

Sequel Primer

This Sequel takes the original book and develops the Mag/Min framework significantly in several, important ways. First, it presents a conceptualization of Becker's idea of denial in more depth and specificity. Secondly, it lays out a deeper level of the operation of denial when the self is challenged, whether by a crisis, or by the need to explore the self in more depth as the self-improvement work proceeds. Third, it introduces the dynamic of transcendence, which is a part of Becker's work, but was not developed in the original Mag/Min book. As a result of these three expansions, and the presentation of them in specific examples, the Mag/Min theory is more robust, because the foundation is more clearly elucidated, and the overall framework has more integrity. Therefore, it can be trusted even more both as a practical book, and as one with the theoretical foundation more understandable.

Denial

The original book was grounded in Becker's conceptualization of denial as an essential process for the human to handle the existential anxiety provoked by the existential paradox. Briefly, the existential paradox is the situation in which humans are aware of the fact that on the one hand, they can imagine the infinite. Language allows them to fantasize all kinds of possibilities, even that they will never die. At the same time they are aware of the fact that they have a mortal body that will eventually die. The paradox is that while both are true, they contradict each other, and the conflict is irreconcilable. Becker contends that this paradox generates existential anxiety because the conflict is about our existence, and it cannot be resolved. As a consequence, he says that in order to live a normal life, one needs denial.

In my Mag/Min framework that denial takes the form of denying one side or the other of the paradox, either the mortal side (Magnifier) or the infinite side (Minifier). The Magnifier assumes things will generally work out and one does not need to be concerned about the risks of problematic outcomes. The Minifier assumes things generally do not work out, and one does need to be concerned about the risks of problematic outcomes. The Sequel extends the conceptualization of denial in the original book into an explicit structure of a denial mode, either Mag or Min, comprised of two elements, the Directive and the Rationale, which are paired as a unit. As one is contemplating a decision, the Directive is the awareness of what to do, and the Rationale is the basis for why the person should take that action.

(To visualize the following explanations, it is helpful to consult the basic Chart for the Sequel that can be found on the Books/Sequel and Chart link on the website)

In addition, the Sequel further refines the concept of the Direction by scaling it from the extremes of either end of the continuum of Mag or Min to the Middle. Home positions at the extreme ends of the continuum, either Mag or Min, reflect lower functioning, while positions toward the Middle reflect higher functioning. At the extremes, the articulation of what to do as one considers a decision, is defined as a Rule. In the Middle range of the continuum, this articulation is defined as a Principle. The difference between them is one of internalization. When the basis for making a decision comes from operating from a Home position at the extreme of Mag or Min, the Direction comes from a determination that is external. The person is following what they have taken in from the outside world, and have accepted as valid. On the other hand, from a Home position in the Middle range, the Direction comes from a determination arrived at from internal exploration, validated by their experiences.

Level I and Level II

Most of the time people are not aware of the operation of their denial mode, which of course is exactly how the denial is supposed to work. However, there are times when the self is challenged by a crisis, or even by the work the person is doing on self for example, in therapy. This prompts reflection about the denial mode, which then emerges into the person's awareness. In the Sequel, I am defining this process as moving to a deeper level, defined as Level II. It is the level where the stability of the denial mode is disrupted and the person is working to recover it.

The original book proposed that the work of self-improvement involves experimenting with one's pattern of decision-making to move the Home position more toward the Middle. If a person is a Mag, the experiment is to modify the Direction by allowing the possibility of more limitations, taking risks more seriously. If the person is a Min, the experiment is to modify the Direction by allowing for more possibilities, with less focus on risks. In Level I this experimentation in decision-making is focused on specific situations, like one's relationship with one's spouse or children, one's job or one's health. In Level II, because the self is challenged and the denial mode is disrupted, the exploration extends to a broader range of one's experiences. The person questions their pattern of decision-making across more areas of their life than just a specific area as in Level I.

Because the Rationale component of the denial mode is paired with the Direction, any modifications to the Direction from the experimentation, modifies the Rationale as well. So if the Mag changes the pattern to allow more limitations, the reason why they are doing that, changes the previous Rationale. Similarly, if the Min changes the pattern to allow more possibilities, the reason why they are doing that, changes the previous Rationale. This paired modification of the denial mode moves the Home position more toward the Middle of the continuum.

It is also possible that the work of exploration in Level II, prompted by a challenge to the self, leads a choice to not experiment with a change in the

denial mode. In that case, the original denial mode is reinforced and the stability of the self returns to where it was before the disruption, and the Home position stays at the same point on the continuum.

Transcendence

Becker talks about the need for a transcendent to support the essential need for denial. While I do not dispute the need for a transcendent, the Mag/Min theory proposes that the operation of a transcendent is different for a Magnifier and a Minifier. This difference becomes apparent in the Rationale component of the denial mode, and in its pairing with the Direction.

This leads to the conceptualization of two dimensions of transcendence. From the perspective of the denial modes of Mag and Min, transcendence is a process, outside of awareness, not an idea. Magnification and Minification as denial modes provide transcendence of the Existential Paradox through protection from the simultaneous awareness of living and dying, by denying one or the other. This protection from the awareness is more complete at the extremes and less complete with more awareness and existential anxiety in the middle range, but still denial of the opposite, just less so.

However, when the self is challenged in a way that disrupts the denial mode, the person moves into Level II, and the awareness of the denial process comes to the fore. With this increase in existential anxiety from the awareness of the denial mode components of Direction and Rationale, comes more of a focus on the Rationale, which supports the previous pattern of decision-making. At this point, the other dimension of transcendence becomes apparent.

As explained above, transcendence is the process of denial common to both Mag and Min, but carried out differently for each in the denial mode. This happens usually outside of one's everyday awareness as the denial

protects. In the process dimension of transcendence, the Rationale component justifies the actions taken as one makes decisions, but does not function as a transcendent idea because it is more limited to specific situations.

However, when the self is challenged and the person moves into Level II, the exploration to recover the stability of the self, can lead to the questioning of the larger basis for the pattern of decision-making across multiple situations. In this case, the Rationale becomes more of a transcendent idea. This is the other dimension of transcendence in this Mag/Min framework. I sometimes refer to the two dimensions of transcendence as “little t” and Big T.”

Systems

Just as the original Mag/Min book is thoroughly grounded in systems theory, the Sequel is as well. Actually, the expanded elements of the Sequel further reinforce this grounding in systems thinking. The format of the Sequel follows that of the original in that the dynamics of Mag/Min are first presented, as they are in this primer, from the perspective of the individual person, and then transposed onto the template of systems, like the family.

In the original, this shift to systems occurs by framing the dynamics of denial in terms of the operations of triangles. The Sequel similarly presents the expanded elements presented above in this primer, by describing specific examples of triangles in a family. So, these examples of triangles incorporate the three elements of: the Direction and Rational components of the denial mode of Mags and of Mins; Level I and Level II; and transcendence.

Note

This Mag/Min theory is surprisingly complex in spite of its intuitive simplicity. While there is a summary of the Mag/Min theory in the

beginning of this Sequel, the reader can profit much more from the in-depth exploration of it in this book, after having read the original.