Conation: The Missing Link in the Strengths Perspective

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In 1984, I was a newly graduated MSW, and a wide-eyed Peace Corps volunteer living in a land-filled barrio on Manila Bay in the Philippines. I was walking home one day when I spotted a 10-year-old boy sitting alone in a nipa hut. He was emaciated, sitting in his own urine, too weak to swat the flies from his face. Inquiries revealed that his name was Ernesto, and that he lived alone with his grandmother. No one knew why he was in such poor condition, or why he had failed to thrive since about age six. I had Ernesto evaluated by local doctors, who believed he might be suffering from muscular dystrophy. There was nothing they could do for him, and they sent him home.

I brought Ernesto's case to the attention of some fellow Peace Corps volunteers and local Filipinos. One volunteer suggested I try to find materials to build Ernesto a wheelchair and make some adjustments to his nipa hut to improve his maneuverability. Another recommended that I interview everyone who knew Ernesto (to get a more complete bio-psycho-social history), and then research treatments for muscular dystrophy. The local midwife recommended creating a feeding schedule for Ernesto's grandmother to follow, as well as a regular exercise and muscle-stretching routine.

None of these options appealed to me. The recommendations of my fellow volunteers, while sound, seemed frustratingly slow. I remembered hearing about a nun in Manila who took in disabled children, so I talked Ernesto's grandmother into letting me take him to her facility. Without calling ahead or making an appointment, I headed off with Ernesto and a neighbor who helped me carry him. In the end, this proved to be a useful course of action. The nun accepted Ernesto into a beautiful residential facility she operated for children with disabilities. His health

improved and his quality of life was significantly better, although as predicted, several years later he succumbed to the ravages of muscular dystrophy.

What struck me about this experience was the difference between the way I reacted to Ernesto's situation and the reactions of my friends. Any of our approaches would probably have helped the boy, but they were very different. I wondered why. With the exception of the local midwife, we had similar backgrounds and similar education. We all had the same objective. Yet our responses to the problem were very disparate. The differences were shaped by something fundamental to our individual characters, something that seemed to me was neither intelligence, nor training, nor emotion, nor learned response. We simply tackled the problem in very different ways. I would not fully understand these differences until decades later when I began to study the concept of *conation*.

The Concept of Conation

According to Schur (1990), conation is one of the 1000 most obscure words in the English language. Merriam Webster's (2005) online dictionary defines conation as "an inclination (as an instinct or drive) to act purposefully." It comes from the Latin word *conari* (to try) and *conatio* (an attempt), and it is the only word I have come across that begins to articulate the differences between my approach to Ernesto's situation and those of my friends. Even at the time we were tackling this problem, I had a sense that being able to describe and usefully leverage our differences would have made us more effective as a team and more helpful to all the people we were serving. This still seems true to me today. It is for this reason that I believe the concept of conation is necessary to fill in some crucial gaps in social work theory and practice. Without a clear understanding of the conative aspect of behavior, social workers limit their ability to significantly improve quality of life for those they are committed to serving.

With that understanding, they can achieve quicker, more thorough, and more lasting positive impact.

In this paper, I will describe the concept of conation and discuss the role it has played in theories of human thought and behavior, from the classical Greek philosophers to the present day. The review of the literature will make it clear that semantic and conceptual conflicts about conation have kept the concept from taking its place as a crucial component of social work theory and practice. Finally, I will discuss the practical application of conation as described in one theoretical system—Kolbe theory—which, though unaddressed in the social work literature to date, has been empirically shown to play a useful role in improving the efficacy of human action, education and productivity. This discussion will show that conation not only fits into the Strengths Perspective, but it is a necessary aspect of that perspective, and that its omission from the social work literature heretofore has limited the effectiveness of social work practice.

Chronological Overview of Scholarly Discussions of Conation

The concept of conation has endured a long history of semantic confusion. Definitional vagueness, mislabeling, and failure to effectively operationalize the concept have historically separated—and still separate—theorists' views of the role conation plays in human life. This has limited most American social work theorists' ability to study and utilize conational factors in their analysis and practice. For centuries, scholarly attention to conation has been largely confined to Europe.

The History of Conation as a Component of the "Tripartite Mind"

The philosophers of classical Greece saw the human psyche as tripartite. In *The Republic,* Socrates (via Plato) proclaimed that the soul had three parts: 1) the logical-rational or reason, 2) the spirited, and 3) the desiring – appetite. While there is some disagreement, many

philosophers and theorists accept this as the first written analysis of the mind as having cognitive, affective, and conative components (Cudsworth, 1788; Kolbe, 1990; Peters,1962/Brett, 1921; Sternberg, 1987).

