

## Reflections on the Story of Big Jim

To begin this piece, let me tell you about a student from several years ago nicknamed Big Jim by his peers. Big Jim was a high school student from a lower, middle class neighborhood in a large southern city. He ran with a “gang” of similar youths, numbering around 25, most of who were older and had either finished high school or dropped out. Other youths in the area feared this “gang” and generally avoided their “hang-outs.” Big Jim was well respected within this “gang” and could even be thought of as one of its leaders even though he was one of the youngest members and a relative newcomer to the “gang.”

Big Jim smoked, drank extensively, carried a knife, and “lived” at night. Big Jim made his “living” from what was often referred to as the “midnight auto supply” and from breaking into vending machines. He was reasonably clever and never got into trouble with the law for anything more serious than traffic offenses and public intoxication. School was largely an inconvenience. Big Jim was frequently absent from school and almost always tardy, when he did attend. He informally dropped out for a short period of time but went back to mollify his father. He failed several courses but did graduate with a general (non-academic) diploma.

In addition to his “trade,” he engaged in many other troubling activities. All of his buddies carried a weapon of some sort and several carried pistols. Here are a few events from Big Jim’s life to help give you a feel for his behavior. Once Big Jim almost got caught following his “trade” when a store owner, with a pistol, confronted him while he and a companion were attempting to break into a vending machine. Friends, who were waiting nearby, in an auto, saw what was happening and drove up the street toward the storefront. As the store

owner turned to look at the car speeding toward him, Big Jim and his companion seized the opportunity to start running up the street. The car caught up with them and slowed down while their friends pulled them in through open windows. As this escape unfolded the store owner yelled at them and fired several shots in their direction. In another incident involving guns, Big Jim was in a “recreational” joust in which two cars speed toward one another and engage in “combat.” Big Jim was the driver of one of the cars in this joust. As the cars speed toward one another from opposite directions, the passengers in the “shotgun” seat of the respective cars attempted to shoot out a tire on the oncoming car.

During one period, Big Jim rode a motorcycle. A favorite pastime, with a few friends, was to go downtown and taunt police officers in squad cars into chasing them. Since they were on motorcycles, they held the advantage of maneuverability and usually managed to elude the patrol cars in the traffic. An important aspect of this “game” was to be so unpredictable that the radio communication advantage enjoyed by the police was reduced or eliminated. Big Jim never got caught during this “game.” His closest call was when he had to go through a U.S. Post Office building on his motorcycle to evade a patrol car that was getting too close for comfort. Big Jim and his friends were also frequently involved in similar “games” using cars and “played” with other youths from different parts of the city.

Big Jim came to school when it suited him. When he wasn't in school, he often spent the day in a downtown “pool hall” with some of his friends. During one 45-day term, he was absent 39 days. This occurred when the principal of the school informed Big Jim's parents that he would be automatically suspended any day that he was tardy. Big Jim's father began escorting him to school to make sure he got there on time. Big Jim would go into the school and “hang

out” until the last bell had rung. He would then go to the office and check in late and be suspended. The school rescinded this policy as unworkable after the first term that it was employed.

Big Jim also refused to participate in some school activities such as physical education. When he would refuse to participate, he would be sent to detention, which was similar to a short-term in-school suspension program. The rule for this detention was that after a fixed number of days in detention a student would get as many “licks” with a paddle, from the principal, as the number of days he had been in detention. On the first couple of occasions when Big Jim was called into the principal’s office for his “licks,” he refused to bend over for the “licks” and informed the principal that each time the principal hit him he would hit the principal. These confrontations resulted in stand-offs that were ended by invoking some other punishment, such as suspension.

The school prohibited students from smoking at school. When Big Jim wanted to smoke, he would do so. Once when he was caught by the principal and told that if he was caught again he would be suspended for ten days, he told the principal that he would continue to smoke when ever “he damned well pleased” and that he might as well go ahead and suspend him now. Following this incident, Big Jim would occasionally go by the school office and ask to see the principal. When he got in to see the principal, he would always light up a cigarette after entering the office and smoke it while talking to the principal.

