



Episode 79: "A Humble Approach to Behaviour Change (Part 2)"

with Lindsay Miles-Pickup, Methods Specialist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group (BC BIG)

In part two of this two-episode series inspired by Michael Hallsworth's "Manifesto for Applying Behavioural Science", Lindsay Miles-Pickup and I continue our conversation about the evolution of the practice of behavioural insights. In this episode, Lindsay walks us through a recent BC BIG project on active transportation to illustrate how BI can be used as a lens and why it's important to take humility to heart.

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 part two of my conversation with Lindsay Miles-Pickup.

Lindsay is an all star Methods Specialist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group BC Behavioral Insights Group. In part one of our conversation, we talked about how the practice of BI is continuing to change and improve, and we anchored our discussion and Michael Hallsworth's recent manifesto for how to apply behavioural science. Lindsay walked us through how BC BIG is integrating new BI ideas into their work by focusing on an organ donation project with BC Transplant and Service BC.

In part two of the conversation we'll turn to a different project to explore more fresh ideas for the practice of BI. Let's dive in. I'm liking this game, the game of applying manifesto proposals to projects so maybe we can play another round with another project. And another one you mentioned before is around transportation. So maybe you can give us some broad strokes of that project and then we can think about which proposal ideas apply.

LINDSAY MILES-PICKUP, GUEST: Sure. This is an exciting one. I am a big fan of government walking the walk and talking the talk. So the government of British Columbia, as most people know, is extremely committed to reducing carbon emissions to address the climate crisis, and they've recognized that change often has to start from within. If we're going to promote climate friendly behaviours, we ourselves, as the government of British Columbia, need to be leaders and demonstrate what that means.

So as such, we were approached by the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure to look at ways to encourage the use of active and sustainable transportation by public service employees. So, over the span of a number of months, my incredible colleagues looked at ways to integrate a Fresh Start Effect for new employees to encourage their use of active and sustainable transportation.

And if you haven't looked up the impact of the Fresh Start Effect, I would highly recommend you read the work by Dr. Katie Milkman. There's a really interesting phenomenon about how we might be more willing to change our behaviour during times of feeling fresh or new. So, the importance of New Years, our birthday, even a new week. So, we really wanted to capitalize on this because we knew changing behaviour is a fairly difficult task to do. And so we thought that by integrating this into a time of a fresh start, a new job, that we

might be able to support British Columbians or BC Public Service employees in looking at alternative ways to commute to work.

APPELT: Such a good project and such a great opportunity to get in right when folks are new and excited and forming new habits. So, I was thinking for this one, maybe we would talk about exploratory research and solution design. And I know you used multiple tools for this project with BI just being one among many.

And again, going back to the idea of the proposal, each idea in the manifesto being multiple ideas baked in, this one reminded me of two. BI as a lens and then being humble, exploring and enabling. So let's talk about each of those. Let's start with behavioural science as a lens. What's that mean? Or how did BC BIG interpret this one?

MILES-PICKUP: Well, it's extremely funny that you ask me in particular about this, because on our last Calling DIBS episode. I spoke in length about how behavioural insights can be used as a tool in your tool kit. And I do stand by that. But as you look to the manifesto, it speaks to how we need to move away from this language about how behavioural insights can be used as a tool and how it should instead be used as a lens. And while I do think it's more about the purpose as opposed to the language, I do appreciate their point here.

APPELT: Maybe this is an example of heterogeneity. Our lenses are their tools, or vice versa. Different words mean different things to different folks, but the underlying idea I think is the same, whether we're using their terminology or ours.

MILES-PICKUP: Tool or lens, yeah, hopefully we can speak to what that means and why you might hear that different language. So, there is this common misconception that behavioural insights look at behaviours in isolation. And while this can be the case at times, and it can actually be really helpful in addressing certain problems, it's also created issues where behavioural science is seen as only able to address these certain small things, which we sort of talked about earlier, too. So, the manifesto speaks to this need to change the way we frame behavioural science.

