

Choice Theory

by Kim Olver

You have listened to me for a year now talking about Choice Theory but I know I've never really explained what Choice Theory is. Choice Theory is actually an explanation of all human behavior developed by Dr. William Glasser.

There are basically five components of this theory—the basic human needs, the quality world, the perceived world, the comparing place and total behavior. I'll give a brief overview of each one, starting with the five basic human needs.

The Basic Human Needs

We are born with five basic human needs—survival, love & belonging, power, freedom and fun. We are all born with these needs but we experience them to varying degrees. One person might have a high love & belonging need, while another person is high in freedom. We are born with these needs and are biologically driven to get them met in the best way available to us.

The Quality World

This is a place that exists inside all of us where we store pictures of things that have satisfied one or more of our basic needs in the past or things we think may satisfy them in the future. These things do not have to meet society's definition of quality. Alcohol is in the quality world of an alcoholic, stealing cars in the quality world of a car thief, and domestic violence is in the quality world of a batterer. The only two requirements for entry into the quality world are that it meets one or more of our needs and it feels good.

The Perceived World

There is much to be said about the perceived world but for the purposes of this article, all I want to say is that we each have our own perceptions of the world. Our sensory system takes in information through sight, touch, sound, taste and scent, however we all have unique ways of processing that information based on our life experiences, our culture, and our values.

The main thing to remember about the perceived world is that if you encounter others whose perceived world doesn't match yours, it doesn't mean one of you is wrong. It simply means you are different. Remembering this simple statement will reduce much of the disagreements and fighting that occurs in people's lives. Acceptance of this fact would mean we could give up the need to convince others of our point of view. We could simply accept the fact that we see things differently and move on.

The Comparing Place

The comparing place is where we weigh what we want from our quality world against our perceptions of what we believe we are actually getting. When these two things are a match, all is well.

However, when our perceptions and quality world don't line up, in other words we

perceive we are not in possession of the things we want, then we are driven to action to get those things we are thinking about. People generally don't make a lot of progress or change the things they are currently doing unless they are in some degree of discomfort—the greater the pain the more motivation to try something different.

This is where conventional wisdom tells us that if we want what's best for other people in our lives, then it is our responsibility to raise their pain level to get them to do things differently because we generally know what's best for them. Right?

Wrong. We can only know what's best for ourselves. Remember, our perceived worlds are all different. We have unique values and experiences. How can we possibly know what's best for someone else when we haven't been in their skin or lived their life? We can only know what's best for ourselves.

Total Behavior

There are two main things about behavior. One is that all behavior is purposeful and two is that all behavior is total. Let's begin with the idea that all behavior is total. There are four inseparable components of behavior—action, thinking, feeling and physiology. These all exist simultaneously during any given behavior in which we engage. The first two components—acting and thinking—are the only components over which we can have direct control. This means that if we want to change how we are feeling or something that is happening in our bodies (physiology), then we must first consciously change what we are doing or how we are thinking.

As for all behavior being purposeful, all behavior is our best attempt to get something we want. We are never acting in response to some external stimulus. We are always acting proactively to get something we want. This means that when I would yell at my son to clean his room after asking him nicely several times, I wasn't yelling because my son "made me mad." I was yelling because I was still using my best attempt to get him to do what I wanted, which was to clean his room. This seems like I'm splitting hairs but it's an important distinction to make when you are attempting to move from a victim's role to that of an empowered person.

The Implications

Choice Theory pretty much rids us of the idea that people are "misbehaving." All anyone is doing is their best attempt to get something they want. Of course in the process, they may break laws, disregard rules and hurt others but those are really side effects of doing the best they know how to get their needs met. We are all doing our best—some of us simply have better tools, resources and behaviors at our disposal than others.

If we embrace Choice Theory's concepts, then our function should be more to educate and help others self-evaluate the effectiveness of their own behavior. Know that often they will continue to do things exactly as they have because it's familiar and/or because what they are doing really is getting them something they want. It is not our job to stop them, nor is it our job to rescue them from the consequences of their own behavior.

We can only make our best attempt to help others evaluate the effectiveness of their behavior and to choose a different way that perhaps is not against the rules or doesn't hurt the person or someone else. Then, we need to get out of the way and let the situation play out. This may seem hard to do—like you aren't doing your job as a parent, teacher, counselor, or supervisor, however, I ask, what is the alternative?

When you attempt to force or coerce or bribe another person to do things he or she doesn't want to do, you may be successful. You may be able to find the right reward or create a painful enough consequence to get another person to do what you want but in so doing you are breeding resentment and contempt. Your relationship will suffer. If you believe, as I do, that relationship is the root of all influence, then you are losing your ability to influence another by using external control.

If you have enjoyed this article and want to learn more about it, you should check out my website <http://www.choicetheorycentral.com>.

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