

A Model for Systematic Thinking and Decision Making

Alireza Moula
Department of Health and Society
Linköpings universitet, Sweden
E-mail: alimo@ivv.liu.se

Abstract

In order to improve the situation of Iranian families in Sweden, I initiated a two-year program aimed at educating and supporting these people. A model for problem-solving and decision making was developed and used both in the educative radio programs and especially in the help-line conversations. After showing its effectiveness, the model has been taught to university students and to social workers in Sweden and Iran since 2000.

Keywords: Model, systematic thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, educating.

Introduction and goal of the paper

I conducted an intervention research involving Iranian families, one of the largest immigrant groups in Sweden. The objective was to construct a family pedagogy based on the opinions/narratives of members of these families and subsequently put this teaching into practice. I initiated a two-year program aimed at educating and supporting these people. From 1998 to 2000, as many as 13,000 Iranians listened to a total of 83 live radio broadcasts and 525 telephone calls lasting a total of 22,507 minutes were made by Iranians for private family counseling. A model for decision making was developed and used both in the educative radio programs and especially in the help-line conversations. After showing its effectiveness, the decision making/problem-solving model has been taught to university students and to social workers in Sweden and Iran since 2000. The goal of this paper is to introduce this model and show how it was developed during practice.

A Model for Systematic Thinking and Decision-Making

<p>1. Defining the general and the concrete situations and the problem. According to the humanist or the empowerment perspective each individual is the expert of her/his own situation. The practitioner who comes into contact with a help-seeking individual is the expert of using one or more models, concepts or ideas. Both experts through dialogue define the general and the concrete situations. The discussion starts with the general situation and the conversation goes on toward constructing a clearer picture of the situation. Often, help-seeking individuals have an idea of what their problems are. Through the dialogue the definition of a problem or problems may also emerge.</p>
<p>2. Defining the desirable situation. Through dialogue the two experts construct a map of the help-seeking individual's desired situation and how he/she can ameliorate his/her situation.</p>
<p>3. Possible alternatives. Through dialogue the two experts imagine possible alternatives. At this stage they do not think about what is possible or not, what is good or bad. All imaginable alternatives should be considered. They then pay attention to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. The consequences of the imagined alternativesB. The resources available for realizing each alternativeC. The barriers preventing the realization of each alternative
<p>4. Choosing the best possible alternative and planning for action. Many times help-seeking individuals put pressure on the practitioners to say which alternative is the best. This means that the help-seeking individual is not ready to take control over her/his life and needs more time. In such situations practitioners should continue the dialogue and avoid choosing alternatives for people. When the help-seeking individual chooses an alternative the dialogue continues to plan, in some detail, for action.</p>
<p>5. Evaluation: Looking back and consider steps 1 to 4. After a while the practitioner and the help-seeking individual review the situation and considering the consequences of the chosen alternative they can have a better picture of the situation. Usually there is the possibility of changing the course of action and choosing a new alternative.</p>

Describing the Steps of the Model

Step 1 Thomas and Thomas (1928) wrote that if men define their situations as real they are real in their consequences. This known theorem connects people's understanding of the situations to actions and to their consequences and justifies the three first steps of the model. Practitioner and the help-seeking individual, through dialogue, construct a picture of the general and concrete situations. The help-seeking individual is regarded as the expert of his or her own life. The practitioner can with patience and curiosity proceed from what and Andersson and Goolishian (1988) and Anderson (1997) called "not knowing position" and helps the individual to define situation. We can compare the dialogue-process with a funnel and how a discussion becomes more and more specific. The beginning moment of the dialogue is like the top of the funnel, it is wide and open and allow considering many relationships and experiences. Somewhere in the middle we have a definition of the concrete situation, a picture about a few relationships and experiences. Somewhere near the bottom of the funnel we may have definition of a problem.

Step 2 Dialogue continues and the individual tries to imagine the desirable situation. The desirable situation is connected to present situation and the problem as defined in step 1. It is possible that the dialogue (in step 1) cannot lead to definition of the problem, but when the individual talks about the desirable situation and what she/he wants, then, it becomes clearer what she/he *does not* want. The practitioner should not regard steps very strictly and be flexible enough to let the dialogue go up and down the steps when necessary. It is also possible that the help-seeking individual thinks of several desirable situations. Then, the next step would help us to find out which desirable situation is more possible from a practical point of view.