So, we need to see behavioural science is a lens that can be applied to any public or private issue. And that by using this frame, we can enhance the way that we see policy options. So, Michael Hallsworth also spoke to the need to look at the goals of behavioural science so that instead of just focusing on creating interventions that change behaviour, we also need to understand human behaviour in context. And this is really important to me and I think the work of BC BIG as well.

So, this puts an additional emphasis on diagnosing behaviour, something that I and others on this podcast have spoken to the importance of. So that's the importance of that exploratory research phase. And I have to say though, that for me, this has a different emphasis. So particularly as I think of how it relates to how behavioural insights can be used in public policy.

So, it's no secret that economic theory dominates the way that public policy is both analyzed but also developed. So, this notion that individuals, you know, we're self-interested and we choose options based on weighing pros and cons, that's so deeply ingrained in the way that government works, most of us don't even realize it. But we tend to forget this human factor that we have these heuristics and biases that impact us daily, that we're influenced by the environments and contexts and social networks that are around us. So, when the manifesto speaks to behavioural science being used as a lens, I take this quite literally about the opportunities that we have in government to apply this lens to everything we do.

So, by applying behavioural insights as a lens, we can start to change this notion of how is it that people make decisions? So, it's important that we strengthen this realistic understanding of human behaviour to create better programs and services and policies for the people of British Columbia. And BC BIG is not going to be able to do that alone.

So, we need to equip public service employees, both current and our future employees, with the information to apply that lens to the work that they do. So not everyone's going to be running randomized controlled trials, but we do want people to think about these factors that influence us daily to create better outcomes for everyone. And while I know this is a slight departure from the way the manifesto speaks about how behavioural science can be used as a lens, I do see this as an opportunity to promote behavioural science as something that can be looked at beyond just a discrete behaviour, but in more complicated factors like how we set up taxes and infrastructure and all of these different aspects in the work that we do.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think you said it so well, I don't even think I have anything to add. So, I'll just ask you directly, how did this manifest in your active transportation project?

MILES-PICKUP: Yeah, to be honest, and I was not the lead on this project, I had two fabulous colleagues, Anna Burrowes and Takuro Ishikawa, or Tak Ishikawa, who had led this project, and I think they did a really fabulous job at setting this project up for using behavioural science as a lens into the future.

Transportation behaviours are extremely difficult to change. That's not new. There are a lot of different factors that account for our behaviour when it comes to things like driving. So, we have habits, we have heuristics and biases. We have contextual factors like needing to drive our children to school. It could be how far away you live from work. There could be infrastructure availability issues, safety issues, physical ability issues, access to services, not to mention the influence of years of marketing about how we perceive our identity in relation to our transportation behaviours. I don't want to call out any particular company, but there's been a lot of advertisements over the years that relate your toughness as an individual to the car that you drive. And all of these things are influencing our decision about how we're going to commute to and from places.

So we knew that this was going to be an uphill battle when we went into it. And one of the things that my very creative colleagues did was to include a survey component for the employees, which not only measured any changes in their behaviour, but also assessed their belief and attitudes, as well as where individuals sat in relation to their stages of change. And I think that this is where the behavioural sciences can really be applied as a lens. So, we can look at these survey results and the additional barriers an individual would face and apply these behavioural insights to those various components into the future.

So, for example, one barrier that was commonly referenced was the need for infrastructure in offices for individuals after biking to work. So, showers and changing rooms and bike rooms, etc. Nobody wants to sit in a meeting all sweaty all day. So, while the discreet behaviour we were looking at might be getting more people to use active transportation, behavioural insights could also be used at looking at designing these types of facilities to make them easier for people to access. How we structure them, where we structure them, all of those different things.

So this is just one of the ways that I could see behavioral insights being used as a lens in this situation where you've got all of these different factors that make up our transportation behaviours as opposed to just a tool in the context in which Michael Hallsworth relates to it, where it would just be use to look at that one particular act of transportation behaviour.

