Choices Through the Life Cycle[1]

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Life is a series of choices. Continually, we are faced with decisions to be made. And ultimately, the choices and decisions we make, in turn make us, or determine the life we have. In this paper, I will present some of the research that I have done over the years which highlight some crucial choices that we face over the life cycle.

Aggression in Six Cultures

I became aware of some of the choices young children face when as a graduate research assistant, I worked on the Six Cultures project data with my professor, William W. Lambert (Lambert and Tan, 1979, 1989). The six cultures project was an ambitious attempt to study the socialization of children is six cultures around the world. The six cultures were located in the Philippines, Okinawa, the United States, India, Kenya, and Mexico. One of the major goals was to determine the extent to which behaviors were innate (in which case they would appear uniformly across the six cultures) or culturally shaped (in which case there would be variation across cultures).

The particular behavior we focused on was aggression. We wanted to see if aggression was biologically determined in which case its incidence should be relatively uniform across the six cultures; or if it was learned, in which case the cultural differences in child socialization should result in cultural variations in the incidence and expression of aggression.

The first thing we did was to distinguish between two kinds of aggression: self-instigated aggression vs. retaliatory aggression. Self-instigated aggression was defined as aggression without provocation (as in bullying); while retaliatory aggression was defined as an attack, physical or verbal, in reaction to some provocation. We assumed that self-instigated aggression would be more reflective of raw, biologically based aggressive tendencies. This was the kind of aggression that Konrad Lorenz (1971) and other ethologists theorized was continuously building up and had to be released periodically. On the other hand, we assumed that retaliatory aggression was more situationally determined, and that different cultures with different values would encourage or discourage retaliation differently.

The data consisted of numerous reports from six field teams on many incidents of aggression complete with data on many circumstances surrounding each act of aggression. Upon analyzing the data, we got two major surprises. The first was that it was retaliatory aggression that was rather steady across cultures. Across the six cultures, girls tend to retaliate one fourth of the time while boys tended to retaliate around one third of the time. It was with self instigated aggressive acts that we found more cultural variation.

The other surprise had to do with the profiles of the children who often engaged in aggression without apparent provocation. We had expected that these children would be the bigger, tougher children who would act like bullies. Instead we found that these children were subjected to more obedience pressures from their mothers. They also received more maternal warmth, and were often described by their mothers as being "meek".

This led us to reformulate our conceptualization of retaliatory vs. self-instigated aggression. We figured that both types of aggression were probably in response to provocation. The difference is that retaliatory aggression

was an immediate response, such that the observing field team was able to witness the whole sequence of provocation and response. On the other hand, self-instigated aggression is a delayed retaliation, with enough temporal distance such that observers are not readily able to make a connection between provocation and response. The response came later, usually in a sneaky way, such as pushing the other person down in the midst of play.

It appears therefore, that a victim of aggression who wishes to retaliate (and most children do) has two choices: immediate retaliation, or a sneaky, disguised attack at a later opportune moment. Bigger, assertive children are more inclined to retaliate immediately. Smaller, compliant kids are more inclined to choose a sneaky delayed attack. Further analysis of the data showed that if one's goal was to inhibit future attacks on oneself, immediate retaliation is the more effective option. The delayed, sneaky retaliators tend to be picked on more in the future.

What I learned from this study was that: 1) even in early childhood, we are confronted with choices to make; 2) certain choices are more effective or adaptive than others; and 3) people are different such that the "correct" choice for one person may not necessarily be the correct choice for another person.

Paths Towards Identity Achievement

The interest in the choices people make led me later to an interest in the concept of identity. Erik Erikson's (1959) name is often associated with identity, and I sought to construct a measure of ego identity vs. identity diffusion, and to discover some of the factors that lead one towards identity achievement or towards a failure of identity.

