Private Interview: Theories in the Life Span

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Abstract

The social work profession places emphasis on the importance of both how individuals interact with their environment and the people within that environment and understanding how individuals are affected by these interactions. There are many theories that social workers use to comprehend reasons human behavior occurs in relation to their interaction with the environment. Most are based on the idea of the person-in-the-environment, which views people’s problems within the context of the environment that they occur. Therefore, people act as a reaction to their environment and the consequences these reactions will induce. There are theories to help conceptualize the causes of events and decisions made by people. Two to be discussed are the closely connected conflict theory and systems theory. To delve further into how these theories can be applied to my interviewee’s life development, issues including emerging adulthood, personal beliefs, and the risk-taking factor will also be discussed.

Keywords: conflict theory, systems theory, emerging adulthood, personal beliefs
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Introduction to Theories

I have chosen two theories to explain the development of my interviewee: conflict theory and systems theory. These two theories as applied to my interviewee’s life development are intertwined and work together to explain how the life course of my interviewee unfolded. I chose conflict theory because there were many conflicts that required reaction and a resulting developmental change. The conflicts that arose were heavily among the systems my interviewee was associated with. Conflict theory is “an approach that views social behavior from the perspective of conflict or tension among two or more groups” (Rogers, 2016, p. 107). With all of the life-changing events and decisions that my interviewee went through and made, there was a conflict involved that ultimately had an effect on the outcome. Furthermore, Roger (2016) explains that conflict theory “provides a framework from which conflict between superordinate and subordinate groups in society can be systematically analyzed” (p. 107). The very first life-changing and independence-inducing decision that my interviewee made was based on a conflict with a superordinate group. He left his home country to escape religious persecution.

Conflict theory has been expanded to include not only societal conflict, in the larger system, but also struggles that occur in many different aspects of the subsystems, social and personal life” (Rogers, 2016). This leads us to the second theory, systems theory, which views human behavior as the result of active interactions between people and their social systems. Systems can include any formal or informal grouping of people: couples, families, schools, communities, or governments. My interviewee is and was part of many systems: home country, family, marriage, religious institution, and school to name a few.

Conflict can occur within any level of these systems and has three types of concerns: compliance-based, identification-based, and internalization-based. The compliance-based
concern is a conflicting idea within one’s self with regards to decision making. People with these conflicting feelings base their decisions on “whether other people might think less of them”. The identification-based concern has to do with “whether doing this is something that a good member of their group would do”. The internalization-based concern resonates with ideas of “whether doing this violates their beliefs or values” (Eagly, Baron, & Hamilton, 2004). The concern that someone is most invested in constitutes a major role in their decision-making process. The internalization-based concern is the most powerful one because it does not rely on the person in their environment. This means that when this aspect outweighs the others, a person will make a decision despite how others’ opinion of him/her may change because of it or despite the fact that a good member of his/her group would never take that course of action.

This applied to my interviewee with every life changing decision he made. The first being that he chose to leave his home country to escape religious persecution. He was a member of the home country system and family system at the time. He was the oldest son and presumably a proud citizen, yet in some stages of his life had feelings of regret towards the decision to leave. There were reasons to stay. His compliance-based concern of what his family thought and identification-based concern of whether it was the right thing to do, being the oldest son did not outweigh his internalization-based concern of his staying in the country preventing him from practicing his beliefs. These concerns can be applied again when he made the life changing decision to marry a woman his family was not approving of. The compliance-based concern regarded compliance to his mother’s wishes and the identification-based concern asked the question of whether a good son would go against his mother’s wishes. Again, the internalization-based concern outweighed both the compliance-based and identification-based
concerns. He believed that that woman was his soulmate and to not marry her would be to not be true to his heart, one of his beliefs.

At any given age, conflicts may arise that change the course of one’s life. Only when a person is at the age of making his/her own decisions can they respond to conflicts by his/her own will. Emerging adulthood is not universal, instead it is a consequence of cultural and historical conditions (Arnett, 2002). Emerging adulthood is associated with increased independence, exploration, and personal responsibility. It is also associated with embracing adult social and emotional roles (Arnett, 2000). My interviewee explained the expectations of him at the time that he decided to leave his home country. He was to go to school, get drafted for two years and then get married. With these expectations of adulthood, comes decision making, which is ultimately why the life course of my interviewee did not follow the “normal” of a male citizen in his home country. During emerging adulthood, there is a shift towards self-discovery, as reflected by changes in identity development, self-concept and regulation, and evolution of peer, romantic, and familial relationships. Individuals in this stage may undergo significant restructuring of their sense of self (Labouvie-Vief, 2006). Indeed, during this time, my interviewee was indulged in the company of his mentor and two best friends at the time. Together, with their help, he formed a sense of self-identity. He believed in God by choice, after being raised with God only through the motions and without the emotion. It was a decision he made.

