

A Psychological and Developmental Understanding of the AS Tracking Factor Seeking Change

A psychological definition of the factor Seeking Change

The factor Seeking Change refers to the degree to which a pupil actively seeks new experiences, opportunities ideas and relationships. It is an indication of the level of exploration, stimulation, novelty and risk that a pupil seeks in their day to day life. In seeking change, a pupil actively seeks new experiences, opportunities ideas and relationships. In limiting change, a pupil actively seeks to limit new experiences, opportunities ideas and relationships.

Self-Expansion Theory (ARON, ARON 1996) is a psychological construct which explores a person's drive for change. The theory proposes that if we depict a person's sense of self as a *territory*, we can consider the extent to which a person chooses to extend their territory through the intentional exploration of new experiences, opportunities, ideas and relationships. Meeting new people, engaging in new experiences and opportunities, and exploring new ideas may be a means by which an individual can experience personal growth, stimulation, satisfaction and self-efficacy (Mattingly, Lewandowski 2014). However, this is not to assume that this is the only means by which this can happen.

In seeking change an individual's focus is on *extending* rather than on *consolidating* their territory. Aron and Aron describe those who expand their territory as high expanders, and those who consolidate their territory as low expanders. High expanders focus is on what they could be, could do, or could have; whilst low expanders focus on who they currently are, what they are currently doing, or what they currently have. It is important to note that limiting change does not necessarily presume apathy, or lack of motivation. To focus on a specific task or idea requires self-discipline, focus, perseverance and commitment. To have fewer friendships can often mean deeper friendships. To say no to an experience or opportunity can require resolve and determination, especially if those around you are joining in.

A developmental understanding of Seeking Change

The journey from infancy to adulthood involves constant change and transition; yet a healthy navigation of those years is dependent on security, stability and familiarity. The task of managing the interplay between change and stability is something infants and their caregivers are engaged in from their earliest days (Rothbart, M. K. & Bates, J. E. 2006).

Attachment Theory suggests that in order for infants to explore the world around them, they must have at least one secure attachment; this tends to be a parent or significant care-giver (Bowlby 1997, 2005). This relationship offers infants a secure base from which they can explore their growing environment, knowing they can return to that secure base for comfort and reassurance at any time (Sroufe 1997; Ainsworth, Bell 1970). As infants explore the world around them, they begin to notice predictable patterns which make sense of their experiences. They form and continually modify internal schemas which enable them to predict and anticipate future actions and responses (Piaget 2002, ©1959; Dewey 1997, ©1938). Caregivers support the interplay between exploration and routine in many ways. For example, they provide a secure base to the exploring infant in building in predictable routines for sleeping, eating and getting dressed whilst encouraging them to try new foods, relate to a wider social circle and take greater risks in their play.

As pupils move through their early school years, a balance of exploration and stability underpins healthy psychosocial functioning and cognitive development. Predictable routines and consistent behavioural expectations give pupils security and model important facets of affective-social self-regulation (Bandura 1977). This tempers the higher levels of impulsivity and sensation seeking that characterise childhood and early adolescence (Casey et al. 2008). Unsettling or destabilising experiences such as transitions, disappointment or failure are not avoided, but are carefully scaffolded through healthy

processes such as emotional attunement, validation and discussion (Sroufe 2005). New, unfamiliar learning concepts are introduced through familiar objects and experiences, purposefully moving between the concrete and the abstract enabling pupils to steadily build their own cognitive schemas (Piaget 2002, ©1959). Pupils are encouraged to set themselves challenging future goals demanding effort and determination (Mueller, Dweck 1998; Zimmerman 1990; Bandura 2010) whilst also developing the self-discipline to focus on the task before them (Zimmerman 1990; Bandura 2010).

Adolescents perhaps evidence the fragile interplay between the predictable and the novel more starkly than younger children. Adolescence is an important time of exploration as adolescents increasingly seek out new experiences and sensations to explore the extent of their autonomy and power, and individuate themselves from their family. Yet they experience considerable anxiety as they cope with the confluence of so many physical, psychological and relational changes. (Yurgelun-Todd 2007; Smetana et al. 2006; Sebastian et al. 2008). To navigate these fluctuations, healthy adolescents continue to draw upon predictable routines, clarity of expectations and sustained emotional attachments (Steinberg 1990; Parkes et al.; Juang, Silbereisen 1999; Hubbard, Dearing 2004; Holmbeck et al. 1995).

