

Magnification and Minification

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Introduction

This Primer is a synopsis of my book. It is intended to serve as a prelude so that people will have a general outline of the Magnification/Minification framework to read before the book is published.

The main ideas are here, but the whole framework is not developed. The book will present a more complete explanation of how the dynamic of Magnifying or Minifying works as it defines the self. It also presents a more complete explanation of the practical aspects of working with the framework, including a guide of 6 steps. In this way readers can understand how it applies to them and how they can use it.

The foundational ideas behind the framework presented in the book will be recognizable to my supervisees, clients, students, readers of this website, and others. These ideas include the differentiation of self from Bowen theory, language, self/systems and existential anxiety.

Major Ideas

1. People live their lives from a fundamental position of either Magnification or Minification. This basic mode becomes the determining factor in making decisions throughout life, as it is always the primary focus.

When confronted with a situation of having to make a decision about taking action, one could say that a major factor is the consideration of the probability of a favorable outcome versus an unfavorable one. While there is always the possibility either could happen, in making this calculation people

operating from Magnification minimize the possibility of failure. They focus primarily on the possibility of success. It is the opposite for people operating from Minification. They focus primarily on the possibility of failure and diminish awareness of the possibility of success. For both, the calculation relies on a perception that favors the likelihood of one or the other. To the extent this pattern of Magnification or Minification overrides a balanced assessment of the evidence, both are distortions. The best decisions are ones made with a more balanced consideration of what is possible and what is not possible.

People operating from Magnification assume that things generally will work out, especially if you try. They make decisions, both little ones like whether to buy some new clothes or continue to wear the old ones, as well as big ones like whether or not to marry their lover, on this basis.

People operating from Minification assume that things do not always work out, and you need to be prepared for disappointment and failure. They too make decisions, both little and big, on this basis.

2. While a person operates only from one or the other, Magnification or Minification, these two modes of living life are on a continuum, with the extreme of Magnification on one side and the extreme of Minification on the other. Points near the extremes represent lower levels of functioning and those closer to the middle, higher levels of functioning.

For people operating on the extreme ends of the continuum, the perception of the possibility of success or failure is skewed toward one or the other, reducing the likelihood of making a good decision. For people operating more toward the middle of the continuum from either side, the perception is more balanced as it includes consideration of both a favorable and an unfavorable outcome.

The following are a few examples of what I mean by operating from the extreme of Magnification: continuing to do physical workouts when tired, risking injury; continually pushing a child to excel in academics, or sports, to the exclusion of rest, sleep, and quiet time; demanding that employees work overtime regularly to grow the business, eroding morale.

The following are a few examples of what I mean by operating from the extreme of Minification: going on a crash diet, desperate to lose weight out of fear of gaining even more; applying for a job well below one's qualifications, not wanting to seem over-confident; marrying a partner with serious problems, feeling it is the best he or she can do.

Closer to the middle on the Magnification side is a person who often takes charge but recognizes she needs to slow down and listens seriously to objections people have to her ideas; or the person who buys a lot on credit, but recognizes the need to not incur costly interest charges and limits his spending when necessary.

Closer to the middle on the Minification side is a person who is a good listener and often quiet, but recognizes he needs to speak up and does, when he knows he has something important to say; or the person who only buys necessities and keeps things for a long time, but recognizes the need to replace worn-out items and does buy new things to enhance her productiveness.

Here is one of the many charts in the book. It is one of the basic ones of the Magnification/Minification continuum that displays the general range of characteristics of functioning at several points.

Click on Chart 0.1 on this Book page of this website to see it.

3. Magnification/Minification is a framework that describes a universal dynamic of the self, with decision-making as its primary vehicle.

Operating from a position of Magnification or Minification, is a way to manage a deep anxiety about living in the world, and a person can be calmer and ultimately more productive by operating closer in to the middle from either of the extremes on this continuum of Magnification/Minification.

This framework assumes that the self is a critical means for managing anxiety about life and death, about survival. I know that the way to make it in the world is to either assume that you have to do what you have to do and

take risks, or to assume that you have to be careful. Those assumptions about how the world works and what it takes to survive, define who I am and drive the way I live my life. This anxiety is what creates the dynamic of operating from half-full or half-empty, because the ambiguity of the middle position is too frightening. I have to know it is one or the other.

