

**Shrink Rap Radio #245: The Art of Choosing**  
**David Van Nuys, Ph.D. aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Sheena Iyengar**

**Excerpt:** *“Who we are is the sum of all our choices. So in the old days, who we were wasn't completely about personal choice. It was also affected by your birth, what town you lived in, and it was understood that a lot of choices were dictated by that. Today though, everything about you, not just the big ticket items like whom you marry and what career you undertake and where you live, everything about you including your eye color, including your iPhone color. Everything about you is supposed to tell the world who you are. And you're supposed to engage in this exercise of unearthing by looking deep inside you what that core you is and having identified that make choices ranging from the very small and trivial to the really really big that are consistent with that, that somehow will add up to this meaningful, understandable, recognizable package. And this should be recognizable not just to you, but to everybody in the same way.*

**Introduction:** That was the voice of my guest, noted social psychologist and author, Sheena Iyengar, Ph.D., is the inaugural S.T. Lee Professor of Business at Columbia Business School, with a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology, and the Research Director at the Jerome A. Chazen Institute of International Business. Sheena's primary research interest is how people perceive and respond to choice, and for her research on this topic she has been the recipient of numerous honors, including the prestigious Best Dissertation Award from the Society of Experimental Social Psychology in 1998 and the Presidential Early Career Award in 2002. She is currently recognized as one of the world's leading experts on choice. Her work is regularly cited in the popular press, including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Fortune and Time magazines, the BBC and National Public Radio, as well as in bestselling books such as Blink by Malcolm Gladwell. She has recently written her first book, The Art of Choosing, which explores the mysteries of choice in everyday life.

**Dr. Dave:** Now, here's the interview. Dr. Sheena Iyengar, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Hi. Thanks for having me here today.

**Dr. Dave:** I'm thrilled to have you on the show. My wife gave me a copy of your book, “The Art of Choosing”, as a Father's Day gift and I knew I had to try to get you on the show. I love the cover art, by the way. The apple and the orange really pop against the velvety looking black background.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Laughs. Well, I hope it ended up being a good Father's Day present.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, definitely. Definitely. Now I have to ask you if you are related to the famous author of the Yoga text B.K.S. Iyengar who wrote “Light on Yoga” 1966 which helped kick off the Yoga revolution in this country.

**Sheena Iyengar:** He's probably related to my husband. I'm actually an Iyengar by marriage rather than by birth.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Sheena Iyengar:** All the Iyengars are related to each other. It's a very small community.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh really? So it's not as big a community as, say, Smith or Jones?

**Sheena Iyengar:** No, no, no. It's a very particular small brahmin caste in the south of India. So they usually only marry one another. Iyengars usually only marry other Iyengars so they're all related to each other. But I was actually a <unclear > before marriage, so...

**Dr. Dave:** So you're sort of a revolutionary. You broke that pattern.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yeah. We actually were quite an unusual marriage when we got married because, you know, I was a Sikh, so I'm supposed to marry a Sikh and my husband is an Iyengar and he was supposed to marry an Iyengar.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Well, I loved.. One of the things that I really like about your book is the way that you weave your family history in and out of the narrative, and in and out of all the research that you cover. So that's really a nice touch..

**Sheena Iyengar:** Oh thank you.

**Dr. Dave:** And I feel like I know you as a result of that. And you and I have at least one thing in common which is that we were both undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Oh really?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. But I see that you had a double major getting a BS, Bachelor of Science in Economics from Wharton and a BA in Psychology.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yes. I actually started off at the Wharton School and about halfway through I found that I was taking a lot of Psychology courses so I figured I should be a... turn it into a double major.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that's quite a feat because I know that the Wharton School is extremely demanding in and of itself and I think double majors are fairly rare. Now you later got a Ph.D. From Stanford in Social Psychology but I notice you have an appointment at Columbia in both business and Psychology.

**Sheena Iyengar:** I do indeed.

**Dr. Dave:** And I've recently become interested in Behavioral Economics. Would you describe yourself as a Behavioral Economist as well as a Social Psychologist?

**Sheena Iyengar:** I would describe as a Social Psychologist who does research in the area of choice and the role choice plays in your life and I don't limit myself to just psychological analysis. So I do look at the world choices in our lives from the perspective of psychology, economics, anthropology,

physiology. So some of the questions that I look at certainly relate to behavioral economics, but I wouldn't say that I'm a behavioral economist.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. And was it still while you were an undergrad that you began doing research with Marty **Seligman**?

