

The Concept of Choice (Excerpt)

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In this paper I explore the concept of choice. I briefly review the literature on the subject and I describe ways that have been suggested to develop choice. Throughout the text I refer to ways in which choice generates conflict in people's lives and how it might be dealt with.

Review of Current Research on Choice

The concept of choice is inextricably entwined with the notion of freedom. Whenever a person chooses between two or more "possible courses of action, then - however he chooses - he is living his freedom" (p. 32). "Freedom is possibility" (May, p. 10). Choice, is the exercise of that possibility.

Choice has also been described more specifically as the bridge between wish and action (Yalom, 1980). According to Yalom, "One initiates through wishing and then enacts through choice" (p. 302). He explains:

Once wish materializes, the process of willing is launched and is transformed finally into action. . . . The process between wish and action entails commitment; it entails 'putting myself on record (to myself) to endeavor to do it.' The happiest term [to describe this process] seems to me to be 'decision' -- or 'choice.' (p. 302)

According to Maslow (1968), choice is the touchstone of mental health. Self-actualizing people are distinguished by their choices.

Such people . . . tend spontaneously to choose the true rather than the false, good rather than evil, beauty rather than ugliness, integration rather than dissociation, joy rather than sorrow, aliveness rather than deadness, uniqueness rather than stereotypy. (p. 168)

In his view, the psychologically sick individual suffers from impediments to his or her growth, resulting in the absence of a "real identity" and remarkably "little power to make . . . decisions

and choices” (p.164). As well, such person loses the natural correlation between what he or she wants or needs to do and what is good for him or her.

Then what he wants to do may be bad for him; even if he does it he may not enjoy it; even if he enjoys it, he may simultaneously disapprove of it, so that the enjoyment is itself poisoned or may disappear quickly. What he enjoys at first he may not enjoy later. His impulses, desires, and enjoyments then become a poor guide to living. He must accordingly mistrust and fear the impulses and the enjoyments which lead him astray, and so he is caught in conflict, dissociation, indecision; in a word, he is caught in a civil war. (p. 159)

Choice in the existential-humanistic tradition is a deeply layered notion that raises profound questions: How much do we want? How much do we have or believe we have?

How much choice do we want?

In Wheelis’s (1973) view, we only truly want choice in the realm of the trivial. In more serious matters we prefer to be constrained. “We might choose to live or die, but prefer not to choose, want to believe rather that we have to live. . . . We prefer to have such matters settled, removed from choice and hence from freedom” (p. 23). In between the minor and deep issues, he believes people differ in their perception of freedom and choice. Where one person feels trapped, another sees options. Wheelis describes this continuum of perceived constraint as the “realm of necessity” (p. 24), composed of two categories: subjective or arbitrary and objective or mandatory. Only the objective constitutes true necessity: “It derives from forces, conditions, events which lie beyond the self, not subject to choice, . . . will [or] effort” (p. 24). It includes things like natural laws, height, eye color, gravity - things we are metaphysically unable to alter.

Arbitrary necessity encompasses forces within our control but which are perceived to be externally imposed (Wheelis, 1973). It includes the choice not to leave a spouse for a lover, or to remain in an unsatisfying career rather than pursue a dream. ¹ Arbitrary necessity is often fear

¹ Wheelis also refers to giving in to the impulse to drink as an example; however, given the more currently understood physiological aspects of addiction, this example no longer seems applicable.

disguised as exigency. It represents an internal conflict so formidable that one feels inexorably cornered. At such junctures, to the extent we cannot tolerate the conflict, we renounce freedom by expanding necessity, often by not acting at all. In this way we end the dissonance and reduce the tension. However, as we attribute increasingly more circumstances to necessity, we are left with a superficial equanimity at the expense of our sovereignty, flexibility and strength. As Wheelis describes,

Observing others then who laugh at risk, who venture on paths from which we have turned back, we feel envy; they are courageous where we are timid. We came close to despising ourselves, but recover quickly, can always take refuge in a hidden determinism. (p. 30)

How much choice do we have?

According to Wheelis (1973), we never run out of choices. “In every situation, for every person, there is a realm of freedom and a realm of constraint” (p. 30). Even the concentration camp prisoner trudging toward the gas chamber has choice. Although at that moment he lacks what might be construed as meaningful choice - he cannot choose to live - he retains the power to choose how he will die: He could choose to “shout ‘Comrades’! They will kill you! Run! or to say nothing” (p. 31). In perceiving choice within that moment, “however he choose[s] - he is living his freedom” (p. 31).

Wheelis’s (1973) conception of choice seems limited to conscious decisions. In his view, “Freedom is the awareness of alternatives and of the ability to choose” (p. 15). Thus, choice is contingent upon awareness. Even issues of arbitrary necessity are limited to conscious conflicts. In such decisions, “The issue is not one of conscious versus unconscious. The contending forces are both conscious. The issue is the boundary of the self, the limits of the ‘I’” (p. 25).

