Cultures of Choice:
Towards a sociology of choice as a cultural phenomenon

Ori Schwarz
Bar-Ilan University

Abstract
The article explores different ways to conceptualize the relationship between choice and culture. These two notions are often constructed as opposites: while sociologies of modernization (such as Giddens') portray a shift from cultural traditions to culturally disembedded choice, dispositional sociologies (such as Bourdieu's) uncover cultural determination as the hidden truth behind apparent choice. However, choice may be real and cultural simultaneously. Culture moulds choice not only by inculcating dispositions or shaping repertoires of alternatives, but also by offering culturally specific choice practices, ways of choosing embedded in meaning, normativity, and materiality; and by shaping attributions of choice in everyday life. By bringing together insights from rival schools, I portray an outline for a comparative cultural sociology of choice, and demonstrate its purchase while discussing the digitalization of choice; and cultural logics that shape choice attribution in ways opposing neoliberal trends.

Keywords
Bourdieu, choice, choosing techniques, consent, culture, digitalization, Giddens, neoliberalism, online dating, sociological theory

Our everyday lives are densely populated with choices, or at least widely believed to be so. Countless moments in the lives of contemporary individuals are framed and experienced as choices: everyday customer choices between different brands of toothpaste or pasta at the supermarket; self-presentation choices such as what to wear today; autobiographical 'big' decisions such as whom to marry, where to live, and what occupational training to undertake; and moral choices, such as whether to sacrifice one's own good for one's family, or whether to obey unjust laws. Some of these decisions are made through formal calculation, others are the result of informal lengthy deliberations, and yet others are spontaneous and hardly reflexive, yet all are often framed as choices, as actors are perceived to freely choose among several viable options and commit themselves to a certain path of action. Choice is widely experienced as a ubiquitous dimension of human life in general and Western late-modern lives in particular.

This ideology of choice is epitomized in Giddens' famous preposition that 'in post-traditional contexts, we have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act' (Giddens 1994:54). While some sociologists celebrate the era of choice, others criticize this account. Trying to refute this 'ideology' of choice, they insist that what appears to be free reflexive choice is still informed and constrained by social structure; and that reflexivity and the capacity to act upon it are themselves unevenly distributed privileges (Adams 2003, Atkinson 2007, Bauman 2007; Hughes 2010). However, within these important debates on structure and agency, both parties relegate culture to a narrow range of roles. While the problem of choice has haunted sociology since its dawn, the answers usually offered fail to fully grasp choice's cultural dimension.

This neglect is surprising since during the last 25 years the sociological mainstream has shifted away from structural or economic determinism towards a growing recognition of culture's role in shaping
social life. Indeed, rival schools offer competing conceptualizations of culture (Reckwitz 2002; for a possible synthesis see Patterson 2014), yet most contemporary schools share an understanding of culture as non-universal (hence, capable of producing cultural difference) shared patterns structured by knowledge—including both practical knowledge (specific ‘practices’, ways of doing and their unique know-how) and abstract schemas of classification and normative evaluation that organize mental representations of reality and endow it with meaning. Given this wide shared definition, how can we think of the relationship between culture and choice?

Below I portray the main paths taken by sociologists to conceptualize this relationship, two well-trodden paths representing well-established sociological traditions—(1) the modernization path, in which cultural imperatives are viewed as gradually giving way to choice as modernity evolves; and the (2) dispositional path, in which culture is viewed as structuring choice by inculcating cultural preferences in individuals through socialization, thus revealing a hidden degree of determinism behind apparent free choice. While often associated with Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu respectively, each of these paths was taken by various schools and scholars. Although in different ways, in both these traditions choice is viewed as the ‘other’ of culture, rather than a cultural phenomenon.

Later I draw on seminal works in various sociological schools and elaborate on them to outline two alternative ways to conceptualize this relationship, two ways in which choice is nevertheless cultural. The first explores (3) choice practices: culture can shape choice not only through its contents (by instilling in individuals preferences and dispositions) but also through its form, by organizing choice processes. Shifting attention from content to form reveals that acts of choosing are inherently cultural, since when people make choices, they employ culturally specific ‘choosing techniques’ embedded in particular normativities, epistemologies and materialities. The latter explores (4) ascription of choice, viewing choice as a category in a cultural classificatory system. Culturally specific ‘lay sociologies of choice’ frame some actions by some actors as free choices, while denying this status to others. This classification is highly consequential, shaping both actions and reactions to them.

Turning our focus to choice practices and ascription of choice yields a new research agenda for a comparative cultural sociology of choice, which shifts attention from the voluntarism vs. determinism debate to the empirical study of cultural transformations such as the digitalization of choice processes in online dating, housing and hiring; and the shifting judicial understanding of choice in sexual interactions.

