

Sheena Iyengar: The art of choosing

1 Today, I'm going to take you around the world in 18 minutes. My base of operations is in
2 the U.S. But let's start at the other end of the map in Kyoto, Japan, where I was living
3 with a Japanese family while I was doing part of my dissertational¹ research 15 years ago.
4 I knew even then that I would encounter cultural differences and misunderstandings, but
5 they popped up when I least expected it.

6 On my first day, I went to a restaurant, and I ordered a cup of green tea with sugar. After
7 a pause, the waiter said, "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I know." I said. "I'm
8 aware of this custom. But I really like my tea sweet." In response, he gave me an even
9 more courteous version of the same explanation. "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I
10 understand," I said, "that the Japanese do not put sugar in their green tea. But I'd like to
11 put some sugar in my green tea." Surprised by my insistence, the waiter took up the issue
12 with the manager. Pretty soon, a lengthy discussion ensued², and finally the manager
13 came over to me and said, "I am very sorry. We do not have sugar." Well, since I couldn't
14 have my tea the way I wanted it, I ordered a cup of coffee, which the waiter brought over
15 promptly³. Resting on the saucer were two packets of sugar.

16 My failure to procure⁴ myself a cup of sweet, green tea was not due to a simple
17 misunderstanding. This was due to a fundamental difference in our ideas about choice.
18 From my American perspective⁵, when a paying customer makes a reasonable request
19 based on her preferences, she has every right to have that request met. The American
20 way, to quote Burger King, is to "have it your way," because, as Starbucks says,
21 "happiness is in your choices." But from the Japanese perspective, it's their duty to
22 protect those who don't know any better -- in this case, the ignorant *gaijin*⁶ -- from
23 making the wrong choice. Let's face it: the way I wanted my tea was inappropriate
24 according to cultural standards, and they were doing their best to help me save face.

¹ A *dissertation* is the major paper that you write when you study for a doctoral degree.

² Followed.

³ Right away; quickly.

⁴ Get

⁵ Your *perspective* is your way of looking at things.

⁶ A Japanese word for foreigners: 外人, literally *outside person*.

25 Americans tend to believe that they've reached some sort of pinnacle⁷ in the way they
26 practice choice. They think that choice as seen through the American lens best fulfills an
27 innate⁸ and universal desire for choice in all humans. Unfortunately, these beliefs are
28 based on assumptions that don't always hold true in many countries, in many cultures. At
29 times they don't even hold true at America's own borders. I'd like to discuss some of these
30 assumptions and the problems associated with them. As I do so, I hope you'll start
31 thinking about some of your own assumptions and how they were shaped by your
32 backgrounds.

33 First assumption: if a choice affects you, then you should be the one to make it. This is
34 the only way to ensure that your preferences and interests will be most fully accounted
35 for. It is essential for success. In America, the primary locus⁹ of choice is the individual.
36 People must choose for themselves, sometimes sticking to their guns, regardless of what
37 other people want or recommend. It's called "being true to yourself."

38 But do all individuals benefit from taking such an approach to choice? Mark Lepper and I
39 did a series of studies in which we sought the answer to this very question. In one study,
40 which we ran in Japantown, San Francisco, we brought seven- to nine-year-old Anglo-
41 and Asian-American children into the laboratory, and we divided them up into three
42 groups. The first group came in, and they were greeted by Miss Smith, who showed them
43 six big piles of anagram¹⁰ puzzles. The kids got to choose which pile of anagrams they
44 would like to do. And they even got to choose which marker they would write their
45 answers with.

46 When the second group of children came in, they were brought to the same room, shown
47 the same anagrams, but this time Miss Smith told them which anagrams to do and which
48 markers to write their answers with. Now when the third group came in, they were told
49 that their anagrams and their and markers had been chosen by their mothers. In reality,

⁷ The very top.

⁸ If something is *innate*, you're born with it.

⁹ centre

¹⁰ An *anagram* is a word that spells another word when it's letters are put in a different order.

50 the kids who were told what to do, whether by Miss Smith or their mothers, were actually
51 given the very same activity, which their counterparts in the first group had freely chosen.

52 With this procedure, we were able to ensure that the kids across the three groups all did
53 the same activity, making it easier for us to compare performance. Such small differences
54 in the way we administered the activity yielded¹¹ striking differences in how well they
55 performed. Anglo-Americans, they did two and a half times more anagrams when they
56 got to choose them, as compared to when it was chosen for them by Miss Smith or their
57 mothers. It didn't matter who did the choosing, if the task was dictated by another, their
58 performance suffered. In fact, some of the kids were visibly embarrassed when they were
59 told that their mothers had been consulted. One girl named Mary said, "You asked my
60 mother?"

61 In contrast, Asian-American children performed best when they believed their mothers
62 had made the choice, second best when they chose for themselves, and least well when it
63 had been chosen by Miss Smith. A girl named Natsumi even approached Miss Smith as
64 she was leaving the room and tugged on her skirt and asked, "Could you please tell my
65 mommy I did it just like she said?"

