

On the Concept of “Lived Choice” and Its Potential Uses in Sociological Theory

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce the idea of “lived choice” proposed by Japanese sociologist Takahashi Yoshinori (e.g. Takahashi 2005, 2007, 2008) and to scrutinize its significance in sociological theory. The discussion has three stages as follows.

First, three components of the concept in Takahashi’s own view are identified: “disarming of the self” as the beginning, retrospective construction of lived choice at the moment of decision-making in action, and “open sociality” as the dimension of social order that sits behind the concept.

Second, I will probe the implications of the concept in its own right. The originality of the idea of “lived choice,” in my opinion, lies in its fundamental logical structure of “modal understanding.” To test this view, the structure is generalized as an explanatory methodology in action theory and compared with the deductive-nomological typology as an individualist position. The comparison focuses on the differences in the ways in which the two methodologies include contingency in the choice of action.

Finally, the discussion examines the possibilities of the concept and three problems that arise from the generalization: the subjectivity/objectivity of contingency, the temporal horizon of lived choice, and the two dimensions of uniqueness and effectiveness that constitute lived choice.

The paper concludes that the concept of lived choice and its methodology could usefully occupy a unique position in sociological theory and play a complementary role to the existing theoretical system in general, and the individualist-nomological system in particular.

1. An Introduction to the Concept of “Lived Choice”

Takahashi (2005) describes his concept of “lived choice” as follows.

Lived choice (choix vécu) is a concept that has been proposed by the author, in an effort to develop a theory of social action. *Lived choice* is the experience of being fascinated by or attracted to something. Such an experience is, as it were, the disarming of one’s self vis-à-vis *that*

something. The person who has such an experience has a special connection with *that* something in that the person disarms only in relation to *that* something. In that sense, the person can be said to have made an unintentional choice of *that* something. This choice, as opposed to the choice as an act, is that which is lived. That is why such a choice is called here *lived choice*.

The idea of lived choice, as described above, originates in an attempt to extend the horizon of action theory, which tends to pay attention exclusively to the “dimension of the institution” and overlook the “dimension of life.” The “dimension of the institution” means an aspect of sociality that is fixed in human action through institutions, while the “dimension of life” refers to an aspect of sociality that is generated from human action *per se*¹⁾. Such actions, which originally created social institutions, according to the creator who coined “lived choice,” consist of neither purposive rationality nor normativity. If they are classified according to the four types of action proposed by Max Weber, it can be classified only as “affective action.” Further, this kind of affective action, which has neither rationality nor normativity, can originate solely in lived choice²⁾. It is not possible to interpret the “dimension of life” within a social action without tracing back to the moment when the experience that enables the action, namely “lived choice,” occurred.

The description above is a brief outline of Takahashi’s concept of lived choice. The concept is investigated in more detail below, through a consideration of its three components: 1) the “disarming of the self” as the beginning, 2) the retrospective construction of lived choice at the moment of decision-making in action, and 3) “open sociality” as the dimension of social order that sits behind the concept.

1) *“Disarming of the self” as the beginning.* The idea of the “disarming of the self” is influenced by the concept of the “experience of dissolution.” The concept was coined by the Japanese sociologist Sakuta Kei’ichi (1993) to refer to the experience when subjectivity and objectivity melt into each other and become undifferentiated. An action that is described in sociology usually supposes an agent who has selected it, whereas the experience of dissolution, according to its advocates, deprives the agent of his/her subjectivity. Takahashi (2005, 2007) expresses this phenomenon as “the disarming of one’s self.” An agent who encounters the “key object,” in other words, has no choice but to dissolve the boundary of his/her “self” and unify themselves directly with the object. This “de-differentiation” or “unification” between the subjectivity of an agent and the objectivity of the key object is the essential component of the disarming of the self³⁾. Moreover, the concept of lived choice includes the experience as the beginning phase that affects the following phase of decision-making in action.

2) *Retrospective construction of lived choice at the moment of decision-making in action.* “Lived choice” is a bipolar concept, namely, it exists within the space between the disarming of the self and decision-making in action. The concept’s *raison d’être* lies in the relationship between the two poles

and interpreting the influence of the former on the latter⁴⁾. We can discover the second component of “lived choice” through considering the relationship between experience and action - that is, the constructivist character of lived choice. Disarming of the self, the first component, is constructed retrospectively as lived choice at the moment of decision-making in action. Disarming of the self, in a sense, is experienced twice, at the beginning and the end of the process of lived choice. The causal relationship between both poles of lived choice, therefore, is not linear but circular. The questions and possibilities raised by the circular nature of lived choice are discussed in more detail in the consideration of the temporal horizon in section 3.

