

Building Up

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Abstract

The theory of building up, developed using classic grounded theory (CGT), explains how the fit between an individual and a transformational opportunity impacts the extent to which an individual is empowered by that experience. Classic grounded theory identifies and explains human behavior patterns using an inductive, iterative process of data collection and analysis. Theoretical sampling guided data collection and constant comparative analysis of data, which yielded building up as the core pattern of behavior in negotiating challenges through transformative opportunities. Building up summarizes the potential outcomes of participation in an opportunity based on the fit of the interaction of variables in the individual and in the opportunity. An optimal fit is ideal; however, most relevant for practical applications are the variables that most frequently contribute to a good enough fit, which are deconstructing limiting beliefs, feeling supported within the experience, a sense of agency, and the timing of the opportunity.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, transformation, empowerment, beliefs, agency, skills

Introduction

This study began as an inquiry into the sociological and psychological mechanisms contributing to the healing, empowering, and sometimes dramatically transformative effects of adaptive surfing. The benefits of participation in adaptive sport programs have been established (Arslan, 2013; Lundberg et al., 2011; Lundberg et al., 2011; Yazicioglu et al., 2012). However, there is not a substantial amount of research about adaptive surfing that identifies the specific mechanisms of these positive outcomes that might inform program development in order to maximize limited resources. Classic grounded theory (CGT) methodology is well suited for a phenomenon that is not well understood, as the theory emerges from lived experiences in the substantive area and is practically applicable (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1998). As happens with CGT, the substantive area expanded as data was collected, analyzed, and abstracted, eventually encompassing transformative opportunities more generally, such as rehabilitation programs and higher education. What emerged was a mid-range theory describing the impact of the fit between the individual and the opportunity on the extent to which an individual is built up within an opportunity.

Building up is empowering individuals by deconstructing limiting beliefs and developing internal and external resources within a transformative opportunity. The fit between an individual and an opportunity influences the extent to which an individual is likely to be built up. An optimal fit is ideal, but a good enough fit may be sufficient for building up. The key components of a good enough fit are deconstructing limiting beliefs and building resourceful beliefs and skills, being cared for, agency, and the timing of the opportunity. As one study participant, a motivational coach by trade, stated, "There are key components, not all of them need to be in place." For some in the study it was "someone who believed in me," for another it was "being able to accomplish something much bigger...as far as my physical limits, I amazed myself." The key components of a good enough fit may be the most relevant for practical application of the theory.

Methodology

This classic grounded theory study was conducted in an attempt to explain the activity within a system using CGT's iterative, systematic, six-step process (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These steps, often simultaneous, are preparation, data collection, analysis, memoing, sorting, and writing (Simmons, n.d.).

Per CGT protocol, preparation was minimal in order not to impose preconceptions about "the patterns of behavior which are relevant" (Glaser, 1998, p. 117). The phenomenon or topic of interest was identified, adaptive surfing, but a theoretical structure in the form of a research question or hypothesis was not (Glaser, 1998). In this case the initial grand tour question was: *What is your experience of adaptive surfing?* The first participant had attended an adaptive surfing clinic shortly after losing their leg. The concepts that emerged from open-coding directed theoretical sampling beyond the adaptive sports community. Subsequent data collection and constant comparative analysis served to identify and verify theoretical patterns in the data (Glaser, 1998). The conceptual insights and relationships between concepts derived from constant comparative analysis of the data were recorded as memos (Glaser, 1998).

Substantive coding of the data revealed the core variable, or the concept that best accounts for the primary system of action, which then became the focus of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially, the core variable identified was *possibilizing*, reflecting the tremendous impact of deconstructing limiting beliefs and reconstructing possibility. However, this did not encompass the development of skills and community within the opportunity, and the concept became a key variable in the core variable. Further collection and analysis of data from a total of 16 interviews and related literature yielded building up as the core variable in transformative opportunities. When the data was saturated, or nothing new was derived from the data, theoretical coding connected concepts to the core variable and to each other in the form of theoretical memos. Memos were then organized relationally into an outline, which became the first draft of the theory (Simmons, n.d.). At that point, literature was integrated into the write up in the same way the data is integrated; categories and properties were compared for relevance and fit (Glaser, 1978, 1998).