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yes, I was a junior while I was at University of Pennsylvania and I stumbled upon Marty's lab.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I've been very interested in the whole positive psychology movement that he kicked off. And I've interviewed several of his students and colleagues. Now he inspired you to do some research in religion and on outlook on life as affected by their religious affiliation. So tell us about that research and what you found.

**Sheena Iyengar:** So when I was a junior in college at the University of Pennsylvania, I went to Marty **Seligman** and I asked him whether members of more fundamentalist faiths would be more depressed than members of more liberal faiths. And my **reasoning** behind that was because I was taking Marty's class and in Marty's class we talked about learned helplessness and how when people experience loss of control in their lives they become depressed and also there's a lot of performance detriments as well, like athletes tend to perform less well when they experience less control, students tend to perform less well with school when they feel a lack of control. And so I reasoned, well, if you belong to a fundamentalist religious group, and I was raised a Sikh, you have to live with a lot of rules, and you're constantly being told what to do and what not to do, and you're told what to eat and what not to eat, and what to wear and what not to wear, and whom to marry and how to live your life. And I thought, my God, that's definitely a recipe for no control. And I pose these questions to Marty and he, you know, he wasn't a religious person and really didn't know what the answer was to that question. And so we decided to do a study. And what we did was we.. I.. I surveyed members of nine different religious faiths and they ranged from liberal to fundamentalist. So their liberal faiths were reformed Jews and Unitarians. Moderately a fundamentalist faith included Catholics, Methodists, conservative Jews. The fundamentalist faiths included Calvinists, Muslims, Orthodox Jews. Actually it's one of the few studies done on Muslims that pre-date 9/11.

**Dr. Dave:** Interesting.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yes. And actually got a lot of attention after 9/11.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Sheena Iyengar:** And what we found was that the members of more fundamentalist faiths were actually more optimistic. And I just don't mean about their religion. I mean in terms of their attitudes about negative things happening in their lives. So if they lost a job, if they.. if something terrible just happened to them.. or a death in the family, or they didn't get what they were really looking forward to, they were much more likely to have a more optimistic outlook on life. The things that somehow work out for them that they would just have to use a different strategy or try again, whereas members of

more liberal faiths were much more pessimistic about things happening in their lives. And this of course links up to differences in depression rates. Remember the more fundamentalist faiths were much less likely to be prone to being depressed than the more liberal faiths. And then when we compared people who believed in God versus people who didn't we again found that the people who didn't believe in God were more pessimistic and more prone to being depressed.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that's a fascinating finding. So early on, you've found that religious fundamentalists were more optimistic and happiest... happier. And many people have suggested that religion is a kind of crutch to shield people from taking responsibility for their lives and the hard facts of existence. And then I'm wondering if your later research that you've talked about later in the book on the French vs. the US handling of end-of-life issues supports that notion as well, that somehow, religion is a crutch, but maybe in a positive way.

**Sheena Iyengar:** That's an interesting question. I think a lot is happening with religion. You know, it's a set of ideas and you know, ideas link to lots of different effects on your life. But.. so lets take up a few of them. Um.. religion gives you a greater sense of how you're supposed to live your life, like what's right and wrong, to remove some of the uncertainty, and I'm going to put "right" and "wrong" in quotes. So that means that when you're trying to decide what to do, there's already a script that tells you what you should do, which can help reduce some uncertainty. When you're an atheist, you have to write the script entirely from scratch, which imposes a lot more uncertainty. It also gives you a lot more work to do because you have to figure out every single, "right and wrong", how you're supposed to live your life, from the very small to the very important or consequential. I think that's one benefit of religion is it reduces some amount of uncertainty. Another benefit is that it gives you guidance on how you're supposed to do a lot of things. It actually frees up your mind perhaps for doing.. for spending more time and effort on the things that it doesn't give you guidance on. And I also think that religion has much more of an emphasis on destiny and fate and in acceptance of what is and in trying to make more of what is. Sort of adapt better to what is. Which is in a sense freeing. You know, if you feel like, look, what happened happened was God's will then that perhaps better enables you to focus in on now how am I gonna adjust to what has happened and make the most of it. Whereas, say if I don't believe that what happened was what God willed and I believe it happened because it was something I did, or some set of chance event, then I feel more responsibility and burden to try to undo it or try to make it not happen again. And I'm more fixated on changing the environment or the circumstances that led to the event rather than trying to focus on well, what do I do next. So I think those are the differences between being religious versus not being religious.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, you were raised as a Sikh and so I'm wondering how your research and what you learned.. has that had any impact on your spiritual choices?