Medieval theological scholars, such as Augustine in the 4th century BC and Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century AD, adopted the Grecian image of consciousness, writing about the capacity of the mind to know (cognition), to love (affective connection), and to will (conation) (Mueller, 1988; Peters, 1962/Brett, 1921; Sternberg, 1987). Though subsequent European religious scholarship sustained the concept of a tripartite mind, little was written about conation—or any non-religious aspect of consciousness—until the 17th century "humanists." Spinoza (1632-1677) articulated the "conatus principle," an innate striving to persevere or persist against obstacles (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). Less lauded humanists like Cudsworth also picked up the Aristotelian concept of conation, writing that there are aspects of consciousness "not devised by us, but exist in nature and obtrude themselves upon us (p.26)," as "instincts of nature." Cudsworth used the word "conation" to describe the will that "first moveth in the soul, and starteth all wheels (p.26)…a thread of life always spinning out…an ever bubbling fountain in the center of the soul, an elater [i.e., drive or to drive] or spring of motion (p.30)."

Influence of Enlightenment Philosophers and Faculty Psychologists

In the 18th century, the German "faculty psychologists" (e.g., Alexander Baumgarten; Moses Mendelssohn) returned to the concept of conation (Hilgard, 1980). They based their model of the three-part self—cognitive (thinking), affective (emotions/feeling), and conative (striving or doing)—on both Classical scholarship and the rich German philosophical tradition created by luminaries like Leibniz and Kant. Schopenhauer, for example, argued that Descartes' dualistic conception of the mind and body was a false dichotomy, stating, "what I

will and what in physical terms I do are one in the same thing" (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1972, p. 328). Schopenhauer described the will as the "secret director," or inner nature—an initiator of action that is spurred by motivation (i.e., wishes or desires) and unconsciously produces actions or conations (Schopenhauer, 1910).

This model of the mind remained central to psychology for the next 200 years, moving into English-language social theory when it was adopted by Scottish, British, and American psychologists (e.g., Hamilton, 1860, Bain, 1868, and James, 1890, respectively). Bain (1868) described the conative part of the mind as "volition or will, embracing the whole of our activity, as directed by our feelings" (p. 2). Roget, in his famous thesaurus (1852), included the tripartite "Plan of Classification" for the mind, labeling the three parts "intellect, volition, and affections" (p. xxx) (Kolbe Certification Manual, 2000). He recognized conative power as the key element of volition, describing motive as the cause of volition, and equating lack of motive with "unwilling."

At this point, we begin to encounter a conflation between the concept of motivation and that of instinctive conation—a semantic tangle that still confuses the study of conation (Kolbe, 1989). Some nineteenth-century scholars described the conative process as the shaping of action based on a motivating impulse, while others seemed to assume that conation and motivation were in fact identical, the terms interchangeable. This is a key disparity, and one that merits—in fact, requires—clarification here.

Conation, as described by those who first defined and best articulated it, is not equivalent to "desire," "motivation," want" or "wish" (Bain, 1868). Motivation and desire are affective aspects of consciousness. They are not conation. Precursors to and sustainers of action, they do not create the specific form of the action itself (Poulsen, 1991). For example, in the story of Ernesto, my friends and I were all motivated to help the boy, eager to take action,

and capable of doing so. But the way in which we acted were dissimilar, and this, I now believe, was because of conative differences. The confusion between the idea of conation (as motivation or as instinctive drive) is still problematic today. But from the earliest discussion of conation, most thoughtful scholars have maintained that *conation is not a description of wanting, but a label for the characteristic way in which people go about fulfilling their desires.*

Important Twentieth Century Influences

As late as the early 20th century, the concept of conation was overlooked by most scholars in the United States. A notable exception was William McDougall (1871-1938) a Harvard psychology professor, physician, philosopher, and vocal critic of behaviorism (Brand, 2005; Kolbe, 1989). McDougall categorized the mind's components as cognition (a knowing, a thing), affective sensation (feeling something about that thing), and conation (a striving towards or away from the object). He was joined by a few other American psychologists, such as Lundholm (1934), who agreed with McDougall that all behavior is shaped by propensities that shape action. "Conation," wrote Lundholm, is "purposive or goal-seeking activity" (p.25). He pointed out that a conative process is best understood as one that *impels* action (drives it from within) while cognition and other outside forces *compel* action (drive it from external force or action) (Kolbe, 1990).