3) “*Open sociality*” as the dimension of social order that sits behind the concept. “Open sociality,” the third component of “lived choice,” relates to macro-sociological or collective phenomena, while the first two exist at the micro-sociological or individual level. Open sociality, which stems from Henri Bergson’s philosophical term *société ouverte*, means sociality open to all humanity. It emerges out of “pure memory” (*souvenir pur*), surpassing dynamically existing social institutions and norms, and consequently, it, to a greater or lesser degree, invests lived choice with trans-individuality⁵⁾. Needless to say, as Takahashi himself notes, not all lived choice is accompanied necessarily by open sociality to its full depth⁶⁾. It is, in other words, a case-by-case question how deeply a lived choice assumes such sociality. Whether and how this aspect should be taken as a dimension of lived choice is discussed in section 3.

2. Generalization of the Concept: Elucidation of its Logical Structure

This section generalizes the concept of lived choice in its own right, namely, according to its own logic, whereas the previous section summarized advocates’ assertions about it. First, several problems that arise from the use of lived choice for a typology of action are critiqued. Second, the logical structure of the concept is elucidated and compared with the deductive-nomological typology in individualist sociology, to reveal the uniqueness of the concept and its role.

2.1 Problems arising from the use of “Lived Choice” for a Typology of Action

Action motivated by lived choice, according to Takahashi (2005, 2007), is pure affective action uncontaminated by any utility or normativity. The concept of lived choice, therefore, corresponds with one ideal type of action. This restrictive definition certainly provides convincing reasons for establishing the concept as unique in sociology, but some problems over its generalization for sociological investigation arise at the same time. Three critical ones are summarized concisely below.

First, it is uncertain whether the concept can occupy a truly independent position in action or sociological theory. If lived choice were defined solely through the absence of utility or normativity,

it would be merely a residual category with no independent nature at all. Alternatively, if it coincided with affective action in general, there would be no need to coin a new concept. Takahashi does not adopt such strategies but characterizes lived choice with particularity or singularity as that which emerges when a particular individual encounters a particular object, that is, the “key object.” This characterization, which presupposes the absence of alternative objects or actions, is, however, at risk of falling into tautology or *petitio principii*, as it suggests that the key object alone must be selected by the agent because he/she has nothing else to select. If so, the concept will not be able to assert its unique relationship to action theory.

The second problem concerns the distinction between form and object. Through focusing on “forms” of action, lived choice is used as the definition of a certain kind of affective action. Lived choice is characterized as the essential relationship between the choice and the key object, as it is founded upon the perspective of observing the “objects” of experience or action. One form of action, namely, an ideal type of action, must not be confused with others. On the contrary, an object of action exists in principle in any type of action, including utilitarian and normative actions. If so, is there any reason why the essential relationship with the key object cannot be found in any type of choice in addition to affective choices? No. Utilitarian or normative actions may have a relationship with the key object that originated in the lived choice. Forms and objects of action, therefore, are in a tense relationship one another within the original definition of lived choice: the former tends towards specialization, while the latter includes the possibility of generalizing the concept so it applies to any type of action. In this regard, Takahashi himself approves the phenomena of “metamorphosis” from the “key object” to a “desirable object” which is desired by the subject⁷⁾. A desirable object, which has been transformed from a key object, may be desired by the agent institutionally, that is, rationally or normatively. Such an object may also be acquired affectively or customarily. If the metamorphosis of the key object is permitted as a derivative phenomenon of lived choice, there seems, even more, to be no necessity to attribute lived choice exclusively to the ideal type of affective action.

The third problem relates to the theoretical foundation of the concept. Takahashi himself founds his original concept upon Bergson’s philosophy, that is, the idea of “*souvenir pur*.” We will not discuss the propriety of this argument directly. Here we indicate solely that such a philosophical foundation, based on a certain philosopher or, more precisely, a metaphysical position, seems predestined to narrow its empirical applicability in sociological investigations, because of the difficulty in proposing a definitive criterion for its application to empirical research⁸⁾.

The three problems discussed above suggest a limit to the use of the concept of lived choice for a typological definition of action. The next subsection attempts a possible generalization of the concept through the elucidation of its fundamental logical structure.

