

PSYCHOLOGY

Social Psychology and Social Change

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Over the past several decades one of the quieter social sciences, social psychology, has made breakthroughs in interventions to solve social problems. Unlike the other branches of psychology, social psychology was borne out of an interest in remedying society's ills. When the father of the field, German refugee Kurt Lewin, conducted his seminal studies, the problems of World War II preoccupied him: the power of leaders to shape citizens' behavior for good and ill, intergroup conflict and aggression, minority groups' belongingness and adjustment, de-Nazification and cultural transformation ("nation building" in today's parlance), and so on (1, 2). At the heart of Lewin's approach rested a novel idea: social problems are amenable to experimentation. "The best way to understand something is

have large consequences. For example, to encourage families to eat cheap-cut meats like sweetbreads during the war (because the finer cuts had limited supply), Lewin showed the importance of the gatekeeper, the person who controls the behavioral channel—in this case, the housewife. He also demonstrated the impotence of persuasion and the power of the small group. Bring housewives together into a new group supportive of change, freeing them from the grip of their old familial norms, and they would try the novel foods far more frequently than if they were lectured to. Time and again, Lewin showed that what often seem problems of bad attitudes,

lack of information, or economic incentives were instead problems of group influence, identity, and social perception. But most revolutionary was Lewin's method. There was a combination of optimism and folly in the idea that researchers could, through the experimental method, change reality and improve social conditions for the better (3).

In *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change*, Timothy Wilson reviews much of this history and revisits the field of social psychology 70 years after Lewin's pioneering work. He focuses on the contributions of social psychology to understanding and remedying social problems. Wilson is a social psychologist at the University of Virginia who has made groundbreaking discoveries in the study of intuition and introspection. In clear prose that does not trivialize the science, he reviews the many success stories in social psychology. There are interventions that harness the power of expressive writing and volunteerism to improve happiness and health and to lessen rates of teen pregnancy. There are interventions that reduce student failure and close gaps between minority and nonminority students by inculcating in them core positive beliefs that sustain them through hardship, such as the belief that intelligence is not a fixed entity but rather like a muscle that grows with effort. There are interventions that

improve intertribal trust in Rwanda by modeling cooperative intergroup relations through radio soap operas. In the United States, interventions that defuse blacks' and whites' fear of interracial rejection increase their likelihood of becoming friends. And reminiscent of Lewin, there are studies that cleverly manipulate social norms to reduce teen alcohol use and encourage energy conservation.

What these interventions share is that they are grounded in science, found effective in randomized experiments, have surprisingly large and durable effects—and, by and large, aren't used. Over and over, Wilson writes, schools, government agencies, and workplaces opt for interventions that not only have never been subjected to experimental test but also, when they finally are, often yield null and even negative effects. These interventions are usually based on a

combination of intuition, ideology, and good intentions. Wilson critiques several popular but unwise interventions: Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E., implemented in 75% of the school districts in the United States), "scared straight," certain forms of posttraumatic grief counseling, many commonplace diversity training programs, and the self-help and positive thinking industry in general [*The Secret* (4) receives sustained criticism]. These are analogous, Wilson writes, to the practices of leeching and bloodletting before the scientific method took hold in medicine. The amounts of money spent by schools, workplaces, and other institutions on ineffective programs, and the degree to which intuition and ideology determine how taxpayer money is spent, are astonishing. But all of us are culpable. When it comes to the mini-interventions that we naturally inflict on our family and co-workers, commonplace practices that seem obviously salutary, like praising your child's intelligence or rewarding people for their freely chosen good behavior, can backfire, sometimes dramatically. Wilson discusses how such unwise practices often arise from inaccurate theories of human nature.

Redirect also helpfully reviews larger-scale programs that reliably achieve positive results in randomized trials (such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters) and various programs to reduce teen violence and substance abuse (such as LifeSkills Training).

Wilson wants society to adopt more of an experimental approach to solving social problems—putting interventions to the test

Redirect

The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change

by Timothy D. Wilson

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**To change direction.**

to try to change it," he was fond of saying. Beyond descriptive and correlational studies, Lewin championed experimental manipulation: Introduce an exogenous shock to the system, and see how it responds.

