Workbook 1.3
Person Centred Practice Across Cultures

Choice making –
cross-cultural differences and what can we learn from them?

July 2016
About National Disability Services

**National Disability Services** is the peak body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote quality service provision and life opportunities for people with disability. NDS's Australia-wide membership includes more than 1000 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to state, territory and federal governments.
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1. Preface

This workbook is part of a series of resources for the disability services sector designed by futures Upfront for NDS with funding provided by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services; Ageing, Disability and Home Care.

1. Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability
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This workbook is part of the “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability” series.

1.1 How to use this workbook?

This workbook can be used in many different ways, including:
  ➢ As a self-paced learning program by an individual
As a self-paced learning program for a group
As part of formal training organised by an organisation
As part of coaching and mentoring.

This workbook includes exercises and opportunities for reflections (when working by yourself) or discussions (when working with others).

There is plenty of room in your workbook to take notes and make comments.

1.2 What is this workbook about?
This workbook is designed to help you understand the importance of choice and choice making as a critical element in delivering person centred supports and services to people from CALD backgrounds with disability.

We recommend you also use the other workbooks in the “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability” series.

1.3 Outcomes
At the end of the workbook you will:
- Be able to think more deeply about choice and choice making
- Use your learning to assist people more effectively in making choices
- Understand some of the differences across cultures in relation to choice and choice making

1.4 Who is this workbook for?
- People interested in improving their culturally responsive person centred practice
- People who want to strengthen their ability to facilitate choice and choice making
- People who want to know more about choices and what we can learn from different cultural practices

1.5 How long will it take to complete?
This workbook should take about 45 minutes to work through. If you watch all the videos it might take you around 90 minutes
2. The Workbook

2.1 Introduction

‘Choice and control’ is seen as one of the cornerstones of the new way of delivering disability (and other) services. The idea is that people with disability are at the centre exercising choice and taking control. This is seen pretty much universally as one of the steps towards fulfilling the intentions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The UN Convention mentions choice several times, including as a general principle in Article 3:

“The principles of the present Convention shall be:
Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one’s own choices, and independence of persons.”

Reflections

Can you think about the last time you made a choice? How did you feel about your ability to choose? What makes choice making easy or hard for you?

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2.2 What is Choice Making?

Before thinking about choice making and differences across cultures, let’s begin with a definition, then explore the difference between decisions and choices and finally, think about supported decision making, which is particularly relevant in our context.

2.2.1 Choice Making – a definition and some more

“[Choice making] is the power or opportunity of making a selection”

Ok that was way too easy. What about choice making as something we do?

“Choice-making is an intervention strategy that can reduce problem behaviours, increase motivation and develop personal freedom.”

Or, if we think about choice making as a process, there are a few elements to consider:

- Preferences: choices are about our likes and dislikes (e.g. my favourite ice cream is strawberry)
- Choice making within limitations: choices happen within constraints (e.g. strawberry ice cream is not available, so I choose vanilla.)
- Autonomy: choices are an expression of our individuality (e.g. the fact that I choose vanilla says something about me and how I express my individuality)

2.2.2 Decision making and supported decision making

Some people talk about choice making, while others talk about decision making. In the disability sector we use both terms. We mostly use the term decision making in the context of supported decision making.

The difference between choice and decision making can be explained as:

“With decision, it is more of a process orientation, meaning we are going through analysis and steps to eliminate (or cut off) options.

With choice, it is more of a mindset approach, meaning we have a perception of what the right or wrong choice may be.”

This suggests that if we are thinking of choice and choice making as a mindset, rather than simply a process, it makes sense that this mindset might be shaped by our experiences, perceptions, cultures and more.

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3 [https://www.thindifference.com/2012/06/decisions-vs-choices-is-there-a-distinction/](https://www.thindifference.com/2012/06/decisions-vs-choices-is-there-a-distinction/)
Given its importance in working with people with cognitive disability, we must pay some attention to the idea of supported decision making\(^4\), which is:

“.. a process of assisting a person with disability to make their own decisions, so they can develop and pursue their own goals, make choices about their life and exercise some control over the things that are important to them”

The core principles of supported decision making outlined in the above document are:

- Every person can express their will and preference
- A person with disability has the right to make decisions
- A person with disability can expect to have access to appropriate support to make decisions

Supported decision making is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, especially Article 12: Equal recognition before the law.

