

A Research Review: *Definition-formed Example Stories*

Reader's Guide: This case study describes results from on-going research. We examined recently published non-fiction, story-rich books within two original, customized genres: a) under-recognized patterns in life and b) new, uncommon, unexpected or radical ways of thinking or viewing the world. Fifty-five books have thus far been reviewed. The results are startling. An unanticipated and extraordinary portion of the stories within these select books are written in a definition form. Other definitions: secondhand smoke, mark-to-market, obesity, open source, the long tail, money, air space, standardization, occupational licensure, financial derivative, Penny Post, law, marriage, civil union, quality of a lifetime, and patriotism. 1,000 words

The Approach

This case study describes select findings from current on-going research. In an effort to better understand the latent power of definitions we reviewed recent non-fiction, story-rich books in two original, customized genres: **a) books about under-recognized patterns in life** and **b) books on new, uncommon, unexpected or radical ways of thinking or viewing the world**. Fifty-five books ranging from the well known including *Outliers*, *Freakonomics*, *Biomimicry*, *The Long Tail* and *The Black Swan* to more specialized books such as *The Invention of Clouds*, *The Stuff of Thought*, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, *Traffic*, *Life Without Lawyers* and *What is Your Dangerous Idea* were systematically examined. We identified all stories used within these books that rely primarily upon a definition form.

Open4Definition found more than two hundred and sixty definition-rich stories.

Plainly, these stories were used to support a wide and varied range of premises within these diverse books. In the best seller, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, for instance, he promises to reveal how hidden patterns work so readers can “deliberately start and control positive epidemics of [their] own”. This phrasing coincidentally describes a key element within the Implementation Stage of our [Open4Definition Universal Process](#).

From these many stories, sixty-six were then selected as “A List” stories. Next we mined these examples even further for selective use in this Case Study. We also complemented these findings with a number of definition-rich stories from other and already existing Open4Definition [Resources](#).

The Current Situation

Conventional wisdom favors ideas that can be expressed “in a nutshell” and grasped instantaneously. The history of science shows us that many of the smartest advancements seemed lunacies at the time they were first proposed. Time actually does

slow down when one travels (Einstein). The earth is as we now know neither flat nor is it at the center of the solar system. All the known findings still support the theory of evolution.

Open4Definition's movement into the world of definitions is of course less earth shattering. None-the-less, the approach that we are taking is admittedly often not readily grasped at the first encounter. This is partially because of **the long established frame through which societies view the world, our common conventions and, of course, individual and habitual mindsets.** We believe that this case study will help many new members of Open4Definition more easily bridge that gap.

Our charter is to create a contemplative and lively influence on ever evolving definitions and to do so both selectively and collaboratively.

The Findings

How better to deal with problems or benefit a specific passion than to systematically improve those consequential definitions that most impact them. To ease comprehension a quick tour of the latent power of definitions follows.

- **Grasp** the unexpected and favorable impact from the application of the term "secondhand smoke" in public health; the unforeseen and negative impact of "mark-to-market" on the recent world financial near meltdown; the American "obesity" epidemic; and the forty-fold increase in ten years in Bi-Polar Disorder diagnosis in U.S. children that was aided by an obscured change in definition.
- **Consider** the impact of the novel definition of Linux "Open Source" in the computer world; the concept of 'The Long Tail'; and our long conditioned acceptance of "money" in daily commerce.
- **Glimpse** the affect of Irish property law definitions involving inheritance during the nineteenth century Irish Potato Famine where a million starved and another million or two shipped off to America. Now contrast this to the more recent and orderly redefinition of "air space rights" that enabled commercial flights and the series of "standardization" definitions of the now ubiquitous shipping container and its impact on world trade as well as seaboard city populations.
- **Contemplate** how an interlinked series of independent Occupational Licensure definitions now cover one in four working Americans, yet this expansive field remains largely invisible to the general public.

Definitions viewed over a long expanse of time can shape a "story of stories".

Take the evolution of Risk Management from simple odds making in sixteenth century card games to today's financial derivatives. Or consider how the spread of the "Penny Post" in England has evolved into U.S. Zip+four postal codes. How China's fifteen century inward decision to forego Ocean going vessels and define strictly enforced laws led to the dismantling of their large shipyards thereby opening the world's sea lanes for Atlantic Europe dominance and thus the spread of Western Civilization around the globe.

These are just a swatch of examples.

Some definitions provide a fulcrum point for entrenched ideologies and man's most deeply seated beliefs. We'd be negligent to not point out at least a few.

