

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The elements of choice: why the way we decide matters

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While creating unprecedented challenges for societies *writ large*, the past few years have also been a remarkable era for landmark boost in the writing of value to behavioral scientists. This has occurred through broad media coverage of behavioral policies, new textbooks proliferating along with a growing number of higher education courses on the subject, and increased recognition in government and science. Without a doubt, it is clearly a period of visibility in the field. *The Elements of Choice: Why the Way We Decide Matters*, Eric Johnson's long-awaited *magnum opus* from 2021, is perfectly suited for its time, giving us two missing aspects from that growing literature base: the "elements" and the "why". *Elements* gives readers not only the major ideas of decision science from the past few centuries but breaks down our understanding of the reasons behind choices in a way few books have – methodically, emotionally, and comprehensively.

Review

Elements undoubtedly fills in a similar space as *Nudge* or *Thinking: Fast and Slow*, but where it stands out is shifting from a deep dive on a single idea to an anthology of evidence. Rather than present a framework or a tool and then provide cases to better understand, Johnson produces a narrative periodic table of behavior, separating by concepts and contexts while mixing explanations between vivid events from the recent past with lesser-known scientific studies.

The Elements

You get the gist of the idea in the opening paragraph, but this is not a book to simply get this gist. Instead, as the extremely indicative title implies, you get critical levels of insight that are not always present in similar works. Johnson goes behind what happens in everything from choosing from food menus and investment options to saving lives and donating organs. The point in each case is not just to be informed and inspired by the outcomes, but to understand better what seemed to produce them.

He breaks these down incisively and broadly through reader-friendly descriptions of decision science matched with real-world anecdotes most will find generally familiar.

Johnson recounts decision paradigms with technical but engaging detail in the way most of us talk about a vacation itinerary: with great excitement and the sort of detail that has audiences wanting to plan their own. The most difficult thing about this book is the internal contradiction of wanting to keep reading, knowing whatever comes next may be more engaging than what came before, versus stopping for a while to process and not forget what you just read. It tells in a fluid, engaging narrative format what has taken many of us volumes to compile and articulate. In short, it is the trade book version of a textbook.

The Why

Elements is not necessarily unique in presenting scientific ideas on choice in a narrative format, and in many ways extends the tradition of Johnson's contemporaries. Where it separates from the pack is how far beyond the behaviors themselves, digging deep into the logic and implications. Johnson does not stop with examples about landing airplanes on water or labeling gas mileage on cars for environmental impact. Instead, the book presents multiple narratives in almost each instance, walking readers through entire scenarios in which they can easily relate while also understanding the mechanisms of interest.

At times, he works in a visual aid of the evidence or the actual intervention tool, each time capturing both the fascinating reason for including it while also waxing poetic about the logic behind and the implications. Where there is debate on either side, *Elements* ensures readers are aware that some aspects may not have agreed explanations.

But perhaps most importantly, and certainly most uniquely, Johnson goes *there* ...

Organ donations and behavioral public policy

This section contains one spoiler, beginning in the third paragraph.

Since *Nudge* was published originally, countries around the world have shifted to registering organ donors under the banner of "presumed consent". Presumed consent essentially works as a default in which individuals – typically those with a license to drive a motor vehicle from the government – are treated as voluntary donors unless they actively indicate that they do not wish to be. Broadly speaking, behavioral scientists have not been hugely supportive of this method for several reasons, namely the absence of evidence that the presumption is accurate, the low rates of participation in opt-in countries, and the irreversibility of the outcome (unlike a retirement plan, you cannot withdraw an organ donation).

This discussion is one of the most critical I have each semester in the school of public health where I teach the behavioral public policy class. Typically, I present an example from Chile or the UK where presumed consent has been proposed or implemented and open the discussion on what students think about the ethics and appropriateness of this topic. Curiously, a similar pattern emerges in almost every group: most students do not find it appropriate, but a small number stand strongly in

support. Those students almost always have one or more of these things in common: they are nurses who deal directly with patients on waiting lists (and family members of those who did not receive one in time), doctors who have experience with both donor families and recipients, or students who have direct, personal experience awaiting a donor.

