

The Psychology of Chance Encounters and Life Paths

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ABSTRACT: *Psychological theories have neglected the fundamental issue of what determines people's life paths. The central thesis of this article is that chance encounters play a prominent role in shaping the course of human lives. In a chance encounter the separate chains of events have their own causal determinants, but their intersection occurs fortuitously rather than through deliberate plan. Some fortuitous encounters touch only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others branch people into new trajectories of life. A science of psychology cannot shed much light on the occurrence of fortuitous encounters, but it can provide the basis for predicting the impact they will have on human lives. An analysis is presented of personal factors and milieu properties that govern the branching power of chance encounters.*

Psychological theories of human development focus heavily on the growth of cognitive and behavioral competencies, especially during the early formative years. But our theories have not devoted much attention to the fundamental issue of what determines people's life paths. Knowledge of cognitive and behavioral skills does not, in itself, tell us much about what course personal lives will take. Several factors might account for neglect of this crucial aspect of human development.

Most developmental models of human behavior presuppose a developmental determinism in which childhood experiences set the course of later development. According to psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1953), personality patterns are firmly set in the first few years of life. Thereafter, the child's inner life becomes the major source of action and the definer of social reality. Socialization theories, while not foreclosing discordant changes over time, nevertheless tend to view life patterns as largely the product of childhood socialization (Goslin, 1969). Stage theorists portray development in terms of an invariant succession of distinct stages (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). People may differ in the rates and terminal levels of their development, but the path itself is foreordained.

The appearance of continuities in the lives of many people adds credence to the primacy of early

experience. The scholastically gifted are more likely than are school truants to enter the ranks of eminent scientists. Metamorphoses of social isolates into vivacious personalities or aggressors into passive personalities are not all that common. There are two psychological processes by which the products of early development can foster continuities in behavioral patterns. One process operates through selection of environments, the second through production of environments. After people acquire certain preferences and standards of behavior, they tend to select activities and associates who share similar value systems, thereby mutually reinforcing preexisting bent (Bandura & Walters, 1959; Bullock & Merrill, 1980; Elkin & Westley, 1955; Mischel, 1968). Through their actions people create as well as select environments. By constructing their own circumstances they achieve some regularity in behavior (Bandura, 1977; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974).

Continuity has distinct meaning when applied to particular response patterns, but it takes on considerable indefiniteness where life paths are concerned. One can always find linkages between early and later endeavors as, for example, between pursuit of scholarship in childhood and professional careers in adulthood. However, at this level of generality, continuity can be achieved through a variety of life paths. Personal lives, whether marked by continuities or discontinuities, have their particular characters. A comprehensive developmental theory must therefore specify factors that set and alter particular life courses if it is to provide an adequate explanation of human behavior.

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Theorists who approach human development from a life-span perspective call attention to the need for an expanded orientation to the study of lives (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980; Brim & Kagan, 1980). In this view, the environment is treated not as a situational entity, but as a varied succession of life events that vary in their properties to affect the direction lives take (Brim & Ryff, 1980; Hultsch & Plemons, 1979). Some of these include biological events, many include customary social events, others involve unpredictable occurrences in the physical world, and still others involve irregular life events such as career changes, divorce, migration, accidents, and illness. The impact of sociocultural change on life patterns—economic depressions, wars and cultural upheavals, technological revolutions, and other social events that make life markedly different—also receives attention within the life-span framework (Elder, 1981).

Whatever the social conditions might be, there is still the task of explaining the varied directions that personal lives take at any given time and place. This requires a personal, as well as a social, analysis of life paths. A central thesis to be developed and documented in this article is that chance encounters play a prominent role in shaping the course of human lives.

