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Sarah Grace Danborn
Indecision:
Biopsychosocial Frames

ABSTRACT

This project is a theoretical investigation of indecision as it has been conceptualized from a number of perspectives, including within the literature of vocational counseling, the fields of cognitive and neuropsychology, and in emerging research from social psychologists and behavioral economists. Two theory chapters utilize concepts from existential theory and Winnicott's true and false selves to explore the phenomenon more deeply. A discussion chapter critiques these theories and offers suggestions for further research, as well as implementation suggestions for the clinician based on the research and theories presented.

INDECISION: BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL FRAMES

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2013

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Choosing Smith's SSW was among the best decisions I've ever made. From the initial mindfulness exercise during my first practice class with Annemarie Gockel to the hilarious and poignant advice dispensed during my final session with Chris O'Rourke third summer, I have been profoundly grateful for the authenticity and intellect of professors and classmates alike, for the sense of myself gradually opening in response to new people and ideas, and for the knowledge that this is just the beginning of my growth as a clinician.

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This project has been by turns exhilarating and profoundly humbling. Through it, I've had the chance to explore questions that have long intrigued me and wallow in existential theory. Were it not for Cara Segal, I would still be wallowing and exploring, so I thank her for her enthusiasm, insight, structure, and support. Thank you also to Marian Salley, second reader and first friend, for her humor, encouragement, and time.

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This project is nothing if not a "long, slow heave of the will."
Here it is.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Clinical social workers often work with individuals who are struggling on some level to make a major life decision, yet indecision itself is seldom explored as a phenomenon. Although decision-making processes have been discussed in the psychological literature, these accounts often focus on narrow subfields of cognitive psychology. Social workers could benefit from an exploration of the phenomenon from an integrated biopsychosocial perspective. How might indecision be conceptualized within the frameworks of existential psychotherapy and theories arising from emerging biosocial research, and how might clinicians draw upon these ideas when working with individuals, particularly college students, who are struggling with vocational choice?

In an era of increased compartmentalization and specialization, social work's dedicated attention to the whole person in environment offers a much-needed perspective. Vocational literature on indecision among college students is remarkable for its consistent inattention to neurobiological and social contexts. The vocational literature that is influenced by existential psychotherapy has, to date, been minimal. A synthesized perspective is needed.

This theoretical thesis will utilize social work's long-established valuing of holistic and biopsychosocial approaches to explore the phenomena of indecision from unique but intersecting perspectives, including neurobiology, social psychology, and existential psychotherapy. After this introductory chapter, a second chapter apprises the reader of the project's methodology. The third chapter explores the phenomenon of indecision from various angles, including sections on how indecision is currently conceptualized in the vocational literature, and how emerging research from cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, social psychology and behavioral

economy has shaped our understanding of indecision. Two literature-review chapters will then be devoted to understanding this phenomenon from two distinct theoretical perspectives. Chapter four contextualizes indecision within relevant tenets in existential psychology, while chapter five considers indecision in relation to Winnicott's concept true and false selves. Finally, chapter six synthesizes and critique these theories before offering possible interventions for clinicians based on the emerging research and theoretical frames discussed in previous chapters. The intended audience for this study is clinicians who are working with individuals, particularly college students, many of whom are making major life decisions for the first time; however, individuals who are themselves curious about indecision and decision-making processes may also find this project of interest.

People present to clinical social workers with a variety of strengths, symptoms, and possible diagnoses. Indecision is but one of these. This theoretical study aims to answer the question of how one can understand the phenomena of indecision by coupling emerging research in neuroscience and social psychology with theories from existential psychology and Winnicott's concept of true and false selves. In doing so, the project intends to offer suggestions for clinical intervention based on a holistic biopsychosocial perspective, a hallmark of the social work field.

CHAPTER II

Conceptualization and Methodology

This study engages in a review of select literature regarding the phenomenon of indecision as conceptualized in the vocational literature and documented in emerging research from the fields of neurobiology and social psychology. Rather than explore indecision deductively through an examination of the experiences of individuals who have struggled with making decisions or the perspectives of those who have treated them, this study will attempt to understand the phenomenon inductively by analyzing how indecision can be conceptualized from select theoretical orientations. These theoretical orientations are existential psychotherapy and Winnicott's concepts of true and false selves.

A theoretical rather than empirical study is proposed because a preliminary review of the literature suggests there is relatively little published research expressly relating indecision among college students to existential psychology or Winnicott's concept of true and false selves, even less research applying relevant concepts in social psychology and neurobiology to the matter, and no known research considering the phenomenon from a comprehensive, biopsychosocial perspective.

The aforementioned approaches have been selected as theoretical frames for this study for several reasons. Within the fields of college counseling and vocational psychology, indecision among college students has variously been correlated to elements ranging from diffuse identity formation to trait anxiety (Brown & Rector, 2008). Implicit in much of this

research is the assumption that indecision is maladaptive and even pathological. In contrast, this project's theoretical emphasis on existential psychotherapy and true and false selves offers a more holistic conceptualization of indecision as a normal part of identity formation and growth, consistent with social work's emphasis on strengths-based formulations and interventions. Self-determination, an important value of social work, is also an integral part of existential psychotherapy.

Existential psychotherapy conceptualizes all human concerns, including indecision, as stemming from the inalterable givens of the human condition. These include death, freedom, responsibility, isolation, and meaninglessness. As such, existential psychotherapy affords us a mirror through which we can see indecision as reflective of our finitude, for to choose is to select not only what we become but also what we will not be. This rendering of indecision as a sort of hovering between potential selves recommends existential psychotherapy as a theoretical lens for this project.

The concept of authenticity spans existential psychotherapy and Winnicott's concept of true and false selves, which was chosen as a second, more contained frame through which to explore indecision. If we are caught between two options, are we then somehow simultaneously positioned between more or less authentic expressions of self? And if so, do those labels correspond to particular options? Winnicott's construct of a spontaneous expression of true self may offer the clinician a means through which to consider how the contrasting false self influences choice and decision-making process, and also how decisions bring to life more and less authentic expressions of self.

Through psychological constructs that stem from the psychodynamic roots of social work, the innermost workings of the self, caught between potentialities, is explored. But this

project is also reflective of social work's attention to the environmental and social factors that shape an individual's inner processes. Our collective understanding of the cognitive and neurobiological processes underpinning decision-making have greatly advanced in recent decades, in part because of findings in neuroscience and in part due to the contributions of social psychologists and behavioral economists whose research will be described the phenomenon chapter that follows.

Data Collection

No data is being collected for this project, as it is a theoretical project. Select literature from a variety of subfields within psychology is being considered for this project.

Discussion

Expected findings include the notion that emerging research in neuroscience and social psychology, combined with established theories of existential psychologists, can enhance clinicians' understanding of how to treat individuals struggling with indecision from a strengths-based perspective.

Limitations of this methodology include the fact these theoretical orientations are broad. Efforts will be made to explain the choosing of certain theorists or researchers over others, and acknowledgement will be made of the sheer volume of additional research and theory that exists and is beyond the scope of this project.

One bias inherent in the study of vocational indecision is the assumption of a certain amount of economic privilege in the very act of choosing, which must be acknowledged. Students from more advantaged backgrounds often have greater latitude of choice in their decision-making processes, for a variety of reasons. First, information about a greater variety of careers may have been available to them both formally and informally through contact with

individuals in those professions. Second, funding for pre-collegiate enrichment and training programs, which then place them in positions to make more informed choices, are more often available to students from more advantaged backgrounds. And finally, students whose families of origin have the means to support them or provide a safety net should they make a different choice or explore an alternate route might approach decision-making from a less high-stakes vantage point than their less economically-advantaged peers.

This writer comes from such a socioeconomic background, which engendered a certain amount of choice, and this condition is recognized as both a privilege and a potential point of bias. It is also important to acknowledge this writer's penchant for normalizing the phenomenon and inclination toward a strengths-based treatment rationale. While neither is inconsistent with social work's approach to the human condition, this subjective vantage point is hereby addressed. This bias will perhaps be most evident in the synthesis chapter, in which suggestions for clinicians are advanced. This study will endeavor to present theoretical perspectives as clearly and objectively as possible, and will make a point of acknowledging the ways in which indecision can and does interfere with optimal life functioning. Throughout, this study will also attempt to clearly and objectively represent the empirical evidence.

CHAPTER III

What is Indecision?

What is indecision? This chapter will explore various answers to that question, and in so doing consider the ways that indecision has been conceptualized within the field of psychology generally and in career counseling in particular, emerging neurobiological research about decision-making processes and cognitive biases, and the function of our social environment in our valuing of choice. The first section will consider the definition of indecision in the common parlance, and differentiate indecision from ambivalence. A brief overview of types of conflict (Lewin, 1999) will be given. The second section will consider William James' (1943) typology of decision-making as utilized by Yalom. The third section will use Brown and Rector's (2008) meta-analysis of career indecision as measured in the vocational literature as a point of departure for a discussion of indecision as it has been historically conceptualized within the field of college counseling. The fourth section will then give an overview of the various psychological traits and states to which indecision has been correlated and make two observations; first, that indecision is universally pathologized in the literature and second, that few, if any, studies make an effort to contextualize indecision from the perspective of either existential theory or object relations psychology; moreover, the literature specific to college students' decision-making processes in particular tends to ignore indecision within the unique framework of a highly individualistic society in which options are valued, perfection is mythologized, and choices overwhelm. Recent research regarding our evolving understanding of the neurobiological aspects of choice will be

presented. Finally, the emerging research of social psychologists and behavioral economists will be introduced, and the impact upon our understanding of choice conflict will be explored.

Ambivalence v. Indecision, and Lewin's Typology of Conflict

Although "indecision" and "ambivalence" can be, and often are, used interchangeably in everyday speech, for the purposes of this project the two terms will be distinguished for the reasons given below. In contemporary parlance, "ambivalence" is used to mean "uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite things" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1998). First introduced into the psychoanalytic literature in 1911 by Bleuler (van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009), the term is in that context used to indicate contradictory feelings about the same object; i.e., a person may love and hate his father. However, these conflicting emotions, or valence, are rarely experienced at the same time, because one is usually repressed and thus not experienced on a conscious level (van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009). Within the context of decision-making, ambivalence is most relevant to approach-avoidance conflict, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Indecision, in contrast, is not necessarily defined by having mixed feelings toward the same object, though that quality can certainly contribute to the state. Indecision is "an inability to decide; vacillation," (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1998), and though it can arise from having mixed or conflicting feelings about a particular object or choice, one can also experience the state because one has positive feelings about, or valence for, more than one option or choice and thus experiences an approach-approach conflict. For the purposes of this project, vocational indecision will be defined as the ongoing state of refraining from, or avoiding, making a choice with regard to vocation.

One way to understand inner conflict is through the approach/avoidance taxonomy developed by Kurt Lewin (1941; reprinted 1999), widely considered to be the father of social psychology. This model characterizes conflicts as avoidance-avoidance, approach-avoidance, and approach-avoidance based on the individual's feelings for, or movement toward, a particular option. A person may experience decision conflict because two options are both attractive (approach-approach), because neither option is palatable (avoidance-avoidance), or because the qualities of a single option render it at once both attractive in some regards and repellant in others (approach-avoidance).

One could argue that this distinction between ambivalence and indecision is muddled by the way our feelings about an otherwise positive option can be complicated by negative feelings (i.e., regret) for another positive option we are not choosing because we are choosing the first. Thus, we can experience approach-avoidance conflict (ambivalence) toward an option precisely because we experience approach-approach conflict about the option *when considered in the larger context of two or more options*. We may resent, on either a conscious or an unconscious level, the fact that an otherwise positive choice is in essence the rescinding of some other possibility, an observation that has been bolstered by recent research from the fields of social psychology and neurobiology as will be discussed later in this chapter.

To choose one option – in this case, one's vocation - is in many cases tantamount to *not* choosing another option, a somewhat harsh reality captured neatly by Baumeister & Tierney (2011), who observe that “decide” shares an etymological root, the Latin *caedere*, with the word “homicide.” *Cedere* means “to cut down, or to kill” (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011), and this is precisely the problem: That to choose to be something is to choose not to be something else, that the act of choosing is by definition also the act of rejecting at least one other possibility.

William James' Typology of Decision-Making

In his definitive text on the use of existential precepts in psychotherapy, Yalom (1980) draws heavily upon William James' multiple categorization of decision to help frame the discussion. James, an influential philosopher and psychologist who is known for his pioneering work in pragmatism, functional psychology, and the development of a theory of emotions, describes five different types of decision: Reasonable; willful; drifting; impulsive; and decision based on change in perspective (quoted in Yalom, 1980). The first two of these utilize willful effort, according to Yalom (1980), but the other types are also decisions, though we may not regard them as such.

Reasonable

Reasonable decisions, according to James, are the type made in full conscious awareness and utilize rational powers of thought (James, 1975; Yalom 1980). This is the type of process referred to when we are exhorted to make lists of pros and cons. Benjamin Franklin's (1833) rendering of the decision-making process will be explored here. A critique of this type of decision will be offered in the discussion / synthesis chapter.

Willful

Willful decisions are those that involve a "slow heave of the will" (James 1975; Yalom 1980). According to James, these types of decisions are exceedingly rare, happening only a few times in the course of a lifetime, as the vast majority of decisions don't require this type of effort. Quitting smoking is an example of this type of decision, one that requires continual and dedicated effort. A critique of this particular type of decision will offered in the discussion/synthesis chapter.

