# Choices of Different Subjective Quality: Inner Structure and Phenomenology

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A problem of choice is one of universal problems, common to all humankind. In most real life situations it is essentially impossible to find an *objectively* “right” or, at least, optimal decision of a task; thus, the *subjective* quality of choice process seems to be a critical issue and should be an object of a special study.

In earlier research ([1], [2]), we found four qualitative dimensions of choice which are invariant for various real life choices: elaboration, emotional valence, autonomy, and satisfaction with the outcome. We developed and validated a 23-item questionnaire called the *Subjective quality of choice technique* (SQC) based on semantic differential methodology and measuring these key choice parameters.

The aim of the current study was to investigate differences in the subjective experience of “high”-quality (HQ) and “low”-quality (LQ) choices by comparing their inner structure and phenomenological descriptions.

We proposed the participants (N=130) to recollect two different choice situations (HQ and LQ ones) from their experience (in randomized order). We asked them to describe these situations, evaluate them by the SQC, and fill a number of self-report measures.

We compared the descriptions of HQ and LQ choices using quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Using t-test, we found significant differences in 3 of 4 scales of the SQC: HQ choices were evaluated as much more mindful, pleasant, and satisfying, than LQ ones. Using correlation analysis of SQC-scales (separately for HQ and LQ choices), we found differences in associations between scales: for instance, autonomy was positively associated with emotional parameters of choice process only in case of HQ choices. Factor analysis of the SQC-items (separately for each type of choice) showed that in case of HQ choices autonomy scale was split into 2 different factors – *independence* (“I have made this choice on my own (independently)/ following the advice of my folks”, “depending only on myself/ hoping for others’ assistance”, etc.) and *voluntariness* (“in line with my desire/ without a desire”, freely/ under pressure”, etc.). On the contrary, there were no references to voluntariness in choice in free descriptions and structure of LQ choices.

In other words, this refers to the issue of *agency* as the key point which differentiates HQ choices from LQ ones. A good autonomy in choice does not mean only lack of pressure and/or advice – it means having a possibility to be the author of one’s choice, taking the initiative in the process (which is also associated with positive emotions during choosing). Here we can see the parallel with “negative” and “positive” liberty (I. Kant, E. Fromm, I. Berlin, C. Taylor).

Thus, speaking of choice is hardly meaningful without specifying its subjective quality. The regularities found on the situations of HQ choice cannot be generalized for the choices of lower quality, and vice versa.

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References

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