

The Illusive Obvious: Our Habits and Definitions are Interdependent

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Visible Habits, Invisible Definitions

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User's Guide: The key to personal improvement lies as much in definitions as habits, yet we habitually fail to either examine or selectively improve our definitions. This White Paper delves into first, the interdependence between and second, the impact of our habits and definitions. In addition, it raises a series of thought provoking questions while providing a few unexpected answers that can be applied tomorrow. (15 pages) Key definitions and examples: sapient definition, secondhand smoke, obesity, self-improvement, conscious mind, habitual mind and universal process.

Gaining an Understanding

An Overview

We do what we do repeatedly. Indeed, people function mostly on auto-pilot. Let's therefore consciously explore a major facet of our subconscious – the interdependence between habits and definitions.

When definitions or their application haphazardly change in the environment around us, we among many others usually adapt. We will even alter long-standing habits to accommodate a new or revised definition or application. For example, the definition of secondhand smoke in America significantly reduced the habit of smoking by ostracizing smokers.

The Problem: What we typically won't do, unless forced, is examine and selectively improve critical definitions on our own initiative. That is the central issue that *Open4Definition* addresses.

This White Paper explores both the relationship and mutual dependence between habits and definitions.

Our objective is straightforward. By design, we intend to shift the focus on definitions to a more balanced footing. That is, in relationship to

the enormous attention paid and dollars spent to manage and improve individual habits and affect people's beliefs.

Almost everyone is hesitant to take any responsibility for most commonplace definitions. The only possible exceptions are those definitions that are *a*) clearly individual behavior related (e.g. personal diet), *b*) based solely on our own individual perspective (e.g. love), or *c*) a grave and present threat (e.g. medical mistreatment or emergency rules).

The interrelated outcomes that we seek might be summarized as follows.

Change your habits, improve your life. Overhaul beliefs, change your life and perhaps influence others. Create sapient definitions to improve the lives of many by altering habits and possibly beliefs.

Habits can only change one person at a time. The first example used is smoking and secondhand smoke. Beliefs also change one person at a time. America, for further illustration, now views smoking with utter distaste. A single sapient definition - in this case secondhand smoke - helped change the bad smoking habits of many and also alter beliefs within our society.

Unlock the potential of definitions in the human equation. This White Paper is written for a specific audience. This is one of several *Open4Definition* efforts underway to awaken the illusive obvious in the minds of those ready to consider definitions in a new light. It also raises as many questions as it answers and that is but one place where the involvement of others is needed.

Self-Improvement is Bad Habit Dependent

The self-improvement industry owes its very existence to an obvious disconnect between our habits and our goals. **Bad habits have spawned a wide range of services and businesses.** These include services and training geared toward eating healthy, consistent exercise, weight loss, relationship management and smoking secession.

Our worst habits call for even greater intervention in the form of professional and licensed services. These fields deal with harmful and habitual behaviors ranging from illegal drug use to destructive conduct and marriage instability to abusive relationships. They exist because we often fail to self-manage ourselves much less those around us.

Everyone accepts that bad habits exist. Individually, we often try to overcome them. The fact that these habits form a foundation for considerable economic activity has become an accepted part of life. Bad habits are a powerful economic engine. They create considerable demand for specialized services.

Of course, bad habits are vastly, vastly outnumbered by our good ones. These range from good grooming to safe driving and effective daily routines to polite behavior in groups. However, we don't usually catalog or address the favorable ones. We also do not use self-help materials and attend seminars on how to celebrate or accentuate our good habits either. The bad in this case clearly outweigh the good.

Habits Fill Our Days

To say that **habits are deeply ingrained** into our minds and within the everyday lives of each human being is an understatement. We do what we do repeatedly. Our habits are triggered by a cue or done in response to the context that surrounds us. A recent quote from a couple of U.S. psychology professors neatly sums this up. "Most of the time what we do is what we do most of the time."

The vast majority of our daily actions is preset and occurs with little if any conscious thought. We simply are on auto-pilot. Of course, each of us draws upon our own unique set of habits. We recognize that there is also considerable overlap in habits from person to person. Just consider how often we ask, "That's normal isn't it?" When specific bad habits like smoking, over eating or alcoholism exist at a high level in the general population the result is that a collection of services are offered to ameliorate their affect on us both individually and as a society.

Habits are habit forming. Not only do we go through much of life on autopilot we are constantly adding to those things we do repetitively and by script. Remember when you first learned to drive a stick shift? The amount of active thought was incredible. You could barely check all the mirrors while clutching and shifting. Now it is a breeze. You can even eat and talk on the phone while driving! It is simply not economical for active thought to predominate. It is these unthinking routines – or habits – that are the basis of everyday life.