Drifting

This type of decision, according to James, involves a slow movement in one of two directions because neither seems better than the other. Individuals will commonly ascribe the making of this decision to something *outside* themselves, whether that be another person or a different circumstance. This is a way of avoiding responsibility for the decision, according to Yalom (1980); nevertheless, it is a decision.

Impulsive

Impulsive decisions can seem as external as the third type (Yalom, 1980), but the difference is that an impulsive decision is acknowledged as having been made from within rather than from without. An individual makes the decision, but not based on any type of rational analysis; because the decision seems unreflected upon, it can feel to the individual as though she made the decision in an altered self-state, that she was not wholly “herself” in the making of the decision.

Decision Based on Changes in Perspective

This type of decision is made in response to the obtaining of new emotion or information that results in a “change of heart”; Yalom (1980) uses examples of his work with cancer patients to exemplify this type of change.

For both Yalom and James, it is important to understand that individuals are making decisions even when they think they are not. This framework for decisions will be framed within the larger context of existential thought in the existential theory chapter that follows, and a critique of these ideas based on research from social psychology will be offered in the synthesis chapter.

Decision Theory and Cognitive Biases

The tradition of trying to quantify relational values and corral unwieldy aspects of a choice into a rational calculation is a long and storied one. In a letter to an advice-seeker, Benjamin Franklin (1833) wrote about decisions:

When these difficult cases occur, they are difficult, chiefly because while we have them under consideration, all the reasons pro and con are not present in the mind at the same time...to get over this, my way is to divide half of sheet of paper by a line into two columns; writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con. Then during three or four days' consideration, I put down under the different heads short hints of the different motives, that at different times occur to me, for or against the measure. When I have thus got them all together in one view, I endeavor to estimate their respective weights; and when I find one at each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out. If I find a reason pro equal to some two reasons con, I strike out the three...and thus proceeding I find at length where the balance lies...I think I can judge better, and am less likely to make a rash step; and in fact I have found great advantage from this kind of equation, in what may be called moral or prudential algebra (quoted in Iyengar, 2011, p. 131).

Though the calculations of relative values may have become more sophisticated since Franklin's time, the awkward project of trying to measure what is essentially unquantifiable continues. The past twenty years have seen an increase in the contributions of a group of psychologists (Plous, 1993) behavioral economists, management gurus and mathematicians who have offered guides for decision-making based on everything from cost-benefit analysis to game theory. With titles like "The Right Decision Every Time," (Kopeikina, 2005), such offerings attempt to streamline and organize decision-making processes through problem clarification and rational analysis.

While such advice can be helpful for organizational decision-making, such analyses do not necessarily translate when considering indecision on a personal level. Iyengar (2011) recounts an anecdote about a pioneering figure in the field of decisional analysis, who was faced with an offer to teach at Harvard and a counter offer of an increase his salary from Columbia, his home institution. He reportedly asked a friend for advice, who responded that he would do well to apply the decision-making methodology that had earned him the offer in the first place: “break the decision down into its components, map the relationship between them, and do the math to determine what option was best for him,” to which the professor reportedly replied, “You don’t understand. This is a serious decision.” (Iyengar, 2011, p. 7). This story, though amusing, highlights the difficulty of utilizing such theories in our everyday lives.

Nevertheless, such guides introduce readers to a host of cognitive biases that shape judgment and affect decision-making in a variety of economic and political arenas. Cognitive biases can be broadly described as deviations in judgment or perception resulting from heuristics, or information-processing shortcuts that the brain uses on an unconscious level (Plous, 1993; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Research on cognitive biases and decisional balance was ushered into the psychological community through the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, whose landmark paper, “Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases” (1974) introduced the idea of anchoring. Anchoring is the phenomenon of placing undue emphasis on the first piece of information offered, which then results in situating an object’s perceived value in relation to the first value given or stated (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Consumers are more likely to consider a car a bargain, for example, if its final price is lower than the original asking price....regardless of the actual value of the automobile. In the past forty years, researchers have begun to operationalize and study a host of interrelated cognitive biases that affect judgment,

perception, and even the notion of rationality itself (Ariely, 2009; Kahneman, 2011). While a comprehensive discussion of these biases is beyond the scope of this project, clinicians could benefit from a brief introduction to germane concepts, including the idea of anchoring noted above and loss aversion, which will be explored in detail later in this chapter. Before delving more deeply into the emerging research of social psychologists and behavioral economists regarding decision-making processes, it is important to consider how indecision has been conceptualized within the field of college counseling, in which young adults are frequently making, often for the first time, choices that will determine the course of their very lives.

Indecision as Conceptualized in the Vocational Literature

In their meta-analysis of vocational indecision as conceptualized and measured in the vocational literature, Brown and Rector (2008) maintain that most counseling interventions are “demonstrably, but modestly effective,” with students who participate in career counseling achieving approximately one-third better outcome (as measured by increases in reported decidedness upon a major) than their counterparts who did not participate (p. 392). One reason that treatments are not more effective, according to Brown and Rector (2008), is that extant assessment tools and treatment models are “theoretically truncated” and fail to take into account the complex causes of indecisiveness among students:

[...M]ost interventions that have appeared in the outcome literature seem to ignore (or at least fail to assess for) the underlying reason that might be responsible for clients’ choice-making difficulties and consequently fail to target intervention efforts to the source of the client’s indecision (p. 392).

This sentiment is echoed by other researchers in the field, who collectively seem to find it curious that while indecision has been correlated to factors ranging from trait and state anxiety

(Campagna, 2007; Kelly & Lee, 2002) to family of origin (Whiston & Keller, 2004), interventions remain remarkably untailed to these highly divergent causes.

Most interventions for indecision, according to Brown and Rector (2008), stem from the conceptualization of career indecision advanced by two seminal papers in the field. Holland and Holland (1977) positively correlated career indecision among college students to one of three broad attributes: “a.) information and skills deficits; b.) environmental problems and personal barriers; and c.) individuals with diffuse and unclear identities and significant levels of anxiety and immaturity” (quoted in Brown & Rector, 2008, p. 393). Subsequent interventions, then, have tended to involve the bolstering of skills and dissemination of information; the alleviation of personal barriers to the extent possible through mentoring programs; and identity formation work (Gallagher, Borg, Gonlin, & Kelleher, 1992). To the extent that assessment tools exist, they tend to measure for gaps in one of the three aforementioned areas (Kelly & Lee, 2002; Brown & Rector, 2008).

Holland and Holland’s (1977) third sub-type is further documented by Salomene (1982), who noted in his experience a pattern among individuals whom he labeled “chronically indecisive:” those who sought treatment for help making a particular career choice, but whose intake history indicated “past difficulty in making important life decisions” and presented with “chronic feelings of helplessness, dependency, immaturity, anxiety, and frustration, and low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem” (quoted in Brown & Rector, 2008, p. 393). Interventions for these individuals, then, would target self-esteem and anxiety, though a preliminary review of the literature suggests that there is remarkably little written about what, precisely, that anxiety might be about.

Scores of other researchers, including Campagna (2007) and Kelly & Lee (2002), continue to document the well-established correlation between trait anxiety and decision-making difficulties. Pines (2005) applies psychodynamic approaches to career burnout, but does not examine indecision from a psychodynamic perspective.

Post-modernist and constructivist influences

Like most other subfields within psychotherapy, career counseling has been influenced by postmodernist and constructivist ideas, which collectively challenge the very notion that reality can be objective. For psychotherapists, the influence of these ideas has translated into less emphasis on pathologizing clients and more attention to the shared co-construction of the therapeutic experience (Lowenthal & Snell, 2003).

Many researchers, including Savickas (1993) and Osipow and Littlejohn (1995) identify two distinct trends in the career counseling literature in response to these influences: First, a development of interventions specifically for individuals from particular groups, and second, a questioning of the role of the clinician as guide. Savickas (1993) remarks upon the move away from “logical positivism, objectivist science, and industrialism”(p. 205) and toward co-constructed realities. The role of career counseling practitioners should correspondingly shift, he argues, and rather than diagnosing, assessing, and matching for rightness of fit, career counselors should instead see themselves as co-creators and “editors” of a individual’s life narrative (Savickas, 1993).

This concept of the clinician as editor is drawn from narrative therapy (White, 1989; 2000; White & Epston,1990), which holds that humans make sense of the world and their experience in it through narrative – human depictions of sequential procedure. Narrative therapy,

then, helps individuals construct their experience of a situation and draws attention to the fact that our experiences of, and narratives about, situations are fluid (White & Epston, 1990).

The very admission that people want their work to mean different things was in some ways new to the vocational career literature (Gallagher, Borg, Gonlin, & Kelleher, 1992), which had heretofore held assumptions, often unstated, about the role work should play in one's life. Gallagher, et al. (1992) calls for vocational counseling to expand its scope to understand the role of work within the broader context of how a person wants to create her world, and subsequent researchers (Schwartz, Wrzesniewski, McCauley, & Rozin, 1997) examine the different roles people ascribe to their work, reminding readers that people may view their work as careers, jobs, or callings, respectively. It follows, then, that interventions should take into account the relationship that an individual has toward work and the value that she places upon it.

More recently, Cohen (2005) applied key tenets of existential theory to career decision-making based on the concepts of freedom, responsibility, meaning, authenticity, and existential guilt. Cohen (2005) found that many of the connections were perhaps most resonant for individuals changing careers or in transition periods, noting that the average college student's past might offer a less rich repository of experience within which to contextualize these ideas. This project hopes to build upon this edifice and offer suggestions to the clinician while also exploring the function of anxiety.

Summary of Indecision as Conceptualized in the Vocational Literature

Although indecision among college students has been extensively studied and measured, very little research, theoretical or empirical, normalizes the experience as developmentally or cognitively appropriate. Nor does the literature explicitly consider the context of the environment within which the indecisive student chooses, in which a preponderance of options is offered by a

society that reveres individualism and choice. Finally, the vocational indecision literature is divorced from an overt consideration of the neurobiology of choosing. It is to the neurobiological underpinnings of decision-making and the social construction of choice to which we now turn, in an effort to address that gap.

The Human Organism and the Neurobiology of Decision-Making

In order to understand indecision from as nuanced a view as possible, clinicians could benefit from overview of the neural and cognitive processes underpinning indecision. Indications of preference for choice in the animal kingdom will be briefly noted, and the cognitive process of decision is broken down more specifically. The concept of two systems (Kahneman, 2011; Iyengar, 2011) for automatic and reflective choosing utilizing the corticostriatal network and the prefrontal cortex, respectively, will be discussed, and the implications of the ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex into an individual's mid-20's will be noted (Sowell, Thompson, Tessner, & Toga, 2001). Gailliot, Baumeister, and Schmeichel's (2007) research on glucose levels and willpower will also be considered. The physical experience of emotion as it pertains to decision-making will be discussed. Finally, the amygdala's aversion to perceived loss (Leher, 2010) will be explored. Implicit in much of this research is the idea that the human organism, like many members of the animal kingdom, instinctively prefers options to no options, yet we haven't quite evolved to process, let alone cope with, the preponderance of options available to us.

This is Your Brain on Choice

Where does all this deciding take place? The short answer is in the corticostriatal network, a system comprised of the striatum, prefrontal cortex, and the neural pathways that connect them, a comprehensive system that collectively "provides the mental connection

necessary for wanting what we want” (Iyengar, 2011 p. 8). Certain areas of our brains are more active in the choice and decision-making processes, and the corticostriatal network is widely considered to be at the center of these endeavors (Iyengar, 2011; Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004). The corticostriatal network is comprised of the striatum, which can be understood to dictate preference, and which all members of the animal kingdom possess, and the prefrontal cortex, the comparatively large size of which differentiates humans from other members of the animal kingdom and which is known to be the seat not just of logic and reasoning, but of the ability to make predictions based on sophisticated calculations, such as weighing our competing wants against one another, or guessing what it is we might want in the future and contrasting that with what we want now (Iyengar, 2011; Kahneman, 2012). The prefrontal cortex is still developing well into an individual’s mid-twenties (Iyengar, 2011, Kahneman, 2012; Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004), a fact which is important to consider when working with college undergraduate students.

Although the prefrontal cortex is regarded as the apparatus by which we gauge the consequences of our actions, and as such accepted as the seat of rational thought and decision making processes, the frontal lobes themselves have been remarkably difficult to distinguish from one another in terms of specific functions and processes until relatively recently.

Researchers have within the past ten years begun to study the relative role of various parts of the frontal lobe during decision-making activity by using functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI (Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004). Neuroimages of the brain reveal that the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (ACd) and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) have a negatively reciprocal relationship with regard to the perceived volition of a choice; that is, activation increased in the anterior cingulate cortex and decreased in the orbitofrontal cortex when the participant viewed

the decision as his or her own; the activation pattern was reversed when participants took an action that was not of their own volition (Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004). These responses suggest that we literally utilize different parts of our brain when we are assessing the consequences of our own decision rather than assessing the consequences of a decision another is making for us (Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004). In fact, simply *perceiving* that we have control over a situation, whether or not we do, activates the ventral medial prefrontal cortex (Walton, Delvin, & Rushworth, 2004).

