BEHAVIOR CHANGE THROUGH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: INCORPORATING BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE INTO PROGRAM DESIGN

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As public diplomacy practitioners, we are often asked to do the impossible – both in the implementation of policy and in the evaluation of whether we were successful. When evaluating the success of our efforts, however, our everyday use of historical analysis and anecdotes can be both untimely and misguiding, serving only to confirm our biases. To better demonstrate the impact of its foreign engagement strategies, the United States Department of State has in recent years taken a more rigorous approach to assessing program success. However, nearly every program report publicly available on the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs website is based solely on participant surveys.[1] Given historical issues with participant selection, one can easily surmise this approach may not tell the entire story of a program's impact – people given a free trip abroad or a select academic experience may likely be predisposed to looking at that program favorably. Is there a better way to examine whether that opportunity was truly life-changing? Did that program result in a change of behavior? Does public diplomacy truly influence people's lives?

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[*] The views expressed in this essay are the author's own, and do not represent the US Department of State or the government of the United States

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1) Completed program reports of the U.S. State Department Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs can be found at: https://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations

When our legislative overseers ask public diplomacy practitioners to show our accomplishments, we must still do better. We are past the age where numbers of clicks and reach are sufficient. Instead, the evaluation and impact analysis must grow organically from how public diplomacy practitioners conceive, design, and execute our engagement strategies. And in that regard, there is one glaring omission from the processes of public diplomacy engagement: the use of behavioral sciences to inform our overall practice.

In this paper, I hope to demonstrate how even a rudimentary infusion of behavioral sciences principles can elevate our engagement of target audiences to achieve our foreign policy objectives. As a result of my early experimentation with bringing the behavioral sciences into my public diplomacy approach, I am convinced that this area needs to be researched more in-depth by both the public diplomacy academic community and practitioners who wish to see greater impact and demonstrated effectiveness. While behavioral sciences are nothing new, they have only recently been brought into economics and are just now starting to permeate the business world. Behavioral economists are paving the way, showing how these principles can influence and change behaviors toward a greater end. Public diplomacy would do well to follow their lead.

In this essay, I will give a case study from my own experimentation with the behavioral sciences in my public diplomacy practice and discuss how that case study might be scalable into other areas of our practice. I will then speak to other aspects of public diplomacy that could benefit from the introduction of behavioral science principles and lay out some potential pitfalls, including the need to be more explicit about our ethical code and how we operate in foreign, sovereign environments.

Introduction to the Case Study - Why Change is Required

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, U.S. public diplomacy realized the need to shift focus beyond traditional elite audiences.[2] As a result, officers over the last 20 years have been incessantly exhorted to engage beyond the capitals in which they are stationed. Despite recent attempts to reorient public diplomacy towards "emerging voices" (U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2021), officers are still constrained by the paradigms in which they operate, rendering this task extremely challenging. The qualifications rubrics for most programs are innately exclusionary, impairing efforts to break the mold. Most programs are hamstrung by a lengthy list of prerequisites – such as English language skills or scholarly achievement – which few, except elites, can meet. The attempted reorientation towards non-elites should be commended in light of growing research on the power of grassroots, bottom-up campaigns to enact change (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021, pp. 147-148, 181-182). The public diplomacy toolkit is ideally suited to engage these true stakeholders and change agents, indicating a significant gap between our stated goals and capabilities with the

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2) See then Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Margaret Tutwiler's testimony to Congress on February 26, 2003 as a prime example of this shift in focus. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-108shrg93694/html/CHRG-108shrg93694.htm

results we are achieving. The toolkit need not change so much as the way we apply it.

When promoting programs and academic exchanges to target audiences outside the capital, U.S. embassies often invoke our values and merit-based opportunities. And indeed, in my own practice I have always believed the message that anyone who meets the qualifications for a program has the opportunity to participate can be a powerful narrative that resonates with many traditionally underserved communities. While true in the most basic sense, this message rings hollow to target audiences who simply cannot compete with their more affluent counterparts from the capital. The end result actually undermines the intended message by ultimately selecting participants who already have access to better schools and opportunities. This can perpetuate old narratives that undermine the pursuit of U.S. political objectives such as democratization, anti-corruption, and good governance. If a government is sincere in its desire to reach emerging foreign voices, it must consider a radical overhaul of its participant selection processes and program design methodologies to meet the challenge, eliminating the inherent institutional perverse incentives and biases that drive engagement in unintended directions.

Case Study - Educational Advising in Central Africa

The test program grew organically from a reexamination of a stated policy goal to promote democratization in a growingly authoritarian political environment. Our analysis pointed to a lack of access to educational and employment opportunities that barred individuals outside of certain ethnic groups and party affiliations. One of the programs at our disposal was an under-utilized academic advising program designed to advise prospective university students on how to apply for placements and scholarships to attend school in the United States.

