Small Wins

Redefining the Scale of Social Problems

Karl E. Weick   *Cornell University*

ABSTRACT: The massive scale on which social problems are conceived precludes innovative action because bounded rationality is exceeded and dysfunctional levels of arousal are induced. Reformulation of social issues as mere problems allows for a strategy of small wins wherein a series of concrete, complete outcomes of moderate importance build a pattern that attracts allies and deters opponents. The strategy of small wins incorporates sound psychology and is sensitive to the pragmatics of policymaking.

There is widespread agreement that social science research has done relatively little to solve social problems (Berger, 1976; Cook, 1979; Kohn, 1976). Common to these assessments is the assumption that social science is best suited to generate solutions, when in fact it may be better equipped to address how problems get defined in the first place.

A shift of attention away from outcomes toward inputs is not trivial, because the content of appropriate solutions is often implied by the definition of what needs to be solved. To focus on the process of problem definition is to incorporate a more substantial portion of psychology, specifically, its understanding of processes of appraisal, social construction of reality, problem finding, and definition of the situation.

Whether social problems are perceived as phenomena that have a serious negative impact on sizable segments of society (Kohn, 1976, p. 94), as substantial discrepancies between widely shared social standards and actual conditions of life (Merton, 1971), or as assertions of grievances or claims with respect to alleged conditions (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p. 75), there is agreement that they are big problems. And that's the problem.

The massive scale on which social problems are conceived often precludes innovative action because the limits of bounded rationality are exceeded and arousal is raised to dysfunctionally high levels. People often define social problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them.

To understand this phenomenon, consider the following descriptions of the problems of hunger, crime, heart disease, traffic congestion, and pollution.

To reduce domestic hunger we grow more food, which requires greater use of energy for farm equipment, fertilizers, and transportation, adding to the price of energy, which raises the cost of food, putting it out of the price range of the needy.

To solve the problem of soaring crime rates, cities expand the enforcement establishment, which draws funds away from other services such as schools, welfare, and job training, which leads to more poverty, addiction, prostitution, and more crime.

To ward off coronary heart disease, people who live in cities spend more time jogging and cycling, which exposes their lungs to more air pollution than normal, increasing the risk of coronary illness.

To ease traffic congestion, multilane highways are built, which draws people away from mass transit so that the new road soon becomes as overcrowded as the old road.

To reduce energy use and pollution, cities invest in mass transit, which raises municipal debt, leading to a reduction in frequency and quality of service and an increase in fares, which reduces ridership, which further raises the municipal debt (Sale, 1980).

When social problems are described this way, efforts to convey their gravity disable the very resources of thought and action necessary to change them. When the magnitude of problems is scaled upward in the interest of mobilizing action, the quality of thought and action declines, because processes such as frustration, arousal, and helplessness are activated.

Ironically, people often can't solve problems unless they think they aren't problems. If heightened arousal interferes with diagnosis and action, then attacking a less arousing "mere problem" should allow attention to be broader and action to be more complex. Responses that are more complex, more recently learned, and more responsive to more stimuli in changing situations usually have a better chance of producing a lasting change in dynamic problems.

To recast larger problems into smaller, less arousing problems, people can identify a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results and that can be gathered into synoptic solutions. This strategy of small wins addresses social problems by working directly on their construction and indirectly on their resolution. Problems are constructed to stabilize arousal at moderate intensities where its contribution to performance of complex tasks is most beneficial.

Arousal and Social Problems

The following analysis of small wins assumes that arousal varies among people concerned with social problems, but tends to be relatively high, which affects the quality of performance directed at these problems. Arousal is treated as a generic concept under which is assembled a variety of findings that cohere because of their mutual relevance to the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Broadhurst, 1959). Although arousal mechanisms are neither simple nor unidimensional, they do seem to be localized in at least two physiological sites (reticular formation, limbic system), are visible under conditions of sensory deprivation, produce differences in the quality of learning and performance, and have observable physiological effects.

The specific effects of arousal on performance associated with the Yerkes-Dodson Law are that (a) there is an inverted-U relationship between arousal and the efficiency of performance with increasing levels of arousal, first improving and then impairing performance and (b) the optimal level of arousal for performance varies inversely with task difficulty. Even though these coarse propositions have been amended, tuned more finely, and differentiated, they remain basic principles in which an analysis of social problem solving can be anchored.

Key assertions for the present analysis culled from previous investigations of arousal and performance include the following:

1. Arousal coincides with variation in degrees of activation and varies along at least two dimensions, energy–sleep and tension–placidity (Eysenck, 1982; Thayer, 1978a, 1978b).

2. As arousal increases, attention to cues becomes more selective and this editing is especially detrimental to performance of difficult tasks (Easterbrook, 1959, although this generalization has received mixed support. See Baddeley, 1972; Pearson & Lane, 1983; Weltman, Smith, & Egstrom, 1971, for representative work).

3. At relatively high levels of arousal, coping responses become more primitive in at least three ways (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981): (a) people who try to cope with problems often revert to more dominant, first learned actions; (b) patterns of responding that have been learned recently are the first

ones to disappear, which means that those responses that are most finely tuned to the current environment are the first ones to go; and (c) people treat novel stimuli as if they are more similar to older stimuli than in fact they are, so that clues indicating change are missed.

To invert this list, highly aroused people find it difficult to learn a novel response, to brainstorm, to concentrate, to resist old categories, to perform complex responses, to delegate, and to resist information that supports positions they have taken (Holsti, 1978).