In the United States during the mid- to late twentieth century, enthusiasm for behaviorism came to dominate the theoretical landscape (see Hershberger, 1988, and Scheerer, 1989). With the advent of cognitive psychology in the 1950s, American social science's focus turned toward developing measurements and tests for intelligence (Hilgard, 1980). This may explain why, even now, the social work literature is virtually devoid of any scholarly consideration of the tripartite mind, and conation's role in human activity.

In light of centuries' worth of work, analysis, and scholarly discussion, it is surprising the concept of conation still has not been utilized in disciplines like clinical psychology and social work. The diverse, hazy definitions of conation offered by many scholars are partly to blame for this omission. Until a single definition of conation has been agreed upon, research in the area is bound to be argumentative and indeterminate, and the quantification of conative processes impossible. Perhaps because of this, those scholars who did identify a conative component in the human psyche never went so far as to create any model of how conative, cognitive, and affective aspects form an integrated process.

With problems both in defining conation and identifying an integrated model, social science practitioners (e.g., educators, psychotherapists, and social workers) have heretofore had no way to utilize the concept of conation. Instead, they have turned to cognitive, behavioral, and other perspectives that are more amenable to measurement. The conative aspect of the mind faded into relative obscurity in pragmatic social science application until the late 20th century, when educational psychologists picked up the thread of a discussion that had largely been dropped (Snow, Jackson & Corno, 1996).

Educational Psychology's Perspective of Conation

Several educational psychology researchers have studied affective and conative aspects of learning, as well as cognitive, to explain variations in student performance. However, they too have failed to agree upon a single, operationalized definition of conation, or a model that integrates conative, cognitive, and affective processes (Kanfer, 1988). It is widely accepted that school learning involves all three parts of the mind; however, the existing research on identifying conation and integrating its function with other aspects of learning is "small scale, isolated and piecemeal" (Snow & Jackson, 1993).

To rectify this situation, Snow developed a taxonomy of affective, conative, and cognitive constructs of individual learning differences (Snow, Corno & Jackson, 1996; Snow & Jackson, 1997). In Snow's taxonomy, the conative dimension is divided into two sections: motivation (i.e., the predecisonal state) and volition or will (i.e., postdecisional state), (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). Snow operationalized motivation using self-related constructs (like self-efficacy or self-esteem) and achievement orientation states. The two primary achievement orientations are performance and learning. Performance-oriented learners are motivated to action by approval, whereas learning-oriented students seek challenges and often persist even in the face of failure (Jackson, 1998).

This conceptualization is consistent with Snow's view of conation as a "continuum or commitment pathway from intention to action." However, it employs measures that were not designed for conative phenomena. These measures involve a normative perspective of conation as positive or negative—individuals are seen as having "high or low conative ability." But quantifying conative levels is meaningless if conation is understood as a shaping force that dictates patterns of action. For example, when my friends and I tried to help Ernesto, we chose different forms of action depending not on "high" or "low" levels of conative ability, but by qualitatively different types of action, all of which were conative. Snow's approach is like testing a French person, an American, and someone from China, then rating their speaking ability from "high" to "low" without noting that the languages are different. All these people can speak, but they speak in different ways.

Snow also identified differences in individuals he referred to as "action versus state orientation." An action-oriented person, he said, enacts intentions immediately, while a state-oriented person easily fixates on the past, often failing to act because of unrealistic intentions or procrastination (Jackson, 1998). Anyone who has received any formal education will recognize

these distinctions as valuative—an "action oriented" person is a "good student," while a "state-oriented" person is a poor one.

Despite this tendency to fall into valuative patterns and spurious measurements, Snow did make two major contributions to our understanding of conative processes. One was his recognition of the need for an integrated model of the tripartite mind. The other was a "whole-person-in-context" (i.e., systems) perspective on individual differences and learning (Shavelson, Kupermintz, Ayala, Roeser, Lau, Haydel, Schultz, Gallagher, & Quihuis, 2002; Snow, 1994). Snow believed that everyone has a dynamic, fluid "person-in-situation aptitude complex," the product of transaction between individual aptitudes and the particulars of a given situation. If the aptitudes are "ill-tuned or mismatched" then failure occurs (Shavelson et. al, 2002). This conceptualization is consistent with social work's person-in-environment and systems framework.

Snow died in 1997, his work unfinished, his lack of definitional precision making his concept of conation too vague to operationalize. His efforts led only to further research that framed conation as the ability to set and achieve goals—actually a cognitive process, not conative or instinctual. For example, Davis & Henry (1997) wrote that some people are more successful at setting and achieving goals than others because they are more motivated and have more control over their behavior—something they called "higher conative capacity." Again, this is a misuse of the term: conation is not goal-setting motivation or achievement, but the way in which a person with any degree of motivation or goal-orientation goes about acting on that motivation and achieving those goals. Different people might have high or low levels of motivation to help Ernesto, and high or low capacities to achieve that goal. Even so, each individual may approach the issue in ways that are qualitatively different.