Either culture or choice? Modernization and dispositional theories

Modernization theories: from culture to choice

Sociological accounts of modernization often enumerate choice among modernity’s core components, yet their notion of choice is not cultural but rather culture’s other. Max Weber portrayed modernization as a shift from traditional action (which, being automatic and habitual, leaves little leeway for choice) towards instrumental rationality (Weber 1978). Moderns bring their actions under ‘constant self-control’ (Weber 1992), deliberately choosing the optimal means to achieve their ends, even when it means breaking with tradition. For Weber, culture as a ‘switchman’ may set these ends; whereas cultural differences may explain why this shift toward modernity and capitalism has begun earlier in some societies; yet, instrumental rationality itself is allegedly culturally-neutral: Weber believed there is nothing culturally-specific about modern calculatedness itself. Thus, moving away from cultural traditions to instrumental rationality increases uniformity.1

For Weber, choice had increased already in early modern Europe, due to differentiation and autonomization of ‘value-spheres’ (Wertsphären) such as art and religion. These multiple spheres and their incommensurable logics have posed individuals conflicting moral demands and compelled them to make choices while developing their ‘value orientations’ (Weber 1946). Some contemporary pragmatist sociologists (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006; Swidler 2001) elaborate on this plural notion of culture, conceptualizing choice in terms of manoeuvring between different available moral frames that coexist within the same culture (and the same individuals). However, Weber suggested that in modernity this
cultural plurality is threatened, as all spheres are being somewhat colonized by the single universal logic of instrumental rationality.

Weber's modern choosing subjects are neither emancipated (they are rather captives in the iron cage of rationality, thus unfree in Kant's terms: Brubaker 1984:105) nor individuated (they are compelled to follow universal rationality), but are choosers nevertheless: they deliberate different possible paths of actions and choose the means they find most suitable to achieve their ends. This century-old rationalization paradigm is still prolific and capable of producing important insights on contemporary societies (Wernick 1991; Illoz 2007; Wee and Brooks 2010).

'Reflexive modernization' theory (Giddens 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) goes further in this path, suggesting that for late modern individuals traditional action is no longer an option, but neither can they avoid choice by relying on the unchallenged authority of experts. Compelled to live in an ever-changing, flexible world where no 'default options' remained, and with access to diverse alternative sources of knowledge, contemporary individuals are compelled to choose reflexively their lifestyles, sexuality and family structure, and write their own biographies. Choosing is thus the single most important feature of our age of 'second', 'reflexive' modernization. While for Weber the predictability of consequences rendered choice rational, for second modernization theorists its unpredictability renders choice individualized and free.

However, Giddens does not embed reflexivity in any cultural setting: instead, post-traditional choice is conceptualized as the logical opposite of culture and history, habit and tradition (for critique see Adams 2003; Sweetman 2003). Furthermore, while late modern individuals are understood as choosing humans, homo eligens (Bauman 2007), no close attention is paid to the way they make their choices. For a sociological imagination that conceptualizes structure in terms of habituation (Giddens 1979), forced dehabituation amounts to emancipation from social structure: once action is no longer habitual, choices might seem simply unstructured.

For Giddens, culture might have well guided action in the past, in pre-modern cultures of 'destiny' (1991:109), but when knowledge is no longer local, knowledge and information disembodied actors from their context in time and space, that is, from their cultural context, and facilitate reflexivity. In this post-Weberian model, choice is reflexive rather than rational, yet choice remains the successor and opposite of culture. The rise of choice (and of the necessity to choose) is the flipside of the weaning power of culture and the demise of cultural traditions.

Dispositional sociology: choice as an illusion

While modernization theories maintain that culture was succeeded by choice, dispositional theories still find culture as choice's hidden truth. It is a common wisdom that 'economics is all about how people make choices' while 'sociology is all about why they don't have any choices to make' (Duesenberry 1960:233). Micro-economists and rational choice theorists usually assume choice to be universal, natural and directed at maximizing expected marginal subjective utilities. These schools understand the subjective dimension of utility as organized by individual preferences and tastes that require no further explanation, hence they rarely discuss culture. Contrariwise, sociologists are often interested in uncovering the hidden determination behind choice by revealing external and internal constraints.

External constraints are central in narratives such as Pamela Stone's (2007) who suggested that while women who opted out from elite professions often claim to have chosen to quit, they actually had little choice due to job market structures and gender norms. While cultural norms delimit their actual capacity to choose, culture offers them discursive tools to frame compulsion as choice and avoid feeling disempowered. Both choice and culture are thus understood in terms of false consciousness, flowers hiding the structural constraints that critical sociology strives to uncover.

Yet, the main role ascribed to culture in sociological accounts is to constrain choice internally, from within subjects, through dispositions. In dispositional sociologies culture shapes subjects—individuals with certain values, goals, preferences, dispositions, tastes, desires, attitudes and so forth. Then, these socialized (that is, culturally-formed) subjects choose among available options based on who they turned out to be.
The notion of dispositions acquired through habituation is as old as Aristotle, and psychologists have long used similar notions to explain cross-situational consistencies of the personality. Yet, sociologists have used this notion differently, insisting that these dispositions originate in society or social structure.