Building Up

Building up occurs when the fit between an individual and an opportunity is optimal or good enough to facilitate transformation by deconstructing limiting beliefs and building up internal and external resources, such that an individual emerges from an opportunity empowered with beliefs, skills, and connections. Such opportunities may be provided and/or undertaken to facilitate healing or growth, to build resources for specific goals, to manage an existing challenge, or to mitigate an expected difficulty or challenging transition. The fit refers to the multifaceted interaction of the variables of an opportunity and the individual participating in it. Fit generally falls into three categories: optimal, good enough, and insufficient. The theory of building up focuses on the impact of the fit between the individual and the opportunity on the outcomes of participation: not yet built, still building, and built up.

Both a good enough fit and an optimal fit may lead to still building or built up, outcomes in which the individual may emerge from the opportunity empowered with a fuller, richer, more extensive set of internal and external resources with which to manage challenges. Still building is a continued need for scaffolding or further opportunities, whereas an individual who is built up is more likely to be self-sustaining. Paying it forward may result from either of the latter and is when an individual chooses to participate in building up others. The outcome of not yet built up is very little change in pre-opportunity individual variables due to an insufficient fit.

The Fit

The fit influences the extent to which the individual is built up. As the fit gets closer to optimal, the breadth, depth, pace, and intensity of building up increases. An optimal fit occurs when an individual's unique combination of existing resources and challenges; their path to the opportunity; the timing of the opportunity relative to the timing of the challenge(s); and the opportunity variables are synergistically aligned, often by leveraging the struggle with the challenge itself. For example, the participant described earlier, who had recently had a leg amputated, improved physical symptoms and mobility as well as deconstructed beliefs about limitations and disability, and made meaningful connections within the community through participation in the opportunity. The greater the challenge and the fewer internal resources an individual has, the more likely the need for an optimal fit. An optimal fit is most likely to result in the outcomes of being built up and paying it forward, described by one participant as "a dramatic, whiz-bang effect," but a good enough fit may also result in building up. The critical components of a good enough fit for building up are altering beliefs and developing skills, being cared for, a sense of agency, and the timing of the opportunity.

The goal of building up is empowerment. Building up can be conceptually reduced to a before and after the opportunity progression, however the complexities of the variable combinations are interdependently layered. The interplay of individual variables and opportunity variables are relevant to both the fit and outcomes; the interaction of these in the context of the fit will be described as each of the variables is introduced.

Individual Variables

Individual variables are beliefs, challenges, resources, and the pathway to the opportunity. The salience of a resource or challenge to an individual's experience is relative to the

individual, the cultural context, and the environment. Beliefs may determine what is a resource or a challenge in certain contexts. The terms resourceful belief or skill and challenging belief or skill are used to distinguish the two. For example, one participant's persistence was productive in adapting to their situation, "I am the type of person that will make it work." For another study participant, that particular skill contributed to resisting, saying of a substance use rehabilitation program, "I don't even know why I was there. I don't have problems like those other kids." As that participant did in the previous statement, comparing oneself or one's situation to others may be a resourceful or a challenging skill. The skill that produces "it could be worse," said by one participant, is the same skill that might result in "everything is so hard and stressful for me," said by another participant. Beliefs, whether limiting or resourceful, are central to the theory of building up. Beliefs impact each variable in the fit. Deconstructing limiting beliefs and reconstructing resourceful beliefs that underpin resourceful skills may be critical to a good enough fit.

Beliefs

Beliefs are conscious and unconscious assumptions or understandings that an individual holds as true. Information, or the lack thereof is a critical piece of the development of beliefs, because it can provide or limit a framework for conceptualizing possibilities. Several study participants described having no knowledge of possibilities and unconsciously having assumed that those possibilities do not exist, for example "You can't surf in New England." As one study participant said of being unaware of possibilities: "You don't know what you don't know." Beliefs include "limiting statements and assumptions regarding what exists and what does not (either in actuality, or in principle), what objects or experiences are good or bad, and what objectives, behaviors, and relationships are desirable or undesirable" (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, p. 4). Self-referential beliefs about possibility and accessibility are the most salient to building up. Commonalities in participants' limiting beliefs reflect the influence of stigmatized or marginalized social identifiers on self-referential limiting beliefs, expressed in statements like "black people don't ski," "I'm too old for that," or "I'm almost 30, I am supposed to have a career." One participant believed themselves to be a "bad student" and expressed limiting beliefs about material resources and the accessibility of education. They retrospectively described the development of these limiting beliefs as an ongoing self-fulfilling narrative informed by everyone around them, often based on a desire to protect from harm, failure, humiliation, or heartache. For example, another study participant was discouraged from pursuing higher education by her father, based on his beliefs about what was possible for a working-class, black woman at that time.