Chance Encounters as Determinants of Life Paths

For purposes of the present discussion a chance encounter is defined as an unintended meeting of persons unfamiliar to each other. Consider, by way of example, the following fortuitous encounter that profoundly altered a person's life. Paul Watkins was a talented teenager headed on a promising course of personal development—He enjoyed a close family life, was well liked by his peers, excelled in academic activities, and served as student-body president of his high school, hardly the omens of a disordered destiny (Watkins & Soledad, 1979). One day he decided to visit a friend who lived in a cabin in Topanga Canyon in Los Angeles. Unbeknown to Watkins, the friend had since moved elsewhere and the Manson "family" now lived there. This fortuitous visit led to a deep entanglement in the Manson gang in the period before they embarked on their "helter skelter" killings. To an impressionable youth the free flow of communal love, group sex, drugs, spellbinding revelations of divine matters, and isolation from the outside world provided a heady counterforce that launched

him on a divergent life path requiring years to turn his life around.

In the preceding case the initial meeting was entirely due to happenstance. Human encounters involve degrees of fortuitiveness. People often intentionally seek certain types of experiences, but the persons who thereby enter their lives are determined by a large element of chance. It is not uncommon for college students to decide to sample a given subject matter only to leave enrollment in a particular course to the vagaries of time allocation and course scheduling. Through this semifortuitous process some meet inspiring teachers who have a decisive influence on their choice of careers.

Such a twist of events launched one of my colleagues into an academic career in psychology. Having to fulfill an area distribution requirement, he was faced with a choice between two philosophy courses or an additional course in psychology, which he had grown to dislike through contact with instructors unburdened by infectious enthusiasm. Choosing what he considered to be the lesser of two woes, he opted for a psychology course that enjoyed some popularity. However, because of heavy overenrollment, an additional section had to be created, a gifted scholar was persuaded to teach it on short notice, and the disconsolate undergraduate had the good fortune to be cast into it. What he discovered was very much to his liking. This compounded fortuity of distribution requirements, overenrollment, faculty recruitment, and chance section assignment set a career path. Had any one of these factors been absent, his occupational pursuit would doubtless have taken an entirely different course.

One can similarly document the influential role that initial chance encounters often play in the formation of partnerships of marriage. Let me cite but one example with which I have some personal acquaintance. Seeking relief from an uninspiring reading assignment, a graduate student departs for the golf links with his friend. They happen to find themselves playing behind a twosome of attractive women golfers. Before long the two twosomes become one foursome and, in the course of events, one of the partners eventually becomes the wife of the graduate golfer. Were it not for this fortuitous constellation of events, it is exceedingly unlikely that their paths would ever have crossed. Different partnerships create different life courses. The graduate student in this particular case happens to be myself.

A further variant of fortuity includes scenarios in which chance events give rise to arranged en-

counters that alter life paths. Nancy Davis met her future husband, Ronald Reagan, through such a turn of events (Reagan & Libby, 1980). While pursuing her acting career, she began to receive in the mail announcements of communist meetings intended for another person bearing the same name, who appeared on a Hollywood list of communist sympathizers. Fearing that her career might be jeopardized by mistaken identity, she voiced concern to her film director, who arranged a meeting with Ronald Reagan, then president of the Screen Actors Guild. Before long they were wed. In this instance, a coincidental likeness of names and a postal mix-up altered the course of lives.¹

The discussion thus far has focused on direct chance encounters that profoundly affect life paths. Sometimes the path-setting event involves a fortuitous symbolic encounter mediated through another's actions. In his Nobel lecture, Herbert Brown (1980) recounts how he happened to decide to pursue doctoral research in the rare field of boron hydrides. As a baccalaureate gift, his girlfriend presented him with a copy of the book, *The Hydrides of Boron and Silicon*, which launched his interest in the subject. This was during the Depression when money was scarce. She happened to select this particular chemistry book undesignedly because it was the least expensive one (\$2.06) available in the university bookstore. Had his girlfriend been a bit more affluent, Brown's research career would in all likelihood have taken a different route.

As the preceding examples illustrate, some of the most important determinants of life paths often arise through the most trivial of circumstances. Although the separate chains of events in a chance encounter have their own causal determinants, their intersection occurs fortuitously rather than through deliberate plan (Nagel, 1961).

