

Intentional Self Development: A Relatively Ignored Construct

Anindita Bhattacharya, Charu Gupta, and Seema Mehrotra
NIMHANS, Bangalore Tech-Mahindra, New Delhi NIMHANS, Bangalore

The role of intentional plan or purpose in human development has been insufficiently addressed in empirical research. The concept of intentional self development (ISD) has brought into fore a focus on individuals' own contribution to their development. This paper aims at providing a brief overview of the construct of ISD and its conceptual overlap with other constructs. There is a scarcity of literature from India on this construct. A few exploratory studies on Indian samples are used as illustrations to bring to light the scope of future research. The limited empirical research on ISD available so far suggests that a fairly significant proportion of adults, especially youth, see themselves as active agents in their own development, set personal growth-goals, experience a sense of cognitive engagement in such goals and work towards realizing such goals. Implications of the construct of ISD for research and practice in mental health promotion are highlighted.

Keywords: Intentional Self Development, Personal growth, Growth goals

Human development has been seen for a long time as a passive process shaped by environmental forces acting on an individual's genetic predisposition. Though this approach in developmental psychology explained human nature to a large extent, it failed to address a number of questions regarding an individual's own contribution to his/her development. Until about two decades ago, the conceptualisation of human development tended to ignore intentional plan or purpose, and not much systematic research efforts were made to examine the idea of human agency (Dannefer, 1989).

Action perspectives in development have tried to fill this lacuna in the conceptualization of human development by highlighting an individual's own contribution to one's development. According to Brandstandter (2006), an individual is not only a passive product of his/her ontogeny but also an active producer of his/her development. Through the lens of action perspective, the individual is seen as a dynamic and active agent in bringing about changes in his/her own growth. The social cognitive theory too adopts an agentic perspective of human development, adaptation and change (Bandura, 1986, 2006). According to Bandura, individuals have the capacity to self-organise, self-regulate and self-reflect. The four core properties

of human agency according to this perspective are: *intentionality* (individuals plan their actions and form strategies to achieve their goals), *forethought* (individuals are capable of looking into the consequence of their prospective actions and utilise such a view to guide and motivate themselves), *self-reactive-ness* (i.e. the capacity of individuals to not only plan and make choices but also to motivate and regulate their behaviour to achieve their goals) and finally *self-reflective-ness* (the capacity to self examine one's own functioning, to self reflect on one's thoughts and action and make the appropriate changes and adjustments as needed). Thus, the core property of self- agency is the meta-cognitive aspect i.e. the ability of individuals to think about their own experiences, analyse their behaviour and use this knowledge in order to modify their actions to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1986, 2006).

Though human beings may be seen as agents of their own development, it does not imply that their actions are completely autonomous rather than situationally determined. Human development is best perceived as a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioural and environmental determinants (Bandura, 1986).

The main focus of this paper is to gain greater depth and clarity into the process of human

agency in development and highlight its implications for research and practice, in the field of mental health promotion.

Intentional Self Development (ISD)

Intentional orientation towards action mainly emerges during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, when an individual attains a capacity to plan and work towards his personal future. Though intentional self development is influenced by the prevalent socio-cultural forces, an individual actively engages in maintaining and modifying the factors that impinge on him/her, in addition to adjusting his/ her own personal goals and their pursuits in line with one's own resources, capabilities and intentions. An individual's actions also serve the purpose of maintaining a stable identity by reducing the discrepancy between one's conception of present self and future development (Brandstandter & Greeve, 1994).

Perceptions about one's capability to influence one's development can play a major role in shaping one's motivation to work towards one's goals. Individual are likely to differ from one another in terms of perceptions of their capability to shape their own development. Such individual differences may occur as a consequence of interplay between variety of life experiences and one's temperament.

The term intentional self development has been propounded by Brandstandter (2006) to refer to the process of personal growth in which an individual intentionally takes action to influence his/her own self-identity and personality. The process of intentional self development essentially involves forming personal goals, as well as plans and actions to achieve these goals. Such goals in turn affect one's concept of self. Moreover, through continuous self appraisal, an individual evaluates his goals, actions and self. Another term, personal growth has been defined by Bauer and Mc Adams (2004) as akin to intentional self development, and seen as a kind of growth that involves the intentional development of one's personality and life course. From the literature review, a subtle distinction can be made between these two concepts. Intentional self development seems to be a broader construct including goals which need not always involve

personal growth goals, but also goals that have a wider influence on an individual's life for example, working on achieving a career goal, striving for professional competence or fighting for peace and justice (Brandstandter, 2006). On the other hand, personal growth goals may be said to be more specifically centred on bringing about changes in one's own personal attributes and qualities and may or may not be influenced by other broad goals.