Big Jim was given innumerable days of after school detention but never stayed after school. When threatened with suspension or expulsion, if he didn’t stay after school, he would state that he had no intention of showing up and could the suspension start now. Big Jim came

and went as he pleased. If he decided that he'd had enough of school or a class and wanted to leave, he just walked out. When teachers threatened to fail him or kick him out of their classes, Big Jim would inform them that he didn't give a damn and they could do as they pleased because he certainly would.

Big Jim was not usually a behavior problem in classes and seldom got into fights or other conflicts. Although there were a number of students at the school who didn't like Big Jim, they were afraid of his friends and what might happen to them, off school grounds, if they crossed Big Jim. The principal of the school appeared to like Big Jim and tried to find a way to engage him. The school had a tracking system and Big Jim was in the slow track. The principal thought part of the problem might be a lack of challenge and moved him to the regular track. Big Jim continued to perform at the same level as in the slow track. The principal then moved him to the fast track, where Big Jim continued to perform in his customary manner. Big Jim did apply himself and was quite productive in an English class one year because the teacher in this class recognized that to reach him, she had to find a way to merge her goals with his goals.

Big Jim was a very difficult student to deal with and caused most of his teachers' considerable frustration. He probably escaped permanent expulsion because he was not a particularly disruptive student and he did manage to pass most of his classes. Big Jim was the graduating senior probably considered by most teachers and students to be the least likely to succeed. Big Jim's parents were even more frustrated than his teachers and tried to "manage" him in a variety of ways ranging from linking an allowance with compliance with their rules to using threats and strategies such as locking him out of the house. None of these attempts produced any constructive changes. When he was younger Big Jim's father had employed

physical punishment in an attempt to discipline Big Jim. In adolescence, Big Jim brought this to an end when he stopped an attempt by his father to whip him with a belt by getting a gun he had hidden in the house and facing his father down. Big Jim's father often predicted that Big Jim would be in prison by the time he was 21 years old. Had a diagnostic label been placed on Big Jim, he probably would have been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder.

I'm sure you're curious about what happened to Big Jim. Was he a failure who ended up in prison as was predicted? In a word, no! Actually, Big Jim became a successful professional person. In short, Big Jim turned a corner and went in a direction that was unpredictable by anyone, adult or peer, who had been associated with him. As educators of students with behavior problems we should be particularly interested in this sudden turn of affairs in Big Jim's life. In particular, we should be interested in how Big Jim accomplished his transformation and any lessons it may hold for us.

What were the circumstances under which Big Jim "turned the corner," and moved off in an unpredictable direction? The pivotal event, according to Big Jim, was a high-speed auto crash that took place during his senior year in high school. Big Jim was seriously injured and almost died. He suffered extensive facial lacerations and lost a massive amount of blood as a result of his face striking the windshield during the accident. Over the next year, he underwent a number of plastic surgery operations to repair the damage. Probably the only reason he survived was that he was taken to an emergency room in a university hospital for a prestigious medical school. Shortly after being brought into the emergency room he overheard a discussion, between two physicians, about the seriousness of his condition and the difficulties they posed to treating him.

As he went into shock and lost consciousness, Big Jim reported that he was certain that he was dying.

Why was this a pivotal event in the life of Big Jim? He reported that shortly after getting out of the hospital, he received some school photos that had been made only a week before the accident. Big Jim said that as he looked at a photo of himself from a few weeks earlier, it suddenly struck him that the person in that photo, in contrast to his current appearance, no longer existed. The next question to follow was if the person in the photo no longer existed then who was he? He said that he realized that he was free to be anyone he wanted to be. That in some sense his radical change in appearance had severed the connection with his past and he was not bound by it. Therefore, he set out to redefine who he was and re-create himself. Big Jim “turned left at Thursday” and struck off in a direction that left all who knew him puzzled.

One important lesson Big Jim’s story illustrates is about trying to make permanent changes in people’s behavior. It is hard to make anyone change their behavior if they don’t want to change. Given sufficient leverage, which was lacking and could not be found in Big Jim’s case, behavior can be manipulated, either through positive or negative consequences. However, can anyone doubt that such change would last only as long as the leverage could be applied. Coerced change in behavior is usually a temporary change. Remove the source of coercion and the behavior reverts to its former path. This effect is frequently observed when students are moved from a highly structured setting; e.g., token economies, to normal settings; e.g., regular classroom programs.