You will recall that Erikson regarded the psychosocial crisis of identity as the main task of the adolescent or teenager. Identity achievement is defined as the making of commitments. The two most important kinds of commitment in identity formation are occupational commitment, and values commitment. Those who have achieved ego identity have a good idea of what they want to have as an occupation, and they have a firmer sense of values, of what

they consider to be right or wrong. Those who are still in the process of shaping their life commitments are said to be in a state of moratorium. And those who do not see any need to make commitments or who refuse to face the need to make commitments, are in a state of identity diffusion, which Erikson viewed as the opposite of identity achievement.

Some students and I (Tan, *et al*, 1977, 1987) worked on establishing a scale to measure ego identity. We came up with a 12 item forced choice scale which was published in the *Journal of Personality Assessment*. We then went on to use this scale to determine some important antecedents to achieving ego identity. Focusing on female subjects, we found some interesting things.

Women who have achieved ego identity saw themselves as different from their mothers. Their perceptions of themselves and their mothers along the same set of semantic differential scales correlated negatively. However, their self perceptions correlated positively with their perceptions of their fathers, implying that they identified more with their fathers. Presumably, most of these women have traditional mothers. And to make their own set of commitments, a break from them was necessary. When asked to rate the extent to which their goals in life were consistent with their parents expectations of them, the identity achieved women gave lower ratings than women low on identity achievement.

This brings to light a choice facing many young people: to arrive at a set of commitments on their own, or to follow a path that has been neatly laid out for them, usually by their parents. The latter has been termed a "foreclosure" by Erikson. This choice between adopting a "packaged identity" laid out for them vs. searching for the occupational and values commitment that is appropriate for oneself is perhaps the most crucial choice that the adolescent faces.

Ideals of Romantic Love

Later in life, I got interested in romantic love: both from an experiential point of view as well as from the point of view of a psychologist. Together

with a student, Robert Morais, we tried to list down a set of behaviors and attitudes that are relevant to romantic relationships (Tan and Morais, 1993). We came up with 28 items and factor analyzed them. Nine factors emerged: 1) growth and bond formation; 2) respect for partner's independence; 3) similarity between partners; 4) sensitivity to partner; 5) respect for partner; 6) superficiality vs. depth; 7) absorption and dependence; 8) approach-avoidance; and 9) warmth without idealization.

We proceeded to do further tests to see what people thought the appropriate behaviors were for men and women along these nine factors. Of the nine factors, men and women had statistically significantly different views on three of them. These factors were: sensitivity to partner, absorption and dependence, and respect for partner's independence. Men and women differed in their perceptions of the role these factors play in a successful romantic relationship.

The sensitivity to partner factor included items such as sharing partner's concerns, being sensitive to partner's needs, being happy when partner succeeds at something. The absorption and dependence factor included items such as feeling possessive towards partner and losing oneself in partner. The factor labeled respect for partner's independence included items such as encouraging partner to pursue his or her own interests, and being happy for partner when she succeeds in her independent pursuits.

The following differences were found between men and women with regards to appropriate romantic behavior. Women: 1) wanted men to show more respect for their independence, 2) think that men should expect less absorption and dependence from them, and 3) think that men should show more sensitivity. On the other hand, men: 1) did not expect as much respect for their independence (perhaps because they already have it?), 2) feel that women should exhibit absorption and dependence, and 3) think that women should show more sensitivity.

In a way absorption and dependence and respect for partner's independence can be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum. Absorption on the one hand represents a pressure towards a fusion between the man and the woman. At the opposite end of the continuum, respect for partner's

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independence represents a retention of separate identities between the two individuals. If one examines the differences between the sexes, it appears that men want women to be more toward the fusion end of the continuum, while women want to be more on the separate identities end of the continuum.

I believe that these two ends of the continuum present the critical choice that we face in romantic relationships. People, especially men, who insist on a relationship characterized by absorption and dependence face trouble when their partners start to feel smothered by the relationship. On the other hand, relationships with a mutual respect for the other's independence provide more chances for personal fulfillment. While absorption and dependence may contribute to initial bonding, at some point the couple should be able to maintain separate identities in order to continue a healthy long term relationship.

