

Choice Theory as a Model of Adult Development

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ABSTRACT

Choice Theory is popularly recognized as a basis for the practice of Reality Therapy, Quality Education and Lead Management. There seems to be little thought given, however, to Choice Theory as a broader model for human development. This lack of perspective is surprising given the Institute's training emphasis on application of Choice Theory in practitioners' lives, as well as vocations. While some attempts have been made to expand the Basic Needs concept, through suggestions of additional Needs, there has been no real attempt to use Choice Theory as a frame for understanding human development through the lifespan. Development is understood as occurring within individuals who may be designated as more fully or less fully developed. Development in these individuals is contrasted and compared with other developed individuals. Although this is not intended to be an exhaustive thesis, by any means, Choice Theory is presented as an idea with richer veins to be mined, especially in the developmental area.

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The ideas in this paper are predicated on the author's understanding of Choice Theory, an internal control psychology formulated by Dr. William Glasser (1998) that states that all human behavior is motivated by five Basic Needs - the physiological Need of survival and four psychological Needs that may be represented by the terms, love/ belonging/ acceptance, power/recognition/ achievement, freedom/ independence/ choice and fun/ learning/ excitement. Choice Theory is the product of consideration and research applied to Control Theory (Glasser, 1984), itself a product of Behavior: The Control of Perception Psychology (Glasser, 1981), an offshoot of William T. Powers' Perceptual Control Theory (Powers, 1973).

Powers (1973) suggested that subjective perception is the only reality for any individual and that all behavior was motivated by the need to control individual perceptions and, hence, reality. Glasser originally embraced Powers' idea of perceptual control as a theoretical framework for his Reality Therapy, suggesting in Behavior: The Control of Perception (BCP) psychology, a model similar to Powers' Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). Glasser later posited that Basic Needs were the motivators for behavior and the individuals parted ways, Glasser to reformulate BCP into Control Theory, later to become Choice Theory,

and Powers to refine his PCT, believing that there was no logical foundation to create Basic Needs when PCT explained behavior without them.

This paper is an attempt to understand Choice Theory in relation to the concept of adult development. While this paper is not necessarily meant to set forth an exhaustive theoretical frame, it is hoped that the discussion will stimulate research in this direction.

Development Through the Lifespan

Human beings continue to develop throughout their lifespan. Development is here defined as the ability to progressively make good choices to meet Basic Needs. Choices are defined as "good" if they move individuals closer to meeting their Basic Needs in ways that do not harm them or others. Choices are defined as "bad" (or less effective) if they do not move individuals closer to meeting their Basic Needs or if the choices harm the individual making the choices or harm others.

Choices begin to be made in infancy and continue through the physiological developmental stages of childhood, adolescence, young, middle and older adulthood. As individuals age, they may or may not become consciously aware of their Basic Needs. Individuals may or may not develop strategies to satisfy their Basic Needs. All individuals will, however, progress from relying on others to satisfy their Needs to making conscious choices about their behaviors that satisfy their own Basic Needs. This progression, from others satisfying Needs to self satisfying Needs is development.

Development is not sequential but is progressive. Individuals do not pass through various stages of development but do become progressively better at making choices to meet their Needs. This progression is noted by a lessening of motivation to fulfill the Need. While all Basic Needs motivate us to meet their genetic level of satisfaction, it will be noted that Needs satisfaction, itself, is in constant flux. That is to say, just because an individual engages in Needs satisfying behaviors at one moment in time does not mean that Needs satisfaction is temporally static. As individuals change within their relationships and relational environments, Needs satisfaction will fluctuate. E.g., if one's Needs are primarily met through one's marriage and employment, Needs satisfaction may diminish if the spouse dies or leaves or if one is terminated from one's job.