Predicting the Impact of Chance Encounters

Some chance encounters touch people only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others branch people into new trajectories of life. Psychology cannot foretell the occurrence of fortuitous encounters, however sophisticated its knowledge of human behavior becomes. This factor introduces a measure of unpredictability about the direction of the flow of human lives. Patterns of change can therefore vary widely in different individuals. They may display basic continuities throughout their life spans, continuities in some aspects of life but discontinuities in others, or a

vast discontinuity at any point along the way affecting virtually all domains of functioning. A science of psychology does not have much to say about the occurrence of fortuitous intersects except that personal bents and social structures and affiliations make some types of encounters more probable than others. However, psychological knowledge can provide the basis for predicting the nature, scope, and strength of the impact they will have on human lives.

Recent years have witnessed growing public apprehension that advancement of psychological knowledge will provide increasingly effective techniques for predicting and controlling human behavior. This popular view is nurtured by literary futurists conjuring up scary images of societies populated with human marionettes whose every act is highly predictable and controllable. Enlarging the knowledge and methods of social influence does not necessarily raise the level of social control. This is because personal and social mechanisms of reciprocal influence place constraints on how much people can control one another. This issue has been addressed fully elsewhere (Bandura, 1974, 1977) and need not be reviewed here. However, the matter of predictability is especially germane to the concerns of this article. The unforeseeability and branching power of fortuitous influences make the specific course of lives neither easily predictable nor easily socially engineerable. Fortuity of influence does not mean that behavior is undetermined. Unforeseeability of determinants and determination of actions by whatever events happen to occur are separate matters. Fortuitous influences may be unforeseen, but having occurred, they enter as evident factors in causal chains in the same way as prearranged ones do.

Analyses of the power of chance encounters to inaugurate enduring change generally emphasize personal susceptibilities to social influence. These are usually treated as personal vulnerabilities in influences judged to be negative and as personal competencies in influences that lead toward beneficial futures. Personal attributes certainly play

¹ At the 1982 meeting of the Western Psychological Association, I received a call from a social science editor who wished to share an experience he had in connection with this presidential address. Upon arriving for the talk, he took a seat which happened to be next to a former Stanford undergraduate who had recently completed her doctoral degree. This chance meeting eventually led to their marriage. With only a slight change in time of entry, seating constellations would have altered and this particular social intersect would probably not have occurred. A marital partnership was thus fortuitously formed at a talk devoted to fortuitous determinants of life paths!

a significant role in determining what changes, if any, fortuitous influences may produce. However, the attributes of social environments into which persons are fortuitously inducted also operate as highly influential determiners of the degree and course of personal change. Indeed, closed social systems wielding strong coercive and rewarding power can work profound irreversible changes even in the seemingly invulnerable. As the Watkins case cited earlier illustrates, even the best laid personal foundations can be undermined by powerful group influence.

Neither personal proclivities nor situational imperatives operate as independent shapers of the course of lives. Chance encounters affect life paths through the reciprocal influence of personal and social factors. In documenting these determinants and reciprocities, evidence of negative discontinuities is cited more often than fortuitously initiated triumphs over adversity. This is because tragedies are more highly publicized than personal triumphs. Moreover, it is the derailment and destruction of promising futures that is of particular social concern and hence commands priority. Although the focus of analysis is on drastic personal change, it should be noted that chance encounters touch all lives throughout the life span.

Personal Determinants of the Impact of Chance Encounters

ENTRY SKILLS

If persons are to affiliate with those whom they have had the good or bad fortune to meet, they must possess at least some of the personal resources needed to gain sufficient acceptance to sustain continued involvement with them. Mismatches of attributes and interests cut short fortuitous encounters through disinterest or rejection. Personal attributes mediate the effects of fortuitous encounters on life paths in another important way. The skills and interests people cultivate determine the circles in which they move and hence the kinds of social encounters they are most likely to experience. The everyday activities of delinquent gangs and those of enrollees in Ivy League colleges will bring them into contact with quite different types of associates. Differential affiliations cultivate different interests and skills. Individuals contribute to their own destiny by developing potentialities that afford access to particular social milieus.