Intentional self development is viewed as a dynamic process, with a lot of emphasis given to the interpretive processes that aid the individual to analyse his/her actions, adjust them when necessary and utilise them to further motivate and self regulate and thereby influence one's own personal development. These interpretive processes are not only influenced by one's own experiences in the past, but also by numerous other factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and the culture a person is part of (Bauer, 2009a). The approach to study intentional self development has been mainly to explore the goals (mostly personal growth goals) that people have and the related processes (Brandstandter, 2006).

Intentional Self Development, self regulation and implicit theories of change

Self regulation is explained by Zimmerman (2000) as systematic efforts to direct thoughts, feelings and actions, toward the attainment of one's goals. It is inherently linked to goal attainment. Goal attainment reflects the ultimate purpose of self regulation. Goals are involved across different phases of self regulation (Zimmerman, 1998)

1. Forethought (setting a goal and deciding on goal strategies).
2. Performance control (employing goal-directed actions and monitoring performance).
3. Self-reflection (evaluating one's goal progress and adjusting strategies to ensure success).

According to Carver and Scheier (1998), the process of self regulation takes place at three levels: micro, mezzo and macro self regulation. Micro self regulation refers to bringing about changes in one's thought, feelings and behaviour

in the immediate moment. Mezzo self regulation is a little broader than micro in the sense that it pertains to changing one's usual pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviours in a particular context. Macro self regulation, deals with changing one's broader personality characteristics in one's self as a person. Intentional self development may be said to involve macro self regulation, with the inclusion of certain aspects of micro and mezzo levels (Bauer, 2009a).

According to Bauer (2009a) intentional self development may be said to be one form of self regulation. It differs from other forms of self regulation in terms of the depth of analysis, intentionality and emphasis on one's own self as the product of self regulation. Research on self regulation, typically views it as involving a feedback system, with the focus of self regulation being reactive rather than intentional and pro-active. On the other hand, intentional self development emphasises on the intentional aspect of self regulation; in which an individual takes initiatives towards changing one's usual pattern of thinking, feeling and behaviour. Finally, intentional self development places emphasis on self development and growth through the self regulatory process. Self evaluation of progress, subjective interpretations of one's action and strategies enhance perceived self efficacy and motivation (Schunk, 2003). Self regulation thus can be seen as a means of facilitating development of one's self-understanding and in turn bringing about changes in one's broad personality characteristics.

Recent research has also shown that individuals often depend on what is called as "implicit", "lay" or "naive" theories of personality (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Morris, Ames, & Knowles, 2001) for interpreting and predicting human behaviour, Entity and incremental theories are examples of such beliefs. Individuals are said to be entity theorists when they believe that human attributes (such as intelligence or personality) are fixed and largely resistant to change while individuals are said to hold incremental theories when they believe that human attributes are malleable and cultivable and can develop and change incrementally through a person's efforts. A number of researchers have

demonstrated that these two lay theories lead to different pattern of social perception and explanation (Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001; Plaks, Levy, Dweck, & Stroessner, 2004). According to Molden and Dweck (2006), beliefs that one's abilities and attributes are fixed and stable versus beliefs that they are dynamic and malleable, should have a pronounced effect on the way in which people interpret failure. For entity theorists, failure may signify a permanent lack of abilities. Hence, following failure, any act towards self regulation is more likely to be revolving around suppressing the importance of the failure and coping with its negative emotional impact. In contrast, for incremental theorists, failures may signify that further efforts and improvements are required to develop their attributes and thus their self regulation process following failures may often be directed at working on improving their abilities (Dweck, 1999). The research on this construct of implicit theories of change hence has significant relevance for understanding motivations underlying intentional self development goals and efforts.