This brain image research complements a body of earlier research that cumulatively suggests we have an innate preference for choice. For example, infants who were played music in short intervals each time they pulled a cord showed signs of happiness, such as smiling, clapping, and cooing. When the same music was played at the similar intervals regardless of whether the infant pulled the cord, these same infants showed signs of distress (Brown, et al., 2003). The same stimuli appeared to be distressing to the infants when it could not be controlled. The preference for control over an environmental condition as opposed to experiencing that same environmental condition at random has been well established (Brown, et al, 2003; Lewis et al., 1990). It seems that in addition to preferring choice over no choice, we prefer many options over few – as do mice and pigeons. For example, mice who could either take a straight route or choose one of many branching paths repeatedly chose the branching paths, even though the amount of food at the end of the path was the same (Catania, 1975). And pigeons that were taught to tap a button for pellets preferred situations in which there were several buttons to press, even though each button offered the same reward (Suzuki, 1999).

The behavioral consequences of a perceived lack of control are exemplified in Seligman and Maier's (1967) fundamental research regarding the disinclination of dogs to avoid shocks

they could control after first being subjected to shocks, administered at random, that they could not control. This experiment led to the theory of learned helplessness popularized by Seligman (1973), which posits that depression arises in part when we become separated from a sense of control or agency over our own lives and feel that our lives are happening to us rather than being created by us. Seligman's theory also draws upon the theory of internal and external loci of control (Rotter, 1954) a construct that has also been studied in conjunction with college students and indecision. Students who score higher on measures of external loci of control reported more decision-making difficulty than did their peers who scored higher on measures of internal loci of control (Parsons & Schneider, 1974). More current research suggests that stress levels, as measured through cortisol amounts, are higher for workers who perceive that they have a greater degree of control over their work environments than do their peers, working the same job, that perceive themselves to have less control (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011).

So it seems we prefer choice, that something innate in our condition – and captured in neuroimaging – prefers having choices, and that this preference can even be considered a drive, a need, without which we can become depressed and distanced from our own sense of agency. But sometimes our longing to choose trumps the relative benefit of the choice itself.

Too Many, Too Few: Research on Loss Aversion, Options, and The Cultural Implications of Choice

This section will introduce and provide a brief overview of research regarding our range of responses to options. At one end of the spectrum, research regarding loss aversion will be explored. At the other end of the spectrum, the phenomenon, documented by research, of individuals becoming figuratively paralyzed by options will be discussed. The idea of an optimal number of options will also be presented.

Open Doors: Loss Aversion and its Implications

Most of us are familiar with the expression that we are “keeping our options open.” In Shin and Ariely’s (2004) landmark experiment, researchers invited participants to play a computer game that featured three doors, each a different color. Each participant had a total of 100 clicks, or choices, to make. It required one click to open a door, and another click, once a given door was open, to gain or lose a certain (small) amount of money. The object of the game was to obtain as much money as possible.

Only one door could be open at a time; if participants wanted to open another door, it required spending another of the allotted clicks to switch and open the other door. If participants spent their time, clicks, and choices within one door, the other two doors would incrementally shrink in size and eventually disappear; however, participants could prevent this from happening by clicking on the shrinking door. The researchers found that participants invariably preferred keeping multiple doors, or options, open; the majority used their finite number of clicks to switch between doors. Notably, participants continued to do this even after being advised by researchers that all doors were created equal, and that the best possible outcome in terms of monetary gain – the overtly stated object of the game – was to select one door, allow the others to recede, and spend the rest of the allotted clicks within that door.

The experiment highlights our innate aversion to loss. We value options, as was discussed above, even when those options cost us in the long term. The amygdala’s aversion to loss, perceived or otherwise, is experienced as troubling, and it can at times interfere, like static on the radio, with our reception of the cause and effect reasoning rendered by the non-reptilian part of the brain. It seems that we have difficulty reconciling what we know about an overall gain in the long term with the intrinsic pain of a lost option in the short term, a finding that was

replicated in real-life scenarios by Botti and Iyengar (2009) in their study of the cost of choice in terms of subsequent outcome satisfaction.

An important consideration in this experiment is that options were finite; the choices were three. What happens if the choices are infinite...or at the least, a whole lot more than three?

The Optimal Number of Options

Iyengar and Lepper's (2000) jam experiment addresses precisely this question. We prefer choice and have an aversion to loss, as has previously been shown. But at what point are options too many? At what point do choices overwhelm? Inspired by Miller's (1956) seminal article, "Seven as a magic number, plus or minus two," Iyengar decided to investigate our threshold for choice, hypothesizing based on Miller's work that individuals become overwhelmed when presented with more than seven options, and that, in these instances, an individual may elect not to choose.

If there are too many choices available to us, do we simply decide not to choose? To answer this question, Iyengar staged an experiment in a supermarket renowned for its variety. Iyengar set up an experiment involving two sample tables. The first sample table included over twenty varieties of jam. Customers were invited to sample as many varieties as they liked and given a coupon for any jar, redeemable only that same day. A confederate was stationed in the jam aisle, making note of how many customers with coupons went on to select a jar of jam. Experimenters then set up the same table, in the same place in the store, but this time with only seven jars of jam. Customers were again invited to sample as many jams as they pleased and given the same coupon, good only for that day. Again a confederate stationed in the jam aisle made note of how many customers with coupons selected a jar of jam. Experimenters found that the number of customers who elected to buy a jar of jam increased by over fifty percent when

they had been presented with fewer choices (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). The idea that we can become paralyzed by choice, effectively electing not to choose when faced with too many options, is explored by Iyengar (2011) and others in subsequent research (Schwartz 2002, 2005).

The Cost of Excess: Making Sense in a World of Too Much

The implications of Iyengar and Lepper's (2000) jam research have consequences beyond toast. For example, Iyengar teamed with other researchers and found that employees who were presented with too many options in their 401K investment portfolios failed to make a choice and procrastinated enrolling in part because the options were too many; when these options were curtailed, more employees participated (Iyengar & Kamenica, 2008). A similar effect was noted with regard to Medicare Part D applicants, many of whom reported being so overwhelmed by the options available to them that they neglected to sign up in time for the deadline (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006; quoted in Iyengar, 2011).

These studies suggest that people can be paralyzed by choice, deciding not to decide in the face of too many options. But some people choose, and some seem to choose with comparative ease. If more is not less, how do deciders cope in a world of too many choices?

Maximizers, Satisficers, and the Myth of the Perfect Fit

Barry Schwartz (2002, 2005) is a social psychologist whose work has popularized the theory of "maximizers" and "satisficers" with regard to decision-making types. Schwartz uses the example of purchasing a sweater to illustrate this concept: Suppose two individuals want a sweater. It needs to be blue, and long-sleeved, and not scratchy. A satisficer will go into a store or two, find a sweater which fits that description, and, if the price seems reasonable, purchase it. A maximizer, on the other hand, will go into the same two stores, find the aforementioned sweater that fits the description, and then proceed to sock it away somewhere, searching instead

for an identical sweater at a lower price point. Or the maximizer will wonder, if it was that easy to come up with a sweater, if perhaps there is another, better sweater out there somewhere. It is the myth of perfection that so torments the maximizer and prevents him or her from simply choosing – for to choose is to rescind the possibility of something else. Likewise, it is the myth that there could have been something better – something perfect – that then interferes with our enjoyment of the choice we made, whether that decision be about a sweater or a life partner.

Schwartz (2002, 2005) maintains that people will approach a decision – any decision, from purchasing a sweater to choosing a partner or a profession – as either a maximizer or a satisficer, and that all people at some point fall at both ends of the spectrum with regard to decision-making in a given domain. People who tend to be maximizers in many life domains, however, are more likely to experience high levels of anxiety, perfectionism, neuroticism, and less overall life satisfaction (Schwartz, 2005).

The idea that decision-making takes a toll on the decider has been researched by Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice (2007). Based on this pioneering study, which has since been replicated (2011), Baumeister has popularized the theory of decision fatigue.

Ego Depletion and Decision Fatigue: Baumeister's Research

What is the effect of having to make decisions about so many different aspects of our lives, from jam to sweaters to careers? Baumeister et al.'s (2007) research seeks to understand the impact upon the decider of making multiple decisions – exponentially more than our predecessors. In addition to explaining the research supporting the theory of decision fatigue, this section will address the phenomenon of ego depletion (Vohs, et al., 2008).

Ego Depletion. Ego depletion is predicated upon the idea that willpower is an exhaustible resource that can be used up, or depleted, and that various tasks that require self-

control sap the ego of its willpower. Efforts to control oneself exert and thus deplete the ego, rendering an individual less able to control herself after having recently expended ego strength to control herself. Notably, ego depletion extends across different task domains, and depletion for one task can affect performance on an unrelated task. For example, if participants were asked to watch a comedy routine and force themselves not to laugh, they performed more poorly on puzzles and mind-teasers subsequently administered than did participants who were allowed to laugh at the same comedy clip. Researchers are currently exploring the question of how ego strength is restored. Various experiments have studied several plausible contributions, ranging from time, sleep, and caloric intake to distraction and affect-boosting experiences that seem to replenish a depleted self. Because these variables are difficult to isolate and understand, findings are at this point preliminary.

Decision Fatigue. This term refers to the decreasing quality of an individual's decision-making skills after being asked to make multiple decisions, and is an outgrowth of the idea of ego depletion, as it follows that decisions require ego strength and self-control. Baumeister and Tierney (2011) show, for example, that judges presented with individuals convicted of the same crimes will assess harsher sentences later in the day than earlier in the day; this finding has been replicated in courtrooms in both Israel and the United States, and in both countries, prisoners seen just after lunch received slightly more favorable sentences than did their peers appearing just before lunch or later in the afternoon.

Decision fatigue has most often been studied in conjunction with consumer choice, with researchers (Levav, 2002; Baumeister, 2006; Iyengar, 2012) theorizing that decisions requiring trade-offs (negative and positive elements for a given choice, or for each of two or more options) utilize more of an individual's ego strength than is utilized in instances when one choice is

clearly advantageous, or has no drawbacks. Levav (2002) argues that salespeople have intuited this for quite some time, showing that customers more frequently acquiesce and purchase add-ons beyond their original intention after they have had to make a number of other trade-off decisions about a product, such as a car.

Critiques of Baumeister's Research. Developmental psychologist Carol Dweck (2010) has responded to Baumeister's research by pointing out that the subjects have consisted entirely of undergraduate college students, the majority of whom are under age 25. Because the prefrontal cortex, the seat of reasoning, control, and higher-level thought, continues to develop into an individual's mid-twenties, Dweck and others argue that demographic limitations of the sample sets skew Baumeister's findings. Indeed, attempts to replicate the findings on individuals in their forties show a considerable decrease in ego depletion, or an increase in ego strength. Dweck and colleagues also found (2010) that beliefs about willpower and ego strength directly correlated to participants' performance on tasks that required self-control. However, the concept of decision fatigue has been less challenged than has the idea of ego depletion.

Poor Foresight and Inaccurate Hindsight: Research Regarding our Sub-par Predictive Ability and Collective Proclivity for Revisionist History

Complicating our already fraught decision-making process is the problem of the future self, or more precisely, the poor ability of the current self to accurately predict what the future self wants and needs. Daniel Gilbert's (2008) research suggests that we believe that we know what we want in the future, and that we are often mistaken because we routinely fail to take into consideration the myriad changing circumstances, including our changing preferences, that would affect the relative attractiveness of the choice for the future self. We change, but we often fail to recognize that we do.

Yet we rarely recognize this phenomenon, not in the least because of our penchant for revisionist history, also known as impact bias (Wilson, Myers, & Gilbert, 2003). Impact bias is a cognitive distortion by which we convince ourselves that we wanted what we have, rather than admitting that we made a decision that we now regret. So when we presented with information suggesting that choice we made in the past is not benefitting us currently, we tend to adjust our recollections of our preferences at the time, or our reasons for choosing what we chose (Wilson, Myers, & Gilbert, 2003).

Emotion is another factor that complicates our ability to accurately predict our future selves. We believe our prefrontal cortexes are eminently reasonable, but in fact they may be capricious, easily influenced by our emotional experience at the time we are making both predictions and decisions. For example, researchers surveyed participants immediately after the 2000 U.S. presidential election, asking participants who were either in the throes of elation or despair to predict how they would feel in six months' time (Wilson, Myers, & Gilbert, 2003). Participants consistently over- or under- estimated their subjective experience of happiness or distress, and participants also uniformly remembered that their emotion at the time of the election was less intense than they reported it to researchers at the time.

In the well-known "Love Bridge" experiment (Dutton & Aron, 1976), researchers had a young woman in the middle of an ordinary footbridge stop male passersby and ask them to participate in a short psychological survey. Participants completed the survey and then the researcher gave her contact information, telling participants they could call if they had any follow-up questions. Researchers repeated the process on another bridge, this time a suspension bridge that was swaying over 200 feet above a river. A much higher percentage of participants from the high swaying bridge called the researcher than did participants from the ordinary bridge

(Dutton & Aron, 1976). When asked, participants from the rickety bridge uniformly ascribed their motivation for calling the researcher back to attraction, whereas the few participants from the ordinary bridge who called simply stated that they were curious about the experiment. Dutton and Aron (1976) theorized that participants on the rickety bridge felt anxious and stressed by the conditions and later misattributed the physiological signs of arousal and anxiety to attraction.

This theory of misattribution of emotion has implications not only for how we decide, but also for what we think about how we decide (Iyengar, 2011; Leher, 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly in a society that prizes rational thought, we tend to overestimate the role of reason in our decision-making processes and underestimate the role of our emotional state at the time. This misattribution of emotions plays both backward and forward: We are also prone to view our choices themselves through the lens of our current emotional state, be it positive or negative. Interestingly, the very act of trying to rationalize our choice could have an effect upon our emotional state; evidenced by the prevalence of individuals overthinking a choice and subsequently becoming less satisfied with it, which has been well documented in the research (Wilson, et al., 1993).

