Discussions of proposals for self-determination by children and adolescents have typically centered on concerns about their ability to exercise autonomous choice completely. Consequently, in recent years there have been numerous articles analyzing the cognitive requirements for competent decisionmaking in various situations. Despite this interest in applying psychological research to questions of children's rights, the available literature has been largely indirect. That is, data concerning the ways in which children actually exercise choices when given the opportunity for self-determination in "real life" are notably absent. Rather, reviewers of the literature have tended to extrapolate from laboratory research on cognitive and social development.

Furthermore, competence has been emphasized with the exclusion of other psychological considerations which may be relevant to policy decisions concerning increased autonomy for children. In particular, little attention has been given to the effects upon children of allowing them increased freedom and autonomy. In what ways does the experience of freedom and autonomous action change children? It is conceivable that children might be able to make a competent choice, but that they would be adversely affected by facing the dilemmas involved. Conversely, it is possible that children's competence to make a reasoned choice is marginal, but that there are positive benefits from the experience of decisionmaking per se which outweigh the risks.

This article is an examination of possible effects of freedom and autonomous action on children. Competence issues aside, what actually happens when the autonomy of children is increased? It should be emphasized that this discussion consists, primarily, of speculations based on research which is tangential to the question of effects of increased autonomy. There have been few systematic evaluations of natural settings in which children have been given a clear measure of autonomy.

In considering the effects of autonomy, it is important to examine the psychological meaning of this concept. Behavior may ultimately be determined by external contingencies, and in that sense freedom and autonomy may in fact be illusory. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that the experience of autonomy, irrespective of its antecedents, is an important mediating variable and motivating force. Indeed, the social-psychological literature is filled with research on the effects of the experience of power and perceived control.

Even from a behaviorist perspective, "freedom" can be conceptualized meaningfully. The degree of personal autonomy one has can be defined as the breadth and efficacy of his behavioral repertoire: the range of alternative behaviors an individual possesses in a given situation. Also relevant is the strength of available counter-controls: the degree of control an individual has over his controllers. That is, does the individual have any power to reinforce or punish those who are in authority?

The significance of this psychological conceptualization of autonomy is that it implies that freedom and autonomy are not all-or-none variables. Even if children possess rights (whether legal or "natural") to self-determination in particular contexts, it does not necessarily follow that individual children will experience having real choices.

More generally, children (particularly young children) are unlikely to perceive themselves as having rights, regardless of the "objective" reality of their legal
status. As Keith-Spiegel puts it, children learn that they should "obey thy father and mother"—and anyone else bigger than they are. Both cognitive-developmental and social-learning theorists emphasize the significance of participation in role-taking in determining the rate of moral development. Essentially, moral-development theorists conceptualize achievement of milestones in cognitive development as necessary but not sufficient for progress in moral development. For example, from a cognitive-developmental perspective, formal-operational thought (the capacity to think abstractly) is necessary for the attainment of principled moral reasoning. However, attainment of such reasoning based on abstract ethical principles also requires extensive experience with resolving ethical problems in social interaction and exposure to diverse, "higher" points of view. From a more social perspective, development of such principled reasoning requires a pluralistic cultural setting in which there is an opportunity to attempt to integrate diverse expectations and to choose among a variety of means of access to social and economic goals.

The implication of these analyses is that a requisite of enhanced moral development is the opportunity for democratic resolution of social conflicts and for independent moral decisionmaking by children. For example, in his classic text on moral development, Piaget advocated schools based on "self-government" and interpersonal cooperation. From Piaget's perspective, schools based on a primary value of respect for authority are unlikely to facilitate moral development on an individual level. Rather, such disciplinary systems confirm the young child's egocentric view of morality as the avoidance of punishment for violation of rules established by authority.