Toward A Practical and Empirical Theory of Conation

Given the pitfalls in the academic debate on conation—a debate that has continued for centuries—it is hardly surprising that social work theorists have not yet focused on conation as a useful concept. However, a sound and useful theoretical framework for understanding and applying conation has arisen outside the literature of academia. The remainder of this article will consider the work of an independent theorist, author, and publisher named Kathy Kolbe, who observed conative differences while designing learning tools and helping educators and business leaders maximize performance. I will discuss Kolbe's work as it fits into the academic discussion of conation, describe its implications within the field of social work, and explicate practical applications that have been quantified by independent academic research. This will support the assertion that conation would be a useful addition to social work assessment and intervention process (currently, the profession uses only cognitive and affective measures and interventions).

Kolbe's conative model has been evaluated by researchers at over twenty universities, including Harvard, Stanford, the University of Chicago, UCLA, and the University of Pennsylvania (Hoffman, 2001; Kolbe, 2000b). It has also been analyzed by legal departments and human resource specialists in multinational corporations, who approved it for use in selection, placement, team building, and leadership training (Kolbe Statistical Handbook, 2002). Public, charter, and independent schools in 40 states have used it for faculty training and assessment of students' abilities (Kolbe.com, 2005). Yet a thorough academic appraisal of it for use by social workers has never been published.

Kolbe's father, E. F. Wonderlic, pioneered the use of standardized intelligence tests for job placement (Hoffman, 2001). Afflicted from childhood with dyslexia, Kolbe herself questioned reliance on cognitive and affective assessments for evaluating potential performance

(Kolbe, 2004). She wondered why she and some others learned best using methods that were not encouraged by most educators, and that seemed unrelated to level of intelligence. She began observing conative patterns while developing materials for primary education, first for gifted students, then for children who were mentally retarded, and still later for adults (Friedrich, 1985).

After decades of research, Kolbe developed assessment tools for identifying natural conative propensities. Always open to evaluation by independent researchers, Kolbe gave this author access to her entire data base (case histories of over 500,000 subjects on the Kolbe A™ Index, Kolbe Statistical Handbook, 2002; Kolbe unpublished data, 1985 – 2005). What follows is a discussion of Kolbe's model in the context of its potential for practical application among social workers. What emerges is an elegant, highly pragmatic, and ethical method of improving learning and performance (Hoffman, 2001).

The Kolbe Model of Conation

By the mid-1980s Kolbe had amassed tens of thousands of hours of observation, using "thick descriptive" and phenomenological observation in the style of social anthropologists, Piagetian child psychologists, and some developmental theorists. As we have seen, contemporary researchers of conation, such as Snow et al. (1996) and Atman (1987) conflated variables and used value-laden instruments to measure something they had only vaguely conceptualized. Kolbe avoided these pitfalls by ensuring that her research was data-driven and value neutral. She attempted measurement only after identifying specific phenomena by persistent observation. Kolbe's analysis of the conative patterns of over a half million subjects who completed her assessment of personal conative strengths (the Kolbe A Index) is undoubtedly one of the largest N's ever collected by a single researcher.

After years of research, Kolbe codified her major findings into twelve fundamental principles or axioms (See Text Box 1) (Kolbe, 2005b). These guiding statements highlight the fact that the conative faculty is an essential ingredient in human performance, and that dismissing conation or defining it inappropriately has stymied our understanding of human nature and added significantly to human stress. In the remainder of the paper I will examine many of Kolbe's axioms and investigate how they can be applied to social work practice.

Kolbe's 12 Axioms

1: The Cognitive, Conative, and Affective dimensions of the mind are all essential to creative problem solving and productivity.

2: Each mental dimension performs independently, yet the their capacities blend into a functioning or unified whole.

3: Impairment in one dimension does not interfere with the effective use of the others, yet diminishes the total process.

4: Conation is the one dimension which is fully developed at birth.

5: The conative dimension is the only dimension which is unaltered by outside stimuli.

6: Conative modus operandi (MOs) are determined by Zones of Operation in four Action Modes.

7: Conation is the one dimension in which everyone is equal – yet diverse.

8: Instincts drive the conative dimension, providing the mental energy behind purposeful action.

9: Individuals control goal attainment by making differing levels of effort in using abilities in all three dimensions.

10: Each mental dimension has its own hierarchy of effort, mirroring each other in intensity, with each requiring sequentially higher levels of effort to maximize effectiveness.

