THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN CONTROL

A General Theory of Purposeful Behavior

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To Betty with deep love and appreciation

Say not, "I have found the truth,"
but rather, "I have found a truth."

—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 1923

Acknowledgments

Introduction

If the construction of a new theory is difficult (and it is), then deciding how to present it in a useful way to a general audience is even more difficult.

The natural tendency of the theorist is to present the step-by-step reasoning behind every definition, assumption, postulate, and proposition and to cast the final work in a parsimonious but very detailed system of inference. Possible applications of the theory could then be addressed in later chapters of the book. Presented in this way, the first five or six chapters would resemble a geometry text. The problem is that very few people want to read geometry books. That is not to say that many are not interested in the application of geometric principles in everyday life, it is just that they have less interest in how the principles were derived. On the other hand, one cannot appreciate the application of theoretical principles without some understanding of the principles themselves. And, of course, there are people who *do* want to follow the formal development and exposition of the theory; in other words, they do like geometry books.

In our presentation of *The Psychology of Human Control: A General Theory of Purposeful Behavior,* we have attempted to satisfy both types of audiences (and in so doing, may satisfy neither) by dividing the book into three major parts: an overview, implications, and anatomy. In the first part, we have described the theory in a general way but have included sufficient detail and examples for the reader to gain a clear understanding of the major ideas. In Part II we explain important implications of the theory. In Part III the formal development of the theory is explained in terms of its basic assumption, one corollary, and five propositions. Thus, the reader is free to read only Parts I and II or all three parts.

Prediction theory has been in development for over eighteen years. It began as a quest for an explanation of the higher mental functions that are central to

human existence, the motivation to use these functions, and the consequences of capitalizing on them. The search was for an explanation of attributes that are distinctively human, rather than for what people have in common with other creatures, a search for an understanding of human superiority. Our interest was in developing a theory that is broadly generalizable across human beings. This led to the publication of the first version of prediction theory in the book *Rational Behavior: An Explanation of Behavior That Is Especially Human* (Friedman 1975). The publication of *Rational Behavior* was followed by years of research to validate and apply the theory. In 1981 the book *Human Behavior and Predictability* was published (Friedman and Willis) to report additional evidence supporting the validity of the theory and to show its broad applicability in a great variety of human endeavors. In both of these books we were able to show that predictive ability is a prevalent activity of people that contributes substantially to human superiority over infrahumans. As for motivation, we assumed and argued that people are motivated to predict.

The latest version of prediction theory presented in this book is a departure from previously held positions, especially with respect to human motivation and the means of satisfying it. This departure, although controversial to some, provides new leverage for explaining human behavior and achievement. We now contend that people want to control the world around them, and a large preponderance of their behavior is directed to that end. The mental ability that is largely responsible for that control is predictive ability—the ability to make accurate predictions about the future. When people make accurate predictions, we call them intelligent; when they act on those predictions and control results, we call them successful. And both predictive ability and the guidance of behavior by predictions are largely acquired characteristics. In short, we now hold that the end people seek most of the time is control, and that predictive ability is the primary means to that end. Therefore, the theory that follows is an explanation of the dynamic relationship between and among those predictive processes responsible for human control and success.

We have deliberately chosen the word ''control'' rather than others found in the literature, such as domination, power, influence, authority, manipulation, leadership, persuasion, and restraint, because it is the most inclusive word. It includes the most subtle manipulation of loved ones to get them to behave in the way that you want, to teaching first graders to build a better world, to the edicts of a dictator. And it can be viewed in terms of various mixtures of influence and coercion. Control wears many faces. It is exercised in a variety of tactics and strategies; it may be understood or it may go unrecognized, but always it is the significant activity in the daily life of the individual and the collective life of groups.

Another distinctive feature of prediction theory is the preeminent role that predictive ability plays. Others have attributed human dominance of the planet to language, the opposed thumb, tool making, social cooperation, our erect posture, and ability to plan for the future, to name a few factors. We contend

that humans' ability to make accurate predictions is primarily responsible for their superior achievements. Predictive ability is expressed in many ways, quite often subtly, but on thorough analysis it turns out to be a most potent asset, at the very core of our success.

In the previous books on prediction theory, the focus was on deriving constructs and propositions from existing data. In this book the emphasis is on the logical integration of constructs and propositions into a general theory of purposeful behavior. Let this serve as an initial orientation to the focus and domain of the theory.