Sociological theories are highly diverse in their conceptualizations of the content of socialization: as 'norms', 'representations', 'values', 'preferences', 'tastes' or unreflexively operating 'dispositions'. Some assume that each individual carries a single ordered set of stable preferences and desires that construct subjective utility (the 'portfolio model': Hindess 2015, Whitford 2002) while others assume inculcation of rather abstract generative dispositions; some stress dispositions shared by a whole nation, while others hold that individuals internalize inconsistent conflicting dispositions, which are realized in different contexts (Lahire 2011). Yet, all dispositional theories assume that what seems to be choice is eventually pre-determined by culture that moulds subjects, thus rendering choice epiphenomenal.

The most influential version of the dispositional model is Bourdieu's, in which socialized subjects do not carry sets of simple preferences, but rather sets of generative dispositions that can generate new preferences and choices in changing circumstances (Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Here choices are inseparable from the semiotics of distinction and the marking of identity, and hence from choices made by class others (Bourdieu 1984). However, while some leeway remains for (often unconscious) strategizing, Bourdieu's theory eventually denies choice, explaining it away as a mere illusion. Choices are merely the result of complex, yet principally predictable interactions between the choosing subject, context, and objects available to choose from; between habitus and field. Apparent choices are reframed as acts of 'position taking', which can be traced back to dispositions and further back to structural positions that shaped dispositions. Bourdieu employed statistics to show that 'individual choices' are strongly patterned, hence illusionary. Sociology's task is to expose and demystify this illusion of choice, which serves to grant legitimation to inequalities and pass judgment on members of the working class for their allegedly voluntary 'choices'. Bourdieu stressed that the habitus creates 'collective individuals' (Bourdieu 2005:211) rather than individual choosers, so much so that 'choices imply no acts of choosing' (Bourdieu 1984:474).

This strategy remains indifferent to choice as a process, reducing it to mere realization of a culturally shaped potential. Dispositional sociologies consider deliberation epiphenomenal, since moments subjectively experienced as moments of indecisiveness and deliberation eventually produce rather predictable decisions.

Lakes of ink have been spilled in the struggle between modernization and dispositional sociologies of choice, which has occupied British sociology for over two decades. Adherents of the former accuse their opponents of determinism, and are accused in response of excessive voluntarism. However, neither camp manages to retain both culture and choice within a single framework. We started our exploration asking how choice relates to culture. However, in both paths we ended up with only one side of the equation: while sociologies of modernization eventually dropped culture (which was allegedly succeeded by choice), in dispositional sociology culture survives but choice disappears.

This should not surprise us, since the notion of 'culture' was originally developed during the 18th and 19th centuries to express ambivalence about human freedom and to characterize a space of freedom bounded within 'self-determined determination': culture referred to those constraints on human agency that could not be traced back to nature (Bauman 1999a; Eagleton 2000).

Pragmatist sociology of culture (in both Boltanski's and Swidler's versions) did manage to retain both culture and choice within a single framework; it conceptualized culture as enabling and constraining choice. However, culture and choice still remain conceptually and temporally separated: by supplying actors with a repertoire of logics, strategies of action and justifications, culture shapes the options from which actors can later choose.

Paying closer attention to the ways people make choices may bring choice and culture closer together, revealing the cultural patterning of choice practices.
Studies in other disciplines, such as psychology and behavioural economy, have repeatedly demonstrated that choices cannot be reduced to pre-existing preferences or dispositions (Tversky & Kahneman 1981; Lichtenstein & Slovic 2006). These studies demonstrate that choices are strongly informed by their context and the framing of the dilemma. Preferences either have limited influence on actual choices or are reconstructed in each context anew. Put simply, settings and processes structure choice no less than dispositions. What these disciplines fail to notice, is that choice processes are cultural practices, culturally specific ways of doing grounded in normativity, which rely on both practical knowledge (culturally specific decision-making skills) and abstract representations and epistemologies (since choice always relies on production and manipulation of knowledge of the options). While these studies indicate that culture may condition choice considerably by shaping choice processes, the task of exploring these influences awaits sociologists trained in the study of culture.

Culture offers actors not only repertoires of options to choose from, but also repertoires of ways of choosing, culturally specific techniques of choice. Following intuition; asking for advice from experts or diviners; using algorithms that offer personalized recommendations; tossing coins; rationally weighing pros and cons in one's head (or formally calculating risks and utilities with an Excel software); engaging in introspection to search for one's true (but assumedly hidden) will and desires (possibly with the help of a psychotherapist); and preparing shopping lists (to defend the autonomy of consumer choices from marketing manipulations: Callon and Muniesa 2005) are just a few of many possible paths (for further discussion see Illouz 2012). Barry Hindess (2015[1988]) pointed out that action is shaped by individual and collective deliberation processes (which vary across domains and cultures) in order to refute the unrealistic premises of rational choice theory, yet these deliberation processes themselves have hardly become subjects of sociological investigation.

Developing a comparative framework to study cultures of choice requires attending to several qualities that characterize these cultures: normativity, materiality, historicity and locality. These are rarely discussed together, which requires collecting insights from dispersed literatures.