On the surface, the particular program in question was wildly popular, boasting hundreds of participants per year drawn to the promise of travel and study abroad. However, in the prior five years of the program, only two local student participants had succeeded in qualifying to continue their education in the United States. Despite this apparent failure to achieve its stated purpose, the program was labeled a success due to the opportunity it afforded the embassy to engage with such a significant number of youth in the country. The embassy hoped program participants would learn the lesson that merit, not privilege, should be the determinant factor in their lives. However, that message consistently failed to resonate with a population struggling under a patronage system and the authoritarian tendencies of their country's ruling party. Due to its empty promise of merit-based achievement, the program was, in fact undermining U.S. credibility in a key community. Given the popularity of the program and the arguably negative impact it caused, the advising program was overdue for a complete overhaul and an ideal candidate for experimental reform.

Our reimagined program incorporated the principles of two prominent scholars in the behavioral sciences into two vital aspects of the program. First, we instituted a participant

selection method that leaned on elements of Angela Duckworth's work on grit. As Duckworth contends, grit is a more accurate predictor of success than any other measurement in use today, focusing on a person's ability to sustain a long-term effort toward a desired goal (Duckworth et al., 2007). This was of particular importance given that the basic parameters of qualification for the program – test scores, grades, language ability, or means to pay application fees – vastly skewed participants towards students with proximity to power. These were the students who traditionally had every opportunity laid out for them and whose futures were already secured. The idea was to attract a more diverse array of participants beyond these elites, and moving away from the traditional qualification metrics was vital to casting a broader net.

Eschewing the final threshold qualifications at this initial stage and supplanting them with an alternative applicant evaluation method helped us to rethink who should be invited into the program.[3] Grit provided a metric to discern future potential outside of established norms. In our applicant interviews, we utilized Duckworth's simple, straightforward multiple-choice quiz to rate a person's level of grit (Duckworth, 2016, pp. 54-57), which added minimal additional burden on the functionaries administering the program. This change in selection criteria automatically uncovered a cohort of applicants who were more geographically, socially, and racially diverse than previous iterations of the program. Here, we achieved a major programmatic goal from the onset, extending the program to a segment of the population that our efforts would have overwise disregarded. Of significant note, this result was achieved with minimal effort and no additional resources beyond the initial conceptualization of how to implement the new selection approach.

Of course, the success of the revitalized selection process would be for naught if the program was unsuccessful in improving on the program's historic inability to place students at universities in the United States. The program also needed to be redesigned to capitalize on the participants' potential to meet the acceptance criteria of American universities. To accomplish this, we incorporated the work of Patricia Devine into the design of the day-to-day program. Devine's research has looked specifically at racism as a habit, a perspective that naturally lends itself to a more prescriptive methodology of changing a behavior that is determined to be unwanted (Devine et al., 2012). While there are a litany of behavioral science studies that focus on changing unwanted behaviors affecting life choices, such as losing weight or overcoming addiction, Devine's work is unique in her application of behavioral science to a broader social issue. Devine outlines various components an intervention should include in order to positively affect a person's actions through the identification of harmful habits and replacing them with more positive or productive habits.

To achieve this type of behavior change in our educational advising program, we emphasized active and sustained engagement with the cohort to build positive study habits, improve language skills and prepare students for the unfamiliar environment of an American

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3) Interestingly, and unbeknown to us at the time, Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman was the first to design a psychological questionnaire specifically for participant selection. Kahneman developed his "Kahneman Score" in the 1950's for the Israel Army, and is largely credited for the Army's success (Lewis, 2017, pp. 81-83).

higher-education classroom. We assumed success and sought to mold program participants into successful college students. Incorporating these elements led to a revised program that was sustained, regular, methodical, and ultimately successful.

Case Study - Program Impact

The experiment had several unintended effects. First, the program improved our ability to engage directly with audiences from different societal sectors beyond the standard groups we were accustomed to interacting with. Nearly all participants ended up hailing from outside the capital – achieving that long-stated aim of U.S. public diplomacy leadership.

In contrast to previous years, however, not a single participant began the program with even the basic qualifications to be placed in a U.S. college or university. On the whole, the groups' English language level was average and well below what was required for study in the United States. Their writing ability was considerably worse. The majority were from communities devastated by cycles of brutal ethnic conflict that left traditional family structures fragmented, leaving these students with greater responsibilities to help feed their families than concentrate on homework. All of this meant that as a group they typically struggled in their current studies, and most had middling grades. In short, despite their intellectual promise, none of this cohort would have been able to participate in previous versions of the program.