Lewin also advocated a diagnosis stage in what he dubbed "action research": First assess the relationships among variables in a system. In doing so, one could identify the pressure points where a small nudge might

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with randomized controlled trials. This is a good idea, at least when the ambition is to disseminate the interventions widely. However, one problem that *Redirect* does not explicitly address concerns limitations in the experimental method itself. There is nothing better than an experiment for testing causality, whether an intervention A affects a social problem B. However, a positive experimental result risks deluding us into believing that A is both necessary and sufficient to solve B (5). But as Lewin taught us, the effect of A will depend on the context into which it is introduced—the preexisting system of variables. Encourage students to see their academic fates as within their own control, and they will thrive, provided that they inhabit a classroom that provides them with opportunities for growth, such as committed teachers and quality instruction (6). Many of the interventions Wilson reviews act like catalysts. They will not teach a student who cannot spell to spell, but they will encourage the student to seize opportunities to learn how. Because the effects of interventions are context-dependent, there will be no silver bullets.

Another question concerns how to scale up the interventions to reach more people. Many (though not all) of the interventions are highly psychologically leveraged and carefully crafted. The medium is as important as the message: You can't simply tell students that their intelligence is expandable and that success is possible and then expect positive results. The message needs to be conveyed vividly, impactfully, and sometimes stealthily: for instance, by recruiting beneficiaries to deliver the message of optimism in their

own words to younger students. Seldom do beneficiaries of these interventions feel singled out as in need of help. The researchers anticipate that stigmatizing people as “in need” could do more harm than providing no help at all. Likewise, high-pressure messages to teenagers about the risks of poor nutrition do not work as well as, say, getting them to participate in fun extracurricular athletic activities or social-political causes that have hidden but beneficial side effects for health (7). The stealth, attention to detail, and human touch found in many of these interventions could be lost in large-scale efforts to scale up (8, 9).

Wilson uses the thought-provoking metaphor of “story editing” to describe the ingredient common to many of the successful interventions he reviews. They alter the narratives people tell themselves about their world and their place in it: Is it safe or threatening? Do I belong or not? Am I capable or not? During sensitive periods, people's storytelling can be redirected and the change can build on itself over time. Amend the opening sentence of the story of your transition to college, or to a new job, and the arc of your story may be entirely different from what it would have been otherwise. This helps explain why seemingly simple interventions, such as writing about a traumatic experience, or volunteering for a humanitarian cause, improve health and well-being. They give people an organizing narrative that puts their lives in an optimistic context.

Wilson compellingly argues that effective interventions validated by social-science research are rarely implemented. This is a

problem. Why are such interventions ignored in favor of ideology and intuition? What can we do to prevent this? What interventions should we be implementing today? Nonetheless, Wilson's account should not leave readers with the belief that social-psychological experiments have failed to affect real-world practices and policies. When social psychology affects practice and policy, it usually does so through a delayed, trickle-down process (3, 10). For example, the medical establishment's emphasis on patient-centered care follows in part from social-psychological research on the importance of predictability and control in health. The currently popular notion that good social policy nudges people to make decisions consistent with their long-term self-interests (for instance, by making retirement saving a default for employees, which they are free to opt out of) similarly follows from decades of social-psychological research. The book points to many interventions that could trickle down as well, informing education, health, and social policy.

How common sense and ideology lead us astray in our attempts to fix social problems, how surprisingly difficult it is to discern whether a program works without a true randomized experiment, and how sometimes subtle social-psychological processes contribute to big social problems constitute the lessons of *Redirect*. As the scientist Paul C. Stern once wrote, a policy objective of science is to “separate common sense from common nonsense and make uncommon sense more common” (11). Wilson's book does science and society a great service by accomplishing precisely this.

References and Notes

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12. I thank E. Ponin and D. Sherman for feedback.

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BROWSINGS

A Bee in a Cathedral: And 99 Other Scientific Analogies.

Joel Levy. Firefly, Richmond Hill, Ontario, 2011. 224 pp. \$29.95, C\$29.95. ISBN 9781554079599.

Educators, science communicators, and researchers have long used the “x is like y” construction with familiar objects and actions to make scientific ideas clear to their audiences. Writer and journalist Levy presents 100 such easy-to-understand comparisons that illuminate facts and principles from physical sciences, biology, human anatomy and physiology, and technology. These range from Johannes Kepler's clockwork cosmos to John Searle's “Chinese room” thought experiment on artificial intelligence. For each analogy, the author supplements his concise description with a set of related facts and figures. Designer Lindsey Johns's two-page spreads effectively organize the short text and accompanying colorful graphics. These falling cards (above), for example, flank a comparison of entropy with the disorder introduced by shuffling a freshly unwrapped pack of cards.