Step 3 Watzlawick has said the best help that we can give someone is to find a new alternative for her/him (in Engquist, 1996). At first all possible alternatives should be founded without any attempt to rank them. Later, we should try to consider barriers and resources in front of each alternative. And finally *the consequences of each alternative should be looked at very carefully*. Only at this stage the help-seeking individual can rank the alternatives. Sometimes we have 3 or 4 alternatives and for each alternative we have to look at barriers, resources and consequences. This is the step of the model that demands much thinking and patience. According to my experience (in almost 1000 cases I have used this model) many people use this step of the model in their daily life. The main difference, however, between how a practitioner applies it and how people use it is the systematic approach of the practitioner in looking carefully at each alternative and its barriers, resources and consequences. *And it is this systematic approach that makes the great difference.*

Step 4 Many times it is not easy for help-seeking individuals to choose an alternative. They may put pressure on the practitioner to recommend one. The practitioner should encourage the help-seeking individual to study the alternatives and choose one. After the individual selected an alternative together with the practitioner they plan for action.

Step 5 The help-seeking individual and practitioner can look back and try to find out whether the individual is satisfied with the course of action.

Discussion: Advantages of this Model

1. The strength of the model is the marriage of two ideas: stress on the social constructionist idea about the role of language and communication in our lives (Gergen, 1994 and 1999) and the pragmatist philosophical idea which maintains that individuals attempt to

adapt themselves to their environment. The first idea pays attention to the creative role that dialogue plays in defining the situation and constructing alternatives for action. The second idea is about how individuals confront the challenges of their social environment. The first step of the model maps the hard realities of life, the sad moments and problems that individuals confront. The second step is an attempt to imagine the desirable situation, a “journey” to the domains of dreams and visions. The third step is an attempt to find a way between the present situation and the desirable one and creates a bridge between “what is” and “what could be”. The dialogical journey of practitioner and help-seeking individual between these three steps of the model is in line with the ideas of Cooley (1918) who concludes that human life in every aspect, is essentially tentative, that we work it out as we go along, and always must, “that it is a process rather than an attainment” (p. 408). In this third step of the model the key term is “best possible” alternative. This pragmatist model is built on the realistic assumption of moving from the real situation as it is mapped through the dialogue. At the same time it maintains that life can always be improved with reference to our dreams and wishes (Dewey and Mead about ameliorism, see Forte, 2001, 2002, 2003).

2. It is a humanistic model that raises the status of the help-seeking individual to be the expert of her/his own life. It is an effective kind of “help to self-help” and does not create dependency on experts. Many social work perspectives share this humanistic principle. Saleebey (1992) means that the greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your own riches to people but to reveal people’s own strength to them.

3. Dewey (1938) writes that we are told that it is impossible for human beings to direct their life intelligently. According to these claims the complexity of human relations and the fact that human beings are too emotional make it almost impossible to plan their lives by using their intelligence. Dewey rejects this idea; he believes that nothing prevents us from using our intelligence in our daily life activities. For Dewey intelligence has to do with remaking of the old through union with the new. This model is an intelligent decision-making/problem-solving model for two reasons: (a) connecting past and present to future and (b) comparing different alternatives. Such a connection and comparison increases the reflective capacity of help-seeking individuals and practitioners. Many times there is no quick solution. The model raises the consciousness of all about the complexity of life and situations.

