The Science of Who We Are and How We Relate

Editors: Mark Leary, Shira Gabriel, Brett Pelham

Jul 06, 2015

MIGHTY OAKS FROM LITTLE (PSYCHOLOGICAL) ACORNS GROW

By Kody Manke and Kevin Binning

Kody Manke and Kevin Binning discuss new research on psychological interventions that have long lasting effects.

Historically, the field of social psychology made its mark by showing that social influences can have surprisingly powerful effects. By manipulating some small aspect of the social situation, psychologists in traditions such as cognitive dissonance theory and social compliance documented effects on behavior that were much stronger and larger than most people would have assumed.

A related but under-appreciated discovery in social psychology is that the effects of brief social influences can have surprising endurance. While much research has focused on behavior immediately after an experience, numerous lines of research have examined how situational influences may create long-term change. In one classic study (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1964), several weeks after children were given either a mild or severe admonishment to avoid an attractive toy, those who received a mild warning (and therefore very little justification to avoid it) actually disliked and derogated the toy more than those who received a severe warning (and, with it, a satisfying explanation for why they had avoided it).

In another study, asking people to first display a small public service announcement in their window greatly increased the likelihood that, two weeks later, they would place a much larger public service announcement in their front yard (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). And in recent work on attenuating stereotype threat in academic settings, brief self-affirmation exercises boosted academic performance among threatened group members up to three years after the intervention (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009).

Although a variety of research has documented examples of brief effects lasting over time, the processes underlying these effects are far from fully understood. In a symposium at the 2014 conference for the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, researchers presented several novel lines of research seeking to understand the paradox of when, how, and why small, brief psychological experiences and interventions can create large, lasting effects. One goal of the symposium was to encourage more dialogue with other disciplines that study related processes. For example, proponents of life course theory in sociology study how people exist in structural, social, and cultural contexts, and how the interplay between these systems leads to the outcomes of one experience affecting the outcomes of later experiences. They have long discussed processes such as recursion, transitions, and trajectories – all processes that can help to

explain the mechanisms by which psychological experiences have long-lasting effects. By engaging in dialogue with this and other disciplines, social psychology stands to gain valuable insights from perspectives previously overlooked or underutilized in our research.

The symposium at SPSP revolved around the idea of cumulative consequences: people exist in a social system with which they are continuously interacting, and these repeated interactions between the psychological and social systems compound on one another. In these ways, each successive interaction builds on those before it – the final outcome is a product not of a single social experience, but rather of the accumulation of all of an individual's experiences (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014). A student performing just a bit better in class may lead their teacher to hold them to higher standards. In turn, the student may respond to the higher standards with increased motivation in school, which may ultimately lead to further improvement in academic achievement. Thus, a brief psychological experience may carry forward not simply in isolation, but rather by affecting subsequent experiences in cumulative interactions that create a trajectory of change.
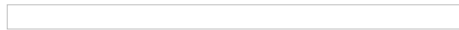
Photo courtesy of JohnsonEarth

To begin, research by Kody Manke and Geoff Cohen showed how a single instantiation of academic threat can have lasting and far-reaching consequences. Female participants either took a difficult, evaluative, stereotype-relevant math test (threat) or a similarly difficult, evaluative, stereotype-irrelevant verbal test (non-threat). Compared to their non-threatened peers, the threatened females students showed lower performance on a math test and decreased identification with both math and their gender group at a one-week follow-up session. Furthermore, a one-year follow-up found that the effects of the threat persisted, even outside the lab. Such findings are consistent with the idea that an initial instantiation of threat can carry forward by affecting subsequent interactions. People may use stereotypes about a central and essentialist characteristic (e.g., their gender) to interpret future experiences in stereotyped domains. To the extent that they interpret negative experiences in ways that are consistent with the stereotype, these experiences might be especially likely to carry forward, perpetuating and reinforcing the stereotypes.