These types of limiting beliefs may also be associated with or trigger particular emotions. The emotional salience of a limiting belief is particular to the individual. Sometimes, a limiting belief is an assumption based on a lack of information and is relatively emotionally neutral, described by one study participant as "I can surf on one leg in Maine, it doesn't have to be on two legs in California." More often, emotions associated with limiting beliefs are often unpleasant or negative. Sometimes the belief is limiting because of the emotions associated with it, particularly fear and shame, expressed by study participants in statements such as "I'm too dumb for college" or "You know you try to ignore it, but people stare."

Of particular relevance to a good enough fit in building up is providing an individual with different information to facilitate deconstructing limiting beliefs and building new beliefs, described by one participant as having the “courage to challenge the stories.” This progression of deconstruction was expressed by study participants as “I never thought I would” or “I never thought I could” reconstructed to “If I can do this thing, then I can definitely do that. And if I can do that, then that, and what is next?”

Resources

Resources are an individual variable impacting the pathway to the opportunity and the fit, an opportunity variable, and an outcome of building up. Internal resources are resourceful beliefs and skills that an individual can harness to leverage external resources, whether material or being cared for.

Internal resources. The internal resources of existing beliefs and skills influence the pathway to the opportunity. Resourceful beliefs allow for the development of skills useful to managing a challenge. Skills are areas of competence or mastery. Skills may be task-specific or more generalized meta-skills, patterns and habits of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors developed through intentional practice or unconscious repetition.

Skill development may be more easily facilitated if the beliefs that underpin those skills are already in place. For example, going to Harvard “coming from a blue-collar family” was described as a process in which the participant believed that they “had choices: continue on dead end or do something different,” which also required persistence. Another described making a choice about her emotional response to having her leg amputated, “I couldn’t have a pity party. I lost my leg, not my life.” Participation in the opportunity may provide the setting or situation needed to build up these resourceful beliefs and skills, if they are not already present. Often, these shifts in self-referential beliefs are the result of comparing within the opportunity, expressed by several participants as “if that person can do it, so can I.”

External resources. There is variability in the degree of awareness of, access to, and utilization of resources. External resources may be material, such as money, tools, equipment, or human resources: supporters, communities, or organizations. External resources will be further discussed in the context of the opportunity variables.

Challenges. Challenges are areas of vulnerability or difficulty, such as limiting beliefs, loss, or conditions of the mind, body, or spirit. Challenges are generally what brings an individual to an opportunity, because navigating the challenge requires more than an individual’s existing resources to accomplish. Study participants experienced challenges such as lifelong and acquired physical and psychological disabilities, racism, and surviving abuse. Building up is about empowering an individual with beliefs and skills that may improve the experience of a challenge and/or build the resources to navigate the challenge or accomplish goals.

Timing of the opportunity. The degree of fit that is needed to be built up is influenced by the timing of the opportunity relative to the timing of the challenge, the individual’s developmental stage, and the nature of their challenges. Some opportunities are

specific to non-normative or unplanned challenges and others prepare for reaching goals, and/or overcoming or mitigating challenges by preemptively developing resourceful beliefs and skills. For example, the mother of a son who had significant neurological challenges sought out opportunities so that they might not ever fully experience some of the challenges associated with the condition. Another participant described Pirate Camp, an opportunity for children to intentionally construct resourceful beliefs, as “a place they can go that everyone is like them and not only do kids not have limbs, counselors don’t have limbs. They can say I want to be like him. This guy is training for Para Olympics.” An optimal or good enough fit may result from addressing challenges within a certain window of time or within appropriate developmental periods, particularly if the opportunity arises at a critical juncture or turning point in the challenge. One study participant, who acted as a supporter, described the change in a friend, who had also recently lost a leg, that she brought to an opportunity. “She was so depressed, just so down. I knew what it did for me, so I talked her into coming. On the way home she was a whole different person, just bubbling and giggling.” The timing may be especially relevant for opportunities designed for recovery or rehabilitation after a life-altering or traumatic event, expressed by one participant as “I had to turn this into something good.” An insufficient fit may result if a window of opportunity has passed or has not yet opened, expressed by participants as “I wasn’t ready” and “it was too late.”

