



original article

A psychosocial model of behaviour change and a role for life events**Jane Ogden**^{1*}¹ Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, UK

As an undergraduate I was taught about the importance of life events theory in the context of both depression and physical illness. The work of George Brown and colleagues was held up as a cornerstone of psychological research and paved the way for a multitude of interesting studies which integrated a number of varied psychological perspectives. The other day I looked in the back of a current textbook on abnormal psychology to find the name George Brown absent. Life events theory now seems to have been removed from our repertoire. This paper is not a eulogy to that work but reports some of our own recent research which indicates that life events may still have a role to play in our understanding of behaviour change and that such an approach may be a useful route to get the individual's social world back into our ways of thinking.

Current work on behaviour change

Predicting and explaining health related behaviour has long been the domain of health psychology. Over recent years, however, health psychologists have turned their attention to exploring the nature of behaviour change. To date this has mainly drawn upon two approaches. The first has involved the development of interventions based upon models such as stages of change theory, the theory of planned behaviour or the health belief model and has highlighted the role of skills training, cognitive shifts, implementation intentions or education as a means to promote healthier behaviour. This approach has been applied to a number of behaviours including diet, sexual health, exercise and safety helmet use (see Rutter and Quine, 2003 for a review). The second approach has involved an analysis of existing intervention-based data as a means to identify the strategies or components of strategies which are most effective at bringing about change. To this end, researchers have coded a multitude of different interventions to develop a taxonomy of the active ingredients of change (Abraham and Michie, 2008).

Although varying in their focus of analysis both these approaches have two fundamental perspectives in common. Firstly, they emphasise the central role of individual psychological factors such as cognitions, emotions and motivations as the mechanisms of change. Secondly, they conceptualise behaviour change as the

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result of a slow process of cognitive shifts and the development and implementation of behavioral intentions, motivation or plans. In particular, social cognition models emphasise behavioural intentions and planning, and the work evaluating interventions highlights the impact of repeated attempts at change. These analyses omit two additional possible sources of change. First, the role of social and structural factors remains neglected. It is often as if the individual exists in an environmental vacuum. Second, behaviour change may occur in a more dichotomous fashion following a specific event which has been explored using a number of different terms including teachable moments, life events, life crises, epiphanies and medical triggers. This approach reflects the work of Miller (2004) who argues that decisions to initiate and possibly maintain behaviour change are quantum rather than linear events and suggests that such quantum leaps result from a sudden rise of motivation or inspiration that is greater than the sum of its constituent cognitive parts. It is also in line with life events theory that was a central part of psychological theory and research towards the end of the twentieth century (eg. Brown and Harris, 1978). In a similar vein, West and Sohal (2006) and Larabie (2005) report that many smokers quit smoking "cold turkey" without planning and Matzger et al (2004) report that people who sustained long term remission from alcohol, were twice as likely to have done so after experiencing a transformational experience traumatic life event. Our recent research has explored the role of ►

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both psychological and social factors in promoting behaviour change with a particular emphasis on the impact of specific life events.

Life events and behaviour change

Our first study in this area (Ogden and Hills, 2008) involved a series of qualitative interviews with those who had shown sustained behaviour change in terms of either smoking cessation ($n=10$) or weight loss maintenance ($n=24$). The analysis highlighted the role for a number of different life events relating to their health, relationships or salient milestones. The results also illustrated that the impact of these life events was mediated through three key sustaining conditions; namely, reduced choice over the previous unhealthy behaviour, reduced function of their past behaviour, and a model of their health which emphasized behavioural causes and solutions. Using the example of weight loss maintenance, it was argued that the initial change in diet triggered by the life event is translated into sustained behaviour change if the event reduces the individual's choice about when and how much to eat, if it reduces the function and benefits attached to eating and if the individual believes that their weight problem is caused by their behaviour. Further, we concluded that sustained behaviour change is facilitated through a process of reinvention as individuals respond to the life event by reinventing themselves as a healthier and thinner person. This model is illustrated below in Figure 1.

Several components of this model have now been operationalised and tested in two subsequent quantitative studies. In the first study, members of a slimming club ($n=538$) completed measures concerning two events which had caused changes in diet and exercise resulting in either weight loss or weight gain (Ogden, Stavriniaki and Stubbs, 2009). They then described the event and rated a number of sustaining conditions. The majority of participants could describe a time when a life event had resulted in weight loss (73.9%) and weight gain (85.4%) including relationship problems, pregnancy, illness and death of someone close. In addition, differences were found between weight loss and weight gain in terms of the sustaining conditions; the weight loss event was perceived as reducing the choice over food and the function of eating and as increasing the choice over exercise and the function of this behaviour whereas the weight gain event showed the reverse effects. In the second study dieters who had lost 10% of their weight for more than 1 year ($n=431$) were compared to unsuccessful dieters ($n=592$) on the same components of the model (Epiphanou and Ogden, submitted). The results showed that successful dieters reported a reduced choice over their old diet and exercise behaviours, more benefits from their new healthier behaviours and indicated greater endorsement for the behavioural and solutions to their weight problem. Both these studies therefore provide some empirical support for the role of life