2.2 The Fundamental Logical Structure of "Modal Understanding"

This subsection elucidates the fundamental logical structure of the concept "lived choice." In order to make the significance of the structure clear, it is compared with the logical structure of so-called deductive-nomological explanations (Hempel & Oppenheim 1948) for two reasons. One is that both "lived-choice-driven" and deductive-nomological typologies are commonly interested in choice as the fundamental explanandum, so that the difference between the two logical structures relates to how each deals with the contingency inherent in any choice. The other is that both typologies adopt methodological individualism, and therefore the role that the lived-choice-driven typology could play in sociological theory is evaluated according to how deeply each explanatory typology clarifies the particularity or singularity of an individual's choice. This comparison makes it clear that the concept employs a unique methodology called "modal understanding," and the "lived" of "lived choice" means the synthesis of both aspects of modality, namely, contingency and necessity within an individual's choice. In our conclusion, the concept of lived choice occupies a unique position in sociological theory in this respect.

To be contingent is to be "neither necessary nor impossible" (Luhmann 1984). "Contingency" means the negation of both impossibility and necessity. The contingent is that which could be otherwise. In other words, it is accompanied necessarily by alternatives that have not been chosen under the extant circumstances. A choice that cannot be the case without alternatives is necessarily contingent. To explain a choice is precisely to explain the contingency inherent in the choice. The two explanatory sociological typologies discussed here, the lived-choice-driven and the deductive-nomological, whose fundamental explanandum is decision-making in action as choice, deal with the contingency inherent in choice in different ways and in contrasting and even complementary styles.

Hempel & Oppenheim (1948) propose a scheme for deductive-nomological explanation (*the DN typology* in the following). It includes three components: laws, boundary conditions (both constitute explanans), and explanandum. This means that if and only if both law and boundary conditions exist, then explanandum can and must occur. In the DN typology, contingency is processed as follows. A decision-making in action as explanandum is placed side by side with the alternatives that would take place if the choice were not chosen. In this step, an explanandum and all of its alternatives are equivalent to each other in terms of what can be chosen by the subject. Two kinds of explanans are carried into the explanation as the next step in order to distinguish the choice from the alternatives. While laws provide criteria for distinction, boundary conditions play roles as factors of distinction. The DN typology, therefore, entails *the negation of contingency as equivalence through explanans as generality*. The explanandum can be explained only when the contingency inherent in it is absorbed into generality as explanans. This absorption of contingency into generality is the very core of the logical structure of the DN typology.

The explanatory typology that is based on and driven by the concept of lived choice (*the LC typology* in the following) has, in contrast to the DN typology, a logical structure that does not erase contingency, but rather sublates it through a contradiction to necessity as a negation of it. In the LC typology, the chosen as explanandum is within the “horizon of modality” which lies between two poles of modality: contingency and necessity. It appears as a synthesis that holds both contradictory aspects of modality simultaneously and interconnects them as inseparable from each other. In the DN typology, the chosen is placed side by side with the alternatives that are equivalent to it, that is, contingency within a choice that is externally opposed to necessity appears in the form of *probability*. Contingency as probability is connected to necessity through the intervention of general laws and boundary conditions. The fundamental question of the DN typology is why and how necessity is manifested in reality *in spite of* contingency. In the LC typology, lived choice is represented as retrospective choice in the moment of decision-making in action. Lived choice is choice, not because it is compared with the alternatives, but because the contingency inherent in the choice enables necessity. The relationship with the key object, in other words, is essential and hence necessary *only because* the choice could have been otherwise, that is, it is contingent. The fundamental aim of the LC typology is to understand *why and how the subject finds necessity for him/herself in a chosen object or experience that is originally contingent for him/herself*. The term “modal understanding” is employed to encompass such a complicated and dialectic relationship between both aspects of modality. In modal understanding, contingency does not appear as probability, as in the case of the DN typology, but as *fatefulness*. Modal understanding, which interprets a lived choice as a fateful encounter with the key object, is the cardinal logical structure of the LC typology.