The Human Decider in the Social Environment:

Choice within the Context of Individualistic and Capitalistic Society

Though we seem to be hard-wired to desire a certain amount of choice, as has been shown, what that choice symbolizes can vary among cultures. While a thorough exploration of how choice is conceptualized in various cultures is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting a few key distinctions between individualist and collectivist cultures with regard to choice. Iyengar and Lepper (1999) suggest that because individuals in more collectivist societies tend to conceptualize themselves as part of a whole, their choices are more typically based on

what will be best for the community or family of which they are a part. The choice is made because of their part in the whole, and they are more likely to see themselves as who they are in relation to others. This is in contrast to Western cultures, in which people tend to see themselves primarily as individuals and secondarily as interrelated parts of a whole. Western culture also tends to conflate preferences with identity and implicitly encourages one to ask: What do I declare about myself through this car or sweater or profession?

Because choice is more highly valued in Western culture, we tend to perceive more of it in the same situations than do our counterparts from more collectivist cultures in which individual choice is less revered as a precursor for both identity and happiness. In one study involving an international corporation, workers fulfilling the same job description for the same manager perceived different levels of autonomy and choice within the job, with workers from individualistic cultures describing themselves as having much more choice within their duties than did their counterparts from more collectivist cultures (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004). Implied in the findings is the notion that individuals tend to construct their experiences and perceptions in a way that correlates positively with the emphasis placed on personal choice within their respective cultures.

Conclusion

As clinicians consider a client presenting with decision-making difficulty, it is important to take into account not only the neurobiological hard-wiring that makes the rescinding of a choice so difficult, but also the highly individualistic culture in which that person is making a choice. The capitalist roots of this culture mean that a great emphasis is placed on options, and that, generally speaking, more options are regarded as preferable to fewer. Complicating matters even further is the myth of the perfect fit implicit in so many of the messages young people

receive. Informed by research regarding the extent to which choices overwhelm, and yet also aware of the importance of personal agency, the clinician can help a client normalize her experience of indecision, contextualizing it from both biological and social frames. Yet such interventions are incomplete if disconnected from an ongoing inquiry into what deciding means for the individual. The clinician who is familiar with precepts of existential psychotherapy may be equipped to guide such a exploration. Likewise, an understanding of Winnicott's true and false self can augment and deepen the clinician's formulation. It is to these respective frames of existential psychotherapy and Winnicott's true and false self, then, that we now turn.

CHAPTER IV

Existential Frames

This chapter will begin with a brief historical context for the rise of existentialist thought in philosophy and the arts, and trace the consideration of these ideas in post-modern psychological writings through those theorists whose work will be referenced: Yalom (1980); Frankl (2004); Fromm (1941); May (1953; 1969; 1977; 1994); and Bugental (1965; 1976). It will then consider several concepts from existential psychology that could be particularly useful in understanding career indecision among college students. Although these concepts are tremendously intertwined and interdependent, effort will be made to consider them individually as they pertain to case conceptualization for the individual struggling with indecision. These elements are: death, existential isolation, meaninglessness and meaning-making, freedom and responsibility, will, and authenticity, which includes identity formation and the related concept of existential guilt.

Existential Thought in Philosophy, the Arts, and Psychology

Frederich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard may be considered among the most influential philosophers to first concern themselves with the inherently subjective experience of reality and the corresponding struggle of individuals to create meaning in a world that has no objective meaning or value assigned to a given experience. Drawing upon their work, Jean-Paul Sartre popularized the term “existentialism” in his *Existentialism as a Humanism* (1945), which advanced the notion that there are no givens or absolutes, and man is confronted with making

meaning in a world that has none. Meaning occurs inasmuch as it is constructed; we are responsible for meaning-making. The absurdity of this task is captured in both the fiction and treatises of Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, all of whose writings concern individuals who confront this essential truth.

Sartre's treatise, *Being and Nothingness* (1943) preceded *Existentialism as a Humanism* and explored the function of death in shaping awareness of our finiteness. Later works such as *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) considered the themes of freedom and responsibility. Meanwhile, Camus's novels showcased protagonists operating in an objectively value-less system and fashioning meaning within it. Existentialist sentiments enjoyed prominence on a literal as well as figurative stage, and were showcased in the "Theater of the absurd," which included plays such as Samuel Becket's "Waiting for Godot" (1953), in which two protagonists wait in vain for someone or something named Godot to arrive. Such works question the meaning of human existence amid the absence of a governing belief system and the inescapable finality of death.

Psychological ideas are often at once both reflective of and responsible for larger cultural shifts, and existential psychotherapy is no exception. Within the field of psychotherapy, many practitioners and theorists were considering the implications of freedom (Fromm, 1941), the function of anxiety (May, 1953; 1969; 1977; 1994), and the importance of meaning-making (Frankl, 2004). Though psychotherapists throughout the United States, Britain, and Europe had been engaging with these ideas to varying extents in their conceptualization of cases and the human condition, it was Irvin D. Yalom's seminal text *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980) that synthesized the work of many of those listed above and offered the first and arguably most comprehensive discussion of the use of existential precepts in psychotherapy. Yalom defines

existential psychotherapy as “a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual’s existence” (1980, p. 5) and goes on to identify the four integral concerns of the human condition as death, freedom (and with it, the responsibility necessitated by freedom), existential isolation, and meaninglessness. I will now consider each of these concepts in depth.

Death Anxiety and the Function of Finitude

Overview

Yalom (1980) opens his exploration of our finitude by making two observations: First, that death and life are interdependent and “exist simultaneously, not consecutively” (p. 29), and second, that death is a source of anxiety. As we are living, so too are we dying: That knowledge can be difficult to bear, and we tend to cope by living in what Heidegger (1962) termed a state of “forgetfulness of being.” In such a state we go about our daily business without conscious awareness of our finitude, as opposed to a state of mindfulness of being, in which we are continually aware of our own being, and with that, the corresponding inevitability of ceasing to be.

For Heidegger (1962) and others (May, 1963; Frankl, 2004), we can only begin to take responsibility for ourselves and live authentically when we are aware of ourselves and thus aware that we are at once becoming and ceasing to be. This tension makes us anxious, and so we tend to dip in and out of awareness of finitude either by conscious choice (via mindfulness exercises and the like) or because we have a boundary experience, such as an accident or the death of a loved one, which then forces us to consider death. Yet it is this very facing of death that enlivens us. As has been well documented in the literature, a forced awareness of being,

such as a cancer diagnosis, often brings with it a reassessment of priorities, a revaluing of one's experience, and a commitment to living with sensation and intention (Yalom, 1980).

Application to Indecision

Indecision can be viewed as the active manifestation of awareness of death and its attendant limits: There is simply not enough time to pursue everything that interests us, and embedded in this statement is acknowledgment of our dying. Or, as Yalom puts it: "Irreversible decisions often evoke existential anxiety precisely because they exclude other possibilities and confront the individual with [what Heidegger termed] 'the impossibility of future possibility'"(1980, p. 171).

In his seminal study of anxiety (1963), Rollo May identifies precisely this type of existential anxiety as instructive, reflective of the constraints of our experience, and not something that should necessarily be cured or medicated away. From this vantage point, indecision can be seen not just as reflective of our finitude but also a mirroring of our values and desires, which can at times seem mutually exclusive. The existentially-minded therapist can harness indecision and lead from uncertainty toward a discussion of values, among other things.

Meaninglessness and Meaning-making

Overview

As noted earlier, the questioning of an objective reality by various writers and thinkers fit hand in glove with the assertion that there is no cosmic meaning assigned to our experience. To the extent that individuals ascribe cosmic reasoning to a situation, they choose to do so. Often individuals are unaware that they have chosen the value structure by which meaning is made; instead, value structures are experienced as self-evident or as culturally bound, socially reinforced mores. May (1963) holds that we tend to avoid awareness of meaning-making, as the

apprehension of ourselves as meaning-makers confronts us both with meaninglessness, which is fundamentally disorienting and uncomfortable, as well as with our responsibility to adopt a value structure and fashion some semblance of meaning from our experiences.

In the common psychological parlance, a sense of meaning in one's life is assigned great import; indeed its absence is a commonly cited symptom of depression. When asked to describe the purpose of a life, Freud himself identified work and love as the purposes of a life; one of his most prolific followers expanded that response to include meaning-making. Perhaps no writer has placed more emphasis on the project of meaning-making than Victor Frankl, whose logotherapy can be considered an existentially-based psychotherapy with a particular emphasis on meaning and purpose.

Frankl's Contributions

Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist of Jewish descent who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, observed the varying psychological coping strategies of fellow prisoners and postulated that those who were able to connect to a sense of meaning were more likely to survive the tortuous treatment than were their counterparts who did not ascribe meaning to their suffering (Frankl, 2004). Frankl himself wrote his observations on scraps of paper in the camp; working on this project gave his life, and even his suffering, a continued sense of purpose that culminated in the 1946 publication of *Man's Search for Meaning*. For Frankl (2004), meaning is essential for life, and the need to live a meaningful life trumps even our desire to live a happy one.

Frankl took issue with Freud's drive model, which he felt was reductionist in its explanation of human motivation and behavior (Frankl, 2004). He disputed the notion that aggressive and libidinal urges account for many of our motivations, citing our innate need to

make meaning of our experiences and have purpose in our lives as a primary example of a component of human experience and behavior neglected by the drive model. It is perhaps worth noting that a broader interpretation of the drive model might allow the liberal reader to understand libidinal urges as vitality or life force. This reading might group meaning-making and a purpose-driven life under the auspices of life force. Yet such a reconciliation of these models would fail to address Frankl's secondary critique of the drive model, the role of the unconscious. In Frankl's view, the overly large role afforded the unconscious in dictating human behavior in Freud's drive model has the unintended result of stripping the individual of agency. Frankl is far from alone in his view (Bugental 1973; Fromm, 1941; May, 1994; Yalom, 1980). By emphasizing personal responsibility and the importance of meaning-making, Frankl helped expand upon the earliest models of psychoanalysis.

Application to Indecision

A few of Frankl's basic assumptions are important considerations in our treatment of indecision. First, as noted above, Frankl takes issue with drive theory and any hedonistic model of functioning that positions pleasure-seeking, rather than meaning-making, as our primary motivator. This potentially shapes how we think about indecision in two important ways.

Meaning-making and values identification. The meaning that an individual assigns to a particular decision can and often does vary considerably based on that individual's values structure, regardless of whether that individual is conscious of having deliberately chosen a values structure or instead regards the value structure to which she subscribes as self-evident and/or dictated by religious or spiritual beliefs. For this reason, values identification work could be very important to the course of therapy. Evolving contemporary therapies with an existentialist component, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, greatly

emphasize the importance of values in shaping intervention and treatment planning. While ACT describes itself as a third-wave behavioral therapy (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2003), its emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to shape a values structure renders the treatment highly compatible with, and arguably an extension of, existential psychotherapy. ACT will be explored in greater detail in the discussion chapter.

Indecision as process. Another important and heretofore unexamined connection between meaning and indecision is the *process* of indecision. That is, indecision is almost universally maligned; treatment of it within the literature consists largely of relieving it and accomplishing a resolution of some sort. Is it possible for meaning to be assigned to indecision itself? From the vantage point of existential thinkers, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes. Could indecision be seen as reflective of flexibility, or the capacity to hold potentiality? To date, this writer is unaware of any theorists who connect the two in this way, an idea that will be more thoroughly explored in the discussion chapter, which will offer, among other things, a strengths-based interpretation of indecision.

Existential Isolation, Freedom, and Responsibility

Overview

While we are inherently relational beings, shaped by and through our relationship to others, and while two or more individuals can and do construct a third realm of relatedness, which is co-created, existential psychotherapy redirects attention to the aloneness that is an inescapable component of the human condition. This awareness that we are at once together and irrefutably alone is termed existential isolation, and with it comes the realization that no one else can live our lives for us, though certainly they can share in, and shape, our lives. Existential isolation is the premise on which freedom and responsibility rest.

Freedom from and freedom to. The humanist psychologist Erich Fromm (1941), whose work builds upon existentialist constructs, posits a distinction between freedom *from* and freedom *to*, which echo ideas threading through the work of thinkers from Plato to Sartre. The former, also called negative freedom, refers to the absence of certain social and environmental constrictions and barriers, such as war, poverty, hunger, and oppression, which are adverse to optimal functioning. Negative freedom can also include the absence of certain limitations on the individual imposed by others. The latter, also called positive freedom, concerns the freedom to exercise options, pursue valued direction, and make decisions based on those values. Positive freedom in and of itself can be anxiety-inducing, and Fromm suggests that in order to mask or manage that anxiety, we create parameters for our freedom while at the same time avoiding conscious realization that we are doing so. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm suggests that we avoid this awareness of our positive freedom through several means, including conformity, in which we subscribe to social mores and hold them as our own without awareness of our action or role in the matter. Doing so contributes to the advancement of a pseudo self, through which we endeavor to escape the “dichotomy inherent in freedom,” which Fromm neatly sums up as “the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness” (1941, p. 260). This pain of aloneness recalls the existential isolation mentioned above; it in fact points to the same phenomenon that no one can live our lives for us, and that within our worlds, however constricted, lies the freedom, and responsibility, of choice.