Contents

Part I

Prediction Theory: An Overview

Part I is organized to make the theory as understandable as possible. In Chapter One: Human Motivation, we posit the propensity of humans to control outcomes as the basic assumption underlying the theory. We devote the entire chapter to explaining our position and the broad generalizability of the control motive. In Chapter Two: Gaining Control, we explain how people go about pursuing and achieving control. In Chapter Three: Maximizing Control, we explain how people can organize their behavior to maximize control. After explaining how control is achieved and maximized, we explain in Chapter Four impediments to control and the effects on personal attitudes of success and failure in achieving control. Numerous examples common to our daily lives are used to clarify meaning so that the reader can understand the main ideas of the theory without undue anguish.

The formal development of the theory is presented in Part III.

Chapter One

Human Motivation

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth.

<div align="right">Genesis 1:26</div>

NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING

Normal people do the most abnormal things. A woman refuses to divorce her husband although it is clear they no longer want each other and their lives are a continuous, no-win battle. Skydivers and hang glider pilots put themselves in positions where one slight mistake would cost their lives. People work crossword puzzles but nobody knows why. Men and women of great wealth work harder and harder at risk to their health to get even more wealth. People borrow more money for today than they can comfortably pay back tomorrow. A supervisor humiliates a subordinate on whose work quality his own job depends. Some men and women work at jobs or maintain personal relationships for years that give them no pleasure. Respectable people are found guilty of income tax fraud. Voters elect to high office people who have no credentials for the job other than a smile and a pleasing television manner.

The list could go on and on. The point is that we do not have explanations—common sense or theories—that account for behaviors of normal people that range from highly rational to quite mad. If crazy people did crazy things and sane people did sane things, the whole job of understanding would be easier. But they don't. Almost all of us do things that seem rational and things that seem irrational. What we do not have and what we need are fundamental principles that are so basic we could use them to understand ourselves and others and, in using them, behave more effectively. We need general principles that

could reconcile the rational and the irrational, an explanation of why, among other things, we thwart our own attempts to achieve. The search for those principles is the purpose of this book.

SEARCH FOR FUNDAMENTALS

For us to understand human behavior, it is necessary that we look for commonalities or patterns in the things people do as well as the causes of their behavior. And if our explanation is to be of broad application, we must look for these commonalities across large and varied groups of people. We cannot confine ourselves, for example, to the study of a relatively small group of sick people as did the mighty Freud nor to groups of hungry animals as did some of the great conditionists. No matter how appealing it might be to investigate the abnormal or unusual—paranoia or genius—we must assume that these are special manifestations of some more fundamental principles of human behavior and search for those fundamentals.

We must attempt that hardest of all intellectual jobs, the finding of meaning in the commonplace. For the vast majority of people (very probably all people), day-to-day life is neither particularly dramatic nor spectacular. That is not to say that all lives are not subject to high drama, low comedy, significant achievement, and terrible disappointment. Matadors have their ''moments of truth'' when it is necessary to go in over the horns and stake their lives on the outcome. But they fight very few days compared to the total span of their lives. Accountants also have their ''moments of truth'' when their reputations may depend upon a single audit. But it does not happen every day or even every year. The life of an airline captain is considered by many to be glamorous and many a little boy (and now girls) want to be one when they grow up. But the actual work of a commercial or military pilot is really quite routine, and we have never met one who did not want to keep it that way. That is not to say that from time to time these people are not faced with situations that must be handled with instant efficiency to safeguard the lives of hundreds of people as well as their own. But airlines would not exist if these were everyday, common occurrences. Rock stars do record hit songs and carpenters find better ways to truss roofs and children perfect motor skills. But these events are only occasional in life. None of them represents the minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour, day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year fabric of life and existence. And while any general theory of behavior must account for them, it cannot begin with them.

So, we must search for our fundamentals in the more common activities of people. It is there that we must look for those patterns that reflect whatever underlying principles there might be to human behavior. What is it that you and we have in common with the matador, the accountant, the pilot, the rock star, the carpenter, the developing child, the wealthy and the poor, the great achievers and the failures, the white-black-yellow-red, the man and the woman, the young and the old, the policeman and the criminal, the well fed and the starving, the

strong and the weak, the conservationist and the exploiter, the winners and the losers?

