Redirect: Changing People's Behavior by Editing Their Stories

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Can People Change? How?
Change is Often Needed . . .

- Health Behaviors
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Teenage Violence
- Alcohol & Drug Abuse
- Racism and Prejudice
- Parenting Issues
- Child Abuse
- Educational Issues
- Voter Turnout
- Job Attendance
- Promoting Peace
- Environmental Problems
- Relationship Problems
- Personal Happiness
In all of these examples:

- People act in ways that have negative consequences for themselves or others
- How change their behavior?
Traditional Approaches

The Person
- Skills
- Habits
- Motivation
- Emotions

Environment
- Healthcare
- Schools
- Poverty
- Jobs

Behavior Change
Social Psychological Approach

**The Person**
- Skills
- Habits
- Motivation
- Emotions

**Environment**
- Healthcare
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- Jobs

**Behavior Change**
The Power of Construals

- True of physical perception
- Also true of how we view ourselves and others
- “Stories” metaphor
It’s our stories that matter . . .

Daniel Kish
Objective person and environmental variables matter too, of course.

But people’s stories about these factors hugely influential.
It’s Our Stories that Matter

- Mindsets, stories, construals, attributions
- They can be changed
- Simple, inexpensive interventions
- Long-lasting behavior change
- Tested with experimental method
A college student fails her first test
Exacerbation Cycle

“I’m a failure, I can’t make it here”

bad grades → low effort, high stress

Self-Enhancing Cycle

“I’m fine; I just need to work harder”

good grades → high effort, low stress
Story-prompting
(Wilson & Linville, 1982)

- Participants: First-year college students not doing well
- Story-Prompting Group: “Many first year students do poorly at first but do better later” (30 minute intervention)
- Control Group: Did not receive this information
Wilson & Linville (1982)
Story-Editing Approach

Attempts to Change People’s Stories
  - Brief interventions
  - Lead to long-lasting change
  - Tested experimentally
  - Start small, scale up
Story-Editing Techniques

- Editing Instigated by Others:
  - Labeling
  - Story-Prompts

- Self-editing
  - Writing exercises
  - “Do Good, Be Good”
Labeling:

- With Children
  - Labeling kids as “helpful” (Miller et al., 1975)
  - Labeling kids as feeling guilt instead of “darn, I got caught” (Dientsbier et al., 1975)
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Story-Prompting:

- Direct instruction
- Testimonials/data from others
- Social Norms Approach
- E.g., Wilson & Linville (1982)
How prevent child abuse?
Story-prompting with parents
(Bugental et al., 2010)

- Parents who abuse their children tend to blame those kids for acting out
- Can we redirect these interpretations?
- Participants: At risk parents with a newborn
- 20 home visits over a year
- Some randomly assigned to get a story prompt
Story-prompting for parents
(Bugental et al., 2010)

- Helped parents reinterpret their babies’ conduct
  - “Why is your baby crying?
  - Can you think of any other reasons?”
- Home visitor reinforced explanations that were easy to fix
  - “Maybe it isn’t that my baby is trying to provoke me. Maybe he gets indigestion in the evening”
Another Example of Story-Prompting

- Reducing Prejudice
- Contact Works
- But many reluctant to initiate contact
- White students’ theory: “It would be awkward, I wouldn’t be welcomed”
Story-prompting in college students (Mallett & Wilson, 2010)

- “Get-to-know-you” conversations between Black and White students went better than people predicted
- Could we get people to revise these stories?
Story-prompting in college students
(Mallett & Wilson, 2010)

Story-Prompting Group:
- Participants: White college students at beginning of 1st year
- Saw a video of a pair of students, one Black, one White, who were friends
- Wrote about times they unexpectedly became friends with someone

Control Group did not get this information
How Reduce Achievement Gap in College? (Walton & Cohen, 2011)

- Minority students often feel like they don’t belong
- Misattribute common experiences
- Intervention designed to change that attribution
How Reduce Achievement Gap in College? (Walton & Cohen, 2011)

- Participants: White & Black 1st-year students at selective college

- Belonging Intervention
  - Read survey results that older students felt they didn’t belong at first but then adjusted
  - Wrote essays about how their experiences were similar
  - Gave a speech to be shown to future students
How Reduce Achievement Gap in College? (Walton & Cohen, 2011)

- Control Group: similar procedure about topics unrelated to belongingness
- Total time of intervention: 1 hour
- Results: No effects for White students
Grades, Senior Year

Walton & Cohen (2011)
Doctor Visits Previous Month (3 years later)

Walton & Cohen (2011)
Self-Reported Happiness (3 years later)