11: Conative efforts that go against an individual's natural grain or MO will cause debilitating stress.

12: Synergy results from the right combination of collaborators' MOs.

Text Box 1

The Role of Each Dimension of the Tripartite Mind in Creative Problem-Solving

The Kolbe model places the conative faculty of the mind in the context of the decision-making and creative problem-solving processes. Snow et al. (1996) correctly pointed out that all three dimensions of the mind—cognitive, conative, and affective—are essential to problem-solving and productivity; however, Snow's work never went so far as to articulate how the three dimensions interact during the creative process. Kolbe's prolific research revealed empirically how this process occurs. Her observations led her to believe that there is a natural order among the three dimensions of the mind that triggers the integrated efforts of emotion, action, and thought (Kolbe, 2005). Kolbe (2005b) observed that human beings do not take any deliberate action until they encounter some sort of motivating circumstance or condition. In her depiction of the integrated creative process, motivation (the *affective* domain of the mind) is the catalyst for action. Instinctive energy—one of Kolbe's two-pronged *conative* domain— shapes the pattern of action, and the "Will," or self-determination, drives the instincts toward volitional or purposeful action. These conative elements when applied to specific efforts are then screened by *cognitive* reasoning, which edits and evaluates decisions. If they pass this cognitive screening test, the individual takes action (Kolbe, 2004).

We can see how this played out in my story about Ernesto. The sight of the little boy sitting in his own urine, unable to swat flies from his face, created my intense desire (motivation catalyst) to improve the quality of his life. My instinctive energy (conative mind) was engaged, and since my instinctive modus operandi favors risking the unknown, I decided to take Ernesto

to the nun in Manila. As I thought about how best to do this (cognitive analysis), I decided not to call ahead for an appointment—I reasoned that it might be easy for the nun to say "no" to me on the phone. If she saw Ernesto in person, I thought, she would have a more difficult time turning him away. All of these mental processes added up to our Manila adventure.

In this instance (and, Kolbe would add, in all others), my instincts drove the conative dimension of my mind. However, if my affective mind had not been motivated, I would have done nothing, and if my cognitive faculties hadn't kicked in, I may have floundered in indecision. All three dimensions of the mind must be engaged to take effective action. (Piaget's Theory of Disengagement sidestepped these truths and led to exaggeration of the cognitive influence (Kolbe, 1994-2004)).

Kolbe's research convinced her that the "affective, cognitive, and conative mental dimensions perform independently, yet their capacities blend into a functioning or unified whole" (Kolbe, 2005b, p. 3). To test this axiom, she compared results on the Kolbe A Index with results on highly rated affective and cognitive measurements. She found that IQ and personality tests do not predict conative test results, nor do her conative test results correlate with IQ tests or personality inventories. For example, Kolbe found that impairment in the cognitive dimension (as in mental retardation) does not interfere with the effective use of the conative dimension. She also found that there is no correlation between conative patterns and affective subgroups, such as in the much-used Myers-Brigg Personality Test (which divides aspects of the affective personality into qualitative categories) (Kolbe Statistical Handbook, 2002).

Identification of Instinct-Based Behaviors

Kolbe identifies four aggregates of behavior in her subjects that relate to the ways in which individuals spontaneously approach tasks or problems. Her model identifies the following as instinct-based behavior "clusters" (Kolbe, 1985-2005):

1) gathering and communicating information;
2) sorting and storing information;
3) dealing with risks and unknowns;
4) manipulating physical objects and spaces to achieve desired ends.

Kolbe refers to these universal processes as "Action Modes™" (Kolbe Professional Growth Seminar, 1987). She labeled the four modes as: 1) Fact Finder, 2) Follow Thru, 3) Quick Start, and 4) Implementor (See Figure 1). In test-retest studies on the reliability of the Kolbe A Index, the four instinct-based modes remained highly consistent (Kolbe Statistical Handbook, 2002). Her subjects utilized these aggregates of behaviors as they channeled activity toward a given purpose. The modes of action are distinct from the affective or emotional parts of the personality, and they are highly stable and resistant to change (Hoffman, 2001). In other words, the conative dimension appears to have a "mind of its own," resisting efforts to alter or interfere with its natural method of operation.

Kolbe's research indicates that all individuals are capable of operating, and do operate, in each of the four action modes. A "form" of each of the four action modes was observed in scholars and preschoolers, geniuses and people who were mentally retarded. The "form" is the way in which a person operates in any given mode, as determined by the things the person naturally does or avoids doing. Kolbe identified three forms or Zones of Operation™ in each action mode. They are "initiate," "accommodate," and "prevent." The word "initiate" describes what a person *will* do, given his or her volitional instinct. The term "accommodate" describes what the person is *willing* to do to respond to people's needs and situations. And finally, "prevent" refers to the unwillingness of a person to get bogged down or "paralyzed" by the actions of others—in other words, what that person probably *won't* do by natural inclination.

