

Afterword

Evolving the Future

A number of years ago, I received an e-mail from someone named Tony Biglan, who introduced himself as president of the Society for Prevention Research. He invited me to attend a symposium on prevention research from an evolutionary perspective that he was organizing for the society's next annual meeting.

I had never heard of Tony or the Society for Prevention Research, but I was happy to accept his invitation because I had just started to use my evolutionary expertise in a practical way to improve the quality of life in my city of Binghamton, New York. I outlined my new project, which I called the Binghamton Neighborhood Project, to Tony in my reply to his e-mail. Within seconds I had a return reply:

“Oh boy. You need me. This is what I do.”

Indeed it was. Over the ensuing weeks and months, I was amazed and delighted to discover that Tony and his colleagues were already doing what I aspired to do: accomplish positive change in real-world settings. Some of their change methods worked at the individual level. If your view of psychotherapy is to spend years on a couch talking about your childhood, think again. I discovered that there are therapeutic methods that can be taught on the basis of reading a single book or attending a single three-hour session. Some of the change methods worked at the level of small groups. One of these was the Good Behavior Game, which provides lifelong benefits when played in the first and second grades. Perhaps most amazingly, some of the change methods worked at the level of large

populations, such as a program that reduced cigarette sales to minors in the states of Wyoming and Wisconsin and another program implemented at a countywide scale in South Carolina that reduced the rate of child maltreatment. In a world of problems that seem to defy solutions, I felt that I had stumbled across a secret society of benign wizards.

Many practical change methods are poorly validated, which makes it difficult to know whether, how, or why they work. But Tony and his colleagues were also wizards at assessment. The gold standard of assessment is the randomized controlled trial, in which the individuals or groups that undergo the change method are randomly drawn from a larger pool, creating a comparison group that is similar in every other way. For example, in the South Carolina study (headed by Ron Prinz), eighteen counties were selected that were roughly comparable in size and demographics. Of these, nine were randomly selected to receive the treatment, and their child maltreatment statistics were compared to the other nine counties. Why weren't the results of such a high-quality study front page news?

I was so impressed by what I discovered that I began to wonder what I had to contribute with my own nascent efforts. I needn't have worried. Tony and his colleagues—especially Steven C. Hayes and Dennis Embry—were as eager to “discover” me as I was to “discover” them. The very fact that their work was largely unknown was a problem that I was in a position to help solve.

In my book *Evolution for Everyone*, I write that the Ivory Tower would be more aptly named the Ivory Archipelago—many islands of thought with little communication among islands. The world of public policy and practical change efforts suffers from the same problem. A change method that works arises and spreads within a given island but goes no further unless “discovered” by some brave wayfarer from another island. Evolutionary theory can transform the Ivory Archipelago into the *United* Ivory Archipelago by providing a unifying theoretical framework. This unification took place in the biological sciences during the twentieth century (and continues), and it is in the process of taking place for the human-related academic disciplines. It can also work its magic for the world of public policy and practical change efforts. Tony, Steve, and Dennis sensed this possibility, which made them as excited to work with me as I was to work with them.

I tell the story of teaming up with Tony, Steve, and Dennis for a general audience in my book *The Neighborhood Project*. We outline our vision for a professional audience in an article titled “Evolving the Future: Toward a Science of Intentional Change,” which is published with peer commentaries and our reply in the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. Now Tony has outlined the vision in his own words in *The Nurture Effect* with great wisdom, experience, and humanity.

I think of what Tony and the rest of us are trying to accomplish in historic terms. Historians will look back upon the twenty-first century as a period of synthesis for human-related knowledge, similar to the synthesis of biological knowledge that took place during the twentieth century. With understanding comes the capacity to improve. There is no doubt that the synthesis is taking place, but *how fast* is less certain—and speed is of the essence, because the need to solve our most pressing problems won’t wait. The more people who read *The Nurture Effect* and absorb its meaning, the faster the world will become a better place.

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