Episode 73: "Applying BI in Humanitarian Settings"

with Britt Titus, Behavioral Insights Lead with the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Britt Titus applies BI to wicked problems in humanitarian settings around the world. These problems and settings require modifications to the standard BI approach to problem-solving. Britt walks us through how her team at the IRC has expanded the problem scoping phase to spend time: (1) validating assumptions with a variety of involved parties and (2) identifying leverage points that maximize impact and feasibility.

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 calling DIBS on Britt Titus.

Britt is Behavioral Insights Lead with the International Rescue Committee, Airbel Impact Lab for Research and Innovation. And she's got quite the resume having worked with Nudge Lebanon, BIT, the UN, and the UK House of Commons.

She does really amazing work, applying BI to wicked problems, as evidenced by her recent lightning talk at our BIG Difference BC conference. I'm really excited to learn more today, and so let's just jump right in and welcome to the podcast, Britt.

BRITT TITUS, GUEST: Hi, thank you so much for having me.

APPELT: Let's start by just having you tell us a little bit about yourself.

TITUS: Great. So, as you mentioned, my name is Britt Titus, and I lead the Behavioural Science team at the IRC, the International Rescue Committee.

For those of you who are not familiar with it, the IRC is a large international humanitarian organization that works with communities in over 40 countries around the world, mostly communities affected by conflict, crisis and displacement.

And the organization is about, I think between fifteen and seventeen thousand people. Our behavioural science team is four people. So, we are a small team within a large organization working to try and improve humanitarian outcomes using behavioural science. And I live in Brooklyn, New York.

APPELT: Wow, that's such amazing work and I really want to dig into that. But before we talk about now, maybe we can talk about then a little bit. I always like to hear about people's paths to BI because they're all different and all fascinating. And I'm having a sense that yours might be quite fascinating indeed. So how did you become interested in behavioural science? What was your journey to BI?

TITUS: That's a great question. So, it was not a linear, obvious progression like many people. So, I actually started off my career working in the humanitarian sector, so I started off working within the United Nations, for the World Food Program and started off by doing really direct emergency response work.

So, I was deployed for the Syria emergency and the Ebola outbreak response in West Africa in 2014 and did a lot of on the ground response work. And I think in that time, working in places like Liberia for the Ebola outbreak response, a lot of the kind of things that I was grappling with and the questions that I was interested in were a lot of behavioural questions.

So “how does trust of the community impact our outcomes and our ability to slow the disease transmission?” and “how do people feel about the response and the responders and why are we seeing certain behaviours in this place but less in this place?”.

And so those were the kind of questions that I was really interested in, and the same with other emergencies around the world. And so, I was really interested in this and worked more and more to kind of work in innovation and thinking through how do we respond to emergencies before they happen, emergency preparedness work. And finally went back to do my Master's program so I could really dive into some of these thorny, thorny issues.

And I think in my first week in my Master's program, someone told me about something called behavioural science, I think in the line for the cafeteria. And I had this light bulb moment where I thought, “That's it”. That's what I've been so interested in and have felt is so essential for our ability to reach our, you know, our humanitarian outcomes that we're trying to achieve. And yet I hadn't heard it mentioned explicitly in those terms, and I didn't know that there was a dedicated field of study around it.

So when I learned that, I took all the courses that I could in my Master's program on Applied Behavioural Science and Behavioural Public Policy, and then was on a real mission to try and find a place where I could apply behavioural science to humanitarian outcomes. At that point, there wasn't much at all in that intersection.

And so, I started off working in Nudge Lebanon, which was doing work in Lebanon with refugees among the host population as well, and really got to do some really interesting applied work on things like gender-based violence and social cohesion work. Before finding out that the International Rescue Committee had a Innovation and Research team with a dedicated Behavioural Science practice that they were hiring for.

And so that's really where I got to really kind of apply my expertise in humanitarian response and my newfound, at that point, interest and passion for behavioural science. So, now I feel like I get to work at that intersection. I feel very, very grateful for that.

APPELT: That is so fascinating.

And I like how you kind of hit the nail on the head for me there, which is sometimes when you hear about these massive problems or these really insidious problems, you think, oh, that's a medical issue or a political issue.

But there's almost always behaviour involved. And when we realize that it opens up so many opportunities to work complementarily with other tools. And so, I think it's such a fascinating intersection and I'm happy you're working there.