66 The first-generation children were strongly influenced by their immigrant parents'
67 approach to choice. For them, choice was not just a way of defining and asserting their
68 individuality, but a way to create community and harmony by deferring to the choices of
69 people whom they trusted and respected. If they had a concept of being true to one's self,
70 then that self, most likely, was composed, not of an individual, but of a collective.
71 Success was just as much about pleasing key figures as it was about satisfying one's own
72 preferences. Or, you could say that the individual's preferences were shaped by the
73 preferences of specific others.

74 The assumption then that we do best when the individual self chooses only holds when
75 that self is clearly divided from others. When, in contrast, two or more individuals see
76 their choices and their outcomes as intimately connected, then they may amplify one

¹¹ Resulted in.

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77 another's success by turning choosing into a collective act. To insist that they choose
78 independently, might actually compromise both their performance and their relationships.
79 Yet that is exactly what the American paradigm¹² demands. It leaves little room for
80 interdependence or an acknowledgment of individual fallibility¹³. It requires that
81 everyone treat choice as a private and self-defining act. People that have grown up in
82 such a paradigm might find it motivating. But it is a mistake to assume that everyone
83 thrives¹⁴ under the pressure of choosing alone.

84 [Part 2]

85 The second assumption which informs the American view of choice goes something like
86 this. The more choices you have, the more likely you are to make the best choice. So
87 bring it on Walmart with 100,000 different products, Amazon with 27 million books and
88 Match.com with -- what is it? -- 15 million date possibilities now. You will surely find
89 the perfect match. Let's test this assumption by heading over to Eastern Europe.

90 Here, I interviewed people who were residents of formerly communist countries, who had
91 all faced the challenge of transitioning to a more democratic and capitalistic society. One
92 of the most interesting revelations came not from an answer to a question, but from a
93 simple gesture of hospitality. When the participants arrived for their interview I offered
94 them a set of drinks, Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, seven to be exact.

95 During the very first session, which was run in Russia, one of the participants made a
96 comment that really caught me off guard. "Oh, but it doesn't matter. It's all just soda.
97 That's just one choice." (Murmuring) I was so struck by this comment that from then on I
98 started to offer all the participants those seven sodas. And I asked them, "How many
99 choices are these?" Again and again, they perceived these seven different sodas, not as
100 seven choices, but as one choice: soda or no soda. When I put out juice and water in
101 addition to these seven sodas, now they perceived it as only three choices: juice, water
102 and soda.

¹² A *paradigm* is a typical example or pattern of something. /'pærədɑɪm/

¹³ Ability to make mistakes or be wrong.

¹⁴ Live well; be healthy.

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103 Compare this to the die-hard devotion of many Americans, not just to a particular flavor
104 of soda, but to a particular brand. You know, research shows repeatedly that we can't
105 actually tell the difference between Coke and Pepsi. Of course, you and I know that Coke
106 is the better choice.

107 For modern Americans who are exposed to more options and more ads associated with
108 options than anyone else in the world, choice is just as much about who they are as it is
109 about what the product is. Combine this with the assumption that more choices are
110 always better, and you have a group of people for whom every little difference matters
111 and so every choice matters. But for Eastern Europeans, the sudden availability of all
112 these consumer products on the marketplace was a deluge¹⁵. They were flooded with
113 choice before they could protest that they didn't know how to swim.

114 [Part 3]

115 When asked, "What words and images do you associate with choice?" Grzegorz from
116 Warsaw said, "Ah, for me it is fear. There are some dilemmas¹⁶ you see. I am used to no
117 choice." Bohdan from Kiev said, in response to how he felt about the new consumer
118 marketplace, "It is too much. We do not need everything that is there." A sociologist from
119 the Warsaw Survey Agency explained, "The older generation jumped from nothing to
120 choice all around them. They were never given a chance to learn how to react." And
121 Tomasz, a young Polish man said, "I don't need twenty kinds of chewing gum. I don't
122 mean to say that I want no choice, but many of these choices are quite artificial."

123 In reality, many choices are between things that are not that much different. The value of
124 choice depends on our ability to perceive differences between the options. Americans
125 train their whole lives to play "spot the difference." They practice this from such an early
126 age that they've come to believe that everyone must be born with this ability. In fact,
127 though all humans share a basic need and desire for choice, we don't all see choice in the
128 same places or to the same extent.

¹⁵ A very strong rain.

¹⁶ A situation which makes problems, often one in which you have to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance.

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129 When someone can't see how one choice is unlike another, or when there are too many
130 choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and
131 frustrating. Instead of making better choices, we become overwhelmed by choice,
132 sometimes even afraid of it. Choice no longer offers opportunities, but imposes
133 constraints. It's not a marker of liberation, but of suffocation¹⁷ by meaningless minutiae¹⁸.
134 In other words, choice can develop into the very opposite of everything it represents in
135 America when it is thrust upon those who are insufficiently prepared for it.