Adolescents' response to risk taking demonstrates an interesting interplay between change and stability. In some contexts, adolescents can be extremely conservative and risk averse; they wear familiar outfits, and stay within a familiar social grouping. Yet the same adolescents can engage in risk taking, impulsive behaviours which put them at risk. Both strategies of seeking and limiting change may serve the same goal: to be socially acceptable to their peers and reduce likelihood of peer rejection (Leary 2005). As adolescents increasingly detach from their nuclear family unit, social acceptance amongst peers is perhaps even more important. This drive for peer acceptance may explain why adolescents engage in risk taking behaviours *despite* changes in their neurological circuitry. From the age of ten, children exhibit decreased levels of impulsivity, and around the age of fifteen the need to seek out new sensations and experiences also begins to stabilise (Steinberg 2007). Neuroscientists increasingly recognise that adolescent risk taking is significantly influenced by social context. An adolescent is more likely to engage in exploratory, risk taking behaviour in the company of peers when risk taking may lead to social reward (Gardner, Steinberg 2005; Smith et al. 2014; Blakemore 2008)

Self-regulation of Seeking Change

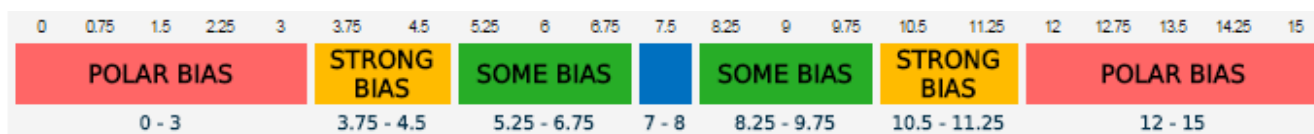
The AS Tracking assessment measures pupils' bias towards seeking or limiting change at a particular point of their development, and continues to track fluctuations over time. The assessment takes two measures. It measures pupils' generalised bias (how they regulate change when not in any particular context); secondly pupils' contextual bias (how they regulate change when in their particular school or school boarding house). To understand how the assessment elicits this bias, refer to the paper 'How the AS Tracking Assessment measures Steering Cognition'.

Most children and adolescents will have some degree of bias towards either seeking or limiting change. However, this bias is not necessarily fixed. Pupils who self-regulate their drive for change purposefully adjust their drive in relation to the particular context they are in. They pay attention to the cues around them, as well as their own internal cues, and make a judgement about whether this is a time to lower or increase their drive for change. In being attentive to those cues, they will need to consider the social context: *is this a situation where trying something new would be helpful, or do I need to stick with what I am familiar with?* They will need to consider who they are with: *is this a time to engage with someone new, or do I need to stay close to those I am familiar with?* They will need to consider the task: *is this a task where it is appropriate to take a risk, or do I need to do what I have always done?* They will need to consider the intended outcome of what they are doing: *Do I need to focus on precision and detail, or speed and novelty?* They will need to consider what is going on around them: *is this a time to have a go or a time to be more cautious?* Knowing when to seek or limit change is critical if children and adolescents are to make wise, emotionally healthy, pro social choices as they engage in different tasks, interactions and social contexts.

Pupils with a polar low or high bias are those who at this point in their development strongly seek or limit change. Their bias suggests that they are more likely to ignore or misread the cues which suggest the need to increase or lower their drive for

change in a particular context. Pupils who develop a polar, habitual bias towards high or low seeking change have an increased risk of developing future affective-social difficulties.

