PART I

Big Science, Big Theory, Big Ideas
When asked to identify my most underappreciated paper, I pretty much knew right away which one I would write about. But that did not stop me from spending hours examining the Web of Science to see which of my papers were truly ignored—I found one from my early days that has never been cited, not even by me, not even by my three co-authors, not even a single time. My temptation to cite it here is trumped by the necessity of limiting citations to three; it will therefore remain in oblivion. Instead, the paper that I’ve often thought was underappreciated examined how people create and maintain life change by constructing narratives about how and why they changed (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). In fairness, the paper has been cited about three times per year on average (total citations = 46), so it has not been totally ignored (although at least one recent paper in JPSP on narrative life change failed to cite it, so at least those authors support my claim of underappreciation). Here I describe why I wrote the paper, what we found, the story that we should have emphasized, and why I think we have a lot more to learn about how subjective interpretations are crucial for understanding life change.
NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL LIFE CHANGE

Whether people can change key aspects of their lives is a fascinating and important question for psychologists and the lay public alike. A glance at the psychology section in most bookstores (perhaps more appropriately called the self-help section) suggests that many people are trying to transform central aspects of their lives, such as getting over shyness, losing weight, giving up addictions, learning to like themselves, and so forth. Indeed, the life change industry is big business, raking in billions a year: self-help books bring in more than $10 billion, weight loss programs more than $50 billion, alcoholism treatment around $22 billion, and so on. The human species has amazing talents that have led to the development of higher education, space travel, medical miracles, and eye-popping technologies. But as my colleagues and I have noted over the years, people are also prone to self-regulatory failures, from failing at weight loss, to overcoming addictions, to avoiding driving while impaired, to spending beyond their means, etc. Thus, the life change industry benefits from a lot of repeat customers.

Given its importance, one might expect that understanding the psychological basis of life change would be a high priority for research. Yet this has not been the case, perhaps because studying life change is extraordinarily difficult. For instance, typically the evidence for change is obtained after it has taken place—even in prospective studies where there are assessments at various time points (and objective indicators might verify that change has occurred), there remains ambiguity regarding most aspects of change, such as time course (slow vs. sudden), differential motives, precipitating or sustaining factors, cognitive change, and so on. Indeed, although there are various theories about how people contemplate change, the factors that increase the likelihood of success (e.g., social support, an empirically validated psychological treatment, financial resources), and the conditions under which change is maintained, there is a stark lack of information regarding how people actually transform their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. At the same time, in spite of the difficulties of understanding change, a variety of evidence indicates that people do make important life changes, both with and without therapy. But how do they do it?

To understand the phenomenology of life change, my graduate student Patricia Nichols and I collected narrative accounts from people who had succeeded at making major life changes versus accounts from people who had tried and failed in their attempts (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Because the paper is lightly cited and probably not widely read (hence its status as underappreciated), I will describe the basic findings. The successful and unsuccessful change stories differed in substantial and predictable ways. Individuals who reported successfully making changes described extreme negative affect, and often suffering, before the change was made, after which they developed a new identity. One common theme in the successful change stories was the occurrence of a focal event that triggered the change attempt, such as one
woman deciding to leave her husband after taking a class that she said changed her entire outlook on life. Of course, we had no evidence that the change stories were true, and we speculated that people were misremembering their prior circumstances in order to create the perception that they had changed. We proposed that the stories people create may serve as important guides for future behavior. That is, the belief that one has changed may motivate behaviors that help sustain change.

UNCONSCIOUS FORCES AND THE INTERPRETER

One of the most important developments in psychology over the past few decades has been the growing recognition that much of human mental life exists below conscious awareness and that people are generally unaware of the cognitive processes (and the neural activity that gives rise to thought and emotion) that underlie most actions. Classic work by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson demonstrated that people have limited access to their mental processes. Building on that seminal work, psychologists (notably John Bargh, Dan Wegner, and Ap Dijksterhuis) have documented important ways in which subtle, unconscious influences have a huge impact on behavior. Thus, contextual cues may prime certain thoughts or behaviors, such as viewing other people as more likeable when we are drinking a hot beverage. In Dan Wegner’s elegant work, he has demonstrated that people have illusions of agency in which they either falsely believe they have control over events that occur without their involvement or lack a feeling of will for events they clearly did cause. This is important because it shows there can be a discrepancy between the actual cause of events and what people believe about the cause of those events. Hence, we begin with the idea that a great deal of behavior occurs in the absence of self-awareness of the mental processes underlying the behavior as well as possible misperceptions of personal agency for producing the behavior.