Responsibility. The existential frame of responsibility is inextricably linked to freedom and attempts to capture the idea that no one else can be held accountable for our lives. Even in dire circumstances, as Frankl (2004) illustrates, we are free to make meaning from our circumstances, to imbue our response with the values we hold, and to thus take responsibility for

our lives. Jean-Paul Sartre described responsibility as authorship: “To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one’s own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings, and, if such be the case, one’s own suffering” (quoted in Yalom, 1980, p. 218). We are responsible not only for our actions but also for our failures to act. From an existentialist perspective, the individual alone is the creator, which means less that God is dead than it means that we are responsible for ascertaining whether or not we believe, that our belief itself is a choice for which we are responsible. Even a leap of faith requires the choice to leap.

Responsibility for our choices comes with a price, a conscious awareness of our existential isolation and agency in choosing. Responsibility awareness may be both essential for authentic and autonomous functioning and difficult to bear, for it confronts us “with the dread of our groundlessness” (Yalom, 1980, p. 226). Because the confrontation of our groundlessness is so uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing, we often construct ways to cede responsibility. In Yalom’s view, the following help individuals avoid responsibility awareness: “compulsivity, displacement of responsibility to another, denial of responsibility through positioning oneself either as a victim or as one who “loses control,” avoidance of autonomous behavior, and decisional pathology” (p. 224).

An important limitation of responsibility from the perspective of existential psychotherapy is that responsibility for one’s attitude does not necessarily mean responsibility for one’s feelings, but rather for one’s relationship toward one’s feelings, a distinction that will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

Application to Indecision

As applied to indecision, the idea of freedom suggests that, in the absence of particular constrictions (negative freedom), we have the liberty to create the frames from which we choose.

Responsibility holds that individuals are charged with making their own decisions, and that no one can make a decision for another, for one must accept a decision that another makes on that individual's behalf. Indeed, the ceding of responsibility from one person to another is a form of decision-making, as James's typology suggests. Moreover, decisions do not "happen to" an individual from this perspective; even when we believe we are ceding control by not taking action, we are exercising our freedom to *not* decide – and in so doing, deciding.

Some existential theorists are aware of the social and environmental factors that contribute to this increased emphasis upon, and subsequent felt experience of, our positive freedom (Bugental, 1973, May, 1965; Yalom, 1980). As social roles have become more flexible, and the religious institutions governing behavioral expectations grown less revered, we have in Western industrialized countries become increasingly aware of the options extending before us, and as Yalom (1980) notes, flummoxed by the responsibility of our own choosing:

Today's patient has to cope more with freedom than with supposed drives. No longer pushed from within by what he or she "has" to do, or pulled from without by what he or she "must or "ought" to do, the patient has to cope with the problem of choice—with what he or she *wants* to do. (p. 224)

If the vocational options available to a woman in generations past, say, were secretary, nurse, or teacher, she could in a best-case scenario choose from among these allowable options. Should she hate her vocation, however, she could find comfort in knowing that really she ought to have been a pilot.

Yet the *ability* to become just about anything presents us with the *problem* of the ability to become just about anything, for it brings with it the burden of ascertaining what we most want

to be. Indeed, the atrophying of social structures within the past two centuries especially has served to confront us with our freedom, and with it, the at times confounding nature of our want.

Wishing and Willing

*Through the will we project ourselves into the future,
and the wish is the beginning of that process. Yalom, 1980, p. 299*

What is want, and what does its absence imply? To better understand the role of desire and the ramifications of a lack of desire, we turn to the work of Rollo May. May, an influential humanist psychologist whose relationships with leading existential psychologist and theologians such as Paul Tillich, concerned himself with the role of anxiety in our lives and deemed much of it normative if not instructive, as noted above. He also examined the function of desire, and explored what its absence implies. How do we understand the phenomena of the individual who doesn't know what he or she wants?

Wish is a prerequisite of want, defined by May in *Man's Search for Himself* (1963) as "the imaginative playing with the possibility of some act or state occurring," which one presumably holds or maintains thorough a state of wanting, or desire, and then enacts by pulling the "trigger of effort," that is, employing will and thereby making a choice. Wishing and fantasy work can be one place to start, then, for the therapist working with an individual who claims not to know what she wants. While a fantasy may or may not be indicative of a deeper want, learning to identify and play with fantasy can connect an individual to the part of herself that wishes. Creative play is key to this process.

For May (1963), difficulty identifying a want is often directly linked to difficulty naming a feeling, and may arise when the needs of others are overbearing and supersede the wants of the small child, whose ego is still in a fragile state of development. The child then learns to

sublimate and negate his or her own wants, looking instead to the caregiver or, in later life, others, to ensure that their needs are being met. Gradually the individual becomes less and less familiar with her own want until it becomes almost foreign, strange and unrecognizable. For May, the ability to want is never truly obfuscated, but the ability to recognize a want can indeed become obscured. To remedy this, May recommends helping an individual recognize and experience feeling states in the “here-and-now” of the therapy room, though he cautions that the process is often a lugubrious one: “Psychotherapy with the affect-blocked (that is, feeling-blocked) is slow and grinding” (1963, p. 307).

In other cases, individuals may be more in touch with their feelings. However, the lack of awareness of a want could be means of eschewing vulnerability, for to acknowledge a want is also to risk the particular disappointment of that want going unrealized. Individuals whose needs are routinely not met during childhood might develop a difficulty identifying their wants and verbalizing them to another, for to do so opens the possibility of disappointment – in others and in the self (May, 1963).

May (1963) characterizes impulsivity as another disorder of wishing, describing it as a lack of discriminating, acting promptly and impulsively on all wishes. “One who acts immediately on each impulse or whim avoids wishing as neatly as does one who stifles or represses wishes” (p. 312). Impulsivity prevents us from recognizing what we really want: “An individual who cannot discriminate among his wishes attempts to fulfill all of them, and in so doing loses his true self—the self that wants one thing more deeply than another thing” (p. 312). Impulsivity may be the essence of wishing without willing.

For Yalom (1980), wishing is the beginning of a decision, a necessary precursor to will. “One initiates through *wishing* and then enacts through *choice*” (p. 344). Yalom goes on to use

the term decision to be synonymous with choice. If no action occurs, then no true decision has been made, May contends, which seems to contradict James' description of a drifting decision, one that is made when responsibility is ceded. The concept of will, then, can be understood as the coupling of responsibility with want.

Simultaneous Wishing and Indecision

All of the above can be helpful in understanding how a wish can be difficult to ascertain. But what about those for whom wishing is not the problem, but rather choosing from among equally desirable wishes? Simultaneous ambivalence is described as experiencing two wishes fully and directly, as opposed to sequential ambivalence, described as experiencing first one want and then another, which may protect a person from experiencing the inherent contradiction that is inescapable in simultaneous wishing (May, 1963; Yalom, 1980). In fact, for the impulsive wisher, an important therapeutic task is to experience them simultaneously so as to feel the full brunt of the loss of the unchosen option and thus take responsibility for choice. We tend to avoid this position because of the discomfort within it, but it is only in experiencing wishes – and their conflicting externalities – simultaneously that a solution can become apparent. Yalom writes: “[I]f one is able to confront deeply and with full intensity all one’s relevant wishes, then one will eventually fashion a creative, innovative solution—a solution that could not have been foreseen” (1980, p. 313). Yet such a solution depends upon our ability to tolerate both the discomfort of conflicting wants and our own responsibility in prioritizing one want over another and thereby shaping our lives. As Yalom (1980) observes:

...[W]hen one in full awareness wishes and decides, one is confronted with responsibility...[o]ne creates oneself...and wishing and deciding are the building blocks of that ongoing creation. As Sartre has often told us, an individual’s life is constituted by

his or her choices. An individual wills himself into being what he is. If one is terrified by self-constitution (and by the groundlessness inherent in such knowledge), then one may avoid willing by, for example, deadening oneself to wishing or feeling, by abdicating choice, or by transferring one's choice to other individuals, institutions, or external events. (p. 230)

Freudian Analysis and the Will: Rank's Critique

For psychotherapist Otto Rank, one of the earliest of Freud's mentees to break with the founder of psychoanalysis, will can be understood in three developmental stages: counter will, or opposition to another's will; positive will, or willing what one feels one must; and creative will, or willing what one wants. Early experiences of having counter will squelched or denied by parents might result in not the creative will being compromised, as willing itself can be construed as problematic, or *verboten*. Like May, Rank believes that because of this early negation, a goal of therapy for the neurotic individual is learning to will without guilt. Analysis can be helpful in this regard, but there are drawbacks: For Rank, Freudian psychoanalysis can serve to weaken the will through both its process and its emphasis on resistance, a criticism embraced by subsequent thinkers who referred to psychoanalysis as "systematic training in indecision," (quoted in Yalom, 1980). Other theorists, such as Farbar, question the role of the unconscious in will, noting that once unconscious drives or wants have been made conscious, one still must make a choice. But how do we know that a given choice is an authentic one?

Authenticity, Identity, and Existential Guilt

One is guilty to the extent that one has failed to fulfill authentic possibility.

-Yalom, 1980, p. 277

Authenticity

Rollo May (1963, 1994) describes authenticity as taking responsibility for one's existence. Echoing May's emphasis on responsibility, Yalom (1980) cites Sartre's notion of a sense of deliberate authorship over one's life. In a fitting example of parallel process, Existential Humanist James F.T. Bugental struggles to precisely define authenticity in a book concerned with that very problem: *The Search for Authenticity* (1965). Bugental notes that authenticity can be very difficult to describe, but is nonetheless recognizable when experienced. He goes on to enumerate some characteristics of authenticity, such as a sense of being in the present moment, a spontaneous and genuine connection with others, a recognition of the responsibility inherent in making choices, and connection to meaning and values structures. From this perspective, authentic choices contribute to a developing sense of who we are; they are the building blocks of the evolving self. Authenticity relates to identity formation in important ways, and a choice made on the basis of, or in accordance with, a given identity may or may not be authentic.

Identity Formation

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development addresses the question of identity formation, also referred to as individuation, may be helpful to review in this context. Briefly, Erikson's model of psychosocial development breaks a life into several separate stages, each characterized by a tension or conflict. The developmental task at any given stage is to resolve the conflict and integrate the experience into the evolving self. While a study of Erikson's model is beyond the scope of this paper, one particular stage, Identity versus Role Confusion, is worth discussing in more detail due to its relevance to choice. Erikson held that in this stage, individuals try on different vocational and social roles sensing which meshes most with their felt sense of who they are as people. Individuals gradually incorporate positive identities into their self-concept, and this helps give them a sense of being and purpose. If individuals do not ascribe

to a particular identity or set of identities, role confusion may ensue. In the case of role confusion, individuals vacillate between roles and experience less stability than do their counterparts who successfully incorporate elements of a cohesive identity into the self.

Existential Guilt

Existential Guilt is an integral component of the existential understanding of indecision; however, the concept depends upon a nuanced understanding of how guilt is contextualized in the psychological literature. Guilt, which Yalom (1980) defines as “the dark shadow of responsibility” or “anxiety with a sense of badness” (p. 276), is also essential to differentiate from shame, which is often experienced as a global sense of wrongness at one’s core (Keran, 2010). Freud made a similar observation, noting that guilt and a sense of inferiority are often similar in subjective experience (Keran, 2010; Yalom, 1980). A distinction must also be made between neurotic guilt and “real” guilt or, in Buber’s terms, between “guilt” and “guilt feelings.” (Yalom, 1980, p. 276). Yalom (1980) distinguishes among these related concepts when he writes:

Neurotic guilt emanates from *imagined* transgressions (or minor transgressions that are responded to in a disproportionately powerful manner) against another individual, against ancient and modern taboos, or against parental or societal tribunals. “Real” guilt flows from an actual transgression against another. Though the subjective dysphoric experience is similar, the meaning and the therapeutic management of these forms of guilt are very different: neurotic guilt must be approached through a working through in the sense of badness, the unconscious aggressivity, and the wish for punishment; whereas “real” guilt must be met by actual, or symbolically appropriate, reparation. (p.277)

Guilt requires some sort of reparation, but what recourse can be given when the transgression is against the future self?

Existential guilt. Yalom (1980) describes how an existential perspective in psychotherapy adds dimensions to the concept of guilt by imbuing the definition with both finitude and responsibility. Existential guilt is often conflated with, but is more than, simply regret or self-recrimination. “Existential guilt issues through omission” (p. 285); it is less a remonstrance of who we have become than the loss of who we have failed to be.