**Video**

One of the most excellent and accessible resources in the area of decision making is the video ‘Decisions, Decisions’ by Speakout Advocacy  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmWO3E1kJT4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmWO3E1kJT4)

Thinking about the description above, it appears that while supported decision making is a process, a way of working that can be easily applied to choice making.

### 2.3 Choice and cultural difference

The following points about the nature of choice, how we choose and how choice making might be linked to our culture are mostly based on the work of a few key academics and writers.

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\(^4\) ADHC (March 2016): Supported Decision Making - Factsheet No.1;  
Videos

Luckily for us there are also some TED talks by those academics and writers for those of us who like to watch as well as read:

  “How to make choosing easier” on [https://www.ted.com/talks/sheena_iyengar_choosing_what_to_choose](https://www.ted.com/talks/sheena_iyengar_choosing_what_to_choose)

Throughout this workbook, you will also find references to books and other resources for you to follow up, if this workbook and the ideas in it have sparked your interest.

Reflections

Do you think that how you choose is influenced by your culture? Have you noticed your attitudes and approaches to choice being different from the people around you, or have you seen different people respond to the same choice differently?

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Ok, we have to admit one of the above reflection questions is a bit sneaky and we apologise, but hopefully we can use it to make a point. So please bear with us.

The first question we asked was: “Do you think that how you choose is influenced by your culture?” If your first response to this question was “What does that mean? I don’t really understand the question? What do they mean by my culture?” you would be right.

Unless we have thought about this a lot, or we are a member of a minority culture where choice and choice making is really different between our culture and the culture of the majority, or maybe we have travelled a lot or lived in another culture with a very different relationship to choice, the questions basically is a bit silly. That’s because mostly we don’t see our relationship to anything we believe or think as being shaped by our culture, especially if we are part of the majority culture. It’s just something we do. It is ordinary to us, average.

It may be useful to remember that our experience of culture is a bit like being a fish in water. Imagine being the fish; you don’t think about water. Water just is. Well, not when the fish gets pulled out of the water. Then water becomes really, really important. Culture for humans, is a bit like water for fish. You don’t pay any attention until you get pulled out of it.

To illustrate the point, here is a response from a woman from Indian background called Shena Iyengar, a woman with vision impairment who lives in the US and who does lots of research on choice (there will be more from her later):

“Because I was going back and forth between American culture and Sikh culture, there was constant struggle between whether you are supposed to think of your choices in terms of duty fulfillment or personal preference fulfilment.”

The second and third questions we asked you above in the reflection section, were probably somewhat easier to think about. It’s easier for all of us to see how people around us are different from ourselves and sometimes we attribute this difference to their culture.

2.3.1 Choice and control means a better life

In Australia (and maybe in the Western world generally) much of our current relationship with choice and choice making looks like this formula:

More choice + control = A better life

The researchers in this field seem to agree that all humans value some level of choice and choice making. There can be no doubt that more choice and control will be a good thing for people with disability, many of whom have had so little choice and control in key areas of their lives that any increase in this area is an improvement.

However, making choices is complex. Given that it is such a central ‘theme’ of person centred thinking and critical in delivering on the promises of individualised funding assisting people have a better life, it is helpful to explore some key principles a bit further.

2.3.2 Does more choice mean more well being?

Barry Schwartz\(^6\) talks about what in the U.S. is called ‘patient autonomy’, that is, people get to choose their health care provider. Schwartz argues that because people do not really understand their choices, this patient autonomy is simply shifting the burden and responsibility from someone who knows (in this case a doctor) to somebody who knows nothing about it (the patient) and who is likely to be unwell at the time of having to choose. He argues that more choice does not necessarily lead to better outcomes.

Sheena Iyengar in her book\(^7\) and the above mentioned TED talk, referring to a cross-cultural study, says that having had a choice in a difficult matter does not necessarily make a person more satisfied or happier afterwards. She gives an example where either a doctor or the next of kin had to make a really difficult decision about people’s care and treatment (turning off life support). She found that in the country where the doctor made the choice to turn off life support (in France), the next of kin was coping better with the decision one year afterwards than the next of kin (in America) who made the same decision themselves. In an interesting twist, the next of kin in America continued to insist that it was important to them that they had the choice (even so it left them feeling worse than the next of kin in France).