Culture equips us not only with choosing techniques, but also with normative prescriptions, regarding which choosing techniques are appropriate where and why. Choice techniques and their normative horizons transform historically (often reflecting wider trends, e.g. towards individualism and the authenticity ethic): delegating to parents crucial choices such as which professional training to undertake, whom to marry or where to live, appears to have lost legitimacy in Western societies. The same increasingly applies to choosing a marriage partner before a trial period of cohabitation. Ethics of choice are also local, changing across space, social group, time, and life-sphere; choosing techniques that would be laudable while buying a laptop may be reproached if employed to choose a life partner or a field of study, and vice versa; choosing students or employees based on holistic evaluation, chemistry, intuition or even ‘love’ may be acceptable and even laudable in the USA (Rivera 2012, Stevens 2007), but considered biased, discriminative, unprofessional or simply meaningless in some European cultural contexts. Choices such as moving to the countryside while leaving behind a prosperous corporate career in order to ‘follow one’s heart’ following introspection (Hoey 2006) or hiring job candidates based on psychological tests, have little meaning outside their unique cultural context that grants these choice procedures epistemological and moral validity. A cultural belief that choice options are ‘constitutive incommensurables’ may well lead to refusal to choose at all (Espeland & Stevens 1998).

While helpful insights on choice techniques and their temporality are scattered in various literatures, two works deserve special attention for offering sets of dimensions that allow characterizing and comparing cultures of choice and their peculiar techniques. In her pathbreaking account of ‘architectures of choice’, Eva Illouz characterizes these architectures by their modes of self-consultation; levels of formalization; structures of suspicion; rationality; and consideration of remote consequences (Illouz 2012:20-21). This list is distilled from her monumental study of the transformation of love and partner choice in modernity, where she reveals dramatic transformations between early modern and late modern partner choice techniques, such as a growing reliance on introspection; self-consultation to identify ontologized emotions and uncover one’s assumedly hidden preferences; subjective (rather than objective) evaluation criteria; maximizing rather than satisficing; and a unique combination of rationalization and emotionalization of choice. Michele Lamont’s (2009) discussion of ‘evaluative cultures’—based on her study of peer-review panels that choose whom to award prestigious fellowships—lists other important...
characteristics that shape choices in institutional contexts, including cultural scripts, institutional rules and settings, weighs attributed to various standards, preferences for objectivism or subjectivism, and techniques for producing and determining truth claims. While focusing on variance between evaluation criteria (e.g. originality vs. validity), she also reveals how choice is shaped by ethically- and epistemologically-grounded techniques (collective deliberation rather than calculating average grades). These two works offer a promising point of departure for a cultural sociology of choice: both study evaluation and consequent choice as cultural practices, components of a cultural repertoire stabilized through habituation, institutionalization and legitimation and inseparable from meanings and normativity. Both offer general grids for comparing cultures of choice, grids that allow explaining why and how choice differs across cultural contexts.

However, a comparative cultural sociology of choice should go beyond their frameworks. Illouz defined 'architectures of choice' as consisting in 'mechanisms that are internal to the subject and shaped by culture' (Illouz 2012:20, emphasis added). However, choices rarely take place exclusively 'within individuals': they are often achievements of distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995, Hardie & MacKenzie 2007), shared between multiple humans and non-humans. Non-humans such as lists and tables, coins and algorithms, gauges and shelves are crucial (though often unaccounted-for) components of choice techniques. Studying choice processes at the intra-individual level repeats one of the mortal sins of disposition theories: it allocates both culture and action exclusively within individuals. Contrary to liberal ideology, neither culture nor action can be located exclusively within individuals. Since cultural practices are shaped not only by normativity, but also by materiality, we should complement Lamont's and Illouz's grids with insights from studies more attentive to materiality, namely from actor-network theory.

Karpik (2010) suggested that when people choose among non-standard commodities (such as wines, loudspeakers, Brahms recordings or restaurants) they cannot rely on prices alone. They must compare quality, and to do so they partially delegate the cognitive task of judgment (evaluation and screening of options) to external (both human and non-human) 'judgment devices', including certification labels, experts, reviews, bestseller lists, prizes, and friends' advice. Often the most consequential choice is which judgment device to follow, as different devices direct choosers to different choices. If Karpik is right, a cultural sociology of choice must explore the genealogy, sociology and demographic distribution of these devices.

From an ANT perspective, choice processes are not performed by well-bounded subjects whose will is the unmoved mover of social action, but rather by heterogeneous networks that function as 'calculative centres'. Cognition, evaluation and calculation, on which choice relies, are distributed between humans and non-humans. In order to produce realistic accounts, cultural sociology of choice must pay closer attention to material settings, tools, and other non-humans involved in distributed cognitive and emotional choice processes. Much can be learned from Michele Callon's insights on calculation processes, in which non-humans play various roles such as constructing the set of alternative options to choose from; representing them (shaping knowledge of these options); focusing attention on some of their characteristics; and rendering these unique objects comparable (Callon and Muniesa 2005; Karpik 2010).