The branching power of fortuitous encounters is most graphically revealed when a chance inci-

dent permanently alters the course of people's lives by bringing them into an entirely new circle of associates. Markedly discontinuous inductions are unlikely to take hold without adequate preparedness of entry attributes. Pasteur's adage that chance favors the prepared mind is, of course, well illustrated in the shaping of research paths through accidental discovery.

Groups vary in the types and level of entry skills they demand for rewarding affiliation. Chance encounters more readily produce converts to undemanding life-styles than to those built through toil on complex competencies. Thus, for example, to gain acceptance by a pre-med group requires substantial knowledge of science and academic skills achievable only through arduous effort over a long period. Other groups, such as quasireligious cults and authoritarian collectives, initially require little beyond personal compliance (Richardson, 1978). The all-too-easy entry into semiclosed milieus arouses public fears over the hazards such groups pose to young people's futures. Groups relying on deceptive recruitment and heavy-handed constraints to bar defections are of greatest concern to the public.

EMOTIONAL TIES

Chance meetings are most likely to affect life courses when individuals come to like the people they meet or gain other satisfactions from them. Interpersonal attraction seals chance encounters into lasting bonds. Once established, binding relationships serve as a vehicle for personal changes that can have long-range effects.

The way in which an encounter can set in motion events that alter the entire course of a person's life through subsequent affectional involvement is vividly documented in the tragic case of Diana Oughton (Powers, 1971). She was a sensitive, gentle woman whose background and personal attributes contradicted the common correlates of political activism. She came from a privileged conservative family from which she received a sheltered conventional upbringing. After graduating from Bryn Mawr, her humanitarian concerns led her to service work as a Vista volunteer in a remote Indian village in Guatemala. This work among the destitute Indians greatly sensitized her to the human suffering caused by social inequities. On a visit to Guatemala City, she met a Fulbright scholar who had grown cynical about the prospects for peaceful social change. He belittled her tireless efforts as mere symptomatic treatment and argued repeat-

edly that only revolutionary force would bring needed sweeping reforms. This encounter set her on the path of militant action.

Upon her return to the United States she became increasingly involved in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which at the time was splintering into opposing ideological camps. She was drawn into the violent Weatherman faction, not by studied design, but through affectional attachment to a leader of this faction, whom she met as a fellow teacher at a makeshift community school. As is often the case in radical psychological change, affectional dependence is combined with an environmental closedness within which intense conversion efforts are applied. To discipline themselves and to extinguish revulsion over ruthless behavior, the Weathermen created small collectives in which they eradicated their "bourgeois morality" with a vengeance. The brutalizing process, carried out around the clock in barricaded houses, included devastating group criticism, intense political indoctrination, revolting acts such as eating tomcats and vandalizing gravestones, mandatory sexual relations between members of the collective, and martial training (Powers, 1971). These charged activities were often conducted under high deprivation of sleep and food. When destructive forays and street battles with the Chicago police failed to produce the heralded revolution, the Weathermen resorted to underground bombing attacks. Diana's brief career as a revolutionary ended with tragic suddenness in a townhouse bomb factory when an antipersonnel explosive intended to help destroy the society she had come to hate took her life instead.

VALUES AND PERSONAL STANDARDS

Human behavior is partly governed by value preferences and self-evaluative standards (Bandura, 1977). Through this internal source of guidance people give direction to their lives and derive satisfactions from what they do. Valuational mechanisms therefore partly govern the extent to which social encounters may shape the course of personal development. Unintended influences are more likely to leave their marks if the persons involved share similar standards and value systems than if they clash.

Some of the earlier studies of determinants of atypical life courses centered on children from impoverished backgrounds who went on to college careers (Ellis & Lane, 1963; Krauss, 1964). In these families the parents themselves could not provide

the necessary resources and preparatory skills. However, a key role in setting the course of the children's intellectual development during their early years was usually played by a parent or a family acquaintance who valued education highly. The values so instilled were further promoted by admired teachers and through selective association with college-oriented peers who served as the major acculturating agency.