APPELT: Yeah, that's a great, great point. And I like how you described it and the idea that we don't want BI to be so narrowly applied, nor do we want it to be working in isolation. It needs to be working with the other tools in our tool kits, or the other lenses in our glasses, however we want to describe it. And so we said there is another proposal that was relevant here, which was 'be humble, explore and enable'. So, can you walk us through that one? How did BIG interpret this?

MILES-PICKUP: This part of the manifesto felt pretty personal to me. I think if you've ever met me, humble is not the first word that would come to mind. I have a tendency to jump to conclusions about what might be driving a challenge and what possible solutions may be. It's taken a lot of years of active listening to not jump in with a solution based on what I think the challenge is. And I still have a long way to go, to be honest.

APPELT: So you are human, is what you're telling us?

MILES-PICKUP: Very much so. I come with a lot of faults, and I am not sure that I am 100% alone in that. In fact, I think there are a lot more humans out there that have this same challenge. And I'm not even sure that this context is unique to the field of behavioural sciences. I know the manifesto speaks particularly about this within the behavioural sciences, but this is not unique to what we do. I think we all run the risk of being really overconfident in our assumptions, and there's an opportunity for us to take a deeper inquiry to reveal the explanations of the behaviors that we're looking at. So, we really need to recognize the limits of our knowledge, particularly when we're looking at complex systems. Here's that complex systems keep coming back. That's sort of the theme here.

So, we can easily misidentify causes and effects by applying some of these simple models that we're really used to. And I think that's a real risk that we face in this field, particularly as we look to build capacity of others to use behavioural insights. Changing behaviour, particularly in complex situations, isn't always as easy as just applying the EAST framework. So, I really appreciate how the manifesto speaks to epistemic humility or the realization that our knowledge is always provisional and incomplete, and that it might require revision in light of new evidence.

So, I agree wholeheartedly with the manifesto that we need to focus instead on doing a better job at understanding individual's goals and needs as opposed to jumping to conclusions about that. We need to spend more time in designing our interventions with people and recognize that sometimes the behaviours that people are undertaking are in their best interest. There is so much more in this particular section to unpack that we're not able to in this session. They talk about boosts and nudge plus and all of these really amazing insights that are developing in the field of behavioural science. But I truly believe that both in the field of behavioural science, but also public policy, that this one in particular should be a priority for us all to look at.

APPELT: Very well said. And I totally agree that each of these proposals could be multiple podcast episodes. So, kudos to you for being able to help us navigate them within one or two podcasts. So, when we think about this idea, how did it come to be exemplified in this particular project? How were you able to apply that here?

MILES-PICKUP: Well, I have two wonderful colleagues who show a lot more humility in everyday life than I do. And I think that they approach this project with a lot of humility from the outset. They really understood the limitations of the project. And while we all understand how transportation and behaviours impact the greater climate issues, I think the team really recognized the importance of understanding people's goals and their needs.

So, when you have an individual who has child care needs, maybe they need to get groceries after work, they may need transportation that can help them transport materials throughout the day, or they may have anxiety about being able to get to a place in a certain amount of time, who are we to say that taking their bike is the preferred behaviour? The car honestly might be the best thing for them to manage their day, and I think that was really clear in the way that this intervention was designed, the way it was communicated, the way they collected research at the end of it.

They did a really excellent job in building in this additional information and gathering information to analyze these behaviours and understand where were people in the stages of change and what did it mean to them to undertake this new method of transportation, of active and sustainable transportation? It was really important to them to put into practice that epistemic humility and to build their knowledge and more evidence to support this work into the future. And I think they did a really great job at exemplifying that.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's really well said. I think that goes back too, to what we were talking about before with the exploratory research is you need to talk to the population to understand it from their point of view and going into the other phases, you have to recognize that what's the right behaviour for one person is not the right person for another.

So going back to what we were saying about heterogeneity. So even though going back to your very first point, we approached this podcast as if we could go linearly really and see that this proposal in that proposal, I think from what you brought up today, it's really clear that even the pursuit of behavioural science is a complex system and heterogeneity isn't in this box and humility isn't in this other box, but rather these all these ideas are hugely intertwined and it makes it more complicated, but also more rewarding to work in this space. Well, are there any other proposal ideas that you wanted to bring up, whether in the context of this project or more broadly?