Lastly, the more intensive nature of the program meant that we could only accept a fraction of the number of participants compared to previous years. Rather than hundreds of participants, our experimental cohort totaled only 17. By agency standards, the surface metrics did not equate to the definition of a successful program. Initial feedback from colleagues and leadership suggested we were not wise to give up on engaging with such high numbers of participants. The current evaluation system is based on a more data-driven approach derived from an over-reliance on communications scholarship, which values high volumes of engagements to ensure impact. Our decision to intentionally reduce numbers was met with skepticism. We justified this difference by redefining our key assumption, believing that a smaller number of successful candidates who were able to gain a life-altering result was more valuable than a larger net of participants in which fewer reached the goal of studying in the U.S. Meanwhile, the small numbers meant our experiment was pre-emptively deemed a failure and not continued in subsequent years beyond my departure.

The final program results were nothing short of astounding, confirming the potential for this approach to be both practical and successful in the field. In a single iteration of the new program, the success rate went from statistically insignificant to over 80 percent while challenging long-held definitions of success related to our standard data-driven approach. Of the 17 students who took part in the trial, 15 were accepted into U.S. institutions while also receiving the necessary financial support to allow them to enroll and attend school in the United States. Even more impressive were the colleges they eventually attended, which

included MIT, UC Berkeley, Michigan State, and Harvard. The only one of the 15 who decided not to attend college in the United States instead accepted an opportunity at a European university.

Years later, all have now completed their studies and returned home – living proof to their communities of what can be achieved through merit and grit. Having achieved success atypical of peers from similar circumstances, they are well-positioned to be the kind of trail-blazing future leaders of their communities that public diplomacy dreams of shaping, ready to confront their society's challenges in an unprecedented way.

A Scalable Model or a One-Off Success?

While a small sample size, it is important to note that the program itself was inspired by another program run by MindLeaps. A U.S.-based organization operating in similar environments in multiple countries across Africa, MindLeaps seeks to utilize an arts-based curriculum to prepare street children for boarding school and beyond. MindLeaps' founder had previously observed that kids off the street lacked the basic cognitive skills to succeed in a school environment. Aside from limited learning capacity, they were not even equipped with the most basic ability to sit still during class – and nearly all returned to the streets within a short period of time.

After integrating a more behavioral science-based approach, MindLeaps achieved previously unheard-of levels of success. Alumni of the program not only stayed in school but consistently performed at the top of their class. 90% of students who graduated from the program remained at school, with a near identical percentage of those students placing in the top 20% of their classes. These outcomes demonstrate that the true problem was not the students' intellectual capacity or potential, but the social circumstances that limited their ability to gain the social and cognitive skills to excel.[4]

Grit is not a static score (Duckworth, 2016, pp. 89-92). A person can undertake a program to improve their own grit and, in turn, increase their chances of reaching the lofty goals they set for themselves. For the public diplomacy officer, the potential application of Duckworth's studies can go beyond mere participant selection. Grit can also be useful as a tool for measuring a program participant's development or for a program facilitator to measure progress. And for a program with a long enough period of performance, routine measurements of grit will produce a rarity in public diplomacy practice – data that demonstrate true impact.

The idea of using cognitive tools like grit to measure progress and design programs is not new. Numerous educational organizations are adopting Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) models to better engage students. In the United States, many state-level departments of education are implementing SEL principles into their curriculums for a range of intended

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4) For more, see MindLeaps website at: https://mindleaps.org/en/

effects, from increased learning to improved discipline and to reduce the risk of violence and drug use (Taylor et al., 2017). Civil society institutions such as the Goethe Institute have also implemented an observation-based assessment program to track participant progress.

The expanded cognitive and social-emotional learning model at the heart of MindLeaps' success employs an in-house developed tracker that measures progress along seven cognitive skills, of which grit is only one. Those other cognitive skills are language, self-esteem, teamwork, creativity, discipline, and memorization. Developed in conjunction with Carnegie Mellon University Rwanda, program facilitators are able to monitor and track progress in real-time at every session using a system of indicators specifically tailored to MindLeaps' dance-based curriculum. Facilitators assess participants at every engagement, using an app that collates ratings and produces a progress report for each class and student, which can be broken into separate reports based on any desired target group. Facilitators gain expertise with the system and assessment criteria with minimal training and require mere minutes to input data at each session.

The successful implementation of science-based principles by both programs with similar levels of success shows the potential applicability and scalability of the approach across all avenues of engagement. On the surface, an arts program for street kids has little in common with an academic advising program. The programs were drastically different, and the basic design was incomparable apart from the underlying philosophical approach. Yet the similar results are emblematic of what can be achieved through a more deliberate behavior science-based methodology. In fact, the active and sustained approach which occurs naturally in such public diplomacy staples such as academic and cultural exchanges and the U.S.'s English Access Microscholarship Program may help explain why those programs have proven so successful.