So pulling on that idea, you're using BI to tackle these wicked problems and complex systems, how does that shape the practice of BI?

TITUS: That's a great question. So that's something I've been trying to figure out daily with the help of our wonderful team, over the last few years. Because if we look at the behavioural science evidence and the examples and the case studies and the literature, it does not reflect the type of problems that we are working on at IRC.

So the types of problems we're trying to tackle on a daily basis are things like “How can we diagnose and treat childhood malnutrition in Mali?” Or “How do we improve farmer's resilience to climate shocks in Syria in a conflict setting?” and things like that. And as you can imagine, there's just not a lot of literature out there on those topic areas. There's not a lot of literature on how to address those types of problems, let alone on populations who are experiencing conflict or crisis and displacement.

So there's just a lot that we don't know, and it's just not reflected in the behavioural science literature. And so, we've really had to take a step back and think, you know, does this conventional way of applying behavioural science, or the way that I was taught at least, of how to apply behavioural science to problems and issues, does it still work in these very different contexts with very different populations and very different problems?

And the answer is that we have to shift it a lot. We have to make quite a few changes to be able to use behavioural science with hope that it actually leads to the same, really positive outcomes that we see in other contexts for other types of problems. And so one of the big, I guess, things that is different about working on these types of problems in humanitarian settings is that we have to start working on problems much earlier on in the project lifecycle.

So often we're not coming in to address something like low uptake of a service or low implementation of a program. We are working on those, but sometimes and often, more often than not, working on problems where we're really starting from the beginning of we're seeing a problem in a context and we're trying to address it.

So, for example, as I mentioned, maybe childhood malnutrition in Mali. And so we really have to take a step back and think, “Okay, how does behavioural science work when we're not trying to encourage uptake or increase an existing solution, but really use behavioural science to help us even define what the problem is?”

And because there's not a lot of evidence in that space, typically and there's typically not a lot of data or quantitative data that we can get from local government and say, “Okay, well, can we analyze the data and see what the problem is”, it means that we have to spend more time upfront really defining what the problem is and validating it with the populations that we serve. Since we as the project team, in places like New York, are the least qualified to diagnose what the problem is that we should be working on and what is the priority in any given context.

So it means that we also have to do a lot of work upfront to understand what the problem is. And we also have to do a lot of validation with the population upfront to make sure that we are in fact working on the right thing and we are solving for the right thing in their context.

And finally, I think a big change or difference with the problems that we work on is that many of these problems, such as childhood malnutrition in a conflict setting, involves many actors and many behaviours at many different levels. So it's not just the parents of children that we need to focus on when we're addressing something like acute childhood malnutrition and something that's so important to address, because if not

treated, it can be fatal. But we have to look at the entire health system. We have to look at the health workers, we have to look at people in the community. We have to look at people in the Ministry of Health and how that impacts the outcomes we're looking at, and all of their behaviours are important.

But we find that it's not often enough just to look at the individual or at the individual or household level. We have to look at many different people in the system and how all of their behaviours are influencing one another and how the humanitarian situation, which is often dynamic and rapidly shifting, how is that impacting behaviour? So we really have to take more of a systems approach, in looking at the wider system, who's behaviour matters for who? What are the changing dynamics that are likely to change the outcomes?

And so really taking that more dynamic, systemic approach we found has been really much more helpful for us in kind of addressing some of these more complex issues and really taking a shift from not designing for an evaluation or an experiment. So not prioritizing from the beginning what is measurable, or what do we have data on, but we're really designing for scale and impact from the beginning. Like, how are we going to have the most impact on this problem from the beginning means that we really have to start thinking about where in the system is going to be the most impactful place for us to shift or focus on, and really starting from that really early place to define what that is and where we should be focusing our limited resources.

APPELT: Yeah. I mean, even a more static behavioural insights project is quite tricky, so I can't imagine doing it when everything is very dynamic. I do want to pull apart each of those things you mentioned. But before we go into that, I have one still pretty high level question, which is just how do you decide where to adapt the practice and where to keep it more the same? How do you make those decisions?

TITUS: Yeah, so I mean, I think it really depends on which context we're working on, what type of problem it is we're solving. There are some problems and some context that we work on that really lend themselves very well to the, I guess, the more conventional kind of approach to behavioural science.