This tends to be the consensus view from personality and clinical psychology today. In the popular book *Passages*, Gail Sheehy (1977) talks of the "piggyback principle". In some couples, the women have no clear identities or goals for themselves; they "piggyback" on their men. The man's goals become her goals; his preferences become her preferences. Though she may feel comfortable in this role of "adjunct to her husband", at some point the woman usually starts feeling frustrated because her personal development is stunted.
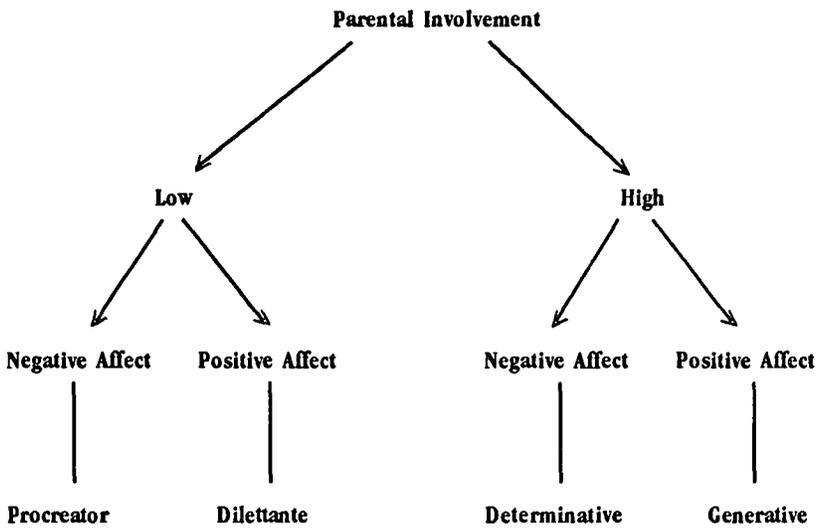
Another popular writer today, M. Scott Peck (1978), uses an analogy from mountain climbing to make the same point. Mountain climbers have a base camp; from this base camp they mount their expeditions to the higher reaches of the mountain. Marriage is like the base camp. With traditional couples, the wife looks after the base camp while the husband goes and climbs the mountains, coming home to the base camp every so often. What often happens is that the husband grows and achieves self realization and fulfillment, while the wife becomes stunted, angry and frustrated. The obvious solution, in Peck's view is for both husband and wife to tend the base camp, and for them to each take turns venturing forth on excursions towards the mountain peaks.

Choices In Parenthood

Proceeding with our journey across the life span, we come to the choices that parents face. I once wrote an article on the "Four Meanings of Fatherhood" (Tan, 1989). Starting from a 2 x 2 model, I distinguished between high vs. low paternal involvement, and positive vs. negative affect towards parenting. The combination of these two variables resulted in a typology of four types of fathers.

This model can also be viewed as a two step decision model of parenthood (Figure 1). The first step is the choice of involvement: to be or not to be involved. The second step reflects the affective accompaniment to the role: to approach parenthood in a positive and enjoyable way, or to see it negatively as a burden to bear.

Figure 1. Choice Model of Parenthood

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                        Parental Involvement

               Low                              High

        Negative Affect   Positive Affect   Negative Affect   Positive Affect

          Procreator        Dilettante       Determinative      Generative
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Those who opt for minimal involvement and do not really enjoy the role of parent are basically *procreators*. To them parenthood is mainly the production of children and providing for the basic necessities of life for their children.

There are those whose involvement is low by choice or by force of circumstance (e.g., they work overseas, or are maritally separated from their spouse and children), but who nevertheless enjoy their limited roles as parents. I have called them *dilettantes*. These parents are basically looking for friendship and companionship in their children.

Among those who are heavily involved with their children, there are those who involve themselves more out of a sense of duty or mission that is not all that enjoyable. These I have termed *determinative* parents who approach parenthood as a mission to be accomplished. They see their task as one to be sure that their children grow up in certain definite ways.