Work by Carissa Romero and colleagues (Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014) directly illustrated that the beliefs people hold about their abilities and emotions can directly shape life outcomes. In particular, students who believed that intelligence could be changed were more likely to move to advanced math courses over time. Among students with low well-being at the beginning of middle school, those who believed that emotions could be changed showed greater well-being over time. Thus, Romero and colleagues' illustrate that one way brief interventions can have lasting effects is through targeting internally held beliefs (e.g., about one's ability to change) that affect motivations and interpretations of subsequent experiences, shaping life choices and trajectories.

Life course research by Steven Hitlin and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson examined how adolescents' views of agency can affect their mental health and occupational success trajectories as they transition to adulthood. Utilizing the Youth Development Study (YDS), the researchers found that possessing a high sense of agency (perceived capacities and life chances) influenced both mental health trajectories and occupational success trajectories in positive ways as adolescents transitioned to adulthood. Perceiving that one has agency was predictive of both higher occupational success and better psychological health over time.

Finally, Kevin Binning and colleagues considered ways to leverage insights about people's sensitivity to situational pressures to help protect and deflect people from maladaptive trajectories that cumulate in negative consequences over time. They document that brief values affirmation writing exercises – timed to coincide with salient threats in the environment – can reinforce the self from within, making partisans less likely to conform to partisan norms (Binning, Sherman, Cohen, & Heitland, 2010), as well as making the academic performance sixth-grade students less vulnerable to the stress of transitioning to a new middle school. These effects persisted over days, months, and years, suggesting that reinforcing the self-concept can initiate processes that strengthen and protect the self-concept during future experiences.

Taken together, the research not only documents examples of social experiences having lasting effects, but also begins to shed light on the way that these effects may propagate over time.

Aronson, E., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1963). Effect of the severity of threat on the devaluation of forbidden behavior. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *66*(6), 584.

Binning, K. R., Sherman, D. K., Cohen, G. L., & Heitland, K. (2010). Seeing the Other Side: Reducing Political Partisanship via Self-Affirmation in the 2008 Presidential Election. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *10*(1), 276-292.

Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *science*, *324*(5925), 400-403.

Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual review of psychology*, *65*, 333-371.

Freedman, J. L., & Fraser, S. C. (1966). Compliance without pressure: The foot-in-the-door technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *4*, 195.

Romero, C., Master, A., Paunesku, D., Dweck, C. S., & Gross, J. J. (2014, February 10). Academic and Emotional Functioning in Middle School: The Role of Implicit Theories. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035490

Kevin Binning received a Ph.D. in Psychology from UCLA and completed postdoctoral training at Stanford University and UC Santa Barbara. He studies social psychological issues related to diversity in educational and political contexts. In the fall he will assume a position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and Research Scientist in the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

Kody Manke is a PhD candidate at Stanford University, where his primary interests are social psychological interventions, identity formation and maintenance, stereotype threat, and culture. He now works primarily with Geoffrey Cohen, and previously worked with Patricia Devine at the University of Wisconsin and Steven Neuberg at Arizona State University. Email: kmanke@stanford.edu. Website: http://cohenlab.stanford.edu/kody-manke/.

ABOUT OUR BLOG

Why is this blog called Character & Context?

Everything that people think, feel, and do is affected by some combination of their personal characteristics and features of the social context they are in at the time. Character & Context explores the latest insights about human behavior from research in personality and social psychology, the scientific field that studies the causes of everyday behaviors.

Learn More

Contribute to Character and Context

Visit the Blog Roll for other feeds

SEARCH THE BLOG

Google Custom Search

GET EMAIL UPDATES FROM THE BLOG

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

POPULAR ARTICLES

Does Social Media Make Us Sad, Stupid, and Narcissistic?

It's a Meaningful Life: The Surprising Existential Benefits of Self-control

Self-Compassion Can Help You Feel More Like Yourself

Happy Spouse, Longer Life?

Why Third Place is Usually Better than Second

Share this page

View our Privacy Policy here.

View our Privacy Policy here.