So if we're working in a context on a problem where we have more evidence on it, so for example, in the health space on non-communicable diseases, for example, those types of issues, the types of issues that we also see in non-humanitarian settings or in the global north, there might be more evidence on those. We might already have a lot of evidence about what works in those contexts, and it might really be a question of how do we encourage uptake and use and implementation of those solutions that we already feel very confident about because there's so much evidence in context where we're working.

And so when we do have a lot of confidence about the evidence base for the solution, we already know what's going to work very well, we can use what looks more like a conventional behavioural science approach to encourage uptake of that solution or follow through or implementation. We still might have to do a little bit more contextualization and upfront, kind of formative research to make sure that it works in humanitarian contexts. But it really depends on how much confidence we have in the existing solution and the existing kind of evidence base. That tends to be less common for us, given that we're working in places like Syria and Mali and Chad, on these topic areas that, as I mentioned, just don't have a lot of literature at the moment.

So, yeah, when we are starting with a context that we know a lot less about, that there's a lot less evidence about, that we're starting from the beginning more of an open-ended question of how are we going to address malnutrition or how are we going to address climate resilience in Pakistan or Syria, we really need to adapt the BI approach much more to fit those contexts. So, I think it really comes down to our confidence in our assumptions.

APPELT: That makes a lot of sense. And like you said, it depends. It's not that there's one way of doing it. It's figuring out the right way for the problem and the context.

TITUS: Absolutely.

APPELT: So, let's dive more into specifics. You have talked about how you start projects with this very intentional effort to avoid narrowing the scope too soon, which I think is always a tough impulse to avoid. People often want to just start solutioning before they've even scoped. So can you talk about why that's so important and how you do it?

TITUS: Yeah, absolutely. I was reminded recently of an Albert Einstein quote who was actually the founder of the IRC, the International Rescue Committee after World War II. So his words feel especially appropriate in this context. But he said that if he had an hour to solve a problem, he would spend 55 minutes defining what the problem is and just 5 minutes trying to solve it, the quote was roughly that.

And so I think that's really relevant because especially, you know, as I mentioned, where we are working in these more complex, dynamic environments on these thornier issues, we really have to spend a lot of time defining what the problem is and trying to avoid narrowing in too soon. And I think that's another habit that we're all in, in working in environments where we are problem solving is we want to jump to a definition or we want to kind of narrow in very quickly. And so sometimes it's really counterintuitive to take a step back and spend more time really getting clear about what the problem is.

And I think this is, you know, it's challenging. We don't always have the luxury of this, especially if we're told what the problem is that we need to solve by a donor or a client. It's much harder. But I think sometimes in behavioural science, we've seen that, you know, sometimes we start with an idea of the problem that's not actually the problem. And we get so far into the different steps of the project lifecycle. Maybe we get all the way to ideation and we're coming up with ideas and maybe we're even running an experiment or we're implementing something only to find that that really wasn't the most important problem to solve in the first place. And maybe there was something a bit deeper or with a different actor in the system that if we could have shifted their behaviour, we could have seen more sustainable, larger impact.

And I think this is a challenge in behavioural insights, specifically, because I think often traditionally or previously in behavioural science, we focussed a lot as a community or as a sector on encouraging uptake of solutions that already existed. And so often the kind of framing of the problem was the lack of uptake of X, or the lack of use of Y. And so, the problem is really defined as the lack of the solution or lack of use of the solution, which, as I mentioned, works really well if you have a lot of evidence and a lot of validation of your assumptions that this really is the best thing for this population.

But in our context, as I said, we don't have the luxury of being able to really feel very confident about many of our assumptions when we start, which means that we really have to take five or six steps back, and spend a lot of time on defining what the problem is. And so what we do for that is, when we're really starting with a very open ended problem, we tend to start with, “Well, what would an ideal system look like? What would an ideal seed security system look like in Syria? What would an ideal system to address malnutrition look like in Mali?” And then work backwards in terms of “Why are we not at that place? Why are we not at that ideal system?”

And we can use a lot of really creative tools to really identify why are we not at this place where we want to be as a country, as a community, and we can use tools like storytelling, we can use root cause analyses and lots of other really interesting tools to really get at really defining what is the kind of gap between where we want to be as a system, and as a as a community, or as a nation, and where we are right now.

