



[Episode 38: "How Can Being More Equitable, Diverse, & Inclusive Improve the Field of Behavioural Insights?"](#)

Part 2 with Sylvia Apostolidis, President of the Jasmara Group.

Sylvia Apostolidis returns for Part 2 of our exploration of the intersection of Behavioural Insights and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. In Part 2, we turn to how EDI can improve BI. We discuss ways in which the field has not been diverse, inclusive, and equitable, changes it can make to be more diverse, inclusive, and equitable, and how those changes will improve the science and practice of BI. Sylvia leaves us with some action items to help us all be more inclusive in our day-to-day lives.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today we're again calling DIBS on Sylvia Apostolidis.

Listeners to part 1 of our conversation know that Sylvia has spent more than 15 years working in the field of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and that Sylvia has gradually been adding tools from Behavioural Insights to her work. In part one of our conversation, Sylvia, and I talked about what terms and concepts mean in Behavioural Insights versus equity, diversity, and inclusion, and how the two fields and their concepts interrelate. We also talked at length about how Behavioural Insights can be a powerful tool to help organizations accomplish their equity, diversity and inclusion goals.

Today, we'll be flipping that around a bit, in part two. We'll talk about how behavioural insights as a field can do better when it comes to equity, diversity and inclusion. And we'll also cover how being more equitable, diverse, and inclusive can strengthen the field of Behavioural Insights in numerous ways. We'll jump right into that conversation.

We've talked a lot about how Behavioural Insights can help organizations accomplish their EDI goals, but there's also the fact that BI historically has not been equitable, diverse and inclusive. And so I think that is also an interesting part of the discussion, and I think, maybe one of the parts we can start with there that really pulls on what we were just talking about is the idea that a lot of the behavioural decisions science research that underlies Behavioural Insights have been ideas that have been tested, developed and tested, looking at really a subset of the population.

And in the academic world, because they always like to come up with acronyms, we have an acronym for it, WEIRD populations, which means that most of the behavioural decisions science research has been tested on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic populations. I thought we could talk a little bit about why it matters, who participates in research and how that might affect the knowledge base of behavioural decision science research.

SYLVIA APOSTOLIDIS, GUEST: Yeah, for sure. So that WEIRD acronym, what I might add to that as well is men. So, you know, there's nowhere in that WEIRD acronym where we're addressing that. And the reality is that our society is built around the most dominant group and historically most dominant group, which is men, white, cisgender men, specifically. And this stems back, you can think about in the 1970s, the Reference Man.

So, the Reference Man was defined as someone who is between 20 and 30 years of age. Weighing 70 kilos, is about 170 centimeters in height and lives in a climate with an average temperature of about 10 to 20 degrees Celsius. Now he's Caucasian, and has a Western European, or North American background. The Reference Man has been used to test the safety of cars, for example.

It wasn't until really, really recently that cars were tested with women in mind, and, to this day, cars aren't tested for safety for pregnant women. There are no standards around that. And this Reference Man, it really permeates everything. I think it was just a couple of years ago, and I think it was in 2019, where some space shuttle was ready to go out into space, and they realized that the women astronauts didn't have the right gear. It's just been recently where construction clothing is being made for women. Even if we go into a big stadium, there's not enough washrooms for the women compared to the men because the men are the ones kind of designing this.

Everything's been designed for them, and you can think about hospitals and how black people are not served as well, or from a health perspective, don't get the same health attention as the Reference Man does. And so that lens is really limiting, and that lens creates inequity in our society. That lens doesn't give us the perspectives that we need in order to design for everyone, which is really what we want to be doing. And I think behavioural insights, as a field, probably has the same characteristics as other fields do, as well.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah. And I think, you know, with this idea of if the research doesn't pull on the different groups you get, you know, lighthearted examples like when NASA first sent women into space for, I think it was like a two day or something journey, and they sent 100 tampons, which would be way more than needed.

Then it also has these really important ramifications, like in medicine, where, you know, if you don't know that these symptoms of heart attacks are different for men and women, then women are potentially dying at higher rates just because the evidence doesn't even realize that there are distinctions.