It may be necessary and expedient to use coercive strategies in an attempt to maintain good order and a safe environment in schools and other settings serving children and youth.

However, if permanent change in behavior is the long-term goal of a program, leveraged changes in behavior are not enough. In some cases, such changes may not even be possible. This was certainly true in the case of Big Jim. Everything from threats and intimidation to rewards were tried with no success. They were unsuccessful for two reasons. First, the change efforts were insufficiently powerful to coerce the desired changes. Second, the changes that were sought were inconsistent with who Big Jim's thought he was and what he wanted or valued.

The second point leads to another important lesson. If you want to make contact with a student in a way that can facilitate a cooperative alliance, you must first understand who they think they are and what goals guide their behavior. The English teacher mentioned earlier was the only teacher Big Jim had who understood this and was able to establish a cooperative alliance with him. In part, because of his "trade," the midnight auto supply business, Big Jim was very interested in mechanics and often would bring repair manuals to school with him to study. He also thought that he would perhaps one day be an automobile mechanic. The English teacher also recognized that given Big Jim's personality, he was not going to respond to a traditional teaching relationship. Therefore, she undertook to teach English to Big Jim through an independent study approach where he retained most of the control over the process. She also employed his interest in automobile mechanics by using auto repair manuals and technical manuals for textbooks. This teacher recognized that if you sincerely want to engage someone in an attempt to change their behavior, you must engage them on their own terms and in a way that they perceive as relevant to their needs.

The third lesson, I take from the story of Big Jim is that for permanent change to take place the change must be self-directed. A constructive change in a pattern of behavior requires

that one redefine oneself. Redefinition is accomplished through a change in one's goals and values, which are, in turn, reflected in a change in one's behavior. Big Jim had two important insights as a result of reflection on his accident. The first insight was that one is bound by one's past only so long as one believes that one is bound by it. The second was that the self is, in many respects, a creation of our beliefs and goals and that we can influence those beliefs and goals through our choices. Big Jim came to these insights independently and employed them to transform his life.

In a recent paper (Center, 1997), I explored a view about the nature of consciousness based in quantum physics. In that paper, I concluded that if the nature of consciousness outlined therein is accepted then one must accept consciousness as a causal agent in our behavior. Furthermore, volition and choice are necessary components of such a conception of mind or consciousness. This conception of consciousness, functionally speaking, is one of consciousness as an executive control system (Powers, 1980). An executive control system employs goals and priorities to filter input, facilitate decision-making and guide behavior. Powers (1973) proposed a model for understanding human behavior that provides a detailed look at what an executive control system model of human behavior might look like and how it might function.

If consciousness is a causal agent in behavior, behavior cannot be fully explained in environmental or biological terms alone. To fully understand behavior one must also take into account the role of consciousness. Consciousness as an executive control system leads to a perspective on behavior change that requires that intervention be conceptualized in terms of strategies that can affect an individual's beliefs and goals. Interventions need to be about changing the beliefs and goals structuring one's executive control system, i.e., about changing



minds. Clearly, this must be a self-directed task. However, a *cooperative alliance* between the individual and a change agent, such as a teacher, is not precluded.

I propose that the notion of a cooperative alliance be used as an intervention philosophy to guide selection and use of behavior change strategies. There probably are some circumstances where a cooperative alliance and self-directed change may not be possible. For example, when an individual is suffering from a condition in which biological factors play a dominant role, e.g., schizophrenia. However, once the biological component of such a disease is being successfully managed medically, I think the intervention philosophy is still apropos. Medical management of such diseases may still leave an individual with serious psychological problems that are the by-product of their experiences prior to successful medical treatment. Mental health problems that are diseases, in the medical sense; however, probably account only for a small percentage of the children and youth in need of help (Albee, 1968) or adults for that matter.

A cooperative alliance is not possible when coercion underlies an effort to change behavior. However, reasonable and just discipline procedures focused on maintaining a respectful atmosphere need not interfere with establishing a cooperative alliance. A cooperative alliance requires that a teacher or other change agent be empathetic and caring enough to develop an understanding of the student that will permit meeting that student on some common ground. This is what the English teacher mentioned earlier succeeded in doing for a brief time with Big Jim. Once contact is established it is possible to begin building a relationship. The relationship must be engaging enough to permit the change agent to question and challenge the goal structure of a student without causing a loss of contact. The purpose of this process of questioning is to bring a student to recognize that his or her goal structure may be flawed. Once this recognition is

accomplished, the change agent should attempt to get a student to recognize that he or she can redefine their goals and thereby actively determine who they will become. Once a student accepts that self-directed change is both possible and desirable, the change agent can become an ally in the process and provide guidance.