The Pathway to the Opportunity

The pathway includes the means of discovering the opportunity, the motivation for participation, and the conditions of the opportunity. Discovering may happen through stumbling across, seeking it out, or being required. Motivations may include curious, proving it, getting better, and obliged. Structural conditions include accessibility and eligibility, and may influence motivation and discovery positively or negatively. The most salient variable in the pathway to a good enough fit is the impact of pathway variables on an individual’s sense of agency.

Discovering the opportunity

The means of discovering the opportunity may influence engagement in the opportunity. Stumbling across is randomly encountering the opportunity, whether through random observation or receiving unsolicited information. For example, one study participant insisted that a friend, previously described, who was experiencing debilitating depression after losing a leg, go to an adaptive surf clinic. Stumbling in also occurs by participating in an opportunity unaware of the potential for building up, for example, one participant said “I had no idea what I was getting into or how it would change me.” Individuals seeking an opportunity tend to recognize a need for building up, which is more likely to lead to an optimal or good enough fit because of the relationship to motivation and existing resourceful skills and beliefs. Required is being mandated or otherwise given little choice in participating, for example, being committed to a drug rehabilitation program or pressured to go to school. The lack of agency in being required may adversely impact other variables in the fit. The motivation for participation may impact whether or not required participation may result in building up.

Motivation

Motivation is the reason for participating in the opportunity. The primary interaction between the means of discovery and the motivation may be the degree of agency. There may be more than one source of motivation and motivation may shift during participation. Deci and Ryan (2000) noted that intrinsic motivation, rather than a response to external controls, increases engagement and confidence, which may enhance persistence.

Curious is often the result of stumbling in and a lack of knowledge, described by one participant as “what the hell, why not? It’s free!” and another as “I thought it might be fun. I didn’t think it would help anything.” Getting better is trying to improve and is often the result of existing skills and recognizing a gap between resources and challenges. For example, one study participant described participating in multiple opportunities until finding the right fit to build up resources to manage mental health issues. Proving it is intentionally deconstructing beliefs. Some participants expressed a need to change self-referential beliefs, for example, “I had to see if I could do it.” Others expressed a desire to deconstruct others’ limiting beliefs, “there were people who said that I couldn’t do it.” For example, the participant who believed that they were a bad student was motivated by “showing them” and ultimately by proving it to themselves. Proving it may be the result of any means of discovery. If required participation results in a motivation of proving it, building up is more likely to occur, even if the participant initially was motivated only by obligation. Obligated is usually the result of required participation but feeling obliged also may be rooted in beliefs rather than external consequences, such as one study participant who went to college “because I was supposed to.”

Structural conditions. Structural conditions are the requirements or parameters for participation, including accessibility and eligibility. Accessibility is whether an opportunity is available to an individual and/or the individual’s belief that it is available, as in cost, time, and/or who participates in the activity. For instance, one participant with vision impairment had difficulty registering for a clinic due to compatibility problems with her adaptive technology and the organization’s website. Additionally, they had to arrange to be driven twenty miles to get there. Minimally, an individual must have access to sufficient knowledge and resources to get on the pathway to the opportunity, for example knowing that scholarships exist and how to apply for them. Eligibility refers to the requirements for participation and may include qualifying needs, social identifiers, or particular challenges, often defined by the organizations that provide opportunities. Structural conditions may promote or discourage participation, particularly if conditions of eligibility activate stigma around the identifiers, such as claiming disability status to participate. For example, one study participant described hesitating claiming disability status for her son to gain access to certain services because she feared the stigma of “being labeled.” Another didn’t want to think of themselves as a disabled Veteran.

The Opportunity

Opportunities are made up of two main components: the nature of the activity (or activities) and resources available within the opportunity. Any given activity may have unique and specific attributes or characteristics, the activities within building up tend to have key

features in relationship to fit and building up, particularly the focus of the activity, which may be primarily one of mind, body, or spirit, and the temporal qualities of the activity.