And like you said in behavioural insights, there's been in recent years, findings that some of the biases around people over focusing on individuals is something that's more bounded by Western, WEIRD populations, whereas Eastern Collectivist cultures have different biases.

So, I think as we research more populations, we're finding out that some of the biases are universal, and some aren't, and that's really important to know. And I think it also goes to your point, way back at the beginning of our conversation about when we're saying something isn't diverse, that doesn't mean the same thing in each organization. One organization might be too white, one might be too Asian, one might be too female, one might be too male. We have to be diverse in a number of different variables to have a rich understanding of the phenomenon.

APOSTOLIDIS: Exactly. And that actually brings us to this diversity of thought. And so often we think about diversity of thought, we think about demographic difference on our teams. But we also need to be thinking about the different ways people think that come on to our teams. So are some people more risk averse? Do they have more of a lens around people or outcomes or options?

Juliet Brook's done some good work around trying to identify not just putting together diverse teams from a demographic or identity, but also what makes a diverse thinking team from the perspective of the diversity of approach. And they're both really important, and it's really interesting because there's a couple of different identity dimensions that are important.

One is gender evidence based, of course, one is gender, one is race and one is education or functionality. So, when woman enters a team, she brings a different perspective, when someone who is BIPOC comes on to a team, what happens is it's not necessarily that they bring a different perspective, but the other people become more curious. And that actually creates that diverse thinking, so it actually alters the behaviour of the dominant group.

And so, that's the kind of evidence that we want to go to when we start thinking about what exactly is a diverse thinking team. Is it only demographic difference? Why does it matter? Or is it also this diversity of approach as well that we also want to be trying to bring in because we know that leadership teams, they really have a very limited diversity of approach. As you go up and up the ladder, leaders really focus on outcomes and options, but there are a lot more variables like risk and people that we should be considering when we make a good decision that gets lost as we go up that ladder. That's the kind of evidence that we need to bring to our solutions when we start to think about what exactly is a diverse thinking team.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely, and I love how we've put together that you need the research to include diverse participation from various different groups. But you also need the researchers, the decision makers, to be diverse along different characteristics.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah.

APPELT: And I think a bright spot is that that is a place where the behavioural decision science is doing better, where it's by no means solved, but we are seeing more researchers use more diverse populations to test their theories. It's not just testing on undergraduate students in psychology classes, we are seeing people go out into the field. People do research online, where you can reach more variety of folks, and we are seeing the field itself have more diverse population of researchers. Still a lot of room for improvement, but that's somewhere where I think there is recognition of the problem and not just awareness, but actual action towards it.

And another place, which I think is related, is that I think not so much for lab projects, but for behavioural insights projects tackling the real-world problems, we are starting to see more of a norm towards including an exploratory research phase where there is conversation with the population of interest, not just assuming these people aren't doing this because they don't know any better or because there's a default bias. Or, we don't assume, we actually go into the population and try to understand their barriers through conversations and other practices.

But I know that for behavioural insights, that's kind of a newer tool in the BI toolkit, and that for other fields, that's more of an established practice. So, are there ways that behavioural insights can be better at incorporating that exploratory research phase? Are there fields we should be learning from?

APOSTOLIDIS: Yes, definitely. So interestingly, when I started on this journey of challenging our status quo, I came across behavioural insights, but then I also came across design thinking and this human centered design and how we really need to understand the employee experience and, in my case, really deeply, in order to get to those really powerful solutions.

And not just that, but also, when you bring people in and start with empathy, you also bridge differences through that process. So, you get a bunch of people through a design thinking process, that are focused around providing us insights into their experience, and we lead with empathy in that process. But then through that process, they're also understanding each other. And so, you're promoting commonalities, you're bridging the differences through that human-centered design.

And the other thing that I think design thinking offers us is it tells us, let's design for the extreme user. So, the outliers. And if we could design for the outliers, then that becomes really inclusive for everybody. And I sometimes talk about, this is not in a corporate world, but from a personal experience, I have twin boys, and one of my sons has unilateral hearing, so he only hears from one side.

