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Every act of choosing is about who we are  
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Every day, each of us makes dozens of choices, including choosing to choose not to choose.

My bathroom-mirror survey of a cooperating respondent suggests that a majority in this visible cohort believes that most -- well, at least some; well, a few hopefully -- of these choices are made with something like reasoned analysis.

The point of Sheena Iyengar's The Art of Choosing (Twelve, 2010) is that biology, brain mechanics, culture, experience, context, presentation, beliefs, labels, associations, other people, emotional cues and self-contrived voodooos shape human choices as much as -- and often more than -- logic and number-crunching. This is deeply troubling to someone like me who had his head conked with four years of liberal arts.

Iyengar is a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business where most courses analyze economic, business, consumer and financial choices as matters of data and self-interest. As a social psychologist, she looks at all the other factors that influence these decisions. She writes that we often make choices that are not in our best self-interest; I guess we learn that early enough.

The Art of Choosing draws on Iyengar's experiences as a Sikh who lost both her eyesight and her father early in life. She stitches her own narrative into her explanations of current research findings.

Having spent her career mulling choice, she ends up both invigorated by the choosing process and willing to limit choice as a way to make it more manageable. She rightly says an excessive number of choices, particularly those that are largely similar, is often phony and designed to confuse. Better results come from fewer options that can be thoroughly researched and understood.

She finds comfort, benefits, success and "control" in traditional Indian arranged marriages, although she chose to choose her own husband. Iyengar's use of the idea of "control" in an arranged marriage is control arising from acceptance, the control felt by those who believe in a supreme power or fate.

Individuals raised in collectivist, group-oriented cultures, such as Japan, favor having more choices made for them than those raised in individualist cultures like ours where choice among options is valued and risk is accepted.

Whether one orientation is better or more successful than the other depends on how better and success are defined: both work.

While Iyengar argues for the benefits of fewer choices, I've usually found that reframing a problem to expand the number of choices yields better solutions.

When reading this book, you need to keep in mind the distinction between choice and choices. Choice means that the individual has the agency to choose or not choose; most Americans want that and value it. Choices are options. Choice without choices is meaningless, as are choices without choice. Choosing from among genuine choices is control, a powerful human need.

Iyengar knows how we make choices but she is not comfortable with managing risk or uncertainty, which are often seated on either side of choosing. She would apply for a job that she might not get, but she would not start a business or do something edgy.

There's nothing wrong with being an inside-the-box person, but it's worth knowing that the author of a book about choosing doesn't care much for it.

Caution is often rewarded; risk-taking is often penalized. Still, timidity about choosing, which is really about change, favors the status quo. Iyengar would not, I think, have chosen to throw in with the American rebels, preferring the two-thirds of the colonists who either sided with the King or sat on the fence. Hers is a static caution.

For all her understanding of the research, I found her reasoning to be oddly clueless sometimes as only a bright academic can be.

When Iyengar was interviewing Eastern Europeans after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she offered them seven popular sodas. This was not part of her research. One of the first participants made the off-hand comment that seven sodas amounted to one choice—soda. Even when she offered water, juice or soda, interviewees still saw the seven sodas as a single choice. This stumped her. She attributed their opinion to having lived under Communism.

Maybe so, maybe not. I had exactly the same reaction—soda is one choice, even though Coke and Pepsi want me to think otherwise. And the closest I've been to Eastern European Stalinism is Nova Scotia.

Iyengar shows through her review of the literature and her own experiments how consumer choices are easily and constantly manipulated. She doesn't flinch from working for such companies. She accepts things as they are and chooses not to deal with certain discordant implications of her own research. I

found this a little peculiar.

I read this book to learn how I could make better decisions and help my real-estate clients do the same. Iyengar's advice boils down to five ideas: 1) acquire subject expertise to better evaluate choices; 2) reduce the number of choices to a manageable number; 3) work within restrictions; 4) prioritize; and 5) precommit to better choices as a way of not making bad ones (e.g., adopt a no-more-than-one-cookie rule to prevent eating every Oreo in the bag).

Her approach doesn't throw data and decision-tree analysis out the window. I think it simply loads five other layers onto the old running-the-numbers-and-reason-it-out approach.

My copy of Iyengar's book is marked with repeated margin checks that indicate agreement and an equal number of "NOs." That's a book worth reading.

I was not convinced that choosing "remains an art," as she concludes. I still think it's more an act of knowledge, analysis and judgment. But I also know that the most successful choices often incorporate creativity. The Art of Choosing did help me understand that making better choices is harder than I thought, not easier.

Since all the Seltzer family talent for art piled up in my cousin Sandi ([www.sandiseltzerbryant.com](http://www.sandiseltzerbryant.com)), I better stick with the old costs and benefits and the even older pros and cons. Ours is an arranged marriage, but it still works.

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