<p>INTERNALISED CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS Undisclosed need for control Hidden anxiety in times of change, pressure or instability Risk averse Intractable, stubborn Overly focused/ disciplined Limited/fixated thinking patterns/ Perfectionism, burn out Drawn to close attachments which may not be healthy Unhealthy self-soothing strategies in times of pressure and strain</p> <p>EXTERNALISED CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS Socially controlling, inflexible Social isolation Risk averse, inhibited Perfectionism, burn out Narrow interests/social groups Drawn to close attachments which may not be healthy Overly focused/ fixated Anxious in change/pressure Unhealthy self-soothing strategies in times of pressure and strain</p>	<p>More likely to be cautious about new ideas, experiences and opportunities</p> <p>More likely to seek stable relationships and consistent and routines</p> <p>More likely to focus on detail and precision</p>	<p>Highly self-monitoring of seeking change</p>	<p>More likely to seek new ideas, experiences and opportunities</p> <p>More likely to seek new relationships and spontaneity</p> <p>More likely to focus on speed and novelty</p>	<p>INTERNALISED IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOURS Undisclosed impetuous decision making Private, escapist, unrealistic plans and ideas Impatient, driven Private goal setting and aspirant stress Solitary hidden risk taking</p> <p>EXTERNALISED IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOURS Limited self-control and discipline Easily distracted, careless Limited perseverance Unrealistic goals/aspirant stress Over stretched, fatigue Limited problem solving skills Limited personal organisation Social risk taking, experimentation Few sustained, deep friendships Unhealthy self-soothing strategies in times of pressure and strain</p>
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The incipient risks associated with a polar bias towards high seeking change

Pupils with a polar bias towards high seeking change are those who at this point of their development habitually seek new experiences, opportunities, ideas and relationships. Pupils who habituate this pattern of thinking and behaviour face a number of associated risks. The risks may vary depending on where a pupil directs their drive for change: some pupils may seek change in their externalised, social world; others may seek change in their internalised, private world.

Pupils who externalise a polar bias for high seeking change seek new experiences, opportunities, ideas and relationships in their externalised, social world. This is likely to influence how they engage in their learning, navigate social situations and relationships, and approach times of pressure and strain. Their need for frequent stimulation may lessen their ability to focus. They may have a limited concentration span, and be easily distracted by environmental factors; over time this is likely to affect their learning (Duckworth et al. 2007; Schunk, Zimmerman 1994). This may be particularly true when tasks are slow, repetitive and demand perseverance and stamina. They may struggle to commit to tasks or processes that require discipline and self-control in order to work towards a long term goal, such as revision for exams, or an extended piece of work. They may exhibit poor self-management skills which affect their ability to organise themselves and their belongings. They may be impetuous in their approach- not stopping to read the question, listen to instruction or plan a task. They may exhibit poor impulse control, struggling to monitor and regulate their responses in different situations (Mischel et al. 1988a) which may result in poor social functioning and potential social isolation (Eisenberg et al. 2000; Tangney et al. 2004; Wentzel et al. 1990). They may struggle to delay their gratification, needing to have what they want straight away rather than developing temperance, patience and self-control. Difficulties in delaying gratification has been found to correlate with an increased substance misuse and academic underperformance (Wulfert, E., Block, J. A., Santa Ana, E., Rodriguez, M. L., and Colman, M. 2002; Mischel et al. 2011; Mischel et al. 1988b; Mischel et al. 1989).

Socially, they may gravitate towards highly arousing or risky situations, something that the teenage brain is particularly predisposed towards, especially in the company of their peers (Blakemore, Robbins 2012; Steinberg 2008; Smith et al. 2014). Their focus on what they could have, rather than what they currently have may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment, which can have an adverse impact on mental and physical health (Wood et al. 2010). Their appetite for new relationships may attract them to wider social, changing networks rather than smaller, more intimate and stable relationships. Given that at least one or two stable, secure and intimate relationships is critical to healthy psychosocial development, this may leave these pupils vulnerable to emotional isolation, though socially connected (Kupersmidt, Dodge 2004; Larson, Richards 1991; Rotenberg, Hymel 1999). Their drive to engage in new experiences may lead to an overly busy and frenetic schedule, without times of solitude and rest. This may lead to risks associated with fatigue and limited self-reflection.