MILES-PICKUP: I think one of the pieces that came up for me in the manifesto was this notion of moving beyond biases. And this is an important one and a little bit tricky. One of the things that really drew me to the field of behavioural science and behavioural insights was this understanding of heuristics and biases. To me, it helped explain notions that I could never understand before. We would do this incredible work internationally to build water options to make it easier for people to access clean drinking water. And we would see limited uptake. And for the life of us, we couldn't understand why the infrastructure was there, it was easy to get to, all of these different things.

But then when I started to explore this world of biases, I certainly understand more where we were falling short on these types of projects. But there's also limitations to those biases. Mainly is we don't really know when they're at play, which ones are competing with one another. And we have this tendency, this goes back to that overconfidence side, to be overconfident in understanding which biases and heuristics might be at play. And we tend to sort of stop our understanding there because it's a nice, clean, simple explanation of human behaviour.

And we don't tend to look outward of all of those other influencing factors. We're seeing really great models be developed like the behavioural drivers model, which has been really established and driven by the folks at UNICEF that are starting to build out all of these different influencing factors beyond just heuristics and biases.

And I think that's a really important thing for us to understand as behavioural scientists so that we're not overconfident, we're not making assumptions, and we're understanding the complexity that surrounds people that's influencing our daily decision making. Sometimes it's as simple as not having access to a printer. It's not necessarily that they're experiencing a sense of scarcity or choice overload, they just don't have a printer. And

I think those are all really important components. I think they're important components in both of the projects that I've highlighted, but also for how we as behavioural scientists move forward in creating better outcomes for individuals.

APPELT: As usual, very well said. And I love that you brought that note up. I know we have been usurping your time today, and I want to be respectful of your time. So maybe I'll move us towards our traditional wrap up questions. Do you have a message for our new BI practitioners in training?

MILES-PICKUP: I've said a lot before in previous podcasts, I've had the opportunity to speak to a lot of new practitioners about the importance of scoping and exploratory research, and I stand by that. One of the things in reflecting on this conversation in particular is a lot of this can feel very overwhelming. I don't think the manifesto was ever designed to be a "here's how you do it" kind of method, step by step guide. It doesn't exist in that linear, 'A+B=C'.

So I think my advice for new practitioners would be to embrace the messy. There's going to be things that you're not going to know how to do, and it's worth experimenting and taking risks and trying new things. Do it in the pursuit of why do we do this work. We do this work to create better outcomes for people. And I think if that's your North Star and that's your guide, that as you navigate these new options, these considerations, all of these things, it can feel a bit overwhelming as a new practitioner, to let that be the guide that helps keeping driving you forward to move through this as the behavioural science field continues to evolve.

APPELT: I think that's a perfect note. And I really like what you're saying about how the field is evolving. And we're all evolving all the time. And so, any given project is not going to be perfect. But we're doing the best we can with what we know at the time, and then we can always return to it later and do a new variation with our evolving knowledge.

And I think also your idea of just we're all humans, and we said human behaviour is complex, that applies to us too. Even as we're working on projects, we're all humans behaving. And so, giving yourself that grace to do the best you can, but don't expect perfection. I think that's wonderful. Any last thoughts? Anything I should have asked and didn't?

MILES-PICKUP: I don't think so. Thank you for the opportunity to let us share all of this information to be a bit vulnerable about where BC BIG is at in this evolution and ways that we're looking forward to strengthening our services to make sure that we're producing the best outcomes for British Columbia. So just a big thank you.

APPELT: Well, thank you. It's always a good day when I get to chat with you, and even better day when I get to hear about the fascinating work you're doing. And there is no perfection, but talking to you comes pretty close to perfection. So, you're a BI all star, and I can't wait to see what else you do. So thanks for coming on to the podcast today, Lindsay.

MILES-PICKUP: You're not helping my cause for humility here.

APPELT: That is never my goal when it comes to Lindsay. So thanks, Lindsay. And thanks to all of our listeners for joining. Another episode of Calling DIBS.