This framework also provides a way for a person to shift the point of basic functioning by changing the pattern of his or her decision-making and thereby change the self. A change to higher functioning is always toward the middle of the continuum where there is more vulnerability, but where the anxiety is tolerable because life goes better as one is more functional. Change away from the middle, toward either extreme, is regressive to lower functioning.

4. This is a powerful idea because of its simplicity and practicality.

People can usually tell quickly whether their Home position on the continuum is Magnification or Minification. From then on, this framework provides a template for understanding the patterns of one's decision-making. People find they do not have to waste time and energy trying to figure out how they generally act.

This clarity about self, derived from this framework, then offers a practical way to make better decisions in the future. If you know you operate from the Magnification side, you know that to change the pattern to increase your level of functioning, you always need to incorporate minification into the basis for your decisions. If you know you operate from the Minification side, you know you always need to incorporate magnification into the basis for your decisions.

Some people are not able to tell immediately which side they operate from. They genuinely think that they either go back and forth from one side to the other, or operate on one side in certain situations and on the other in other situations. My experience, validated over and over again in presenting this material, is that everyone does indeed operate from one side or the other, not both.

The resolution of this problem of confusion about both sides is that there is the "Basic" mode of operation, defined by the Home position, but

also a "Social" mode. The Social may be the same as or different from the Basic one but it is just a secondary, though important, deviation from the Home position. In any case, it is the Basic one that determines the pattern of decision-making, and it is the Basic one people work with to make changes in their lives.

Therefore people who can identify their Home position immediately probably have Basic and Social modes that are the same, either Mag or Min, and people who are not clear right away probably have a Basic, Home position that varies from their Social one.

5. How do you work with this framework and how does change happen?

First steps

I have identified 3 phases to begin to use this framework:

1. Identify the Home position
2. Identify specific behaviors that reflect current decision-making patterns
3. Experiment with making decisions that reflect movement toward the middle.

Home position

A simple test to help determine which side of the continuum the Home position is on, is to ask yourself which you are more afraid of, too much magnification or too much minification. What scares you more: being powerful, smart, a leader; or knowing your place, being humble, taking direction? The same test in the opposite way is to ask yourself: which you are more comfortable with, accepting diminished possibilities or magnified possibilities of favorable outcomes.

Behaviors

Behaviors can reveal the pattern of decision-making that marks the home position of either Magnification or Minification. Initially a person uses anxiety as an important measure of where the home position is. People from Minification are afraid of magnification and

people from Magnification are afraid of minification. Then as they begin to reflect on their experiences in the past or imagine future situations, they also notice behaviors that go with their pattern of decision-making that grounds them on one side or the other of the continuum.

A person operating from Magnification realizes that he most often will take on a challenge. He will say yes. That is a specific behavior for him that reveals and maintains his home position on the Magnification side of the continuum. Similarly, a person from Minification notices that he almost always declines when presented with an opportunity to do something new. He always has to think about it. He always says ‘maybe.’

Experimentation through decisions

Knowing the behavior makes this framework very concrete in the daily lives of people. The person from Magnification can recognize the operation of this protection mechanism each time he says yes to a challenge automatically. He can use the awareness of the pattern of that specific behavior as a concrete and practical tool to change himself. He can experiment with powerful changes to his self simply by not saying yes to those challenges, taking some time and thinking about it. In the same way, the person from Minification can experiment with saying yes immediately without thinking about it. For each of them this is very simple direction, not complicated with many different variations to consider. And this simplicity can be trusted because of the reliability of the home position, which does not waver from one side to the other.

6. Change

My interest in this framework is about change. That’s why I am a therapist and a teacher. This framework of Magnification/Minification offers a concrete way to change the self by modifying the patterns of one’s decision-making. Behaviors reflect those patterns of decision-making. People who operate from Magnification will behave in ways that support their not having to deal with possible failures. People who operate from Minification will behave in ways that support their not having to deal with possible successes. To the extent they maintain this Home position neither

can learn from their mistakes. The decision-making patterns continue. The person from Magnification ignores what went wrong and the person from Minification ignores what went right. To make changes, people must experiment with making different decisions that lead to different behaviors.