Existential psychotherapy’s emphasis on responsibility is integral, here:

First the full acceptance of responsibility for one’s actions broadens the scope of guilt by diminishing escape hatches. No longer can the individual comfortably rely on such alibis as “I didn’t mean it,” “it was an accident,” “I couldn’t help it,” “I followed an irresistible impulse.” Thus real guilt and its role in one’s interpersonal dealings frequently enters into the existential therapeutic dialogue. (p. 277)

In addition to a larger scope of responsibility, existential guilt operates by conceptualizing the transgressor as the present self and the transgressed against as the future or potential self rather than another: “One is guilty not only through transgressions against another or against some moral or social code, but one may be guilty of transgression against the self” (Yalom, 1980, p. 277). Heidegger and Kierkegaard developed this concept, a form of despair that emerges from not being willing to be oneself, most comprehensively. Paul Tillich built upon their frame in *The Courage to Be* (1952), noting that anxiety is intimately related to our possibility or potentiality:

Man’s being is not only given to him but also demanded of him. He is responsible for it; literally, he is required to answer, if he is asked *what he has made of himself*. He who

asks him is his judge, namely he himself. The situation produces the anxiety which in relative terms is the anxiety of guilt, in absolute terms the anxiety of self-rejection or condemnation. Man is asked to make of himself what he is supposed to become, to fulfill his destiny. In every act of moral, self-affirmation man contributes to the fulfillment of his destiny, to the actualization of what he potentially is. (p. 51-52)

Implied throughout these conceptualizations is the notion that there is an ideal potential for each person to uncover and become, an idea that can be traced back to Plato and which will be examined in the discussion chapter that follows. Existential guilt is described in similar terms by humanists such as Bugental (1975) and Rollo May (1973) who understood repression in direct relation to one's own potential unrealized repressed potential. May (1973) urges the clinician to take a larger view, one that encompasses both the individual and his or her potentialities:

We must ask the following questions, therefore, if we are to understand repression in a given person: *What is this person's relation to his own potentialities? What goes on that he chooses or is forced to choose, to block off from his awareness something that he knows and on another level knows that he knows? The unconscious, then, is not to be thought of as a reservoir of impulses, thoughts, and wishes that are culturally unacceptable. I define it rather as those potentialities for knowing and experiencing that the individual cannot or will not actualize.* (p. 17)

Though uncomfortable, existential guilt can serve a purpose, acting as a boundary experience and alerting us to our failures to ourselves. Echoing May's assertion of the worth of anxiety, Yalom pauses to reflect on how existential guilt can guide us, describing it as, "[A] constructive emotion...a perception of the difference between what a thing is and what it ought to be" (p.278). In this way it reminds us of, and returns us to, ourselves.

Conclusion

Rooted in an awareness of our inherent subjectivity and finitude, existential psychotherapy emphasizes meaning-making and responsibility for one's own choice. It is built upon a concern for the potential of the self, and from this vantage point most psychopathology can be understood as a renunciation of responsibility for the self. It offers clinicians working with indecisive students a framework for understanding why choice can be difficult, and points the clinician toward interventions that draw attention to agency and emphasize valued action. Existential psychotherapy is primarily concerned with the present and potential selves, in contrast to Winnicott, whose theory of true and false selves seeks primarily to understand the role of the past in shaping the present self.

CHAPTER V

Winnicott's True and False Selves

Contextualizing Winnicott

Donald Winnicott was born in 1896 in England to a well-to-do but emotionally distant family and came of age during the first World War (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004). Winnicott trained first as a pediatrician and later as a psychoanalyst under Melanie Klein, by whom he was heavily influenced and from whose theories his later work markedly diverged (Goldstein, 2002). He became a highly visible member of the British Psychoanalytic Society at a time when Kleinian Object Relations theory was competing with Anna Freud and her followers; together with Ronald Fairbairn, John Bowlby, Margaret Little, Marion Milner, and others, Winnicott became a part of the British School or Independent Group of Object Relations theorists.

In his relief work for evacuees during the London bombings of World War II, Winnicott met and eventually married his second wife, Claire, a psychiatric social worker, with whom he often collaborated in writing papers and advocating for the rights of the disadvantaged (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004). Perhaps because of his wife's influence, Winnicott's conceptualizations gave greater weight to the environmental factors in shaping a child's psyche than did the more purely intrapsychic models of his peers (Goldstein, 2002). Winnicott's theory of child development is singular in its conceptualization of capacities rather than developmental stages, which are more typical of other models of Developmental theory, most notably those created by Piaget and Erikson. Several of Winnicott's ideas about a child's earliest experiences

comprise the theories upon which the construct of true and false selves is based, and it is to these theories that we now turn.

**Holding Environments, Transitional Objects and “Good-enough” Mothering:
Foundational Concepts for the True & False Selves**

Whereas Kleinian Object Relations theory focused primarily on the fantasy life of the infant, Winnicott broadened the inquiry to include the ways in which the infant internalizes experiences of the caregiver and the surrounding environment. Over the course of his more than 6000 clinical interactions and consultations, Winnicott developed the notion of the “good - enough” mother, one who is generally responsive to the child’s needs and gestures and whose occasional misattunements provided optimal frustration for the child (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004). For Winnicott (1971), the good-enough mother, beyond being generally responsive, is also able to tolerate aggression and even hatred from her infant. This tolerance is a bulwark in the construction of the holding environment, for it allows the infant to demonstrate a full range of emotion without fear of destroying either the caregiver or the relationship. The knowledge that the mother can withstand the infant’s rage is one building block of being real, as that knowledge fosters full expression of self in other relationships.

The good-enough caregiver is an integral element of Winnicott’s holding environment, which is comprised of ongoing reciprocal processes between caregiver and infant: Holding and integration, handling and personalization, and object presenting and object relating. A central premise is that each baby is an individual, and thus the holding environment encourages the development of a self-experiencing being rooted in a particular body. This particular body is gradually understood by the developing infant to exist not just apart from the caregiving other but as a coherent whole, according to Applegate and Bonovitz: “Proper holding facilitates the

innate drive of this nascent self toward achievement of unit status, or *integration*” (2004, p. 33).

The understanding of self as different from, rather than an extension of, a caregiver is a necessary prerequisite to the cultivation of a coherent and integrated self.

Optimally, the holding environment begins with the new mother’s positive projective identification of her infant with her own preverbal state, which allows her to be sensitive to the baby’s needs. As the mother takes care of the baby in a physical way, she tends to the baby’s physiological and emotional need for quiet and connection, a need that is immediate after the birth process, which interrupted the baby’s sense of continuity of being. The mother works to minimize impingements, such as loud noises, on the baby’s environment and in doing so allows the baby to gradually integrate novel sensory and emotional experiences into the domain of self. As needs continue to be predictably met, the baby can relax into a state of simply being in which she oscillates between integration and unintegration, the latter described by Applegate & Bonovitz (2004) as “a free-floating state in which she can relax into the knowledge of the caregiver’s reassuring and reliable presence” (p. 36). This capacity to integrate new experiences, cultivated gradually through attentive management of the baby’s environment, is directly linked to the capacity to be alone.

If the first permutation of the holding environment fosters a sense of the baby as simply being, the next dialectic of the holding environment, handling and personalization, results in the capacity to develop a sense of self as distinct from the other. As the baby is held and cuddled, she develops an emerging sense of herself as distinct from the other. Physical touch draws the baby’s attention to the sensation of the presence and absence of pressure on skin, functioning as a sort of boundary experience, the repetition of which allows personalization to occur: *This is where I end and you begin*. Additional experiences of handling and personalization come about

organically as the byproduct of the inevitable misattunements in which the caregiver either misreads the infant's cues or is unable, because of the certain circumstances, to respond as appropriately and swiftly as the infant might demand. These moments provide doses of optimal frustration, which will be discussed in more detail below. In addition to fostering personalization, the holding environment provides a forum for object presenting and object relating.

Skillful presenting of the object, such as the bottle or the breast, at the very moment the baby craves it contributes to the temporary illusion of omnipotence in the developing infant. This illusion of omnipotence in turn facilitates the infant's developing sense of self as separate from the object, for the infant begins to differentiate between the self and the object he or she desires and seems to summon purely by wanting. Yet even rupture and repair contribute to this sense of the self as separate from the other. For in those moments that the infant wants and the immediacy of that want is thwarted, the infant learns to tolerate frustration of the current want, and also, in an optimal situation, that the want will eventually be satisfied before the situation becomes dire. These moments can afford both an opportunity to develop the capacity to self-soothe as well as the knowledge, via experience, that caregivers can be imperfect and can still meet most essential needs, and that misattunements and ruptures can be repaired. These realizations help foster the emergence of a true self.

Winnicott's True and False Selves

Building upon developmental concepts advanced earlier, such as the "good-enough" mother, the "holding environment," and "the capacity to be alone," Winnicott introduced the terms *true self* and *false self* into the psychoanalytic literature in 1960. Goldstein (2002) offers this summary of the concept:

According to Winnicott, the *true self* represents an individual's *core potentialities* and develops when there is good-enough mothering. He thought that maternal failure, particularly in the form of impingements on the child...leads the child to create a "false self" that adapts to the mother and the surrounding environment at the expense of the true self. As the false self, which is a façade aimed at pleasing others, becomes more rigid, it becomes split off and the person becomes alienated from his or her true self, which remains hidden. Thus, the false self is a defensive organization that both "hides and protects" the true self at the expense of its full expression. It can be more or less severe depending on the nature of early mother-child interactions, in some instances leading to psychosis (p. 77).

For Winnicott (1965), the true self is rooted in the physical, responsive to the cues of the body, a visceral experience in which the baby "collects the details of aliveness" through attuned caregiving and cultivates "a sense that life is worth the trouble of living" (p. 121).

This sense of aliveness is tantamount to a sense of personal agency, as will be discussed below, whereas the absence of that sense of personal agency can contribute to the development of false self. Winnicott (1965) asserts that for the false self, "other people's expectations can become of overriding importance, overlaying or contradicting the original sense of the self, the one connected to the very root of one's being" (p. 146). While the expectations and desires of others can override the desires of a self at any time, this occurs with less intrapsychic conflict when a false self is more fully developed, or a true self less fully formed.

This false self forms in response to a patterned experience of negation of the true self. "Through this false self, the infant builds up a false set of relationships, and by means of introjects even attains a show of being real" (1965, p. 146). For Winnicott, the problem is not

only the false construction of the self, but the construction of false relationships and false representations of the other, all of which are taken into and shape the self.

A Continuum of False Selves

For Winnicott, the developmental stage at which disruption to the true self occurs results in different permutations or expressions of the false self. Earlier and more severe disturbances to the true self result in a false self that is more entrenched and deeply divided from the true self. One can conceptualize these false selves along a continuum of health, beginning at one end with the most extreme, or split-off compliant false self, the false self as protector of the true self, the false self in search of the true self, the caretaker self, the false self built on identifications, and the social false self (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004).

The most severe false self is a “truly split-off compliant false self which is taken for the whole child” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 204). This kind of false self can arise when the earliest caregiver’s responses are consistently incongruent with the infant’s, when the caregiver fails to respond to an infant’s “spontaneous gesture,” and, worse, when the caregiver instead imposes a gesture to which the infant must respond, thus negating the child’s most nascent experiences of an omnipotent self. In these instances, “spontaneity is foreclosed, the true self is hidden” (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004, p. 208). Those individuals for whom the true self is hidden by the compliant false self might be characterized as having difficulty focusing and being reactive, or as Winnicott puts it, “have a need to collect impingements from external reality” (1960, p. 150). In these cases, the false self becomes ascendant as a matter of survival.

The false self is not always completely split off from the true self, however. Sometimes the true self is “secretly acknowledged” by the individual, in which case the false self functions as an overlay to protect the true self from feelings of vulnerability (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004,

p. 210). Perhaps arising to shield the infant from critique, condemnation, or invalidation by the caregiver, this false self becomes an aloof exterior as the child grows older. This conceptualization is less dichotomous than the model discussed above.

Sometimes the false self is less a protector than a searcher, as in the configuration of the false self in search of the true self (or at the least, a means by which the true self may find expression). In this presentation, the individual “employs compliant or acquiescent behaviors, not to survive or protect a nascent self, but to pave a way for true self-expression” (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004, p. 216). The false self can be manifested in the active seeking out of direction from others, among other expressions. In these instances it is likely that the true self progressed farther along the developmental spectrum before becoming stunted through a traumatic experience, or the repetition of invalidating misattunements on the caregiver’s part, without adequate repair to the relationship.

The next step along the continuum toward health brings us to the false self built on identifications, in which there is “a sense of a distinct, personal self, but it is modeled in an exaggerated way on the behaviors of others rather than being flexibly expressive of the spontaneous true self” (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004, p. 224). To a certain extent, this trying on of various personae is a natural part of identity formation, differentiation, and growth. Indeed, the pattern of exploration of various facets of self is integral to the consolidation of self. But when identity is adopted externally rather than experienced as an internal emanation from within, a false self may emerge. Applegate and Bonovitz (2004) warn that this sense of being shaped by external identities may result in adults who “carry this vulnerability into adulthood [and] are able to find relationships in which their essential dependency on others for self-definition is legitimized and supported” (p. 225). From this vantage point, the receipt of heavy

encouragement toward both patterned ways of being and the pursuit of particular life paths may result in a skewed development of self.

In these situations, a false self is ascendant and obscures the intention and desire of the true self. Again, as with most permutations of the false self aside from the social false self discussed below, the development of a true self is presumed de facto to develop organically in the absence of the obfuscating wants of others, an organic sense of authenticity into which a person can develop through repeated acts of spontaneity and the assertion of individual desire and opinion. Yet the social false self can serve a function for the true self in, fittingly enough, social occasions.

The social false self brings us to the far end of the continuum of health, and is conceptualized by Winnicott as necessary for functioning in polite society and also for protecting the true self. The true self must at times be reined in by the social false self, and it is paradoxically this selective monitoring of the self in certain situations that allows a spontaneous true self to thrive. As Applegate and Bonovitz (2004) put it, “Part of the role of the false self at this adaptive level is legitimate sequestering of the core of true self experience” (p. 226). Sometimes the true self doesn’t need to be showcased, and so long as putting forward a false self is a deliberate move, individuals are rarely the worse for wear. The ability to follow social cues, make small talk, and observe mores is essential—not only in keeping the trains running on time, but also to allow space for spontaneity, authenticity, and the generative expression of the true self.