When these findings are focused on problem solving, they suggest that to call a problem serious is to raise arousal, which is appropriate if people know what to do and have a well-developed response to deal with the problem. This is analogous to the situation of a simple task, the performance of which improves over a considerable range of activation because selective attention does not delete the few cues that are essential for performance. High arousal can improve performance if it occurs after a person has decided what to do and after she or he has overlearned how to do it.

To call a problem minor rather than serious is to lower arousal, which is also appropriate if people don't know what to do or are unable to do it. If we assume that most people overlook the fine-grain detail of problems, think only in terms of force as a response (Nettler, 1980), and overlook minor leverage points from which the problem might be attacked, then it is clear they have neither the diagnoses nor the responses to cope. This means that people need lower arousal to keep diagnostic interference at a minimum and to allow for the practice of relatively complex skills. To keep problem-related arousal at modest intensities, people need to work for small wins.

Sometimes problem solving suffers from too little arousal. When people think too much or feel too powerless, issues become depersonalized. This lowers arousal, leading to inactivity or apathetic performance. The prospect of a small win has an immediacy, tangibility, and controllability that could reverse these effects. Alinsky (1972, pp. 114–115) persuaded a demoralized neighborhood group to picket for reinstatement of Infant Medical Care, which he knew would be granted if they merely asked. Organizing for the protest, making the demand, and then receiving what they asked for energized people who had basically given up.

Examples of Small Wins

Small wins have been designed and implemented in a variety of settings. For example, the Pittsburgh Steelers in the National Football League have won 88 games and lost 27 under their coach Chuck Noll (as of February 4, 1980). Those statistics become more interesting if they are partitioned on the basis of

whether the Steelers were playing against teams with winning records or teams with losing records ("Superbowls," 1980). Against opponents who won more than half of their games, the Steelers won 29 and lost 26, or slightly more than half of these games (53%). However, against opponents with winning percentages below .500, the Steelers' record was 59-1, meaning they won 98% of these games.

Thus a professional team renowned for its power got that way by consistently and frequently doing the easy stuff. The Steelers did not become great by winning the big one. Against tough opponents, they did no better than anyone else. These data suggest that winning teams distinguish themselves by more consistent behavior in games in which their skill advantage should make a difference, a condition that is part of the prototype for a small win. Thus, the best indication of good coaching may be the ability to induce consistent high performance against weak opponents rather than against strong opponents (Peters, 1977, p. 286).

The successful effort by the Task Force on Gay Liberation to change the way in which the Library of Congress classified books on the gay liberation movement is another example of a small win. Prior to 1972, books on this topic were assigned numbers reserved for books on abnormal sexual relations, sexual crimes, and sexual perversions (HQ 71-471). After 1972, the classifications were changed so that homosexuality was no longer a subcategory of abnormal relations, and all entries formerly described as "abnormal sex relations" were now described as varieties of sexual life (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, pp. 13–14). Labels and technical classifications, the mundane work of catalogers, have become the turf on which claims are staked, wins are frequent, and seemingly small changes attract attention, recruit allies, and give opponents second thoughts.

The feminist campaign against sexism has been more successful with the smaller win of desexing English than with the larger win of desexing legislation (ERA). The success of attempts to make people more self-conscious about words implying sex bias is somewhat surprising, because it represents an imposition of taboos at a time when taboos in general are being removed. "For even as books, periodicals and dictionaries (not all, to be sure) are liberally opening their pages to obscenities and vulgarisms, they are unliberally leaning over backward to ostracize all usage deemed offensive to the sexes" (Steinmetz, 1982, p. 8). This hypocrisy notwithstanding, the reforms have been adopted with little objection, due in part to their size, specificity, visibility, and completeness. As one commentator on Steinmetz's essay put it, "winning equality in the language was necessary; and while the winning shouldn't be overestimated, it will work—the drops of water on the rock—to change

consciousness, and in time, unconsciousness" (Williams, 1982, p. 46).

When William Ruckelshaus became the first administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1970s, he laid aside his mandate to clean up all aspects of the environment and went instead for a small win.

He discovered some obscure 80-year-old legislation that permitted him to go after some cities on water pollution. He took advantage of the legislation, effectively narrowing his practical agenda for the first year or two to "getting started on water pollution." On day one of the agency's formal existence, Ruckelshaus announced five major lawsuits against major American cities. The impact was electrifying. The homework had been meticulously done. Noticeable progress was made quickly. It formed the beachhead for a long series of successes and distinguished EPA from most of its sister agencies. (Peters, 1979, p. 5)

Ruckelshaus did not tackle everything nor did he even tackle the most visible source of pollution, which is air pollution. Ruckelshaus identified quick, opportunistic, tangible first steps only modestly related to a final outcome. The first steps were driven less by logical decision trees, grand strategy, or noble rhetoric than by action that could be built upon, action that signaled intent as well as competence.

Alcoholics Anonymous has been successful in helping alcoholics, partly because it does not insist that they become totally abstinent for the rest of their lives. Although this is the goal of the program, alcoholics are told to stay sober one day at a time, or one hour at a time if temptation is severe. The impossibility of lifetime abstinence is scaled down to the more workable task of not taking a drink for the next 24 hours, drastically reducing the size of a win necessary to maintain sobriety. Actually gaining that small win is then aided by several other small measures such as phone calls, one-hour meetings, slogans, pamphlets, and meditations, which themselves are easy to acquire and implement.

