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Improving Staff-Client Interactions using Behaviorally Informed Narrative Change Strategies in Detroit

To address harmful narratives among human service providers in Detroit that can hinder staff-client interactions and staff motivation, we designed a series of action-oriented activities to guide conversations and center clients and personal agency in staff work. Through perspective-taking exercises and relatable stories, staff members were able to shift their attitudes, improve staff-client interactions, and increase motivation. The work is promising and will expand to more human service providers for a broader impact.

Narratives can be helpful, but also harmful

Human beings process enormous amounts of information at any one time, and invariably, can't make sense of all of it. We use heuristics (rules of thumb) and narratives to help synthesize and understand the world around us, and our interactions with it. Narratives in particular are the collections of stories we use to explain the world. They come from countless sources and influences. Some are deeply ingrained through media consumption; others emerge from lived experience.

In the United States, some of the most deeply held narratives revolve around poverty, as highlighted by Ai Jen Poo and Eldar Shafir. Unfortunately, many of these narratives are inaccurate and harmful, perpetuating stigma and hindering the creation of effective support systems for those experiencing poverty.

Recognizing that narratives shape our perceptions and interactions with the world, and ultimately our behavior—what positions we take on policy, how we design programs, and how we treat other people—our Economic Justice team examined attitudes and beliefs about poverty in

Highlights

- *Inaccurate narratives among human service providers can hinder staff-client interactions and staff motivation.*

- *"Trusting Choice, Seeing Change" serves as a behaviorally informed tool countering harmful narratives to enhance staff-client relationships.*

- *Promising pilot results indicate the potential scalability and impact of behaviorally informed narrative change campaigns to foster social change.*

the U.S. We need to understand and gain insight into the harmful narratives that people currently hold to be able to leverage the ways behavioral principles play a role in shaping and reinforcing narratives to potentially shift them.

We uncovered a nuanced understanding of these attitudes through a series of national surveys inspired by the Narrative Observatory, the Public Perceptions report, and the Attitudes Towards Poverty scale, and we identified harmful meta-narratives, or themes, about poverty prevalent in our society, such as paternalism, personal responsibility, welfare, meritocracy, and fatalism.

In Detroit, we partnered with human service provider organizations such as local community centers, temporary housing shelters, health clinics, family support and developmental services to uncover and understand narratives staff members hold to design innovative and behaviorally informed tools to shift harmful narratives and support staff to counter them in their day-to-day work. While human service providers may better understand the realities faced by people living in poverty than the average person, no one is immune to holding harmful narratives, including those experiencing poverty firsthand.

Through surveys and interviews, we learned which false narratives were most prevalent among staff, and gained valuable insight into what drives them. Although staff members endorsed false, harmful narratives less frequently than the general population, we observed that two specific types of narratives, fatalism and paternalism, were the most commonly endorsed narratives among them. Paternalism narratives suggest people living in poverty cannot make good decisions for themselves and their families, and fatalistic narratives assert that poverty is unavoidable– no matter what we do, we will never eradicate it.

Replacing false narratives with more accurate ones in Detroit

Shifting the narratives held by human service provider staff is critical in both improving staff-client interactions, and maintaining staff morale in ways that foster a more equitable and supportive social services environment.

Our team spent two years collaborating with local human service provider organizations in Detroit to combat paternalism and fatalism narratives. We formed a Local Narrative Team (LNT) to center the community and its lived experiences while co-creating and testing a behaviorally informed intervention to combat narratives hindering positive staff-client interactions and general staff motivation at human service organizations.

Drawing from the expertise and insights of the LNT, the understanding we gained from interviews of the challenges service providers face, such as limited time and resources, and applying evidence from behavioral science, we developed *"Trusting Choice, Seeing Change,"* a series of action-oriented, guided conversations explicitly tailored for staff members at human service provider organizations.

Behavioral science, the study of how people make decisions and take action in the real world, offers valuable and innovative tools for understanding and replacing harmful narratives. Our initial research, including interviews, surveys, and co-design sessions, helped us identify three key drivers of behavior relevant in Detroit. When creating solutions, we leveraged the behavioral insights to design an effective counter-narrative campaign. Although we are still in the early stages of understanding how these three behavioral factors influence narratives, based on the results of our pilot, we believe they hold great potential to lead to meaningful narrative change.

1. **Fundamental Attribution Error:** A phenomenon in which individuals tend to attribute others' behavior to their character rather than external circumstances outside of others' control. In our interviews, some people described poverty as a consequence of character flaws, such as laziness or complacency. They simultaneously acknowledged the systemic and historical factors contributing to poverty but were unaware of the contradiction. To counteract fundamental attribution error driving service provider interactions, we designed exercises that encourage perspective-taking, a cognitive process to imagine someone else's perspective and empathize with how they might feel or think in a given situation, allowing staff to immerse themselves in their clients' experiences. This helps challenge staff to shift their focus from judgments about a client's disposition to consider their situation instead and work to understand poverty from a contextual perspective.