And I think the important thing that we try to do as early on as possible is to start validating what those assumptions are, because I think it's really easy to, as we know as behavioral scientists, a lot about things like groupthink and confirmation bias. It's very easy for us to get swayed by what someone says in a meeting or a workshop or what one piece of evidence says or what we've already defined the problem as in a place. And so it really takes a lot of debiasing and a lot of real reflection to get us out of thinking that we know what the problem is and really treat everything that we think the problem is as an assumption to be validated with people who are a lot closer to the problem than we are.

And so as early on as possible, we want to bring in our team members. For us, it's our country program colleagues who are on the ground. So, for example, our Syria country program team or our Mali country program team who know a lot better than we do about what the problem is and make sure that we're finding out from them what the problem is. And then we want to go even closer because we know that there are people that are even closer to the problem than our country program colleagues, and that might be stakeholders, and then it might actually be affected community members and find ways that we can really validate these assumptions with them and find out for them what is the ideal system and why are we not there.

And so we really start to fill in the blanks as we go and treat it as a very iterative process of figuring out what is the problem and where should we be focussing on, rather than trying to figure it out definitively from the first workshop and then and then using all our resources to go straight in on that. So I think treating everything as a hypothesis, treating everything as an assumption, and then finding creative ways to validate what your assumptions are as you go and allowing room to continue updating what you think the problem is as you go, I think has been really, really helpful for us in making sure that we're addressing the right problem.

APPELT: Yeah, and I really like what you just said, actually, about treating everything as hypotheses. If we reframe our assumption as hypotheses, then it feels safer, psychologically safer, kind of to test them because it's not something that's going to you know, it's our assumption that's so closely held is our hypothesis, and so we can test it and validate it with the people who have the knowledge to tell us if our hypothesis is true or false. And I think it's so powerful to do that validation work from the beginning, because like you said, a lot of times there's some problem definition and then going to the population, which by then you've got those assumptions.

So making sure there's still a hypotheses at the point when you're talking to folks. So how do you tackle the stage of talking with folks and this validation approach?

TITUS: Yeah. So I think definitely a first step is to talk to whoever in your team is the closest to the problem that you have access to, and really trying to get some initial hypotheses and assumptions from them so that it can guide your next steps. And so again, we really treat this as an iterative process of validation. So, we really want to speak to our team members who are in-country first, to really understand their experience of what the problem is.

And that can be both anecdotal, it can be using programmatic data. Whatever we have can be part of that initial, again, treating it as assumptions to start with. But then we try to as quickly as possible, try to validate whatever our assumptions are with community members, with the affected population, with people who are working in the problem.

So if it's a health project, it's who are the frontline health responders or who are the patients, who are the community members who might be impacted or impacting the problem, to really understand from their

perspective what is going on. And what we've found is that this definitely brings us to a different type of problem definition than we would have had otherwise.

And I think the example that comes to mind is a project that we had in northeast Nigeria, where we wanted to improve uptake of social emotional learning skills. We wanted children to improve their social emotional learning outcomes, which are really important for a whole host of other really important outcomes, whether it's educational attainment or behavioural, and longer-term outcomes around schooling and career.

So we really had a lot of evidence around the importance of social emotional learning in schools. And so in implementing the same type of approaches in northeast Nigeria, we saw that there was really low outcome. So we didn't see any impact on social emotional learning outcomes even though we were implementing this program. And I think a conventional, maybe behavioural science approach would diagnose the reason for the poor uptake of these social emotional learning activities, maybe goes speak to teachers, focus on teachers, and try and really understand how can we get teachers to use more of these activities in their classrooms.

However, what we did is we took a few steps back before trying to address the problem as lack of use of the activities in the classroom and say, “Well, what do teachers think is the problem? What do they see as the ideal for the children that they're teaching? What skills do they think are most important for children to learn? Where do they see is the problem in children learning those skills?”.

And then we also went beyond just talking to teachers and we spoke to parents of children, because parents of children are very influential and also have a lot to say about what children need to learn in the classroom, as well as at home. And then we spoke to local government officials, and we also spoke to other members of the community, to really understand how they saw the problem. And what was really interesting is that we learned that teachers and other people in the community saw these activities, these social emotional learning activities as just for fun and games. They thought they were really just to energize kids. It was just like fun icebreakers, but didn't really have a purpose.