Elements will find a very friendly audience from those three groups. Taking a (very) personal narrative and giving it prime position in one of the earlier chapters of the book, Johnson takes one of the rare academic public defenses of presumed consent. As in most of the book, he first articulates the elements of the issue (too few donors/registered donors) and structural barriers that likely produced them (inefficient mechanisms to register), while also integrating both psychological and decision theory. However, while many in the field pivot toward the ethics from the view of the donor, Johnson emphasizes more the moral, altruistic, and transactional aspects with society.

Policymakers and special interest groups should absolutely take note of Johnson’s discussion. While I personally have sided with the view that presumed consent is not appropriate, at least in its current form, Johnson provides compelling counterarguments that absolutely deserve an audience. In the cases of those countries that have already implemented presumed consent, this view may have already preceded him and will bolster that case. Johnson’s argument provides a service to the ethics discussion across other ethical dilemmas in the field, not only related to defaults.

Some readers may wonder about other factors such as fears linked to organ donor volunteers receiving intentionally poor treatment (Penn Medicine cited this myth as the number 1 reason individuals do not register¹). Johnson leaves the door open on that, though as readers will note, places a heavily weighted “if” in the penultimate paragraph. Agree or disagree, this section will now become mandatory reading for my students – and I recommend you read this section (and the full book) to learn more about Johnson’s perspective on it.

Additional themes

It will come to no surprise of Johnson’s fans that he also has a fair bit to say on the value of default settings. For those not familiar, default settings are essentially what you get when you do not actively choose something else. Did you check the box at the end saying didn’t want to get promotional materials? Or wait, did it say check the box if you *did* want them? It is not hard to see why Johnson is not alone in seeing defaults as so powerful, not only is his argument on organ donation centered on defaults, but news cycles in 2022 widely covered how a simple change in defaults by Apple wound up coming at an expense of \$12 billion to Meta.

Using multiple examples and some visuals, Johnson gives a robust run-through of defaults, and what he calls “almost defaults”, which have many similar features but no pre-selection. As he runs through these topics, you can see his marketing professor side shine through (no wonder students especially love his class!). Moving away

¹<https://www.pennmedicine.org/updates/blogs/transplant-update/2019/march/myths-about-organ-donation>

from the grim consequences of cancer treatment, Johnson crosses over to German train tickets, Starbucks, and Zoom (as well as a pseudonymous German automobile company).

However, where Johnson's b-school professor side really kicks up is in the applications chapter (9; though frankly, most chapters probably could count at least somewhat as application chapters). Whether or not they actively choose to do this, some of the most rapidly successful businesses in recent decades have capitalized masterfully on the elements Johnson speaks of. Behavioral scientists like me – though perhaps not necessarily surprised by the elements in Johnson's unpacking – may find it particularly validating (or even therapeutic) to read these given how I am wont to tell anyone within earshot each time I spot a clear decision science-informed method used throughout the day. That he uses Netflix as the primary frame for these carries a lot of weight (even for non-subscribers of Netflix, who may gain a better understanding of why their friends won't stop talking about it).

For those less interested in business and more in matters of civic or public interest, Johnson has anecdotes for you as well. Pulling from various popular and government sources, Johnson demonstrates how the simplification of often misunderstood concepts like probability and uncertainty are directly relevant to public understanding. That understanding, as Johnson makes clear through his example selection (meta-choice, you might say) is extremely important in times of climate change and fracturing of democratic norms.

Ultimately, Johnson is writing to inform as much as he is preparing readers to utilize. This is arguably what really sets *Elements* apart from similar books. At some points, you may feel unable to take on the many specifics and anecdotes he includes – but it is very much worth pressing on, as the closing chapters provide the sort of bringing-it-all-together that all readers can leverage.

