspired social roles and career trajectories may also matter. For example, a person who aspires to be promoted within a company might be less inclined to delegate their tasks and decisions as doing so might suggest that they want less rather than more responsibility. Although Experiment 3 suggests that people are not less likely to delegate decisions with positive consequences with the hope of earning credit or praise for such decisions, in cases where people are aspiring to a higher position, people may sometimes even seek out decision responsibility so long as the expectation for success is high so that they can demonstrate their ability to take on additional responsibility.

13.2. Theoretical and practical implications

Although the term “passing the buck” is common, there is at present little research examining when people are likely to do so and to whom they may do so. Understanding the dynamics of delegation generally and buck passing specifically is of theoretical consequence for researchers in management, marketing, psychology, and of practical consequence for managers, marketers, and anyone who bears responsibility for making decisions for others. For instance, the fact that decision makers are more likely to delegate decisions on behalf of others than ones on their own behalf suggests that people who are in a position of making decisions

for others may be more amenable to others' input and support than those making choices for themselves. Likewise, encouraging people to think about the other people who may be affected by their decisions may make them feel more responsible for the outcome and thus more amenable to seeking counsel from others. Another meaningful contribution is in identifying to whom people can delegate in order to successfully pass the buck. The fact that people prefer delegation to deferral, that they only delegate to other people rather than opt to have inanimate objects or chance make the decision, and that they only delegate to people with the status to assume responsibility for the decision, suggests that delegation is something more complex and nuanced than simple decision avoidance. Practically, it suggests that automated agents like algorithms cannot take the place of human agents as potential surrogates. It also points to why managers may sometimes fail to delegate decisions to other employees even when not doing so contributes to organizational inefficiencies—because delegating means that they

will have less control over the outcome of the decision, and they may expect to assume the blame for the decision regardless of whether or not they make it themselves. Most of all, this research identifies choice delegation as a meaningful and relevant topic for study, emphasizing that studying decision making necessitates not only understanding what people want to choose but how they wish to make a choice and whether they want take responsibility for doing so.

Appendix A

In Experiments 2, 3, 5, and 6, participants considered a choice between the following hotels. Participants considered three unattractive or attractive hotel options in Experiments 2 and 3, and they considered the first two unattractive hotels in Experiments 5 and 6.

Option #1	Hotel Rating ★ ★	<i>Worst shower ever! No hot water and water pressure was non-existent. Would never recommend! -J.P.</i>
		<i>Terrible customer service! I had to wait 4 hours for my room to be ready. Not impressed. -M.S.</i>
		<i>Fairly good value. -D.P.</i>
Option #2	Hotel Rating ★ ★	<i>The beds were horribly uncomfortable! Like sleeping on rocks. -R.P.</i>
		<i>About what I expected. -B.G.</i>
		<i>On a business trip and very far from the convention center! Seemed to be in an unsafe neighborhood! -K.W.</i>
Option #3	Hotel Rating ★ ★	<i>This hotel is incredibly out dated and worn down! It is absolutely hideous. -D.G.</i>
		<i>Dingy with horrible lighting. Smelled like cigarette smoke. Much worse than I expected! -A.M.</i>
		<i>Had the standard amenities that I needed for a business trip. -D.C.</i>
Option #1	Hotel Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★	<i>Best shower ever! Endless hot water and perfect water pressure! Would absolutely recommend! -J.P.</i>
		<i>Excellent customer service! Offered online check-in and my key and room were ready when I arrived! Very impressed! -M.S.</i>
		<i>Fairly good value. -D.P.</i>
Option #2	Hotel Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★	<i>The beds were unbelievably comfortable! Like sleeping on clouds! -R.P.</i>
		<i>About what I expected. -B.G.</i>
		<i>On a business trip and super close to convention center! Gorgeous views and seemed to be in a safe neighborhood! -K.W.</i>
Option #3	Hotel Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★	<i>This hotel is incredibly contemporary! Absolutely beautiful! -D.G.</i>
		<i>Immaculately clean with great natural lighting. Much more luxurious than I even expected! -A.M.</i>
		<i>Had the standard amenities that I needed for a business trip. -D.C.</i>

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