- "Marriage" versus "Civil Union"
- The definition of when life starts remains a key factor in the U.S. abortion debate
- The widely varying definitions of "patriotism" dependent upon individual perception
- The grip of "Shiria Law" in select parts of the Muslim world

If there was ever a need for sapient definitions (and sapient is a key precept in Open4Definition) these are it. In addition, these are issues where a change in definition could shift the tectonic plates of a society.

In Conclusion

Open4Definition believes that currently interlocking definitions become institutionalized to create culture in often random ways and all without the qualitative evaluation of sapient to - at a minimum - attempt to *stack the deck* in a more positive way.

What was surprising is that the authors rarely if ever directly use the word definition in those example stories that were by our criteria clearly definition-reliant. This is pure speculation, but we think that this is a commonplace oversight. We also accept that this same omission happens subconsciously in much of what occurs in everyday life. In short, most definition forms remain all but invisible to the untrained eye and mind.

Definitions form the shorthand of life. By their very nature they create man-made, often unconscious passageways. Coupled with habits, definitions silhouette a system affecting everything that we do day after day. Our passage through routine occurrences and everyday life depends upon definitions more than we even realize.

The draw of definitions is unmistakable and unexpected. See the world differently through a new set of eyes and new possibilities to enhance *the quality of a lifetime*.

This research focused on how definition-formed stories were used to support a variety of arguments by an expansive range of thinkers and leading authorities. The definition-rich stories that were unearthed also support one of Open4Definition's central hypotheses:

Definitions shape mankind's largest and yet most under recognized pattern.

It is ironic. Definition-formed stories silhouette the premises of many noted authors in a variety of books. Definitions also clearly overlay their narratives in an unexpected way to often form a story within their stories. Possibly, and even more interestingly, definitions are almost completely under-recognized as being central within the also under-recognized patterns presented in the books reviewed. Said metaphorically, definition-forms are a hidden and significant slice of each pie baked by these authors.

Copyright © B. Helton, 2009

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has. - Margaret Mead

After Notes

Secondhand smoke is a definition used to frame a highly successful public health agenda to reduce smoking in America. It is powerful example of how a sapient definition can dramatically help alter the habits of many and ultimately lead to a shift in the beliefs of an entire society. [Secondhand Smoke: Backburning the Fire](#) provides a one page Case Study on the far reaching effects of this definition. Secondhand smoke is also used as a lead example in several Open4Definition [Whitepapers](#).

Mark-to-market is another far reaching example used in our seminal Whitepaper, [Unleashing the Power of Definitions](#), page 4 that also illustrates the far reaching affects that can result from the application of a definition. In this case, the truly unexpected was the near melt down of the world's financial system.

Malcolm Gladwell in a book to be released book this month also uses the **mark-to-market** definition within a story about the causes of the Enron failure. *What the Dog Saw* (New York, Boston and London: Little, Brown and Company, 2009): 171-173.

The U.S. government revised definition for **obesity** has raised the bar on the definition of overweight to include professional athletes like Tom Brady and Kobe Bryant. These are both technically questionable definitions. Never-the-less, they are having a positive impact. That is because these definitions raise the stakes to such a high level. If 66 percent of all adults are defined as overweight then the U.S. is in a crisis. Crisis management calls for bolder steps, period. See [The Illusive Obvious: Our Habits and Definitions are Interdependent](#), page 13.

Ori and Rom Brafman detail the making of an epidemic where from 1994 to 2003 the number of children diagnosed with **bipolar disorder** – a condition characterized by cycles of devastating hopelessness and despair followed by times of ecstatic excitement – had skyrocketed. An explanation for this forty-fold increase was the broadening of the definition of **bipolar disorder** in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). *Sway* (New York: Doubleday, 2008): 90-97.

James Surowiecki by our count used ten definition-formed stories in his ground breaking book illustrating the under recognized power of crowds. He shared the story of Finnish hacker Linus Torvalds and the creation of Linux, which unlike Microsoft's Windows is owned by no one and therefore everyone. This has also over time lead to **Open Source** definitions in a wide variety of both software applications and fields. *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004): 72-74.

The Long Tail is the title of a 2006 book written by Chris Anderson that has also become a definition in business circles similar to Jell-O or Coke. Nassim Nicholas Talib in his book discussing the under recognized theme of rarity, extreme impact and retrospective (though not with foresight) predictability and again by our count used eight definition-formed stories in support of this premise. **"The Long Tail"** from Mr. Talib's perspective takes a fresh look at what he sees as a very real dynamic within our world. *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2007): 223-225.