So, when he was in junior kindergarten, we put up these panels in his room so that it absorbs the sounds. And we ended up doing that, and those panels went from room to room to room in elementary school with him. And I remember his kindergarten teacher saying, "I think I just want to keep Marco as a kindergarten for the rest of my life" because they were so helpful for her, too. So those panels not just helped my son hear what was being taught, but it helped everyone. So he could be categorized as an extreme use or an outlier, but it helped everyone. And I think that's what the power of inclusive design does. It doesn't just design for one. It designs for everybody.

And with that, I'll just add, I think what we can also do is we can teach everyone to be an inclusive designer. So just like the example that you gave around behavioural scientists, they now have this different lens because they're more aware of the importance of designing inclusively, I think that's a tool that we can teach people how to design with different perspectives, how to design for everybody. And that's actually a strategy an organization, for example, can use.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think it kind of brings together some of the different pieces we've talked about where when we're doing the step of exploratory research, we might realize that the population isn't homogeneous in terms of this need, like, for example, saving for retirement. Not everyone should be saving at the same rate, where a lot of the earlier plans around helping people do these things might say like, "Okay, everyone's going to save more."

But then for some folks, actually saving is going to negatively impact them. They actually should be spending more right now. So, by doing the conversations, you start to realize that there's different subgroups. And so maybe the solutions either need to be different solutions, or solutions where they have some opportunities to guide which solutions, so kind of tailored. So, I think the idea of an extreme user, and then that there can be extreme users in different directions.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, it's a great point.

APPELT: Wow. Well, we have covered a lot of big ideas, and I think I love, something we talk about with behavioural insights is that it's easy to be overwhelmed and it can be helpful to have like action items that we can take with us because, you know, we all want to be more inclusive in design and we want to have diverse teams, but that can be hard to have as an action item to walk away with. So, are there maybe one or two easy actions listeners can take with them to be more inclusive in their day to day lives?

APOSTOLIDIS: One really easy thing to do is "flip it to test it". And so, let's say in your day-to-day life, and you ask yourself, "Would I be reacting the same way to a woman as I am to this man? Would I buy this toy for a girl versus a boy?". If you flip it to test it, then it's kind of almost like you're playing devil's advocate with your

brain and you're able to consciously potentially interrupt those stereotypes that we all hold. So that technique of "flip it to test it" is something that everyone can do on their day to day.

The other thing that we can do is just become more aware of our language. Language really matters, even when we use the term guys to address a bunch of women or a bunch of people. Even when we use the word girls to talk about women, like language really does make a difference. And so, if we can become more aware of how we address people, how we use language, that's another thing to be mindful of as we go forward. So just those two is, you know, language really does matter and 'flip it to test it'.

APPELT: I love those two and 'flip it to test it' actually really resonates with me because I've done research on that idea not specific to bias, but I have a project where we have people focus on the opposite first. So, whatever would be your natural inclination, try to think about the other thing first.

And yeah, it really does work. It helps you, you have this implicit default, and it helps you shift out of that implicit default. And it can rebalance your pro-con list because if you go in thinking one thing, you're going to really stack your pro-con list. But if you try to think about the opposite, it can help you come to a decision that's more informed. So I love that. Well, as we tend towards wrapping up, do you have a message for our BI practitioners in training?

APOSTOLIDIS: So, for me, I feel like I'm a BI practitioner in training, as well. I've taken that first course with you, but my plan is to take the next course because I've learned a lot on my own. But I want to almost, I want to learn more. I think a lot of reading. There's so many new interesting articles and new books that because behavioural insights is exploding, there's a lot more that we can learn about. I think learning and reading, following people even online, and getting connected into the BI community are things that I'm going to do, as a BI practitioner in training, because that's what I feel like I still am, of course, maybe we all are.

APPELT: Yeah, there is so much to learn. It is really a field where you can never just rest on your laurels because there's constantly new research coming out. And I know for myself, I have a Tsundoku on my reading table by my bed, where it's just all the new BI books that have come out in the last two years, so, absolutely.