**Sheena Iyengar:** Well, I'm not particularly religious. But I do think that.. I guess having been raised as a Sikh, and certainly most of my family are very traditionally Sikh, it does give me from the perspective of an inside observer, so I'm an observer who was an insider, you know, it does give me a sense of when people say, well, why would anybody be really religious? You know, I do have a sense of what are the positives that are gained from being a member of a religious faith. And also being an insider on the atheist front, I do have a sense of what are some of the cons, you know, both the pros and

the cons associated of being on the other side.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. Well, let's talk about your famous jam study and your finding that less is more. I love the way that you relate that people are always telling you about this famous study without realizing that you're the person that carried it out. So tell us all about that. People stopping you on airplanes and you konw.. and telling you about your research and then take us through the research and its implications.

**Sheena Iyengar:** When I was a Ph. D. student at Stanford University, I used to frequent this grocery store called Dyaeger's and it's this fancy, upscale grocery store that offered you lots and lots of choice. You know, like 250 kinds of mustards and vinegars and 500 different kinds of cheeses and vegetables and fruits. And I used to go to that store and I loved going there because it's almost like going to an amusement park, you know, and you walked in there and they had so many varieties and you start contemplating all the excitement and fun you are going to have. And then somehow when I got into the manouche of having to decide what I was actually gonna buy, I was never able to figure out what I was gonna buy. And one day, I walked into the manager's office and I asked him, you know, "Do you find that customers have a harder time actually figuring out what they were gonna buy?" And you know, he was very surprised by the question. And said, "Well, look. Haven't you seen how many customers come to our store? Haven't you seen the busloads of tourists that come here?" And of course I had. We decided to do a little experiment where we put out a tasting booth where we put out either six different flavors of jam or twenty four different flavors of jam. And we looked at two things. First, in which case were people more likely to stop and sample some jam. And we found that 60% of the people stopped when there were 24, whereas, 40% of them stopped when there were six different jams on display. But when it came down to buying behavior, which is the second thing we looked at, we observed the opposite effect. Of the people who stopped when there were 24 different jams on display, only 3% of them actually bought a jar of jam. Whereas of the people who stopped when there were six jars of jams on display, 30% of them actually stopped and bought a jar of jam. And so what we observed with that, even though people were initially attracted to the larger display of jam, when it came down to buying, they were more likely to buy a jar of jam when there were six than when there were 24.

**Dr. Dave:** That's really fascinating. And this finding actually has a really widespread impact in the world of commerce.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yeah, it's been.. you know.. it's funny all the different ways in which people talk about it. It's come back at me in a lot of different ways. But yeah, people regularly refer to it as "The Jam Study".

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. (chuckles)

**Sheena Iyengar:** Or "The Jam Problem". But yeah, I've been.. because of that jam study, there's been times that I've been accused of being a communist by people like Rush Limbaugh.. you know.. to people telling me about how they've used "The Jam Study" to adapt the three-by-three rule. You know, how we split from 24 and six down to a three by three rule is quite fascinating to me, but you know,

it's.. I think what people are experiencing for the most part is that it is difficult to make choices when you have a lot of choices. And that's true not just of jams, but it's true trying to decide whom to marry. It's true trying to decide which.. how to deal with the Medicare Part D, prescription drug policy. It's true when you're trying to figure out how to put away your money for your retirement. No matter what it is, having a lot of choices makes it harder for you how to figure out what to choose. And I think people are struggling with finding ways to simplify it for themselves. And I think that The Jam Study, you know, sums up the problem quite succinctly.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, there's a whole movement around simplicity so in a way that certainly supports what you're saying. Are there situations where lots of choice is better?