It is also noteworthy that “practice does not make perfect; practice makes habit!” Habits, indeed, fill our days.

Definitions Evolve Haphazardly

Just as habits are the shorthand of behavior, definitions provide shortcuts for a broad range of daily situations and activities. One difference, however, are those habits come from within the individual as a result of environment or repetition while definitions may often be externally imposed by society. Typically definitions are just unthinkingly accepted.

When we refer to definitions we mean this in its broadest sense.

They impart structure to the inner workings of our everyday environment and make business and trade possible. Definitions enable us to make our way through the day like a finger on Braille deftly handling the bumps along the way. That is because there is mostly common agreement and a general consensus of understanding.

Even difficult and inconsistent definitions like love, freedom and reality are often brandished as if everyone agrees on their meaning.

This agreement is based on both usage and the limitations of language. Traditionally, **definitions are collectively spawned from countless and repetitive human choices and refinements** rather than from the laws of nature or Divine Providence. They often evolve over time. Definitions hold a space in our memory when they are different enough from other words or descriptions and useful enough to retain. Some definitions are full of nuance while others are very straightforward.

At the Intersection of Habits and Definitions

Habits and many definitions are similar in that both are almost always handled from our subconscious habitual mind. On the other hand, a definition may cue a habit, but typically it is not one. For instance, smoking is an unhealthy habit. Secondhand smoke is an applied definition that has been the key ingredient in dramatically reducing U.S. smoking rates to the lowest in the world. In contrast, obesity and being overweight are definitions that describe a physical condition usually resulting from eating, exercise and other personal habits.

There may also be an unthinking region in our conscious mind. That is, when the executive conscious mind is engaged and yet it automatically discounts terms, labels and definitions. For instance, do we think about the definition of an elevator when we enter the lobby of a high rise building; particularly if we are headed to the fortieth floor? Then again, if it is our habit to take the stairs because our office is on the third floor we only think about using the elevator when we are cued. That is, we will alter our habit when someone is accompanying us or when we are carrying a heavy load. Still, we do not define the term elevator any more than we define walking into and out of it, unless we are a small child or elevators are new to us.

Some definitions are encountered infrequently and therefore we never quite experience enough repetitions of use to encode them into our subconscious. Often these are definitions applied in a specific field. These can often be specialized and range from accounting rules to zoning ordinances.

What we clearly fail to do with definitions is either examine or work on improving them with anywhere the vigor that is reserved for ridding ourselves of bad or destructive habits. Said simply, **we see a poor habit as potentially correctable.** We can do this with or without outside help. On the other hand, most **bad definitions are seen as a societal problem.** They are simply not our concern unless they present a significant personal threat to our way of life.

The ratio of bad to good habits compared to the ratio of bad to good definitions is likely similar. While for habits a few really rotten apples in the barrel can spoil them all, the same does not hold true for definitions. One significant bad habit can lead to the demise of an individual, yet a bad definition won't destroy a working society. In fact, we simply integrate both good and bad definitions into our daily lives.

Of course, habits often include commonly accepted definitions within them. Specific definitions often even cue habits. In one sense habits are our way of integrating regular and routine definitions into our daily routines. For example, we stop on red and go on green. These and many other definitions, customs and rules are relegated to the habitual mind. In stark contrast, the often arcane definitions of, for example, state licensing requirements for various professions are usually not well understood and particularly by the customers they serve. These requirements are complex, rule-centered and non-routine with multiple tiers of definitions. We are therefore simply forced to deal with them from our conscious mind.

A change in a habitual-based definition or its application often causes a habit to be reviewed. This takes us off auto-pilot. The habitual mind hands off the situation to the conscious, executive mind. A new habit will then reform over time once a satisfactory response is tested, finalized and repeated. What is far less likely to happen is a challenge to the new definition itself. We are simply hesitant to take any responsibility for most commonplace definitions. The exception is those definitions that are *a*) clearly individual behavior related (e.g. personal diet), *b*) based solely on our individual perspective (e.g. love), or *c*) a grave and present threat (e.g. medical mistreatment or emergency rules).

Looking Back Toward Tomorrow

From an evolutionary vantage point, habits existed long before definitions. Repetition and learned protective behavior were crucial to survival. Definitions, as we know them now, existed once in only the most rudimentary forms such as man, woman and food. These may actually have been distinctions more than definitions. A distinction is all about

differentiation. A man is distinctly different from a woman and to reproduce we had to at least instinctively understand those differences.

