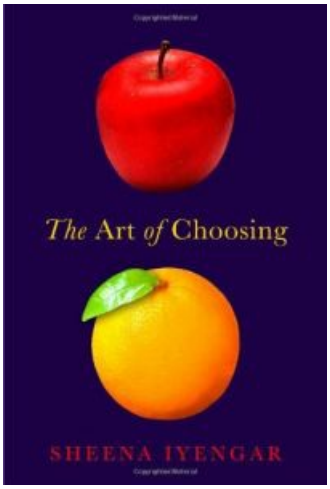

Book The Art of Choosing

Sheena Iyengar
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Recommendation

Easy choices – like cake or death, as in British comedian Eddie Izzard's famous routine – don't require much thought or study. But almost any other choice invites complications and confusion, a problem social psychologist Sheena Iyengar mines and turns into fascinating reading. In this study of different facets of decision making, she delves into such topics as whether your devotion to Coca-Cola relies on its taste or its ties to Santa Claus, and she touches upon subjects as varied as fashion, rats, jam, arranged marriage, and even the life and death of premature babies. This compelling book answers questions about decisiveness with intriguing studies, though you may not agree with every conclusion. Perhaps Iyengar could have offered her suggestions for improved, real-life decision making more succinctly, but she provides excellent detail, plus take-home tips for making better choices in the supermarket or the boardroom. Given the fine job she's done combining research with gee-whiz revelations, *BooksInShort* suggests this book to managers, marketers, public relations professionals and all sales executives.

Take-Aways

- Choice defines and empowers people, although it sometimes overwhelms them.
- Human beings want to have choices, even from infancy. Being able to choose – and thus have some control in life – makes folks healthier and happier.
- Culture – whether it emphasizes individualism or collectivism – plays a part in your expectations about choice.
- Religion and national culture can define values that limit individual choices.
- Each decision defines your identity, so having too many choices adds difficulty.
- Choosing is easier when the brain's two decision-making systems – the unconscious "automatic" system and the conscious "reflective" system – work together.
- Advertising and marketing reach deep into culture to influence your choices.
- Heuristics (rules of thumb), including framing, patterns, availability and confirmation bias, also can affect decision making.
- You can work against your inherent choice biases if you understand them.
- Too many options stymie most people, so they don't decide or they dislike their conclusions, but you can learn to make better decisions.

Summary

Choosing Life or Death

Would you sink or swim if you found yourself adrift in the ocean? That is, could you be like Steven Callahan? He's the boater who survived a capsizing accident by spending 76 days on a raft 800 miles from the Canary Islands living on barnacles and rainwater. Or would you give up and die? No one can say for sure, but it's interesting to consider for many reasons, including the idea of choice. That theme unites the stories of many survivors who define their life-and-death decisions as deliberate choices. Callahan wrote, "I choose to kick as long as I can." Most people hope their survival doesn't depend on that, though choices do define people.

> "The ability to choose well is arguably the most powerful tool for controlling our environment."

Even rats act differently if they seem to believe it will save their lives. When psychobiology researchers in 1957 put rats in individual jars of water to see how long they would swim before drowning, rats of similar strength swam surprisingly different time spans. Some sank almost immediately; others swam an average of 60 hours. In a follow-up, researchers put the rats in the water jars, let them "wriggle free," caged them and immersed them, over and over. Put in the water for the last time, the rats all swam to exhaustion, averaging 60 hours. None gave up instantly. It seems they had learned that escape was possible, and they chose to live as long as they could.

> "The challenges we face in finding our authentic self and choosing in accordance with it are considerable."

Choice covers both the capacity to control people and events, and an underlying belief in the possibility of such control. Being able to rule your environment gives power to self-determination, even for babies. In one study, researchers attached strings to the arms of infants "as young as four months." When they moved their arms, music played. The babies grew "sad and angry" when researchers removed the strings and they could no longer make music play, though music continued sporadically. Wanting to choose comes naturally, though it isn't linked to any distinct biological advantage. Without choice, as zoo animals show, even if someone else's decisions set you up in luxury, you won't be happy. Having a measure of control makes people happiest. A nursing home let some patients decide when to watch movies and which plants they wanted. After six months, those who had more perceived choice "were happier and more alert" and, it turned out, "were less likely to have died."