Finally, despite publishing a book called ‘The Tyranny Of Choice’, Renata Salecl\(^8\), a philosopher from Slovenia, argues that opening new choices can shift our thinking and helps us imagine and possibly create another reality. This means that, for example, having a choice about participating in a mainstream activity, rather than one exclusively available to people with disability, might open the thinking of someone to the possibility that life could be inclusive.

\(^6\) Schwartz, B (2004): The Paradox of Choice: Why More is less
\(^7\) Iyengar, S (2010): The Art of Choosing
\(^8\) Salecl, R. (2011): The Tyranny of Choice
Thinking about these findings, there are clearly cultural differences in our relationship to choice and the importance we place on choice making.

Putting all of this into a person centred thinking and doing context, could there be situations were choice and choice making could lead to less good outcomes?

Of course, in part, these questions depend on what we think a good outcome might look like. It also depends on whether we believe all choices have to be perfect right from the start or whether making some choices is as much about learning about the act of choice making, as it is about the outcome itself.

**Reflections**

What’s your relationship to choice making? What kind of choices are important to you? What makes choice making stressful for you?

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### 2.3.3 Is choice making something we learn?

Sheena Ivengar, referring to studies with people who grew up in pre-capitalist Eastern block countries, makes the point that choice making can produce fear and anxiety in people, especially if they are not used to many choices.

This is not a new idea. Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish Philosopher, said that anxiety was the:

> “dizzying effect of freedom, of paralysing possibilities and of the boundlessness of one’s own existence”

So we put strategies in place. If choice making becomes all too much for us, we try to manage by:

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9 Kerkegaard, S. (1844): The Concept of Anxiety
Creating yes/no options,

Distinguish choices that are real from choices that are not real;

Reducing the differences between the choices (create categories).

Basically, if we become overwhelmed by the choices on offer we do not experience this as liberating, but as constraining or even anxiety provoking.

But can choice making can be learned? How can we go about it?

Frank Sonnenberg, an author in the leadership area, provides the following advice:

“Making good choices begins with taking charge of the decision-making process:

Manage the big stuff. It’s very easy to get side tracked by insignificant issues in life. If you spend a lot of time on trivial stuff, you won’t have time to contemplate things that matter.

Values matter. Make decisions that are consistent with your core beliefs and values. The alternative invariably leads to regret.

Learn from the past. Learn from your experiences and the experiences of others. Identify situations where you’ve had a similar choice in the past. How can you apply those lessons learned to the existing situation?

Know what you know and what you don’t know. Don’t try to be an expert in everything. Seek input and advice when variables lie outside your comfort zone.

Keep the right perspective. View an issue from every vantage point. What do the facts say? What is your intuition telling you? Is your conscience trying to tell you something? Listen up.

Don’t procrastinate. You’ll rarely have all the information that you need to make a “perfect” decision. So don’t demand perfection. The philosopher Voltaire warned against letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. That advice still holds true today.

Once you make a decision, don’t look back, make it work. Don’t second-guess yourself. You can’t relive the past. It’s a waste of valuable time and energy.”

All of this has relevance for us as we move from a system where people with disability had no or very few choices to an environment where a proliferation of choices is expected.

Working from a person centred perspective, it might be useful for us to remember the studies of Shena Iyengar with pre-capitalist Eastern Europeans. If with think of people with disability, especially people with intellectual disability, as a cultural group, then we could certainly see that a lack of choices in the past might mean that people may experience fear and anxiety in the face of too many choices. Just thinking about the choices may leave some people feel overwhelmed and worried.

**Reflections**

What are your strategies for choice making? Can you write them down? (because if you can write them down then you can share them with others)

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2.3.4 Do we know what we want (when asked)?

Malcolm Gladwell\(^{11}\) says that if you ask people what they really want, they don’t tell you. We often don’t quite know what we want. Or we think we know what we want, but it is not really what we want.

He uses examples from advertising food that suggest that we say one thing, but often we really mean something else.

We all know about optical illusions, but we are not so good at understanding the illusions of our mind and how those impact on our choice making.