Several studies of micro-innovation are also compatible with the idea of small wins. For example, Hollander's (1965) closely documented microeconomic study of decreases in production costs of viscose rayon yarn manufacturing at five DuPont plants between 1929 and 1960 demonstrates that minor technical changes—rather than major changes—accounted for over two thirds of the reductions. A technical change is a change "in the technique of production of given commodities by specific plants, designed to reduce unit production costs" (p. 23). Major technical changes (e.g., introduction of compensation spinning) differ from minor changes (e.g., introduction of forklift trucks) in time, skill, effort, and expense required to produce them.

Analyses showed that the cost reductions were substantial (e.g., from 53.51 to 17.55 cents per pound

of rayon from 1929 to 1951 at the Old Hickory plant). Technical changes, as opposed to changes in quality of pulp input, management practices, quality of labor, and plant size, accounted for approximately 75% of the reductions, and most of these technical changes were minor (specific percentage of reduction attributable to minor changes in the five plants was 83%, 80%, 79%, 100%, and 46%, the last being a new plant making a new product, tire cord yarn).

The minor technical changes were small improvement inventions, rather than major inventions, made by people familiar with current operations (p. 205). Experience with the process was crucial, since the very acts of production that created the problems in the first place were also the sources of the minor improvements that could solve the problem. People learned by doing.

Left for further research is the interesting possibility in this study that minor innovations were dependent on preceding major innovations. Ten to fifteen years after a major change, the number of minor changes that were improvements was close to zero (pp. 205–206). Small alterations in technique can improve productivity for some time after a major change, but these improvements may not go on indefinitely.

Implied in Hollander's analysis is the possibility that older plants can produce almost as efficiently as newly built plants if technical changes are identified and funds are invested in them. Thus, contemporary fascination with quality circles may be appropriate if it aids in identifying needed minor technical changes.

The point to be drawn from Hollander's analysis is summarized by Machlup (1962):

A technological invention is a big step forward in the useful arts. Small steps forward are not given this designation; they are just "minor improvements" in technology. But a succession of many minor improvements add up to a big advance in technology. It is natural that we hail the big, single step forward, while leaving the many small steps all but unnoticed. It is understandable, therefore, that we eulogize the great inventor, while overlooking the small improvers. Looking backward, however, it is by no means certain that the increase in productivity over a longer period of time is chiefly due to the great inventors and their inventions. It may well be true that the sum total of all minor improvements, each too small to be called an invention, has contributed to the increase in productivity more than the great inventions have. (p. 164)

Characteristics of Small Wins

A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals. Small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results.

The size of wins can be arranged along a continuum from small to large. Lindblom's (1979) example of monetary control makes this point. Raising or lowering the discount rate is a smaller win than is the decision to use the discount rate as a method of monetary control. Both of those actions are smaller than introducing the Federal Reserve system, which is smaller than a change that eliminates the use of money entirely. Lindblom summarizes the example by drawing the generalization that a small change is either a change in a relatively unimportant variable (people tend to agree on what is an important change) or a relatively unimportant change in an important variable (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963, p. 64).

Small wins often originate as solutions that single out and define as problems those specific, limited conditions for which they can serve as the complete remedy. I emphasize the importance of *limits* for both the solution and the problem to distinguish the solutions of small wins from the larger, more openended solutions that define problems more diffusely (e.g., "burn the system down").

Once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win. When a solution is put in place, the next solvable problem often becomes more visible. This occurs because new allies bring new solutions with them and old opponents change their habits. Additional resources also flow toward winners, which means that slightly larger wins can be attempted.

It is important to realize that the next solvable problem seldom coincides with the next "logical" step as judged by a detached observer. Small wins do not combine in a neat, linear, serial form, with each step being a demonstrable step closer to some predetermined goal. More common is the circumstance where small wins are scattered and cohere only in the sense that they move in the same general direction or all move away from some deplorable condition. Ideals, broad abstract ends, and lasting ambitions are less influential in defining a means–ends structure for a series of small wins than they are in articulating the specific trade-offs that occur when each win improves something at the expense of something else (Lindblom, 1979, p. 519).

A series of small wins can be gathered into a retrospective summary that imputes a consistent line of development, but this post hoc construction should not be mistaken for orderly implementation. Small wins have a fragmentary character driven by opportunism and dynamically changing situations. Small wins stir up settings, which means that each subsequent attempt at another win occurs in a different context. Careful plotting of a series of wins to achieve a major change is impossible because conditions do not remain constant. Much of the artfulness in working with small wins lies in identifying, gathering, and

labeling several small changes that are present but unnoticed (e.g., the Aquarian conspiracy, megatrends, back to basics), changes that in actuality could be gathered under a variety of labels.

Small wins provide information that facilitates learning and adaptation. Small wins are like miniature experiments that test implicit theories about resistance and opportunity and uncover both resources and barriers that were invisible before the situation was stirred up. Attempts to induce self-consciousness about sex references in speech revealed that language was more susceptible to change than had been thought earlier (e.g., Basic English never took hold); that opponents to language change were more dispersed, more stuffy, and less formidable than anticipated; that sex-biased language was more pervasive and therefore a stronger leverage point than people realized; and that language reform could be incorporated into a wide variety of agendas (e.g., APA *Publication Manual* revision). Language experiments uncovered entrenched sexism that had been invisible and created a more differentiated picture of allies, opponents, bystanders, and issues.