What is not in the book

Though it is relatively simple to link aspects of the book to a number of general and specific topics not included, a few major themes not explored are worth noting. While I may be somewhat biased in this list, I would suggest the first is inequality. Johnson does make a brief mention of how appropriate choice interventions may have some potential for reducing inequities, using schools as an example. My view would be that the broadest definitions of choice architecture involve physical, civil, and political environments. Mountains of research, policy, and (frankly) history converge on just how much those environments have been used to create and prolong many forms of inequality.

Johnson is absolutely right in highlighting choice elements for individuals to be aware of as a matter of protecting ourselves. Even unintended consequences of behavioral interventions can create or widen existing inequalities. I highlight this not as a criticism of Johnson or the book, but as a call to readers in government who should take note of the power of choice architecture when thinking of legislative tools to protect the most vulnerable from harms created by misguided uses.

Another broader factor not explored in much depth were more distal aspects of choices, like what makes people avoid exercise or use the train in the first place? Sure, we recognize that the most successful companies seemed to have mastered

the art of getting us hooked on their platforms, but what about when we have to do the work, like exercising or eating healthy, rather than just binge-watching suggested shows on Netflix?

This is again not a comment on the author or the writing – the point of the book is of course the elements of the decision, not the universe of all factors in behavior. Focusing only on the proximal factors like salience, simplicity, defaults, and reminders may be part of why some recent papers on nudging have been underwhelming, though. There may be a time and a place for sending letters to encourage certain outcomes or reduce risk, but failing to account for wider contexts (e.g., *why* are doctors prescribing antibiotics so much, or *why* do so few people get flu shots?) means the “simple” interventions are most effective for the “simple” barriers. To be sure, Johnson is not wedded to nudges as the primary or priority behavioral intervention method, but one cannot escape the concept while reading *Elements*.

Finally, I would urge readers to take it upon themselves to think about downstream effects of the binary behaviors (e.g., opting in vs leaving the box unchecked) in the anecdotes. Johnson puts together very delicate examples of how decisions for platform setup and screening made by companies like Tinder, OKCupid, and Coffee Meets Bagel produce very different results for consumers. This again speaks to the fundamentals *at the point of decision*. Where do we not get into much discussion is: to what end? Is one platform producing more happiness? Happier couples? Greater long-term mental health and well-being through better relationships? Or simply more matches and temporary, superficial hits of adrenaline without a greater gain?

While the space between receiving an organ donation and quality of life is not hard to imagine, the same impact cannot be assumed for Netflix making suggestions for what to watch next. Ultimately, our choices will indeed have a great impact on our lives, so it stands to reason we should consider how each of those platforms does – or does not – actually contribute to our well-being.

What was missing before

Elements fills in a major gap in books of its kind by being the first to truly connect the core concepts to actionable recommendations for a very wide audience. Whereas most behavioral economics literature understandably points toward policy or individual behavior change, Johnson gifts us with something that speaks more widely. Through *Elements*, individuals can recognize both the way choice environments may influence our own behaviors concurrently with thinking how to potentially make use of the same thinking for our own work. As opposed to thinking it is for us to read but others to implement, Johnson shows how it is us in both the story and the solution.

Suggested audiences

While decision sciences have long been relevant in management, policy, and health-care, the broad popularity of behavioral economics more widely has grown substantially in recent years. For that reason, this book is really suited to broad audiences,

particularly students that want to connect core, technical theory to everyday issues and practice, and to professionals that (policy, business – especially marketing, non-profits) are already interested in the subject but want to better understand the logic behind and implications of choices.

In the end, I highly recommend this book, whether for general interest, to complement more dense reference material or decision science papers, or for a desire to make use of its precepts. If you are already highly informed on the subject, you still stand to gain a great deal from reading this. In sum, read *Nudge* if you want to be excited about behavioral economics; read *Elements* if you wish to really understand them.