**Digitized choices**

Accounting for the distributed nature of choice processes is necessary in order to explore a major transformation they currently undergo. Digitalization transforms choice across fields—from hiring decisions (Marchal et al 2007) through consumer choices in online shopping (e.g. Scott & Orlikowski 2014) to online dating sites. Digitalization of consumer, professional and interpersonal choices involves delegation of cognitive, evaluative, calculative, screening and choice processes to non-humans—online forms and algorithms that organize information about choice options; offer evaluative criteria to formalize users preferences; weigh criteria against one another to simplify complex choices; and rank and rate options.

While digitalization remoulds choice processes, its effect is not uniform: while digitalizing hiring processes through electronic job boards has formalized and standardized evaluation criteria (Marchal et al 2007), digitalizing consumer choice in the tourism industry has destabilized standardization (Scott & Orlikowski 2014). In other areas (such as housing, discussed below) we know very little about digitalization's influence on choice.
My study of dating website OKCupid offers a good example. To help users choose a partner (or a manageable set of reasonable candidates) from among more than a million users, the website presents them first with the most suitable candidates. To enable OKCupid to find them, users are asked what their ideal partner would reply to multiple questions. They must also weight preferences to enable commensuration: is a potential partner’s reply to ‘will you teach your children to believe in Santa?’ worth 10-times or only 5-times more than their answer to ‘Do you chew gum?’ Users are also asked to set threshold conditions, e.g. automatically excluding all those who are even one inch shorter than 5’ 8”, live more than 3 miles away, or belong to certain ethnic groups. Choosing whom to date turns into a very different cognitive task, namely, developing an abstract predictive model to screen and rank thousands of potential candidates based on hundreds of criteria, and classifying populations based on the assumed share of desirable partners among them (thus rendering the database legible, diffusing the state's way of seeing to individuals. Users first construct their model in ways organized by the website’s design, and then delegate to algorithms the screening, weighing of multiple criteria, and ranking. Many of the questions introduced into the model would not be asked, clarified and influence partner choice offline. Choice is not simply realization of intra-subjective preferences, as the latter are constructed by the site. My interview and shadowing data revealed incongruences between users’ internal beliefs and choice practices: even users who insisted vehemently that the algorithm was incapable of predicting who they were likely to like, eventually chose to use the algorithmic sorting feature that presented them with profiles sorted by their calculated fit.

Intuition and informal impression are harder to delegate to algorithms, hence they are introduced only later, when users browse the profiles already ranked high by the algorithm. Even at this stage the website’s materiality informs choice, as the presentation of self is delegated to profiles, semi-standardized sets of photos and short texts organized by the form’s fields. Yet, this stage demonstrates that choices are hardly ever fully delegated to non-humans. There are many ways, in which users can make sense of the representations of choice digital platforms offer them, and as my data show, OKCupid users creatively develop multiple ways to engage with these platforms; which features to use and how, on which information pieces to focus and how to interpret them. While sometimes idiosyncratic, these choice practices still rely on shared normative and epistemological horizons: practices such as looking at photos only after reading the profile to avoid bias, or contacting users only after reading their profile in two different occasions to reduce the influence of mood, are obvious attempts to ‘rationalize’ choice, comparable to those documented by Lamont (e.g. 2009:43).

Hence, to understand digitally mediated choice processes we must account for nuances of design, code and materiality, without neglecting cultural questions of morals, semiotics and epistemology. This applies more generally: studying choice processes as a set of cultural practices must address the multidimensional construction of these practices, including the techno-material, epistemological, semiotic and normative dimensions, thus bringing together dimensions often studied in isolation by different schools.

As the modernization and the dispositional paradigms retain their central position in the field, sociologists often avoid closer analysis of most human choice processes, leaving them to other disciplines, which are less attentive to culture. Rather than viewing choice as the result of the corrosion of cultural traditions or as merely the pre-determined realization of cultural dispositions, we may ask how choices are informed by the moments, ethics and techniques of choice that mediate the interaction of subjects and objects. These practices, anchored in bodies and minds, meanings and material artefacts (and hence, shaped by technological transformations such as digitalization), are the elementary components of choice cultures.

Folk Sociologies of Choosing

Choice is thoroughly cultural not only as a category of analysis but also as a category of practice used by actors to represent the world symbolically, as lay ascriptions of choice are organized by cultural frames and discourses.

Preoccupied with gauging actual degrees of choice and agency, sociologists often forget we are not the only ones who ask whether human actions are freely chosen, constrained or determined by ‘social’ or other forces. Laypersons ask, debate and answer the same questions, while trying to ascribe meanings to the actions of themselves and others, evaluate them morally (e.g. distribute culpability) and react to them.
Whether actors frame particular actions as demonstrations of 'free choice' is thus highly consequential. Experts such as judges, psychologists, social workers and probation officers must assess the degree of free choice in the actions of others as part of their occupational tasks and responsibilities.

To do this job they must rely on cultural schemas, frameworks, evaluative criteria and tests. 'Choice' is a culturally constructed category, and its shifting meanings and boundaries, the shifting ranges of situations and actions classified as 'choice', deserve systematic sociological analysis. Which cultural repertoires are available to non-sociologists while addressing this sociological theoretical conundrum in their personal and occupational lives?