A series of small wins is also more structurally sound than a large win because small wins are stable building blocks. This characteristic is implicit in Simon's (1962) analysis of nearly decomposable systems and is illustrated by a fable (Kuhn & Beam, 1982):

Your task is to count out a thousand sheets of paper, while you are subject to periodic interruptions. Each interruption causes you to lose track of the count and forces you to start over. If you count the thousand as a single sequence, then an interruption could cause you, at worst, to lose a count of as many as 999. If the sheets are put into stacks of 100, however, and each stack remains undisturbed by interruptions, then the worst possible count loss from interruption is 108. That number represents the recounting of the nine stacks of 100 each plus the 99 single sheets. Further, if sheets are first put into stacks of ten, which are then joined into stacks of 100, the worst possible loss from interruption would be 27. That number represents nine stacks of 100 plus nine stacks of ten plus nine single sheets. Not only is far less recounting time lost by putting the paper into "subsystems" of tens and hundreds, but the chances of completing the count are vastly higher. (pp. 249–250)

Small wins are like short stacks. They preserve gains, they cannot unravel, each one requires less coordination to execute, interruptions such as might occur when there is a change in political administration have limited effects, and subparts can be assembled into different configurations. To execute a large win such as ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment requires much greater coordination because interdependencies are more dense, timing is more crucial, and defections are a greater threat. If one crucial piece is missing, the attempted solution fails and has to be restarted.

Parts of Saul Alinsky's (1972) model for building community organization parallel the notion of small wins. Alinsky's three criteria for working goals are that the goals be highly specific, realizable, and immediate (Peabody, 1971, p. 525). If people work for something concrete, if people have an opportunity for visible success from which they draw confidence, and if people can translate their excitement and optimism into immediate action, then a small win is probable, as is their heightened interest in attempting a second win.

As an example of how these goals might be directed toward solving the problem of pollution, Alinsky suggests that people try to influence polluters by influencing the polluters' bankers. To do this, the normal time-consuming process of opening and closing a savings account is turned to advantage by having 1000 people enter the bank, each with $5, to open a savings account. Although this volume of business may paralyze the bank, it is not illegal and no bank is eager to be known as an institution that forcibly ejects depositors. Once the deposits have been made, the people come back a day later, close their accounts—again a time-consuming activity—and the process continues until this secondary target, being punished for someone else's sins, brings pressure to bear on the offender. Making mass changes in savings accounts is a specific, realizable, immediate, small, and controllable opportunity. It is just like defeating a second-rate team, changing the card catalog, finding a chairperson, suing five cities, staying sober for an hour, or introducing a forklift into a work procedure.

The Psychology of Small Wins

From a psychological perspective, small wins make good sense. This is evident if we review what is known about cognitive limitations, affective limitations, stress, and the enactment of environments.

Cognitive Limitations

Given the reality of bounded rationality (March, 1978; Perrow, 1981), small wins may be effective as much because they are "small" as because they are "wins." The growing documentation of ways in which people take cognitive shortcuts on larger problems (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Kiesler & Sproull, 1982; Miller & Cantor, 1982) suggests that smaller wins may suffer less distortion from these heuristics. People with limited rationality have sufficient variety to visualize, manage, and monitor the smaller amount of variety present in scaled-down problem environments. When people initiate small-scale projects there is less play between cause and effect; local regularities can be created, observed, and trusted; and feedback is immediate and can be used to revise theories. Events cohere and can be observed in their entirety when their scale is reduced.

An example of scaling down problems to more manageable size is an incident that occurred during the Apollo 13 mission when the astronauts staged what some regard as the first strike in space on December 27, 1973. Mission control had been sending more and more directions, corrections, and orders to the astronauts until finally Commander Gerald Carr said, "You have given us too much to do. We're not going to do a thing until you get your act in better order." He then shut off communications for 12 hours and the astronauts spent their day catching up and looking out the windows. They regained control over their circumstance. They did so partly by complicating themselves—an astronaut who both disobeys and obeys mission control is a more complicated individual than one who merely obeys, and partly by simplifying their system—they cut off one whole set of demands and reduced their problems simply to dealing with their own preferences. Their system became simpler because they had fewer demands to accommodate and simpler schedules to follow.

To gain some control over interdependent problems, people can disconnect the parts so they don't affect each other. Problems escalate only because they are tied together in a circular fashion and become vicious circles. A system with fewer interdependent events is a simpler system. It is easier to comprehend, easier to control, easier to improve.

Small wins disconnect incomprehensible systems such as the Library of Congress, a DuPont factory, EPA, or NASA. Once the system is disconnected, people then focus their attention on specific events that have been stripped out of their context, specific events such as the HQ portion of the Library classification system or a sequence of space experiments. What is common in instances such as these is that the "mere problem" that people finally end up with becomes manageable, understandable, and controllable by fallible individuals and stays that way until the larger system is reconnected. Arousal is reduced because control and predictability increase. The mere problem is also seen more clearly, which improves the chances that a small, specific solution that fits it will be invented. The resulting small win becomes a visible change in a highly inertial world. The change was made possible because the bounds of rationality were not exceeded. The change also becomes more visible to other people because its size is compatible with their own bounded rationality.