And what they said they really needed in the classroom, the real gap was around classroom management. Like a lot of these teachers were teaching classrooms of 200 or more children. And so what they really needed was for children to be able to sit still, to focus, to not disrupt other learners in the classroom. They wanted to be able to teach a whole class of 200 kids at once and know how to do that and know how to support the children in the classroom when you're teaching so many children at once. And so it didn't mean that we abandoned the social emotional learning outcomes that we were promoting, but we learned that the problem was a lot bigger and slightly different than what we thought it was.

And so, we were able to bring in a solution for classroom management, as well as bringing in solutions for social emotional learning outcomes and combine them, so that we were using social emotional learning activities to promote positive outcomes for classroom management, help teachers manage these large classrooms, and really adapt and contextualize these activities so that they met the needs of the program, which was improved social emotional learning. But they also met the needs that the teachers had, which was really immediate and really, really kind of obvious once we went in and spoke to them.

And so it really allowed us to have a better understanding of what the problem was, and how we could achieve both our objective, but also through meeting the objectives and the needs of the teachers in their everyday outcomes. So that for me is just a really important example that I always think about in terms of are we solving for the right problem and have we actually spoken to people about what the problem is, in order to be able to solve it properly?

APPELT: Yeah. Wow. As someone who teaches undergrads, the idea of 200 small children is just daunting.

TITUS: Oh, yeah.

APPELT: Wow. Yeah, totally hits home. So, I feel like we've got a good sense of the importance and how we can validate the problem. One of the other big differences you highlighted is this idea of identifying and prioritizing of leverage points. And I think that's quite a big divergence from these simple, static situations that we might be using BI in and other contexts.

So can you tell us more about what you mean by leverage points? Why are they important and how do you identify them?

TITUS: Yeah, absolutely. So I think yeah, for some of these more complex problems that we're tackling, where we're really trying to figure out how can we have the most impact on outcomes of interest, we found a challenge that kept happening is we kept trying to use the standard BI methodology, which pretty quickly goes from problem identification to identifying target behaviours. And we found that this was really difficult to do in our settings because how do you define what the right target behaviour is when you're starting off the project from the beginning? And whose behaviour is the most important?

And when you have so many different actors in the system, and someone's behavior might be really important today, but maybe in a few weeks, when you have a rapidly changing dynamic situation, someone else's behaviour might be more important, and their behaviour might be impacted by somebody else who's three levels above them in the health system, for example.

And so, what we found is like really trying to go in for these very specific target behaviours too soon was actually really limiting us. And it was really hard to prioritize what's the most important target behaviour using things like, “Well, what's the most measurable behaviour or what's the most impactful behaviour?”. Because we really couldn't define what that is so early on in the project with any kind of confidence. And it felt really limiting to do that for some of these more complex problems.

And so we found that we were really getting stuck there. And so taking a step back and looking at the overall problem, we found that it would be really helpful to bring in "systems thinking" approaches, which I think I mentioned earlier. And so systems thinking is another discipline that really looks at systems as indicated in the name. And so what we've been testing out is more of a behavioural systems lens. And one of the things that systems thinking offers us is it helps us really focus on leverage points.

And leverage points are, you can think of them as maybe as tipping points, or places that if you change this thing in the system, it would have the most ripple effects throughout the entire rest of the system. So yeah, it's the places we can have the most leverage. It's the places that we can have the most impact and change in the overall grand scheme of things, if we change that.

And we found that that approach actually lent itself much better for the types of complexity and big problems that we were tackling. And so, what we have been doing is we've been taking a few steps before we even get to the point of target behaviours of first defining what is the system, what is the ideal system that we're trying to get to. As I mentioned, speaking to people and really filling in that picture, using other voices as close to the problem as possible. So, “What is the overall system that we're working within? What is the ideal system and what is preventing us from getting there?”. Then we're validating that as much as we can with communities, with stakeholders.

And once we have a really good sense of what the system is, and what are some of those challenges for us getting to that ideal system, we can then look at and say, okay, “Well where in this wide perspective of the system should we focus our limited resources and efforts on, knowing we can't focus on everything?” And that's been a really, really helpful approach for us, focusing in on very specific places within the system before we try to define whose behaviour should we be trying to change and what.