The nature of the activity

The types of activities or endeavors involved in an opportunity may include the full range of human activities and interactions, from writing to extreme sports. For example, some of the opportunities that study participants described included adaptive sports clinics, yoga teacher training, substance use programs, and college, with varying degrees of intentional building up within the opportunity. Often the focus of the activity is an intentional feature of the opportunity. For instance, the mind is primarily the focus of education, whereas often yoga is intended to engage mind, body, and spirit. In an optimal fit, the nature of the activity actively improves the challenge. As one participant said, "It is so fun and it helps so much, I mean, the confidence, it even helps with standing in the kitchen cooking." This type of alignment is not necessary to a good enough fit. The intended or manifest focus per the organization may not reflect the actual experience of an activity for an individual. For example, activities focused on the body or mind may also be a spiritual experience for the individual, such as expressed by several participants about surfing, hiking, and other activities in nature, even though the organizations that provided the opportunities may not have an explicit spiritual focus. An optimal fit may include this unexpected impact beyond the intended focus, for example, having a transcendent experience, which may be more likely to have dramatic results, as one study participant described, "a thunderbolt moment." Even an optimal fit between the activity and the challenge may result in an insufficient fit if other factors are not aligned, expressed as "it just didn't do it for me," and "The whole thing was stupid. They wanted us to do dumb s**t, like that was supposed to help someone."

Positive emotional experience of and absorption in the activity may also contribute to building up. Engaging in an opportunity often involves being vulnerable and/or fear of the risks inherent to the activity. There is an inverse relationship between the extent of the fear(s) and the extent of the deconstruction of limiting beliefs and creation of resourceful beliefs, related to the unexpectedness of positive emotions resulting from participation. A good enough fit may include some fear(s) around participation and an overall positive emotional experience of participation. Communities and organizations often explicate overcoming fears with phrases described by participants such as "going outside your comfort zone" or "being courageous," which may be particularly fertile ground for building up. One participant said, "I like that it scares me. I had to overcome so much fear to even try it."

Temporal qualities include the duration, frequency, and recurrence of the activity. Temporal qualities may affect accessibility through increased costs (both time and money) for longer programs. Frequency and recurrence tend to affect the extent of the development of resourceful skills and connections.

External resources. External resources are the total combination of material and human resources. The quality and quantity of the material and human resources may interact with individual beliefs to impact fit and outcomes. It may be expected that the

individual access resources independently within the opportunity in some cases, such that the individual is presumed to already have internal resources. For example, one participant was not aware that study abroad scholarships were available or that they might qualify, despite that they were already engaged in the larger opportunity (attending college). It was through guidance from a supporter that they began seeking, and ultimately learned to leverage, external resources within that opportunity.

Material resources. Material resources include the tools, equipment, and physical space required for the activity. Quantity and quality of the material resources may influence the extent to which the individual feels cared for and engages in the opportunity. One study participant described feeling special and treated well at a multi-day event for Veterans that was well-equipped and planned out. Multiple activities were offered in several different prestigious (to them) venues. Another participant described playing sled-hockey at the Bruins practice rink with excitement, saying, “how awesome is that?” Material resources available to an organization may influence the extent to which that organization can provide human resources that contribute to being cared for, which is critical to a good enough fit.

Being cared for. Being cared for is being provided for, nurtured, or supported by individuals, a community and/or an organization. In an optimal fit, the individual feels cared for by several supporters, the community, and the organization. Being cared for is a critical component of a good enough fit, and ultimately, it is the supporters that provide being cared for within the opportunity.

Supporters. Supporters encourage, teach, advocate, and nurture. A good enough fit may require being cared for by at least by one supporter. The defining feature of a supporter for a good enough fit may be that the supporter truly believes in the individual’s capacity for success and effectively communicates or demonstrates that belief, such that that the individual trusts the supporter. One study participant, who is a supporter, described unwavering confidence in getting anyone on a surfboard and riding a wave, “with the exception of assisted breathing, anyone can surf.” Study participants often mentioned the importance of supporters, regardless of whether or not they were built up by their experience. Several participants explicitly discussed feeling “taken care of” and “safe,” both physically and emotionally, as a vital part of their experience.