In times of emotional pressure or stress, some pupils may be more prone to deflection rather than wrestling and working through uncomfortable situations and feelings. Because they externalise their high seeking change bias, they may deflect through self-soothing social activities which may not be healthy e.g. social risk taking, distracting processes such as self-harm, soothing through food, substances or shopping, impulsive actions which may have far reaching consequences. Some pupils may be more prone to setting themselves unrealistic expectations which lack a sense of perspective. This could lead to fatigue and health related difficulties.

Pupils who internalise a polar bias for high seeking change seek new experiences, relationships and ideas in their internalised, private world. This is likely to influence how they engage in their learning, navigate social situations and relationships, and approach times of pressure and strain – yet their thoughts and behaviours may be less explicit to those around them. They may struggle to focus on the task before them because their attention is on their own stimulating ideas and thoughts. They might deviate from tasks to follow self-directed tangents which are not appropriate. They might disengage from social learning contexts to follow their own ideas, missing out on important learning and appearing dismissive or indifferent. They might struggle to commit to tasks, becoming easily bored and prone to daydreaming. Over time this pattern of thinking and behaviour may impair academic achievement. Some pupils may struggle to organise and structure their many internalised ideas, becoming overwhelmed and confused. Other pupils may internalise unrealistic, demanding personal aspirations which place them under intolerable tension. Under times of stress or in the face of failure this may trigger an extreme emotional response (Elliott, Dweck 1988; Higgins 1987; Higgins, E.T., Roney, C.J.R., Crowe, E., Hymes C. 1994). They may make impetuous, rash decisions which are not externalised to others who could have supported the decision making process. They may be drawn to hidden, solitary, risk taking behaviours, which are not visible to others. This might include dangers associated with social media, substance abuse or engaging with material or social groups which could be unhelpful or dangerous. Under pressure or stress, they may look for escapist outlets, perhaps exploring ideas or playing out fantasies which are not conducive to their social and psychological wellbeing. This might include deflective solitary self-soothing behaviours such as self-harm, use of substances or food to comfort or distract, gaming.

Emerging AS Tracking data trends amongst pupils with a polar high seeking change bias

- A greater number of boys than girls have a polar high seeking change bias, particularly in the younger years. This correlates with wider longitudinal adolescent research.
- Pupils' generalised data shows a higher trend towards high seeking change; this bias almost always modifies in school. This suggests the school culture supports pupils in developing a healthier and more rounded approach to change.
- A higher proportion of younger pupils have polar high seeking change than in older year groups, indicating that a healthy and more rounded approach to change is a feature of increasing maturity.
- There may be a correlation between high seeking change bias and pupils who have diagnosed ADHD behaviours. Further research is necessary to confirm this observation.
- There may be a correlation between high seeking change and pupils who complete the assessment unusually quickly. This may suggest a bias towards working at pace and thinking impulsivity.

- Research carried out by Mind.World in 2015 found that **self-reported** considering or engaging in self-harm was associated with a polar low Seeking Change bias and a polar high seeking change bias (80%).

The incipient risks associated with a polar bias towards low seeking change

Pupils with a polar bias towards low seeking change are those who at this point of their development habitually seek to limit new experiences, opportunities, ideas and relationships. Pupils who habituate this pattern of thinking and behaviour face a number of associated risks. The risks may vary depending on where a pupil directs their drive to limit change: some pupils may seek to limit change in their externalised, social world; others may seek to limit change in their internalised, private world.

Pupils who externalise a polar bias for low seeking change seek to limit new experiences, opportunities, ideas and relationships in their externalised, social world. This is likely to influence how they engage in their learning, navigate social situations and relationships, and approach times of pressure and strain. Some pupils may exert considerable social control in order to make their world more predictable and structured. This may lead to controlling social behaviours such as dominance, inflexibility and refusal. They may use passive control strategies such as obstruction or refusal, which has a negative impact on those around them and may result in others' avoidance of them. Some pupils might become increasingly risk averse, refusing to engage in tasks, relationships or experiences which are unfamiliar or open-ended. They may be particularly inflexible when things are changed or what is expected doesn't happen, perhaps voicing their frustration in a way which presents them as stubborn or intolerant. They may opt out or refuse to engage in activities where they can't control the outcome, where there is a level of risk, or where there is little time to rehearse in preparation; this will lessen their opportunities to develop resilience. They may become increasingly anxious or frustrated when in times of transition, change or uncertainty, which may lead to withdrawal or volatility. They may develop routines and practices which they believe bring order and structure and get frustrated when others don't follow. They may become fixed on particular ideas, tasks or relationships which narrow their interests, opportunities and social groupings. They may become overly focused on detail, perhaps developing the risks associated with perfectionism.