The logical structure of the LC typology and its relationship with the DN typology is examined in the following. In the writer’s opinion, the structure, whose originality lies in modal understanding, may play a complementary role to the DN sociological explanation. Both types are bound together by the methodological stance of individualism that asserts that a choice as explanandum cannot be explained satisfactorily until the subjective meaning of the choice to the agent is understood. The criterion for the comparison of the significance of both logical structures is the *individuality of the event* that is revealed through each typology. In the DN typology, an individual agent, the action that he/she chooses, and the situation in which the action was chosen, are each classified as certain types. The reason for this is that an action or a decision as the explanandum chosen by an individual in a certain situation must be explicable through general laws and boundary conditions constructed according to a certain typology. The DN typology focuses, therefore, merely on the probabilistic connections between general variables: a typical individual chooses a certain type of action under certain typical boundary conditions in accordance with certain general laws. The LC typology focuses, in contrast, on a singular event where a concrete individual makes a choice in a singular

situation that is significant, primarily, precisely for the person in question. While the DN typology seeks to reveal the individuality of the event to be explained from the perspective of *typicality*, the LC typology aims to elucidate the individuality of lived choice from the perspective of *singularity*. Individuality is typically characterized in the DN typology as in principle an effect arising from existing socio-cultural factors. Individuality as singularity in the LC typology, on the other hand, confronts us with an “epoch-making” event, where an individual creates history independent of existing socio-cultural factors. Therefore, the individuality on which the LC typology focuses lies deeper than the DN typology can reach. For, being truly independent of the socio-cultural and enabling subjectivity of a subject in the first place, the former individuality is primordial and the latter is its derivative. Further, the originality of the LC typology lies in its ability to allow us to understand and *relive* how an individual came to interpret the contingency of his/her choice as necessary, namely, to accept it as a *lived* choice. This argument also plays a complementary role to the DN typology in terms of its absolute comprehension of individuality.

In conclusion, the concept of lived choice as argued above (summarized in Table 1) should not be used for a particular typology of action, but should be regarded as a universal aspect inherent in any type of action, latently at the least, and the fundamental logical structure of modal understanding has sufficient independent significance for sociological investigation.

Table 1 Two typologies of sociological explanation

typology	contingency inherent in choice as	individuality of event as	how to deal with contingency by	how to interpret an explanandum as
DN	probability	typicality	absorbing into generality	effect of socio- cultural factors
LC	fatefulness	singularity	sublating with necessity	epoch-making creativity

3. Related Problems and Possibilities that Arise from Generalization

This section analyses three problems that arise from the generalization that the previous section asserts in order to scrutinize the possibilities of the idea of lived choice. They are: 1) the subjectivity/objectivity of contingency, 2) the temporal horizon of lived choice, and 3) the two dimensions of uniqueness and effectiveness that constitute lived choice.

The first issue is who can and should identify contingency in a lived choice. At first glance, it appears an easy matter to answer this question, because the person who experiences lived choice, according to the definition, is the agent him/herself. The generalized model of lived choice proposed

here, however, recognizes “subjective contingency” of this kind, which is apparent to the subject him/herself, but also “objective contingency,” which can be observed by others. Objective contingency enables others to trace the moment of lived choice that is no longer contingent for the agent him/herself. In this general model, which regards lived choice as a latent aspect inherent in any type of action, an observer (a sociologist) can inquire whether the decision-making in question originates in the lived choice of its key object. If the question is answered affirmatively, he/she can seek to understand how the lived choice occurred and how the experience was lost from the agent’s mind so that the object has metamorphosed into a desirable object.

The second issue is the temporal horizon of lived choice. An experience of the forced disarming of one’s own self is a momentary event, whereas a lived choice is always constructed retrospectively in the moment of decision-making in action. “Retrospective construction” of lived choice means that relationships between lived choice and decision-making are not unidirectional but interactive. If so, each phenomenon of lived choice lies between the two poles of the temporal horizon: momentariness and continuousness. The “momentary phase” of lived choice refers to the moment when the choice initially takes place. The “continuous phase,” in contrast, refers to the retrospective construction of the experience. Our general model, which accepts such a wide-ranging temporal horizon from momentariness to continuousness, makes it possible to pay attention to the continuous and interactive relationships of retrospective construction between lived choice and decision-making.

The last point at issue is the two dimensions constituting lived choice: uniqueness and effectiveness. The “uniqueness” of lived choice, on the one hand, means the degree to which the connection between an agent and an object is extraordinary, that is, beyond the expectation based on ordinary or typical social (and sociological) factors. The “effectiveness” of lived choice, on the other hand, means the extent to which a lived choice changes existing social relationships, structures, or systems and contributes to the formation of a novel social order. These two dimensions should be considered independently so they intersect. Figure 1, which includes both dimensions, shows the typology of action originating in lived choice: monumental, revolutionary, typical, and heroic. This typology is summarized as follows. Monumental action, which is especially unique and especially effective, is accomplished typically by a historical figure who creates an epoch or a novel social order. This type of action is particularly suited to being connected with the concept of lived choice. Revolutionary action, which is not so unique but especially effective, refers to a collective movement that follows a monumental action and, as a result, establishes the new social relationships or order that the monumental action created. Typical action, which is neither so unique nor effective, reproduces the existing social order, and therefore it is explained successfully, not by the LC typology but rather by the DN typology. However, it is noticeable that our general model understands the experience of lived choice as inherent in any type of action. Further, heroic action, which is not as effective but is