Supporters’ knowledge of the process of building up may enable them to facilitate transformation more effectively, such that the right amount of encouragement, support, or pressure can be applied at the right time in the right amount for the individual at that moment of building up. One study participant described this as “personalized attention and instruction from all of these people who really know what they are doing.” This may require being “tough” and not taking resistance personally or reacting to anger. One participant, a supporter, explained, “it pisses people off when you challenge them, you have to have the courage to get over yourself.” Supporters who explicitly share the same or similar challenge(s) and are intentionally modeling possibility may be more likely to establish trust and reconstruct beliefs. One study participant, who is an amputee said, “My instructor had one leg, she didn’t let me get away with anything...she was so good with me.” Bandura (1977) noted that modeled behavior may have more impact if similarity to the model “increases personal relevance” (p. 197).

Community. A community is a group of people connected by one or more commonalities, such as beliefs, challenges, or the opportunity. Several study participants described lasting friendships and community built within the opportunity that developed into external resources relied on long after participation. Study participants described feeling “at home” and like they had “found their tribe.” Communities provide a sense of belonging, which is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), whether through the shared feature that binds the community or the shared experiences within the opportunity. One study participant described feeling supported and encouraged by the “50 people there to make the day work for the Vets, and that is what you need, to go out and do it.” One supporter described this as, “Same people, same problem, same page, all week. They get each other.” Lundberg et al. (2011) noted that building social networks is both an outcome itself and a catalyst for additional positive outcomes within opportunities.

Organization. Organizations are the formalized communities that provide opportunities, whether a small, grassroots, volunteer-based organization or a large hierarchy, such as a university. Organizational belief systems are explicitly expressed in the form of a mission statement, however, the formalized belief system may or may not be enacted implicitly in the everyday interactions of the organization. A disconnect between explicit organizational beliefs and enacted beliefs may decrease the goodness of fit. One participant described not fitting into or understanding the “WASPy [white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant] competitive ways” of a small, elite liberal arts college. They described limiting beliefs developing, rather than being deconstructed, within the opportunity. DeRosa and Dolby (2014) found that students’ experiences of a university are influenced by the culture of that institution, as expressed in social interactions, policies, and practices.

Ultimately, the organization’s role in the fit may depend on the individuals within the organization. Extensive resources may be more likely to contribute to an optimal fit but are not necessary to a good enough fit. Adequate material resources to provide the conditions for supporters to safely and effectively administer the opportunity are sufficient for a good enough fit, as long as enough individuals within the opportunity are supporters.

Outcomes

The outcome of built up occurs when limiting beliefs are deconstructed and resources developed to manage current and future challenges. Built up may result from a good enough fit but is most likely to result from an optimal fit. Built up does not necessarily mean that an individual will not require support or resource development in the future, but that the individual is able to recognize gaps between resources and challenges and leverage external resources to address those gaps. Those who are built up tend to be self-sustaining. One study participant described this as “I can sort myself out now” and another described it as “I can handle it.” Developing skills facilitates developing more skills. Appraisal theory posits that cognitive appraisals of stressful events involve both an assessment of the event, whether or not it is stressful, and an assessment of resources, whether or not the individual has the resources to cope with it (Folkman et al., 1986). Deconstructing limiting beliefs and building resourceful beliefs may change the initial appraisal; building both internal and external resources may change the second appraisal.

Paying it forward is complex and may serve to provide a sense of purpose; enact beliefs, such as optimism or gratitude; and/or make meaning of challenges. Participants expressed these functions in phrases like “I just love giving back,” and “I did something good in this life.”

Still building, or progress in building up, does not preclude the need for continued opportunities. It is movement toward being built up. A study participant described himself as “lost and searching” and still building through several opportunities in which the fit was not quite right. When he found an opportunity that was closer to an optimal fit, he was built up.

The outcome of not yet built up may occur when participation in the opportunity has very little impact on beliefs, resources, or challenges. Thus, there is very little change in the individual’s relationship to challenges or means of managing challenges or achieving goals. This is most likely to occur as the result of an insufficient fit, often because of a lack of agency or the timing of the opportunity. This does not mean that building up is not possible. In some cases, it may take multiple opportunities to become receptive to being built up. Active resisting or entrenched limiting beliefs may require an optimal fit, or a different type of opportunity, at a different time, or in another context.