**Sheena Iyengar:** Well...

**Dr. Dave:** I mean, we sort of think of that as the American way, right... have lots of choice?

**Sheena Iyengar:** It's about how we frame it. So can we handle lots of choice? Certainly, some of us can. Well, all of us can in particular context. So if you have real expertise in something and you know exactly what you want, then having a lot of choice is very helpful. So for example, a chessmaster, when he/she is contemplating their next move, they are actually keeping track of more choices than there are stars in the galaxy at that moment, at that time. But because of their expertise, when they're actually making the decision of what should be their next move, they are able to so quickly eliminate all of those irrelevant or inappropriate options and just zero in on that handful of options that they have to compare and contrast at the moment. So whenever we know, we use specific preferences, like if you know that you need.. you really want to eat kung pao chicken right now, then yes, you're better off running to the Chinese restaurant that's offering you a hundred options than offering you five, because you're more likely to find kung pao chicken. You're not gonna be overwhelmed because you know exactly what you want, you just have to ask for it and more choice in that case is better. So in that case, certainly having more choices is better. But how many times do we all know precisely what we want? And I think it's another way that we often undervalue in which more choice is better. I think that more choice is more better not when they're provided to you, not when you're trying to decide between A, B, C, all the way down to Z. It's when you are able to create an option that's most suitable for you. So what we really mean is the freedom to be able to invent the option that's most relevant for us. And if that we're able to do, then more choice is truly better.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. Let's back up a little bit because I sort of skipped from the beginning of your book to the end. In your prologue, you posed a set of questions that you hope to answer in your book. And I think those questions provide a good skeleton for some discussion here. So for example, you ask, why is choice powerful and where does its power come from? So what can you tell us about that?

**Sheena Iyengar:** You know, what's interesting is when you look at those people and animals, we're all born with an innate desire and need for choice. And we all grasp that. It's remarkable when you look at say, an infant's need for immediate control over their environment. If you turn on music versus if the kid's hands accidentally touches a thing and it turns on music, they react so much more positively if they feel like their touching this thing suddenly led to the music turned on...turning on. And on kids,

the first words out of their mouths, no matter where in the world you go, is usually something to do with the expression of preference – yes or no, or I like it or I don't like it. And so we are born with this innate desire for choice. And when we can draw on it, it actually means a difference between life and death. I mean, it's a difference between whether we have a happy life or a not so happy life. If a person feels like they have control over their jobs, they do better and they feel happier. If someone is in a very terrible situation, whether it be that they're suffering from cancer or AIDS, whether they be, you know, stuck in an untenable situation, like a holocaust situation, or someone's stranded in the ocean, you know, um, on a raft that is leaking, you find that in all of these cases, the people that seem to have a higher likelihood, not a hundred percent, but a higher likelihood of actually making it, are the ones that are able to convince their minds that they were free, that they . It's a very powerful idea and that powerful idea comes from the feeling of being of free and feeling of being in control of their life. Now that shouldn't be confused with how many choices you have, which is what we often tend to do. We often think that if you give people more choices, you'll feel more in control. It's true that feeling that you have choice, feeling that you have control, can really make the difference in your life. And that's what you have to focus on.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, I don't know if you ever encountered Viktor Frankl's book “Man's Search for Meaning”, but he was a psychoanalyst who also was a concentration camp survivor. And he found that some people died in the camp and some survived and that the ones who survive exercise even very small choices, that even in that small situation, there was some room for choice. And also Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychiatrist who founded the school of.. practice called psychosynthesis. And he was thrown into jail by Mussolini's folks and purportedly, the way he framed it, when he was thrown into jail was, “Well, at last, I have space to meditate.” (Chuckles) So how we frame the situation certainly is very important.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Absolutely. And it does seem that framing it in terms of choice is critical to our well-being and **our survival.**

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Now another question that you pose is: “Do we all choose in the same way?” What were you thinking about there and what have you found out about that?