Expressed more concretely, it is unsurprising that children do not acquire a sense of personal involvement in a democratic political system when the student "government's" authority is limited to choosing the band for the dance in the school gym. Conversely, political socialization is likely to be enhanced if freedom of the press is not simply taught as an empty platitude but is experienced by the school newspaper staff. "Due process" is much more meaningful when actively applied to school disciplinary procedures.

The long-term political cost of a system in which socialization is based on an experience of lack of participation and of a "law-and-order" morality is a populace which does not apply democratic principles to concrete situations. There is ample evidence that, while most Americans support civil liberties in the abstract, large percentages of American adults would not extend freedom of speech to unpopular groups or due-process rights to criminal defendants. While this lack of tolerance is in itself disturbing, one of the related issues is that many citizens probably do not exercise their rights because they neither perceive themselves as really having rights nor understand the application of rights. Of concern here is that these views are most common in disadvantaged groups who have little experience in diverse social role-taking. Perhaps an initial step toward these groups' use of their rights under the law as a "mobility belt" is the development of socialization systems which foster the experience of autonomy.

There may be immediate affective and behavioral consequences of increasing freedom for children. Perhaps most directly relevant here is reactance theory. Briefly, reactance theory predicts that when an established or expected behavioral
freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination, reactance is aroused and the individual is motivated to restore the freedom. There are several ways in which this motivation can be expressed behaviorally. Most obviously, the individual can act directly to restore the freedom. The classic example of this means of expression of reactance is the phenomenon of “reverse psychology.” That is, if told not to make a particular choice, the individual will in fact do so.

Secondly, there can be an indirect attempt to restore freedom, such as disobedience of the next request made. Third, the individual may not take action to restore freedom, but (if not) reactance will result in a perception of increased attractiveness of the lost freedom.

Given the relevance of this social-psychological concept to children, it might be predicted that increased freedom would reduce reactance. Correspondingly, one might expect a reduction in oppositional behavior which was principally motivated by a desire to assert freedom of choice.

However, such predictions are overly simple. There are several factors which affect the strength of reactance, one of which is the importance of the threatened freedom. One of the considerations in making predictions about reactance in children is that, as discussed previously, they may not feel that they have freedom initially. Obviously, one cannot restore a freedom which was not there.

Studies using first and fifth-grade children, unlike earlier research with college students, have shown that direct attempts at social influence by adults produce compliance. Only when another adult creates or restores the freedom does the direct influence produce observable reactance behavior.

The initial predictions of decreased reactance with increased freedom may be valid, however, for older children and adolescents, who are usually provided with more opportunities for independent behavior than younger children. At least one study corroborates this hypothesis. Wicklund and J. Brehm informed junior-high students that they would be having an assembly with a speaker who would advocate lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. Four days later, the students were told that the assembly had been canceled because a school administrator objected to their hearing the speech. As predicted by reactance theory, the majority of students in the “censorship” condition expressed more positive attitudes toward lowering the voting age. Presumably the freedom to hear diverse opinions was in fact salient to the junior-high students.

In addition to reactance, other social-psychological constructs may be useful in explaining or predicting responses of children to increased freedom. The best researched of these concepts is probably locus of control, the degree to which an individual perceives reinforcement as being under his control. While there is probably some relationship, it is important to note that there is not a direct parallel between increased opportunity for autonomous decisionmaking and locus of control, and the relationship may be a weak one. To reiterate, locus of control involves perceived control over reinforcers. It is conceivable that a youngster might have control over decisionmaking but still not feel that his behavior has systematic consequences. In other words, a child might believe that his being rewarded or punished was not contingent on the quality of decision that he made.

To the extent to which increased autonomy implies an increase in control over contingencies of reinforcers, an increase in locus of control would be expected, however.
Such an increase was reported in an evaluation of an "Open Campus" high school in northwest Georgia. Students were given the same freedoms that they would have if they were attending a community college. Locus of control of the students became more internal, especially for blacks, who arguably had less previous experience of control.

