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An Expert on Choice Chooses

Michael Weschler for The New York Times

Sheena Iyengar, who is blind, called on a committee of experts and friends to help her express herself through decor.

By PENELOPE GREEN

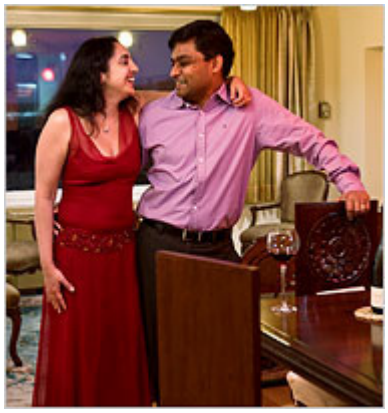
SHEENA IYENGAR, the S. T. Lee professor of business at Columbia University, was home from work the other day, dressed in a cream-colored twin set and a sparkly gold pencil skirt. She was seated at the head of a long cherry dining table she designed with her husband, Garud Iyengar, a financial engineer who is also a professor at Columbia, in the living room the two had decorated in earthy colors with a mix of furniture found at auction, in India and at a store in downtown Manhattan. There was a clear point of view — a consistent style or discernible taste, if you will — that linked all the objects in the room, including Dr. Iyengar's outfit.

Yet there was a mystery, too: how had Dr. Iyengar, a social psychologist who firmly believes that taste is an unreliable compass, and who is also blind, navigated the murky landscape of self-expression and made a series of decisions in all sorts of categories — clothes, paint, furniture — that would seem to require both sight and a conviction about taste?

Like most of us, Dr. Iyengar is an expert in none of these areas. She is, however, an expert in choice, after a decade and a half of research teasing out the patterns of human decision-making and revealing its contradictions: how we love choice but are confounded, even paralyzed, by too much of it. In "The Art of Choosing," her first book, out this month, she presents the biology and the psychology of choice, examining how different cultures construct choice and pondering how we might choose better.

"We're born with the desire, but we don't really know how to choose," she said. "We don't know what our taste is, and we don't know what we are seeing. I'm a great believer in the idea of *not* choosing based on our taste. I could wear makeup today, and one person would say it looks bland, another would say it looks fake, and another might tell me I look really natural. Everyone is convinced their opinion is the truth, and that's what I struggle against. But doesn't everyone? What I do is aim for consensus. That's my rule of how to choose."

Dr. Iyengar wasn't kidding. She has built a wardrobe and furnished her sprawling Upper West Side apartment in a postwar building owned by Columbia University by convening a committee of experts, trusted advisers that include her teaching assistants, her friends and her husband, whose opinions she gathers and then weighs, one against the other. It's an elaborate and fascinating process she follows out of necessity and offers as a tool for the rest of us.



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Dr. Iyengar and her husband, Garud, both professors, at their Upper West Side home.

"You cannot get to the heart of how things are going to be perceived unless you ask these judges," she said. "When you're choosing furniture for your home that's supposed to express who you are, what you are also saying is you want other people to infer what you want them to infer. What if they see something different? Wouldn't it be really depressing if you're trying to be bohemian and instead they see you as Rush Limbaugh?"

Animals, particularly humans, love choice, and seem to thrive on it. Like Robert Frost, rats will choose mazes with branching paths, even though there is no reward for doing so. Four-month-old humans, in one experiment that allowed them to "choose" pleasant music by tugging on strings, were palpably irritated when their strings were taken away, even though the same music played at random intervals. Even on a cellular level, brain imaging, mapping a biology of choice, reveals that neurons respond more to rewards people have chosen than those they have passively received. Study after study concludes that it's the choosing that delights, more than the object of choice.

Here's the paradox: too much choice paralyzes us, no surprise to anyone who has ever stumbled into a Super Stop & Shop and tried to buy eggs. Dr. Iyengar is the author of a now-famous academic study that describes this paralysis.

In the mid-'90s, when she was a doctoral student at Stanford, Dr. Iyengar, now 40, conducted her jam study, in which research assistants set out pots of jam on tables in a supermarket — different flavors in groups of 6 and 24 — and offered samples to shoppers. What she discovered was that many of the shoppers who visited the table with the smaller sampling ended up buying jam along with their other groceries, as compared with a mingy few among those who visited the table with the greater selection. The study — more is less! — made Dr. Iyengar a darling of corporate America and a celebrity in social science circles.

In her book, she described the magic number — seven — at which "more" turns into less, inspired by a 1956 study that showed that our senses can easily discern anywhere from five to nine objects of perception, like sounds, colors or lights — any more, and we begin to make errors.

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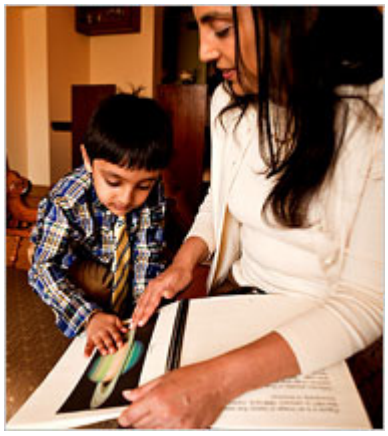
A Hindu shrine (he is Hindu, she was raised a Sikh).