So while it's true that we all have an innate desire for choice, or are born with it, and we all benefit from perceiving our lives as being in our control, how we think that control should be exercised, the way we think we can create better lives for ourselves and our society is culturally variable. So what I mean by that is that when you look around the world, we all have very different ideas about choice, what role it should play, what do we expect when we choose for ourselves versus having others choose for us. Who should make the choice? Me or somebody else? And so for example, in one of the chapters of my book, I talk about one of the key assumptions that say, Americans have. And that key assumption is that if a choice really affects you, then you should be the one to make it because that's essential to your success, because you're really the only person in the world who knows what's gonna be most likely to accommodate your preferences and interests. Now, we all take that for granted in American culture that that's the way one.. that's the truth.. We think of that as a universal truth. But when you look around the world, that's not a shared truth. So for example, one of the studies that I did was with kids – Anglo-American kids and Asian kids – in a very simple experiment. I brought them

into a laboratory and I told them, you know, here's a bunch of anagram puzzles. And then in once case I told them you can choose what you wanna do. In another case, I told them that their mothers had made the choice for them. And then I compared their performance. Now the American kids had a very predictable response. They did better when they chose for themselves and they were actually outraged and a bit insulted that we'd asked their mothers what they would do in school, for chrissakes. So the performance dropped. Now by contrast, the Asian kids performed much better when they thought they were doing what their mothers had prescribed. And did worse when they chose it for themselves. And that's because they have a different conception in the Asian cultures about who should be.. who is in the best position to make the choice – you or the one I trust? Which is a simple example of what I mean by cultural differences and our attitude towards choice.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, there's another great example that you give in the book as well about end of life care and even in a less cultural extreme, difference between the US and France, which we don't think of as being culturally that different. Yet in France, doctors take a more authoritarian approach towards making decisions about, you know, when to pull the plug for somebody who's close to dying. And here, we expect relatives to make that decision. And your research suggests that here, people suffer longer, they suffer more anxiety, and so on, being burdened by that sort of choice.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Absolutely, yes. We compared parents of dying infants in both the US and in France, and just as you mentioned in the US, the parents have to decide when to pull the plug. And in France, the doctor decides if the life support should be removed. And while the parents have veto power, the norm is that the doctor makes the decision. Now, that has.. that simple difference – who decides – has enormous consequences for how these parents cope with the loss. Now, it's not that the American parents think they made the wrong choice, because in most of these cases, the child is going to be a vegetable. But they're so guilt-ridden have a really hard time coping with the fact that they made that choice. So when you look at.. and this actually relates to some of the other questions you've raised before, when you look at the individual responses of the French and American parents, the kinds of things they say are like, French parents are more likely to say, “You know, he was here for so little time, but he taught us so much. He gave us a new perspective on life.” So they're acknowledging they didn't have control. They're acknowledging that this happened and it was a terrible thing, but they're moving on. It's almost as if God had willed it. And that's it. Move on. The American parents, having made the choice, are much more likely to keep torturing themselves and say things like, “I keep thinking to myself, what if? What if? What if? What if I had chosen differently?” Another parent would say something like, “I can't believe they made me do that. They were purposely torturing me.” And another parent said things like, “I feel as if I played a role in an execution.” Now the interesting thing of course is that if you ask the parents would you rather have had made the doctor make the decision, American parents would say, “No.” They really feel that they are the only ones that should be making that decision. And I think that's really because in American culture, we have another very important assumption which we believe as universally true. And that is that you should never say no to choice.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. That's the key thing is that there are so many things that we assume are universally true and your research really calls into question a lot of our assumptions. I think that is one of the really neat things. Now another question that you pose is “What's the relationship between how we



choose and who we are?" What were you thinking of there?

**Sheena Iyengar:** Well, if you think about what choice has come to mean in our lives, particularly in a culture like ours, which has become more and more individualistic and you know, granted the whole world is becoming more individualistic, we just happened to be on the extreme end. What that means in our lives is that who we are is sum of all our choices. So in the old days, who we were wasn't completely about personal choice. It was also affected by your birth, what town you lived in, and it was understood that a lot of choices were dictated by that. Today though, everything about you, not just the big ticket items like whom you marry and what career you undertake and where you live, everything about you including your eye color, including your iPhone color. Everything about you is supposed to tell the world who you are. And you're supposed to engage in this exercise of unearthing by looking deep inside you what that core you is. And having identified that make choices ranging from the very small and trivial to the really really big that are consistent with that, that somehow will add up to this meaningful, understandable, recognizable package. And this should be recognizable not just to you, but to everybody in the same way. And that's a huge burden. That's a huge challenge, too. So much of who you are **isn't inside you.** It's an interaction between you and the context in which you're operating.