As previously stated, built up does not necessarily mean that an individual will no longer experience gaps between resources and challenges or experience difficulty applying previously developed skills to new goals or unexpected challenges. This may include further participation in opportunities or paying it forward as a way of continuing building up. Built up may mean actively seeking and leveraging further opportunities to continue building up. Subsequent opportunities may not have the same “whiz-bang,” “life-changing” impact as the initial opportunity described by study participants. One study participant described continually finding ways to challenge their own beliefs and build resources, for example, participating in yoga teacher training. They commented on the profound impact that the training had on fellow yoga instructor trainees, stating that “it wasn’t that dramatic for me.” However, their intentions for participating in the teacher training were to continue building up in order to pay it forward by becoming a supporter.

The theory of building up describes the conditions necessary for transformation to occur, or an individual to be built up, within an opportunity. Building up is a process of empowerment through deconstructing limiting beliefs and developing internal and external resources through participation in a transformative opportunity. Ideal conditions, or an optimal fit between the individual and the opportunity, yields a “whiz bang effect,” as described by one participant. An optimal fit between the individual and the opportunity is the most likely to result in being built up, described by one participant as “it changed everything!” A good enough fit may be sufficient and more practically applicable and achievable in programs as it is less individually nuanced.

Discussion

The critical variables of a good enough fit are most notably supported by the literature on possible selves theory, self-determination theory, and character skills, also referred to as soft skills, or non-cognitive skills. A brief overview of the literature in these areas follows.

Possible Selves Theory

Beliefs influence every variable in building up, most critically, self-referential beliefs. Possible selves theory posits that individuals must first imagine possibilities for themselves before actions can be taken toward realizing that self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In other words, as one participant said, "if you can't see it, you can't be it." An optimal or good enough fit between the individual and the opportunity in building up experientially deconstructs limiting self-referential beliefs and provides new information with which to imagine a possible self. Possible selves theory highlights the importance of exposure to information to "individuals' views of what is possible" (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011, p. 233), reinforcing Bandura's assertion that modeling a behavior has a greater impact if the model is similar to the observer in some aspect (Bandura, 1977). Lundberg et al. (2011) found that participation in adaptive sport opportunities facilitated an identity negotiation process that shifted limiting self-referential beliefs about disability and stigma toward a more positive self-image. Their findings mirrored study participants' statements like "there is a whole universe of things that I can do." Imagining a possible self and establishing goal directed behavior toward that self may require beliefs about possibility, which may in turn influence developing skills pertinent to that goal (Markus & Nurius, 1986). "A focus on possible selves is broadly construed as an effort to tie self-cognition to motivation, but as a consequence it also relates self-cognitions to self-feelings or affect" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 958). In other words, altering beliefs may preclude the skill development that contributes to the outcome of built-up.

Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that motivation is based on three basic human needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence in SDT loosely corresponds to skills in building up. It refers to an intrinsic need for developing mastery. Relatedness in SDT corresponds to being cared for in building up. Supporters, in self-determination theory, provide "a sense of security that makes the expression of this innate growth tendency more likely and more robust" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 235). Autonomy is self-directed behavior, or agency. This is critical in building up as "autonomy occupies a unique position in the set of three needs: being able to satisfy the needs for competence and relatedness may be enough for controlled behavior, but being able to satisfy the need for autonomy is essential for the goal-directed behavior to be self-determined and for many of the optimal outcomes associated with self-determination to accrue" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 242). This sense of agency is a critical piece of the individual's motivation and therefore engagement in building up. Self-determination theory supports several critical elements in a good enough fit: skill building, being cared for, and agency.

Skills

Sometimes called character skills, non-cognitive skills, or soft skills, skills have been given considerable attention for their importance in lifetime outcomes such as employment and well-being (Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Kautz et al., 2014). These transferable meta-skills are a key outcome of building up. Petersen and Seligman (2004)

noted that even traits that tend to be more stable are “also shaped by the individual’s setting and thus capable of change” (p. 10). Likewise, Gutman and Schoon (2013) suggested that non-cognitive skills are malleable and that the plasticity of different skills varies developmentally throughout the lifespan. Of particular importance to being built up is developing or enhancing resilience, or the ability to recover from adversity. According to Gutman and Schoon (2013), resilience involves exercising a particular set of skills that comprise adaptive coping. Peterson and Seligman recognized that “some settings and situations lend themselves to the development and/or display of strengths, whereas other settings and situations preclude them” (p.11). Supporters may be vital in the development of these skills. Fitzgerald and Laurian (2013) found that caring and trust in the teacher-student relationship is critical, particularly in developing skills such as grit, which has been shown to be predictive of retention in education and achieving long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Heckman and Kautz (2013) argued that skills “enable people... [and] give agency to people to shape their lives in the present and to create future skills” (p.5).