Intentional self development and growth goals

Goals form an essential part of intentional self development and are reflected through an individual's plans, projects and course of action (Brandstadter, 2006) in which one invests time and effort. The implementation of these goals depend on numerous factors like, the way in which the goal is interpreted, means necessary for attaining the goal and whether the means to achieve the goal are available at personal and social level, as well as the perceived barriers which may hamper the attainment of the goals. Growth goals involve the desire for personal development and are seen as central to the initiation of intentional self development and personal growth (Bauer, 2009b).

The literature review reveals that intentional self development has been examined empirically by mainly focussing on the growth goals of people, and their outcomes on an individual's self attributes and self development. Theory and research on social-cognitive personality development emphasizes two key mechanisms of development, one cognitive i.e. the

differentiation and integration of concepts and the other social i.e. social inter-actions and dialogue. Theories of social-emotional well being tend to focus on the individual's ability to adapt to the emotional demands of everyday life (e.g., Freud, 1953; Maslow, 1968). Bauer and McAdams (2004) explored as to how the personal goals guide personality development assuming the intentionality of the development process. They utilized two studies with college students and working adults as samples. Goals oriented towards personal growth or 'growth goals' were expected to correlate differentially with two forms of personality development- social-cognitive maturity & social-emotional well being. They demonstrated that individuals' narratives that emphasized on major life goals of conceptual exploration (i.e. explicit expression of intentions to explore or otherwise learn about new perspectives) were especially likely to manifest higher levels of social-cognitive maturity. On the other hand, narratives that emphasized intrinsic interests i.e. the overt expression of intentions to do things that were intrinsically motivating, e.g. to grow personally, to foster meaningful relationships, or to contribute something to society (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995) were found to be especially likely to have higher levels of social-emotional well being. Their study indicated that people who have personal growth goals are likely to have high levels of personality development. Another interesting finding was that integration of major life goals and everyday goals with a focus on growth was related with higher levels of personality development.

Most of these studies give emphasis on narrative descriptions of growth goals. Elaborate analysis of individual narratives helps in looking in depth at the factors which influence the initiation of these goals and the processes underlying their pursuits.

***ISD research in the Indian context:
Illustrations***

ISD processes are likely to be shaped by individual level variables as well as broader socio-cultural contexts. However, research in the area of ISD is still at a nascent stage in the Indian context. Some of the relevant studies using Indian

samples, including a few completed as well as ongoing exploratory level studies carried under the supervision of the third author are briefly described below.

Perceptions of Self as an agent:

As described earlier, individuals' perceptions and beliefs regarding their own development and their implicit theories of change are likely to shape their self development goals and efforts. Gupta (2010) attempted to explore Intentional Self Development (ISD) processes in college youth. The primary objective of the study was to explore inclinations towards and engagement in ISD processes the content of ISD goals as well as to document barriers and felt needs in the process. For this purpose, the study employed an ISD exploratory data sheet which consisted of items involving Likert type ratings as well as a few open ended items. In addition, a semi structured interview was conducted with a sub sample of participants consenting for the same.

Self was viewed as the most important agent in one's development by 23% of the participants in the overall sample of 209 (18 to 25 years old) college youth. Approximately 39% indicated the belief that self and environment were equally important while a quarter expressed that non-self factors were more important and 11% indicated 'self' to have hardly any role in one's development.

The perceptions of self as an agent were explored in yet another sample as part of an ongoing study by the first and the third author that is aimed at understanding the processes and determinants underlying personal growth goals. In a heterogeneous sample of 227 urban college going youth, 29% considered self as the most important factor in their development while 35% felt that self was equally important as other factors like environment in their development. While 28% participants indicated the perception that self had some role in addition to other factors, 8% endorsed the idea that self has hardly any role in one's development. The patterns of results in this study mirror closely the observations by Gupta (2010) and highlight that even within rather homogenous samples involving college youth within a limited age range, there are individual differences on the extent to which self is seen as

an agent in influencing one's development. Such differences are in turn likely to influence individuals' ISD goals and actions.

Gupta (2010) also elicited participant's own definition of self-development through an open ended item. Content analysis of responses uncovered the multiple ways in which self development was defined by the participants. While, slightly more than 50% of lay definitions of self development involved aspects revolving solely around self (e.g. mastery of environment, gaining knowledge, confidence, patience, emotional regulation, and exploration of strengths and weaknesses), other definitions involved mention of self in relation to 'others' in divergent ways (e.g. growing and helping others to grow, self development in terms of relating well to close others, self development as involving assertion and autonomy from influence of others or self development as being guided by others). In a small set of definitions, self development was defined in terms of contribution to the society at large.