Affective Limitations

Repeatedly, psychologists have demonstrated that small changes are preferred to large changes. The small scale of small wins is important affectively as well as cognitively. Examples are plentiful.

Successive small requests are more likely to produce compliance (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Changes in level of aspiration are most satisfying when they occur in small increments. Positions advocated within the latitude of acceptance modify opinions more often than does advocacy that exceeds these limits. Orders within the zone of indifference are followed more quickly and reliably. The central measure of perception is the *just noticeable* difference. Theories are judged interesting when they disconfirm assumptions held with moderate intensity (Davis, 1971). People whose positions are close to one's own are the targets of intensive persuasion, while those whose positions are farther away are dismissed, isolated, or derogated. Social comparison is more stable the more similar the comparison other is. Small discrepancies from an adaptation level are experienced as more pleasurable than are larger discrepancies. Brief therapy is most successful when the client is persuaded to do just one thing differently that interdicts the pattern of attempted solutions up to that point. Extremely easy or extremely difficult goals are less compelling than are goals set closer to perceived capabilities. Learning tends to occur in small increments rather than in an all-or-none fashion (this generalization is highly sensitive to the size of the building blocks that are postulated in all-or-none positions such as stimulus sampling theory). Programmed learning works best when there is a gradual progression to complex repertoires and a gradual fading out of stimulus prompts for answers. Retention is better when people are in the same emotional state in which they learned the original material (Bower, Monteiro, & Gilligan, 1978). Numerous other examples could be given. The point is that incremental phenomena such as small wins have a basic compatibility with human preferences for learning, perception, and motivation.

Small wins are not only easier to comprehend but more pleasurable to experience. While no one would deny that winning big is a thrill, big wins can also be disorienting and can lead to unexpected negative consequences. The disruptiveness of big wins is evident in the high stress scores associated with positive changes in Life Events Scales (e.g., Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy, & Dohrenwend, 1978). Big wins evoke big countermeasures and altered expectations, both of which make it more difficult to gain the next win (e.g., attention paid to Nobel prize winners often makes it impossible for them to do any further significant work).

Stress

Since arousal is a central construct in stress research, the soundness of small wins should be evident when stress formulations are examined. Recent work by McGrath (1976) and Kobasa (1979) reveals just such a fit. McGrath argued that there is a potential for stress when people perceive that demands exceed capabilities under conditions where it would be ex-

tremely costly to ignore the issue (p. 1352). The severity of perceived stress becomes stronger as uncertainty about the outcome increases. Uncertainty intensifies the closer the perceived demand is to the perceived ability. Large demand–capability discrepancies in either direction virtually assure successful or unsuccessful outcomes compared with situations of smaller discrepancy in which the outcome could go either way.

When people scale up the gravity of social problems, they raise at least the importance of the issue and the magnitude of the demand. The crucial question then becomes: What happens to the third variable of perceived capability to cope with demands?

Although numerous assumptions about perceived ability are possible, it would seem that the generic statement, "This problem affects you, and you can make a difference," reduces the perceived discrepancy between demands and abilities. If people respond to "you can make a difference" with the retort, "that's nonsense," then larger discrepancies will be created and stress will be minimal. If, however, people respond with a different reaction such as "that might just be true," then the demand–capability discrepancy is narrowed, which makes the outcome more uncertain and the stress more intense. As stress increases, the disruptive effects of arousal on problem solving increase. Just when people feel most encouraged to do something about a problem, they become least capable of translating that growing optimism into detailed diagnoses and complex responses. They become disabled by their own optimism, because it intensifies the perceived uncertainty of outcomes.

Once the gap between ability and demand begins to narrow, it becomes crucial that people see how their abilities can unequivocally *exceed* demands in order to remove some uncertainty. This assurance of success is precisely what people begin to feel when they define their situation as one of working for a small win. When a large problem is broken down into a series of small wins, three things happen. First, the importance of any single win is reduced in the sense that the costs of failure are small and the rewards of success considerable. Second, the size of the demand itself is reduced (e.g., all we need to do is get one city to discipline local polluters). And third, existing skills are perceived as sufficient to deal with the modest demands that will be confronted.

A small win reduces importance ("this is no big deal"), reduces demands ("that's all that needs to be done"), and raises perceived skill levels ("I can do at least that"). When reappraisals of problems take this form, arousal becomes less of a deterrent to solving them.

The potential attractiveness of a small win is that it operates simultaneously on importance, demands, and resources and defines situations away from the "close calls" where higher uncertainty and higher stress reduce problem-solving performance. Small wins induce a degree of certainty that allows greater access to the very resources that can insure more positive outcomes.

Additional recent research on resistance to stress, especially Kobasa's work with hardiness (Kobasa, 1979, 1982; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982), suggests the psychological soundness of the strategy of small wins. While Kobasa has interpreted hardiness as a personality disposition, pursuit of a small wins strategy could induce more generally the perceptions associated with this disposition.

Hardiness is composed of commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment refers to involvement and a generalized sense of purpose that allows people to impose meaning on things, events, and persons. Control is the tendency to act and feel as if one can have a definite influence (not *the* influence) on situations through the exercise of imagination, knowledge, skill, and choice. People with a sense of control tend to experience events as natural outgrowths of their actions rather than as foreign, overwhelming events. Challenge is the belief that change is an incentive to grow rather than a threat to security. Thus, incongruent events are opportunities rather than disasters.