There are several approaches to behavior change that I think are readily adaptable to the above requirements. One is the Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) approach to behavior change (Ford, 1994) based on the theory of Powers (1973). The PCT approach of Ford emphasizes self-directed change in one's goals and the behaviors employed in meeting those goals. Another is the Adlerian approach to behavior change (Stein & Edwards, 1997), which focuses on an individual's goals and employs the Socratic method of questioning to help a individual better understand his life situation and how it could be changed. A third is the Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) approach of Albert Ellis (Bernard & Joyce, 1984), which is directed at changing an individual's belief system. All of these approaches, in my view, could be usefully combined with *life story* or *personal myth* exploration and modification following the model discussed by McAdams (1993). For example, in the RET approach, behavior is motivated by one's goals and one's goals are a reflection of one's beliefs. Maladaptive behavior, e.g., vandalism suggests the possibility of a dysfunctional goal, e.g., revenge, which suggests an irrational belief, e.g., I am a victim. There are other approaches, including applied behavior analysis that could be combined with the approach suggested here, if used in a manner consistent with working within a cooperative alliance.

Our core beliefs represent broad general constructs (personal myths), which may have any number of associated goals subsumed by them. These beliefs and goals are organized into a

pyramidal structure along the lines described by Kelly (1955) and Powers (1973). The most dramatic and sweeping change can be brought about by a change in core beliefs or personal myths. Once the core beliefs or myths change, a reformulation of the associated subordinate goals becomes a necessity in order to maintain the integrity of the construct system.

I think Big Jim's core personal myth was that he was an outlaw. His conception of an outlaw was not of a criminal but rather of someone outside the normal structure of society. In his own words "...an outlaw stands outside of history and tradition, culture and words. An outlaw has freedom...." It seems to me that a major goal of Big Jim's was freedom or autonomy. Much of his behavior was directed by this goal. If you think about some of the behavior described earlier you can see the goal of freedom running through it. Being a successful thief is a way of demonstrating economic freedom relative to socially approved means of acquiring wealth. Taunting and evading the police is a way of demonstrating freedom relative to social authority. Being unmanageable by the school is a way of demonstrating freedom relative to the demands of a significant social institution.

This is not to say that other motives cannot play a role, but rather to say that to understand Big Jim it is necessary to go beyond superficial explanations. For example, one could explain stealing as a behavior simply determined by its consequences, i.e., monetary reward. One could also explain some of Big Jim's other behavior such as the motorcycle chases or defying school authorities as being motivated by social reinforcement, i.e., gaining status with his peer group. A reasonable explanation of some sort could probably be generated for each of Big Jim's behaviors; however, what one would have is nothing but a lot of isolated pieces that contribute little or nothing to understanding the person.

There is no doubt that Big Jim had some serious antisocial and aggressive components in his personality. Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989) have proposed a theory of criminal behavior, of the antisocial and aggressive variety, in which they argue that there is a biologically based temperament trait that predisposes one to this type of behavior. One of three temperament source traits for personality, Psychoticism (P), is the principal contributor to this behavior pattern (Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1976). Individuals high on P, can be described negatively as aggressive, arrogant, sensation seeking, and manipulative. On a more positive note, they can also be described as assertive, achievement oriented, and creative. Eysenck & Gudjonsson (1989) propose that another trait, general intelligence (G), affords high P individuals some protection from the negative predispositions of the P trait. That Big Jim subsequently became a professional person, holding a graduate degree, is probably evidence enough that he had high G. It is also likely that when he decided to change the course of his life that it was the G trait that allowed him to exploit the more positive aspects of the P trait predispositions. Not all youth with high P characteristics have the advantage of high G. Such youth are much less likely, on their own, to learn to exploit the positive aspects of their temperament. Even in the case of someone like Big Jim, there is no guarantee that this will just happen. A teacher or other change agent who is willing and able to work in a cooperative alliance with such youth may be able to exercise considerable influence over their future direction.

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