Values theory is another theory but can be applied as a part of the systems theory for my interviewee. My interviewee formed his self-identity based off of his religious values and beliefs. He would never have acquired these values without being a member of his religious system. Basic personal values are abstract beliefs about desirable goals that guide principles in
people’s lives. Values, when strongly held, can be seen in attitudes and behavior and are central to individuals’ self-concepts (Alessandri, Caprara, Castellani, Döring, Schwartz, & Vecchione, 2016). My interviewees’ religious values geared him through his decision-making process after he formed his sense of self. This includes the most recent major decision he made to stay in one place after living the military life of moving around. His religious leader believed that he should stay because of the opportunity to grow religiously. In his final place of residence, there was a religious environment he could not find anywhere else. There was a sense of community and connectedness that was driven by the values he held.

There are several conceptually distinct approaches to personality stability or change. Of the three types of stability, individual-level stability refers to the consistency of a trait at the level of the individual person. One characterization of risk-taking proneness is the tendency to engage in behavior that bears the chance of losses as well as gains (Hertwig, Josef, Mata, Richter, Samanez-Larkin, & Wagner, 2016). Because leaving his home country was so new, it was definitely a risk. He could not possibly have foreseen any of the events that took place in his life and mentioned that he had planned to return to his country of origin after completing his studies in the United States. My interviewee assured me that he would not change anything in his past if he were to do everything all over again. The risk-taking factor is a component that changes the game. It is the difference between the life my interviewee led and the lives of other religious citizens that did not leave his home country.

Demographics

My interviewee is a fifty-four-year-old male. He is a father of eight and has been married for thirty-two years. He is currently a Lieutenant Colonel in the US Army. To ensure his privacy, my interviewee wishes to conceal his ethnicity, his country of origin, and his religious
background. I chose this person for my paper because I knew that he had quite a life. I knew about the many accomplishments he had though he did not discuss them in great detail or any below. I knew that my interviewee had travelled far and wide, being in the military and I thought this would have an impact on the way he viewed life and development. I thought that perhaps he would have a grasp on the meaning of life and it proved to be true.

INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD (0 TO 5)

My interviewee described his family of origin as a large family of ten. He has nine siblings, is the oldest of the boys and the second oldest of all the children in the family. His mother did not have any prenatal care and delivered with the help of a midwife. The good memories that my interviewee remembers from this age was the daily family breakfast. He recalls that during that time there were four of them in the family, two of his younger brothers and his older sister. They had breakfast before daycare, where they studied their religious book. He does not recall any challenges in development during this age. The social environmental challenge that his family faced however, was poverty.

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (6-11)

During this age range, my interviewee did not experience any changes to family dynamics, but his family moved to a new and better house, neighborhood and school. His family moved out of poverty, but money was always an issue. He recalls his parents buying shoes for the holidays. The shoes would be two sizes too big to save money and let the kids grow into it. He fared well in school though he disliked it because of the authority the teachers had over the students. They were permitted to discipline students with the use of corporal punishment. His main difficulty at school was avoiding the teacher’s disciplining methods. At home, he did not experience any difficulties and described the home environment as loving. He said, “We had a
great mother...very loving, very caring, very intellectual...She provided a good environment, maybe just for me.” He was his mother’s favorite. He said that even though his mother was illiterate, she made them do their homework and review it with her. His father was not at home very much and only saw him “maybe” on Fridays. If his dad was in a bad mood they may get to see him. He would wake them up out of bed to hit the boys. He never laid a hand on his daughter.

**ADOLESCENCE (12 TO 18-22)**

The family dynamics changed in that his family grew. The younger children were born. There were three new kids to the family and his mom had a couple miscarriages. Challenges in school during this time were related to competition, which was a big thing. There was no collaboration, rather they had to compete against each other to excel. If they did not excel, they were punished. His older sister was the smartest. My interviewee describes his adolescence as the pivotal and most essential time of his life. He said, “I got hooked up to faith at that age. I had my pieces together. I had a sense of identity.”

During this time, he had a teacher that to him was very special and like a father figure. This teacher filled the role of his absent father, serving as his mentor, coach and counsellor. This mentor introduced him to prayer and God. He also had two friends from his class that were important people in his life at that time and critical to his development, especially regarding the development of self-identity. They encouraged and supported him; they served as his close friends. These two friends went through school with him for five years and assisted him with schoolwork as it progressively became more difficult. He spent most of his time with these two friends. He describes the conversations they had as “intellectual” and “intellectual religious”. They spoke about “understanding your heart and body” and “who you are and where you came
from”. They learned about the stories of their religious Prophet’s before them. This was the time of his life that he started “believing in God and believing God”. He could not afford books, so he borrowed them from one of those two friends and gave them back. That friend was relatively rich, but he and his family did not treat my interviewee as though he were in a different class. This friend’s mother was very hospitable and with only two kids of her own, she treated my interviewee like her own. My interviewee believes that this family was, in part, responsible for his spiritual formation. During school, my interviewee was with those friends. After school, he would go to their houses and come back home too late only to get in trouble.