The False Self and Indecision

Little has been written about ambivalence or indecision from the framework of Winnicott’s true and false selves, though some commentators at least peripherally suggest that

indecision could be seen as a byproduct of identification of false selves (Applegate & Bonovitz, 2004). What follows is an attempt to theorize about how indecision might be conceptualized within the framework of true and false selves that Winnicott advances.

In the case of the compliant false self, indecision could be seen as reflective of an either/or proposition in which each of the schizoid selves competes for expression and the individual has the subjective experience of feeling drawn toward different poles. This situation might be most closely likened to Lewin's approach-approach conflict discussed in the phenomenon chapter.

When considering indecision from the perspective of the false self as protector of the true self, one could conceptualize the state of non-deciding as preventing full revelation of the exposed true self. A decision allows one to become known, but for the true self that does not seek expression, such knowing is not desirable. From this perspective, indecision is a cloak that covers the true self, and the stakes of deciding are tantamount to a revealing of the true self, which the false self as protector seeks to obscure. Indecision serves an adaptive purpose within this structure, whereas it obfuscates development in the structure of false self in search of the true self. In the latter structure, resolution is sought so that the true self might become known. This construction is dependent upon a notion of the false self as an overlay that obscures the true self; assiduous efforts to strip away the errant desires of the false self reveal the nascent desires of the true self. But sometimes, false selves are less cloaks than they are the thwarted development of many nascent potential selves.

The false self based upon identification offers a model of what is arguably the most recognizable form of vocational indecision. Indecision from this frame can be seen as vacillating between one role and another, the sort of trying on of potential selves. For Winnicott, this is

slightly different than simply exploring a different facet of the integrated true self, as from this perspective there is an undercurrent of artificiality about the identified self that one is adopting. If one can experience the assumed identity as the manifestation of an internal representation of the self, heretofore unrealized, then this false self model may not be operative, and the individual may instead be motivated by an authentic sense of true self that happens to find expression within an established identity. Winnicott's emphasis on spontaneity as a key component of the true self may help the clinician decipher such a potentially confusing presentation. Thus, the therapist's attention to the rigidity with which the client holds an identity may offer a clue as to whether the identity is a formulation of a true self or false self based on identification. Is there room for movement and spontaneity within the identity? Or do actions seem rote, based on an external conceptualization of what one "should" do based on the assumed identity?

These questions may help distinguish a true self from a false self based on identification, but additional difficulties arise when one feels not simply equally pulled between potential selves, but equally sure that each is an authentic outgrowth of the true self. It is important to keep in mind that the true self transcends categorization or corraling into established professional tracks, and may well achieve fluid expression in more than one established role. However, should two roles be exclusive, Winnicott might again hold that the ability to act spontaneously within an identity is the litmus test of whether that identity is an extension of a true self, contrasting this with the more rigid, or even calcified expression of identity within a false self. In short, if one cannot experience identity fluidly and make one's identity one's own from moment to moment, it is probably not the identity of the true self.

The related concept of identity formation is important to consider here. Part of what makes a decision difficult is the assumption of one identity at the expense of another, the

privileging a future self. As noted earlier, Yalom (1980) maintains that de-identification of the individual from the roles he or she assumes can serve to connect one with one's existential isolation, and also with one's authentic experience of oneself in the here and now. One could argue that the assumption of any identity serves to thwart authentic expression of a true self, an idea that will be more fully explored in the discussion chapter that follows.

Conclusion

Winnicott's conceptualization of true and false selves offers crucial insights into how the infant develops into an integrated and autonomous individual who can and does act with authenticity and spontaneity, as well as how obstacles in the environment affect that development and result in varying permutations of a false self presentation. While this chapter has endeavored to theorize about how indecision might relate to each of these false selves, in so doing it may have unintentionally implied that the true self is somehow exempt from indecision. In this regard, Winnicott is silent, as are his myriad commentators. How might a clinician understand the individual who seems authentic, spontaneous, attuned....and indecisive? This critique will be further explored in the discussion chapter that follows.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion

This chapter will explore some shared characteristics of the theories previously discussed: existential frames and Winnicott's true and false selves. Points of divergence between the two will also be considered. It will then offer suggestions for the clinician based on these theories as well as research mentioned in the phenomenon chapter. The chapter will then make recommendations for further research, both theoretical and empirical, before addressing limitations and benefits of the study as a whole.

Essentialism, Constructivism, and the Fallacy of a Static Self

It is impossible to relate Winnicott to the existentialist thinkers without first addressing a common critique of Winnicott which arises from a misapprehension of what is meant by the true self. A reductionist interpretation might render the true self as essentialist—something to be uncovered as layered false selves are removed, the true self finally revealed. This essentialism of the self is so axiomatic that we seldom question it in everyday speech, and it has made an indelible imprint. We speak of “finding” ourselves, suggesting that there is an extant self to be discovered. If we can just shrug off the parts that obfuscate the core, than a true self will emerge, fully formed. This concept stands in stark contrast to the existentialist self—a self that is constructed, laid down choice by choice, mortared with want, an edifice that is always being remodeled.

Perhaps part of the problem is verbiage; the word *self* refers to a noun, and the true self might be understood then as essentialist, a core self that persists when more external, false selves are unmasked. But Winnicott's entire concept is based on the notion of authenticity of being and spontaneity of action. It is by definition a dynamic state. One might begin to address this conundrum by conceptualizing the true self as a verb rather than a noun, performance art rather than a statue, a flexible and responsive entity, ever changing.

The phrase "paralyzed by indecision" sometimes comes up in conversation about those who seem stuck between mutually exclusive options, poised at once for both options and at the same time for neither. If we hold in mind Winnicott's notion of spontaneous self, the notion of paralysis seems strikingly appropriate. We need spontaneity to recognize and respond to an authentic want, and that spontaneity seems compromised when we cannot move. Intuitively this may seem true, again begging the question of whether, and how, the true self can experience indecision. I will explore this question shortly, but first, consider how Winnicott's concept of true and false selves square with similar ideas in the existentialist and humanist frames.

Winnicott's Selves as Related to Similar Existentialist Constructs

Winnicott's true and false selves originate in object-relations theory, with the true self formed by attuned caregiver responses, secure attachment patterns and the integration of healthy transitional objects to produce an individual who is authentic, spontaneous, and vivacious. The false self is formed when a child repeatedly subverts his or her organic expression of self, often in response to strict or inconsistent caregiver responses, and endeavors to appeal to the caregiver. Over time, these adaptive attitudes become calcified, a shell that protects one not only from the capricious moods of the caregiver but ultimately from oneself, one's needs and desires. How

does Winnicott's concept compare to ideas of the self advanced by other thinkers, especially those within an existentialist construct?

Fromm's Original and Pseudo Selves

Fromm's strikingly similar concept of original and pseudo selves is conceived as a response to the weight of freedom. One can obfuscate the original self through the pseudo self, and in so doing escape the loneliness or existential isolation that is inherent in taking responsibility for the development of the true self. Fromm's pseudo self arises less from a failure of others to manage the environment than it does from the actual self that shirks responsibility. One could argue that Winnicott's false self arises in response to external factors, whereas Fromm's pseudo self issues from internal avoidance.

May's Problem of Wishing and Wanting

May devotes a substantial portion of *Man's Search for Himself* (1963) to the consideration of the individual who does not know what he wants. Though he refrains from describing this self as false, the sentiment of an empty sense of self is similar. May offers a few different interpretations of how a person might come to regard his or her own wants as foreign, and these reasons span a range from those similar to Winnicott's emphasis on external impingements to avoidance of disappointment or responsibility. The person who does not know what he wants does not know what he feels, May maintains, and while this may arise from factors similar to the negation of self Winnicott describes, a person elects to remain in this space of not knowing through choice.

Kierkegaard's Despair of False Choosing

That element of choice is also paramount for Kierkegaard, who observes that, "The deepest form of despair is to choose to be another than himself" (quoted in Rogers, 1961, p.

110). “Choose” is the operative word in this sentence, implying as it does the thread of responsibility woven through existentialist thought.

It is this distinction that most aptly characterizes the different approaches to falseness taken by Winnicott as compared to various thinkers within the existentialist frame. One might make the general observation that for existentialist thinkers, falseness arises in response to avoidance of responsibility, whereas for Winnicott, it arises in response to environmental shaping and consistently misattuned caregiving.

Is the True Self Immune to Indecision?

Much attention is given to how a false self arises and how to work with the false self in therapy; similarly, one the previous chapter suggests some ideas about how indecision is understood through the lens of the false self. While the previous chapter endeavored to understand how false self presentation may be implicated in situations in which an individual struggles with indecision, here I consider the role of the true self and indecision.

One impression the literature promotes is that the true self is an evolved psychological specimen. Yet the individual who is “true to herself” while simultaneously wanting mutually exclusive paths continues to exist. Is one of this person’s wants somehow more authentic than another? Lewin’s approach-approach typology, introduced in the phenomenon chapter, is helpful in conceptualizing the equally alluring nature of these options. One can (and often does) employ some version of Benjamin Franklin’s pros and cons lists, but items don’t always equate. They’re just qualitatively different.

It may be useful to invoke plural ideas. In other words, if there are multiple false selves, why only one true self? Could it be that we are equipped with the potential to evolve in different and equally (if such a measurement can be taken) valuable ways? To explore this idea, it may be

helpful to further fuse the ideas of Winnicott and the existentialists and consider the notion of the true self in conjunction with existential guilt. Does one feel existential guilt only if one's self is situated somewhere along the continuum of false selves? Or can one feel existential guilt, even while living a full and authentic life as a true self, because one recognizes that there was another way to be full and real?

In the case of the former, the therapeutic task is discernable: help the true self flex its muscles and move through layers of falseness—identify feelings and wishes and wants, create opportunities for spontaneity, for that intuitive flash of full self to be recognized and validated. But for the true self—or selves—that compete for mutually exclusive wants, it is perhaps less helpful to assign more or less value to one or the other of the options than it is to acknowledge the loss of a potential self inherent in each gain. As Kierkegaard observed in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (1922), “I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations—one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it—you will regret both”(p. 170).

Privilege and Indecision

A critique of the social false self is offered by Applegate and Bonovitz (2004), who note that marginalized people may develop “a socially sanctioned false self presentation as a way to survive hostile conditions” (p. 227). While Winnicott notes that most individuals adopt a social false self without detrimental effect to the true self, the situation is different for individuals who must subvert a part of their authentic self in order to pass in a dominant culture that expects adherence to particular norms. In cases of extreme racism and oppression, we must wonder about the emotional toll on the true self of being regarded by those in power as subservient or of lesser

value. What is the effect on the true self of failing to see oneself reflected in the dominant culture, or of being portrayed in a limited or stereotyped way?

The contemporary concept of code switching may be more aligned with Winnicott's notion of the benign adaptation of the social false self. Code switching can be defined as using more than one language or context-specific way of communicating (Wei, 2000). It happens both consciously and unconsciously as individuals take stock of the communication situation and elect, either intuitively or deliberately, to bring different elements of the same self to the conversation, depending on context. Yet this alignment isn't quite symmetrical, for code switching is less about the subjugation of an element of the true self than it is about the free and adroit expression of several types of self. In this manner, it is perhaps a subtle argument for the notion of multiple true selves.

The effect of institutional racism and oppression on a systems level is important to consider here with regard to vocational indecision and the false self construct. Individuals with fewer socioeconomic and educational resources may have been less well prepared to pursue certain career paths than their counterparts who have been equipped with the necessary prerequisites. Because of this, there may be a premature narrowing of vocational options, an earlier constriction. Should this be viewed as the ascension of the false self? Similarly, individuals with other family responsibilities may well forsake certain careers as too financially insecure, or not remunerative enough to sustain one's own and one's familial obligations. Are these problems of falseness, or of competing priorities that at times render a compromise, a brokered offering between the true self and the false self that is attuned to its place in the family system? Indecision within a vacuum, without being pulled in some way by the needs of others, is most certainly a problem of privilege.

Shades of Existential Psychotherapy within a Winnicottian Frame

Winnicott's emphasis on the external caregiver responses that shape a baby into a being may seem, at first glance, to contend with existential psychotherapy's mantra of personal responsibility in the shaping of our own worlds through our thought, perception, and action. An existentialist critique of false selves could be that the falseness is attributed in too large a measure to our early environment. Might an existential psychotherapist wonder if we're shirking responsibility somehow? Yet the two theories concern themselves with similar questions of authenticity, being, and choice, approaching similar ends via very different means.

While a Winnicottian approach cannot be characterized as existentialist, woven into some of his definitions are attention to boredom, diffuseness, and the passage of time. He compliant false self is described as having "extreme restlessness, an inability to concentrate, and a need to collect impingements from external reality so that living-time of the individual can be filled by reactions to these impingements"(Winnicott, 1960, p. 150). Here Winnicott makes oblique reference to the filling of time, and one might extrapolate that time is filled in part because it relieves us of the burden of aloneness. Similarly, the focus on external impingements relieves us of the notion of existential isolation. Winnicott's attention to the function of busyness in concealing us from a sense of our own non-being is echoed throughout the existentialist literature.

