

A Conceptual System For Understanding Personal Actions

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ABSTRACT

One of the missing elements in the social psychological research of recreation behavior is a comprehensive model for understanding personal actions. The conceptual framework proposed here attempts to synthesize both normative and behavioral measurement systems. It stresses assimilation and accommodation as the two interaction processes that are the key to understanding personal actions. As new research findings are isolated, this framework has the flexibility to be modified to produce a more comprehensive model because it advocates relationships among variable types rather than proposing a theoretical position.

Introduction

Heberlein [1] argues that wilderness and outdoor recreation are a good content area for the study of personal actions (values and/or behavior) because 1) the study of wilderness and outdoor recreation permits the examination of a wide range of research questions and fosters future research alternatives and 2) the data have both theoretical and practical implications for policies. Research in this area also provides for the examination of a particular interest group, such as recreational users, in relationship to the general population. This would give the researcher an indication about the generality of values and/or behavior phenomena.

When social psychological literature about personal recreational actions was reviewed, it was found that there is a lack of a comprehensive framework dealing with theory, measurement, and research findings [2]. Lack of consideration and/or congruence among these three elements has caused problems in the use of the information. When empirical research fails to consider any of the three elements, the resulting information cannot be effectively utilized because missing components give rise to spurious relationships or lack of complete understanding. Deficiencies in commonality among the elements causes lack of efficient information utilization because the interrelationships among the components are not well understood. With the development of a comprehensive model, social psychological information can be technologically applied with consistence of outcome. This can only be achieved when theory and research findings are jointly related through a measurement model. Since there seems to be a need for a comprehensive model for personal actions with regard to outdoor recreation, this project was undertaken to develop a framework that relates congruent theoretical and measurement systems to research findings.

Measurement Systems

Most measurement techniques are based on normative models. These models seek to prescribe behavior given certain assumptions about objectives and behavior. As Sewell and Rostron [3] noted:

Normative models help to explain, for example, what one ought to do to maximize one's satisfactions, given assumptions about goals and behavior. Such an approach is especially appropriate where choice is conscious and information is available [p. 26].

These models are conceptual schemes that have been developed to assign monetary or output measures to the recreational experience. The assumptions underlying these models are:

1. that an area is worth as much as people spend in terms of money and/or effort on its use or development and/or
2. that man's behavior is a function of rational thought that seeks to maximize attainment of an individual's goals [4, 5].

The other measurement techniques used are the behavioral models. These seek to describe and predict behavior in terms of decision processes. As Sewell and Rostron [3] expressed:

Behavioral models . . . help to explain how one arrives at decisions, given less restrictive assumptions about the goals sought and alternatives taken into account. This approach is more pertinent where intuition plays a large role, where choice is wide, and where the decision is more habitual or unconscious [p. 26].

Behavioral models stress the assimilation and accommodation of cognitive processes and seek to measure these processes from behavioral responses.

Normative models are limited by the necessity for quantifying qualitative information, and/or the uncertainty of how market or interactive mechanisms reflect the quality of the recreational experience. Behavioral models also have their limitations. It is difficult to find indexes or measures of cognitive processes [6] or to identify variables whose quantitative and qualitative characteristics are consistent through time and space. The degree of variability in this type of data is so great that generalizations only have limited application [7]. Additionally, La Piere [8] discusses the inconsistency between cognitive processes and behavior. Therefore, if a component [cognitive (conscious), affective (unconscious) and action tendency (habit or learned behavior)] process model is related to output behavior, a synthesis of the normative and behavioral measurement systems can be achieved for a more comprehensive approach that will increase perspective.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework was developed for the orderly measurement and theoretical and research interpretation, analysis, and utilization of information about personal recreational actions. Since this framework is based upon an output component process, it resembles the hierarchical approach of systems theory.

PROCESS COMPONENTS

Values are those cognitive processes that are organized into unified systems that situationally direct behavior [9]. Therefore, overt behavior of an individual is a partial indicator of his values, that is, his cognitions, feelings, and action tendencies toward various objects (Table 1) [10-12]. These elements of a value system are mutually interdependent.