As individuals age and move into different life roles, the ways in which they meet their Basic Needs vary. In childhood, Basic Needs are met primarily through relationships with parents. In adolescence, Basic Needs are met through relationships with peers, and in young adulthood, Needs are met through relationships with "significant others" and individuals in vocational and academic settings. In middle adulthood, Basic Needs are met through employment relationships and in older adulthood, relationships with "significant others" and friends fulfill required Needs. Basic Needs do not change but life roles change, based on choices made to fulfill immediate Basic Needs requirements. As roles change, the ways in which Basic Needs are met change.

More and Less Fully Developed Choice Individuation

A more fully developed individual will seek ways to compensate for the lack of Needs satisfaction caused by these life events through finding other ways to fulfill the Needs by making good choices. A less fully developed individual may make bad choices in attempts to fulfill the Needs "void" caused by changing relationships, e.g. loss of spouse and co-workers, and relational environments, home and work life. The term, void, is used to denote the difference between the satisfied and un-satisfied Needs levels. Basic Needs are always met at some level. Individuals are compelled to achieve some level of Needs satisfaction to continue operational functioning. The methods for obtaining Needs satisfaction may be bad choices, but choices will be made in an attempt to meet basic needs. e.g., individuals may choose to depress in response to the hypothetical situation given above, i.e., the loss of a spouse and employment. This is a bad choice but it is the best choice the individual can create at the moment. A good choice in the hypothetical would be to develop or rely on a support group and work toward seeking other employment. The more developed individual would choose thinking and behaviors that more fully helped meet Basic Needs satisfaction. The less developed individual would choose actions and cognition that less fully meet Basic Needs.

The pejorative nature of the more and less fully developed individual's definitions is acknowledged. From a biopsychological perspective, development is about the ability to meet Basic Needs. Simply meeting Basic Needs, however, does not imply development. Applying criteria of harm to self or others in defining "good" and "bad" choices are based on sociocultural perspectives that differentiate between human development and simple change.

Psychopathic and antisocial behaviors designed to meet Basic Needs are no more or less developed than prosocial strategies for Needs fulfillment. They are simply different ways to achieve Needs satisfaction. Perhaps "other developed" would be a more appropriate term for individuals in this category, while "less fully developed"

remains applicable for individuals who make choices that move them no closer to greater Needs satisfaction but who meet Needs on a survival level, i.e., the minimal level required to prevent Basic Needs frustration.

Sex, Race and SES

Sex, race and socioeconomic status (SES) are irrelevant factors in fulfilling Basic Needs in so far as all individuals have access to environmental and relational vectors for Needs fulfillment. This is not to deny that limited opportunities may exist for individuals based on race, gender and SES. Limited opportunity, however, does not prevent individuals from making good choices to meet basic Needs, regardless of the environmental or social richness. This is seen on a survival level with organisms that exist in environments "at the edge" of biological sustainability (for examples refer to Gould & Gould, 1989). While these organisms may not "develop" in the manner in which the term is here being used, the analogy serves. Life finds a way to exist, whether it be biological life or psychological life, and both may flourish in the cruelest of environments. Even in a society that represses opportunities based on discriminatory ideologies, opportunities exist for individuals to develop. Indeed, if Needs fulfillment is based on attainment of pictures in the Quality World and pictures in the Quality World are based on individual cognition, then individuals may fulfill Basic Needs in whatever environment they find themselves. Aspirations are contingent upon previous, individual experience. One cannot imagine what is unknown to one's experience and, therefore, one cannot develop a picture of Needs fulfillment based on what has not previously existed in the form of environmental stimuli. Individuals may become more fully developed in whatever environment they exist.

Gender Bias in Needs Fulfillment

Male and female proclivities are subjective descriptors. Humans are integrated beings. Both "male" and "female" aspects are human traits expressed as behaviors aimed at fulfilling internal motivators. Sociocultural modeling may provide individuals with clues of how to go about fulfilling Basic Needs but individual choice is the final arbiter of behavioral expression.