Laypersons and experts employ various folk sociologies in their everyday sense-making: positivist 'Durkheimian' or 'Marxian' folk sociologies (in which actors are moved by invisible social forces, material or otherwise); 'Weberian' (neo-Kantian) ones, in which actors choose, even if their choices are informed by their culturally-specific understanding of reality; or 'Giddensian' folk sociologies of reflexive individuals writing their own biographies who may differ in their access to resources but not in their capacity to and necessity of constant choosing. Actors also shift between different folk sociologies, differentially positioning themselves vis-à-vis neoliberalism across contexts.

A comparative cultural sociology of choice is much needed, since most sociological accounts of ascribed choice replicate a single meta-narrative, termed below 'the era of choicism', while failing to account for other cultural resources and trends that shape choice ascription. This meta-narrative suggests that under neoliberalism ever more social outcomes are ascribed to choices of individuals. Through this ideological framework the poor (Bauman 2007), single mothers, victims of natural disasters (Hanson & Hanson 2006) and other populations in distress are perceived as 'bad choosers' responsible for their misfortunes. Thus, the ascription of choice legitimizes and justifies inequality (in an era when divine order or biological-racial difference can no longer do this job: Hanson & Hanson 2006). It similarly legitimizes the dismantling of civil solidarity and the welfare state's safety net, which is allegedly unnecessary for responsible, prudent choosers. Thus, the 'underclass discourse' constructed poverty as chosen, suggesting the poor were victims of their own bad choices and failures to seize opportunities (Bauman 2007); whereas conservative Americans blamed victims of Hurricane Katrina of their plight for allegedly choosing not to flee away (Hanson & Hanson 2006).

Since choice ascription is systematically used to exclude 'bad choosers' from entitlement to social benefits and solidarity, being perceived as passively moved by external social forces may paradoxically shield individuals (even if at a price of losing respect: Dunn 2004). Thus, experts are least prone to assign poor children to special education frameworks (that would damage their life chances) when their parents are conceived of as passive victims of strong social forces (Sadi-Nakar 2010). Similarly, women employees are relatively protected from the motherhood penalty in contexts where motherhood is not construed as a choice (Kricheli-Katz 2012). The distribution of privileges and resources relies on cultural discourses of choice and their use.

The literature associates increased choice ascription with the reorganization of various social spheres—including government, romance, consumerism and therapy—around choice. Being able to choose is increasingly considered the core of identity, citizenship, and even humanity itself. Nicholas Rose (1999) suggests that despite internal and external constraints, the modern self is required to construct a life through exercising choice among alternatives. Life is constructed as a sequence of choices, every one of which is emblematic of the chooser's unique identity (ibid.). Psychotherapies maintain individuals as functioning choosers, helping them not to find choice meaningless, and are thus 'technologies of individuality for the production and regulation of the individual who is "free to choose"' (ibid.). In consumer culture, choices are understood simultaneously as authentic manifestations or realizations of already-existing selves, and as the entrepreneurial project of self-making (Cronin 2000; cf. Giddens 1994). In spheres such as love, choice became a highly salient cognized and reflexive category (Illouz 2012; Swidler 2001). For Foucauldian scholars increased ascription of choice represents a wider shift in forms of governance, as individuals are no longer governed by externally imposed imperatives they should follow. Instead, they are expected to make prudent and responsible choices that internalize the actuarial logic: assessing risks, considering remote consequences and rationally preparing for various scenarios through choosing (Lemke 2001; O'malley 1992; Rose 1999).
Critical sociologists have endeavoured to debunk neoliberal ascriptions of choice, responsibility and culpability by revealing the structural forces and social mechanisms that constrain choice and reproduce structure. Time and again sociologists demonstrate that poverty cannot be reduced to ‘bad choices’. Beverley Skeggs claimed that while individuals are assumed to ‘choose’ their repertoire of the self, those held responsible for ‘choosing badly’ often lack ‘access to the range of narratives and discourses for the production and display of an ethical self’ (Skeggs 2005:972). Following the ideological imperative to choose may itself be a privilege. Sweetman (2003) suggested that a disposition to choose reflexively characterizes the habitus of particular groups. Bauman wrote that while ‘all of us are doomed to the life of choices (…) not all of us have the means to be choosers’ (Bauman 1998:86). Put simply, these works and many others suggest that the realm of actual choice did not expand as quickly as the realm of ascribed choice.

**Shrinking boundaries: beyond the critique of neoliberalism**

While there is much merit to these critical analyses, they often portray an overgeneralized picture, to which an empirical comparative cultural analysis may be a potent antidote. For example, Lemke (2001:201) suggested that neoliberal responsibilization ‘can be deployed in all sorts of areas’. Were shifts in choice ascription organized solely by this single cultural logic, there would be little need for a comparative cultural sociology of choice ascription. However, culture is rarely monolithic and uniform across spheres, and choice ascription is no exception. While non-sociologists increasingly ascribe economic misfortunes to individual choices while ignoring structural factors, this cannot be generalized to *all* misfortunes. Turning choice into the object of a comparative sociological analysis may complicate the picture and raise new questions: which factors shape choice ascriptions in different spheres and what explains differences between spheres. Below, I briefly discuss three areas—personality disorders; addiction; and sexual violence and rape—where the boundaries of ascribed choice reveal an opposite trend, shrinking rather than expanding.