But before beginning our search we must acknowledge that fundamentals—brilliant fundamentals—have been offered. The field of modern psychology, the only scientific discipline perhaps ever to so completely capture and hold the imagination of the general public, is a compendium of questions, answers, and methodologies concerning human behavior. Who can dismiss the fundamentals offered by Pavlov, Freud, Watkins, Thorndike, Kohler, Levin, Skinner, Piaget, Allport, Rogers, Pribram, Bandura, Weiner, and literally hundreds of other first-rate thinkers as irrelevant, incompetent, or immaterial? The value of their work hardly requires our praise; the fundamentals offered by each stand as mile markers along the road to understanding the nature of people and their behavior.

But that is just the point. Their fundamentals are mile markers; the road stretches far ahead. And science moves down that road of understanding in small increments, even in the present age. Only very occasionally is there a Newton or Darwin or Einstein or Freud that takes us through a quantum leap of comprehension. Mostly it is done through speculation, debate, and the grinding accumulation of data.

That is the unenviable position in which we find ourselves: that of offering additional speculation in the form of a theory with a new orientation. We believe it to be strong in its explanatory power, deceptively simple in its postulates, immensely practical, and very generalizable across people. In short, it is a theory anyone can understand and use, and its use is dramatically effective. It generates new interpretations of human motivation, intelligence, learning, leadership, temperament, recreation, problem solving, happiness, purposeful behavior, retirement, and other factors that enable new solutions to persistent problems to be derived and offered. But back to our search.

Our awareness of the need for more general psychological theories gave impetus and direction to our efforts. We became convinced that the most likely way to uncover significant new fundamentals of human behavior was to develop a general, unifying psychological theory. Improvements in the human condition are dependent on scientific advancements, and scientific advancements are in large measure dependent on the formulation of general, unifying theories. The physical sciences have benefited enormously from the development of general theories, and in all probability someday the social sciences will, too. Joseph John Thompson's theory explaining the activities of electrons underlies and fostered the development of almost all electronic sending and receiving equipment—the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, to name a few significant inventions based on his general theory. Einstein's theories of relativity gave rise to numerous discoveries and inventions. Notable examples are nuclear energy and the invention of the atomic bomb and atomic submarine. As valuable as Newton's theory is, Einstein's formulation of a more general theory proves to be much more valuable.

When we began developing our theory, we realized the undertaking would

be difficult and that there would be resistance to it as there is to most new ideas that propose change. One reason to expect resistance to a general theory in the social sciences is because when a science is embryonic there are a large number of disparate theories, and professionals in the field tend to adopt a particular theory as an integral part of their professional identity. It is not uncommon for psychologists to distinguish themselves as Freudians, Adlerians, Skinnerians, Piagetans, etc. In contrast, in the more advanced physical sciences we rarely find scientists referring to themselves as Einsteinians, Thompsonians or quantum theorists.

Cautions to theorists who propose a general theory take many forms, ranging from the dangers of oversimplifying to overgeneralizing. A most common warning is that to explain everything is to explain nothing. We were aware of the risks in constructing a general theory. But we were also aware that in the social sciences, where there are so many particularistic theories of such limited scope, there is a great deal to be gained from the development of more general, unifying theories.

Although the theory we propose is general compared to most existing psychology theories, it is quite limited in scope. It focuses on human behavior and cannot be expected to explain the psychological conduct of other animals. Further, the emphasis is on the higher mental functions, problem solving as opposed to perception, for instance. More specifically, it is limited to the explanation of the effects of purposeful behavior on efforts to achieve control, as we will explain.

We believed in our theoretical approach enough to proceed with it despite the risks and long labor that theory building entails. We consoled ourselves with the knowledge that far greater minds than ours with far more to lose—Darwin and Freud, to name two—were beaten severely about their theoretical heads and shoulders with a variety of blunt objects and yet their purpose—understanding—was advanced. Besides, we were enchanted with the adventure of theory building as others are captured by entrepreneurship, archeological explorations, and laboratory research.

In general, scientists tend to stick close to the data in drawing their conclusions, and many are uncomfortable with venturous extrapolation. Theorists tend to be more speculative. They begin with assumptions they are not bound to prove as a starting point and foundation for the construction of their theories. As they build their theories layer by layer, they are mindful of established facts and tend not to stray from them. At the same time, to build a new theory they must extrapolate into the unknown. This is especially true of theorists in the social sciences who have fewer hard facts to build upon than their compatriots in the physical sciences. And social theorists who attempt to build more inclusive general theories take the biggest intellectual risks. They usually venture further out on a limb than the rest. If they are in error, as they often are, they can only hope that they will be met with constructive criticism that enables them to correct their mistakes, rather than antagonists chopping at the base of the limb.

But let there be no mistake, whether theorists are in the physical or social