They may become increasingly inhibited and risk developing social anxieties, perhaps around a particular person, activity or place (Muris et al. 2011; Hirshfeld-Becker et al. 2008). Their caution and reticence to engage in new experiences or meet new people, is likely to result in fewer intimate relationships and fewer opportunities to develop the social competencies needed to engage in the adult world. They may be overly controlling in their relationships, perhaps leaving others feeling subjugated or dominated in some way. Conversely, they may be particularly drawn to strong, dependant or collusive attachments with security and bellowing, but may not be healthy. In times of pressure and stress, pupils may seek an even greater level of externalised control. This might manifest as an unhealthy focus on order and structure, or refusal to engage. It may also lead to a fixation on a particular person or object, or a focus on controlling a particular aspect of life such as eating or achieving a particular outcome, task or goal.

Pupils who internalise a polar bias for low seeking change seek to limit new experiences, relationships and ideas in their internalised, social world. This is likely to influence how they engage in their learning, navigate social situations and relationships, and approach times of pressure and strain. We may recognise these pupils as having high standards of personal conduct and self-discipline, who in times of transition or uncertainty respond by increasing their own internal levels of control and intrinsic order. However, such a strongly internalised need for control and consistency may be detrimental. Their admirable qualities of self-discipline may become too restrictive, perhaps having negative consequences on their health. They are likely to be predisposed to the development of anxiety symptoms when faced with adverse situations, lacking the resilience to cope with risk, change or uncertainty (Brozina, Abela, John R Z 2006) perhaps becoming drawn towards anxious controlling behaviours of self-harm, eating restriction or obsessive compulsive responses such as checking and monitoring. They may also be more prone to internal rumination, fixating on issues and concerns, which ultimately will increase their levels of anxiety (Roelofs et al. 2009). They may become overly fixated on achieving the standards they set for

themselves, perhaps resulting in perfectionism; perfectionism is a significant risk factor for a number of mental health issues (Flett, Hewitt 2014). They may develop exclusive or collusive relationships, which may be unhealthy and possibly destructive in some way.

Emerging AS Tracking data trends amongst pupils with a polar low seeking change bias

We have identified a number of trends emerging in pupils with a low seeking change bias.

- There is a very strong correlation between pupils with polar low seeking change and lower self-disclosure, suggesting that caution may be a contributing factor in limiting pupils' willingness to share their ideas, thoughts, feelings and opinions. It may be that choosing not to share aspects of themselves with others is also a contributory factor in pupils becoming increasingly risk averse.
- Pupils with polar low seeking change bias are more likely to have polar scores in other AST factors which may indicate that a polar low seeking change is an indicator of wider poor self-regulation.
- Some pupils with a generalised polar low seeking change bias can exhibit polar high seeking change in school. This high variance may indicate a pupil who is struggling to find a healthy approach to change. Instinctively, these pupils may be exerting considerable control, yet school may provide an opportunity for risk taking and deflection from that pressure. The reverse may also be true. The pupils may exert considerable control at school, yet out of school accrued pressure may be released through deflective or impulsive behaviours.
- AS Tracking data suggests that schools or boarding houses can have an adverse influence on pupils' seeking change causing some pupils' seeking change bias to drop very significantly. This suggests that the Seeking Change factor is particularly influenced by context.
- There may be a correlation between low seeking change and those pupils with social communication difficulties and autistic spectrum behaviours. This may suggest pupils' need to manage change and risk in what they may perceive to be an unsettling and unpredictable world.
- Research carried out by Mind.World in 2015 found that
 - struggling to cope with pressure was associated with a polar low self-disclosure bias and a polar low seeking change bias (83% accuracy)
 - considering or engaging in self-harm was associated with a polar low self-disclosure bias and a polar high seeking change bias (80%)

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