Recognizing Total Behavior in the Function of Boredom

With age, "tastes" may change. Those things which fulfilled Basic Needs in the past still fulfill Basic Needs in the present but the degree to which fulfillment is met may vary. One indication that behaviors that previously fulfilled Basic Needs may be waning is the feeling of "boredom." Boredom is an indication that pictures in the Quality World are losing efficacy as motivators of behavior. These phenomena (phenomena because emotions are viewed as the effect of constellations of influences) may also account for the "seven year itch," the popular notion

of the desire to move from one relationship to another every seven years. Fisher (1989) suggested that it was actually a "four year itch," four years being the requisite time for a child to be conceived, born and reared to a self-sustaining age. The biological advantages for a "four year itch" are assumed to be increased genetic diversity (Fisher, 2004), an evolutionary advantage, and sustained Basic Needs fulfillment at a high level of satisfaction. While the "itch" may be biological in nature, the manner in which this is handled is mediated by sociocultural expectation. Sociocultural norms, values and mores will influence individual choices in Basic Needs fulfillment in more fully developed individuals. Such influences are not always congruent with efficient Needs satisfaction and may actually interfere with Basic Needs fulfillment. Puritanical ideologies may find themselves at odds with biological imperatives, creating psychological disturbances. These disturbances are dilemmas that may be solved by more fully developed individuals through self-reflection and alternative choice recognition. Regardless of resolution or non-resolution of psychological dilemmas, boredom may serve as an identifiable affective precursor to biological imperatives. This relationship between affective, physiological and cognitive states with behavioral functioning defines the concept of Total Behavior.

Antisocial and psychopathic individuals, as has been noted, do not employ less fully developed strategies for Needs satisfaction. They employ other strategies for Needs satisfaction. Cheating is an evolutionary stable strategy (Számadó, 2000; Colman & Wilson, 1997). Promiscuity is another method to ensure genetic continuity and variability. While these behaviors may not be socioculturally acceptable, they are sociobiologically viable.

Definition of Midlife Event

More fully developed individuals may develop self-reflection skills that allow them to move from fulfilling Needs on an unconscious level to fulfilling Needs on a conscious level. This shift from unconscious to conscious fulfillment of Basic Needs may precipitate a "midlife crisis" in some individuals, although not necessarily in all individuals and not necessarily in mid-life. This particular "midlife" event may be due to a picture in the Quality World demanding, as it were, satisfaction. After many years of fulfilling Basic Needs on a survival level, the internal drives exert themselves in an effort to more fully achieve satisfaction. The Total Behavior created to fulfill the repressed pictures in the Quality World, i.e., the under-fulfilled genetic drives, may force choices, but the force is internal and the external expression is always a conscious decision to action. Jung (1933) noted that "the achievements which society rewards are won at a cost of diminution of personality. Many – far too many – aspects of life which should also have been experienced lie in the lumber-room among dusty memories. Sometimes, even,

they are glowing coals under grey ashes" (p.104). Boredom, which may predict a midlife event, could be an indication that the coals are, indeed, smoldering beneath a layer of socioculturally repressive ash.

Evidence suggests that even in other developed individuals, including psychopathic individuals, some sort of midlife event occurs that brings about a decrease in criminal behavior, behavior designed to meet Basic Needs. According to Hare (1993), criminal activity remains high in psychopaths until about the age of forty, when a decline occurs. The decline is more pronounced in nonviolent offenders than in violent offenders. While it is unlikely, given knowledge of psychopathy, that these individuals become more self-reflective, it is possible that previous pictures in the Quality World begin to fade, as they do in more and less fully developed individuals and other strategies are employed to achieve Needs satisfaction. This same phenomenon is seen in antisocial individuals at about the age of fifty years (Troisi, 2007).