The cognitive component is the knowledge or belief that an individual has about an object (persons and things). There are various levels of cognitive responses possible: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Table 2) [13]. Synthesis and evaluation are critical because these are the levels upon which core (basic) values are founded [14]. Knowledge of the world is selectively organized according to the principles of learning and stimulus organization into a unified system [15]. The characteristics of a cognition are influenced by the system in which it is a part. Knowledge leads to expectations which have a profound influence upon the organization and actions initiated by cognitive systems. An individual's knowledge is selectively conditioned by perception which is determined by his physical and social environments (situational variables), ability (intellectual, psychomotor, and

Table 1. Value Components

Components (Interactions occur among all components)

- A. Cognitive domain—Beliefs (the content of a belief).
 Subjective reality—what an individual believes to be true or acts as if it were true.
 → Leads to expectations
- B. Affective domain—Feelings (emotions) (the commitment to a belief).
 Feelings toward an object.
 → Leads to needs → byproduct motivation.
- C. Action tendencies—Action patterns (the extent of the commitment to a belief in terms of action).
 Predisposition to act in a certain way.
 → Leads to habits.

3. Values provide a screen for assimilation and accommodation (See Figure 1, Model 3).

social skills), experiences (past and immediate), judgmental process (organizational and decision-making processes), and wants [6, 16-19]. Judgmental process is a complex phenomena. Because of this problem, the term acquires various definitional components based upon the level or point of discussion in the total model.

The feeling component, that is, the emotion connected with the object, is the motivational character of values. There are various levels of affective responses possible: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization (Table 2) [20]. Organization and characterization are critical because these are levels upon which core values are based [14]. The affective component develops and changes according to an individual's ability, experiences, and judgmental process (organizational and decision-making processes), and the availability of the environment [6, 16-19]. Feelings about an object lead to the formation of wants. The degree to which wants are satisfied or frustrated determine their developmental sequence in the future. The wants of an individual are oriented around self and self tends to be defined in terms of groups to which he belongs or aspires (both primary and referent). Success or failure of self is in part determined by an individual's expectations. A want that has become an initiating and sustaining force of behavior is called a need. The action driving force behind a need has been termed motivation.

The action tendency component, that is, behavioral readiness associated with a value, is the result of an individual's experiences in trying to satisfy his desires. If an individual's experiences are generally favorable, he will be disposed to support the object. If his experiences are negative, he will be disposed to oppose the object [6]. There are various levels of predisposition responses possible—high tolerance level, low tolerance level, occasional action, and consistent action (Table 2) [18-20]. Consistent behavior is critical because this is the level upon

Table 2. A Condensed Description of Bloom's *et al.*, and Krathwohl's *et al.*, Typologies

<i>Core Values</i>	
Evaluation—An ability to evaluate worth of an object for a given purpose in terms of established criteria.	Consistent behavior, active—Actions which are frequent and extensive.
Synthesis—An ability to put together elements and relationships to form a whole in such a way as to clarify structure and process.	Consistent behavior, passive—Actions which are frequent and limited.
Analysis—An ability to break down elements and relationships in such a way as to clarify structure and process.	Occasional action, active—Actions which are infrequent and extensive.
Application—An ability to utilize abstractions in a new situation without being prompted.	Occasional action, passive—Actions which are infrequent and limited.
Comprehension—An ability to use ideas or materials without seeing their fullest implications.	Low tolerance level—Limited amount of stimulation needed for action (related to a self improvement or social need); intends to use resource some day.
Knowledge—recall or recognition of material, ideas, or phenomenon.	High tolerance level—Crisis needed to stimulate action (related to a safety or physiological need); no intention of using resource, but is willing to give up resource to know that the area, feature, or good will exist in a particular condition.
Neutral	Neutral
<i>Peripheral Values</i>	
Valuing—Sufficient commitment to an object to identify with it and want it.	Occasional action, active—Actions which are infrequent and extensive.
Responding—Seeks out object and gains satisfaction from working with it; self-initiated.	Occasional action, passive—Actions which are infrequent and limited.
Selected attention—Attends to object in spite of competing stimuli, when the circumstances are favorable.	Low tolerance level—Limited amount of stimulation needed for action (related to a self improvement or social need); intends to use resource some day.
Receiving—Tolerates the presence of an object.	High tolerance level—Crisis needed to stimulate action (related to a safety or physiological need); no intention of using resource, but is willing to give up resource to know that the area, feature, or good will exist in a particular condition.
Neutral	Neutral

