

Book Review

Wilson, T. (2011). *Redirect: The surprising new science of psychological change*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 288pp, ISBN 0-316-05188-8, £14.99.

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Do you sometimes wonder how effective your work with children and youngsters is? If so, this book will surely give you clues for how to find answers for your questions. If not, it is about time to listen to the wake-up call this book contains.

Redirect is a plea for research—a plea to research what we do in the areas of care, prevention and education and to act according to that research. Wilson gives different examples of well-intentioned treatments that turned out to cause more bad than good. One of these cases is a project that brings potentially criminal youth in contact with inmates who tell them forbidding stories about prison life. What does research bring to light about this project? It is counterproductive. Wilson uses ‘story editing theory’ to explain this. He argues that projects like the above give youngsters a different, more negative self-image: ‘apparently I am someone who finds criminal activities very tempting if they let me participate in such a project’ (p. 160).

The central message of this book is that ‘the stories we tell ourselves determine who we are’. In care, it is essential that – apart from research – we ask ourselves how our actions influence the self-image of our clients. Do we make them more powerful? Do we help them believe in themselves? In addition, do we teach them how to tell themselves useful stories? The importance of the last question is illustrated by the description of methods used to prevent child abuse. Wilson compares programs that are used with parents of at-risk infants (p. 123-130). Professional home visits that give parents pedagogical recommendations and teach parents how to deal with their anger do not seem to lessen the chances that the infants are mistreated. If, however, professionals teach mothers how to interpret the signals of their babies differently, and by doing so give another meaning to those signals, so that the mothers will react differently to them, then the chance of child abuse diminishes and the chances for a secure attachment rise. The crux of the story is that parents who abuse their children tend to blame them when they experience them

as bothersome, rather than attributing the behavior to something that can easily be altered, like ‘ my child is hungry’ or ‘he needs a hug’. Wilson argues that if you want people to act differently you cannot simply teach them skills, you have to help them to tell themselves different stories.

Wilson’s plea for research on effectiveness is ardent and logical. There are, however, ethical problems with research in the field of residential care: randomly assigning children and youngsters with severe problems to care and comparing them with children and youngsters with similar problems that will not be given care is not acceptable in this day and age. That was not always so. *Redirect* describes the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (p. 162) which started in 1935 and ended in 1965. Subjects were 500 underprivileged boys around 10 years old. Over the course of five years, 250 of them received treatment in the form of homework assistance, psychotherapy, summer camps and other forms of guidance - 250 did not. Thirty years later the men who participated in the treatment were more likely to die younger and had more criminal records. Wilson gives two possible explanations. First, the influence these boys had on each other during summer camps, and second, the story editing theory: ‘I seem to be a difficult kid’. These are only possible explanations; there is no evidence that the story editing theory explains these bad treatment results. More importantly, youth care from 1935 is not the same as youth care in 2015, although bad peer influence is still a problem in residential care, if you ask me. Nevertheless, what is definitely similar is that good intentions alone are not good enough in care. We need to ask ourselves what we are doing. These questions can be ethical and philosophical, but they also need to be about effectiveness. We owe it to society, to parents, to children and youngsters to investigate our actions.