Mental Health in Development

The individual that is being called "more fully developed" tends to exhibit a greater degree of mental health. Note that the "less fully developed" individual is still mentally healthy. If there does not exist a pathological cause for the individual's behavior, e.g., depressing, then the individual is not mentally ill (Glasser, 2005). Mental illness is only used to denote a brain illness with a pathogenic origin. Depressing is a cognitive behavioral choice, as are all of the "personality disorders" listed in the DSM-IV-TR. Alzheimer's is a pathological illness caused by amyloid, senile plaques and neurofibrillary tangles in the human brain. Individuals who choose thinking and actions that lead to greater Needs satisfaction move away from cognitive behavioral choices such as depressing, because they do not meet Needs satisfaction beyond the survival level. Individuals with Alzheimer's cannot make cognitive behavioral choices to reverse the effects of that disease. The greater the degree of mental health, the greater an individual's facility with making good choices and, therefore, the greater an individual's developmental ease.

Spiral Nature of Development

This model of development may be viewed as an upward spiral where choices about Need satisfaction must be made throughout the life cycle but choices are made at higher levels of development. As has been stated, "higher levels of development" refers to good choices that lead to sustainable Needs satisfaction. As has also been stated, Needs satisfaction is a dynamic variable. While more fully developed individuals may make more sustainable choices, e.g., developing a support group to deal with loss of other relationships, they may also make less sustainable choices immediately to satisfy Basic Needs, e.g., hiring a prostitute. Both choices lead to Basic Needs fulfillment

but development of a support group is the more sustainable choice for fulfilling an individual's Needs.

This ability to make more and less sustainable choices indicates the "Snakes and Ladders" nature of adult development. While progress is made up the spiraling ladder of development through making sustainable and good choices, and learning from these choices, regression is possible when encountering a "snake" of a problem that is outside the usual domain of one's life experience. Bad choices may be made and an individual may "slide" down the progression spiral. Since development is non-sequential, however, knowledge gained from all choices, both good and bad, provides an individual access to a previous position on the "board of life" without having to re-climb the stairs of experience. Knowledge once learned need not be re-learned.

Knowledge may or may not be transferable to other life situations. Non-transferable knowledge is knowledge that an individual does not transfer from one setting to another. The knowledge is situated in the context of one meaningful life event. When met with a similar life event in a variable context, the previous knowledge does not seem applicable to the current situation. Choices may be made that do not meet Basic Needs in as facile or Needs fulfilling a manner as could be due to the non-transference of relevant knowledge. A "slide" occurs. New situational knowledge is gained. The individual, when faced with the same choice, can then draw on the previous, experiential knowledge and make a more fully developed choice. More fully developed individuals may be more adept at transference of cognition to different life situations, developing a "suitcase" full of behavioral strategies to deal with life events (R. Wubbolding, personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Affects as Indicators of Needs Fulfillment

The more fully developed individual is the "happy" individual. It is the individual who defines life and relationships as joyful and ultimately fulfilling. Happiness is here distinguished from pleasure. True happiness often requires an individual to make choices that are painful in the short-term but that lead to long-term joy or happiness. An individual may make choices that are good for long-term Needs fulfillment but that cause immediate or short-term Needs denial. During the period between short-term Needs denial and long-term Needs fulfillment, one will suffer.

Just as happiness defines Needs fulfillment, misery defines Needs denial. The more fully developed individual will make good choices that lead to long-term, or sustainable, Needs fulfillment. Less fully developed individuals may make choices that provide for immediate Needs satisfaction at the expense of long-term Needs fulfillment.

Consideration of long- and short-term choices demands recognition of the possibility of suffering. The ability to suffer may be a blessing or a curse. The more

fully developed individual who has a great capacity for suffering will find that capacity to endure suffering as a boon when having to make Needs denying choices to fulfill long-term Needs satisfaction and when struggling to make choices that only nominally meet Basic Needs requirements. These nominal choices illustrate the spiral nature of the development in even more fully developed individuals. The less fully developed individual may find the same capacity to endure suffering as a curse that leads, not to resolution in the attainment of Needs through good choices, but to a non-motivating misery.