Nick Crossley (2000) demonstrated that by reframing a growing range of behaviours and emotional states as disorders, the psycho-industries have amoralized them, as they are no longer ascribed to choices of moral subjects. Thus, technical interventions are substituted for moral ones. Even racism is increasingly framed as a mental illness to be treated with psychiatric drugs (Thomas & Brunsma 2014). Viewed from this perspective, the thriving sociology of medicalization and pathologization is highly relevant for students of choice: it demonstrates how new psychological knowledge has shrunk the realm of ascribed choice.

A unique family of ‘disorders’, the boundaries of which were expanded, is ‘addictions’. Once classified as addictions, actions are expelled from the realm of choice and reframed as compulsive. The notion of addiction was originally restricted to narcotic substances, but has gradually extended to normative healthy and self-defining activities such as work, shopping, internet surfing, eating, sex, exercise, and even relationships (Cronin 2000; Reith 2004, Sedgwick 1994). A growing number of decisions are thus perceived as not representing the authentic self and free will of the actors, and thus not chosen. Under certain circumstances, this ‘pathology of the will’ frame exempts ‘addicts’ from accountability.

However, the most striking field where redefining choice challenges the choicist meta-narrative is sexuality. Since the 1970s the range of sexual interactions framed as volitional choice has dramatically shrunk, as evident in changes in legislation and case law across the West. For space reasons I only survey the main trends, without going into details. The ‘era of choice’ narrative suggests that under neoliberalism social safety networks collapse and individuals are expected to bear responsibility for their allegedly risky or ‘bad’ choices. However, unlike victims of poverty or natural disasters, victims of sexual violence are ever less prone to be accused of bringing their misfortune upon themselves by engaging in risky behaviours and ‘bad choices’. Lawmakers and judges are ever less likely to consider a nocturnal stroll, a visit at a man’s home, ‘suggestive’ clothing, drinking alcohol, or kissing as ‘victim precipitation’ in rape cases. Causality chains are shortened to defend a liberal ideal, women’s right to choose every moment anew whether to have sex, without being constrained by their former choices; yet, this stands at sharp contrast with the neoliberal framing of economic misfortunes, as women are *decreasingly* expected to predict all possible risks and prudently minimize them.
Law moves further away from the neoliberal logic while increasingly recognizing that under certain circumstances, even explicit consent does not amount to 'meaningful choice'. This applies both to intoxication and to consent within extremely uneven power relations (such as relations of authority in workplaces, educational institutions, therapy, or spiritual counselling). Here choice is not isolated from the chain of causation. Instead, apparent choice is framed within a wider causal context that uncovers it as coercion.  

These counter-choicist trends were shaped by shifts in cultural constructions of sexuality and in sexual morality; in cultural ideals such as the separation between sex and power in 'pure relationships' (romantic relationship purified of all material interests: Giddens 1991); by psychological knowledge; and by political, cultural and legal struggles of the feminist movement.  

Indeed, sex is increasingly redefined in contractual terms of consent of sexual subjects defined by their autonomy to choose. However, in the sexual field (unlike the economic field) this conceptualization led to highlighting structural restrictions that render some alleged choices meaningless, shrinking the realm of ascribed choice.  

Without underplaying the importance of neoliberalism and choicism, we must then recognize that choice as a category of practice cannot be reduced to any single logic. It is shaped by various cultural logics and professional discourses, through struggles over meanings and power. Psy-sciences’ knowledge and feminist critique are resources that allow actors to restrict choice ascription in some fields, while neither endlessly replicating neoliberal logics nor challenging the whole neoliberal order. Ascriptions of choice rely on cultural frames that cut down or lengthen chains of causality and inform moral judgments and social action. The comparative project of cultural sociology of choice allows us to go beyond deductions from grand theory and gain understanding of cultural complexity in context.

Conclusion

The argument outlined above represents a refusal to view choice as either culturally-neutral dynamics succeeding cultural traditions; or an automatic realization of cultural structure inscribed in socialized individuals, and thus a mere illusion. Culture shapes choice not only by restricting choice (as in sociologies of modernization), shaping the set of alternatives (as in pragmatist repertoire theories) or producing cultured subjects and pulling their strings (as in dispositional sociologies). It also shapes choice processes (thus moulding both the phenomenological experience of choosing subjects and the actual choices they make) and ascription of choice.  

The plurality of choice techniques and their influence on choice pose a challenge to prominent schools, including Bourdieusian theory (which tends to dismiss materiality and technology as mere reflections of the social) and rational choice theory and its universal presumptions (Hindess 2015).  

Recognizing that culture and choice are not mutually exclusive may take us away from metaphysical debates on free choice and determinism towards more empirical (and arguably, more fruitful) questions, such as how people choose among different alternatives; and how they determine which actions they encounter should be treated as choices. Cultural sociology’s analytical toolkit may help exploring cultural repertoires of both choice practices that organize choices as actual actions unfolding in time and space, practices which evolve historically and are anchored in normativity and materiality; and choice ascription schemas employed by non-sociologists to frame some actions (but not others) as ‘choices’, that is, choice as a discursive category, the boundaries and meanings of which vary historically and culturally.  

