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 born 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 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 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 to lessen rates of teen pregnancy. There are interventions that reduce student violence and substance abuse (such as LifeSkills Training). Wilson also helpfully reviews largescale 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
A Bee in a Cathedral: And 99 Other Scientific Analogies.


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.

BROWSINGS

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. Educators 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 benefactors vividly, impactfully, and sometimes stealthily. Research suggests that the effects of interventions are context-dependent, there will be no silver bullets. 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

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

www.sciencemag.org SCIENCE VOL 334 14 OCTOBER 2011 179