**Dr. Dave:** Spoken like a true social psychologist. (Chuckles)

**Sheena Iyengar:** Well, yeah, I guess. (Chuckles) That's just the way my advisor would have said about the person in the situation interaction, right?

**Dr. Dave:** Right. Right. I think what I got from your book is that choice is not as simple as it might seem at first. In some situations we feel better with having a choice. But there are others where choice is burdensome and we're happier with having someone make it for us. There's some situations where an expert maybe could make a better choice than what we might. We think we like lots of alternatives to choose from, but too many choices can become a burden of sorts. So really, you kind of opened up the world of choice and show us how complex.. it contains a lot of complex issues.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yeah, what I'm trying to do in the book is really... it's two things. One is that I'm trying to elucidate for people the world of choices come to play in their lives, to try to give them a better sense of how important this thing is that they're doing every second of their lives, from the moment they're born 'til the moment they die. But also I'm trying to tell them about the role its playing in their lives in a way that will get them to expand their toolkit, shall we say, in terms of the use of choice. Because I do think we can be much more strategic, and I don't mean strategic in the complete business sense that people often use that. But I think we can be much more strategic about when we want to choose, when we want to delegate choosing to someone else that we think can do a better job, or can make our life easier. If we do choose, what are the ways in which we want to go about choosing.

**Dr. Dave:** I don't know if this is relevant or not, but what about the notion of the wisdom of crowds. I wonder if that impacts anything that you are talking about here. Are crowd-sourced choices better than individual choices?

**Sheena Iyengar:** It depends on which condition you're talking about. So if you go back to your earlier question about identity, crowds can actually paradoxically help you a lot. So let's say you're somebody that wants, let's pick something that, you know, decisions that a lot of people obsess about. What should I wear? And people often obsess about that because want to communicate the “most appropriate” image for themselves that reflects who they are, and what kinds of position they're in, etcetera. And how they want people to perceive them, right? The way we currently conceive of that task is that you're supposed to say, “Well, what do I want to be? Who am I?” And I say, “Well, I'm fun-loving and casual”, let's say. And so now I'm going to pick an attire that will.. that will bring that out. And of course once I pick out that attire that is consistent with my being fun and casual, of course, everybody will recognize it for what it is. And then of course, the reality is, they won't because that's your image of what's casual. But so much of that image and who you want to be is dependent on others recognizing it, the way you intend for them to recognize it. And in that case the wisdom of crowds is very helpful. It's what I call the consensus method. In that case, what it is, is if you get independent, and when we say wisdom of crowds, we mean independent judgments. If you get independent judgment, what do you.. what image do you think.. what image would you have of someone who wore this set of clothes? And if you get a whole bunch of independent judgments, you will actually get a better sense of how will that set of clothing items be interpreted, be perceived or construed by the external world. Which actually helps you make a better decision about whether that is really what you want to wear given “who you are”. That's one case which the wisdom of crowds can be very helpful.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. Now I wear a number of different hats. Not ties, but hats. And one of them is of qualitative market researcher which I've been doing on the side for about 25 years now. Primarily focus groups for wide variety of commercial entities. And of the challenges is always to get a better “the real reasons people make the choices they do”. And to gauge how likely they are to buy a certain product or brand in the future. So I'm wondering if your research gives us any different tools or approaches for this kind of undertaking.

**Sheena Iyengar:** So we know that if you ask somebody “What do you want?” or “Do you like this thing?”, we don't really know the answer to that question. We're pretty bad at that. And really a better way to get at whether somebody will like something is whether they'll use it. And you sort of use more behavioral measures to get at, you know, the liking about things, rather than what they say.

**Dr. Dave:** So you'd be more...

**Sheena Iyengar:** .. Use behavioral measures...

**Dr. Dave:** ... For setting up behavioral measures or maybe even sort of quasi little experimental set-ups to see how people actually behave. Like your jam study. In your jam study, if you ask people, you know, why did you choose that jam, they wouldn't be able to articulate that “because there were fewer choices that's why I bought jam.”

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yes, unless your final interest is in people's attitudes than what they say, I wouldn't ask them what they think.

**Dr. Dave:** In the epilogue to your book, you tell a delightful story about consulting one of India's most famous astrologers and you ask him how this book you are working on at the time would turn out. And he answered, "Madam, this book will exceed your expectations." Has it?