In the cases of MindLeaps and our academic advising case study, success rates went from near zero to near perfect. And as we expand on applicable theories and case studies, public diplomacy practitioners would do well to further examine how the behavioral sciences can enhance the public diplomacy toolkit. This will assist in the crafting of new strategies and engagements with a significantly greater probability of success. Further, a reformed public diplomacy practice would automatically produce digestible metrics to report progress back to legislative overseers and funders. MindLeaps has used its SEL-based dance curriculum in a number of countries to directly impact major challenges such as poverty, income inequality, corruption, and violent extremism – similar goals faced by many public diplomacy efforts, with considerable implications for all forms of cultural diplomacy. There is no reason to think implementation across the spectrum of public diplomacy engagement would not be similarly effective.

If public diplomacy practitioners are looking for a more direct comparative example of how to incorporate the behavioral sciences into our engagement practice, we can look to the success of Save the Children's Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children, or CUBIC. CUBIC has examined the utility of more traditional behavioral economics concepts,

such as nudging to increase the effectiveness of their outreach programs. Save the Children has used CUBIC to target both decision-makers and communities to create positive behavioral change, with goals easily recognizable to public diplomats. Although only in existence since 2020, they have already seen increased effectiveness in programs that have sought to reduce domestic violence, improve childhood vaccination rates, curb child labor, and strengthen education outcomes.[5] Foreign ministries would do well to follow the Save the Children model and establish a similar behavioral science research and implementation cell within public diplomacy departments.

Conclusion - How Behavioral Sciences Can Inform Public Diplomacy

The successful implementation of a Social and Emotional Learning framework into a cultural program raises a range of possibilities for cultural diplomacy. In light of the growing track record of SEL implementation in education, it makes sense to examine more deeply the potential for SEL to inform program design for foreign audiences. Many public diplomacy programs are conceived with the notion of behavior change in order to promote a specific policy objective. SEL presents another lens to apply to the public diplomacy toolkit to inform program design and evaluate whether a program is achieving its desired impact.

A significant challenge facing public diplomacy practitioners is how to prove an inverse action or counterfactual. If a policy objective is to prevent vulnerable youth from resorting to violence, it has been traditionally difficult to demonstrate how a certain program or intervention was responsible for deterring a person's descent into violence. But can SEL frameworks be used to show that a public diplomacy program is achieving its policy objectives? While we may never know whether a program altered the life path of that individual, the next best evidence might be to compare the psychological profiles of program participants with those we know travel that path. By assessing the change a program has had on participants' psychological predictive indicators, we can say that a person no longer matches the profile of a person with that vulnerability. The program can be shown to alter the projection of what is reasonable to expect from that person's future behaviors. Further, we might also be able to quantifiably demonstrate the likelihood of that individual to find success in other areas of life that are more beneficial to society.

Even as the behavioral sciences are making their way into a variety of fields, most notably business and economics, there have yet to be any comprehensive academic examinations of their potential within public diplomacy. When that finally happens, it will be sure to reignite the age-old debate of our profession of informing versus influencing versus propaganda. The use of behavioral science by the largest Tech firms has proven controversial, with accusations of subversive manipulation (Orlowsky, 2020). And behavioral scientists themselves warn against going too far in making people feel coerced into decisions against their will, or the overuse of behavioral-informed strategies for short-term vs long-term gains.

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5) For more, see Save the Children's CUBIC website: https://www.savethechildren.net/cubic

Certainly, a new code of ethical conduct will be in order for public diplomats who employ the behavioral sciences in their practice. Responsibly bringing the behavioral sciences into public diplomacy will open new avenues for research and hopefully, in turn, help reform the practice of public diplomacy to be more efficient and effective. As rudimentary as the experiment in my case study was, the potential for deepening the impact of our programming through an informed practice is evident and needs further research.

At a time when our public diplomacy professionals are being asked to do more with less, expanding our program design and evaluation processes to include the behavioral sciences might be a productive method to answer this call. Research has shown how conflict resolution efforts that incorporate local voices are more likely to result in lasting peace (Olsson & Madhav, 2018). However, those key stakeholders are often excluded from negotiations and peace processes due to preconceived Western perceptions of a lack of education or experience. This perception could not be more ill-informed or detrimental to finding a resolution (Autesserre & Gbowee, 2021, pp. 69-76). As the street kids of MindLeaps and the rural students of the case study have shown, the issue might be opportunity, not capability. Public diplomacy already possesses the toolkit to identify and engage these stakeholders. Program design that incorporates behavioral science principles can help ensure the success of those programs while producing data to show their impact. Indeed, bringing the behavioral sciences into public diplomacy may not only make our programs more effective but could prove an essential element to ensure we are making the most of our engagements with foreign audiences.

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