The three operating zones and the four action modes create a 3-by-4 matrix that shows 12 different conative strengths or talents (Kolbe, 2005).

	Fact Finder Gathers and shares information	**Follow Thru** Stores and organizes information	**Quick Start** Deal with risks and uncertainties	**Implementor** Handles space and tactile efforts (Builds or demonstrates)
Resist action or **Prevent** Problems	*Won't* Require documentation Get bogged down in minutiae Overanalyze	*Won't* Be rigid with plans Get stuck in routines Follow a schedule Act sequentially	*Won't* Be impulsive Be ambiguous Cause distractions Force change and disruption	*Won't* Require concreteness Force tangible solutions Have to see a prototype Need to physically demonstrate
Accommodate or **Respond** to people's needs	*Willing to* Review the data Work within priorities Give specifics Go with the highest probability	*Willing to* Maintain order Work within the system Adhere to the plan Maintain concentration Stay in sequence	*Willing to* Go along with risks Try alternatives Use metaphors Interject spontaneously Follow another's hunch	*Willing to* Work with tangible goods Use models Use tools and equipment Envision concrete examples Utilize protective gear
Insist or **Initiate** action	*Will* Collect data Establish priorities Create analogies Put in writing	*Will* Design systems Seek order Arrange logistics Force closure	*Will* Promote experimentation Take risks Discover alternatives Ad lib	*Will* Create tangible goods Develop prototypes Master mechanical devices Detect solutions tactilely

Figure 1

Kolbe calls the twelve possible typologies of conative action "Paths to Success" (Kolbe, 2005). All are equally valid, and each may lead to useful, successful, and constructive action. While we can all learn to solve problems using any of these paths, each of us has four paths (one in each action mode) that are most natural. Individuals are more successful when allowed or (preferably) encouraged to problem-solve using their four natural tendencies. "Conation," Kolbe notes, "is the one dimension of the mind in which everyone is equal, yet diverse" (Kolbe, 2005b. p.5). Each of the twelve Paths to Success is considered to be as "good" as the others.

The matrix enables us to identify the four instinctive paths a given individual might take when confronted with the need or desire to act. For example, when I boarded the bus with Ernesto, I was demonstrating my tendency to *initiate* action in the Quick Start mode (I am an initiating Quick Start). I *resisted* the suggestion that we focus on building a wheelchair for Ernesto. I remember feeling totally incompetent even thinking about this option, displaying my tendency to avoid building physical solutions (I am a preventative Implementor). As an accommodating Follow Thru, I was *willing* to work within a system that could respond to Ernesto's needs, such as the residential facility. And finally, though I did dig up a little information about Ernesto and his options, detailed, extensive research was not my emphasis (I am an accommodating Fact Finder, but not an initiating one).

Instruments for Measuring Conation-Based Behavior: Kolbe Indexes

The actual instinctive makeup of each individual is, of course, subconscious and therefore impossible to measure directly (Kolbe, 2004). However, the conative behaviors associated with action modes can be measured. Kolbe developed a set of algorithms that have

proven valid, reliable, and universally applicable (Kolbe Statistical Handbook, 2002). The Kolbe A Index is a 36-item questionnaire that asks respondents to choose how they are "least likely" and "most likely" to respond to different problem-solving scenarios. The three zones of operation for each action mode are placed on a 10 point scale (See Figure 2). The result is a series of four numbers, which together indicate a person's modus operandi (MO). For example, my MO is 5573 (I am an accommodating Fact Finder and Follow Thru, initiating Quick Start, and preventative or resistant Implementor). The 1-to-10 scale that spans the zones of operation in each action mode are distributed normally in the population with no biases by gender, race, or age (Kolbe Statistical handbook, 2000).

It is crucial to remember that unlike intelligence and personality tests, The Kolbe A Index does not measure "high" or low" conative ability. That would be as senseless as labeling people "good" or "bad" at breathing oxygen . If a person is able to act, he or she is using conative ability; every individual is perceived as normal and perfectly capable. The result of Kolbe's testing system specifically identifies a person's natural abilities or talents, with no value judgment attached to the result. By the same token, a person's Kolbe result does not indicate a need to change conative functioning; it simply describes the way in which that person's strengths are indicated in actual behavior. Kolbe's underlying assumption is that every human being is "perfectly capable," and must be given the freedom to act on his or her instinctive power or to utilize conative talents (Kolbe, 2005). Playing to individual conative strengths is an adaptive strategy that individuals can use to solve problems more successfully, and to be more productive.

