

**Negotiating Constraint:
Compliance, Creativity, and the Perception of Non-Canonical
Options**

This proposed dissertation examines why some individuals perceive, evaluate, and act on unconventional or socially discouraged options under constraint, while others do not perceive them as viable -- even when those options are structurally available. Across domains such as education, health, identity, and crisis decision making, institutions typically present a narrow set of pathways. Alternative routes may exist, but they are often obscured, stigmatized, or excluded from formal guidance. While many individuals adhere to a "canonical" path despite significant personal cost, others identify and pursue more "creative" options that allow them to advance in ways they judge most suitable.

The central questions of this research: What governs the transition from compliance to negotiation when an individual faces a high stakes constraint? Why do some people accept an institutional boundary as fixed while others treat the same boundary as a negotiable variable? Related questions include how legitimacy is assigned to certain decisions and not others, how risk is evaluated under pressure, and why similar constraints can produce either adaptive expansion or catastrophic collapse of perceived alternatives. The project is not directly concerned with celebrating rule-breaking or prescribing deviation, but may brush upon these subjects to gain understanding of how people come to see certain choices as possible, impossible, legitimate, or forbidden, [etc].

The Need for This Research

The need for this project arises both from personal observation and from gaps in existing scholarship. In my own experience across educational, medical, and institutional contexts, I repeatedly encountered situations in which an officially sanctioned pathway was framed as the only [correct] viable option, despite the existence of alternatives that were technically permitted but culturally

discouraged or perceived as high risk. Pursuing those alternatives required independent research, tolerance for uncertainty, and willingness to navigate social illegibility. These experiences raised questions that were not adequately answered by existing frameworks explaining conformity, creativity, or rational choice. Rather than treating these experiences as proof of a personal method, I see them as prompts for inquiry into broader patterns of perception and decision making.

More broadly, while several fields address aspects of this problem, they rarely converge on the question of how individuals actively negotiate these constraints:

Decision science and cognitive psychology have produced extensive research on biases and bounded rationality, explaining why people rely on defaults and make predictable errors under uncertainty. *[For example: why does someone hide money under the mattress like their grandfather did, even though holding those funds in a savings account could pay for a family trip every year?]*

Sociology and political psychology have examined system justification, norm internalization, and clarifying why individuals defend existing structures even when those structures disadvantage them. *[For example: remaining a loyal employee to a company with stagnant wages and poor work-life balance.]* But this research doesn't always show how/why some people reject loyalty/authority, while others internalize it completely.

Creativity studies often focus on innovation, originality, or artistic production, but tend to bracket life navigation and high stakes decision making outside explicitly creative domains. *[For example: exploring how an artist developed an innovative style in acrylic brush strokes... while often leaving unexamined the non-artistic decision processes that make such creative trajectories possible.]*

Cultural and institutional theory showcases how systems simplify reality to exclude what does not fit their models, yet often stops just shy of examining how individuals work within or around those simplifications. *[For example: a patient with a complex medical history whose every complaint is dismissed as "just lose weight" but not showing how a patient might find ways to work through this rigid system when seeking help.]*

This project may also engage with cognitive neuroscience, particularly research emerging from neuroaesthetics and the neurobiology of decision making. Recent work examining how brains process novelty, evaluate risk, and filter sensory and social information may offer empirical grounding for what this dissertation aims to explore.

Neurodivergence and Option Perception

One lens notably absent from these frameworks is neurodivergence. Existing research suggests that individuals with neurodivergent cognitive profiles -- including autism, ADHD, and other variations, may process social expectations, institutional norms, and risk evaluation differently than neurotypical individuals. Where neurotypical cognition may be attuned differently for social cohesion and norm internalization... a neurodivergent cognitive thought process may be less likely to automatically absorb "how things are/should be done" as equivalent to "how things could be done."

Many neurodivergent individuals face significant barriers precisely because institutions are designed around neurotypical assumptions. However, the same cognitive differences that create friction with institutional expectations may also enable clearer perception of alternative options that others filter out as illegitimate or invisible entirely. With this dissertation, I would love to explore whether neurodivergent cognition represents one mechanism among others, by which some individuals perceive these "option spaces" differently, and what this could suggest about the relationship between cognitive style, institutional design, and adaptive decision making.

Methodology

This proposed research will lean toward qualitative analysis. It will begin by developing a conceptual framework, and defining key terms. These concepts will be grounded in existing scholarship from cognitive psychology, sociology, and cultural theory, and other related fields. The project will then analyze case studies drawn from those domains including educational pathways, medical decision making, identity negotiation, and crisis responses. These cases will be selected not solely to evaluate outcomes, but to reconstruct

decision processes—focusing on how alternatives were discovered, evaluated, justified, or dismissed, and how perceived constraints shaped each stage.

Comparative analysis will identify recurring patterns, points of divergence and failure outcomes. I will ensure particular attention to survivorship bias, unequal access to resources, and differential risk exposure [and any other identified nuances]. The project will explicitly address the ethical limits of generalization, recognizing that strategies available to some individuals may be catastrophic for others. The goal is not to produce a universal prescription, but to map conditions under which adaptive negotiation is more or less likely to occur, and to clarify where narratives close off options that were actually viable.

Structure and Scope

The dissertation is conceived as a book intended for a broad audience while maintaining rigor and transparency about its limitations. I envision structuring it around conceptual chapters interwoven with analytic case studies, allowing readers to engage with both the framework and its practical real-world applications. The aim is to make complex ideas legible without reducing them to motivational advice or simplistic self-optimization, as often seen in existing books touching on decision science. I am very open to alternative recommendations on structure and scope.

Ultimately, I see such a project sitting across & between disciplines rather than within any single one. By examining how people perceive and negotiate “option spaces” under constraint, and what triggers the shift from compliance to negotiation... This dissertation aims to contribute a grounded, interdisciplinary account of adaptive decision making that could speak to both scholarly and public audiences.