As has long been noted by attribution theorists, even with a lack of insight and inaccurate perceptions of agency, the human mind seems compelled to offer some explanation for events. The history of psychology has documented that people seem motivated to do two things: (1) make sense of events in a way that creates order and structure to instill a sense of coherency and predictability, and (2) portray the self in the best possible light. It is with these two motives in mind that we begin to understand the role of people’s interpretations of events in relation to their perceived success or failure at life change. Let’s examine the two motivational processes.

In terms of making sense of ongoing events, I have been greatly influenced by my collaborator Michael Gazzaniga’s interpreter theory, based on his groundbreaking work with split-brain patients, whose two hemispheres had been surgically separated. In such patients, the left and right hemispheres can be interrogated separately by presenting information selectively to one or the other. Because there is contralateral control of movement (i.e., the right hemisphere controls the left side of the body and vice versa), the left hand can select an object that was shown to the right hemisphere,
but the right hand cannot because it does not know what the right hemisphere observed. Mike identified a left hemisphere interpretive mechanism that creates causal explanations for events and actions, even in the absence of complete or veridical knowledge. For instance, in one classic study in which a split-brain patient’s left hemisphere was forced to make sense of why the left hand selected a shovel (which was selected because it matched a snow scene shown to the right hemisphere), the left hemisphere (which was shown only a chicken claw) was quick to explain the action by the information available only to it, which is that the shovel must be used to clean out a chicken shed. In other words, when faced with personal actions for which the self does not have access to the mental and biological processes that produced them, the interpreter spins a story to make sense of events. Unfortunately, the interpreter’s story is only as good as the material it has to work with, and as noted earlier, people have only limited access to the mental events that cause actions.

In terms of the motives to cast the self in a positive light, research in social psychology demonstrates that people’s accounts of past events strongly influence their current self-perceptions as well as their assessments of whether they have changed. Anne Wilson and Michael Ross have conducted elegant research documenting the ways in which people disparage their past selves in order to bolster or enhance their current self-views (Ross & Wilson, 2003). This work builds on Michael Ross’s earlier work showing that people get what they want by revising what they had (e.g., when you don’t lose weight you might believe you did because you mistakenly recall that you used to be heavier than you are now). In other words, people distort their pasts to feel better with their present states. Likewise, Lisa Libby and her colleagues demonstrated that people think they have changed more when they consider themselves from the third-person perspective compared to the first-person perspective (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005). Libby and colleagues point out that subjectivism influences how people interpret change, a finding that is very consistent with that of our underappreciated paper.

PULLING IT TOGETHER

The various perspectives highlighted in this chapter (unconscious influence, left hemisphere interpreter, motivated reflections of the past) are key ingredients to understanding how people understand and describe their efforts at life change. As we speculated, it seems likely that a variety of forces conspire to produce change, only some of which are apparent to the person undergoing change. As the subjective interpreter examines the available evidence to make sense of things, and given the self-enhancement biases inherent in retrospective accounts, a story emerges that explains the life change in a way that portrays the past self as horribly flawed and the new self as changed in identity and distant from that flawed self.

Importantly, whether this interpretive account is accurate may not be important for future behavior. Put another way, irrespective of the factors actually responsible
for change, what sustains change is dependent on the interpretive account. As William Thomas said in 1928, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." The belief that one has made a successful life change emerges from a narrative that explains the new self as changed in meaningful ways from one’s old self. The implications of this pattern are important for understanding any endeavor in which people try to change. For instance, insight therapies may be unsuccessful because trying to get in touch with your real self and the past that produced that self may inadvertently affirm the core self that is difficult to change. Therapies such as cognitive behavior therapy might inspire the person to change to the person he or she wants to be and to break clear from the maladaptive past. Likewise, encouraging people to distance themselves from their old selves, in part by taking a third-person perspective, may help provide the resources to sustain the new self (Libby et al., 2005).

So, why was the original paper overlooked or underappreciated? I think the paper was a bit ahead of its time and did not benefit from the newer insights into unconscious processes, illusions of agency, constructive processes, and interpretive motives. Moreover, crossing levels of analysis from social to neurological accounts helps complete the story in a more satisfying way.

Then again, maybe my old self was a crappy writer with a bad sense of where to publish. Thank goodness I’ve changed.

REFERENCES