Culture Dictates the Need for Choice

For 5,000 years, young women met their husbands for the first time on their wedding days, after their parents arranged the marriage. Many contemporary people don't understand how anyone could let others handle that vital decision. Some faiths still prescribe many matters for their believers. Researchers expected members of these fundamentalist faiths to feel more hopelessness, pessimism or depression than people with more choice, but, instead, they show less. Depending on culture, religion and homeland, people grow up with varying stories about the nature of God, control and choice. Such inculcated values dictate how they interpret self-determination and how much choice they want.

> "Fight or flight was never intended to address 6:30 a.m. wake-up calls or the long commute to a dead-end job."

The collective way of life that dominated world culture through history provides a community context for arranged marriage. Romantic love always has existed, but it didn't get linked to marriage until individualism emerged in Western society. Research with couples in either arranged or love-based marriages shows that high "love scores" appear early in romantic marriage, but love diminishes over time, and lower love scores appear early in arranged marriages, but love increases over time.

> "It seems like common sense not to work in the room that has the TV, even if it's turned off, or to put away the cookies...but we don't always do the very simple things that make self-control less of a struggle."

A culture's "degree of individualism or collectivism" helps explain choice worldwide. Anglo-American students did better schoolwork when given personal choices. Asian-American kids did better when they thought they were doing what their mothers had picked out for them to do. Western kids learn to consider their own wishes first, using an individualist perspective centered on personal interests, traits and preferences, from cereal to career choice. In collectivist cultures, kids learn to emphasize their group in their decisions. They identify themselves by this connectedness. They learn to prioritize fulfilling their parents' wishes, not their own. Understanding different cultural narratives and how they affect choice should help people globally understand each other better. For example, in the 1980s, the Sealed Air Corporation, which makes Bubble Wrap, gave small teams responsibility for production at their plants. U.S.-born workers felt empowered and they succeeded. But the policy upset one plant's Cambodian and Laotian immigrant workers, who thought their manager wasn't doing his job properly. Only when the firm's leaders introduced the new plan gradually and the workers learned that it was congruent with their deep belief in "collective harmony" did they find it "culturally acceptable."

Defining Yourself with Choice

The way that people interpret consumerism's choices has changed with industrialization. Buying was once very matter-of-fact, but it has been transformed into collecting markers of personal identity. As "an ethos of independence" took over, getting noticed replaced blending in, and choice became an exercise of personal definition. Now, people everywhere face utterly new alternatives. Options for family structure, religion and even eye color (with "tinted contact lenses") let you express yourself in countless ways. Along with freedom, these decisions carry the burden of defining a person's self-image. Three challenges make this hard: People believe they are more unique than they are, they want a consistent vision of themselves and they want it to mesh with others' views of them. With each potentially immobilizing choice, people define themselves privately and socially. The solution: Try to see your identity as ever changing, so that choosing helps you discover yourself.

Expecting Great Choices – and Why That Doesn't Work

As the "marshmallow studies" of the '60s revealed, human brains have two systems: "one conscious and reflective, the other unconscious and automatic." Often, they agree. But in these studies, four-year-olds "battled" between the two systems. Researchers left each child alone with a marshmallow on a plate. The child could eat it right away, having one treat, but a kid who waited until the adult returned would earn two marshmallows. The kids waffled. After about three minutes alone, most settled for one treat. Even adults' automatic systems can be overwhelmed by such "temptation," prompting explanations like, "I don't know what came over me." The 30% of kids who held out for two treats actually went on to be superior students and adult high-achievers. The four-year-olds' restraint (some fought their automatic impulses by covering their eyes or pretending the marshmallows were clouds) suggests that physically or mentally removing a temptation can strengthen self-control. Other self-discipline steps include limiting your exposure to forbidden items or trying to synchronize your automatic and reflective systems.

> "The elaborate process of producing style...is perhaps not quite a conspiracy so much as a very chic version of the chicken-and-egg game: Which comes first, the customer or the designer?"

When it comes to choosing, rules of thumb, or heuristics, usually work, but sometimes they lead you astray, often when they work subconsciously.

Here's how four heuristics function (just knowing them might improve your decision making):

1. "Availability" shapes preferences, in that people recall and prefer exciting information, dramatic results, and the "first or last options" in a series, including a list of

job candidates.
2. "Framing," the way information is posed, greatly affects how people respond to it. When doctors presented cancer treatment options to patients based on how many survive, instead of how many die, the patients made markedly different choices.
3. "Patterns" are influential because they seem to supply order, but misreading patterns or connections can disrupt good decision making.
4. The "confirmation bias," the tendency to support "existing beliefs," leads people without data to make decisions based on unsupported assumptions.