which core values are based [14]. When an individual does not satisfy his desires, frustration or anxiety is the most common response. Understanding these types of responses gives insight into action tendencies because these are the responses that limit behavior.

An individual's cognitions, feelings, and action tendencies interact to form a highly interrelated complex value system which situationally direct behavior.

STRUCTURE

Values differ in their systematic structure. Not all values have the same potency in directing behavior because of differences in characteristics. These structural differences may be either part of the components or a part of the nature of the value system itself.

The differences in the value potency is a matter of degree where the structural components are concerned. Values can be classified on their potency level: core or peripheral (Table 2). Core values are those that are the most stable and have the greatest instrumental importance. Peripheral values are those that have not proven their instrumental meaning to core values through the judgmental process (organizational and decision-making processes), but they have been assimilated into the cognitive structure [17].

Value components may differ in their valence, multiplexity, and instrumental importance [6]. Valence refers to the degree of favorability or unfavorability toward an object. Multiplexity refers to the number and kind of elements making up the components. Instrumental importance refers to strength and number of wants served by a particular component.

A value or value system may differ in its degree of consistence. This refers to the level to which the component factors are constantly related to one another. There seems to be a certain degree of consistency with regard to multiplexity and valence among the components of values [11].

Values do not exist in a state of isolation. They are interconnected and the degree to which values are interconnected varies. Values that are highly interconnected are called value clusters. The total set of value clusters form a constellation. The degree to which values of a cluster are consonant characterizes the value system. Consonance refers to the degree to which the values of a cluster are consistently related to one another. A value constellation has the same characteristic as a cluster, but the value clusters are more important in determining behavior because they are the molar units of interaction [6].

Values differ in their component and system structures. These structural differences are what causes variability in behavior.

VARIABLES

Internal and external are the two major types of variables that interact with the value components. The internal variables refer basically to an individual's

judgmental process (perception, organization, and decision-making processes). The external variables are the conditions or circumstances that are not under the direct control of cognitive processes (situational variables).

The judgmental process includes those perception, organization, and decision-making procedures which selectively modify other assimilation and accommodation mechanisms. The perception process is the attention, recognition, and interpretation of information about objects. This process can be evaluated using an awareness taxonomy developed by Lime [21]. Katz [22] has noted that understanding context or function is important to obtain insight into the decision makers frame of reference. To understand the functional nature of an object the meaning, expectations, needs, and habits must be evaluated because these are the interaction elements of the judgmental process where perspective is formulated [23]. Gibson [24] has developed a model to describe meaning (problem salience). This model incorporates concrete, use, emotional, and symbolic dimensions. Expectations are the anticipated occurrence of an event and can be evaluated using a wilderness-development continuum [25]. An anticipated encounter with recreational areas can be characterized in terms of people; quantity, quality, and diversity of wildlife and habitat; smell; sound; and development. Needs are a function of growth and are hierarchal in nature [26]. The levels of growth are:

1. physiological (hunger, thirst);
2. safety (security, order);
3. need to belong or be loved (affection, identification);
4. esteem (prestige, success);
5. self-actualization (the desire for self fulfillment).

In an effort to make Maslow's work more explicit, Gellerman [27] has suggested that self-actualization be defined in terms of competition and power. McClelland [28] has proposed that self-actualization be defined in terms of achievement. These added dimensions make the ambiguous term of self-actualization more definitive.