Lives follow less predictable courses when personal standards are inadequately developed and there is much cultural confusion about what is valued. In the absence of internal guides and normative consensus fortuitous influences more easily hold sway. The cultural upheaval of recent years—when countercultures were springing up around mystical and religious cults, makeshift communes, drugs, and merchandised human potential movements—left many dislocated lives in its wake.

Personal vulnerability to recruitment into unusual life paths has aroused the greatest interest in relation to cultist influence (Bromley & Shupe, 1979; Singer, 1979). For the most part, the recruits for quasireligious cults and regimented communes are teenagers and young adults who feel lonely and despondent, who find their lives devoid of meaning, and who lack career skills around which to organize their lives. Cults provide instant friendship, an ideology that gives purpose and meaning to one's existence, and a communal regimen that imposes order on one's everyday activities. For youths leading unhappy, empty lives, cultist offerings can hold considerable appeal.

People are better able to resist entrapment in life courses through insidious means if there exist societal safeguards against deceptive recruitment and coercive social control. However, it is difficult to devise safeguards that do not threaten freedom of belief and association. Indeed, a number of writers have deplored use of the brainwashing metaphor to justify forcible actions that violate the civil liberties of unpopular but law-abiding devotees of strange creeds (Robbins & Anthony, 1980). As Szasz (1976) argues in his characteristic penetrating style, one can no more wash a brain than draw blood with a cutting remark. In these brainwashing accounts, which are colored by selective reports of defectors with understandable antipathy to cultist regimentation, powerful "mind control" techniques presumably transform unsuspecting recruits into devoted automatons. Although cultist influence certainly involves vigorous indoctrination, for people leading discontented lives affiliation with such groups is perhaps better

explained by the attractions they provide—a sense of community, meaning, and direction—than in terms of occult “mind control.”

Social Determinants of the Impact of Chance Encounters

MILIEU REWARDS

The course that human behavior follows is substantially influenced by the effects it produces. Hence, the rewards a group provides play a crucial role in determining whether chance encounters will link individuals enduringly to groups that favor certain life paths over others. In studies in which social rewards are systematically varied, individuals affiliate with groups when social rewards are high but withdraw from them when rewards are low (Baer & Wolf, 1970).

Groups can supply a variety of benefits. Because individuals differ in what they value and desire, they may become strongly attracted to a particular social milieu for quite varied reasons. To those lacking close personal ties, social acceptance and affection become a strong source of attraction. In their recruitment practices, some cults exploit such voids by “love bombing,” in which they shower initiates with unconditional love and friendship (Lofland, 1978). To the insecure and confused, the meaning and direction that dedicated groups give to one’s life may serve as a major basis of attraction. Others may be drawn to a group by the worthy purposes it is designed to serve. In the lives that went awry through fortuitous induction into pernicious collectives, initially these groups traded heavily on mesmerizing images of utopian societies (Powers, 1971; Watkins & Soledad, 1979; Winfrey, 1979).

Whatever the initial affiliative inducements might be, once individuals become attached to a primary group, they are socialized into its ideology and life-style through a vast network of proximal rewards and sanctions that members provide each other in their daily transactions.

SYMBOLIC ENVIRONMENT AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Constraints of time, resources, and physical separation impose severe limits on the amount of information that can be gained through direct personal experience. To a large extent people therefore must act on their images of reality. The rapid growth of communication technology has vastly

increased the power of the symbolic environment on human thought and action (Gerbner, 1972). Print, audio, and audiovideo media enable groups to transcend the confines of time and place in promoting their systems of beliefs and images of social reality. Even unacquainted members who are widely dispersed are easily linked together through the shared symbolic environment.