Deliberate cultivation of a strategy of small wins infuses situations with comprehensible and specific meaning (commitment), reinforces the perception that people can exert some influence over what happens to them (control), and produces changes of manageable size that serve as incentives to expand the repertory of skills (challenge). Continued pursuit of small wins could build increasing resistance to stress in people not originally predisposed toward hardiness.

Enactment of Environments

Small wins build order into unpredictable environments, which should reduce agitation and improve performance. Most "reality" surrounding social problems is disorganized, fragmented, piecemeal. When people confront situations that contain gaps and uncertainties, they first think their way across these gaps. Having tied the elements together cognitively, they then actually tie partial events together when they act toward them and impose contingencies. This sequence is similar to sequences associated with self-fulfilling prophecies (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977).

A crucial element in thoughtful action consists of "presumptions of logic" (Weick, 1979, p. 138) about situations that will be confronted. These presumptions draw people into situations in anticipation that the situations will make sense. This anticipation sets the stage for the second half of the process where, finding themselves in a presumably sensible situation,

people take action. In doing so, they create patterns and consolidate scattered elements, both of which create the sensible situation that was anticipated.

This sequence of events is especially probable in the case of small wins. A small win is a bounded, comprehensible, plausible scenario that coheres sufficiently that people presume in advance that a forthcoming situation will be orderly. Having imposed the logic of small wins on a situation cognitively, the person then wades into the situation and acts with persistence, confidence, and forcefulness (Moscovici, 1980). Such decisive action is appropriate for an ostensibly orderly situation which, of course, has actually become more orderly precisely because forceful action consolidated it. Forceful action monopolizes the attention of other actors and becomes a causal variable in their construction of the situation. As a result, their actions become more interdependent and more orderly than they were before the intervention occurred.

Even though the actions associated with small wins are brief, specific, and localized, they can have a deterministic effect on many problem situations, because those situations are often even less coherent than the actions directed at them. The situations are loosely coupled, subject to multiple interpretations, and monitored regularly by only a handful of people. The confidence that flows from a pursuit of small wins frequently enacts environments in which the original problem becomes less severe and the next improvement more clear.

The Politics of Small Wins

Small wins can penetrate the main occupational hazard in Washington—information overload. The pace of work in Washington is fast, incessant, and unavoidable. The Obey Commission in 1977 found that in an average 11-hour day, a House member has only 11 minutes for discretionary reading (O'Donnell, 1981). That is where small wins have power. Small wins are compact, tangible, upbeat, noncontroversial, and relatively rare. They catch the attention of people with short time perspectives who have only 11 minutes to read.

Small wins also attract the attention of the opposition, though this is not inevitable. Opponents often assume that big effects require big causes, which means that they discount the importance of small wins. Opponents also often assume that attempted solutions cluster. Since small wins are dispersed, they are harder to find and attack than is one big win that is noticed by everyone who wants to win big somewhere else and who defines the world as a zero-sum game.

Because someone's small win is someone else's small loss, the stakes are reduced, which encourages the losers to bear their loss without disrupting the social system. A vague consensus is preserved by small wins because basic values are not challenged. People can accept a specific outcome even if they disagree on the values that drive it or the goals toward which it is instrumental.

The fact that small wins attract attention is not their only political virtue. In the world of policy, there are seldom clear decisions or clear problems (Weiss, 1980). Outcomes are built from bits and pieces of action, policy, and advice that are lying about. Since small wins are of a size that lets them supplement rather than dominate policy, they are more likely to be incorporated than are other more conspicuous solutions (McNaugher, 1980; Redman, 1973).

Despite their apparent political advantages, however, small wins may sound hopelessly naive, since they rely heavily on resources such as hope, faith, prophecies, presumptions, optimism, and positive reappraisals. Authors of many of the policy articles that have appeared in the *American Psychologist* have criticized psychologists for being naive and knowing relatively little about playing "hardball" with constituencies that have serious resources and know the game (e.g., Bazelon, 1982; Dörken, 1981; Hager, 1982; Sarason, 1978). Psychologists have responded by deprecating the game (e.g., March, 1979), making efforts to learn hardball (e.g., DeLeon et al., 1982), or by defining new games (e.g., Fishman & Neigher, 1982). The thrust of the present analysis, however, is that we need to be less apologetic for our apparent naivete than we have been.

First, being naive simply means that we reject received wisdom that something *is* a problem. Being naive means nothing more than that. We are always naive relative to some definition of the situation, and if we try to become less so, we may accept a definition that confines the definition of small wins to narrower issues than is necessary.

Second, being naive probably does have a grain of denial embedded in it. But denial can lower arousal to more optimal levels, so that more complex actions can be developed and more detailed analyses can be made.

Third, to be naive is to start with fewer preconceptions. Since it's usually true that believing is seeing, strong a priori beliefs narrow what is noticed (e.g., concern with sexism leads people to ignore threats that could annihilate both sexes). People with naive preconceptions will see a different set of features and are less likely to become fixated on specific features.

Fourth, naive beliefs favor optimism. Many of the central action mechanisms for small wins, such as self-fulfilling prophecies, affirmation, self-confirming faith that life is worth living (as first described by William James), the presumption of logic, trust, the belief in personal control, and positive self-statements, all gain their energy from the initial belief that people can make a difference. That belief is not naive

when the world is tied together loosely. Firm actions couple events. And firm actions are more likely to occur when belief is strongly positive than when it is hesitant, doubtful, or cynical.