And a leverage point might look like for example, the topic or the node of coordination between different government bodies that are really important for cascading shifts throughout the wider system. So, our project on seed security in Pakistan did reveal that this really important area within the system, where there was a lot of influence that was held, but a lot of problems at the same time was coordination between a few different government bodies and that if we could make some shifts there, we might be able to see really positive cascading effects throughout the system. And the same goes for health projects. We might identify that what is happening at the health facility is really important for what's happening throughout the system. Or it might be much higher up, it might be around policymakers. And there, there could be something to do with what policymakers are deciding, or not deciding on a certain topic or issue that really is most important for impacts about the system.

And so, we really try to define what those are. And there might be multiple leverage points within a system that we prioritize that we think would have the most impact for us to change them and also are most feasible for us to change them. And then we really focus in on what those are. And once we really define what those are, and really zoom in to those parts of the system, that's when we can really start thinking about, “Okay, well, who's behaviour is important to this leverage point? Who's behaviour would have to change for us to really have leverage here?” And then we can really go into those micro behaviors.

But really starting off with the leverage points helps us answer how are we going to have most impact on this wider problem and where do we actually have the ability and leverage to have most impact on the system? We find it to be a very, very helpful tool to help us know that we're focusing on the right thing with the right resources.

APPELT: Yeah, that resonates as well. I think we often think about the feasibility and impact of the behaviour, but it makes sense to start with the feasibility and impact in the points and the leverage points in the system. But I think what you're saying too, just the idea of the push and pull of feasibility and impact. Sometimes the most impactful is not the most feasible, and vice versa. So finding the one that maximizes both feasibility and impact is hard work. But like, without that, why you would be tackling something?

TITUS: Absolutely. And sometimes the leverage points that may not look behavioural from the outset, may actually have a lot of behavioural pieces within them. And so we might find that everything in the system is getting stuck around, for example, something to do with stockpiling or supplies or assets. And if we really zoom in to it, and maybe in a previous iteration, we might have kind of put that to the side because it doesn't seem behavioural.

But in this, we really get to really focus on these really important points in the system and then we can really pull apart, well, “What can behavioural science support here? Where could we add a behavioural lens?” And maybe it is around forecasting of supplies needed. And it may not seem behavioural, but it's really it is. Or maybe it's around coordination, as I said, or it's around trust between different actors within the system.

And so, we also find that the leverage point analysis really helps us make sure that we're focusing where we can have impact and feasibility and then bringing the behavioural lens rather than trying to, from the outset, know what is behavioural and what's not, because sometimes it's not always clear.

APPELT: Yeah, yeah, it's often surprising. I think going back to what we said at the very beginning of the podcast, that things that don't seem behavioural when you actually pull them apart, there's a lot of human behaviour that has led to situations being what they are.

So we've focused quite a bit on the problem definition phase, which is, as we've just said, so important. And without it you can't have a project. But I'm wondering if there's other key differences in the approach that you'd like to highlight and... I'll pause there. Is there any other key differences?

TITUS: Yeah. So I think what we've talked about today is really expanding out the problem definition phase of a project and really putting more effort and focus and attention in that first, those first phases and making sure that we're really setting ourselves up for success and making Albert Einstein proud of us for spending a good amount of time knowing what we're solving for before we try to solve it, and really making sure that we're treating everything like an assumption and continuing to iterate and validate what are our assumptions as we go.

And so a lot of that really even comes before what behavioural scientists would know of as defining those target behaviours, going in and doing a behavioural mapping, those really, really specific steps that might come next. And so what we do is we still try to do those activities as much as we can once we have focussed in on what those places are within the system that we should be focussed on. And so we still do a lot of those actions and activities, those target behaviours, those behavioural mappings before we try to even get to ideation. I think maybe what sets our approach maybe a little bit different from maybe a conventional approach to behavioural science, maybe in other contexts would be that, you know, as I mentioned earlier, we do have to do a lot of validation with communities.

And so, at multiple steps in the project, we do a lot of kind of validation activities with the affected community or with the population. And so, that looks like doing our design research, our formative research. It means that if we are unsure about something, if we're unsure about one of our assumptions, something's coming up, maybe a behavioural barrier and we're just not sure whether it's actually representative of the situation. If we can go and ask someone, you know, go and speak to someone who knows the problem a lot better than us, we try to do that and it means that we do a lot of prototyping and iterative testing before we move to a kind of evaluation.