Fortuitous induction into a group not only brings one into contact with new incentive systems, it furnishes a distinct symbolic environment as well. Symbolic systems help build affinity and solidarity and shape ideological perspectives on life. A libertine who, through an odd turn of events, becomes a convert to a born-again religiosity will come to experience a markedly different social and symbolic life. Through a similar inaugural process, individuals who choose paths that lead to medical schools, athletic fields, or to the theatrical world become deeply immersed in distinctive symbolic environments.

Groups seeking mass followings devise their own communication modes to promote their beliefs and systems of values. In the past the print media were used heavily for this purpose. Because of its greater potential for collective influence, the video system feeding off telecommunication satellites has become the dominant vehicle for disseminating symbolic environments. By creating their own video networks, for example, electronic evangelists have now become a prominent part of the daily lives of their many followers. Further developments in fiberoptic laser transmission, with its enormous information-carrying capacity, will provide households with diverse symbolic environments to serve almost any preference. Diversity and ready choice of symbolic environments allow greater leeway for self-directedness to affect the course of personal development.

In a pluralistic society, groups embracing diverse ideologies must vie for attention and influence. As a result, the persuasiveness of any one group can be attenuated or nullified by the sway of others. In communal life where members are cut off from outside influences, the symbolic system becomes a powerful force that can shape even the most bizarre patterns of collective thought and action. In the beginning, Jim Jones used messages of love and egalitarian utopias to gain and hold followers in the People’s Temple. As his image as faith healer and prophet began to tarnish and members began to defect, the humanitarian themes turned into messages of fear and hate designed to implant suspicion and dread of the outside world. In the iso-

lated jungle settlement of Jonestown, where Jones exercised total control, "for hours on end, and sometimes all night, Jones used the camp loud-speakers to amplify his nightmare vision" of outside mercenaries invading their compound and torturing, killing, or imprisoning them in concentration camps (Winfrey, 1979). He preached that, since their destruction was inevitable, they should follow the only dignified course available—revolutionary mass suicide through which they would be reunited by reincarnation to form the utopian society that had eluded them.

MILIEU REACH AND CLOSEDNESS

The social contexts within which interpersonal influences operate vary in how extensively they touch personal lives and in their degree of closedness. The least confining milieus involve loose alliances centered on a few activities that constrain neither personal ties nor beliefs and latitude of action. At the opposite end of the continuum are the totalistic milieus structured around an insulated communal life that prescribes beliefs and behavior patterns for virtually all aspects of living. If needed, heavy-handed methods are used to counteract dissent and defection. In the moderately constraining milieus personal lives are extensively shaped by one's primary affiliations, but active participation in mainstream societal activities creates opportunities for competing influences to exert their effects.

Chance encounters have the greatest potential for branching persons abruptly into new trajectories of life when they induct them into a relatively closed milieu. A totalistic environment supplies a pervading new reality—new kinships, strongly held group beliefs and values, all-encompassing codes of conduct, few vestiges of individuality, and substantial rewarding and coercive power to alter the entire course of personal lives (Bromley & Shupe, 1979). The power of communal control is further enhanced by curtailing personal ties and exposure to influences outside the group. Immersion in heavily prescribed activities that leave little time to think or to explore other milieus has similar encapsulating effects.

Public attitudes toward milieu control vary depending on the purposes it serves. People fear the existence of engulfing milieus that gain converts to unconventional or cultist life-styles, but they cherish those that steer lives in socially valued directions. To cite but one example, highly regimented prep schools that set children on paths

leading to prestigious universities and illustrious careers are held in very high regard.

When insulated communal life is heavily dictated by a charismatic figure, the imbalances of power and lack of counteracting mechanisms generally produce a drift toward increasing coercive control. Exercise of power changes the user in ways that are conducive to punitiveness. As Kipnis (1976) has shown, wielding power over others strengthens manipulative attitudes and fosters estrangement from, and devaluation of, those subject to control. Devaluation in turn heightens punitiveness in unilateral power relationships (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). Dissent is suppressed through punitive control, and defection is deterred by threats and forcible restraint. The perversion of communal power is most tragically illustrated in the Jonestown massacre.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CLOSEDNESS

People seek and hold firmly to beliefs because they serve valuable functions. Indeed, life would be most taxing and chaotic if people had no conceptions of themselves and the world around them. Their experiences would lack coherence; they would cede the substantial benefits of foresightedness, which requires a system for predicting conditional happenings in daily affairs; they would lack guides for action with situational influences pulling in all directions; and finally, they would be without basic goals for organizing their efforts over long time spans. Belief systems thus help to provide structure, direction, and purpose to life. Because personal identity and security become heavily invested in belief systems, they are not readily discardable once acquired.