As an aside, if you think you know what you want and that you can’t be manipulated, have a look at the work of what’s called behavioural economists in the area of irrational decision-making. Dan Ariely, a Professor

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of Psychology and Behavioural Economics, did a great TED talk and wrote a whole book on this topic.¹²

Back to Gladwell, who also said that in order to find a way towards ‘happiness’, we have to find a way to each person, person by person. Each individual is different. We are not ‘clusters of people’. This sounds very much like operating from a person centred approach.

The two points made by Gladwell are very important to those of us wanting to work from a person centred perspective that is culturally responsive.

Firstly, if we simply ask people what they want, many (but not all) people will not know. We need to find better questions; better ways of being and exploring choices together with people; and people need to have the time, resources and opportunities to find out the answers for themselves. None of us can imagine something we cannot imagine – this might sound funny but if you think about it, you know this is true for everyone. Sometimes we cannot imagine what might be possible. This is why listening to and learning from people in similar situations is really important.

Secondly, if we treat people as one group (for example, treating people with the same disability as one group, or people from the same ethnic community as one group), we will miss the opportunity for people to make the choices that work for them as individuals within their cultural context.

### 2.3.5 Are more choices better for you?

Most people believe that everyone benefits from making choices about the things that affect their lives and that more choices are better than fewer choices. Well, not really. Both Iyengar and Schwartz say that having too many choices leads to:

- **A lack of engagement**: it’s all too hard and we simply delay choosing. The more there is on offer the less likely it is that we will choose.

- **Less satisfaction with the choice we made**: we are always thinking about what would have been if we had chosen something else. We worry about having chosen the wrong thing, even if we if we are ok with our choice. This is ‘the grass is always greener on the other side’ thinking.

- **Less satisfaction due to higher expectations**: if things are good now, we expect them to be perfect next time and yet nothing seems ever good enough. This is ‘in the good old days everything was better’ thinking.

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**Poorer decisions:** If we have 10 or more choices in a range of critical areas (such as finance or health care) we tend to make poorer decisions than if we had fewer choices.

### 2.3.6 Is making choice an expression of our individuality?

Sheena Iyengar suggests that people from cultures that value the self over the collectives generally see choice making as an expression of their individuality, an act that defines their identity.

At the same time, she powerfully proves that in cultures that value the collective over the individual, decision making by individuals is much more about an opportunity to express harmony and connectedness with others.

Now does this really matter?

Yes it does. In a cross-cultural experiment Iyengar shows that making choices that are congruent, that is, in line with your culture, result in better outcomes from those choices. Having made a choice that is ‘culturally right’ you have a better chance in achieving success as a result from that choice. In Iyengar’s study that meant American children performed better in a test when they chose elements of that test themselves. While children from a Japanese background performed better when they followed the choice their mother had suggested to them.

Many people with disability have learned not to make choices and to first listen to what other people think. People who are highly dependent on others for their day-to-day care and support may listen to others and their wishes first, and then choose something that is in line with the choice of the people surrounding them.

So again the learning from cross-cultural studies can assist us in our person centred thinking and doing.

### 2.3.7 What to do with all of that?

Maybe after all of the above its important to say again: It is great that people with disability will have more choice and control and, like everyone, most will value that.

To assist people in their choice making Sheena Iyengar provides us with four tips:

- **Drop the number of choices:** Assist people to cut out choices that don’t work, the choices that are not really a choice anyhow.

- **Before you choose, imagine the outcome of the choice:** Help people to try imagine, try to understand (and feel) the consequences of the choice; assist people to make that imagination feel real.
Put the choices into categories and choose a category first: for example, assist people to choose between further study or work before you choose between all the work options and all the further study options.

Start with a small number of choices and increase after that: for example, assist people to choose between ice cream or cake for dessert, and only then help people choose from all the different flavours of ice-cream.

Finally, she says, and we agree, any good person centred practitioner can assist people to be choosy about choosing.
3. Conclusion

This workbook aimed to assist you in understanding how to support people to make choices. Using research and insights from a range of studies, including cross-cultural studies, we deepen our understanding of how we humans are both similar and different in how we experience choice making, why choice making is important, and even how successful we will be once we have made our choice.

You may also want to have a look at some of the other workbooks relating specifically to “Individual Practices – working with people from CALD backgrounds with disability”.

Reflections

What are some of the take away messages from this workbook? Are there things you disagree with? Was there something that surprised you?

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