> "The characters in many of our most compelling and enduring stories try – and often fail – to resist the lure of the forbidden. Eat any fruit but the one on this tree? Love anyone but the son of the enemy? We know how that turns out."

To protect yourself from bias, either become an expert in nearly every field or study your choices with your reflective system. However, it isn't so good at registering emotions, so using your automatic system might make you happier. Consider decisions others made in your situation.

Manipulating Choices?

In fashion, separating real options from industry-induced selections is difficult. Fashion designers unite with predictors from many industries to decide on vogue colors several years ahead, thus influencing your choices. Prognosticators and buyers preselect your available color palette long before you know what you want. Marketers who expose buyers to their wares with heavy media attention are using the powerful "mere exposure effect." This trigger is effective because people like products and concepts more with increasing familiarity, though it only works if they didn't hate them at the outset.

> "We take the choices that...have lit up like stars across our memory, and we chart our journey by them."

Differentiating among products based on real variations is difficult. Blind taste tests show that most wine drinkers enjoy cheap and expensive wines equally, but when they see the prices, expensive wines taste better to them. Some manufacturers produce a wide variety of nearly identical products over a range of prices, so choosing among related items can be mind-boggling. Consider Coke versus Pepsi, the eternal battle between very similar, sweet, carbonated drinks. Though they have nearly identical ingredients, consumers almost always claim to prefer one above the other. Coke's marketing over time made it a unique brand. Ads positioned Coke – and its patented red can – behind the front lines in World War II, and even attached it to Santa Claus. Coke paid Swedish illustrator Haddon Sundblom to create ads showing Santa giving soda to kids around the world. That became the classic St. Nick image: a round, smiling man in a red suit with a black belt and boots – now an icon tied to Coke, prompting good feelings unrelated to its taste.

> "We're reluctant to give up choice in any situation because we believe it enables us to change."

Other factors complicate decision making, such as familiar signals called "primes," which trigger "automatic associations," and ads with subtle "subliminal messages." Listing these persuaders makes people sound like automatons, choosing at the mercy of forces out of their control unless they're ever vigilant. In fact, priming and other such factors provide a subtle undercurrent to selection processes and barely affect your core beliefs. But since people dislike giving up control, they tend to overreact and idealize choice. Instead, worry about how these factors shape major decisions, like who to vote for, but not minor ones, like which drink to buy.

When Choice Overwhelms

Executives often refer to the "jam study," in which grocery shoppers with many jams to choose from bought fewer jars than shoppers with a limited selection. Now professionals use this information, for example, to decide how many mutual funds to offer clients. Although intuitively it seems that more choice might improve your quality of life, research shows diminishing returns for increasing alternatives after a certain point. A 1950s study found that from five to nine options provides the ideal range for understanding the whole picture. When Procter & Gamble cut its Head & Shoulders shampoo options from 26 varieties to 15, sales increased 10%. With fewer choices, people are increasingly ready to decide and more pleased with their decisions.

> "Choosing helps us create our lives."

People have a strong desire for more options, even though that doesn't give them better choices. Excess options tend to make people regret and second-guess their decisions, perhaps because they think about all the alternatives they sacrificed by narrowing down to a final option. How can you navigate overwhelming options? Accept that more choice isn't always good. Develop more expertise so you can make better selections. Rely on others' know-how. Turn decisions into group activities or use the collective "wisdom of the crowd," as with the *Zagat* restaurant guides showing consumer ratings. Limit your choices by type or group. Learn to choose better by starting with easy options and moving to harder ones.

Grave Choices Are Always Hard

Choice becomes more demanding when the stakes are a lot bigger than jam and soda. Studies in the medical field reveal a fascinating look at the psyche. In one particular case, parents of a critically ill premature baby had to decide to take her off life support. They struggled much more with guilt and anger after she died than did parents whose doctors made that same decision for them. In the end, the issue may be, "What are the costs exacted by the choice itself?"

About the Author

Sheena Iyengar, Ph.D., is a business professor at Columbia University. Her work has appeared in many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Fortune* and *The Wall Street Journal*.