2. **In-group/Out-group Bias:** This common bias involves favoring individuals perceived as belonging to one's own group (in-group) while displaying negative or less favorable attitudes towards members of other groups (the out-group). This can occur in any setting where there are noticeable differences between groups of people. Surveys measuring support for group-based inequalities consistently indicated that the more people perceived those experiencing poverty as part of a different group, the more likely they were to endorse harmful narratives. To address this bias in service providers, we sought to reduce in-group/out-group perceptions and create a new, common identity by highlighting shared experiences across staff and clients, and fostering collaboration and interaction between them. Through perspective-taking and group-reflection exercises, we emphasized the universality of everyone needing support at some point in their lives, normalizing this experience and cultivating a sense of unity and solidarity in helping others overcome challenges.

3. **Negativity Bias and Availability Heuristic:** Negativity bias is our human tendency to weigh negative events more heavily than positive ones in our minds–simply put, bad things loom larger than good things. The availability heuristic refers to our tendency to overestimate the likelihood of something happening, or its frequency or popularity, based on how easy it is to find or remember. Together, these two biases often skew our perception of the world and those around us. To counteract this in Detroit, we combined our "Trusting Choice, Seeing Change" conversations with prominent cues and reminders of new, accurate counter-narratives throughout the physical environment staffers work in. By strategically placing visible reminders in key places like staff's workspaces, we aimed to make our counter-narratives more available and help challenge the salience and prominence of negative perceptions.

By fostering conversations with colleagues, and leveraging behavioral principles, the *"Trusting Choice, Seeing Change"* conversations offered a supportive environment for staff members to engage in open dialogues, reflect on their narratives, and ideate strategies to counteract harmful narratives at their organizations to improve staff-client interactions.

Results

The "*Trusting Choice, Seeing Change*" pilot yielded promising results that prompted us to expand to a larger sample size to assess findings further..

Qualitative feedback from staff members indicates a significant impact on their attitudes and behaviors. Through the intervention, staff members learned to recognize paternalism and fatalism in their workplace and personal lives, reflecting a heightened knowledge of the falseness of the harmful narratives and the importance of centering clients and personal agency in staff work. They reported feeling more connected to clients, trusting their choices, and recognizing the importance of individualized care. Moreover, staff engaged in meaningful discussions about preventing and countering paternalism and fatalism in their interactions with clients to improve staff-client relationships and found a more profound sense of purpose within their work.

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> **I was able to use the content to collaborate with another staff member to better support one of my clients."**
>
> *-Trusting Choice, Seeing Change participant*

Furthermore, the staff's willingness to re-imagine procedures and protocols reminded them of their capacity and power to adapt and innovate within their service delivery even under challenging conditions, such as limited time and resources. They recognize that they can individualize and empathize with their clients while still meeting requirements, showcasing a more compassionate and client-centered approach.

The feedback also indicates broader interest in expanding the pilot and implementing behaviorally informed narrative change strategies in other areas. Staff and leadership at our partner organizations showed interest in scaling the conversation series to their HR teams, Boards of Directors, and the onboarding process for staff.

Our quantitative findings presented promising trends regarding the campaign's key objectives. Our analysis revealed that the treatment group, staff members who participated in the "*Trusting Choice, Seeing Change*" conversations, exhibited a lower endorsement of paternalism and a slightly lower endorsement of fatalism narratives compared to the control group, staff members who didn't participate. Additionally, we observed a decrease in the approval of imposing administrative burdens in social policies and an increase in interpersonal generosity, which reflects a willingness to give, support, and be considerate of others in our interactions.

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> **I'm already thinking of ways to incorporate these discussions into other programs that we have."**
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> *-Trusting Choice, Seeing Change participant*

With a more substantial sample, we can gain greater confidence in the robustness of these findings and better assess their potential impact on a larger scale. The positive outcomes of our initial pilot campaign suggest that applying a behavioral science lens in staff-client interactions and narrative change campaigns has the potential to yield promising results in shifting harmful narratives and fostering more equitable attitudes and behaviors.

Overall, the pilot results highlight our behaviorally informed narrative change campaign's effectiveness and potential scalability. The combination of these promising qualitative and quantitative findings underscores the significance of our efforts in reshaping harmful narratives and promoting positive social change at scale.

Takeaway

With a deep understanding of human behavior and an experimental toolkit, behavioral science is a field uniquely positioned to design new innovative approaches to narrative change. By understanding and leveraging the ways behavioral principles play a role in shaping and reinforcing narratives, we seek to create tools to amplify the efforts by many organizations and disciplines working to shift harmful narratives about poverty and help advance the narrative change field.

In alignment with our commitment to transformative narrative change, our efforts extend beyond Detroit. We are conducting similar narrative change work in different cities across the US. Our goal is to use the power of behavioral science to create profound transformations in social and service provision contexts, ultimately promoting greater support for effective social policies that accurately address poverty's true root causes.

If you are interested in learning more about our work or collaborating with us, we encourage you to contact us via email at ematos@ideas42.org.