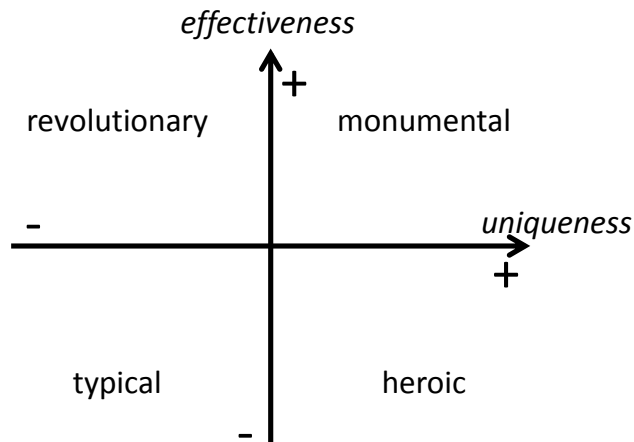


Figure 1 Typology of action resulting from lived choice

especially unique, is another type of action that is particularly appropriate for the concept of lived choice, because it exceeds existing social institutions or norms, no matter how good or evil its consequences are for society.

“Open sociality”, one of the three components of lived choice as discussed in section 1, is a sub-dimension of uniqueness, as uniqueness encompasses openness to all humankind as a form of extraordinariness. If so, an action resulting from lived choice with sufficient open sociality can be classified as either monumental or heroic.

The general model of lived choice proposed briefly above recognizes objective contingency, the continuous phase, and the two dimensions of uniqueness and effectiveness as the components of lived choice.

4. Conclusion

My conclusions are summarized in four points as follows.

1) Lived choice is the sociological concept whose two essential components are the disarming of the self and retrospective construction in the moment of decision-making in action.

2) The fundamental logical structure of the concept is modal understanding, in which a choice as explanandum is placed in the space between contingency and necessity, in order to elucidate the manner in which the agent sublates both aspects of the choice.

3) The concept of lived choice should include the following three aspects in order to be inherent in any type of action: objective contingency, the continuous phase, and the two dimensions of uniqueness and effectiveness.

4) The concept of lived choice, with the fundamental logical structure and general character in

sociological observation as summarized above, may occupy a unique position in sociological theory and play a complementary role to the deductive-nomological model in methodological individualism.

Notes

- 1) “Lived choice is, in my opinion, a process independent of normative control in society. [...] It is crucially important to recognize that there is lived choice, or a dimension which moves independent of directions from institutions.” (Takahashi 2007: 7)
- 2) “[...] [S]elf-interest, value, and affect are constructed exclusively as three categories. When the distinction between self-interest, value, and affect is scrutinized thoroughly, affect turns out to appear in the sense of lived choice.” (Takahashi 2007: 95)
- 3) “Disarming of the self,” according to Takahashi (private conversation), is more inclusive than the “experience of dissolution,” because the latter emphasizes the disappearance of the objectivity of the object as its essential component, but the former does not.
- 4) “While the experience of dissolution is [...] the concept that focuses on the experience of relinquishing the distinction between subject and object, the cardinal intellectual interest of the concept of lived choice lies persistently in action. What is important is [...] how the experience influences the choice of action *ex post facto*.” (Takahashi 2007: 20)
- 5) “Because people [touch pure memory: T. A.] in the ‘disarming of one’s self’ of lived choice, every lived choice generally is an experience of trans-individuality.” (Takahashi 2007: 50)
- 6) “Open sociality,” according to Takahashi (private conversation), is not a necessary condition for lived choice, but it can be understood only in the case that the key object is a person or people or their attributes.
- 7) “Once a fiction which regards the relationship between the key object and an agent as that between ‘donor-and-recipient’ is adopted, the key object itself, in turn, will come to be desired. [...] The key object metamorphoses into a desirable object in this way.” (Takahashi 2007: 187)
- 8) The significance of adopting the idea of “pure memory,” according to Takahashi (private conversation), lies in the fact that it leads an observer (a sociologist) into paying attention to the background of a lived choice, which consists of the life history as a whole of the agent.

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