**Sheena Iyengar:** I'm still trying to figure out what that means. (Laughter)

**Dr. Dave:** Hopefully, he meant it in a good way.

**Sheena Iyengar:** That's right. Hopefully! I still don't know what he meant. You know, I don't think I had.. I don't think I knew what my expectations were so everyday if I get another email, or someone's asking me a question, or interested in something I said or talked about, I'm grateful, and that's an exceeding of my expectations. But I don't actually know what he meant by that.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay. Now you're a social psychologist and a professor at Columbia and an author of a very successful book, and also a wife and a mother. And, oh by the way, you're also blind. And you're quite open in the book about the fact that you're blind. And I have to say I was amazed to read that and how little it seemed to have impeded your career. I wonder.. My background is a clinical psychologist, so of course I like to get personal, and I'm wondering about choice in the context of your own life, and what sorts of choices or decisions you've made to help you adapt to blindness. What can you tell us about that?

**Sheena Iyengar:** Well, you know, it's interesting you asked that. I do think my blindness got me interested in choice, albeit indirectly. You know, as a blind person, you don't have as many choices. And that's a reality you live with. And, in an odd way, that helped me with choice. It helped me both in making choices as well as in understanding choice and what it has to offer. You know, it helped me in making choices because I didn't have as many. It was always much easier to know which option you preferred. You know, nowadays, when I look at the young people, they're thinking about the whole world of career possibilities. And I would have liked that when I was young but I didn't think, oh god, what am I interested in. That was not a realistic question. It was, "What are you going to be able to do well?" And in a sense that, while it's still related to, obviously what you're going to do well was what you're interested in, it narrowed it in. It imposed a constraint, which maybe made it a lot easier to make the decision. I was going to be.. I was going to study people, and why they do what they do. And I was going to be an experimentalist. That seemed like something I could do. I figured that out when I was an undergrad. I didn't have to second-guess it. I guess the second way in which blindness affected my understanding of choice.. remember I said earlier that we think we want choice and the way we grab for more choice is by demanding of the choice providers that they give us more and more and more. I never.. I guess I learned from a very early age that those weren't the useful choices. That the most useful choices were the ones you could create for yourself. You know? People were always telling me what I could do. Go become a lawyer, go become a musician, go become a lottery ticket seller, go become a masseuse. Those were the sort of options that I would be given as a blind person, right? And the things that I couldn't.. you know.. and then there were those questions, "Well, can she shave her legs? Can she go to school? Can she study math? Can she study science?" You know? And for me then, it became imperative to think about, well, what option can I create that will be doable

for me? Of course the option I would have to create had to keep in mind both the possibilities of choice as well as the limitations. And I guess what I learned in the end was that the art of choosing is our ability to balance our hopes, our desires, the possibility, all the while, having a clear-eyed assessment of the limitations.

**Dr. Dave:** And you actually.. you tell us a story, not in any context related to blindness, but you do tell a story about jazz.. jazz composition and how even people who play jazz.. it's the constraints and the limitations in a way that inspire or provide the context for creativity.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Yeah. I really believe that. I really believe that that is true for any of us to be excellent in anything. That what you need to have is knowledge and practice. And what that will do is make it more salient to you what the constraints are. And it's only as you recognize the constraints that you're able to be creative about generating what amounts to be.. the more useful or “better” options. So many of the options that we have in the marketplace today are not meaningful. You know? What's the difference really between a pale pink and a light pink nail polish? Or Coke and Pepsi? You know, those are created differences by marketers designed to make us feel that we chose in line with our preferences. But it's when we create the options that we are actually creating the one that's meaningful to our context.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, this is probably about the place where we should begin to wind down. What final thought would you like to leave our listeners with?

**Sheena Iyengar:** I think choice is so important in our lives that it's important to recognize that in the end, choice is the only tool we have that enables us to go from who we are today to whom we want to be tomorrow. And because it's so important, each of us ought to ask ourselves what are the choices that are really important to us. And what are the domains in our life which are really just distractions, and that we really shouldn't be focusing in on those because they would take away from our larger goals.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that sounds like a wonderful piece of advice. Dr. Sheena Iyengar, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Sheena Iyengar:** Thank you so much for having me on today.