In more modern times, a distinction is one way to fine tune a definition while a perception is ordinarily a baseline for understanding a definition. As languages developed and subsequently societies formed, discrete definitions emerged to handle the growing complexities and more varied interactions of life. Of course, definitions did evolve and change over generations of usage. As our societies became ever more advanced, definitions played a pivotal role in allocating scarce resources like food as well as controlling behavior within groups of people. That was the foundation for tribes and ultimately cities and then states.

Definitions along with physical might became the essential ingredients for exerting power over other people. This is not just a recent happening; it dates back 5,000 years or more. Still, the keepers of “key” definitions were the ruling class and in some ways that continues. These definitions are often called rules, laws, procedures, duties and practices. In parallel, other definitions like customs, values, rituals and behaviors evolved with less oversight. They were more in response to conditions, external factors and even individual habits and preferences.

Key definitions were once reserved and controlled by the very select few. They often had life and death implications. Definitions were changed only begrudgingly. They were ingrained like habits recessed firmly into man’s habitual mind. Only major upheaval or edict left definitions open to potential change. In perspective, habits did not matter nearly as much as definitions in the rule or control of others. So a change in a habit was considerably less threatening to the rule of man over man than the altering of an important definition. To illustrate, it was once a feudal right to set measures (weight, distance, etc.) and make other important definitions. Indeed, one definition of power in Europe over many centuries was how far around you people would accept the measures that you had defined.

Maybe definitions can be handled piecemeal because they simply don’t stand in the way of our next meal. We have become a refined society focused on the nuances of life. **We live mostly by script** and the

improvement of definitions is outlined in few, if any, of our scripts. That is the case **because of both historical precedent and the stealth-like nature of definitions** themselves.

We also emphasize definitions in the form of rules that range from scientific principles to the U.S. Electoral College. So exactly who rules who now? We are self-ruled, on the other hand, whoever sets the definitions still has the most say and sway over how things get done.

The Democratic Party's 2008 Presidential nomination, for instance, of Barack Obama was determined by a set of rules and definitions that discounted the Electoral College approach required in the general election, which he also won. In stark contrast, his main opponent in the primary, Hillary Clinton actually won the popular vote in nine out of the ten most populated states; and a lot of good that did her nomination bid.

The National Democratic Party's rules and definitions also seemed focused on expanding the power of party leaders and elected officials ranging from senators to governors to party loyalists. The rules makers selected 799 superdelegates – party insiders – and allotted them 795 nominating votes, which by themselves represented almost 40 percent of the votes needed to secure their party's nomination. Superdelegates were, not surprisingly, all experienced rule-makers who benefited from the rules they set in place.

What occurred in the Democratic Party nomination process was notable, but not unusual. Nevertheless, definitions unfortunately still don't seem to make it up on the radar screen except in often subtle or hidden ways. In contrast, in the industrialized world bad habits are targeted openly and vigorously; and often even by governments and other organizations.

Possibly this is why even today we so actively engage and encourage people to improve their habits. As a society we spend billions upon billions of dollars on improving habits each year, yet we have consistently failed to even make an effort to develop a common process or template for tackling and improving definitions.

Gaps in Our Understanding

Why do we fall short? At a minimum, we should consider periodically examining and making reasoned changes in select definitions. In particular, we should target those improvements that would lessen the negative impact of our worst habits. Instead as a society we are more likely to redefine harmful habits as conditions. This allows us to consume formal and costly treatments and professional interventions for conditions like substance abuse and personality disorders. This is but another result of how deeply definitions connect to our habits.

This White Paper raises as many questions as it answers including the following four sets of thoughts.

- ❖ *Do we habitually employ a simple rule of thumb such as, “Maybe that is neither a good nor reasonable definition but the effort to change it doesn’t justify doing anything beyond complaining or expressing disbelief.” Or is it just that most of what we do is what we do most of the time and that with tunnel vision we just move on to whatever is next?*
- ❖ *Habitual responses/behavior is driven from the cerebellum where the mind’s procedural sequences from cue to action are stored. Is there also an unthinking region in our brain when the executive conscious mind is engaged that purposely discounts definitions and is this hardwired into humans? Is it possible that we hesitate to change definitions for fear that that might alter our habits or complicate life and thereby dampen built-in survival mechanisms? If not, possibly we simply overlook their importance subconsciously.*
- ❖ *Do we have to first break habits before we can make widespread improvements in behavioral-centered definitions or their application? What if the two are so strongly connected that we can only change them at the same time? Of course, there may be a backlash whenever there is a change in a definition, for example the conversion to the metric system, that makes people consciously reconsider a decision or pattern long ago relegated to habit, routine or script.*

- ❖ *If the reality is that most actions are the result of automatically executed scripts that have been encoded in the unconscious, habitual mind then why do we even try to explain ourselves? Is it because of badly framed definitions or simply to justify our actions after the fact? Of course, this is more philosophical than experimental so maybe we should deal with this only after we have a better grasp of the answers to other key open issues.*

Finally, it may also be possible that definitions don't get the treatment that habits do because most people live in their behaviors, not in their language. That is a pretty sobering thought.