So we spend a lot of time testing our ideas in an iterative way, with communities as much as possible, before we even try to evaluate or do an experiment because as I mentioned, there's very few assumptions that we can make about the population in terms of how they will respond or the types of interventions that might work in these contexts. So we have to really, really take that humility perspective and kind of just assume that we know very little until proven otherwise. And so I think maybe what sets our approach a bit different from others is that we try as much as we can to validate at every single step of the project lifecycle.

And while that sounds like it might be very time and resource heavy, it doesn't have to be. Sometimes, you know, if we're unsure about something or we want to make sure that we're really validating something, we can do a focus group discussion, which is better than no focus group discussion. So we really try to do and think, “Well, what can we do? How can we validate this with the community and the experts and the people who know it best?”. We find, as a rule of thumb, to do any testing or to do any interaction with community or stakeholders who know rather than to do less, even if it means that it's a single interview or five interviews or something like that. So I think that's probably something else that maybe we really, really put a lot of thought and effort into as well.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think, like you said, it's so important. It may not be effortful, but even when it is effortful, it's so worthwhile because I mean, kind of the whole ethos of BI is learn and test small rather than fail big. And that applies even within a project like we want to learn that there is a huge gap in our solution, we want to learn that before we test it, even on a small scale. So the more you can get that information early, the more valuable it is.

TITUS: Absolutely. Yeah. Sometimes, you know, there's definitely some question like why are we only going to speak to three people, or six people at this point? And, you know, and sometimes it's like, well, the alternative would be speaking to no people. And so if you can do something, if you can test small, even if you only have access to a really small number of people, just do it if you can, because it always does help you clarify or improve your assumptions around what the problem is and how to solve it, even if it's at a very small scale.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's an amazing point in terms of how we can draw from what you're doing, lessons that will apply in all BI settings. So, thinking about applying BI in humanitarian settings, what can we extract and apply to other settings beyond what you've already mentioned?

TITUS: Yeah, that's a great question and an important one too to make this relevant, I think. I mean, I think applying behavioural science in very extreme settings like humanitarian contexts, conflict settings, etc., I think that it really just kind of exposes some of the things that maybe some of the issues or opportunities that may exist in other contexts, but maybe just are less apparent, but they just become a lot more apparent for us just because there are a lot more extreme contexts.

So I think many of the things that we're trying to solve for exist in the US or in Australia or Canada, it's just that maybe they're less obvious or they're easier solutions to maybe overcome them. And so I think there's a lot of parallels, even though the contexts we work on are quite unique. So I think, we have seen that behavioural science really works well with other disciplines. And so, no matter what problem you're focusing on, it's really helpful to bring in some of these multidisciplinary systemic approaches. So, bringing in design thinking and so the iterative nature of design thinking really helps us implement that core tenet of behavioural science in our approach, which, as you said, is, you know, test small, fail small.

And so I think design thinking really helps us do that and implement that in a very practical sense. And then I think bringing in things like systems thinking really helps us approach some of these bigger thornier issues that we're increasingly, I think, around the world, trying to bring behavioural science to. And think, “Well, how does behavioural science get applied to things like climate or these other big topics?”. And I think that we're really seeing the ways that we can stretch behavioural science beyond maybe what it's been used for before.

But I think in that stretch, it really helps to bring in these other interdisciplinary approaches. And what we found is really helpful for that is rather than, as I said, focusing on what are the specific target behaviours that we should change or how can we encourage uptake of this solution, is taking those few steps back and thinking, where can we have most impact in the system? Where should we even be focusing our change in this large, maybe overwhelming at first problem?

And so I think that's the question that we've really started with, is “Where can we have most impact on the system?” rather than, “What is the right target behaviour to focus on?”. And I think that's lent itself really well to it and having solutions that are a lot more kind of multidimensional, and have a lot more impact and potential for scale. You know, and many of our solutions don't only, for example, involve the individual or household, but many other people within the system.

So our malnutrition project I mentioned in Mali, where we're trying to improve malnutrition outcomes for children, our behavioural solution doesn't just target parents, but it targets religious leaders, social networks, female chiefs, multiple different levels of society.