The concept of "personal causation" may be more promising than locus of control as an outcome variable in studies of effects of increased autonomy. While the concepts are superficially similar, reported correlations between personal causation and locus of control are quite low. The difference is conceptualized as being between perception and experience. Personal causation refers to the global experience of being in control: a dimension ranging from feeling that one is the Origin of his behavior to feeling that one is a Pawn, pushed around by the environment. Of interest in the present context are the efforts of deCharms and his associates to develop school settings which are based on increasing children's sense of themselves as Origins. Through teacher training, they have helped teachers to increase the "origin climate" in their classroom, to increase students' sense of personal control and responsibility. Such attempts to vest control in the students result in increased academic achievement as well as increased Origin scores.

As suggested by such findings, there is reason to believe that increased autonomy would increase children's performance in those spheres in which they had the opportunity to make choices. For example, the affirmative act of making a choice might induce cognitive dissonance if a child did not follow through on an educational or treatment program to which he consented. Consequently, the freedom to decide might increase the child's motivation to perform well in the program. Furthermore, to the extent to which such programs are in themselves stressful, participation in the decisionmaking process might serve as an "inoculation" against the stress to follow and increase the probability of the child's sustained involvement in the program.

The significance of choice as a factor in performance has been examined most extensively in a series of studies by Brigham involving preschool and elementary-school children. In these studies, response rate in working arithmetic problems was markedly accelerated when the children had had the opportunity to choose among enjoyable math games as reinforcers (compared with teacher-selection of the consequence). Choice itself was also demonstrated to be a positive reinforcer. That is, response rate was further increased if the child had the opportunity to choose where he or the teacher would select the consequences. Response rate was also accelerated, although not to a statistically significant extent, by the opportunity to set goals within the contingencies. Even though the student-set goals were substantially the same as had been set by the teacher, most children preferred to set the goals themselves.

While there is reason to believe that increased autonomy for children would have a number of positive psychological effects, it is probable that these variables would interact with task difficulty and age. To the extent to which children are not predisposed to make "good" decisions in difficult situations, the negative consequences of these decisions might actually increase the children's discomfort. Furthermore, where the choice is between aversive events or one of such complexity that it is an
impossible choice, the necessity of making a choice itself may be quite anxiety-provoking.

In order to identify factors predicting these potential negative effects as well as to test other hypotheses suggested in this article, there is a need for field research evaluating systematic attempts to increase children's autonomy. There are now many programs which include some measure of youth autonomy, but these programs have seldom been evaluated.

One of the few relevant evaluation studies was an examination of the effects of allowing elementary-school children access to health care on their own initiative through the school nurse as done by C.E. and M.A. Lewis, A. Lorimer, and P.P. Palmer. Lewis et al. related use-patterns to variables which had been found to be relevant to adults' use of the health-care system (e.g., class, sex, locus of control, perceived vulnerability, etc.). They also studied effects of the program on health-related beliefs, actual use rates, etc. Briefly, they found that the program was effective in reducing perceived severity of health problems and increasing the value placed on self-care. Actual patterns of utilization of health care were not changed, however. It was concluded that "the lack of behavioral change should not be a surprise, since the children are still immersed in a real-world system that removes them from a decisionmaking role with regard to their own health care." 27

Lewis et al.'s study is instructive in at least two ways. First, it is indicative of the kind of research that needs to be done: conceptually-based evaluations of attempts to increase children's autonomy in natural settings. Second, the results of this study lend emphasis to the point that a sense of autonomy may not be easily engendered when most of children's experiences indicate that they have very little choice. At most, isolated attempts to increase autonomy are likely to have effects which are situation-specific. Researchers must be as sensitive to "psychological" as to "objective" freedom.

Footnotes

6 Keith-Speigel, op. cit., p. 56.
13 Levine, F.J. and J.L. Tapp, op. cit.
17 Wicklund, op. cit.; and Brehm, op. cit.
21 Ibid.
26 Ibid.