Finally, there are those who are heavily involved with their children, but have learned to enjoy the experience and whatever comes with it. I have called them *generative* parents as they exhibit the best traits of Erikson's sense of generativity. They face the challenges of parenthood as best they can, nurturing the growth and maturity of their children. The problems and challenges they face become opportunities for growth and the task of parenthood becomes an opportunity for personal development and fulfillment. For example, a parent may try to see things from his child's perspective, thus broadening his understanding of the world. Or he may try to "lead by example", and in his effort to set a good example, come to lead a more responsible life.

Most of us become parents at some point in our lives. Ideally, it should be a role we take as a conscious choice. But whether we choose parenthood or parenthood chooses us, we can choose to go through the motions of the role, to approach it as a cross to bear, or to tackle it in such a way so as to enhance our personal growth.

The Choice of Contenment

This leads me now to the choice that I find most interesting today. The choice of happiness and contentment. My initial interest in this topic came when I was doing a comparison between poverty level peasant farmers vs. upwardly mobile farmers (Tan, 1974). I was trying to see whether upwardly mobile farmers, when compared to the more economically stagnant farmers, would be happier because of their improving lot, or more disgruntled because their "rising expectations" would leave them with many unfulfilled desires.

The data collected showed that the upwardly mobile farmers did express more contentment with their lives. But the more interesting findings had to do with the correlates of contentment within the two groups (see Table 1). Among the upwardly mobile farmers, contentment correlates positively with internal control as well as self-potency. On the other hand, among the poorer farmers, contentment correlates negatively with internal control; i.e., the more internal control they feel, the less happy they are. So, being poor *per se* does not stop you from being happy. But for the poor to be happy, they have to have external control, i.e., they have to be fatalistic.

Table 1. Selected Correlates of Contentment

Poor Farmers:	
Contentment correlated with:	
Internal Control	= -0.563
Self Potency	= -0.708
More Successful Farmers:	
Contentment correlated with:	
Internal Control	= 0.420
Self Potency	= 0.510

I would like to relate these findings to Seligman's work on explanatory styles. In his book *Learned Optimism*, Seligman (1991) asserts that there is an optimistic explanatory style and a pessimistic explanatory style. If something good happens to you, e.g. a promotion in your job, and you are an optimist, you tend to attribute the cause of that good fortune to something internal within you; e.g. I really worked for it. A pessimist, on the other hand, tends to attribute it to something external; e.g., my *cumpadre* made the promotion possible. In explaining a bad result such as failing an exam, the opposite holds true. An optimist would attribute it to an external factor, e.g., the exam was unfair; while a pessimist would attribute it to something internal, e.g., I am stupid.

This theory of explanatory styles can be used to explain the dynamics behind the findings on the peasant farmers. For them life is difficult; as optimists, they attribute their hard lot to something external such as a greedy landlord or a God who works in strange ways. This allows them to be happy. On the other hand, the wealthier farmers also adopt an optimistic style: life is good because of something internal: their effort, their intelligence. The poor farmer and the rich farmer live different lives. Each has to make his own cognitive adjustment to his own particular circumstances in life in order to achieve happiness. But in either case, happiness can be viewed as a choice: adopt an optimistic explanatory style and be happy, or adopt a pessimistic explanatory style and be discontented.

If I may speculate a little, perhaps this optimistic explanatory style of the Filipino might explain another paradox in Philippine life: the paradox of individual happiness coupled with national discontent. In a recent study of happiness, Encarnacion (1997) used a ladder scale among health workers and found that the average rating for individual contentment was 8.1 on a 10 point scale. The subjects' corresponding rating of satisfaction with the state of the nation was a measly 5.1. When asked how they expected their lives to turn out five years from now, the subjects averaged a rating of 9.0 out of 10. The corresponding rating they gave for the future of our nation was a much more modest 7.0.