Across the Divide of Definitions and Habits

We have discussed important facets of definitions. **The relationship of definitions with and impact on habits and our lives is significant.**

We have raised as many questions as answers. Still, it is through asking questions that we can discover new answers and hopefully superior ones. These are not just intellectual musings. By better understanding how definitions are stored and handled in the brain we will be able to better design a universal process for deliberately improving those definitions that are most intricately linked to behavior and our habits.

We are often ill at ease within ourselves for deep seeded reasons. One of these reasons may be that the definitions under which we live are all too often in disharmony with what we actually do (and, again, habits dominate what we do). For example, we can define good health, yet the lifestyle that we live may run counter to achieving and maintaining our health.

We do, however, suspect that definitions are, like habits, often relegated to the habitual mind with one major difference. While we have learned to review and even alter many habits on the fly, definitions are usually just stuffed back somewhere into the deep recesses of our mind. Maybe this is because of conditioning or precedent, but it is also a possibility that that is really just the way we are wired.

In fact, the majority of definitions have little, if any, impact on human behavior. They center more on the practical and are often relegated to

communities of specialists. For example, GAAP - generally accepted accounting practices or Joint Accreditation of Hospital operating standards. So maybe we just mentally slot these various types of definitions all together in a “do not touch” bin.

A Different Attention Deficit Solution

What is definite is that **habits get our attention while improving definitions doesn't**. What we fail to recognize is that improvements in definitions can also have a major and often *highly leveraged* impact on our habits. Remarkably this is but the tip of the definition iceberg.

It just makes sense. We should make improvements in select definitions and their applications; particularly those that are negatively affecting behavior. To accomplish this, we have to first make our definitions much more visible. In essence, definitions that lie beneath the surface (and within the recesses of our minds) need much more concentrated and conscious attention and effort.

Again, **“most of the time what we do is what we do most of the time.”** That is the intersection of definitions and habits with which we are most familiar. It is after all hard to out maneuver our subconscious mind.

Then again, when definitions change in the environment around us, we often adapt quickly and change our habits more readily. As we previously pointed out, the definition of secondhand smoke in America over time significantly reduced the habit of smoking by ostracizing smokers. Counter intuitively today's new U.S. government definition for obesity includes professional athletes like Tom Brady and Kobe Bryant. This is probably a bad definition. It may, never-the-less, also bring about a positive impact. That is because this definition raises 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.

Of course, our individual definitions are usually considerably less dramatic. For instance, we define healthy foods until we place the next fast food order. Definitions have to be moved to our conscious mind until the habit

of consistently ordering healthy dishes is deeply ingrained within our habitual mind.

Using Knowledge to Act with Impact

The Illusive Obvious

The key to improving behavior lies as much in definitions as in habits. We see this linkage as something like this:

Habits ↔ Beliefs ↔ Definitions

- ❖ Habits change one person at a time.
- ❖ Beliefs are overlaid on us, but their change usually happens for one person at a time.
- ❖ Definitions can alter the habits of many simultaneously and may as a result also impact individual beliefs.

A Conclusion

Between sapient definitions and habits there is little question which of these two if changed would more quickly generate wide spread improvements. An improvement in everyday definitions - when done thoughtfully - would provide the best return on additional dollars spent in almost any comprehensive effort. Then again, this has not been the reality. Habits dominate and beliefs are fought over.

Habits are a constant reminder of our imperfection. We can live with bad habits, but it is doubtful that we can survive without habits. In short, considerable resources will always be spent each year on managing bad habits. **Sapient definitions can, we are certain, help us** selectively (and occasionally dramatically) improve the uneven return from this on-going effort.

We are seeking good hands and better minds to help definitions make a more positive impact in life, work and commerce. Join us, and if you like get started by critiquing this paper. *Open4Definition* certainly doesn't

expect to get everything right the first time around and that is one definition that we will forever stand behind.

We simply should not continue to overlook the impact of definitions on habits and by extension, our overall quality of life.

Both affect our beliefs and influence harmony among people in ways that largely remain under appreciated.

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