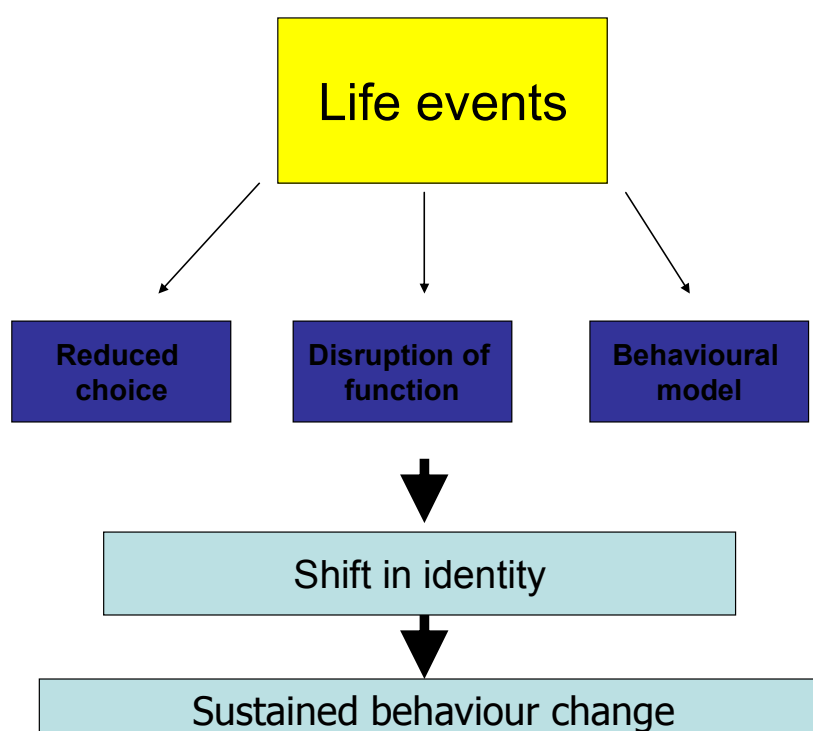


Figure 1: Life events and behaviour change (Ogden and Hills, 2008)



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events in behaviour change. Furthermore, they support the notion of sustaining conditions that enable initial changes to be translated into sustained behaviour change in the longer term. Further research is needed to explore how these variables culminate in a process of reinvention.

A psychosocial model of sustained behaviour change

Much research on behaviour change emphasizes planning and a process of slow cognitive shifts. Our research indicates that at times changes in behaviour may be more dichotomous than this and can follow sudden triggers or life events. Furthermore this research also indicates a central role for social and structural factors which can often be neglected in psychological research. Firstly, the life event happens to the individual from within their social world and may well be the result of a change in their relationships or job that is imposed upon them. It is true that this event needs to be appraised and interpreted by the individual involving the entire repertoire of psychological processes studied within psychological research. But the event itself remains an external structural factor which impacts upon the person. Second, central to the sustaining conditions outlined by the model are changes in the individual's environment. For example, a reduction in the benefits of the older unhealthy habits could result from the breakdown of an unhappy relationship making comfort eating no longer necessary, the onset of a new relationship in which smoking is no longer acceptable or a new job whereby colleagues no longer gather together to have a cigarette. Similarly, a reduction in choice could reflect a change of job to a work place where smoking was prohibited throughout the day, or a change of relationship whereby a new person was responsible for bringing food into the house. The extreme case of choice reduction occurs in those who have lost weight through obesity surgery and have had choice over food intake removed by the limited capacity of their new stomach size. Research indicates that rather than feeling prohibitive this can be experienced as liberating and result in a renewed sense of control (Ogden et al, 2006). Such changes in the individual's structural world may then provide them with the support and incentive to reinvent themselves as a healthier individual.

To conclude

Some changes in behaviour may occur as the result of plans and incremental changes in cognitions reflecting the role of internal psychological processes. But individuals exist within a social world and sometimes this world generates sudden life events which can also promote behaviour change.

Furthermore, this initial change may be translated into new behaviour patterns which can be sustained if a number of conditions are met, many of which also involve the individual's environment. Put simply, behaviour change can be sustained if changes in the individual's social world make it easier to be healthier and offer the opportunity for the individual to reinvent themselves. As psychologists we can help individual's to process life events in ways which make them seize the opportunity to create a new sense of self. And as social people we can argue and support changes to the environment which make initial changes easier to sustain. ■

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