Why this discrepancy? People with optimistic explanatory styles tend to blame others for the negative happenings in their lives in order to achieve

happiness. And who shall bear the brunt of this "other blame"? I suggest that the nation as a collective entity or the government as its representative provides a convenient scapegoat for our miseries. I will not debate here whether this scapegoating is justified or not. However, I do believe that the Filipino people do hold the government accountable for many facets of their lives. Many people, for example, assume that poverty alleviation is the government's responsibility, but how many of the poverty stricken insist on having more children than they can feed?

This view of the relationship between fatalism and contentment is radically different from previous conceptualizations (Figure 2). The traditional view of the Filipino is that his fatalism is the cause of his poverty. There is the stereotypical image (probably initiated by American educators), of lazy Filipino farmers napping while waiting for coconuts to fall. Later, Lagmay (1993) studied the situational contexts in which the phrase *"Bahala Na!"* was used and concluded that the phrase represents "psychological ascendancy" and is used to prepare the Filipino for action in the midst of uncertainty. It thus connotes activity rather than passivity; being upbeat rather than downbeat.

Figure 2. Views of Fatalism and Poverty
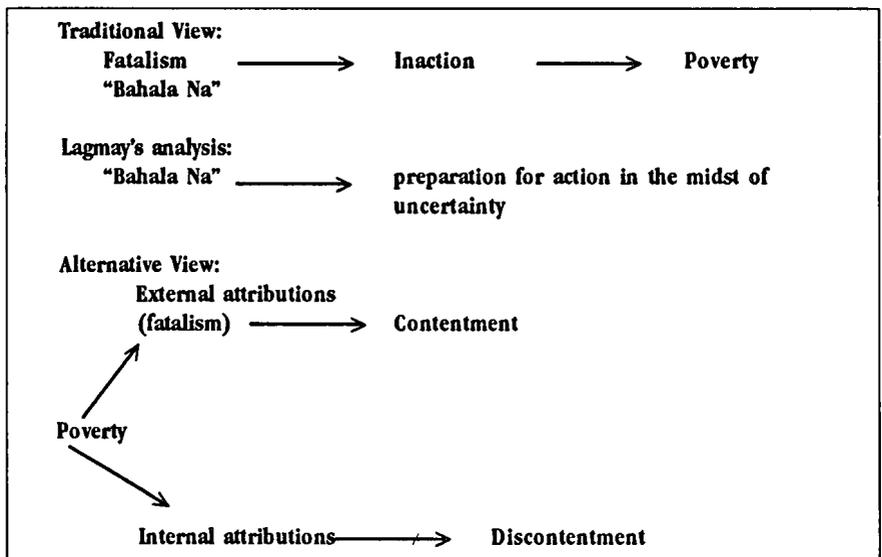
I suggest a third view of fatalism: that fatalism could in fact be a consequence of poverty. A fatalistic outlook is a cognitive adjustment to poverty which allows the individual to be happy in the midst of misery. Just put yourself in the shoes of the poverty stricken: if you are poor, and you believe this is your own doing, can you be happy? But if you are poor, and you believe that those are the breaks of life, that it was just your bad luck to have been born poor, then one can accept one's fate philosophically with resignation, with calm and even with contentment.

There is another important and obvious implication to this finding: wealth does not determine happiness. This has since been corroborated by recent survey findings. A cross-national survey reported that even if we Filipinos have only one seventh the per capita purchasing power of the Japanese ($2,900 vs. $22,000), we are actually much happier than the Japanese. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by the Social Weather Station (Arroyo, 1991), they found that 88% of the A, B, and C socioeconomic classes in our country consider themselves very happy or fairly happy. Among class D respondents, the corresponding figure was 85%. And among the E class, the poorest of the poor, 82% still consider themselves very happy or fairly happy.