Conative Stress

According to Kolbe's observations, anything that interferes with free use of natural conative drives causes stress, which can become debilitating (Kolbe Certification Manual,

2000). Signs of conative stress include taking too long to accomplish goals, becoming indecisive, or lacking the mental energy to carry out actions (Kolbe, 2004). When people are asked to go "against their grain," taking action in a way that conflicts with their conative MOs, they become frustrated, withhold action, or try to alter their natural responses. **Conative stifling** occurs when an individual tries to function within a system that only rewards one "right" method of problem-solving—a method that runs contrary to the individual's instinctive responses.

For example, elementary and secondary schools most often reward students for initiating Fact Finder or accommodating Follow-Thru tasks—thoroughly gathering data and following the teachers' system. Perhaps this is due to the fact that teachers in these grades are more likely to be initiating Fact Finders, who consider that approach most scholarly, and/or initiating Follow Thru's who need their students to respond accordingly (Kolbe, 2005). In this context, what happens to a student who is a preventive Follow Thru, and an initiating Quick Start? The worst-case (and sadly very common) scenario is that the child is wrongly considered obstreperous, uncooperative, inattentive, defiant, stupid, and/or "dysfunctional" (ADD or ADHD diagnoses are common). The best-case scenario is that these students learn, or are taught, ways of navigating through or around tasks that heavily favor information gathering and organization—as well as the authority figures who define such tasks as "proper" education.

C**onative conflict** often occurs between two people with significantly different modus operandi. A preventive Follow Thru and an initiating Follow Thru will have two very different ways of sorting and storing information. The person who prevents systems from becoming highly structured might seem to have a messy desk area, but works best when everything that might be useful is within sight. A work-mate could be distracted by the clutter. **Conative strain** is caused by false expectations or an individual trying to act outside his or her natural

talents (Kolbe, 2004). For example, if a child tries to emulate a parent or other adult who has a significantly different MO than she does, the child will soon become frustrated because it does not come naturally for her to take action in the same way as her role model.

A Case Example Using Kolbe Principles of Conation

The following is a true case example that can provide more context for understanding of the Kolbe conative model and its potential usefulness in social work practice (Names and other facts were changed to protect anonymity).

Jeff was a 16-year-old student with an IQ over 150. He scored extremely high on standardized tests. However, Jeff had not been even moderately successful at completing classroom assignments or homework. As a result, he had an extremely low grade point average (2.00). His parents were baffled. Jeff's father and many of his teachers continually stressed that Jeff was very intelligent, and that his failures must be due to "laziness." His mother tried to remain patient and encouraging but she was at her wits' end. Jeff was a "good" kid. But during his high school years he became increasingly withdrawn from his family. Jeff just wanted people to "let him be himself," but he wasn't even sure what that meant or how to do it. Someone recommended to Jeff's mother that she have her family take the Kolbe A Index. The parents, Jeff and his sister all took the index.

Jeff's MO was 3378 (i.e., preventive Fact Finder and Follow-Thru, initiating Implementor and Quick Start). When gathering information, Jeff does not get bogged down in minutiae, nor does he overanalyze information. He naturally resists or avoids following a schedule, repeating patterns, acting sequentially, or following procedures—all generally considered necessary for completing homework assignments. Jeff's natural tendency is to demonstrate by building tangible things, which he is rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to do in school. When problem-solving, Jeff will be most successful when he is allowed to utilize a process of trial and error rather than writing a detailed research report or completing complicated assignments in a linear and logical order.

Both of Jeff's parents and his sister were in direct conative conflict with Jeff. They are all initiating Fact Finders and Follow-Thru's, and preventive Quick Starts and Implementors –

exactly the opposite of Jeff. When she realized the implications of these results, Jeff's mother immediately apologized to Jeff for trying to make him "fit into a mold," or act in ways that felt natural to her, but not to him. Jeff's relief was instantaneous and very visible. He reaffirmed that all he ever wanted was to be allowed to be himself, and added that he finally knew what that meant. From early childhood, Jeff had judged himself as "bad" for being different from his parents and sister, believing that their modus operandi were "right." Even when he forced himself to imitate them, however, he felt miserable—and most often, he failed.

Unknowingly, the school system, Jeff's teachers, and his parents had been stifling Jeff's conative strengths, limiting the natural expression of his own ideas and solutions, and denying him the joy of accomplishment. Jeff knew at a very deep level that he was not "lazy." However, at a conscious level he agreed with others' assessment that he was inadequate, and possibly morally defective—ample reason for his emotional withdrawal from others.