**EARLY ADULTHOOD (MID 20’S TO EARLY 40’S)**

When entering this stage of life, my interviewee reported life changing experiences. The most impactful experience was moving to a different country. He left home and migrated into a new land, the United States. He sought independence and the prospect of doing something different. He said that back home, the normal was to go to school, get drafted for two years and then get married. There was also religious persecution in his country of origin. They were gathering all those who were religious and putting them in prison.

During this time, my interviewee also got married. He said, “I met my soulmate…” They had different cultures, religions and ethnicity. They put having children on hold for a while until they could decide what religion the children would follow. He remembers that getting married to this woman was a big decision as it went against what his family wanted. His mom wanted him to marry someone from his hometown. So, he said, marrying this woman changed his destiny. Originally, he planned to graduate and go back to his home country. Life did not go as planned and married life affected his studies at the beginning. He had to drop a lot of courses because, with school and work, he could not meet the demands of married life.
To exacerbate his life situation at the time, the economy was bad in 1989 when he just had his first daughter. As a result, he decided to join the army to pay for his tuition. He went active and was stationed in Europe for six years. He said, “It was lovely. It was close to my hometown. My family from back home came to visit us. My mom finally accepted that I was married to who I was married to.” He decided to become a chaplain in order to concurrently serve God and country “without any spiritual bipolar struggle”. He described this decision as, “I broke the code. I felt very at ease and it has been awesome ever since then.”

The challenges that he faced at this time were related to his family's acceptance of marriage. He was forced to choose between his upbringing and what his heart chose. During this time, his family dynamics did change, as his father had passed away. It affected him greatly because he never went back to see him before he died. For a long time, he lived thinking that he should be regretful, that he made the wrong decision especially being the oldest son. The institution of marriage greatly strengthened his development during this time. The diverse nature of his job also contributed to fostering his development during this stage of life. It allowed him to deal with a lot of different people of different faiths. He was in a helping profession, either helping people directly or bringing them the help they needed from their respective religious needs.

Transitioning from the early 20’s into his 30’s then to his early 40’s was not difficult for him. He described it as “challenging but not difficult”. With each transition came a life changing decision. From his 20’s to 30’s he decided to never go back to his home country. From his 30’s to 40’s he decided to change job from enlisted to officers.

MIDDLE ADULTHOOD (MID 40’S TO 64)
During this stage, my interviewee’s career had not changed but described it as becoming “enriched and full”. He was faithfully leading by believing in God. His mission was to be accessible, available and approachable. Regardless of who he helped, they were able to come to him and connect. This was a result of connecting to them on the human level. He helped them become a better human and understand their relationship with God and how they can stabilize that relationship. He also helped them to understand final destiny to God and how they can prepare for it. Regardless of their religious affiliation, with him they were able to understand themselves and self-identity, God, and the universe they were living in. This was in order to know their disposition and purpose in life. He said, “I have become [for people] what that mentor was for me.”

He spends most of his time at work. He does not have any issues with his family of origin and his relationship with his mother is as strong as it will ever be. He is very satisfied with his current lifestyle. When asked about his satisfaction with life he answered, “Very much so. Very content. Very at peace. Faith is the essence of my life.”

His religious leader encouraged that he stay in one place. From his 40’s to 50’s he made the decision to stay in one place in his life. There was nothing that inhibited development. There were medical challenges, but no physical constraints and he did not experience a midlife crisis.

LATE ADULTHOOD (65 and above)

In about ten years, my interviewee plans to still be working, not in the same capacity but “with the same momentum, passion, and drive”. He does not expect to have any challenges with his family of origin. When asked about physical challenges with functioning, he said, “I pray to God not.” He expects to remain married. The environmental strengths that would foster his development will be the same source from the religious leader. About life, my interviewee has
said “Life is your time. Even though it is free, it is precious. We don’t own it; we just use it. We don’t keep it; we just spend it. And when we lose it, we don't get it back. Life is fleeting. We are completely responsible for our own behavior. We are a product of our decisions, not conditions. To get different results we gotta do things differently. Never accept the status quo.”

The only things that my interviewee would have liked to know in his 20’s are the people he knows now, specifically the religious leader that he met in his 40’s and still knows or at least “someone like him”. He explained that after moving to the States in his 20’s, he learned from books rather than from a teacher in person. He said that if he had to do it all over again, he would not change anything because there were moments that were awesome and there are moments that “helped me make lemonade” and “though it was sour, it still tasted good”.
References