Aside from an optimistic explanatory style, another way to achieve happiness is to seek out the good and the interesting in any situation that we may find ourselves in. This cognitive skill can take the form of setting challenging goals for oneself, or of seeing a deeper meaning to the things we do (e.g., "I am going through this hardship so that I can provide a good education for my children".). This point was well made by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (1990) in his book *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Csikszentmihalyi conducted several studies to find out what makes people happy. Many people believe that they would be happiest if their lives were free of stress and worry. Csikzentmihalyi instead found that to most people, their happiest moments come when they are faced with a difficult but interesting challenge and work hard and succeed in overcoming the challenge. Csikszentmihalyi discusses the "autotelic personality" which has an uncanny ability to find challenge and novelty in the most drab and boring activities. He (p. 149) cites the instance of Joe Kramer, a factory worker in Chicago. Joe worked as a welder, welding steel plates on to the

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wheelbases of freight cars. The physical environment was awful to say the least: the factory was hot in the summer, cold in the winter; sparks were continuously showering on to the floor, and the noise of metal clanging on metal was so noisy one had to shout into a person's ear to make oneself understood. Joe worked on this job for 30 years; declining several promotions. He said he did not want to become a foreman, that he preferred to be a simple welder than be anybody's boss. Though he remained in his lowly job, the plant managers all agreed that he was probably the most important person in the factory. He had mastered every job in the factory and could take on the job of anybody who was absent. Joe had to quit school after Grade 4, and yet he was able to fix any piece of machinery that broke down, from huge mechanical cranes to tiny electronic monitors. And he enjoyed his work thoroughly.

Csikszentmihalyi described Joe as having an "autotelic personality", a personality that is highly capable of self-preservation and self-realization. Autotelic persons survive through an ability to create flow experiences from the most barren environments. While his co-workers often described the factory work conditions as inhumane, their jobs seen as burdens to be escaped from as soon and as often as possible, Joe managed to continuously perceive challenging opportunities for action and fulfillment.

I once served as president of the Psychological Association of the Philippines, and one of the most interesting things the president does is to be a judge for the Meralco Foundation Work Attitudes Awards. Here I met many "autotelic personalities"; workers who put in hard, honest work everyday. Most of them gladly put in effort that is beyond the call of duty. I remember meeting an award winner who put in eight hours of work everyday for 22 years without a single day of absence. And she was a bright, cheerful person, not a stressed out workaholic.

I suggest that industrial workers who face repetitive work day after day and yet are able to maintain high levels of happiness probably do so by making their work more meaningful. We can always compensate for a dull external task by enriching it cognitively. All of us, whatever our occupations, have to face boring chores at least some of the time. It is up to us to enrich

these jobs internally by setting up our own cognitive challenges, or find a deeper meaning to out work. This choice is ours to make.

To go a step further, Rollo May (1981) distinguished two kinds of freedom in his book *Freedom and Destiny*. He distinguishes between Freedom of Doing or Existential Freedom, and Freedom of Being, or Essential Freedom. Freedom to do is the freedom that many people fight for. We fought for the right to choose our president in 1986; the movie director fights the censors for the right to make movies the way he thinks they should be made, children rebel against their parents for the freedom to choose their own careers or their own romantic partners. These may all worthy principles to fight for, but there is still a deeper and more basic freedom.

Rollo May called this deeper level of freedom Essential Freedom, a freedom within the inner core of man. Rollo May cites the story of a Chicano prison inmate who was in solitary confinement for five years. In spite of this, he seemed to be in good spirits psychologically. As he put it, "They took away my liberty, but they cannot take away my freedom. As long as I have thoughts, I am free." May further noted a paradox of freedom: we often realize our Freedom of Being only when our Freedom of Doing in gone.

Victor Frankl (1963), the founder of logotherapy, recognized this freedom of being as an inner, spiritual freedom that cannot be lost. Frankl was incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp where most of their freedoms were restricted. You could even say of most inmates that they were "fated" to die. Even then, Frankl observed, man still has a choice in the way he accepts his fate: to remain brave, dignified and unselfish, thereby adding a deeper meaning to his life, or to forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. When all is said and done, this is probably the most fundamental of all the choices that we face in our lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to share three simple insights that I have learned from reading, research, and reflection over the years. First, life is a series of choices. Second, these choices are opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment. Third, we are the products of the choices we make.

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