Our long conditioned **acceptance of money** was explored by Niall Ferguson. It is so commonplace few would consider it to be what it is: a series of interlinked and interdependent definitions. Eight of his stories relied upon the definition form. These ranged from how Cotton Bonds became critical to the funding of the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War to a series of definitions underpinning modern day life insurance. *The Ascent of Money* (New York, The Penguin Press, 2008): 26-31.

An explanation of "how too much ownership wrecks markets, stops innovation, and costs lives" is heavily definition dependent. Michael Heller examines the power of definitions without saying so in his stories about **The Irish Potato Famine** and **"air space rights"**. In the latter, the longstanding definition of the ownership of air overhead was delinked from the ownership of the land below. He also has an informative chapter on the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Wars (pages 165-186) which bitterly split the Chesapeake for nearly a hundred years, until a truce was brokered in 1962 and all because of an ill defined boundary definition between Virginia and Maryland as laid down by English King Charles I in 1632. *The Gridlock Economy* (New York, Basic Books, 2008):129-130 and 27-29.

The new world the box made in the late 1950's through the 1960's and beyond is described by Marc Levinson in how **standardization definitions** were critical to the now ubiquitous shipping container. *The Box* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006): 126-149.

See [Occupational Licensing Unveiled -- Its Huge](#) for our one page case study on **Occupational Licensure**. John R. Lott, Jr. also discussed this in one of several spin off Freakonomics books. *Freedomnomics* (Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing, 2007):102-107. Mr. Lott also grosses over Smoking Bans in restaurants on pages 107-109 without even making the connection to the **Secondhand Smoke** definition.

By our count in Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's book *Freakonomics* (2005) there are three definition-formed stories and in their just published sequel, *Super Freakonomics!* (2009) there are also at least three more.

Peter L. Bernstein outlines the evolution of **Risk Management** in a seminal book along with the myriad of definitions necessary to move this evolutionary progression along. We identified nine definition-formed stories alongside terms like life expectancy, bell curve, and Game Theory. *Against The Gods* (Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto and Singapore, John Wiley & Sons, 1996): various pages.

Thirteen illustrative stories in definition form were identified in a book about the evolution of world trade. This included William J. Bernstein's description of the British "**Penny Post**" as well as the impact of Smoot-Harley on world trade. His new way of viewing the world relies upon a careful building of the history and those definitions used to describe how trade has shaped the modern world. *A Splendid Exchange* (New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008): 309-310.

Seth Godin shares a case study of **ZIP+4** as one of five definition-formed stories and how it was a game changing innovation for the U.S. Postal Service. *Purple Cow* (New York, Penguin Group, 2003):77-78.

China's fifteenth century decision to forbid Ocean going vessels because of internal political issues was a definition that ended their treasure fleets. Jared Diamond describes how this also left the door open for Western dominance of the world in smaller vessels. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2005): 411-413.

The several and contrasting examples at the top of page three can be sourced from various [Whitepapers](#).

In the opening paragraph twenty percent of the fifty-five (with review continuing) books examined were provided as examples. Of these eleven books those that have not already been referenced in these after notes follow. The bold number at the end of each listing in this selective bibliography highlights our count of the number of definition-formed stories within that book.

Benyus, Janine M. 1997, ***Biomimicry***, New York: William Morrow and Company. **(8)**

Brockman, John (editor) 2007, ***What is Your Dangerous Idea***, New York: Harper Perennial. **(19)**

Gladwell, Malcolm 2008. ***Outliers***, New York, Boston and London: Little, Brown and Company. **(4)**

Hamblyn, Richard 2001, ***The Invention of Clouds***, New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux. **(9)**

Howard, Philip K. 2009, ***Life Without Lawyers***, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co. **(8)**

Pinker, Steven 2007, ***The Stuff of Thought***, New York: Viking. **(5)**

Vanderbilt, Tom 2008, ***Traffic***, New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf. **(4)**

Bill Wasik in his treatise on how stories live and die in viral culture describes the impact of **The Tipping Point** on the on-going search for under recognized patterns in both life and work. We paraphrase his description in the second paragraph including Malcolm Gladwell's quote. Mr. Wasik also used the definition form in five other stories. ***And Then There's This*** (New York, Viking, 2009): 133-136.

Since Malcolm Gladwell's book on **The Tipping Point** was a) the inaugural book of one of the two genres that we customized in this research [Under-recognized patterns in life] and b) became a definition unto itself we of course included it in our review. It has remained on the best seller list for almost a decade. ***The Tipping Point*** (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2002): various.

A definition-formed story involves definitions in a broad context. This framework includes definition uses ranging from customs to behaviors to social norms and practices, descriptions to mathematical and scientific meanings, and rules to rituals to duties to values to relationships and beyond.