The organizational and decision-making processes (interegation and comparison) depend upon the evaluation of an individual's style in selecting situational alternatives to achieve a desired outcome [3]. The evaluation of these styles depends upon the isolating of significant factors in the selecting of alternatives which allows for comparisons upon a process basis within the limits of functional perspectives. When Bettman's [29] and Kernan's [30] decision process models or typologies are related to Lime's [21] awareness scale, a congruent system for evaluating selection process styles (perception, organization, and decision making factors) can be developed. The judgmental process (selection process styles) will include also those variables that relate to the functional nature of an object.

Situational variables are those variables that stimulate or inhibit the

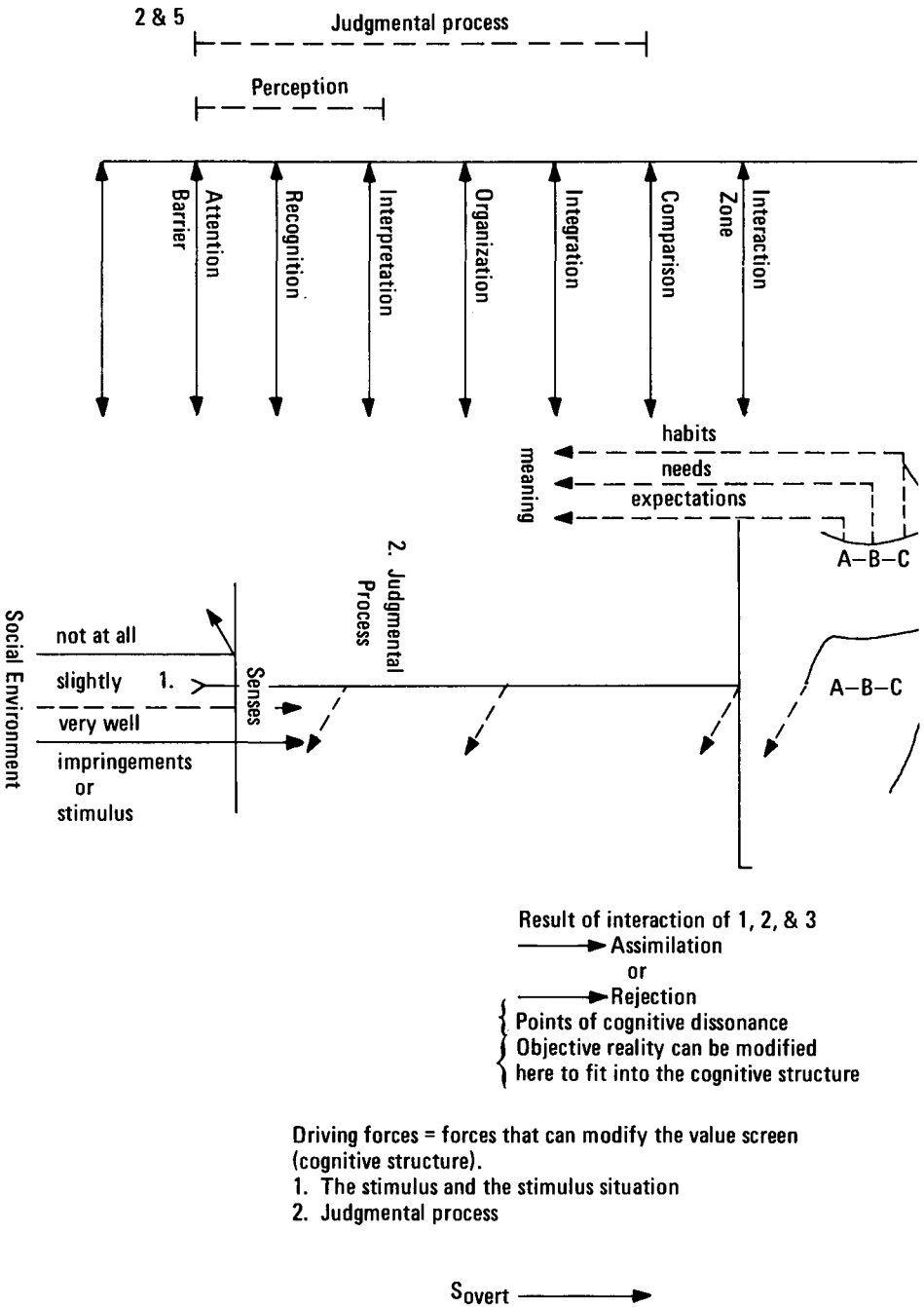


Figure 1. Assimilation and accommodation.