Ongoing experimentation then leads to a disruption of the pattern as one becomes more aware of how one operates. Eventually people from Magnification begin to realize that, on balance, allowing minifications really does work out better in the long run, and people from Minification realize the same thing about allowing magnification. They then continue to monitor their decision-making and opt more and more to make decisions that move the home position more toward the middle. Of course, as they do this, their behaviors change. People from Magnification behave in less risky ways and people from Minification take more risks. These behavioral changes become more stable and now reflect a different pattern. At the same time people from Magnification think differently about themselves as do people from Minification. Now the self has changed as people act differently and think differently about who they are and why they do what they do.

To this point this whole presentation of this framework has been oriented toward the functioning of one person. It needs to be presented this way in order for people to understand it conceptually and then apply it to themselves. However the framework has much more power, as people can understand it in a broader perspective of systems thinking.

It is one thing to understand one person's process of Magnification or Minification through his or her behaviors and ongoing decision making, but quite another to understand the pattern of that person as part of the dynamics of say a family or an organization. Then one can conceive of that person's Mag or Min as part of a larger pattern of that system.

For example, a mother who operates from Magnification has a daughter and always challenges her to do her best. She responds to her mother's challenges with always challenging herself and begins to operate from Magnification herself. Her younger sister over the years has developed a pattern of not engaging in this dynamic, not challenging herself, but acting more passively, taking life as it comes and adopting a more accepting attitude. She has developed a pattern of operating from Minification, but one could speculate that her Home position of Minification is influenced and maintained by the Magnification Home positions of her mother and sister. In

addition, one could say that her Minification pattern supports the Magnification position of the mother and daughter as they react to her different way of living life.

Then, if one of those daughters, say the oldest one, works to change her Home position and begins to make decisions that allow more minifications, that would affect not just her functioning, but the functioning of her mother and sister. The Minification sister could no longer as easily default to a more passive stance if her sister were less challenging. She might feel a press to take more initiative in the family. The mother might feel an initial sense of distance in the usual alliance with her oldest daughter and question herself some. In this way the oldest daughter's changes affect the family system she is part of. This is a very important aspect of the power of this framework in that one person's changes can change a system.

7. How do you work with this framework and how does change happen?

Later steps

With this first set of 3 phases of working with this framework established, I have identified another set of characteristics of using it long-term.

4. One is to use it as the basis for all decision making. The person from Magnification always needs to monitor to not ignore minifications in any decisions, as does the person from Minification need to monitor not to ignore the magnification in any decisions.

5. Another is to tolerate and learn to accept the anxiety and vulnerability that accompanies this way of living. One is no longer as protected from the anxiety about survival by denying the successes in life or the failures.

6. Finally, the last one is to not forget the larger perspective of systems thinking, by making the mistake of assuming one's own dynamics are autonomous.

8. Narrative

The important dimension of Narrative completes the outline of this Primer. This is the part of the framework that is based in language and neuroscience. The simple idea is that the self is basically a memory, which is accessed as a story. You know who you are because you remember who you are, and that is reinforced constantly by others who remember who you are and who they are in relationship to you.

Decisions are made in the context of this ongoing memory process of narrative. As I make decisions, I am aware of what fits who I am, my story. Changing the pattern of those decisions changes my story for myself and for others.

Actually this whole Magnification/Minification framework is based in language. The only way to work with it is in language. One could also say that working with changing the self through changing decision-making patterns through changing the narrative of the self, is changing brain patterns as memory processes change.

9. Much more to say

As noted in the introduction to this Primer, this is only a skeletal presentation of the overall framework. The book is organized around the self and develops the basic functioning of the Magnification/Minification framework in the process of decision-making. It explains the process of identifying the Home position and the behaviors that manifest and maintain the decision-making patterns that stabilize the self. It demonstrates the process of changing the self, with a focus on the anxiety that is an inevitable part of the work. It presents the major component of the framework, based in language and neuroscience, of the self as a story, a narrative, and how one can track and change the pattern of Mag or Min by working with the story of one's life from the past and as it moves into the future. As examples I present composite stories compiled from the lives of actual people I have worked with using this framework, along with my own actual story. There is an extensive array of charts that accompany the components of the framework and help the reader visualize the ideas. There is also a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) chapter that succinctly responds to typical questions that always come up as people begin to work with Magnification/Minification. Finally there is an appendix that presents the underlying theory base for the framework using the work of Murray Bowen, Humberto Maturana, Ernest Becker and others.