By bringing together discussions, insights and sensitivities from various strands of cultural sociology, STS (including ANT) and post-Foucauldian scholarship, we may comparatively explore cultural repertoires of choice practices and choice ascription; their employment across contexts; and their formation and transformation by new technologies and discourses, cultural ideals and norms of propriety. My accounts of the digitalization of choice in online dating sites and the construction of sexual choice in law, while brief and incomplete for reasons of space, may demonstrate the prolific potential of such a cultural sociology of choice. It raises questions such as why does ascribed choice expand in some spheres but shrink in others,
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(i.e., which cultural resources can effectively negate neoliberal discourses); why does digitalization affect choice processes in contradictory ways across fields; and what techniques, epistemologies and ethics do users develop while engaging with digitized platforms to make meaningful choices.

Turning choice into a topic for comparative cultural sociology allows comparing choice practices and choice ascription across (national, class and historical) cultural contexts or between different institutional spheres, while revealing shared patterns hidden by the current scientific division of labour. Some patterns emerge simply from rereading existing literature from this perspective. Thus, choosing between candidates through emotional reflexivity, searching for 'chemistry' and 'love' and framing choice processes through the metaphor of 'dating' emerges as a recurrent pattern across institutional spheres in the USA (Rivera 2012, 2015, Stevens 2007). Once such patterns were identified and reified, future research may explore their emergence, inner logic and jurisdiction; or compare them with parallel choice practices in other cultures of choice, such as the UK's. Choice ascription, as a pragmatic act relying on discursive and institutional resources, similarly varies across life-spheres and national contexts.

Alongside these synchronic comparisons, we may compare diachronic processes, focusing on wide technological and normative transformations that influence choice processes across spheres, such as digitization of choice processes; or the rise of the authenticity ethic (e.g. Schwarz, forthcoming), a normative horizon that influences the legitimacy of different choice techniques. In both cases, these wide transformations are translated into practice in various, surprising ways in different spheres. The same applies for choice ascription that undergoes different shifts in the financial and sexual field, as shown above.

Finally, shifting focus to the how of choice may contribute to existing sociological subfields that are organized around the study of life-choices but neglect choice processes. One example is the sociology of field-of-study choices. This established subfield has produced valuable knowledge on how preferences, interests, expressive considerations and available information shape choice, and interpreted choices in terms of habitus, rational choice, reflexivity, or their combination. However, even the most sophisticated studies (e.g. Ball et al 2002) neglect choosing processes as patterned actions taking place in time and space and anchored in ethics. As Shani (2014) shows, attention to choice processes and their ethics help explain why strong students choose to study the humanities.

The sociology of residential choice is another subfield that usually neglects choice processes, producing either dispositional (Bourdieu 2005) or reflexive modernization (Clapham 2005) accounts, while failing to study choice techniques (such as financial calculation, imagination, or strolling around). This literature also fails to account for the heavy digitalization of the field, which transforms choosing practices, as listing websites and social network sites partly replace estate agents; whereas websites such as streetcheck.co.uk offer house buyers easy access to neighbourhood crime, voting and demographic statistics (including distribution of 'social grades', educational qualifications and ethnicities).

How people choose matters, as choice techniques inform actual decisions. How people ascribe choice matters too, as choice ascription is a pillar of moral judgement. Framing the study of choice around these questions takes us from the metaphysics of free will into the nuanced study of cultural repertoires. Making cultures of choice the object of a comparative sociology may yield new knowledge by bringing together scattered insights and accounts from different fields and integrating isolated debates on the materiality, meaning and normativity of choice, and thus improve our understanding of choice as an ever-changing social phenomena.

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1 Weber refused to conceptualize instrumental rationality as yet another form of culturally-specific value-
rationality (Oakes 2003). Neo-institutionalism goes beyond Weber in viewing instrumental logics (e.g. the market logic) as inherently cultural and granting them equal status to others.

ii Although in Goldthorpe’s Weberian version of RCT culture may shape choice by setting goals and by influencing calculations of subjective expected returns (1998:185-6).

iii E.g. Stevens (2007) identified a common temporal pattern across contexts, from college admission to buying jewels, in which a highly formalized ‘coarse sort’ (applying strict rules to limit the set of options) is followed by a ‘fine distinctions’ stage (when each option is evaluated differently).

iv This shift from reified tastes to tasting processes is already apparent in the post-Bourdieuian sociology of art (Denora 2000; Schwarz 2013).

v Victims’ failure to resist is similarly no longer interpreted by judges as indicating choice, based on psychological knowledge.

vi Some versions of RCT address the challenge by suggesting that choice guided by heuristics, affect and intuition may be more rational than calculation under certain circumstances (Slovic et al 2002), yet they ignore the role of culture—the way structures of knowledge lead actors to address similar choices through different choice practices anchored in their unique ethics, epistemologies and materialities.