expression of cognitive processes. Knowledge about these variables is limited, but research by Barker [16] has provided a base for understanding them. He has shown that the controller elements are the components that aid in the understanding and management of a situation. He has also found that the primary characteristic of any situation is its consistency through time and space. Those circumstances that occur constantly through time and space are the stable situational variables or patterns while those that are not consistent are the unstable situational variables. The stable situational patterns are those factors that usually influence the value formation directly while the unstable variables usually tend to interact with values to influence behavior. Sonnenfeld [18, 19] has added much to the knowledge about the stable variables by making several of the variable types more explicit, that is, residence, sex, age, marital status, and occupation.

These internal and external variables are the primary factors that interact with values [6, 16, 17].

ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

Assimilation and accommodation are the two interaction processes that influence behavior (Figure 1). Assimilation of an object's image into the cognitive structure is a product of the situational variables (the stimulus and stimulus situation), judgmental process, and the interacting core and peripheral values (Figure 1) [16, 17, 31, 32]. The result of this interaction is either the rejection or the acceptance of the image. If it is rejected, the cognitive structure is unchanged unless it has caused a stimulation of cognitive dissonance [33]. If it has been accepted and supports current cognitive structures, the image takes on great instrumental meaning. If it is accepted and does not support the current cognitive structure, dissonance or low instrumental meaning (peripheral values) is the result. Values with low instrumental meaning either become core values or are rejected through the interaction with the judgmental process (organization and decision-making processes) [14]. Dissonance is a state of cognitive imbalance that causes changes in values or behavior if the cognition is not justifiable. If it is justified, the imbalance will be maintained within the system as long as cognition is want satisfying.

According to Sonnenfeld [18] there are two types of accommodation—*adaptation* and *adjustment*. Accommodation is the interaction product of the situational variables (the response and the response situation), judgmental process, and core or peripheral values (Figure 1) [17, 32]. Adaptation is when the tolerance level of an individual is shifted in a positive or negative direction to adjust to change [18]. This usually occurs when the situational variables are strong, the judgmental process is relative, and the values are peripheral. Adjustment is when the actions of an individual are shifted in a positive or negative direction to adjust to change [18]. This usually occurs when the