Emotions’ roles in decision-making processes and development of the model

Ratey (2001) writes that emotion is “messy, complicated, primitive, and undefined because it’s all over the place, intertwined with cognition and physiology” (p. 223). He hopes that with the help of science our knowledge of how emotions function increases and we learn how we can more effectively manage our everyday emotions (p. 224). Ratey states that cases of some of the patients’ indicate that “lack of emotion leads to poor reasoning and ultimately to poor social judgement, even when factual intelligence is still intact” (p. 292). As Neurosociologist Franks (2003a) observes

“One can know cognitively that others regard killing as a serious crime, but without empathetic emotions, the private compulsion making such behavior automatically undesirable to the individual is lacking... Mastery of any culture’s right and wrong must contain an emotional component. Socialization is not just a process of stuffing heads with shared and disembodied symbols; it involves the body as well as our thoughts. Without physiologically grounded constraint of emotions, role taking would just as well produce a society whose ‘understanding’ of others would be used only for their manipulation” (p. 789)

Damasio (2003) notes that “emotional signal is not a substitute for proper reasoning. It has an auxiliary role, increasing the efficiency of the reasoning process and make it speedier” (p. 148). In an earlier book, Damasio (1999) talks about different “levels of life regulation”. He describes emotions as complex, stereotyped patterns of responses. Feelings too are described as sensory patterns signalling pain or pleasure. Emotions and feeling are under the line of consciousness and high reason above the line of consciousness. Reasoning is described as complex, flexible, and customized plans of response that are formulated in conscious images and can be executed as behavior. (p. 55). Franks (2003b) with reference to the studies of Damasio and others states that “most rational business choices are laced with emotions” and “the anticipation of regret, patience in making well thought out decisions, and expectations of long-term success involve emotions” (p. 625). Franks criticises ideas of “pure logic determinancy” and means that rational decision making and social control depend on their own supportive embodied emotions (p. 626). Emotions accompany previous experiences. However, coming situations may be like previous ones or may not. An individual once beaten by a dog may feel frightened as soon as he/she sees a dog. The reasoning may indicate that indeed the majority of dogs do not beat and the individual may overcome the fear. Or a driver who has survived a very ugly car crash may dare not to drive again. However, he/she can overcome this fear by reasoning and of course training to start to drive again. Therefore the reasoning strategy should consider the point that previous experiences accompanied with strong feelings may make one more wise and cautious but should not work as a barrier for further acts that are important for the future of individuals. It is quite possible that an individual is in a situation that he/she has no time or motivation to apply a reasoning strategy for making a decision. Then one trusts one’s feelings because they accompany similar previous experiences. What is proper is that, whenever emotions “come up”, the individual tries to reflect on them. The person can apply the reasoning strategies to what one’s emotions “demand” and carefully think about what one wants to do. In the final stage the individual may make decision on the basis of awareness of consequences of different alternatives or as Damasio (2003) writes “the emotion signal can operate entirely under the radar of consciousness” (p. 148). I use Damasio’s ideas to develop the model in a way that it explicitly covers the role of emotions in decision-making/problem solving activity. First I present Damasio’s model:

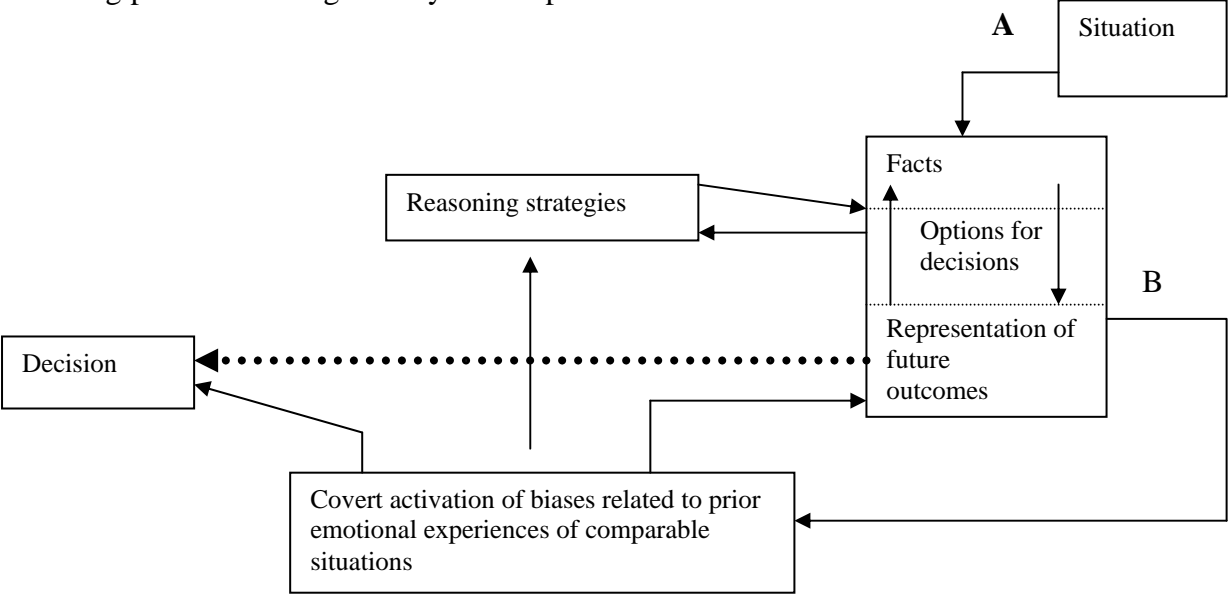


Figure 1. Normal decision making uses two complementary paths. Confronted with a situation that requires a response, path A promotes images related to the situations, the options for action, and the anticipation of future outcomes. Reasoning strategies can operate on that knowledge to produce a decision. Path B operates in parallel and promotes activation of prior emotional experiences in comparable situations. In turn, the recall of the emo-

tionally related material, be it covert or overt, influences the decision-making process by forcing attention on the representation of future outcomes or interfering with reasoning strategies. On occasion, path B can lead to a decision directly, as when a gut feeling impels an immediate response. The degree to which each path is used alone or in combination depends on a person's individual development, the nature of situation, and circumstances (Damasio, 2003, p. 149).

As we see in Damasio's model, the part he names path A is very similar to my model; What he calls "facts" is the same as definition of situation in my model, what he calls "options for decision" and "representation of future outcomes" is like step three in my model. On the basis of learning from Damasio's model I complete the model by illustrating and discussing the role of emotions in the process of how individuals make decisions. The complete model is shown in the figure below:

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<p>2. Defining the desirable situation. Through dialogue the two experts construct a map of the help-seeking individual's desired situation and how he/she can ameliorate his/her situation.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*****</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Consider and discuss how previous experiences and emotions attached to them influence future desires.</p>
<p>3. Possible alternatives. Through dialogue the two experts imagine possible alternatives. At this stage they do not think about what is possible or not, what is good or bad. All imaginable alternatives should be considered. They then pay attention to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. The consequences of imagined alternatives B. The resources available for realizing each alternative C. The barriers in front of each alternative <p style="text-align: center;">*****</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Consider and discuss how different alternatives are related to previous experiences and attached emotions.</p>
<p>4. Choosing the best possible alternative and Plan for action. Many times help-seeking individuals put pressure on the practitioners to say which alternative is the best. This means that the help-seeking individual is not ready to take control over her/his life and needs more time. In such situations practitioners should continue the dialogue and avoid choosing alternatives for people. When the individual chooses an alternative the dialogue continues to plan, in some detail, for action.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*****</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Consider and discuss if a previous experience and attached emotions function as a barrier or resource to choosing the desired alternative.</p>
<p>5. Looking back and consider steps 1 to 4. After a while the practitioner and the help-seeking individual review the situation and with the consequences of the chosen alternative can have a better picture of the situation. There is always the possibility of changing the course of action and choosing a new alternative.</p>

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Alireza Moula has worked many years as a social worker, is educated as a sociologist and wrote his PhD thesis in social medicine and public health. He works as an assistant professor in social work at Dalarna University in Sweden and conduct research in neurosociology at Linköpings universitet, Sweden. He is currently the cooperator of a research project between two universities, one in Iran and the other in Sweden. The project aims to establish a knowledge bank about humans as biopsychosocial beings and combines knowledge from social sciences with neuroscience. This knowledge base is used for developing a neuro-pragmatist empowerment model for daily life regulation. Four doctoral students, registered in Linköpings universitet in Sweden, will use the model in a participatory action research to help several groups of children, adolescents and women in Iran.