Hare (1993) notes that psychopathic, i.e., other developed, individuals have a lowered affect that may be biologically induced:

In effect, the elements needed for the development of psychopathy – including a profound inability to experience empathy and the complete range of emotions, including fear – are provided in part by nature and possibly by some unknown biological influences on the developing fetus and neonate (p.173).

Because of lowered affect, psychopathic and antisocial individuals may require greater stimuli to register the experience of Needs fulfillment (Troisi, 2007). This may explain why a greater threshold of fear is exhibited by psychopathic individuals. Less fear allows for more intense interaction, thus providing the more intense sensation required for Needs satisfaction.

Other developed individuals are also less affected by standard punishments for criminal behaviors. Such punitive measures seemingly have little or no effect on the behavioral strategies of psychopaths in Basic Needs fulfillment. Psychopaths may, at some point, suffer due to minimal Needs satisfaction but it is not due to the meager punishments meted out in most correctional systems. Indeed, the very appellation of "correctional" applies to projections of what prosocial individuals believe would deter other prosocial individuals, both more and less fully developed, from behaviors that violate sociocultural norms. Other developed individuals may actually find "correctional" measures to be stimulating and Needs fulfilling, hence, they have no reason to change their behavior.

Spirituality

Although some have proposed that the Basic Needs be expanded to include spirituality (Litwack, 2007), spirituality, itself, satisfies other psychological Needs. This, in and of itself, precludes spirituality from being a Basic Need. If Needs were satisfied by each other, then there would be no motivation for behavior. The very genetic presence of the other satisfying Needs would suppress the behavioral imperative.

As spirituality is a Needs satisfier, however, it is possible that it represents a developmental construct. If spirituality is viewed as a "way of knowing" or a "way of making meaning" that incorporates a concept of some-

thing greater than the individual, it is possible that spirituality represents choices that include global consciousness decision making, i.e. the awareness of the social ramifications of individual choices. While more fully developed individuals will make choices that satisfy Basic Needs and do not harm self or others, more spiritually developed individuals make choices that positively impact society. Kohlberg suggested similar stages of self-transcendence in his theory of moral development (stages 6 and 7), as did Fowler in his "universalizing" stage of faith, and Maslow in his concept of "peak experiences" (Bee & Bjorklund, 2004). While this ability to choose socially constructive alternatives is not viewed as a developmental stage in the proposed Choice Theory model, it is acknowledged as an aspect of the more fully developed individual, who does not make socially positive choices.

Limitations of Choice Theory as a Model of Human Development

Basic Needs Theory is based on the idea that the Needs are genetically encoded. To date, no evidence exists for a genetic blueprint for Basic Needs. The lack of evidence for the Needs, however, does not negate their existence. Whether there exists a freedom gene, or any other specific gene solely tied to any Basic Need, is questionable, despite the fact that genetic heritability of personality is given much credence in certain schools of personality psychology (Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007). While personality traits have long been seen as heritable by these schools, the idea of Basic Needs as a construct in personality formation has been largely ignored.

While Brown and Swenson (2005) developed a Contextual Needs Assessment instrument to assess the relative strengths of Basic Needs – an exercise that recognized the genetic basis of Basic Needs through the inference that Basic Needs are common to all human beings - Minatrea and O'Phelan (2000) correlated the Basic Needs with the Myers-Briggs Typology Indicator, suggesting that Basic Needs may, indeed, be related to personality. Such studies have been few and far between.

It is suggested in this paper that clusters of genes are activated and/or repressed based on environmental influences during the life cycle and this activation and/or repression leads to psychological predispositions referred to as Basic Needs, the configurations of which define human personality. This scenario, if valid, lends further credence to the developmental nature of this theory since activation and/or repression of genes usually occurs during discrete periods in the developmental life cycle.

While studies to validate this thesis have yet to be presented, it is suggested that discussions of this nature may serve to stimulate such research and expand the dimensions of Choice Theory as a model of human adult development.

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