Walton & Cohen (2011)
Story-Editing Techniques

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Writing Exercises

- Pennebaker (1997) Expressive Writing
- King (2001) “Best Possible Selves”
- Oettingen (2012) “Mental Contrasting”
- Kross & Ayduck (2011)
Writing Exercises

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- Kross & Ayduck (2011)
Kross, Ayduck, & Mischel (2005)

- Participants recalled event that made them feel “overwhelming anger and hostility”
- Randomly assigned to write about it:
  - From 1st or 3rd Person Perspective
  - Focusing on Feelings or Reasons for Feelings
Focus on Feelings

1st Person

3rd Person

Kross, Ayduck, & Mischel (2005)

Reported Anger

High Anger 3.00

Low Anger 1.00

1.00

1.50

2.00

2.50

3.00

1st Person

3rd Person

Focus on Feelings

Explain Why

Kross, Ayduck, & Mischel (2005)
Self-Distancing/Why Writing

- Mediated by reconstruing conflict
- Replicated with:
  - Different measures (e.g., blood pressure)
  - Different affective states (e.g., dysphoria)
  - Different populations (e.g., depressives)
Change Techniques

- Editing Instigated by Others:
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“Do Good, Be Good”

- Helping Others increases Happiness (Dunn et al. 2008)
- Teen Outreach (Allen et al., 1997)
“Do Good, Be Good”

- Helping Others increases Happiness (Dunn et al. 2008)
- Teen Outreach (Allen et al., 1997)
How prevent teenage pregnancies?

- Sex education, with information about birth control, helps
- Does not increase sexual activity
- What else works?
“Do good, be good” (Allen et al., 1997)

- Teens most likely to have unprotected sex: Those who are alienated, disengaged
- How can we revise these stories?
Teen Outreach: High school students randomly assigned to:
- Volunteer program
- Regular health class

Volunteer program included classroom activities and supervised volunteer work in community agencies
Allen et al. (1997)
Story-Editing and Culture

- Culture a powerful determinant of our stories
- European American Culture stresses Independence
- Native American, Hispanic Cultures stress Interdependence
Story-Editing and Culture

- Cultural Matching Theory (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014)
- Most colleges stress independence, bad fit for those who value interdependence
- “Belongingness” interventions can help (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012)
Story-Editing and Culture
(Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, under review)

- Reframing Purpose of Education
- **Participants**: Native American middle school students from Washington State
- **Story-Prompt:**
  - *Independent*: “Getting an education will benefit you in the future”
  - *Interdependent*: “Getting an education will benefit you and your tribe in the future”
  - *No Prime (Control)*
- **Interdependent prompt increased academic motivation and sense of belonging**
What do all of these examples have in common?

- It’s our stories that matter
  - The way we understand the world, the narratives we tell ourselves
- People’s stories can be redirected
- Based on social psychological theory
- Small nudges lead to *self-sustaining* change
- Use of experimental method
Testing, testing . . .

- We all believe in evidence-based programs . . .
- But what is “good evidence?”
- No substitute for the experimental method
- Randomly assign people to take part in the program or to a control group
Testing, testing . . .

- Many programs instituted before being properly tested
- When they are, some turn out not to work, or even to backfire
SCARED STRAIGHT!

It took going behind bars to keep them out.

"Powerful and Gripping."

- Washington Post

D.A. TO KEEP OFF D.D.
DRUG ABUSE RESISTANCE

Academy Award Winner
Best Documentary Feature

The Legendary Documentary Film By Arnold Shapiro

ISM
Stress Management
Where We Are Now

- Dozens of Social Psychological Interventions
- Shown to work with random assignment
- Wide range of problems
What’s Next?

- Exactly how do these interventions work?
  - Mediating Variables
- Can they be generalized/scaled up?
  - Moderator Variables
  - Practical Issues
  - Maintaining Fidelity of Intervention
  - Funding
- Continue using experimental method
Examples of Scaling Up

- PERTS (perts.net)
- Mindset Collaborative (National Study)
- Belongingness Interventions
- Carnegie Foundation Statway
In Sum . . .

- Much work to do . . . but
- Exciting Times in Social Psychology!
Can People Change? Yes!
“A masterpiece.” —MALCOLM GLADWELL

REDIRECT
Changing the Stories We Live By

TIMOTHY D. WILSON
Foreword by Daniel Gilbert
A bit of history . . .

- The Power of Construals
- Use Theory to Change Construals
- Test with the Experimental Method
- Small Changes Can Have Big Effects

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947)
Belonging Uncertainty
(3 years later)

High Uncertainty

Control | Belonging

Walton & Cohen (2011)