APOSTOLIDIS: It's just so fascinating, really. I mean, it's really the study of human behaviour, and we think that we're all rational. That's what we were taught in Economics 101, and that's just not the case. But so many of us still think that it is. And so the field itself, I find so interesting and exciting really and how it can be applied to so many different social problems that we have.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think that's my favourite thing about it is that it doesn't ever feel stale, there's always new problems to apply it to and new things to learn.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, and also that by undertaking a BI project, we're contributing to that knowledge as well. I like that. I like being at the forefront of some new ways of thinking and new ways of doing things, which I think BI offers us. Yeah, and we're always aiming for good as well. So not only are we learning and pushing knowledge, but we're trying to make a positive difference in the world, which doesn't get much more rewarding than that.

And I'll just add also, I think that BI is particularly helpful for these complex, wicked problems like diversity and inclusion. A wicked problem can be defined as a social problem that may not even have a solution like health care or diversity and inclusion. So behavioural insights is an, I think, an excellent tool to help make headway on these wicked problems that we have.

APPELT: Yeah. And that that reminds me of a conversation I had recently where someone asked me how long they thought behavioural insights would be needed. And I was like, well, I think it's kind of like you said, these challenges don't necessarily have solutions, we'll be working on them for whether it's equity, diversity, inclusion, sustainability, these are problems we're solving. We're working on them sequentially and, you know, chipping away at them.

APOSTOLIDIS: Well, yeah, because if you think about how bias manifests itself, it's really in those decision points and in those moments. There's a zillion moments where we're making decisions and every one of those moments we can design for more objective outcomes and so agreed. Behavioural Insights is definitely going to be a field, a very powerful field to get us to move in the right direction and in our case, move towards diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces.

APPELT: Absolutely. Well, any last thoughts, any questions I should have asked and didn't or anything else you wanted to raise?

APOSTOLIDIS: The only thing that I think is interesting and it's going to go back to how BI can be applied in the workplace to build these inclusive workplaces is it's not just around process, but it is around how we motivate people as well. I'm going to go back to those nudges that we talked about earlier, and even the way we present data can drive more inclusivity.

I mentioned that there were 96 percent men who were the CEOs. Most of the time we present the minority data first. So, four percent women. When we present data, that is the majority data, our minds aren't used to that. And so, it gets triggered in a different way. And so, even how we present data matters, can make a difference, because one of the stickiest issues is engaging leaders.

Or as another example, you know, we've been presenting the business case for a really, really long time, and it's not getting the traction, the numbers aren't getting the traction people are, leaders are getting it, they're nodding, but they're not really doing anything.

So instead, what we can do is appeal to emotion. We can humanize the data when we present it with faces rather than just the data and the facts. Because stocks don't have as much impact, sometimes. We think that they do again, going back to our assumptions. But really, we need to story-tell. We need to personalize. We need to use emotion.

And those are the kinds of insights that help motivate people. We interrupt bias in process, but we can frame even the word diversity. It brings a lot of fear and people like the status quo. So how can we define terms differently so that it's more about diversity is all of us versus diversity is difference. One could have more impact to lessen the fear, to increase the engagement than the other. So really, behavioural insights and this evidence-based approach offers us an opportunity to impact all of that and all of those challenging problems that we often see when we're trying to build inclusion in the workplace.

APPELT: I like how that kind of I feel like that brings a lot of the different threads together of what we've talked about, and it's an interesting idea to think about how something so simple as framing and what words we use, and what we mean by them, and how we define them, how that can make a big impact.

APOSTOLIDIS: Exactly.

APPELT: Well, thank you. I was eagerly looking forward to this conversation, but it managed to exceed my hopes nonetheless. I am very happy we were able to chat. And I think the pandemic has been a tough few

years. But when we get to talk about exciting places for development, like making organizations more equitable, diverse, and inclusive and using BI to do so, but also using BI to make BI itself more equitable, diverse, inclusive. Talking about these topics feels energizing and feels like, you know, there's a lot of good work that's going on and a lot more good work ahead. So thank you for sharing today and thank you for sharing your time.

APOSTOLIDIS: My pleasure. Thanks for inviting me, Kirstin.

APPELT: And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.