Optimism is also not naive if we can deny the relevance of hopelessness for the spirit of optimism. We justify what we do, not by belief in its efficacy but by an acceptance of its necessity. That is the basis on which Don Quixote survives.

Don Quixote embraces the foolishness of obligatory action. Justification for knight-errantry lies not in anticipation of effectiveness but in an enthusiasm for the pointless heroics of a good life. The celebration of life lies in the pleasures of pursuing the demands of duty. (March, 1975, p. 14)

One can argue that it is our duty as psychologists to be optimistic. To view optimism as a duty rather than as something tied to unsteady expectations of success is to position oneself in a sufficient variety of places with sufficient confidence that events may be set in motion that provide substance for that hope. Small wins may amount to little, but they are after all wins, and wins encourage us to put the most favorable construction on actions and events.

Naivete can be a problem when optimistic expectations are disconfirmed (small flops), for although it increases the likelihood that good things will happen, it does not guarantee they will. Disconfirmation often leads people to abandon their expectations and adopt skepticism and inaction as inoculation against future setbacks. The important tactic for dealing with the flops implicit in trying for small wins is to localize the disconfirmation of expectations. Cognitive theories of depression (e.g., Beck et al., 1979) suggest that people often generalize disconfirmed expectations far beyond the incident in which they originated. The faith that makes life worth living can suffer setbacks, but these setbacks are specific and, in the case of small flops, limited. Highly aroused people who have flopped attempting a large win can't see those specifics, so they abandon all faith and all possible scenarios for how life might unfold. That is the generalizing that needs to be contained and often is contained by trying for smaller wins, with smaller stakes.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis leaves several questions unanswered. For example, is the concept of arousal really necessary to understand why attempts to cope with large problems are self-defeating? Cognitive explanations (e.g., "I simply can't cure cancer so I'll work to make terminally ill patients more comfortable") may make it unnecessary to resort to motivational explanations. I favor motivational explanations under the assumption that social problems are emotional issues argued under emotionally charged conditions.

What is the natural distribution of arousal around social problems? The preceding analyses assume that most people feel intensely about social problems most of the time, or at least at those crucial times when they try to diagnose what is wrong and rehearse what to do about it. That assumption is a simplification, because it is clear that participation is uneven, unpredictable, and easily distracted (Weiner, 1976). Furthermore, interest in a given issue soon diminishes and bored people wander off to other problems (Koestler, 1970). Nevertheless, there are problem elites, opinion leaders, and hubs in networks. These people are central because they feel strongly about issues. Those strong feelings can affect their thought and action directly, and others who model this thought and action indirectly.

What role do individual differences in arousability or sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) play in strategies to cope with social problems? Implicit in the preceding argument is a rule of thumb: If you can tolerate high levels of arousal, go for big wins; if you can't, go for small wins.

Questions such as this notwithstanding, it seems useful to consider the possibility that social problems seldom get solved, because people define these problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them. Changing the scale of a problem can change the quality of resources that are directed at it. Calling a situation a mere problem that necessitates a small win moderates arousal, improves diagnosis, preserves gains, and encourages innovation. Calling a situation a serious problem that necessitates a larger win may be when the problem starts.

REFERENCES

Alinsky, S. D. (1972). *Rules for radicals.* New York: Vintage.
Baddeley, A. D. (1972). Selective attention and performance in dangerous environments. *British Journal of Psychology, 63,* 537–546.
Bazelon, D. L. (1982). Veils, values, and social responsibility. *American Psychologist, 37,* 115–121.
Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive theory of depression.* New York: Guilford.
Berger, B. M. (1976). Comments on Mel Kohn's paper. *Social Problems, 24,* 115–120.
Bower, G. H., Monteiro, K. P., & Gilligan, S. G. (1978). Emotional mood as a context for learning and recall. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 17,* 573–585.
Braybrooke, D., & Lindblom, C. E. (1963). *A strategy of decision.* Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
Broadhurst, P. L. (1959). The interaction of task difficulty and motivation: The Yerkes-Dodson Law revived. *Acta Psychologica, 16,* 321–338.
Cook, S. W. (1979). Social science and school desegregation: Did we mislead the Supreme Court? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 5,* 420–437.
Davis, M. S. (1971). That's interesting: Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Philosophy of Social Science, 1,* 309–344.
DeLeon, P. H., O'Keefe, A. M., VandenBos, G. R., & Kraut, A. G. (1982). How to influence public policy: A blueprint for activism. *American Psychologist, 37,* 476–485.

Dohrenwend, B. S., Krasnoff, L., Askenasy, A. R., & Dohrenwend, B. P. (1978). Exemplification of a method for scaling life events: The PERI life events scale. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19,* 205–229.

Dörken, H. (1981). Coming of age legislatively: In 21 steps. *American Psychologist, 36,* 165–173.

Easterbrook, J. A. (1959). The effect of emotion on cue utilization and the organization of behavior. *Psychological Review, 66,* 183–201.

Eysenck, M. W. (1982). *Attention and arousal: Cognition and performance.* New York: Springer.

Fishman, D. B., & Neigher, W. (1982). American psychology in the eighties: Who will buy? *American Psychologist, 37,* 533–546.

Freedman, J. L., & Fraser, S. C. (1966). Compliance without pressure: The foot-in-the-door technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 4,* 195–202.

Hager, M. G. (1982). The myth of objectivity. *American Psychologist, 37,* 576–579.