At variance with this insistence on consciousness, Farber (2000) identifies the predominant role of the unconscious behind certain choices. In his view, the will is divided

between two realms, conscious and unconscious. The conscious will directs a person toward a specific goal. In this realm, the goal is known and the steps toward achieving it are recognized at the outset. Farber calls this will “a utilitarian will, in that we do this to get that” (p. 79). Choices that are made in this realm include examples such as quitting smoking, going to college, or selecting a career.

In contrast, the will which occupies the unconscious realm is limited to moving a person in a direction, rather than toward a particular object. Yalom (1980) describes it as an agency of “propulsion,” which “eludes direct and immediate scrutiny” (p. 298). Importantly, unlike choices made within the conscious realm, decisions occupying the unconscious realm are not experienced as choices. One does not recognize that a choice has been made until after the fact. Examples of the distinction between these two realms include the following:

I can will knowledge, but not wisdom; going to bed, but not sleeping; eating, but not hunger; meekness, but not humility; scrupulosity, but not virtue; self-assertion or bravado, but not courage; lust, but not love; commiseration, but not sympathy; congratulations, but not admiration; religiosity, but not faith; reading, but not understanding. (Farber, 2000, p. 79)

Farber cautions against attributing conscious control to activities within the purview of the unconscious realm, because attempting to will that which cannot be willed results in mounting anxiety. “Since anxiety, too, opposes such willing, should we, in our anxiety about anxiety, now try to will away that anxiety, our fate is still more anxiety” (p. 79).

Similar to Farber’s (2000) view, May (1969) suggests that choice can be limited by unconscious forces. May distinguishes *intention*: the realm over which we have control, from *intentionality*: that which eludes our conscious awareness. An intention is a “psychological state” (p. 234) that underlies every action. Consciousness itself subsumes intention, in that “each act of

consciousness tends toward something, is a turning of the person toward something, and has within it, no matter how latent, some push toward a direction for action” (May, 1969, p. 230).

Intentionality, however, is an epistemology, “a way of knowing reality” (May, 1969, p. 226). May explains that intentionality underlies all intentions, both conscious and unconscious:

It refers to a state of being and involves, to a greater or lesser degree, the totality of the person's orientation to the world at that time. . . . Intentionality . . . goes below levels of immediate awareness, and includes spontaneous, bodily elements and other dimensions which are usually called "unconscious." (p. 234)

Intentionality can prevent us from noticing obvious things, as well as remembering traumatic events. This *resistance* occurs, he believes, because we cannot permit ourselves to perceive a fact which we are not able to tolerate or take a stand against. “We are, unable to give attention to something until we are able in some way to experience an ‘I-can’ with regard to it” (p. 232).

Consequently, we can be trapped in an intentionality that limits our awareness to only those ideas we are able to accept.

Ways to Develop Choice

Psychotherapy is largely about expanding personal choice (May, 1969; Yalom, 1980; Maslow, 1968). In fact, according to some authors, the goal of therapy is to discover one’s ability to exercise free choice. Schneider and Krug (2010) state, “The chief question for the existential-humanistic therapist is how does one help this person (client) find choice - meaning, clarity, poignancy - in her or his life, in spite of (and sometimes, in light of) all the threats to these possibilities”? (p. 32).

One method of recognizing greater choice is to heighten our awareness of past choices. Doing so permits us to view our current condition as the result of our own decisions, rather than

as predetermined and unalterable (Wheelis, 1973). He suggests that viewing one's history in terms of choices, enhances a person's sense of agency:

If . . . the determining causes of which we gain awareness lie within, or are brought within, our experience, and if we use this gain in understanding to create present options, freedom will be increased, and with it, greater responsibility for what we have been, are and will become. (p. 117)

No matter our past circumstances, Wheelis insists that there was always some choice involved :

[Even] in the life most crushed by outside force, there . . . exists the potentiality for actions other than those in fact taken. With the noose around our necks there still are options - to curse God or to pray, to weep or to slap the executioner in the face. (pp. 115-116)

Choice and Psychotherapy

Conscious choice enters psychotherapy in various ways (Yalom, 1980). First, some people commence therapy seeking help with a particular decision. In such case, the therapy will be centered on that decision and its implications. Second, if a client seeks deeper therapy, one particular decision can be a springboard for understanding other choices. By looking at the various themes related to that choice, a greater comprehension of underlying motivations for many of that person's choices may emerge. Third, the therapist and client might focus on the presence of choice in every every action, including instances of personal growth and change, with the understanding that many such choices are unconscious (Yalom, 1980). Over time in depth psychotherapy, those less obvious motivations, and the choices that resulted, may slowly emerge.

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