Intentional self development goals

Beyond examining individual differences in the role of self as an agent in development, exploring the presence of intentional growth goals in varied samples of adults becomes an important initial step in ISD research. Slightly more than half of the college youth (59%) in Gupta's study (2010) reported currently having an ISD goal. About 70% of these goals were defined exclusively with reference to 'self' (e.g. development of competencies / mastery) where as a few of these ISD goals involved themes related to 'self and others'. As far as the salience of such ISD goals are concerned, 58% described their current ISD goals to be as important as other current goals in life while for 12% of the youth, ISD goals were the most important current goals. Eight percent of the youth reported these goals to be unimportant while 22% did not respond to the item on salience. Apart from relative importance of ISD goals in the context of other goals, frequency of thinking about one's ISD goals was also assessed. It was found that while 49% report high cognitive engagement in intentional self development goals (thinking about it 'often/

'always'), roughly 30% reported very low cognitive engagement (thinking 'rarely'). Approximately 23% reported thinking about their current ISD goals, 'sometimes' indicating moderate level of engagement with such goals

Qualitative data in this study (Gupta, 2010) also highlighted the interconnectedness between perception of self as an agent in development on one hand and the salience of self development goals. The participants in the qualitative phase of the study also emphasised the 'process' aspects in ISD, including the role of 'significant others' as listeners and facilitators. Practical constraints in terms of lack of resources, motivational issues and accessibility of guidance emerged as some of the top most barriers to ISD. In the overall sample, slightly more than half of the participants reported high need related to 'knowing what to do' (knowledge) vis. a vis. their ISD goal, support from family and skills in handling motivational and other barriers.

In the ongoing study by the authors mentioned earlier, the focus is on personal growth goal as a special subtype of ISD goal. The presence and reporting of personal growth goals in college youth has been explored using two different approaches. Initially, an open ended item was used that asked participants to list their top five current life goals. The top goals thus generated were examined by the researchers to determine the number of goals that fell in the category of personal growth goals. It was found that out of 323 participants, 19% came up with one or more than one goal that could be classified under the category of personal growth goals; although there was a predominance of goals in the domains of career and relationships. On a subsequent item used in the same study, the participants were provided with a brief definition of personal growth goal along with some examples and then asked to respond to a question about presence/absence of a personal growth goal in their current life and mention the nature of such a goal, if any. It was found that 30% of the participants indicated presence of at least one personal growth goal on this item along with making a specific mention of the nature of the goal which could then be verified as a personal growth goal. It appears that the

reports of personal growth goals can be influenced by the nature of the approach used. The divergent frequencies of personal growth goals obtained through the above approaches as well as supplementary information through interview data provide a few leads in understanding the findings. We speculate that personal growth goals do not emerge very frequently in spontaneous listing of top personal goals because, growth goals may often be seen as a means to achieve other goals in life (e.g. learning to be persistent is a personal growth goal which may be subservient to another important goal such as doing well in academics). On the other hand, the provision of a prompt and a definition of personal growth goal tend to result in a higher proportion of participants reporting a personal growth goal. The nature of instructions provided should be such that an effect of a potential social desirability response bias is minimized. The observation in our study that only about thirty percent of participants reported a personal growth goal even on specific inquiry indicates that social desirability bias may not have played a prominent role. Based on the content of the personal growth goals, these could be grouped into the following broad categories: relational- social (e.g. decreasing shyness or frankness), cognitive (e.g. increasing decision making skills), emotional regulation (e.g. learning to handle anger) and cultivating a general sense of acceptance-peacefulness. Yet another relevant study examined the role of content, motives and styles of personal goal pursuits and their relationship with wellbeing in a sample of 141 Indian adults in their middle adulthood (35 to 60 years, mean age being 45 years). Three personal goals of topmost current importance were elicited from these study participants, yielding a pool of 423 goals. Out of this pool of personal goals, ten percent could be classified by the researcher as personal growth goal. Health goals and parenting-related goals were most frequently reported as one of their three most important current goals in this sample of midlife Indian adults. A participant-wise analysis revealed that around one fourth of the study participants had at least one current top goal with a focus on personal growth (Rao, 2009)