Hollander, S. (1965). *The sources of increased efficiency: A study of DuPont rayon plants.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Holsti, O. R. (1978). Limitations of cognitive abilities in the face of crisis. In C. F. Smart & W. T. Stanbury (Eds.), *Studies on crisis management* (pp. 35–55). Toronto: Butterworth.

Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., & Tversky, A. (Eds.). (1982). *Judgement under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Kiesler, S., & Sproull, L. (1982). Managerial response to changing environments: Perspectives on problem sensing from social cognition. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 27,* 548–570.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37,* 1–11.

Kobasa, S. C. (1982). Commitment and coping in stress resistance among lawyers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42,* 707–717.

Kobasa, S. C., Maddi, S. R., & Kahn, S. (1982). Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42,* 168–177.

Koestler, A. (1970). Literature and the law of diminishing returns. *Encounter, 34,* 39–45.

Kohn, M. L. (1976). Looking back—A 25-year review and appraisal of social problems research. *Social Problems, 24,* 94–112.

Kuhn, A., & Beam, R. D. (1982). *The logic of organizations.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lindblom, C. E. (1979). Still muddling, not yet through. *Public Administration Review, 39,* 517–526.

Machlup, F. (1962). *The production and distribution of knowledge in the United States.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

March, J. G. (1975). Education and the pursuit of optimism. *Texas Tech Journal of Education, 2,* 5–17.

March, J. G. (1978). Bounded rationality, ambiguity, and the engineering of choice. *The Bell Journal of Economics, 9,* 587–608.

March, J. G. (1979). Science, politics, and Mrs. Gruenberg. In *The National Research Council in 1979* (pp. 27–36). Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.

McGrath, J. E. (1976). Stress and behavior in organizations. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 1351–1395). Chicago: Rand McNally.

McNaugher, T. L. (1980). Marksmanship, McNamara, and the M16 rifle: Innovation in military organizations. *Public Policy, 28,* 1–37.

Merton, R. K. (1971). Epilogue: Social problems and sociological theory. In R. Merton & R. Nisbet (Eds.), *Contemporary social problems* (pp. 793–846). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Miller, G. A., & Cantor, N. (1982). Book review of Nisbett and Ross, "Human Inference." *Social Cognition, 1,* 83–93.

Moscovici, S. (1980). Toward a theory of conversion behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 13, pp. 209–239). New York: Academic Press.

Nettler, G. (1980). Notes on society; sociologist as advocate. *Canadian Journal of Sociology, 5,* 31–53.

O'Donnell, T. J. (1981). Controlling legislative time. In J. Cooper & G. C. Mackenzie (Eds.), *The house at work* (pp. 127–150). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Peabody, G. L. (1971). Power, Alinsky, and other thoughts. In H. A. Hornstein, B. B. Bunker, W. W. Burke, M. Gindes, & R. J. Lewicki (Eds.), *Social intervention: A behavioral science approach* (pp. 521–532). New York: Free Press.

Pearson, D. A., & Lane, D. M. (1983). *The effect of arousal on attention.* Unpublished manuscript, Rice University.

Perrow, C. (1981). Disintegrating social sciences. *New York University Educational Quarterly, 12,* 2–9.

Peters, T. J. (1977). *Patterns of winning and losing: Effects on approach and avoidance by friends and enemies.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University.

Peters, T. J. (1979). *Designing and executing "real" tasks.* Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.

Redman, E. (1973). *The dance of legislation.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sale, K. (1980). *Human scale.* New York: Putnam.

Sarason, S. B. (1978). The nature of problem solving in social action. *American Psychologist, 33,* 370–380.

Simon, H. A. (1962). The architecture of complexity. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 106,* 467–482.

Snyder, M., Tanke, E. D., & Berscheid, E. (1977). Social perception and interpersonal behavior: On the self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35,* 656–666.

Spector, M., & Kitsuse, J. I. (1977). *Constructing social problems.* Menlo Park, CA: Cummings.

Staw, B. M., Sandelands, L. E., & Dutton, J. E. (1981). Threat-rigidity effects in organizational behavior: A multi-level analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 26,* 501–524.

Steinmetz, S. (1982, August 1). The desexing of English. *The New York Times Magazine,* pp. 6, 8.

Superbowls super coach. (1980, February 4). *Time Magazine,* p. 58.

Thayer, R. E. (1978a). Factor analytic and reliability studies on the activation–deactivation adjective check list. *Psychological Reports, 42,* 747–756.

Thayer, R. E. (1978b). Toward a psychological theory of multidimensional activation (arousal). *Motivation and Emotion, 2,* 1–34.

Weick, K. W. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing* (2nd ed.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Weiner, S. S. (1976). Participation, deadlines, and choice. In J. G. March & J. P. Olsen (Eds.), *Ambiguity and choice in organizations* (pp. 225–250). Bergen, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.

Weiss, C. H. (1980). Knowledge creep and decision accretion. *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization, 1,* 381–404.

Weltman, G., Smith, J. E., & Egstrom, G. H. (1971). Perceptual narrowing during simulated pressure-chamber exposure. *Human Factors, 13,* 99–107.

Williams, C. T. (1982, September 5). Letter to the editor about "Desexing the English language." *The New York Times Magazine,* p. 46.

Zuckerman, M. (1979). *Sensation seeking: Beyond the optimal level of arousal.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.