Applications of the Theory

The fit may be of practical interest for the design, structure, and delivery of opportunities to maximize the potential for building up within the constraints of limited resources. Many of the key components of a good enough fit depend on supporters ability to facilitate the experience. Agency is a critical piece of a good enough fit and can be facilitated in a myriad of ways in even the most restricted settings. Behan (2014) noted that agency was a primary motivator for people who are incarcerated participating in educational opportunities within a prison facility. As described in the literature above, supporters are critical to facilitating the experience of agency in order to develop competence through skill building. Certain roles are associated with being a supporter, such as parents, teachers, or coaches. However, individuals in these roles may have limiting beliefs of their own. Limiting beliefs about an individual’s ability may interfere with building up or contribute to an insufficient fit. Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) connected lack of grit to fixed mindset, or the belief that one’s abilities and traits, such as intelligence, are innate and immutable, rather than flexible and capable of growth. A good enough fit may not occur if these limiting beliefs are held by the people who are supposed to be supporters. Student achievement outcomes are influenced by teacher expectations (Brault et al., 2014; Gershenson et al., 2016) which are sometimes rooted in “limited information, incorrect beliefs, and biased expectations” (Gershenson et al., 2016, p. 209). Programs that intentionally deconstruct limiting beliefs and explicate building meta-skills for supporters as well as opportunity participants may be more effective. This may be critical not only to program design, but also to staffing and training.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research might further investigate accessibility to being built up, whether tearing down instead of building up is a possible outcome, and the phenomenon of paying it forward. Classic grounded theory methodology focuses on activity within a system, not individuals per say. Individual attributes, such as race, age, or gender are relevant when and if they indicate or verify a concept (Glaser, 1998). For example, in the case of building

up, aspects of identity, such as class, race, and age, emerged as individual variables that contributed to challenges or were challenges in and of themselves. Ultimately, in this study, it was the limiting beliefs related to these aspects of identity and/or the impact on accessibility, rather than the particulars of it, that were relevant to building up. Accessibility for all to being built up may be presumptive. A study with more diversity in study participants, particularly as related to class, might reveal differential pathways to building up. For example, a few study participants described having experienced poverty in the past or coming from a working-class family. These individuals had already overcome challenges associated with poverty. Inclusion of participants who are currently experiencing poverty may reveal further conditions that preclude accessibility.

Many study participants described being torn down, some could clearly remember the person, place, and timing of the creation of some limiting beliefs, often within an opportunity intended to build up. Further studies might investigate those in roles that are presumably supporters who are tearing down by enacting their own limiting beliefs. Several participants relayed experiences of “feeling dumb” or like a “bad student” based on interactions with teachers and that the feeling was intensified by the belief that a teacher is “supposed to” be a supporter as well as the belief that the teacher is an authority and expert. Further study might reveal attributes of such supporters, their communities, and/or organizations that might mitigate tearing down by those who should be building up.

Finally, it may be that an optimal fit for supporters is paying it forward. Paying it forward may also provide opportunities to continue building up, which may look more like renovating. Some study participants described continually and intentionally finding ways to challenge beliefs, build resources, and to pay it forward. Another CGT study might begin with the relationship between being built up and paying it forward, particularly since supporters emerged as a key variable in the fit of building up, regardless of outcomes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, building up empowers the individual. Built up individuals have developed the skills and beliefs to navigate challenges and pursue goals. The extent to which an organization can provide at least a good enough fit for most individuals may maximize resources invested into opportunities. A good enough fit may offer enough through participation that the individual realizes the potential for experientially developing beliefs and skills to continue accessing internal and external resources. “Greater levels of skill foster social inclusion and promote economic and social mobility. Skills give agency to people to shape their lives, to create new skills and to flourish” (Kautz et al., 2014, p. 8).

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