Group affiliation instills and strengthens beliefs in accordance with its ideological commitments. Once initiates get caught up in the belief system, it can exert selective influence on their course of development for better or for worse, depending on the nature and imperativeness of the creed. Belief systems vary in their immutability, ranging from authoritarian prescriptions to be accepted unquestioningly to provisional conceptions that invite change through experience and critical analyses (Rokeach, 1960). Induction into a group that invests its own system of beliefs with infallibility and treats those of others as mistaken, if not evil, erects a psychological closedness to outside influence. In some groups the psychological hold is further strengthened by devaluing independent thought and implanting distrust of family members and other outsiders (Bromley & Shupe, 1979).

While beliefs provide direction and meaning to experience, they distort it as well. Adherents see what they want to see, reinterpret incongruities to their liking, and even rewrite their memory of events they have experienced (Greenwald, 1980; Snyder, 1980). Moreover, by influencing actions anticipatorily, beliefs channel social interaction in ways that create their own validating realities (Snyder, 1981). Thus, through selective perception and processing of information and anticipatory construction of social realities, belief systems take on self-perpetuating properties. Control through indoctrination is much more profound than control through milieu constraints. Once a creed is fully adopted, behavioral adherence in diverse settings no longer requires the presence and sanctions of advocates.

Fostering Valued Futures

Knowing what factors mediate the impact of chance encounters on life paths provides guides for how to foster and safeguard valued futures. At the personal level, one set of factors concerns mastery of the means for shaping one's own destiny. Human influence operates in reciprocal rather than unidirectional ways (Bandura, 1978; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Pervin & Lewis, 1978). The degree of reciprocity in social transactions partly depends on the personal resources people have to draw on and on the extent to which they exercise the influence that is theirs to command. The more they bring their influence to bear on themselves and others, the greater the likelihood that they will realize valued futures.

A strong sense of personal agency requires development of competencies, self-percepts of efficacy, and self-regulatory capabilities for exercising self-directedness (Bandura, 1982a, 1982b). These types of personal resources expand freedom of action and enable people to serve as causal contributors to their own life course by selecting, influencing, and constructing their own circumstances. Mastering the tools of personal agency does not necessarily assure desired futures. But with such skills people are better able to provide supports and direction for their actions, to capitalize on planned or fortuitous opportunities, to resist social traps that lead down detrimental paths, and to disengage themselves from such predicaments should they become enmeshed in them.

To exercise some measure of control over one's developmental course requires, in addition to ef-

fective tools of personal agency, a great deal of social support. Emotional resources are especially important during formative years when preferences and personal standards are in flux and there are many conflicting sources of influence with which to contend. Social ties contribute in several ways toward achieving a secure sense of self-direction. The internal standards through which people influence their own motivation and actions are acquired through modeling and evaluative reactions by significant others (Bandura, 1977; Kanfer, 1977). Self-directed influences do not act as autonomous regulators of behavior. To surmount the obstacles and stresses encountered in the life paths people take, they also need social supports to give incentive, meaning, and worth to what they do. When social ties are weak or lacking, vulnerability is increased to fortuitous influences that offer friendship in exchange for conformity to strictly prescribed life-styles and ideologies.

Humans have an unparalleled capability to become many things. The life paths that realistically become open to them are also partly determined by the nature of the cultural agencies to which their development is entrusted. Social systems that cultivate generative competencies, provide aidful resources, and allow ample room for self-directedness increase the chances that people will realize what they wish to become.

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