Using this conative information, Jeff's parents explained to his teachers that anyone wishing to help Jeff (rather than further frustrate him by demanding that he use processes that were inimical to his instinctive style) needed to encourage Jeff to solve problems in ways that are natural for him. Jeff was able to cognitively process conflicts that arose for him at home and school without feeling misunderstood—or judging natural conflicts to be his (or anyone else's) "fault." He began to liberate himself from the false judgments and interpersonal conflicts that had contributed to his low self-esteem. In all these ways, the inclusion of conative data in Jeff's case helped turn his self-reinforcing negative cycle of failure, blame, hopelessness, and silent defiance into a positive cycle of understanding, adaptation, success, and confidence. His sense of self-efficacy, his relationships, and his schoolwork all benefited, and instead of failing out of school, Jeff went on to college.

This example shows that Jeff utilized all three dimensions of his mind—connecting with his conative style, applying his knowledge to cognitive analysis of his own situation, and resolving the emotional or affective aspects of his life—as a way to achieve overall success. Similarly, the series of decisions I made while a Peace Corps volunteer to help Ernesto required that I use all three parts of my mind at ever higher levels of effort. Kolbe theory does not elevate conation to a higher level than the cognitive or affective, nor does it underestimate the inclusion of "will" or self-determination as an intergral part of the conative process. Optimal functioning requires that all three components work together; the individual who is operating at his or her highest level of effectiveness has true compassion (affective), a powerful vision for the greater good (cognitive), and a meaningful mission to help others (conative). Kolbe refers to these highest levels of functioning as "social responsibility" in the Dynamynd Decision Ladder™ (Kolbe, 2004).

Applications to Social Work Practice

Kolbe's work on conation, both descriptive and prescriptive, is completely consistent with social work values and the Strengths Perspective. Everyone is perceived as creative; no conative pattern is more or less useful or important than another. The theory and practice are designed to enhance self-determination, while honoring the dignity and uniqueness of every individual. The cultural pressure to conform to certain patterns of action is a kind of "conative oppression" that debilitates many individuals in environments from grade school to the welfare system.

By using conative interventions side by side with affective and cognitive interventions, social workers can help individuals use their instinctive powers, along with their other mental faculties, to achieve a higher quality of life. When people who have been pressured to use

unfamiliar conative tactics realize that another mode of action functions well for them, they are likely to experience a higher sense of self-efficacy and personal empowerment.

Using conative analysis for specific applications in various fields (e.g., education, social work, crisis management, health care, family counseling, career guidance, and team leadership) advances the usefulness of the system to a level of societal benefits that could impact school reform, response times in crises, health care costs, and other unresolved conundrums dependent upon expert interpretation of heretofore unrecognized and unutilized conative actions, reactions, and interactions.

The educational system could be transformed by the addition of information on conative differences. Training programs could help teachers understand and facilitate each student's conative profile, to understand their own conative talents, and to work harmoniously, rather than contentiously, with students who differ from them. Peer mentors could be matched with specific protégés based on both individuals' conative modus operandi. The effectiveness of student learning groups could be greatly improved by a synergistic use of disparate conative talents.

Affective and cognitive clinical interventions in dysfunctional social systems could also be greatly enhanced by adding a conative component. For example, family discord and dysfunction, including marital problems and parent-child conflict, may be caused by conative stress between a husband and wife, or a child and parent, with different natural abilities. Understanding and being able to articulate conative differences could make an enormous impact in addressing such problems.

The ubiquity of ADD, ADHD, or ODD diagnoses may in part be explained by a failure to include conative variables in clinical analyses of behavior. It may well be that, as a culture dominated by an educational meritocracy where "Follow Thru" and "Fact Finder" behaviors are

heavily favored , we are pathologizing the natural abilities of those with other conative talents. In fact, the highly structured and systematic treatment methods used for ADD and ADHD could be the very reason why preventive Follow Thru's "fail" to progress during treatment.

Such possibilities should be explored by social work researchers and practitioners. Kolbe's work provides one useful basis on which social work scholars can construct hypotheses and practical interventions to clarify the conative component of human action. As the most pragmatic of all social science disciplines, social work has always been an eclectic field, open to useful discoveries and ideas from any quarter. The concept of conation could be immensely helpful; in fact, Strengths Perspective cannot be complete without a consideration of this key component in individual and group life. The power of instinctive action must be understood if we are to maximize social work's power to help human beings and human groups achieve a higher quality of life.

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