136 But it is not only other people in other places that are feeling the pressure of ever-
137 increasing choice. Americans themselves are discovering that unlimited choice seems
138 more attractive in theory than in practice. We all have physical, mental and emotional
139 limitations that make it impossible for us to process every single choice we encounter,
140 even in the grocery store, let alone over the course of our entire lives. A number of my
141 studies have shown that when you give people 10 or more options when they're making a
142 choice, they make poorer decisions, whether it be health care, investment, other critical
143 areas. Yet still, many of us believe that we should make all our own choices and seek out
144 even more of them.

145 [Part 4]

146 This brings me to the third, and perhaps most problematic assumption: "You must never
147 say no to choice." To examine this, let's go back to the U.S. and then hop across the pond
148 to France. Right outside Chicago, a young couple, Susan and Daniel Mitchell, were about
149 to have their first baby. They'd already picked out a name for her, Barbara, after her
150 grandmother. One night, when Susan was seven months pregnant, she started to
151 experience contractions and was rushed to the emergency room. The baby was delivered
152 through a C-section, but Barbara suffered cerebral anoxia, a loss of oxygen to the brain.

153 Unable to breathe on her own, she was put on a ventilator. Two days later, the doctors
154 gave the Mitchells a choice. They could either remove Barbara off the life support, in
155 which case she would die within a matter of hours, or they could keep her on life support,

¹⁷ Not being able to breathe.

¹⁸ Very small details.

156 in which case she might still die within a matter of days. if she survived, she would
157 remain in a permanent vegetative state, never able to walk, talk or interact with others.
158 What did they do? What would any parent do?

159 In a study I conducted with Simona Botti and Kristina Orfali, American and French
160 parents were interviewed. They had all suffered the same tragedy. In all cases, the life
161 support was removed, and the infants had died. But there was a big difference. In France,
162 the doctors decided whether and when the life support would be removed, while in the
163 United States, the final decision rested with the parents. We wondered: does this have an
164 effect on how the parents cope with the loss of their loved one? We found that it did.

165 Even up to a year later, American parents were more likely to express negative emotions,
166 as compared to their French counterparts. French parents were more likely to say things
167 like, "Noah was here for so little time, but he taught us so much. He gave us a new
168 perspective on life." American parents were more likely to say things like, "What if?
169 What if?" Another parent complained, "I feel as if they purposefully tortured me. How
170 did they get me to do that?" And another parent said, "I feel as if I've played a role in an
171 execution."

172 But when the American parents were asked if they would rather have had the doctors
173 make the decision, they all said, "No." They could not imagine turning that choice over to
174 another, even though having made that choice made them feel trapped, guilty, angry. In a
175 number of cases they were even clinically depressed. These parents could not
176 contemplate giving up the choice, because to do so would have gone contrary to
177 everything they had been taught and everything they had come to believe about the power
178 and purpose of choice.

179 [Part 5]

180 In her essay, "The White Album," Joan Didion writes, "We tell ourselves stories in order
181 to live. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We
182 live entirely by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate¹⁹ images, by the ideas

¹⁹ Not connected. Unrelated.

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183 with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria²⁰ which is our actual
184 experience." The story Americans tell, the story upon which the American dream
185 depends is the story of limitless choice. This narrative promises so much: freedom,
186 happiness, success. It lays the world at your feet and says, "You can have anything,
187 everything." It's a great story, and it's understandable why they would be reluctant²¹ to
188 revise it.

189 But when you take a close look, you start to see the holes, and you start to see that the
190 story can be told in many other ways. Americans have so often tried to disseminate²² their
191 ideas of choice, believing that they will be, or ought to be, welcomed with open hearts
192 and minds. But the history books and the daily news tell us it doesn't always work out
193 that way. The phantasmagoria, the actual experience that we try to understand and
194 organize through narrative, varies from place to place. No single narrative serves the
195 needs of everyone everywhere.

196 Moreover, Americans themselves could benefit from incorporating new perspectives into
197 their own narrative, which has been driving their choices for so long. Robert Frost once
198 said that, "It is poetry that is lost in translation." This suggests that whatever is beautiful
199 and moving, whatever gives us a new way to see cannot be communicated to those who
200 speak a different language. But Joseph Brodsky said that, "It is poetry that is gained in
201 translation," suggesting that translation can be a creative, transformative act.

202 When it comes to choice, we have far more to gain than to lose by engaging in the many
203 translations of the narratives. Instead of replacing one story with another, we can learn
204 from and revel in the many versions that exist and the many that have yet to be written.
205 No matter where we're from and what your narrative is, we all have a responsibility to
206 open ourselves up to a wider array²³ of what choice can do, and what it can represent.

²⁰ A changing scene of real or imagined figures, for example as seen in a dream or created as an effect in a film/movie.

²¹ Unwilling

²² Spread

²³ Variety

207 And this does not lead to a paralyzing ²⁴moral relativism. Rather, it teaches us when and
208 how to act. It brings us that much closer to realizing the full potential of choice, to
209 inspiring the hope and achieving the freedom that choice promises but doesn't always
210 deliver.

211 If we learn to speak to one another, albeit through translation, then we can begin to see
212 choice in all its strangeness, complexity and compelling beauty. Thank you.

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²⁴ Making you unable to move, unable to make a choice

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