There have been a few studies that have focused on exploring the cultural differences in

terms goal setting, but none of them have examined ISD goals in particular. Significant cultural differences have been observed in terms of goal setting and satisfaction with one's goals between western and Indian samples in some of the studies. Researches in the area of goal pursuit have mainly explored the effect of self set goals and goals set by parents on well being. For example, Radhakrishnan and Chan (1997) investigated cultural differences in the relationship between self discrepancy and life satisfaction. In this study, Indian and American participants rated the importance of own and parental goals from their own and their parents' perspective. It was observed that Americans rated their own goals as more important than their parents' goals for them, while Indians regarded their own and their parents' goals as equally important. For Americans, the discrepancies between their own and parental ratings on personal goals predicted lower well being. On the other hand, for Indians, discrepancies between their own and parental ratings on parental goals predicted lower well being. Pandey and Singh (2009) found that as the discrepancy between parents' and their offspring, in terms of importance attached to life goals increased, the subjective well being of the latter decreased. However, satisfaction with the progress towards the life goals, either set by oneself or set by their parents, was found to be associated with greater happiness. This line of research on personal goals in general contains important issues that require exploration with respect to intentional self development goals in particular. Family was seen as a major influence in one's self development as observed in the qualitative arm of the study by Gupta (2010). It was seen as providing the participants with unconditional acceptance and motivating them towards achieving their own growth goals. Participants also mentioned the influence of their parent's attitudes and characteristics (e.g. simple living, hard working, equality in treatment) on their own growth goals. Friends were also seen as an important part of the self development process, as they formed the support systems in times of stress and difficulties. Other factors mentioned were experiences in schools and colleges, influence of teachers as well as spiritual leaders.

Similarly, the preliminary observations on the emergent interviews-based-data in the ongoing study by the authors also suggest influence of significant others in forming and working on one's personal growth goals. Future research needs to examine the extent to which intentional self development goals and processes are influenced by goals, wishes of significant others and their motivational efforts, especially in collectivistic cultures.

ISD: Implications for mental health promotion

Intentional self development with its emphasis on contribution of individuals to their own development, and the capacity of individuals to work towards their growth goals in a planned manner has immense implication in the field of mental health promotion. Although intentional self development may be conceptualized to be a life long process, its implications become rather salient in the context of a thrust on positive youth development programs in contemporary societies across the globe. According to Damon (2004), the focus of positive youth development should be on the developmental assets, talents, strengths and constructive interests of youth rather than narrowly on their vulnerabilities. According to Nicholson, Collins, and Holmer (2004) youths perform better when they are given attention, heard, respected and engaged in a meaningful way in community activities. Moreover development-systems theories (Lerner, 2002; Lerner & Galambos, 1998) also highlight the plasticity of youth development. The limited empirical research on ISD available so far suggests that a fairly significant proportion of adults, especially youth, see themselves as an active agent in their own development, set personal growth goals, experience a sense of cognitive engagement in such goals and attempt to work towards realizing such goals. This group of individuals in the community thus seem to constitute a group that needs attention of mental health professionals engaged in designing and delivery of promotive community based intervention programs. Designing of promotive programs that take in account the felt needs of individuals with respect to intentional self development goals can help in maximizing the

synchrony between intervention-contents and the requirements of a given target group in the community. Individuals with ISD goals are also likely to be the ones who are in relatively high states of psychological readiness to participate in promotive programs. Whether this translates into higher actual participation in such programs, lower drop out rates and maximal positive gains for such individuals is an arena that requires exploration. On the other hand, potential community participants of promotive programs who are low on ISD processes may require approaches that help motivational enhancement to begin with, in order to optimize psychological readiness for participating in any promotive intervention.

On the whole, intentional self development is a construct that is ripe with unexplored potentials for researchers and practitioners in the field of mental health promotion in general and positive youth development in particular.

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Received: May 06, 2012

Revised: August 06, 2012

Accepted: September 11, 2012

Anindita Bhattacharya, PhD Research Scholar, Dept of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, Bangalore - 560 029, Email: itsanindita@gmail.com

Charu Gupta, Clinical Psychologist, Tech-Mahindra, New Delhi

Seema Mehrotra, PhD, Additional Professor, Dept of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, Bangalore-29, Email: drmhrotra_seema@yahoo.com