Responsibility and Oppression within Existential Psychotherapy

The existentialist's dogged attention toward freedom and choice can at times seem tone deaf in its practical assessment of the role of social and environmental factors in shaping the tools with which an individual is operating in the first place. In this respect, the work of Frankl is integral in helping to distinguish what, precisely, we are charged with taking responsibility for in

our lives. For Frankl and others, this includes not only our response to oppression, but the meaning we make from it.

At what point does indecision keep us from assuming responsibility?

Yalom (1980) regards indecision as a decision-making pathology for the paralyzing reasons noted earlier. It is, he also reminds us, a means by which we try to shield ourselves from taking responsibility for ourselves and our lives. The argument against indecision has convincingly been laid out in earlier chapters and elsewhere, and is widely accepted for good reason. If indecision continues on interminably, it does render us in a middle space, neither here nor there. But there is perhaps a midpoint between careful consideration and pathology, in which indecision is simply a reflection of our finitude. From a strengths-based perspective (Saleebey, 2006), the person caught between wants is perhaps demonstrating flexibility, attention to possibility, diversity of desire. Of course, if this state of indecision extends interminably, it is not sustainable or responsible. This then begs the question: to whom are we responsible as we make these decisions?

Individualism, True Selfhood, and Existentialism: Culturally Bound

As Iyengar (2010) demonstrated in earlier research, the relative value assigned to choice is far greater in the United States and other western nations than in more collectivist cultures. In the latter cultures, individuals are more likely to assign value to negative freedom than to positive freedom, whereas the reverse is true in the United States (Iyengar, 2010). Similarly, the emphasis is more skewed toward being an individual in Western Cultures, which place more attention on how one distinguishes oneself as an individual than do more collectivist cultures, that instead focus on the distinguishing of an entire group. All of this is important when considering the cultural limitations of both theories explored in this project.

The Un-forming of Identity Formation

Yalom (1980) notes that in his work with terminal cancer patients, he's taken to heart research indicating that in the United States we tend to over-identify with many roles, especially those from which we derive the most meaning or stature. Interestingly, according to Yalom, individuals even in European countries are less likely to fuse identity and occupation (i.e., "I am a teacher" versus "I work as a teacher") than are their counterparts in the United States. Even the prevalence of, "So, what do you do?" as an opening question marks the emphasis we assign to vocation in the United State—an emphasis that is not unique in the world, to be sure, but one that may strike an individual who identifies herself primarily by the groups to which she belongs, or the land from which she comes.

There are advantages and disadvantages to being more or less identified with any given role, of course, but Yalom hypothesizes that people who can let go of their assumed identities can better engage with the world on a here-and-now level, which is important as people adjust to reduced capacities and through that, the renunciation of certain roles.

In a move that seems downright un-Ericksonian, Yalom (1980) describes essentially undoing the identity formation task that we are so eager to embark upon as young people. He encourages people to write down their major identities (e.g., teacher, mother, partner, marathon runner, volunteer gardener, etc.) on index cards and then set them aside, one by one, rendering them symbolically separated from their identities and yet inexorably present.

In the Consulting Room: Considerations for the Clinician

Prefrontal cortexes, false selves, existential guilt and collectivist cultural mores: What do we do with all of this information? What follows are approximately seven (the optimal number,

you'll remember, plus or minus a few) considerations to keep in mind when engaging with college students mired in indecision.

The Prefrontal Cortex is Still Developing Into an Individual's Mid-Twenties.

What are the implications of this fact? Research shows that the prefrontal cortex is the heavy lifter when it comes to considering the long-term consequences of our actions, and it stands to reason that this in some ways limits traditional undergraduate students, rendering their foresight less prescient than the average middle-aged person. But it is also true that we're demonstrably off-key when it comes to predicting the future tune we'll be singing. Perhaps it would be helpful to separate these processes a bit. While the average older adult might be more skilled than the average 18-year-old at correctly anticipating the more nuanced consequences of a choice, there's no evidence to suggest that she is better at predicting how she'll *feel* about said choice in the future. It would be fair to assert that older people are more aware of how they might feel based on past experiences, but this is of little help when making novel choices.

Especially for First-Year Students, the Experience of No Road Map Could Be New

Students may be experiencing for the first time an exhilarating sense of possibility coupled with a new, and far less exhilarating awareness of limits. Adults spend a lot of time telling children that they can be anything they want but seem less eager to clarify that they can't be everything they want—perhaps because it is obvious, or perhaps because most adults are in denial about this as well. Especially for a student who has not had to make many decisions about the future yet, the process of rescinding options can be new and unexpectedly painful. This is not to suggest that students haven't already shown themselves capable of making decisions about important matters, such as where to college in the first place.

Existential Guilt Can Plague Therapists, Too

Though few clinicians need reminders to be aware of their counter-transference, it's important to acknowledge that paths not taken can trouble the therapist and make her more likely to unwittingly exert some sort of unconscious influence on the indecisive student. Just as parents need to be deliberate about not living through their children, so to do therapists need to scrutinize their interventions when a client's choice reminds them too much of their own roads not taken. It is important for therapists to cultivate awareness of their own existential guilt, as unexamined existential guilt may result in an unconscious encouragement of one option at the expense of another. When clinicians are aware of, or have made peace with, their existential guilt, they can better evaluate their interventions and assess for the role of their own unrequited potential selves.

Normalize the Paradoxes

We seem hard-wired to prefer choice, even to need it, yet too much of it overwhelms us. It might be helpful to make such an observation to a student, see whether the student identifies, and go from there. Students may be interested to know, from a psychoeducation perspective, that what they're experiencing is normative. It may be helpful for students to be introduced to the idea of loss aversion, as doing so may help distance an individual from the particulars of a choice and help her instead acknowledge that the loss is nearly always painful, on some level. From an existentialist perspective, loss is painful because it reminds us of our finitude, but that idea is biologically supported in the literature regarding both loss aversion (Shin & Ariely, 2004) and the amygdala's response to loss.

Similarly, students may be comforted by the research of social psychologists regarding our (in)ability to accurately predict our future feeling states. Knowing that we are more vulnerable to feelings of regret about a decision at any point that our lives are difficult may better equip individuals to handle those feelings when they inevitably arise.

Assess for Location on the Maximizing—Satisficing Continuum

There isn't a proper continuum yet, but there could be (see suggestions for further research, below). Nevertheless, holding this model in mind may help the clinician understand how the student is approaching a given choice. Is there a "perfect fit" out there? Is a student approaching the choice with the idea that there are many workable fits? How does the student approach other choices? If Schwartz's (2002) research is correct, then it makes sense to help an individual put some choices on autopilot so as to free up more psychic energy for the decisions that really matter.

Make Meaning-Making Conscious

One way to help a student who is indecisive may be to try to elucidate the deeper meaning behind a given decision. As discussed earlier, existential psychotherapy posits many of its interventions on the idea that we need to make meaning of our lives in order to find fulfillment and, if possible, render some sense of even suffering. Helping a student identify the value(s) that draw her toward a certain decision may serve to illuminate other avenues of honoring that value even while making a different choice. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) utilizes several types of exercises, including values card-sorts, to help clients identify and prioritize values, and encourages the idea of moving in a valued direction even in the face of unwanted feeling; i.e., completing a project that makes you anxious because you value completing your education.

Work with Parts

It seems that some of the consternation experienced by those who are having trouble deciding derives from an often unacknowledged assumption that one ought to feel certain about something. Yet we are often entirely of one mind about anything. Helping individuals identify

and accept different, and at times conflicted, parts of the self may serve to normalize the experience of being “of two minds” about a choice while at the same time serving to increase awareness of the self as multi-faceted, nuanced, occasionally conflicted, and entirely okay.

Render Responsibility Present

Yalom (1980) critiques many “responsibility awareness” as ill conceived at best, noting that “I can’t” bells and similar gimmicks are often intrusive and fail to elicit the intended result of assumption of responsibility for one’s choices. But responsibility awareness can be heightened in more nuanced and palatable ways. It can be easy, especially for clinicians who aim to be strengths-based and sensitive to client-directed therapy, to fall into more supportive roles. But there are ways for the clinician to do this, including drawing connections between stated goals and values and lack of movement toward them.

The Road Not Taken (Yet): Suggestions for Future Research

If a reader of the literature on indecision among college students could make just one observation regarding the extant research, one could describe it as pathologizing. Many of the suggestions for intervention mentioned above are rooted in an understanding of indecision that is, if not normalizing, at least less pathologizing. What follow are but a few suggestions for further research regarding indecision.

Empirical

More research is needed about the myriad ways students and clinicians view indecision. It is possible that clinicians aware of themselves working from a Winnicottian or Existentialist approach may already be utilizing many of the techniques identified above, in addition to other innovative interventions. Qualitative studies utilizing a sample group of clinicians in college counseling centers might identify ways that clinicians are aware of the role of existential guilt as

they counsel others. It may be interesting to ask clinicians about their own experiences with difficult choices and also how they work with indecisive clients, coding answers with an eye toward a possible correlation between

A psychometric tool could be developed to assess for location along a continuum of maximizer to satisficer, and respondents could be queried regarding their opinions of indecision as related to their location along the aforementioned continuum.

Theoretical

It would be fascinating to consider indecision from an array of psychodynamic theoretical frames, and this project is just a beginning. How might indecision be conceptualized within drive and ego psychologies? Self psychology? A Kleinian approach? What follows is a sampling of just a few of this researcher's many questions, some of which might warrant a closer look.

Drive psychology. Might the desire to choose be constructed as an innate need, as Iyengar and others suggest in their research, or even an unconscious drive? And if so, might this drive – the unconscious desire to have choice – shape our very choosing, rendering us more loathe to surrender our options (as in Ariely and Shin's (2004) open doors experiment)? Could choosing be conceptualized as a part of a sexual drive, inasmuch as it reflects vitality, potentiality, and possibility – a life force?

Ego psychology. What defenses might we employ to either further the illusion of choice or in some way reduce our options, so that we are required to choose less? Could indecision itself be conceptualized as a defense against becoming, which necessarily entails that we grow in some way that is unknown and hence possibly threatening on an unconscious level?

Object relations psychology. How do the internalized representations of others shape our own decision-making processes? Could contradictory or competing representations of say,

two different caregivers contribute to a schizoid state in which an individual feels she must rescind one part of herself to explore another?

Self psychology. How might indecision be conceptualized using the model of the tripartite self? How does mirroring affect the process of deciding? Could one frame indecision as vacillating between the poles of twinship or idealization? Does the idealized parent imago in some way impinge upon authenticity?

Attachment theory. How do various attachment patterns affect decision-making processes? Does secure attachment correlate to an increased general ease in deciding? Do anxious-avoidant attachment patterns contribute somehow to increased ambivalence about future choices?

Humanistic psychology. Where does choice fit within a hierarchy of needs? Is indecision an impediment to self-actualization?

Trauma theory. How does the feeling of helplessness in the face of death or threat of death, characteristic in a trauma, affect one's sense of agency and efficacy? Might a current indecision be sourced back to one's perception of the role of one's decision in a traumatic event?

Dialectical behavior therapy. Is indecision reflective of the absence of wise mind? What are the secondary emotions, such as judgment, that one feels toward one's indecision? Can one accept the current state of indecision, notice feelings of judgment, and work toward making a choice?

This is necessarily a non-exhaustive list, but it serves as a beginning. It would be fascinating to consider how practitioners from an array of theoretical orientations and therapy practices might approach the phenomenon, and perhaps utilize a clinical case study to compare and contrast varying approaches.

Benefits of this Study

This study serves as an umbrella under which to gather much of the contemporary research regarding the social psychology and neurobiology of decision-making processes. Its phenomenon chapter especially serves as something of a primer to the field, and the intent of earlier sections in this chapter is to render some of that research usable in a clinical setting. This project also provides a forum in which to closely compare and contrast two theoretical approaches to indecision and choice. In attempting to apply each of these two theories to vocational indecision, this study aims to advance the discourse.

It is validating for any practitioner to see key tenets of a theoretical field supported in the research, and this study perhaps offers such validation by highlighting the emerging research, such as that surrounding loss aversion, that has long been intuited by practitioners and understood through a distinct theoretical lens (i.e., the condition of finitude).

Limitations of this Study

Among this project's many limitations is its scope of inquiry, which is at times a hindrance. Entire volumes have been written about particular aspects of the theories treated above, whereas in this project treatment of those same concepts is peripheral.

At the same time, the study is also limited in the amount of theoretical frames it can reasonably explore. As noted above, there is much room for further research into various theoretical frames of indecision. In a sense, it is only the beginning.

The theoretical nature of this project is also, in and of itself, a limitation. Many of the suggestions offered earlier in this chapter require empirical verification of their efficacy as interventions. Similarly, the implications of these interventions in working with marginalized populations is intimated but not fully explored, either theoretically or empirically. And as noted

in the introduction, my own complicated stance toward indecision both informs and limits this work.

Conclusion: A Biopsychosocial Frame

Social work's unique person-in-environment approach affords the practitioner a holistic and informed vantage point from which to conceptualize indecision. Much of the emerging research in social psychology and neurobiology can inform the clinician's work with indecisive clients, helping to shape interventions that are rooted in a fundamental respect for the client's past and potential selves. Although Winnicottian and existential conceptualizations of indecision differ markedly, each can be useful to the therapist attempting to understand the particular way an indecisive client approaches choice. While more research into the theoretical underpinnings of choice is certainly needed, this project offers a starting place from which the clinician can choose how to both appreciate and approach the indecisive client.

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