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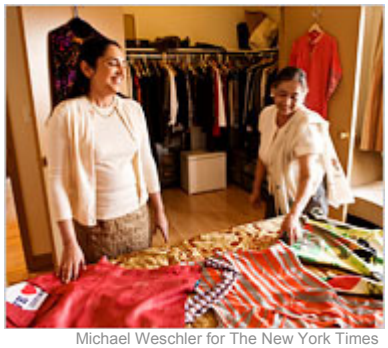
Dr. Iyengar with her son, Ishaan.



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Dr. Iyengar with her mother.

The number of people in Dr. Iyengar's committee of experts hovers around five, she said. There are three research assistants: Esther Adzhiashvili, who is Russian and loves color; Kate McPike, who hails from Delaware and "likes J. Crew"; and John Remarek, "who everyone says you can tell has no interest in clothes." Sometimes her personal trainer will be roped in, or another friend. Her husband always gets a vote (she sees him as "maverick" in his tastes — he wanted to paint their family room black — yet he described himself in an e-mail message to this reporter as conservative, proving his wife's contention that labels are wildly subjective).

The Drs. Iyengar met by chance, at a bus stop in San Francisco when they were graduate students at Stanford. She found him morose and geeky; he thought she was confident, bright and funny. Predictably, they fell in love, and married a few years later, horrifying their families — he is Hindu, she was raised a Sikh — whose respective cultures view arranged marriages as sacrosanct. (Panicked, his mother visited the family astrologer who told her not to fret; the couple had been married in seven past lives and would be married in seven future ones as well.)

It was an involved process, Dr. Garud Iyengar told this reporter later via e-mail, to choose someone outside his caste and his religion. In the end, his marriage calculus was solved by the tricky factor of love. "Over time," he said, "she became someone I could not live without."

Explaining romantic attraction, Dr. Sheena Iyengar writes, is nearly impossible. In her book, she relates the experience of one of her graduate students who traveled to India with a woman in whom he had a romantic interest. He knew of the "love on a suspension bridge" study, which showed, through an elaborate ruse, that participants were more likely to develop an attraction for someone they encountered in a dangerous setting, like a spindly bridge swaying above the rapids, than in a more staid environment. The student thought to recreate the study with the object of his affection, on a thrill ride on a rickshaw through Delhi. But it backfired: the woman fell for the rickshaw driver.

Dr. Iyengar can trace her interest in choice back to her own family life — "my first study," as she calls it. She was raised in the collision of two cultures, each of which is based on markedly different ideas about choice. There was the strict Sikh world she was born into, "which had all sorts of rules and duties you had to think about constantly: you couldn't cut your hair, you couldn't talk to boys," she said, and the American one outside her door in Flushing, Queens, for which choice, of course, is its own religion.

Further, she and her only sister were born with retinitis pigmentosa, a disease of retinal degeneration, which left both blind by the time they were in high school. Biology and

culture had seemingly boxed her into a world of little choice. Was she trapped by fate or made resilient by these preconditions, she asks in her book.

Certainly she was inspired by them. As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Iyengar looked at how religious conviction affects people's sense of well-being. Her results were counterintuitive: the more orthodox and fundamentalist among her study group appeared to be more optimistic and resilient than the people who followed a looser, more liberal religion.

Any upbeat narrative, it seems — God is in control, Coke is refreshing — helps us feel better about our choices even as it limits them. (Studies have shown that Coke's narrative, for example, is stronger than Pepsi's, largely owing to feelings about the color red and the soft drink's iconic typeface, which gives Coke market share but is also the reason most folks can't tell the difference in blind taste tests.)

Which brings us back to decorating.

"One of the things we're struggling with is what impression we want to communicate," she said. "Do we want a warm house, do we want to come across as chic? What do those words mean? It took me a while to figure out I wanted a mix-and-match approach: I wanted a home that wasn't purely Indian or purely American, and I wanted it to be eclectic. But what does eclectic look like?"

Dr. Iyengar knew from her research and that of others that it's easier to choose from options sorted into categories. Coffee drinkers, for example, enjoy their coffee selection more if they choose coffee flavors from menus organized into categories like "spicy" or "nutty" than if they pick from an uncategorized list of 50 flavors. So she and her husband visited small furniture stores, researching the feeling and look of labels like "modern," "Colonial" and "English antique."

"The worst thing you can do first is go to a huge department store," she said. "Once you learn what you like and realize you can't afford any of it, then you can take that information, the shapes that appeal and the patterns they fit into, and go back into the bigger pool of choices."

Once she made her furniture choices, every object — the dainty English desk in her bedroom, the suite of Louis chairs in the living room — was previewed by her committee. "What's great about getting other people's comments is you learn the problems," she said. "You can get so enamored of something you don't give enough weight to its drawbacks. You have to invite criticism."

Did she have to train her gang? "At first people are nervous," she said. "Then they loosen up, and knowing their opinions are just one of a group's and that I don't always go with their opinions, they get more competitive, which makes them state things in a more pure way."

It's been a two-year process, "and we're still not done," Dr. Iyengar said. "You have to be choosy about what you choose."

Recently, her husband mentioned he had a hankering for a weekend house. Her response was instant, she said. "I told him he was crazy."