So I think that's one. I think a second one is how important it is to validate our assumptions through interactive, qualitative activities, because, yes, we do have a broad evidence base. You know, there's more and more really exciting behavioural science evidence coming out every year, every month, which is wonderful. But we know how important and how context-specific behaviours are, and how important context is to behaviour.

And I think you know, we talk a lot in behavioural science about the replication crisis. I think one of the big solutions to that is to do more validation and to focus more on defining the problem with the affected community and to focus more on testing our solutions with the affected community to make sure that we're really rooting anything that we do in the local context as much as is possible on a project.

And so we've continued to be surprised on projects where even, you know, at month six or month seven of doing interactive, qualitative activities with populations, we're learning new things that if we didn't learn that, the project would probably fail at some point. And so I think, you know, the approach that we've taken in humanitarian context because we have to, because there is no evidence in these contexts and with these communities, I think it's just as important in any context to do that level of iterative testing and qualitative work upfront and validating your assumptions with affected people as much as possible.

And I think, you know, ultimately, while it is a challenge to work in these contexts, I think it also provides a lot of opportunities for innovation. I think that through testing and applying behavioural science in new contexts, we can't replicate. We can't just look to the evidence and say, “Well, that worked in in Syria before, that worked in Mali at addressing malnutrition”. We really have to come up with quite new, innovative behavioural solutions. And I think it really does push the field when we are stretching it and applying it in new places where we can't rely on past evidence or past studies to replicate.

And so, I think those are some of the main lessons that I think that come out most strongly in our work that I think really could be applied to any behavioural science project, especially in the world that we live in, and that many teams are becoming more and more ambitious with the types of problems they work on with behavioural science. And so I think a lot of these lessons are also applicable to those.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. And I think there has been this slow, especially slow when we think of the history of behavioural science, the slow recognition that it's not, you know, one solution fits all and things do need to be context dependent. And I think maybe what I'm hearing from you is that when you're in these dynamic settings, it gets you to that realization sooner. And so dynamic settings demand dynamic solutions, which the field has started to recognize.

But I think what you're saying is also that the practice itself has to be dynamic and you have to adapt it. And I think that's where the field is slowly going that direction. But when you're in these settings like you are, it forces you to get there sooner. And so you're leading the way and thinking of ways that the solutions and practice can be adaptive and dynamic.

TITUS: Absolutely, yes. More failure faster definitely forces you to try and to try new things, which I think is a blessing and a curse.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Well, we are running tight on time and I want to be respectful of your time. So I'll do my traditional final questions. Which first one, do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training?

TITUS: Yeah, I think some of them would be to kind of think of behavioural science as a lens. And I think that was something that came out very strongly in Michael Hallsworth's recent manifesto for behavioural science, is really thinking about behavioral science, maybe less as a toolkit or a very specific approach or methodology that we can apply systematically in every single project and context, and think of it more like a lens, a way that you can kind of join projects and really provide that behavioural angle or lens to everything that we do. And I think approaching behavioural science in that way allows it to be more dynamic and I think it allows it to be more applicable to more types of problems than we've seen in the past that it be used for.

And so I think more flexibility in how we apply behavioural science because of where we're applying it and the types of problems we're applying it to, I think, allows behavioural science practitioners to be more useful in maybe interdisciplinary project teams to work on bigger, more complex problems. And so I think bringing that flexibility and that kind of perspective as behavioural science as a lens has really been helpful, at least for me, as we continue to work in this field as it grows and as it changes and as it develops and as we continue trying to use it to tackle these larger, systemic and societal issues.

APPELT: Yeah, that's a great message. And I think definitely something that we're also trying to convey to students is just the multiplicity of ways behavioural science can be useful in different situations and the ability to keep trying things. So yeah, so any last thoughts, any questions I should have asked and didn't, anything you wanted to get across?

TITUS: No, I think you covered all of it. They were great questions. Thank you so much.

APPELT: Well, thank you, Britt. This has been really delightful. And I think I have many favorite things about BI, which is good because it's what I do. But high on that list is the ability for BI to have real world impact. And so, I've been really excited to talk with you and hear about the real-world impact you're having, and how you're advancing the practice of behavioural science. And the conversation exceeded my hopes.

So it's been a delight and I'm just so eager to continue to see how you do this amazing work. So thanks for sharing your time and energy today.

TITUS: Thanks for having me. Thanks for inviting me. It was such a pleasure.

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