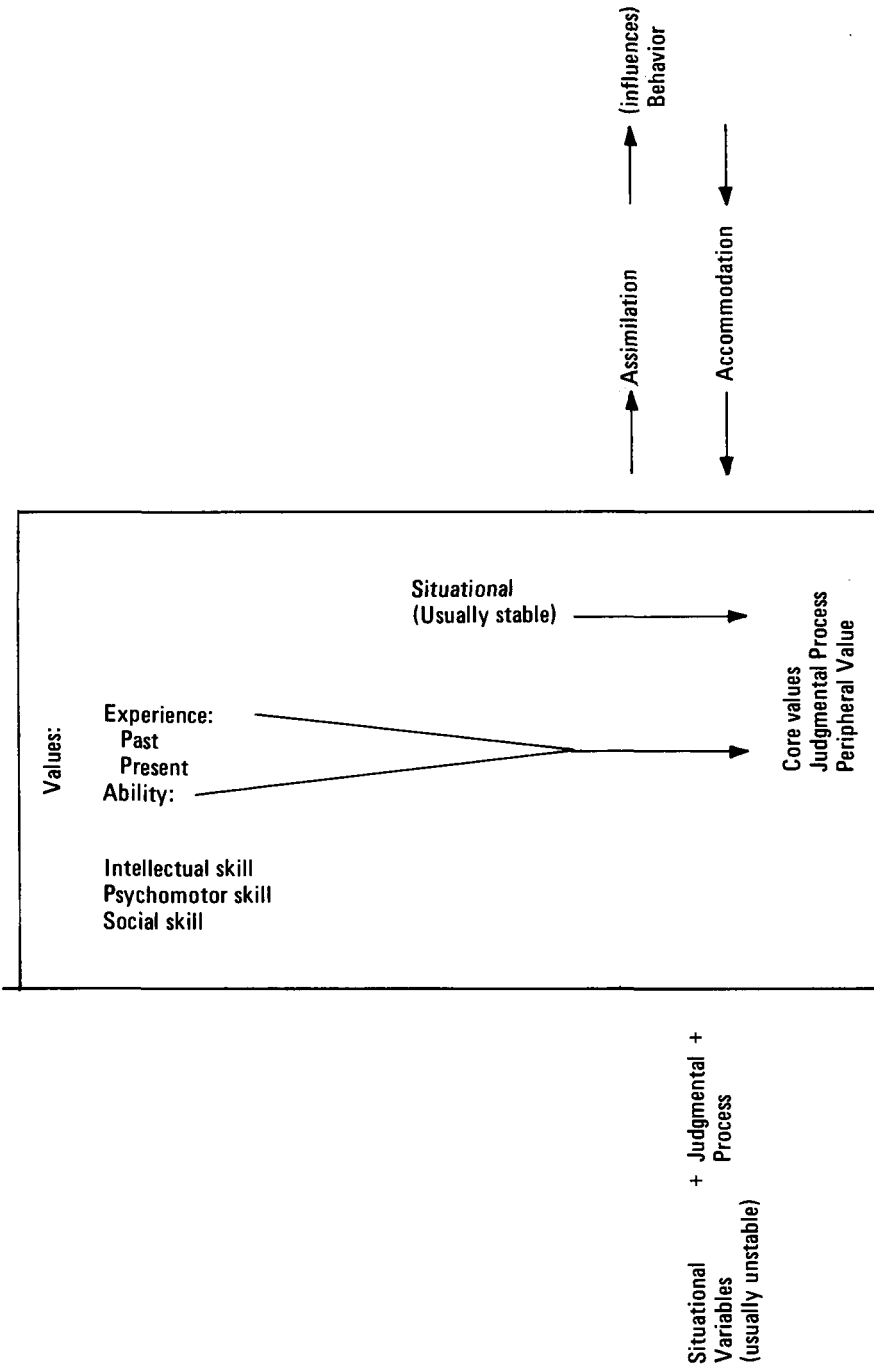


Figure 2. Variable paths for value formation and/or behavior.

situational variables are weak, the judgmental process is absolute, and the values are core. Adjustment and adaptation are not mutually exclusive phenomena.

There is also a state of insensitivity, but this is only a minor consideration because no accommodation occurs. Interactions that cause accommodation are dependent upon balance between these variables. If there is imbalance, the limiting factor determines behavior [6, 16, 17].

Assimilation and accommodation are interaction processes that selectively influence behavior (Figure 2).

Discussion

Due to a lack of congruence between theory, measurement, and research findings, there is a need for a comprehensive model that combines these three elements. With such a model, perspective can be added to social psychological research, thereby, providing a more practical base in which to utilize such information. The model offered here is a synthesis of normative and behavior measurement systems and stresses assimilation and accommodation processes for the understanding of personal actions.

The variable types included in the model only deal with definitional limits within the system since the analysis was limited to intrarelations not interrelationships. To operationalize the model, such techniques as multivariate model building and simulation must be used to clarify interrelational aspects of structure and process so that perspective and causal analysis can be maintained throughout the large variable system. The model in itself provides for a great degree of flexibility because it does not advocate any particular theory, measurement technique, or research findings, but only the relationships between variable types. Such a system permits the addition or deletion of variables as the structure and process becomes clearer because it does not seek to interpret but only to find the best possible theory and measurement techniques that clarify research findings. Additional flexibility is added to the model because it incorporated both structure and process that are common to all observed phenomena.

Technological application is most useful in information utilization when based upon a comprehensive model. Operationalization, therefore, is the next step for further development to clarify the relationship among and within the variable types.

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